

Prince of Shadows

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A Fantasy Romance Short Story
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Chapter One

Happy Birthday, Idiot

All the other priestesses tried and failed to kill the Prince of Shadows.

But I wasn't like the other girls.

Cold sweat dotted my palms. Sweet jasmine filled my nose. The rest of the priestesses whispered softly underneath their white hoods as each of my footsteps clicked on the polished moonstone floors of the Temple.

My legs wobbled like a newborn foal as my clip-clops echoed off the sparkling quartz pillars that soared up all around me. I was finally allowed out of my flowing white robes but was forced into a heavy dress that dug into my waist and squeezed my breath out of my flushed lips in tiny puffs. The strangling confines of the silver and white gossamer dress were only half as torturous as *clicking* on my tip-toes in the high heels that appeared at the foot of my bed after dinner.

The idea was that the Prince might be nice if I looked nice. I doubted that, but I had no power to argue.

I wanted to spend my eighteenth birthday hiding behind a stack of books in the library, but tonight was too important for the High Priestess to leave me to do what I wanted.

Rare thorns of green spiked in the eyes of each priestess as my shining silver dress swished past. Every priestess of the Temple of Selene had skin ranging from a midnight sky to a pale moonbeam, but they all had hair only as dark as bright gold and blue eyes. Their eyes all looked so similar they cleaved the spectrum of blue

into bits and parceled out individual pigments to try to feel unique. Marine. Sapphire. Cobalt. Cerulean.

And then there was me. Brown. Brown eyes and brown hair. Combined with my olive skin, I was horribly out of place amongst the fair-haired and celestially beautiful priestesses.

The clicking stopped as I ended my promenade in front of the High Priestess.

High Priestess Illuna was the embodiment of moonlight. Her pale face was only gently kissed by age and her white hair tumbled out of her hood in waves down to her hips. Her necklace of egg-sized opals sparkled with tiny rainbows as her chest rose and fell with her calm breath. She was the only other woman in the temple without blue eyes. Twin rings of shining pewter bored down on me with a maternal sternness, carefully examining my braided hair, my tightly-laced dress, and my trembling knees under my skirt.

I dared flick my eyes up to avoid Illuna's piercing gaze and found the kinder eyes of Selene—our beautiful moon. The image of Selene was carved into the moonstone wall with perfect arcs of a chisel. Her gentle eyes were pieces of glimmering crystals. Her mouth was turned up in a smile. Her long celestial hair curled around her head and her arms were spread wide like she waited for a loving embrace.

The words we chanted every day at twilight rang in my ears as if they echoed off the stone.

Selene is goodness. Selene is light. Light will overcome darkness.

High Priestess Illuna examined every girl who was to visit the Prince of Shadows, but I was different.

Because I was their last chance.

Ever since I was dumped in the Temple of Selene with my cheeks sticky with tears, Illuna warned me about the darkness that lies within the shriveled black hearts of both the Prince and the King of Shadows.

If the High Priestess of Selene was light, the King of Shadows was darkness. He and Illuna formed a treaty years ago that if she sent priestesses to learn the shadow magic of the King, he would withhold his power of suffocating nightfall.

From what Illuna told us, the King of Shadows had steeled restraint over his power.

His son, however, did not.

PERCI JAY - PRINCE OF SHADOWS

As soon as a priestess became of age, she was eligible to travel to the Castle of Shadows to fulfill the treaty and learn shadow magic. Each time, the Prince of Shadows sent her running back to the temple screaming in fear of what she saw.

As Illuna's eyes swept my painted face, I bit my lip to stop myself from promising her that I was different than everyone else. I wouldn't run. I wouldn't scream.

"Callista Rosebriar." Illuna's voice was a swirl of midnight mist in the bright Temple. "You know what to do."

Simple. Illuna was not known for dramatics.

Having passed her inspection, I clicked back through the quartz and moonstone hall past the other sneering priestesses and stepped out into the night.

The glowing full face of Selene greeted me amongst a black night. Selene was the faithful friend of every evening, whether she was fat and happy or a thin little crescent, but her presence was a tipped hourglass, losing her light little by little until the sky went dark.

What was coming was no ordinary new moon, but the Prince's twenty-first birthday. The night he inherited the full power of his late father. The night he became King of Shadows.

The night he was going to kill Selene and swallow all of her light forever.

I boarded a small carriage pulled by a team of white horses and we set off to the Castle of Shadows. The carriage jostled along the dirt path as I wrung my hands together.

Unlike the other girls who rode in the same carriage before me, I did not strap a dagger to my thigh or pour poison into a ring to kill the Prince. I had my own weapon, a different way to kill, one that shoved me into the corner of the Temple under fearful blue eyes and panicked whispers.

The other girls refused to sit with me at meals. Or use any spoons or bowls I might have eaten with. Never let me whisper secrets in their ear. Never shared lip balm.

I was careful not to chew on pencils or let my lips touch the pages of my beloved books, but that did not matter. I was the Temple disease—kept at a distance and hopefully I would die out.

The carriage stopped sooner than I thought. Time moved faster when you planned to commit murder, I supposed. I poked my head out of the door and my

eyes traveled up the tall towers of the Castle of Shadows. Each turret and wall was shrouded in darkness, like someone cut out the silhouette of a tall castle in the night sky, with no windows in sight.

I pulled myself out of the carriage and my infernal high heels settled on the stone pathway up to the castle's black doors.

Click. Click. Click.

My hands fumbled around the black void of the door until my palm jerked back at the cold bite of iron. I wrapped my hand around the handle and pushed my way inside.

No sense in knocking. He knew I was coming.

I expected to find a foyer with cobwebs hanging off iron chandeliers or dark purple wallpaper with filigrees of faces in torment, but somehow even the dreaded Prince of Shadows himself surprised me.

The castle was filled with nothing. Nothing but darkness.

The door slammed shut behind me and I forced myself not to gasp as darkness enveloped me. I looked down—I could not even see my hands or the shimmer of my dress.

Illuna's calm words soothed my shaking mind.

Shadow magic is an illusion. Nothing he does is real.

I gulped and grounded myself. My feet were on the floor, even in the damn heels. My fingertips ran along my sticky palms. I listened to my breath. I tasted the remnants of mint and cucumber soup from dinner on my tongue.

Eight tiny spider legs crept up the base of my spine.

Not real. Not real. Not real.

The spider crawled up the bare skin of my neck and perched at my ear.

"So," it whispered through obsidian fangs, "I hear it's your birthday."

I clenched my teeth. Not real.

The spider stroked the hairs of my earlobe with its thorned toe. "And you chose to come here?"

Not real.

"You're the last one of Illuna's girls, aren't you?" The spider's tiny voice grew deeper. "And you didn't even bring any weapons."

PERCI JAY - PRINCE OF SHADOWS

I smirked in the dark abyss. The Prince's magic really was all just an illusion if he didn't know about my real weapon.

The spider chuckled low, his voice plummeting into the depths of vocal chords. "Well, since it's your birthday, why don't I honor the treaty by showing you the *best* shadow magic I have?"

The spider disappeared from my ear and then a puff of breath tickled my cheeks. I smelled ash and clove. The Prince was right in front of me. I had my chance.

I pushed into the darkness, searching for a shirt or a collar to grab onto. I had only a blink to succeed. I needed to grab him, kiss him, and run.

Unlike the other girls he frightened away, the touch of my lips would kill.

I had the kiss of death.

Where I expected to grip fabric, I instead clutched onto cold air. I lost my balance on my toes and toppled forward, falling through the darkness into nothing.

"Happy birthday, idiot."

The floor disappeared and I fell down, down, into nothingness.

I couldn't trick myself to believe the falling wasn't real.

Author Perci Jay

Chapter Two

Daddy Issues

I turned over and over in the darkness until I fell on my belly on a floor covered in thick, slippery ribbons. The ribbons pulsed and writhed. *Slithered.*

The floor was hundreds of snakes.

I pushed up and found my feet again. Feet on floor. Hands at sides. Screams in throat. The snakes hissed and rattled around my ankles. The darkness had no bounds, but I was not afraid. If a pit of serpents was the best he could do, the Prince of Shadows was a pathetic threat.

“Snakes don’t scare you, huh?” The Prince’s voice echoed around me like he shouted down an open stone well.

The hissing at my heels silenced. The scaly ribbons of muscle left my ankles. A soft whisper of billowing fabric cascaded down and then the tap of two footsteps landed in front of me.

A thin arc of silver sliced through the air as an obsidian claw carved out a large circle in the dark void. The slice of blackness crumpled forward and revealed the Prince of Shadows himself.

I quickly took note of the surprisingly normal parlor behind him—dark wood couches, burgundy damask wallpaper, silver frames of portraits—before I studied my prey.

The Prince of Shadows was just as he was described—gray skin, black hair that fell around his shoulders, fingers ending in shining claws with black tendrils of

shadow creeping up his wrists and forearms, and wearing entirely black clothes—but what no trembling priestess was able to convey were his terrifying eyes. His eyes were yellow from lash to lid with no white in between. His pupils were slits of fat diamonds. His mouth was turned up into a smirk.

I swallowed. I had to kiss *that*.

The Prince laughed low in his throat and crossed his arms. “What? Not what you were expecting?”

I narrowed my eyes and shifted my weight on my toes to run for him.

“Forget about what you heard of me in that cute little Temple of yours,” he said. “Allow me to make a formal introduction.”

I bolted forward, but only made it two steps before the Prince snapped his fingers and a blare of a pipe organ knocked me backward. The vibrations of the unseen organ tingled my skin as I tried to get up.

“Ugh no,” the Prince sneered. “I wanted that in D minor. Let’s try again.”

Blackness snapped over the Prince as sickly notes from the organ filled my stomach with dread. The notes were slow and foreboding.

A pack of wolves growled behind my back.

“I was named Kyrian Luxbane.”

The wolves snapped at my legs and arms, but I did not flinch. Not real.

“I am the only heir to the Throne of Darkness.”

The wolves disappeared. The music crawled up the staff as the notes picked up tempo.

“Son of King Onyx Luxbane.”

Phantoms with unhinged jaws wailed behind me. Then in front of me. Chains of the condemned rattled near my ears. The sickening melody grew faster.

“And in a short fourteen nights, I finally inherit my birthright. My throne. My full power.”

A stinging blade pressed into my throat. A knuckle forced my jaw upward. I closed my eyes even in the blackness. Not real.

The pipes of the organ screamed.

“Oh, Daddy would be so proud of me. If he were still alive.”

The music stopped. The blade sliced my skin.

My hands instinctively flew to my neck, but no blood poured out. I opened my eyes. Kyrian appeared in front of me with his hands behind his back and his yellow eyes gleaming with smugness. I tried to lunge for him, but an invisible force wrapped around my wrists and held me back.

My stomach dropped. Some of the shadow magic *was* real.

“Your turn,” Kyrian said. “It’s only polite.”

I gulped. “My name is Callista Rosebriar. Daughter of no one. Heir to nothing.”

He hummed. “Interesting. Most of the other girls try to run by now.”

“Well, I’m not like most girls.”

A wicked smile crawled up Kyrian’s face. “Yes you are.”

Kyrian disappeared in a blink. A claw speared the back of my neck and pierced the base of my mind.

I couldn’t hold back a scream that time.

“This usually works.” Kyrian’s voice was low and choppy. He was concentrating. “There’s always shadows of someone in here you’re afraid of.”

The tendrils of cold shadows curled around my mind and sunk in. My body shook as one wrapped around my spine like a creeping vine. I gritted my teeth. Feet on floor. Fingers in fists. Mint on tongue. Death on lips.

I wasn’t going to let him get to me.

“An ex-boyfriend, maybe...”

Nope.

“A teacher who struck your knuckles in class...”

I never went to school.

“Ah, here we are.” One of the tendrils tightened around a screaming memory at the base of my mind. “Very typical of Illuna’s girls.”

My eyes widened as the tendrils slithered out of my mind.

“Your father.”

Tobacco and marble dust filled my nose. Calloused hands of a weathered mason wrapped around my small hand with no love in the grip.

“Take her, Illuna.” Kyrian’s voice was a perfect imitation of my father’s as he repeated my worst memory. “She won’t be like your other girls, but I can’t keep her. Not after what she did.”

My breath seized. If Kyrian kept going, he would find out my secret. I struggled against the shadows that bound me.

“She killed her mother.”

I had to stop him before he realized what the loving kiss of a three-year-old girl could do.

“Stop!” I yelled. “Stop it!”

Silence. The tendrils of shadow slithered off my wrists. The castle doors creaked open in front of me and precious moonlight spilled in.

Kyrian leaned on the doorframe, his gray face full of smug triumph.

“Well, I fulfilled the treaty and taught you shadow magic,” he said with his canary eyes gleaming. “Now you’re free to go back to the Temple and cry about how poorly I treated you. Toodles!”

I glanced out the door where Selene’s full face smiled down on the darkness. I could have run for Kyrian again and given him a kiss goodbye, but running hadn’t worked. He was too quick.

If I was going to get him in a position where I could plant one on him, I had to get him to let his guard down.

I had to stay in the castle long enough to trick the Prince of Shadows himself.

I folded my arms across my chest. “You didn’t fulfill the treaty. You didn’t teach me anything, all you did was scare me!”

Kyrian rolled his eyes. “Not my fault you’re a slow learner.”

“I’m the last priestess of the Temple of Selene.” My voice was a bite of confidence amongst the darkness. “If you’re going to honor your late father’s treaty, you need to actually teach me shadow magic.”

And that could take days. Long enough to let me kiss him before he smothered Selene in eternal darkness.

I kicked off my heels and they clattered on the floor. The pads of my feet planted firmly on the cold obsidian tile. “I’m staying.”

The corner of Kyrian’s mouth flicked up for a heartbeat, but his eyes narrowed. He lifted his shoulders off the doorframe and mirrored my stance. Feet square with shoulders. Arms folded. Brow and nose pointed slightly down. Smirk across lips.

“Fine.”

The castle doors slammed shut and Selene’s precious moonlight was gone.

Chapter Three

Buttercream

I did not stand in the darkness for long. A tendril of cold shadow wrapped around my waist and knocked me back into a hard chair. I gripped the curved wooden arms and my head snapped forward into the black abyss.

The darkness was replaced with dim light and I was faced with Kyrian's ugly yellow eyes. He lied on his belly propped up on his elbows on top of a long table. A dining table—where I sat in the only chair.

Just as I nearly slammed my palms into the table and lurched forward for the kiss of death, Kyrian's eyes flicked downward and I followed them to the dark wood. A round cake with pink icing appeared on the table right underneath my nose. Eighteen tiny unlit candles were perfectly placed on top of the cake like the radials of a spiderweb.

“What?” I whispered.

“It's your birthday, Callie,” Kyrian answered, like it was obvious.

“My name is *Callista*.”

“Whatever.”

A slender tendril of shadow appeared from underneath the side of the table and placed a silver fork to the right of the delicious cake.

My mouth watered. I was never allowed to eat cake before.

Kyrian laughed at my hesitation. “I know it's different from the vegetable broth and leaves you nourish yourself with at the Temple, but it's a special occasion.”

My eyes narrowed. He was probably going to make roaches crawl out of the tasty pink cake as soon as I took a bite.

“Oh, come on!” Kyrian scoffed. He swiped his talon over the edge of the pink swirls of frosting and licked the sugary fluff off his claw. I was surprised to see his tongue wasn’t forked. “It’s not shadow magic, it’s *buttercream*. It’s delicious!”

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. “Where did it come from then?”

Kyrian shifted his weight and let his head lull to the left. “The kitchen. Shadow magic can’t create. It can only summon.”

I glanced at the silver fork, still unconvinced.

“You had someone make this cake as soon as you knew I was coming?”

Kyrian looked down at the table and his fingers rippled into loose fists. “No one lives in this castle but me.”

I glanced at the cake. I pictured obsidian claws wrapped around a piping bag and creating swirls of pink buttercream.

My eyes went back up to Kyrian, whose hands were placed in front of him as he clicked his claws together. He studied something that was apparently interesting on the left side of the ordinary dining room. “You baked me a cake not knowing if I would stay?”

Kyrian’s mouth formed a tight line and he refused to look at me.

I blinked. “You baked me a cake *hoping* I would stay?”

Kyrian’s head snapped back to face me and his claws splayed out on the table. “It’s lonely in here, all right? You girls usually run away after five minutes!”

“Because you scare us!”

“Because all of you try to kill me!”

I pursed my lips and crumpled my silver skirt in my fists. He knew.

Kyrian stared at me for a tense heartbeat but then his shoulders slumped forward as he sighed. “But you’re different from the other girls. You didn’t come in with knives or poison or any tricks. You just wanted to learn about shadow magic, just like my father wanted you girls to.”

My throat trembled as I tried to swallow. Kyrian crossed his ankles behind him and rested his chin on his fist. “You’re a nice girl. And nice girls get birthday cake.”

I looked down at the cake as my stomach turned. The sweet aroma of the buttercream frosting stung my nose. Kyrian was going to find out eventually that I was not a nice girl.

But that didn't mean I had to let his cake go to waste.

I let a smile laced with guilt slide across my deadly lips. I waved my hand over the web of candles and a tiny white flame ignited on each wick.

Kyrian's pupils narrowed as the eighteen flames made the room a bit brighter. A wide smile climbed up his cheeks.

"Wow," he said in a breath, "I've never seen one of you priestesses do that!"

I sheepishly looked down at the candles. My fists kneaded the crinkles of my skirt. "This is the extent of the light magic I can do. The other priestesses can do much more, and Illuna is a master of—"

"I know," Kyrian cut me off. His smile faded. He clicked his claws on the table for a second, but then the shine returned to his eyes. "Aren't you going to make a wish?"

I bit my lip. I only had one wish in my mind, but I couldn't bring myself to wish for the death of the baker of my cake—especially when he was sprawled out in front of me like an overgrown kitten.

"Why don't you make a wish?" I said, deliberately changing the subject. "Your birthday is coming up soon."

Kyrian held up a claw. "First of all, I don't have birthdays. I was never born, I was *made*. Formed from the shadows of the castle with my father's magic."

I folded my arms again and smirked. "You're just splitting hairs."

"*Second*," Kyrian continued with narrowed eyes and an additional raised claw. "I can't make a wish. Watch."

Kyrian blew on the candles, but the flames did not move.

My stomach dropped. "You mean you can't—"

Kyrian waved his claws over the candles and the flames disappeared. "Shadow magic can hide light, but not extinguish it." Kyrian blinked and the flames returned, softly flickering and dancing as if they hadn't been snuffed.

I wiped my sweating palms on my dress as my blood ran cold. "But what about when you get your full power?"

Kyrian shook his head. "Is that how you think shadow magic works?"

I swallowed and my eyes fell to my hands in my lap. I had kneaded my skirt so much the white gossamer was wrinkled and stained with splotches of sweat. Illuna told us the Prince of Shadows would dunk the moon in his tea and eat it like a wafer to plunge the world into eternal darkness

But if Kyrian couldn't even extinguish a birthday candle, that would mean Illuna lied.

I held my breath and made my wish.

I wished to know the truth.

I puckered my deadly lips and pushed out a cool breath over the eighteen candles, snuffing each one out in a ripple of air. As soon as the last flame turned into a thin curl of smoke to join the other seventeen, Kyrian clicked his claws together in quick applause.

I smiled. "This cake is awfully big. Do you want some?"

Kyrian's eyes lit up. Silver flashed in the air as a thin shadow tossed up a fork from underneath the table. Kyrian caught the fork mid-air. "Don't mind if I do!"

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Chapter Four

Dark Side of the Moon

I had read about normal beds. I used to close my eyes after lying down on my thin little cot in the corner of the Temple and fantasize about princesses stacked up on a hundred mattresses or sleeping in canopied beds big enough to fit twelve sisters in.

Kyrian gave me a bed covered in purple blankets with crisp linens. The mattress was soft enough to sink in a little bit and the bed was wide enough that I could stretch my arms and legs in either direction without touching the edge. I also had a mahogany wardrobe filled with baggy sweaters, flowing knitted scarves, and wool socks that hugged my calves and ankles. The real treasure of the wardrobe, however, was a pair of warm, black *pants*.

Apparently, Kyrian's father had a whole wing of the Castle of Shadows stocked with clothing and comfort for all Selene priestesses who wanted to learn shadow magic. All the other girls were just too fearful to realize the gift they could have.

Prejudiced idiots.

Over the past three nights, Kyrian sat with me on the couches in his parlor and showed me how he used his shadows to summon items, how he re-created memories—"shadows of the past," as he called them—and even how he crafted compelling illusions with a blanket of darkness.

I took in everything he taught me and added my light magic into the lessons. He built up my knowledge and confidence so much that I could make light dance

around the room and create lifelike illusions to counter his shadows of memory. We ended our first lesson by sitting on the same couch, a cushion apart, and creating an enthralling opera of shadow puppets on the wall of the parlor. “Le Opera de Ombre” had comedy, tragic betrayal, and a love-triangle for some reason.

Kyrian’s invisible pipe organ enhanced the drama as the swooning Madame Bologna spurned the advances of the evil Captain Baguette for the third night in a row. I laughed as the shadow of Madame Bologna gave the silhouette of the Captain a well-deserved slap for an unwanted kiss. Kyrian laughed next to me and made the heroic Sir Champagne chase after the dastardly villain with his sword aloft. Somehow that cushion in between us grew smaller and smaller over three nights. Our shoulders touched during the second act.

On the fourth night of my education, Kyrian decided the best way to illustrate his magic was with...

“...a pie?” I asked.

Kyrian sat on the dining table in front of me with his legs crossed. A freshly-baked meat pie was between us. The crust was perfectly golden brown and tiny whispers of steam waved up into the air.

Kyrian held up his silver spoon as if it were an instructor's pointer. “Why not?”

He ran his spoon over the flaky crust. The tiny scraping sound made my mouth water and my stomach growl.

“Think of the pie as the full moon,” Kyrian said. “She’s happy, complete, and whole.”

Kyrian stabbed the spoon into the crust and it shattered. He dug out a spoonful of meat and warm gravy and ate it with a smile.

“You know, after promising me that you weren’t going to eat the moon,” I said with a smirk, “this is a pretty poor illustration.”

Kyrian’s voice was muffled from his mouth full of food. “I’m about to make a point. Eat, Callie.”

I stopped asking him to call me Callista days ago.

I cracked the crust with my spoon and filled my mouth with delicious beef, gravy, and peas. I hummed in satisfaction as the warmth and light spice coated my tongue. Kyrian’s baking skills were even better than his operatic soprano.

After a few minutes, we had completely consumed the pie, leaving only a few crumbs in the silver tin.

Kyrian wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He picked up the empty pie tin in his hands and flipped it to face me. “Now think of this pie tin as the new moon.”

I raised my eyebrow and laughed. “Okay?”

Kyrian tapped his claws on the side of the tin. The sharp echo of the taps made my spine tingle. “An empty pie tin might seem sad—no more pie, just like there’s no more moonlight—but it’s really a happy opportunity for something new.”

I propped my elbow on the table and leaned my cheek onto my fist. “I don’t follow.”

“I have had this pie tin for years.” Kyrian said as he flipped the tin in his hands. “I’ve made meat pies, sweet pies, and mud pies. But I can only make more pie if the tin is empty.”

“So, what you’re saying is you’re going to make me more pie?” I laughed.

Kyrian smiled and tossed the tin back onto the table with a clatter. He waved his hand over the tin and his tendrils of shadow formed a dark illusion of the same meat pie filling the silver circle. “If the pie had stayed whole, just like if the moon stayed full all the time, you couldn’t have more pie. Nothing would change. Nothing would be new.”

I tapped my spoon on the tin as I looked into Kyrian’s canary eyes. The wheels were turning in my head.

“You can’t fill your stomach if it was never empty to start with,” he continued. “Wholeness needs absence. Sound needs silence. Light needs darkness. That’s the balance of change. The balance *progress* needs.”

I tapped my spoon on my deadly lips. I abandoned the plan to kiss him. He had too much to teach me.

“If I was never hungry, I would never eat,” I said thoughtfully. “I would miss out on so many delicious foods and experiences if the absence never made me seek more.”

Kyrian’s eyes shone and he raised his spoon above his head in triumph. “You’re getting it!”

My chest was filled with the tingles of enlightenment. I gently put down my spoon on the table and kept my eyes on Kyrian as my cheeks rose with my smile. “And if I never sought out darkness, I would never have the knowledge you’re giving me. The truth of the world.”

Kyrian let out a chuckle—the same chuckle he had during the second night of the shadow opera.

I blinked. “Le Opera de Ombre” was not just a fun little distraction—it was another lesson. The light and the darkness came together to create shadow characters. Comedy and tragedy clashed for a compelling story. The high notes were only high because the low notes were low. Sir Champagne was only so good because Captain Baguette was so evil.

Opposition was not antagonism, it was a necessary bond that kept the world both in balance and interesting. Kept one grounded and eager to explore.

Made life worth living.

I let out a breath and looked up at Kyrian. He smiled at me as we finally reached mutual understanding. I pressed my hands on the table and rose from my chair. Brown eyes met yellow at the same height.

“Everything I was taught at the Temple was wrong,” I said. “Every night we recited Selene is goodness, Selene is light, light will overcome darkness. There was no balance. Only supremacy.”

Kyrian’s smile faltered and he hopped off the table. He walked to my chair and extended his gray hand to me. His yellow eyes were as soft as a harvest moon.

“Come on,” he said. “There’s more you need to know, but it won’t be easy to hear.”

I hesitated for only a moment, but I slowly reached out and placed my hand in his. His skin was warm like lava rock. His claws wrapped around my fingers and his cold shadow tendrils coiled around my wrist like twin serpents.

I rose from my chair and Kyrian led me out of the dining room.

The halls of the castle were dim as always and I could barely see more than a few paces forward, but instead of lighting a white flame on the tip of my finger to find my way, I trusted Kyrian’s lead.

Kyrian opened a black door and we spiraled down a set of steps in complete darkness. I focused on the warmth of Kyrian’s hand and the coolness of the

shadows wrapped securely around my wrist since I could not rely on my eyes. My feet matched the rhythm of the taps of Kyrian's shoes and his gentle puffs of breath as we went down, down, down, into the heart of the Castle of Shadows.

My feet stopped descending, but Kyrian pulled me forward. After a few short paces, he stopped and pulled me next to him. Even though we ran out of stairs, he did not let go of my hand.

"I can see down here," Kyrian said. His voice was a gentle comfort in the abyss of the dark unknown. "But now would be a good time for one of those cute white flames of yours."

I flipped over my left palm and a calm white flame appeared. The flame did not dance, but stayed still and pointed like a flickering arrow. The white light filled the small dark chasm and stopped on a wall of carved obsidian. The jagged cuts in the wall formed the image of a scowling woman with her arms crossed. She was closed-off, mean, and maybe even evil.

"I know you were taught Selene is goodness and light," Kyrian said, "but this is Selene, too. She has a dark side just like everyone else does."

I stared at the hard brow of the image of who I thought was my faithful friend of the night. I studied the hard lines of her cheeks, her narrow eyes made from pounding chisels of a steel blade, and her tight lips. All I saw was ugliness.

But that was all I *saw*.

I closed my fingers around my white flame and snuffed out the light. Once I was safely surrounded by air as black as ink, I slowly reached forward until my fingertips touched the cool and jagged surface of the obsidian.

Kyrian's claw on his thumb stroked the back of my right hand and the tendrils of shadow around my wrist playfully swirled up my right arm, across my shoulders, and then to my left arm as I explored Selene's face.

The coolness of the shadows dancing around my wrist mirrored the cold stone. My fingertips traced the jagged lines, dipping into the nicks in the edges, caressing the contrast of smooth and rough across her face. Every line was a story. Every imperfection was a treasure.

She was beautiful.

"We were always held to the standard of the full moon—perfection." My voice and my warm breath echoed back to me off the stone.

Kyrian's shoes tapped in the darkness as he stepped even closer to me. "Because Illuna doesn't believe in balance—she believes in absolutism."

I swallowed. Illuna took me in even though I was a defective waste of a human. I was so eager to kill for her because she gave me everything I had in life, and I wanted to give her everything I was in return.

But if I had kissed Kyrian and given her that last piece of me that she didn't already have, there would have been nothing left of me.

My devotion would have consumed me whole.

"Her and my father disagreed on the concept of absolutism," Kyrian continued. His voice was heavier. "He put limitations on his power to keep balance. Every King and Prince of Shadows is bound to the castle, never able to set foot outside the doors. He and Illuna set up the treaty so the priestesses of Selene could come and learn about shadow magic since we couldn't come to your Temple. I remember some of the priestesses who came and happily learned shadow magic alongside me. They started to question Illuna's way of thinking and how she might even misunderstand Selene. Illuna didn't like that."

His hand tightened around mine but the cool shadows slacked limply around my arms. "So, she killed my father. Burnt him out of existence with her white flame."

The tip of my nose stung and tears blossomed in the corners of my eyes. Illuna wanted to banish all darkness to save us from wickedness and pain. I wasn't surprised she killed King Onyx, but a stone of guilt slid from my chest to my gut as I realized I was no better than her.

An attempted murderer didn't deserve pie and shadow puppets.

My fingers ran over the indentations of Selene's lips. "You say there's a darkness in all of us, but what if the darkness is too horrible? What if it's twisted and ugly and better left..."

"...left in the dark?" Kyrian finished.

My hand left the stone and I turned to face where I knew Kyrian was standing. I could not see him but he could see me. He was formed from darkness, maybe he already knew of my secret affliction that condemned me to a lonely life without love. Maybe he even knew I came to the castle to kill him just like everyone else had.

Kyrian's voice sent warmth into my belly. "Callie, I see you. I may be nothing but darkness, but I know what light is. Your smile is a moonbeam. Your laugh is like a shooting star. No one is perfect, but I know you are good because...because you are the only person I've seen since my father died who hasn't tried to hurt me."

I didn't let my cracking heart show on my face. He had no idea what I was.

I swear I could see him smile even in the blackness. "I can't tell you how happy I am that I finally have a friend."

I smiled back at him. He was never going to know the truth. "Me too, Kyrian."

Author Perci Jay

Chapter Five

Comfort Needs Pain

King Onyx's library was a dream of tall wooden shelves filled with the smell of old parchment. I curled up on a couch with a perfect leather-bound copy of "The Pirate and the Princess." I had a copy at the Temple library, but the book essentially became mine because none of the other priestesses would touch it after I read it. The cover of my book had bent and worn corners, faded illustrations, and pages stained with the oils of my fingers and even a couple of teardrops toward the end. The book wasn't perfect, but it was still a beautiful story.

A ball of white light tumbled in the air above my head so I could read the words in the dim library. Kyrian laid on his back on the top of one of the tall bookshelves and his shadows danced around his forearms as he tossed a small rubber ball up in the air.

My eyes left the page and looked up at Kyrian and his purple ball. His birthday was three nights away and I was still seeing his lessons of balance everywhere. The ball rose and fell in the air. Up and down. Over and over to make a game to pass the time.

"Not one for literature, are you?" I called.

Kyrian caught the ball in his claws and twisted onto his belly to look down at me. "This library is just for you priestesses. I can't read."

My heart sank a little. "You can't?"

Kyrian gave me a half-smile in response to my pity. He palmed his ball in his left hand and reached down with his right hand to grab a book off the top shelf. “My eyes don’t work that way. I’m made to see in the dark, not follow tiny stamped text on a page.”

He opened his book and I watched the tip of his nose track back and forth with the lines on the page while his yellow eyes did not move. His brow furrowed and he snapped the book shut. “Just gives me a headache every time.”

I closed my book and pressed it against my chest. Books were my small reprieve from the loneliness of the Temple. I hated that Kyrian couldn’t have what I took for granted.

I let out a breath. Kyrian was just like me—lonely just because he was made differently from everyone else.

I looked back up at him as he lazily rolled the ball around on the top of the shelf. A smile blossomed on my deadly lips. “I could tell you this story. It’s my favorite, so I have it memorized.”

Kyrian sank his claws into the rubber ball. His shadows curled as a feline smile crept up his face. “Prove it.”

In a blink, Kyrian stole all the light in the room except for the sphere of white light hovering above my head. He gave me a dark canvas to paint with.

I rose from the couch and split the ball of light into pieces and sent them in every direction. Each one hit the floor and grew into a tall tree until we were surrounded in a forest of white light.

“All right, I am the kidnapped Princess Rose and you have to save me.” I waved my hand and created a dress with a flowing skirt and puffy sleeves made from thin threads of light over my clothes. I pinched the outline of my skirt and drew it to the side as I curtsied.

Kyrian snorted. “Princess Rose? I see why this story is your favorite, Callista Rosebriar.”

“Shh!” I hissed. “And you’re Easton, the fearsome pirate with a rapier.”

“That’s a stupid name,” Kyrian said. His shadows twisted around his right hand and extended outward to form the shape of a thin black sword.

“Drop the attitude, or else Count Telemicus is going to get you.”

A white outline of the evil Count, including his signature curled moustache, appeared behind Kyrian with his sword aloft and ready to slice Kyrian in the back. Kyrian caught the light in his yellow eye and he whipped around just in time for his shadow blade to block the Count's sword.

"Save me, Easton!" I cried in a swooning falsetto as Kyrian and the Count battled.

"Avast, villain!" Kyrian cried in a bombastic tenor that sounded nothing like his own voice. He pierced the outline of the Count in the heart with his shadow blade and the Count crumpled forward dramatically. Kyrian removed his sword from the fallen Count and held it to his side with a smug smile on his face.

I laughed and crossed my arms. "Don't look too happy, you still have to wrestle the giant."

"The WHAT?" Kyrian cried. An outline of a fist the size of Kyrian's body crashed down on the floor next to him and Kyrian scrambled forward from the shockwave. The white outline of an ugly giant grew from the floor and soared up, up, to the ceiling. The giant growled down at Kyrian, who hid behind the couch.

"Callie," Kyrian said as he peeked out from the back of the couch, "how does Easton wrestle that?"

"Climb up on his back and show him who's boss, silly!" I laughed.

Kyrian leapt over the couch and gave me a mischievous look. "You make it sound easy."

Kyrian dodged another pound of the giant's fist and jumped up on the giant's wrist. He ran up the white line of the giant's arm and sat behind the giant's neck. The giant's bulky arms reached up and grappled at him, but it couldn't catch him. Kyrian's shadows formed twin ropes that wrapped around the giant's thick neck. Kyrian jerked up his wrists like he was pulling on marionette strings and the giant choked on the shadows. The giant fell to his knees and then folded forward—defeated.

Kyrian panted as he dismounted the fallen giant. "Princess Rose better be half as pretty as you are, because all this fighting isn't worth it otherwise."

"Oh, you're not done," I said as I poked him in the center of his chest. "You can't forget about the swamp dragon."

Kyrian's pupils went wide. Light danced below us like churning marsh water. An outline of a serpentine dragon's head emerged from the water behind Kyrian. He

turned around with his shadow blade formed and ready when the dragon opened its mouth and shot out intense white flames at Kyrian's feet. Kyrian cried out and shut his eyes. His shadow blade disappeared. Kyrian's claws slammed over his eyelids as he stumbled backward.

My heart skipped a beat. I blinded him.

I waved my hand and sliced a gap between the dragon's head and its neck. The white outline of the head fell to the ground like a whisper and the thin lines of light extinguished. The marsh disappeared. I dimmed the light of the trees that fenced us in our fantasy world as I kneeled beside Kyrian.

"Are you all right?" I placed my hand on his shoulder as he crumpled onto his knees. "The dragon is gone. I changed the story and Princess Rose slayed it herself."

Kyrian slid his claws off his face. His eyelids fluttered like butterfly wings as he blinked and his pupils widened from thin lines to fat diamonds. Kyrian looked up at me and smirked. "That lazy princess might as well do *something*. What happens next in the story?"

I took his hand and helped him back up onto his feet. "Well, all the monsters are defeated."

Kyrian raised an eyebrow. "And?"

His warm hand stayed wrapped around mine. His cool shadows coiled around my wrist and forearm before resting at my elbow. My belly was airy and warm. My deadly lips parted slightly as I looked into Kyrian's yellow eyes. I knew what came next in the story. I earmarked it, read it over and over, and closed my eyes and imagined that something I could never experience would one day be mine.

Kyrian chuckled low in his throat. "I know what comes next."

His free hand held the side of my face. His claws gently caressed my hair. He leaned in until his mouth was a breath away from mine. My lashes fluttered down and I gave into the fantasy for a heartbeat.

Then the truth of what I was forced me to push him away.

"No!" I shouted as I broke out of his hold.

Kyrian stumbled back, his canary eyes wide with horror. "Callie, I'm so sorry. I thought you wanted—"

"I do." My voice was shaking. My breath was frozen in my chest. "I *want* to kiss you."

A confident smile cracked across his face and he leaned down. “Well, all right.” I clamped my hand over his puckered lips. “I *can't*, Kyrian.”

Kyrian wrenched his face out of my grip and his brow furrowed in confusion. “Callie, what’s wrong?”

I crossed my arms across my chest and held my elbows. I had to break his heart one way or another, and the truth was better than a panicked lie.

My voice trembled. “If I kiss you, I’ll kill you.” I swallowed as Kyrian’s eyes widened. “That’s the true darkness inside me, Kyrian. I have the kiss of death.”

Kyrian’s face fell. He was silent for three agonizing heartbeats.

“So *that’s* your weapon.” His voice was low and hollow. His eyes were shining and not with pride. His voice broke. “You’re just like the other girls.”

“Kyrian—!” I cried.

I reached for him, but he vanished into the darkness.

Author Perci Jay

Chapter Six

Absence

When I couldn't find Kyrian for a few hours, I thought he was just giving me another illustration in balance. Togetherness needs separation. Closeness needs distance. Intimacy needs aloofness.

But then the day before his birthday came without so much as a trace of him and I realized I really did hurt him. I hurt him with the worst weapon anyone could sneak into the Castle of Shadows.

Deceit.

I did my usual rounds through the castle to look for him. I searched in the dark corridors between the bookshelves in the library. I kneeled on the floor of the dining room and looked under the table. I sat in the center of the couch in the parlor with a white spotlight on the wall, hoping I could tempt him to come out of hiding with a fourth night of "Le Opera de Ombre."

But he didn't show.

The last stop on my search was the kitchen. I hoped to see Kyrian baking another pie, but I was disappointed with a lifeless room with the empty silver pie tin on the counter. I walked into the kitchen and slumped down on my elbows in front of the tin. The wooden counter was covered in black streaks of burn marks, cuts from errant knives, and faded coppery stains from spices—proof that the master baker wasn't perfect either.

I drummed the tips of my fingernails on the smooth surface of the tin just like Kyrian had done with his claws.

Click. Click. Click.

I could make a pie and draw Kyrian out with the good smell, but I had no idea how to cook. I let out a determined breath and straightened up. Lighting the kitchen on fire was worth the risk if I could see him again.

I searched through the cabinets and gathered a large floppy sack of flour, a bag of sugar, a jar of butter, and a tin of something called “cumin.” I stared at my pile of ingredients with my hands on my hips. I could figure out what to fill the pie with later, but first I needed to make the crust.

I dumped a few cups of flour onto the wide counter along with some sugar and sifted the pile together with my fingers. Then I scooped globs of butter into the powdery mountain and mashed the ingredients together in my hands. All my labor produced was a sad white lump that didn’t resemble dough at all. I reached for the cumin and accidentally knocked the sack of flour over onto my chest and pants.

I fell onto the floor and coughed through the cloud of chalky white. I had a chunk of the sorry excuse for dough in my hand and I squeezed it in my fist as I growled in frustration.

“Damn it, Kyrian, I’m trying!” I cried. My chest shook with a hiccup and then a sob as I started to cry. My short, jagged cries echoed off the pots hanging from the ceiling. “I’m sorry I came here to kill you. I didn’t know—I didn’t know anything about the truth of Selene before you and I’m sorry. And now I’m just trying to make you a stupid pie for your birthday to make it up to you and I *can’t!*”

I angrily threw the wad of dough against the wall and it limply tumbled down to the floor. I folded my elbows on top of my knees and pressed my forehead into my arms as I cried.

“First of all, your tears are just going to make the dough salty.”

I sniffed and raised my head from my arms. Kyrian stood across from me and leaned against the wall with his arms folded and a smirk on his lips. The sad ball of dough was at his feet.

I smiled and wiped away a tear with the inside of my wrist as he spoke again. “Second, I don’t have birthdays, remember? I was never born.”

I sprang up on the balls of my feet and ran toward him. I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my cheek into his collarbone.

"I missed you." I whispered through my smile.

Kyrian scoffed, but he wrapped both his warm arms and his cool shadows around my back. "You're getting flour all over me, and I'm wearing black!"

"You *only* wear black."

"Exactly. That's why I always bake naked."

I smiled and backed out of his hug. His shadows retracted and his arms returned across his chest as I laughed. "Really?"

Kyrian's canary eyes were shining with familiar mischief. "No, but I got you to laugh, didn't I?"

I smiled and bit my lip as I glanced down at the floor. I flicked my eyes back up to his smirking face. "Where were you?"

Kyrian sighed and ran his claws through his long black hair. "Deciding how I felt."

My heart skipped a beat. I joined my hands in front of my flour-dusted belly and my eyes fell to the floor again. "And what did you decide?"

A tendril of shadow crept up underneath my chin and pushed my face up so brown eyes met yellow.

"I'm not angry with you," Kyrian said in a low voice. "It's not your fault that you...misunderstood what I am, it's Illuna's. She's poisoning all of you girls with her absolutism."

I smiled. "Well, I'm not like the other girls."

Kyrian laughed and his shadow left my chin to wrap around my shoulder and pull me in for another hug. "You keep saying that. It's quite irritating."

He rested his cheek on the top of my head and sighed. "Illuna scares me. If she's been teaching you girls that I'm going to destroy the world when I get my full power, who knows how far she'll go to stop me from seeing midnight tonight?"

I pursed my deadly lips. Illuna was a strict High Priestess. She believed *any* threat to Selene's light needed to be eliminated.

"Well, I was the Temple's last chance to kill you," I said into his chest. "And as much as I would like to give you a birthday kiss, I'm going to hold off."

Kyrian chuckled and affectionately ran his hand down the back of my head. His claws lightly scratched my scalp and sent a tingle down my spine. “Again, it’s not my birthday, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

A shadow wrapped around my waist and tugged me a little closer to him. Kyrian’s lips pressed against my forehead and I froze. My blood ran through my arms as cold as the shadow around my waist. Kyrian’s heart drummed underneath my palms on his chest. After a couple of heartbeats, Kyrian’s kiss turned into a smile against my skin.

“Even as an *evil* shadow creature,” he whispered, his warm breath tingling the skin on my forehead, “I still need affection.”

My fingers curled to grip the soft black linen of his shirt. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch, his smell, and the sound of his breath so tantalizingly close to mine. I traced my nose up his collarbone and lifted my face up. His warm breath tingled the soft skin of my deadly lips and they parted. I could taste him. *Taste him.* He tasted like meat pies and pink birthday cake and laughter.

Every ounce of my restraint stopped me from rising up on my toes and taking a taste of that happy life for myself—the life and the love I could never have. His claws stroked my hair behind my ear as we listened to each other’s heartbeats, tasted each other’s breath, and stayed in our tiny little world without light or darkness, without good or evil, and without lies or truth. All that existed was us.

But that world was just a fantasy.

A voice filled the kitchen, including the thin strip of air between my and Kyrian’s lips. It was the voice of my surrogate mother.

“Callista. Come out.”

Illuna was at the Castle of Shadows.

Chapter Seven

Balance

I slowly backed out of Kyrian's embrace as Illuna called for me. I turned toward the kitchen door. Light magic couldn't summon. The only pull I had toward Illuna's command was fifteen years of complete devotion.

Kyrian's shadow uncurled from around my waist. Even the thin void of darkness trembled in fear as it left my body.

I looked up into Kyrian's beautiful canary eyes. "I'll take care of this. I won't let her kill you."

Kyrian swallowed and then nodded. I grabbed his warm hand and gave it a squeeze. My fingertips sweetly traced his obsidian claws as I pulled away and walked out of the kitchen to face the lying High Priestess.

I walked through the dim foyer and pushed open the doors to the Castle of Shadows. My hands hadn't even left the door before I found the beacon of white light standing ten paces away from the castle doors. Illuna's hands were folded in front of her and her pewter eyes were calm, but the arc of the other fourteen priestesses behind her had the fires of hatred in their blue eyes.

"Is the Prince of Shadows finally vanquished?" Illuna asked calmly.

I swallowed as my fingertips trembled against the wood of the door. My brow hardened and I steeled myself to finally give Illuna and the other girls the truth. I moved out from behind the castle doors and closed them shut with my hands behind me as I faced off against Illuna for the first time.

“Kyrian is not going to kill Selene.” My bold voice rang out into the night. “He is not going to kill anyone.”

Dianella, the oldest priestess who had midnight skin and a cloud of white curls underneath her hood, glanced with knitted eyebrows at the other girls next to her. Illuna’s eyes were still shining with a calm imperium, but she gave me a gentle smile.

“Did he tell you that?” Illuna asked with a low tone of amusement.

I gritted my teeth and pressed my palms further into the wooden door. “He didn’t have to. I know.” I lifted my eyes to the other fourteen priestesses. “Shadow magic isn’t dangerous. It can’t extinguish our light. In fact, my magic has only gotten stronger since being with—”

“Do you see the dark power of the Prince of Shadows, ladies?” Illuna interjected. Her calm voice was a suffocating enchantment over the evening air. “He tricked sister Callista. He consumed her, swallowed her mind whole—”

“You swallowed my mind whole,” I spat. Some of the priestesses gasped with their fingertips flying to their open lips. Some blue eyes hardened under the shadows of their white hoods. “You taught us to strive for perfection in Selene’s image, but I have seen both sides of Selene. She is both good and evil, both warm and cold, both serene and enraged—”

“Selene is goodness, Selene is light,” Illuna chanted. A handful of the other priestesses joined her. Dianella noticeably remained silent. “Light will overcome dark—”

“The world needs *balance*,” I shouted, “and if you kill Kyrian, if you destroy Selene’s dark side, you won’t erase evil from the world, you will only blind us with endless light!”

Illuna closed her lips and her skin and hair grew a glowing halo of white that grew stronger with every heartbeat. Even the stars in the night sky went dull as Illuna’s power grew. I blinked and shielded my eyes with my hands.

“I wanted to give him the mercy of a quick death,” Illuna said, her voice calm yet blaring like a heavenly trumpet, “but you give me no choice.”

Illuna’s hands unlocked and her palms opened, sending raging towers of white flame barrelling toward me. I squeezed my eyes shut as celestial warmth shot through me and blasted the castle doors open.

I turned on my heels and ran into the castle. The tall white flames that were brighter than daylight split and blazed through every part of the hall. The white flames did not singe the baseboards or leave smoke on the wallpaper—they would only incinerate the Prince of Shadows.

Just as the tongues of white flame started to creep up the foyer stairs, I ran past them and raced up the steps.

“Kyrian, I’m coming!” I shouted. “Go up as high as you can!”

He was trapped inside the flaming castle, but I needed to buy him as much time as I could. I had to stop the flames before they found him.

I turned around as soon as I reached the top of the stairs. The white flames licked each step as they climbed upward. I channeled my own light magic and pushed out with my hands to beat back the flames, but the full extent of my power could only slow the flames down to a creeping ripple. Illuna’s fanatic absolutism was too strong.

“Please, damn it!” I cried. I grit my teeth and pushed harder, but the flames kept coming.

“Callie.” Kyrian had appeared behind my shoulder.

“Kyrian, what are you doing?” I cried, keeping my eyes on the approaching flames. “Run!”

“I can’t see.” Kyrian’s voice was unnervingly calm. “I can only follow your voice.”

“Then follow my voice up to the tower!” I shouted. The flames were three steps away from the top and I stepped backward into the hallway. My power blew on the tongues of white fire like they were candles on a birthday cake, but they would not extinguish.

“There’s no point, is there?” Kyrian asked. “I can tell in your voice.”

Beads of sweat ran down my temples as I pushed against the deadly heat. “Stop it, Kyrian. Run!”

His hands found my elbows. His chest pressed against my back. His breath warmed the back of my hair. “I will not run like a coward and burn.”

A thin blanket of shadow washed over us, giving us a small bubble of shade as the flames grew closer and closer. His hands gently guided me to turn around. Kyrian’s eyes were open under the shade, even though his shelter of shadow was as

thin as cheesecloth. His claws gently ran through my hair and his hand rested at the back of my neck. My heart fluttered but my eyes stung with tears.

Kyrian leaned in closer. "If I'm going to die anyway..."

He said nothing more. He didn't need to. I slowly raised up on my toes and closed my eyes as a tear rolled off my lashes. My arms locked around his neck, begging him not to go, before my deadly lips met his.

I let a sob slip into his mouth. His claws tangled in my hair and his arm hooked around my waist. He gripped onto me, his last tether to life, as I gave him the kiss of death. I counted his heartbeats against my chest, wondering which one would be the last. Kyrian took in a breath to kiss me again. *He took a breath.*

I unlocked my hands and pushed against his chest so I could look up at him. Kyrian looked down at me with wide yellow eyes, his chest rising and falling with his breath, and his heart pounding underneath my palm.

"How?" I whispered as another tear rolled down my cheek.

Kyrian blinked in disbelief and smiled. "You can't kill what was never born. Looks like the darkness inside you can't destroy what is made of darkness."

I brought my fingertips to my lips. I was born to kill. Forbidden to love. Brought up with a firm yet guiding hand to see my curse as a gift to banish evil.

I would not banish evil, but my dark gift would bring balance.

I dropped my hands from my mouth and they curled into fists at my sides. "Keep your shadows intact as long as you can and run to the tower."

Kyrian's jaw tightened but he nodded. Our bubble of shadows crumpled until it encased him in a dark veil and he ran through the hallway. His footsteps pounded up the stairs as mine scurried down through the white fire.

My heart drummed. Sweat mixed with tears on my cheeks and dripped off my jaw. My deadly lips trembled.

My feet hit the floor of the foyer. Illuna raised me in the light. She loved me when no one else would. In her pewter eyes, I was never a disease or a curse, but a gift to overcome darkness.

My hands pushed open the castle door. Illuna's white halo glowed around her body. Her power pulsed out of her palms toward the castle. Her arms were spread open as if waiting for my embrace.

Fifteen years of devotion and love pulled on my heartstrings and almost stopped my running feet, but birthday cake, shadow puppets, and laughter pushed me forward.

Love needed sacrifice.

Illuna's pewter eyes widened as I was a breath away from her. I wrapped my arms around her back. We were heart-to-heart and eye-to-eye.

"This is for Selene." I closed my eyes. Illuna's heart thumped into my chest before my lips met hers and her arms slacked underneath my hold.

I gave Illuna the kiss of death but my arms squeezed her as tightly as they could. An embrace of gratitude. A promise of growth. A final goodbye to the mother who chose me.

White light poured into my lips and warmed my heart and hands. Illuna's power waned with each heartbeat until nothing was underneath my lips.

A chain clinked and a weight dropped on my finger. I opened my eyes to find Illuna's glittering opal necklace hanging off my hand and an empty gap in my arms.

My heart was heavy as stone and my breath was stuck in my chest. My fingers wrapped around the heavy necklace chain like it was the rough hand of a heartbroken mason. My cheeks were sticky and my vision was warped by shaking tears as I looked up at the entire spectrum of blue glaring at me.

"How could you?" hissed one.

"You sided with that monster?" spat another.

"You were her favorite and you still—"

The air shifted and all the enraged priestesses silenced. My shoulders shivered as the temperature plummeted. Fourteen mouths gasped and their eyes widened as they stared behind me.

I turned around and craned my neck to look at the dark outline of the castle. The castle was moving—breathing. Tendrils of shadow like dark arms swirled from the tallest tower of the castle and snatched the light from the stars.

Midnight. Kyrian had his full power.

The King of Shadows had returned.

Chapter Eight

All Hail the King

I gripped my arms with Illuna's necklace still hanging off my fingers. I stared up at the dancing shadows on the breathing dark castle as the fourteen priestesses behind me looked on in horror. The arms of shadow retracted into the tall tower and everything was still.

A low clap of thunder rolled through the castle and my heart jumped. A few of the priestesses shrieked in fear. A wave of shadow pulsed out of the open castle doors toward us. Some of the priestesses whimpered and scurried away from the oncoming wave, but I let the darkness lap at my ankles. The shadow was cool on my skin, but the sentiment was warm.

An invitation.

I turned around. All the priestesses cowered and clutched onto each other's white robes as they looked at the Castle of Shadows.

I swallowed my sadness and tried to warm up my voice. "He wants to meet you all again. He won't hurt anyone. I promise."

Dianella's chin bobbed amongst the younger girls who trembled under her arms like ducklings. "Did you forge an alliance with the king?"

I pursed my lips and nodded. "Something like that, yes."

Dianella gently stepped away from the other girls and held out her hand. "Take me to him."

I stared at her outstretched palm. "Are you sure?"

Dianella knew I wasn't asking about any fear of visiting the king. Her marine eyes darted from me, to her welcoming hand, and back. "I'm sure."

I bit my lip. I transferred Illuna's opals into my left hand and I slowly placed my right hand in hers. A couple of the priestesses gasped in fear as our palms met—Dianella touched the disease.

Dianella ignored the other girls and walked with me, hand-in-hand, toward the open castle doors.

"Did he really make your light magic stronger?" Dianella asked.

I nodded as I stepped over the threshold. "It was like my power grew to act as a counterweight to his."

Dianella entered the Castle of Shadows at the end of my hand. Her blue eyes looked up at the dim light of the foyer.

We could not see Kyrian, but his presence was a powerful whisper like the puff of air that blows out a candle. We heard one footstep on the stairs above us. Then another.

I cleared my throat and glanced toward Dianella. "He's a fan of formal introductions, so may I re-introduce you to Kyrian Luxbane, King of Shad—"

I caught a glimpse of him on the stairs and he stole the words from my lips. He stalked down the steps like a large panther. His shadows curled down from his broad shoulders like an ermine cape. His black hair was longer and shining in the dim light. A crown of onyx gems like a dozen black daggers shot up from his head. His eyes shone like gold.

Kyrian gracefully stepped off the stairs. He and Dianella studied each other for a few moments, sizing each other up to see who would strike first. Kyrian smirked and crossed his arms across his broad chest.

"Dianella," he nearly purred. His voice was deeper and stronger, and I knew deep in my veins he wasn't just mimicking someone else. "I'm surprised you came empty-handed."

Dianella chuckled low in her throat. "I wouldn't want to give *his majesty* another scar, now would I?"

I glanced at Dianella, who had a rare smirk on her lips. She glanced back at me. "I started to suspect Illuna was wrong about the Prince of Shadows when I stabbed him in the stomach on my visit and he didn't retaliate."

Kyrian laughed. "It merely tickled."

Dianella took a confident step toward Kyrian but kept her eyes on me. "Then, I wondered why all the priestesses' magic was fleeting in the years after King Onyx died. We needed something to ground our power so it didn't slip away from us into the air. What did you call it, Callista?"

I shifted my weight onto my toes and my cheeks flushed. "A counterweight."

Kyrian quickly shot me a smile that made my knees weak and then turned his attention back to Dianella. "Sounds like you want to propose a new treaty."

Dianella nodded. "Name your terms."

Kyrian's shadows danced behind him like snakes. "Same as my father's. I want the Selene priestesses to learn shadow magic. Any of them can study here with my full hospitality so long as no one tries to murder me."

"Very well," Dianella answered. "Although I have an additional term to add."

Dianella winked at me and then straightened her back and placed her hands in front of her. My heart clenched—she was a nearly perfect shadow of Illuna. "One of our priestesses strayed too far into the darkness to return to the Temple. Callista will need to remain in the Castle of Shadows to maintain the balance in our alliance."

One of Kyrian's shadows lassoed me around the waist and gently pulled me to his side. His arm snaked around my back and his claws gently stroked my left shoulder. "I'll accept the burden, even though her baking is absolutely atrocious."

I held back a giggle like a trapped butterfly in my throat. I gripped Illuna's necklace in both hands and raised it up to Dianella. She smiled and then stepped forward and bowed her head. I looped the chain around her hood and let the weight of the large opals rest on her chest.

Kyrian held out his right hand to Dianella as his shadows crawled toward his wrist like black smoke. Dianella's palm lit up with a tiny white sun. The new High Priestess of Selene and the new King of Shadows joined hands to seal the treaty. Shadows coiled up Dianella's forearm and a ribbon of white light twisted around Kyrian's, locking their promise of balance and peace in place.

Before Dianella left the castle, she promised two priestesses would arrive to study shadow magic by the end of the week. Kyrian coolly accepted, but his shadows around me vibrated with a giddy happiness. He was going to make a lot of pies.

The door to the Castle of Shadows closed and blanketed Kyrian and I in darkness. Kyrian's arm didn't leave my back, but I blew a tiny ball of white light out of my lips. The bauble of gentle light floated in the air so I could get a good look at my handsome king.

"Am I supposed to bow, *your majesty*?" I said with a smile.

Kyrian chuckled. "If you are inclined to drop to your knees, I certainly will not stop you."

He wrapped his shadows around my waist again. He placed his hands on either side of my face with his claws against my cheeks.

"Although I can think of a better use for your lips than singing my praises."

I closed my eyes and lifted up on my toes. I pushed forward and gave the King of Shadows a kiss of a new life. Our lips parted and I tasted dozens of meat pies, decades of birthday cakes, and laughter that brightened even the darkest night.

I breathed him in and kissed him again.

This life and this love was finally mine.

Author Perci Jay

THE END.