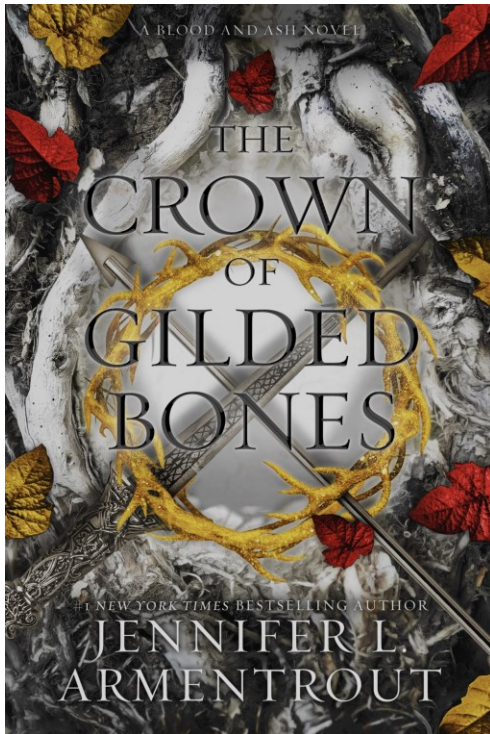


THE CROWN OF GILDED BONES: A BLOOD AND ASH NOVEL: BOOK 3



Adult

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

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Book Summary:

In a fantasy world, a new queen discovers her identity and begins to use her newfound powers to fight enemies.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains obscene sexual activities; explicit sexual nudity; violence; profanity; and alcohol use.

4 /5

Not For Minors
BookLooks Review Rating

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30	This time, his lips brushed over mine in a featherlight kiss. I could barely feel it, but it somehow still managed to twist my insides into knots. He then lifted his head, and I saw it in his features—the stark stillness of a predator locking onto its prey.
95	I wanted to see his stupid dimples again, and I wanted to kiss them.
97	Casteel lowered his head, pressing his lips against mine.
108	<p>I tilted forward, pressing my breasts against his bare chest. The contact left me hungry in a way much different from earlier but just as potent. I shifted in his lap. We both groaned. Instinct took over, my body knowing what I wanted—what I needed—as I drank from his wrist. I rolled my hips against his, shaking at the intense curling sensation deep in my lower stomach.</p> <p>His blood... gods. My skin tingled now, becoming overly sensitive. The tips of my breasts ached as they brushed against the fine dusting of hair across his chest. I whimpered, pressing down against the hardness straining through thin pants. I wanted... no, I needed him.</p> <p>“Whatever you want,” he said, his words a vow. “I will give it to you.”</p> <p>Him. I wanted him.</p> <p>Keeping his wrist to my mouth, I planted my hand on his chest and pushed—pushed hard. He fell onto his back as I tilted my hips, rubbing against his length. With shocking strength, he lifted both of us just enough to shove his pants down to his thighs with one hand. The feel of him hot and hard against my lower body dragged a thready moan from me.</p> <p>“Fuck,” he gasped, his large body shaking. And then he moved again, lifting me in one fluid motion and angling my hips. He brought me down onto him, sliding deep inside me. His wrist smothered my cry of surprise as his hips flexed and thrust upward. Toes curling, I pushed down, matching his pace as I curled myself around his arm, drinking deeply.</p> <p>“She’s taking too much,” the other man said, his voice closer. “You’ve got to stop her.”</p> <p>Even in my lust-addled mind, even as tension coiled tighter and tighter inside me, I knew the one who moved under me and in me wouldn’t stop me. He’d let me take it all. He’d let me drain him dry. He’d do that because he...</p> <p>“For fuck’s sake,” the wolvern snarled. A heartbeat later, I felt his arm clamp down on my waist as his fingers pressed into the skin under my jaw. He pulled my head back, but I didn’t fight him because this male’s blood was everything to me.</p> <p>The one under me sat up, curling an arm around my hips, just below the other’s arm. A sharp swirl of tingles rushed through me. He reached around the wolvern’s grip, fisting my hair as he pressed his forehead to mine. Under me, he moved his magnificent body at a furious rhythm. My entire body stiffened and then lightning flew through my veins. My muscles clamped down on him, spasming. My cry mixed with his rough shout as his hips pumped furiously, and he followed me into the wild, mindless bliss that wracked my entire body. Slowly, the tension poured out of me, turning my muscles to liquid. I didn’t know how much time passed, but finally, the hand under my jaw eased, and one of the arms slid away from me. My cheek fell to a warm shoulder, and I sat there, eyes closed and breathing shallowly as he held me tightly to his chest, his hand still tangled in my hair at the back of my head.</p>
112	Our mouths met, and there was nothing gentle about the way we came together. He grasped the back of my head, his hand fisting in my hair. I held onto him, my fingers digging into the skin of his shoulders. It was a wrecking sort of kiss, demanding and raw. We claimed each other. Our lips mashed together. Our teeth clashed. Our arms wrapped

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	<p>fiercely around one another, and the kiss, the way we held each other, became something else entirely. His hands slid down my sides to my hips as he pulled me against him, where I felt him hardening against me once more.</p> <p>“I need you,” he groaned against my lips. “I need you, Poppy.”</p> <p>“You have me,” I told him, echoing the words I’d said to him once before. Now, they felt like an unbreakable vow. “Always.”</p> <p>“Always,” he repeated.</p> <p>Lifting me from his lap, he stood and then turned, placing me on the center of what I realized was a fairly narrow bed. I got a brief glimpse of the dark walls and fractured sunlight seeping through the cracked boards of</p> <p>...And now he climbed over me, his attention feral and possessive. Every muscle in my body tensed. My leg curled as he slid his hand up my thigh, the rough skin of his palm creating delicious friction. I couldn’t look away from the vivid burn of his eyes. I was absolutely transfixed by them—by him. Slipping an arm under my waist, he flipped me onto my belly. Surprise flickered through me. I started to rise, but the heat of his body against my back pressed me down to the rough blanket. Casteel rained kisses down my spine, over my hips, and then to the swell of my rear, eliciting a shiver from me.</p> <p>“If you ever tell me to kiss your ass,” he said, “remember that I already have.”</p> <p>A throaty laugh parted my lips, the sound and act surprising. “I don’t think I’ll forget that.”</p> <p>“Good.” He lifted me to my knees, using his thigh to urge my legs farther apart. My fingers dug into the coarse material as a tremble of anticipation rolled through me. “I’m not going to last very long,” he warned. “But neither will you.”</p> <p>I couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe with him curling his arm around my waist as his other hand clamped down on my hip. He didn’t move. My pulse thrummed.</p> <p>“Cas—” His name ended in a sharp cry as he thrust into me.</p> <p>He pulled me back against him as he plunged into me, over and over, his pace wickedly savage. Pulling my back flush to his chest, he ground his hips against my rear as his hand left my hip and folded over the base of my throat. He pressed his lips to my damp temple.</p> <p>“I love you.”</p> <p>I broke apart, shattering into a thousand tiny pieces as my release crashed through me with such force that a growl rumbled from his chest. His arms tightened around me. One more deep thrust, and he came, shouting my name. Panting and slick with a fine sheen of sweat, he brought us both to the bed. The blanket scratched my skin, but I was sated, boneless,</p>
115	<p>Casteel kissed me, his lips moving over mine so gently, so tenderly. It was a sweet and slow kiss as if it were the very first time our lips had ever come together, as if he were learning the shape and feel of my mouth against his.</p>
116	<p>His mouth found mine again, and this time... oh, gods, the kiss went deeper. I melted into him as his tongue stroked my lips, parting them. Tiny shivers erupted all over my body, and we kissed until we were both breathless.</p> <p>“Cas,” he echoed against my lips. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear you call me that.”</p>
120	<p>“You would be going at my throat right now if you were a vampy. You wouldn’t feel warm and soft in my arms or around my cock,” he said, and I flushed a hot pink.</p>
151	<p>Not even a second later, he was next to me, kissing the corner of my lips. “I like that,” he said, placing his hands on my hips. “A lot.”</p>

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155	No one spoke beyond Casteel asking if I was hungry or Naill offering his flask, claiming the whiskey would help keep us warm the farther we traveled.
202	<p>He reached for the hem of my tunic, lifting it.</p> <p>...He motioned for me to lift my arms, and I did so. Air flowed over my bare arms as I watched him toss the top aside. The plain slip I wore was so much thinner and better suited for the climate, but its tiny straps and the near-sheer, cinched bodice hid very little. He drew a finger along the strap as he eyed it, slipping it under the flimsy material. “These silly, tiny straps...” The tips of his fangs dragged across his lower lip.</p> <p>....My skin tingled as he ran his finger along the bodice of the slip, over the swell of my flesh. The peaks of my breasts tightened and hardened as his gaze returned to mine.</p> <p>...I glanced down at my dusty pants. “I’ll dirty the bed if I sit.”</p> <p>“Then you’ll have to take the pants off.”</p> <p>My brows lifted. “Are you trying to get me naked?”</p> <p>“Poppy,” he purred, brushing several strands of hair over my shoulder. “When am I not trying to get you naked?”</p> <p>I laughed softly. “Good point.” I reached for the flap of the breeches, knowing he was teasing and enjoying it—and relieved that I could still enjoy it despite everything that had happened. I undid the buttons.</p> <p>...He made quick work of tugging off the boots as I steadied myself. The pants came next, and then I was standing before him in nothing but a slip that reached my thighs.</p> <p>Casteel remained where he was, his gaze traveling over the length of my legs.</p> <p>...His gaze roamed over me—my arms, the skin above my breasts, my face.</p>
207	<p>Casteel shucked off his clothing with an utter lack of self-consciousness that was fascinating and enviable. I couldn’t take my eyes off him as he walked into the sunken stall and began fiddling with the faucets on the wall.</p> <p>...should’ve focused on whatever sorcery made that possible, but I was mesmerized by him—by the dusting of dark hair on his calves, the breadth of his shoulders and chest, and the lean, coiled muscles of his stomach. His body was proof of a day rarely spent idle. He enthralled me, everything from the delineated lines of his chest, the wickedness of the length of him, to the life he’d lived that played out across his bronzed skin in a smattering of pale scars.</p> <p>His body was... gods, it was a masterpiece of perfection and flaws. Not even the Royal Crest brand—the circle with the arrow piercing the middle—on his right upper thigh detracted from the raw beauty of him.</p> <p>“When you look at me like that, every good intention I had of letting you enjoy your first shower disappears with each passing second,” he said, water sluicing over his shoulders as he crossed under the rain shower. “And is replaced by very inappropriate intentions.”</p> <p>Heat flushed my veins as I toyed with the hem of my slip. My gaze dipped below the tight muscles of his abdominals, lower than his navel. He’d hardened, the skin there a deeper hue. A curling motion was sharp and sudden in the pit of my stomach and then between my thighs.</p> <p>His chest rose sharply. “I think you’re interested in those inappropriate intentions.”</p> <p>“And what if I am?”</p> <p>“I would find it very hard not to cave to them.” His eyes brightened. “And that would be a problem.”</p> <p>My pulse was a heady thrum. “I’m not sure how that could be problematic.”</p>

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	<p>“The problem? If I get inside of you right now, I don’t think I can control myself.” He stopped in front of me and dipped his head. His lips brushed the shell of my ear as he slipped a finger under the strap of the slip. “I’d have you up against that wall, my cock and fangs so deep inside you that neither of us would know where one began and the other ended.”</p> <p>An intense, aching pulse washed through me in tight waves. The memory of the scrape of his fangs against my skin, the bite, and the brief pain that gave way to pleasure took center stage in my mind. “I still don’t see how that is a problem.”</p> <p>A deep, rough sound came from the back of his throat. “That’s because you haven’t seen me lose control.”</p> <p>...His head tilted, and my entire body jerked at the feeling of a sharp fang against the side of my neck.</p> <p>That tantalizing ache settled between my legs and throbbed.</p> <p>...“And I had my mouth between your thighs, and the taste of you coursing down my throat?”</p> <p>I shuddered, my eyes drifting shut. “Yes. T-that morning. You weren’t in control then.”</p> <p>“You reached me, Poppy.” His fingers slipped under both straps of my slip, and he drew it down slowly, over the tingling tips of my breasts. “I didn’t lose control then.”</p> <p>...As the slip gathered at my waist and then fell to the floor, I found myself shamefully wanting to know.</p> <p>“I would lose control now.” His fingers skated down the curve of my shoulder and over the swell of my breast. The touch was featherlight, but my back arched. He brushed his lips over my cheek as his thumb moved in maddening circles over a tingling nipple. “My mouth would be all over you. I’d drink from your throat. I’d drink from here,” he whispered against my lips as he folded his hand around my breast, kneading the flesh. I gasped as I felt his other hand slip between my thighs. “I’d definitely drink from here.”</p> <p>He could... he could drink from there? “I don’t have an issue with any of those things.”</p> <p>...He skimmed a finger through the dampness gathering at my center, stroking the fire already flaming to life in my veins.</p> <p>...Casteel kissed me, tugging at my lower lip.</p> <p>...He chuckled against my mouth and then kissed me again, slipping his hand out from between my thighs. “Shower,” he reminded me—or himself.</p> <p>The level of disappointment I felt when he took my hand was quite shameful, especially when he turned, and the hard length of him brushed my thigh. Another wanton pulse rolled through me as he led me into the stall. He stepped into the shower and turned to me, water wetting his hair, coursing over his shoulders, and droplets—warm droplets—sprinkling my outstretched arm. His heated gaze was so intense it was like a physical caress as it swept over me.</p> <p>My body trembled as I stood there, letting him look his fill.</p>
212	<p>My eyes drifted shut once more, and my mind wandered to pure, sinful places as his hands took the same path the sponge had minutes before. I thought about what he’d said he would do with his fangs and... his cock. My blood heated as the fire roared to life inside me once more. Could he do that here, under the shower? That seemed quite slippery, but if anyone could do it, it would be Casteel.</p> <p>He glided his hands over my breasts. My head fell back against his chest as they lingered there. I bit down on my lip as one of his hands coasted over my belly. My skin tightened as pleasure curled low. His fingers on the hardened peak of my breast wrung a gasp from me</p>

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	<p>as his other hand made its way below my navel. My body reacted without thought, widening the space between my thighs.</p> <p>“Enjoying your shower?” His voice was thick with smoke.</p> <p>He knew exactly how much I was enjoying it, and the knowledge that he could scent my arousal enflamed me instead of embarrassing me. I nodded anyway.</p> <p>...His hand slipped between my thighs. “Just being thorough,” he said, swirling his thumb across the bundle of nerves there.</p> <p>I gasped, rising on tiptoe. The ache twisted deeply as my lips parted. I moaned as my hips lifted to meet his hand.</p> <p>He kissed my shoulder as he eased his hands away. My eyes snapped open, and I started to turn toward him. “I’m not finished,” he said before I could speak. “Your legs still need to be cleaned.”</p> <p>My brows rose. “Seriously?”</p> <p>His eyes were like pools of warm honey. “Very serious.”</p> <p>I couldn’t care less about my legs. “Casteel—”</p> <p>“I would never forgive myself if you didn’t find your first shower to be as effective as a bath,” he said, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “But you should sit. You’re looking a little... flushed.”</p> <p>“I wonder why.”</p> <p>He chuckled deeply, and I briefly considered hitting him but decided against it even though he truly deserved it for teasing me like this. I let him take me to the bench and sat, sucking in a soft breath of surprise as I realized a faint mist of water fell over the space.</p> <p>Casteel added more soap to his hands and lowered himself to his knees before me.</p> <p>“Comfortable?”</p> <p>I glanced down between his legs as I nodded. He wasn’t even remotely unaffected by this.</p> <p>“Good. Your comfort is my utmost concern.” Water clung to his lashes as he curled one hand around an ankle. He grinned, his gaze rising to mine as he lifted my leg. My breath snagged as he placed my foot on his shoulder. The position left me... oh, gods, it left me utterly exposed to him.</p> <p>A shaky breath left me as I watched him shift his gaze to my very center. A hint of fang appeared behind his parted lips, and everything inside me twisted most deliciously. My palms flattened against the smooth bench as he drew his soapy hands up my calf and then my thigh. I held my breath as his fingers reached the crease between my hip and thigh. He dragged his hand along the inside of my leg, his knuckles brushing my most sensitive area. Air punched out of my lungs.</p> <p>Casteel’s hand stopped there as he met my gaze. “Still comfortable?”</p> <p>“Yes,” I whispered.</p> <p>That sensually cruel smile of his appeared, and tension gathered sweetly in my body. He dragged his hand back down as the mist of water continued wetting my skin. When he finished, he placed my foot back on the floor and then lifted my other leg. Cooler air rushed against my heated flesh. He did the same as before, sliding the soap between my toes, over the pad of my foot, and then up and up my leg. I tensed, nearly straining in anticipation, my heart pounding as his knuckles once more grazed my core. Drawing his hand back down the length of my leg, he wiped away the soap and bent his head, kissing the jagged scar on the inside of my knee.</p> <p>Hooking his arm around my calf, Casteel didn’t put my foot down on the floor. He moved in closer, the width of his shoulders widening my legs.</p>

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	<p>My heart stuttered as my eyes widened. A wave of taut shivers cascaded through me. Not even that morning he'd woken from the nightmare and had been close to bloodlust had I been this exposed to him. A flutter moved from my chest to my stomach.</p> <p>"Are you... are you still being thorough?" I asked, my voice husky.</p> <p>"Yes. I think I missed a spot." He kissed the space above the old scar. "I think I see many more spaces I missed. And you know me, I'm a perfectionist. I also wouldn't want those spots to feel left out. Do you?"</p> <p>"No." My heart pounded so much that I wondered if he could see it, but when I looked down, all I saw was the turgid peaks of my breasts between soaked strands of coppery hair. I lost a bit more breath as I took in the sight of myself—my shoulders back against the tile, my breasts thrust out, and my legs open wide for Casteel. My eyes remained open as my head fell back against the wall. I watched him as his wet hair teased my skin.</p> <p>"How about here?" He kissed the inside of my thigh as his palm ran up the back of my leg.</p> <p>"Or here?" His lips found one of those ragged scars on the insides of my thighs. He shifted his head as he brushed his lips over the pulsing flesh between my legs. I jerked. "Yeah, I think this spot is especially dirty and lonely."</p> <p>I moved beyond words as his head bowed. The wet slide of his tongue over me dragged a throaty moan from me. My eyes fluttered shut and reopened only halfway when he said, "I need to pay extra special attention to this area." He made another pass with his tongue, this time swirling it around the tight bud of nerves. "It may take me a while."</p> <p>I trembled as his tongue flicked the skin and then slipped inside me. A dizzying burst of pleasure shocked my senses. He tilted his head again, and his lick was deep and slow and wonderfully indecent. My hips tilted up, matching his strokes—his teasing, shallow strokes. What he was doing was decadent and not anything I had ever imagined when thinking about bathing.</p> <p>I would never be able to think of anything else when I was near water now.</p> <p>My hips twitched as I felt a long finger replace his tongue, trailing lightly over the swollen flesh then slipping inside me a fraction with each sweep. My body was becoming an inferno.</p> <p>"Cas," I breathed, shuddering as I teetered closer and closer to the precipice.</p> <p>He halted, looking up at me with eyes that were now luminous. "You should hold onto the bench."</p> <p>With shaking hands, I gripped the edge of the seat.</p> <p>One side of his lips curved up. "Good girl."</p> <p>He dipped his head, his breath hot against me. A heartbeat passed. I felt his lips and then the erotic graze of a fang—</p> <p>I cried out as the sharp, brief sting sent a shockwave through my entire body. A knotted whirl of burning pleasure shot down my legs and up my spine. My eyes were wide-open, but I swore I saw bursts of white light. Then his mouth closed over the throbbing bundle of nerves as his finger thrust inside me. He sucked deep and hard, coaxing not only my arousal but the thin bit of blood I knew he'd also drawn. My entire body reared off the bench, my grip slipping</p> <p>He placed his other hand on my stomach, pressing me back down to the seat. He feasted from me as his finger pumped in and out. He consumed me, and I was lost—willingly lost in the raw sensations flooding me, devoured by the groan he unleashed against my flesh. I squirmed against him in senseless desperation. The feel of him was too much, and yet, it wasn't enough. The pleasure bordered on pain wrapped in beauty. It was exhilarating and</p>

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	<p>frightening as the intense heat coiled deeper and tighter inside me.</p> <p>“Cas,” I moaned again, not even recognizing my voice as his hand left my stomach. Tipping forward on the edge of the bench, I gained leverage with my other foot. My chin dropped as my hips lifted from the tile and rolled against his finger, against his mouth. The sight of me churning against him became branded in my mind. The sight of the muscles in his upper arm flexing and tensing as his hand moved between his legs was imprinted on my skin. His lashes swept up, and his gaze locked with mine as his arm made quick and jerky, hard movements and pushed me over the edge. I came apart, screaming his name as he gave a hoarse shout against my skin. I shattered, over and over, breaking into pleasure-wrapped shards. The release was devastating and glorious in its intensity, coming in on endless waves that left me boneless against the tile. When he eased his finger out of me, tiny bursts of pleasure still sparked through me.</p> <p>His lips curled into a smile against my swollen flesh. “Honeydew.”</p>
216	<p>He leaned over me, capturing my lips. The kiss was soft and languid and wrapped my heart in warmth and light.</p>
218	<p>I tipped my head up, kissing him.</p>
219	<p>He’d returned with a bottle of wine and a platter of sliced meats and cubed cheeses. ...Even though there was much to discuss, the full stomach, wine, and what he’d done in that shower all worked against that.</p>
220	<p>Andre was the most uninhibited of all my lovers—”</p> <p>...He was quite shameless in his search of pleasure as he was with his willingness to give, but his most impressive seduction was not his manhood.”</p> <p>...But his most impressive seduction was not his manhood. It was the dark, wicked kiss of our kind, one he was all too eager to bestow in the most scandalous locations.”</p> <p>I realized what Casteel was getting at. The dark, wicked kiss of our kind. But my mind got stuck on the bestowing the kiss in the most scandalous locations part. Casteel hadn’t bitten me in that very scandalous location in the shower, but he’d drawn blood.</p> <p>...Casteel continued, “ Torro took me from behind, his thick hardness already taking me to bliss while Andre knelt before me, his mouth closing over my—”</p> <p>...“We’ll talk about your uncomfortable curiosity in great detail later, but you need to get off me and change into something that makes it less easy for my manhood to find its way to your lady parts.”</p> <p>...His arm eased off me, and I started to rise when he lightly smacked my rear. I let out a little squeak, and those damn dimples appeared in both of his cheeks.</p>
225	<p>Casteel was entering the bedchamber when I returned, carrying a fresh platter of food and a new bottle of what appeared to be some sort of sweet wine.</p> <p>...I relaxed as he popped the cork and poured a glass of wine.</p> <p>...He handed the glass to me.</p> <p>...I took a sip. The wine tasted of sugared berries.</p>
226	<p>Highlight(blue) - Page 226 · Location 3373</p> <p>He nodded as he leaned in, brushing his lips across mine. “Because hearing you say it makes me want to get my mouth between your thighs again, and that need is quite distracting.”</p> <p>...He kissed me quickly, nipping at my bottom lip as he withdrew.</p>

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227	<p>“You know, the one I found her with on that window ledge? The scene was about a very dark sort of wicked kiss on a very inappropriate area,” Casteel continued while Kieran stared at us blankly. “And foursomes.”</p> <p>...“Foursomes?” Kieran repeated, his gaze shifting to me. “I imagine you had a lot of questions about that.”</p>
228	<p>I arched a brow as I took a drink of the wine.</p> <p>...He chuckled, kissing me quickly once more.</p>
235	<p>“Yes. You are the rightful ruler,” he said, and I swallowed hard, almost reaching for the wine glass again.</p>
243	<p>I reached out with my senses, tasting... something dry and oaky, like whiskey—almost nutty. Determination.</p>
247	<p>The heat of his body quickly seeped through our shirts. It was like no one else was in the garden as he lowered his mouth to mine—surely not his father, because the kiss was fierce and deep, making my heart race.</p> <p>When Casteel’s mouth left mine, my breath came out in short pants. He pressed his forehead against mine, holding me tightly.</p>
250	<p>Mindful of the dagger I held, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Putting on more appropriate clothing won’t change the fact that you’ve already seen me in nothing more than a shirt,” I said, surprising myself.</p>
261	<p>I lifted my arms. “I think you like taking my clothes off.”</p> <p>“I do.” Casteel tugged the shirt up and over my head. Cool air washed over all the newly exposed skin. He dropped the tunic to the floor as he stared down at me, his lips parting just enough that I could see a hint of his fangs as his gaze swept over me in a slow, lingering perusal. Muscles tightened low in my stomach. He placed his hand on the side of my ribs and under my breast. The contact sent a sharp pulse through me. His other hand did the same on the other side of my body. “However, I do not like undressing you, only to cover you immediately.”</p> <p>I looked down, my toes curling even more against the tile floor at what I saw beyond the puckered, rosy-pink tips of my breasts. His golden-bronze skin was such a striking contrast to mine, and his hands were so large and strong.</p> <p>...He lowered his head, and his warm breath coasted over my chest and to the swell of a breast.</p> <p>...A brief, pleased smile crossed his face, and then he caught the sensitive skin between the edges of his teeth and then his lips.</p> <p>...The pink tip of his tongue flicked over the throbbing, tightened skin.</p> <p>...He nodded, and then his mouth closed over my breast again. I felt the wet slide of his tongue and then the wicked scrape of his fangs. My breath caught at the forbidden sensation, and then he struck, sinking his sharp teeth into the flesh above my nipple. I cried out, threading my hands into his hair as my entire body jerked. The razor-sharp pain was intense, shooting through my entire body. There was a second where I wanted to pull away when the pleasure-pain was almost too much, but it was gone in a heartbeat. He sealed his lips over the tingling skin of my breast and sucked deep, drawing the sensitive peak into his mouth, taking my blood into himself.</p> <p>A fire erupted inside me, heating my blood and every part of my body. My head spun, and I shuddered as his growl rumbled against my skin. I held onto his hair, shamelessly holding him there as damp heat flooded my entire being. An aching spike of pleasure darted</p>

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	<p>through me. My hips twitched as he tugged at my skin. “Cas,” I breathed. He made that sound again, that sensual, rough sound, and then he moved, pressing my back against the wall, the hard line of his thigh between my legs. I gasped at the contact of the cold tile against my bare skin and the feel of his breeches-clad thigh against my core. He dropped a hand to my hip, and as he pulled harder on my breast, he tugged my hip down and forward, rocking me against his leg. Tense, tight waves of pleasure rippled out from between my thighs and from my breasts as I stood on tiptoe, my weight mostly supported by him. The drag and pull of his mouth on my breast seemed to be connected to the intense throb at my core. My hips moved against his thigh. There was nothing slow about it. I rocked hard against him, driven by the dual sensations of him feeding from my breast and the soft friction of his leg against my swollen, tightened flesh. Tension curled and whirled, spinning tighter and faster. He feasted, and I became frenzied, tugging at his hair, sinking my nails into his skin. My legs clamped down on his thigh, and all the tension inside me erupted, lashing through me in the most delicious and stunning way. I shook, calling out his name as my release rolled through me. I was still trembling, twitching when his tongue soothed over his bite, and he straightened, holding me tightly against his chest. His mouth closed over mine in a slow, languid, iron-rich, and musky kiss. The taste of my blood on his lips sent another wave of pleasure through me. “You,” he drawled, his voice thick. “You really liked that reward.” My forehead rested against his as I struggled to gain control of my breathing. “A little.” “A little?” His laugh was like smoke. “You came so hard, I could feel you through my pants.” “Oh, my gods.” I choked on a laugh. “That is so...” “What?” His lips dragged across mine. “Inappropriate?” “Yes.” “But it’s true.” He kissed me as he eased me to my feet. “You can stand? Or have I blown your mind and your muscles?”</p>
264	<p>“I’d rather be naked.” He winked when I raised a brow. “I’d rather you were naked, too.” “Shocker,” I murmured.</p>
270	<p>Jasper stopped pacing, coming to stand near the terrace doors of the living area. He took a deep drink, finishing off the whiskey.</p>
271	<p>For a moment, I thought he might drop his glass of whiskey.</p>
272	<p>Casteel took a healthy drink of his whiskey.</p>
276	<p>While I did have a lot of questions for her, I wasn’t sure I could hold a conversation because I would be thinking about wicked kisses and foursomes.</p>
280	<p>“What would you like to drink?” he asked, joining me. “There’s water, wine, and whiskey—the three Ws of life.” I arched a brow. “Wine.” He smirked as he poured the faint pink liquid and then fixed himself a glass of whiskey. I tentatively tasted the wine, pleased to find that it tasted like strawberries.</p>
293	<p>He slid his hand around to my cheek, tilting my head back. Dipping his head, he kissed me softly.</p>
294	<p>He kissed me, capturing my lips in a deep, drugging sort of kiss.</p>

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299	Dipping my head, I kissed him quickly before hopping out of his lap. He rose, shooting me a sultry look that scalded my skin as he went to the door.
307	He kissed me softly, scattering what was left of my senses.
311	<p>My eyes widened, but before I could respond, he turned, pressing me back against the stone wall. In the dim lights, his eyes were a luminous, churning honey color.</p> <p>...Casteel folded his hand behind my head as he leaned into me. Against my stomach, I could feel the hard, thick length of him as he brushed his lips across my temple.</p> <p>...Soaking up his lush, piney scent and his warmth, I let my eyes drift shut as I clutched his sides, swords and all.</p> <p>...“It shouldn’t be,” he agreed, sliding a hand over my bare arm and then across my chest. A curl low in my stomach made itself known as his palm grazed my breast.</p> <p>...His hand slipped over my hip and then my thigh. I could feel the heat of his palm through the dress as he skimmed past the wolveren dagger.</p> <p>...I bit down on my lip as his fingers gathered the material of the gown in a fist. “I’m not Nyktos.”</p> <p>“No shit,” he said against my mouth.</p> <p>...“She was gone.” He nipped at my lower lip, drawing a gasp from me.</p> <p>...The sheer intensity of the way he claimed my lips cut off my words. That low curl in my stomach intensified as he tilted his head, deepening the kiss.</p> <p>Balmy air curled its way around my legs as he drew the skirt of my gown up. Shock at his intentions warred with the elicited pulse of pleasure. “We’re in public.”</p> <p>“Not really.” The tips of his fangs grazed the underside of my jaw, and every muscle in my body seemed to clench. Up and up it went until his fingers skimmed the curve of my ass.</p> <p>“This is a private garden.”</p> <p>“There are people around—” A breathy moan escaped me as the skirt rose above the dagger. “Somewhere.”</p> <p>“No one is even remotely close enough to us,” he said, slipping his hand out from behind my head. “The wolveren made sure of that.”</p> <p>“I don’t see them,” I said.</p> <p>“They’re at the mouth of the alley,” he told me, catching my ear between his teeth. I shuddered. “They’re giving us privacy to speak.”</p> <p>A short giggle left me. “I’m sure that’s what they think we’re doing.”</p> <p>“Does it matter?” he questioned.</p> <p>I thought about that as my pulse sped up. Did it? What had happened last night flashed before me, as did the memory of seeing Casteel prone on the Chambers’ floor. Believing he’d died. In a heartbeat, I remembered what it had been like when the blood had drained from my body, realizing there would be no more new experiences, no more moments of wild abandon. That little girl had gotten a second chance, and so had I. I wouldn’t waste it.</p> <p>“No,” I said as his gaze lifted to mine. Heart pounding, I reached between us. The backs of my trembling fingers brushed against him, and he jerked as I undid the flap of buttons. “It doesn’t.”</p> <p>“Thank fuck,” he growled and then kissed me again, obliterating any reservations that stemmed from a lifetime of being sheltered. His tongue stroked mine as he slid an arm around my waist, lifting me. His strength never ceased to send a thrill through me. “Wrap your legs around me.”</p>

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	<p>I did, moaning at the feel of his hard flesh nestled against mine.</p> <p>He reached between us, and I felt the tip of him pressing into me. “Just so you know”—he raised his head, his gaze locking with mine—“ I’m completely in control.”</p> <p>“Are you?”</p> <p>“Totally,” he swore, thrusting into me.</p> <p>My head pushed back against the wall as the feel of him, hot and thick, consumed me. His mouth closed over mine, and I loved the way he kissed me, like my very taste was enough for him to live on.</p> <p>He moved against me and in me, the twin warmth of his body and the stone blocks at my back a delicious assault on my senses. The thrusts of our tongues matched the slow plunge of his hips. Things... things didn’t stay that way. Wedging his arm between my back and the wall, he rocked against me until my body became a fire he fanned with each stroke and each intoxicating kiss. He pressed in, grinding against the small bundle of nerves, only to pull back and then return with another deep thrust. When he started to retreat, I tightened my legs around his waist, locking me to him.</p> <p>He chuckled against my lips. “Greedy.”</p> <p>“Tease,” I said, mimicking his earlier act by catching his lip with my teeth.</p> <p>“Fuck,” he groaned, shifting his hips as he ground into me, over and over, the movements increasing in intensity until they became feverish, until it felt like I would break apart. My head spun as the bliss built. He felt like he was everywhere, and when he dropped his mouth to my throat, and I felt the scrape of his fangs, it was all too much. Spasms rocked my body in tight, slick waves, throwing me so high, I didn’t think I’d ever come down as he followed me into that bliss, shuddering as my throat muffled his deep moan of release. We stayed like that for a little bit, joined together, and both struggling to gain control of our breathing. Shaken, it took quite a few minutes for me to come to my senses while he eased himself from me and carefully lowered me to my feet.</p>
324	<p>“I am, too. I would want to be doing this—all that we’ve done today,” I said. “You?” “The same,” he said quietly, and I knew he spoke the truth. “But with you naked and more sex.”</p>
325	<p>I curled my fingers around Casteel’s chin and pulled his mouth to mine. I kissed him quickly.</p>
328	<p>I had no idea how Kieran and the female had gotten from where I’d last seen them to him leaning back in the sand and her kneeling between his legs, her hands in the general vicinity of an area that would definitely be considered naughty.</p> <p>“Are they...?” I sucked in a sharp breath as Kieran’s head fell back. My eyes widened. Casteel’s chuckle was dark and soft. “Do you still need me to answer that question?” I swallowed. “No.”</p> <p>The hand at my hip continued moving in small, distracting circles as I watched who I thought might be Lyra move her head back and forth in a way that reminded me of how I moved against Casteel.</p> <p>...It was like when Casteel kissed me between the thighs, except the way Willa had described it, there was less kissing and licking, and more... sucking. That whole act had confused me greatly when I first read about it, but that was before I had learned that there were all kinds of acts one could do with any number of body parts.</p> <p>...“You did say the wolverine were into public displays of affection.”</p>

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	<p>He laughed again. "I did, and they are very open with their... affections. They feel no shame in doing so. I'm sure at some point you will definitely see a bare ass or two."</p>
330	<p>His offer tugged on my heart, and I turned my head, kissing the underside of his jaw. ... "Okay," he said, tilting his head and kissing me.</p> <p>...But I really shouldn't be watching, and that was exactly what I was doing, my gaze finding where Kieran and Lyra had gone with rather unerring accuracy. I saw Lyra place a hand on his chest, pushing him back as he started to sit up or... reach for her. She was in control of her actions as Kieran retreated to rest on his elbows, a confidence in her as her head moved, a hand following the movements.</p> <p>I really should have kept my senses locked down when I focused on Lyra, but I felt that control I had assumed was there, mixed with warm smokiness. The warmth in my cheeks increased, flowing down my neck as I shifted, stretching out my leg. My breath caught as Casteel's fingers moved a scant couple of inches from my hip to the left, still moving in those maddening, tiny circles.</p> <p>And I really, really shouldn't have left my senses open when my gaze flicked to Kieran. The spiciness gathered in the back of my throat and low in my body, the place Casteel's fingers were so dangerously close to.</p> <p>... "Are you watching them?" Casteel asked, his voice full of smoke.</p> <p>... "If so, you wouldn't be the only one, nor are they the only ones being watched," he said, one of his fingers stretching over the thin material of my gown. "They find no shame in any act of affection, whether they are involved in it, casual observers... or more active watchers."</p> <p>Active watchers?</p> <p>...He joined them as Casteel shifted behind me again, leaning forward to slip his hand under where the hem of my gown was gathered at my knees. My heart might have stuttered as he trailed those fingers up the length of my bare skin, somehow managing to keep the skirt of the gown in place. The fingers on his right hand continued creeping lower and lower as I saw the man lower himself behind the one who moved on top. My pulse pounded as Casteel's fingers hesitated under my gown at the vee of my legs.</p> <p>A slight tremor of anticipation tinged with uncertainty ran through me, followed by a sharp twist in my very core.</p> <p>"Poppy, Poppy, Poppy," Casteel murmured as a finger above the gown reached the sensitive bundle of nerves. "Does what you're seeing in that tent answer any questions you might have had about how three lovers can enjoy each other?"</p> <p>Yes? No? I saw the woman who had been riding the man under her still, her back bowing as the man behind her pulled her close to his chest.</p> <p>"The newcomer is either moving inside her or against her," Casteel explained as his finger moved in those damn circles above the gown and along the crease of my thigh and hip.</p> <p>"Did Willa's journal explain the technicalities of that?"</p> <p>The heat from my skin had entered my veins, stirring up my blood as I nodded. "It did." I wet my lips. "It sounded like it could be... painful."</p> <p>"It can be if not done with care," he said. "And it appears that they are taking care."</p> <p>No one appeared to be in pain, and no one seemed to be paying any attention to where we sat on our blanket. A breathlessness entered me as I slowly inched my thighs apart and asked, "Are they taking part in the Joining?"</p> <p>"I do not know." The fingers against my bare skin slid toward the elicited ache. A strangled sound left me as he lazily drew a finger through the gathering wetness there.</p>

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	<p>...“Have you—?” I bit down on my lip as his finger pierced my flesh. My entire body jerked, spasmed, just like the three in the tent. I really needed to stop looking.</p> <p>And, of course, I found myself looking to where Kieran and Lyra were. They were kissing now, but her arm still moved at his hips in a slow rhythm.</p> <p>“Have I what?”</p> <p>Pulse thrumming as Cas’s finger slowly plunged in and out of me as he continued worrying the sensitive flesh, I gave up on remaining still before I even started to try. I lifted my hips against his hand as I forced my brain to remember how to form words. “Have you ever done that? What they’re doing under the canopy?”</p> <p>His lips moved down the side of my throat, tugging gently on the column of my neck. “I have.” He nipped my flesh, wringing a gasp from me. “Does that bother you?”</p> <p>Some of the passion faded enough for me to ask, “Why would it?”</p> <p>...“You’re over two hundred years old, Cas. I imagine you’ve done all manner of things.”</p> <p>His fingers moved again. “With all manner of people?”</p> <p>The way he said that made me giggle. “Yes.” Though my smile faded because I wanted to ask if he’d done that with Shea.</p> <p>...Casteel kissed my neck. “No, Poppy. We didn’t.” Surprised, I started to look back at him, but he curled his finger, hitting a spot inside me that caused my legs to stiffen and my toes to curl into the blanket. “W-why not?”</p> <p>“We were friends, and then we were more,” he said, the tension curling deeper and deeper inside me as my gaze darted across the fire, the canopies, and the shadows. Somehow, my focus ended up on Lyra and Kieran. They were no longer kissing. Lyra’s head was at his waist again, and his hand was balled in her hair, his hips moving—“But our relationship was never one of raw need. That doesn’t mean I cared any less about her, but it wasn’t like this. There was no constant need to be inside her in every way imaginable, and even ways not yet thought of. I never found myself constantly hungering, and I believe you need that to find yourself exploring those things with someone you’re committed to,” he said, and my breaths became shorter and shallower.</p> <p>...I don’t know if it was the things he was doing to my body, what was going on around us or his words, but I teetered on that edge and then tumbled over it, falling and crashing like the waves rolling against the beach. The shattering release left me trembling.</p> <p>Once my heart slowed enough for the pleasure-induced fog to clear, I turned my head toward him. “Do you... do you want to do that with me?”</p> <p>He kissed me as he eased his hand out from under my gown. “I want to do everything imaginable, and things no one has ever thought of with you,” he said.</p> <p>...I kissed him, hoping that everything I felt for him could be communicated with that kiss, and then decided the kiss wasn’t enough. A tendril of excitement swept through me as I rocked back, grabbing his hands. “I want to go somewhere... private.”</p> <p>Amber glowed from within hooded, sensual eyes. “We can go back—”</p> <p>“No.” I didn’t want to wait. If I did, I would lose my nerve. “Is there not somewhere private here?”</p> <p>...“You’re up to something, aren’t you?”</p> <p>“Maybe,” I admitted, grateful for the heavier shadows here as I took hold of the front of his shirt and stretched up, bringing his mouth to mine.</p> <p>My heart thrummed as our tongues touched and danced, much as I had around the fire. We kissed and kissed, and even though he had to know this wasn’t why I’d sought privacy, he didn’t rush me. He just followed my lead, saying nothing as I pressed tiny kisses to the</p>

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	<p>base of his throat. Sliding his palms up and down my arms, he remained quiet as I drew my hands down his chest. When I reached his stomach, I sank to my knees. His hands fell away from me, hovering at my sides as I unhooked the flap of his breeches, feeling the rigid thickness there.</p> <p>The taste of smoky spice consumed my senses as I reached in, wrapping my fingers around his warm, hard skin. He was breathing heavily now, and my heart raced as I eased him out. His skin felt like heated steel encased in silk as I tipped forward, halting when I felt him spasm in my hand.</p> <p>“Poppy,” he ground out. I lifted my gaze, momentarily stunned by the churning flecks of bright gold in his eyes. A shudder worked its way through him. “You don’t have to do this.”</p> <p>“I want to,” I told him. “Do you want me to?”</p> <p>“You can do anything to me, and I’ll want it.” Another tremor worked its way through him. “This? My cock in your mouth? I’d have to be dead and nothing but ash to not want that.” My lips twitched. “That’s... kind of flattering.”</p> <p>He choked out a rough laugh. “You are—” He groaned as I glided my fingers from his base to his tip.</p> <p>“Am what?”</p> <p>His fingertips touched my cheek. “Everything.”</p> <p>Smiling, I lowered my head. The salty taste of his skin was a surprise, dancing over my tongue. Tentatively, I moved my hand down his length, exploring as I brought him deeper into my mouth like I had read about in Willa’s diary.</p> <p>“Poppy,” Casteel groaned, his palm flattening against my cheek. She’d written about other things, stuff that reminded me of what Casteel had done for me, and I wasn’t sure if he’d enjoy that or not. But I... I wanted to do those things. I drew my tongue over his taut skin, finding a little indentation under the ridge of his head and swirling my tongue over it.</p> <p>“Fuck.” His body jerked. “I... I wasn’t expecting that.”</p> <p>Fighting a smile, I did it again, and he swore. “Did you read about that in Miss Willa’s book?”</p> <p>I hummed out an agreement, and the act seemed to vibrate through him. His entire body flexed, and I felt him throb.</p> <p>“Fuck,” he rasped. “I love that godsdamn diary.”</p> <p>A laugh escaped me then, and based on the way his hips jerked, he liked how it felt. There was nothing in Miss Willa’s diary about laughing while doing this, but as I curled my hand around his base, I stopped thinking about that damn journal and just let instinct take over. I flicked my tongue across the head of his cock, marveling at his reaction—at the lazy heat swamping my senses. I liked doing this. Liked knowing he enjoyed it.</p> <p>His hand slid from my cheek as his fingers threaded through my hair. He cupped the back of my neck, but he didn’t put any pressure there. All he did was move his thumb, gently massaging the muscles. It was a... supportive presence as he continued letting me learn what made his body move in short, shallow thrusts, what caused his breath to catch, and what made the spicy flavor intensify. I realized something. Not only did I like this but I also enjoyed the control, the way I could slow his breathing or increase the way he throbbed against my tongue just by the pressure of my mouth, or how hard or soft I sucked on his skin.</p> <p>“Poppy, I’m not... gods, I’m not going to last much longer.” His grip on my neck tightened</p>

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	<p>as he rocked against my hand, in my mouth. "And I don't know if that diary spoke of what happens." It had. And I wanted that. Wanted to feel him finish, to experience that, knowing I had brought him to that point. I drew my hand up the length of him, closing my mouth over his head. He shouted my name, and then his hips stiffened as he pulsed and spasmed against my tongue. No sooner had I finished, and before I could even feel rather proud of myself, he dropped to his knees before me, claspng my cheeks. Tilting his head to the side, his mouth was suddenly on mine, his tongue against mine. The kiss was as demanding as it was worshipping, all-consuming as it left little room for anything else.</p>
359	<p>thought of the way Casteel had kissed me in front of his father, and my cheeks warmed.</p>
376	<p>If that were the case, then was my birth mother... forced into pregnancy? Raped by a deity out of his mind and somehow manipulated into the act?</p>
417	<p>I lifted my mouth to his because saying it wasn't enough. And that kiss of gratitude and affection quickly turned into something needier, more demanding. The one kiss quickly spun out of control, or maybe that was the thing about kisses. They weren't meant to be controlled. I didn't know how he got me undressed so quickly, but I was completely nude by the time I managed to pull his shirt off over his head. He caged me in, my back flush with the wall and my front against his. My senses nearly shorted out at the feel of his warm, hard skin. Scraping a fang over the side of my throat, his hands skimmed down, one stopping on my breast and the other gliding between them, lingering where the bolt had entered me. There was no sign of that now, but I knew he would never forget the exact spot of the wound. His hand continued on over the softness of my stomach and the scars, slipping between the vee of my thighs. His fingers spread out, the pads of his fingertips brushing against the very center of me, sending a jolt through my body. "You know what I've been craving?" He captured my lips in a quick, scorching kiss as his other hand teased the aching peak of my breast. "Poppy?" I swallowed as his hair tickled my cheek. "What?" "Are you even listening to me?" He nipped at my throat. I shuddered as he said, "Or are you not capable of listening?" "Totally." My entire being focused on how his fingers curled around my nipple, how his other hand stroked lazily between my thighs. "I'm totally capable of—" I gasped, clutching his shoulders as he slipped one finger inside me. "Of... of listening." He chuckled against my neck as he slowly moved his finger in and out, over and over until I was breathless. "So? Do you know what I'm craving?" Truthfully, how quickly he distracted me utterly astonished me. Pleasure curled, stirring something deep. "What?" "Honeydew," he whispered against my lips, picking up the pace as he tipped his head down. "I could live on the taste of you. I swear to you." My pulse rocketed as his decadent oath wove its way through me. He lifted his head, working another finger inside as his eyes became bright and full of more wicked promises. He watched, soaking in every soft gasp and flutter of my eyelashes as his fingers pumped in and out, his gaze latched on to mine, refusing to allow me to look away, to escape the maddening rush of feelings he created.</p>

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	<p>Not that I ever wanted to.</p> <p>A dimple appeared in his right cheek as he brushed his thumb over the sensitive part of me, his eyes alight as I sucked in a shrill breath. He began tracing an idle circle around the tightened bud, coming close to touching it but always straying away at the last moment.</p> <p>“Cas,” I panted.</p> <p>“I love the way you say that.” Golden flecks sparked to life, churning. “I love the way you look right now.”</p> <p>“I know.” My hips moved forward, but he pressed in.</p> <p>“Stay still,” he ordered gruffly. His thumb made another enticingly close circle. “I’m not finished looking at you. Do you know how beautiful you are? Have I told you that today?” he asked, and I was almost sure he had. “How stunning? With your cheeks flushed and lips swollen? Beautiful.”</p> <p>How could I not feel that way when I could feel that he believed what he said. I felt like I was burning up inside, catching fire. My hands slipped down his chest. Awed by the way his heart pounded against my palm, I strained against his hold, brushing my lips against his. He leaned into me, his arousal pressing against my hip as he kissed me.</p> <p>“I have to do something about that craving,” he told me, and that was the only warning I had.</p> <p>Before I could protest the absence of his hand between my legs, he was kneeling. “I could spend an eternity on my knees before you,” he vowed, his eyes amber jewels.</p> <p>“That would be painful.”</p> <p>Casteel pressed his thumb down on the bundle of nerves, and I cried out, my hips arching into his hand. “Never.”</p> <p>His mouth closed over me, and he did something truly devious with his tongue. I cried out, driven to the edge with his sensual assault. My back arched as far as he’d allow it.</p> <p>I wanted more.</p> <p>And I wanted this to be about both of us. Not just me.</p> <p>Maybe it was everything that had happened and what I could soon face. Maybe it was the heat of his mouth against me. It could’ve simply been the fact that I needed him—needed to remind both of us that no matter how tonight ended, we were alive, we were here, together. And nothing could ever change that.</p> <p>All of those reasons could have fueled my actions. Given me the strength to take control of my desires, the situation, and of Casteel—and prove that I could handle him at his calmest and at his wildest, his most loving and his most indecent.</p> <p>I pushed off the wall, clasp the back of his neck. I wasn’t sure if I just surprised him or if I had overpowered him. It didn’t matter. Curling my hand around the back of his neck, I urged him to stand, bringing his mouth to mine. I tasted him on my lips. I tasted me and us. Slipping my hands into his breeches, I undid them as I walked him backward, helping him get rid of them. When his legs hit the bed, I pushed him.</p> <p>Casteel sat, his brows lifting as he stared up at me. “Poppy,” he breathed.</p> <p>Placing my hands on his shoulders, I planted my knees on either side of his thighs. “I want you, Casteel.”</p> <p>He shuddered. “You have me. You will always have me.”</p> <p>And I did have him as he shifted under me. I lowered myself onto him, the air seizing in my throat as we became one.</p> <p>Pulse fluttering, I curled my arm around his neck, sinking my fingers into his hair as I dropped my forehead to his, clutching his arm with my other hand. I began to move,</p>

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	<p>rocking against him slowly. I gasped as heat filled my chest and settled between my thighs in a tight, hot ache. My breath touched his lips. "Prove it," I ordered. "Prove that you're mine."</p> <p>There wasn't even a moment of hesitation. His mouth crashed onto mine, and the kiss was stunning in its intensity, stealing my breath. My entire body tensed as I lifted myself and brought my body back down, drinking as deeply from his lips as he did from mine. The fine, rough hairs on his chest teased the aching tips of my breasts as I rode him. "Yours." Stark need shone through the slits of his eyes. "Now. Forever. Always."</p> <p>My fingers tightened around his hair. With each roll of my hips, he reached that spot inside me, the one that sent pleasure bounding through every limb. I moved faster, moaning as I angled my body toward his. I shuddered, letting go of his arm and dragging my hand over his chest. A wildness entered my veins as the friction of the hard length of him ignited a fire. I kissed him greedily, sucking on his lip, his tongue. His hands gripped my hips as he lifted his, meeting my thrusts.</p> <p>"Should have known," he said, his breath coming in shorter, faster pants. "You'd love doing it like this."</p> <p>"I love... I just love doing it," I whispered. "With you."</p> <p>His hands slid to my rear, cupping it as he rocked me harder against him. "Yeah, you do." He squeezed, holding me tightly against him until there wasn't a breath of space between us. "Promise me."</p> <p>All the throbbing tension in me curled tightly. I tried to lift myself but he held me in place. "Anything," I rasped, my nails digging into his skin. "Anything, Cas."</p> <p>"If Ian is what you fear and giving him peace is something you cannot safely carry out..." he said, his words causing my already stuttering heart to skip. He dragged his hand up my back, fisting his fingers in my hair. He tugged my head to his. "Promise me that if it puts you at risk, you won't attempt it. That you will wait until it's safe. Promise me that."</p> <p>The words spilled from me. "I promise."</p> <p>Casteel moved at once, lifting me from his lap and onto my belly. Before I had a chance to take a breath, he thrust deeply into me. My back arched as I kicked my head back, his name a hoarse shout on my lips. He rolled into me, grinding his hips against my rear. I cried out, and a word snuck out, a demand that scalded my cheeks. "Harder."</p> <p>"Harder?"</p> <p>"Yes." I curled my upper body around, reaching back and clasping his hips. "Please."</p> <p>"Fuck," he growled, and I felt him jerk deep inside me. "I love you."</p> <p>There was no chance to tell him the same. He forced an arm under me, curling it just below my breasts. His chest came down on my back, his weight supported by the arm propped by my head. Then he gave me what I wanted, thrusting into me hard.</p> <p>Casteel was relentless, his body pounding against mine. We became twin flames, burning bright and uncontrollable, lost to the fire. It was a welcomed madness, the frenzy in our blood and our bodies, and it went beyond sex and finding pleasure. It was all about us taking and giving from one another, falling and letting go together, being swept away in trembling waves of rippling pleasure.</p> <p>But when the tremors subsided and Casteel eased us onto our sides, my promise to him returned like a vengeful ghost, there to warn me that I might not be able to keep it.</p>
445	<p>Emil and Naill were also with us, and listening to those two bicker about everything from the best-tasting whiskey to whether a sword or an arrow was a better weapon was quite entertaining.</p>

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454	Then his mouth was on mine, the kiss quick and raw, a clash of teeth and tongues.
487	“Would you like something to drink?” “Whiskey, if you have it,” Willa answered. Eloana laughed. “Now you know we always have that on hand.” ...Willa joined the Elders, whiskey in hand.
488	Across from him, Willa took a drink of her whiskey and not-so-discreetly rolled her eyes.
494	“You have my support, even if you do not require it. You also have my advice. I’ve never been to Iliseeum. Obviously,” she told us, finishing off her glass of whiskey.
502	Casteel lowered his head, kissing me, and there was nothing quick or chaste about the way his lips claimed mine. It might’ve even been a little inappropriate—or a lot—but so was the way I sank against the length of his body. ...Casteel chuckled against my lips as he pressed his forehead to mine. “Our people are really into displays of public affection, in case you haven’t noticed.”
504	And there were many indecent things I could think of taking place in there.
506	Grinning, I stretched up and kissed the corner of his lips. “Nothing your dirty mind will approve of.”
528	Casteel kissed me, and there was nothing ridiculous about that. His tongue parted my lips, and I welcomed his taste.
529	I kissed him in response, and then unfortunately, pulled free.
538	He smiled slightly, pouring wine into the other glass.
539	Nyktos asked instead of answering, sipping his wine.
540	I took a drink then, swallowing a mouthful of the sweet wine.
544	“Did you want to be that?” I’d asked. “A commander?” “The commander,” he’d corrected with a teasing kiss. ...I’d grinned as I kissed him, and he then proved that fighting hadn’t been the only skill he’d learned. Another night, when his body was curled around mine and after a long day of meetings, he’d asked, “There’s something I’ve been wondering and keep forgetting to ask. When we entered Iliseeum, and you saw the skeleton soldiers, you said they were hers. What did you mean?”
546	Her mouth was small, but her lips were full. She was short, several inches shorter than me, but the cut of her tunic showed off the curves of her breasts and the lushness of her hips that would’ve seemed at odds with someone of her stature.
550	I hid my smile as I took a sip of my wine. ...“I wish we weren’t about to have this meeting because I really want to fuck you on this table right now.”
556	I asked as his palms slid up my legs. “I’m going to do what I wanted to last evening and fuck you on this desk,” he told me, and muscles low in my stomach clenched. “This isn’t a table.” “It’ll work.” He gripped the waist of my breeches. “But first, I’m hungry.” The breath I took caught. “Then you should retrieve something to eat.” “I have.” My face caught fire. Blazing, golden eyes locked with mine. “Lift your ass, my Queen.”

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	<p>A giggle crept free. "That is a sentence that sounds wholly inappropriate."</p> <p>He grinned, and a hint of a dimple appeared. "I'm sorry. Let me rephrase that. Please lift your ass, my Queen."</p> <p>The ship rocked, jostling me. My ass did lift, and Casteel seized the opportunity. He pulled off my breeches, letting them join the boots on the floor. Cool air swirled around my legs, stirring the edges of my slip.</p> <p>"You're going to have to let go of the desk." He curled his fingers around the hem of the long-sleeved shirt.</p> <p>I forced my fingers to ease, and my stomach lurched as the ship rocked again. I started to grab the desk, but he was faster, pulling the shirt up and over my head. The moment my arms were free, I grabbed hold of the desk once more.</p> <p>"Pretty," he murmured, toying with the tiny strap on the slip and then the lace of the cinched bodice. His deft fingers loosened the buttons with shocking and impressive ease. The material parted, exposing my skin to the salty night air seeping in through the cabin window. He dragged his thumb over the rosy tip of one breast, causing me to gasp. "Not as pretty as these, though."</p> <p>My heart thudded, and I wasn't sure if it was due to the ship's motions or the intent in his words.</p> <p>He eased the straps down my arms, stopping when they fell against my wrists. Then he stretched up, reaching around to pick up my braid. He pulled the leather thong from the end and slowly began to unwind the hair.</p> <p>"I'm going to make you re-braid my hair," I told him.</p> <p>"I can do that." He spread the lengths over my shoulders, then he caught the edge of the slip, pushing it up my hips to where the material gathered at my waist. Those callused palms swept down my legs once more as he leaned back. Gripping my ankles, he spread my legs and placed my feet so they dangled off the arms of the chair. I'd never been more exposed in my life.</p> <p>He dragged a finger along his lower lip as his gaze swept over me. "I've never seen a more tantalizing dinner. It makes me want to rush to the main course." His gaze lingered on the shadowy area between my thighs. "But I do love a good appetizer."</p> <p>Oh... gods.</p> <p>Casteel looked up at me, a secretive little grin playing across his lips as his arousal washed over me, mixing with mine. "I almost forgot. The next best thing to a good conversation while enjoying dinner is reading a good book."</p> <p>My eyes widened as he bent, reaching into the bag. "You did not—"</p> <p>"Don't move." Casteel shot me a heated look, and I froze. He withdrew the all-too-familiar leather-bound book. Straightening, he cracked it open. "Pick a page, my Queen."</p> <p>Was he going to read to me? "I... I don't know. 238."</p> <p>"238, it is." He found the page and then turned the book over to me. "Read to me. Please?"</p> <p>I stared at him.</p> <p>"It would be so very difficult for me to enjoy my dinner and read at the same time," he coaxed, eyes glimmering. "Or is reading this out loud too scandalous for you?"</p> <p>It was, but the challenge in his tone provoked me. Letting go of the desk, I snatched the damnable book from his hand. "You really want me to read this to you?"</p> <p>"You have no idea how badly I want to hear you say words like cock." His hands settled on my knees.</p>

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	<p>I glanced at the page, quickly searching for the word and found it. Damn it. Damn him, and—I gasped as his lips skated over the scar on my inner thigh.</p> <p>“You’re not reading.” He kissed the rough skin. “Or are you that distracted already?”</p> <p>I sort of was, but I forced myself to focus on the first line and immediately regretted it. ““ His... his manhood was thick and proud as he stroked it, enjoying the feeling of his own hand, but not as much as—” I jerked as his lips danced over my very center.</p> <p>“Keep reading,” he ordered, his words sending a dark and hot shiver through my core. My gaze darted back to the page. ““ But not as much as I enjoyed watching him pleasure himself. He worked himself until the tip of his...” My entire body trembled as his hot, wet tongue slipped over me. ““ Until the tip of his proud, his... his proud cock glistened.”</p> <p>A deep sound rumbled from him, causing my toes to curl. “I’m sure there’s more.” His tongue danced over my flesh. “What does he do with that proud, glistening cock of his, Poppy?”</p> <p>Pulse pounding, I scanned the page. “He...” A breathy moan left me as he pierced the flesh there. “He eventually stops stroking himself.”</p> <p>“And?”</p> <p>The words didn’t make any sense for a moment. “And he pleasures her with it.”</p> <p>“Don’t tell me.” He nipped at the skin, dragging a ragged sound from me. “Read it to me.”</p> <p>“You are... wicked,” I told him.</p> <p>“And also very curious to discover how he pleasures her,” he replied. “I may learn something.”</p> <p>My laugh ended in another moan as he returned to his dinner. ““ He grasped my hips with those large hands of his and held me there, between him and the wall, as he slid into me. I tried to keep quiet, but no—” I cried out as his mouth closed on the bundle of nerves, and he suckled deeply.</p> <p>The scrape of his fang sent an intense bolt of pleasure through me. My legs attempted to close reflexively, but he caught an ankle, preventing it as he tugged on the skin there. Tension tightened and curled and throbbed—</p> <p>His mouth left me. “Keep reading, Poppy.”</p> <p>Struggling to breathe, I wasn’t sure if I could read, but I managed to find where I’d stopped. ““ But no one... fucked as passionately as a soldier on the eve of battle.”</p> <p>The chuckle that left Casteel was sensual and dark. “Keep going.” He flicked his tongue over the pulsing pinnacle. “And I’ll keep enjoying my appetizer.”</p> <p>I blinked several times. ““ He took me... hard and furiously, and I knew I would bear the marks of such on the morrow, but I...” My hips lifted as he worked a finger into me. He wasn’t slow. He didn’t need to be. I was as primed as I imagined Miss Willa had been. ““ I will wear those marks with more than fond memories. I will think of how his hips pounded against mine, how his... his cock stretched and filled me...” As I read from the indecent diary, Casteel enjoyed his appetizer with his fingers and his mouth, until I no longer knew what I read. Until I couldn’t make sense of the words, and the journal slipped from my grip, falling closed on the desk, and I shamelessly writhed against his mouth and hand. The release came all at once, rushing over me in stunning, crashing waves.</p> <p>I was still trembling when he rose above me, tearing at his breeches. His... his cock was just as hard as the one I’d read about, just as proud and... glistening with a bead of liquid. “Poppy?” he breathed as his lips danced over my jaw, down my throat.</p> <p>“Cas?”</p> <p>The sound he made nearly sent me over the edge all over again. “I just want you to know</p>

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	<p>one thing.” His mouth hovered over my wildly beating pulse before he eased me onto my back. He gripped my hips, tugging me to the edge of the desk. My feet slipped free of the arms of the chair. I curled my legs around his waist as his lips skated down my throat, over my chest, and to the aching tip of a breast. “I’m still in complete control.”</p> <p>He thrust into me at the same moment his fangs pierced my skin. Twin bursts of fiery pain lanced my breast, stunning me for a brief second, and then my entire body spasmed at the deep, staggering pull of his mouth. He devoured, and he fucked, just as he’d said he wanted to. Heat flowed through my body, igniting a fire that couldn’t be controlled. He drank from me as his body moved in and out of me, and when he lifted his head from the tingling skin of my breast and bit into his wrist, I didn’t look away from the bright red liquid welling on his skin.</p> <p>...I didn’t know how he moved us to the bed, but we were suddenly there, and his mouth was on mine, and our combined taste was in me. Casteel moved slowly, tenderly, and this... this was different than what we had done on that desk. In this moment, I felt bonded to him. It was more than just sex, more than two bodies enjoying each other.</p>
582	The gown’s deep vee cut between the swells of breasts, reaching the impossibly narrow waist encased in rows of rubies chained together.
588	The Handmaiden stepped back while Malik took another drink of his wine, one eyebrow arched.

Profanity	Count
Ass	12
Bitch	10
Cock	10
Fuck	46
Piss	5
Shit	30