


LBRIS

We know
books

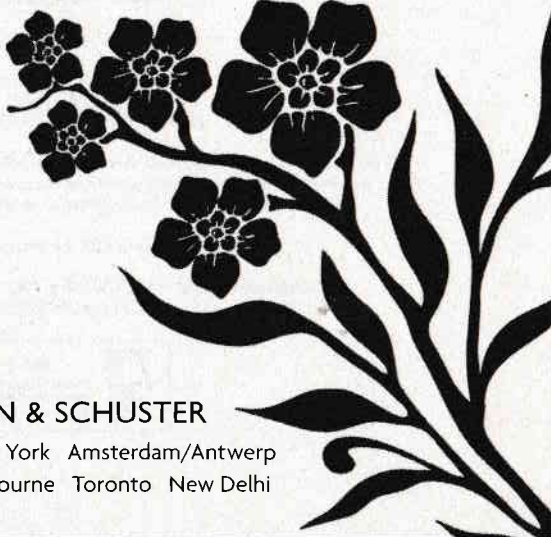
ALSO BY LAUREN ROBERTS

Powerless
Powerful: A Powerless Story
Reckless
Fearful



Fearless

LAUREN ROBERTS



SIMON & SCHUSTER

London New York Amsterdam/Antwerp
Sydney/Melbourne Toronto New Delhi



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 in the Scorches, when I had spat the truth of this kingdom's fragility at Kai's

feet. My whole life has been spent in the slums, crowded and hungry. It's no shock that the records reflect a scarcity I know firsthand.

'Dor and Tando will not trade their livestock, crops, or knowledge of adapting to the Scorches.' Kitt flicks his gaze over the stunned crowd. 'We cannot expand, nor can we eat, without them. Izram's water, the Shallows, has grown far more treacherous over the years. Even the fish within it shy away from our shore.' His voice grows solemn while I hang on every word. 'If we do not open up our borders, and allow Ordinaries to live among us once again, this Elite kingdom will fall.'

There is a swelling of shouts before the king silences them with reason alone. 'Even still, our surrounding cities will not trade with us if we remain an Elite society. When my father began the Purging three decades past, Ilya cut ties with Dor, Tando, and Izram. They lost our resources as much as we lost theirs, and this broken relationship will not be easily healed. These kingdoms now care very little for Elites.'

Warmth begins to pool in my chest, feeling so foreign I almost don't recognize it to be hope. But I have witnessed the animosity of Dor alone, shared their loathing for Elites. Not because they possess powers, but because of how they treat those without. And after decades of self-righteous shunning, it will take quite the gesture of goodwill from Ilya to prompt peace.

I'm swaying on my feet again.

That gesture of goodwill is me.

I feel hazy, numb to the fate set before me. As an Ordinary, a united Ilya was all I ever hoped for. My home, a place where I no longer needed to pretend to be something I wasn't in order to stay alive. But that skeptical, scrappy side of me says that Kitt couldn't possibly want this. Not when his father did everything in his power to eradicate the Ordinaries.

'As for Paedyn Gray . . .' The sound of my name startles me back to an unsettling reality. 'Her treason is not all that it seems. Our union will serve as a peace offering to the surrounding kingdoms. This show of faith will welcome Ordinaries back into Ilya, and therefore, entice our neighbors to reopen trade with welcoming Elites.' Kitt smiles

tightly. 'Our marriage will mark the beginning of my reign, and the strongest Ilya there has ever been.'

I'm picking apart every word, pulling at the syllables to make sense of them all. Then he turns towards me, every thought vanishing when he plucks that ring from its velvet box. There is a dizzying moment in which I think he might hear me swallow, might see the panic welling in my eyes.

That is when his gaze softens, and I see myself reflected in it.

Every fear, every bit of unease. He wears all of it and more. Because that ring in his shaking hand represents everything he was taught to hate. And yet, here he stands, going against the wishes of his beloved father in order to save this kingdom.

So, I let him raise my left hand between us. Let him see the willingness that smothers every worry. It is my turn to become the difference I always dreamed of being, even if the king's reasonings do not resemble my own. He wishes only to salvage this kingdom by whatever means possible, while I offer him my hand for a united Ilya alone.

I am the sacrifice that Ordinaries have bled and died for.

I am the power they lack.

The ring trembles around my broken nail. His eyes flick to mine in quiet permission.

Every moment of my life has built up to this one. This one fleeting second of bravery.

I nod, and he pushes the ring down the length of my finger.



CHAPTER 2

Kai

I thought I'd known torment until it wrapped around her finger. No, torment is tangible, and it gleams atop her tanned skin.

I stare, unblinking, at the symbol my brother slid onto her finger. It is binding. It is infinite. It is my undoing.

A laugh threatens to slip past my numb lips. It's not as though she hadn't promised to be my ruin, hadn't already become my demise. She is the single most destructive thing I have ever desired, and yet, it is the diamond on her finger that will destroy me.

I watch Paedyn through the gaps of a gawking crowd, just as I will for the rest of my life. I'll be forced to spend my days at her service but never at her side. In her shadow but never truly seen. In love with a girl I'd bowed to long before she became my queen.

Kitt steps aside, allowing the court full view of his betrothed. Short hair whispers atop her shoulders with each slow turn of her head. Silver meets tanned skin, gliding across the scar trailing her neck until the torn skin gleams like the sharp end of a blade. Her blue eyes cut through the crowd, searching and swift and so unsure.

I step behind one of the many marble pillars framing the room, avoiding her piercing gaze for perhaps the first time. I've been nothing but willing when it comes to drowning in those ocean eyes. But now,

I can't fathom drowning if she is not the anchor I'm sinking with.

Questions fly around the room, each one teetering on an accusation. I blend into the chaos, listening as the court voices my very own confusion. Because this was the last decree I ever thought would form on Kitt's lips. And he hadn't even bothered to inform me of it.

I roll my neck, practically feeling that indifferent mask of the Enforcer melting away from the rage simmering beneath. The abilities of every person in this room begin to press down on me, begging to be unleashed. Anger is too dangerous an emotion to let myself feel. It dulls my senses and heightens my Wielder ability until all I know is the power pulsing beneath my skin.

But I have no one to blame but myself. I did this to her, to us, to each moment I spent hoping she would be the center of every one to follow.

I am the monster who hunted her down. I am the beast who delivered her to this doom. And I am afraid I'll become so much worse when I'm no longer striving to deserve her.

A man shouts beside my ear, waving a hand so obnoxiously that I contemplate breaking it. Better yet, maybe I'll borrow his Blazer ability and singe that wagging tongue from his mouth.

Fortunately for the man, Kitt's voice swells over the echoing shouts before I get the chance to do anything rash. 'I will answer all your questions in a formal meeting to come. Following that, we will announce our engagement to the surrounding kingdoms.'

Engagement.

It feels as though the ground is caving in beneath me. Why couldn't we have just stayed in that field of poppies? I would spend the rest of my days making her flower crowns if she wanted to be a queen. My queen. Not Kitt's. Not Ilya's. *Mine.*

My eyes trace over her, tracking each movement. Kitt dismisses the court, quieting every conversation with a wave of his hand. In that moment, that single movement, I see our father. It's as though he is the one standing before this court, and Kitt is nothing more than his shadow.

This king is not the same one I left a fortnight ago.



This king is collected and calm and conscious of every move he makes.

But just as it always does, my gaze trails back to Paedyn. She is making her way across the room now, spine stiff and eyes straight ahead, fixed on the maid awaiting her beside the towering doors still several yards away. Sneers follow her every step as she strides through the crowd. Dozens of disgusted faces close in on her, growing bolder by the second. And I'm already moving before a man steps into her path.

He leans close enough to subtly mutter his vile comment, but the spittle flying from his mouth to splatter her freckles doesn't go unnoticed. I shove the man away from her so forcefully that I vaguely wonder whether I let a Brawny ability slip to the surface. The reckless action has me suddenly standing between Paedyn and the man who so clearly has a death wish. Stepping forward, I tower over him, ignoring the gasping crowd surrounding the scene I've made. Because the truth is, I don't give a damn about what this court thinks of me. And my reputation sure as hell can't get any worse.

'So much as breathe on her again,' I snarl, 'and I'll ensure it's the last time you ever do.'

'No.'

Her voice cuts through every crazed thought, washing over me as though relief itself is nothing more than the mere presence of her. Paedyn steps beside me, her gaze unwaveringly set on the now ghostly pale man. 'No,' she repeats, voice lethal. 'I will be the one to ensure that the next breath you take to insult me, or my people, will be the very last one you ever taste. And it will be me, an Ordinary, that ends your Elite life.'

She stares at him, looking as though formidability is woven into the very fiber of her being. My ears ring in the sudden silence smothering the throne room. Every eye is pinned on her, every jaw slackened by her words.

My future queen has just made her first decree.



That damn ring is going to slip off her finger with how terribly her hands are shaking.

I follow her out the double doors, fleeing the stifling throne room and gossiping court within. She quickens her pace down the plush halls, and I can only imagine how out of place we look among the emerald embellishments. The Enforcer – half-naked and wrapped in bandages – and the king's betrothed – bloody and dipped in a layer of grime.

'Paedyn,' I call, lengthening my strides.

That only has her skidding around another corner. I sigh, trying again. 'Pae, wait.'

She stops, suddenly. Shakily. Even at my distance, I see her shoulders tremble, hear the shuddering of her breath. She braces a steadying hand against the wall, and I'm about to call out again when a swarm of people spill into the hallway behind.

Shit.

I need to think fast, need to get Paedyn out of here before the entire court finds their future queen gasping for air in the hallway. Plague knows they would credit her panic to her weakened, Ordinary blood.

My eyes land on a door occupying the same wall Paedyn is currently slumped against before doing the only thing I can think of.

'All right, up you go,' I murmur before scooping her legs into my arms and slinging the rest of her over my shoulder.

This manages to get her attention. It's as though I've awakened a slumbering beast. 'What the hell—?' She wriggles in my hold, nails biting into the bare skin of my back. 'Put. Me. Down.'

I head for the door, a flood of voices following. 'Tempting, but I'm a bit busy saving your ass at the moment.' She can't see the smirk that twitches my lips, but I'm sure she hears it in my voice when I add, 'Speaking of ass, how's the view back there, Gray?'

'Nauseating,' she bites out.

I whip open the door and step inside. 'You know I can see your left foot twitch, yes?'

She grumbles incoherently in response to her betraying limb before nearly smacking her lolling head against the door I close.

Darkness swallows every inch of the small space.

I set her gently on the floor before me, feeling her breath tickle my

heated skin. My hands linger over the shape of her. Calluses catch on the thin fabric of her shirt, dragging it up as my palms slide over her hips. I can't see the shape of her in this pressing darkness, so I'll simply have to settle with feeling every inch of it.

Her voice is breathy in a way that has me gripping her tighter. 'Where are we?'

'Likely a forgotten broom closet,' I mutter. 'Couldn't have the entire court seeing their future queen in shambles, now, could we?'

The words were intended to tease, but they tear through my teeth, biting and bitter. And I regret them the moment I feel her body tremble beneath my hands. 'Hey,' I amend gently, pulling at the hem of her shirt until she stumbles against me. 'Talk to me.'

I can feel each thundering beat of her heart against my chest. And just like that, the distraction I'd created for her dissolves. She's crumbling again, her voice cracking as her composed facade does the same. 'I . . . I can't do this. I don't want to do this.' I feel each vigorous shake of her head. 'I was ready to die. I was ready for you to be the last thing I saw and now—'

'Don't say that,' I choke out, cutting her off before any more of my fears can escape her mouth. 'I would have never let that happen. I promised to fix this, and I will.'

'Fix this?' Her laugh is little more than a rasp. 'Kai, this is no longer a matter of life or death. This is . . .' When her breath catches, I know it is the ring she runs trembling fingers over. 'This is until death do us part.'

There's that anger again, washing over me in waves. Because she was meant to be the death of me, not the life of another. It was her I was meant to adore in this world and crawl to in the one after. But now she's tethered to a king, and I am nothing more than her killer.

I fumble for her hands, desperate to hold on to her for as long as I can. 'Focus on this ring,' I urge, spinning the band on her thumb. 'Your father's, not my brother's. Until I figure this out, spin it like you always do. Distract yourself.'

I feel a weak scoff tremble through her body. 'But this doesn't belong to my father. Not truly.' Her voice quivers beneath the weight

of each word. 'Everything I thought I knew about my life was a lie. And now I'm expected to live it alongside someone I thought wanted me dead?'

I shake my head, not knowing how to help her deal with the sudden discovery of how she became Adam Gray's daughter. It was not by blood, but by chance and neglect of a stranger. And I am useless when it comes to curing her of this confusion, this hurt.

'I don't understand any of this,' she continues in a rush. 'I should be dead by now. Every person in this Plague-forsaken kingdom *wants* to see me dead, not on a throne.' She sighs into the shadows, her breath skittering across my skin. 'But Kitt is right. The kingdoms won't open trade if Ilya does not welcome Ordinaries again. You saw how hated Elites were in Dor.' I feel the quick shake of her head. 'I've wanted a united Ilya more than anyone, even if the king does so begrudgingly. But . . .'

'But the Elites will not accept an Ordinary queen so easily,' I finish for her. 'Hell, even the idea of Ordinaries freely living in Ilya.'

There's a beat of silence before words are spilling from her mouth, the one I can't see but know the shape of by heart. 'I thought Kitt was spiraling. I thought he was grieving and angry.' A shaky breath. 'I thought he'd order you to drive a sword through my chest the moment I set foot in that throne room.'

'I thought he would too,' I murmur. 'And I was prepared to severely disappoint him.'

The ache in her voice makes me wince. 'Kai . . .'

'Pae. I had no idea that this is what he had planned.' Dirty fingers comb through the messy strands of my hair. 'I've known little of Ilya's disarray over the years. And that is simply because I was spending more time in the slums than anyone filling this castle. You confirmed my suspicions in the Scorches, about the lack of food and land. But I hadn't realized the situation was so dire.'

I can feel her spinning that ring on her thumb.

'You said he wasn't himself when you left,' Paedyn ventures softly. 'He was grieving. The people whispered about his madness.' The next words are a distant thought plucked from her head. 'So, what changed?'