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ONE

"You'll never beat me. You'll never win this one, Ever. It's impossible. You can't do it. So why waste your time?"

I narrow my gaze and peer into her face—taking in her small, pale features, her dark cloud of hair, the absence of light in her hate-filled gaze.

My teeth clenched tightly, voice low and measured, I say, "Don't be so sure. You're running a serious risk of overestimating yourself. In fact, you *are* overestimating yourself. I'm one hundred percent sure of it."

She scoffs. Loudly, derisively, the sound of it echoing throughout the large empty room, bouncing off the plank wood floors to the bare white walls, meant to scare, or at the very least intimidate and throw me off my game.

But it won't work.

Can't work.

I'm too focused for that.

All of my energy concentrated down to one single point, until everything else fades away and it's just me, my readied

fist, and Haven's third chakra—also known as the solar plexus chakra—the home of anger, fear, hate, and the tendency toward putting too much emphasis on power, recognition, and revenge.

My gaze narrowed on its location like a bull's-eye, right smack dab in the center of her leather-clad torso.

Knowing that one quick, well-directed jab is all it'll take to reduce her to nothing more than a sad bit of history.

A cautionary tale of power gone wrong.

Gone.

In an instant.

Leaving nothing behind but a pair of black stiletto boots and a small pile of dust—the only real reminder that she was ever here.

Even though I never wanted it to get to this point, even though I tried to work it out, tried to reason with her, to convince her to come to her senses so we could move toward some kind of understanding—cut some kind of deal—in the end, she refused to give up.

Refused to give in.

Refused to let go of her misguided quest for revenge.

Leaving me with no choice but to kill or be killed.

Leaving me with no doubt of how this one ends.

"You're too weak." She circles. Moving slowly, carefully, her gaze never once leaving mine. The stiletto heels of her boots assaulting the floor as she says, "You're no match for me. Never were, never will be." She stops and places her hands on her hips, head cocked to the side, allowing a stream of glossy dark waves to fall over her shoulder and hang well past her waist. "You could've let me die months ago. You already had your chance. But you chose to give me the elixir instead. And now you regret it? Because you don't approve of what I've become?" She pauses long enough to roll her eyes. "Well, too bad. You have only yourself to blame. You're the one who made me this way. I mean, what kind of creator kills her own creation, anyway?"

"I may have made you an immortal, but you took it from there," I say, the words firm, deliberate, ground out between clenched teeth, despite Damen having coached me to stay quiet, stay focused, to make it swift and clean, and not unnecessarily engage her in any way.

Save your regrets for later, he said.

But the fact that we've found ourselves here means there is no *later* where Haven's concerned. And despite what it's come to, I'm still determined to get to her, to reach her, before it's too late.

"We don't have to do this." My gaze locks on hers, hoping to convince. "We can stop right here, right now. This doesn't have to go any further than it already has."

"Ha, you wish!" she sings, gleefully mocking. "I can see it in your eyes. You *can't* do it. No matter how much you think I deserve it, no matter how much you try to convince yourself of that, you're too soft. So what makes you think it'll be any different this time around?"

Because now you're dangerous—and not just to yourself, but to everyone else as well. This time is different, entirely different. As you're about to see . . .

Curling my fingers so tightly my knuckles instantly blanch, I steal a second to center myself, find my balance, and replenish my light—just as Ava taught me to do—while keeping my

hand low and steady, my gaze fixed on hers, my mind cleared of all extraneous thoughts, face cleared of all extraneous feelings—as Damen recently coached.

The key is to give nothing away, he claimed, *to move quickly, with purpose. To get the deed done before she has the chance to ever see it coming—won't even realize what hit her 'til it's way past too late.*

Until her body has disintegrated and her soul's moved on to that bleak, dreary place.

Refusing her even the slightest opportunity to make a move or fight back.

A lesson learned on a long-ago battlefield that I never thought would apply to my life.

But even though Damen warned me against it, I can't keep from apologizing. Can't stop the words *forgive me* from coursing from my mind to hers. Seeing her respond in the flash of pity that tempers her gaze before it's quickly diminished by the usual mix of hate and disdain.

Her fist rising—aiming for me—but it's too late. Mine's already in motion, moving forward, in full swing. Slamming right into her solar plexus, sending her reeling—spinning—shattering—headed straight into the infinite abyss.

The Shadowland.

The eternal home for lost souls.

Aware of my own sudden intake of breath as I watch how quickly she disintegrates. Fragmenting so easily it's hard to imagine she was ever once solid form.

My gut churning, heart crashing, mouth so dry and parched no words will come. My body reacting as though what just happened before me—the act I just committed—wasn't just a game of make-believe, but the horrifying real deal.

"You did well. You were right on target, right on your mark," Damen says, crossing the room in a fraction of an instant, his warm, strong arms sliding around me as he pulls me close to his chest. His voice lilting softly in my ear as he adds, "Though you seriously might want to lose the *forgive me* part until after she's gone. Trust me, I know you feel bad, Ever, and I can't say I blame you, but it's like we've discussed, in a case like this, it's either *you* or *her.* Only one can survive. And if you don't mind, I prefer it to be *you*." He runs the tip of his finger down the length of my cheek, tucking a stray chunk of long blond hair behind my ear, before he adds, "You can't afford to give her any sign of what's to come. So please, save the apology for after, okay?"

I nod and pull away, still fighting to steady my breath. Glancing over my shoulder at the pile of black leather and lace on the floor. All that remains of the Haven I manifested, before I blink it away and erase every trace.

Stretching my neck from side to side, and shaking out each of my limbs in a move that could either be taken as letting off steam or preparing for more, Damen choosing to interpret it as the latter when he smiles and says, "So, another go then?"

But I just look at him and shake my head. I'm done for the day. Done with pretending to kill off the ghostly, soulless form of a former best friend.

It's our last day of summer, our last day of freedom, and there are much better ways for us to spend it.

Taking in the sweep of longish, wavy dark hair that spills across his forehead and falls into those amazing brown eyes, before drifting over the bridge of his nose, the angle of his cheekbones, to the swell of his lips, where I pause

long enough to remember how wonderful they feel against mine.

"Let's go to the pavilion," I say, my eyes eagerly searching his before moving on to his simple black tee, the silk cord bearing the cluster of crystals that hides underneath, all the way down to his faded denim jeans and the brown, rubber flip-flops on his feet. "Let's go have *fun*," I reiterate, taking a moment to close my eyes and manifest a whole new costume change for myself. Swapping out the T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers I wore to train in, for a replica of one of the more beautiful, low-cut, corseted gowns I sometimes wore in my Parisian life.

And all it takes is one look at his clouded gaze to tell me it's as good as done. The lure of the pavilion is pretty much impossible to resist.

It's the only place where we can truly touch without the interference of the energy shield—where our skin can meet, and our DNA mingle, without any imminent danger to Damen's soul.

The only place where we can disappear into another world that holds none of the dangers of the one that we live in.

And even though I no longer resent the limitations of our life here, no longer pay it much notice now that I know it's a direct result of my making the *right* choice, the *only* choice, that my choosing to make Damen drink Roman's elixir is the only reason he's still with me today—the only thing that saved him from an eternity in the Shadowland—I'm happy to accept his touch in any form that it comes.

But still, now that I know there's a place where it gets so much better than this, I'm determined to get there, and now would be good.

"But what about practice? School starts tomorrow and I don't want you to get caught off guard," he says, obviously struggling to do what's noble and right even though it's clear that our trip to the pavilion is as good as done. "We have no idea what she's planned, so we have to prepare for the worst. Besides, we haven't even gotten to the Tai Chi yet, and I think we really need to. You'll be amazed at the way it helps to balance out your energy—recharging it in a way that—"

"You know what else is good at *recharging* my energy?" I smile, allowing him no time to answer before my lips meet his, willing him to just say the word so we can go to a place where I can kiss him for real.

The warmth of his gaze upon mine, filling me with a glorious swarm of the tingle and heat only he can provide. Pulling away as he says, "Fine. You win. But then you always do, don't you?" He smiles, his gaze happily dancing with mine.

Grabbing hold of my hand and closing his eyes, as the two of us step through a shimmering veil of soft golden light.