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AJ NUEST

The Golden Key Legacy:  
A Time  
of Reckoning

fantasy

# A Time of Reckoning

The Golden Key Legacy

AJ NUEST



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## Chapter 1

“From there, we shall scour the cliff side, until the entrance to Gaelleod’s tomb is revealed.” Fandorn smiled, the wrinkled skin near his eyes cracking more than the dry dirt inside the castle courtyard.

Oh, no. Rhys slumped. Aw, *hell* no. Leaning side to side, he searched the bustling bodies for Faedrah, and found her standing a few feet before the portcullis, her head lowered in private conversation with Vaighn.

One guess was all Rhys needed to figure out who’d come up with this bright plan.

As if his stare had somehow psychically tapped her on the shoulder, she glanced toward him and her head snapped up. Her eyes widened then she frowned.

That’s right, lady. There was no fucking way.

“Excuse me, my boy.” Fandorn nodded toward the gatehouse and the loud discussion growing louder by the second between Denmar and Faedrah’s dad. “If I am interpreting the tones of that conversation correctly, my assistance is required by our king.”

Rhys jerked his chin at Fandorn as the old geezer wandered off. Seemed this excursion they were about to take had tensions running a little hot all around. But, god dammit. Just about the time he believed he’d finally gotten a handle on this place, *someone* up and changed the rules.

The earth rocked under his boots, and he gritted his teeth against the bone-jarring impact as another Dregg rammed to the ground like a high-speed locomotive. The moldy air gusting off its wings nearly shoved him forward a step. A few blonde strands pulled free from Faedrah’s braid, whispering across her lips and dancing around her head like a golden halo, and Rhys clenched his fingers against the urge to cross the distance and tuck those silky tendrils behind her ear.

Sure, she was sexy as hell—one lick of her mouth and his blood was on fire, one wriggle of her tight little body under his hands and his cock grew a

mind of its own—but if the woman expected him to willingly volunteer for human pay load duty, she'd lost her damn mind.

The Dregg lumbered past Rhys' shoulder, apparently bent on joining the rest of the fan club crowded around Faedrah's mom, then paused and lifted its face to sniff the air. A skinny forked tongue snaked out and slathered a layer of slime over the quivering slits that doubled as its nostrils. Eyes as dead and empty as a great white shark's locked onto Rhys as the hulking creature swiveled its head.

He braced for the incoming assault, every muscle in his body tense, but still winced as the Dregg released a series of chattering shrieks that pierced his skull like fingernails scraping down a chalkboard.

Jesus Christ. Enough already. Squeezing his eyes tight, Rhys scrubbed his lids with his thumb and index finger before pinching the bridge of his nose. As if this exact same reaction from every other Dregg he'd had the pleasure of meeting hadn't already delivered the message loud and clear. Evidently, the god damn legacy his father had left him manifested in a particular scent. One whiff and the Dreggs picked up on his connection to Gaelleod, hackles raised and fangs bared like a police dog sniffing out some border-crossing contraband.

Fine. That made two of them. Dropping his hand, Rhys leaned forward and curled his top lip to return the creature's twisted sneer. "Yeah? Well, I'm not real fond of you, either."

"Grommel!" Faedrah stormed across the courtyard in their direction, hands fisted at her sides. "Cease this instant!"

Grommel? This thing's name was...*Grommel*? Rhys huffed. How the hell could she tell? To him, they all looked—and stank—the same.

The hairy behemoth broke off its caterwauling, backtracked a step or two and ruffled its leathery wings before lurching toward the rest of the crew. The musty stench of bog water it left in its wake soured the lunch in Rhys' stomach, and he smacked his lips in disgust.

Vaighn swung around to follow behind his sister, ambling toward Rhys at a leisurely stroll, shaking his head and lips compressed as if holding back a smile.

Oh, really? Rhys crossed his arms. Far as he could see, not one god-damn thing about this situation was funny.



The prince stopped beside Faedrah, hand resting on the pommel of his sword, posture slouched as if the dude didn't have a care in the world. "I take it my sister's plan to infiltrate Seviere's Kingdom undetected has left you quite unsettled."

Oh no, not at all. Being dangled over the cliffs by a sentient parachute who just so happened to hate his guts sounded like the best idea ever. Rhys darted a sharp glance at the one woman who could ever get him to agree to something so stupid. "That's putting it mildly."

"I would be happy to entertain any other suggestions you may have to expedite our speedy conveyance to the entrance of Gaelleod's tomb." Flipping an open palm toward the beasts clustered around her mother, Faedrah raised her brows as if they were a bunch of cuddly teddy bears instead of a super-sized mutation between a bat and those fucking flying monkeys from *The Wizard of Oz*. "Nonetheless, the Dreggs have already agreed to our plan. With their aid, an arrival from the seaward side of the cliffs seems the most prudent course."

Sure, sure. Or they could just save everyone the trouble and go careening to their deaths like a bunch of lemmings right now. Rhys shifted a glower between Faedrah and her brother. "I don't like it. What's our guarantee they won't accidentally drop one of us?" Like him, for starters.

"You are welcome to follow on horseback, if you prefer." Vaighn shrugged. "Though such a delay will most certainly ensure you fail to partake in all the fun." Shoulders jerking to attention, he slapped a hand to his leather chest plate like he'd just had the mother of all ball-busting revelations. "Unless, perchance, our four-legged creatures alarm you as much as a Dregg?"

Faedrah smacked her brother's arm, but that didn't stop the two of them from sharing a chuckle at Rhys' expense.

He squinted, bobbling his head. Yeah, yeah, fucking hilarious. "If you ever get to my world, remind me to take you for a ride on my motorcycle, your highness." They'd see then who had the last laugh.

"You worry unnecessarily, my heart. I've ridden with the Dreggs countless times." Running a warm hand down each of his biceps, Faedrah tugged his elbows apart and stepped close, settling her arms around his waist. "Their leader, Reddeck, has sworn his clan's allegiance to the White Queen. For any Dregg to disavow her wishes would be tantamount to

sacrilege.” Rising on her toes, she pecked his lips. “You must trust me in this. Our entourage *will* reach its destination unharmed.”

“If you say so.” He curled his fingers around the thick braid trailing down her back and tugged. Still, a little added insurance never hurt, and while she’d been off scheduling this chance to go skydiving with a clan of boogey men, Rhys had been using the time to sort through a pile of discarded weapons in the armory, hoping to finalize his own strategy in sticking an ace or two up everyone’s sleeve.

“Here.” He released her and backed away a step, flipping open the black leather pouch he’d threaded onto his belt. Metal clinked and silver chains snaked between his fingers as he scooped the contents into his palm. “A little something for everyone in the group.” Four of the necklaces he handed to Faedrah—one each for her mom and dad, Denmar and Fandorn—though the wizard’s was more a souvenir than anything else. Fandorn didn’t need a lucky rabbit’s foot any more than Rhys did.

Unless, of course, Gaelleod woke up barrel’s blazing before they’d successfully murdered him in his sleep. Then it was pretty much guaranteed they were all up shit creek without a paddle.

The fifth, he tossed in the general direction of Vaighn.

The prince snagged the chain in mid-air and held the medallion in front of his eyes, dim light from the gray cloud cover winking off the surface as it spun back and forth.

“Jewelry?” He grimaced, refocused on Rhys and blinked once. “Really, you shouldn’t have.”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. The dude acted like Rhys had just dropped to one knee and proposed.

“Vaighn,” Faedrah scolded. “I most vehemently suggest you reconsider.”

“It’s my signature, dumbass.” Rhys nodded toward the swaying pendant. “A protective symbol that might just save your ass, considering there’s a good chance we’re about to interrupt Gaelleod’s beauty sleep.” Shrugging, he tipped his head. “Odds are, this little surprise party Faedrah’s got planned is really gonna piss him off, but if you don’t want it then, hey, no skin off my nose.” He reached for the necklace, the corner of his mouth twitching as Vaighn jerked it out of range.

“On further contemplation, perchance my sister offers an alternate perspective.” The sigil bounced against Vaighn’s chest plate as he dropped

the chain around his neck. "'Tis the height of rudeness to refuse a gift so graciously given, despite the repulsiveness of its creator or the hideous nature of its design." He bowed slightly at the waist. "I believe the stakes between us have been leveled, Wizard."

Rhys grunted, his gaze following as Vaighn sauntered off to supposedly check in with Fandorn, Denmar and the king. But his bogus indifference fell flat. Especially once the king pointed at the medallion and Vaighn smiled, nodding in Rhys' direction.

"Wait." He frowned. "Did that asshole just call me repulsive?"

Faedrah chuckled. "Flattering praise, indeed, from the highest ranking member of the royal guard."

Ah. So that's how this game was played. "Yeah, well, your brother's one ugly son of a bitch, himself."

Her musical laughter was drowned out by an ear-piercing shriek and Rhys winced, instinctively scooping her back into his arms. God dammit, being surrounded by this many Dreggs was like standing inside an ambulance bay, all the sirens blaring at the same time.

Grommel broke from the group and the Earth vibrated under Rhys' boots as the Dregg hailed a series of punches along the ground like a rampaging gorilla.

Fucking great. *This* was their ride? Or maybe... Rhys' shoulders dropped a solid inch. "Let me guess. They drew straws, and Grommel just found out he got stuck with me."

The Dregg leader lurched forward and rammed a hand against Grommel's chest. The two scuffled, raising a haze of dirt that blended with the same dull gray as the sky.

"'Twould seem so." Faedrah sighed, sliding her hands along his chest to behind his neck, and Rhys linked his hands in the small of her back as her nails scraped and tingled his scalp. "I'm sorry, my heart." The sadness in her eyes turned them the richest, most beautiful shade of chocolate brown. "Had I known the Dreggs' would find your presence displeasing, I swear \_\_\_"

He dropped his lips to hers, swept a kiss along the sweet slope of her mouth and dove in for more. No. None of this was her fault. And he'd be good god-damned before he stood here like a dick and let her carry the guilt over something that had always been outside her control.

He'd catch whatever she tossed his way. That's what he'd told her. And if jumping through mirrors or, hell, becoming a Dregg's personal special-order delivery is what she wanted, then it was time he strap on a pair and live up to his promise.

The tip of her tongue met his in a seductive flick. Her breathy chuckle washed over him like a warm invitation and his blood pumped straight into his groin. Her arms tightened around his shoulders. He slid one hand down to cup her leather-slicked ass as the full curves of her breasts met his chest.

Jesus Christ, the woman drove him insane. They fit together like a hand in a glove.

He thrust his fingers under the tight weave of her braid; angled her head to deepen their kiss. Her back bowed. She moaned against his lips as their hips bumped, her soft belly cradling the ridge of his cock.

Fuck, as soon as they got back...*if* they came back...he was locking them inside her bedroom and insisting they follow up on those two days of uninterrupted sex.

Someone cleared their throat—Vaighn, judging by the lower register. Yeah, yeah, no public displays of affection and all that shit. Faedrah pulled back, but Rhys shoved her forward, forcing his thigh between her legs.

No one from the court was around and, besides, he didn't give two shits what everyone thought of the two of them locking lips. God only knew what might happen once they entered Gaelleod's tomb. This could be their last moment together, and if Faedrah's brother didn't like it, he could take a fucking hike.

She swayed against him, a sexy whimper catching in her throat, and he dug his fingers deeper into her sweet, round ass. *That's it, baby. I got ya.*

A second, louder, clearing of the throat, and Faedrah pushed against Rhys' shoulders, breaking free of his arms.

God! What the fuck? They couldn't have a few measly minutes? He ground his teeth and turned, ready to rip a Faedrah's brother a new asshole.

His shoulders wrenched, and Rhys crossed his arms over the way Faedrah's entire family stood nearby, surveying the scene with varying degrees of awkwardness. But his anger didn't dissipate. Not as her dad leveled a fierce glare at them, and most definitely not when Vaighn rolled his eyes and the queen pressed three fingers to her lips, trying and failing to hide a smile.

The king fisted his hands, his jaw so tight it was a wonder he didn't crack a molar. "If you are *quite* finished molesting my daughter."

Rhys cocked a brow. Yeah, the two of them needed to get something straight. Like, right now. It was high time the king either shit or got off the pot.

"I'm never gonna be finished with your daughter. Not ever. If you're waiting for that day, I hate to tell ya, it ain't gonna happen." He clomped forward a step, spreading his arms to the sides. "So whatever punishment you wanna dole out or hole you wanna lock me in, have at it. Just keep in mind your decision isn't gonna change a damn thing." He glanced at Faedrah's wide-eyed stare, shaking his head; aimed a finger at the ground and punctuated each sentence. "I'm here. I'm staying. I love her. You got that? Even when she gets a ridiculous idea in her head that drives me batshit crazy, I love her."

Faedrah's jaw dropped. Not a split second later, she squinted, running that delicious tongue of hers along the edge of her teeth.

"So there you have it." Rhys dropped his hands in surrender. "I'm guilty of loving your daughter. Go ahead and convict. But I suggest you rethink the metal bars and chains, because there's no way in hell I'm letting her face-off against Gaelleod alone."

Her dad jerked upright. A tense moment hung in the air before he darted a glance at his wife.

"Well." The queen's eyebrow twitched. "That sounds oddly familiar."

Satisfaction settled in the center of Rhys' gut. He just bet it did. According to the stories Faedrah had told him, once upon a time, the queen had charged straight into Seviere's castle to steal back the key...and the king had gone with her, regardless of his opinions or the bullshit that errand entailed.

Fandorn cleared this throat. "Of a surety, I defer to your ruling, Sire. Yet, be advised, 'twould be wise to have the boy with us. His knowledge and powers will provide an added benefit whilst navigating the labyrinth to Gaelleod's tomb."

"Agreed." Denmar stroked the tip of his pointed goatee, the luster of his black leather eye patch an exact match to the dull sheen of his bald head. "The lad longs to prove his fealty to the crown? What better way than to deliver the killing blow, himself?"

Ha! If that challenge was supposed to bring on a nervous sweat, the dude was in for a rude awakening. Rhys couldn't wait to follow through on their plan.

A low growl rumbled in the king's chest, but he jerked his head to the line of waiting Dreggs. "On with it, then." He spun away, then pulled up short, pointing a thick finger at Rhys. "Hands off the princess."

Yeah, right. Like that was gonna happen. Rhys dipped his chin. "Highness."

He faced Faedrah, but her attention stayed fixed over his right shoulder as she started toward her Dregg. Yep. He'd reserved himself a night in the doghouse, all right.

Snagging her wrist, he stopped her mid-stomp and yanked her shoulder to his chest. "I'm going to pay for that 'ridiculous idea' comment at some later date, aren't I?"

She boosted her chin. "At the moment it's least expected."

And there it was. The flash of anger in her eyes that made him rock hard and aching to be buried inside her. "God, I can't wait."

He chuckled at her exasperated huff, wagging his brows at the sway of her perky ass as she marched off. His gaze landed on Grommel, and he eyeballed the Dregg from the tufts of its pointed ears to the deadly talons on its feet. This entire task force should have their heads examined. Too bad the crazy train had left the station sometime last week.

Closing the distance, he stared the creature straight in its bottomless blank eyes. "Don't get any wise ideas."

The Dregg snorted, wings rustling and snapping like sheets hung out to dry. Rhys turned his back to the creature and squinted as dust and dead leaves whipped into small tornadoes from the down stroke of six sets of veined wings.

A set of hairy hands grabbed his waist, and Rhys seized Grommel's wrists. A bounce on his toes and the ground shrank beneath his feet.

Waves of nausea wadded in a tight ball as they shot into the sky, lodged under Rhys' breastbone and stayed there. The tinny flavor of adrenaline flooded his mouth, and he jerked his knees to his chest as Grommel pin-wheeled right, skimming a notched parapet in the castle wall. "God dammit. You cut that a little close, don't you think?"

A chuffing worked the bellows of Grommel's lungs and Rhys scowled over his shoulder. What the hell was that supposed to be? A Dregg laugh?

He faced forward and his stomach screamed for his throat as they pitched at an eighty degree angle, dive-bombing the charred landscape. Rhys shook his head, jaw locked tight. The shithead was doing this on purpose.

Okay, if that's the way he wanted it. Clearing his mind, Rhys pinpointed the nearest rock, envisioned his target and *plunk!* It bounced off the side of Grommel's head.

The Dregg wavered on the wind, a growl showcasing his fangs, but the risk was worth the disorientation gurgling in Rhys' gut. "Test me again, and I promise you'll lose."

Grommel snuffled his irritation, but leveled out, and the bile scorching the back of Rhys' throat gradually sank like mercury inside a thermometer on a cold day.

Good. He filled his lungs and forced his body to relax, legs loose and swaying with each pump of Grommel's wings. Winding tendrils of smoke snaked up from the ground. The bare branches of the lifeless trees clawed at the sky like in the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Christ, what a mess. Based on the level of devastation, it would take years for the kingdom to get Gaelleod's poison out of its system.

Ahead in the distance, one by one, the dark silhouettes of five jointed wingspans disappeared over the edge of the cliffs...just like they'd planned. Rhys rolled his shoulders, steeling his nerves for the dive, and shot a warning glower at the hairy monster behind him. The asshole better not test his luck by trying to shear off a layer of Rhys' skin against that uneven wall. If they were doing this, they were doing it his way.

"Let's take this nice and easy." A salt-tinged breeze coasted over his cheeks as they closed in on the horizon. "Easy now." The roar of the waves built beneath the rush of the wind in his ears. "Nice and smooth, and we'll get this done so we can all go home."

Grommel soared over the water and veered slightly left, wing tip slicing the air in a cool glide. Circling back to the group in a wide loop, he flapped once and approached their descent at a less vomit-inducing angle.

"Dude. That was awesome." And Rhys meant it. That the Dregg had taken his comfort into consideration proved Grommel was capable of

empathy. Good to know, considering that particular emotion had become something of a commodity these past few days.

The scenery from the ocean side of the cliffs left him speechless, and appealed to the aesthetic of Rhys' artistic eye. A foamy rope of indigo water crashed in a violent spray against the jagged coastline. Veins of mica and iron ore glinted from between slabs of sheer white rock.

He had to admit, Faedrah's country was beautiful and, for the first time, something other than hatred for Leo twisted Rhys' need to make sure he did everything in his power to save her kingdom. This place deserved to be preserved. For future generations. Hell, over time, he could even see himself loving it just as much as she did.

"Fall in behind them and watch the wall." He pointed to the line of Dreggs soaring a few feet ahead and below. If the knot of anxiety in his gut was any indicator, the entrance to the tomb was gonna be a bitch to find. "Time to put on our game face."

He kept his eyes peeled, scanning and rescanning the cracks and crevices as they flew north. Tears streamed back into his hairline and his eyelids grew sticky from the constant wind. Hours passed, the sky changing from mottled gray to an alien coral pink as the sun set somewhere beyond the thick layer of Gaelleod's fog. On his right, the black water stretched into oblivion. To the left, the endless coastline unrolled like a frayed white ribbon. The muscles in his lower back ached from the cranked angle of Grommel's grip and, still, nothing. Not one fucking clue to where his father had holed up underground.

Rhys dug his thumb and index finger into his eye sockets to clear the crusty residue from his lashes. Christ, they were completely screwed unless they somehow stumbled across a miracle. No matter how hard they looked, this was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Dropping his hand, he tipped his head side to side to stretch his neck, letting his eyes stay closed for a few seconds of rest. After staring at the same god damned wall for so long, everything was blurry anyway. Coupled with the fading light, his vision wasn't doing him a whole hell of a lot of good.

He paused. Now there was a thought. Maybe his blurry vision wasn't the problem. Maybe the problem was he'd been using the wrong sense from the start.



Faedrah had called the tomb a crystal crypt. Since quartz was a mineral... He jerked.

Fuckin-ay, he had a sixth sense at his disposal.

Lowering his chin to his chest, he envisioned a wide beam shooting from his mind, a searchlight tuned in on the mineral composition of quartz. The screen behind his eyelids remained an empty slate, but he tried again, widening his focus just like Fandorn had taught him.

Amethyst...citrine...diamond... The nerves along the back of his head lit up like a Christmas tree, and he grunted. Typical. Leo was the only one with balls big enough to encase himself in the hardest, most expensive substance known to man. Not that it mattered. Now that Rhys had found him, the miserable son of a bitch was done.

Jamming his index finger and thumb into his mouth, he blew a piercing whistle. The tomb was half a mile behind them. Maybe less.

The Dreggs wheeled around and he circled his fist in the air before waving everyone back the way they'd come. Squinting into the increasing darkness, he followed the radar blip in his head, then growled and smacked his fist against his thigh as the route dead-ended straight into the cliffs. Not that he'd expected a welcome mat and doorbell, but *come on!*

He blew another quick whistle to snag Fandorn's attention and jabbed a finger toward the area. "Light it up!"

An orb of wizard's fire expanded in the wizard's hands and streaked across the sky. Rhys blinked to clear the iridescent trail imprinted on his vision as the ball exploded and crackled like a fourth of July firework against the white rock.

Movement caught the corner of his eye, and he gripped Grommel's wrist, leaning into the turn as the Dregg veered left. The heavy beat of its wings stirred the air as they closed in, whooshing like the huge bellows inside the smithy. Inching along the cliffs, Rhys cocked a brow as a set of worn, uneven steps appeared carved in the stone, leading smack-dab to a wide flat ledge. The opening to the crypt sparkled and glinted in the fading light, hidden inside an outcropping that jutted toward the water and curled in on itself like a set of gnarled fingers.

That sneaky bastard. Leo had created the perfect optional illusion to camouflage the entrance.

Rhys scanned the terrain for whatever could've caused the movement, but came up empty. Most likely, it had been some sort of animal, startled by Fandorn's fire. And with night approaching, it was best everyone come in for a landing before risking a broken arm or leg in the process. "Set me down."

The gravity under his boots was every bit as welcome as the release of the strain on his back. Grommel peeled off into the night and Rhys stepped aside to make room for the rest of their party, his arms itching for Faedrah's soft curves, to have her pinned against him, safe and sound, in one piece.

The second her feet touched ground, she rushed forward, grabbed his cheeks and kissed him square on the mouth. "How ever did you find it?" She tossed her arms around his neck and hung on tight. "Goddesses' tits, I believed our cause was lost."

He smirked, opened a palm behind her and, exerting a push, caught a large yellow diamond as it snapped off a formation near the entrance and dropped into his palm. "Diamonds." She released him and he offered the gem to his muse. "Once I zeroed in on them, the place lit up like a neon sign in my head." Her brows crumpled in confusion, and he chuckled. "Like the lights with no flame in my world."

"Ah." She handed the diamond back to him and he hesitated before tossing it over his shoulder. Sure, a rock that size would be worth a pretty penny, but he wasn't about to decorate any part of Faedrah's body with something his father had created.

"Well..." He glanced around the group, all tugging on their clothes and checking their weapons were still secure. "Might as well get this party started."

Fandorn rapped the bottom of his staff against the ledge and the knot of wood at the top sizzled and snapped before settling to the bright glow of a halogen light bulb. Slipping the folded map out from under the rope tied around his waist, he shook it open and offered the parchment to Rhys. "After you, my boy."

Wonderful...but not surprising. Rhys waved off the sketch. He didn't need a piece of paper to tell him where to go. The route was still embedded in his brain, and his better option would be to watch every step. One slip, and he'd officially become the expendable crew member in this landing party.

With a nod toward the rest of the group, he faced the entrance and stepped inside.

The dense void of outer space swallowed him whole, until Fandorn entered behind Faedrah and the light from his staff refracted off the gems in the narrow passage like laser beams.

Rhys blinked to adjust to the bright light and then froze, frowning down at the crystalline dust coating the path in a layer of white powder. Fresh boot prints led off into the distance.

Shit, he'd been wrong. He leaned left then right, peering ahead into the dwindling shafts of light for sign any of movement. That hadn't been an animal scampering along the cliffs. Someone was in here with them. "We've got company. Everyone keep on your toes."

A string of silver chimes sang against the walls, pinging down the tunnel and vibrating the diamonds in a whining distortion. He slumped and pivoted toward the group—Vaighn, Faedrah, her mom, dad and Denmar all equipping themselves with some sort of weapon.

Really? Rhys lifted his brows. Why not just get an air horn? Then maybe they could all do the wave like the crowd at a football game.

Vaighn glanced over his shoulder at the king and queen before refocusing on Rhys. "What?"

"Nothing." *Idiot.* Rhys sighed and started them down the path. So much for the element of surprise.

Though the going was dicey in some spots—the precious rubble like casters under their boots made it easy to slip or twist an ankle—navigating the trail wasn't the biggest hurdle, even in the tight crevices where the breathing room got a little thin. The map in his head remained clear as day and, even better, the welcoming committee had laid out each step. There wasn't any guesswork involved as they approached the gaping chasm and Rhys eyed the glittering bridge comprised of one solid, mind-blowing diamond. While the surface was slicker than shit and measured barely half a foot wide, crossing it didn't even work up a sweat. He placed each boot on the print left in the diamond dust and told everyone else to play follow the leader.

The same was true once they'd all made it to the other side and had to shimmy beneath a monolithic overhang that protruded from the cave like a

fucking glacier. As long as the group mimicked his motions and stayed hot on his heels, his position as point man suited just fine.

The only pisser was, asking as much was fucking impossible. The diamonds were razor sharp, and—surprise, surprise—the entire place had evidently been constructed using some sort of spell. One wrong move...the snag of a cloak or the smallest misstep and someone invariably tipped sideways, slicing an arm or a leg or the inside of their palm as they braced themselves against the wall.

If that didn't twist his 'nads enough, the powdery dust was littered with needle-like slivers. If anyone so much as skimmed a section of exposed skin against any surface or, worse yet, inhaled too deep, the outcome could be like burying their face in fiberglass.

Rhys did what he could to make the route less hazardous, melting the biggest shards to a rounded nub or shoving them aside altogether, but just about the time the last of their crew inched through a section behind him, all his work disappeared.

It was like trekking through a living, breathing geode. One that enjoyed fucking with them every step of the way. Each gasp made his muscles tighter. Every curse cranked his anger another notch hotter. They needed to move fast and, at the same time, asking Faedrah's family to hurry up was like handing them a death sentence.

By the time he jumped down from the last tunnel into the central chamber, Rhys was coated in a layer of shimmering sand. It grated between his fingers and the bend inside his elbows, but he resisted brushing off his arms. The itchy grit would most likely turn his skin into hamburger.

The ledge around the perimeter sloped to a spike-infested pit, the diamonds gradually descending from white to yellow, then green, blue, violet and down to indigo—a lethal sunset that darkened to a midnight sky filled with glittering stars. Low in the center, stretched from the roof to the floor, a thick black column braced the cave like a faceted chrysalis. A bizarre white light pulsed inside, each thrum vibrating through his body, drilling into his head and pressing against his chest like a gong.

That black cocoon had to be where Gaelleod slept...the repeating flash his heartbeat...but not for long.

A quick scan of the dark corners for their absentee host, and Rhys turned to help Faedrah off the high ledge. He nearly popped a vessel at the

networked slashes peeling back the tight fit of her leather suit, each one showcasing a seeping red scrape running helter skelter along her arms and legs. Denmar toted a nice-sized gash over his leather eye patch and Vaighn's loose sleeves hung shredded down his arms.

Fuck, what a disaster. The only upside was, this far under, the temperature was cold enough to slow the bleeding, and all Rhys needed was five minutes, more or less. There was no need to get close. A few well-placed fissures, a hard shove and that column would tumble like a house of cards.

After that, he could use the biggest shards to skewer Gaelleod in his bed. Seemed appropriate, considering all they'd been through to get here.

"Let's do this and get the hell outta Dodge." Diamond bits rasped under his boots as Rhys pivoted toward the resonating pillar and Fandorn stepped to his side.

Rhys closed his eyes, centering his focus on the mineral components of the black diamond. The walls of the cave shuddered. A loud *crack* split the ceiling and diamonds rained down like jagged hail. Lifting his hands, he splayed his fingers and pressed harder, using the droning vibrations to burrow deeper, his mind's eye following the path of each zig-zagging fracture down to the source.

A creepy chuckle built in volume, bouncing around the ceiling like some corny Halloween soundtrack. The folds of Fandorn's robes whispered as he closed in and seized Rhys' wrist. "Cease."

He yanked back his power, lowering his hands. Rocks tumbled, shimmering stones clacking against each other as they bounced and rolled into the pit. Vaighn inched forward, sword drawn, followed by Denmar and the king.

Rhys turned one ear to the buzz of dead air and glanced around the walls. Evidently, whoever was in here with them had finally decided to make an appearance.

"Continue on this course, Wizard, and you shall die."

Rhys cocked a brow. Like hell. If he didn't continue *then* they would all die. He squinted into the shadowed crevices, waiting, but nothing moved. "The only people who are gonna die here today are Gaelleod and whoever you might be, unless you hightail it outta here PDQ."

Another laugh danced around the cave, filled with a calculating awareness that tingled the hair on Rhys' arms. "You are the son of my master, are you not? Born centuries afield and returned to this realm through the veil?"

Shit, who was this dude? And how the hell did he know anything about Rhys' life?

"And the lovely Faedrah. Daughter to the bastard king and his prophesied white queen. Heir apparent to the Austiere throne and Keeper of the Key. My, how you've grown into a reigning beauty."

*All right, that does it.* Every muscle in Rhys' body tightened. The dickwad had just crossed the line.

A deep growl built in the king's chest, and he stomped forward, white-knuckling the hilt of his sword like he was itching to take a swipe. "Show yourself, minion. Let us stare our enemy in the eye before the killing blow of our vengeance is delivered."

Genuine humor saturated the next evil laugh. "You speak of retribution for a kingdom so easily granted. A reign as king that should have never been yours." The flutter of a dingy cape caught the corner of Rhys' eye, and he snapped his head to the left. "The Austiere Kingdom is *mine*, brother!"

A hunch-backed figure lurched from behind the black tower of Leo's tomb. The king stumbled back a step. An ear-splitting clang reverberated against the walls as Vaighn dropped his sword. "F-father?"

Son of a bitch. Rhys sized up the misshapen lump of flesh previously known as Braedric Austiere. Faedrah had told him some of the story surrounding Vaighn's dad. The rest had been filled in by whispers he'd overheard at the castle. Christ, this was the last headache they needed. Evidently, Gaelleod wasn't the only zombie featured in this night of the living the dead.

"You insipid fools. You come here bearing grandiose plans to eradicate the evil from this realm, but you cannot do a thing!" The former reigning prince tossed one deformed hand to the side, the ragged ends of his cloak snagging on the floor as he limped forward. The puckered skin near his mouth twisted in a warped sneer. "Destroying Gaelleod will merely bring ruin to your precious kingdom."

What a fucking asshole. Rhys clamped down hard on the anger blistering the inside of his chest. That was nothing but a bald-faced lie. A last-ditch

attempt to mess with their heads so Braedric Austiere could reap whatever rewards Gaelleod had promised him in exchange for watching over his tomb. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Diamond dust fell from his matted hair to his shoulders as Faedrah’s uncle shook his head. “So much power and yet, still, you do not see.” He stopped before the pulsating tower, craning his neck to peer up at Rhys from his stooped position.

A chill that had nothing to do with the cool air settled over Rhys’ skin.

“You are from the future, son of Gaelleod. Slay your father now, and your life will cease to exist.”

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## Chapter 2

*What?* A snort grated the back of Rhys' throat. What the hell kind of bass-ackward logic was that? Next, the asshole would be trying to convince them the only way out of this diamond-infested Venus Flytrap was to hand over the key.

Smirking, Rhys crossed his arms. No wonder everyone hated this piece of royal shit. He glanced at Faedrah and rolled his eyes. Big man thought he was so smart, picking up on their worst fears and then twisting the facts around so they'd buy into his...

Jerking his focus back to Faedrah, Rhys sucked air as his stomach dove for his feet. Oh no. He clenched his jaw against the roar gathering like a volcanic eruption in his chest. Oh, *fuck*, no.

The thin crescent of tears hovering along her lower lashes...the subtle shift in her throat as she swallowed... God *dammit*. Unlocking his arms, he tried and failed to come up with some way to reject the undeniable truth in her eyes. There was no fucking way. What that motherfucker said *couldn't* be right. Not after all they'd been through. Not after coming this far.

"He lies!" Vaighn surged forward and the king grabbed his son's arm, stopping the prince from taking a header straight into the glittering pit of death.

"Long have I awaited the day when I could end the reign of your insurrections." Eyes wild, fists shaking, Vaighn scanned the shards as if searching for the safest route down to the lump of flesh that represented his dad. "I shall enjoy watching the life ebb from your eyes." He snatched his sword off the floor, bouncing forward on his boots like he was prepping for one helluva leap. "Come, father. Let the full length of my blade be sanctified by your blood."

Rhys' fingers curled in on themselves; his heart twisted. Jesus *Christ*. Talk about being in touch with that reality. An absentee father...one who'd



handed the people Vaighn cared for most in the world nothing but heartache and pain.

Expelling a slow breath, Rhys shook his head. Seemed he and Vaighn had more in common than he'd ever imagined.

"No, Vaighn." The king faced Faedrah's brother, turning his back toward Braedric to grip his adoptive son's shoulders. "This deformity you see is not your father. Braedric Austiere was lost to us long ago."

A muscle ticked in Vaighn's jaw, his lashes clumped together like they were wet. Rhys cleared his throat and dropped his focus to his feet. He'd known from the start Leo had done everything in his power to wreck Faedrah's family, but watching the outcome of that criminal behavior take shape firsthand? Shit, that pain was like a sharp knife to the gut.

"You are correct about one thing, my beloved Uncle." Vaighn placed his free hand on the king's arm, holding on so tight the tips of his fingers dug into the muscle. "Braedric Austiere is not my father. Not since the day you welcomed me as a son and equal in your family."

The king searched Vaighn's face, nodding. A single tear tumbled and tracked through the white dust on his cheek.

A rasping cackle shook Braedric's shoulders, and he swiped a wad of glistening spit off his chin. "Do not deceive yourself, Vaighn. Your loyal king does not consider you his equal. His daughter ascends to the throne, a seat which has always rightfully belonged to you. The king fears you, my son, and the threat of royal blood that flows through your veins. *My* blood, and the same which bequeaths you the authority of every sovereign throughout Austiere history."

"Shut it, ya right bloody bastard." Denmar lunged forward. "Or I shall jump this crevasse and skewer your black heart, myself."

Rhys glared at Braedric Austiere from under his brows. God, it would be so easy for him to kill the fucker right where he stood. Payback for all the hurt, the anger, the gut-fisting frustration of being ignored. But doing so wasn't his responsibility, and he'd be kicked to hell and back before stealing something so epically important from Vaighn.

The prince closed his eyes, a small smile in place as if what his dad had just said was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard. A last-ditch effort to get Vaighn to switch sides. "Yet, I shall have no rest, my soul shall attain no peace until the sins of my birthright have been avenged." Stepping back

from the king, he dropped his arm and nodded toward the mutilated man standing by the column. “I beg you, my king. Sanction this one last favor. Allow me to fulfill my duty as a member of the royal guard. Grant me release from the prison I’ve borne since childhood, and permit me the privilege of slaying our kingdom’s most treasonous enemy.”

Well, he got that right. Rhys raked both hands through his hair, linking his fingers across the back of his neck. Toting around the responsibility for a father’s actions, watching it destroy people’s lives day after day... That wasn’t living. Not really. Not when Vaighn had the ability to do something about it, and not when Rhys held that same power in his hands.

“I must refuse, my son.” The king shook his head. “I could not bear to los —”

“Let him go.” Rhys cocked a brow as the entire group pivoted in his direction. Of everyone living out this nightmare, he understood the most. Nothing...not the future or past...not the heartbreak of a broken promise or even the risk of losing his life mattered to Vaighn. Not when pitted against the safety of his family. Not when the chance to right every wrong he’d been forced to carry was only an arm’s length away.

The only thing he cared about was this opportunity to settle a very old score and how, in doing so, he’d be saving everyone he loved in the process.

Dropping his arms to his sides, Rhys huffed a sour breath against the bullshit hand they’d been dealt. He and Vaighn most of all. “It’s his life, Your Majesty. Vaighn’s a grown man and can make his own decisions.” A knot of resentment dug into the base of Rhys’ throat. Shit. If only the making decisions part was the worst of it. The final outcome is what really sucked ass. “Besides, if you deny him this opportunity, he’ll never forgive you.”

The king hesitated, the skin near his eyes crinkling as he squinted. His shoulders fell, and he pivoted toward his wife.

“Be careful, Vaighn.” Diamonds crunched as she strode forward and wrapped her arms around her son’s neck. “Though you follow your destiny, every moment we are parted your welfare will be foremost in our hearts.” His arms tightened around her waist as she patted his back. “We shall anxiously await your safe return.”

Faedrah hitched a breath and acidic bile percolated in Rhys' stomach. But he didn't dare look at her. One glance at the misery in her bottomless brown eyes and he wouldn't be able to think straight. And he needed every synapse firing at full capacity if he planned to logically think things through.

Suspending his hand over the pit, he concentrated on the minerals in the diamonds and smoothed a clear path straight down to the center. "Go get 'em, Your Highness. Just do me a favor and come back with the asshole's head on a pike."

A full grin lifted Vaighn's cheeks, and he nodded as he released the queen. "On my honor, Wizard." He turned and then paused, meeting Rhys' gaze a second time. "You have my sincerest thanks...brother."

Rhys' brow twitched and he nearly chuckled. *Well, I'll be damned...* The people in this world never ceased to surprise him.

"You shall fail." Braedric's tone was so off the cuff, so blasé, the statement came out as simple fact. "Gaelleod shall rise and restore my place as the rightful Austiere King, or you will kill him now and your young wizard shall cease to exist...and the line of the bastard gypsy king will fade as uselessly as it began." With the twirl of his cape, Braedric scuttled around the column and disappeared.

"But not before the steel of my blade removes your head from your shoulders." Vaighn took off like a bullet down the slick path, rounded the tower hot on his dad's tail and was gone.

Faedrah's family seemed to take a collective breath as if waiting for... hell, Rhys didn't know. The silence stretched, filled with nothing but the continuous drone of Gaelleod's heartbeat. A second later, the weight of five sets of eyes landed on Rhys. He lowered his gaze to the ground and kicked a green diamond over the ledge. It clacked and bounced against the jagged spikes, lodging between two white tines like an olive in a martini.

Christ, what he wouldn't give for a strong shot of alcohol right about now. Not that it would dull the numbing ache filling the spot where his heart used to be. Or make his decision any less painful.

Propping his hands on his hips, he shook his head. The upshot was, he and Faedrah were royally screwed. To leap back through time and confront Leo in the future was a fucking joke. That idea had suicide mission written all over it. In his world, Rhys' powers weren't a tenth of what they were in

this place. Besides, the two of them had already boxed two minutes in that ring and been KO'd in the process. No way in hell was he putting Faedrah through that again. Especially when a good chance existed that's exactly the way Leo would expect them to react. If nothing else was certain, sure as shit, he was counting on Rhys being weak, on running scared in the face of a threat just like he had as a kid.

The resentment of past hurts scrubbed at the scabs over his heart and, this time, Rhys didn't stuff the memories down deep. He let them burn through his chest, let them fuel his decision to move forward in the one way he already knew was best.

Getting rid of Leo here was the safer play. The *only* play they had left. In this time, there was nothing Leo could do to stop his death from unfolding. He was a festering wound waiting to be cauterized, and no one but Rhys had the ability to flatten the fucker where he rested. Besides, whatever potential threats Leo might think to levy on Faedrah once he woke up, however he might choose to blackmail her family, his reign of terror needed to stop. And it needed to stop now. Before his evil infected every square inch of her kingdom and there was no hope of ever bringing it back.

Rhys was the only one who could give her that gift, even if it meant he'd be leaving the only woman he'd ever loved.

He tipped his head back on his shoulders, cheeks expanding as he blew on harsh breath toward the ceiling. Still, he would be leaving her alive, with a family who loved her more than anything else in the world. He would be protecting the woman he loved, and would finally gain closure for all the beatings, all those moments his anger had nearly consumed him...the continuous stream of insults that had reduced him to a worthless pile of shit.

Was that tradeoff worth the loss of his life?

Shit, was there even a question?

Lowering his head, he faced his muse and smiled at the beautiful tears hovering along her lower lashes. "I love you," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

She stutter stepped forward. "No." The queen grasped her arm, but Faedrah shrugged her mother's hand off her body. "Rhys, look at me. You cannot do this!"

Turning toward the black crypt that encased his father, he gathered his power and thrust both hands toward the pulsating light. The ground

rumbled in warning. The walls shook as fissures cracked like lightning bolts down the inside of the cave.

“Rhys McEleod! Desist in this madness this instant!” The king bellowed off to his left, but Rhys was way ahead of him.

Gathering some loose shards off the floor with his mind, he jammed them into the cracks zipping down the outside of Leo’s tomb. They would brace the structure, but probably not for long.

“Get out now!” The tinkling of cascading rubble nearly drowned out his voice. The entire place splintered and sang like the deafening crash of a chandelier. “I’ll do my best to hold it until everyone’s clear!”

But, instead of shooing everyone for the exit like Rhys expected, Faedrah’s dad lurched forward and placed his hand on Rhys’ wrist. “Stop, my boy.”

What the hell was he doing? The king’s voice was calm, his face relaxed...everything about him the complete opposite to the chaos inside the cave. He pressed down until Rhys had no choice but to reel in the energy tingling through his fingers and lower his arms. “Your death this day is not the fate our Goddesses have planned for you.”

Rhys frowned, searching the king’s face for answers. Had the dude lost it? He should be whooping it up he’d finally gotten his wish. The asshole who’d stolen his daughter’s heart had decided to take one for the team.

“I have just lost one son.” King Caedmon placed a tight grip on Rhys’ shoulder. “I will not stand idly by and allow Gaelleod’s evil to deprive me of another.”

Wait... Rhys’ frown deepened to a scowl. What did he just say? He turned his head, carefully studying the king from the corner of his eye. Maybe Faedrah’s dad was pulling his leg. Or, the more obvious choice, he’d accidentally inhaled some diamond dust and it had fried his brain.

The king chuckled, and the warmth inside that sound reminded Rhys so much of Grady, the bitterness scoring a hole in the center of his chest slid up and settled into a hard knot at the base of his throat. He grunted, blinking at the moisture in his eyes.

“My daughter loves you and, for the first since your arrival, I believe her faith in you is soundly placed.” The king smiled over his shoulder at Faedrah’s watery gaze before facing Rhys a second time. “You were fully prepared to sacrifice your life to safeguard Faedrah and her future kingdom.

A king...a *father* could not ask for more from his daughter's betrothed. You have proven yourself worthy, my boy. I endorse your petition to be wed."

Whoa. Rhys stumbled back a step. Talk about turning on a dime.

He glanced at the surprise lifting Faedrah's brows before surveying the rest of her family, all their faces filled with acceptance, kindness, maybe a little fear over what he might do next. "But...what about—"

"Gaelleod has rested in this crypt for twenty passings of the seasons, my boy. To act in haste would seem a fruitless error in judgment." The king turned toward the black tower, his chin lowering as he scanned it from top to bottom. "A few days to strategize our next course would serve us well."

Rhys scratched his head, trying to process what had just happened. One second he was road kill and the next he was getting married. *Married?*

"I do not believe I have ever seen you quite so dumbfounded." King Caedmon pursed his lips like he was trying to curb a smile. "Without hesitation, you charge forth to eradicate the most perilous scourge the Austiere Kingdom has ever known, and yet now your tongue seems remarkably tied." He squinted. "Has the thought of joining your life with that of my daughter's left you offended?"

Shit. That was the thing about this world. Everything was either black or white. There was no gray area in relationships, especially where the king's daughter was concerned.

"No, no." Rhys ran a hand along the scruff on his cheek. Either way, one thing was for sure. Standing here like a dumbass with nothing to say was a mistake of epic stupidity. "Truth is, I'm not sure how Faedrah feels about all this. I've never asked her if she'd consider spending the rest of her life with me."

The king's brows shot toward his hairline, lips turned down in a shrewd frown. "Well then, perchance you should." He cleared his throat and leaned close. "Yet I caution you to choose your words wisely. They may be the last you are granted without interruption."

"Ha!" The queen propped a hand on her hip. "Curb your tongue, my love. Or an interruption of words may be the least of your worries."

Rhys shared a quiet chuckle with the king. His gaze landed on Faedrah, and he searched her eyes, trying to envision a life without her. Yeah, that wasn't happening. Not if he had any say in their future—their past—whatever the hell this was. It didn't matter. Whether they landed in her

world or his, he loved her. Hell, he'd loved her since before he even knew she truly existed. Now that her dad had finally accepted their connection at face value, they could move forward together no matter where they were.

So, married. To Faedrah. The thought spread like a warm blanket over his chest. Fuck, yeah, he wanted to marry her. More than anything else he'd ever done.

"What do you say, Princess?" He smirked. "Wanna get hitched?"

Her footsteps crunched as she neared, his arms open and waiting to pull her close, to cinch her sweet curves against him while his tongue dove inside to sample her clean taste again and again.

Her arm swung back, and his chin snapped to the right as pain exploded through his cheek. The loud smack echoed off the walls, followed by the queen's gasp.

Rhys slowly turned back to his muse, but Faedrah was already halfway to the exit. She jammed a boot into a crack near the floor and climbed through the opening.

The king sputtered, his head rolled back on his shoulders and his booming laughter drowned out the pulsing of Galleod's heart. His shoulders bounced and he shook his head as a few more chuckles worked the muscles of his throat.

Ha, ha, fucking hilarious. Rhys scrubbed a hand along his jaw. Okay, that response had to be a resounding *no*.

"Goddesses tits, my boy!" The king grinned, slapping a hand on Rhys' shoulder. "I daresay you have met your match." Eyes sparkling with mischief, he tugged Rhys into a rough one-armed hug, lifting his other hand toward his wife. "Indeed, I've made the right choice. This marriage shall serve them both well."

\* \* \*

The man's head was filled with horse dung if he assumed for *one heartbeat* she would bind her life to his in matrimony.

Faedrah marched along the serrated spikes of the diamond encrusted passageway, her footfalls determined though the light from Fandorn's staff faded at her back. Why ever would she do something so incredibly daft? A few more strides and the eerie glow of deep gloaming saturated the tunnel.

So Rhys could disregard her the moment of his choosing? So he could cast himself into oblivion and leave her heartbroken and inconsolable, a withering rose seated upon the Austiere throne?

“Faedrah!”

If he truly believed she would willingly consent to such foolishness, he could kiss her barren backside!

The channel narrowed and she cautiously braced her palm on to the wall to steady her balance. Nights beyond numbering she had fought Gaelleod’s cruel incursion of her dreams only to end dying upon the sharp edge of his dagger. Yet Rhys all but served himself upon a silver platter to fulfill the dark lord’s most coveted schemes.

Were those the actions of a man whose heart’s desire was to live out his days at her side? She would think not!

“Faedrah, stop! Just wait a second. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

As if he cared one way or the other. She spun to face him, whipping a short sword from the baldric at her back. A flashing arc of silver spliced the air as she leveled the deadly tip at his chest. “You wish to die? You crave an ending to our quest?”

Pulling up short, he lifted both hands in a show of surrender. “All right. I get you’re pissed, but let’s put the sword down, okay?”

Absurd. As if the silver of her blade was of any more threat to him than the down of a feather. Yet she would drive her point home with whatever tools were at her disposal. “Do not order me about as if one thought to my wellbeing is foremost in your mind.” Stepping forward, she jabbed the tip of her blade into his chest. A soft chime vibrated against the crystalline walls, traveling the length of the silver into her hand. “You’ve proven well enough my happiness is not the least of your concerns.”

He frowned, withdrawing a step as she prodded and poked. “What the hell are you talking about? Your happiness *is* important to me.”

Ha! Twice since their arrival in her realm he had presented himself for execution. Perchance his third attempt would be just the charm. “Then you think me blind? An addle-brained fool?”

“Of *course* not!” Anger glinted in his eyes, sparking with the same verdant starlight as the green diamonds cluttered around their feet. “I just asked you to marry me, for Christ’s sake. Not sure about this world, but in mine that question pretty much defines love and respect.”



“And yet, at every turn you seek to present Gaelleod the achievement of his goals.” She backed him against the wall, and irritation plucked at her nerves as the diamonds behind him melded to a slick sheet of glass. Threatening a wizard of his means was an exercise in futility. Particularly in lieu of his persistent need to do himself in. “Above all, your father stands to gain the exact fulfillment of his desires should your life cease to exist.”

“Oh, now hold up just a second. You got that backwards.” Encircling her blade in his bare hand, he forced the weapon down between them. “If I die, Leo gets nothing. He needs my body, Faedrah. If I take it away, his plans aren’t worth shit.”

A rueful smile tugged one side of her lips, and she huffed, releasing the hilt of her sword. Let him have her blade. ’Twas of no use to her if he did not see her point. “As are mine, my love. As are mine.”

Backing away from him, she searched his gaze. Did he presume for one moment she did not know? That she had not lived and breathed his same wretched bitterness through Vaighn? “And watching you destroy yourself? Bearing witness to the anguish such deeds would cause in those who hold you most dear? Would that not present Gaelleod the ultimate pinnacle of his desires?”

Rhys hesitated, his fingers whitening around the circumference of her blade.

“Ten years I stood silent while Vaighn struggled to live down the transgressions of his father. Ten years borne of insurrections which were not rightfully his.” Her voice caught and she gritted her teeth against the misery bearing down upon her chest. “Vaighn’s father did not *leave*. His evil deeds did not disappear into the ether. Braedric Austiere has been with his son every day since the moment of Vaighn’s birth...controlling his actions, determining his fate, altering Vaighn’s life into something ’twas never meant to be.”

Jabbing her finger at the ground, she locked her knees against the impulse to reclaim the distance between them. She refused to allow her beloved to suffer Vaighn’s fate. There had been enough misplaced guilt. Enough misery over past hurts. Shouldering such hopeless duties would serve neither of them any good. “I will not have it from the man who binds his life to mine. I will *not*.”

But, perchance, her petition came too late. She eased back another step, shaking her head. “Gaelleod controls you even now, my love. You hold within your beautiful, loyal heart the ability to steal from him everything he craves, yet you freely offer him your life as if everything it entails is his just reward.”

The tension eased from Rhys’ jaw. His shoulders lowered, and the anger in his gaze transformed into awareness a scant moment before his eyes slipped closed.

“If you truly despise him as you say you do, there would be no sweeter revenge than to persevere. Become the antithesis of all that Gaelleod embodies. Best him on *our* terms, and accept the blessings you’ve been granted by living on in happiness and peace.”

Rhys lowered his head and, in the silence which ensued, three heavy heartbeats pulsed in Faedrah’s ears. He must accept she had spoken true or every moment they shared moving forward would be tainted with bitterness and loss.

She would not permit their life together to start in such a way. Braedric... Gaelleod...the evil plaguing her kingdom had already overshadowed the joy bestowed upon her brother. She would not stand idly by and let its filthy taint go unchecked.

“God dammit.” Rhys’ chest rose with a deep intake of breath. He glanced down at his hand and turned the sword as if, for the first, realizing he held it in his fingers. His focus lingered along the blade before he lifted his gaze to hers. “I never saw it that way.”

“Indeed.” She crossed her arms, arching a shrewd brow. Yet the mystery remained how he planned to proceed moving forward. “And now that you do?”

A grunt bounced his shoulders and he flipped the sword, offering the hilt in her direction. “Whatever we decide, I’m gonna do my best to give Leo hell. I choose to fight...and live.”

Thank the nine. She slumped as the weight of her declaration eased from her shoulders. Her heart would have certainly been lost had he not consented, though chances were high they would have hounded each other until some or another settlement had been reached.

She grasped the hilt of her sword, casting a gentle smile toward the man she loved. Yet instead of releasing the weapon, he jerked her close, slipped

one arm about her waist and hauled her to his chest.

“So, now that we got that worked out, you gonna answer my question?” The fingers of his other hand dove into her hair, and he angled her head as if he longed for the taste of her lips.

The whisper of his breath spread a seductive warmth through her body. A firm wall of muscle met her stomach as she relaxed inside the tight band of his arm. He widened his stance to cradle her hips and her pulse spiked, his palm easing down to cup her bottom and apply a generous squeeze.

An edgy impatience mounted between them, their bodies swaying as they perched on the edge of a kiss. She slid her arm about his shoulders to pull him down to her lips, but he would not relent. Not until the words he hungered for had been formed by her tongue.

His brow twitched, and she bit down hard on her bottom lip. Only one response would grant her release from this desperate need and, to keep him with her, she would gladly submit. No danger in either world compared to agony she faced of forging ahead without him, and she closed her eyes to await the moment they would finally be joined in a kiss.

“I accept.”

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## Chapter 3

Faedrah's eyes slipped closed as the strength of her mother's embrace tightened about her shoulders. The unbound sheets of the queen's white tresses slid glossy and sleek beneath her palm, and Faedrah curled her fingers in their silky texture, hugging her mother back just as fierce. The slightest tip of her head and the scent of night blooming jasmine filled her senses, mixed with subtle warmth and the familiar perfume of her mother's skin.

"Oh, that the Goddesses had granted us another way."

The strike of her father's boot heels continued their nervous pace under her mother's bare whisper, and Faedrah squeezed her eyelids to thwart the budding threat of her tears. Chances were high, once her sorrow arrived, it would not cease, and she would not allow herself to assume the worst, regardless of the grim circumstances she and Rhys were about to face.

"The future has not yet been set. Let us not despair an outcome Rhys and I will strive our utmost to avoid."

However much they had struggled to reject the truth...no matter the wrath of her father's anger or Fandorn's pursuits to aid in their quest, none could deny the path before them had been set.

She and Rhys had been offered no other choice but to return to his world and battle Galleod in the future.

Yet, with this decision, a bleak despondency had settled about them like an unshakable shroud. 'Twas no guarantee the strength of Rhys' powers would follow him through to his world and, in taking such a leap, the likelihood Faedrah and Rhys would never return had continued to grow thick and foreboding in the air.

Her father's footsteps ceased, and despite the hopelessness Faedrah warred to keep from invading her heart, a gentle smile graced her lips as she envisioned the way he habitually raked his hair back from his brow. "Can

we not delay this leave-taking but a day or two longer? Perchance, given more time, we can ferret out a more optimistic course.”

With the parting of a reassuring squeeze, Faedrah released her mother and withdrew a pace to find the king standing across the throne room, facing the vibrant magenta sky glorifying Helios’ descent through an open stained-glass window.

Several days had passed since their sojourn to Gaelleod’s crypt, and though they’d discussed the topic at length, tarrying long into the night, nary an alternative had made itself known.

She neared the window and slipped her hand around the king’s upper arm, leaning the side of her head against his shoulder. “To what end, father? We have delayed long enough and at our kingdom’s expense.”

Beneath the splendor of the radiant sky, the Austiere fields lay blackened beyond recognition. Leafless trees reached skyward amid tendrils of acrid smoke, their putrid odor wafting from fissures rent upon the barren ground. The once thriving forest beyond had altered to a hard black slash, vacant of all life save whatever vile spawn sought sanctuary in Gaelleod’s malicious fog.

“We cannot allow the dark lord’s plague to run rampant throughout the entirety of our lands.” Faedrah brought her other hand to her chest and fisted the golden key in her fingers. Lifting her head, she turned to better study the profile of her father’s face. Had it truly been less than a fortnight ago she had longed for escape? To cast aside his concerns in lieu of seeking her fate?

What a fool she had been.

Regret built as a heated weight at the base of her throat, and she quickly snapped her focus back to the inhospitable view. What a silly, spoiled little girl. How could she have ever regarded this white castle perched high atop the sprawling mountains as a prison? What manner of discourteous entitlement had she harbored to imagine her privileged life as a curse? If now given the choice, she would have happily agreed to remain sheltered within the safe haven of her parents’ home.

Unfurling her fingers, she stared down at the mysterious treasure cradled in the center of her palm. She’d once craved the forbidden fruits of the key’s enigmatic secrets and, in doing so, had opened a doorway leading to her fated half. Though her life would be lost without him, at what cost had

she made such an impetuous decision? Only to become the figurehead guiding those she loved to heartache and ruin? To watch her kingdom fall to its knees before an enemy of invincible doom?

She had longed to be the savior of her people and, instead, she had led them straight into Gaelleod's inescapable trap.

"Majesties. I've found something."

Faedrah turned from the window, as did her father, to find Fandorn entering the throne room through a side door. His footfalls were hurried, his gray robes trailing behind him, his hair a wild mass of tangles about his head. He carried a large leather-bound tome in both hands and brought it to a decorative table along the wall, dropping it with a resounding bang. "Look here."

The binding crackled with age as he flipped to the center, and Faedrah hastened to close the distance as he aimed a rigid finger at an illustration bound on the right-hand side. "Have you seen this dagger, my child?"

The queen strode up behind her, along with her father and Rhys as Faedrah stared, unblinking, at the page. Goat-headed forms writhed in ecstasy down either side of the diagram and, in the middle, a large silver blade dripped crimson with blood, an inverted pentagram cast in gold upon the hilt.

'Twas the same curved blade she'd seen in her nightly visions...and the same Gaelleod had cruelly plunged into her beloved's chest.

Faedrah closed her eyes against the horrifying reminder and spun away. "Indeed. Yet, I've not the occasion to view it firsthand." Blinking, she turned back to the table and locked on to Rhys, and her heart rebelled as an anguished understanding filled his gaze. "'Twas shown to me in a dream. You bring us the dagger Gaelleod employs to complete his rite of transformation."

The king muttered a curse as the queen's shoulders fell. She peeked askance at Rhys before addressing the aged wizard. "What does this mean, Fandorn? Have you found its location?"

"I have not, my queen." One of the wizard's bushy eyebrows rose, though he kept his attention pinned to Faedrah, and she shivered as a dire warning tempered his words. "I fear this instrument of the dark lord's vile incantations has been secreted far outside our reach." He reached down with one hand, and dust wafted into the air as he slammed the cover,

shuttering the image from view. “Gaelleod’s knife contains a dark magic which spans far beyond the limits of our kingdom, and is the only blade promised to withhold the power and capacity to kill him.”

Faedrah snapped her focus to Rhys. He’d withdrawn to pace before the open armoire, the veil aglow with shimmering light, the dark-blue curtain crumpled aside in preparation for their leap. As if sensing her perusal, he stopped and met her gaze, and her heart skittered forward at the unyielding determination etched upon his face. “Well, then, we’d damn well better go find it. Based on Faedrah’s dreams, I’m guessing the bastard’s got it with him in the future.”

She would gladly offer her life in payment to safeguard those she loved, a sacrifice to secure the wellbeing of her kingdom and, deep within his eyes, she knew. Rhys, as well, was prepared to take what necessary steps to protect her people.

Yet, to pilfer the treasure Gaelleod valued above all other? To steal inside his lair and slaughter him with the very object meant to secure his rule? A harsh breath left her lips over the outcome of such appalling odds.

Perchance, if she and Rhys stayed true...if they stood united, their hearts forged by the purest of intentions, all would not be lost.

She had to believe as much. No other reassurances remained.

His chin lowered the slightest degree as he searched her face. Torchlight from the sconces set about the room winked off the silver vambraces encasing his forearms. Magic ignited to spark and sizzle along his hands. “Our time together isn’t over, Faedrah. Not by a long shot.”

A small smile came unbidden to her lips, and she nodded. “I know, my heart.” Still, the question remained. How many passings of Helios’ bright face were left them? How many tender moments before their time of reckoning drew nigh? “And there is much yet to be done.”

She stepped toward the armoire, but was waylaid as the king’s large hand grasped her shoulder. He spun her to face him and a breath left her throat as her father whisked her into his arms. “You *shall* return to us, daughter.” Cupping her head to the hard wall of his chest, he centered her cheek over the steady beat of his heart. “Swear it to me now. Swear to me you will return unharmed or I fear I shall order you remain in this realm.”

Wrapping one arm about his waist, she fisted the soft folds of his shirt. “I shall do my utmost to try, P’pa.”

His muscles tensed beneath her palm. Holding her tight, he placed a firm kiss upon the top of her brow and then thrust her away, his footfalls brisk as he crossed the room for his gilded throne.

Stamping down the urge to follow and request one last embrace, Faedrah pivoted back to her mother. The queen offered her hand, and Faedrah clutched it in hers as they joined Rhys before the armoire.

“No mother has ever been more proud, than I.” The queen grasped Rhys’ fingers, pausing a moment before relinquishing her hold on Faedrah and linking her hand with that of her betrothed. “The king and I owe you an unpayable debt. We love you both.”

Placing a tender kiss upon Faedrah’s cheek, the queen drew the curtain, shuttering Faedrah and Rhys within the magic of the veil. The strike of the queen’s footfalls faded against the high ceiling as she crossed the room.

Silence droned in Faedrah’s ears, at odds with the turmoil cascading through her heart. A breath stayed lodged within her chest as she lifted her gaze to the mirror.

Dim light cast the majority of the opposite room into shadow. Yet still, the corner end of a low, well-appointed sleeping pallet rested silently within a shaft of moonlight. A large, woven reed mat, much like those commissioned for use in the sparring room, lay centered upon a glossy hardwood floor. Two thick dressing gowns had been spread atop the blankets, awaiting their need, and Faedrah took heart her uncles had followed through on their promise to keep the veil well within the safety of their reach.

Rhys brought the back of her hand to his lips, the scruff of his beard prickling her skin. “You sure about this, Princess? It’s still not too late to change your mind.”

So that Gaelleod could reign victorious? So he could torment her kingdom throughout a horde of unending years?

Straightening her shoulders, she darted a firm glance at her betrothed. “Quite.”

A curt nod, and he firmed his grip on her hand. “Whenever you’re ready, then. I’ll follow your lead.”

With a parting peek toward the heavy curtain at her back, Faedrah filled her lungs to their capacity and they leapt.



“Are you kidding me?” Wizard Oliver smacked his palm to his forehead, crinkling the diminutive piece of parchment pinned to the lapel of his silk sleeping shirt. “Rhys killing Gaelleod equals suicide?” He sighed and rubbed at a spot between his brows. “This time travel business is such a pain in the ass. I swear to God, there isn’t enough wine in the world.”

“Psst.” Sir Jon drew Faedrah’s attention with soft hiss, nodding in Rhys’ direction. “What’s he doing?”

She glanced to where her beloved perched beside her upon the padded edge of a wicker settee and her nails instinctively dug into the stiff, woven reeds of the armrest. A single silver spoon lay before him on the low table, unchanged in form or function, Rhys’ eyes darting along the length as if the utensil withheld the secrets to the cosmos and all it contained.

Shaking her head at Sir Jon, she forestalled the urge to run her palm down the hunched tension of Rhys’ back and placed a silencing finger to her lips. Since the moment their unceremonious tumble through the veil had announced their arrival, her beloved had been like a man possessed. First waylaying all greetings in favor of demanding the use of a black writing instrument so he could scrawl the sigil of his signature upon every wall of her uncles’ island abode. Insisting no words pass between them until he’d scribbled that same protective badge upon slips of paper and commanded each person to affix them to their attire.

Ordering Sir Jon to bring him the nearest piece of silver so Rhys could disappear inside his mind and try to ascertain what, if any, residual powers had accompanied him into this realm.

Even as the witch, Violet, and Sir Todd had stumbled sleepy-eyed into the large, airy common area of her uncles’ home, Rhys’ had remained distant, his gaze devoid of the dangerous passion Faedrah had come to know and love. Though he’d cast an unruly glare toward the interruption and, as if seeing them for the first time, scowled toward the spotless glass panes doubling as the outer walls of the structure, once Sir Todd and Violet had found their seats, Rhys had mentally vacated the room.

The last item on Faedrah’s agenda was to interrupt her beloved’s meditations.

A dubious lift of his brows, and her dark-haired uncle levered up from his cross-legged position at Wizard Oliver’s feet. “Wine it is, then. As much as we can drink.” He padded to the far wall, the bottom edge of his loose

cotton trousers flopping atop his bare feet, swung open a low wooden cabinet and selected a bottle from the latticed shelf. “And in case anyone cares, I’m cracking open the good stuff.”

Rhys muttered a curse; his gaze narrowed. A frustrated breath heaved his shoulders, and Faedrah clamped her jaw tight as he raked a hand through his hair.

The pop of a cork, and crystal chimed as Sir Jon slipped the stems of two wineglasses from an overhanging rack. After conveying his burdens to the table, he took a circuitous path back round to the cupboard and used both hands to bring forth four additional glass goblets.

Faedrah studied the cursive F etched into the sides of the delicate stemware as Sir Jon set about doling out the libation. Mayhap her uncle was right and a draught of strong wine would do them all good...particularly given the horns of her current dilemma.

Whilst she welcomed her beloved’s foresight in ensuring Gaelleod be kept unawares of their arrival...and the added benefit inherent in Rhys’ signature guaranteed his father would be powerless to hone in on the proximity of the key...unease had grown to the weight of a millstone around her neck. One that continuously increased in circumference and thickness the longer she occupied her seat.

Precious time had passed as her beloved stared, unspeaking, at the silver spoon resting upon her uncles’ table, and frustration all but simmered in the air about him as the utensil transformed not one bit. Moreover, with his distraction, the telling of their excursion to Gaelleod’s crystal crypt had been left to her, and she worried her explanations over the cause behind their subsequent failure had been somewhat marred in translation.

“So, from what I’m hearing, the bastard’s got you by the shorthairs.”

“Indeed.” She nodded at Sir Todd, the tension in her shoulders slackening a degree. Thank the nine, ’twould seem her account of their time in her world had carried the clarity she intended. “Our hair is decidedly short. Razor-shorn, in fact, and we are in sore need of any succor you may see fit to offer us. We must do our utmost to mask our incursion of Gaelleod’s domain if we withstand one chance at delivering the strike of our killing blow.”

“Hold on a second.” Wizard Oliver sprang forward in his seat, a sharp finger aimed at the plush rug tickling the soles of her feet. “What are you

saying? Since you can't do away with Leo in your world, the two of you are planning head to over to his place to kill him in this one?"

"That's it precisely." Faedrah paused, studying the array of stunned faces staring back at her as Sir Jon offered her a glass of claret.

The witch Violet paled, tucking her feet beneath the glowing screen propped open atop her thighs, the elongated width of her seat shrinking her stature to that of a dormouse. Sir Todd lifted his brows and expelled a short puff of air.

Rhys grumbled and shook his head, though his attention never wavered from his labors.

Faedrah frowned. "I fail to see the reasoning behind your hesitation. Does not your world wish to be rid of the nefarious nature of Gaelleod's evil deeds?"

"Well, of course we do, sweetie." Violet reached across the wide arm of her chair to apply a supportive squeeze to Faedrah's wrist. "But in our world, this little discussion we're having is known as pre-mediated murder. We have laws against it, especially since we can't prove Leo McEleod has done anything wrong."

Wizard Oliver fell back in his chair, eyeing the level in his glass as Sir Jon dispensed him a measure of wine. "There's no way in hell any of us are walking into Leo McEleod's house." Reaching out with one finger, he pressed the bottleneck down until the red liquid had glugged to the rim. "Not to mention what could happen if you and Rhys are actually successful. Heaven forbid, you're caught and the motive gets out. If the case went to court, any sane jury would lock you in the loony bin and throw away the key." He snatched the glass from his lover and downed half the contents in one breath-stealing swallow.

"The operative word here being *if*." Sir Todd squinted, one arm lying crosswise atop the thin cotton shirt encompassing the girth of his protruding belly, the other hand stroking two long, slender braids plaited into the wiry beard on either side of his lower lip.

"Todd." Violet shot a warning glower at her mountainous other half. "Get serious. If Faedrah and Rhys went anywhere near Leo, there would be witnesses. The evidence against them would be stacked from here to Mars. We all know the guy has put the screws to half the Chicago police force. Not to mention the way he's beefed up security ever since—"

With an abrupt jerk of her shoulders, she reigned in her tongue, and dread slid like an oily serpent through Faedrah's stomach as the witch cast an uneasy glance toward the top of Rhys' head.

"Ever since *what* has happened?" Edging forward on the settee, Faedrah set her wineglass upon the table. Full disclosure to any events that had passed whilst she and Rhys were absent from this realm was paramount. Hedging for the sake of civility was a luxury none of them could afford to take.

Sighing, Violet shook her head and tapped a series of lettered squares on the mystical portal balanced upon her lap. She spun the device and lifted it to the left arm of her chair, offering Faedrah full view of the screen. "Read it and weep."

Faedrah's brows shot up the same distance her heart plummeted in her chest. The glowing display depicted a picture of Rhys' beloved Grady, smiling with as much warmth and acceptance as the first time Faedrah had looked upon the butler's face. Yet the element which sent alarm tingling through the hair at her nape, was the accompanying image of a hale and hearty Leo McEleod, shown slightly lower inside the screen and to the right.

She peeked askance at Rhys before her snarl of outrage had the chance to escape. 'Twould seem her love had been correct in his assumptions regarding the black plague invading her kingdom, the same as he'd rightly deduced Gaelleod's connection to the key. Whilst the beauty of her lands all but withered and faded, Leo McEleod had reaped the rewards. He'd grown stronger in this world, revived. The strength of her kingdom had been stolen in exchange to reverse the deterioration of his bodily form.

She gathered the apparatus from the arm of Violet's chair to better read the small lettering surrounding Grady's likeness, her grip growing tighter about the frame with each passing of the vile lies unfurling before her eyes.

Though the recanting did its fair part in relating the truth of Grady's death, the details behind his murder had been skewed to a story of infuriating madness. The broken glass found scattered around his body, followed by her and Rhys' fateful disappearance, put the onus of culpability squarely on Rhys' shoulders.

Lifting her eyes from the screen, Faedrah firmed her jaw. Gaelleod had named Rhys as Grady's executioner, stating the horror over Rhys' violent

outburst at the McEleod estate had been too much for Grady's age-worn heart to bear. In the days since, Leo McEleod had employed a regiment of mercenaries on par with that of the royal guard to safeguard his immoral dealings, and requested any news of Faedrah and Rhys' whereabouts be sought by the authorities with persistence.

She closed her eyes. How like Galleod to twist the events to better suit his needs. How cunning to play the victim, subverting his wickedness in trade for placing the blame at his son's feet. Yet this distortion of the facts did not hinder her desire to rid both worlds of the dark lord's degraded mongering. If anything, it only heightened the bitter tang of hatred which thickened and soured upon her tongue.

"Heed my words well." She blinked and settled her gaze upon each member of their entourage, in turn. "Rhys and I go forth with the blessings of Austiere's devoted king and queen. Regardless of the dangers inherent in our task, neither he nor I shall renounce this last chance we've been given to be rid of Galleod's infestation. By the blessed tears of the nine, we shall endeavor until we are no longer able, and concede what end the goddesses have preordained as our fate."

She offered the all-seeing portal back to the witch. "Help us or not, our goal here remains the same." Yet, with this exchange of hands, as Violet met Faedrah's gaze, a quiet understanding passed between them, and Faedrah swallowed hard at the telltale breaking of her heart.

What that she could save her friends the weariness of such a troubling decision. What that she could turn the tide and spare them all this perilous harbinger they faced.

Not one soul in either realm should be made to bear the burden of her responsibilities. Least of all, the loyal companions she'd called upon in this room. "But, be it known, we shall respect whatever verdict you choose to offer, and accept with grace and thanks the aid you've granted us thus far."

"Well, hell." With a roll of his eyes, Wizard Oliver tossed his head. "When you put it that way, how are we supposed to say no?" He muttered a curse before lifting his wineglass in her direction. "Of course, we'll do whatever we can to help you. For God's sake, doll, you should know that by now."

She smiled softly and nodded, adoration for her uncle growing stronger with each beat of her heart.

“Yay!” Jon grinned, softly clapping his hands. “I’ll call ahead and make sure the plane is fueled and ready to go.” He popped to his feet. “Oh, and we’ll need something to wear.” He frowned, tapping a finger against his lips. “What *does* one wear to stop the apocalypse?”

“I’ll handle communications.” Violet’s fingers flew across the black board on her lap and she tapped once, twice, thrice as her focus darted across the screen. “Ollie, I’m gonna need your credit card. We need to set up a base of operations. Someplace deep underground.”

Faedrah eased back in her seat, shaking her head. Now that they’d consented to join the campaign, ’twould seem her friends’ enthusiasm had formed a mind of its own.

“Leave that to me.” Sir Todd’s gravel-laden voice cut through her musings as he slapped his hands against the armrests and stood, and Faedrah squinted at the colorful runes encasing his forearms as the first inklings of an idea sprang to mind. “Several of the boys have been grumbling for a while now it’s been too quiet. I’ll place a few calls, put out the word whoever’s interested in raisin’ a little hell should meet us at the bar.”

Faedrah smiled, nodding her thanks. ’Twould seem she’d been correct in her assumptions regarding Sir Todd’s allegiance to a steel-horsed *gens d’armes*. Their support in facing Gaelleod would provide an added benefit, indeed.

“Make sure they know how to keep their mouths shut.”

Everyone froze; Sir Jon’s eyes enlarged to the size of saucers.

A slow swivel of her head, and Faedrah’s jaw came unhinged as Rhys held up the silver spoon, twisted and bent beyond recognition. She placed a hand atop her chest in stunned amazement, yet her joy over her beloved’s accomplishment wilted as quickly as it had bloomed.

Something untoward glinted in Rhys’ eyes. A troubling storm which bespoke his anxious discomfort.

Faedrah held a breath, biting her bottom lip.

A twitch of Rhys’ brow, and the light chime of silver echoed against the rafters as he tossed the warped utensil to the table. He collapsed against the settee and his chest rose with a heavy sigh. Raking both hands through his hair, he linked his fingers across the back of his neck. “Shit, Faedrah. That took everything I got in me. Looks like we’re in for one helluva fight.”



## Chapter 4

Faedrah lifted her chin as the door hasp slipped into the lock with a soft *click*, yet she did not turn her gaze from the serene view spread out before her like a regal tapestry. A fair breeze fluttered the filmy drapes framing the open glass doors of the bedchamber, and centered just above the faint, dark line of the inky horizon, Selene dipped her toes into the sea. The moon goddess' pearlescent face shown down upon the black water. The cascade of her milky white tresses rode the undulating waves, frothing and hissing as they neared. And as Faedrah stood listening, silently waiting, she could've sworn the barest hint of Selene's playful laughter frolicked through the thin, long-necked trees.

The soft cadence of Rhys' footsteps neared as the wash of the tide met the sandy shoreline in its eternal kiss. The melodious ring of fine crystal caressed the quiet as he set their wineglasses upon the rolled-top writing desk on her left.

Dawn would break soon and, with it, Helios would herald the day. Perchance, this rising would signal the last occasion his nine starlit daughters allowed Faedrah and her beloved to bask in the glorious rays emanating from the sun god's face.

A pair of warm hands landed atop the dressing gown blanketing her shoulders, and her eyes fell closed as the sweep of two supple lips brushed her hair back from her brow. "Thanks for giving me a minute. That article was a bitch to digest."

'Twas only fair she petition Violet to permit Rhys to read the truth of his father's deceit firsthand, though this did not staunch the regret Faedrah had suffered whilst agonizing hatred had filled her lover's gaze. Each passing of his eyes over the glowing screen had stretched unbridled fury increasingly more taut across his handsome face, and the words she had tried to offer in consolation had been botched by her inept tongue.



Unable to bear witness to the torment he endured, shuttering that same cold rage inside her breast, Faedrah had left the frenzied activity of the common room in search of a moment's peace.

The comforting heat of Rhys' palms slid down her arms. The edge of his jaw met her shoulder, and he wound his arms about her waist to tug her back against the hardened muscle of his chest. "Hey. You know what we need?"

She recognized exactly what desire lingered in her heart, though given Rhys' predilection for love-making, her doubts were high he spoke of the same thing. "A grand miracle?"

'Twas anyone's guess the escalating potency Gaelloed's power had achieved in their absence, how sharpened the edge of his magic had grown at her kingdom's expense. A shiver stole through her body, and Rhys cinched her tighter in his embrace. If the rehabilitation of the dark lord's appearance echoed the enhancement of his skill, she and Rhys were bound for a battle to test every wit and reason they contained.

"Well, yeah, that too. But I was talking about a long hot bath." His lips traced a searing path down the side of her throat. He pushed the collar of her dressing gown aside with the edge of his jaw and little sparks tingled her skin as he nibbled the crest of her shoulder. "Some time alone, just the two of us, on the off-chance we can forget about everything for a while except why the hell we're doing this."

She smiled. A relaxing soak would surely lead them in one direction, and despite the unfortunate timing, Rhys brought forth a valid point. Untangling his arms from about her waist, she threaded her fingers through his, palm to palm, and lifted the backs of his hands to her lips.

In reigning victorious, how many young lovers would be gifted tender moments such as this? For what more reason could they implore the goddesses' divine blessing than the endowment of everlasting love?

Clutching his hands to her chest, she curled her fingers more securely between his knuckles. A soft laugh shook her shoulders as he firmed his grip and held on to her just as fierce. So much control lay hidden within his hands. She lowered them back into view. So much potential this world held just beyond his reach.

A flip of her wrists, and she loosened her hold, stroking her fingertips down the calloused landscape of his palms. Given the time and effort he'd

expended warping that damnable silver spoon, his magic remained, flowing through his body, and yet he'd experienced difficulty tapping the source.

But, why? She frowned and traced her thumbs along the deep creases bisecting his skin. If her suspicions regarding Gaelleod's abilities held true, the inhabitants of this world had been fed a jagged lie and magic was, indeed, a part of this realm. So what obstruction stood in Rhys' way? And, even more vital, what steps, if any, could they take to remove it?

She brought one hand up and held his coarse palm to her cheek. "Tell me."

The heave of his sigh along her back...the way he dropped his arms and withdrew a pace conveyed he understood exactly what information she requested. But she must know the truth. If only to clutch at any last strands of hope or salvage what small certainties were left them.

He plucked one of the wineglasses from the table and tipped the rim to his lips; his throat shifted as he swallowed. "I can see it." The burgundy line within his glass angled dangerously near the lip as he studied the wine in a beam of moonlight. "Christ, I can almost feel the vibration of each mineral in this room." Shaking his head, he pivoted toward the armoire and ambled toward the veil.

The thick sleeves of his robe had been shoved to his elbows, the belt secured in a snug slipknot about his waist. Yet the seams were strained due the width of his chest and shoulders, and the folded collar formed a deep vee atop his smooth, rippling flesh. "When I was in your world, it was like each molecule was a grain of sand. They were loose and easy to manipulate. All I had to do was reach out and scoop them up." A sweep of his hand through the air and he fisted his fingers before his face.

The slightest tip of his chin, and he squinted at the mirror's shimmering surface. A low rumble of discontent issued from between his clenched teeth. The muscles in his forearm flexed as he dragged his fingers over his eyelids to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Here it's like all the sand is stuck together. Like, in order to move one grain, I gotta lift the whole god-damned beach."

Faedrah's eyebrow twitched. 'Twas a true testament to his resilience and the strength of his formidable powers. Despite the odds, the magic he'd labored to summon had been successfully invoked a short span ago. "And the silver spoon?"

“Don’t get too excited.” He dropped his hand to his side. “I found a snag.”

Whatever did he mean? She studied him from the corner of her eye, frowning, and he searched her face before his shoulders slumped in defeat. “An imperfection in the silver. Sorta like...a loose thread in a piece of fabric. Once I noticed it, I was able to pick at the edge until it lifted enough for me to give it a good, hard yank.” He rolled his eyes, sighing. “Only problem is, it took me forever to find it, and no guarantee says Leo’s knife is gonna have that same flaw.”

Indeed. Faedrah crossed her arms, chewing the inside of her cheek. Given the nature of Rhys’ powers, the blade Gaelleod used during his vile ceremony was their most logical target. Once revealed, Rhys must do his utmost to gain control of it, though it was doubtless a treasure Gaelleod coddled and protected above all else. Certainly, one kept free of blemishes and stains.

Nonetheless, they could not afford to dismiss any idea presented them, however trifling it may be. “Perchance such an imperfection could be inflicted upon the silver, allowing you to gain sway over its abilities.”

“Maybe.” Rhys shrugged, returned to his spot near the table and lifted her glass, offering the wine in her direction. “Either way, once we’re at Leo’s, we’d better have our shit locked and loaded. Considering the time it’ll take me, coupled with the shock and awe Leo’s prepping to launch at our asses, I’ll be lucky to get in one clean shot.”

She nodded, lips pursed in contemplation as she accepted the glass. ’Twas a small flicker of hope in an otherwise bleak situation. Yet if her years under Denmar’s tutelage had taught her anything, a successful war campaign relied heavily upon the element of deception. Mayhap Gaelleod’s preparedness could be exploited to their advantage. They could draw upon his arrogance...do the opposite of what was expected.

*Emerge from the shadows when not anticipated. Appear weak where we are strong.*

She hummed, running the tip of her tongue along the sharp edge of her teeth. Many factors would be at play during the rite of the dark lord’s incantations. If close enough, perchance one *shot* would be all she and Rhys required to sabotage the outcome of Gaelleod’s schemes.

Her jaw firmed in determination. If nothing else, they could use what chance remained to wedge a vexing thorn in Gaelleod's side.

"Then we shall do our utmost to make one shot count." She tapped the side of her glass against Rhys' with a light *clink*.

He huffed, his gaze riveted to hers as he joined her in a hearty swallow, and Faedrah delighted in the mischief caught by the light of Selene's moonbeams, glinting within the depths of his piercing jade eyes.

"Christ, it turns me on when you get pissed. Come on." He clasped her hand in his and tugged her toward the far corner of the room, pressed his back to a wooden door and wagged his brows as they entered the privy.

Applying the tip of his elbow to a small switch upon the wall, he flooded the room with bright light.

Faedrah stumbled to a stop. A heartbeat passed before Rhys glanced over his shoulder, and his low whistle echoed about the gray-veined marble denoting the room. Two pedestal steps lead to a large, sunken wash basin, so vast and deep four or more of them could have easily lounged about inside. "Shit, the things I'm gonna do to you in that tub."

Arousal spiked in her belly. Her imagination ran rampant with all the ways Rhys relished applying his able mouth to her skin.

He leaned over to twist two silver knobs protruding from the wall and water thundered from the spigot. Steam rose into the air like the mists which oft hovered among the high mountain peaks near her home. A quick yank to the knot at his waist, and her brows shot heavenward as his robe coasted down the length of his arms to crumple in a heap near his feet. "Remind me at some point to send Oliver and Jon a big ol' basket of fruit."

Faedrah lowered her chin against a smile, pausing to absorb the measure of her lover's naked form from the side. The smooth rounded cap of his shoulder tapered to an arm honed by might and years of hard effort pounding steel. A long, fixed ridge flanked his torso, at complete odds with the ladder of eight well-defined grooves which stepped down the tiers of his ribcage. The line of his back dipped inward with a slight curve, dotted by a tempting dimple perched atop the tight flex of his backside. A rope of corded muscle arced down the front of his hip and, beyond, dark hair formed a mouth-watering trail starting just below his navel, and ending in a nest of dense curls which framed his well-hung manhood.

“Enjoying the view?” Rhys cocked a brow and pivoted to fully face her, and his unabashed sexuality ravaged every feminine wile she contained.

A whimper eked from her dry throat. Her palms grew anxious to explore every hard-edged curve; her tongue starved to taste the heady flavor of his skin. Yet whilst she longed to shed the dressing gown preventing her such pleasures, the same warning she’d fought to deny since his enticing invitation, pealed like the strike of the Apex bell in her head.

Numerous passings of Helios’ bright face had elapsed since the time of her womanly course. For her and Rhys to so recklessly lose themselves in throes of abandon could initiate a result neither of them were prepared to undertake.

He seized the belt at her waist, and her hands met his chest as he jerked her against the unyielding tower of his body. “I’m gonna lick every delicious inch of you.” His lips danced near. Her knees all but gave as he dipped his head to skim the tip of his tongue up her throat. “I’m gonna make it so that no matter what bullshit Leo throws at us, you never forget this night.”

A throb pulsed hard and fast between her legs. Her nipples peaked against the soft cotton folds of her robe. The tight cinch of her belt went slack, and her breath caught as the heated caress of his fingers stroked a downward path along her belly. Sweet Goddesses wept, the man kindled the yearnings of her body with more skill than the bard plucked the strings of his lute.

He buried his scruffy cheeks in her hair and her head fell back. Warm tingles sparked and sizzled along her skin. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down, relishing the slight sting as he nuzzled the shell of her ear. “Rhys, we cannot.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” His words were clipped, a grating rasp thickened by desire. “Shit, I’d like to see anyone bust in here and try to stop us.”

Her back bowed. The sides of her dressing gown brushed past her thighs to be replaced with the hot press of rigid muscle. “The timing is not right, my heart.” One of his arms threaded about her waist and he yanked her to his hips, his arousal thick and stiff between them. “For us to continue may result in the conception of our heir.”

He froze, yet he did not withdraw from her, and as his deep exhalation warmed her hair, she wrapped her arms about his neck to keep him near.

Water splashed and swirled over the trip of her pulse in her ears. The steady thump of Rhys' heartbeat instilled a bittersweet ache in her chest. Of all the nights they must abstain this, by far, would be the cruelest...on the eve of impending doom, when all light and love could be forever banished from their worlds.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Faedrah. The thought of being a dad scares the shit out of me." Rhys pulled back from her, releasing her waist to cup her cheeks in his hands. "And there are a lot of things in this world people can use to prevent pregnancy. Hell, I'm sure Oliver and Jon would move heaven and earth to get us anything we wanted." He lowered his forehead to hers and Faedrah's heart leapt as magic glittered and sparked in his gaze. "But when it comes to you, I'm a greedy son of a bitch. You should know that by now. The last thing I want is a layer of latex between us. Not tonight. Not after knowing how fucking good you feel without it."

He closed his eyes, the fringe of his lashes two dark fans atop his shadowed cheeks. His teeth clenched with such force a muscle spasmed in his jaw, and Faedrah curled her fingers in his hair against the urge to crush her lips to his and let their passions soar toward whatever bliss awaited them...the consequences be damned.

"But I'm not convinced any of that counts for squat." Rhys blinked and lifted his head. His gaze dropped to her mouth, and he swept the ball of his thumb across her lower lip. "Remember that day in the cave? When you told me the best way I could beat Leo was to live life to the fullest?"

An ember flared and burned bright in her heart, and she nodded inside the safety of her lover's hands.

"Well, I made you a promise that day. What kind of asshole would I be if I let Leo force feed me those words?" He cocked a brow. "So, here it is. You were right, Faedrah. But you were right about more than just me or any guilt Vaighn might be carrying around because of his dad. Truth is, I'm over letting Leo suck the joy out of every fucking second. He doesn't deserve it. And, god dammit, I'm sick and tired of him always being one step ahead. The buck stops here. Right here and now. With you and me and whatever kids we might make."

Tears burned, and Faedrah dug her nails into the muscles of his shoulders as the truth of his words arrowed home. She and Rhys had been granted a rare blessing through their bond. One refused the prior descendants of his bloodline.

If the worst were to happen, Gaelleod would one day endeavor to fill her womb with his successor. What better way to circumvent his father's ploy, to begin afresh and protect them all than for Rhys' to gift her his true child? Their child, conceived in love, born pure and free of Gaelleod's ill-begotten curse.

Rhys tucked his hands inside the collar of her dressing gown and urged the sides from her shoulders, and Faedrah released him to let the sleeves tumble past her fingers to the floor. Enveloping her in his strong embrace, he swept a tender kiss across her lips. "As much as being a dad might scare me, I'm not stupid. I get how this might be our last chance, our *best* chance to hit Leo exactly where it'll count the most." He thrust his fingers into her hair, his thumb propped under her chin to ensure she remain devoted to his gaze. "I'm not about to let that rat bastard win. Do you understand me? Not now. Not in the past. And, most definitely, not in the future."

And neither would she.

His eyes flew wide as she leapt into his arms. Circling her legs about his waist, she held on to her beloved with all her might. A warm tear snuck from between her lashes and traced down her cheek. "I love you, Rhys." His courage and commitment could ultimately save her kingdom. "More than Helios' bright diamonds number in the sky."

He chuckled and palmed the length of her hair, rocking her side to side. "The feeling's mutual, Princess." A smack of her bare backside, and she jerked back from him in surprise. "Now no more doomsday prepping. Together, we're gonna go kick Leo's ass and then we're heading back to the castle to get married."

A smile bloomed, and she shook his shoulders. "Agreed."

He smirked, yet the devilish curl of his lips did not mask the sharp bite of hunger in his gaze. She released the tension in her thighs and he grunted, jostling her onto his hips.

His pupils dilated. The tip of his tongue skimmed his bottom lip.

With a teasing arch of her brow, she laced her fingers behind his neck and shimmied farther down his torso.

Their centers met, the head of his manhood a delightful pressure prodding her folds, and her internal walls quivered as he dove forward to capture her lips in a searing kiss.

His hips shifted as he strode forward. The solid muscle of his thighs bumped the curves of her bottom as he climbed the steps and lowered them into the bath.

Water eddied through the ends of her hair, tingling her scalp. The heated line rose to tickle the crease of her bottom as Rhys shuffled beneath her, his hands curled behind her knees to keep her straddled atop his hips.

The ridge of his cock slid sleek and smooth along her hidden pearl and she gasped, slapping both hands to his chest. His soft laugh was decidedly evil. The glint of desire in his gaze, wicked beyond compare. He ran his splayed fingers up the sides of her waist; cradled her breasts in the wide dip between his fingers and thumbs.

A sweep of those calloused digits over her nipples, and they peaked and hardened. Sparks glimmered near the edges of her vision. The water licked and fluttered against her skin. His second taunting caress of her breasts, and a shudder dislodged the set of her shoulders. She slipped her hands behind his neck and wrenched him to her chest.

The angle between them deepened and she writhed, fighting the buoyancy of the water to remain seated against him. Rhys drew her breast into the hot cavern of his mouth. His hands met her shoulders and his hips jerked. Heat expanded low in her belly, trickling into her legs, and she tossed her head, arcing into him.

His low moan shivered the hair on her arms. The enthralling swirl of his tongue sent fireflies dancing down her spine as he nipped and suckled.

Rhys seized her hips; his thighs widened. He forced her knees farther apart, and her muscles trembled as he floated his hand up her inner thigh. His middle finger circled her entrance. His thumb tapped and rubbed her aching bud. She grabbed his wrist to force him deeper, but he resisted.

His other hand rose to the base of her ass. His fingertips teased and stroked her higher, his cheeks hollowing as he pulled her breast deeper into his mouth.

A whimper caught in her throat, and she swayed, setting a mounting rhythm. Her core spasmed as he dipped the tip of his finger inside. "Shit, you're sexy. I love how I can make you come with just my hands."



She glanced down to find his heavy-lidded gaze glinting with arousal, his jaw tight and teeth clenched. A furious rap of his thumb and she tensed. The quick thrust and curl of his finger inside her, and a loud rushing built in her ears.

Shimmers ignited and zipped across her skin. She hissed, her arms shaking, her body perched upon the edge as Rhys wrenched his thighs closed and sheathed her onto his rigid member.

She sharply inhaled and he groaned as she convulsed around him. The light dimmed and she cried out as the entirety of her being was pitched toward the heavens. He rolled his hips, filling her fully. Her internal walls spasmed and she fisted his hair as he plunged all the way to the base. His lips found hers and water splashed as he lifted and slammed her to his hips again and again.

A second wave of euphoria grew as Rhys ground against her. Tremors gripped her form, and she shuddered as a vast pulse surged. Ecstasy detonated throughout her body. Quivers heated and cooled her skin. She reached behind her with one hand and he roared, his hips rising from the water as she stroked the underside of his erection.

His warm essence burst through her core. She braced her hands upon the hard planes of his stomach and rocked, hoping to extend the pleasure of his orgasm. Starlight glittered in her fingertips, the soles of her feet. His hips rose higher and he gritted his teeth. A deep throb ricocheted and he roared a second time as his cock twitched inside her.

Shuddering, slowly lowering himself into the water, he blinked and his cheeks expanded as he blew a harsh breath. “Dammit, woman. God *dammit*, how is it even possible that sex with you keeps getting better and better?”

She laughed, rolling off his hips to stretch her languid limbs along the length of his body. He lifted an arm about her shoulders, dragging the tip of his thumb down her cheek as she nestled her head on his chest.

Trailing the backs of her nails down the little bumps of his ribcage, she snuggled closer, following the path of one raised vein as it angled down the inside of his hip. “How long, do you surmise, ’twill be before we reach the pinnacle of our love-making?”

He peeked askance at her from beneath the thick fringe of his lashes. “Not a clue.” Lifting his foot from the water, he curled his toes around one of the silver knobs and twisted the first...and then the second...to the right.

She circled her thumb and index finger around his manhood, and answering sparks of pleasure flared to life within her as his flesh firmed and stretched inside her grip.

“But I got my heart set on one thing, Princess.” A suggestive bounce of his brows, and she grinned as he flipped from the water to blanket her with his heated body. “I’m damn sure gonna try and find out.”

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## Chapter 5

*“Nod if you can hear me.”*

Rhys kept his focus pinned on the dark hallway at the back of the grungy biker bar, rubbing the heel of his hand over the gauze pad and itchy medical tape stuck to his left pec. What the hell could be taking so long? Faedrah had swapped spots with him in Buzzer’s tattoo chair over an hour ago.

*“Rhys, are you there? Hello?”* Rustling echoed through the tiny mic Violet had told him to plug into his ear. *“Damn,”* she whispered.

Rhys shot a quick glance around the room. Christ, he should’ve had his head examined for agreeing to Todd’s suggestion this motley crew ride as back-up over to Leo’s. While the brawn was there, the brains end of this operation seemed a little iffy. Shit, if Rhys had to guess, he’d place bets nine out of ten of these dudes had a rap sheet a mile long. All around, the biggest priority seemed to be catching a buzz-on, and having them around Faedrah wasn’t sitting all that well in his gut. Not that he’d been given had a lot of choice. With Nate MIA, his short list of friends added up to a big fat zero, and Faedrah had insisted Todd’s Harley riding *gens d’armes* would be the ideal stand-ins for a battalion of palace guards.

Rhys raked a hand through his hair then grimaced as the high-pitched screech of speaker feedback drowned out the thump of AC/DC’s *Highway to Hell* blaring from the dented jukebox in the corner.

*“God dammit.”* He tore the wireless earbud from his ear and glared at Violet through the cloud of cigarette smoke ballooning up from the mosh pit of mismatched tables crammed in the middle of the club.

She waved a hand then pointed at her headset. A jiggle of the attached microphone curled in front of her lips, and Rhys sighed as he plugged the com device back into his ear. *“Well? Are you getting the feed or not? You didn’t answer me.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”* He adjusted his back against the bar, shaking his head as she spun around to face the long narrow table Todd’s cronies had

set up on the other end of the bar, opposite the hallway leading to Buzzer's tattoo parlor. Her fingers clicked something into one of the keyboards before she wheeled her chair farther down her bank of networked monitors.

Rhys shifted his attention back to empty hall. One patch of skin was just like the other, his ass. He huffed. Buzzer may have fooled everyone else with that statement, but Rhys hadn't bought into his bullshit for a second.

Crossing his arms, he leaned to the side as three leatherbacks crossed his line of sight. Okay, fine. No one could argue Faedrah's idea to get matching tattoos had been a stroke of genius...least of all him. One he should've seen coming the second Forbes' private jet was wheels up for Chicago and she started asking after the *veneficus* tats inked along the undersides of his arms. But the buttery smooth softness covering every inch of his muse didn't come anywhere close to a normal woman. Especially when it came to the mouth-watering slopes of her breasts. And the image of her baring that flawless flesh for another guy? The idea of Buzzer eyeballing that perfect mound of skin?

Shit. Rhys squinted at the hallway, willing Faedrah to walk through the door. God dammit, he should've never left her alone in that room... wouldn't have if Violet hadn't insisted he step outside and get suited up. He knew better than anyone how addictive Faedrah was. How one taste of her was never enough. The night they'd spent locked behind closed doors on Forbes' island had forever pounded that reality into his brain.

Those two luscious globes had filled his hands like they'd been molded by Faedrah's sex goddess specifically for him. His cock twitched, and he inched his boot to the right. She'd been wet when he slid inside her, hips gyrating at the perfect speed. Whimpers had caught in her throat right before she convulsed, and she'd clamped down so hard around him he'd practically died and gone to Heaven.

Gritting his teeth, he ripped the bandage off his chest and balled up the gauze before tossing it aside. Fuck, she'd returned every single one of his needs with an urgency that only made him crave her more. In exchange, he'd taken his damn sweet time memorizing every inch of her, hoping by doing so he could somehow imprint her taste and fresh clean scent on his brain so he would never forget.

He slipped the black t-shirt Jon had handed him off the bar and crammed his arms into the sleeves, worked the collar past his head and tugged the

hem down to the waistband of his leather pants. But the best, by far, had been the way she'd snuggled against him in bed. Her hair had covered his chest like a soft blanket threaded with silver, their legs and arms tangled while they whispered and giggled about stupid stuff.

That night their bodies had been so in tune, they'd gotten punch-drunk on sex. Or maybe it was the desperation that had heightened their libidos. Deep down, they were both trying to cling to a moment they might never see again.

He lifted the leather jacket off the stool on his right and shrugged it onto his shoulders, adjusting the Nero collar as he took another sweep of the room. The three men who'd crossed in front of him stopped at the back corner booth near Violet's surveillance set up, and nodded at Todd and Oliver who were knocking back a beer. The one sporting a long brown ponytail spoke a few words and Todd flicked a hand toward the table.

Rhys grunted. Evidently, Violet's husband ran this organization like some mafia godfather. No one made a move without the boss' say-so, and good thing too, since that loyalty was pretty much the only thing stopping Rhys from marching across the bar and down that fucking hallway so he could kick open the door to Buzzer's inner sanctum.

*Five more minutes...counting down from four minutes ago.*

He'd seen the hungry glint in Buzzer's eyes when Faedrah had approached him about getting tatted. Not that his reaction was any big shocker. Unlike most of the club's members, the tattoo artist was second generation. Young enough to be sniffing around where he wasn't wanted. Besides, any man would have to be half-dead not to notice how she lit up a room.

The second their entourage had stepped inside the dingy interior of the bar, conversations had stopped mid-stream. Heads had swiveled; jaws dropped, and the black leather cat suit Jon had strapped Faedrah in had popped the gears of every red-blooded male of legal age.

Rhys resettled his back against the bar, arms crossed, and counted down the seconds in his head. Whether or not she'd picked up on Buzzer's interest, Faedrah was too polite to say anything...had too much style to offend the guy by asking a favor and then backpedaling. Even if he was in there flirting with her, eyes all bugged out of his head and drooling like a

horn dog, she would treat him with respect. Her supposed “duty” to Todd demanded it.

Unless, of course, the skeeze ball got grabby. Rhys smirked. If that happened, well then. An evil chuckle shook his shoulders. She’d make it so that no woman was in danger of getting poked by Buzzer’s needle for a good long while.

Movement caught the corner of his eye, and he slid his focus to the left as two of the dudes slumped into Todd’s booth. The third swung a chair around and straddled the seat. The five men settled into a conversation, the one at the end hunched over the back of his chair, tatted forearms balanced on the table. The matching leather patch stitched across the back of his vest had been stamped in red gothic script with the word *Crucibles*. Beneath, another black patch displayed the gang’s emblem—a grinning skull sitting on a metal cup surrounded by flames, the phrase *Can you take the heat?* stamped below in that same blood red script.

The three newcomers turned their heads in unison and locked on to Rhys. The music cut out, and clinking glasses mixed with raspy laughter filled the bar until the chest vibrating thump of *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* crackled from the speakers.

Yep, that’s right. Rhys clenched his jaw, meeting each stare, one after the next. He was the prick who’d dumped this pile of shit in their laps, the first born and only living son of the asshole they were going after. He was also the douche bag who was about to lead their gang straight into hell, Faedrah bound and gagged on the back of his bike like a sacrificial lamb led to slaughter.

A harsh breath blurted past his lips. But what the hell did they expect? He’d been the first one to argue this scheme she’d cooked up was crazier than a bag of cats, but the woman refused to listen. If they thought he hadn’t already boxed four rounds in that ring, they could kiss his hairy white ass. She was proof positive showing up at Leo’s uninvited would knock the fucker off guard. And, hell, maybe she was right. After all, it wasn’t like anyone else had any bright ideas about how to get them inside.

Disgust flooded his mouth and Rhys sneered, smacking his lips. Manhandling her in front of dear old dad is where things were bound to get tricky. The thought alone was enough to burst an artery in his head. But it wasn’t like someone else could do it...not that he would’ve trusted anyone

who volunteered. He was the only one who could guarantee she wouldn't get hurt while being rough enough they could convince Leo the act was real and Rhys wanted to switch sides.

Whether or not Leo bought into the act? Well, that was still up for grabs. But one thing was for damn sure. Leo would never count on Rhys showing up with Faedrah in tow as a peace offering.

Faedrah entered the room and Rhys pushed up from the bar. Thank God. It was about fucking time. She turned with a smile and nodded her thanks as Buzzer followed behind her, one of her hands pressed to her chest like she was about to break into *The Pledge of Allegiance*.

She pivoted back around and met Rhys' gaze through the dim clatter. Her eyes glittered with awareness, but she didn't smile, and his shoulders dropped as she held up a finger for him to wait a second. Shit, now what?

Fisting his hands, he kept his focus on her as she glanced around the room, located Oliver, Todd and the members of his gang in the corner booth and started in that direction. Okay, good. Rhys eased the air from his lungs. Whatever she was after, at least she was headed for people they trusted.

She placed a hand on Todd's shoulder and he sat back from the conversation, glancing up at her face. Lowering to eye level, she moved her hand to his forearm and her lips started moving.

Anxiety jabbed Rhys' gut as Todd frowned, leaning away from her. He narrowed his eyes as the other dudes shifted uncomfortably in their seats and traded raised eyebrows around the table. Oliver crossed his arms with an emphatic bounce and mouthed, "No."

Aw, fuck. This did not look good.

Faedrah paused, staring at Oliver. She shifted her attention back to Todd and kept talking, her heels lifting from the floor as she leaned in. He shook his head and slashed a hand between them, but whatever he said back to her was hidden by his beard.

God dammit, what the hell was she doing? Rhys shuffled his boots, shoulders high and tight, every synapse in his brain screaming for him to get over there and find out.

The guy with the ponytail sat forward in the booth and spoke. Rhys stepped from the bar. Faedrah jerked her head around, hesitated and then nodded.

Uh-uh. No chance in hell. Rhys strode forward and skirted the nearest table. Whatever she'd just agreed to wasn't happening. Not unless he was included in the decision and *especially* not since her suggestion seemed to royally piss off Todd.

The big guy pointed a thick finger across the booth, mumbled something and ponytail shrank back in his seat. Faedrah stood, slamming her fist on the table. Heads turned; conversations halted. Rhys shouldered past a group of riders and wound through the crowd, pushing for the other side of the bar.

Todd gripped the edge of the table and shoved his bulk from the booth. Faedrah stumbled back, lifting her chin in defiance. Oliver scrambled to follow, but the guy seated at the end snagged his upper arm and held him in check.

God dammit! Rhys tossed a vacant chair aside, jerked his shoulder from someone's grip and kept moving. What the hell was going on?

A nod from Todd, and the other two men slid from the booth, arms crossed, creating a human blockade in case anyone got it in their head to interfere.

A violent rage built, clawing at Rhys' gut. His legs filled with lead and the world inched to a stop as Todd gritted his teeth, swung back and Faedrah's head snapped to the right as he rocketed his fist into her face.

"What the fuck are you *doing*?" Rhys leapt forward, flipping a table out of his path. Blinding rage seared the edges of his vision. Glass shattered; feedback shrieked and Violet squawked in his ear.

On instinct, he zeroed in on the large silver belt buckles of the two riders and *shoved*. A gap appeared between them, and he slid through. Shouting and chaos erupted as he leapt onto a table and skimmed his hip along the top.

His feet hit the floor, two lunging strides, and he rammed his shoulder into Todd's stomach, tackling the fucker to the floor.

"Wait!" Faedrah screamed on his right. He clamped his hands around Todd's throat and squeezed. God dammit, the asshole would never touch her again. "Rhys, cease this instant! Sir Todd did as I asked!"

Rhys lifted and slammed the asshole down to the ground. Hands grappled for his wrists. Fists pounded his back and shoulders. The lights flared and



pops ricocheted around the room. Sparks rained down, stinging his face as an arm wrapped around his neck and wrenched him off of Todd's waist.

"Rhys, stop!" Violet shouted. "Get your shit under control or you're gonna tear down the entire building!"

Two sets of knees pinned his arms to the floor. Boot heels dug into his legs as bearded faces swung back and forth over his head. Faedrah shoved between the bodies and clasped his face in her hands. "Be still, my heart. Please, do not fight them."

A red welt covered her left cheek. Blood poured down her face from the gash under her eye. God *dammit*. Rhys squeezed his eyes tight, grinding his teeth. He was gonna kill Todd. Christ, they never should've come here. The second his arms were free, he was gonna make it so that asshole would never hit anyone again.

"I asked Sir Todd to strike me." Faedrah leaned down and dotted kisses over his face, his eyelids and lips. She braced her forehead against his. "We must make every effort to forestall Gaelleod's suspicions. A minor injury now could ensure our later victory."

Her words slammed into his brain and his body went limp. A *minor injury*? Had she lost her damn mind? He blinked and searched her face. "Faedrah, what in the hell are you talking about?"

She smiled, though it came off lop-sided, and moisture trickled from the corner of her left eye. "I knew you would never strike me. Nor would you agree to Sir Todd inflicting me harm. Yet we must do our utmost to ensure the dark lord believes the sincerity of our ruse. What better way than for me to appear before him bearing the insult of your anger? 'Tis a small price to pay in exchange for the deliverance of our worlds."

Mother...*fucker*. He closed his eyes, shaking his head. God dammit, the woman made his heart crack open right in his chest. Too bad, one of these days, her antics were also likely to throw him into cardiac arrest.

But she was right. Deep down inside, he knew she was right. He growled, pounding his fists on the floor. None of this would work unless Leo saw it with his own two eyes. The best thing...the *strongest* thing they had going for them was their love. So that was their play. To appear weak where they were strong from start to finish. And shit, after what she'd just gone through to prove it, he wasn't about to let her down.

“Son of a bitch,” Violet muttered. “Rhys, I’m gonna kick your ass. Dammit, you fried my hard drive.”

Faedrah gasped and sprang back from him, her lips parted as she spun toward Violet’s computers.

Wait...what? “Hold on. Get off me.” Rhys jerked his arms and legs and, the second the pressure disappeared, he sat up to follow Faedrah’s line of sight.

Smoke wafted from the three monitors Violet had networked on the table, mixing with the bank of cigarette smoke hovering near the ceiling. The hi-def sound system she’d plugged into the wall sizzled near the outlet. The speakers buzzed, the sound warbling like she’d tapped into some bizarre alien transmission. Beer dripped off the nearby tables, the mugs shattered. The light fixtures on either side her equipment flickered and popped.

A belt buckle snapped, and the guy standing next to her lost his jeans to around his ankles. He mumbled a curse, slapping his hands over the crotch of his tightie-whities.

“What the hell did you do to my club?” Todd groaned and pushed to sitting, rubbing a hand around his neck. He shot a scowl back and forth before aiming a finger at Rhys. “You’re paying for the damages.”

What the...? Rhys swiveled toward the bar and followed the line of destruction. A charred black channel ran diagonally across the room, starting where he’d been standing and leading all the way to where Todd had punched Faedrah, up the wall and past Violet’s station to the ceiling. “Well, I’ll be damned. Looks like I’m back in action.”

That was...at least as far as his muse was concerned, since everything a foot or so outside the path appeared intact. Then again, that seemed right on the money. His powers had always been connected to Faedrah, and when it came to her and keeping her safe, apparently the roadblock between fantasy and reality remained more of a two-way street.

“Well, bucky for you.” Violet lifted a keyboard off the table, sighed and tossed it aside with a rattling *clack*. Leaning down, she righted a chair with a grunt and stepped onto the seat. “It’s forty minutes to zero hour and I’m down, people.” She crossed her arms, tapping the toe of her army boot as she squinted at Rhys. “Time to empty the saddlebags, fellas. I need every cell phone, iPad and laptop we got.”



## Chapter 6

The piston-popping rumble of fifty-plus hogs practically dislodged the stars, bouncing off the palatial homes and drowning out everything except the tight heat of Faedrah's thighs clamped around his hips.

She'd been right, though. Rhys gunned the engine and smirked as the *blat-blat* of his Indian peeled back the summer night like a hot knife slicing through butter. Showing up at Leo's with Todd's crew heavy at their backs was a good thing. In fact, it fucking rocked.

In the past, going anywhere near his childhood home had always been a bitch, and doing so with his muse trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey on the back of his bike was the epitome of every bullshit disappointment he'd faced inside those four walls. Seemed only fair he snub his nose at Leo's bogus respectability by announcing their arrival in the most obnoxious way possible.

And if the neighbors called the cops, who gave a shit? An ear-splitting growl inched up on his left, and Rhys glanced over as Todd's chopper closed in, the big guy's eyes hidden behind a set of aviator shades, gray beard trailing over his right shoulder. If they got lucky, whoever phoned in the disturbance would hopefully complain enough, a squad would be dispatched to Leo's to investigate.

Rhys bounced his brows and pulled in the clutch, revving the engine until it red-lined and a chest vibrating *bang* shot from his tailpipe. Because he and his muse weren't sneaking in tonight. Hell, no. This time, they were coming at Leo balls to the wall with a wild side of heavy, fine-tuned carburetor.

The edge of Todd's moustache twitched and he leapt forward, peeling around Rhys in a wide right-hand turn, one hand near the ground and waving half the crew to follow.

Rhys shifted into a lower gear and wrapped his fingers around the back of Faedrah's knee as they coasted to a stop at the corner.

It'd only been two blocks since they'd pulled over, and already he missed the soft cushion of her breasts against his back, the warm band of her arms around his chest, but she'd insisted on being tied up before they got too close.

Snapping those handcuffs around her wrists had been so fucked up, he'd bungled it the first time. Even though he knew full well the key was hidden inside her sleeve just in case things went sour, he'd still left them too loose. Same with sticking that wadded rag in her mouth and securing it with a bandana.

Bracing his foot on the ground, he checked the quiet street for oncoming traffic. Not that there was any. It was nearly midnight and, this late, everyone in Leo's affluent north shore neighborhood was most likely tucked in bed for the night.

Faedrah wriggled close, turning her cheek to his shoulder. Her legs squeezed him on either side, and an unexpected chuckle worked the muscles of his stomach.

God, she'd been pissed. The second that bandana had slipped past her chin and dropped to her neck, she'd arched a brow at him meant to shrivel his balls. Too bad her irritation accomplished nothing but making him hard. He'd just crossed his arms and cocked a brow right back at her, only breaking their stare-down after she'd threatened to call Todd over to handle the job.

Yeah, Rhys wasn't about to let that happen. If anyone was tying her up, that person would be him and only him.

Todd's right-hand man rolled to a stop beside them, dipped his chin and revved his bike. A few leaves fluttered down from the trees lining either side of the boulevard. A Schnauzer barked inside the lighted interior of a glass patio, front legs braced on the back of a padded chair, but he might as well have been singing Pavarotti. Rhys couldn't hear a damn thing.

Half a block ahead, the McEleod estate sat back from the street on the right, two high globed streetlights illuminating the front hedge and either side of the drive. The plan was to wait until Todd had circled back around, parking his men along the street until the entire block was covered. This was as much a tactic at intimidation as an added guarantee the back stayed clear. If this high noon standoff went down the way they'd planned, Rhys and Faedrah would need a clean exit.

If not, well then, none of it would matter...except for Faedrah. Rhys ran his hand back and forth along her thigh. She'd still be alive and under Leo's thumb, which was where the rest of the Crucibles came in.

Todd had given his word the second Rhys and Faedrah made it inside...*if* they made it inside...his crew would take out Leo's security. Afterward, if the whole works had blown up in Rhys' face, Todd had also promised to do whatever was necessary to get Faedrah back to the mirror and home, where she'd be safe, even if that meant losing some of his men in the process.

A single headlight rounded the corner a block down. The tinny flavor of adrenaline flooded his mouth, and Rhys' stomach took a swan dive for his boots. He inhaled, cheeks expanding as he pushed all the air from his lungs.

God, this was gonna suck. He should've listened to his gut and just told Faedrah to stay behind. A visual of *that* conversation set up shop in his head, and he rolled his eyes. And do what to stop her? Be exactly like Leo and lock her up so she couldn't escape? Besides, if he stood one chance in hell at knocking Leo's lights out, Rhys needed her there. And if they were doing this, if they were seriously facing the end of forever, there was no one he wanted with him more than his muse.

A pop of the clutch, and a breeze ruffled his hair as he started them down the street. It was the fucked up circumstances that had his balls twisted in a knot. Shit, just the thought of Leo being anywhere near her pissed him off...not that this did him a damn bit of good.

Rhys ground his molars, his nostrils flared. He'd hoped that would be enough. That the idea of Leo touching her would set off some sort of chain reaction. But in those forty minutes before tip-off, while he sat staring at a belt buckle on the bar, no matter how hard he kept that visual in his head, his efforts amounted to zilch.

Christ, it was most frustrating hand he'd ever been dealt, even though he understood the problem the second the dust had settled inside the club. Faedrah wasn't in any real danger. Shit, at that precise moment, she'd been trading hugs with Oliver and Jon. Rhys' heart knew it, his head knew it and, apparently, so did his magic, because the short gap to using his powers had stretched back to the San Francisco Bay Bridge.

He met Todd in the center of the block and they slid to the curb, parking their bikes wheel to wheel. Most of the gang followed suit while a few drove on ahead to fill in the rest of the block. Which meant, to come out on

top, Rhys had no choice but to place her in harm's way. He had to put Faedrah directly in the Leo's path, and gamble with everything that had ever meant anything in his life.

He closed his eyes and sighed. Loving her the way he did, Christ only knew if he could do it.

A door on the side of the house swung open, spilling a block of yellow light onto the sidewalk leading toward the garage. Two suits exited, dressed identically in black, wearing the same set of dark sunglasses. They stopped about halfway down the lawn and folded their hands.

Jesus *Christ*. Amusement tightened Rhys' stomach as he killed the engine. Evidently, they'd just entered the Matrix.

*"I'm up as of ten minutes ago."* Violet spoke in his ear and he jerked his focus to Todd. *"Everyone's in position. I'll stay with you as long as I can."* She paused. *"Good luck, Rhys."*

Todd nodded and shut down his bike. Sending up a Hail Mary, Rhys swung off his seat to the ground.

"I love you," he whispered, squeezing Faedrah's thigh.

She winked, and the urge to jerk that damn bandana off her lips and dive in for a taste, to kiss her and beg for forgiveness before they even got started, nearly made him call the whole shit mess quits right there.

He gritted his teeth and pivoted toward the house. The last engine cut out down the street, and the immediate silence was almost as loud as the deafening roar that had escorted them in.

Leo's front man cocked a brow. "May I help you?"

Rhys huffed. "Cut the crap. Leo knows why I'm here." He reached behind him and grabbed Faedrah's arm, yanking her off the seat. She whimpered, and something inside his chest cracked as she tripped over her feet and stumbled forward, falling to her knees on the grass.

Son of a bitch, she was one hell of an actress. For a split second, even *he* believed he'd shoved her. "Now be a good little watchdog and tell Leo I brought him a gift."

The front door creaked open, and Rhys swiveled his head left. Leo stepped onto the stoop, a maroon velvet smoking jacket resting on his shoulders, the soft light from the streetlamps catching on the satin lapels. Black slacks hung in starched creases down to his shiny black shoes. Ruddy

color tinted his cheeks, his eyes were clear and exacting, and fresh crop of brown peach fuzz sprouted from his head.

Well, looky here. *Perfect*. Seemed as if Leo hadn't just been using the life he sucked out of Faedrah's kingdom for a little boost. More like he'd siphoned off enough gas to level the tank back to around the age of fifty.

No wonder the area surrounding the castle looked like shit. That much energy had to be addictive. Rhys was counting on it.

He smiled. "Hi, dad. You look...better."

Leo's focus flicked to Todd, back over to Rhys and down to Faedrah. One side of his lips curled in a calculating smirk. "Rhys, I'm offended. There's no need for all this." He waved a hand toward the street. "You didn't think I'd welcome you and the lovely Faedrah back into my home with open arms?"

Ha! Nice. "Consider my friends as insurance." Rhys tipped his head toward the bikers, paused and jerked his chin toward Leo's goons. "You know how it is."

"Ah, yes. A necessary evil for a man of my means." Leo's attention returned to Faedrah and one of his eyebrows rose. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. Did I hear you say you'd brought me a gift?"

*Fuck, yeah*. Check number one off the list. Confused is exactly the way they wanted Leo. Now, if Rhys could just stay in the driver's seat for number two. He shrugged. "A gift in trade is probably more accurate. I'm interested in making a deal."

Leo hesitated. The night stretched, and furry little creatures everywhere scurried for cover as his head fell back and he let loose a hair-raising cackle. "Oh, Rhys, you slay me. Truly, you do." His Adam's apple slid up and down with his chuckle, the muscles working on either side of his scrawny throat. "I believe you've come here under false pretenses, as if you withhold something I cannot just reach out and take. Though, I must say, I've thoroughly enjoyed watching your struggles, enough they've caused me quite the delay." He peeked at Rhys from the corner of his eye and a dangerous pressure built low in Rhys' gut. "I take it your sojourn to Faedrah's homeland didn't merit the outcome you'd anticipated?"

Asshole. They'd just see about that, wouldn't they? "You sure there's nothing I got that you need?" He strode forward and wrapped Faedrah's



braid around his fingers. Taking his cue, she screeched, tipping back, leaning into his palm as he tugged on her hair.

“And this?” He fisted the gold chain and yanked until the tension was tight around her neck. “It’s cool with you if I just snap this beauty off right here?”

The lead Matrix wannabe stepped forward, reaching for his breast pocket, and Leo whipped up his hand. “Don’t.”

That’s right, fucker. Rhys smirked. Life was pretty shitty when someone had ya by the balls. “I got everything you need right here, *dad*.”

He pulled the chain harder and Faedrah gasped, the muscles in her throat straining, body stretched on her knees. All he had to do was pop his thumb and Leo’s connection to her world would go up in smoke. After relying on the added pep for so long, it was anyone’s guess where that would leave him. Not Leo’s happy place, based on his knee jerk reaction. “But I’d be willing to give it up for the right offer.”

Faedrah shook her head, weeping. A moan rolled up her throat and she fought to speak around the gag. “Nuh. Nuu-uh!”

Oh shit, was she really gonna make him go there? “Shut up!” He shouted inches from her face, and then clenched his jaw against a smile as Leo squinted. Hands down, the woman was a damn genius.

“You would forsake your beloved Faedrah?” Leo withdrew a step, a cunning gleam in his eye. “In exchange for what?”

“Life.” Rhys lowered his chin, staring straight at Leo from under his brows. “Power.” He let the word hang in the air. “I was a god in Faedrah’s world. I had everything and I liked it. You don’t need me. As long as you have Faedrah and the key, you could live another hundred years in this reality.” He flexed his arm and she pushed to her feet, shaking, her chest heaving like she was out of breath. “She refuses to take me back through, so you deal with her. She’s your problem now. Let her have the next son. Give me what I need, and I’ll stay the hell out of your way.”

Leo pursed his lips, the first hint of suspicion narrowing his gaze, and Rhys snatched his chance to dangle the bait a little deeper.

“That surprises you?” He laughed, cinching Faedrah tighter. She squeaked and danced around on her toes. “You never got to know any of them, did you? Never took time out of your busy schedule to spend two minutes with your sons.” He gritted his teeth. “Well maybe you should

have. After all, we *are* related. I'm not sure why it's so fucking hard to believe we would want the same things."

One of Leo's eyebrows rose, and the delight shining in his eyes shot sour bile up the back of Rhys' throat. "Perhaps I've underestimated you. A negotiation, then." He refocused on Faedrah and grinned.

Magic prickled in the tips of Rhys' fingers, and he stomped on it like an ant. Christ, if Leo caught wind of his powers before they were ready, they were screwed.

"Yes, I like that." He glanced around the yard. "But not here." Turning for the house, he opened a flat hand toward the doorway. "Please, do come in."

*Bingo!* Whether or not Leo had bought into the lie didn't matter. He wasn't ready to play *Let's Make A Deal* any more than Rhys, and was an idiot to think Rhys would believe one fucking word out of his mouth. But he'd invited them in, with enough brains intact to play out their next move. That's all they'd been after.

Rhys kept a tight hold on the chain and pressed his arm into Faedrah's back, but she planted her feet, fighting him like hell.

He shoved and she edged forward, wriggling and squirming until they'd reached the stoop. Hauling her inside, he met Leo's fake smile. "Let's stash her someplace safe. If memory serves, you've made some improvements to the basement."

Leo pushed the handle closed and shrugged as if whatever Rhys wanted was all the same to him. "Very well."

He walked them past the staircase to the door opposite his study, waved a palm over the lock and twisted the knob, standing aside as Rhys wrestled Faedrah down the stairs.

Electricity lifted the hair at Rhys' nape as Leo stepped off the bottom riser and slithered past them, leading the way down a dank hallway that ended at another locked door.

Water dripped off to the left in a steady splash. Glee twinkled in Leo's eyes as he glanced over his shoulder. "I think you'll find the accommodations to your liking."

His gaze dropped to Faedrah, and he winked, swinging the door wide.

Rhys thrust her into the room. One step over the threshold, and she stomped on his foot. He cursed a blue streak, hopping sideways. A quick

spin, and she rammed her shoulder into his ribcage.

He roared, pin-wheeling his arms, and stumbled back. A maniacal laugh built, echoing off the concrete walls. Rhys fisted his hand and swung, hoping the misdirection had worked and he'd connect with Leo in time.

His arm froze mid-punch. Faedrah's shoulders wrenched upright and she sucked air through her nose, her body stiff as a board. A current tingled over Rhys' skin. The ground disappeared beneath his feet, and he clenched his jaw as the air thickened, a dense pressure lifting his arms to the sides like he was about to be crucified.

"I cannot recall the last time I've had such fun." Leo rubbed his hands together, striding forward. A flick of his finger, and Rhys flew back. A grunt punched from his lungs as his spine slammed the concrete wall. "In fact, I daresay this has been so enjoyable, I'm nearly sad to see it end."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Chains rattled overhead, and Rhys twisted his shoulders, yanking at his arms as a set of shackles snaked down from the ceiling. "God dammit, I thought we had a deal."

Leo tipped his head back and laughter burst from his throat, so freakish and abnormal it doused the room in a layer of slime. "Oh, come now, Rhys. I believe the time for our little game has passed. Do you think me a fool? You are no more willing to give up the princess than I."

The iron cuffs snapped in place and Rhys hissed as the air decompressed, his arms jerking in their sockets as his full weight dropped a solid foot. His toes danced around a drain in the floor, and his stomach knotted at the dark red stain ringing the outside.

"But do not worry yourself." Leo crossed to his altar and flipped open a thick book. "I promise to keep your beloved close until she's outlived her usefulness."

Heat flooded Rhys' veins. Pinpricks numbed his fingers and, this time, he welcomed his magic like Faedrah's kiss. *Just a little more, fucker. Bring it on and we'll get this done.*

Leo lifted his hands to the sides and the candles on the altar flared. His lips whispered some bizarre incantation, and a pulse point throbbed in Rhys' skull.

A black cloud formed in the empty space over Leo's book. Shadows crept into the corners of the room, swirling and thickening. Rhys glanced at

Faedrah and she blinked. A tear rolled down her cheek, but she didn't move.

The acidic flavor of ashes dried his tongue. A drone buzzed in his ears, and he gritted his teeth. Shit, they were so close, but he needed more, to have his powers barrel in like a freight train if they hoped to make it out of this clusterfuck alive.

Reaching inside the empty void, Leo licked his lips. The candles flickered and the flames altered to the violet glow of a black light. He stepped back, lifting out a curved, silver knife.

*Yes!* Rhys expelled a harsh breath, puffed a few times and filled his lungs, searching for any imperfection in the silver, any flaw he could find. His magic fizzed and sputtered at the edges. He narrowed his focus and *shoved*, but the god-damned knife refused to move.

Turning from the table, Leo resumed chanting, his voice pitched both high and low, two octaves at once. Whispers of otherworldly voices joined in, and Rhys' stomach lurched; Faedrah shuddered. He thrashed at his restraints, growling.

Leo lifted his eyes to Rhys, empty and filled with black. The tempo of his incantation grew faster, the voices frantic. He balanced the knife on his fingertips and closed in. The blade glowed, and Rhys tried to fling it across the room.

Stopping before Rhys, Leo grabbed the handle and his chanting cut out. "In many ways, you were the pinnacle of my creations. I certainly hope you don't take offense. Your death is nothing personal."

Pushing the zipper of Rhys' jacket aside, he lifted the knife overhead and plunged it toward Rhys' chest.

Rhys squeezed his eyes closed and braced. A small percussion rebounded against his eardrums, and he flinched. A second passed...then a couple more. He peeked at Leo through one eye and the tension in his arms went slack. Holy shit, it had worked.

The tip of the knife poked Rhys t-shirt, piercing the fabric, but the blade had stopped dead in the air.

"What have you done?" Leo swung the knife back and jabbed it toward Rhys a second time. And then a third. "*What have you done!*"

He scrambled for the collar of Rhys' t-shirt and ripped off a wide strip in one swipe. His eyes bulged at the raised ink of Rhys' signature, tattooed

over Rhys' heart. Nostrils flared, Leo seized Rhys by the throat. "Do you think this will stop me? Do you truly think I shall not find another way?"

Yeah, good luck with that plan, asshole. Rhys grimaced and faked a cough. "God, Leo, your breath reeks. What up, major halitosis?"

Faedrah grunted, her eyes wide. She shook her head and then rocked back on her heels as a full-throated laugh burst through her gag. Gasping for air, she bent forward at the waist, stomping her foot as another round of laughter shook her shoulders.

"Right?" Rhys chuckled along with her. "I swear to God, the dude stinks worse than Fandorn."

She nodded, laughter tears streaming down her cheeks, Rhys' stomach cinching tighter over her amusement the more Leo stammered and fumed like some bratty kid.

He bounced the knife handle in his hand, strode toward Faedrah and wrenched her head back. "We shall see how you fare without your lovely muse."

Everything in Rhys' world slammed into focus. His back arched, wrists straining against the shackles as lightning bolts exploded down his spine. Light crackled from his hands. The shadows shrieked and scampered for the corners as his body buzzed like he'd been shot with a thousand volts.

A smile twisted his lips as he lowered his chin. Every piece of metal in the room, every mineral down to a molecular level was his, dammit. They all belonged to him.

An evil chuckle rumbled in Rhys's chest, and Leo shook his head. "This cannot—"

"Now, Faedrah!" Rhys aimed a sharp beam of energy straight at her handcuffs. Her hands jerked free at the same moment Rhys shoved at his restraints.

The shackles split with a metal *clang*. She drove her elbow into Leo's stomach, tangled the gold chain around her fingers and yanked. Leo bellowed. Rhys' feet hit the floor, he ran two steps and jumped as she flung the key into the air.

An earthquake rocked the ground. Cracks zig-zagged through the foundation. The walls shook and the candles toppled. Melted wax sprayed and sparks smoldered on the black tablecloth covering the altar. "No!" Leo shrieked.

Rhys snagged the key, spun and punched both hands forward, throwing everything he had into the knife. It flew from Leo's hand, but he thrust both arms up, stopping the blade in mid-twirl.

Gritting his teeth, Rhys dragged the knife to eye-level, pushing harder, aiming the tip toward Leo's chest. Heat built at his back. Flames sputtered and licked at the air. Leo's face grayed. His skin sagged. He panted and curled his fingers as the nails lengthened and yellowed.

A moan wound up from Faedrah's chest and her legs wobbled. God dammit, her memories. Her parents had said she might lose them. She staggered back, tearing the gag from her mouth, and dropped her head into her hands.

"Stay with me, Faedrah!" Rhys grappled at the knife with his mind. Leo growled and the sharp end spun back toward Rhys. "God dammit, don't you leave me!"

She shook her head, blinked and glanced around the room. Her eyes landed on Leo, and her jaw firmed as she peered past his shoulder and locked on to Rhys. "Never. I shall never leave you, my heart."

Hands fisted, she went up on her toes and sprinted straight for Leo, jumped and rammed both feet into his back. Rhys roared, pouring the last of his power into the knife. It twirled as Leo careened forward. Rhys grabbed the handle and jammed it all the way into Leo's chest, down to the hilt before giving it a hard twist.

Leo stumbled back, fell and scrambled away, crab-walking and flopping around like some possessed, disjointed body. He smacked into the burning altar and his hands fluttered and slapped at the knife. Hot wax streamed onto his head. The black bled from his eyes, streaking down his face.

Flames snaked over his clothes. The stench of rotting flesh filled the air and Leo screamed, thrashing. "I may die in this realm, but I live on in mine!"

Beams of blue light shot from his fingers, from his eyes and gaping mouth. His back bowed off the floor as fire enveloped his body. Rhys dove for Faedrah and knocked her to the floor, covering her head with his arms. The shadows screeched. The air was sucked from the room a second before a bone-jarring detonation lifted and slammed them back to the ground.

Debris pounded Rhys' back and legs. Dust and smoke filled his lungs, and he buried his face in the soft slope of Faedrah's neck. Coughing,

holding her close, he waited as the tremors subsided.

He lifted his head and ran his hands over her cheeks, her shoulders, down her sides and back up again. Ashes floated past his shoulder and caught in her closed lashes. Black smudges covered her forehead and cheeks. “Are you all right? Sweet Jesus, Faedrah, can you hear me?”

She wheezed and waved a hand in front of her face. “I am fine, my heart. None the worse for wear.”

He slumped back on top of her and crammed his arms under her shoulders, squeezing her tight. “Thank God. For a second there, I thought I’d lost you.”

“I am afraid you are still burdened with my presence.”

He chuckled and leaned away, cupping the top of her head so he could wipe the grime off her forehead with his thumb. “Holy shit, we did it. We won, Princess.”

She smiled. “I did not harbor any doubts that we would.”

*“Rhys? Oh my God, are you there? Just...say something. Todd’s coming. He should be there any second.”*

“I got ya, Violet.” He dropped his lips to Faedrah’s, and damned if he didn’t give two shits about anything else other than the fact she returned his kiss.

Footsteps thundered down the hall and the blown-out frame of the door slammed open against the wall. “Rhys!” Another round of bricks fell from the rafters.

“Over here!” The weight holding Rhys in place eased up as Todd and a few members of his crew dug him and Faedrah out from under. He sat up and scanned the basement, but there wasn’t much left...unless he could count the pile of cremated ashes that had once been Leo.

Rhys pushed to his feet and offered Faedrah a hand up, kicked a smoldering beam out of the way and high-stepped over a pile of cinderblock. He nudged the black mound with the toe of his boot and his brow twitched. No way.

Leaning down, he picked up the silver knife and swiped it back and forth over the side of his hip to clean off the oily residue. Faedrah wound her hand around his bicep and leaned in, and he glanced at her, flipping the blade over and back. “What the hell are we supposed to do with this, now?”

She frowned, and the confusion in her eyes made him hesitate. “For all my efforts, I cannot recall its significance.”

Shit, he forgot. The key. Unless he got that chain back around her neck, they’d be stuck here...her kingdom, her mom and dad and everyone who loved her in that world would be gone from her memories.

Sirens wailed somewhere off in the distance, and Todd glanced up at gaping hole in the floor of Leo’s study. “Later. It’s time we hit the road.”

“Yep.” Rhys shoved the knife into the back waistband of his pants and faced his muse. “Just one last thing.” He clenched the chain he still had wound through his fingers and closed his eyes, searching for any defect in the gold. The broken ends helped, giving him the perfect place to start, and the middle of his hand got hot as he concentrated on melting the links together.

He opened his fingers and, all things considered, the necklace looked pretty damn good. A nod down at his work, and he dropped the chain around Faedrah’s neck.

Todd muttered a curse, bracing his legs as another earthquake shook the ground. A few more chunks of concrete tipped from the walls and shattered. White dust hissed from between the cracks and a row of books slid off the overhead crater, flapping and bouncing as they landed.

But Rhys kept his eyes on Faedrah, watching...waiting...hoping he hadn’t fucked up the key’s magic and everything they’d been through would fall back into place.

She grabbed his arm and pressed two fingers to her forehead, squeezed her eyes tight and shook her head. The rumbling eased up and she lifted her gaze to his—aware, sharp, the perfect chocolate brown. “I remember...” She searched his face. “The two of us floating amongst the stars.”

The mural he’d painted in her bedroom. Damn straight. He smirked. “Floating, huh? That all you remember?”

One of her eyebrows rose, and he crossed his arms as she ran her focus up and down his body. “If memory serves, you and I have agreed to be wed.”

Yep, his furious little muse was back, and apparently reliving everything they’d done in her bedroom since she seemed to be mentally tearing his clothes off. He strode one step forward, snuck an arm around her waist and jerked her to his hips. “That’s right, Princess. And don’t you ever forget.”





## *Epilogue*

Denmar released the catch and the sand bags creaked, swinging to and fro over the narrow wooden beam at the gate of the Gantlet.

Faedrah sighed, searching the far tree line to either side of the large audience gathered beneath the white canopies staked upon the lawn. Royal blue pennants woven with the silver crest of the Austiere Kingdom caught and fluttered in the warm autumn wind. Green and floral garlands hung draped in a colorful display around the chairs and heavily-laden refreshment tables. Liveried servants batted at flies as they bowed and coursed through the crowd. Every able noble within her father's rule had arrived to celebrate this joyous occasion and, yet, she could not displace the lingering disquiet burdening her heart.

Two full cycles of Selene's passings had lapsed since Faedrah and her beloved Rhys had returned to the realm of Austiere. Two cycles of the moon, whilst every soul had rejoiced, the woods and surrounding lands had begun to heal and preparations for this long-awaited day had consumed the entirety of the kingdom.

Following her and her beloved's victorious purge of Gaelleod's foothold in the future, Sir Todd and his loyal band of steel-horsed riders had hastened their troupe to the home of her two faithful uncles. There, amid tears of farewell and heartfelt promises to one day return, Rhys had passed to Wizard Oliver and Sir Jon the silver blade Gaelleod had employed during the rite of his immoral transformations. Whilst both she and Rhys were hard-pressed to let such powerful magic vacate their watchful eye, the goddesses would not allow such an object safe passage through the veil. Rhys and Faedrah been left no choice but to take heart her uncles had vowed to secret the blade inside the armoire.

The moment they had returned to the castle, she'd removed the golden key from around neck, locking away both sides of the veil and the dangerous power contained therein.

Yet, in this realm, Gaelleod and his lost blade remained.

Faedrah closed her eyes, smiling softly over the impatience of the confident warrior threatening to take hold inside her. She stepped past the first bag and paused. Many hours Rhys had endeavored to locate Gaelleod's most treasured instrument of evil, toiling long into the night beside Fandorn whilst they combed through the castle's library. He'd lead several excursions into Gaelleod's crystal crypt, the days long spent exploring the tunnels, enough Faedrah had become accustomed to her beloved entering their bedchamber coated in diamond dust, his dark hair shimmering like a sea of stars. Still, for all his efforts, the dagger's location remained shrouded in mystery, and though Rhys used a portion of his powers to ward the tomb of Gaelleod's undead sleep, he would not allow for the entrance to be sealed.

Though his appeal contained a treacherous risk, neither the king nor queen nor anyone in all the realm dared to argue his request the doorway remain open. How could they when Vaighn had yet to reemerge from within that warren of diamond littered halls?

Another step, and Faedrah slipped past the second bag. Each morning as Helios had announced the beginning of a new day, she had hoped for the best and, each night, as the sun god set, her brother's rightful place within the kingdom remained vacant. For a time, Faedrah had insisted they postpone her contest in the Gantlet. Of all her brothers at arms, Vaighn was Austiere's true champion, stalwart of heart and fealty, unbested with his able sword, and she could not rightfully accept the Austiere crest until the two of them had contested.

Her heart slowed as she envisioned her brother's smile, the devilish mischief glinting in his eyes. What that she would give to have him taunt her? To have him enter the sparring room, his hair a tousled mess and his clothes unkempt after a long night tossing the bedclothes with a courtier?

Out of love and the deepest respect for her brother, she had continuously deferred...until the goddesses made known to her they had other plans in mind.

The swing of the final bag formed a steady rhythm in her mind, and she widened her stance, unsheathing a short sword from her back. A fortnight had passed since the expectation of her womanly course, and before Rhys confined her to lazing about the castle...before the grand announcement of

their upcoming arrival had spread to every ear in the realm, she would follow through on this day. She would do the one thing she could to honor her brother, and take his place as the King's right arm until the joyous moment of Vaighn's return.

The crowd quieted. A soft breeze tugged a loose strand from her braid and she smiled as it tickled across her lips. Her first opponent lingered near, hidden behind the foremost wall on her right. The scent of his sweat and leather chest plate gave his location away.

The knock of an arrow, the creak of a bow, and her second opponent made himself known. Straight ahead, he kneeled behind the low defense of a free-standing partition. Silver hummed as the third withdrew his sword, and she lowered her chin, targeting his position high atop the rope bridge. Once engaged in combat, she could locate the fourth and fifth from that vantage point with ease.

Filling her lungs, she awaited the swing of the bag, then dropped to one knee and rolled beneath it, using the unexpected maneuver to mask her advance. The first arrow loosed with the recoil of a bowstring, and she dodged left, knocking its aim off-kilter with her sword. The crowd *ooohed*. A smattering of applause accompanied their praise. She sprinted dead on for the archer, batting his arrows from the air, veered right at the last moment and charged for her first contender. His brows shot toward his hairline at her misdirection, and she used the beat of his surprise to leap and rebound off the wall.

Her boot heels rammed his shoulder. He staggered sideways and an arrow *thunked* into his leather shield. She landed behind him, flipped to her shoulders and pinioned her legs toward the backs of his knees. His full weight slammed to the ground from the force of her kick. A second well-aimed thrust at his shoulders, and she sprang to her boots as he careened face-first to the ground.

A sickening crunch accompanied his fall, and he turned his head aside, one hand holding the bridge of his nose and blood gushing down his lips. "Submit, milady. I submit."

The tip of an arrow glanced off her shoulder, and Faedrah hissed, spinning for the edge of the Gantlet and the high wooden arm that extended toward the crowd. A length of rope dangled from the top, swaying in the

breeze, and she leapt with all her might, body extended, and snagged the cable in mid-air.

The audience cheered, ducking low as she swung toward the tents. A careening swoop through the center of the Gantlet and she flipped, soaring aloft to gain hold of the bottom support rope of the bridge.

Her momentum spun her under and around, and she brought her knees to her chest as her side slammed her opponent's hardened chest plate. Pain ricocheted through her body. His back rebounded off the side hand rope, and he flailed his arms, tipping forward as the hit swung her under and back up behind him. A hard shove with her boot as she crested the hand rope, and he flipped like a piece of lumber, tumbling head over heels to smack the ground.

The rope bounced beneath her boots as she landed, and she peered down at the guard's prone form.

A wheeze leaked from between his parted lips, and he put a hand on his chest. "Submit."

She twiddled her fingers at him and raced for the end platform. Arrows whizzed past her head. A glance at the maze below, and she located the last two guards, each waiting behind the innermost ends of two opposite, identical walls. A narrow gap stood between them, forming the entrance to the Table of Doom.

A spring off her toes and she flew through the air, arms spread high, one leg bent as the floor rushed up to greet her. The crowd gasped as she landed and tucked onto one shoulder, rolling forward to disperse the impact to her legs. Dodging left then right, deflecting a hailstorm of arrows, she ran full force toward the archer, sprang hands over heels and *smack*, slapped the side of his head with her blade as she landed.

He flinched at the blow and she leveled the edge of her sword across his neck, bent in a crouch behind him. "Load your bow. Two arrows, please."

He hesitated and she pressed her blade deeper. He sharply inhaled as a bead of blood rolled along the sharp edge toward the hilt.

Muttering a curse, the archer reached for his quiver, knocked back a set of arrows and she squinted, leveraging her threat on his neck to set her sights on her two remaining targets. Yet she must be crafty, aim high enough to clear the walls.

Faedrah pressed her knee into the archer's back and tipped the bow back until the angle was pitched toward the sky, warranting her satisfaction. "Release."

The arrows flew from the bow, two black streaks against the lofty clouds, arched gracefully toward the ground and, a moment later, two identical howls of agony echoed from behind the walls.

A smile graced her lips, and she dug her blade deeper. "Are we moving forward the easy way or the hard way?"

"Easy, Your Highness." The archer glanced at her from the corner of his eye, disgust curling his lips. "I submit."

"Right, then." She stood and tousled his hair before jogging toward the Table of Doom. A hearty round of applause showered from the crowd amid cheers and piercing whistles. A glance left then right as she passed through the gap and a chuckle shook her shoulders as both guards bowed low, muttering their surrender. The first one's foot had been pinned to the floor by her arrow and the second grasped his sword arm, the thick black staff protruding from between his bloodied fingers.

Sheathing her sword at her back, she dipped her chin at Fandorn, standing in the center of the table, and strode forward to stand before him. Full dress regalia adorned the king's tall form, awaiting her arrival on the wizard's right and, beside him, the queen had donned her gray leather warrior's ensemble in homage to Faedrah's ascent through the guard.

Rhys stood to the left of Fandorn, his black leather waistcoat and breeches stretched across his muscular frame, sunlight winking off the silver vambraces he'd crossed before his chest. A dark scowl pleated his brow, and he shook his head. "Okay, that sucked."

Faedrah laughed. Her beloved had given his solemn vow he would not employ his powers to interfere in her final test, yet to remain no more than a bystander had surely stretched his nerves to the limit of their extent.

Tipping her head toward the slight injury peeling back the leather atop her shoulder, she arched a brow at her beloved. "A slight nudge to that arrow would've earned you much in the way of my favor."

Rhys unlocked his arms, clenching his grizzled jaw. "Don't start with me, Princess. It was hard enough to just stand here and watch. Though with the way you move, I gotta hand it to the guy. It's a wonder he got anywhere close."

Her mother smiled, linking her arm with that of the king. “Your father and I are so very proud of you, Faedrah.”

The king cleared his throat, nodding. “Indeed, my daughter. No father in all the realm could ask for more from his kingdom’s future queen.”

“Yeah, yeah we’re all thrilled Faedrah just tried to get herself killed.” With a roll of his eyes, Rhys stepped forward and turned about to face Fandorn, taking his place on Faedrah’s right.

Darting a sidelong glance his way, she pursed her lips against a smile. “Speaking of things starting anew...” She lifted her hand and placed it upon her belly. “I have joyous news of which you should be made aware.”

Rhys froze; slowly swiveled his head. A magnetic current vibrated the silver at her back as his face flooded a deep red. “Are you kidding?” He pivoted to fully face her and grabbed her upper arms, his hands trembling, glanced back at the Gantlet and expelled a harsh breath. “ Tits of the nine, Faedrah! Are you crazy? Going through the Gantlet pregnant?”

She rolled her lips to curtail a laugh. Her beloved’s use of their effrontery never ceased to tickle her heart.

The queen gasped and slapped a hand to her chest. Her rosy smile bloomed, and she softly clapped. “A babe! How wonderful!”

The king sputtered, swiping a hand down the front of his face. “Helios wept, my boy.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Did you just now conclude the woman you’re about to marry is as headstrong as her mother? Of course, she would contest in the Gantlet before making you aware of her condition.” He tossed that same hand in the air as if he’d long since relinquished any chance at winning an argument with an Austiere queen. “That decision makes perfect sense.”

“Oh, my God.” Rhys whisked Faedrah close, gathering her in his strong arms. He dotted kisses over her cheeks, her lips and forehead, then thrust her away and applied a gentle shake before another round of his ardent kisses heated her skin. “Sweet Jesus, I hope it’s a boy.”

Faedrah closed her eyes, her heart taking flight as her beloved cupped the back of her head in his warm hand. “Sure as shit is slick, taking on another Austiere woman will kill me.”

The king and queen shared a chuckle, and Rhys leaned back to search Faedrah’s gaze. “My crazy, beautiful, stubborn as hell muse.” He brought

his lips to hers and she gladly met his kiss. “Just wait until we’re alone, Princess. You’re in deep shit.”

Faedrah’s pulse skipped over all the delightful ways her beloved might exact revenge for such an offense, and she quietly laughed as he applied a firm squeeze to her back side.

Fandorn cleared his throat. “At your majesties’ pleasure, shall we begin?” With a nod from her parents, he called the courtiers to order, and Faedrah smiled into Rhys’ eyes as the wizard opened his hands to his sides. “We are gathered on this auspicious day to witness the joining of two hearts bonded in love.”

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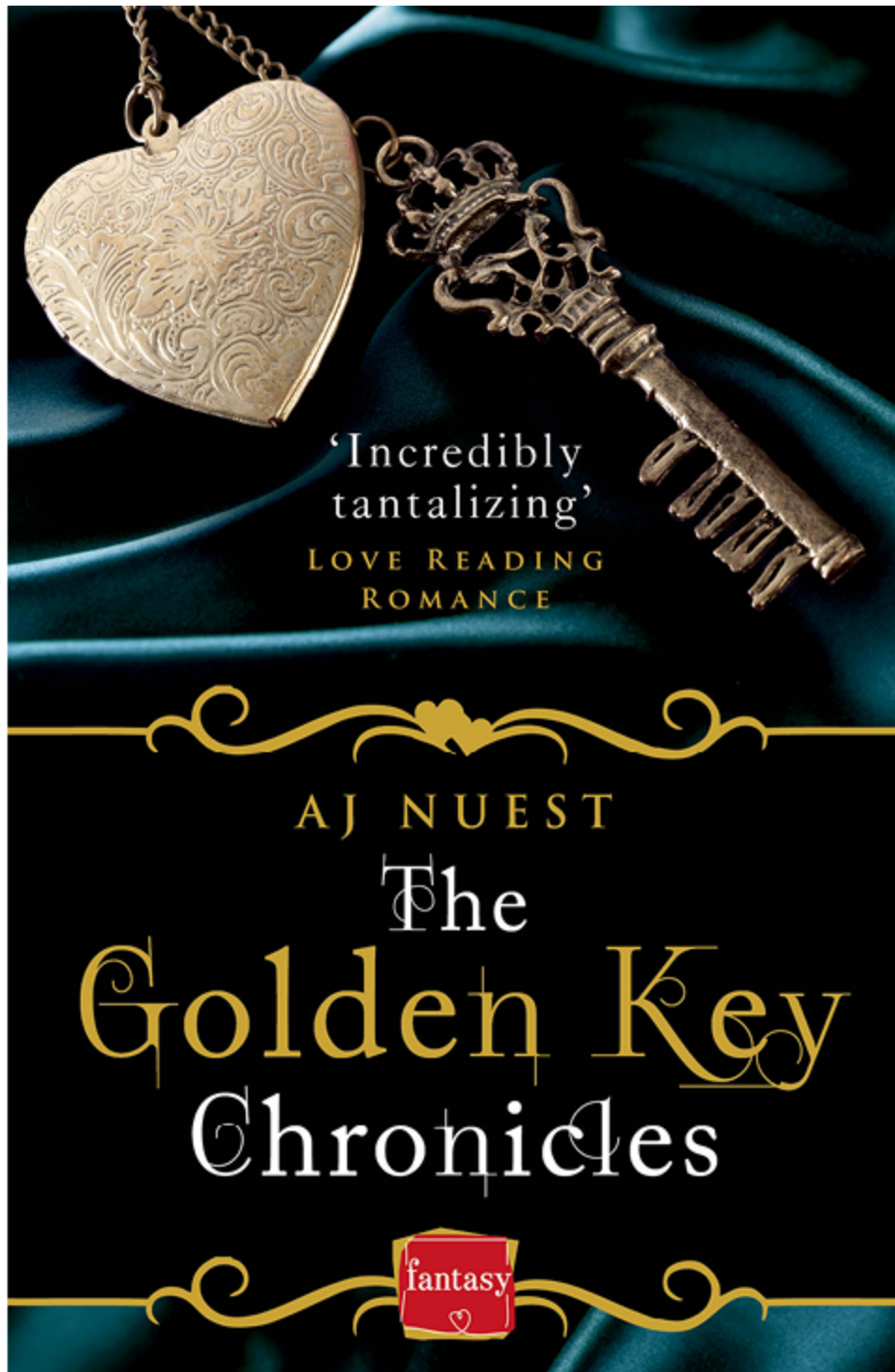
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I am a multi-published, award-winning author who lives in the middle of a cornfield in NW Indiana. My loving husband, two beautiful children and a bevy of spoiled pets have agreed to stay and, in exchange for three rations per day and laundry service, tolerate my lunacy.

While I spend most days happily ensconced in crafting romance across a multitude of genres, an underground coup has been percolating. The dog has just informed me the cat is secretly vying for dictatorship

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