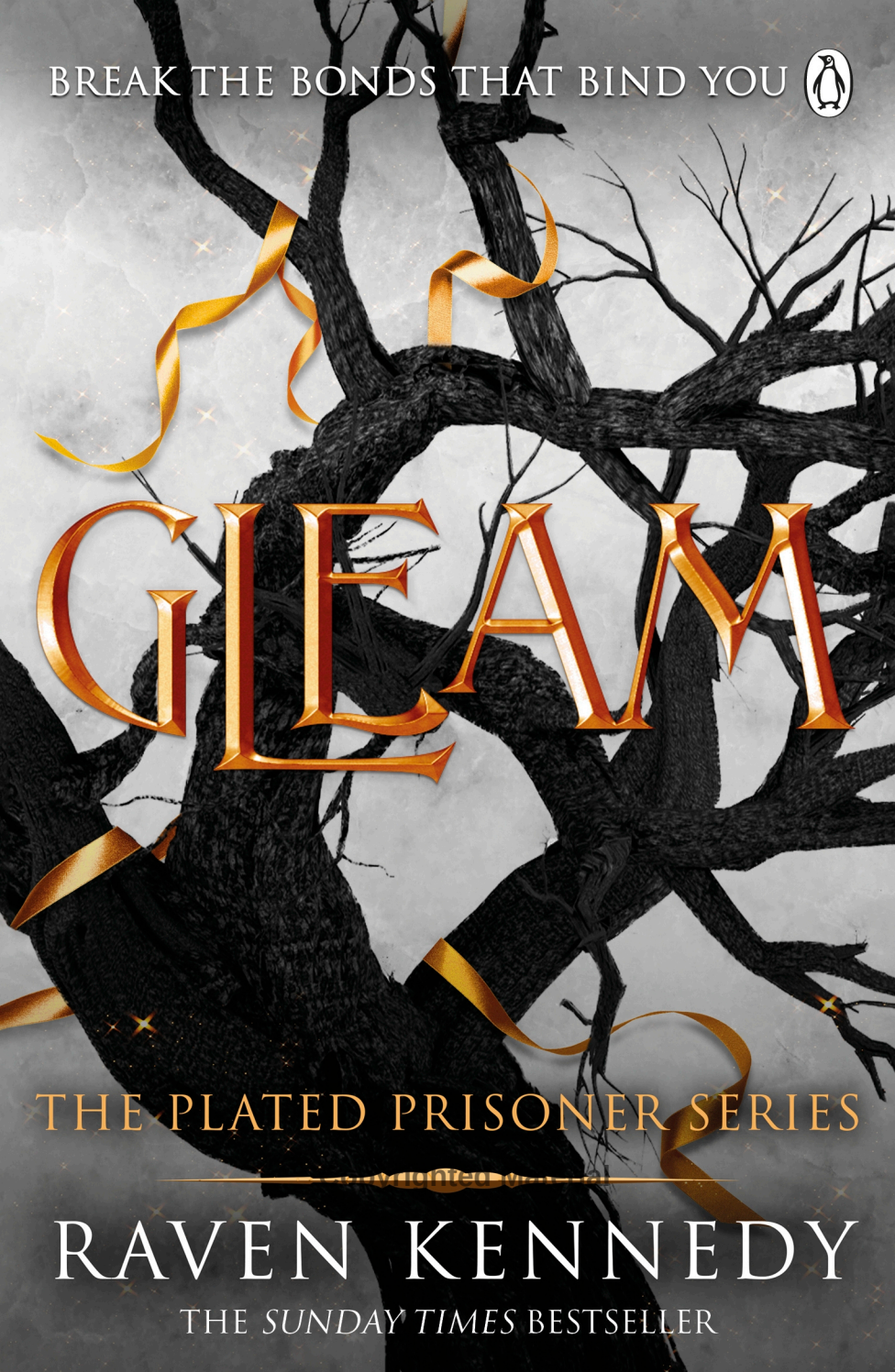

BREAK THE BONDS THAT BIND YOU
GLEAM
THE PLATED PRISONER SERIES
RAVEN KENNEDY
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

GLEAM

RAVEN KENNEDY



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About the Author

Raven Kennedy is an international bestseller, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds. The Plated Prisoner series, a dark fantasy romance, has sold in over fifteen countries. It became a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Sunday Times*, and *Spiegel* bestseller, hit #1 in the Amazon store, and has sold over four million copies worldwide.

The Plated Prisoner series is being adapted for television by Peter Guber's Mandalay Television.

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First published by Raven Kennedy 2021
Published in Penguin Books 2022
001

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Typeset by Imagine Ink Designs
Edited by Polished Perfection
Cover uses font Sveva by astype
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–95502–7

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About The Book

The myth of King Midas reimagined.

This compelling and dark adult fantasy series is as addictive as it is unexpected. With romance, fae, and intrigue, the gilded world of Orea will grip you from the very first page. Be immersed in this journey of greed, love, and finding inner strength.

Please Note: This series will contain explicit content and dark elements that may be triggering to some. It will include explicit romance, mature language, violence, non-consensual sex, and emotional manipulation. It is not intended for anyone under 18 years of age. This is book three in a series.

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To those who were kept in the dark.
May you smile at the sun.

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Additional material



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PROLOGUE

AUREN

Ten years ago

The sky doesn't sing here.

It doesn't dance or play, it doesn't sink against my skin with a sweet perfume, or breeze through my hair with a fresh kiss.

Not like it did in Annwyn.

The rain weeps down, and water floods the ground, but even that doesn't sweep away the stench of this place. The sun dips and the moon crests, but there is no harmony with the goddesses slumbering in their eggshell stars. This horizon is tepid and lacking.

Nothing feels as alive here as it did at home. But then, maybe those are just the make-believe memories of a little girl. Maybe Annwyn wasn't like that at all, and I've forgotten.

If I have, I'd rather keep pretending. I like the way it

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is in my mind—overflowing with a vivaciousness that saturated my every sense.

Here, my senses are saturated too, but not in a good way.

Derfort Harbor is still drenched from this morning's showers. Everything here is always waterlogged from either the sea or the sky. Sometimes both. There isn't a single wood-pitched roof that isn't sodden or a weathered door that isn't peeling from the oppressive moisture.

The clouds often pull in storms from the ocean and toss them here. There's nothing cleansing about the rain, though. It simply dumps back into the sea that fed it, reeking of fish while it floods the muddy streets.

The air is claggy today with a humidity that soaks through my dress and weighs down my lungs. I'll be lucky if my clothes dry once I hang them up tonight, lucky if my hair is anything other than damp and frizzed.

But no one looks at my hair or clothes anyway. Greedy eyes always fall against my gold-pinched cheeks, roam over my skin that's ten shades too gleaming to be real. That's why I'm known as the painted girl. The golden orphan of Derfort Harbor. No matter what rags I wear, there's absurd richness that sits beneath my sodden clothes. A worthless wealth of my skin that does nothing, yet has caused *everything*.

All along the market street, the vendor tarps are still dark, burlap sacks saturated, carts covered and dripping. I close my eyes and breathe, trying to pretend that I'm not smelling the sharp iron from the anchor maker. I'm not smelling the drenched wooden planks on the moored ships. I'm not smelling the crates of flailing fish mixed with the brined sand from the shore.

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My imagination isn't quite enough to stave off the stench.

Of course, the air would probably smell a little better if I weren't sitting on top of the pub's refuse bin. As terrible as the scent of old ale is, this spot is one of the driest and most shadowed, making it valuable real estate.

I shift my weight on the metal lid as I lean against the building at my back, gaze scanning the market alley. I shouldn't be here. I should keep moving, but even that's a major risk. Zakir has too many eyes in the city. It's just a matter of time before I'm caught, whether I stay in one spot or not. I'm hiding from him, from the duties he's placed upon me. I'm hiding from his thugs who roam the streets, keeping watch on the beggar children—not for their safety, but to make sure no one else encroaches on Zakir's territory or steals from his thieves.

I'm hiding in a place where there is no hope of staying hidden.

Like a tug against my eyes, my gaze lifts, going between two vendor tents to see the ocean beyond. I watch the sails of the docked ships, their shapes like tethered clouds that try to pull toward the sky. My stomach squeezes at the sight of them, at their taunt of escape. A bobbing temptation of freedom that's right there on the horizon.

It's a lie.

Stowaways are punished severely in Derfort, and I'd be a fool to try it. More than a handful of kids at Zakir's *have* tried it, and didn't live to tell the tale. I don't think I'll ever forget the way the gulls pecked at their flayed flesh from where they hung, their bodies left to sway in the tidal breeze and pucker beneath salted rain.

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That smell, above all others, is by far the worst.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?"

I flinch so badly that I scrape my arm on the rough limestone bricks at my back as Zakir appears in my shadowed spot, looming over me like a threat.

Brown eyes glare out of a ruddy face, his chin prickled with week-old hair like spines on a cactus. I can smell the alcohol on him, so strong it overpowers the trash beneath me. He's probably been into the cups for hours.

"Zakir." I can't keep the guilt out of my voice, am barely able to look him in the eye as I slide down from my spot to stand in front of him.

He puts his hands on his hips, making the sage-colored vest he's wearing gape at his hairy chest. "You got wax in your ears? I said what the hell are you doing?"

Hiding. Dreaming. Pretending. Avoiding.

As if he can hear the silent answer in my head, he sneers at me, teeth stained from pipe smoke and pints of henade. Lips cracked from too many curses and verbal kicks and cruel deals.

Ever since the long moon came and marked the new year, Zakir's duties for me have changed. By his count, I'm fifteen years old. An Orean adult.

"I was just..." An excuse doesn't come to my tongue quick enough.

Zakir slaps me on the back of my head, making my neck snap forward. It's the only place he ever hits me now. My gold skin bruises a dark, burnished color rather easily, but no one can see the marks beneath my hair.

"You were supposed to be at *The Solitude* an hour ago!" he snarls, getting down close to my face. "Bastard

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came in hollering to me that you never showed, and the guy I had watching you said you must've snuck out the back door."

Wrong. I climbed out the broken window in the cellar. Easier for me to make my escape down the back street behind the inn. The other option would've been the side alley, and that's always full of feral dogs fighting for the scraps left in the bins.

"You fucking hearing me?"

I grab my dirty skirts and squeeze, as if I'm trying to pop the sound right out of his voice until it bursts like a grape. "I don't want to go to *The Solitude* again."

My voice trundles out like the roll of an uneven marble across the ground. I don't even like to *think* about the inn, let alone talk about it. Despite its name, solitude is the last thing I'll find there. There, where my innocence was stolen like grubby fingers dipped into strangers' pockets on the street. All I'll find in *The Solitude* is the oppression of unwelcome gazes, the trappings of repulsive touch.

Zakir's face hardens, and I think he's going to smack my head again with his meaty, ringed fingers, but he doesn't. I wonder how much of my hard-earned coin went into buying him those encrusted gold gems.

"I don't give a fish-frying shit what you want. You work for *me*, Auren."

Desperation tightens my throat, cutting off my air with its grip. "Then send me back to the streets to beg on the corner or pickpocket the marketers," I plead. "Just don't send me there. I can't do *that* again." My eyes inadvertently fill up. Another thing in Derfort that floods.

Zakir sighs, but that hateful sneer doesn't loose from

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his face. “Ech, don’t give me that weepy act. I kept you off your back for this long, which is more than I can say most flesh traders would’ve done. If I’m not making a profit off you, then I have no need to keep you,” he warns. “You got it good with me. Remember that, girl.”

Good.

That word trills through my head as I think of my life for the past ten years. Lots of other kids have come and gone, but I’ve stayed the longest because my strange golden skin attracts him the kind of attention that he’s made profitable. But not once, in all of that time, would I ever say I’ve had it *good.*

Forced to beg on the streets all day and pickpocket at night, I had to learn to make my strange looks work for me while I roamed the port city. It was either that or I had to clean Zakir’s house top to bottom, scrubbing surfaces until my fingers cracked and my knees hurt. Though, there was never really getting the cellar clean. It always dripped with cold and mildew and loneliness.

There are usually ten to thirty of us down there, crammed together beneath rotting blankets and old sacks. Kids sold and purchased and worked. Kids who never play or learn or laugh. We sleep and we earn coin, and that’s pretty much it. Friendship is always squashed, nonexistent, while meanness and a competitive edge is constantly cultivated under Zakir’s watchful eyes. Just dogs kept salivating to fight each other over a bone.

But I have to look on the bright side. Because even though it’s not good...it could be worse.

“What’d you think was gonna happen?” he huffs out, like I’m a naive idiot. “You knew this was coming, because you’ve seen the other girls. You know the

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rule, Auren."

I look him steadily in the eye. "Earn my keep."

"That's right. You earn your keep." Zakir checks me over, gaze stopping on my muddied hem as a frustrated cough puffs up from his pipe-burnt throat. "You're a damn mess, girl."

Normally, being a mess is part of the orphan beggar child act, but I've moved on from that. Being fifteen meant Zakir changed my clothes from patched up scraps to ladies' dresses.

When he brought me my first dress, I thought I looked pretty. I was actually stupid enough to think he'd given it to me as a birthday gift. There were real pink laces at the front and a bow at the back, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen since I've lived here.

But that was before I realized that pretty dress meant something ugly.

"Get to *The Solitude*," Zakir tells me, his tone elbowing aside any room for argument.

Dread settles in my stomach as his eyes drag back up. "But—"

A yellow-nailed finger points in my face. "The customer paid for you, and that's what he'll get. Locals have been waiting years for the painted gold girl to grow up. You're in high demand, Auren. A demand that *I've* grown even more by making them wait—another fact you should be grateful for."

Good. *Grateful*. Zakir uses these words, but I'm not sure he knows what they mean.

"Because of me, I've made you the most expensive whore in Derfort, and you're not even in a brothel. The saddles are boiling with jealousy." He says this like it's

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something to be proud of, as if he's giddy that even other whores don't like me.

He scratches at a spot on his cheek, eyes gone greedy. "The gold-painted beggar girl of Derfort Harbor is finally old enough to buy for a night to get between her legs. I won't let you ruin my chance at earning those coins *or* ruin my reputation on the streets," he says, voice as rough as storm-chopped waters.

My fingernails prick into my palm as I fist my hands, and the space between my shoulder blades tingles, itching. If it would make any difference to scrape off my skin and pluck out my hair, I would do it. I would do anything to get rid of the gleam of my body.

There have been nights where I've tried to do just that while the other kids slept. But unlike the rumors that run rampant in Derfort, I'm not painted. This gold will never come off, no matter how many times I wash or scrub myself raw. The new skin and hair always grows in gleaming just like before.

My parents called me their little sun, and I used to be proud of the shine. Yet in this world full of gawking Oreans and a bereft sky, all I want to do is go dull. To finally find a hiding spot where no one can find me.

Zakir shakes his head at me, eyes bloodshot from late nights of gambling, a perpetual cloud of smoke hovering around him like always. He seems to hesitate for a moment before he leans back with his arms crossed and says, "Barden East has his feelers out for you."

My eyes go wide. "Wh-what?" I ask, the fearful whisper puffing past my lips.

Barden is another flesh trader here at the port. He runs the eastside—thus the second name that he

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adopted—but unlike Zakir, who's somewhat tolerable, I've heard that Barden is...not.

Zakir had the decency to wait until I was considered an adult before he made me a saddle for passing sailors and townies. But word around Derfort is that Barden is the worst kind of flesh trader, who has no such decency. He doesn't deal in punitive child beggars and pickpockets. His wealth is made from cutthroats and pirates, from flesh trading and whoring. I've never traveled to the east side, but it's rumored that the way Barden runs his business makes Zakir look like a saint.

"Why?" I ask, though the word comes out garbled, throat too tight with a threatening noose that seems to be wrapped around my neck.

He gives me a dry look. "You know why. It's for the same reason the saddles in the brothel started painting their skin different colors. You have a certain...*appeal*, and now that you're a woman..."

Bile rises to my throat. Funny how it seems to taste of seawater. "Please don't sell me to him."

Zakir takes a step forward, crowding me against the side of the building. My neck prickles with his nearness, the skin along my spine jumping like my fear wants to sprout out.

"I've been lenient, because out of all the others, you've always made me the most on the streets," he tells me. "People loved giving coin to the painted girl. And if they didn't, you could distract them enough to pluck it from their pockets later."

Shame crawls up my throat. What would my parents think of me if they saw me now? What would they think of the begging, of the stealing, of the scrapping in

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fistfights with the other kids?

"But you're not a kid anymore." Zakir runs his tongue over his teeth before spitting a polluted glob onto the ground. "If you disobey me again, I'll wash my hands of you and sell you to Barden East. And I'm telling you now, if that happens, you'll *wish* you'd stayed with me and behaved."

Tears prickle in my eyes. My back muscles flinch so hard that my spine stiffens.

Zakir digs into the pocket of his vest and pulls out his wooden pipe. Once he puts it in his mouth and lights up, he levels me with a look. "So? What's it going to be, Auren?"

For a split second, my eyes move past him to look over his shoulder, to the ships at the harbor again. To those billowing sail clouds tied to the sea.

I was my parents' little sun.

I used to dance beneath a sky that sang.

Now, here I am, a painted whore in the slums of a sodden harbor, with filth in the air and a silent cry in my throat, and no amount of rain will ever wash the curse of my goldenness away.

Zakir sucks on his pipe, blue smoke wringing out through his teeth with a grunt. He's getting impatient now. "For fuck's sake. All you have to do is lie there."

My body shudders, tears threatening to spill. That's what the first man told me. *"Just lie down on the pallet, girl. This will be quick."* He dropped a coin on the mattress when he was done with me. I left it there, metal worn and tainted with the passing of too many hands, though it wasn't nearly as tarnished as I was.

Just lie there. Just lie there and chip away, little by

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little. Just lie there and feel yourself die from the inside out.

"*Please*, Zakir."

My plea makes his teeth grind on the tip of his pipe. "It's going to be Barden, then? You'd rather live on Eastside?"

I shake my head emphatically. "No."

Not even the people on Eastside want to live on Eastside, but most of them have no way of leaving. With trash at my back, puddles at my feet, and my owner blocking my way, I know the feeling. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

He jerks his chin. "Then get to work. *Now*."

Hanging my head, I squeeze past him and start to walk down the street while my heart pounds in my throat and thrums down my spine. Two of Zakir's cronies step in front of me to lead the way, while he follows behind like an ominous shadow, steering me to my decrepit fate.

My shoes stick to the washed out gravel, but I barely notice when pebbles lodge inside, gritty pieces stabbing the soles of my feet. I barely notice the busy market either, full of shouting and haggling and arguing. I don't look at the ships again, because that taunt of freedom is just too much to bear. So, I search for that platitude of numbness inside of me and try to pretend that I'm anywhere but here.

I drag my feet, but it doesn't matter how slowly I walk to *The Solitude*. I still end up at its white-washed door, still see my bubbled reflection in the crude arrangement of bottom-cut bottles cemented in place like a window. The poor person's stained glass.

My heart hammers so hard that my feet waver, as if

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I were standing on one of those ships instead of solid ground.

Zakir steps up to my side, and I feel a breath of his blue smoke blown against my ear. It's the same color as those bottles. "Remember what I said. Earn your keep, or I'll let Barden East have you."

With a stern look, he walks off, a hand in his pocket jangling the coins I've made him, while two more of his men materialize and follow like guard dogs. The others stay behind with me and take up stances by the door, herding Zakir's sheep. I already know without looking that there will be another man stationed at the back.

The spindly man on my left looks me up and down, the gray pallor of his face mismatched with his sallow eyes. "Hear Barden East likes to try out his whores first. Makes 'em go through tests before he lets 'em work," he says, causing the other man to trudge out a snort.

I stare at the door, stare at the blue glass bottoms that remind me of the circular eyes of a spider, knowing I'm going straight into its mouth, already trapped in the web Zakir threw me into.

I try to remember.

I try to remember the lyrical pitch of my mother's voice. The breeze through the wind chimes that hung outside my window. I try to remember the sound of my father's laugh. The way the horses nickered in their stalls.

But a blink goes by, and it's all drowned out with the sound of the men taunting me. With the market banging in my skull, pitched in shouts and clacking, just as the clouds crack and start to pour again, drenching us all with fetid water.

No, the sky doesn't sing here.

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And every year that passes, the song of home gets drowned out from my memory just a little bit more, washed away to a polluted seashore rife with cragged cruelty.

Just lie down on the pallet, girl.

I shun the ships sailing away at my back, shun the choice that is no choice at all, between the East and the West, between Barden and Zakir. Between life and death. Then, with a raindrop on my cheek that might have spilled from my eye, I open the door and walk into the inn.

And I die, just a little bit more.

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CHAPTER 1

AUREN

Truths are like spices.

When you add some in, it means you have more layers to digest. You get a taste of things you were missing before. But if you add too many, life can become unpalatable.

But when those truths are repressed for too long, when you realize you've grown accustomed to the bland lies, there's no hope of removing the overpowering taste from your tongue.

And right now, my mouth is charred with the revelation I have to somehow swallow down.

You're King Ravinger.

Yes, Goldfinch, I am. But you can call me Slade.

Rip, Ravinger—whoever he is—he watches me choke on his truth.

What do you do when someone isn't who you thought they were? In my head, Rip and the king were

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two very different males. King Ravinger was an evil I didn't want to face. Someone with a foul power that I wanted to stay far away from.

And Rip was...well, *Rip.* Complicated and dangerous, but someone I considered as a sort-of ally who taught me a lot in our short time together. Someone who both scared and irritated me, but who I came to care for.

But now I have to reconcile all of those previous thoughts. Because the person who pushed my buttons and forced me to admit what I am, the male who kissed me in his tent and stood on the snowy shore of an arctic sea to watch a mourning moon...he's someone else.

He's the king everyone fears. The ruler who delivers rotted corpses like they're bouquets of daisies. He's arguably the most powerful monarch that Orea has ever seen, because he's *fae*, and he's been hiding in plain sight.

I've been sleeping in his damn tent, just feet away from him every night, without knowing who he really is.

I'm unable to sift through all of the layers that this truth brings. I'm not sure I'm in a state of mind to properly pick it all apart and digest it, and I don't even know if I *want* to.

No, right now, I'm too pissed.

I glare at him. "You...you fucking *liar*." I can hear the scorching vehemence burning my words as surely as I can feel their flames light up my eyes. It consumes me in a second.

Rip—Ravinger, whoever he Divine-damned is—rears his head back, like my anger is a shock to him. His body tenses, the malevolent spikes of his arms reflecting off the dim light of the room. A room that feels entirely

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too small all of a sudden. “Excuse me?”

I stand in the doorway, and my fingers bunch into fists at my sides, as if I can take the reins of my anger and steer it galloping forward. I take a step into the cage room toward him, my exhausted ribbons trailing after me like sickly worms writhing on the floor.

“You’re the king,” I say, shaking my head like I can erase this fact. I *knew* his aura was strange. I knew I could feel an underlying power there, but I never would’ve guessed the depth of his trickery. “You tricked me.”

Rip levels me with a glare. The black coal of his eyes looks like it wants to catch the flame of mine. He looks like he’s ready to burn in my anger.

Let him.

“I could say the same,” he retorts.

I bristle. “Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me. You *lied*—”

“So did you.” Ire bleeds through his expression, making the gray scales along his cheeks glint in the dark, the sharp face of a predator bearing down on me.

“I concealed my power. There’s a difference.”

He scoffs. “You hid your power, your ribbons, your *heritage*.”

“Being fae has *nothing* to do with it,” I snarl.

He eats up the remaining space between us in three long strides. “It has *everything* to do with it!” Rip seethes, looking like he wants to reach out and shake me.

I lift my chin, refusing to cower, imagining my ribbons rising to punch him in the gut. If only they weren’t so limp and exhausted. “You’re right,” I reply with forced calmness. “I’ve had to hide in a world that wasn’t my own for twenty years without seeing a single

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fae, until I met you."

Some of the hardness leaves his face for a split-second, but I'm not done. Not nearly.

"You pushed me relentlessly to admit what I was."

Irritation flashes through his features, lightning to strike the hollow ground. "Yes, to help you—"

My eyes narrow. "You forced truths out of me while concealing yourself. You don't think that's hypocritical?"

Rip's teeth grind together so hard I wonder if he'll break a tooth. I hope he does, the lying bastard.

"I couldn't trust you," he replies coolly.

A whip of a scoff comes out of my mouth, the sound of it punishing and unkind. "You self-centered ass. You stand there and talk about how *you* couldn't trust *me*?"

"Careful," he says, baring his teeth in a wicked smile. "There's a saying about rocks and glass houses."

"I don't live in glass, I live in gold. So I can throw whatever damn rocks I want," I snap.

"Right. I should probably expect nothing less from you."

My back goes rigid. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you're always so quick to judge me," Rip replies with cool indifference. "Tell me, did you call Midas a liar as well?" he challenges, his spiked brow lowering over his eyes. "How long has he been claiming your power as his own? How long have you been *lying* to everyone about him?"

"We're not talking about Midas."

A cruel laugh snakes out of him, ready to bite, to hurt. "Of course not, right? Your golden king can do no wrong," he says scathingly.

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My nails dig into my bare palm so hard that I nearly break the skin. “You had no right to be angry when I chose to come back to him. Not when you’ve deceived me from the start.”

A terrible growl escapes his chest, like he tried to hold it back and failed. “He’s deceived you too!”

“Exactly!” I scream, and the sound of it, the utter emotion that comes barreling with it, makes him stagger back. “I am *so* damned tired of being deceived! The lies, the manipulations. You tried to pretend that you were so much better than him, but you’re exactly the same.”

Rip’s expression goes as dark as night, and my stomach clenches. “Am I?” His reply is a strike, but his eyes land the blow.

A hot, heavy quiet drops between us. The dead-weight of a corpse smoldering at our feet. The smoke of our discretions clouds our sights of one another.

“Thank you for explaining exactly what you think of me.” His aura slinks around him, and since I know now that it contains the repressed steam of his festering power, it makes me want to run and hide. “It’s a good reminder of just how skewed your perceptions are.”

I hate him. I hate him so much right now that my eyes burn. They burn until I can’t hold back the lick of flame anymore. A scorching tear leaks down my cheek, and his eyes follow it until it drips off my jaw.

“Maybe my perceptions wouldn’t be so *skewed* if the people I trusted didn’t constantly trick and twist and lie,” I retort, bashing away another stray tear.

Behind him, set in the shadows of the room, the broken cage mocks me. It’s a reminder. Of exactly what can happen when someone I trust misleads me.

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"Auren..." There's a sound there, in his voice, one that I can't bear to hear.

I look down, focusing instead on the puddled shadows that have formed at our feet, a breath shaking through my chest. "You stood there and kissed me and tried to make me choose you, when I didn't even know the real you at all," I say, voice gone flat as I look back up at him. "You made me feel like the worst person in the world for choosing him, even though I warned you over and over again that I had to."

Rip's head jerks at that last part, eyes narrowing in the dark. "You *had* to?"

I regret my slip of the tongue immediately.

Keeping a stoic expression, I say, "I want you to leave."

That dark, shadowy anger returns to his face, the lines of his power writhing against his bristled jaw. "No."

My heart squeezes tighter than my fists. I hate that part of me still feels relieved that he's here, as if I'm safe now, as if he's still my ally.

He's not.

I have no allies, and I need to remember that. Whatever I thought Rip was to me, that's gone now. I have no one.

Uncurling my fingers, I raise a hand and drag it down my face. I'm so tired. So damn tired of the lies. His. Midas's. *Mine*. I'm wrapped in deceit and molded in manipulation, stuffed full of everything I've done to survive.

I want it all to unravel. I want to come out of the tangles that have coiled around me before I become mummified with them.

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The tension rolling off Rip's shoulders is so tight that he's practically vibrating with it, a cloud of thunder ready to roil. "So that's it? I'm to bear the brunt of your anger, while you continue to fall at Midas's feet?"

My eyes flash. "What I do is no concern of yours."

"*Dammit*, Auren—"

I cut him off. "What do you want, Rip? Why are you here?"

He crosses his arms, spikes sinking beneath his skin in a fluid, effortless motion. "Me? I was just going for a walk."

"Oh, good, another lie to add to the list," I say sardonically. "Should I grab a quill and paper to keep track?"

Rip sighs and scrubs his hands down his face in a rare crack of his stony facade. "You're overreacting."

My entire body goes still as I gape at him. "I just watched you change from the king to the commander as quickly as someone pulls on a coat," I say pointedly. "A few hours ago, you rotted Ranhold's front yard just by walking, and you threatened the city with war. Behind me right now, I'm fairly certain there's a roomful of guards that you killed. You just admitted to deceiving me the entire time I knew you, and yet...you think I'm *overreacting*?"

The muscle in his jaw jumps. "Tell me, which one of those things bothers you the most?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not a fan of lies, but mindless murder is pretty up there too."

"It wasn't mindless."

I swallow, trying to deal with the confirmation that there are definitely dead guards in the next room. "Did

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you rot them?"

"I'm far more interested in *your* power," Rip replies, and my stomach drops as he turns to look at the woman's statue inside the cage. "Is that the first person you've turned gold?"

"It was an accident," I blurt, because I'm *not* a mindless murderer.

His eyes flick back to me in victory, gaze sweeping my face, and I want to kick myself for just confirming his assumptions.

Realization dawns over his expression, making his eyes glint in curiosity. "An accident... Is it by touch, then? Is that why you always stay covered? Are you unable to control your own power?"

His condescending questions make shame pool in my stomach. Coming from the male who seems to have insurmountable control over his magic, I shouldn't be surprised that he picked up on my inadequacy, but it still stings.

"How does it work?" he presses when I don't answer.

"There you go again, trying to rip truths out of me that you have no right to," I say. "Is that why they call you Rip?"

"You let people call you the gold-touched saddle," he counters, making me see red. "For every thing you hate about me, it seems Midas has already done it a thousand times over."

He's right, and I hate him for that too.

The skin around my eyes tightens, but I can't say anything, because all that's caught in my throat is my own self-loathing.

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Rip cocks his head and looks me over. “He plays it very well, to be a king without power. To use you with such clandestine forethought. No wonder he keeps you caged.”

The last thing I want to do is talk about being caged. A cold sweat breaks out over my back at even hearing the word.

“How do you change the way you look?” I ask, changing the subject. “How the hell does no one realize that the two of you are actually the same damn person?”

As furious as I am with him for deceiving me, I’m even more furious with myself for not realizing the truth. Even with the rotted lines of power that crawled up his face, even with the green eyes and the shadows he was bathed in, I should’ve recognized him. I’ve been with Rip enough that I should have seen through it.

Ravinger has the same strong jaw, the same black hair. Rip is just more *fae* looking. Sharper. It’s no wonder people say that the feared commander has been mutated by King Rot, because Rip looks so *other*. The bones of his face, the tips of his ears, the spikes on his back and arms, all sharp enough to cut glass and so different from anybody else I’ve ever seen.

In his Ravinger form, he looks strange because of those creeping dark roots that sway against his skin like shadows, so much of it hidden beneath the scruff of his jaw. I wonder just how far those lines stretch. I wonder what they *mean*.

Yet even with these deviances, Rip and Ravinger show enough likeness that I should’ve picked up on it. As soon as the king walked into the room, I should’ve sensed who he really was. Green eyes or black, spikes or smooth,

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tipped ears or curved, I should've known.

Both forms are drop-dead gorgeous and otherworldly, and no matter the eye color, he looks at me with the same intensity as always.

"A learned maneuver," he answers simply. "As far as other people, they see what they're told to see, believe what they're told to believe. But I don't have to explain that to you, do I? Midas has been reaping the benefits of that for years," Rip says with apparent disdain. "Why the hell would you let everyone believe that he's the one with gold-touch power, when it's been you all along?"

I nearly roll my eyes at his irritated bafflement.

"Are you kidding? I was *glad* to hide it. The first time gold started to drip down my fingers, I knew I was in trouble. Do you know what people would do to a girl who can turn everything gold?" I shake my head at him, swiping a tired hand across my brow. "No. This world has used me enough."

Used, abused...and that was when I only *looked* gold. I don't even like to think about what would've happened if I hadn't run away when I did. If I'd still been there in Derfort Harbor when my power manifested, things would've become much worse for me, and I *never* would've gotten away. A tremor goes through me at the thought.

The spikes on Rip's back curl like fists, while unreadable expressions move over his face like shadows. "And now? Do you feel like you still need to hide, Auren?"

My golden eyes hold his gaze. "Don't ask me that."

"Why not?" he challenges.

"Because you want me to spill the truth for the

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wrong reasons." There's a sadness seeping through my skin, a disappointment that's settled over my shoulders like a cloak. "You want me to stop hiding so that I ruin Midas."

His silence, his inability to deny it, says everything.

First Midas, now him. I want to run far away from every damn king in Orea and hide where none of them can find me ever again. *How much more can I take?*

It's getting harder and harder to stand here, to look at his face and feel such crushing disappointment stabbing all the way through my heart.

"I want you to leave, Rip," I say again, hoping this time he'll listen.

"I told you, you can call me Slade."

"No, thanks," I reply curtly, enjoying the flash of frustration that goes through his eyes. "But I'll curtsy for you instead, Your Moldering Majesty."

He glowers at me. "Fine. I'll leave. If you tell me one thing."

"What?" I ask impatiently.

Rip leans in so our faces are right in front of each other, so close that I can feel the heat of his body. "Why were you screaming?"

I blink, caught off guard at his question. "I...I wasn't screaming."

The look on his face is wholly unconvinced, and my unprepared stammer didn't help. "Hmm. Maybe I should be the one to retrieve the paper and quill to keep track of the lies between us."

Bastard.

"You're mistaken. You didn't hear me scream," I lie, though my heart is pounding in my chest so hard that I

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hope he doesn't hear it.

In truth, I was like some caged animal, ready to tear down the door with my nails while the guards kept me locked in this room with no way out, but I'm not about to admit that now. Not to him.

Rip arches a condescending brow. "Really? So I imagined you shouting, begging to be let out?"

Shit.

It takes a lot of conscious effort not to reveal anything on my expression, especially with him so close. "Maybe you don't hear as well with that ugly branch crown around your head."

Much to my irritation, he smirks. I hate that the sight makes my stomach leap.

Even though there's barely a foot between us, Rip leans forward, making me suck in a breath. He steals all the air in the room, yanking the pulse in my veins like a dog on a leash.

Nearly chest to chest, he tilts his head down while I tip mine up. We look at each other with too many mixed emotions written in our locked eyes, with no hope of ever translating them.

What are the words in the silent, churning eyes of this male? Why is it that I feel like I'm being crushed from the inside out? He has a power over me that has nothing to do with his aura, and everything to do with the way my gaze strays down to his lips when he sucks in a breath.

He gives me that maddening smirk of his. "Mmm. I like your anger, Goldfinch. If only it weren't always directed at me."

I open my mouth to yell at him, but before I can get

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a word out, he reaches down and takes hold of one of my ribbons, freezing me in place as my heart stutters.

We both look down as he holds it, and when he gently rubs the satiny gold length, I forget how to breathe.

As if it's purring, my ribbon vibrates slightly between the pads of his finger and thumb. A shudder travels through the rest of them, each one going languid in relief as if they can feel it too. Chills scatter over my arms as he continues to stroke, easing it in a way I've never felt before.

I should yank it away. I should back up. I should do anything to put space between us.

But I don't. I don't, and I can't even admit why.

His nearness, his gaze, it makes it too hard to think. I can't function properly with the feel of his exhale against my face, with his barely-there touch.

I need to remember who he is, what he's capable of. I need to keep my guard up now more than ever.

"You should always keep these out," he says quietly, and for some reason, another tear wants to spill out of me.

I don't like these feelings gathering around me. I want to hold onto my anger, to use it to help me push him away. The air between us has grown thicker, like we've passed the first line of trees and moved deeper into the woods. It's so congested with branches and brambles that I can't get through it without being scratched.

It takes effort, but I manage to clear my throat and whisper, "Go, Rip. Please."

His expression shutters, and whatever moment we were just stuck in dissipates. He drops my ribbon, and it immediately sags down, drooping like a flower, a silent sigh of regret bent to the ground.

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When he steps back, I'm both relieved and bereft. I try to feel nothing instead.

Rip opens his mouth like he wants to say something else, but then he goes still, his head cocking as if he hears something.

My hackles immediately rise. "What?"

"Hmm, seems I can't leave just yet."

"And why not?"

His infuriating smirk returns, but it's not like before. This one is...mischievous, and it fills me with dread. "Because your golden king is coming. I think I'll stay and say hello."

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CHAPTER 2

AUREN

My eyes flare wide. *"What?* Midas is coming back?"

Rip arches a brow. "What's wrong, are you distressed at that fact?"

I press my lips together as frustration washes over me. If Midas is nearly here, then I've lost my chance at trying to sneak out.

Although, honestly, that wasn't realistic anyway. I would have to know the ins and outs of this castle really well and be *very* lucky to make it out without Midas finding out. Even if by some stroke of luck, I *did* manage to flee, it would just be a matter of time before he tracked me down. He won't ever let me leave him.

I'm trapped. A saddle knotted in reins.

"You need to leave *now*," I insist.

Much to my aggravation, Rip just looks at me, not moving an inch. "Why?"

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I blink incredulously. “Because if Midas finds you in here...”

“What’s he going to do? Turn me gold?” Rip mocks with a vindictive gleam in his eye. Of course he’s smug, why wouldn’t he be? He holds Midas’s greatest secret in his hands.

Tension wraps around me. “Don’t—”

The smile he gives me is sly. “Excuse me while I slip on my other coat.”

Before I can brace myself, his power lashes out, and nausea strikes my stomach. I slump against the door frame, nearly gagging at the turmoiled magic now clawing through the air.

Rip begins to transform again, and I watch as the sharpness of his features recede. His pointed fae ears soften, his cutting cheekbones smooth out, and his gray scales disappear. The row of short spikes above his brows are gone in a blink, just as quickly as the ones on his arms and back.

As Rip fades and King Ravinger settles in, his entire body quakes. He rolls his muscled shoulders, and dark, insidious lines appear beneath the skin of his neck. They crawl up, reaching his jaw like roots searching for better soil.

I inhale, breathing through the sick feeling in my gut. But before it overwhelms me completely, his power pulls away, taking my nausea with it. Trembling, my body slumps in relief as I stare at him.

His transformation finishes, and when he opens his eyes again, the familiar black gaze is gone. Instead, I see the deep green of a rotten king’s irises.

Look away, I tell myself.

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I need to look away, because every time our gazes meet, my stomach twists and my chest aches, and I feel like I don't know him at all.

My heart is pounding hard again, but I don't know if that's from the effects of his power or if it's because he scares me in this form—*King Ravinger* scares me. Funny how he loses the scales and spikes yet somehow becomes far more terrifying.

I don't like seeing this version of him. No matter how much I try to remind myself that it's only Rip, he feels like a stranger to me. A stranger that I don't dare trust.

My trepidation tips over into fear, and I turn and stumble into Midas's bedroom, needing to put space between us, needing to *flee*.

But I only take a couple steps before I'm tripping over something on the floor. I manage to catch myself before I faceplant, only to realize that the thing I tripped over is a body.

"Great Divine..." My hand flies to my mouth as I look down in horror at the person sprawled at my feet.

The guard's eyes are closed, and his mouth is left gaping. The golden chest plate he's wearing gleams, but beneath it, his skin has gone wilted and gray. A grape picked off the stem and tossed on the ground for the sun to shrivel.

My gaze jumps from him to a second body, another guard in the same condition. And then another, and another, and another.

A strangled sound scrapes out of my throat, and my ears ring with chilling alarm. But I can't look away from the prone corpses, from the dried out eyes staring in

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shock. Can't turn away from the lips that have cracked and peeled, or the cheeks that have sunken in.

This...this is what Ravinger is capable of.

One second, all of these guards were alive, and the next, they're nothing but dehydrated husks.

I feel my chest rising and falling with rapid breaths, but no matter how quickly I seem to be breathing, I'm not getting enough air, because one thought blares through my head.

Would I have done the same thing?

If the sun hadn't gone down and my gold-touch power was still active, if I'd been able to break down that door, would *I* have been the one who'd killed them instead of Ravinger?

I feel tears burn my eyes. Maybe it's my body's only defense, attempting to blur the vision in front of me, though it doesn't work.

What does work though, is when Ravinger steps in front of me, blocking my view. My eyes trail up his body until I meet his gaze. Green eyes skate over my face like steam stroking over fevered water.

"You need to breathe, Auren."

"I *am* breathing," I snap.

"You're panting and going to hyperventilate if you keep it up," he replies calmly. "Have you only ever seen death gilt in your own power?"

I almost laugh bitterly. "I've seen plenty of death."

Old, creased memories tear open one after the other. I met death the night I was stolen from home, and it's been stalking me ever since.

"These men didn't deserve this," I say, dashing a tear away angrily when it falls from my lashes.

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"I disagree. They were holding you against your will."

My eyes flash. "They were just following orders. Doing what they were told." My mind floods with the things *I've* been told to do. "I didn't want—" I hate that my voice breaks off. "*This*."

I'm choked with a guilt that seems to grow in the silence.

"Those golden eyes of yours, so expressive," Ravinger murmurs. "There's hate one second and heart the next."

With his forest-green gaze locked on me, he lifts a hand, and I flinch on instinct. He pauses, face darkening at my reaction. "I won't hurt you, Goldfinch."

My expression tells him he already did.

With a tightening jaw, he turns his hand, as if he's turning an invisible handle. Slowly, the dark lines of his power swivel around the skin of his palm, wrapping around his fingers like creeping vines.

Like a breeze, I feel his power brush over me again. I brace myself for the nauseating impact, but it doesn't come. This time, there is no pulse of putrid wrongness. Magic tugs in the air like a wraith's grasp on an inhale, pulling breath into lungs.

Nothing makes me shudder or gag or keel over. I don't become sick. Instead, energy thrums around us, and the base of each of my ribbons stretches, my back prickling with goose bumps.

Coughing suddenly erupts in the room, and I jump in alarm, whirling around at the noise. "What—" All around me, the sprawled guards are rolling over or sitting up, hacking on dry coughs like sandpaper against their

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throats, gasping in breaths through flaking lips.

My wide eyes snap to Ravinger. "How did you—I thought they were dead!"

He lowers his hand again, the lines gone from his palm. "They would've been had I waited much longer. A rotting body can only be reversed after so long."

I blink, shaking my head while the soldiers get to their feet. They're confused, looking like they just looked Death in the eye and aren't sure how they were able to cross the line back into living.

"You just...you...*wh*y?" I ask breathlessly, because I don't understand him at all.

Ravinger doesn't get a chance to answer me though. The bedroom door is suddenly tossed open, interrupting us.

Midas jerks to a stop in the doorway. His golden tunic and pants glimmer in the low light, somehow making his honey blond hair seem even lighter. The look on his face reveals his surprise as his gaze sweeps the room, his tanned, angular jaw tightening. He takes in the staggering guards still attempting to stand at attention, and then his eyes latch onto me. When he notices Ravinger standing next to me, his expression fills with rage.

"What is the meaning of this? What the *hell* do you think you're doing in my personal rooms?" I barely recognize Midas's voice with the fury currently running through it. He stalks forward and stops beside me, though his brown eyes lock onto the rotten king.

Ravinger doesn't seem bothered by Midas's anger. In fact, he's looking at Midas with bored amusement. It seems he hasn't just transformed his appearance, but in a

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split second, he's taken on another persona as well. Even his gestures look different. Ravinger appears cocky and relaxed, black brows arched with an expression that's somehow both aristocratic and mocking.

The spikes, scales, and glare are all gone. In their place is a derisive turn of his lips and lines vined into his skin, crown cocked on his head. No wonder other people don't suspect one for the other.

"Oh, are these not my guest chambers?" Ravinger replies with false innocence as he looks around the room. "My mistake."

"You damn well know it's not," Midas grits out. "And what the Divine hell did you do to my guards?"

The men are still coughing a little, but at least they managed to stay standing, even if they do look like death rolled over.

"Oh, them? I rotted them a little."

Midas blanches. "You...*you what*?"

I watch the two of them warily, stuck between two unyielding stones.

Ravinger shrugs. "They're fine now. A little food and rest, and they'll be right as rain."

I can feel Midas's anger as surely as I can see it simmering in his brown eyes. "This is an act of war."

Green eyes hook onto Midas, spearing him through. "If this was war, you'd know it," Ravinger says coldly, his disparaging expression replaced by something far crueler. My chest tightens, gaze shooting between them.

Midas seethes silently for a moment, and then his attention shifts to the open door of the cage room—the door that's now gleaming gold. "What is my favored doing out and vulnerable to a foreign king?" he demands

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of the guards.

I don't know how it's possible, since their pallor is already so terrible, but the armored men seem to pale even more. A couple of them steal nervous, quick looks in my direction, and my stomach sinks.

They saw. They saw the door to the cage room turn gold. In my anger, I slammed my palms against it, trying to break out, and I gilded the whole thing for them to witness.

Midas's brow gathers thunder, his eyes darkening as he realizes what they must've seen.

Shit.

"Foreign king?" Ravinger interrupts, seemingly oblivious. "Midas, we signed a treaty only a few hours ago, don't you remember? You and I are allies now," he says with a smirk.

"And yet, here you are, in *my* chambers, using your powers against my guards and standing beside my favored where you have no right to be!" Midas snaps. "You and I both know you didn't think these were your rooms."

Midas doesn't like to be caught off guard. Being the planner that he is, he's meticulous in the way things are supposed to play out. With Ravinger having infiltrated his personal chambers, it's leaving him threatened, like cornered prey.

Midas is dangerous when he feels cornered.

Ravinger looks around the room, noting the bed, the fireplace, the balcony—all of it with bored disinterest. "Perhaps you're wrong. Perhaps I truly did mistake these for my own chambers, and I rotted your guards because I thought you were attempting to ambush me."

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A sound like a growl erupts from Midas's chest.

"Or..." Ravinger goes on. "Perhaps I simply wanted to see how the acting monarch of Fifth Kingdom lives." Green eyes slip over to me. "Interesting how one keeps a king's favored," he muses with a twist of his lips. "What does it say, do you think, about a male who keeps a woman in a cage?"

The breath in my throat catches. I can feel my heart pounding with the tension in the room. It's as thick as ropes, ready to coil around my neck and yank me off my feet.

Ravinger watches Midas, and Midas watches Ravinger.

I watch them both.

Ravinger wants to poke and prod, be a thorn in Midas's back. Midas, however, looks like he wants to pummel Ravinger to the ground.

But...he can't.

Of course, usually *I'm* the only person who knows that. Midas plays his part very, very well. He's had a decade of practice, after all. A sleight of hand here, purposely placing me there, bringing in gilded items after the fact...he knows how to act like he's the one with power.

But Ravinger knows the truth now. Midas is ignorant of that—and I want to keep it that way. Yet maybe that's all about to be ruined, right here and now. Maybe Ravinger is about to call his bluff. Or maybe he'll simply rot Midas where he stands.

My nerves constrict, like a corset pulled too tight.

Midas's guards fidget on their feet. Maybe they feel the threat as easily as I can. The last thing they probably

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want to do is have to go up against Ravinger again. It didn't go so well for them the first time. But as guards, they don't really have much of a choice.

The silence in the room only makes the tension worse, and even my ribbons, as sore as they are, stiffen along my spine, like they expect a fight to break out. If there is a fight, it's one that Midas can't win. You can only get so far with threats.

He must come to the same conclusion as me, because I see it the moment Midas decides to back down. It takes effort, but his features smooth out, his fingers relax, and he forces his expression to go blank with a courtly visage, scrapping all traces of his true emotion.

Midas is no fool. He knows how to study his opponents, and right now, he sees that he doesn't have the upper hand. When you can't play to win with your power, then you play politics instead.

Which is why I'm not surprised when he clears his throat and says, "We are indeed allies, as you say. So I will forgive this *mistake*."

Ravinger tilts his head, mouth playing with a smirk. "Much obliged." His eyes slide to me again, and he tosses a wink in my direction before strolling out of the room.

As soon as the rotten king is gone, my eyes drag over to Midas, but he's busy watching the guards.

"You failed me," he tells them.

The men go tense, and some of them flinch when he strides past them into the hall, speaking words too low for me to hear. As soon as he pulls back in, ten new soldiers file inside, and they immediately grab hold of the guards who were charged with watching me.

The men don't fight as they're hauled away, and I

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know with sinking realization that Midas is going to have them killed for witnessing what I did to the door.

"Don't kill them." The plea sprouts up from my mouth like a reaching plant, though I know it will be fruitless. So many of my requests to Midas are.

"It's done," he replies, eyes pinched. "They sealed their own fate by seeing what they were not allowed to see."

My throat clogs with irrevocable guilt. Not only did I lose control and gild the woman who acted as my stand-in, but now these men are going to die because of my power too. Maybe not by my hand, but the end result is the same.

Like I told Ravinger, I've seen plenty of death.

Maybe the guards would have been better off as rotted heaps on the floor. Who knows what the kinder fate would have been? Which king's retribution would they have preferred?

I swallow hard, but this time, the nausea that rises in my stomach has nothing to do with Ravinger's power. Instead, it has everything to do with my own regret, and the man standing next to me.

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CHAPTER 3

AUREN

With Ravinger gone, the room suddenly feels empty. I hadn't realized just how dominant his presence really was until he left.

I should feel relief that he's gone, but I don't.

My gaze locks onto Midas, bitterness breaking through the planes of my face like cracks in the glass. It's a wonder I'm not openly snarling. My entire body is tense, anticipating what he'll do.

For a moment, he does nothing but look at me. He's no longer wearing his crown or his robe, just a gold tunic and pants tucked into gleaming boots.

Ravinger mentioned that it's been hours since they made their treaty. Which means Midas was off doing who knows what, leaving me in here to pace like a savage animal. Anger simmers alongside the pain in my chest, both emotions bubbling beneath the surface.

I don't know what he sees in my face, but I see

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plenty in his. I'm reading him now, like everything he's ever spoken is a scrawl of lies across his lips. The pages he's taken up in my life are empty of anything real.

A knock at the door interrupts our silent regard. Midas strides over to the room where the cage is and closes the gilded door, shutting away what happened before he calls for whoever it is to enter.

Two maids walk in from the corridor, their golden dresses covering them from head to toe, with matching bonnets tied at the tops of their heads. One carries a pile of clothing, and the other holds a tray of food. They both dip into a curtsy before heading for the washroom.

I hear the clank of pipes and the screech of water.

Midas clears his throat, voice softer. "They'll get your bath ready, and you can clean up and eat."

I pause in surprise. I was expecting him to try and toss me back into the cage room. I was ready for him to berate me with questions about how I got out, about what Ravinger was doing in here, but instead, he holds his hand out like an olive branch.

"I don't want to take a bath," I grit out. What I really mean is, I don't want to take a bath just because he ordered it.

Midas lets out a breath. "Auren, the cage—"

"I will *not* go back into a Divine-damned cage!" I hiss in a vicious whisper. "You can bring in every blacksmith in the kingdom, and I swear to the goddesses above, I will break every single door. You can lock me in that room, set a hundred guards to keep me, but I will—"

I stop abruptly, aware of the two maids in the other room, both of us stealing looks toward the washroom.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I lean in closer

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to him, lowering my voice so that only he can hear. "If you try to shove me in there again, I will fight you every step of the way, and I won't *ever* turn another thing gold for you again."

The vitriol that spews from my mouth flares hotter than any fire. May it burn him as badly as he has burned me.

Midas goes stiff, his tanned face staining with twin spots of red anger on his cheeks. I've shocked him. I can see it in the way he's forgotten to breathe. He's not used to this version of me, this person who isn't bending over backwards and kneeling at his feet.

My chest heaves with the furious passion in my voice. I wouldn't be surprised if my golden eyes started to blaze.

Midas stares at me. I can see him calculating, can practically hear the thoughts spinning around in his head as he tries to think of how to handle me. I know this, because for all those years I was in love with him, I didn't just pine after him. I watched him, too. I *learned* him, as one learns a language.

It was necessary, because of his temper, because I never wanted to get on his bad side or set him off. It's because of my sensitivity to his emotions, because of my many years of studying him, that I know the way his mind works.

His expression softens, his carob pod eyes becoming tender, as if my words have gotten through to him.

Midas lifts a hand, letting the pad of his thumb brush along my jaw. I stiffen and move my head to pull away, but he brings up both palms to hold my cheeks, looking at me with tortured eyes. "I'm so sorry, Precious." His

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breath is at my lips, repentant voice in my ear.

Before, I would've melted at this. I would've leaned forward like a flower bending in his presence. But I don't curl into his touch, and my lips don't lift up in a forgiving smile. My lashes don't flutter closed, and a sigh doesn't pass my lips.

Because...it's too late.

The blindfold has been ripped from my sight. Now, my heart doesn't squeeze. My stomach doesn't flutter. He broke something inside of me far more than just my heart. He broke my will. My drive. My voice. He broke down my very spirit, and I let him.

The burden of love I held for him for so long has scraped off. Peeled away like dried, dead skin flaking in a scorching sun. Colorless, depleted strips that no longer feel a thing. Never again will I be the clay that he molds in his hold. I'm going to shape myself.

"I acted abominably. I was completely out of my head," he says, soft fingers caressing my cheeks as I stare at the gilded buttons on his shirt. "I was just so damned worried about you, and I needed to keep you safe after what happened. I only just got you back, and all this stress with Fourth Kingdom..." Midas trails off, hands dropping away from my face.

I say nothing, too busy seeing past his flowery words and digging into the gritty ground of what he's really doing.

He's changing tactics.

Midas is no fool. He knows that my threats would make his life difficult. After all, he needs me. His entire claim to the throne depends on it. The laws of Orea demand that only those with magic can reign, and Midas

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needs my power to uphold his deceit.

What would people say if he suddenly stopped turning things gold?

He needs me complacent. What better way to get me back under his control than to tug at my heartstrings?

He was always able to convince me to *behave* in the past. To do as he said, trust that he knew better, and let him do whatever the hell he wanted while I wasted away behind gilded bars.

But Midas can't keep me without my compliance, and that's a truth he never wanted me to see. He never wanted me to wake up and realize just how much power I actually have.

While we steep in silence, the sounds of the water cut off in the washroom, and the maids file out a moment later. They bob into a departing curtsy before letting themselves out of the room. Still, I say nothing.

"Come, I'll take care of you, and we can talk, just like you wanted to," he says beseechingly. He plays it so well—the remorse, the heartfelt acknowledgement.

I could fight him. I could spit in his face and tell him I know what he's trying to do. I could turn and run out of the room and try to get out of the castle. Even though those options sound wildly appealing, I hold myself back.

If I want to be free of him, *truly* free, I can't act impulsively. Like Midas, I have to plan. Because he will never let me go. Not ever. So if I'm going to do this, I have to be smart.

"Precious?" he prompts.

I have no allies, no connections. What's to say that, even if I could get out of Ranhold, someone else wouldn't capture me and use me for their benefit? No, I'm done

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being a prisoner. I'm done being owned.

I have to plan and do things right, flee where Midas can't get to me ever again. I have to become strong so that I can protect myself against the world that would use me.

So...I nod. It's time for me to play the game.

"Alright."

Midas's expression smooths in relief, the lines of worry around his eyes changing into the crinkling of a smile. How satisfied he must be, to think he's so easily hooked me again.

What a pushover I was.

He leads me into the bathroom, past a silver-framed mirror and the toilet, right over to a large iron tub at the back wall. It has clawed feet and a painted rim, with glass-covered stone carved into the shape of a lion, its mouth gaping in a roar that spews water instead of sound.

"Let's get the filth of Fourth's army off you," Midas says as I stop in front of the tub. It's already filled with steaming water, a thin layer of bubbles waiting along the surface like drifting lily pads.

"Did King Rot hurt you?" he asks, keeping his tone carefully even.

Yes. But not in the way you think.

"No. He only just walked in before you came."

Midas seems to be placated by that. "I don't like that ugly bastard being in the same room as you."

I blink in surprise. *Ugly?*

His power is ugly, sure, but the male himself? No. Far from it. Ravinger is achingly beautiful in the same way as when he's in his Rip form. There's an ethereal masculinity that doesn't quite fit in this world. Of course, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at Midas's evaluation

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of him. Midas abhors anything less than perfect. He probably looks at Ravinger and sees those strange marks of power that slither just under his skin, and he thinks that makes Ravinger grotesque.

Choosing not to reply, I turn away slightly while Midas busies himself with the tray of food that's been left on a stool beside the tub. Slowly, I begin to strip out of my clothes. Each piece is overworn, dirty, wrinkled. They feel heavy as I drop them into a heap on the floor.

For a moment, I just stare at them. So much happened in those clothes. I wasn't the same person before I wore them. It's like stripping off the armor that I'd worn during battle. The Red Raids, Sail, Captain Fane, Rip, Midas...all of it happened in that dress.

I don't know if Midas's eyes are on me, and I don't care. He's seen my naked body many times. I'm far more protective of what lies beneath my skin. What's inside of me—my mind, my heart, my spirit—those are the things I want to keep from his sight.

Taking a breath, I leave behind the pile of clothes and step into the tub. Sitting down, I'm immediately wrapped in warmth that seems to sink all the way into my cold-pressed bones. My ribbons slither to the bottom, their tired lengths soaking up this simple comfort.

I groan as I lean my head back against the curved rim, relishing in the heat. After weeks and weeks of nothing but rag baths in the snow, this is *heavenly*. I won't even let Midas's presence ruin it.

Eyes fluttering closed, I breathe in the scent of the floral oils the maids must've mixed in. But I flinch and spring them open again when Midas's hands suddenly begin to stroke my hair from behind. "Shh, it's alright,

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Precious. I'm going to make it all up to you."

"The only way you can make it up to me is by not trying to lock me away ever again," I tell him evenly, focusing on the bubbles as they float on the surface of the water.

I might need to play along, to act like I'm once more ensnared by his charm, but I won't go back to being a captive.

Midas hesitates for a moment, hands paused at my hair. "Of course," he says after a stunted breath. "Of course. The cage was only ever there for your protection. But if you don't need it anymore, then I'll keep you safe without it."

He backtracks beautifully.

I let a small smile play on my lips and turn to look at him over my shoulder. His handsome face is the epitome of adoration, but his shoulders are stiff, betraying the burden of his lingering anger. "Truly?"

"Yes," he replies vehemently, grasping onto my tentative hope as he reaches down to cup my face, as tendrils of blond hair fall across his forehead. "I'm so sorry for the way I behaved earlier, Precious. Forgive me."

"You hurt me," I say, and this time, I'm speaking true.

He leans down from where he's perched on the stool beside the tub and presses his cheek against my forehead. His skin is cold, while mine is dewy with the steam of the bath whispering between us. "I'll make it up to you. I'll earn your trust and forgiveness again."

"You said you didn't need my forgiveness," I remind him with a bite in my tone.

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Midas winces before he reaches over and picks up a silver pitcher from the floor. He dunks it in the water and begins to wet my hair.

"I wasn't thinking straight." He rolls up his sleeves and drags the tray of food closer to me. Then he begins to lather soap in his hands and starts washing my oily, tangled strands. "I don't expect you to forgive me right away, but I only acted that way because I was worried about you."

I believe that Midas does care for me, in his own twisted way. But it's not healthy, and it's not enough. It's not what I deserve. I don't think I'll ever have the kind of love that I crave.

That thought makes my eyes blur as I stare at the ceiling, gaze locked onto the frosted window at the top of the wall. Grief clings to me as much as the beaded water against my skin.

As sadness overtakes my anger, I wonder what's wrong with me. Why couldn't he love me? *Truly* love me?

Midas loves my shimmering skin, my gleaming hair. He is undoubtedly in love with my *power*. I gave him my heart, and I was too young, too stupid to see that his adoration was for my gold, not *me*.

I must be defective in some way. Unworthy.

Or maybe this is simply what I'm destined for. Maybe this is all I'm allowed to have. The woman who can turn the world gold has to have a check on her own greed.

Perhaps love is the price of my power.

My thoughts droop down like a weight depressing at the edge of a petaled conscience. Midas continues to wash my hair, keeping up conversation in a steady cadence. He

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talks of how much he missed me, of the things he's been doing in Fifth Kingdom since we've been separated, of how much work we have to do now that we're together again.

I let him speak and he lets me stay quiet, using the food as my excuse not to talk. I eat everything on the tray without tasting it, too busy chewing my own quiet contemplation. I can't help but think about the last time he did this, took care of me, bathed me, right after the attack with King Fulke.

Automatically, my hand lifts to my throat, fingers stroking over the small scar that still resides there. It wasn't Midas who saved me that night, not really. It was Digby, and I lost him too.

Somehow, in some way, everyone I've ever loved has been taken from me. Even Midas, and he's sitting just inches away.

After I've scrubbed, rinsed, and polished off the last of the food, I get out of the tub and pull on a fresh night dress. It's thick white cotton, the hem reaching my toes, the sleeves wide and ending at points past my fingers. My ribbons wring themselves out before hanging loose in lazy strips against my back.

"There," Midas murmurs, looking me over from head to toe. "You're shiny and new again."

I offer him a tight smile. My body is as tired as my spirit, and all I want to do now is get away from him. "I need to sleep."

He quickly nods. "I've had the maids make up a room right across the hall," he says. "You can stay there. Have your own...space."

Wary surprise has me turning to face him. "My own

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room? *Without* bars?"

He tucks a damp strand of hair behind my ear. "No bars. Just your own room where you can relax and be safe," he says quietly. "I meant what I said. I was wrong, and I'll make it up to you, Auren. Now, come. You must be tired."

I let Midas take my hand, and he leads me out of his rooms and into the hall. Nodding to some guards, he opens the door across from his. I step inside with him and look around the dark room, though all I can see by the weak moonlight is a pillowy bed.

Letting go of me, Midas walks to the wall and closes the curtains, while I go lie down. I barely have the energy to pull back the covers before I slip onto the feathery mattress.

I stiffen when I feel the bed dip as Midas lies down beside me. He wastes no time pulling me in and arranging me so that my head rests on his chest. I'm like a block of ice against him, refusing to melt, wanting to slide away.

"Relax, Auren," he commands. "Rest now. I'll stay until you fall asleep."

A snort nearly escapes me. That's about as comforting as being told there's a monster under your bed, only, this one is lying down on it with me.

But my tiredness wins against stubbornness.

Inch by inch, I do settle in his hold. Yet when he starts to run a soft caress over my arm, I press my lips closed tight. Hate and sadness sweep through me, but I try to stave off the emotions that try to swell inside of me like a bloated cloud.

Numb. I need to stay numb. Unfeeling, uncaring, behind a thick wall where he can't affect me ever again.

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"You're my precious girl." It's a murmur in the dark, a coax slipping through his shadowed lips.

I hate that he's so good at this. I don't want him to hold me, and yet, it was all I ever wanted for so damn long, and he knows it. Which is why a slow, cold tear drips down my cheek and lands on his tunic as he pets my hair.

"I love you, Auren."

Liar.

What a fake, conniving, devious liar.

"I missed this," he says through a yawn. Maybe that part is at least true for him, or maybe it's just another deceit to pull me in.

Either way, I give myself this moment. Just this one. For the innocent girl who lost the love she thought she had, I let her have this. Because this...this is her quiet goodbye.

Beneath my anger and the numbness are the bruised pieces of a broken heart. And that part of me, that girl who was doe-eyed and head over heels, she's in mourning beneath my bitter anger.

So for that part of me, I let out a shaky breath that vibrates like thunder. Then I press my ear against his chest one last time to hear a song that I thought played just for me.

I focus on the steady beat, and another tear falls with its rhythm as he strokes my hair, because it's not love I'm listening to. It's just possessive control. It's so loud, I can't believe I didn't hear it before.

"You're right back where you belong," he declares.

I close my eyes, wet lashes like drops of dew against my cheek.

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If we shifted, if it were his head pressed against my chest, would he hear? Would he hear the sound of my heart and know what it means? Would he recognize the lyrical loathing?

I fall asleep listening to the constant thrum of our chests, to the two mismatched tunes that will never play in harmony. I let that girl in me break away beat by beat, saying goodbye in her own silent way.

When I wake up, I'll make sure my heart is hardened. Come morning, I'll make sure it only plays a song for *me*.

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CHAPTER 4

KING MIDAS

Sitting inside the iron gazebo, I'm pensive as I absently watch the men working throughout the courtyard. I find the cold air of Fifth Kingdom refreshing, the perfect sharpness to give one clarity.

The bench beneath me is cushioned with straw-stuffed leather that was probably comfortable at one point but has long since gone flat.

Set at my side, my ledger book is like a pair of eyes glaring at me. Inside are all my notes, all my plans, things needing to be done. It's written in code I only use for myself, even though I always keep it with me. You can't trust people, so one can never be too careful, and I have too much at stake.

The demands of running not just one kingdom but two weighs heavily on my shoulders. All the things I must do have become an incessant pressure that buzzes in my head during all my waking hours.

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Now that Auren is back with me, I can focus more ardently on Ranhold. It needs the attention.

I've put off the grumblings easily enough, but I know it won't last. I brought enough gold with me for the transition, but people are growing restless. There are mutterings in the halls. They wonder why the Golden King hasn't turned anything gold yet. My excuse for respecting Ranhold and allowing time for mourning is nearly dried out, and my cache of coin right along with it.

I need Auren to get back to work. Yet I know I must handle her as delicately as I handle the politics here. I have dozens of strings that I'm tying simultaneously, all of which take concentration and finesse.

Which is why I keep coming out here to the gazebo, where the air stings just enough to collar my focus.

At the steady sound of a tapping hammer, my eyes skim over the sculptures outside. The courtyard is filled with them. Standing on stone pedestals every few feet, the blocks of ice are carved into elaborate likenesses.

From my vantage point, I can see one made into a willow tree, on another, a timberwing with its maw open in a fierce cry. Beside it, there's a sensual goddess with her arms outstretched toward the sky, a dress draped over hourglass curves. Each and every sculpture is incredibly detailed, some of them so tall that the artists need ladders to work on them.

With chisels, hammers, and buffing rags, the men painstakingly ensure that every piece is kept in pristine condition. The sculptors are always working, whether it be to create more carvings or to preserve what they've already made.

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I can tell that they're uneasy being watched by me, but they keep their gazes pointedly away, working without pause. I'm just about to pick up my ledger again when a new worker comes out, purple uniform matching the others.

My eyes lock on him immediately, and for a moment, I have to blink to separate what I'm seeing from what I once saw.

With an artisan tool bag belted around his waist, he walks over to the sculpture of a sword standing on its point and begins to polish it with a rag, dusting off collected snow.

He's bald, and four prominent wrinkles run along the top of his head like a tiger's stripes. He has the gruff jaw of a man who could hide a sneering mouth behind his full white beard, though I'm too far away to see if it's true or not.

As he looks his piece over, he rummages in his tool belt before pulling out a pair of spectacles and propping them on his nose. Sharp air hisses through my teeth at the sight.

He looks like my father.

It's not him of course. Not unless he made a deal with the gods to be raised from the dead. But the beard, the bald head, the tanned skin, those Divine-damned *spectacles*, even the knuckled grip on his hammer, it's all very reminiscent of the one who sired me.

Silenus Midas.

Sile to everyone, father to me, though *father* is a term used *very* loosely. He was nothing but a village drunk who sometimes managed to stumble out of the house to do carpentry work in town.

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As for me, I was just the bastard son he loathed. He hated that he had to sacrifice some of his money on food and clothes for me, when he'd rather spend it on ale.

I'm not sure if hate was in my own nature or if he nurtured it, but it was something we had in common for each other. I never knew my mother, but I loathed her too.

Apparently, she was flighty. A loose woman who went too far into the cups in a pub one night and ended up in Sile's bed, breeding me nine months later.

As soon as I was born, she dumped me on his doorstep with a jug of wine and six gold coins, and never looked back. Sile either couldn't track her down or didn't bother to.

I'm not sure what I detested most about him. His laziness, his drunkenness, or his tendency to beat the hell out of me.

Actually, maybe what I hated most was that he was such a joke to the village people. Everywhere he went, he was followed by sneers or mockery or pity.

They bestowed that same treatment onto me as well. I was nothing. Just the bastard son of a bastard drunk, too poor to rub two coppers together, and I was never going to escape that sorry excuse for a life.

Which is why the moment I became a legal Orean adult, I stole a jug of wine—in a mocking tribute of my mother—and left it for him on his soiled bed in our tiny, broken down cabin.

It didn't take long for him to drink himself into a blacked-out stupor. Took even less for me to spark the flint and set fire to the derelict shack of a house. It was always dry in First Kingdom.

"Sire?"

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