

Prologue



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, PRINCE Samsyn.”

The curvy blonde batted her big brown eyes, curled her full dark lips then opened her purple satin robe.

She was naked underneath. As he had expected.

His body responded with cold nothingness. As he had also expected.

It was almost midnight. He had officially been twenty-one years old for four hours.

He felt older.

So much older.

Officially, the world was now supposed to be his—how did they say it in America, those “crazy kids” who would be his peers, if he lived there?—his bitch. Yes. That was it. The world was now his bitch, ready to be molded to his will, commanded at his whim. The Ferrari, McLaren, and Jaguar in the garage downstairs would help him do it faster. When he was done, he could return to this twelve-room suite, on the top floor of a palace, with just as many servants to see to his every desire. He could relax on his own terrace, with a view of the Mediterranean arguably better than that of the king’s.

Best aspect of that? He *wasn’t* the king. On the island of Arcadia, where the twentieth and twenty-first centuries balanced on an interesting teeter-totter, second in line to the throne meant the best of both worlds. All the fun, none of the responsibility.

Or so they said.

Somebody forgot to let fate in on that joke.

As fate liked reminding him, with floods of glee, during moments like this.

He eyed the nude beauty over the rim of the scotch she'd brought. From the moment she entered, he'd known the expensive liquor was just the beginning of Father's "extra" birthday gift. His gut still roiled because of it. He had nearly taken the bottle then tossed out the woman, but what if Father's minions were watching, ensuring she performed the assignment? He hated how much that made sense.

The scotch bloomed to a burn throughout his mouth and throat. He yearned for the warmth to seep lower, into the ice between his thighs. By the Creator, how he craved just an hour of turning his mind off for the throes of a good fuck—but tonight, it simply was not to be.

Tonight, he could take the hypocrisy no more. The sham of a birthday party Father and Mother had thrown for him, with that room full of people—his brothers and sister included—gazing at King Ardent and Queen Xaria like they were the couple who damn near walked on the sea outside the windows. Like they adored each other as much as they did their beautiful children. Like they couldn't wait to end the party and be in private chambers with each other—instead of Mother summoning the pool boy between her thighs, and Father—

Well...Father liked to have choices.

A fact Samsyn should have been more peaceful with by now. He certainly had not discovered the sham yesterday, after all. Three years was a long damn time to live with lies.

Yes. He was old.

And angry.

And tired.

And needing to forget.

Praying to forget.

He took a bigger gulp of the scotch. It loosened him enough to speak to the woman.

"What is your name?"

She blushed prettily. "Arista, Your Highness."

"You are lovely, Arista."

"*Merderim*, Highness."

"Did my father say the same thing when he fucked you?"

She confirmed his suspicion as soon as her gaze dove for the floor. She feigned insult. “I—I cannot—”

“Cover yourself, Arista.” The patience in his tone only came from clenching his teeth. “You are not to be blamed for wanting to make your king happy.”

She softly stepped closer. “I would greatly enjoy the chance to do the same for my prince.” Slid between his legs. Guided his touch to her naked hip. Before Samsyn could process a protest, she knelt and pressed her mouth to his groin.

He shoved to his feet. Released a ruthless growl. “I said cover yourself.” A deep breath reined his rage back in. “You can stay the night, Arista,” he muttered wearily. “The scum who sired me does not have to know we never fucked.”

Her tiny sob sliced the air. “You are a good man, Prince Samsyn. Honorable and decent and—”

He interrupted her by hurling his glass against the hearth.

As drops of liquor sprayed, the flames hissed and spat like fuming demons. Perfect. Fucking perfect.

Honorable. Decent.

He was anything but either. Hiding his parents’ filthy secrets, even from his siblings, had changed him. Tainted him in ways that would never be clean again.

Aged him.

A shrill ring blared through the room. His cell phone. The ring for his most private number, designated as his *must answer* tone. Tonight, he’d never been more thankful for it.

“What?” He gave no further greeting. It would either be Tryst or Cullen on the line, considering the late hour and the number of pissed-drunk mates he had stepped over when exiting the birthday party an hour ago.

“Highness.” The deep timbre was all Tryst. The formality was not. Samsyn’s skin pricked, not all in a bad way. “Your father begs your pardon for interrupting your birthday celebration—”

“Debatable,” he snarled, knowing Tryst understood. The man only looked like a dumb giant. T had seen and heard enough to deduce the truth about the king and queen on his own. “What is it?”

“He requests your personal attention...to something.”

“All right.” He gave it too eagerly but didn’t care. The hook was out of his mouth. No lies would be necessary about how he had handled the situation with Arista.

“We have...a delicate situation.”

He almost laughed. Tryst and the word *delicate* were hardly a logical match. “Creator’s fucking toes, T.” When no commiserating snicker came from his friend, he paced off his disconcertment—and dread—by walking out to the terrace. “Has the *éslike* gotten some poor thing pregnant?”

“No.” Finally, there was a laugh in the man’s voice—though the next moment, he went straight back to cryptic. “But you had best get here, anyway.”

“Good enough.” He looked out to the darkness of the sea, ordering it to yield Tryst’s non-existent details. No such luck. “‘Here’ being where?”

“The airport.”

“The *airport*?”

“Your Highness, with all due respect, just get your ass over here.”



“UN-FUCKING-BELIEVABLE.”

Sometimes, the raw fury of English profanity was a preferable choice to Arcadian. This was absolutely one of those occasions.

Samsyn was tempted to repeat it, but Tryst’s grunt covered the debt. The big soldier, braced against a palm tree just outside the island’s small airport terminal, folded his meaty arms across his chest. A night breeze kicked against the man’s thick black hair. Technically, it was an early morning wind—though two a.m. qualified as an excusable gray area.

“They *lost* Rune Kavill? One of the world’s most despicable terrorists, in one of the world’s most high-security prisons—”

“Escaped out the garbage chute. Three days ago.” T uttered it like he was merely relaying his dog’s latest stupid stunt. Samsyn didn’t blame him for the mental disconnect. Tryst’s sanity likely hinged on it, instead of admitting that the terrorist who’d blown up his mother and sister had broken free by blending in with prison trash. Irony was too ridiculous a word for this

circus—especially when the ringmaster himself had wasted no time rubbing everyone’s noses in its stench.

“Let me get this completely right,” Samsyn stated. “Now the monster has targeted Senator Chase Valen—and his family.”

“To phrase it mildly.”

Another wry quip. T’s tone contrasted the images on the smart pad in Samsyn’s grip. “By the Creator,” he spat. Image after image of violent destruction filled the screen, depicting what once had been a two-story home, in an American neighborhood of manicured lawns and sprawling driveways. “Chase Valen is a good man. He championed the worldwide manhunt for that fuck. Went to the Hague to make sure Kavill received full justice.”

“And his family nearly paid the ultimate price.”

Syn’s finger froze over a picture. A close-up of some items in the rubble of the Valen family home. Smashed dishes, charred curtains...

And a jewelry box.

It was clearly from a girl’s room. Locketts and baubles spilled from it, though oddly, the mirror in its lid had remained intact—along with the tiny ballerina on a spring, poised to pop up when the box’s lid was opened. The dancer turned, too. A pirouette set to *Für Elise*, if it was like the box Jayd possessed in her room.

What would he do if his sister were ever subjected to a horror like this?

Feelings pushed up through him. Hot. Vicious. Protective. Prompting a question. “How old?”

Tryst frowned. “Who? What?”

“Valen’s children. A boy and a girl, yes? Brooke and Dillon? How old are they?”

“Both just turned eighteen.”

“Twins?”

“No. They are from separate marriages. Valen’s first wife died in an auto accident when his girl was a baby. He remarried a year later. The children have grown up together. They are close.”

“So the king has known them their whole lives.” Things were easier, saying it that way. *My father* pulled everything in too close. The dirt. The lies. The secrets.

“I do not know,” Tryst replied. “King Ardent only told me he that Senator Valen has been a friend for close to twenty years, and that the moment Kavill was released, Valen called, begging to hide on Arcadia if the situation became dire.”

Samsyn dropped his glare to the image of the music box again. “This looks dire.”

“Indeed.”

“How soon until they arrive?”

“Not long.” Tryst raked his gold gaze up to the sky. “Valen didn’t feel safe even radioing ahead until they were departing Rome.”

“And they have nothing with them but their clothes and travel documents?”

“Correct.”

“Fuck.”

“Agreed.”

It had no sooner left Tryst’s lips than a distant engine growled in the sky. Sure enough, the lights of a small plane appeared, twinkling on approach to the runway.

Though everything felt like just another aircraft landing on Arcadia, Samsyn tapped the comm piece at his ear, opening the channel to the ten elite soldiers hiding in the foliage along the landing strip. On paper, nearly all of them still outranked him—a factor rapidly pushed aside since he was here as King Ardent’s emissary. All the unknowns of the situation, as well the danger they presented, made Father’s absence a necessity. Samsyn resigned himself to accept it, not enjoy it.

“Everyone on alert,” he directed calmly. “We have to expect anything.”

Well-spoken advice. That he completely neglected to take personally.

Or maybe it would not have mattered, anyway.

Prepared or not, maybe he was destined to walk out on that tarmac, watch the plane’s door descend, then remember nothing except one pair of perfect, petrified eyes.

Literally...nothing.

Had he greeted the senator? He vaguely recalled his lips moving on the words, the assurances to Chase Valen that they would be safe and guarded here.

Had he said anything to Mrs. Valen? Her shoulders had trembled when he pulled her in, briefly bussing her cheeks in formal greeting, had they not?

Had he said anything to the boy? Dillon. They'd clasped hands like men, though the young man clung long and hard, silently conveying his fear.

He *had* remembered. All of it.

And that all of it was just going through the motions—

Until she got off the stairway.

Chin jerked high—beneath wobbling lips. Steps taken proudly—on legs so fatigued, they barely held her up. Shoulders set firm—while shaking from each shellshocked breath.

But most of all, it was her eyes.

Her huge, terrified, mesmerizing, crystal blue eyes.

Reminding him...

of him.

No. More than that. It only started there, this draw he felt toward her...this pull of raw connection, fueled by fires he'd never experienced before. This...*need*...to get nearer to her, though not in any way that would harm her or frighten her. It wasn't sexual or even emotional. It extended so far beyond those labels, into a realm that was...

What?

Mystical?

Fuck.

No. *No.* He was not fairy dust, magic drops, and *Für Elise*. He was *not* "mystical". And he sure as hell was not crashing, cataclysmic connection with a fucking teenager, even if she did walk like a queen despite the hell she had endured, and the darkness in which she stepped.

He wanted to be this creature's strength, sword, and shelter. He craved to drop to his knees before her, sweep his head low, pledge his fealty forever, and utter all the other knightly things from the classic books he had never learned in school. He mentally stabbed himself for it all now. For not getting past the cramped desks and stuffy classrooms and listening to a few of those lessons, instead of ticking off the minutes until he could be free and moving and *doing* something.

Now, he prayed for a single perfect line from one of those books. One ideal thing to say when walking up to the only person who had ever affected

him like a human super magnet, drawing him like a million helpless metal shavings, able to achieve his true form only because she grew nearer.

“Hi.”

That was *not* the perfect thing.

“Hi.” She blurted it between one nervous glance and the next. He wished her no blame. If he were standing in her cute little tennis shoes, gawking up at a hulk like him, he would steal nothing but glimpses too. At once, he rounded his shoulders and gave into a small smile. It rendered no good. His adorable, brave little refugee still trembled like a star readying to fall from the heavens.

A star.

Yes. That was it.

“Starlight, star bright.” Though he did not murmur it with the greatest confidence, it felt right. Even she seemed to sense it, that wide blue gaze softening.

“Wh-what?” The accusation fled her tone. A tiny smile threatened her scared scowl.

“Starlight, star bright.” He was more confident about the repetition, even scooping up her hand and adding a low bow over her fingers. “Look what beauty the sky has brought me tonight.”

Her fingertips shook against his palm. Her lips quaked harder, as if she was unsure what to say or feel. That certainly made two of them. “This is...kind of weird.”

“Well...‘weird’ is all right.” He laughed a little, as her vernacular teased his tongue. He remembered himself the next moment, straightening back to noble formality. “As long as safe goes with it.” He bent over her as far as he dared. “You *are* safe now, Brooke Valen. Of that you can be assured.”

Her gold-tinged brows arched. “That so, big guy?”

He chuckled. “That is so, little *astremé*.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her head tilted, blowing little chunks of her hair across her lightly-freckled cheeks. Her hair was also intriguing. It was so different than Arcadian styles, chopped at vastly different lengths. “Says who? Because in case you haven’t heard, this evil asshole just blew up our whole house and—”

“Brooke.” Her mother whipped a glare over. “Language!”

Samsyn held Brooke back, waiting for the woman to keep going, before he leaned closer over her. “‘Evil asshole’ is about right.” Once regaining the full connection of her gaze—because he knew he would get it—he asserted, “And if he comes anywhere near you, the commander of the Arcadian armed forces, Prince Samsyn Cimarron, personally swears he shall slice the bastard from one ear to the next.”

“Only if I can help.” Tryst emphasized it with a snort.

“‘Prince?’” She seemed unaware of even whispering it. “Well, no shit.”

He grimaced. “Still weird?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her lips quirked. “But cool. Maybe...more than kind of.”

Her awkward honesty tossed all his composure into fresh chaos. The shards of it hit his blood like metal shavings, sharpening his senses, making him even more aware of every move she made now too—

Including the new way she gazed at him.

No more surreptitious glances. No more frightened trembling. Her steps still wobbled a little, no doubt due to the hell she’d just survived, but as Syn helped her into the transport van that would take them up into the Tahreus Mountains, where they could be best hidden in case Kavill gave chase, she looked up to him once more—with a face full of *brand-new* things.

Relief.

Confidence.

Security.

Hope.

She held back none of it. And in giving all of it, gave him yet one more, incredible gift. A sensation in his heart and soul he had written off as forever lost.

Clean.

For many minutes after the van departed, he stood on the tarmac, in the darkness, with a hand over his chest...and confusion clouding his brain.

What the hell had just happened?

Who the hell was he now?

He still had no answer, even when a circle of familiar faces appeared around him. Tryst had roused the guys from the bushes, and they razzed each other with the normal filthy humor that accompanied the end of a mission. Samsyn, normally the ringleader of that party, remained pulled back.

The space beneath his hand was still pristine as new snow. He yearned to keep it that way as long as possible. If he could get back to his suite at the Palais, just to be alone and cherish this longer, maybe a little of it would stick. Even to someone like him...

“All right, all right!” Tryst flung up a hand, silencing everyone. “As charming as you apes are, his highness still has a birthday to celebrate—and, I believe, a certain someone to celebrate it with.” The man gave him a nasty side eye. “Maybe a sweet little blonde, keeping the sheets hot for you?”

Fuck.

Arista. Whom he’d told to stay in the suite as long as she needed.

His hand dropped.

Just like that, his best birthday gift vanished. Wiped out with one reminder of who—of *what*—he really was.

“No.” It spewed on a growl, though he forced a wry twist to his lips. “I am much more open to getting back and finishing off the birthday vodka.”

“Over getting tight and hot with a willing female?” Olyver Frond, one of the team’s more boisterous bastards, voiced it. “Who are you and what the fuck have you done with Samysn Cimarron?”

He summoned a tighter, faker, smile—a complete disguise for how he could not bear thinking of kissing a blonde right now, let alone bedding her. How *any* blonde would only remind him of *one* right now...

Fuck.

No.

“By the Creator’s balls. Have I not wrestled enough with young females and their needs this evening?”

As he hoped, the men bought the sarcasm—except for Tryst, who was shrewd enough to see through everything and smart enough to keep it a secret.

The pretense was agonizing but necessary. One day, he would be the true commander of anyone in a uniform on this island. Cracks in *their* armor were barely acceptable. Cracks in *his* had to be impossible.

Which meant Brooke Valen—and everything she had done to him, for him—would be subjects never visited again.

For that reason—and that alone—he prayed like hell that someone put a bullet through Rune Kavill’s brain soon, making it possible for the Valens to

return home...and for Brooke Valen to become exactly what he needed her to be.

A memory.