

BREAK THE BONDS THAT BIND YOU

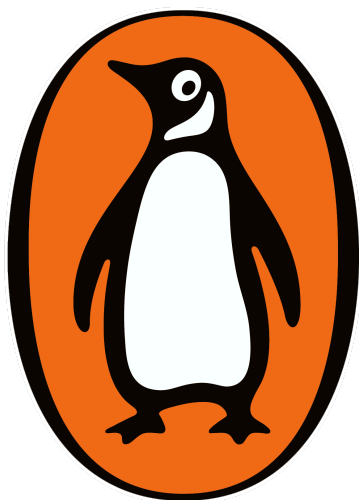


GLEAM

THE PLATED PRISONER SERIES

RAVEN KENNEDY

THE TIK TOK SENSATION THAT HAS SOLD HALF A MILLION COPIES



GLEAM

RAVEN KENNEDY



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raven Kennedy is a California girl born and raised, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds. The Plated Prisoner Series, a dark fantasy romance, has already sold in over a dozen countries and is a #1 international bestseller with over 1 million copies sold to date. It was inspired by the myth of King Midas and a woman's journey with finding her own strength. Her debut series was a romcom fantasy about a cupid looking for love of her own. She has since gone on to write in a range of genres. Whether she makes you laugh or cry, or whether the series is about a cupid or a gold-touched woman living in King Midas's gilded castle, she hopes to create characters that readers can root for. The Plated Prisoner series is being adapted for series by Peter Guber's Mandalay Television.

You can connect with Raven on her social media sites, and visit www.ravenkennedybooks.com

*To those who were kept in the dark.
May you smile at the sun.*





AUREN

Ten years ago

The sky doesn't sing here.

It doesn't dance or play, it doesn't sink against my skin with a sweet perfume, or breeze through my hair with a fresh kiss.

Not like it did in Annwyn.

The rain weeps down, and water floods the ground, but even that doesn't sweep away the stench of this place. The sun dips and the moon crests, but there is no harmony with the goddesses slumbering in their eggshell stars. This horizon is tepid and lacking.

Nothing feels as alive here as it did at home. But then, maybe those are just the make-believe memories of a little girl. Maybe Annwyn wasn't like that at all, and I've forgotten.

If I have, I'd rather keep pretending. I like the way it is in my mind—overflowing with a vivaciousness that saturated my every sense.

Here, my senses are saturated too, but not in a good way.

Derfort Harbor is still drenched from this morning's showers. Everything here is always waterlogged from either the sea or the sky. Sometimes both. There isn't a single wood-pitched roof that isn't sodden or a weathered door that isn't peeling from the oppressive moisture.

The clouds often pull in storms from the ocean and toss them here. There's nothing cleansing about the rain, though. It simply dumps back into the sea that fed it, reeking of fish while it floods the muddy streets.

The air is claggy today with a humidity that soaks through my dress and weighs down my lungs. I'll be lucky if my clothes dry once I hang them up tonight, lucky if my hair is anything other than damp and frizzed.

But no one looks at my hair or clothes anyway. Greedy eyes always fall against my gold-pinched cheeks, roam over my skin that's ten shades too gleaming to be real. That's why I'm known as the painted girl. The golden orphan of Derfort Harbor. No matter what rags I wear, there's absurd richness that sits beneath my sodden clothes. A worthless wealth of my skin that does nothing, yet has caused *everything*.

All along the market street, the vendor tarps are still dark, burlap sacks saturated, carts covered and dripping. I close my eyes and breathe, trying to pretend that I'm not smelling the sharp iron from the anchor maker. I'm not smelling the drenched wooden planks on the moored ships. I'm not smelling the crates of flailing fish mixed with the brined sand from the shore.

My imagination isn't quite enough to stave off the stench.

Of course, the air would probably smell a little better if I weren't sitting on top of the pub's refuse bin. As terrible as the scent of old ale is, this spot is one of the driest and most shadowed, making it valuable real estate.

I shift my weight on the metal lid as I lean against the building at my back, gaze scanning the market alley. I shouldn't be here. I should keep moving, but even that's a major risk. Zakir has too many eyes in the city. It's just a matter of time before I'm caught, whether I stay in one spot or not. I'm hiding from him, from the duties he's placed upon me. I'm hiding

from his thugs who roam the streets, keeping watch on the beggar children—not for their safety, but to make sure no one else encroaches on Zakir’s territory or steals from his thieves.

I’m hiding in a place where there is no hope of staying hidden.

Like a tug against my eyes, my gaze lifts, going between two vendor tents to see the ocean beyond. I watch the sails of the docked ships, their shapes like tethered clouds that try to pull toward the sky. My stomach squeezes at the sight of them, at their taunt of escape. A bobbing temptation of freedom that’s right there on the horizon.

It’s a lie.

Stowaways are punished severely in Derfort, and I’d be a fool to try it. More than a handful of kids at Zakir’s *have* tried it, and didn’t live to tell the tale. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the way the gulls pecked at their flayed flesh from where they hung, their bodies left to sway in the tidal breeze and pucker beneath salted rain.

That smell, above all others, is by far the worst.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?”

I flinch so badly that I scrape my arm on the rough limestone bricks at my back as Zakir appears in my shadowed spot, looming over me like a threat.

Brown eyes glare out of a ruddy face, his chin prickled with week-old hair like spines on a cactus. I can smell the alcohol on him, so strong it overpowers the trash beneath me. He’s probably been into the cups for hours.

“Zakir.” I can’t keep the guilt out of my voice, am barely able to look him in the eye as I slide down from my spot to stand in front of him.

He puts his hands on his hips, making the sage-colored vest he’s wearing gape at his hairy chest. “You got wax in your ears? I said what the hell are you doing?”

Hiding. Dreaming. Pretending. Avoiding.

As if he can hear the silent answer in my head, he sneers at me, teeth stained from pipe smoke and pints of henade. Lips cracked from too many curses and verbal kicks and cruel deals.

Ever since the long moon came and marked the new year, Zakir’s duties for me have changed. By his count, I’m fifteen years old. An Orean adult.

“I was just ...” An excuse doesn’t come to my tongue quick enough.

Zakir slaps me on the back of my head, making my neck snap forward. It's the only place he ever hits me now. My gold skin bruises a dark, burnished color rather easily, but no one can see the marks beneath my hair.

"You were supposed to be at *The Solitude* an hour ago!" he snarls, getting down close to my face. "Bastard came in hollering to me that you never showed, and the guy I had watching you said you must've snuck out the back door."

Wrong. I climbed out the broken window in the cellar. Easier for me to make my escape down the back street behind the inn. The other option would've been the side alley, and that's always full of feral dogs fighting for the scraps left in the bins.

"You fucking hearing me?"

I grab my dirty skirts and squeeze, as if I'm trying to pop the sound right out of his voice until it bursts like a grape. "I don't want to go to *The Solitude* again."

My voice trundles out like the roll of an uneven marble across the ground. I don't even like to *think* about the inn, let alone talk about it. Despite its name, solitude is the last thing I'll find there. There, where my innocence was stolen like grubby fingers dipped into strangers' pockets on the street. All I'll find in *The Solitude* is the oppression of unwelcome gazes, the trappings of repulsive touch.

Zakir's face hardens, and I think he's going to smack my head again with his meaty, ringed fingers, but he doesn't. I wonder how much of my hard-earned coin went into buying him those encrusted gold gems.

"I don't give a fish-frying shit what you want. You work for *me*, Auren."

Desperation tightens my throat, cutting off my air with its grip. "Then send me back to the streets to beg on the corner or pickpocket the marketers," I plead. "Just don't send me there. I can't do *that* again." My eyes inadvertently fill up. Another thing in Derfort that floods.

Zakir sighs, but that hateful sneer doesn't loose from his face. "Ech, don't give me that weepy act. I kept you off your back for this long, which is more than I can say most flesh traders would've done. If I'm not making a profit off you, then I have no need to keep you," he warns. "You got it good with me. Remember that, girl."

Good.

That word trills through my head as I think of my life for the past ten years. Lots of other kids have come and gone, but I've stayed the longest

because my strange golden skin attracts him the kind of attention that he's made profitable. But not once, in all of that time, would I ever say I've had it *good*.

Forced to beg on the streets all day and pickpocket at night, I had to learn to make my strange looks work for me while I roamed the port city. It was either that or I had to clean Zakir's house top to bottom, scrubbing surfaces until my fingers cracked and my knees hurt. Though, there was never really getting the cellar clean. It always dripped with cold and mildew and loneliness.

There are usually ten to thirty of us down there, crammed together beneath rotting blankets and old sacks. Kids sold and purchased and worked. Kids who never play or learn or laugh. We sleep and we earn coin, and that's pretty much it. Friendship is always squashed, nonexistent, while meanness and a competitive edge is constantly cultivated under Zakir's watchful eyes. Just dogs kept salivating to fight each other over a bone.

But I have to look on the bright side. Because even though it's not good ... it could be worse.

"What'd you think was gonna happen?" he huffs out, like I'm a naive idiot. "You knew this was coming, because you've seen the other girls. You know the rule, Auren."

I look him steadily in the eye. "Earn my keep."

"That's right. You earn your keep." Zakir checks me over, gaze stopping on my muddied hem as a frustrated cough puffs up from his pipe-burnt throat. "You're a damn mess, girl."

Normally, being a mess is part of the orphan beggar child act, but I've moved on from that. Being fifteen meant Zakir changed my clothes from patched up scraps to ladies' dresses.

When he brought me my first dress, I thought I looked pretty. I was actually stupid enough to think he'd given it to me as a birthday gift. There were real pink laces at the front and a bow at the back, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen since I've lived here.

But that was before I realized that pretty dress meant something ugly.

"Get to *The Solitude*," Zakir tells me, his tone elbowing aside any room for argument.

Dread settles in my stomach as his eyes drag back up. "But—"

A yellow-nailed finger points in my face. "The customer paid for you, and that's what he'll get. Locals have been waiting years for the painted

gold girl to grow up. You're in high demand, Auren. A demand that *I've* grown even more by making them wait—another fact you should be grateful for.”

Good. Grateful. Zakir uses these words, but I'm not sure he knows what they mean.

“Because of me, I've made you the most expensive whore in Derfort, and you're not even in a brothel. The saddles are boiling with jealousy.” He says this like it's something to be proud of, as if he's giddy that even other whores don't like me.

He scratches at a spot on his cheek, eyes gone greedy. “The gold-painted beggar girl of Derfort Harbor is finally old enough to buy for a night to get between her legs. I won't let you ruin my chance at earning those coins *or* ruin my reputation on the streets,” he says, voice as rough as storm-chopped waters.

My fingernails prick into my palm as I fist my hands, and the space between my shoulder blades tingles, itching. If it would make any difference to scrape off my skin and pluck out my hair, I would do it. I would do anything to get rid of the gleam of my body.

There have been nights where I've tried to do just that while the other kids slept. But unlike the rumors that run rampant in Derfort, I'm not painted. This gold will never come off, no matter how many times I wash or scrub myself raw. The new skin and hair always grows in gleaming just like before.

My parents called me their little sun, and I used to be proud of the shine. Yet in this world full of gawking Oreans and a bereft sky, all I want to do is go dull. To finally find a hiding spot where no one can find me.

Zakir shakes his head at me, eyes bloodshot from late nights of gambling, a perpetual cloud of smoke hovering around him like always. He seems to hesitate for a moment before he leans back with his arms crossed and says, “Barden East has his feelers out for you.”

My eyes go wide. “Wh-what?” I ask, the fearful whisper puffing past my lips.

Barden is another flesh trader here at the port. He runs the eastside—thus the second name that he adopted—but unlike Zakir, who's somewhat tolerable, I've heard that Barden is ... not.

Zakir had the decency to wait until I was considered an adult before he made me a saddle for passing sailors and townies. But word around Derfort

is that Barden is the worst kind of flesh trader, who has no such decency. He doesn't deal in punitive child beggars and pickpockets. His wealth is made from cutthroats and pirates, from flesh trading and whoring. I've never traveled to the east side, but it's rumored that the way Barden runs his business makes Zakir look like a saint.

"Why?" I ask, though the word comes out garbled, throat too tight with a threatening noose that seems to be wrapped around my neck.

He gives me a dry look. "You know why. It's for the same reason the saddles in the brothel started painting their skin different colors. You have a certain ... *appeal*, and now that you're a woman ..."

Bile rises to my throat. Funny how it seems to taste of seawater. "Please don't sell me to him."

Zakir takes a step forward, crowding me against the side of the building. My neck prickles with his nearness, the skin along my spine jumping like my fear wants to sprout out.

"I've been lenient, because out of all the others, you've always made me the most on the streets," he tells me. "People loved giving coin to the painted girl. And if they didn't, you could distract them enough to pluck it from their pockets later."

Shame crawls up my throat. What would my parents think of me if they saw me now? What would they think of the begging, of the stealing, of the scrapping in fistfights with the other kids?

"But you're not a kid anymore." Zakir runs his tongue over his teeth before spitting a polluted glob onto the ground. "If you disobey me again, I'll wash my hands of you and sell you to Barden East. And I'm telling you now, if that happens, you'll *wish* you'd stayed with me and behaved."

Tears prickle in my eyes. My back muscles flinch so hard that my spine stiffens.

Zakir digs into the pocket of his vest and pulls out his wooden pipe. Once he puts it in his mouth and lights up, he levels me with a look. "So? What's it going to be, Auren?"

For a split second, my eyes move past him to look over his shoulder, to the ships at the harbor again. To those billowing sail clouds tied to the sea.

I was my parents' little sun.

I used to dance beneath a sky that sang.

Now, here I am, a painted whore in the slums of a sodden harbor, with filth in the air and a silent cry in my throat, and no amount of rain will ever

wash the curse of my goldenness away.

Zakir sucks on his pipe, blue smoke wringing out through his teeth with a grunt. He's getting impatient now. "For fuck's sake. All you have to do is lie there."

My body shudders, tears threatening to spill. That's what the first man told me. "*Just lie down on the pallet, girl. This will be quick.*" He dropped a coin on the mattress when he was done with me. I left it there, metal worn and tainted with the passing of too many hands, though it wasn't nearly as tarnished as I was.

Just lie there. Just lie there and chip away, little by little. Just lie there and feel yourself die from the inside out.

"Please, Zakir."

My plea makes his teeth grind on the tip of his pipe. "It's going to be Barden, then? You'd rather live on Eastside?"

I shake my head emphatically. "No."

Not even the people on Eastside want to live on Eastside, but most of them have no way of leaving. With trash at my back, puddles at my feet, and my owner blocking my way, I know the feeling. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

He jerks his chin. "Then get to work. *Now.*"

Hanging my head, I squeeze past him and start to walk down the street while my heart pounds in my throat and thrums down my spine. Two of Zakir's cronies step in front of me to lead the way, while he follows behind like an ominous shadow, steering me to my decrepit fate.

My shoes stick to the washed out gravel, but I barely notice when pebbles lodge inside, gritty pieces stabbing the soles of my feet. I barely notice the busy market either, full of shouting and haggling and arguing. I don't look at the ships again, because that taunt of freedom is just too much to bear. So, I search for that platitude of numbness inside of me and try to pretend that I'm anywhere but here.

I drag my feet, but it doesn't matter how slowly I walk to *The Solitude*. I still end up at its white-washed door, still see my bubbled reflection in the crude arrangement of bottom-cut bottles cemented in place like a window. The poor person's stained glass.

My heart hammers so hard that my feet waver, as if I were standing on one of those ships instead of solid ground.

Zakir steps up to my side, and I feel a breath of his blue smoke blown against my ear. It's the same color as those bottles. "Remember what I said. Earn your keep, or I'll let Barden East have you."

With a stern look, he walks off, a hand in his pocket jangling the coins I've made him, while two more of his men materialize and follow like guard dogs. The others stay behind with me and take up stances by the door, herding Zakir's sheep. I already know without looking that there will be another man stationed at the back.

The spindly man on my left looks me up and down, the gray pallor of his face mismatched with his sallow eyes. "Hear Barden East likes to try out his whores first. Makes 'em go through tests before he lets 'em work," he says, causing the other man to trudge out a snort.

I stare at the door, stare at the blue glass bottoms that remind me of the circular eyes of a spider, knowing I'm going straight into its mouth, already trapped in the web Zakir threw me into.

I try to remember.

I try to remember the lyrical pitch of my mother's voice. The breeze through the wind chimes that hung outside my window. I try to remember the sound of my father's laugh. The way the horses nickered in their stalls.

But a blink goes by, and it's all drowned out with the sound of the men taunting me. With the market banging in my skull, pitched in shouts and clacking, just as the clouds crack and start to pour again, drenching us all with fetid water.

No, the sky doesn't sing here.

And every year that passes, the song of home gets drowned out from my memory just a little bit more, washed away to a polluted seashore rife with cragged cruelty.

Just lie down on the pallet, girl.

I shun the ships sailing away at my back, shun the choice that is no choice at all, between the East and the West, between Barden and Zakir. Between life and death. Then, with a raindrop on my cheek that might have spilled from my eye, I open the door and walk into the inn.

And I die, just a little bit more.



CHAPTER 1

AUREN

Truths are like spices.

When you add some in, it means you have more layers to digest. You get a taste of things you were missing before. But if you add too many, life can become unpalatable.

But when those truths are repressed for too long, when you realize you've grown accustomed to the bland lies, there's no hope of removing the overpowering taste from your tongue.

And right now, my mouth is charred with the revelation I have to somehow swallow down.

You're King Ravinger.

Yes, Goldfinch, I am. But you can call me Slade.

Rip, Ravinger—whoever he is—he watches me choke on his truth.

What do you do when someone isn't who you thought they were? In my head, Rip and the king were two very different males. King Ravinger was an evil I didn't want to face. Someone with a foul power that I wanted to stay far away from.

And Rip was ... well, *Rip*. Complicated and dangerous, but someone I considered as a sort-of ally who taught me a lot in our short time together. Someone who both scared and irritated me, but who I came to care for.

But now I have to reconcile all of those previous thoughts. Because the person who pushed my buttons and forced me to admit what I am, the male who kissed me in his tent and stood on the snowy shore of an arctic sea to watch a mourning moon ... he's someone else.

He's the king everyone fears. The ruler who delivers rotted corpses like they're bouquets of daisies. He's arguably the most powerful monarch that Orea has ever seen, because he's *fae*, and he's been hiding in plain sight.

I've been sleeping in his damn tent, just feet away from him every night, without knowing who he really is.

I'm unable to sift through all of the layers that this truth brings. I'm not sure I'm in a state of mind to properly pick it all apart and digest it, and I don't even know if I *want* to.

No, right now, I'm too pissed.

I glare at him. "You ... you fucking *liar*." I can hear the scorching vehemence burning my words as surely as I can feel their flames light up my eyes. It consumes me in a second.

Rip—Ravinger, whoever he Divine-damned is—rears his head back, like my anger is a shock to him. His body tenses, the malevolent spikes of his arms reflecting off the dim light of the room. A room that feels entirely too small all of a sudden. "Excuse me?"

I stand in the doorway, and my fingers bunch into fists at my sides, as if I can take the reins of my anger and steer it galloping forward. I take a step into the cage room toward him, my exhausted ribbons trailing after me like sickly worms writhing on the floor.

"You're the king," I say, shaking my head like I can erase this fact. I *knew* his aura was strange. I knew I could feel an underlying power there, but I never would've guessed the depth of his trickery. "You tricked me."

Rip levels me with a glare. The black coal of his eyes looks like it wants to catch the flame of mine. He looks like he's ready to burn in my anger.

Let him.

“I could say the same,” he retorts.

I bristle. “Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me. You *lied*—”

“So did you.” Ire bleeds through his expression, making the gray scales along his cheeks glint in the dark, the sharp face of a predator bearing down on me.

“I concealed my power. There’s a difference.”

He scoffs. “You hid your power, your ribbons, your *heritage*.”

“Being fae has *nothing* to do with it,” I snarl.

He eats up the remaining space between us in three long strides. “It has *everything* to do with it!” Rip seethes, looking like he wants to reach out and shake me.

I lift my chin, refusing to cower, imagining my ribbons rising to punch him in the gut. If only they weren’t so limp and exhausted. “You’re right,” I reply with forced calmness. “I’ve had to hide in a world that wasn’t my own for twenty years without seeing a single fae, until I met you.”

Some of the hardness leaves his face for a split-second, but I’m not done. Not nearly.

“You pushed me relentlessly to admit what I was.”

Irritation flashes through his features, lightning to strike the hollow ground. “Yes, to help you—”

My eyes narrow. “You forced truths out of me while concealing yourself. You don’t think that’s hypocritical?”

Rip’s teeth grind together so hard I wonder if he’ll break a tooth. I hope he does, the lying bastard.

“I couldn’t trust you,” he replies coolly.

A whip of a scoff comes out of my mouth, the sound of it punishing and unkind. “You self-centered ass. You stand there and talk about how *you* couldn’t trust *me*?”

“Careful,” he says, baring his teeth in a wicked smile. “There’s a saying about rocks and glass houses.”

“I don’t live in glass, I live in gold. So I can throw whatever damn rocks I want,” I snap.

“Right. I should probably expect nothing less from you.”

My back goes rigid. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that you’re always so quick to judge me,” Rip replies with cool indifference. “Tell me, did you call Midas a liar as well?” he challenges, his

spiked brow lowering over his eyes. “How long has he been claiming your power as his own? How long have you been *lying* to everyone about him?”

“We’re not talking about Midas.”

A cruel laugh snakes out of him, ready to bite, to hurt. “Of course not, right? Your golden king can do no wrong,” he says scathingly.

My nails dig into my bare palm so hard that I nearly break the skin. “You had no right to be angry when I chose to come back to him. Not when you’ve deceived me from the start.”

A terrible growl escapes his chest, like he tried to hold it back and failed. “He’s deceived you too!”

“Exactly!” I scream, and the sound of it, the utter emotion that comes barreling with it, makes him stagger back. “I am *so* damned tired of being deceived! The lies, the manipulations. You tried to pretend that you were so much better than him, but you’re exactly the same.”

Rip’s expression goes as dark as night, and my stomach clenches. “Am I?” His reply is a strike, but his eyes land the blow.

A hot, heavy quiet drops between us. The dead-weight of a corpse smoldering at our feet. The smoke of our discretions clouds our sights of one another.

“Thank you for explaining exactly what you think of me.” His aura slinks around him, and since I know now that it contains the repressed steam of his festering power, it makes me want to run and hide. “It’s a good reminder of just how skewed your perceptions are.”

I hate him. I hate him so much right now that my eyes burn. They burn until I can’t hold back the lick of flame anymore. A scorching tear leaks down my cheek, and his eyes follow it until it drips off my jaw.

“Maybe my perceptions wouldn’t be so *skewed* if the people I trusted didn’t constantly trick and twist and lie,” I retort, bashing away another stray tear.

Behind him, set in the shadows of the room, the broken cage mocks me. It’s a reminder. Of exactly what can happen when someone I trust misleads me.

“Auren ...” There’s a sound there, in his voice, one that I can’t bear to hear.

I look down, focusing instead on the puddled shadows that have formed at our feet, a breath shaking through my chest. “You stood there and kissed me and tried to make me choose you, when I didn’t even know the real you

at all,” I say, voice gone flat as I look back up at him. “You made me feel like the worst person in the world for choosing him, even though I warned you over and over again that I had to.”

Rip’s head jerks at that last part, eyes narrowing in the dark. “You *had* to?”

I regret my slip of the tongue immediately.

Keeping a stoic expression, I say, “I want you to leave.”

That dark, shadowy anger returns to his face, the lines of his power writhing against his bristled jaw. “No.”

My heart squeezes tighter than my fists. I hate that part of me still feels relieved that he’s here, as if I’m safe now, as if he’s still my ally.

He’s not.

I have no allies, and I need to remember that. Whatever I thought Rip was to me, that’s gone now. I have no one.

Uncurling my fingers, I raise a hand and drag it down my face. I’m so tired. So damn tired of the lies. His. Midas’s. *Mine*. I’m wrapped in deceit and molded in manipulation, stuffed full of everything I’ve done to survive.

I want it all to unravel. I want to come out of the tangles that have coiled around me before I become mummified with them.

The tension rolling off Rip’s shoulders is so tight that he’s practically vibrating with it, a cloud of thunder ready to roil. “So that’s it? I’m to bear the brunt of your anger, while you continue to fall at Midas’s feet?”

My eyes flash. “What I do is no concern of yours.”

“*Dammit*, Auren—”

I cut him off. “What do you want, Rip? Why are you here?”

He crosses his arms, spikes sinking beneath his skin in a fluid, effortless motion. “Me? I was just going for a walk.”

“Oh, good, another lie to add to the list,” I say sardonically. “Should I grab a quill and paper to keep track?”

Rip sighs and scrubs his hands down his face in a rare crack of his stony facade. “You’re overreacting.”

My entire body goes still as I gape at him. “I just watched you change from the king to the commander as quickly as someone pulls on a coat,” I say pointedly. “A few hours ago, you rotted Ranhold’s front yard just by walking, and you threatened the city with war. Behind me right now, I’m fairly certain there’s a roomful of guards that you killed. You just admitted

to deceiving me the entire time I knew you, and yet ... you think I'm *overreacting*?"

The muscle in his jaw jumps. "Tell me, which one of those things bothers you the most?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm not a fan of lies, but mindless murder is pretty up there too."

"It wasn't mindless."

I swallow, trying to deal with the confirmation that there are definitely dead guards in the next room. "Did you rot them?"

"I'm far more interested in *your* power," Rip replies, and my stomach drops as he turns to look at the woman's statue inside the cage. "Is that the first person you've turned gold?"

"It was an accident," I blurt, because I'm *not* a mindless murderer.

His eyes flick back to me in victory, gaze sweeping my face, and I want to kick myself for just confirming his assumptions.

Realization dawns over his expression, making his eyes glint in curiosity. "An accident ... Is it by touch, then? Is that why you always stay covered? Are you unable to control your own power?"

His condescending questions make shame pool in my stomach. Coming from the male who seems to have insurmountable control over his magic, I shouldn't be surprised that he picked up on my inadequacy, but it still stings.

"How does it work?" he presses when I don't answer.

"There you go again, trying to rip truths out of me that you have no right to," I say. "Is that why they call you Rip?"

"You let people call you the gold-touched saddle," he counters, making me see red. "For every thing you hate about me, it seems Midas has already done it a thousand times over."

He's right, and I hate him for that too.

The skin around my eyes tightens, but I can't say anything, because all that's caught in my throat is my own self-loathing.

Rip cocks his head and looks me over. "He plays it very well, to be a king without power. To use you with such clandestine forethought. No wonder he keeps you caged."

The last thing I want to do is talk about being caged. A cold sweat breaks out over my back at even hearing the word.

“How do you change the way you look?” I ask, changing the subject. “How the hell does no one realize that the two of you are actually the same damn person?”

As furious as I am with him for deceiving me, I’m even more furious with myself for not realizing the truth. Even with the rotted lines of power that crawled up his face, even with the green eyes and the shadows he was bathed in, I should’ve recognized him. I’ve been with Rip enough that I should have seen through it.

Ravinger has the same strong jaw, the same black hair. Rip is just more *fae* looking. Sharper. It’s no wonder people say that the feared commander has been mutated by King Rot, because Rip looks so *other*. The bones of his face, the tips of his ears, the spikes on his back and arms, all sharp enough to cut glass and so different from anybody else I’ve ever seen.

In his Ravinger form, he looks strange because of those creeping dark roots that sway against his skin like shadows, so much of it hidden beneath the scruff of his jaw. I wonder just how far those lines stretch. I wonder what they *mean*.

Yet even with these deviances, Rip and Ravinger show enough likeness that I should’ve picked up on it. As soon as the king walked into the room, I should’ve sensed who he really was. Green eyes or black, spikes or smooth, tipped ears or curved, I should’ve known.

Both forms are drop-dead gorgeous and otherworldly, and no matter the eye color, he looks at me with the same intensity as always.

“A learned maneuver,” he answers simply. “As far as other people, they see what they’re told to see, believe what they’re told to believe. But I don’t have to explain that to you, do I? Midas has been reaping the benefits of that for years,” Rip says with apparent disdain. “Why the hell would you let everyone believe that he’s the one with gold-touch power, when it’s been you all along?”

I nearly roll my eyes at his irritated bafflement.

“Are you kidding? I was *glad* to hide it. The first time gold started to drip down my fingers, I knew I was in trouble. Do you know what people would do to a girl who can turn everything gold?” I shake my head at him, swiping a tired hand across my brow. “No. This world has used me enough.”

Used, abused ... and that was when I only *looked* gold. I don’t even like to think about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t run away when I did. If I’d still been there in Derfort Harbor when my power manifested, things

would've become much worse for me, and I *never* would've gotten away. A tremor goes through me at the thought.

The spikes on Rip's back curl like fists, while unreadable expressions move over his face like shadows. "And now? Do you feel like you still need to hide, Auren?"

My golden eyes hold his gaze. "Don't ask me that."

"Why not?" he challenges.

"Because you want me to spill the truth for the wrong reasons." There's a sadness seeping through my skin, a disappointment that's settled over my shoulders like a cloak. "You want me to stop hiding so that I ruin Midas."

His silence, his inability to deny it, says everything.

First Midas, now him. I want to run far away from every damn king in Orea and hide where none of them can find me ever again. *How much more can I take?*

It's getting harder and harder to stand here, to look at his face and feel such crushing disappointment stabbing all the way through my heart.

"I want you to leave, Rip," I say again, hoping this time he'll listen.

"I told you, you can call me Slade."

"No, thanks," I reply curtly, enjoying the flash of frustration that goes through his eyes. "But I'll curtsy for you instead, Your Moldering Majesty."

He glowers at me. "Fine. I'll leave. If you tell me one thing."

"What?" I ask impatiently.

Rip leans in so our faces are right in front of each other, so close that I can feel the heat of his body. "Why were you screaming?"

I blink, caught off guard at his question. "I ... I wasn't screaming."

The look on his face is wholly unconvinced, and my unprepared stammer didn't help. "Hmm. Maybe I should be the one to retrieve the paper and quill to keep track of the lies between us."

Bastard.

"You're mistaken. You didn't hear me scream," I lie, though my heart is pounding in my chest so hard that I hope he doesn't hear it.

In truth, I was like some caged animal, ready to tear down the door with my nails while the guards kept me locked in this room with no way out, but I'm not about to admit that now. Not to him.

Rip arches a condescending brow. "Really? So I imagined you shouting, begging to be let out?"

Shit.

It takes a lot of conscious effort not to reveal anything on my expression, especially with him so close. “Maybe you don’t hear as well with that ugly branch crown around your head.”

Much to my irritation, he smirks. I hate that the sight makes my stomach leap.

Even though there’s barely a foot between us, Rip leans forward, making me suck in a breath. He steals all the air in the room, yanking the pulse in my veins like a dog on a leash.

Nearly chest to chest, he tilts his head down while I tip mine up. We look at each other with too many mixed emotions written in our locked eyes, with no hope of ever translating them.

What are the words in the silent, churning eyes of this male? Why is it that I feel like I’m being crushed from the inside out? He has a power over me that has nothing to do with his aura, and everything to do with the way my gaze strays down to his lips when he sucks in a breath.

He gives me that maddening smirk of his. “Mmm. I like your anger, Goldfinch. If only it weren’t always directed at me.”

I open my mouth to yell at him, but before I can get a word out, he reaches down and takes hold of one of my ribbons, freezing me in place as my heart stutters.

We both look down as he holds it, and when he gently rubs the satiny gold length, I forget how to breathe.

As if it’s purring, my ribbon vibrates slightly between the pads of his finger and thumb. A shudder travels through the rest of them, each one going languid in relief as if they can feel it too. Chills scatter over my arms as he continues to stroke, easing it in a way I’ve never felt before.

I should yank it away. I should back up. I should do anything to put space between us.

But I don’t. I don’t, and I can’t even admit why.

His nearness, his gaze, it makes it too hard to think. I can’t function properly with the feel of his exhale against my face, with his barely-there touch.

I need to remember who he is, what he’s capable of. I need to keep my guard up now more than ever.

“You should always keep these out,” he says quietly, and for some reason, another tear wants to spill out of me.

I don't like these feelings gathering around me. I want to hold onto my anger, to use it to help me push him away. The air between us has grown thicker, like we've passed the first line of trees and moved deeper into the woods. It's so congested with branches and brambles that I can't get through it without being scratched.

It takes effort, but I manage to clear my throat and whisper, "Go, Rip. Please."

His expression shutters, and whatever moment we were just stuck in dissipates. He drops my ribbon, and it immediately sags down, drooping like a flower, a silent sigh of regret bent to the ground.

When he steps back, I'm both relieved and bereft. I try to feel nothing instead.

Rip opens his mouth like he wants to say something else, but then he goes still, his head cocking as if he hears something.

My hackles immediately rise. "What?"

"Hmm, seems I can't leave just yet."

"And why not?"

His infuriating smirk returns, but it's not like before. This one is ... mischievous, and it fills me with dread. "Because your golden king is coming. I think I'll stay and say hello."