

A
GOLDEN
CITY
NOVEL

WINGS *so* WICKED

*join the elite
or die trying*

EMILY BLACKWOOD

WINGS SO WICKED

A GOLDEN CITY NOVEL

BOOK ONE

EMILY BLACKWOOD

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AUTHOR NOTE

Please check your triggers—

Wings So Wicked is a new adult fantasy romance novel with dark themes, violence, cursing, and explicit sexual scenes. Characters are harmed in ways including whippings and stabbings. Death of parents, abusive father figures, depressive thoughts, self harm, deep betrayal and blood sharing/biting are themes in this novel.

This story will get dark and contains an epic cliffhanger, but the series will ultimately have a happy ending.

*For readers who enjoy the wicked pleasure of a slow burn.
Buckle up. This one's for you.*

PROLOGUE

The fall of Scarlata Empire

*C*laudia Fullmall Gawerula stood tall amongst her falling kingdom without shedding a single tear. Aggressive, fuming fires ripped apart building after building in the distance, the growing roar and crackle of burning wood vaguely disguising the horrified, gutted screams of her people as they took their last breaths.

She blinked at the stench of burning flesh that wafted through the slight breeze, but she did not shed a tear.

Claudia flinched when she heard the hungry, animalistic growls of her people—people who were once kind and patient—as they ripped into innocent bystanders on the streets with their sharp teeth. Even so, she did not cry.

The Queen of Scarlata Empire only lifted her chin, beholding the crumbling walls of everything she had worked so hard to build over the last fifty years. She had created peace, created a home not only for herself and her new daughter but for the thousands of other vampyres who counted on her.

For once, vampyres were living in harmony, kingdoms away from any fae who might feel weary about the habits of her people.

It didn't matter how much good she did in the world, though. It never did. She could never stand a chance against the hunger.

She sighed and removed the heavy golden crown from her head as she stood atop the tallest hill that surrounded the kingdom, away from the war below. The second the fae invaded, she had summoned her wings to find her way here. Not to escape the fight, no. She would never leave her people to fight alone. She merely needed one moment—one last look—to remember Scarlata Empire as it once was.

For she knew deep in her bones, like the most primal foretelling of any attack, that their time as a kingdom was over. The fae would never let them exist for so long without retaliating, especially when the hungry ones had been growing more and more.

Being a vampyre herself, Claudia understood the nearly impossible cravings to sink one's teeth into another's flesh, but those cravings must be controlled if one wished to remain sane. Giving into that bloodlust—letting the hunger take over and control your senses until you were its slave—was what she had lost so many of her people to. They turned into monsters, into the vampyres that most of the fae feared.

Claudia was not like that. Her sister was not like that, nor was her neighbor or the baker who rose at dawn daily to make bread for the kingdom.

But it did not matter to the fae. They would take and take and take, killing whatever they feared because they knew no better.

Below her, the fighting intensified. She looked down, holding her crown between her hands as she watched fae attacking vampyres, and vampyres draining the blood from fae.

Some of the vampyres, understand, were innocent. They were not the soulless, hungry monsters that fed on the flesh of their attackers. Those innocent vampyres tried to run, tried to escape, but they were surrounded.

The queen's heart hurt, not just for the innocent vampyres but for the vampyre with lost souls, too.

She knew her kingdom would fall eventually. The numbers of the hungry ones had been increasing for decades. It did not matter how much she begged the goddess to save her kingdom; it was only a matter of time.

But the Queen of Scarlata Empire did not fear death. She set her crown upon the grassy hill, drew her sword, summoned her wings, and flew to fight with her people against the invaders that wished them all dead.

Perhaps she would die today. She would fight with her people against the fae, and she would wield her sword with honor and with respect for the ones who had already fallen. She would fight until her very last breath with her chin held high, because perhaps her kingdom was falling, but she would die remembering what Scarlata Empire stood for.

CHAPTER
ONE

“Begin,” Lord’s order rang through the stone cave walls before he retreated, backing into the protection of shadows.

My opponent emerged from that same darkness, one step after the other. Even in such little light, I could see the raw, primal energy beneath the cloth mask that hid his features.

I was sure his energy matched my own.

My feet were lithe feathers beneath me, ready to move at my will. My heart beat steadily with power, reminding me of my strength.

Reminding me of my *purpose*.

Another opponent, another fight, another test.

Another opportunity to prove to Lord that I was the best, the strongest, the most violent.

I counted to three, waiting for my opponent to make the first move. Over the last twenty-two years, I had learned how to spot a male’s intention to fight.

They could hardly restrain themselves from lashing out within the first three seconds.

But when they did, when they hesitated, it showed me their greatest weakness.

I lunged forward with a wave of lightweight agility, watching his body, observing his reactions as I threw my first punch.

He swatted it away, his robust arms having no problem deterring my force.

I punched again; he blocked me again.

Leaving his midsection wide open.

Too easy. Too predictable.

My fist swung through the opening in his center and contacted my opponent's face with a satisfying *thud*. I ignored the pain that thundered through my knuckles, no doubt from the splitting skin on my bare hands. The scabs hadn't had time to heal since the last time they had split open. They never did.

The male before me hissed, baring his sharp fae teeth at me while blood trickled from his nose.

Males. They always had such uncontrollable tempers.

"Again!" Lord shouted from the far wall of the underground den.

Fuck. He did not sound pleased. I obeyed instantly, unable to rest for a single second before my opponent advanced, swinging his dagger toward my torso.

This guy was temperamental *and* cocky.

I *hated* cocky.

I inhaled sharply before launching myself forward, narrowly avoiding his silver blade, before I pulled my own from my waist and grazed it across his chest, leaving a trail of blood behind.

One quick glance at Lord in the shadows told me he was still not impressed.

He rarely was.

Think, Huntyr. Focus. You should have taken him down by now.

I stepped backward while my opponent recovered, giving myself a second to collect my thoughts. The den was dark and offered minimal lighting, but I could still see the way my opponent gripped his blade tightly. Each finger flexed around the hilt as if letting go would spell his death. As if the blade would save him from failure.

That was his weakness. He relied too heavily on his weapon and likely had weaker combat skills without it.

"Stop dancing around," Lord ordered, his voice booming off the rock walls around us. "You're supposed to be killing each other, not playing games."

He was right.

Lord's voice was enough to send a chill down my spine, raise the hair on my arms.

It distracted me just enough so that when I busied myself with blocking the fist that suddenly flew toward my face, I did not notice the second

punch ready to hook into my ribs.

I doubled over and staggered backward, gasping for breath.

Fuck.

I sucked in air once, twice, then straightened myself, ignoring the screaming in my ribs.

Swiftly and without a sound, I ducked and rolled forward, tumbling toward my opponent's feet. He stood still, ready for me, but he was surprised enough at my advance to leave his legs unguarded.

The second I landed in a crouched position, I swept my foot beneath him, sending him falling to his back with his weapon scattering. Before he could climb back to his feet, I jumped on top of him, pinning his shoulders with my weight while I straddled his torso. He writhed beneath me, scrambling for an escape, but with my weight centered and my knees planted firmly on the ground, he wasn't going anywhere.

My blade found its way to his neck, hovering above the delicate skin.

"You're dead," I growled through clenched teeth. My breath came out in pants, exhaustion beginning to take over my limbs as I held him there, waiting for Lord's order to end the fight.

For a few seconds, time stopped. The cramped, damp den disappeared, leaving just me and my opponent, our breaths blending together, both with our faces covered by a thin cloth, with slits just large enough for our eyes so we could see without revealing our identities.

Of course, I could identify a male with much more than his features. I could identify him by the way he walked, the size of his shoulders, the sharpness of his fae ears, the sway in his stance.

But it didn't matter who he was. It didn't matter who I was, either. We were simply pawns, simply weapons in this wicked, dark world. With one swift motion, I could end his life.

We were all that fragile.

A low growl came from my opponent's chest, reminding me of who and where I was.

I turned my attention to the back wall, where Lord lurked in waiting.

"Sloppy," he muttered.

I scrambled off my opponent and sheathed my weapon, standing tall with my hands clasped behind my back, waiting for more instruction.

My opponent did the same.

Not so cocky now, are you?

That had been another key component I had learned during my lifetime of studying killers under Lord: *Everyone bowed to someone.*

Lord stepped forward with a lazy amount of patience, making us wait every torturous second. His typical dark, perfectly creased trousers and spotless shirt nearly blended with the underground stone around him, the tiny stream of moonlight reflecting off the shine in his hair. He stood with his shoulders back and his hands relaxed, but he towered over everyone in Midgrave with no effort at all. He was aging, yes, but his presence alone still made even the most ferocious fighters tremble before him.

“I expected more from you both,” he drawled. I dipped my chin, unable to look at him as he continued. “If he were a vampyre, you would have been torn to shreds.”

“Yes, Lord,” I replied, keeping my head down.

I stared at the ground in front of me, not wanting to see the lingering doubt that would be all over Lord’s face.

“And you,” he said, turning his attention to the male beside me. “You let a female half your size take you off your feet. That is an embarrassment, and not one I will allow here. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lord,” he grumbled.

I tried not to smile.

Being satisfied by my opponent’s criticism would not lessen my own, and my punishments did not end here with words.

I was not just another assassin being trained by Lord to kill any and every threat that entered Midgrave. Lord had made killing vampyres his life purpose. He gave everything he had to protect the fae of Midgrave from those monsters, and he expected more from me. He expected *perfection.*

And that fight was nothing close to perfect.

The male was strong, stronger than most. It was hard to tell with the disguised faces, but I was certain I hadn’t fought one that strong before.

Maybe Lord was testing me, finding stronger opponents to push my strength.

When I looked up again, Lord was already staring at me. I had learned the meaning behind most of his facial expressions over the years, either from all the hours we spent together or as a form of protection.

Either way, I was always expecting, always watching, searching for those clues.

Like when his lips tightened into a thin line, curling slightly in the corners as he squinted his eyes.

That meant I was royally fucked.

It took everything in me not to cower away when I saw that expression grow on his mouth, followed by the darkness of disappointment in his aged eyes.

“Do you two think killing vampyres is easy?”

“No, Lord,” we answered in unison.

Lord stepped forward. “Do you believe Phantom is a waste? That fighting against the blood-sucking creatures is below you?”

I shook my head, biting the inside of my cheek. *Of course I didn't think that.* I, too, had given everything to become the best vampyre killer in Midgrave—aside from Lord.

Lord's gaze shifted from us to the shadows of the underground den. I felt the weight of his golden, piercing eyes physically lift away from me.

“When I started Phantom after the war, I saw it as the only way fae in Midgrave would survive. Many of the surrounding fae kingdoms had already been ravished by the fall of the vampyre kingdom. Nobody stood a chance.” He paused for a few seconds. My chest tightened. “But I was not going to back down like the others. This place was my *home*. I decided to stay and fight against the depraved beasts, and I trained as many as I could to stand and fight with me.

“Phantom was not created with weak attempts at fighting and ill-prepared assassins. Phantom was forged out of perfection, crafted with a desperate desire to survive, to kill as many vampyres as possible and to remind those blood-thirsty monsters who was in charge here. I did not become the master of vampyre killers by allowing my fighters to make mistakes and train with sloppy punches. When I tell you to kill, you damn well better be prepared to kill. When I tell you to fight, it better be the best damn fight I have ever seen. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes, Lord.” I knew what Lord had done to protect Midgrave, what he had done to protect me. Hearing him say the words himself, however, pulled the air from my lungs.

He was the only reason Midgrave survived. He was the only reason *I* survived. When my parents were killed during the war, Lord found me. He took me in, protected me. He did not raise me to be soft. He did not raise me to be just another victim the vampyres could drain of blood.

No, he raised me to be unstoppable.

I flinched as his eyes slid back to us.

“You both may go,” he said, sounding nothing but bored.

That was it. No second chances. No do-overs. I had one chance at showing Lord how strong I was every week, and this week? I let that male get multiple blows in. Hells, he almost *won*. Lord did not expect me to fight like all the other Phantoms. No, I was supposed to be the best. I was supposed to be his mirror, fighting like the goddess herself and making not a *single* mistake.

My instinct was to stand up for myself, to tell Lord I could be better. Could *fight* better. But arguing with him only made him angrier.

Words won't help you, he would say. And he was right.

My fighting would help me. Getting better, stronger, faster would save me from his punishments.

Not my words.

I dipped my head and followed the male out of the den, walking in silence through the small, tunneled entrance of the underground cave until the cool night air hit my face.

The male did not hesitate before bolting down the alleyway, away from Phantom, away from me. I turned on my heel, running into the night, through the dark alleyways and covered entrances.

It was one of Lord's first rules. Nobody knew the other Phantoms. Nobody revealed their identity. We fought for training purposes, but we never uncovered our faces.

We all remained safe that way. Becoming friends with the others, building relationships with them, it would only distract us. It would take away from our true purpose of killing the enemy.

I continued running from my opponent, my black combat boots guiding me through the damp alleyways set out before me. The route was so familiar now, and I loved being outside at night after the streets emptied and the moon rose.

Midgrave wasn't nearly as hideous when the shadows took over, hiding the harsh reality of what really remained in these streets.

The homeless children, the starving animals, the mounds of rubbish. They barely stood out now, when the only thing to be seen was darkness.

I trudged past a building that used to be a school, now with only two walls still standing and a pile of rubble where fae children used to learn.

Beyond that were a few newly built homes, each with four walls and a roof. It wasn't much, but around here, it was practically a luxury. A few of the older residents lived there now—ones that had survived long enough to earn those new homes.

A few voices and a fit of laughter rang out in the alleyway next to me, but I lowered my head and continued walking. Making friends was not a skill of mine, and I found that keeping to myself was the best way to stay focused. The smell of burning wood and cooked meat wafted through the wind, making my stomach flip.

Midgrave was not small by any means, but it felt that way to me. It felt constrained. Those walls surrounding the perimeter that were once built to keep the vampyres out sometimes felt like my personal boundary in the world—a boundary I could never escape.

I neared the familiar brick building at the edge of our run-down city, the same brick building that had been a beacon for me for over two decades. It was the tallest building left in Midgrave, nearly three stories high. I enjoyed the vantage point; it made me feel protected. Prepared.

This was home. As shitty and rugged as it was, this crumbling space still brought me comfort.

Almost as much comfort as the familiar figure I saw in the shadows, already lounging on the roof with her booted foot dangling off.

Rummy.

A smile spread across my face as I slowed my jog, ducking into the hidden doorway at the bottom of the building and striding up the stone stairs two at a time until I reached the top. The shattered window that led to the roof remained open, and I ducked my head to step through.

Rummy and her smooth golden hair didn't move as I walked up beside her, careful that my boots didn't slip against the few slick remaining shingles before sitting down.

We let silence linger between us for a few minutes. That was one thing I liked most about Rummy: She understood how comforting the night was. I breathed, taking in the cooling air that somehow seemed cleaner up here. Fresher.

I let my foot mimic Rummy's, hanging off the edge of the roof as I reclined onto my back.

"You look like shit," she remarked, twisting her neck until her dark green eyes met mine. "Bad fight?"

I blew out a puff of air. “You really have a way with words,” I joked. Peering out at the city, I shrugged. “It was fine. I won.”

She propped herself onto her elbow and scanned my face in the darkness. Her pointed ears twitched as she focused in on me. “Fine isn’t good, Hunt. Lord isn’t going to let that go.”

“I know,” I answered, trying not to snap at her. “I did my best. He was a lot bigger than me and a hell of a lot stronger. But I still won.”

Rummy shook her head. “How long has it been since your last punishment? Two weeks? Has your skin even healed?”

“It’s healed enough,” I said stiffly.

My mind wandered to the lingering pain on my back, the dull stinging that hadn’t quite disappeared since I lost a fight two weeks ago.

It was rare for me to make a mistake.

It was even more rare for me to lose a fight.

Lord didn’t approve.

Rummy knew Lord. She wasn’t a Phantom, but she had been my friend since I was a child. If Lord knew she existed, he didn’t show it. Sometimes, I thought he knew about our late-night meetups and hidden conversations in the shadows, and maybe he let me have this. Let me have this friendship.

Rummy was strong and fierce and loyal, but she despised him. She hated that I was a Phantom, and she hated that Lord controlled me. She was smart enough to pick up on a few things over the years: bruised fists, lashings on my back, days where I went missing with no contact.

I saw it in her eyes, in the way she flinched slightly when I told her about my fights and my training sessions.

“Don’t say it,” I sighed.

“Say what?”

“Whatever judgmental and incredibly unhelpful comment you’re about to make.”

She huffed, throwing a hand up. “I just don’t understand why you don’t leave. You could run, Huntyr. You could escape, and he would never find you!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. “You know I can’t do that, Rummy.”

“But why?” she demanded.

We had the same conversation every few months, but lately, they had gotten more and more frequent. Rummy had a certain desperation about her

she could hardly contain.

Lately, though, my training had grown more intense. My fights were harder, my punishments fiercer. Lord had been leaving no room for error, not from me or from any of the Phantoms.

But Rummy didn't understand. Nobody could. Lord may have been just a teacher to the rest of the Phantoms, but not to me. He had taken me in when I needed him the most. He had raised me as his own daughter.

It wasn't as simple as leaving Midgrave. I would be leaving the closest thing I had to a father. And worse, I would be disappointing him.

That was something I couldn't bear to live with.

"I need him," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "He's made me strong. He's made me a survivor."

"He's made you his pet." Rummy turned her face back up to the sky, spitting out the word *pet* as if it were poison. "Are you going to let him control your life forever?"

She didn't get it. She didn't understand. Every fight, every punch, every whipping—it was all to strengthen me. It was all so I could survive out there in the world with *them*, the bloodsucking vampyres who took everything from us.

Those creatures killed my parents. They took my family away from me. The only reason they didn't kill me as well was because of Lord. I couldn't help but wonder if this was all part of some wicked plan from the goddess, if I wasn't meant to live this fate so that I, too, could protect people from those killers.

But darkness crept closer to Midgrave every day. Soon, it would take over.

Lord only wanted to prepare me. He wanted to keep me alive long enough to save Midgrave, to save myself.

"Forget it," Rummy mumbled, shaking her head when I didn't respond. "You're going to need this tonight." She reached into the cloth satchel beside her and pulled out a silver flask, twisting the top open and taking a long pull of whatever was inside.

I sat up as she passed the flask to me, hissing as she swallowed the liquid.

Strangely, I found peace in these encounters with Rummy. "Thank you," I murmured. Even in the dark night, I caught a glimpse of her smile. "I don't know what I would do without you."

I put the flask to my lips and drank, letting the liquid burn my throat and stomach. I didn't cough, didn't grimace. The burn was a pleasant distraction.

Rummy laughed. "You'd have to take your whippings without our liquid friend, for one," she said.

"I take it back," I mused. "You *are* cruel." I passed the flask back to her. "And who knows? Maybe Lord is feeling particularly kind this evening."

Her smile slowly disappeared, all hints of amusement swiftly wiped from her face. "Yeah," she said, her snarky tone replaced with a genuine one, "maybe."

CHAPTER
TWO

My senses were comfortably dulled by the time Rummy slipped from the roof, disappearing into the night and leaving me alone.

Without her presence, my mind wandered. Lord usually came home later in the evening, well past midnight. Maybe something would keep him busy tonight. Maybe he would wait until tomorrow to reprimand me for my mistake during the fight.

Or, if I were lucky, perhaps he would come home and send me on a mission instead, teaching me a different lesson by putting me in the face of danger.

It had been weeks since he sent me on a mission, and my hands shook with the need for another fight.

A real one this time. A true fight. With one of *them*, the monsters that lingered in the depths of the shadows.

I shook my head. *Stop thinking that way, Huntyr. If Lord punishes you, you'll take it. Tomorrow will come, and it will be done. You'll be a better Phantom because of it.*

I slipped my body back through the broken window and wandered down the stone steps until I reached the bottom floor.

Home.

I ignored the sinking feeling in my stomach, ignored the way every instinct in my body told me not to go inside the small room I called my home. That was natural. I had to get over that fear of pain.

With a deep breath, I pushed the wooden door open and stepped inside.

Aside from my half-rotted mattress on a cot near the wall and chair in the corner, the room remained empty. It wasn't much, and I never cared for

many material things, but it was home. This space was *mine*, and that was enough.

Not this time, though. This time, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a lantern lit up the back corner of the room.

Shit.

Lord was already home.

I closed the door behind me with a slow certainty and stopped, standing and waiting.

“Lord,” I greeted, swallowing over the newfound lump in my throat.

He sat in the chair beside the lantern, his legs stretched out before him and his arms draped over the sides. His short hair, always perfectly greased back, shined in the dim lighting. Not a single piece ever strayed from its position. Not a single piece of black clothing wrinkled, not a single speck of dirt on those slacks.

Always perfect. Always the master.

“You disappointed me today, Hunttyr,” he began.

I dropped my head. “Yes, Lord. My opponent was stronger than I expected him to be.”

Lord stood from the chair with unexpected speed, crossing the room in two big strides. “Now you make excuses? You think it is his fault that you struggled during the fight?”

I stumbled over my words, “No, Lord, I—”

A hand cut across my cheek. The stinging on my face was nothing compared to the shame that crept through my body. I deserved it.

“It cannot happen again,” he commanded.

I squeezed my eyes shut to keep the tears from seeping out. “I understand.”

“Do you?” Lord challenged, his musky breath brushing over the now-sensitive skin on my face. “I’ve tried, Hunttyr. I’ve tried to protect you, to train you for the dangers of the world. Do you understand how much I have sacrificed for you? How much I risked by saving your life? Do you know just how special you are?”

I did not answer.

“Many of the Phantoms would take your place in an instant to be brought up by me, to be personally trained by me from childhood. You are a weapon, Hunttyr. A sword. There is no room for error here.”

“I can do better,” I mumbled. “I’ll train harder, I’ll get stronger.”

The silence that lingered between us seemed to last for minutes. “You will,” he replied finally. “You have no other choice.”

Lord turned to walk toward the back of the room once more, only pausing for a second to tilt his head toward the ceiling and exhale, long and slow. Perhaps he wouldn’t punish me this time. Perhaps his disappointment would be enough.

But he reached for the whip that always sat in the corner, propped against the wall. I knew then that I was very wrong.

What came next was no surprise.

“Turn around.”

Another beat of silence. My heart stuttered in my chest.

“Yes, Lord.” I did as I was told, moving in slow-motion as I turned and lifted my training garments, peeling away the black leathers and matching black undershirt until I stood facing the door with nothing on but my chest wrap.

The first lash came quickly, unexpectedly. I hissed in pain when the leather snapped through the air, smacking against my scarred, bare back. My hands slapped against the wooden door, holding me up as I braced myself.

“Do you think I enjoy this?” Lord demanded. “Do you think I want to hurt you, Huntyn?”

Another smack of the whip, lower this time. I bit my tongue to keep from crying out.

“I do this for you!” he pushed.

Another lash.

Another.

Tears streamed down my face now, and I was happy Lord could not see my lapse of strength.

Tears were weak. Showing pain was weak.

I eventually lost count of the lashes. Seven, maybe eight.

My vision blurred, my head grew heavy. My forehead fell against the wooden door in front of me as I struggled to stay upright. They were just lashings. This was the punishment I deserved, no worse than any of the others I had received.

I nearly cried out in relief when I heard him drop the whip to the ground. “Look at me,” Lord ordered.

I wiped my face quickly before turning to face him, lifting my chin to meet his steely gaze. I only saw a quick glimpse of anger in his eyes before it melted away to a soft expression of pity, of care.

“Oh, Huntyr,” he cooed. “You have so much potential.” He stepped forward and caressed my cheek. “You could be the one to save us all, you know. It is why I put so much pressure on you.”

I fought to stay upright.

“You understand why it must be this way, right, child?”

I bit the inside of my cheek before answering, “Yes, Lord. I understand.”

He smiled softly, tilting his head to the side as he scanned my face. “Good,” he replied. “Get some rest. I have a very special task coming for you soon. You’ll want to be ready.”

His hand slipped from my cheek as he stepped away, walking out of the door. I listened as his footsteps quietly disappeared, the sounds of him slipping into the room below mine affirming he was really gone before I let myself crumble to the floor.

Hells, I hated him at times. I hated him for hurting me, for turning me into this weapon—into this shell of a fae.

But I also hated myself for disappointing him, for bringing this punishment upon myself.

Darkness swarmed my vision. I could no longer see that lantern in the corner of the room. I knelt on the floor and pressed my forehead against the cool wood. My tears dripped and dripped and dripped as I allowed myself pity, only for a moment.

And then I stopped. I sat up, pushing myself onto my knees. I wiped the snot and tears from my face with the back of my hand.

I was better than this. I could overcome anything.

My back screamed in agony, the blood trickling down my skin until it hit the waistband of my training pants.

I was better than this.

If I could just do what I was fucking told and fight better, fight stronger, this wouldn’t happen. It was my fault, I reminded myself. My fault that Lord was upset. My fault that my skills were not perfect.

Mistakes would get me killed.

This pain? At least I still lived to feel it.



I woke up in my bed, unsure of when I had finally managed to crawl the few feet to the low cot. My shirt was still off, but that was a good sign. That meant my back was getting some air.

My mouth grew stiff with dryness and my muscles ached. I had to get up.

I wasn't sure how long I had been asleep. Sometimes, the lashings would cause me to pass out for days. The worst was when they grew infected, or during the hot months when I couldn't keep the sweat from seeping into the wounds.

This wasn't so bad.

I pushed myself up to my feet, stifling a groan as the scabbed skin on my back cracked. The sun crept through the fabric that covered the window, bright enough to be past mid-day.

I had to get up, had to drink water and eat something before I passed out again.

Don't be weak, Huntyn. It's just a whipping; it will heal like it always does.

I stumbled to my feet and almost fainted when the blood rushed from my head. I just had to—

A rush of pain hit me, followed by an unexpected wave of nausea. I half-ran, half-stumbled to the tiny bathroom connected to my nearly empty room, vomiting up nothing but stomach bile as I dropped to my knees near the toilet.

Fuck. That was not a good sign. I tried to spit in the toilet to cleanse the bile that now covered my dry mouth, but it was nearly impossible. I hadn't eaten anything. My body needed fuel if I was going to regain my strength anytime soon.

A knock on my door made me tense.

"Go away!" I yelled as I threw a hand up and flushed the toilet. Rummy was probably coming back to check on me, and I was in no mood for her antics. She needed no more reason to hate Lord.

The door opened anyway.

“It’s me,” Lord called out as he slipped inside. “I brought you ointment and something to eat.”

My eyes shot open. *Thank the goddess.* I would normally be ashamed for Lord to see me like this with my head hung over the toilet and sweat plastering my black curls to my forehead, but I was in absolutely no condition to argue with that.

Lord was the one who had inflicted these wounds, yes, but he was always a provider to me when I needed it, too. He kept me at his mercy; I was smart enough to know that.

But I wasn’t strong enough to fight it, especially not now.

I sagged in relief.

Lord stepped forward, pausing at the bathroom door to take in what he saw. “Here,” he said, extending his hand and hauling me from the floor. “You need to eat, or you’ll get too weak.”

I let him help me back to my cot. He set me down gently, careful not to touch any of the open wounds on my back.

Once I was fully seated back in my bed, he turned to dig into a paper bag he brought with him. “This will help your back heal,” he said, pulling out a glass container.

It wasn’t rare for Lord to bring me food, especially after a rough training day. But healing ointment? “Why would you bring me this?”

He exhaled loudly, showing me a small sliver of the stress that I suspected ran in his veins at all times. Protecting the entire city from vampyres had weighed on him over the years. His once jet-black hair now had tendrils of white laced throughout, his fierce eyes now accompanied by fine lines etched into the surrounding skin. “Like I said, child, I need you to be prepared for anything. I raised you to be a fighter.”

I didn’t object when he opened the container and knelt beside me, the dirty floor getting dust all over his pristine black pants as he strategically applied the ointment to the ripped skin of my back. I hissed and flinched away at first, but Lord’s touch grew softer.

These were the moments—those soft, caring times in between brutal fights and slaughtering vampyres—that Rummy would never understand. Lord *did* care for me, even if it did not always appear that way on the outside. The way his fingers barely contacted my poor skin, the way he pretended not to notice my sigh of pain.

It was our version of love, our unsaid message that we were family, we would take care of each other.

After a few seconds, the stinging pain in my back turned to a dull ache.

Relief flooded my senses as the healing herbs and tonics seeped into my skin. It was easy to forget what my body felt like without the pain until the nonstop agony finally subsided.

“Thank you,” I whispered through my cracked lips. I took a pain-free breath for the first time since before my punishment.

“You don’t need to thank me,” Lord replied. His voice held no malice or anger. This wasn’t a visit from the assassin master, it was a visit from the man who took in a child when she needed help. “I’m here to talk to you.”

I peered at him over my shoulder. “About what?”

He finished rubbing the ointment across my back, then returned it to the paper bag, tossing it onto the cot.

“Eat,” he ordered.

I obeyed, digging into the bag and pulling out a loaf of bread and an apple. I immediately ripped the bread open with my teeth.

Lord pulled the chair from the corner closer to my cot. “What do you remember about The Golden City?” he asked as he sat down casually.

The Golden City. I quickly recalled everything I had been told about the place. It was a hidden society, one that only the strongest fae could get into. Angels used to live there too, but that was before they became nearly extinct.

The ones that were too good for this life, the ones that were strong and wealthy and smart, they all made it to The Golden City. Of course, you couldn’t just walk right up to it and ask to be let in. It was completely secret, from what it took to enter to what happened once you were inside.

All I knew was that for people like me, for people like the citizens of Midgrave, it was too far out of reach. We were raised here, with crumbling buildings and starving children. We did not possess the skills required to make it into The Golden City. They lived like the goddess herself while the rest of us suffered.

We would never be good enough. We would never be like *them*.

“It’s an elite society,” I replied, swallowing another bite of bread with a shrug. “Only the strongest fae can get in, only the absolute best.”

“That’s correct,” Lord said. “Do you know what’s so special about The Golden City?”

I pursed my lips. “No homeless children. No sick mothers. No unsolved crimes. They’re all perfect, apparently. Better than us, that’s for damn sure.” The words felt bitter rolling off my tongue. I had never met anyone who lived in The Golden City, but I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to live with such ridiculous luxuries while fae like us barely survived.

“They are untouchable,” Lord continued, nodding his head. “Because they possess special gifts. They wield magic freely, pulling power from the archangels.”

I paused my chewing. “Magic? How is that possible?”

Years and years before the war, fae like us had free rein to wield magic whenever they pleased. I’ve heard stories of mothers using fire magic to warm their children, of farmers using magic to adjust the winds and save their crops.

But now? Not a scrap of magic existed in Midgrave. I had a hard time believing it existed anywhere, even in The Golden City. The magic came from the archangels, and without them, we had nothing.

“There are a lot of things that go on there, Hunttyr. Things the rest of us could not even fathom.”

I set down the rest of my bread. “Why are you telling me this, Lord?”

He took a long breath. My nerves erupted, tightening my chest. It wasn’t like him to act this way, so unsure. He braced his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together as he said, “I’m sending you there, child. Your next assignment is to make it into The Golden City.”

My blood froze in my veins. “Is this some sort of test?”

Lord smiled softly. “No. This is no test. You must pass a series of challenges with others who are attempting to become one of the elites, and you’ll be one of the very best.”

I shook my head. It was all way too much information. “But why? Why now, and why me?”

He leaned forward, seeking my face with his eyes. “You are the one I trust the most out there, my child. There’s something I need from you once you are inside, something I cannot trust with anyone else here.”

My heart fluttered. “What is it?”

“Don’t worry about that now,” he said, sitting up straighter. “For now, we must worry about getting you inside.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. How am I supposed to do that?”

Lord explained the process, starting with a special academy I would be forced to attend. I had never heard of the academy, but I suppose I never wondered much about the exact process of making it into The Golden City. Living there was never an option for me, and thinking about how to get in was a monumental waste of time.

The academy, Moira Seminary, would push me to my limits, physically and mentally. I would learn even more physical combat, as well as how to wield magic, magic that we had only heard about in legends from our elders.

“Why?” I asked, my brow creasing. “What are they preparing us for?”

“The Golden City is home to the strongest, most powerful fae and angels that exist, Huntyr. The city is a frequent target for enemy attacks and vampyres. They have become so elite because every single citizen within those towering walls can defend themselves. They earned the right to be there.”

I considered his words. “You’re saying we’ll be training to protect The Golden City before we’re allowed to live there?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That’s right.”

“And what if I fail? What if I don’t make it through Moira?”

Lord leaned forward again, coming a mere few inches from my face, so I could feel his breath on my skin when he whispered, “Failing is not an option, child. You’ll make it through Moira, or you will die like the other students who are not strong enough to pass. Do you understand your assignment?”

Fear threatened to infiltrate my senses, but I pushed it away and lifted my chin. “Yes,” I answered. “I understand the assignment. When do I leave?”

Lord sat back in his chair, apparently pleased with my answer. “Three days. Get plenty of rest. No more training for you; you have everything you need.”

He stood to exit, leaving me speechless on my cot.

Three days? How was I supposed to prepare for a secret elite academy in just three days? My back certainly wouldn’t heal in that amount of time, even with ointment, and I was in no condition for combat training. Not after what Lord did to me.

“Wait,” he said before he reached the door. “I forgot something.” He returned to the chair before unclipping the sheathed dagger from his belt

and handing it to me. “Here. I want you to have this.”

I glanced at him in disbelief. This was so unlike Lord, even now. “You’re giving me your dagger?”

He nodded. “Her name is Venom. She’s been with me through many life-or-death trials, and now she’ll be with you.”

I took the weapon from his grasp, stunned by the solid weight of it. I slowly removed it from the black sheath, amazed by the green emeralds embedded into the perfectly sized silver handle. “She’s beautiful,” I whispered. “But I cannot accept this, Lord.”

“You can, and you will. Let it remind you of why you’re in that school, of what your end goal is. You are the only one who can do this, Huntyr. It must be you.” His words held a certain desperation. “This is what your entire life has been leading up to.”

I nodded, hesitantly accepting the weapon. I still didn’t know why it had to be me, why he couldn’t trust one of the other assassins to do it. But Lord was not a trusting person at heart, and whatever he needed me to do inside The Golden City seemed to weigh heavily on his shoulders.

It was just another mission. I could handle it.

Lord stood and left me alone without another word. I placed the sheathed weapon—Venom—under my pillow, scarfed down the rest of the bread and apple, and drifted into a deep, deep sleep.

CHAPTER
THREE

The pain that screamed in my back had dulled to a constant yet manageable burn as Rummy and I made our way through Midgrave. We walked the same route every week around this time; just as the sun was setting and the beautiful rays of gold and orange flickered over the fallen ruins of our town.

Normally, Rummy and I would talk over each other, explaining every detail of our lives since we last spoke.

This time, though, we walked in silence.

I shoved my hands into my black jacket, my boots crunching over the dirt and rocks as we listened to the sounds of surrounding life: the constant thud from Midgrave's only metal welder in the distance, cries from a screaming baby, the cheerful voices coming from the half-crumbled but still functioning bakery.

And, of course, the half-drunk fae who grew louder and louder with every glass of golden ale they consumed at the tavern.

That's where Rummy and I were headed—the local watering hole.

Like most of the establishments in Midgrave, there was no longer a door. Just an opening in the grey stone that we quickly ducked into before being greeted with a usual cheer from the other fae inside.

"There you are!" the barmaid, Sophia, yelled as soon as we made our way to our usual table near the back. A cloth hung over her shoulder as she set two ales down for the men at the bar, quickly flashed that perfect smile, and made her way in our direction. "I was starting to think you both forgot about me."

“Please,” Rummy scoffed. “If we ever forget about you, that means the entirety of Midgrave has crumbled, and you can find our bones with the ashes.”

Sophia rolled her eyes, quickly busying herself with pouring our ales. Rummy made herself comfortable across from me, slipping off her black leather jacket and leaning forward with both elbows on the small wooden table.

“First round is on me,” she said as she returned, placing the large mugs in front of us. Her bright gaze lingered on me. “You look like you need this.”

I said nothing as I picked up the mug and took two large gulps. I felt their eyes on me, but I didn’t care. They had both seen me in much, much worse condition. A few bruises and a stiff back were nothing.

I set the mug back on the table with a clank. “I’m feeling better already,” I said with a wink.

Sophia pulled the cloth from her shoulder as she spun around, her icy hair trailing behind her as she got back to work.

Rummy, however, eyed me for a second longer. My sarcasm wasn’t nearly as effective on her. She knew me too well. “What’s going on with you?” she asked. Her bright green eyes scanned my face, piercing my soul. “Was Lord’s punishment that bad?”

My foot tapped against the bottom of the table. I was thrilled that Lord wanted me to go to The Golden City, even more so that he trusted me to complete whatever this mission entailed.

But leaving Rummy?

She had no one else. Like most of the fae who used to live in Midgrave before it turned to...well, this crumbling, pathetic excuse for a home, her parents were killed by vampyres years ago during the last large attack. Her and I had a lot in common, actually. We both had nobody.

Nobody except each other.

But the train to the academy would leave in days, and I had to tell her, eventually.

“I’m leaving,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

Rummy’s dark brows drew together. “Okay...”

I leaned in, matching her posture with both elbows on the table, and I lowered my voice. “I’m going to The Golden City.”

It took a few moments for my words to register. She quietly picked up her mug, taking the first sip of ale since we arrived. The rest of the tavern seemed to disappear entirely as I watched her, waiting for her response.

She set her mug down and met my gaze. "I'm waiting for more of an explanation here," she started, "because there is no way in all hells that you randomly decided to get into that place. You do know that most fae don't even get in, right?"

Another few heavy seconds passed. I tapped my fingers against my mug. "Lord is sending me on a mission there."

Rummy leaned back in her chair, rolled her eyes, and threw her hands up in the air. "There it is. There's the truth behind this horrifically idiotic idea."

"It's not idiotic," I retorted. "Can you hear me out, please?"

Her nostrils flared, and I knew Rummy well enough to know that her temper was raging within her right now.

She crossed her toned arms over her chest. "Fine. Start talking. And this better be good."

"I've been training for this all my life, Rummy. Lord made sure I was prepared. I'm the best damn fighter in Midgrave. I've killed hundreds of vampyres, if not more, and this could be my ticket out of here."

A flash of hurt crossed her features. "You want to leave that badly?"

I shrugged, taking another sip of ale. "If it were up to me, I would be perfectly happy staying here and protecting Midgrave from those bloodsuckers. You know that. But Lord needs me to do this, Rummy. We both know I owe it to him."

She scoffed before looking away.

"What?" I pushed.

She shook her head before finally meeting my gaze, an intensity I had never seen before lingering there. "You can't keep letting him control you, Hunt. Yeah, he took you in as a baby and raised you as his own, but was it fucking worth it? I mean, look at you! I bet if I looked at your back right now, it would be covered with reasons you shouldn't give a shit about him or his orders."

I shushed her, quickly glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one had heard. "Keep your voice down!" I whispered.

"My bad, wouldn't want the big, scary Lord to hear me talking this way to his precious Huntynr."

“Goddess,” I mumbled. “I thought you might at least be the tiniest bit happy for me. I’m actually getting out of here, Rummy. How many times have we talked about leaving this place? How many times have you urged me to run away from here? Well, here I am, finally doing it. And you’re so angry, you can’t even fake a tiny smile for me.”

She gave me a half-laugh. “Please, when have I ever been one to fake anything?”

I waited for another argument, another retort, another piercing glare, but none came. Rummy’s smile lingered long enough to break the tension building between us.

Hells. She wanted the best for me. I knew that. Nobody truly understood the relationship I had with Lord, the life debt I would be forever paying back. He took me in and saved my life, giving me the strength and skills I needed to stay alive in a vampyre-riddled kingdom.

I would do anything he asked of me. It was that simple.

“I *am* happy for you,” Rummy said after a while. “I’m going to miss you like fucking crazy, but if anyone deserves to get into The Golden City, it’s you.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. “I’ll come back and visit you once I’m in,” I added. “Moirra Seminary only lasts a couple of months, and as soon as I’m finished with this mission, I’ll come back home. Lord says I have to learn magic, but I have no clue how that will be possible.”

Her eyes widened at the mention of magic. “You’re kidding, right?”

I shook my head. “Not in the slightest.”

She tossed her head back and laughed. Her shiny hair fell over her shoulders as she leaned forward, the grin on her face spreading from ear to ear. “Okay, tell me everything.”

So I did. I told her everything Lord and I discussed, from the combat training, to the magic that existed in The Golden City. I told her about the strongest fae that would compete with me to get in, about how mysterious everything was, how secretive. Her face lit up as I told her about the magic, about how I would be able to use it after they trained us at the academy.

By the time our conversation was over and two more mugs of ale were emptied, any arguments lingering between us faded entirely. That was another thing I loved about Rummy. No matter how much we fought, it was quickly forgiven.

“I fucking love you,” she mumbled as we both stood from the table. She slipped her black jacket on and threw an arm over my shoulder. “And if you don’t make it back here alive someday, I’m really going to be pissed.”

That, I believed.



With only one day remaining until I left Midgrave for an unknown amount of time, I trekked out to the woods that surrounded the city. I found it much easier to clear my head out here, with nothing but the tall masses of trees and trickling water of the river to distract me.

Rummy would kill me if she knew I was coming out here alone. *There are vampyres outside of the city*, she would argue. *You shouldn't be going out there by yourself!*

I wished a vampyre would try to attack me. It would give me an excuse to tear their heart out.

Besides, Lord trained me to be a killer. Vampyre or fae, I would be perfectly fine.

I kept walking, my black combat boots crunching over the cold forest ground, until I found the familiar, secluded spot beside the narrow river. *Thank the goddess.*

Even with the ointment Lord had given me for my back, I needed the cold, refreshing water of the river to relax my muscles before my journey tomorrow.

The sun was still setting, but I didn't care. Nobody else would dare to wander this far from Midgrave.

I dropped my bag and stripped off my leather jacket and boots, followed by my shirt and pants. I tossed everything into a pile until I stood in the forest with nothing but my underwear and chest wrap.

Those, I would leave on. Just in case.

I quickly knelt, sitting on the edge of the riverbank as I dipped my feet in first. It was cold, but I needed cold. I needed *clarity*. After telling Rummy about my new mission, a weight lifted from my shoulders. Now, I had nothing holding me back. This was really happening. I was about to leave my entire life behind to throw myself at the mercy of an elite academy.

Lord chose me for this. I wouldn't disappoint him.

If I had to learn magic, if I had to pass special tests and become one of the elite, I would do it.

I had to admit, it sounded like an adventure. Something deep in my stomach flipped every time I thought about The Golden City, about what might be lurking inside.

The water ran at an easy pace down the stream, tumbling over rocks at the far end of the bank. This area was deep enough for me to bathe in when I needed it, which I appreciated, but not deep enough that I would have to swim. After rain, the river would only be as high as my chest.

Not knowing how to swim was foolish, I knew that, but taking time to learn such things was a luxury I didn't have. Finding shallow portions of the river had become a skill of mine anyway.

With one push off my hands, I slid from the grassy ground of the riverbank and into the water, dunking beneath.

My bodily instincts were always the same: tensed muscles, frozen lungs. It was shocking to enter the uncomfortably cold water, the icy underworld of the river. But after a few stunned seconds, I resurfaced, gasping for a breath.

The skin on my back screamed at the temperature until, slowly, the heat dissipated from the wounds.

Finally, I thought. A few minutes in this water would be enough to calm my body for tomorrow. The chill of the river combined with the ointment from Lord would make me almost as good as new.

And yet uncertainty still swarmed in my mind. Lord explained so much to me, adding details I could have never imagined. I'd barely even heard about The Golden City before two days ago, and now? It was all I could think about.

I was strong, yes. Lord made sure of that.

But elite?

It wasn't only the fae of Midgrave that would fight with me for a chance to make it to The Golden City. It would be fae from all over Vaehatis, from kingdoms I didn't even know existed. How was I supposed to compete against them? Be stronger than *everyone*?

I shook my head, ridding myself of those thoughts. It didn't matter. Lord needed this from me, so it would be done. I would find a way to survive, to make it through the academy. I had no other option.

It sounded ridiculous; I knew that, but after everything Lord did for me, I would risk my life for him.

I cupped the freezing water in my hands and threw it over my mess of dark curls that were now plastered to my forehead and against my neck. I reached over my shoulders and brushed my fingertips across the wounds there. It wasn't as painful as I expected, which was a good sign.

A twig snapped in the distance.

I froze.

Nobody ever wandered this far into the forest. Nobody fae, anyway. Nobody from Midgrave.

Another crack of a leaf echoed in the tense silence. My pointed ears instinctively flickered in the direction, and my already rapid heart sped up, pumping a lethal amount of adrenaline through my blood.

Someone lurked out there.

As quietly as possible, I crept to the edge of the river, keeping everything below my mouth hidden beneath the water.

My eyes scanned over the forest, landing on my clothes and bag in a pile by the river. Even if I was hidden, my clothes were not.

Dammit, Huntyr. You just had to go for a dip today.

I waited a few more seconds, making sure no fae or vampyre bolted from the woods to attack me, before slowly slipping from the shallows and crawling toward my clothes. I threw my black shirt on and slid my black trousers up my wet legs. Shoving the rest of my clothes in my bag and carrying my boots, I crept backward, back toward the city lines of Midgrave.

Not even five footsteps in, I heard the rustling of leaves, followed by a low, animalistic growl. Everything in my body screamed at me to run, which could only mean one thing. *Vampyre.*

I grabbed my new knife—Venom—and dropped my bag.

Come and get me, you blood-sucking bastard.

My heart pounded in my chest, just as wild as my breath, as I waited for my attacker. Vampyres were naturally instinctive creatures, but their bloodlust made them idiots. Even the smartest among their kind would turn into rabid animals once they were hungry enough.

That's why they couldn't be trusted.

"Come on," I mumbled to myself. "I've got plenty of warm, fresh blood pumping through these veins. Come and get it."

I rotated the dagger in my hand, getting used to its weight. It was heavier and more solid than any of the cheap, handmade blades I had used during training, but it would work.

Anything would work if you were strong enough.

I waited and waited and waited, frozen in my crouched position with Venom in my hand.

But nothing came. No vampyre bolted from the woods, aiming their nasty teeth at my neck.

Nothing.

I sat there for a few more minutes, ensuring the vampyres had moved on, before throwing my boots on, sheathing Venom, and silently making my way toward Midgrave.

If vampyres were this close, Midgrave was the next target.

And the Phantoms were the only ones standing between them and a slaughtered city.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Midgrave came into view ahead of me as I traveled back toward the city, with the tops of the crumbling walls shining through the thinning line of trees from the surrounding forest. I could see the short wall that circled it, just fifty paces away, but every instinct I had screamed that something was very wrong.

I picked up my pace, my jog soon morphing into a full-blown sprint. A scream split the air in the distance. Another followed shortly after. *Shit.*

The sound of glass shattering echoed, making my blood run cold.

I yanked Venom from my sheath and ran faster.

A million scenarios ran through my mind as the crumbling walls of the city grew closer and closer. The logical explanation would be the local bandits breaking into someone's house.

But this early into the night?

I didn't want to admit the other option. Because that meant more death. More violence.

If the vampyres made it into the city, I might be too late.

The barely standing stone wall that separated Midgrave from the forest taunted me, just a few feet away. My heart pumped quickly but steadily, my lungs sucking in a powerful breath every second.

I used my free hand for leverage and swept my body over the waist-height wall in one motion.

Two more screams erupted, followed by an unmistakable growl of a hungry, soulless monster. My boots hit the dirt ground again.

Again.

Again.

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