



We know
books

Fearless

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Prologue

There are very few reasons for a meeting between two cloaked figures in the dead of night.

Unsurprisingly, the list is as short as it is unseemly.

For some, it is love. For most, it is lust.

Lust for money. Lust for purpose. Lust for revenge.

But in some cases, it is love that first spurs these lusts. Or rather, the loss of it.

Though these odd contradictories are rare, they are consistently tragic.



A man leans against the wall, his stoic expression swallowed beneath the gaping hood.

It's been several minutes now, though the sudden wave of impatience seems to sneak up on him. Every wary glance begins to weigh heavily atop his cloaked shoulders. Because buried deep beneath that hood is a mind that screams at him to go through with this, persistently drowning out a much gentler, coaxing voice that tells him to walk away, a voice that makes him ache. Still, he leans heavier against the wall, as if to anchor himself to this moment, this



decision, before inevitably sinking with the consequences of it.

Moonlight slips between the slivers of crumbling stone surrounding the alleyway. It makes him uneasy for some unexplainable reason, as though the pale fingers are clawing their way towards him.

Yes, he much prefers the sun to its eerie opposite.

The cloaked figure straightens suddenly at the sight of a shadow slinking closer. It stops before him, morphing into something far more tangible, mortal. They stand, assumably, eye to eye, though their hoods shroud any hint of an identifying feature.

‘Do you know what you have to do?’

This second shadowy figure speaks like gold, rich and soft. He has the practiced ability to spin words into something far prettier than the meaning behind them.

‘To an extent,’ returns the first man. His worn boots shift atop the crooked cobblestones, mind still screaming over that soft voice telling him to run away from this damning decision.

‘Very good.’ The second shadow shoves a hand into his pocket. ‘I’m trusting you won’t disappoint.’

‘I can’t make any promises.’

Pulling the hand from his cloak, the man presents a hefty coin purse to the cool air. ‘This should be enough to ensure you make this worth everyone’s while.’

The first man reaches for the pouch, swallowing at the sheer weight of silvers within. ‘Yes, this should do.’

‘Now—’ the figure lowers his voice, ‘—it needs to look real, understand? Make *me* believe you.’

The first man’s voice is low. ‘I will.’

The battle within his mind roars louder still. But he has learned to ignore the constant din of chaos, just as he does now. Because nothing can save him from this fate. Not even that persuasive, gentle voice.

With a curt nod of his hooded head, the stranger begins that silent slip into a swarm of shadows.

‘Why do you want this?’

Curiosity has the conflicted figure blurting the question. Awaiting an answer, he clutches the pouch against his chest, treasuring the feel of tangible security.

The shadows, shifty as ever and eager to eavesdrop, seem to lean in.

A soft string of words over a shoulder is all the man offers. 'Every brutal act is born of love.'

That understanding alone draws together even the most unlikely of allies. Even hooded and shrouded in shadows, these two strangers have never felt so seen.



CHAPTER 1

Paedyn

A drop of blood splatters onto the floor, marring the pristine marble beneath my shaking legs.

I stare at the scarlet splotch, ears ringing and vision blurring.

Honey. It's just honey.

Rivers of red twine down my leg, their currents swift enough to have me rocking on my heels. Or maybe it's the slow realization of my fate that has this throne room spinning like the band of steel that chokes my thumb. I blink at the shiny floor, staring at the shell of a girl reflected up at me. Her face is streaked with dirt, eyes haunted by a future she hasn't yet seen and never thought she would. Silver hair dusts her shoulders, as pale as the sweaty face it sticks to. She sways, like one might on the shoes of a loved one. Hands are cuffed behind her back, blood leaking from tattered skin.

She is shambles. She is haunted.

She is to be a bride.

But that can't be true. I took his everything from him. And he is going to kill me for it. He has to.

My chest is suddenly too tight, breath catching in my throat beside the flood of words I'm swallowing back. Because death is the fate



I've been preparing for my whole life – the destiny I deserve. I feel it on the stained fingertips that will forever drip with the blood of others, in the O carved atop my sputtering heart to brand me a weakness.

Death is the only constant in my life, like an old friend who hones every one of my dark secrets into a weapon. He calls me weak and all I hear is Ordinary. He calls me doomed and all I hear is an earnest promise. His is the hand my bloody fingers reach for because there is comfort in his imminence.

Now there is nothing but the ringing in my ears and this deafening quiet of the unknown.

'Paedyn.'

I stiffen at the same moment the looming figures around me do. He might as well have called me a traitor. A murderer. An Ordinary weakening our Elite kingdom. Because those are the only names this court knows me by. The only names the entirety of Ilya spit as I was paraded to their king. Simply, they sum up the insignificance of my short existence.

My eyes slowly climb from the pattern my blood has painted atop the floor.

Honey. It's only honey.

Polished shoes crowd my vision, their black shine bleeding into equally dark pant legs. My gaze slides up the slim-fitting stretch of fabric and every seam concealing the strong body beneath. Urging my perusal upward, my eyes collide with his belt buckle before skipping to the box resting innocently in his raised palm. I know what sits within that velvet case, can see it glinting out of the corner of my eye. And yet, I don't spare it a glance, as if that could stop the sparkling shackle from inevitably slipping onto my finger.

Higher still is his wrinkled shirt. I trail every button until my gaze settles at the base of his throat and the collar encircling it. I have yet to look him fully in the face since my sentence rolled off his tongue.

'You are to be my bride.'

It's as though I've been thrown back to the Trials and the equally challenging game of pretend that accompanied them. I couldn't bear to look at him then, not unless I wished to see the king staring back.

But I killed the man I once saw reflected in his son's green gaze. Edric Azer haunts me only in the fragments of my mind and the matching, broken heart he carved into. I made sure of that.

And yet, I still cannot bring myself to look at this Kitt.

My throat burns.

I may have created something far worse than his father.

'Paedyn.' His voice is startlingly soft, reminding me of a time when that wouldn't have been shocking. 'Look at me.'

This isn't the first time he's said those words in response to my pointed avoidance of his gaze. But there is now so much more keeping my eyes from his, a past far more ruinous than the resemblance to a king who had my father killed. There is betrayal. There is hurt. And history is not easily forgotten by the kings who write it.

But that hint of familiarity in his voice has my chin lifting, my eyes gliding from that crumpled collar to crash into his.

Green. Just as they were, and just as they always will be. He looks at me, and I look at him. A criminal without a father, and a son forever trying to please his. Just as we were, and just as we always will be.

And for the first time since that battle in the Bowl, we truly see each other.

His lips twitch into something too sinister for a smile, too soft for a scowl. As though he wears formidability itself. 'The future queen of Ilya bows her head to no one.'

My mouth dries at his words while the entire court leans in to hear them. Their disbelief is palpable, mingling with the collective cloud of confusion that hangs thickly over our heads. Dozens of eyes prickle my skin, tracing the scar down my neck and the blood staining my skin. They take in this new version of the Silver Savior, the one who cut off the very thing that gave her the title. My short hair does little to conceal the brokenness I now bear so blatantly on my body.

The court gawks at what it is they glean from my appearance. I am a Psychic who is nothing of the sort. An Ordinary who somehow survived their Purgings Trials, committed treason, killed their king, and is still standing here before them, alive against all odds.

That is when I hear Death's whisper echoing from the darkest corner of my mind. The part of me that had accepted my imminent doom the moment I learned what it meant to be powerless in this kingdom. Now he calls me queen, and all I hear is laughter.

Because this fate may prove to be worse than Death himself.

'Uncuff her,' the king commands casually.

My breath catches at the brush of calluses against my skin.

Kai.

My head whips around, unable to stop myself. Unable to focus on anything but the burning need to look at him.

But it's not his gray gaze I crash into. No, this one is brown, murky with blatant hatred. These are not the eyes I search for in every crowd. Not the eyes that rake over me with a reverence I revel in. Not the eyes that have counted every freckle dotting my nose, every shiver of my body.

My breath grows shaky before the Imperial who had carelessly cut that cuff from my ankle in the poppy field. He is to blame for every drop of my tainted blood marring this marble floor. His movements are as rough as the hands that carelessly yank at the chain encircling my wrists, further tearing the skin beneath.

Tears prick my eyes, and I blink, forcing them back. I shake my head slightly in defiance to the growing weakness within me and bite the quivering lip that portrays it. My gaze scans the room, body shuddering in pain as I search for him. I'm frantic, eyes fumbling over unfamiliar faces.

Damn the pretending. Damn the hiding. Damn everything but him and us and this moment where I *need* him.

But he's nowhere to be found. And for the first time since stealing those silvers from him on Loot Alley, I feel utterly alone.

The lock clicks. The cuffs spring open.

They fall to the floor, clanking against stone and smearing blood. The sound rings through the ornate throne room, sounding of finality. Of freedom that comes at a price.

'Much better.'

I tear my eyes from the gaping crowd to find the king smiling pleasantly. Rubbing my raw wrists, I watch as Kitt extends the hand

not currently cupped around that little black box I'm avoiding. I blink at his palm, his gesture of goodwill. This single touch separates a traitor from a future queen.

When my gaze flicks up to the king, he offers a single reassuring nod. But the look he wears is laced with a reminder – I have no say in any of this.

So, when my dirt-streaked hand meets his ink-stained one, I let him pull me closer.

I wonder if he can hardly bear to hold the hand that drove a sword through his beloved father's chest, let alone slip a ring onto the finger that once dripped with his blood. As if in response to my racing thoughts, he gives me a gentle squeeze. The action is meant to comfort, though it alarms me far more than any threat.

'We Ilyans believe to have conquered the Plague many decades ago.' Kitt's voice carries across the throne room, deliberate and domineering in that familiar way I know he learned from his father. 'Yes, our powers are a gift from the Plague, but they are also a spit in its face. Because it is Elites who came out stronger on the other side of a sickness meant to kill us. Elites who protected our weak kingdom from conquerors. Elites who showcase their strength in the Purging Trials.'

Murmurs of agreement flutter throughout the room, followed by a wave of prideful nods. I bite my tongue, anger rising until it stains my cheeks with a flush. I am nothing more than their Ordinary entertainment, their example of weakness. I've been put on a pedestal to be poked and prodded, degraded and shamed.

'But Elites weren't the only ones who survived the Plague, were we?'

His question has the rage cooling on my tongue, leaving my mouth dry. Time seems to slow as I turn my face to him and hang on every unspoken implication.

'No, there were also the Ordinaries,' he continues evenly. 'The Ilyans who managed to stay alive, and yet, did not obtain abilities. And after years of coexistence with the Elites, they were banished and continually hunted for their lack of power.'

My palm grows sweaty against his. My whole body stills, though

I'm unsure if it is my sentence or saving grace I'm waiting for.

The king – the Kitt I once knew – sweeps that green gaze over his court. Blond hair peeks between the swirling strands of his gilded crown, glowing like a halo atop his head. When he speaks, it is deliberate. It is calm. It is practiced. 'And if we wish for our great kingdom to remain, we will welcome Ordinaries back into it.'

My knees threaten to buckle, but Kitt holds me upright. It's as though he suspected as much and grabbed my hand, if only to keep me from collapsing at his words. Faces blur around me; mouths move; hands rise in protest. But I hear nothing, see nothing, know nothing but this moment and the hope for every one after.

Kitt's mouth is moving again, cutting through the roaring crowd and my ringing ears. 'I will address all your concerns in due time. But, for your peace of mind, I will elaborate quickly. Since sitting on my father's throne, I have come to realize the dire state Ilya is slipping towards. I've learned more about our kingdom in these past few weeks than I ever had before.' Inclining his head to a figure in the crowd, he continues, 'Calum was once a prisoner of mine. Once a Resistance leader who I thought was a radical.'

My heart stutters, my eyes searching until—

There he stands, swallowed within the crowd. It was his pale blond hair I found first, followed by those watchful blue eyes. Feeling my gaze, Calum offers me a slow nod. I press my lips together, fighting the radiant smile I ache to give him. Instead, I spell out the gratitude in my mind, knowing he's likely reading the whirlwind of thoughts within.

Kitt pushes on, smothering the murmurs rippling through the throne room. 'But the more I questioned him for his treasonous acts, the more he taught me about my own kingdom. Our resources run dangerously low, due to several decades of isolation. There is not enough room within our borders to hold the growing numbers of those in the slums, and records show that our food supply has dwindled alarmingly over the years.'

Ilya's impending doom slides calmly off the king's tongue, as if he's spent every second since I escaped staring at the list of failures his father left him to deal with. My mind flashes back to that moment

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