



DARK
& DARKER
STILL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NIKKI ST. CROWE

A VANE AND ROC ORIGIN STORY

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CONTENT WARNING

Graphic language, violence, gore, abusive parent, talk of suicide, alluding to sexual assault, graphic sexual content, blood drinking, war, displacement, death of family

For a more comprehensive list of all of Nikki's work, please visit her website below.

<https://www.nikkiscrowe.com/content-warnings>

To all the girls who've ever made a mistake

THE JABBERWOCKY PRECEPT

Do not murder the time lest you devour everything in your wake.

ONE

ALICE

VANE MADDRED, UNOFFICIAL PRINCE OF THE UMBRAGE, IS FUCKING ME LIKE HE WANTS TO BRUISE ME.

I'm sure he does.

I clutch at him like he's an oak plank in a churning sea.

We never fuck like we like each other.

Our movements are frenzied, a little punishing.

I think we find ourselves like this most nights because we remind each other of things we hate about ourselves.

He hates that he desires anything, and I hate that I desire one thing I can't have. The fact that that one thing is his uncle is something neither of us will ever speak about.

The floor below us, music thumps against the walls of the Joker's Den.

Sweat coats our skin.

It's the heart of summer and it's always worse in the city where the nearby factories permeate the air with heat and the smell of burning oil.

It's after midnight. I'm drunk but not drunk enough to like myself.

I'm pressed against the wall, my boot braced on the arm of the nearest wingback chair.

Vane is a near carbon copy of his uncle. He towers over me by half a foot, his shoulders broad and muscular. His eyes are violet and bright, his hair dark and unkempt.

But where his uncle is a cliff edge crumbling beneath me, Vane is solid ground, even if it is unforgiving.

"Trying to fuck crown princes now, are you?" Vane asks.

"Yes," I tell him because I know it'll piss him off and I know he'll take it out on me and I just want to feel something, even if it's a punishment.

He growls into me, fucks me harder, his left arm hooked beneath my thigh, spreading me open. His right hand is buried in my hair, fingers like claws, yanking my head back to expose my neck for him.

The hour is here. He and I don't need his clock to know he will be drinking my blood.

Because Vane Maddred is a jabberwocky and jabberwockies need to drink to keep the monster at bay.

His god is time, the tick-tock of his pocket watch his prayer.

But sometimes I think blood is his salvation.

"And were you planning to tell me?" he asks.

"I'm telling you now."

His mouth hovers over my throat.

The "fucker" in question is the Crowned Prince of Darkland, His Royal Highness Evren Lorne. The *official* prince.

We hate him.

Maybe more than we hate each other.

But crowned princes do not make good enemies.

"I'm going to kill him," Vane says and presses his mouth to the rapid thump of my heart in my throat.

"No, you're not." His teeth graze my flesh, and I hiss out.

I'm pent up. Ready to sail. He hasn't given me this much attention in days. Did I bait him by flirting with the Crowned Prince? Yes. Do I regret it? Abso-fucking-lutely not.

Vane is possessive of his toys, and I am his favorite one, even if he likes to break me again and again.

He licks his way up the sensitive line of my throat, and I shiver beneath him.

Maybe I don't hate him.

Maybe he's just enough like his uncle that it quiets that incessant gnawing in my gut.

All of the Maddred men are dark and dangerous and monstrous.

And dark, monstrous things like to be in the company of other dark, monstrous things.

I think that's why we're terrified of losing each other, why we cling to one another, not with love, but the opposite: obsession.

Friction builds between us.

I'm hot and warm and cold all over and when Vane's teeth tickle my neck, I jolt away from him.

"Hold still," he says, yanks my head back, and sinks his teeth into me.

The first hot gush of blood surges out of the puncture wounds.

My veins fill with honey.

Getting bitten by a jabberwocky feels like your bones melt into stars.

I exhale.

To my ears, it sounds like a breath that lasts a lifetime.

I sink down the wall.

Vane adjusts his weight so he can catch me.

Our frenzied fucking slows and the slow drag of his cock is the most sublime feeling in the world.

I'm a puddle, no shape, no weight. I exist only to contain him.

My flesh is sticky in the summer heat, but it's too late to pull off my shirt.

I couldn't move if I wanted to.

Vane drinks from my neck, fills me up and I sway in his arms.

I can feel him growing harder, throbbing against my inner walls. He's described drinking as sexually charged, but if I'm to believe him, I'm the only one he drinks and fucks.

"It's messy," he's said. "And I don't like the clean-up."

Because I know Vane well, I knew he wasn't talking about the *bloody* mess. He was talking about the feelings, the emotional charge, the wake of women he's left trailing after him.

There are a thousand or more on Darkland who would kill to be where I am. A thousand more who would kill me to take my place.

Sometimes, knowing I get all of him, the monster and the man, is more pleasure than an orgasm.

All three of us, Roc, Vane and I, we fuck who we want, but somehow, we always find ourselves here, fucking each other.

"I hate you," I whisper into his ear. But the words come out sounding desperate. Like a wish that will never come true.

He drives in deeper, deeper, harder, harder, as if he cannot get enough of me.

When I first left Wonderland and found myself in Darkland, I thought I would never find a place to set down roots. I'd just lost my family home, and worse, been driven from my world.

But it was with the Madd brothers that I found something new and yet deeply familiar.

And now I want to build something with them, by their side.

Vane drinks from my veins, grunts into me, muscle dimpling in his back, his arms tensing up as he comes.

There is nothing I love more than a Madd brother coming inside of me. As if I'm marked by them, claimed by them.

As if to say, she is mine and she belongs here.

When Vane pulls away, my lifeblood drips from his mouth.

His eyes are glowing yellow in the semi-darkness of our apartment.

"I hate you too," he says and then he throws me into the chair, kicks my legs open, and sinks his mouth to my center.

I arch against the chair, hand hooked over the back, bracing myself.

I'm already soaked, but the blood makes it messier, wet and slippery, and I'm driven to the edge in a flash.

"Fuck," I breathe out. "Fucking hell."

I run my fingers back through his dark hair and grip tightly, driving his mouth into my pussy.

He groans, the sound humming against my clit.

I'm over the edge in an instant, bucking against his mouth.

He hooks his hands around my legs, holding me in place as he eats my pleasure, every last fucking drop.

My breath stutters up my throat as I twitch through the last of the orgasm.

Vane stands up and drags the back of his hand over his mouth.

Blood smears across his face.

His hair is a mess, several strands sticking straight up from my assault.

He's so fucking hot it makes my molars ache.

I want to trap *him* in amber, never let him go.

"Stop fucking baiting me," he says.

We've arrived at the place we both knew we were headed.

“Why? When you make it so easy.”

He leans forward, caging me in the chair.

His strong hand comes up, grabbing me by the throat, squeezing.

“Do as I say, Alice. You won’t like me when I’m mad.” He plants a chaste kiss on the corner of my mouth, leaving a sticky mess of blood, spit, cum, and my juices.

Then he lets me go, buttons up his pants, and heads down the stairs.

I sink back and squeeze the arms of the chair until my nails ache.

Two

VANE

I ENTER THE JOKER'S DEN FROM OUR PRIVATE DOOR IN BACK. IT SPILLS IN BETWEEN THE BAR AND THE BILLIARDS ROOM WHERE walls made of bubbled glass show silhouettes moving around the tables mid-game. Tonight's guest musicians are playing violin and lute along with our piano player, Big John and his son, Little Tom who beats at a handheld drum.

Roc is at the end of the bar waiting for a round of shots to be poured.

"Do you feel better?" he asks and turns to me, his back pressed against the bar, his elbows resting on the nicked and worn dark oak top.

I steal one of the shots before the bartender finishes his pour. "Yes," I answer and sling the drink back. Darkland whisky is smoky and sweet but so fucking smooth.

"You do know she does that just to get your attention."

I'm not about to admit to my older brother that for some fucking reason, I like it when Alice provokes me. It's a game we play on an endless loop. I pretend she doesn't matter and then she baits me and makes me prove that she does.

I come to stand beside Roc and lean into the bar top, sliding the empty shot glass back to the bartender. "Of course I do."

"One of these days it's going to get us in trouble."

"What, exactly, are you getting at?"

Roc angles toward me. "The way you two obsess over one another." He clicks his tongue. "It's not healthy."

"Don't lecture me on what's healthy. You're fucking half the Umbrage."

"Are you slut shaming me?"

"Oh please."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "So, I fuck half the Umbrage...do you see Alice trying to get back at me for it? Flirting with others in front of me? No, because, *one*, she knows I wouldn't care, and *two*, she and I do not obsess over one another. We have a healthy relationship."

"*Healthy*. That's like calling a burger with lettuce a salad."

"I mean..."

"Shut up. Okay, then, what's your sage advice?"

"I wish I had some. I'm just perfect. What I am cannot be replicated."

"Such a fucking asshole."

He sobers, leans into me and lowers his voice. "I'm serious, though. Just figure it out. We have bigger problems to worry about." He straightens, slaps me on the back and says, "Now help me carry these shots to the table."

"You know we have servers for this shit."

"Yes, but they're busy making us money so shut the fuck up and help me."

With a grumble, I grab three glasses and follow him to our table in the far corner.

The table is a half-circle with a booth and three more chairs positioned in front of it. All of the seats are taken. They usually are.

"Get the fuck up." Roc nods at the man at the end. The man was moving before Roc even opened his mouth, scurrying out of the way to make room for us.

Roc slides in first and I follow behind. Shots are divvied up. There's Comor, our most trusted lieutenant; his girlfriend Pen; two of our bonebreakers, Tin and Pike; our cousin, Hana, still a respected member of the Lorne Court; and Callista, a Lorne Court healer, previously a Heart Court blood witch from Wonderland. But we don't talk about that. All of us refugees from Wonderland don't talk about who we were before or what we could do. Calli was one of the most powerful blood witches in Wonderland. Roc and I have tried to poach her from the royal family but she won't budge even though I think healing is beneath

her.

Tin and Pike, sitting in the chairs opposite the booth, scoop up the shots before anyone can even suggest a toast. The alcohol is quickly sliding down their throats. They're already drunk. It's their night off so I suppose they're allowed to get fucking blitzed.

"Where were you?" Hana asks, claiming her shot with two tattooed fingers.

"He was falling for the oldest trick in the book." Callista winks at me as she tosses back her shot.

"Christ. Not you too."

Roc drapes his arm over my shoulders and reels me into his side. He smells like cigarettes and blood and liquor. There's a looseness about him tonight, like some of the pent-up energy of the last few weeks has finally abated. He's been a fucking prick the last month as we worked on striking a deal with the Lorne Court to take over Caligo Port, arguably the most important harbor in all of Darkland.

Today we shook hands on it.

Not without a price, though.

"Oh, don't feel bad," Callista goes on, spinning the empty shot glass on the table. Her dark hair is half tied back, with several small braids hanging along her face. There's a silver hoop in her eyebrow and two hearts through her earlobes. She may have left Wonderland a long time ago, but she still wears her loyalty to the Hearts like a badge.

"Alice is a Spade after all," she says. "They really can't help messing with your mind and pulling you down into the baser human instincts we all try to hide, dismiss, or ignore. You want my advice?"

"I don't."

"You can't trust anything a spade says or does."

"It's not like I'd trust a heart either, Call," I say back. "So, you don't have a lot of room to talk."

Comor whistles. "Damn."

The witch pretends not to be phased. And maybe she isn't. I've never seen Calli get ruffled. She served under the Queen of Hearts and somehow escaped Wonderland during the worst of the war. I don't enjoy her company, but I do admire her tenacity.

I've known Alice longer than I've known Callista, but Call has a point. Wonderland Spades are smart, strategic, and sometimes diabolical. It's why Roc and I brought Alice in under our wing. She's good at what she does, gathering info, charming people, bending people to her will.

But sometimes I fall victim to it too. I fucking know that. I'm just not going to admit it to a heart witch.

"Oh look," Call says, changing the subject, "you're being summoned."

I follow her line of sight across the Joker's Den, where a group of people has entered from the inky darkness outside.

Half of the Lorne Court, with Prince Claude and Princess Rosalind at the front, followed by two of the lesser nobles, and Lady Genevieve beside them. Lady Gen is the daughter of the Duke of Darkland.

It's Gen waving me over.

My shoulders tense up.

"Go," Roc urges me, his expression now serious.

This is the price we had to pay, my duty to our future, compensation for our past.

At one time, Roc was in line to inherit the title of Duke of Darkland. We grew up among the Darkland elite, just as much a part of the Lorne Court as Hana. And then our father tried to overthrow the royal family.

We had anything we wanted. But apparently, everything wasn't enough for Aaric Soren Maddred.

When his plans were uncovered, we went from titled noble assholes to banished assholes, stripped of our titles, our wealth, anything resembling an asset or luxury.

The Umbrage was the only place that took us in.

We were monsters, after all, and monsters make great bonebreakers. Those in power in the Umbrage were happy to use us when they needed people to disappear. Roc quickly became known as the Devourer of Men. He's nearly reached boogeyman status at this point. So, is it a surprise we are now in control of most of the Umbrage? Devouring an asshole or two was worth it.

But somehow, we've circled back to the Darkland elite.

And now they're summoning me to their side.

I don't love this arrangement, but there's no room to have feelings about it.

I will do what needs to be done. And I will do it quietly.

I steal Hana's shot and pound it back.

"Hey!" She lifts her hand in exasperation. "I was just going to drink that."

"Roc will get you a new one."

"I will, Hanny. Promise."

She rolls her eyes at the childhood nickname but gives him a nod.

Gen waves again, more insistently this time, so I slip from the table and make my way across the bar to the future that

awaits me.

THREE

ALICE

ONCE I'M ALONE, I COLLAPSE INTO THE WINGBACK CHAIR. THE CRUSHED VELVET SMELLS FAINTLY OF VANE, LIKE CLOVE OIL AND burning tobacco and whisky.

I stretch over the arm, reaching for my cigarettes on the nearest end table, dropped near a stack of Vane's books and one of Roc's trinkets from their past life among the Darkland elite.

I light a cigarette, exhale. Smoke ribbons in the rays of moonlight spilling in through the five large windows at the front of the apartment I share with the Madd brothers.

I've been here nearly four years now. It's as much my home as Wonderland was, but somehow I still feel like a guest. Vane and Roc owned the building long before I arrived, but if I were looking for apartments, this is the kind I would have immediately fallen in love with.

The building itself is a Noir Revival style, with three floors, each one stretching high with twelve-foot ceilings and tall, arched windows. Decorative brackets hold up the roof, and while you'd have to be on the third floor to notice the detail, each bracket is hand-carved with skulls, the jaws yawning open as if they're screaming.

The windows are my favorite. Iron muntins between each delicate pane of glass make a grid on the lower half, while the iron in the arched upper half forms a pattern much like the sun's rays. It's a contrast I love, the symbolism of it all, both light and dark.

The windows overlook Butcher's Row, named as such because it was once the only place to buy meat on the southern end of Darkland.

As the city grew, and townhomes and merchant shops gobbled up cattle lands, the butchers moved further north along with the ranchers. But the name remains. And honestly, what better name than Butcher's Row in a part of town known for making people bleed?

My first night in the Umbrage, I was robbed by a nine-year-old boy with a switchblade and hungry eyes. He left a cut on my arm, my pockets empty, and my ego bruised.

I never made that mistake again.

I take another hit, head lulled back, and close my eyes.

The spirits are loud tonight.

Like a dozen church bells all ringing a different tune.

It's a full moon, the kind that in Wonderland would have been called a Heart Moon because of its red hue.

The dead are always louder on a full moon.

It might be part of the reason why I provoked Vane. Distraction is always better than the alternative.

"She wonders why I left..."

"He murdered me!"

"Tell him I love him."

The different voices wend in and around each other like wind through a forest.

They always have unfinished business. But don't we all?

Over the years, I've gotten much better at putting up boundaries between me and the dead, but in the Seven Isles, I can't see them. I can only hear them, unlike in Wonderland where spirits roam the city streets and the countryside hills endlessly searching for something they cannot touch and sometimes cannot name.

I didn't realize how much of a distraction they were until I left Wonderland. The Seven Isles is like a vacation compared to my home world.

I don't ever want to go back.

And yet, on a full moon, when the voices rise to a cacophony, I am reminded of the strain. My head pounds and my eyes feel swollen even though I haven't cried in months.

Reaching over to the couch where I tossed my jacket, I grab it and yank it onto my lap. Tucked into the inner pocket is an eight-piece newsboy cap constructed of gray tweed.

It was custom-made for me by the Madd Hatter himself, and imbued with a unique power, a fact that I've told no one, not even Vane and Roc.

I slip the hat on, and immediately my body blips out of sight right along with the cigarette.

I don't know why the Madd Hatter made me a hat that turns the wearer invisible. Did he know that some days I can't bear the thought of being perceived? That some days I don't want to exist?

I never asked him, and he never told me.

But it was the perfect gift.

Because when I disappear, even the spirits stop talking to me.

I can just be as I am, just thought and energy and silence.

With no one to hear them, the spirits soon fade away.

I may not see them haunting the Umbrage, but I can feel them, and so I know the moment I'm alone.

The air is still. The room softer. And the chill in my fingertips is finally gone.

I'm tired and cranky, but I promised my best friend, Jade, that I'd join her for a drink before the night was over.

I come down to the Den with my hair combed and my clothing smoothed over. I don't think I look like I've just been fucked by a Madd brother, but Jade won't care. She knows a lot of the details of my private life, Madd brothers included.

As I cross the main bar room, I purposefully don't scan the crowd looking for Vane. I don't want him getting the idea I care what he's doing even though I do.

I find Jade at our table next to the half-circle booth of the Madd brothers. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the chairs are full, but the booth is only half occupied. Roc laughs at something someone says and the rest of the table joins him.

Vane isn't there. I am always distantly aware of him in the room and I sense him nearby, but I'm not about to scan the Den looking for him like some lonely little puppy.

I join Jade, who is sitting with our friend, Salty, who we would consider one of our best if it wasn't for his choice in work. He's a guard in the royal palace and is making his way up in rank. He wants to either become captain someday or join the ranks of the Shadow Order, Darkland's most elite faction of soldiers. Currently he's a sergeant.

We're all originally from Wonderland—Jade a Diamond, me a Spade, and Salty a Club. It automatically makes us kin, in some way. So, Jade and I love Salty, but we don't necessarily trust him. At least not like we would a *best friend*.

I drop into the chair across from Jade and next to Salty. His long blond hair is left loose around his shoulders, with several strands hanging along his face. When I first met him years ago, his hair was buzzed. I think that might have been his last haircut.

He's wearing a plain black t-shirt and black tactical pants. The shirt is loose around his chest, but tight on his biceps.

I didn't know Salty when we were in Wonderland, and sometimes I wonder if I had, if my story would have turned out differently. He's easy to be around, easy to talk to, and extremely good-looking. In Wonderland, Clubs and Spades were allies. It wouldn't have been out of the question for someone like me to find themselves betrothed to someone like Salty. Not that he's ever confirmed his rank or title in Wonderland. I knew *most* of the nobles of the Club court and I don't remember him, but he has a court card, which means he was either born to a powerful family or he stole it from one. Either option says something about him.

In Wonderland, only those with power, status, or wealth possess court cards—magical cards with unique powers that also act as keys to travel through the looking glass. Though you can only travel if you have a wild card, or a full court—a queen of diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades.

Salty possessing a court card is about the only thing I know about his Wonderland history. Most of us displaced by the Suit War don't discuss our lives in Wonderland. We don't talk about what we left or what we had to do to get here. But most know of the Spade family. It's hard to escape what my parents did and what it got us.

Thankfully, Jade and Salty have judged me on my own and not on the actions and reputations of my family.

"Took you long enough," Jade says and slides a glass to me. It's one of the highball glasses rimmed in sugar, with a bright red drink inside and two slices of orange floating among the ice.

"A Joker Sunrise?" I ask.

"Of course," she answers.

"You know me so well."

I take a sip. The sugar hits me first, then the citrusy, sweet of the cocktail mix, then the heat of the rum. Joker Sunrises make me instantly happier. Jade is truly the best of best friends. From the moment I met her, I felt at ease. There's something practical

and sturdy about her. If you're wrong, she will tell you so, but in a very straightforward way. If you're right, she'll clap you on the back and if you're down, she'll find a way to bring you up. Everything about her is honest. You always know where you stand with her.

As long as I've known her, she's worked as the right-hand woman to Warren Ashmoth, the wealthy importer and exporter who owns South Sea Conveyance. They're secretly hooking up. Have been for over a year. The only part about her life she's not forthcoming about. Warren wants to make it official. Jade is still unsure if it's serious, even though he sends her a dozen roses every single Sunday morning, and every time he walks in the room, her eyes light up.

They are in love. The real kind of love that sinks into your belly and crackles like lightning.

Jade leans into me and several of her braids slide over her shoulder and swing behind her. Two of the braids have wooden beads tied into them, the wood carved with Xs to ward off evil spirits. Jade first settled in Summerland when she crossed over, specifically the southern tip where carvings, in beads or trinkets or doorframes, is a common practice to protect the spirit and the home.

I once asked her if she thought they worked and she told me it didn't matter if they did, that the practice itself gave her comfort.

I've never seen or heard an evil spirit. Most I've encountered are neutral, or as neutral as a mortal spirit can be with their trauma and their fears and their hopes and their worries. So maybe there's something to the extra protection. Maybe Jade's practice, and the practice of others in the Umbrage, are powerful enough to protect us all.

"Salty was just telling me some interesting info," Jade says, lowering her voice. "Something you'll most definitely want to know."

I raise my brows at Salty across the table. "What kind of info?"

Salty leans in too. The three silver bracelets on his left wrist slide forward, chiming together. He's got a good foot on both of us, so he dominates the space quickly, his black shirt bunching up around his broad shoulders. "Vane and Roc were at the palace today."

I've known they've been working on a deal to take over Caligo and that the deal involved the royal family since the unfortunate, *sudden* passing of the entire Caligo family put control of the harbor into the hands of the palace.

Vane and Roc were not the royal family's first choice. They were stripped of their titles, after all, and are now considered mob bosses—impossible to trust, hard to predict.

"Not necessarily clandestine info," I say, slightly bored.

"No." Salty gets a little closer. "But would you know...the Duke of Darkland was there as well."

I pull back, frowning. "Why would the duke join in negotiations over the control of a harbor? He has no stake in imports and exports. None of his businesses sell goods and—"

High-pitched laughter sounds from the billiards room. The kind that scratches against your eardrums and makes your molars clench.

I know that laughter.

It belongs to the daughter of the Duke, Lady Genevieve.

I twist in my chair and glance over my shoulder. I can just make out Vane's silhouette through the murky glass of the billiards room...with Gen snuggled in close to his side.

My gaze snaps to Roc. He's looking right at me, his mouth set in a grim line.

Jabberwookies have heightened senses, including hearing, and though the Joker's Den is full of conversation, laughter, music and the clatter of glasses, I know he heard our conversation.

I know that he knows that I know what the duke's attendance meant. What's the best way to test loyalty? To intertwine your assets. And sometimes, there is no greater asset than a son or a daughter.

Blood rushes through my ears.

My chair scrapes over the hardwood floor as I shove it back.

Roc is on his feet in a second. "Al," he says, a warning, a command.

But I'm not listening. I'm already racing for the door.

FOUR

ALICE

I DON'T THINK ABOUT WHICH DIRECTION I'M RUNNING WHEN I BURST OUT OF THE JOKER'S DEN AND INTO THE ALLEY BEHIND IT, but I end up in Wolbridge Graveyard on the western edge of the Umbrage.

I can't really be surprised.

Death has always been a comfort to me, and because I am quick to anger and quick to run away, I often find myself here looking for solace among the moss-covered granite headstones, the old oak trees, and the dead.

I did, however, forget it was a full moon.

When I come to a stop beside the Wolbridge Family Mausoleum, the voices catch up to me.

There are so many, my head immediately begins to pound.

"Fuck. Fuck off."

There are several winding paths through the graveyard, with three of them leading to entrances. I check my position and decide the nearest entrance is to my left and start heading that way at a brisk pace. But I only manage to take a few steps before a hand, all bones and tattered cloth, is yanking me to the ground.

"Absolutely the fuck not," I tell it and shake it off. "Go back to the Underland. I mean...*fuck. Die*, my friend. Tonight is not your night for resurrection."

The hand, protruding from a lump of grass and dirt in front of a weathered headstone, goes limp, then sinks back into the earth.

The Seven Isles doesn't have a collective term for the place the dead go. Not like Wonderland. But the term Underland is seared into my brain and I'm not sure I could call it anything else. It's just that the dead here in the Seven Isles don't always recognize the name, and so the commands go ignored.

I don't really know where the dead of the Seven Isles go when they cross over, and when I've asked them, they've had no name for it. Those of us from Wonderland go to the Underland when we die, regardless of where we are when we stop breathing.

Back on my feet, I hurry along the path, careful not to tread near the graves.

"Al! Not the fucking graveyard!"

Roc's voice filters above the din of the dead.

I stop. Sigh.

"Out of all the places," he says with a grumble.

I turn to him. The shadows of the oak tree stretch across the path behind me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I shout.

"He was supposed to tell you."

Vane.

He had all the opportunity. We were alone, fucking in our apartment. He could have told me when he cornered me in the living room. He could have told me when he was balls deep inside of me. He could have told me after he made me come in his favorite wingback chair.

But he didn't.

I can guess as to the reasons. There would be at least a dozen.

But none of them matter. He let me figure it out in front of my friends.

"Why?" I ask as Roc gets closer. He's taking a drag on a cigarette, his head bowed forward, the smoke spinning behind him.

If you were to analyze my relationship with each of the Madd brothers, it would be obvious that my relationship with Roc

is better. We don't fight, not like Vane and me. He tells me everything I want to know and sometimes the things I don't just to make me laugh. Sometimes he surprises me with flowers or jewelry or a trinket he found in some shop somewhere. He smiles more than Vane. He loves to meander and will do so at midnight through graveyards or at noon through museums. If I drink too much and end up puking in the toilet, he'll gladly hold my hair back and then fetch me aspirin and cold water to wash it down.

The only problem is, Roc will never commit to a relationship, which means I never get all of him. Not like I do with Vane.

When I get all of Vane, even as rare as it is, it's like an ocean wave dragging me under. The way he overwhelms me makes me feel like I am living and dying at the same time.

It's addictive. A high I'm always chasing.

All of that is about to change, though.

Roc comes to a stop a few feet from me. He curls his finger over the cigarette, finishing another drag. The glow of the burning ember highlights his otherworldly beauty in the middle of the graveyard beneath the glowing Heart Moon.

I should want Roc more. If I were a math person like Jade, the numbers would add up perfectly.

When he pulls the cigarette from his mouth, the smoke curls out, then gets sucked back in, down into his lungs.

"You should have told me. You know he wasn't going to."

Roc exhales and the smoke plumes into the night. "Maybe you're right."

"It's almost like he wants to humiliate me."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"My friends knew about it before I did! Do you know how horrible it is to find out that way?"

He shrugs. "I don't have friends, so no."

"Roc."

"Al."

"Now who's being dramatic?"

He grins at me. "What if I told you—"

A figure covered in clumps of dirt and draped in holey cotton slams into Roc, swiping him from my line of vision.

"Christ," Roc mutters, now on the ground a good six feet from where he was a moment ago. There's a corpse on top of him. Judging by the style of clothing and the desiccated flesh, the man's been dead at least seventy-five years.

"This is why you don't come to the graveyard when you're in a mood," Roc shouts, fighting off the corpse.

"It wasn't planned."

Roc tosses the man back and he lands in the pathway, legs folded at an odd angle, his head, maybe too heavy for what little muscle he has, hangs forward, bobbing like he's drunk.

"Back to bed," I tell him.

"Unnnngghhhh," he mutters.

"I command you to return to your grave."

He manages to get on his knees and crawls across the two-track, over the mossy grass, then wiggles his way back down the hole he crawled from.

"Come on, Al." Roc dusts off his clothes. "How about we get you out of here. I'll treat you to a chocolate croissant."

"Take me for a walk," I counter.

"Of course."

"To Lainey's?" I add.

I haven't seen her in weeks. They forbade me from visiting her while they worked on the Caligo deal. She's technically hidden away in a safe house and we try not to expose her if we can help it and the Caligo deal had a lot of eyes on us. Now, I realize, for more reasons than one.

"Fine," Roc says.

"Yay!" I lunge at him and wrap my arms around his neck. "Oh gods, you smell like the dead." I quickly back off, nose wrinkled.

"Thanks to you."

I flutter my eyelashes innocently. "You know how my power is on a full moon. I'm just a wee little girl, too powerful for her own good."

"Too bratty for her own good." He straightens his jacket. "But in all seriousness, Alice, darling, keep fucking around, and someone will find out about your power and they'll use you up until there's nothing left just like the Queen of Hearts."

This is the reason why no one knows I can command the dead. Vane and Roc both decided it was in my best interest to keep that part a secret so no one in the Lorne Court would take advantage of me. In Wonderland, Spades are known to have a connection to the Underland, but my power is unique. Not even my parents could command the dead.

Though "command" is a bit of a stretch. I don't use the power, so it tends to get away from me when the veil between the living and the dead stretches too thin.

But there are things even Vane and Roc don't know. They think the Underland is an abstract idea, more myth than reality.

They don't know that when I was ten years old, I accidentally found myself wandering the Underland, and that it was as real as the earth I walk on now.

FIVE

ROC

PASTRIES ARE NOT MY FAVORITE. I MUCH PREFER PEANUTS AND BOURBON AND BLOOD.

But a promise is a promise. I am a man of my word, after all.

As we walk, Alice and I share a cigarette. We are silent, but the city is not. Darkland never sleeps. In the distance, I can hear the dockhands shouting to one another. A few dogs bark in a chorus, fighting for scraps. Behind us is the loud rumbling thump and grind of the factories. In front of us, the melody of music grows in volume as we near Fortune's Lane.

Fortune is known for three things: street musicians, good luck trinkets of any shape and size, and pastries.

It's Al's favorite part of the Umbrage as she loves both music and pastries, and while she doesn't believe in luck, I've caught her buying a rabbit's foot or two from the shops on the Lane.

"What's your pick?" I ask her, because we have at least four bakeries to choose from.

We come up on Fortune from the west on Fourth Avenue, where it splits the Lane in half. If we go right, we'll be in the thick of the music and the fortune vendors. If we go left, still more music but fewer trinkets.

"I want to go to The First-Born Baker." Al takes another hit from the disappearing cigarette and hands it back to me.

"I hate the First-Born Baker."

She makes an O with her lips and exhales smoke. "That's because she won't take your shit. It's my favorite thing about her. Other than her croissants, of course." Al smiles up at me, the flames from the gas lamps sending dancing orange light across her face.

There is something special about Alice's features that doesn't exist here in the Seven Isles. There's a flatness to the bridge of her nose, a roundness to her eyes and an equal roundness to her face. Her ears aren't pointy like most of the fae in the Isles, but they aren't soft either. She is the closest thing I have to Wonderland other than Vane and being with her feels like home in a way that's hard to articulate.

Lainey may be our sister with the same mother and father, but she was born here on Darkland soil, and I think despite our shared DNA, the Isles somehow seeped into her blood, making her more Darkland than Wonderland.

Honestly, I'm glad my baby sister has no connection to our homeland. She is the opposite of me and Vane. If we are a boneyard, she is a meadow. If we are a violent storm, she is a morning of sunshine.

She would hate to know her older brother thinks of her as warm and innocent and bright, but in the dark, unforgiving world of Darkland, being all those things is a victory.

I pull on the cigarette, taking the last hit before dropping it on the cobblestones where it hisses and goes dark in a puddle of water.

We go left.

There's a musician on the street corner playing the lute over a tin can slowly being filled with coinage. I flip him a cut, the coin ringing out against the metal and he moves his body in my direction, the music now aimed at me.

He has a singing voice like wheat grass, a dry rasp that I enjoy, but I don't fuck musicians. I have too big of an ego for that.

Fortune's Lane is one of the oldest streets in Darkland and the cobblestones are uneven, the mud between turned black by the soot and dirt of multiple centuries. Because of that, traffic is lighter so it's mostly pedestrians filling the street with some of the shops and vendor stalls spilling over the curb and into the right of way.

Alice and I skirt a tent selling charmed quills and good luck beads strung on leather and chain.

"A charm for the lady?" the man says, stretching his hand out with a flourish. There's a bronze medallion in the squishy cup of his palm with a triangle etched into the metal.

Triangles, especially triangles with a straight line through the top, are ubiquitous in Darkland. The symbol has multiple meanings, depending on who you're asking, but for the most part, it's meant to be a protection symbol, but sometimes it can

also mean change.

“No, thank you,” Al says, barely looking at the man.

“Ahh come on, sweet girl! So pretty. So small and delicate! You need protection from the monsters of the Umbrage!”

I step out of the shadows, grab Al and push her behind me, then press forward into the man’s personal space letting my eyes bleed to bright yellow.

“She needs no protection from the monsters when she has one in her bed.”

“Christ!” The man leaps back. The bronze medallion slips from his grip, clattering to the cobblestones. “I didn’t see you there, Mr. Crocodile.” He makes the sign of the serpent over his face as a way to ward off evil, the evil being me. “Apologies. Sorry. So Sorry!”

The man disappears into his tent, the medallion forgotten in the street.

“A monster in my bed, huh?” Alice says.

“Not a lie.”

“If only I could keep him there.”

“Don’t start.”

“I’m not.”

“I will never belong to one bed. You know that.”

“Never?” The line of her brow lifts. She’s playing with me, laughter trembling on her red lips. She already knows the answer to that question—absolutely not, not ever—but it doesn’t stop her from trying, from hoping.

I hook my arm around her and pull her in close. “Who am I to deny others the pleasure of my company?”

She groans.

I yank her even closer and kiss the top of her head.

“But you will get the most of me and that will have to be enough.”

“It’s not,” she mutters, but I pretend I don’t hear her and she pretends she didn’t say it and we go on with our night.

The First-Born Baker is, as the name implies, a firstborn daughter. I usually perform well with firstborn daughters because they’re accustomed to caring for everyone around them, doling out orders, cleaning up messes, and being the one in charge. When it comes to the bedroom, usually they are happy to give up control, if just for a moment, so their brain can rest, so the itch can be scratched.

But Kenny has rebuffed every one of my advances and at first I thought it was cute, a game we were playing, but she keeps doing it.

When we walk into First Born Baker, she looks past the group of customers at the register and spots me. She doesn’t react because she’s the consummate professional, but as soon as the customers are finished and filing out the door, she crosses her arms over her chest and slings her hip back, giving her curvy body a serpentine form.

God she’s hot. Is she doing that on purpose? If she would just give in, I would have her trembling beneath me in record time.

“Hey.” Alice snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Stop gaping at Kenny.”

“Sorry.” I smile at the First-Born Baker. She smiles back, but it’s the smile of a gravedigger who’s just patted a grave smooth. “Kenny. Looking lovely as always. Did you change your hair?”

Kenny has a mane of thick, bright red hair. It reminds me of the crimson corral on the reef north of Caligo Port. Tonight, and most nights, she has it pulled back in a high ponytail so that inches and inches of red waves cascade down her back.

“Crocodile,” she says. “You haven’t been stabbed yet?”

I lean into the counter. It’s red forest oak with ancient saw marks still visible at the edges. “Oh Kenny. You know I’m a special boy. Only a special blade will hurt a special boy and I’m the only one with the special blade. Did I tell you I’m special?”

Kenny turns her gaze to Alice. “How do you stomach his ego on a day-to-day basis? Also, can you get me that blade?”

Alice sniffs back a laugh.

“She wouldn’t dare. I’m her favorite Madd Brother after all. I’m the only one who buys her pastries.”

“That can’t be true.” Kenny tilts her head, the ponytail swinging. “Tell me he’s not your favorite, Al.”

“Have you met Vane?” Alice says.

This game we are playing is delightful and cute.

I slide my arm around Al’s shoulders and tug her into my side. She brings with her the scent of petrichor and tobacco.

I’m not her favorite, not by a long shot. She would push me over a cliff if it meant having Vane. And she would push me and Vane over a cliff if it meant having our uncle. There’s a long line of Madd men she’s fucked and loved in her own twisted way.

Maybe there’s more of Alice in our veins than there is Wonderland.

“I prefer Vane to this one,” Kenny says and then slides her hands into the back pockets of her high-waisted trousers. “At least he’s quiet.”

Alice’s shoulders shake with laughter. She glances up at me. “She has a point. You never shut up. You love the sound of your own voice.”

“Now you’re just being mean,” I say, but I can’t hide the amusement on my face.

Kenny rolls her eyes.

Alice wraps her arm around my waist and gives me a reassuring squeeze.

“Do you have any of the chocolate croissants, Kenny?” I ask. “Despite what you may think, we did come here for your baked goods, not your enchanting personality.”

Alice digs her fingernails into my side sending a sting of pain through my ribs. A warning to behave myself. Acquiring pastries is the highest priority, and any deviation will not be tolerated.

“Pretty please, Ken?” she adds, pretending she didn’t just assault me under the cover of love.

“For you, of course.” Kenny slides open the door on her side of the glass case and reaches in with a sheet of parchment paper. She pulls out two croissants.

“Make it three,” I amend, and she adds one more to a white paper bag. “For Lainey,” I whisper to Alice and she nods against my shoulder.

“Good thinking. Who’s buying?”

Vane and I have done well for ourselves since taking over the Umbrage, but even so, Alice is not hurting for money. We don’t charge her rent or expenses, which means any money she earns just piles up.

“You.”

“I didn’t bring any money.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“I was just being respectful.”

I snort and start counting out coins as she adds chocolate crisps, latticed sweet tarts, several petit fours decorated with edible pansies and one gingerbread man because they’re Lainey’s favorite.

Kenny hands the bags over and taps in a few buttons on the register. “Ten sterling.”

I give her two gold dormunds, or dormies, and tell her to keep the change.

Kenny eyes the gold. “That’s too much.”

“It’s never too much for you, Kenny.” I wink at her. She frowns. Alice snorts and pushes me to the door.

With our treats acquired and back on the Lane, Alice and I head north for the Darkland Highlands and my baby sister.

SIX

ALICE

WE TAKE A CAB TO NOBLE HILL, THE MID-NORTH OF DARKLAND WHERE THE NOBILITY HAS ESTATE HOUSES ON PROPERTY THAT butts up against the Royal Grounds and the Palace. From there, we walk. It takes us another hour to get to the highlands, and another hour after that to reach the Maddred safe house on the northwestern coast of Darkland.

I know Vane and Roc, like me, were born in Wonderland and so their early days were spent in some other house a whole world away. But I can't help but think of the cliffside cottage as the origin place of Vane and Roc even though it was purchased just a handful of years back.

The house just feels like the better parts of them. And maybe that's mostly Lainey, her laughter filling up its rafters, her light painting the walls and glowing beyond the bubbled glass.

The cottage sits back from the road at the end of a long, winding dirt driveway. It's two stories with clapboard siding weathered to a dusky gray. There's a carriage house to the right of the main house, and a garden shed beyond that.

Because Roc and I spent most of the night getting here, the sun is just beginning to rise over our shoulders turning the sky the soft, pale blue of forget-me-nots.

Beyond the cottage, below the cliffside, the ocean churns against the rocks, mist glowing in the first rays of sunlight.

The air tastes of salt and earth and dew.

I love it here.

I wish I could live here. I wish I could be with Lainey every day.

But the brothers would never allow it and even if they did, I would rarely see them. If it came down to choosing between the oceanside cottage or the soot and chaos of the Umbrage with the Madd brothers, I would choose them every time.

Using his key, Roc lets us in through the side door. It enters into a small mud room where the black and white checkered floor begins, continuing on through the kitchen. We knock off some of the dirt from our boots, careful to keep it on the rug at the door.

Lainey doesn't live here alone. She has a guardian in Ms. Ollen and Ms. Ollen would murder us if we got mud on the floors. Literally. Ms. Ollen is a retired assassin. She is as much Lainey's housemaid as she is her bodyguard, but Lainey doesn't know that. She hates the thought of having to be babysat. "I'm a grown-ass woman," I once heard her say to both brothers. "I'm old enough to live my own life."

They relented and told her a housemaid was their compromise and Lainey agreed. The fact the housemaid is also an assassin seems to have never crossed Lainey's mind. But Ms. Ollen, despite her history, is loving and kind. So maybe Lainey is willing to look the other way if the possibility ever dawned on her.

"I'll make coffee," Roc says.

"I'll set out the pastries."

I grab several of the ceramic plates from the rack and set them out on the worktable as Roc strikes a match, lighting the gas stove. As the kettle heats up, he readies the pour-over with a filter and the ground coffee.

As we work, golden light stretches across the kitchen as the sun rises over the treetops.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaks, then a track of footsteps.

A few seconds later, someone comes barreling down the stairs.

Lainey darts into the kitchen and lunges at her brother, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Roc sinks into her, hugging her as if she is the only soul who matters.

Watching the Madd brothers with their little sister is jarring.

In the Umbrage, they are towering figures, ruthless, violent, extremely powerful. In Wonderland, they were the most terrifying of all the monsters.

But here within the walls of the seaside cottage with their little sister, they are just men with soft hearts and gentle hands. Men who are acutely aware of the fragility of the people they love. The ones who are not monsters and so have none of the armor.

If love could fill a room, the seaside cottage would burst at the rafters.

I am envious of Lainey in that. Her brothers would do anything for her and I'm not sure I've ever had something like that. Even my own parents chose power over me.

"Alice!" Lainey says next and wraps me in a hug. Her dark hair puffs around me. I can smell her lavender shampoo and her bedtime oil—spearmint and sage and jasmine.

"Good morning," I say into her hair. "We brought treats."

She pulls back and checks the worktable. "First Born Baker?"

"Of course."

She claps, then kisses me on the cheek, then turns and kisses her brother too. "Thank you. You both will be written into my will."

"Lainey," Roc chides.

The only thing Roc hates more than monogamy is the thought of something bad happening to his sister.

Lainey laughs and scoops up a chocolate crisp. "I will die before you. This is a fact. I'm not a jabberwocky. I don't know why you pretend otherwise." A cookie crumb sticks to the corner of her mouth. "Besides, I will make the best ghost."

"Lainey!" Roc says.

"God. You are a wet blanket, dear brother."

I can't help but laugh.

I get away with a lot when it comes to the brothers, but Lainey could get away with murdering them and they'd give her a peck on the forehead for it.

I find it endearing and hilarious.

The kettle starts to hiss, then rolls into a shrill whistle. Roc pulls it from the stove and slowly pours over the ground coffee.

"What are you two doing here, anyway?" Lainey slides onto one of the wooden stools on the other side of the worktable. "I thought you weren't coming until the dinner Sunday night." She picks one of the violet pansies from a petit four and spins it between her thumb and index finger.

"Roc made a concession for me," I tell her.

"Why?"

"Because I was in a mood."

"Why?"

The other thing I love about Lainey is how unfiltered she is. She's not afraid to ask anything if her curiosity is piqued. There is no such thing as decorum or etiquette with her, even though she was raised among the Darkland elite. I can only imagine how much that annoyed her father, who was concerned with reputation more than anything else.

I never had the chance to meet Aaric Maddred, but I've heard my fair share about him.

"Vane is engaged," I answer.

"WHAT?!" She lurches off the stool. The stool teeters on three legs before rattling back to the marble floor. "Vane is engaged?" she says to Roc, whose back is still to us. I can tell by the tense line of his shoulders that he was not planning to tell Lainey yet and that I've ruined their plans.

"Who is he engaged to?" she goes on. "When did it happen? Do we like her? Wait—" She turns back to me. "Are you okay with this? No, you're not, otherwise you wouldn't be in a mood. Roc, what the hell?" She pivots again to Roc. "Why is Vane engaged? Did Vane agree to this? Is this a business deal?"

"No," Roc answers at the same time I say, "Yes."

Roc scowls at me.

"When is the wedding?"

"It hasn't been announced yet," Roc answers.

I didn't get around to asking, but now that Lainey has, my curiosity is piqued.

"Is there a date?"

With the pour over full, Roc sets the kettle back on the stove. He turns to face us, his body pressed into the corner of the kitchen counter, his arms crossed over his chest.

The seaside cottage kitchen is painted a soft shade of ivory with the many windows draped in sheer linen. In the kitchen, Roc looks like a dark cloud sent to dim the light. And his answer only proves it.

"Next month."

"Next month?!" Lainey and I say in unison.

Oh god.

Oh my fucking god.

Pain shoots through my molars before I realize my teeth are clenched.

They're rushing the marriage so they can ram through their deal to acquire Caligo Port.

It is because of business, I don't care what Roc says. Maybe he believes the engagement is in service to the larger plan, but he's just kidding himself. He's auctioning off his brother for property and access.

Taking in a deep breath through my nose, some of the tension fades from my jaw. I glance at Roc. "Vane agreed to that? To be married in a month?"

"Yes."

I hate this. I hate that Vane gave in so easily. I hate that they didn't even involve me in their plans. All this time, I thought we were working on a future together, that I would have my place by their side.

I was so fucking naive.

The old wide plank floors at the far end of the house creak as Ms. Ollen makes her way to the kitchen. When she spots Roc, she ambles over and puts his face in her hands. "Mr. Maddred! I'm so happy to see you!" She kisses his cheek.

"Good morning, Ms. Ollen," he says and kisses her back. "You're looking ravishing today."

She playfully swats at him. "Stop it. You're teasing me." She's wearing a thick terry cloth robe and loose-fitting black pajama pants with silk slippers on her feet. Her hair is tucked away in a silk scarf tied at the back of her head. She's wearing no makeup, but I rarely see Ms. Ollen with anything more than a bit of chapstick on her lips.

Ravishing is a bit of a stretch, but Roc is always happy to flatter.

"You have good timing, Mr. Maddred. I'm having trouble with the boiler. Could you look at it?"

"Of course."

Roc follows her down into the cellar.

Lainey perches herself on the stool again and props her elbows on the worktable, her chin in her hand. She blinks at me.

"What?"

She blinks again.

"Lainey, stop."

She has the same dark hair as her brothers, hers long and wavy. She's pale, unblemished, eyes wide and observant.

While she has all of the markings of a Maddred, and the same arcane beauty as her brothers, she has fought the undercurrent of darkness running through their blood. She dresses in pastels, ties her hair with ribbons, drapes her tables with gingham and her bed in floral quilts.

Everything about her feels like a warm summer day. Being with her brings me joy.

Except for when she's grilling me with nothing more than a look.

I relent. "Yes, I'm mad."

"What did Vane say?"

"He hasn't said anything to me. I had to hear it from my friends."

Lainey's mouth drops open. "That asshole."

I grab one of the chocolate croissants and take the stool beside her. "I know. I agree."

"You do know the easiest way to get his attention, don't you?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Who says I want his attention?"

"Oh my god. Please."

The aroma of flaky pastry, melted chocolate, and browned butter hits me. I haven't eaten in hours and hours. "Fine. I'm listening."

I eat as she talks.

"Step one: ignore him. Like seriously, pretend he isn't even there. He will hate it. One time, when we were kids, he refused to play Hearts with me and so I pretended he was invisible for two days and on the third day, he made us a picnic in the garden and played Hearts until my eyes burned."

I admire Lainey's commitment. I'm not sure I have the iron will to ignore Vane. Even when I'm not trying to look at him, I'm drawn to him.

"Step two: make sure he knows you're hooking up with someone else. And not Roc. He won't care about Roc."

I already knew this one. It's why I flirted with the Crown Prince.

"Step three: disappear for a day. Make sure no one knows where you went. He'll lose his fucking mind."

"You might be the most adorable little demon I've ever met. I love you."

She laughs. "I can't take all the credit. I've learned from the best. Uncle Madd is the worst when—"

"Wait." I cut her off.

The laughter dies from her face. "Sorry. I—"

"Was he here?"

"Al . . ."

"Was he?"

She swallows and looks at me and the look says everything.

“How long ago?”

“He left last night.”

“He’s on the island?”

She shakes her head and my throat constricts.

“He was going to Winterland.”

The Madd Hatter was on Darkland, and he didn’t come to see me. I should be grateful. I should consider myself lucky. I can never be sure if Madd is going to fuck me or kill me. He’s the worst of the family.

And somehow the only one who makes my palms sweat and my mouth dry.

Terror is a lot like love and I’m not sure which it is I feel for the Madd Hatter. Maybe both.

“Did he stay here?”

The desperation leaking into my voice is pathetic and shrill, but I can’t stop myself. I’m like an addict hoping for some everpowder stuffed in a cookie jar.

Lainey nods. “In the blue room.”

Every room in the seaside cottage has a color theme and we call the room by its color.

The blue room is on the southwestern corner of the house with wrap-around windows that overlook the vastness of the Seven Isles Ocean.

I lurch away from the kitchen. Lainey lets me go.

I cross through the living room, down the hall. Pass the bathroom and Ms. Ollen’s room.

I come up on the last door where it’s partly cracked open, all the early morning light spilling in through the windows.

The door creaks on its brass hinges when I push it in.

The bed is made. The candles on the nightstand are out, but are clearly half spent, the cold wax frozen in a drip down the sides.

I can almost hear his breath, the ragged huff of it, the flame guttering and going dark.

The curl of the smoke.

The danger of his touch.

I can smell him here.

Soft leather. Rain-dampened wool. The burn of clove cigarettes.

The press of his lips against my throat, the desire to drink, the inability to do it.

The vibration of power caged behind a curse.

“Alice.”

I snap back.

Roc is in the doorway. His shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. A smudge of grease runs over the ink tattooed on his skin.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he says, quiet, testing.

I’m dizzy and ravenous and restless and angry.

Madd isn’t dead, but sometimes I wish he was. Maybe then he’d talk to me.

“I’m just tired,” I say and avoid his eyes.

“You want to lie down?” He props his elbow above him on the doorjamb and leans in. “You can stay as long as you like.”

There is nothing I want more than to curl into that bed, wrap myself in the thin cotton that Madd used just last night. Sink into the smell and feel of him.

It would be as close as I’ve gotten to him in years.

“No,” I answer and step away. “Let’s get back home before it gets too late in the day.”

I go to move past him, but he snatches me by the arm and tugs me into him.

His expression is serious, his jaw clenching. “All three of us will break you if you let us.”

It’s the most honest thing he’s ever said to me.

I lick my lips. Nod.

All three of them, the Madd men.

I should run.

I should leave them all behind and find my own way. Make my own life on some other island, with some other man, one who doesn’t drink my blood or threaten to kill me or fuck me until I can’t see straight and disappear before the day dawns.

A man who smiles at me in a sun-drenched kitchen while he makes me pancakes and pours me coffee.

But even if that man existed, even if he could love me, I would never be the woman who sits, content, in a sun-drenched kitchen waiting for pancakes and coffee.

Not while the dead whispered in her ears.

I’ve always been drawn to morally grey men because in the gray, I don’t have to be so afraid of my own shadows.

“I can handle whatever comes my way, Roc,” I answer.

“Yes, but why, when you don’t have to?”

He’s giving me the easiest out. The chance to leave them, no questions asked.

But how can I? How could I ever exorcise the Madd men from my life?

They are with me as much as the spirits in the ether.

No matter how far I run, I will never escape.

And maybe, deep down, I don’t want to.

SEVEN

ROC

ON OUR WAY OUT OF THE HIGHLANDS, ALICE STOPS AT A SHOP AND MAKES ME PURCHASE A BOTTLE OF APPLE SIX, A SWEET, smooth fae liquor worth twice as much as my boots.

“Is this a cry for help?” I ask her as the road curves out of the seaside town.

“No,” she answers and tears off the gold wrapping, shoving it in the pocket of her jacket. “I was thirsty.”

To the east, dark, thick clouds build in the sky. I think we might get caught in a storm, but Alice seems in no rush.

“For liquor? At eight in the morning?”

With the cap unscrewed, she hefts up the bottle to her mouth and takes a long drink.

While I was working on the boiler, Ms. Ollen told me we’d just missed my uncle. Even if Lainey hadn’t told Alice, I think Al would have figured it out. She has a preternatural ability to sense Uncle Madd as if his presence is a film that’s collected on the walls.

When pressed, she’s expertly dodged my questions about their relationship. Vane and I left Wonderland before Alice, before our uncle. Whatever went on between them happened once we were gone, while the war raged. When Alice came through the glass, she was alone, her entire family dead.

“He’s never coming back,” I tell her. “Not in the way you want.”

She takes another long pull from the bottle.

The rolling hills of the highlands spills into the lower lands of the forest where red oak and black pine and alder trees crowd the dirt road.

Thunder rumbles in the distance and the first spit of rain hits my coat.

“Give it here,” I say and waggle my fingers at her.

She eyes me, reading my face for my intent, before handing the bottle over.

I take a drink. Apple Six is a bit too sweet for my tastes, but the alcohol warms my insides.

Several more raindrops patter against my coat.

“Where is my place?” she asks, her gaze directed straight ahead.

“What do you mean?”

“With you. With Vane. With all of it.” She turns to me, nabs the bottle back. “Do I even belong with you?”

I would argue that she belongs in Wonderland, no matter what we left behind. I knew Al on the other side, so I can confidently say she’s different over here in the Seven Isles. Like a sailor who’s spent too much time on land, his gaze always fixed on the horizon.

One only needs to spend an hour with her to know there is a constant hum of yearning surrounding her, a hunger that never quite seems satiated. And I know a thing or two about hunger.

“Is that really what you want?”

“What do you mean? Yes?”

“You’re still asking questions instead of giving answers.”

She huffs out in frustration. “Then I demand a place by your side.” She comes to a stop in the middle of the desolate road as lightning flashes in the dark sky above. “With Vane occupied, you’ll need someone you can trust.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Can I trust you?”

“What do you mean? Of course you can.”

Rain is falling harder now, flattening her hair against her face.

“You’re impatient, reckless, extremely possessive—”

“I am not.”

“—and you have no control over your power.”

“I can learn to be patient.”

“Can you?”

“Yes!”

Thunder cracks in the sky, and a sudden downpour opens up.

“Come on.” I grab her by the hand and jog ahead to the park that runs through the forest and back toward the sea. There’s a garden in the very center with a boxwood maze, a covered gazebo in the middle.

We’re soaked by the time we make it beneath the roof. I pull off my coat and shake it out, then hang it over the covered railing. Al does the same.

The storm has blown in warmer air from Summerland, turning the morning humid.

Al runs her hand through her hair, pushing out some of the rain.

“Why are you afraid to return to Wonderland?”

Her hand goes still.

“I can’t help but feel like you’re looking for something here that you will never find and deep down you know that.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Why?”

The next crack of thunder reverberates through the wooden floorboards of the gazebo. Alice takes another drink from the Apple Six and winces when she swallows.

“Let’s run home, strip off our wet clothes and fuck until we pass out.”

“Al.”

She pivots, and as she does, some of the tension leaves her shoulders. “Come on. After the night I’ve had.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

She hooks her arm around my neck, pressing her body into mine. I don’t generally need to be coaxed into bed. Al and I don’t play games when it comes to fucking. Not like her and Vane do. But I know she’s just trying to distract me, so she won’t have to answer the question. And okay, maybe it will work. Maybe she knows that if propositioned, I bend easily.

The rain is a driving force on the roof above us. Getting home now will require more walking and a long cab ride and while I’m already wet, I don’t much relish the idea of being soaked. My boots are made from extremely hard-to-acquire leather from Lostland. I couldn’t replace them if I tried. So we have time to burn.

I run Al back into the railing. She lets out a surprised little huff of air.

“Why don’t we wait for the storm to let up and just fuck right here.”

She smiles up at me. She’s always happiest when she’s getting what she wants.

“Okay.”

Hooking my hands around her thighs, I hoist her up onto the railing and wedge myself between her thighs.

EIGHT

ALICE

WHEN I'M WITH VANE, IT'S LIKE CLIMBING TO THE TOP OF A TALL OAK AND THEN PEERING OUT TO THE GROUND BELOW, THE wind rushing up to steal my breath away. There's something disorienting about it.

When I'm with Roc, it's like the tide rolling in, the water settling into a hundred tide pools.

Being with him is just...easy. I don't have to fight it. I don't have to fight him.

His mouth crashes into mine. I arch my back, pressing into him, running my hands through his dark, damp hair. His tongue drives in, tasting me, tasting the sweetness of the fae liquor and all the desire welling up inside of me.

He knows I'm distracting him and myself, but the fact that he lets me is one of the things I love most about him.

Roc does not push. He does not pull. He just bends where he needs to bend, sometimes to get his way, sometimes to give in to those around him.

Our movements grow more frenzied, and when Roc pushes forward again, I can feel the hardness between his legs.

Lightning flashes in the sky again and the electric snap of it seems to echo the thrill in my gut, sinking lower and lower to my cunt.

I don't want to think about Vane. Or Madd. Or Wonderland. Or any of the other things that make me want to scream into the night.

If I have no place, at least I have this, the feel of Roc's hands on my skin, the heat between my legs, the desire throbbing between his.

I groan into him, and the sound seems to spur something in him, because he yanks off my shirt, then unclips my bra and sinks his mouth to my breast.

A hiss of pleasure escapes me as the heat of his tongue drives away the sudden chill of the air.

Still perched on the railing, I arch my back, chasing the comfort of his attention. He grazes his teeth against my nipple, sending a slant of pain and pleasure running through my skin.

"I love the way you taste," he murmurs into me. "I love everything about you. Especially when you're being a brat."

When Roc says it, even though I know he is skilled at flattering everyone, I believe him. Because in these moments, I know he believes it too.

I reach between us, unlatching his belt, snapping it open. He rocks his hips forward making it easy for me.

I unbutton his pants, unzip, and free him quickly.

His cock bobs in the heat, hard and swollen, and when I take him in my hand, he groans into my throat.

"Fuck. This was an excellent idea."

I stroke him slowly and his eyes slip closed, his breath huffing out.

Keeping me balanced on the railing with a hand at the small of my back, he drops his other to my thigh, his thumb rubbing toward my center.

"Don't make me wait," I tell him, stroking him harder.

His thumb dips, grazing my center and a jolt of pleasure zings through me.

"Get these pants off," he orders, and I hop off the railing so I can shimmy out of them with his help.

We're impatient, frenzied, and he hoists me back up, yanking my panties aside to expose my soaking wet pussy.

He nestles himself into me as he kisses up my throat, licking at my pulse point. The sensation tickles, and I gasp out, shrinking away, making him laugh against my tender skin.

I wiggle my hips and twine my legs around him, forcing him closer.

But he holds himself back.

"Stop," I whine.

“No,” he says.

I wrap my arms around his neck. He nips at my bottom lip and proceeds to kiss me everywhere but on the mouth.

“Roc,” I moan.

“Al,” he says holding himself hard and throbbing against me.

“Fill me up.”

“Ask me nicely.”

“Pretty please.”

He sinks in another inch and a breath heaves out of me.

“Why torture us both?”

“It’s no fun when it’s over,” he says, pinching my nipple between thumb and forefinger. “You always were too impatient for your own good.”

I rock back on the railing, teetering over the edge, forcing him to adjust his weight and his stance. He sinks in further.

He laughs against me again, impressed, but the laugh fades into a throaty growl when I clench around him.

He meets my gaze, his bright green eyes almost white against the light of day.

“Fuck me,” I tell him. “Give me this.”

His dark brows sink over his eyes. Sympathy etches into the fine lines around his mouth. “As you command it, Alice, darling.”

And then he sinks all the way in.

I groan, then inhale sharply as he rocks in and out.

Every time he thrusts forward, his pelvis hits my clit, stoking the flame at my center.

I tighten my grip on him. He fucks me harder, faster.

I adjust just slightly, finding the perfect spot so he hits not only my clit, but that sensitive spot deep inside my cunt. Coming that way is my favorite. It’s hard and fast and intense.

“You’re so fucking close, aren’t you?” he says into my neck.

“Yes.” I moan.

He reaches between us and soaks his fingers in my juices, then brings them to his mouth. He sucks my pleasure off the tip of his thumb. “Christ, Al. You taste so fucking good when you’re getting railed by me.”

I smile up at him, eyes heavy. “Don’t fucking stop.”

“With pleasure.”

He grows harder the faster he fucks me and then we’re exploding together, clinging to one another, our moans echoing through the park.

Pleasure blinks through me, making me jolt in Roc’s arms.

He rocks me back, holding the back of my head in the palm of his hand.

I breathe out at the stormy sky as lightning flashes.

“For now,” he says and kisses me once, then twice, “you belong right here with me.”

I straighten in his arms and kiss him back and pretend that a question isn’t burning on the tip of my tongue.

How long? I want to ask.

But deep down, I know I don’t want the answer.

NINE

VANE

“WAKE UP.”

Roc’s lying on his stomach, his arms tucked beneath the feather pillow. Alice is half draped over him. They’re both naked.

Late afternoon sunlight is pouring in through the windows behind me. I heard them stumble in, drunk and laughing, sometime around eleven this morning. Jade told me Alice ran off last night and that Roc ran after her. When I asked her why, she said, “Maybe you should have told her before she had a chance to hear it from someone else.”

She didn’t elaborate, but she didn’t have to.

Did I feel guilty about it? Slightly. I probably should have told her.

Roc opens his eyes and squints up at me. “What time is it?”

“It’s nearly five. We’re going to be late.”

He inhales and groans into the pillow.

Jabberwockies don’t get drunk like mortals do, but that doesn’t mean we don’t suffer from hangovers. It all depends on the liquor, how much, and whether or not we mix it with blood. I don’t see teeth marks on Alice’s neck other than mine, so he must not have drank from her.

“Roc,” I say, more insistent this time.

“Fine. I’m up.” He hefts himself, rolls to his side and slips from the sheet. He stumbles past me for the bathroom.

When he’s gone, I find Al looking at me from beneath the messy tangle of her blond hair.

I know she’s pissed. I can practically smell it.

“I was going to tell you,” I say.

She hasn’t moved. Just keeps staring at me. I swear the air stirs.

“Say something, Al.”

She pulls back the sheet, revealing her naked body. There are bruises along her thighs and a few more peppering her hips. It’s hard to tell which ones are from me and which ones are from my brother.

She grabs one of Roc’s shirts from the chair across the room, shrugs into it and leaves the room.

She doesn’t say a fucking thing to me.

The frustration spins in my gut.

“Al,” I call and follow her.

Our apartment above the Joker’s Den consists of the main living space, the living room open to the kitchen. Our rooms break off from there with Roc’s to the left of the front door, then the bathroom, then mine, then Alice’s. I gave her the front room with the two giant windows overlooking Butcher’s Row because I know she likes a view.

I find her in her room yanking on pants.

“I was going to tell you,” I repeat because I need her to fucking say something.

“Yeah, well, you had plenty of time, didn’t you?” She turns to me and pulls her hair out of Roc’s shirt. “But you didn’t. You let me find out secondhand. You made me look like a fucking idiot.” She tries to push past me for the door, but I hook her in the span of my arms and run her back. She hits the window casing.

“You think I want to get married? To Gen of all people?”

“Then why agree to it?”

On the surface, I know what it looks like. It’s nothing more than a transactional relationship. It would be easy to say it’s good for business, because it is. We’re getting Caligo Port out of the deal. We’ll control two out of the four ports on Darkland, and arguably the two that are the most important.

But Al will see through it.

She'll see through me.

"I have to make amends for what my father did."

Her gaze travels from my mouth to my eyes. A wrinkle of understanding appears between her brows.

"You don't owe anyone anything."

"They don't trust us. Not after what he did."

When it was discovered that my father was trying to overthrow the Lorne Court, he was immediately arrested. I never got the chance to speak to him, to ask him why. All I have are assumptions and I can only assume it was greed and his obsession with power. But now Roc and I have to clean up his mess if we're to make a life for Lainey.

We were stripped of everything. Titles, assets, properties. We had to start over with nothing and a little sister to take care of.

I won't stop now.

"You think marrying one of their own will change their minds?" Al asks.

"It's a start."

"And what about us?"

Deep down, I know I didn't tell her because of this question. Because I didn't want it to be asked and I sure as hell didn't want to answer it.

I lick my lips. Her gaze sinks to my mouth again.

When I'm not with Al, I feel rational. Logic prevails and I can see the way through. Marrying Gen, establishing ourselves among the nobility again, owning the import and export business, it all makes perfect sense. But it only makes sense if Al isn't there.

We are all wrong for each other. We both know that.

And yet we always find ourselves here.

We are like the fable, *Mersa and the Dark Waters*, swimming down and down and down, lungs burning, the bottom always just out of our reach.

And yet we can't stop swimming. We can't help but go deeper. The burn is the punishment and the punishment is the pleasure.

"We can't do this anymore."

My voice is ragged. She practically flinches at my words even though they are spoken in a whisper.

She yanks her arm out of my grip, teeth clenched.

"Fine," she says. "Now get out of my fucking room."

I step back, aware that she's trembling, and two seconds away from slapping me.

I give her a final nod and leave.

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