

In an Underworld realm known as the Seven Circles, seven immortal princes rule their wicked courts through sin and debauchery.

Each circle relies on its citizens and other mythical creatures to fuel the prince's power by indulging in their sin of choice: wrath, envy, greed, lust, sloth, pride, or gluttony.

Power is each prince's greatest currency, and an overarching curse that recently broke threatened to weaken them, leaving them open to attack from other wicked beings that call the underworld home—witches, Fae, shape-shifters, goddesses, and the ever-scheming vampires in the south. Now each House of Sin is secretly fighting to regain its full might and save its court from the curse's lingering effects.

This story takes place in the blustery, northernmost circle, and follows the Prince of Gluttony, whose sin is not simply gorging on the finest foods and drinks but seeking adventure and thrills. Like hunting ice dragons that roam the unforgiving terrain, or maybe fighting his biggest battle to date: trying not to fall for someone he hates...

As mortal poets and playwrights have said: all is fair in love and war.

May the old gods have mercy on the Prince of Gluttony.

A storm named Adriana is coming and she is merciless. At least where he is concerned.



A STRONG GUST OF wind raced down the snowcapped mountains, screaming through the pass, the sound almost as chilling as the winter air itself.

This far north of the Seven Circles, beyond any of the royal Houses of Sin, where nightmares and lesser demons stalked the forest's edge, even the elements gave in to fear.

Fainter, another noise emerged above the tree line. One we'd been waiting for.

I paused, holding a hand in the air, a silent signal for my hunters to halt.

Leather snapped in time with the breeze, the familiar sound muffled only slightly by what I knew was an outer layer of angelic-looking white feathers.

Like most things in the Underworld, that unexpected plumage was a beautiful deception hiding a sinister purpose. Those downy wings in conjunction with the iridescent scales of their bodies helped to conceal the unholy beasts as they slowly flew through snow-laden skies, circling us—their prey—below.

I gripped my House dagger in my fist, heart pumping fast as I peered up through the trees, blinking ice from my lashes, waiting for that first glimpse of Death made flesh.

Immortality would keep me breathing no matter what, but not everyone in our hunting party had that luxury. Like me they fought for the

thrill of it, but it also was one of the greatest sources of fuel for my power. The hunt fed my sin more than anything else. Since my circle's sin was gluttony, most outside the Underworld believed that meant overindulging in food and drink. We did that too, along with fucking and fighting, but most of my sinners took after me—preferring to overindulge in adventure and danger.

That fear, the possibility of failure mixed with a fierce desire to indulge in adventure at any cost, drove the hunters forward through the narrow, unforgiving pass with me, gazes locked on the overcast sky, bodies tensed and ready for battle.

I glanced over my shoulder at the line of elite fighters who'd braved Merciless Reach, the walled outpost I'd built a century before to monitor the savage northern lands just beyond my territory, House Gluttony.

All except one had my royal crest stitched onto their battle leathers, searching for dragons and glory.

I motioned for everyone to remain silent, to be vigilant. It wouldn't be long now.

We'd been tracking the dragons for hours, playing a cat-and-mouse game, both parties eager to pounce. The dragons had known we were close, but thanks to a smattering of evergreens lining each side of the pass, they didn't have a clear visual.

Some hunters bit down on a leather strap to silence the sound of their chattering teeth. They wouldn't last another hour out here, no matter how brave they were.

We needed to start moving again.

I scanned the line until I spotted who I'd been looking for bringing up the back of our group. Gold eyes glinted in the sliver of sunlight shouldering its way through the storm.

My brother Wrath, the general of war, was the only one who looked as thrilled as I was by the approaching sound. He was made for battle just as I was built for danger; a combination that made for poor decisions but great stories.



Out here, where only monsters dwelled, ice dragons were the worst predators.

Which meant they were the best opponents for us wicked Princes of Hell.

Tonight's hunt promised to be a memorable one. Violence simmered in the air, so close I could practically taste the impending battle, my mouth watering in anticipation.

For hours, we'd ruthlessly tracked this particular pack of ice dragons north, far beyond hospitable land. There were seven known dragon packs spread throughout the region; this one happened to claim the territory closest to my House of Sin.

The terrain was milder than that of the far north, but it was still brutal.

Several members of the hunt had been forced to retreat, the harsh winter elements too deadly to contend with. The few who remained were the fiercest, or the most foolish.

Jackson Rose, one of the newest initiates of the royal hunting guild, tripped over an ice-coated root, cursing as he landed face-first in the snow. Felix, a seasoned veteran, shot me a look of apology and grumbled as he hoisted the younger hunter up by his straps.

My skin prickled with sudden awareness.

That one sign of exhaustion was the spark needed for violence to ignite. If the dragons had been unsure of our precise location, that element of surprise was gone now.

"On alert!" I shouted, dagger aimed skyward as I stepped off the path, pausing under the nearest evergreen to avoid what was certain to be an aerial attack.

I silently counted, pulse drumming madly.

The sound of beating wings ceased.

"Be ready!"

All at once the great beasts dove at us like comets falling from the skies.

Majestic wings tucked against their big, scaled bodies, they plummeted to the earth one after another, their numbers taking our party by surprise.



Wind howled around their massive forms, the sound raising the fine hair along my arms.

The largest thundered to the ground before me, snarling as its impact made a crater that displaced several feet of snow and frozen earth, missing me by inches. Iridescent scales shone like diamonds, its jaws filled with rows of snapping teeth that were as deadly as daggers.

A single jagged scar glinted across its chest.

I bared my teeth in a feral grin. It was Silvanus, a dragon I'd sparred with for nearly a century and one I'd hand-raised from a hatchling.

That bond meant little on the battlefield, though.

Our skirmishes were well matched, neither of us willing to be defeated easily.

Silvanus had the temperament of an ornery house cat. Which meant he was similar to my brother Sloth; he only sparred when the mood struck and couldn't be bothered otherwise.

I stole a quick glance at the hunters; almost everyone had their own dragon to battle, and all wore the same wolfish grin as they took turns striking at their opponents.

I focused on my fight again, allowing the thrill to take over as I tuned everything else out.

"Ready to waltz, old boy?" I taunted, trying to spot any opening to strike.

Whoever drew first blood won. With two giant barrels of spiced ale waiting for me back at my warm castle, I felt like celebrating victory tonight, far from the miserable cold that gripped my balls in its icy fist.

Silvanus spewed a stream of white flame at my left foot, forcing me to dance backward. The bastard almost destroyed my favorite hunting boots.

I aimed my dagger at my feet. "Have some respect for fine leather, you scaled heathen."

Pointed teeth gleamed in the waning light, the dragon's version of a grin.

I laughed softly as he unleashed the next stream of icy fire, this time



aiming for my other leg. I'd offered to waltz with him, and the prick was making me dance.

"Well played."

My grin faded. The need to hunt, to win, was taking over.

I stalked forward, gaze narrowed, plan whirling into motion. I'd feint to the left, then catch him with a jab on the right, nicking him under his snout. He was broad, and agility wasn't his strong suit, an advantage I'd press until I claimed victory.

Instead of charging me, Silvanus held his ground, a warning growl sounding low in his chest. His attention was fixed to some point above my shoulder. Given my nearly six-and-a-half-foot frame, he wasn't looking at one of the hunters.

The dragon was warning me about *something* else.

I spun around, narrowly avoiding a blow from a second dragon that would have taken my head off had I been mortal.

All levity vanished at once. A death blow was forbidden in our little games, the fact I couldn't be killed notwithstanding. There were several other hunters here who *could* die.

"Need I remind you of the pact?" I seethed, keeping both dragons in sight.

Silvanus might have warned me once, but I couldn't trust he'd do it again. Like wolves, dragons were pack creatures. They'd fall in line with their alpha.

Silvanus inclined his head, acknowledging the pact.

The other dragon simply snarled.

Once upon a time, ice dragons had freely roamed the Seven Circles, hunting demons and whatever other creatures they desired.

During one of the darkest hours in our history, the seven alphas from each pack planned a coordinated attack, carving a blood-drenched swath across the realm, terrorizing all.

Unlike most creatures, ice dragons didn't always hunt to eat. They *liked* killing. And they'd unleashed all their darkest desires on each House of Sin. The loss of life had been staggering.



So, more than a hundred years ago, I'd negotiated the first peace treaty between the dragons and my brothers. Aided by the right spell, we could communicate clearly with the dragons and had come to terms all agreed upon.

Unless I invited them into my circle for a particular event, the pact kept them sequestered in the far north, on the brutal, almost entirely wild land just above my territory.

They'd divided their territory into seven regions, each run by a different alpha. They kept the identities of their alphas from us, unwilling to share pack secrets, though I strongly believed Silvanus led the pack we interacted with the most.

The dragons simply stated "the alpha" when discussing the lead dragon.

We agreed to leave them to their private politics, so long as they didn't cause serious harm or damage to one another.

In exchange for their acceptance of the pact, I had agreed that my hunters and I would arrange hunts to battle them for sport each month, keeping their minds properly engaged. My brothers were free to join us whenever they submitted a request to my House of Sin.

None of us were permitted to kill.

The new dragon—Aloysius, judging by the slightly darker silvery blue coloring along his tail—took a threatening step closer, his iridescent eyes flaring.

His talons clawed at the ground, churning the snow.

There was an almost wild gleam in his eyes.

I tuned in to my surroundings, becoming aware of the familiar sounds of fighting. I spared a quick glance around—other dragons were behaving normally, if not a bit savagely. The other hunters were flushed from adrenaline surges, their eyes sparkling with each hit.

Still, an uncomfortable feeling prickled in warning.

"Halt!" I called out, my voice laced with the magical command of a Prince of Hell.

My brother stopped fighting, shooting an incredulous look in my



direction, his dagger mere inches from his target's throat. He would have won. Instead, I'd make him forfeit.

And the demon of war was not one to easily give up a fight.

Wrath looked ready to argue but eventually pressed his mouth into a firm line. He clearly didn't agree with my assessment. But it wasn't his call to make; I ruled the hunt out here.

And my gut said to retreat.

I'd learned to never screw with that innate warning system, knowing it'd fuck me back twice as hard for my arrogance and it wouldn't be an enjoyable time.

After tracking the dragons through the blizzard all day, I was just as disappointed as everyone else to end our game so soon. But for now, I had to get us out of here before something went horribly wrong.

"Hunters, dragons." I nodded to each side, then hit my chest twice with a closed fist, a sign of respect and the signal the hunt was indeed over. "Good fight."

I gave Silvanus a long look, ensuring the dragon knew he'd be called forth soon to discuss what had almost happened. Part of the pact ensured he'd heed my royal summons.

His slitted pupils dilated rapidly, his serpentine head shaking almost imperceptibly before he finally gave the signal of understanding.

I had no time to consider Silvanus's odd reaction, as a feral shriek pierced the silence, sending ice rushing through my veins.

I turned just as Wrath's ice dragon lunged forward, its jaws opened wide, latching onto his throat.

My brother was brutally fast, but even his hands found their way to the dragon's mouth seconds too late. Its teeth sank deeper, its eyes rolling back as bloodlust took over.

Ichor spurted from dozens of puncture wounds as it shook my brother, then tore his throat out in one violent motion.

For a long and horribly taut moment, silence reigned as Wrath slowly dropped to his knees, blood pouring from his wound in torrents, the



hunters staring, frozen in horror, at the place where his throat should have been.

It happened from one blink to the next. There was no time to react, even with my supernatural strength and speed.

I inhaled, my inner demon rattling its cage. My brother was not a small male by any means. Nothing could be done to stop the bleeding; the attack was far more than simply drawing first blood as rules dictated. And it would not go unpunished.

But first I had to make sure my demons lived through what came next.

The hunters stood motionless, the pungent scent of piss perfuming the air. These were some of the bravest members of my circle and they were terrified. If a prince could be cut down so brutally, they knew they stood little chance of surviving.

Up until now, during our games, the dragons had held back. The hunters never faced the full might of the creatures, and everyone knew this was suddenly no game.

My brother shot me a furious look, his expression telling me all I needed to know as the light slowly faded from his eyes.

I nodded at him, signaling I understood. I was ready.

I gripped my dagger, waiting.

The second my brother fell, chaos erupted.

As if some invisible tether snapped, the dragons all turned on us as one. And attacked.





TWO

Adriana

“YOU REALLY SHOULD smile more, Adriana, my love.”

Given Jackson’s words were a soft slur, and his steps were almost as heavy as the hand he’d been inching lower on my hip, it was mildly impressive he recalled my name.

As an initiate hunter in House Gluttony’s elite tracking forces known as the royal hunting guild, Jackson was my assignment tonight, which meant I needed to play nice to unravel the secrets of his last mission.

Rumor had it the ice dragons were growing restless in the north.

If proven true, it would be *the* story of the century. Breaking a story like that first could generate a lot of public interest, completely changing my family’s circumstances.

Not because dragons were both feared and revered in our circle, but because public safety would be at stake.

I couldn’t just let the story go and hope for the best. My family lived here. My friends. And all the citizens who deserved to know the truth before something terrible happened.

If the peace treaty was no longer being honored, there had to be a reason for it.

And I fully intended to discover what that reason was.

Jackson waltzed us around the ballroom, his hand continuing its downward path, his drunkenness becoming painfully apparent with each misstep and stumble.

We were drawing unwanted attention.

And not simply because we were waltzing during a minuet.

We bumped into several lords and ladies, earning glares and harsh whispers. When we careened into dowager duchess Oleander, I worried she'd have us tossed from the party. Her icy glare followed us as we continued to spin across the floor.

I grimaced as she leaned into her companion, Lady Violet Gunner, the host of the event, and undoubtedly demanded justice for her crushed toes.

The idea of accidentally knocking Jackson into the hot chocolate station warred with my need to draw him closer, my jaws clamped so tightly they ached.

I'd made two mistakes tonight.

The first was listening to Miss Ryleigh Hughes. My best friend and coworker had instructed me to use our circle's sin of choice to my advantage and encourage overindulgence.

"Loose lips cause delightful slips" was a motto she lived by.

Now I had a drunken hunter causing a scene, a headache starting at my temples, and I was no closer to unraveling his secrets before my next article was due.

I couldn't afford to miss turning in a column. If I didn't get information on the ice dragons soon, I'd need to embellish another rumor involving my nemesis. But if I reported on it first, the ice dragon story would catapult my career—and in turn my salary—more than another scandal sheet would, so I wasn't admitting defeat just yet.

My second mistake was attempting to use my feminine charm to wheedle information out of Jackson. Holding my tongue often proved difficult, and with the clock ticking ever closer to my deadline, my patience was quickly fraying.

Flirting was hard for me under the best circumstances.

And these were *not* the best circumstances.

All at once, I remembered a porcelain doll from my childhood.

Eden, my younger sister, had wanted it desperately, the bright pink dress sparkling in the rare sunny afternoon, catching her fancy.



As the eldest by ten years and already painfully aware of our circumstances, I'd been suspicious of the doll. The dull expression it wore like a shield made me wonder what it was hiding.

Perhaps I should have considered the possibility that the toymaker had been baring their soul and the doll simply represented society's cage for young women.

Be agreeable, pleasant, and beautiful, even if it drains the life from you.

Against my quiet warnings, my stepmother used the coins we'd saved for food to buy the doll, leaving our bellies empty that week.

Eden had cried every night, the doll all but forgotten as the harsh truth settled in: the fortune our father had saved before he died was gone. Spent in its entirety by my stepmother, on one useless indulgence after another. Not that a doll for a child was frivolous. I never scorned my sister for wanting a toy; even then I wished to give her the moon.

Sophie Everhart, my stepmother, was the only one who wouldn't accept our fate, as if her refusal to acknowledge our change in circumstances would prevent it from happening.

Even when we'd been forced to give our town house to debt collectors and moved into the crumbling building we now called home, Sophie Everhart found ways to spend coin we didn't have. Her sin was gluttony and her need to overindulge surpassed common sense.

I'd vowed then and there to make sure we'd be taken care of and would never fall prey to those same sins. Gluttony wasn't simply overindulgence in material things.

Sinners like me often indulged in adventure. And I found no greater thrill than solving a mystery and reporting on it first.

Which made dancing with Jackson and his straying hands tolerable.

Somehow, I managed to muster up the same bland smile the doll had worn, determined to encourage him into carrying on a decent conversation about the dragons.

He gave me a lopsided grin, his attention dropping southward, just like his cursed hands.

Normally, I preferred my romantic partners to take a direct approach



rather than bore me with false declarations of love, but *some* attempt at conversation was necessary.

If someone didn't try to seduce my brain, they didn't make it to my bedchamber. Not that I'd entertained a lover in the last two Seasons. Much to my dismay.

"Elite hunters such as myself prefer a female who simpers. Can you simper?"

No better than he could use proper grammar. "No, my lord. I daresay I can't."

"Shame. You're rather pretty when you're not scowling. That ice-blue hair..."

I drew back in time with the crescendo of the string quartet, narrowly avoiding another unwanted touch, his fingers sliding through empty space instead of my unbound hair.

Jackson's gaze turned hot and hungry.

Initiate or not, he was like most members of the royal special forces: he enjoyed the thrill of the hunt.

"You were telling me of the north, my lord. The ice dragons that roam just outside House Gluttony's territory. I've heard there was an attack."

"Mm. Was I? I can't recall."

I couldn't tell if he was stealthily dodging the question or if he was so caught up in trying to seduce me, he didn't particularly care to listen to a single word that came out of my mouth.

"What were the specifics of your assignment?" I asked, hoping his inexperience with the guild would benefit my investigation. "I can't imagine being stationed up there for long. I've heard it's quite isolated."

"Ah. Merciless Reach. The end of the civilized continent and the Seven Circles. Best known as the outpost of nightmares because of how far from here it is. Until the sweetest sinners sneak into the barracks. After that, acting civilized is the furthest thing from anyone's mind."

Internally, I screamed. "Did His Highness travel with your hunting party? Reports suggest another Prince of Sin was involved in the incident."



Surely I could steer this conversation back to safer ground.

“Everyone always wishes to gossip about the princes. But there are more interesting things to discuss. Did I tell you how we keep warm during those frigid borderland nights?”

His attention dropped to my bodice. Where it remained. Apparently, he was under the impression my breasts would magically answer his question if he stared at them long enough.

“By carving open your enemies and sleeping inside their steaming innards?” I asked sweetly, batting my lashes.

His gaze shot upward, the fire in his dark eyes banking at once. “Pardon?”

“No steaming innards.” I sighed dramatically. “I rather liked the idea of brutal savagery. Lust and violence. Such a sinful combination to indulge in, isn’t it?”

He slowly blinked down at me. Part of him was clearly still interested, if only for the wild, untamed bedroom antics I might provide, but part of him also looked wary.

I suppose I looked like the sort of female who could just as easily carve him open as give him an intense orgasm; he appeared to be weighing the risk.

Blessedly, the music came to an end and so did our time together. My mission failed, but at least Jackson wouldn’t have to struggle any longer with deciding which head to listen to.

I gave a polite curtsy, then made my way toward the far side of the ballroom. Unsurprisingly, Jackson didn’t follow. He turned his sights on a beautifully coiffed noblewoman.

Ryleigh leaned against the wall, mirth sparkling in her amber eyes as I joined her in the shadows. We were both commoners, only invited to these events to report on them, though most nobles forgot our station since we did our best to blend in.

“Jackson looks half in love and half terrified. You really need to work on honing your flirtation, Miss Saint Lucent,” Ryleigh teased. “Practice will do you a world of good.”



“He’s either too drunk to focus on my questions or won’t talk unless I take him to my bed.” With his new partner, Jackson trampled another unsuspecting couple. Completely drunk, then. “And why is my flirtation always to blame?”

Ryleigh gave me a long, lingering look. “Did you get anything useful from him?”

I swiped a flute of demonberry wine from a passing tray, downing it by half. The sparkling demonberries caught the light, looking like miniature stars.

“Nothing that will help tear down Axton or prove the ice dragons are a threat.”

“It’s Axton today, is it?” Ryleigh said playfully. “Prince Gluttony would be flattered you’re finally using that moniker.”

Gabriel blasted Axton, Prince of Sin.

His preferred alias, though not his full true name or else the witch I’d scrimped and saved to pay would have successfully hexed him long ago. “Gabriel” was known the realm over as the Prince of Gluttony, one of the seven wicked princes of the Underworld.

I knew mortals had myths and legends of all the gods and goddesses who ruled the expanse known as the Underworld—my contacts who’d been granted entry to our kingdom told me as much. Although even they had only made it as far as the Shifting Isles.

In truth, the Underworld was broken down into seven circles, each governed by a different Prince of Sin. There was an eighth circle that spanned closer to the southern edge of our realm, but it was forbidden and often ignored by denizens of the Underworld.

On a larger island, due west, were the Fae lands. And near the southern tip of our realm was Malice Isle—home to the vampires. House Gluttony, where I resided, was the northernmost territory, bordered above by wild land inhabited by dragons, lesser demons, and other creatures too dark and twisted or solitary to choose a House of Sin.

Within the Seven Circles, demon princes needed sinners to stoke their sin of choice and thus their power, ensuring they remained strong



enough to protect us from outside threats, so denizens were sorted into the House they best aligned with.

Unlike most in the realm, who were utterly charmed by Axton, I despised the prince.

There was no rule stating that just because I aligned with his sin I needed to *like* him personally. Which meant at least one of the old, major gods was indeed petty.

Not many other circles believed in the old gods, who mostly ruled the seasons, but in the north, some still paid tribute to them. I'd need to figure out who to bribe to take down the prince.

I refused to call him Prince Gluttony in private, and "Gabriel" was too regal sounding for the rake. Axton might be his preferred alias, but that made little difference since it reminded me of a weapon. The prince was far too charming in public to be believable, and everyone ought to associate him with an ax. He'd certainly hacked apart enough hearts throughout the years.

"He's not attended a party in nearly a week, which coincides perfectly with the first rumored dragon attack to have taken place in over a century," I said. "Have you known him to miss any opportunity to feed his sin?"

"Please don't tell me you've been marking the events he's missed in a calendar, Adriana."

I didn't deign to respond. The music ended and dancers exchanged partners as the next song began. We watched silently for any hint of scandal, any refusal or snub.

Men twirled their companions across the polished marble, the noblewomen's skirts unfurling like colorful blossoms. I made a quick note of who was dancing with whom, who stole onto the balcony, and who returned from the gardens looking tousled.

Dowager duchess Oleander continued to glare in our direction, clearly holding a grudge over the accidental toe stomping. Her hair was a deep plum that looked pretty with her complexion but did nothing for her sour disposition.



She was young for a dowager duchess, not too many suns older than me and Ryleigh. Everyone knew she'd married the Duke of Oleander for his title, not his heart. A depressing but common practice among the nobles in both our world and the mortal land.

Her attention shifted to Ryleigh and turned colder. Years back there were hints of scandal involving my friend and the former duke. It would have been the type of news splattered across every gossip column if another more scandalous event had not taken place shortly after.

I quickly averted my gaze.

I spotted Anderson Anders, a journalist from one of our rival papers with a ridiculously haughty *nom de plume*, lurking on the opposite end of the room, watching everyone with a hawklike gaze. He liked to believe his pieces were destined to win awards.

"Why aren't you concerned about the implications of a dragon attack?" I finally asked.

Ryleigh heaved a sigh. "Your source was unreliable at best. If he had proof, he would have gone to the highest-paying scandal sheet by now. Instead, he disappeared."

"He didn't feign the terror I saw, Ry."

"Perhaps not, but there are plenty of other explanations for his fear."

"Such as?"

"Hexes. Curses. Dark magic. Glamour." Ryleigh ticked each one off. "Hells, someone could have used the Hexed Quill and rewritten his memory. Shall I go on?"

I hadn't heard any whispers of the Hexed Quill aside from rumors Ryleigh uncovered during one of her earliest investigations centered on it, but I knew objects of untold power existed in the dark markets and personal collections across the realm.

My friend had a valid point, but I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that the informant had encountered something that terrified him. Something more powerful than glamour.

Ryleigh didn't agree—she felt it was a nefarious plot devised by a rival paper. But there was no need to rehash my theories again tonight. The



ball was almost over, and I had much to do before turning in for the night.

I scanned the room again. No scandal in the making other than Jackson's two left feet and too-bold hands.

"Did you get what you need for your article?" I asked. Ryleigh nodded. "Wonderful. Let's go, then. I want to go home and crawl into bed and stay there forever."

Ryleigh sighed but looped her arm through mine and started for the door. "If you're not careful, your eulogy will be 'she whittled away her days with work and sleep, boring her friends to untimely deaths.' I'm destined for much more than 'death by boredom.'"

I couldn't help but snort. "You poor thing. Your reputation will be destroyed by my need to provide food and shelter for my family. However will you carry on, being tarnished so?"

"Precisely, so you should come to the night district with me. Let's get a drink and gossip about Jackson."

"I'd rather offer myself up for a lobotomy."

"You know, it wouldn't be the worst thing for you to come out with me. We could go dancing. Flirt. Make terrible decisions we'll regret in the morning. Maybe you'll even meet a mysterious stranger and receive an invitation to the Seven Sins."

That was as likely as me publicly professing my love for our prince, but my friend was ever hopeful.

"Maybe another time."

Ryleigh didn't press the issue, though I knew she was disappointed.

I *wanted* to indulge in fun but couldn't. I saw what happened when my stepmother put herself above our family's well-being. My focus was on work and providing, and it was . . . not adventurous or exciting, but it was enough. Because it had to be.

As we worked our way toward the exit, the rake of rakes at last made his grand appearance on the opposite end of the ballroom, a buxom lover tucked beneath each arm.

The Prince of Gluttony tossed his head back, laughing in that bold,



annoying way that crinkled the corners of his eyes at whatever the lover on the right whispered in his ear.

Watching the nip he gave her neck, I could only hope she'd admitted to genital pox.

I didn't realize I'd stopped walking until Ryleigh snapped her fingers in front of me.

"See?" she said, nodding to the prince. "Does he look like he was recently attacked by dragons?"

No. He did not. But that little voice named Intuition told me to dig deeper.



After a long, cold trek through the city, with my gown and fur-trimmed cape hiked up to my knees to avoid ruining the hems, I slipped into our small home and closed the exterior door as quietly as I could manage, taking a moment to orient myself in the dark.

We'd run out of oil for the main room's lanterns days before.

A problem I needed to rectify soon, as my livelihood depended on it. Writing my articles in darkness was difficult at best, and any moonlight was almost always obscured by the heavy snowfall this time of year. The *Wicked Daily* was miserly with supplies and only granted us one piece of parchment per article, so any mistakes I made that caused me to use a second sheet came out of my nearly empty pockets. Drafting in the dark usually stole any spare change I might save if my stepmother or informants didn't take it all first.

"I need money for a new gown."

My stepmother's voice startled me.

I turned the key in the lock and slowly pivoted to face her. She sat on a threadbare settee we'd taken from our former life, spine straight, chin notched up to stare down her nose at me. Her pale blond hair was plaited and pinned as if she'd come from some grand event.

Even in the shadowy room I knew the expression she wore: disdain.



As if I were responsible for her poor choices.

I felt her attention drift over me as I took off my best cloak, and the tension in the small room grew.

She despised when I attended a ball, even knowing I only did so to report on them. Sophie Everhart felt it ought to be *her* waltzing and drinking with her former peers.

Demons aged much more slowly than humans, so Sophie still very much looked to be no older than thirty. I knew she was at least twice that. And, unfortunately, none the wiser.

When she'd met my father, I was just eight and my mother had only been gone for a month and he'd been in deep mourning. Sophie had loved his wealth, liked him, and barely tolerated me for reasons I'd never gleaned. Perhaps it was simply because I reminded her that she always came second in my father's heart, and Sophie didn't like losing to a commoner.

"We don't have any more coins to spare," I said, mindful to keep my tone pleasant. "I need to pay our rent this week. And we need oil. I can't afford to keep going through so many pieces of parchment and put food on the table."

I didn't bother pointing out that we'd be fortunate if we could purchase potatoes at the market this week; most everything else was out of the question.

Though I supposed Sophie didn't care much about that—when it came down to it, she knew I'd give up my rations for her and Eden, like always.

"You'll give me the coin for the gown, dearest. Or I'll have to sell off more of your father's trinkets."

Anger burned deep within me, but I swallowed it down. My father's belongings were my most prized possessions.

Really, all that was left was a small journal he'd used to tally items he'd sold, worthless aside from the sentimental value of his handwriting. And an earring and bracelet set he'd given my mother upon their betrothal, then passed on to me. Of which I'd had the misfortune of



losing the bracelet years before. Plus a few other items that held little value to anyone but me.

I tried a new approach, one that had the only chance at breaking her selfishness.

“Eden needs shoes. I thought we agreed that after our rent and basic needs were met, that would be our one indulgence this month.”

My stepmother slowly rose from her seat, looking far too innocent as she fingered the diamond necklace at her throat. I tried to keep my gaze from lingering on the enormous stone.

She could sell the necklace and earn us enough coin to not worry about food or shelter for the entire year. We’d probably have enough to even purchase a small house of our own outright, and we would no longer be indebted to any landlord.

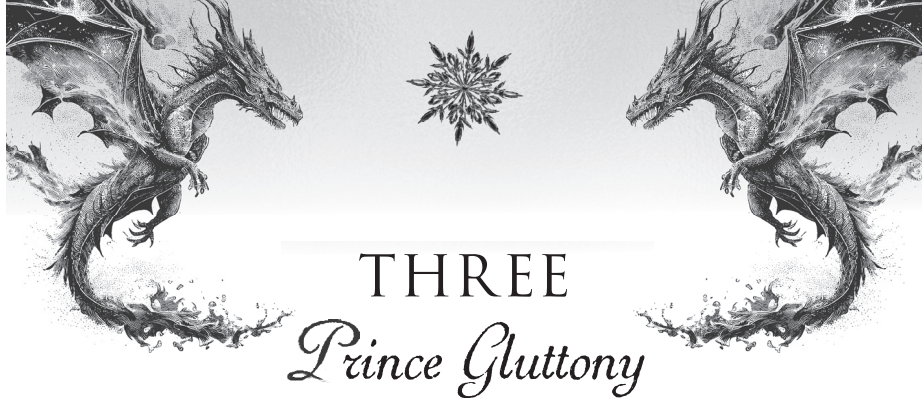
But that would require sacrifice on her part.

Instead, she wore the diamonds around our home, showing them off to the mice and other vermin that chewed through our walls, only to quickly scurry away, disappointed by the lack of crumbs in the pantry.

She caught me staring at the diamond and her lips curled up in a poor imitation of a grin.

“You misunderstood, dearest. The gown has already been ordered. Come up with the money this week, or I will. And it won’t be my trinkets that get sold.”





THREE

Prince Gluttony

AN INCESSANT POUNDING at my bedroom door roused me from the most sinful nightmare I'd ever had. I rolled onto my back, breathing hard, cock standing painfully erect as I stared at the silk-covered ceiling, trying to orient myself.

I couldn't decide if I was relieved by the interruption or annoyed to wake up right as I'd tied my lover to my bedposts and spread her milky thighs wide.

A shiver rolled down my spine. The things I'd do to punish that sweet, tight—

“Your Highness?”

Val, my second-in-command, knocked louder. As if I'd missed the first small seismic event she'd unleashed on my poor bedchamber door. Her tone was curt, annoyed. Which meant she'd had to track me down and was losing patience.

I glanced at the decadent cobalt silk covering the walls, the excessive number of silver pillows spilling onto the floor, the plush fur blankets. *Not* my chamber.

A foggy memory came back; I'd tumbled into the guest suite I reserved for lovers sometime after the Gunners' ball and before sunrise.

But not before I'd indulged in one too many bottles of demonberry wine, giving the demons of my circle the debauched prince they craved. It was best, I had decided after secretly visiting Wrath's circle to monitor his recovery, for me to make a public appearance to quell any more rumors

before they spread. My best spy, known simply as Shayde, reported whispers had somehow flitted past the almost impenetrable walls of Merciless Reach.

One of my hunters had been careless with who he or she had spoken to. It was a problem I needed to solve before any other whispers found their way to a certain gossip columnist.

I smiled at the memory of the night before. I'd taken my task to distract my circle very seriously. Aside from the issue of the hunter who talked too much, my brother was healing nicely, the dragon attack—brutal as it had been, no one was killed—seemed to be an isolated event, and it had been too long since I'd fed my sin through other means. They weren't nearly as potent as when I hunted an ice dragon, but they were sufficient for now.

Last night had certainly indulged my appetites.

A warm hand stroked along my bare chest, tracing the lines of my tattoo.

I'd forgotten I wasn't alone.

Crimson hair spilled across the lithe body of...

Callie? Cassie?

My head ached too much to recall many details. She slowly worked her way down the hard ridges of my stomach, her intention clear from her downward path.

If I closed my eyes, I could easily fall back into my dream.

Nightmare, I reminded myself. It was clearly a nightmare. One that started the moment I walked in and saw *her* at the ball, her gaze locking onto me like I was the scourge of the realm and she wanted nothing more than to rid our world of me.

It'd been almost an entire blessed week of avoiding the bane of the Seven Circles and her ruthless reporting. And then there she was. Miss Adriana Saint Lucent, in all her blue-haired, blue-eyed, hellion glory, scowling. I'd purposely brought two lovers with me, feeding into her distaste as I swept into the party, all arrogant, devil-may-care demon



prince, and pretended not to notice the dark look she aimed at me from across the chamber.

Knowing how much she despised my public displays gave me a perverse sense of elation.

There was nothing quite as satisfying as ruining your enemy's night.

I gently clasped Cassie/Callie's wrist before she reached her target, then rolled out of bed, thankful I'd kept the low-slung trousers on.

I cursed softly at my body's refusal to relinquish its twisted fantasy as I padded barefoot across the overly plush woven rug to the source of my annoyance.

The door nearly rattled off its hinges from Val's next thrashing.

I yanked it open, giving her my most innocent look as my raging hard-on persisted. You'd need to be barred from your senses to miss it, and Val was never out of her senses.

Most unfortunate for her in this instance.

Val cursed under her breath, then narrowed her eyes on my drowsy-eyed bedmate. Probably checking to see if she was decent under the furs. Which she was not.

I twisted just in time to see Callie/Cassie drop the blanket, exposing the globe of her generous breast and the taut bud at its tip, clearly trying to entice my second into indulging her in a morning tryst. I raised my brows in question, mostly to needle her.

Val rolled her eyes at the predictability.

"Rough night, Your Highness?"

Her white-blond hair was braided back from her angular face, her eyes the gleaming blue of most in the north. She had little use for my theatrics, which was ironic since she helped craft my image through her over-the-top parties and events that were designed to fuel my power.

"Waking your prince before the sun rises is poor form."

"Considering it's an hour *after* sunset, and you have a royal matter to attend to in the north tower, I figured you wouldn't mind the interruption."



“North tower” was our code for issues relating to ice dragons and all things north of Merciless Reach, including my hunters. Jackson was here for his debriefing.

Any lingering arousal from my nightmare vanished.

I grabbed my shirt from the chair I’d tossed it on, stepped into my boots, then flashed Cassie/Callie a wicked grin. “A pleasure, as always.”

There was only a slight furrow between her brows. One I doubted even Val picked up on.

I swept from the room before she could reveal one of my most closely guarded secrets.

I had a reputation to uphold, and if she blurted out the truth, everything I’d cultivated over the last few years would be ruined.



Val kept pace with me as we strode through the east wing and turned down the wide, brightly lit corridor leading to the north tower. Marble gleamed under our boots, the sound muffled by the cobalt-and-silver runner that spanned the center of the whole hall.

I barely registered the colorful collection of art in gilded frames we passed, the bouquets of freshly cut flowers, the scented candles, or the intricate sculptures displayed on top of columns evenly spaced on either side of the corridor. Every few feet platters and trays of decadent tarts and chocolates and other pastries tempted all who passed by to stop and sample them.

Almost every inch of House Gluttony was a feast for the senses, should any guest or servant wander down the expansive interior and wish to indulge.

Normally, my second snagged a flute of sparkling wine and filled me in on any reports that came in after a public appearance.

Today she fingered the knives strapped to her hip belt.

“Go on, then.” I glanced sideways at her. “What sage advice are you dying to impart?”



Her hand stilled on the hilt of one knife. Knowing Val, either she was considering stabbing me or she was trying to hide the fact that she was mulling something over.

Something she knew I wouldn't like.

"Miss Saint Lucent published another gossip column about you this morning."

"Did she at least wax poetic on how handsome I am?"

Without breaking her stride, Val flashed an incredulous look my way. We both knew there was no way in any of the hells that Adriana Saint Lucent would write something nice about me.

"Among other colorful terms, she called you an overconfident, ruthless rake."

My lips twitched. "At last. An acknowledgment of my finer qualities."

"Were you even aware that the two ladies you attended the ball with were sisters?"

"I don't recall much talking."

Val pressed her lips into a firm line. "She also said you were more slothlike than your brother. With all due respect, one day the circle might truly listen to her scathing commentary, and some will grow tired of your antics, even if they need your sin."

I exhaled. It was a fine line on which to balance—overindulging to feed my sinners, who in turn fed my power, without tipping them into another House of Sin, like envy.

I understood why Val worried about Adriana's thinly veiled disapproval; it could eventually impact the strength of my House. But, at present, I had other things to worry about.

Like whoever had been telling quite the thrilling tale of ice dragon attacks.

At the end of the corridor, we climbed the winding staircase leading to the tower in silence, the tension building with each step. Halfway up, Val finally said what I'd suspected had been on her mind all day.

"My advice remains. Either completely banish the reporter from your circle or bind her into a magical bargain to keep her silent. She's a liability."



It was a familiar debate between us, and one of the only times we didn't agree on how to proceed. I took her opinion under advisement but would handle the reporter how I saw fit.

Once we reached the top of the stairs, Val waited in the corridor outside the war room tower, spinning her throwing knives, ensuring no one got close enough to spy.

I entered the spartanly appointed chamber without preamble, the door slamming shut behind me hard enough to rattle the leaded-glass windowpane on the opposite end of the room. It was one of the few places in the castle that wasn't lavishly decorated; the tower room was designed for plotting and planning; there was no need for excessive frills here.

Jackson nearly tumbled out of his seat. He'd been leaning back, boots kicked onto my battered wooden table, arms crossed behind his head, humming a popular tavern song.

I hadn't snuck up the stairs; his instincts should have been sharper, honed. He had much to learn about remaining alert to his surroundings if he was to advance in the guild.

I'd put Felix in charge of testing all hopeful hunters in the field as part of the second phase of initiation, so Jackson still had time to learn.

In an odd, almost endearing way, he reminded me of a puppy, over-excited to be near you, big hopeful eyes, yet completely unaware that pissing on the floor was frowned upon.

He blinked slowly, as if coming out of some daydream.

He kept staring as if I was some figment of his imagination and not his prince. "Well?" I arched a brow, waiting.

Jackson's boots slapped against the limestone as he righted himself, jumping to his feet to offer a deep bow.

"Rise and report." My voice was steely, hard. It had the initiate hunter straightening at once.

"She was asking a lot of questions about the hunt."

I fought the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. "I assume you mean Miss Saint Lucent. When you give a report, always start with the subject,



then move on from there. What, *specifically*, was she asking about the hunt?”

“She knew there was an attack, that a prince was involved. Wanted to know what I knew, but I deflected like we’re trained.”

“Miss Saint Lucent specifically said a prince was attacked?”

Jackson nodded enthusiastically. “Pretty girl, horrendous flirt. She started talking about steaming innards when I told her about the barracks at night. Nearly killed my arousal.”

A smile *almost* twitched at the corners of my lips. It wasn’t meant to be friendly. And Jackson seemed to pick up on the nuance.

He blinked up at me, unsure about the tension building as I towered over him.

He’d made an error.

“What happens in Merciless Reach is supposed to remain there,” I said, voice pitched low. “How did that topic come about?”

“I can’t recall.” Crimson spread across his face. “But I do remember her bottom is firm.”

Maybe he wasn’t as astute as I thought.

“You groped her?”

He swallowed audibly. “We were dancing...”

“And? She suddenly asked you to grab her right there in the ballroom?”

“Not exactly, Your Highness.”

I stared until he dropped his gaze, the temperature in the room chilling by several degrees. All Princes of Sin could impact the environment around them with their displeasure. Jackson might have misread my expression, but no one misinterpreted what an icy room meant.

“Need I remind you that the royal hunting guild is a direct reflection of me? *Never* touch Miss Saint Lucent or any assignment again. As a matter of fact, never touch *anyone* without their permission again. Or I will be the one talking about steaming innards. And I promise I will do much more than simply talk about them, initiate hunter. Understood?”

“It won’t happen again, Your Highness.”

Given the trembling of his limbs and the stench of sweat permeating



the small, circular room, I believed him. I eased back a step. “What else did Miss Saint Lucent ask?”

Jackson reported each of her questions, his deflections, an unnecessary but semi-entertaining commentary of the way she carried herself on the dance floor, and an entire monologue about the spiked hot chocolate station’s lack of brandy-flavored marshmallows.

“If you were to advance in the guild, I expect discretion. No more storytelling to impress your friends. No discussing a hunt outside of the warded walls of Merciless Reach. If you ever start another rumor, accidentally or not, you will be banished from the guild and stripped of all memory of it. I will not tolerate any breach of rank.”

I stared until he seemed to shrink in on himself. I had a strong suspicion Jackson had been the one to start the rumors.

As soon as he finished promising he’d never speak of the hunt again, I dismissed him and strode over to the arched window in the tower, glancing down at the city below.

Snow fell in heavy drifts, covering the tiled roofs and cobblestone streets.

My gaze traced the closest avenue at the base of the mountain where House Gluttony sat, skimming over my favorite tavern, then drifted along the night district, before finally settling on printers’ row. The section of the city that housed each of the scandal sheets and bordered the working-class town houses.

The location of my sweet nemesis.

Val was right. Adriana Saint Lucent was a problem. Jackson might have boasted to his friends, his family, or his favorite bartender, but how Adriana found an informant who knew details of the hunt and the subsequent attack on Wrath so quickly was impressive.

And dangerous.

I needed to plot my next move carefully. Removing her from the playing board was priority number one.

“Your Highness?” Val cracked the door, popping her head inside. “Silvanus is here.”





Behind the stables of House Gluttony, isolated from the many eyes of my courtiers, an unmarked carriage rolled to a stop. Despite the long cobblestone drive, the wheels hadn't made a sound as they clattered up the hill, nor had the horses. The whites of their eyes flashed as they stamped the ground, nostrils flaring; they were no doubt unsettled by the unnatural silence.

Even my skin prickled in discomfort.

I waited until the magic that cloaked the vehicle dropped away, then pushed off the fence I'd been leaning against. I plucked up the lantern at my feet and made my way to the coach, my boots crunching over the hard-packed snow. The coachman jolted in his seat, his muscles taut as I emerged from the shadows. He remained that way until I lit the lantern and held it up.

With my hood tugged low over my brow and the quiet menace that radiated around me from waiting in the storm for nearly an hour, I understood the driver's fear.

But he hadn't drawn my ire. That honor belonged solely to his passenger.

The warm glow from the lantern defused the remaining tension as I stepped up alongside the carriage and flashed a robust coin purse his way.

"For your continued discretion, Niles."

"Always, Yer Highness."

I tossed the money to the driver and motioned to where Val still lingered in the shadows to grab our esteemed guest so we could get on with this already.

Before she reached the handle on the coach, Sascha stepped from the conveyance, flipping back the hood of her midnight-hued cloak, and glanced around to ensure we were alone. Snowflakes melted into her equally dark locks, but she didn't seem put off by the frigid weather.

She ran an unsettling gaze over me, her lips twisting up on one side. Tonight, I looked more assassin than prince, my crown was nowhere to



be seen, but my dagger glinted in the silvery wash of moonlight breaking through the storm clouds.

I set the lantern down.

“Forgetting something?”

The witch’s eyes glimmered with annoyance, but she dropped a deep curtsy and held it.

“Your Highness.”

“Next time you’re late, I’ll personally hunt you down, Sascha.”

The column of her throat moved as she swallowed.

“Apologies, Your Highness. It won’t happen again.” She held a gloved hand out, palm up. “Half up front, same as always.”

Val’s fingers grazed the hilt of her favorite throwing knife, not liking Sascha’s impertinent tone. Demons and witches were mortal enemies and tempers flared easily at any perceived slight.

I casually stepped between them.

I paid an obscene amount of coin for Sascha to forget how much our species hated each other, and to sweeten the deal of our association, I also permitted her to keep a permanent apothecary shoppe in the heart of my circle. Most witches lived in the Shifting Isles, but Sascha either had been banished from the coven, or chose to leave for reasons she hadn’t shared.

Like all Princes of Sin, I detected lies, so I knew she’d been sincere when she’d requested to stay in my circle and vowed to not be plotting any revenge.

I’d been dealing with this particular witch for decades and knew how to needle her the most without inciting a war.

I gave her a lazy grin that had her teeth grinding together. “Val? Hand the first coin purse to the lady.”

While the money exchange took place, I glanced toward the tree line where the hulking dragon waited. At my direction, Silvanus had flown in low, then walked the rest of the way to our meeting location to avoid anyone seeing him.

Since I sometimes hosted hunts here, dragons weren’t entirely uncommon on my grounds, but with the current rumor flitting through the



shadows, I wanted to avoid any unnecessary sightings. My stables were far enough from the castle proper and high enough on the hill to keep us hidden from any drunken courtiers who might have spilled from the current party into the gardens or terraces for clandestine trysts.

“Ready?” the witch asked, tying off the coin purse.

I nodded. “Sil. Care to join us?”

The dragon snuffed at my tone but lumbered into the clearing, the air chilling with his arrival. Both Val and the witch shuddered from the proximity to the creature.

Sascha stuffed the coins down her bodice, then whispered a phrase in Latin while making sharp motions with her hands that I swore were simply colorful curses in her native tongue.

She briskly walked over to where Silvanus watched with slitted eyes and repeated the motions, hurrying as her teeth began to chatter. Ice dragons were formidable even when they weren’t actively trying to be. Their very presence was harsh to anyone who wasn’t immortal.

Once Sascha finished, she burned an herb bundle and waved it from head to toe, a dewy sweat breaking across her brow.

“Done?” I asked, picking my nails with my dagger.

She held an ageless hand out, palm up again. I noted the slight tremble in her arm. Whether it was fear or simply the icy chill, I couldn’t quite tell.

“You’ve got a quarter of an hour.”

“For your spell and your silence,” I reminded her, then dropped the coin purse into her grasp. Val escorted her back to her carriage, leaving me and Silvanus to our meeting.

I eyed him for a moment, searching for any sign of aggression.

He huffed an annoyed snort at me.

If you wished to gaze upon my splendor, the coin you paid the magic leech was unnecessarily excessive, though unsurprising, given your sin.

“Witch. And don’t sass me. You know why you’re here.”

The attack.

“No, the masquerade I invited you to. Of course I’m talking about the



attack. Wrath is still recovering, and you better pray to your scaled gods that he doesn't demand retribution."

Your brother's temper does not concern me.

My mouth curved wickedly, showing a hint of teeth. It was not something dragons appreciated. Showing your teeth was akin to drawing a sword.

"When he skins you alive and sews your hide into pretty boots for his wife, you might feel differently."

At least you think they'll be pretty.

"You're in a mood, aren't you?"

He huffed again, the arctic puff sending shards of ice into the air, but remained silent. Stubborn, gods-damned creature. When he was a hatchling, he'd dig in his little claws much the same way. One hundred years later, not much had changed.

"Explain why Hectaurus attacked, or I'll be forced to turn you over to House Wrath."

As if I'd permit that, demon. The alpha believes he was infected by another creature he'd battled several moons before. One of the abominations that roam the northern woods. What happened with the rest of the pack was instinct.

There were many beasts and lesser demons who braved the brutal landscape. Getting a good description about any creature a dragon wanted to fight or kill was often a fruitless venture; they were almost entirely focused on the takedown, but it was still worth trying.

"What creature did he battle? Demon? Hell beast? Shape-shifter? Fae?"

Silvanus's tail swished across the snow. *One with claws and teeth.*

"Which narrows it down so nicely."

Silvanus ignored the sarcasm. *It matters not. The creature was destroyed in battle.*

A fact that was unsurprising. Most creatures didn't survive a true fight with a dragon. We'd been lucky. Shortly after Wrath had been taken



down, they took to the skies. My hunters had walked away with injuries, but all had come through it.

“Does your alpha believe this is an isolated incident or something we need to address?” I thought back to the fight. “Your eyes dilated strangely. Aloysius was rather aggressive too.”

The dragon batted his lashes at me dramatically.

What of my eyes now, great prince? Do they still frighten you?

I gave him a flat, unamused look that had him huffing. He was in rare form tonight.

Aloysius has a temper. And as for Hectaurus, it has been dealt with.

My eyes narrowed on the giant beast. “Exile?”

Silvanus gave a sharp negation of his pointed head, the diamond-like scales sending prisms of light across the snow.

By acting against the treaty, Hectaurus threatened the entire pack’s safety. Our alpha tore out his throat and fed until nothing but bones remained.

I kept my emotions from my face as that savagery sank in. Nature, I reminded myself, had its own laws. Predator or prey. Kill or be killed. One weak link threatened all. Mercy wasn’t in their frame of reference; the very concept of it threatened their survival.

“And what if the alpha is now infected or exposed to what Hectaurus had?”

Silvanus spewed a frosty breath.

The alpha is unchanged, protected by the healing magic of the alpha, and the move was justified.

It was a warning to us all. His law was broken, his punishment swift. An alpha cannot show weakness. Or mercy.

He sent this.

Silvanus stepped aside, beating his feather-covered wings once before revealing what he’d been hiding. *For the love of all things corrupt and unholy*, I thought, hiding my revulsion. An enormous dragon skull jutted up from the snow, the silver bone scarred from teeth marks.



A chill descended down my back.

It was gruesome. Hectaurus had been another hatchling I'd helped socialize. I hated how he'd turned on my brother, but to see his bones picked clean...

I yanked my attention back to Silvanus, who'd been watching me closely.

"I accept the peace offering. But the upcoming hunt will be postponed until the following full moon. I expect the pack will follow all pact rules from here on out."

It would weaken me slightly, but it was only for a month. I'd feed my sin elsewhere.

I will tell the alpha you are pleased. We look forward to sparring at the next full moon.

I dismissed the ice dragon and stared at the grisly gift his alpha had given me, mulling the information over. For all intents and purposes, it pointed to an isolated incident.

However, relief was not the foremost emotion I felt, given the reasonable explanation for the attack. If there was a creature brave or stupid enough to battle dragons on its own, and it was infected with some madness, there was no telling who or what it might have attacked before it met its end. Just because the creature was dead, didn't mean the threat was over.

I'd have Felix send a patrol into the woods to search for any creatures who seemed ill.

A shiver rolled down my spine. I decided that was due in part to the dragon skull gazing up at me, empty-eyed and brutalized. As soon as I got back to the castle, I'd call for him to be placed in the royal mausoleum, in a crypt to honor him.

My unease didn't cease with the plan to lay the dragon bones to rest. I had a feeling it was also due to the little issue of Miss Adriana Saint Lucent that I still needed to address.

First order of business: while Felix searched the north, I'd also set a select group of scholars on the hunt for any illnesses or diseases that



could impact ice dragons, just to confirm that was the cause of the attack. Then I'd ensure my circle remained blissfully unaware of the incident to avoid any unnecessary panic.

The immediate threat might indeed be over, but it would only take one article to tear away the feeling of safety I'd worked hard to instill in my circle and create hysteria.

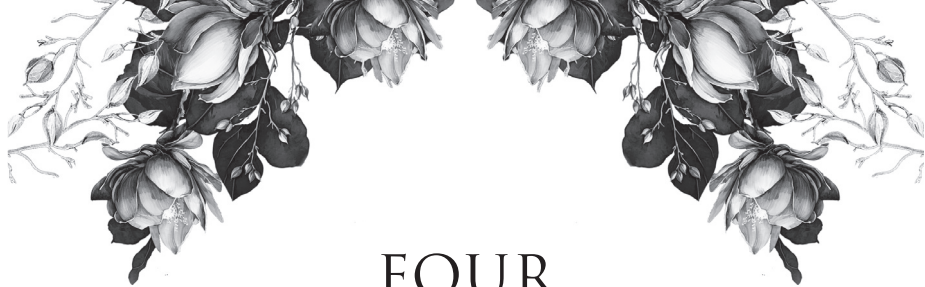
As I made my way back to the castle, I thought about what Jackson had said regarding the meddlesome reporter, and a plan slowly began to form.

It would take a few days to set up, but I knew exactly how to keep Adriana from spreading any gossip about dragons or looking into the story.

And best of all?

She'd positively *hate* it.





FOUR

Adriana

“DO YOU KNOW what this is, Miss Saint Lucent?”

A very red-faced Mr. Gray, one nearly bald and entirely without humor editor in chief of the *Wicked Daily*, slapped the envelope down hard enough to jolt me from the first draft of my latest scandal report, a particularly scathing article I’d written on my favorite nemesis.

Technically, my *only* nemesis, but still. He’d positively hate it, which suffused me with *such* a warm, radiant joy on this blustery afternoon.

It was a welcome relief after a difficult week of reporting. No more rumors of ice dragons attacking circulated, so I had to set that story aside for now. I’d still dig into it in my spare time, though, if only to quell my own curiosity.

Ryleigh was probably right; the informant could have been glamourised by a rival paper, hoping to discredit me. It wouldn’t be the first time another paper went to such lengths to boost their credibility while taking down the competition. Our paper had been doing quite well as of late, thanks in part to my ongoing antagonization of Prince Gluttony.

I glanced up, tucking a strand of pale blue hair behind my ear, wondering if Mr. Gray had hit his head, or if the question was meant to be rhetorical.

Unfortunately, my editor wasn’t known for engaging in intellectual debate and his brows remained stubbornly raised while he waited for my response.

I decided if one asked a stupid question, one surely expected a stupid answer in return. I set my quill down, giving him my full attention.

“It’s an envelope, sir.”

Impossibly, Mr. Gray’s face darkened to an unnatural shade of burgundy, his nostrils flaring at my — admittedly — impertinent response.

If he wasn’t careful, he’d have an embolism right there on the reporting room floor. Though given the nature of our business, one of the staff writers would put a scintillating spin on the tale, driving sales of the *Wicked Daily* to new heights across the realm.

Nothing sold quite as well as stories involving murder or sex or scandal, or better yet, tales containing all three. And if a Prince of Sin was involved? All the better.

It didn’t matter if the stories were entirely true; perception was all that counted.

Sounds of quills scratching on fresh parchment ceased, the five other staff reporters pausing at their desks, wooden chairs creaking like swaying trees in a forest as they leaned closer, always primed for potential gossip.

Julian Wren was the worst; he looked ready to sink his teeth into the growing tension and gorge himself on it. I half expected drool to dribble down his pointed chin. I subtly gave him a crude hand gesture, causing Ryleigh to stifle a laugh and the other reporters to snort.

Our office was a small three-room rental on the lower level of a two-story row house.

We had access to a basement that I was convinced was the chosen habitat of ghouls and refused to set foot down there lest I attract the undead and invite them home.

I had enough mouths to feed without adding any invisible interlopers.

The top floor was rented by a rival paper, making for interesting and hostile meetings in the shared stairwell. Our main room had six desks, all scarred, ancient, mismatched things collected when others tossed them out for trash.



The small back room held Mr. Gray's office, and the final space was a tiny water closet that always perfumed the air with a foul odor. The stench was suspiciously worse after Mr. Gray brought his newspaper in and shut the door for an obscenely long hour after a dairy-rich lunch.

No one had the intestinal fortitude to tell him *his* intestines clearly revolted against cheese. But I was getting closer to letting him in on that poorly kept office secret.

Though, given the steam practically coming from each of his orifices, today wouldn't be that day.

"It's much more than an envelope, Miss Saint Lucent," Mr. Gray gritted out. "Until further notice, you're off the gossip rags."

My ears began ringing. *Surely* I wasn't being fired. From a scandal sheet.

Brazen as I normally behaved, I *couldn't* lose this job. My sister and stepmother depended on my meager earnings to keep the roof over our heads.

Our landlord would toss us out without a second thought if I missed a payment. Out of necessity, not malice. Times were still difficult for a great many, not just my family. Sinners in our circle overindulged in various vices, which led to spending more than we saved. No one regretted their choices; it simply made day-to-day living a struggle for the majority.

"On what grounds am I being let go?"

"Why else? Your rivalry with the prince."

"It's a few unflattering gossip columns; they're hardly serious enough to create a rivalry, sir."

"Perhaps not to you, but His Highness is threatening to burn us to the ground."

Mr. Gray wrenched open the letter and pointed a meaty finger at the House Gluttony crest. I glared at the serpentine dragon winding itself around the stem of the chalice overflowing with grapes, its jeweled eyes slitted from overindulging.

"His Highness alleges your *egregiously* false reports are tarnishing not only his reputation, but his House of Sin, and demands immediate



action be taken, or else he'll hold the paper liable. We can't afford to keep our doors open if the prince makes good on his threats. I warned you to stop antagonizing him."

It was surprising that Axton at least knew the word *egregious*. Too bad the damned prince was ruining my life once again, it seemed.

Maybe *I* was the true glutton for punishment, a fact that irked me to no end.

I wanted nothing to do with the spoiled, self-absorbed prince aside from watching—or better yet, sparking—*his* downfall in the Seven Circles.

A feat that was proving to be harder than I'd expected.

Apparently, everyone in the realm adored his rakish antics and lavish parties, finding him completely charming and aloof.

Prince Gluttony was touted as "the perfect, unattainable bachelor." One who didn't care how often he wasted riches others dreamed of having, all in the name of feeding his sin.

He was the epitome of decadence and frivolity, of overindulging.

And I despised all he stood for.

One of his parties could feed my entire neighborhood for a month. And yet his guests hardly noticed the delicacies being served.

Not everyone in the Seven Circles came from wealth, but most of the working-class citizens in my neighborhood believed in impossible fairy tales. Stories of hope.

Rags to riches and the unrelenting idea that true love could overcome class, station, rank, and other societal barriers. As if those were simply small hurdles to jump over and not massive walls erected to keep the rich together in their own private world.

Once upon a time, I'd gotten swept up in that fantasy too.

A mistake I wasn't foolish enough to repeat.

My sister called me a cynic, but I saw it as being logical and not prone to delusion.

Prince Gluttony had divested me of any daydreams I might have secretly had nearly ten years prior, when I was just nineteen and only partly cynical.



Not that he knew or cared. His prospects were unending, his immortal life charmed.

Ryleigh had informed me and two other reporters just this morning there were *eight* new petitions circulating that called for the prince to host a competition to find a bride, for saints' sakes. Even Prince Lust, the premier prince of pleasure, hadn't drawn such notice among the match-making mothers in the Seven Circles. Prince Gluttony was all anyone seemed to discuss.

As if he were the prize of the century.

The whole damned realm was under his spell; even noble families from other circles wished to make an advantageous match for their heirs with him, regardless of whether their sins aligned.

Gabriel Axton didn't even have the decency to recall the role he'd played in my fall from grace all those years ago. But I would *never* forget.

"Since when is reporting on truth punished?" I challenged my editor.

Mr. Gray leveled me with an icy stare as he quoted, most impressively, "'That the prince would attempt to play coy and fail spectacularly is unsurprising. Gluttony is the least clever of his brothers.' Sound familiar?"

Of all the things I'd written, that was the most offensive? What of the newest article claiming he was more slothful than the Prince of Sloth? *That* was the highest insult I could sling, claiming Axton's sin was more like his brother's than his own.

The old door clattered open behind us, letting in a burst of frigid air that unsettled the papers on my desk, but I didn't remove my attention from my boss.

I waited for Mr. Gray to crack a smile or break into laughter at the absurdity, to tell me it was all in jest and to carry on with my latest draft. My articles might not be award-winning pieces, but they were entertaining and often helped sell our paper to keep us afloat.

When he didn't smile, I drew myself up so I was almost eye level with him.



“Where is the lie? He *did* fail at playing coy and, in my opinion, Gluttony is the least clever of the seven princes.”

Ryleigh coughed into her fist, but I was too annoyed to glance her way.

“Gluttony doesn’t have Wrath’s mind for war or strategy, or Envy’s cunning for games, or Pride’s exceptional focus. All he does is indulge his sin by raking and ravishing. Those are hardly qualities to boast about.”

“No one’s perfect, darling,” a deep voice interrupted from behind me. “But your opinion is personal, not factual.”

It was the sort of low timbre that teased and seduced, eliciting all sorts of dark fantasies.

I would know; it often fueled my fantasies of murder and dismemberment.

I stiffened for only a beat before my temper flared, my gaze clashing with Ryleigh’s across the aisle. *A cough?* I thought at her, knowing she’d read the incredulous look in my expression.

Ryleigh had the good grace to glance away, finding her own article suddenly *very* interesting as she fiddled with her inkpot and avoided my accusing stare.

I shot another withering look around the room. None of my wretched coworkers had warned me the bane of my existence had entered our small office. Not that they would. We were all in slight competition with one another to earn the most coin for the paper, which made for a rather hostile work environment. Ryleigh and I never competed, though.

My coworkers all bowed their heads in deference, my editor included.

I drew in a deep breath, resigned to what I had to do for the sake of propriety.

I slowly pivoted to face the saints-forsaken prince in question, hating that victorious grin curving his lips as my attention swept over him in cool assessment.

All six feet whatever inches of him lazily leaned against the doorframe, toned arms crossed in his fine suit, hazel gaze running over me in triumph, his wretched golden-brown hair mussed in a way that suggested he’d just come from someone’s bed.



The perfect image of royal debauchery and indulgence.

A legendary lover, if only in his own mind.

If he thought he'd won, he was sorely mistaken.

Our little war was only just beginning.

Out of protocol for his rank, I offered him a slight curtsy, standing again before he'd acknowledged it.

Wry amusement tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"We report on rumors and gossip, Your Highness. With all due respect, it's *all* hearsay and opinion."

"Yet your *opinion* is almost entirely fiction these days, Miss Saint Lucent."

"Are you claiming that other gossip columnists don't embellish their stories?"

"We're not discussing other columnists. Just you."

"Precisely the point, Your Highness. I'm the only one being sought out and punished for doing my job."

"So you admit your job has devolved into writing fiction, not fact."

"My job is to take the truth and make it entertaining. And yes, I'd argue that my opinion is perfectly valid for doing just that."

"Except when it's printed for the world to see and is not based in fact yet claimed as such. *That*, Miss Saint Lucent, is delving into the realm of libel."

The self-satisfied ass looked entirely too pleased with his argument. My coworkers and editor, however, appeared ready to launch themselves out of the line of fire.

Except, of course, for drooling Julian. The salivating leech furiously scribbled notes in his journal. I made a mental note to snatch it from his desk and burn it before the office closed.

I focused on the matter at hand, silently counting until the urge to throttle Prince Gluttony passed.

"If I may speak plainly—"

He snorted. "As if you've ever held your tongue. Don't start now, darling."



I drew in a deep breath, ignoring his antagonistic term of endearment.

“As I was saying, you’ve yet to prove me wrong in any of my assumptions. I do not believe you succeeded in playing coy. Please educate me on how that’s fiction.”

I crossed my arms, waiting.

A muscle in the prince’s jaw ticked but he remained quiet.

Victory had never felt more satisfying. I ought to have quit while I was ahead, but I couldn’t stop myself from twisting the knife a bit deeper.

“It sounds as if the true issue is that I’ve struck a nerve, Your Highness. Though I can’t say I’m surprised. The male ego is one of the most fragile things in the universe. One teeny, tiny hit and it shatters like glass. Maybe it’s not my fiction, but the truth you abhor. I doubt anyone tells you how they actually feel. In any aspect relating to your public or . . . private life.”

The devil-may-care smile didn’t falter, but the glint in his eyes darkened to something dangerous. He’d certainly understood the subtle jab at his lovemaking.

Gabriel Axton, Prince Gluttony, was well and truly annoyed now.

At least that was one emotion we grudgingly shared.

And to think it was often said that enemies couldn’t find commonality.

My lips twitched upward, his gaze narrowing on the movement. Axton was at least wise enough to note the action meant his battle was far from won.

As much as I would have loved to keep needling him for my own personal satisfaction, it was time to keep my mouth shut. There were too many important factors at stake, none of which included my pride, so I vowed to bite my tongue. For now.

Surely we could be in the same room for five minutes and not kill each other.

The prince seemed to feel differently. He straightened from where he’d been leaning, his body tensed like a predator ready to strike. Gone was any pretense of indifference.

He was all fire now, no ice.



“The truth is I couldn’t care less about your boring opinion pieces, Miss Saint Lucent. Libel is another matter altogether. I won’t tolerate outright lies being printed, especially when they negatively impact my House of Sin.”

“I—”

“Your opinion on what you believe I’ve done is just that, *an opinion*,” he continued, not waiting for my response. “Unless you interview me or are physically present and I’m explaining every last action aloud, you ultimately don’t know the first thing about the truth. Claiming you do is where you’re wrong. Writing *I believe* he is the least clever of the princes’ wouldn’t have been libelous. That would have alerted readers that you were speaking on opinion. Instead, you framed it as fact. And *that* is what I take issue with.”

I wanted to argue but couldn’t. He was damnably correct.

For once.

He gave me a cool once-over, his attention passing over my drab woolen dress, falling to my scuffed black boots, then flicking back up, his expression now unreadable.

The prince had never sought me out outside of any royal parties I’d attended for work before and clearly wasn’t used to seeing me dress like the commoner I was.

I’d heard rumors over the years, whispers of my being from the Shifting Isles, or distantly related to witches—which was especially damaging to my reputation and career since witches and demons were sworn enemies and the nobles would trust me even less to openly share gossip—so I’d gone out of my way to present myself as a member of the nobility, often fooling others into believing I’d grown up as privileged as they had.

It was necessary to gain entry to their world and secrets.

Times like this, however, revealed who I really was. And Axton seemed less than impressed—one more blasted sentiment we shared about each other.

I locked my jaw, remembering what was at stake: my family’s security. That was worth more to me than engaging in another disagreement.



“Perhaps you ought to think about joining House Envy,” he said, far too casually.

He was baiting me.

I knew it.

The office of nosy reporters who drew in a sharp breath knew it. And yet...

“Why would I do that?” I asked.

As if my question granted him permission to cross the room, the prince was suddenly before me, his lips almost touching the shell of my ear as he leaned in and dropped his voice.

“You’re clearly jealous, Miss Saint Lucent. If you’d like to visit my bed, say the word. I’d hate to leave you in such a distressed state when I can indulge your obvious desire.”

A fresh wave of annoyance crashed through me. Each time he opened his mouth, the prince only proved my assumptions of him being a self-absorbed ass correct.

He stepped back, turning his attention to Mr. Gray before I could do something foolish like step on his boot. Or drop him to his knees.

“Keep Miss Saint Lucent on staff—I imagine she’d do well with any subject aside from gossip. Perhaps an advice column since she has so many opinions to share.” He paused for a moment, immediately putting me on edge. “Romance might be her strong suit.”

I quickly wiped any horror from my expression, my pulse ticking faster as my editor flashed a look of interest my way, his bushy brows raised in thought.

An advice column on romance was the worst thing I could imagine writing each week.

I felt the unmistakable heat of attention on me and glanced Axton’s way. The cursed prince had been watching me carefully, his smile growing more wicked by the second.

All at once I understood.

Axton knew I’d hate that; he’d chosen his return fire carefully. He didn’t march in here today with the hope of taking my job; he’d come



with a much more cunning plan to destroy me. Proving he was far more strategic than I'd believed. Saints curse him.

I'd burn at the stake before I ever gave him credit for the clever move.

I had wondered why he'd come all the way to printers' row to deliver the message himself, when as far as I knew he'd never so much as stepped foot below the night district.

Now I understood with stark clarity. It was to see his plot unfold in real time. Probably so he could stroke himself later to the memory of his one great act of cleverness.

I immediately banished the image that came on the heels of that thought.

"In fact, Mr. Gray," he went on, eyes sparkling with silent laughter the madder I became, "I rather like the idea of citizens of my circle writing in to Miss Match. Or Lady Lovestruck. I'll leave the details to you. And Miss Saint Lucent, of course. She *is* the one with the wildly creative imagination, after all."

"Your Highness, I promise my imagination is hardly worthy of note."

"Don't be coy, Miss Saint Lucent. Just last week Jackson Rose was telling me all about your time together; you made *quite* the impression on him at the Gunners' ball."

My face heated. I was going to borrow a shovel and bury Jackson in a deep, dark hole.

"Well, it looks like we're done here." He flashed another victorious grin my way. "Have a *wonderful* evening, Miss Saint Lucent. I so look forward to reading your romantic advice. It might come in handy. What with all my ravishing and raking and all."

Prince Gluttony winked at me, then swept from our office as quickly as he'd come, leaving me quietly fuming.

I stared after him, mind racing. Of all the nefarious plots he could devise, the devil had chosen my personal hell with devious precision.

I wasn't sure if I should be impressed or run screaming into the abyss.

Unless I could think of a better alternative right away, I was well and truly trapped.

"That's settled, then," Mr. Gray said, striding toward his office at the



end of the room. “We’ll collect some questions from staff shortly and print the first Miss Match article in two days.”

I rushed after my editor.

“With all due respect, I know nothing of giving relationship advice, sir.”

Mr. Gray paused outside his door, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Then I suggest you sort that out before we go to print. You did have hopes of being a novelist, did you not?” he asked. “That skill might be useful. Pretend they’re characters.”

Once, I’d imagined myself creating thrilling mysteries to escape to, sharing them with the world. Now my time was devoted entirely to keeping my family fed and sheltered, not indulging in fanciful dreams that might never come true.

When I remained silent, my editor shook his head, disappointment plain on his face.

“I expect the first draft on my desk tomorrow afternoon, Miss Saint Lucent. If you miss the deadline, don’t bother coming to work.”

