

HOLLOW'S ROW SERIES

LOVELY VIOLENT THINGS

HE'S THE DEVIL.
AND SHE'S HIS
WICKED GAME.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TRISHA WOLFE

LOVELY VIOLENT THINGS

HOLLOW'S ROW SERIES

TRISHA WOLFE

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“

Faith consists in believing what reason cannot.

— VOLTAIRE, THE WORKS

Lovely Violent Things Playlist

[Listen to the playlist on Spotify here](#)

After Dark by Mr. Kitty

In the Air Tonight by Natalie Taylor

Jungle by Emma Louise

Set Fire to the Rain by Adele

Trampoline by SHAED

Uninvited by Alanis Morissette

Something in the Way by Geek Music

Animal by Chase Holfelder

Desire by Meg Myers

Rabbit Hole by AViVA

Fade Into You by Mazzy Star

Death of Peace of Mind by Bad Omens

Bitter Sweet Symphony by The Verve

LETTER FROM THE HARBINGER KILLER

The Overman cannot be allowed to ascend.

The Overman is not a gift to humanity but a death knell, tolling the end of days.

The Overman will not bring enlightenment or peace. The Overman's rising will commence the doomsday that will befall every civilization and plunge humanity into an abyss.

This message is to the Overman: I *see* you. I have *uncovered* you. I will eradicate your higher men one-by-one until you are fearless enough to *face* me.

—The Harbinger

ALCHEMY OF GODS

KALLUM: TWO YEARS AGO

“We are our own god.” I open my arms wide and pan the fifteen ascending rows of college students and alumni. I even spot two professors in the far back.

“Or,” I say, running my hand down my black cashmere tie as I leisurely circle the lectern, “we are gods. Is there a difference?”

Hands of eager students shoot up. I don’t call on anyone to answer; it’s a rhetorical question, and one that’s been posited over since the dawn of conscious humanity. If the great thinkers of antiquity didn’t have an empirical, definitive answer, then none of these ass-kissing nitwits will either.

There’s no way any one person in the course of a forty-five-minute class, or a whole textbook, or even a fucking *lifetime*, can summarize over three thousand years of belief systems and schools of thought, and how our modern interpretation of it was formed.

So as I stand here, looking out over the sea of lost students, knowing they’ll likely glean nothing significant from my class, I cherry-pick the details of history in halfhearted hope they’ll form a semblance of their own opinion.

Maybe that’s almost worth my time.

A series of blackboards line the wall behind me. A projection screen is mounted between two glass block windows that have been blacked out to keep the interior of the lecture hall dim for slides.

I drift in front of the large desk and nod to Ryder, my assistant professor, to change the slide on my laptop. The image on the screen flips to a diagram of Jung’s analysis on esoteric Hermetic Tradition. I loathe having to fall back on Jungian doctrines for discussions, but his analysis is more sound in comparison to Nietzsche—but only because Jung didn’t have the balls to actually practice what he preached.

Philosophy is a discipline in study. Questioning. Thought. Theory. Metaphysics. Morality. And more thought and study and questioning until the end of fucking time itself.

It's a rare breed of philosophy scholar who gets off the regurgitating merry-go-round and actually jumps into the abyss of the psyche. Becoming stark raving mad. Should Nietzsche be respected for his self-sacrifice, or pitied?

That's an existential question for another lecture.

But what it does leave behind is a trail of greedy scholarly leeches ready to make names for themselves off that sacrifice. One such bloodsucker:

"Carl Jung," I say, pointing to the screen, "was considerate enough to provide a diagram for his interpreted process of self-deification into the Higher Self." I move to stand in front of the lectern. "Or really, the very root of which is shamanism. As so many of the modernist fail to attribute their acclaim, we can do that for them."

A collective laugh travels around the hall. I'm not intentionally funny. Snide and mocking, yes. Smug and egotistical? Oh, fucking absolutely. I've earned my notorious reputation. Unlike my peers, all striving, quite pathetically, to immortalize themselves by reinventing the philosophy wheel, I've already established myself in academia.

Reaching one's zenith too soon, however, leaves a long, boring trek back down the mountain.

"Jung coined his path to ascension into the Higher Self, that which has been labeled many things over the centuries—*Aion*, *hen to pan*, all is one, self-deification, Mind of God—as 'Individuation'." I point to the top level of the diagram on the screen.

"Every great thinker has to have their own terminology to stand apart," I continue, "but the destination remains the same: the path to the intellectual enlightened plane of existence, the coveted philosopher's stone where our crude base thought process is transmuted into creative genius." I prop my elbow on the lectern. "In essence, where we get the answer to our question; we *are* god, an enlightened consciousness which possesses the cosmic understanding of all things to create our will within the universe."

I pause to allow some of my speech to seep in past late-night parties and alcohol fueled one-night stands.

"Jung's psychological process of dividing the self from the conscious and

unconscious parts, like every other concept of similar theory, remains challenged, his method incomplete and never proven.” I cock an eyebrow. “His *process*,” I repeat with an underscore. “Otherwise known as some strange, abstract method through *Gnostic* belief systems and spiritual alchemy that, truly, no one has any fucking clue what any of it means.”

Another round of laughter.

I glance down at my hand, at the freshly inked symbols on my skin, feeling the weight of my recent sabbatical heavy on my conscience. I bury my hand in my pocket, run my tongue over the ridge of my teeth, then face my audience.

“But, it’s not what a man writes when he’s had time to form and censor his thoughts. It’s what he says, that which can be swept away by a sudden wind and questioned if it ever existed.” I walk a path across the front of the hall. “Jung posed the question: who has fully realized that history is not contained in thick books but lives in our very blood.”

The laughter and chatter quiets, silence stretching in prelude for a deeper punchline.

I spent majority of my life inside classrooms like this, studying the same philosophies that have been studied for centuries, believing I was discovering a profound wisdom. Zealous, rebellious, the bad boy of academia, my dissertation on resolving philosophical arguments acclaimed, my name already renowned before I embarked on a career within a university.

Then one trip to Cairo to research the origin of Egyptian shamanism linked to the earliest known texts of the Hermetica changed my course.

As seekers of knowledge, we ask the universe to reveal itself.

But once you see, you can never unsee.

“What does this mean?” I ask of the class.

This time, no hands go up. I let my gaze roam over the students in search of someone worthy. A girl with a cute pout twirls a length of her dark hair around her finger in a seductive manner as she begs with her eyes to *pick her*.

She's not the first to try to capture my attention.

It's the eyes. They love the unique blue and green smoldering intensity, and mistakenly attribute my passion as lust. My classroom is not where I hunt for prey.

When I'm hungry, I eat. Pick Me girl would run away in terror if I showed her what I need in order to get off. My tastes have always been particular. But it's like with any drug, the more you use, the harder it is to achieve the same high.

Moving on, I point to a twenty-something guy in an expensive, stylish button-down in the front row. "What does this mean to you?"

His smile is cocky. He reminds me of myself ten years ago, and I have no doubt he'll say something witty to get a reaction from the other students.

"That I wasted a lot of money on textbooks for this course?" he says.

On cue, laughter circles the hall, and I praise his cleverness with a wry smile. "Your wardrobe states your parents can afford it."

His arrogant smile falls as his peers carry on laughing. This time, at him. A psychologist somewhere would infer I'm lashing out at the things I detest about myself. Affluent, absent family. The question of whether privilege greased the wheels of my career.

And this is why I *detest* psychology.

We don't get the choice of where we originate from; but everything after is all choice.

There was a time when I looked in the mirror and saw my father's eyes—but I found a way to never have to see them again.

I turn toward the lectern and look at Ryder, giving him the cue to change the slide. "This weekend, your assignment is to contemplate Jung's—"

"I'm curious what it means to you, Professor Locke."

The question comes from the back of the lecture hall, a distinguished voice obviously not belonging to a student. I face the class and search the rows,

finding the source standing.

“Professor Wellington,” I say, crossing my arms. “I didn’t realize you’d come to sit in on my lecture.”

Percy is new to the university. I’ve yet to have a formal introduction to him, but I’ve heard the scandalous rumors as to why he had to transfer institutions. Authority issues. Countless absences. Marriage and drinking problems. Nothing so dire he’d lose tenure, but then he wouldn’t be here if that was the case.

The dean had arranged a meeting for us to discuss a joint project for the upcoming commencement ceremony, which I expertly avoided.

I don’t play well with faculty.

Wellington rakes a hand through his thinning blond hair, a self-assured smile creasing his features. “Lecture? Did I miss it?” He chuckles. “I’ve heard such praise for the astounding Professor Locke, I had hoped to be impressed.”

The proverbial glove smack to the face. I offended him when I refused to consult on the project. Now he’s here, in my territory, to issue an intellectual challenge and humiliate me. In academia, it’s sadly the only way the stuffy, tweed-and-sweater vest-wearing intellectuals deal to the death.

Tension threads the air of the hall as I move to the front of the room and accept the challenge. “History is not contained in thick books, but lives in our very blood,” I repeat Jung’s assertion. “History is written by people, perspectives. Biased opinions. Our guiding intuition to discern history based on the actions and violence of the past should determine how we choose to pursue the future.” I shrug. “If you want to get philosophical on the subject.”

As laughter erupts to diffuse the tense atmosphere, I hold Wellington’s narrowed gaze, waiting for his rebuttal.

I’ll give him a minute. While in Cairo, I had cemented my viewpoint. I won’t be swayed. What I found in Egypt wasn’t divine inspiration or insight to a profound wisdom. It was nothing rousing or enlightening at all.

It was the damn simplicity of how tragically basic we are.

Upon that realization, I decided there is a difference between pondering life and living it.

Such a simple concept. So obvious once you see the writing on the wall. Yet I felt sublimely stupid for my oversight.

I've since deigned to spend the little precious time I have left on this rock in search of my muse. What immortalized the profound thinkers was their *want*. That driving, maddening desire to create.

And that won't be achieved by becoming a footnote in someone's textbook.

The professor takes a step down from the back row, making his way toward me. "Violence," he echos. "That's an interesting and telling perspective. What about the gift of enlightenment through the study of history? Doesn't that stand to achieve and ensure a peaceful future? Shouldn't we maintain our course of study in books and texts, passing knowledge down to future generations so they don't leap into abysses ill prepared?" He glances around at the students, his smile knowing. "For argument's sake."

I look down at the lacquered floor and shake my head. Goddamn Nietzscheism always worms its way into any debate. Seems Wellington subscribes to the historian's school of thought.

I return my gaze to find him standing on the bottom step, positioning himself a foot above me. "I assume by your use of *gift* you're referring to Jung's idolization of Nietzsche," I say, dodging the *abyss* reference altogether. "The core of Jung's method into the Higher Self, the proposed gift of the *Übermensch*, the overman." My amused expression falls. "Or what Nietzsche and every scholar who came before and after based their idealism on: the shaman's Primal Man."

He holds up a finger. "I think you're considering the concept too literally. It's an ideal, a goal, one that mankind is capable of achieving. Of course, it's an arduous path to an enlightened mind, yet that is our way to peace. But only if we continue to study and learn from our predecessors."

He's a whole generation older than me, and it must really rankle his ego that I've professionally surpassed him by a light-year.

"Regardless, the concept is a fairy tale," I say, and chuckle. "But more so, it's

a paradox. Despite such hope for an enlightened species, there can never be a peaceful future, Professor Wellington.” I take a step in his direction. “In the event this holistic, mystical divinity presented as a gift to the masses, based on the work of esoteric theorists, this state could only be achieved through a destructive force, such as a sacrifice. Or, self-sacrifice. Just as Jung’s alchemic theory stated, correct?” I eye him coolly. “Light cannot exist without the dark. Good cannot exist without evil. The totality. Ergo, peace cannot exist without violence.”

His smug expression loses its edge. “Ego of the philosopher is destructive all on its own.” His gaze drops to the tattoos peeking above my collar. “I find it ironic you’re speaking out against Jung’s alchemic theory of delving into the collective unconscious, seeing as you’re a practitioner of other widely scrutinized, unverified practices.”

He’s referring to the rumors of my interest in the dark arts. Particularly, chaos magick.

I had more than one revelation in Egypt.

“Ah, professor, this is where I specialize.” I move closer to where he looms over me. “Let me explain a little more clearly. Jung used alchemical works and symbolism to further his unsound psychology endeavors. Which is exceedingly insulting to the very Western esoteric sects he founded his theories off of. Alchemy is not a vehicle for scholarly greatness. The Hermetica isn’t a spiritual or philosophical path to psychological gold. Although the pursuit of both reveals the greedy nature of desperate men staring into their insignificance.” *Okay, maybe one abyss reference...*

“I, unlike Jung, am not lifting an archaic belief to incorporate in my unprovable, bullshit theory,” I continue. “My endeavor for the muse is a personal practice. After thousands of years of pondering, we’re no more enlightened than our heathen ancestors dancing around fires. But they did start the trend. They’re the teachers we should still look to, not the hacks.”

Wellington says nothing as I give him a lengthy pause for his rebuttal.

“Besides,” I say, leaning my elbow on the lectern and wiggling my inked fingers, “women like the tattoos.” I smile smugly, earning a few whistles from the class.

Even a narcissist knows when to admit defeat. Wellington is something else, something far worse. I see it in his unblinking gaze, a sadistic hunger. Despite his declaration toward peace, there is a malicious need banked there that craves to destroy.

This primitive force resides in us all, is a part of our very atoms, but it's the hypocrite which makes this force a dangerous one.

"I have no doubt your reputation has scored you plenty of trim, Professor Locke." His smile borders on a sneer. "But how do you presume, then, by your astute observation, to imply that the idealism of the Primal Man to humankind isn't in itself a rare treasure? After all, philosophy teaches us that it's our ideals which make up our world. We are the creators."

I pace a few steps, considering the question seriously. "Because history has proven most treasures have a dark and violent unearthing," I say, sending my response outward for the students. "The monster of greed ultimately descends, gnarling humans into a disfigured beast of selfish gluttony and ego. We as individuals ascend to a higher, godlike power... Every one of us to become the judges of what is right and wrong, good and evil?" My chuckle is sardonic. "That is the very ruin of the cosmos. Society would collapse."

I pause a moment, then: "Think of anything we create. Look around this room. This lectern—" I touch the wood stand "—first a tree had to be cut down, then carved, essentially destroyed, in order to create the podium. Yes, we are the creators—but our creations can only be born from violent acts." I turn and direct my next statement toward Wellington. "There have already been enough narcissists in power over the years to prove this is not an idealism that will reward us peace."

Eyebrows hiked, he says, "I admit, I'm impressed. You've made a compelling argument." But he's not yet ready to concede. "Another question, Professor Lock, if you don't mind. I'm curious if there is no hope for a future of peace and harmony, and only out of destruction do we wield the ability to create, how do we then justify our continued existence on this planet? Is it a selfless or selfish act, should destroying oneself be the only means of defense?"

"I'm afraid that's a question of morality, professor." Checking the time on

my watch, I measure my answer based on the two minutes left of class. “We’re part of a world that was conceived in a womb of violence. It’s only logical that when our chaotic nature threatens to destroy us, we should then turn to any means in answer, such as scapegoating, to reset the balance. It’s more than justifying our actions; it’s essential to our survival and our conscious. Oh, I apologize, our *collective conscious* as an intelligent species. Though I feel that’s a stretch for most of us.”

“I think you’ve won your argument, Professor Locke,” Wellington says, although his arrogant smile contrasts his words.

“Naturally.” I turn my gaze out over the classroom, addressing the students. “If you’re willing to destroy yourself in an act of violence, then and only then can you call yourself god. Otherwise, you’re just another uninspired scholar with unproven theories who idolizes a madman, but doesn’t have the conviction to test his methods.” I look at Wellington. “I think our history books labeled that a coward.”

There’s no mistaking the disdain etched in his severe features. He smooths his necktie down his sweater vest as he nods, then retreats up the steps. But before he exits the hall, he turns to address me one final time. “A thought to leave you with,” he says. “It’s a rather self-fulfilling prophecy, don’t you think, that we employ violence to defend ourselves from our own violence.” A condescending expression crosses his face. “If we are the creators, then by that design, we are the creators of our own doomsday. Quite the conundrum.”

I signal Ryder to close down the slides. “I suppose you’re right on that, Professor Wellington. We can only avoid catastrophe if we’re aware of the signs,” I say distractedly. “But what fucking fun the end of times would be.”

As the class responds with a collective laugh, a dark gleam ignites behind his eyes. “Of course. Bored, privileged philosophers would no longer have the luxury to ponder the muse.” He smiles arrogantly, his insult hitting its mark in my ego. “How *very* exciting to see how our future would evolve, as not every creation can be one of beauty like your lectern. Some are rather horrifying.”

He exits the lecture hall then, but I know this won’t be the last altercation I have with Percy Wellington.

I've made an enemy today.

As the room breaks into a ruckus of students hustling to escape, I pack away my course manuals in my leather satchel, some distracted thought still itching at the back of my mind.

"What a douchebag," Ryder says as he hands me the laptop.

"Professional rivalry keeps you sharp." I pat him on the shoulder. "You'll know you've made it in academia when you get your very own douchebag to heckle your lectures."

His tight smile holds a menacing weight. "Not sure how you didn't punch him," he says. "I would have. I like the concept of taking it back to our primitive roots."

I sling the leather strap over my shoulder. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that." I halt at the door to say, "But if you do, record it and send it to me."

As I walk the outside courtyard toward the parking lot, my thoughts churn deeper, the itch festering into an infection that digs beneath my skin.

...not every creation can be one of beauty...

Maybe not, but when beauty is created, it is always born from violence—that in itself is a horrifying reality to accept.

I'm proof of this. A beautiful creation fashioned by the sharpest blade of violent cruelty.

When my muse does arrive, she will come to me in this same, beautifully violent way.

APOLLONIAN & DIONYSIAN
DICHOTOMY

KALLUM: NOW

I *f you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.*

The infamous verse cited by a mad philosopher has been pondered over by scholars for more than a century. Just what is the meaning behind Friedrich Nietzsche's yawning abyss?

Is it our unavoidable death? Fear of the unknown? Paralyzing recognition of our own insignificance?

To one cocky, egocentric grad student, the meaning was all too clear:

The abyss was the pit of failure for the weak-minded.

My vanity knew no bounds once upon a time. I admit, while studying Nietzsche's doctrines, I wrinkled my nose at the stench of his fear that practically fumed from the pages. I lampooned his duality dichotomy as nothing more than a desperate grasp from a defeated scholar to pad his bloated yet fragile ego.

In his last days, the philosopher penned such notes as: "It hurts me frightfully that in these fifteen years not one single person has 'discovered' me, has needed me, has loved me."

How fucking pathetic.

I found him to be the worst fraud. *Isolation was transcendent*, he had preached, yet he was a hypocrite of his own principles.

The closer one gets to their own death, the more they're willing to compromise their convictions. Thus creating their very own abyss, where their weak minds go to perish.

My belief system, my convictions, were never in any danger of being compromised.

Until her.

My beautiful muse.

Oh, how easily we falter when confronted with the veracity of our solitary existence.

I can confess now how mistaken I was in my first interpretation of Nietzsche.

No one wants to exist in solitude.

At the height of my achievements, I was an academic god. Envied by colleagues, worshiped by aficionado sluts. I had it all, and I wanted for nothing.

And therein lies the dilemma.

The sky was dulled gray, and flavors had lost their taste. Art was bland. There was nothing left to create. Sex was only marginally satisfactory, and only once I pushed to deviant extremes, when I was looked at with fear instead of desire.

The lust for life dried into a dusty wasteland and sat bitter and grainy on my tongue. I was ill with envy over anyone who demonstrated even a meager sampling of passion.

Want—pure, unadulterated hunger—will drive us to the brink to possess, by any means, that which we cannot live without.

The person who wants with a ravenous appetite, who cannot be satiated, will stop at nothing to realize their aspiration.

All of which I starved for.

As the desolate stretch of highway passes in a dreary blur outside the tinted SUV window, I recline my head against the headrest in the backseat, letting the cheap bourbon I downed at Pal's Tavern pound my veins in relentless fury on its way out of my system.

I deserve far worse.

Pensively, I rub my thumb over the blood-stained bandage wrapping my left palm. My silver thumb ring snags on the edge of the adhesive. The distinct feel of the raised cuts beneath the coarse cotton brings her to the forefront of my thoughts.

Today, for the very first time since my little dreamy muse crashed my life, I told a lie to Halen.

With the trickle of the stream washing over rocks beneath the rickety bridge, her scent still infused in my pores from the night before, and the lingering taste of her sweetness testing my control, I gazed into her wide, hazel eyes and told Halen I'd never thought of taking a life before her.

Men have a bad habit of placing blame on others for our weaknesses. Especially those who have the power to wound us. I'd like to say it's a simple defense mechanism, but really, we're all just privileged bastards.

Her rejection sliced deeper than any blade to my skin. I weaponized my anger, letting the lie fall from my mouth. All the while, admonishing her for refusing to accept the truth, for refusing to accept us—when my own past is far more horrifying than anything my little sexy sprite could conjure.

In some cultures, the taking of one's own life is judged harsher than murder.

Before my muse tore into my mind and soul and fucking body with a monstrous, decimating force, I was on the verge of my own self-sacrifice.

But it wasn't my violence that summoned my moon goddess from the cosmos.

It was hers.

My tastebuds came alive. The dull hue of the world illuminated into blinding colors I'd never witnessed before. I had no idea how dead I was until she showed me what it felt like to be alive.

Now, even breathing without her arousing scent is a torturous struggle, the air stale and insipid.

She is the Apollo to my Dionysus.

My other half.

And although the force of the Apollonian and Dionysian coming into conjunction may clash in the most destructive storm, their union is what fosters creative genius and harmony.

Her calm surrender to logic quiets the raging storm of fury and madness which plagues my mind. By the same design, my chaotic frenzy awakens her heartsick soul with maddening vigor.

One cannot exist without the other.

I cannot exist without her.

And whether she admits the truth or not, she cannot exist without me.

To have tasted divinity—to have knelt before my goddess and indulged like a feral glutton, to have buried myself so deep inside her, only to have lost her...

That is my great, yawning abyss.

That is staring into the void of indifference and apathy and feeling your soul wither into a hollow husk. That torment stirs a wicked desperation in a man to which he will forge to the darkest, most depraved bounds of hell to recapture.

There are no limits.

For her, I will kill without remorse. I will lap blood and mutilate in a haze of ecstasy until I'm gorged, and then I will demand more.

And as these soul-rending thoughts mangle my head, I'm hyper-fixated on only one course:

Making Halen St. James realize our inevitability.

Her awakening is just the beginning.

I turn away from the bland scenery of highway and give my attention to the federal agent driving us toward Briar Correctional Institute for the Criminally Insane. He turns the dial to increase the volume on the radio. Through my mounting hangover, I focus on the news update.

Misfortune has once again struck the quaint town of Hollow's Row, where a mutilated body was discovered earlier this morning in a nearby marshland. The male victim, reported to be a town resident, was identified and confirmed to be one of thirty-three disappeared locals that mysteriously went missing

over five years ago. A case which baffled local law enforcement and government officials.

This newest development has occurred amid an active investigation of dismembered body parts found in the same vicinity. Officials report the prime suspect to be the media's infamous Harbinger killer, who stages victims in the likeness of the death's-head hawkmoth before amputating the head. An iconic symbolism foreshadowing a future doomsday.

A cryptic letter was also found at the newest scene which detailed a challenge to the Hollow's Row Mangler, addressed to the "Overman". Authorities are now further investigating whether the deceased Landry was in fact the actual perpetrator of these heinous crimes.

At this time, there are still no leads on the whereabouts of the remaining missing thirty-two residents.

As the details of the report seep past the murky fog swathing my head, a red layer of fury covers my vision. I can feel Halen's staccato heartbeat flare in my veins.

Leroy Landry—the horned man who attacked Halen and I at the killing fields ritual ground—was not the Overman. Which means, the actual suspect is still roaming the town. And now it seems the Harbinger killer has descended on Hollow's Row to tear an apocalyptic-sized seam right down the center.

The connections sync faster than my dulled brain can process.

Halen's in danger.

"Fucking psychos." The agent behind the steering wheel mutters to himself as he lowers the volume on the SUV stereo. He scans radio stations until he settles on a poppy 80s song.

The bass-filled music grates abrasively against my senses, scraping my already worn patience thin. The dull ache at my temples increases as my mind races.

"Why don't you call your superior to get an update on the psychos?" I tell him, jaw tensed around each word.

Flicking his gaze to the rearview mirror, Special Agent Hernandez regards me like I'm one of said psychos and sputters an annoyed breath. "Not any of your business anymore, is it?"

As he leisurely refocuses on the drive to the institute, I fist my bandaged hands in an attempt to curb the impulse to reach over the seat back and strangle him with my handcuffs.

A bad idea, for one: wrecking the vehicle would not get me back to Halen any quicker.

And two: the only person in a position to validate my return to the case happens to reside at Briar.

Impulse control. I have a dire issue there. But the dark fury simmering beneath my skin is all but cooking me alive.

I imagine Halen listening to the same report while she flees the town and her fears of us. My pretty little liar led me to believe she was resuming her place on the task force, when really, she'd been dismissed from her position within her company. I got that much out of the agent aboard the flight.

The lingering burn of her spicy curry imbues an ache in my chest. Even at this distance apart, if I block out everything but her, I can feel the churning vortex of her emotions, the distress tearing at her mind.

Her obsession with the Harbinger killer will find a way to return her to that town. I have no doubt she's already aware of the newest murder, and that she's also already angling to prove I did it.

I can't help the smile that steals across my face. This gives me a thrilling satisfaction, knowing she can't rid me from her thoughts so easily.

She called me a sociopath, a leech who fed off her emotions. I don't deny her claim. I've burrowed in deep. I may be the bloodsucking parasite greedy to glut myself on her—but there is now something far more sinister out there vying to feed off her.

Dividing us was the wrong choice.

"We're here," Hernandez announces, as if I'm a five-year-old who needs

mollifying.

“My anticipation is killer.”

His faded-brown eyes find mine in the mirror. “That hot little criminologist you worked with...the one you kissed...” he says, and suddenly he has my full fucking attention.

“Dr. St. James,” I say, helping him along. Jaw tensed, I throttle the urge to further correct him in the most furious reprimand.

Since my last moments with her, my fuse has been cut to the wick.

“Right.” He pulls alongside the curb beneath the covered drop-off area of the facility. “Did she really strip herself naked and let you put your bloody hands all over her?”

The vision of Halen adorned in bones and my blood stirs a visceral heat beneath my skin.

Hernandez is dangerously close to losing his tongue.

The FBI rumor mill is likely buzzing. An unwanted flash of Agent Alister makes it past the dulled haze. He has an unhealthy interest in Halen, and I can only speculate as to what he’s said to her behind closed doors. I’m not sure my threat to him was made clear enough.

I lock eyes with the agent in the rearview mirror, letting my facial features harden in their natural state. He visibly recoils. “What’s your point?” I demand.

“She’s back on the case,” he says. “Thought you might like to know.” He unbuckles his seatbelt and pulls the handle to open the door.

A roar fills my ears, and I momentarily forget I’m handcuffed as I move to prevent him from leaving the car. The chain linked to my cuffed ankles snaps taut, holding me back. The agent notices.

“How do you know for sure Dr. St. James is working the case?” I demand.

He slides his holstered gun forward on his chest, reminding me that he’s armed. “Agent Alister,” he says, confirming my suspicions. “The locals hired

her on as a consultant to the task force.”

A twisted smirk pulls at the corner of my mouth. I know exactly what local made that happen. I also know that Halen owes her a number of favors, so there was little chance Halen would turn down a request from Devyn Childs to stay on as a consultant.

“Lead the way,” I tell the agent.

Once he has me escorted to processing, I go through the tedious protocol to be readmitted into the hospital.

“Don’t go far,” I tell Agent Hernandez as he removes my shackles.

He huffs a humorous breath, discounting that I will be right back in his SUV and on my way to Halen shortly.

I’m only given a moment of freedom before a hospital psych tech has my ankles and wrists cuffed once again. Ironically, I’ve never laid a hand on anyone in this facility, but the stench of fear permeates the air just the same.

The anticipation for the strike is always more fear-inducing than the strike itself.

I’m led to the office of Dr. Torres, and proof of that fearful suspense is etched into the doctor’s worn features. Seated behind his cluttered desk, Dr. Torres regards me with equal parts disdain and trepidation.

His office is in worse condition than before I left. “I love what you’ve done here,” I say, flicking my gaze to a moldy sandwich displayed on his bookcase. Fittingly, positioned right between Freud and Jung. I cock an eyebrow. “An offering to your gods?”

“Don’t get comfortable, Professor Locke,” Torres says, and I’m pleased he still has the mental capacity to address me professionally. “This session is just a pitstop before you’re transferred to California.”

I gift him my brilliant, devilish smile. “Then I’d say an induction evaluation really isn’t necessary.”

He straightens his askew tie. “This is your departure evaluation.” He’s way too excited to correct me as he flips open a manila folder. “Have a seat.”

The psych tech removes the taupe rug in front of the leather chair to reveal a manacle bolted into the tiled floor. After I'm seated, he proceeds to latch the chain between my ankles to the locking apparatus.

I test the restraint.

"The case study is almost complete," Dr. Torres announces. He's nearly quivering with eagerness. "I just need to evaluate how the case affected your mental state, then you'll be someone else's problem."

See, in the end, the drive for our passions always outweighs our fear and even our commonsense. Dr. Torres has taken great strides toward his accomplishments. He believes my mind is the gateway to his discovery and, ultimately, his acclaim.

Had I been introduced to Dr. Torres before I found my muse, I would have despised him with relentless envy for the simple fact he is so driven by his passion. As we sit here now, I have to actively try not to pity him.

My restraints are checked and doublechecked before Dr. Torres instructs the tech to leave the office. I let my gaze settle on the very driven man behind his messy desk.

Buzzing with anticipation, Torres reaches a trembling hand toward a fountain pen. "Let's begin with Dr. Verlice's field report."

The mention of Stoll triggers an impatient strum across my nerves, and I decide Torres and I do not have time for one last tango.

By shackling me, the doctor is trying to protect himself. But this man knows it's what cannot be physically bound that is the most dangerous threat.

"Dr. Verlice supplied me with his report—" he glances over the frames of his glasses "—which details your rather insubordinate behavior. Alcohol. Parties. Direct violation of your parameters."

"Sounds like a good time." I smirk. "Did he mention wetting himself in his report? I should really send him an apology card."

Torres narrows his gaze, then flips to another page in the folder. "You worked very closely with Dr. St. James," he says, his voice taking on a

baiting edge. “She gave you a positive review. I find that very interesting.”

My nostrils flare at hearing her name in his condescending tone.

He sets the pen down and steeples his fingers together. “Let’s talk about how it was to work alongside the woman who essentially sabotaged your life.”

“No.” The word is a near growl. I prop my elbows on my thighs, allowing the chain to dangle between my knees. “I’d rather talk about the document you have sitting in your printer tray right now.”

He blinks, then briefly glances at the printer. “I see the taste of freedom hasn’t dulled your keen observational skills.”

“The paperwork, Torres,” I say, my tone hardened around each syllable. “Sign the release and send it to Agent Alister.”

The FBI header on the top document gives me reason to believe Alister has set aside his grievances, because—as he’s now working opposite of a certain clever criminologist—he has need of my services once again.

With a jittery shake of his head, Torres chuckles. “That, professor, will not happen.” He pins me with a manic gleam in his eyes. “See, putting you back on the case would only prolong my pain. The sooner I have you transferred, the sooner I can close the case study, and get you the fuck out of my hospital.”

With disdain, I inhale the foul stench of his rank office, suffering the agonizing loss of Halen’s sweet, addictive scent.

I spin my thumb ring a few times, impatient to get the cuffs removed from my wrists. “You told Dr. St. James that I physically harmed you.”

He raises his chin in stubborn assertion. “I told her what she needed to hear to contain you,” he rebounds.

My gaze tapers on him. “And do you believe she, in fact, contained me?”

He blinks rapidly. Clears his throat. Situates his glasses. The doctor’s tics always surface when he becomes distressed.

“I knew your obsession with Halen would present an interesting outcome,”

he says. “I admit, my curiosity won in that regard. However, despite my professional curiosities, I do have my limits. I can’t allow you to hurt her, Kallum. I will not sign the paperwork to put you anywhere near her again.”

Dr. Torres has spent his life delving into the dark recesses of his patients’ minds. In order to understand the psyche of highly disturbed individuals, he’s had to familiarize himself with the most base and violent offenders.

He has gazed into his abyss.

To which, I discovered early on during our very first session, he never resurfaced.

Psychosis tears at his frayed edges like the worn restraints he uses to confine his patients. Where Torres is concerned, it’s the age-old question of the chicken and the egg. Did the doctor lose his final tether to reality before or after he took me on as a patient.

He believes in the power of the mind, so much so, that he credits me for the disfiguring scars marking his body.

Admittedly, it’s almost insulting how little I had to push him toward his cliff. More like a lazy nudge, really.

When Torres invaded my privacy to find me carving a sigil into my forearm, the weak leash he had on his sanity finally snapped. He saw a demon in place of a man—one he believes is trying to take possession of his body.

He’s been trying to burn me out ever since.

With effort, I roll my sleeve past the manacle cuffed to my wrist to expose the sigil I charged before Halen’s arrival at Briar.

I could almost admire Torres’s determined will toward his ambition, if not for the very fatal flaw he made by deceiving Halen.

And now, his attempt to keep me from her.

“Pick up the pen,” I command him.

His gaze darts to the engraved fountain pen on the desk before returning to my eyes. “You have no power over—”

“Pick up the pen, Laurence.” I stress the use of his first name. “Pick it up now, and don’t even think about reaching for that call button.” I place the inked sigils along my knuckles in his line of sight.

Our will is strongest when we believe. Amid his delusions, this man truly believes I’m a demon sent to torment him.

I have simply never corrected him.

With marked conflict, Torres grasps the pen. The gray hair at his temples is damp with sweat. “You realize all I have to do is make one phone call when you walk out of this room.” He chuckles.

Then I have to make sure that can’t happen.

Inhaling a deep breath, I decide it’s time for Dr. Torres to get the help he so desperately needs.

“Place the FBI document on the desk,” I order.

He makes one last weak attempt to resist the command, the hand not clutching the pen gripped to the edge of the desk, before his defenses shatter. I watch him retrieve the document from the printer tray with anticipation.

“She’ll figure it out,” he warns, a devious glint breaking through the dullness clouding his eyes. “She’s smart. She’ll figure out what you did.”

Fury shatters the last of my restraint. “Put your left hand on the desk.”

He makes a pathetic show of fighting each movement. For all I know, he first majored in the dramatic arts before switching to psychology. His muscles spasm as he flattens his palm to the desk surface. His chest heaves, his glasses slip down the bridge of his sweaty nose.

I hold his gaze, staring into his glazed eyes with the blue-and-green flames of mine. Dr. Torres should thank me in the end. I’m almost tempted to let him continue to destroy his own mind. But since I can’t have him further interfering...

“Drive the pen into your hand.”

“Oh god no...” Dr. Torres impales the pointed nib of the fountain pen into

the back of his hand. Blood wells around the gold tip before a thin rivulet trails to the desk.

“Now,” I say, satisfaction rippling beneath my skin, “sign your fucking name.”

Shaking, he pulls the pen free and scribbles his name on the document, inking his authority with his blood.

By the time the psych tech enters to intervene, the document has been faxed to the Hollow’s Row Police Department at the attention of Special Agent Alister.

“You demon—” Torres shouts, as the tech tries to restrain him. “You’re a fucking *demon*. Hell is all around us.” He grabs the collar of the tech’s white shirt. “Can’t you feel the flames?”

With as much darkness as this man has seen, I’d think he’d conjure a less cliché delusion.

Before I’m escorted out of the doctor’s office by Agent Hernandez, I turn back briefly to send Torres a conspiratorial wink.

He’ll be fine. He might even make a full recovery. Then, he’ll go on to write a compelling memoir of how he battled his mental demons and came out the conquering victor.

He should issue me a royalty check from the proceeds.

After Hernandez has confirmed the transfer with the task force, he places me in the backseat of the black SUV once again. I look through the window and give the Briar institute one last, nostalgic glance.

I won’t be returning.

Poppy 80s music rattles from the speakers to fill the interior as I recline against the leather seat, wondering what little Halen is doing right now.

I’m coming, sweetness.

HUNTING GROUNDS

HALEN

There's a story of a monster that feeds off pain. Its fangs sink into the soul and siphon suffering like a vampire sucks blood. Misery slithers in its veins, sorrow is the sinew beneath its flesh. It's a hollow vessel that leeches off agony the same way a creature of the dead feasts on sustaining life force.

In the Greek mythos, poems were ascribed to a daemon like this, these personified spirits who embodied human pain and despair. They called them the *Algea*, the incarnations of our sins, and our mourning.

The human condition is such that we must give our overpowering emotions a name, even fashion them into monsters. So we can comprehend the depth of our heartache, understand our profound grief. So we can make sense of meaningless tragedies, and the pain we ourselves inflict. Then the resulting guilt.

So there's a *reason* for all our suffering.

And further, so we can cast it out of our person as something abstract.

How else can we reconcile all that we endure?

The personification of my profound grief came to me in the form of a beautiful devil with clashing blue-and-green eyes and a smoldering, disarming smile.

My daemon sank his teeth into my flesh, lapped at my tears, feasted on my blood. He latched on to my soul and fed off my pain like a night terror crushes air from the lungs. He's entwined around my bones, seeping deep into my very marrow.

No matter how hard I try, I can't escape him. I feel him beneath my skin, his heated current sparking and burning my muscle, his destructive flame cauterizing my wounds.

Each marshy breath I drag into my lungs sears with the memory of Kallum. The electric feel of his touch, the sensation of his feverish gaze on my body.

The charged moments between us are there behind every blink.

And as I work the newest Hollow's Row crime scene, he's the monster I'm searching for in every detail.

A deep plum tints the sky over the killing fields like the bruises marking my neck. The scent of rain drifts through the endless stretch of marsh reeds, adhering to the early morning dew.

I've been obsessively combing through the crime scene since I arrived on-site yesterday, searching for the one piece of evidence that will tie Professor Kallum Locke to the Harbinger killer's latest victim.

I swipe the back of a gloved hand across my forehead, clearing away damp strands of my overgrown bangs from my brow. Any and every interference to slow me has become a festering annoyance.

Constructing the narrative of a crime scene where I already have the perpetrator in mind is a challenge I've never faced before. My point of view is biased. I'm envisioning everything through Kallum's eyes, walking in his premeditated footsteps.

Which is dangerous. If I make one misstep, one oversight...

Well, I've already watched this play out in court once before.

I can't let Kallum slip through the cracks of the justice system again.

As I refocus on the crime scene, I position the spotlight to project away from the victim. Kallum would have had no light to see by. There was only a sliver of moon at night.

When we were together at the ritual ground.

I chase the thought back to the dark corner of my mind. Then I shake out my gloved hands and stand in front of my tripod. Camera aimed at the intricate webbing of thread and discolored tongues strung between two eerie marsh trees, I snatch the remote from the depressed reed grass and commence the rapid-fire shutter clicks as I move through the scene.

In order to deconstruct the murder, essentially, I'm assembling the crime in reverse.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I let my senses absorb the malicious current lingering in the air as I imagine Kallum's dark thoughts, the pitch-black savagery of his movements. Every action he took steeped in his own vicious brand of evil.

I know where and at what time I last saw him. I can place Kallum at the ritual ground at 4:45 a.m. My call to Agent Alister is timestamped. The next time Kallum was seen was by the two special agents who had been placed in charge of watching him. That was around 7:30 a.m.

To mark the time between, I'm building out from the moment the perpetrator placed the severed head next to the erected body amid the woven thread. That would have been the final touch.

While I'm estimating times, clocking the length of each individual action, I have to be mindful not to force a particular piece of evidence or outcome to tell the story I want verses what the evidence states.

For this very reason, I should recuse myself from the case—but there is no one else who will be more devoted to uncovering the truth.

Even if that ultimate truth buries me right along with Kallum.

A possibility I haven't stopped long enough to fully absorb or process. I can't, not now. Not when I've never been this close to catching the Harbinger before.

I'll face any consequences when Kallum is locked away for good.

Fueled by anger and resentment and even humiliation, I finish logging the timeframe of displaying the victim's body adorned as the death's-head hawkmoth, then glance around at the crime-scene techs trading shifts.

I check my phone: 6:00 a.m.

I told Devyn seven hours ago I'd take a break.

Which I did, technically. A tent has been erected just off the boardwalk of the public hunting grounds, where portalets and coolers of water are accessible. I've had to stop every few hours to tend to my menstrual flow, something I haven't had to deal with in months. Not since the accident that claimed my

fiancé and pregnancy.

Every time I change a sanitary napkin, the emotional wound is scraped open with fresh pain. Only now, there is also the appalling guilt of Kallum and I together.

I may have gotten a logical answer from my doctor for why this is happening to my body, but it's not enough to calm the rising panic every time a visual of him between my thighs surfaces, and I see him tasting me, carving my skin...

A cramp twinges in my pelvis, and I touch my stomach, willing my thoughts back onto the task before me. An ache builds behind my eyes and my vision starts to blur. I ignore the dull throb in my head and push past the weariness pulling at my muscles.

A sinister voice crawls up from the trenches of my mind to whisper that if I stop—if I allow my thoughts to drift to anything other than the obsessive need to dissect this crime scene—I'll be dragged right down to the abyss, to those flashes of memory I'm barely holding back.

The dam can't break.

Since the moment Kallum slashed his palms and painted my body with his blood, images of the Cambridge murder have been assaulting my mind. Each time, a fragment longer, the grainy picture becoming a degree sharper.

All from the killer's perspective.

"I'm just tired," I mutter to myself as I suppress the imagery of a dead man's mutilated face.

Despite what my mind is trying to make me believe, I had no reason to kill Professor Wellington six months ago...a stranger to me.

No motive. No evidence. No crime.

When reciting this mantra starts to lose effectiveness, I read the script inked on my forearm. The verse by Voltaire reminds me that I'm here in this moment. I only have to focus on this scene.

So I immerse myself fully. I imagine the Overman's tongue exhibit already constructed when the Harbinger brought his victim to the hunting grounds.

With the time constraint, he had almost thirty minutes to kill the victim by slicing his throat, remove the antlers, sever the head, then stage the scene.

He spread the arms along the woven thread backdrop and tied each wrist to a tree to resemble the wings of the moth. The face was chalked in black and white to portray the skull on the moth's thorax. Every detail is precise to the previous Harbinger crime scenes.

The only anomaly is the antlers affixed to the victim's head. Unlike Landry, where the antlers were strapped via a leather band, the victim has implants. An extreme measure taken by the offender to modify his higher men into his construct of the Dionysian Mysteries.

This is our first glimpse into what the missing victims have been subjected to for the past five years.

The Harbinger killer removed the antlers from the victim, but not by carving them out of the flesh; he sawed the horns off at the base of the bone.

This particular detail has been what's kept me here, questioning the intent. Removing the antlers completely would be more authentic to the Harbinger's desire to depict the moth.

Was it his intent to desecrate the Overman's higher men? Or was it done purposely to reveal something about the Overman suspect?

The antlers have not been recovered.

While walking in the footsteps of the killer, timing each action he had to take, the blinking light of a firefly catches my notice. "What are you doing out so late," I whisper to the insect. "Or this early, rather."

I watch the nocturnal insect bob around one of the barren trees. My gaze drifts down and, as a detail comes into focus, my breath stills.

My mud boots make a squelching sound as I maneuver toward the spotlight and angle the beam on the wrist of the victim. The thread has been wrapped around his wrist several times. But there in the plied twine is a long fiber.

I retrieve a pair of tweezers and pluck the coarse string from the thread. Before I bag it, I use my phone to take pictures. After I've labeled the

evidence sleeve, I hand it off to one of the task force agents overseeing the crime scene.

It could be nothing more than factory transfer on the skein of yarn. I'm sure just about every ball of yarn out there has different fibers and string from other skeins spooled in the same warehouse.

As my thoughts meander down that path, my wrist flares with an itch, and I circle my fingers around the rope burn. As if on cue to save me from my spiraling thoughts, I spot Devyn making her way up the boardwalk. She's carrying a cardboard container with two coffee cups.

I remove my gloves and stuff them into my pocket, then hoist myself onto the edge of the weathered planks. I extend a hand to accept a coffee, and she raises the carton out of reach.

"No, ma'am," she says. "This is not for you. You are cut off from caffeine."

She's dressed in black tactical pants and a matching rain jacket with the HRPD logo embroidered on the left breast. Her dark hair is pushed out of the way with a thick headband.

I feign insult with a scowl. "How am I supposed to function without mocha-flavored caffeine?"

"Halen, I know you didn't leave." She arches a sculpted eyebrow against her pretty, warm-brown complexion. "You've been on this scene for..." She trails off, shaking her head. "I lost count. But I know it's now been too damn long. You're leaving to get some sleep."

"I just need to do one more thing—"

"No. You need rest. Have you even slept once since the attack at the ritual crime scene?"

No rest for the wicked.

The thought comes to me unbidden. I don't even know who first said it, and I realize Kallum would know. He'd have a whole lecture on the etymology behind it and how the saying altered over the years. He'd somehow layer a veiled sexual innuendo in his lesson, ending on a wink that would make my

heart flutter.

And dammit, I despise the part of me that aches with a homesick pang at the thought.

I do need sleep.

At Devyn's concerned expression, I sigh. "Fine. I'll head to the hotel for a few hours."

"Good. Because if your overtired ass touches this scene again, I'm writing you up," she threatens, eyeing the marsh crime scene lit up by spotlights.

My brows knit together, my smile tight. "Do you have the authority to do that? What exactly is a write-up for a consultant?"

She makes a point of taking a long sip of coffee to ignore my question. Then she uses the steps placed at the side of the boardwalk to enter the scene. "Medical examiner is removing the victim soon anyway, before the storm hits."

I nod slowly as I breathe in the earthy scent of pending rain.

After Devyn sets her coffees on a table, she grabs her crime-scene kit and begins laying out her impression tools, lining up her brushes in order by size. Then she removes a binder from her pack and hands it to me.

"Look it over and sign," she says. "I was able to sweet talk Iris into letting you keep your room at the inn. Expenses covered by the HRPD for the next week. Considering all the rooms are now rented out to media parasites, it's the best offer the department could make."

"No, this is perfect. Thank you." I accept the binder and briefly flip through the consulting contract. I would have agreed to work the case for free. But, seeing as how that might come across as a bit obsessive and raise some red flags, I decided it was time to officially go solo.

"I'll get this back to you soon," I tell her. "Who do I answer to, by the way?"

Her features draw together. "Well, Detective Emmons has taken a leave of absence."

“Understandable.” The decapitated victim erected in the center of the crime scene was identified as his younger brother. The one who went missing with the other thirty-two disappeared residents over five years ago, whose dismembered organs and body parts have been appearing in ritualistic crime scenes all over the killing fields.

“So,” Devyn says, resigned, “Detective Riddick is his second in command, and has taken charge of the case until further notice.”

My gaze narrows on her. “You said that so formally.”

Her laugh is clipped. “Yeah, well. You’ll understand when you meet him. The man has absolutely no sense of humor, let’s just say that.”

“Oh, that sounds like a match made in law enforcement heaven for Agent Alister.”

“At least you still have a sense of humor,” she says with a smirk. “Dark though it may be.”

I slip the binder under my arm and drop down from the boardwalk. “See. I’m fine. I really should finish cataloging the removal of the antlers from the victim’s head before the medical examiner arrives.”

“God, you said that way too casually. It’s getting harder to stomach this case. And *no*,” she says, a hard reprimand. “Go to the inn. Get rested up. I promise, if anything important happens, I *will* call you, Halen.”

I hesitate only a moment before nodding my agreement. Technically, the Hollow’s Row Police Department now signs my checks, even though I haven’t stopped long enough to negotiate my own pay-rate as an independent consultant.

When I was fired from CrimeTech, I had no further purpose here. Then the news broke of the newest victim of the Harbinger killer being discovered right here in this town.

That changed everything.

Before Devyn heads deeper into the scene, I ask her, “Is there any update on what I gave you?”

As Devyn is a forensic analyst and the closest thing I have to an ally here—and a friend—I entrusted her with the evidence from Kallum’s ritual. The wine bottle. The crown of bone. The robe I was wearing. A self-administered SAEK (sexual assault evidence kit).

The last one I hesitated on. No, Kallum didn’t force himself on me. I was a willing participant. And according to the tox screen run at the hospital, no drugs were found in my system. I wasn’t drugged. But, as I can’t yet logically explain what happened to me during the ritual, I have to question and test everything.

It didn’t register until I got back to the hotel and went through my bag what was missing from the collected evidence.

The carving knife.

Sometimes, it’s what’s absent that is the biggest clue.

Did I overlook it when I was hastily gathering items at the ritual ground? Or was it removed from my bag afterward?

“Halen? Did you hear me?”

I blink hard and recenter my focus. “Yeah, sorry. Just zoned out for a second.”

“Uh-huh.” Devyn turns toward her kit. “Well, in order to process everything you gave me stealthily, it’s going to take a bit of time. The lab is overworked with this case.”

A bite the corner of my lip. “Of course. I was just hoping...” I shake my head, having no idea what *hope* even means anymore.

“I know,” she says, her tone soft and reassuring as she faces me. “Look. Whatever happened to you out there—” she nods in the general direction of the ritual crime scene “—it’s going to take even more time for you to process *that*. You’re a psychologist, Halen. You know this. Give yourself enough time to equilibrate or recalibrate or whatever.”

A thin smile ghosts my lips. I nod appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” She steps closer and drops her voice low. “And if you need to talk

about anything that might have happened between you and a certain devastatingly sexy expert consultant. Hey, no judgment. I'm here for that. But if he hurt you—"

"No. I promise. Nothing like that." I meet her concerned gaze, and really hope I'm convincing. "As crazy as it sounds, I just want to make sure I'm not losing my mind."

Her mouth twists into a smile. "Oh, I can confirm that for you right now. You're absolutely batshit. But, I suspect that's why you're so good at what you do."

An amused laugh escapes, and I appreciate her attempt to put me at ease despite our grisly surroundings and the obvious stress of the case. "Thanks. I think..."

"You're welcome. Now, get out of here before you fall asleep on a pile of evidence."

Devyn heads to the center of the scene to confer with one of the federal agents on the task force, leaving me feeling some strange, vulnerable melancholy.

Typically, my field manager Aubrey would check in a couple times before I closed out my day. I'd send in my field reports. I have a strict routine. *Had* a routine. And that might be all I'm feeling, the lack of structure. What kept my mind focused, busy. Off of painful reminders of the past.

Once I have my tripod and tools packed in my case, I hoist the strap over my shoulder, groaning at the tender ache in my back. Really, as the adrenaline that's been fueling my manic efforts to process this scene starts to wane, every sensitive bruise and injury on my body makes itself known.

My back bears the scrapes from the bark where I was bound to a tree. My wrists are abraded with rope burn. My skin is covered in scratches and bruises and bite marks, and a sigil is carved into my innermost upper thigh.

My whole body thrums with a painful, visceral reminder of Kallum.

The hotel room has a soaking tub, and I'm thinking about submerging myself for the next several hours when an alarming sensation prickles the back of my

neck, lifting the fine hairs along my body.

As the early morning air crackles with a volatile, kinetic force, I sense the moment he enters my energy field. Like the darkest flint striking an abrasive surface, the friction of his presence scratches over my skin, heating my flesh.

His fiery chaos pulses against my logical defenses, and my breathing becomes erratic. I can feel him, tangible, magnetic, drawing me in like a moth to a frenzied flame.

I don't miss the dark irony as I stand amid a crime scene designed by the Harbinger himself.

My heart clenches in my chest, and suddenly every molecule vibrates with his frequency as I gravitate toward the boardwalk and climb the steps onto the worn planks. Gathering my remaining strength, I look down the walkway.

Kallum's striking silhouette is framed by the hazy glow of the lamps.

Like a lit match dropped to a trail of gasoline, the distance between us blazes through the dark. He eats each step with a sure but unhurried stride, his gaze intently aimed on me, making the world fall away.

Sheathed in a designer black suit tailored to his beautiful form, he's the devil of deception and debauchery descending on Hollow's Row once again.

Kallum is flanked by Agent Alister and another special agent—one of the tagalong feds.

The closer he draws, a gauzy web of indecision spools around my mind, the heavy thud of my heart drowns out the background of the marsh. White noise fills my head and my hand clasps the bag strap so tightly my fingers go numb.

It's only been hours since I last saw him, and I've already forgotten how consuming his presence is, how—when his sole attention is directed on me—he desires to make me feel like I'm the only person in the universe.

A dangerously deceptive illusion by the chaos magician himself.

Breath bated, I hold his intense stare as he coasts toward me, close enough that when I'm forced to take a breath, his scent of spicy sandalwood burns in

my lungs.

Kallum's mouth tips into a devastatingly beautiful smile. "Hello, Halen."

DAEMON

HALEN

The deep baritone of Kallum's voice curls in my belly as I stay locked in his gaze, reminding me of our first encounter at the Cambridge crime scene. Beneath that vivid memory, however, some elusive feeling, like a misplaced familiarity, tugs at the back of my mind.

A shadow of the past is conjured against the hazy lamplight: Kallum's hands stained in red, his suit jacket draped over my shoulders, his voice breaking through the shroud of my mind: *Breathe*.

I blink hard to clear the vision as the bite mark on my shoulder pulses with heat beneath the bag strap, the place on my body where Kallum claims he traced a sigil before he ever approached me at the university.

"Professor Locke," I say, my voice breathy as I strive to control the tremor. "Welcome back."

I wanted to be more prepared before I had to confront Kallum.

I wanted the evidence to profile him as the prime suspect of this crime scene. I wanted to pin him—without a shadow of a doubt—as the Harbinger killer.

I wanted to witness him arrested and handcuffed, where I couldn't be forced to play his game, where I felt safely removed from his reach.

But life has never once asked my permission before it decided to blow my world apart. I don't expect it to start now.

So I grip the bag strap tighter, lift my chin, and meet Kallum's smoldering gaze with cool indifference. Tension infuses the air of the marshland, the silence stretching until Agent Alister clears his throat.

"Right," Alister says. "No introduction necessary." Sarcasm laces his words as he glances first at the progress of the crime scene, then between me and Kallum. "St. James, I heard you've officially been hired on by the locals."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Two expert consultants," Kallum comments. "Feels a bit overkill." The

goaded remark is punctuated by his smile that reveals the slight dimple in his cheek.

I loathe that dimple.

“There’s two suspects, so maybe not.” I tilt my head, gaze narrowed on him. “That was a fast trip, professor. You work quickly.”

“My services are obviously sorely needed,” he says, letting his gaze drift slow and deliberate down my body to further his innuendo. “And I do aim to please.” His intense eyes settle on my neck, noting the absence of the diamond pendant, and that calculated action trips my pulse.

A reactive flame licks my skin, and I’m forced to look down into the den of the crime scene to escape his knowing leer.

When Alister said he planned to bring Kallum back onboard the case, I had hoped the red tape would take longer to cut through. I wonder how Alister convinced Dr. Torres to release Kallum to the service of the feds once again rather than transferring him to another facility, as he was so intent on.

“I assume everyone will play nice together,” Alister says, attempting to dissipate the obvious awkwardness. He then bows his head in my direction. “Are you leaving?”

Finally breaking free of Kallum’s penetrating hold, I give my attention to the agent in charge. “No, just taking a short break,” I say, deciding there’s no way I can leave Kallum on this crime scene where he can potentially tamper with evidence.

“You look like you’re in need of a bed, Dr. St. James.” Kallum’s voice is fine gravel scraping at my resolve. The dark flame banked behind his clashing eyes sends up a warning flare within me, the insinuation hitting its mark.

I swallow the ache trapped in my throat and flip my white forelock out of my vision. “Some of us appreciate the sacrifice that has to be made.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I mentally claw the air to snatch them back.

Like he’s been given a gift, Kallum smiles down at me with practiced,

weaponized smolder that shallows my breath. “Oh, I more than appreciate your sacrifice, Dr. St. James.”

Liquid heat pours into my veins, and my thighs clench at the empty ache in my core. A flash of memory surfaces—my wrists bound; my thighs wrapped around his thrusting hips—and I can feel Kallum so deep inside me, I have to take a step back to breathe.

My emotions and weaknesses are human. I’m a flawed design. I can’t shut off the torrent of emotions he unleashed inside me in a matter of hours. I gave Kallum a piece of me that I’d never given anyone else...and now, I can’t simply forget, no matter how badly I wish I had the power to do so.

Unlike the soulless demon standing before me, I’m not an unfeeling monster.

Regardless of the confusion waging an internal war, my mind is stronger than my metaphorical heart. It always wins out. Kallum knows this—he even *believes* this—the power of mind over matter, the philosophy of The Will to Power. It’s why the last words he uttered to me were spat with venom.

“There’s no way I’m ever letting you go. We are the duality.”

He wants me to give in to some illogical, immaterial passion. Which he’ll manipulate, utilizing every head game in his arsenal to cloud my reason.

A heavy bout of mental exhaustion claims me already, and we’ve barely started this dance.

When a crime-scene analyst approaches Alister, the agent steps aside to speak with him in private, and suddenly the negative space between us is charged with everything last said and unsaid.

Kallum steps closer, leaving the other agent farther behind. I purposely loosen my grip on the strap, allowing a tingling sensation to bite into my fingertips as feeling returns.

This is exactly how it feels to be Kallum’s object of obsession. First the numbing balm, then the pain.

The bandage around his left hand is stained with fresh blood. As if he knows the effect his proximity has on me, Kallum grins, leisurely rolling up the

cuffs of his black dress shirt to put the bandage in my direct view.

I tear my eyes away and catch sight of the scripted tattoos which decorate the areas between the sigils and archaic designs inked into his skin.

“You’re in pain,” he says, his voice softening as his gaze tracks my body, momentarily landing on the bruises along my neck.

I’m not sure if he’s referring to the attack I sustained from the dead suspect, or our frenzied love making—but I don’t want him probing any of my wounds.

“Halen—?”

“I’m fine,” I say, cutting him off. I look at the scripted words tattooed on his skin, shifting my thoughts to a safer topic, like the verse I’ve read countless times on his arm. “There would be no harmony without high and low notes...”

He glances down at his forearm before returning his attention to me. “Heraclitus’s oppositional process of *eris* and *dike*.”

I hold his gaze, unwavering. “Strife and justice. Or is it strife and harmony? What does the philosophy expert believe?”

A flash of amusement lights his features. His tongue travels over his bottom lip, as if tasting me in the air, a snake scenting its prey. “Impressive. I’m surprised you’ve had time to memorize my tattoos to research.” He tosses an unconcerned look at the crime scene. “Then again, you never could keep your eyes off me.”

A flare of indignation blisters my face. I mentally sidestep his baiting remark. “I just find it ironic you have a quote by a philosopher known as The Obscure. It’s rather...I don’t know... Fitting?”

“Initially, he was called The Riddler,” he corrects before taking a purposeful step forward to crowd the thin space between us with his consuming, towering presence. “There’s no irony here, little Halen. I’ve never once been *obscure* with you. I’ve always been honest, offered you the truth. Ask me anything. Whatever you want, whatever you need, I’ll give you.”

Beneath the heavy press of his implied offer, one thing screams inside my head.

The knife.

With his severe eyes focused on me in challenge, I want to demand what he did with the carving knife after Landry's attack. Did he take it with him when he left the ritual ground? Is it the weapon that was used to sever the victim's head?

"I know how to find them. You know I can find them."

These words Kallum said to me before he disappeared into the high reeds, leaving me to clean up the mess at the ritual crime scene. His claim he could locate the missing victims.

For hours, Kallum was out of my sight—out of everyone's sight. The ankle monitor left behind at the hotel. He had just under three hours to locate a victim, set the scene, and get back to the hotel.

Thinking about it in terms of anyone else, it's not possible. There wasn't enough time. The walk alone would've taken Kallum over forty-five minutes to reach the hotel.

But we're not talking about anyone else—this is Kallum Locke. The man who had an agenda from the moment he first approached me at the university crime scene. The man who knew his end game before I ever sat down across from him at the Briar visitation table.

The man who believes charging sigils on his skin can manifest his most coveted desires, and whose delusional, twisted concept of love is manipulating me into believing I'm a murderer.

If planned ahead, if Kallum already deciphered the location of the town's missing victims, then it's feasible he could have held Detective Emmons' brother somewhere else, somewhere nearby. He removed his ankle monitor once, proving he could've removed it at any point prior to the night of the ritual. As he found the second crime scene with hemlock and ears in mere minutes of studying the first scene, Kallum could have known where to look for a possible third location.

There's a lot of hypotheticals in my working theory, which is not how I break down a crime scene. The only thing I have right now is speculation, and herein lies the danger of building a profile while looking directly at an offender.

Until I find the one pivotal piece of evidence—the murder weapon—I need to focus on the *why* instead of the *how*.

Kallum's motive is simple: Revenge.

My questions burn to be released, but I can't give up my theory to him. Not until I have what I need.

This time, I can't give in to Kallum or his games.

The special agent behind Kallum clears his throat, noting the tension between the two consultants is reaching a fever pitch.

"There's absolutely nothing I want from you." I try to back away, but Kallum reaches out and grasps my forearm. His thumb brazenly grazes the sensitive skin of my inner wrist, feeling the abraded flesh from the rope burn and speeding my pulse.

"You can't leave," he says, his tone taking on a serious edge. "You can't be alone. It's not safe, Halen."

"I haven't been safe since the moment you entered my world." I snatch my arm free, severing his connection.

Weighing his next words, Kallum slides his tongue over his teeth. "Don't you want my theory on the crime scene?"

Like baiting a worm on a hook, Kallum dangles the lure before me. For all my efforts to study the acclaimed Professor Locke, he was the one learning how I tick, how to maneuver me.

Kallum is a sociopath who needs to control the narrative. Anything he offers will be to his benefit. But even Kallum is capable of making a mistake. One way to catch a lying sociopath is to let them talk.

"Enlighten me, professor," I say.

“With pleasure.” A grin hooks the corner of his mouth before he casts a look over the marsh. “There is no such thing as an original idea,” he says, already veering off on a tangent I know will make my head hurt. “Even the master philosophers wove their doctrines from previous concepts. One in particular —” he points to the inked script on his forearm “—Heraclitus. I find it interesting that line in particular called out to you. As if the universe was trying to offer you a clue.”

“The universe? Or a clever philosophy scholar twisting things to his advantage?”

He chuckles. “You really do have trust issues.”

“I wonder why.”

A tense beat thrums the air between us as we stay locked in each other’s stare.

“Though there was only ever one written dogma,” Kallum says, pushing his agenda, “of which nothing remains except in the teachings of Heraclitus’s successors, his core belief in flux was universally accepted.”

I feel myself being drawn in, the quicksand funneling in around me. “I’m too exhausted for existential meanderings,” I say, expelling a sigh. “Just... explain.”

He crosses his arms with a satisfied smirk. “Heraclitus expounded on flux by stating opposites coincide. He was a philosopher Nietzsche openly respected, I suspect, because he declared Dionysus was lord, and they both enjoy their paradoxes. Opposites attract and all that.” He winks at me. “So then, we have to make an educated guess that Nietzsche’s own path to self-deification was constructed from his teachings. Which means your actual suspect is on the same course. They’re seeking unity in their opposite.”

Through his whole spiel, what I latched on to was: “Opposites attract.” I nod tersely. “The duality, right? Apollonian and Dionysian.”

We are the duality.

Kallum’s gaze flares, a hunger banked in the depths of his clashing gaze. “Plato believed we all have a twin soul, that we’re all just here on this planet

searching for our other half.”

I hold up a hand, stopping him. “One riddle at a time.”

“Your suspect hasn’t completed the ascension because he’s searching too, and in fact realized he needs this opposite side of himself in order to fully ascend.” His expression turns pensive. “No one likes to be alone.”

I swallow against the forming ache in my throat. “You seem to have a disturbing fixation with that particular theory, Professor Locke.”

“You have no idea,” he says, his voice a low rumble.

The intensity of the moment strains my defenses, and I’m the one to look away.

“But what I appreciate most,” Kallum says, his tone turning seductive, “is Heraclitus’s theory on the fire of the soul, how the mastery of our desires purifies us.” His fingers trace the side of my palm to pull my attention back on him. His gaze heats as he stares into me. “I can think of at least three different ways we can master our desires right now and save our damned souls, sweetness.”

My heart pounds in my chest. “Go to hell, Kallum.”

His smile is wicked. “Obligingly. But only with you by my side, angel.”

A hot coil of irritation twists my nerves. “None of what you said pertains to that scene.” I point toward the marsh. “Where does the Harbinger killer fit in to your deduction?” I challenge him.

Kallum runs a bandaged hand through his dark hair. “You’re always looking too closely to truly see,” he says. “Is it more likely the Harbinger killer needed a scapegoat, or the Overman?”

I fold an arm over my midsection, a cramp twinging my stomach. “I don’t understand. What does scapegoating have to do with the murder?”

He moves closer. Too close, forcing my head to tip back. “We need to talk about this in private.”

A breathless laugh slips free. “Of course we do.”

As Alister turns his attention on us, he releases a curt breath. “Whatever the issue is, drop it.” He steps between me and Kallum and crosses his arms. “With two psychotic killers in this town, we’re working together and pooling resources to recover the victims alive.”

I lift my chin, remaining silent as Alister moves in closer to me and drops his voice. “I meant what I said before. I’d like it if we could work closely on this.”

I lock my frame in a defiant stance. “Yes. I remember *exactly* what you said, Agent Alister.” Stepping around him, I add, “My initial observations have been given to the local department to share with the task force. You can request all my reports from Detective Riddick.”

Tension arcs through the boggy air. I sense the volatile shift in tide as Kallum first gauges me curiously, then traps Alister in a fierce glare. “Did I miss something important here?”

Alister ignores Kallum outright. “I’m not disputing the locals keeping you on the case, St. James. But that means you still answer to the task force that has jurisdiction. Which means, you answer to me.”

The weariness creeping into my bones steals some of my indignation. I chew back my retort. “Understood, sir.”

Alister’s mouth thins and a muscle twitches in his jaw. “What I need to know is if there are any marked differences between the Harbinger scene here and the others you’ve worked. Any deviating details.”

Despite my tunnel vision on Kallum and my desire to put Alister in his place for the lewd and degrading pass he made at me the day before, I’m still a professional. And there’s still a victim that deserves justice, along with thirty-two other missing victims who need to be recovered.

Glancing over my shoulder, I try to see the crime scene through a fresh lens. The intricate weaving of yarn to create a web where thirty-three partial tongues are displayed like shriveled trophies. Erected central to the first scene is the headless body of the victim—the decapitated head placed near the feet.

Since I arrived on site, I’ve been detangling the two scenes from each other. Teasing apart the knotted details. One a sacrificial offering made by the

Overman, and the second the victim of the Harbinger.

The task force has escalated the Harbinger case to priority.

They put roadblocks up around the perimeter of town, checking all vehicles coming and going. In the letter discovered on the body, the Harbinger made a threat to the victims. He specifically called out the Overman, threatening to take out every “higher man” until the Overman “shows his face”.

I look at Kallum, again questioning just what the letter means, if it means anything at all, or if it’s only meant to derail the investigation.

The logical choice is to focus all efforts on first capturing the Harbinger. I support this. Because, while there is another threat to the victims, the fact is, the Harbinger has proven he can locate them.

And, according to the time of death of the victim here, he can locate them alive.

Relaxing the tightly threaded muscles around my spine, I take a fortifying breath and say, “Besides the fact that this is the first time the Harbinger has invaded another scene, the most obvious deviance from the other Harbinger cases is the antlers on the victim. The letter from the Harbinger was vague. I can’t glean his intent, his motive. Yet,” I add, directing a stern glare at Kallum, “it’s only a matter of time. The Harbinger was rushed. If there was a mistake made, we’ll uncover it.”

I’ll uncover it.

Alister nods confidently. “I agree. But what made this guy show up here? He’s been dormant for over half a year, now this.”

I brought him here.

The words burn at the base of my throat as I hold them back. There’s been a question plaguing me since I first glimpsed the Harbinger scene, and there’s only one person who can answer it.

If I wouldn’t have resisted Kallum at the ritual site, if I wouldn’t have refused to play into his delusion of the sick and twisted connection he believes we have, if I would have accepted him, accepted us together... Then would there

be a victim at all?

He looked me in the eyes and vowed he could find the victims.

He said I needed him in order to save them.

Then I told him I'd never need him for anything ever again.

Demonstrating his claim in the most violent and gruesome manner wasn't only a punishment, it was his proof.

The sky has lightened to a dull, overcast gray with the morning break. I glance down at the sun-bleached boards before I return my gaze to Alister. "I don't know why the killer is here," I say. "But it's clear his delusion has devolved, and that's what I'm going to focus on."

Alister studies me intently, adjusts his shoulder harness. "You're a hundred percent sure this is the same guy."

I wish I wasn't. "Chalk was used to portray the victim's face in the likeness of the death's-head hawkmoth," I say, pushing my bangs from my eyes. "It needs to be confirmed by lab testing and compared to the other scenes, but I can say with a degree of certainty that it's the same technique."

A detail that very few people would be privy to. If you only have news stations and media outlets to view the Harbinger crime scenes, it's easy to mistake the depicted skull on the victims' faces to be paint.

For a brief second, I meet Kallum's eyes, and I see the mischievous gleam.

Professor Percy Wellington was the fourth victim of the Harbinger that proved to be a crime of passion dressed up like a copycat murder. The very murder Kallum is now being remanded to a mental hospital for committing shared this commonality of the crime.

A drumbeat sounds in my head, a flash of a vision follows, and I see the lug wrench tipped in blood held in my hand...

I blink back the encroaching memory.

Kallum cocks his head. "That's a very specific detail," he says, an echo of what I once said to him at the Cambridge crime scene. "A detail like that

would only be known to the officials who worked closely on the cases.”

“And the killer,” I fire back.

His smile is arrogant. “Right. The killer would know all the details.”

A mirrored smile spreads across my face, and it’s completely inappropriate for the moment, and I’m sure makes me look deranged.

Agent Alister regards me with a measure of hesitancy. “All right. Good,” he says. “I’ll trust your assessment on this. He’s our guy. That’s where we’re focused. Which makes my next request not so much a request.” He brings out a folded slip of paper from the inseam of his suit blazer. “We have a lot of fast-moving parts, and since there was a, uh, situation with Dr. Torres, he wasn’t able to refer a psychiatrist to Professor Locke—”

“I’ll do it.”

My abrupt offer to take Kallum back on as his field psychiatrist jars not only Alister, but also Kallum. Both men look uncertain, but it’s the twist of Kallum’s full lips that digs beneath my resolve to make me question if I really have this under control, or if I just handed him exactly what he wants.

“Halen,” Alister says, and I see Kallum bristle at the agent’s familiar use of my name. “I was going to suggest for you to refer another doctor.”

“That would take time.” Impatience bleeds through my clipped tone of voice. “Which is limited, and you’ve stressed we need to utilize our resources. Is there a conflict with me overseeing Professor Locke in the field?” I take the form and hold out my hand for a pen.

Alister hesitates a moment before he concedes. He’s a man who likes to be in control, and this situation is getting dangerously close to the opposite. Though he has little choice if he wants his task force to find the suspects and the victims.

“Since you understand our strained resources, then you can appreciate I’m only able to put Special Agent Hernandez on detail with Locke.”

I glance at the agent in a black suit and earpiece hanging back on the boardwalk. It’s not as if two agents were able to leash Kallum the first time. I

sign my name on the form, placing myself in charge of Kallum's mental health. The irony is grim.

"Done." I hand the form and pen back to Alister.

As I step aside to head back down to the crime scene, Alister eases in front of me and takes my chin between his grip, tilting my face up to him.

I reflexively pull back, but his hold is firm. "You've been working the scene since I last saw you here, haven't you?" It's not a question as he assesses what I'm sure are bloodshot eyes and dark bags. His gaze searches my face before he drops his hand. "You're leaving. Don't come back until you've had sleep."

I trap a retort on my tongue. Alister's action was far too inappropriate...and intimate.

Like a pop of kindling snapping the air, Kallum's dark energy presses against me. I can sense his fury crackling the charged atmosphere stronger than the gathering storm.

I take a step away from Alister as a flash of lightning flickers across the dense cloud cover over the sky. A low rumble of thunder follows in warning.

When I don't respond, Alister nods solemnly. "Look, I don't care whose payroll you're on," he says. "This is my crime scene, and an overworked profiler isn't touching my—"

"She's leaving." Kallum moves into my periphery like a dark shadow. "I'll behave myself for a few hours without supervision."

His words are delivered to Agent Alister with the hard edge of malice laced beneath his quip.

I expel an audible breath at the rise of testosterone as I glance between the two of them. Without a word, I shift my bag strap higher and turn to head off down the boardwalk, leaving the alpha males to their own primitive devices.

As I descend the steps, I pass a woman covered in a Tyvek suit, presumably the medical examiner here to remove the victim.

"We still need to talk."

I'm almost to my rental, and don't stop walking. "We did talk," I say to Kallum, digging out my keys and clicking the fob to unlock the car. I pop the trunk and unload my gear, trying hard to ignore his demanding presence.

Rain pelts the roof of the car. I feel the cool drops on my face. Another roll of thunder travels through the marsh. As I glance up, Kallum is standing beside the driver-side door, hands deep in his pockets.

Agent Hernandez stands behind him at a distance, effectively giving us privacy, though I see his eyes lift to keep track of his charge.

"Please move away from the door," I say.

Kallum's drawn features soften at the weariness in my tone. Or maybe it's the *please*. I'm too drained by him to keep my fight strong for much longer.

"You think I did this," he says, inclining his head in the direction of the wetland crime scene.

Folding my arms over my chest, I stare at him and really try to comprehend how he can deny what is obvious. How does he lie so effortlessly? Does he believe his own lies?

"It doesn't matter what I think," I say. "It matters what the evidence will prove. Now, move the hell out of my way."

Kallum's gaze falls to my crossed arms, to the sliver of skin exposing the rope burn around my wrist. The visceral memory of his touch detonates inside my chest with a resounding shiver.

I reach out and touch the side of the car, grounding myself. "God, Kallum. Just...please go."

He moves closer and clasps my neck, his fingers braced along my nape as his thumb delicately skims the bruises. I swallow hard against his touch, unable to free the trapped breath, until he finally releases me and steps aside.

"I need you to stay inside your room at the hotel," he says. "Don't leave, Halen."

I pull the door open and slip behind the wheel. "I'm the last person on this planet who is concerned with what you need."

He glances down at the GPS monitor strapped to his ankle, his features strained.

“Just so you know,” I say, hand gripped to the handle, “I’ve cataloged every square inch of that scene. I’ll know if anything is altered, which could clue me in on a piece of important evidence, so I’m almost hoping you have the audacity to try.”

I slam the car door shut and key the ignition. Putting the car in Reverse, I back out of the parking spot and refrain from glancing in the rearview mirror as I drive away from Kallum.

There’s a monster that feeds off pain, and his beautiful, disarming eyes look right into me, down to the rawest truth of my grief.

The more vulnerable I become, the deeper my daemon slithers. If I can’t escape him, he won’t stop until he consumes all of me.

IN THE FLICKER

KALLUM

Gray storm clouds hang over Hollow's Row like a dark omen, forecasting bad and violent things to come. The cumulus billows of gas are the deceptive calm gathering before the storm, the harbinger of death and doom.

A bit dramatic, I admit—but I enjoy the play on words.

I watch the swollen clouds drift low in the sky as I impatiently wait across a tweed field of tall reed grass. I sink my hands deep into my pockets and lean my shoulder against the gnarled bark of a marsh tree. Agent Hernandez lingers off to the side, texting on his phone.

A dense charge pulses in the air before the lightning strike.

I remove my hands and let them hang at my sides, detecting the energy rolling through the openness as the following rumble of thunder builds into a chorus.

The moment she appears in my line of sight, lightning flickers in the dark clouds. My blood electrifies, a current webbing my veins beneath my flesh to mimic the pulsing clouds.

In that flash, I see what I've been searching for my whole life.

Conrad wrote: *We live in the flicker. A running blaze on a plain, a flash of lightning in the clouds.*

That blink of a moment.

Our existence is that fleeting.

I hold my breath, counting the seconds between, waiting for the thunder to bring her closer. My muse of heartbreak, the sweetest epiphany. If I had an infinite number of lifetimes, it still wouldn't be enough. She's all that I want, all that I crave, and I'm desperate to make us last longer than an ephemeral flicker in time.

Halen reaches me before another streak of light cracks the sky. She glances

up, her beautiful face highlighted by the flare, then meets my gaze with a kernel of hesitation in those silvery eyes, the hue tinting to match the storm.

“You look striking.” I wink.

I reach out to sweep the shock of white from her eyes, and Halen pulls away. She gathers her long layers of dark brown hair in a low ponytail and wraps it with an elastic band.

“So cruel,” I tease.

“Are we ready?” She directs the question to the agent.

Since locating the missing victims is the highest priority, Halen has taken it upon herself—and me—to scour Leroy Landry’s home for any clues on the main suspect responsible for ritualizing body parts in the marshland.

Hernandez pockets his phone and nods to the black SUV.

As we walk toward the vehicle, I wait for him to climb in, then say, “You won’t find the victims by searching Landry’s house.”

“You’re so sure of that.” She turns her head and looks up to assess me closely. “We could skip all this bullshit right now if you want to tell me where they are, Kallum.”

I release a slow breath, leashing the destructive urge to drag her into the marsh and remind her how much she loves my touch. “Not that I don’t enjoy your scathing retorts—” I palm her waist and bring her close “—but I’m absolutely done with the *bullshit*. I’m no longer holding back with you, little Halen.”

She digs an elbow into my ribs, but I hold on tighter, dropping my mouth near her ear. “If Alister touches you again, I’ll flay his skin from his tendons and carve my initials in his bones.”

Halen stills at my side, whatever snappy comeback she may have stalled on her tongue as I open the SUV door for her. She hesitates, her wary gaze hung on mine, before she hoists herself up into the seat. I shut the door and seat myself in the backseat behind her.

Here’s the truth of it: I’ll take her hatred and anger, because this is difficult

for her, coming to terms with reality after all that she's suffered. Losing her memory is just more salt rubbed into the open wound of her grief.

If she wants to use me as a punching bag, I'll take the abuse. Hell, I'll savor every delicious second of her sweet pain.

However much time she needs to logically sort through her confusion, for her, I can even be patient. I've proven as much.

But I'm not her obedient little lapdog.

I won't let anyone come between us ever again.

Not even her.

The drone of the windshield wipers fills the interior as Hernandez takes the quickest route according to the navigation. Even though it's been proven that Landry was not the Overman, but rather a pawn likely used by the actual perpetrator, the feds are still looking at him in connection to the victims.

We drive down a gravel road and come up on a massive mansion. The monstrosity is just as the locals described: ancient and creepy. Nearly every facet of the gothic revival home is original architecture. I appreciate the ornate windows with embellished tracery. Yet I doubt the elements have been left untouched on purpose. This home has suffered neglect.

A thick ribbon of crime-scene tape wraps the yard perimeter and extends around a huge porch. Dead potted plants line the entrance as we near the front door.

Halen drapes her bag strap over her neck, then proceeds to glove her hands. She holds out a pair of disposable latex gloves to me, and I take deviant delight in tracing my finger over the chafed rope burn on her wrist.

Too soon, she pulls away and enters the house.

I stand at the entrance, inhaling the lingering scent of her ylang-ylang and clove, whetting my appetite with a hit of her fear.

Then I step over the threshold.

Not only was Landry a recluse—the locals dubbing him the hermit—he was a

hoarding recluse. Stacks of old, musty newspapers tower along one wall. Magazines against another. Miscellaneous mail and papers scatter every available section of the hardwood floor that some heap of junk isn't taking space.

Buried beneath the mounds of garbage are antique furnishings. The sprawling entryway is paneled in deep mahogany, and gothic arches frame the hallways. Moving farther into the interior, the expansive main room opens up to two ascending staircases, where towering stained glass windows reach toward a cathedral ceiling.

I can imagine the pride that once went into this home. The old money, too. Then the unfortunate decay that took root with the newest owner.

A hit of nostalgia creeps into my bones, the structure reminiscent of the home where I was raised. Home is a stretch. It had walls and furniture and old money, too—even the decay.

I lift my foot and kick a tacky leaf of paper from my boot heel, watching a bug skitter beneath another heap.

“Oh, my god,” Halen says. “There’s no way the task force could process all this. It’s impossible.”

They likely only searched long enough to uncover the proof needed to make Landry as the prime suspect. A report which noted the wine-making apparatus in the cellar, and the esoteric tomes along with a wide collection of philosophy in the library.

“Our horned hunter makes Dr. Torres look like a tidy little neat-freak,” I say. “Which doesn’t fit your profile at all.”

The person who painstakingly measured each dissected eye to display the organs on marsh trees is obsessed with order and exactness. This is the first thing I deduced when I saw the ritual crime scene.

Halen turns incensed eyes on me. “And just what happened to Dr. Torres?” she demands. “I heard he’s been admitted to his own hospital for psychiatric care.”

I glance back at Hernandez picking through a pile of comic books. Then I

take a step toward Halen, watching her slight frame tense. “I have never harmed the good doctor,” I tell her honestly.

She shakes her head, appall evident in her pretty features. “You’re lying—”

I place a finger over her mouth, stopping her words. Shock prevents her from pushing me away as she stares up at me, silence fueling the anticipation between us.

I keep my finger pressed to her mouth a beat longer, then gently drag it down, letting the pad taste the softness of her lips. “As much as you enjoy making me your devil, I didn’t have to hurt him,” I say, my tone urging her to hear the truth. “Nietzsche set the bar high for mad genius, but sadly for Torres, he’s just plain-old mad.”

She blinks, gauging me through the thick fringe of her lashes, before she takes a deliberate step backward. I observe the hard swallow that drags enticingly along her neck. My gaze settles on the hollow of her throat, where the diamond from her engagement ring used to rest.

She never put the necklace back on.

“No,” she says, nodding her reply. “You don’t lie, Kallum. You just twist the truth until it’s no longer recognizable as such.”

Slipping the glove onto my hand over the bandage, I say, “That’s your philosophy, sweetness.” I push in close to tower over her. “Fortunately, my dissertation was on settling arguments, and I love to prove myself right.”

I sidestep her, in search of the one room in this dilapidated heap that may garner any real truth.

Following the rows of unopened boxes and trash, I locate the library and roll the doors open to expose an opulent room—the only room untouched by the owner’s mental illness. There is no junk or clutter here. The mahogany bookcases are full of timeworn books and some newer editions.

An intricately carved wood desk is centrally located in the room, with a globe and mapping tools. A large herringbone bricked fireplace takes up one corner, a leather reading chair neatly positioned next to the raised hearth.

Halen enters, and I feel her shiver of excitement roll under my skin.

As I walk alongside the inlaid bookcase, I probe at the glove, outlining the ring on my thumb. I reach a row of leather-bound volumes and pause to read the spines.

“Don’t touch—”

Too late to heed her warning, I pull a book from the stack. “This world has been around longer than your laws. Why try to live by them and their rules? In time, they’ll only change again. So take what you want from this life, because it only gives you a small window to choose.” I trek to the desk and crack the musty book open. “Do we really have time to wait for the task force to tag it for processing?”

Her dainty brows knit together, and I love witnessing her moral battle. She breaks rules all the time. Her methods are questionable. Yet she’s trying so hard to walk the straight and narrow when it comes to me, wary of making a mistake. I wonder whose actions she’s more worried over: mine or hers.

Such a dilemma.

I have no ethical quandary when it comes to her.

I’ll do anything.

“I’ve only seen one other first edition at an exhibition in London,” I say as I remove my glove to flip the pages. “A rare book collection from a Rutgers professor.”

Halen rushes the table. “You can’t touch it like that,” she scolds.

“Gloves are far more damaging to the aged pages than the oils on our skin,” I say.

She huffs a derisive breath. “I’m not concerned about damaging the book. Your fingerprints are now all over it.”

A smile tugs at my mouth. “Just push it to the back of the stacks,” I say, flipping a page. “They’ll never find it.”

I can feel her weighty stare on me, scrutinizing my every word.

“Isn’t the task force required to submit fingerprints to be excluded from crime scenes?” I ask.

Her mouth twists. “Yes, but it’s a stretch to include you as part of the task force.”

I touch my chest in mock offense. “The way you wound me, little Halen.”

She lowers her gaze to look at the book. “What is that?”

Holding a page mid-flip, I say, “Come around here.”

After a tentative beat, she moves to my side of the desk, though she keeps a good two feet between us. “Anything of importance to the case?”

“I won’t bite.” I eye the distance between us. “Hard.” At her refusal, I hook my finger through the beltloop of her jeans and drag her to my side.

“Kallum—”

“Aleister Crowley’s magnum opus on magick.” I point to a verse under a unicursal hexagram, which Crowley incorporated from Bruno’s figure of love. “Every intentional act is a magickal act,” I read aloud.

“Sounds remarkably similar to Nietzsche’s Will to Power,” she says.

“Good girl.” I cast an appreciative glance at her, my viscera abuzz at her nearness. Halen likes to accuse me of deceptive methods, twisting the truth, yet she has her own little tactics she employs. She’s far more intellectual and insightful than what she allows others to see.

“Crowley more than idolized Nietzsche, he declared him a profit,” I say, “but he also proclaimed himself ‘the wickedest man in the world’ and the Great Beast six-six-six. So take his eccentric declarations with a grain of salt.”

“Stimulating,” she remarks. “Are you intentionally stalling this investigation?” She glances at the shelves higher up along the walls. “I know this library is your wet dream, Kallum, but we’re here to search out any link to the victims.”

A dark thrill courses through my blood. “Oh, sweetness. I’ll swipe these books to the floor without a fucking thought if you want to put this desk to

better use.” I pat the mahogany surface in challenge.

Her gaze clashes with mine, and I love the way she can’t repress the little quake rolling through her body. A crooked smile carves my mouth. “Crowley was scandalously known for his practice of sex magick,” I say. “He classified the act of sex as the most powerful expression of our will, the most potent energy source.”

Despite my desire to explore that theory this very second, I’d have to politely disagree with the master on this one. Blood is the most potent medium.

My gaze slips to Halen’s shoulder, where my teeth imprint her flesh. During our ritual, I employed a combination of mediums and expressions—blood, sex, saliva, semen—to charge a new sigil and bring her back.

The ire I see brimming in her ethereal features states how utterly I failed. “Kallum...stop,” she warns.

A deviant thought creeps from the abyss, whispering that blood sacrifice is the most concentrated form of black magick, and may be the only way to unblock her memory.

I turn my gaze back onto the book. “As you wish.”

The storm outside releases a torrent against the windows. The roaring downpour drowns out the frantic beat of my heart as Halen starts to ease away. I link my finger through that same beltloop to prevent her escape.

She casts a pointed look at my hand, then her gaze narrows on me like a devious little sprite. “Most of your power lies in intimidation.” Bravely, she steps into me. Her thighs become flush with mine, her gloved palms seek the hard plane of my chest. “But I think some of it is an act. I think...” She peels a glove off and slips a finger up to my neck, where she gingerly traces the ink, making me spellbound by her. “I think it’s a form of misdirection. One of your tricks.”

“Is that so.” My nostrils flare, her sweet scent torturously, dangerously close to pushing me over the edge. “I’m not opposed to you testing your theory, sweetness.” I lower my mouth close to hers, tasting her uneven breaths. “Say the word, and I’ll shred these musty old books while I fuck you senseless on top of them.”

She licks her lips, a goddamn taunt, and I hungrily follow the path of her tongue with a depraved craving that nearly sends me to my knees.

The dare hangs in the splinter of air between us. I know what she's doing, but if my little profiler thinks she can psych me out by coming on strong, she'll be *sorely* mistaken.

"I don't rattle," I say, gripping the beltloop tighter. "Hurt me or fuck me, Halen, but don't use lame psychology tactics. It's beneath you."

I'm hit with a dose of her saccharine fear. Whatever she glimpses in my expression causes her to break away. My jaw sets hard. Disappointment is a fist to my guts.

"I'm tired of games," she says, a hint of exhaustion deflating her shoulders.

"Then don't play them."

"I just want to find them."

"We will."

She searches my features, trying to suss out the truth. With a slow nod, she looks again at the bookshelves high on the wall. "This room didn't belong to Landry," she says, changing the topic as if the realization suddenly comes to her.

Inhaling a deep breath, I rub the back of my neck, my blood still a deafening roar inside my ears, my cock straining painfully against the closure of my slacks. I shamelessly reach down and adjust myself, loving how a pretty pink hue tinges her face at my crass act.

"You're right. It's too neat and organized." I fold my arms across my chest. "And indexed. To a frightening degree. Almost an OCD-like quality." I watch Halen move toward one of the bookcase ladders. "Where better to meditate for years in solitude than a private library. Like your own personal cave. Just like Zarathustra."

"You failed to mention that before," she says, her tone admonishing.

She fails to see how clearly she comes to insights when she gives in to us, freeing herself of other constraints. "The mansion is a hoarder's den. The

library isn't. I felt it was obvious."

"How many years did Zarathustra meditate in his cave, ten?" she says, referring to Nietzsche's allegory, the one the Overman suspect is using as a guide to ascend to a god-like state of consciousness.

"Yes," I respond. "Then he descended his mountain to bring the gift of the Overman to the people." As I say it, I think about a lecture I once gave, where I lambasted Nietzsche and Jung for their blatant lifting of the shaman Primal Man. Wellington was there, my first candid interaction with him.

"A decade is a long time," Halen says, drawing my attention. "Landry was never seen in town. No one talked to him, or communicated with him. If someone else was living in this mansion with him, would anyone know?"

"Most people don't have the patience and discipline to meditate and study for a decade. I think you'll find your Overman wannabe descended the mansion library much sooner."

She nods absently, distracted. "Still, if the perpetrator spent any length of time here, then there has to be something left behind in this room." She climbs onto the bookcase ladder.

I seat myself on the desk and pull my knee up, much more interested in Halen's jean-clad ass as she ascends the ladder than the books. "It's also obvious that Landry knew the perpetrator well. Landry had money, enough resources to provide the suspect with all this. A gift to someone he values, respects. They were probably close."

She nudges the rolling ladder to the side to search a shelf. "Close like family? The background check on him turned up an estranged brother living in another state. He has no other living relatives."

"Blood doesn't always make family," I say, suppressing an unwanted memory from far too long ago.

She casts a curious glance down at me, as if I've said something insightful.

"Don't read into that, Dr. St. James. You know even a recluse needs an anchor, some form of human contact."

She arches an accusatory eyebrow before she returns to her hunt.

“Landry was a sacrifice,” I say. When the perpetrator injected him with hemlock, he set Landry up to be the prime suspect. Conveniently, a dead one who couldn’t talk. “He was maybe even a willing one.”

“I considered that,” she says. “The perpetrator could have manipulated Landry to attack us and take the fall. With all this—” she fans a hand across the books “—it’s likely Landry was devoted to the perp’s belief system. He believed in a higher purpose, one he was willing to sacrifice his life for.”

She’s so fucking close, the need burns underneath my sinew, itching my bones. So close...yet she still can’t see the most obvious connection.

“Landry could’ve also known something about the perp, something incriminating. Something this person didn’t want to get out in the event they were caught.”

“Other than their identity?” she asks.

I shrug. “Every villain has their motive, sweet little Halen. Usually a virtuous one.”

While Halen seeks hidden clues, I try to curb my growing impatience. I slam the red leather book closed and set it aside, my wandering attention drawn to other objects on the desk.

“Back in the eighteenth century, there was a British secret society called the Hellfire Club,” I say, angling a map my way. “Their motto was: Do what thou will. Another take on the Will to Power.” I trace a finger over the map of the town, following creeks through the marshland and beyond. “The society met in caves. The Hellfire Caves. Rumors sparked that it was where the members offered sacrifices to Bacchus, the Roman equivalent of Dionysus. The society practiced black magic, pagan and satanic rituals, orgies.”

She peeks down at me from the top rung. “Does this have a point, Kallum?”

I smile at the way she says my name so casually when she’s distracted. “You never know what tidbit will be useful.”

“Speaking of useless information...” she says, making me chuckle. She uses

her foot to roll the ladder and reposition herself. “You said at the hunting grounds that the killer chose his victim as a scapegoat. Explain.”

I rub my palms together, giving the healing, irritated cuts much needed friction. Halen accepts the truth better when she comes to her own conclusions. “What are you looking for?”

She shakes her head. “Are you going to explain what you meant back there?”

“No. Not until you tell me something first.” I push off the desk. “Why are you here with me, alone, if you truly believe I’m capable of a heinous act like the one at the hunting grounds.”

“We’re not alone. Agent Hernandez is here.” She slides a section of books aside as she plunders the top shelf. “Are you avoiding my question because you don’t actually have a theory?”

I stalk closer to the bookcase. “Are you avoiding mine because you don’t either?”

She wants me to be the killer. Locking me away forever would be so much easier for her. No conflicting feelings to confront, no dark little cravings to provoke her. If she had any evidence at all, or even a sound theory about the Harbinger crime scene, I wouldn’t be here right now.

The atmosphere of the library charges, the rain pelting the stained-glass windows to further the tense silence.

“What are you really looking for here, Halen?”

Her gaze finds mine. “The murder weapon.”

I narrow my gaze on her. “If I was the killer, I wouldn’t plant the evidence to damn me in the one place where authorities would search.”

“Then where did you plant it?” She angles her body so she can glare down at me. “There wasn’t much time, so did you stash it somewhere close to the crime scene?”

Her accusation hangs in the current snapping between us as we lock gazes.

The carving knife. The one I used during the ritual to slash my palms. On

reflex, my hands curl into fists to reopen the wounds, the fresh pain satisfying.

She thinks the knife was used to kill and sever the head of the victim. She's not here to search for that weapon. She's here to force a confession from me.

"You're quite adept at manipulation tactics yourself, little Halen."

"You didn't answer my question."

"It's an insulting question."

"What's insulting is—" Her words break off as she turns and tries to reposition her grip.

I see the moment the ladder shifts, and she loses balance.

Halen's foot slips from the rung. She curses as she futilely grasps at the rail. I rush to reach her in time, jamming my foot on the bottom rung to stop the ladder just as I catch her, curling her lithe body into mine.

For a stunned moment, she doesn't fight me. Her hair has fallen free of the band to slip over the side of her face. Giving in to the fierce demand, I sweep the defiant streak of white behind her ear.

Drawn into the gravity of her gaze, I trail the backs of my fingers down her neck, where she's tried to conceal the bruises beneath a layer of makeup in an attempt to keep me from them. Then I drift farther down, across the bite mark on her shoulder, over the ink on her forearm she hides under her clothes, the bruises and rope burn on her wrist, not stopping until I reach her thigh.

She tenses in my arms as I dip my hand between her legs.

"Kallum..." She places her hand over mine.

Her rioting emotions quicken her pulse, her uncertainty creased between her eyebrows. I want to smooth the divot away. I want to claim the breaths escaping her parted mouth, to taste the burn of her shattered restraint.

Any semblance of control I maintained was crushed the moment I felt her body against mine, and I brazenly slide my hand higher and touch the sigil I carved in her inner thigh. Even through her jeans, through the blood-stained

bandage muting my senses, I feel the mark sealing us together.

There's no escape for me.

I need her to remember.

Her eyes close half-mast as I graze my thumb over her thigh. "Why did you stop wearing it?"

The pressure of her hand leaves mine as she presses her fingertips to the bare notch beneath her throat. My gaze stays locked on hers, willing the truth from her lips.

She swallows, then: "I can't..." A chime from her phone interrupts the moment. "Put me down," she demands.

Instead, with a groan, I shift her body in my arms, forcing her legs to wrap around my hips. Then I seat her ass on the ladder rung. Reaching around her, I fetch the device from her back pocket and bring it between us.

She reaches for the phone, but I tighten my grip on it. "First, one truthful answer."

"This isn't a game."

"I was never under any delusion that it was."

She glares at me before she glances at the phone. "When we...were together," she says, her voice a throaty rasp. "I can't pretend it wasn't real. Wearing Jackson's diamond would feel like a betrayal."

"To him, or to me?"

Her eyes spear me as the phone continues to ring. "I gave you my answer."

I study her delicate features, feeling the misery beneath her words. I place the phone in her hand.

She glances at the screen, then answers the call. "Devyn, what's going on?"

Her eyes drill into mine as I push in between her thighs, unashamed as I'm gifted with the slightest hitch in her voice. A smile slants my mouth.

I catch pieces of Devyn's call in the still silence of the library. A few distinct words: Evidence. Crime scene. Questioning.

"No, no one else," Halen says.

My hackles raise as Halen places her hand to my chest. I'm not sure if she's attempting to push me away or ground herself to me for comfort.

"Okay," Halen says, nodding, her gaze darting to the doors of the library. "I'm on my way."

As she ends the call, I anchor my hands to her waist. "What did you find at the scene?"

Anxiously, she fixes her hair, tucking the loose strands into the elastic. "Let me go, Kallum." When I don't, she expels a lengthy breath. "Now—"

I clasp her hips and lift her off the ladder, setting her feet to the hardwood. I release her, but only so I can angle her face up toward mine. In silent petition, I demand an answer.

Halen stares up at me with intense liquid eyes. "My DNA turned up at the Harbinger crime scene," she says. "I'm being brought in for questioning."

She breaks my hold and shoves past me, ripping her gloves off and tossing them to the floor.

"Questioning for what? Halen, stop—"

"You win, Kallum. Revenge is all yours."

STORM IN HIS EYES

HALEN

The storm clouds have broken against the backdrop of encroaching night. The torrent beats the earth in relentless percussion to match the flood of emotions assaulting me.

I stand under the covered porch, staring out into the haze of sheeting gray. The heavy rain washes away all color and detail, the line between black and white blurred. “Shit,” I breathe.

Devyn’s call was a curtesy, a polite warning to be prepared. The evidence I bagged at the scene was identified as a base yarn from a strand of rope. Transfer on the fibers was conclusively matched to the rope used to bind my wrists at the ritual site. Namely, the wine and blood found in the fibers.

The rope directly implicates me.

My blood, my DNA, is on that piece of evidence.

I could hear the concern in her voice when she tried to give me a way out: *“Was it possible that anyone else could’ve been there with you?”*

Yes—one vain philosophy professor who gets under my skin.

Yet there’s no verifiable proof that Kallum was at the ritual scene, that he’s the one who then went to the hunting grounds—that he’s the Harbinger killer.

I made it all disappear.

Any of his DNA recovered on the rope can be explained. During questioning, I admitted Kallum helped me prepare for the ritual; his blood was all over my body.

I fell right into his trap.

The question of how that strand of rope got on the victim is enough for Agent Alister to bar me from the crime scene. Whether it’s an allegation of carelessness on my part, or an accusation far worse...

I’m already suspect in my methods. I was fired from CrimeTech for those

methods. Before I was assigned this case, I was issued a warning. The personal details that negatively impacted my ability to do my job will become reasons, *triggers*. Any hired expert could take the stand and claim, with a clear conscience, that it's within reason I could commit this crime.

Regardless of the outcome, with an accusation that damning, my professional career would be over.

I palm my forehead as the barometric pressure drums at my temples, an ache building behind my eyes. I hear footsteps on the porch behind me.

Agent Hernandez hovers at the edge of my periphery. "We should wait out the storm," he suggests.

His observation feels loaded with more than one meaning. "That'd be smart." I wait for him to return inside before I step off the porch into the torrential downpour.

I'm drenched before I reach the end of the walkway. Cold rain soaks my thermal and jeans, dousing some of the anger boiling my blood. I cross my arms and squint against the thick beads pelting my face.

"Halen—"

My eyes close briefly at the sound of Kallum's voice. That cord tethered to him snaps taut, and I have to physically will my feet to keep moving.

He's the storm that won't pass.

The heavy beat of his footfalls brings him closer. I don't stop.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"I'm not waiting for Agent Alister to send a detail after me. I'm taking myself in."

"Make him wait." He matches my fast pace easily. "You can't walk all the way back into town in the storm."

"I can do whatever I want. At least for right now, while I'm still free to do so."

"Your fucking logic is going to get you killed," he says, the accusation in his

voice a near growl. “If you don’t get back inside the house, I’ll toss you over my shoulder and carry you back.”

I laugh; I can’t help it. “You don’t know me. You have no idea how *illogical* I can be.” I’ve proven as much during this whole case. “I swear, you’re destruction incarnate. Dr. Stoll. Dr. Torres... You can simply look at someone, and their whole world implodes.”

Beneath my fury, I know damn well my life was destroyed before Kallum Locke strode into my world. But before him, I might have had a chance to repair the damage.

“It’s true that we embody the violence of the stars,” he says, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. The darkness grows denser the farther we head down the gravel road. “But destruction isn’t an end, it’s a beginning.”

“Christ, you don’t stop,” I mutter, my teeth chattering from the chilly, wet air. “Maybe I deserve this.”

Although I wasn’t found at fault for the car accident that took Jackson’s life, I was the one driving. I wanted to be punished. I begged the universe to punish me. And it has finally answered.

I stumble over a pothole. Kallum reaches out to catch my arm, but I snatch it away and walk faster.

“The ancient Greeks thought of Apollo as the superior god, their god of rational thought,” he continues, undeterred. “But when a satyr of Dionysus challenged Apollo in a competition, he had him flayed alive for his audacity.”

I hug my midsection, uselessly trying to shelter my body from the rain. “What am I supposed to glean here, Kallum.”

“That it’s not our logic and reason which stops us from committing such monstrous acts.”

My steps falter. Turning to face him, I stare at him through the barrage of rain.

“Are you insane?” I ask him outright. “Are you really, Kallum. Because...I don’t know if you’re crazy or a genius, or if it’s all an act. At this point, I’m

seriously questioning my ability to discern the difference.”

A crooked smile tips his mouth. He takes a step toward me, and I take a reflexive step back. “I’m crazy for you.” His gaze drifts over my body, deliberately taking in my soaked shirt. “Fucking certifiable. Capable of the most vile, monstrous acts.”

I feel exposed under his heated stare. I tighten my arms around my waist and blink the droplets from my lashes. “Then confess them.”

He licks the rain from his lips, his gaze locked with mine. His silence is louder than the storm.

I nod knowingly. “No way to lie if you say nothing at all.”

Kallum smooths his wet hair back. “Tagore said it best. The small truth has words which are clear; the great truth has great silence.”

“And someone important once said... Truth is the object of philosophy, but not always the philosopher.”

His smirk is devilish. “Did you google that just for me?”

“Maybe,” I admit, and stare down at a puddle deepening around my boots. “I didn’t kill Detective Emmons’ brother,” I say suddenly.

“I know,” Kallum says. “Neither did I.”

I swallow hard as I look up to meet his eyes. “I didn’t kill Professor Wellington.”

He watches me closely, his wet hair pitch-black, the strands dripping rivulets of rain down the beautiful contours of his face. “I didn’t kill Wellington,” he finally says.

The whole truth hovers on a tenuous heartbeat. I don’t breathe. “I didn’t—”

“This isn’t a confessional,” he interrupts. “I told you, when the case is closed, I’ll give you all the answers you seek. I keep my word. But that deal has a stipulation.”

I suck in a breath. “To trust your methods. Right. The ones that lured me into a sex ritual.” My face flushes despite the frigid air, my heart pounds my ribs

like the rhythmic drumming slithering up from my memory.

A dark flame ignites behind Kallum's gaze. "But you got one of your answers, didn't you."

"What I got was fired from my job," I snap.

He shrugs unapologetically. "You hated that job."

Indignation rears hot and fierce. "I'm going to go clear my name, then beg Alister to let me stay on the task force so I can locate the victims and put an end to this madness."

Kallum's features harden at the mention of the agent. A rumble of thunder builds in the distance. I turn and start down the road.

"Then what?" he asks, a hard dare edged around his words. "Reopen the Cambridge case? Turn yourself in to be investigated? There are better, more satisfying ways to uncover your answers, sweetness."

A flash of the ritual steals across my vision, snatching the breath from my lungs. Kallum's hand around my throat, his kiss burning through me. The sigil he carved on my thigh pulses at the memory.

"You better get back to Agent Hernandez," I warn without slowing my pace. "Rain can weaken the signal to the ankle monitor."

"You want me to explain the scapegoat theory for the Harbinger crime scene." He effectively switches tactics. "I can't do that if you don't trust me, Halen."

I huff a derisive laugh. "You mean, trust the monster who used a high-profile case to leverage his revenge?"

"Here you are using rational deduction to your detriment once again." He stomps through a puddle and curses. "Dammit. Look at me, Halen."

I whirl around. "Fine. Let's break it down," I say. "No more games. No more manipulation. No more existential meanderings or vague philosophical quotes. Just cold, hard facts."

He waits for me to continue, his black suit soaked, making him blend into the

darkening night. The falling rain frames his silhouette with an unearthly glow, the hazy stars his own personal backdrop. I hate the fiery ache that claws at my chest at the beautiful sight of him.

“You used the case, people, actual *victims* to get me to perform a ritual under the guise of solving a crime. All so you could fuck me. To play some warped mind game with me. But that wasn’t enough.”

“I’m flattered you think I’m that diabolical.”

“It wasn’t enough to use the victims as a piece on your gameboard, but you had to frame me in the process. You planted the rope evidence at the crime scene. And I let you do it. I gave you the means to hurt me.” I bite down on my lip hard. “You should’ve just stabbed me, Kallum.”

Anger tightens his jaw. “You have it all figured out.”

I shrug a shoulder. “It’s not hard to put together.”

He swipes his tongue over his bottom lip, a dangerous glint flashing amid the flinty shadows of his eyes. “Then I’m about to make your pretty little head spin.”

I plant my hands on my hips, thoroughly drenched, desperate for the way he makes me feel to turn as numb as my frozen skin.

“You won’t be charged with any murder,” he says, not denying any of my other accusations. “After you reported Landry’s attack, you were taken to the hospital. You couldn’t have killed anyone and staged a crime scene, Halen. You’re *not* the one being framed.”

“Then who the hell is being framed here?” I demand. I blink past the rain, my thoughts a tangled web Kallum has spun around me, sank his fangs into me so deeply, I almost crave the pain. At least that I know I can handle.

“The scapegoat,” he says.

I groan my frustration. “Alibi or not, my reputation will be damaged. *More*. Best case scenario, Alister will accuse me of contaminating a crime scene.” A pang of guilt resonates in my chest. “Shit. Maybe I did. I don’t know. I could’ve transferred fibers from my bag, from my tools.”

“You didn’t contaminate the scene.”

The way he says this, so assuredly, drives a sliver of apprehension beneath my ribs.

“But your allegations of me?” He takes a determined step forward. “Revenge is a weak motive. I could’ve walked out of Briar any time I wanted. Dr. Torres wouldn’t have been difficult to manipulate to that end. My very expensive lawyer could’ve appealed. Hell, I have enough money and connections to have you fired from every future position—”

“That’s not how your twisted mind works—”

“I stayed there because of you. I waited patiently for *you*.”

“So you could fuck me, or fuck me over? Or maybe fucking me was just the icing on your payback cake.”

His hand fists at his side. “I love fucking you, Halen. I’ll fuck you ten different dirty, demeaning ways right now that will make you scream my name and plead to let you come. But sex doesn’t start with the act itself.” He takes another deliberate step toward me. “It’s heated glances and charged near touches. It’s cruel words and fiery tempers. It’s instant chemical attraction across a quad when you make that first real connection, when you feel the center of gravity shift...and you know nothing will ever be the same again.”

I swallow past the burning ache in my throat, my breath too ragged to voice any denial.

Kallum stops, keeping a safe distance between us. “We’ve been making love since day one.”

I hate the way my body reacts to his claim, the way my blood burns my veins, my bones ache as if I’m fighting an unrelenting current pulling me toward him.

“So don’t cheapen what I’ve sacrificed to prove myself to you, to keep you safe,” he says, his tone a solemn affirmation. “If you think I suffered six months in a mental institution for a piece of ass, then you’re the one who needs her head examined.”

I hold his intense gaze through the downpour. Racked with shivers, my lips numb and the weight of his words crushing me, I struggle to drag in a full breath.

“I want you,” he says, as relentless as the storm. “All of you. Your sexy as fuck body that drives me right out of my goddamn senses. Your intellectual mind, rational and logical to a frightening degree, but so fucking brilliant everyone else around you pales miserably by comparison. Your beautifully broken soul, so immersed in anguish it chokes me—” he swallows hard “—but I relish the pain. I’m begging for it, because the sweetest taste of you soothes the burn, and it’s fucking euphoric.”

He takes a final step, yet still leaves too many between us.

“And you can deny that you feel the same,” he says, his voice gravel, “but I don’t need a lame verbal profession. Because I can *feel* you, Halen. I can feel what you try to hide. I felt it deep inside you, buried under your skin, drowning in your emotions with such sweet pain, I wanted to carve my own fucking heart out.”

I’m trembling, shaking so fiercely my muscles are fire. The storm builds, the rain hammering down, unyielding, heightening my emotions until the dam threatens to crack.

The only thing separating me from him is the rain.

“Come here.”

Those two simple words commanded by Kallum do something dangerous to me. Every bruise and scrape and injury on my body comes alive, vibrating with a frenzied current.

Goddamn him. I wipe the rain from my face as I take measured steps to reach him, stopping once I’m close enough to feel the rain ricochet off his chest.

Kallum’s gaze stays on me as he tears the soaked bandages from his hands and tosses them to the ground. He then removes his suit jacket and drapes it around my shoulders. I shiver at the sudden embrace of his body heat, the way his fingers trace the back of my neck as he lifts my hair away from the collar. With one expert move, he snaps the hair band, bringing my drenched strands over my shoulders.

Before I can escape him, he has my face trapped between his palms. He tilts my gaze up, mercifully blocking the rain as he towers over me. The cuts on his palms are friction against my skin. The clashing blue and green of his heated gaze lures me in, and my traitorous heart riots in my chest to expose the effect he has on me.

“I love you in my jacket,” he says, a sly smile curling his mouth.

A memory of us in the university parking lot triggers with sudden fury. His jacket around me, the lampposts glowing behind him. A *false* memory, I correct myself, blinking the vision back into my subconscious. It’s the memory he planted during the ritual. It can’t be real—but even as I enforce this belief, I sense my conviction to trust my own mind crumbling beneath the feel of Kallum rubbing my arms to warm me.

When two different beliefs battle for dominance, cognitive dissonance is the resulting mental discomfort. Right now, I’m not mentally strong enough to hold two versions of Kallum: the one who I know is capable of atrocities, and the one sheltering me from the storm.

“I can’t do this, Kallum.” I turn my head, breaking away from his touch.

As if he knows I’m dangerously close to snapping, he drops his hands, sinks them into his pockets.

“Look. Just... Before you go in for questioning, I need you to think, Halen.” The urgent demand in his tone keeps me rooted. “You’re so obsessed with proving I’m your killer, it’s blinded you to one critical aspect.”

I pull his jacket tighter around me. “Are you going to make me play twenty questions to guess it?”

A lopsided smile breaks across his face, that fucking dimple squeezing my heart. “You told Alister there was only one difference between the Harbinger crime scenes, but there’s another. What is the other difference between them?”

“The letter,” I say instinctively. “The Harbinger never addressed his messages to anyone. But that’s not a deviation in method; that’s proof he’s devolving.” As I say this, the apprehension that I could be staring into the eyes of a devolving serial killer rears inside me.

Tentatively, Kallum removes his hand from his pocket and swipes his thumb across my cheek. The cool sensation of his ring sparks an ember beneath my skin. “We weren’t alone at the ritual site.”

Unease crawls along my spine. “I know. Landry was there. Right before he attacked us.”

“And someone else,” he says, his words dredging up the ominous feeling of eyes watching from the eerie darkness of the killing fields. “The person who injected Landry with hemlock.”

A hard shiver cloaks my body. With how fast-acting the poison was, they would’ve had to have been nearby to administer it—and to watch and make sure their plan worked.

“They know, Halen,” Kallum says, reading my anxiety. “About the Cambridge scene. What happened that night with Wellington. They heard everything we said out there.”

Panic is a vise crushing my rib cage. My heart constricts under the pressure.

“If for one second you remove me as your suspect,” he continues, “then who’s the person who could’ve staged the victims’ tongues and the Harbinger scene at the same time.”

I hold up a hand and move back, giving myself space to think. I mentally walk through the crime scene, retracing each step anew.

The impossible window of time is no longer impossible if that person staged both scenes. I was so focused on placing Kallum there, I overlooked the most obvious and logical explanation.

“The Overman,” I say aloud, lost in my racing thoughts.

Suddenly, the Harbinger’s letter has a very disturbing, ulterior message.

I see you. I have uncovered you.

“The letter was calling me out,” I say. “He *sees* me, has *uncovered* a secret that could hurt me.” Through the rain, I find Kallum’s eyes, gauging him closely.

After everything he just confessed... God, if he's ultimately behind this, then he's playing on a whole other twisted level.

When I first read the letter, I imagined Kallum had penned it; a threat to kill the victims.

I will eradicate your higher men one-by-one until you are fearless enough to face me.

"Why kill one of his own higher men?" I say. "That goes against his whole belief system." Yet he killed Landry the moment he dosed him with hemlock. If the offender wasn't one before, then he became a killer in that moment. "And then...why would he copycat the Harbinger killer..."

Kallum's jaw sets rigid, a muscle tics along his jawline. "To make you believe it was me."

A coldness sweeps through me, numbing me against the falling rain.

"Planting the rope at the scene wasn't for the techs to find," he says. "It was for you. You're the only one who can prove I wasn't in the hotel room, that I was at the scene. The Overman wants me out of the way, Halen."

I shake my head. "That still doesn't explain why he'd kill one of the victims. Especially when he needs them, *all* of them, for his rituals to ascend."

His eyes darken. "Because he found someone he wants more."

The implication hits me with a thunderous boom, the storm a deafening roar.

"He wants you, Halen," Kallum says, emphasizing his point. "So I'm not going anywhere. Even when the carving knife conveniently turns up with my DNA to force you to confess to Alister that I was there, I'm not leaving you alone." He sweeps the wet strand of white from my eye, gripping it between his inked fingers before he tucks it behind my ear. A forced smile touches his lips. "If you can't trust the person, trust their intent."

I drag in a shuddering breath, recalling how deeply I distrusted Kallum when first he said this to me. How I knew—sitting at that diner booth, staring into his clashing eyes as he held a steak knife—that I could never trust him, that he'd harm me the first opportunity that presented.

As I stare into his gaze now, there's an open sadness there, a dejection, that feels so genuine I can taste the melancholy infusing the damp air around him.

And I could fall. Right now. Let go of obligations and consequences and even sanity, and fall over the edge with Kallum. Tumble right down into his abyss, and be lost.

Just let go.

I can't lie to myself; a part of me wants to. That part of me which craves the surrender to oblivion that is promised in his frantic kisses and wild, feverish touches.

It's like begging for the sweet caress of death's kiss.

But another part of me, the one still desperately clinging to a life from my past, fears letting go of that final thread.

I'm not yet ready to be unraveled by Kallum.

"And your intent is to protect me," I say between quivering lips, the question implied. "The villain who endeavors to be a hero."

With a wry smile, he slips his tongue over the ridge of his teeth, then he braces the sides of my neck with both hands, his thumbs lifting my chin upward so all I can see is him.

"The villain only becomes such after he's lost that which he cannot live without," he says. "I'm in no need of a metamorphosis. I refuse to lose you."

His mouth hovers so near mine, all I have to do is lift onto my toes to press my lips to his. The dare hangs there between us as he waits for me to be the one to accept him, to trust him, to seal us together.

"So, little Halen," he says, his thumb featherlight as he brushes my cheek. "Will you trust me, or am I going to have to tie you down and force you to let me protect you."

I place my hands to his chest, and the chaotic beat of his heart pounds against my palms. "You won't be satisfied until I'm completely under your spell."

A devilish smile slants his mouth. "Satisfaction is an impossible demand," he

says. “But I can be contented right this second to taste the rain on your lips.”

As his gaze hungrily traps my mouth, I’m pulled into the charged current. His lips are the lightest brush over mine, the tenderest touch, yet the fire threatens to sear us to ash.

The flash of headlights steals into the moment.

I pull back a fraction to sever the connection as the SUV coasts up the gravel road. Another pair of lights appear from the other direction, illuminating the falling rain like beads of glass.

“Fucking hell,” Kallum mutters beneath his breath. He drives a hand through his wet hair.

I escape his embrace completely at the sound of a door opening.

“Halen, why the hell are you in the rain?”

Shielding my eyes, I turn toward the sound of Devyn’s voice. I open my mouth, willing some explanation, but simply shake my head. She waves a hand, motioning me over. I look at the SUV, then Kallum.

“Don’t leave,” he says, the plea reflected in his darkened eyes. “Stay with me.”

Two directions.

And I have to choose one.

“I can protect myself,” I say to him, then slip out of the beam of light. I don’t look back as I walk toward Devyn’s car.

Once I’m settled in the passenger seat, Devyn is mercifully silent as she backs her car around to start in the opposite direction of the gothic mansion. I wait three fierce heartbeats before I look up at the last second to see Kallum still standing in the beam of the SUV’s headlights.

I grip his suit jacket around me and then touch my fingers to my lips, the heady mix of sandalwood and rain a torturous scent that sears this moment into my memory.

THE CHASM BETWEEN

KALLUM

With a clear sky also comes a new form of clarity, one where the FBI task force realizes that a small town doesn't mean small thinking.

What remains of the storm travels through the killing fields as a biting wind, bringing the scent of foul death with it to match the bleak surroundings. The marsh waters rose with the downpour, requiring every member currently trekking through the wetland to wear wading boots.

I glance down at mine, a single thought spared for the ankle monitor presently submerged under the murky water. Agent Alister leads the way through the tall reeds, swatting the grass with zeal, as if the very marsh is at fault for the latest report.

At some time during the night, when the rain drove most people to take shelter, there was at least one busy bee buzzing around the fields up to no good.

As we come up on the second crime scene marked by tattered caution tape and a black willow tree, the only thing that remains of the hemlock grove are the bare canes. The poisonous patch has been stripped.

“Goddammit—” Alister shouts. He rounds on one of the federal agents nearest him. “I want eyes on every scene at all times.”

I glance to my right, tempted to make a bad joke to Halen about how the eyes were already on the first scene...but decide against it as Alister's tapered gaze falls on her in accusation.

“Since you like to traipse around crime scenes at night,” Alister says to Halen, tone patronizing, “do you know anything about this, Miss St. James?”

“If I had, I would have reported it right away,” she says.

Alister gauges her suspiciously before he instructs the task force to start processing the scene. I don't know what transpired between them during the interrogation last night, but she's not barred from the scene today.

When she chose to leave me standing in the rain like some cliché movie scene, I had to restrain myself from following after her. The next time she decides to be *fearless* and go off without me, I won't let a tracking monitor or the threat of being locked up hold me back.

It was late when I heard her enter her room. Then the sound of a chair being slipped under the doorknob. The chain lock on the conjoining door remains broken. It was a long, restless night where I fought the temptation to simply kick in the door.

Other than returning my jacket, Halen's been actively avoiding me all morning. As I watch her diligently setting up her gear, I decide I need something stronger than a lame icebreaker after my confession last night.

What does one do after one rips out their proverbial heart? Greeting card? Flowers?

I'd rather pin her down in the mud and fuck her hard and filthy until she's forced to break her silence. But since we have an audience, I settle for clandestine glances in a dirty marsh.

When a gust of wind sends another blast of decay through the reeds, I bury my head close to my jacket collar and inhale her sweet scent that still clings to the fabric. Hunger sparks anew and burns at the back of my throat.

My willpower won't last another night.

"Sir, you need to see this." One of the feds points past the grove.

While Alister follows the young agent around the barren stems toward a steep ravine cut through the marsh, Halen talks with Detective Riddick, who stepped up to take charge during Detective Emmons' absence.

"Christ," Alister says loud enough to draw others toward the site.

I return my focus to Halen. She's my only concern. My only reason to work this case is to keep her safe.

Her emotions are muddled today. Like the dark marsh waters blocking the GPS signal on my monitor, my link to her is dulled and muted. Frustration at not being able to read her tightens my jaw.

“Shouldn’t you be more interested in what’s going on over there than the cute forensic profiler?”

I slide a sideways glance at Devyn, feeling her rhetorical question hit the mark and doesn’t require a response.

“Yeah, I don’t blame you.” She sidles up beside me in her wading boots. “Halen is far more intriguing than a smelly marsh, but could you humor me anyway with your thoughts on what happened here?”

Halen laughs—she fucking *laughs*—at something Riddick says, and my back teeth grind. I look at Devyn, then direct a glance at the bare hemlock grove. “What do you want to know?”

She arches a perfect eyebrow in amusement. “I don’t know, you’re the expert. Possibly who did this and why? Let’s start there.”

Halen’s tinkling pixie laugh reaches my ears, and I curl a bandaged hand into a fist. The cuts are healed over, but the sting feels just as raw.

“Wow, they’re really hitting it off,” Devyn comments. “Riddick isn’t that funny. At all. He must be trying to impress her.”

“Well, you know what Nietzsche said.” At her curious expression, I say, “Most people are too stupid to act in their own interest.”

“That sounds dangerously like a threat,” she says, eyeing me, “or like someone who feels threatened.”

A humorless laugh escapes. “Touché. But what if I was referring to myself. Funny how easily philosophy can be misinterpreted.” I flash a smile, then wade through the reeds and lower to my haunches to get a closer look at the hemlock canes.

Using the cuff of my jacket, I nudge one of the white roots that was ripped out of the ground. “They were in a hurry.”

“Professor, a rookie can see the perp was in a hurry,” Devyn says, sarcasm sharp on her tongue.

A smirk tugs at my mouth. “Don’t the locals have their own expert consultant?” I lift my gaze to her. “You should probably get her thoughts.”

Like right now, before I tear Riddick's spine through his neck and toss it with the rest of the discarded vertebrae in the grove.

"She's a bit preoccupied right now. Besides, Halen seems to trust your opinion."

"She thinks I'm a killer." I rise to my feet. "Do you believe I'm a killer?"

"I don't know." She makes a point to look me up and down. "You don't look anything like a moth to me."

I smirk and dip low near her ear. "I hide my wings well."

"Locke, get over here," Alister commands from his perch on the ravine ridge.

This catches Halen's attention, and she makes brief eye contact with me.

Devyn glances between the two of us. "Just an observation, but I don't think it's your killer nature that frightens Halen."

I make a sound of amusement. "Show people a reflection of what they fear, and they will question their convictions."

Devyn lowers her notepad. "Thank you for the lesson, professor."

"Here's another," I say. "Whatever the offender has planned with the hemlock is more important to him than whatever he was hiding down that ravine."

Her dark brown eyes widen a fraction. "You think it's something to do with the victims?"

I study her pinched expression, wondering if she was close to any of the missing locals. "Every crime scene so far has been linked to the victims," is all I say before I start in the direction of the ravine.

A line has formed at the clearing's edge. Techs snap pictures, gloves slide into place on hands. As I stride closer, I lift my booted feet to climb out of the marsh waters. A jolt zips down my back as I peer over the edge.

Below are tens if not hundreds of deer carcasses piled at the bottom of the chasm.

The unnerving sight of skeletal remains pales to the stench wafting up from the ravine. From this vantage point, I identify the largest as stags. The pelts have been skinned, the skulls exposed.

The antlers have been removed.

Alister talks into his phone: “Bring those two hunters in for questioning,” he orders the person on the other end of the line. “The ones that discovered the first crime scene.” He ends the call, then looks my way. “What do you make of this?”

“Which part?”

Jaw set hard, he rolls up his shirt sleeves and situates his shoulder harness in a firm reminder that he’s armed with a weapon. “The fucking mutilated deer, Locke.”

I grin, enjoying twisting the agent’s short fuse. “It’s not staged,” I say simply. “I don’t see any esoteric or ritualistic connection here to link to your offender’s agenda.”

“What about the Harbinger,” he says, hooking a thumb toward the bare grove. “He invaded one of the perpetrator’s sites already, so it stands to reason he’d hit another. Why would he raid the hemlock?”

If he’s asking about the Harbinger killer, then Halen didn’t relay anything we discussed last night in the rain.

“I’m not a crime-scene profiler,” I say.

The tension gathering around Alister draws a rigid line across his shoulders. He blatantly looks at the faded celestial rose peeking above the bandage on my hand and the sigils inked into my fingers, disgust evident in his tight features. “That’s all you have to say?” he demands. “I couldn’t shut you the fuck up a few days ago. If you’re no help here, maybe it’s time to send you back.”

“That would be a mistake.” I lock with his flared gaze, the veiled threat behind my words as deadly as my stare.

I sense her proximity before she appears at my side. “I agree with Professor

Locke,” Halen says, defusing some of the hostility. “This isn’t a dumping site for hunters, but it’s not a tribute or ritual site, either.”

Alister tugs his tie to loosen the knot at his neck. “Get the hell down there and figure out what it *is*, then.”

The animosity between Halen and Alister is tangible. My instincts say the agent in charge wanted someone to blame for not yet having a suspect in custody, and Halen presented an opportunity with a contaminated crime scene to place some of that blame.

The media are spinning enticing click-bait stories around the victims and the FBI’s lack of progress on the high-profile case. One such headline declared the feds incompetent for not catching the perpetrator in such a small town.

I thought it was a fair observation.

Halen drapes her camera strap over her neck and tucks her notebook under one arm, then starts down the slope. I reach out and take her forearm, helping to guide her down the steep incline. To my surprise, she doesn’t pull away or chastise me for touching her.

As we reach the base, the putrid stench of decaying flesh and death is so pungent, she covers the lower half of her face. “He’s been dumping here for years,” she says.

“So you think it’s the offender.”

She tilts her head in a mocking gesture, then looks across the bed of remains. “You know it’s him. There’s only one perpetrator in this town, right?” Her sharp remark teases at a ribbon of fear buried beneath the sarcasm.

Whether or not she fully believes she’s in the Overman’s sight, that’s not what she’s afraid of. She’s not scared of Alister or his empty threats. But she is wary of something. I want to pull at that ribbon until she unspools.

“I’m just cautious with what I reveal to Alister. Before I’ve verified the evidence or have a provable theory,” she amends.

The question of what went down during their meeting is right on the cusp of my tongue, but I decide to give her something instead. “The stag skulls are all

different sizes, ages. There are layers of decomp in the heap, ranging from years to weeks.”

“So now you’re a forensic anthropologist.”

The hint of a smile playing on her mouth stokes a blazing brushfire within me, and I want more; I want to earn her laugh. “I am whatever you need me to be.”

Her smile falls. “That’s what worries me.”

She traps me in the intensity of her gaze, refusing to release me until she’s forced to swipe the unruly lock of white from her vision.

I cross my arms and look down at one of the rotting stags. “You don’t agree with Alister’s theory that the Harbinger raided the hemlock.”

Keeping my gaze trained on the hollow eye socket of the skull, I wait for her answer, my inquiry a not-so-veiled attempt to discover if she thinks I’m somehow responsible.

“No,” she says. “I don’t think the Harbinger had any hand in that.”

A small flame of hope unfurls inside me, and as I dare to meet her eyes, some uncertainty passes over her face, dousing that flame just as quickly.

“But then, I’m not sure what I know at all anymore.” She parts her notebook open.

I can work with that.

“Like the hemlock.” She delves straight into the facts. “The offender never wanted this site discovered. We reasoned the hemlock was his contingency plan, his failsafe. If he came to collect it, at the risk of exposing...whatever he was hiding in this ravine, then he’s getting impatient.”

Her thoughts reflect what I told Devyn. “I agree.”

It was our first dinner together at the town diner where I led Halen down the path to the hemlock. Socrates was forced to ingest it when he was found guilty of impiety, for introducing a new deity into society—which is the most important part to remember.

In every society, in every age, if man becomes his own god, then there is no outside force to fear or be governed by. Leaders lose the ability to control the masses. Therefore, the knowledge of this “wisdom” into the Higher Self had to become a secret, hidden.

Fact or fiction, truth or conspiracy theory—it makes no difference.

History is bound and recorded by the violence of those who believed.

“The trunk of the willow tree is where your guy marked his path to ascension,” I say, reasoning out loud. “We discovered no other alchemic symbols at any of the other tribute sites. Only here.”

Those symbols. Three. Always three.

Socrates. The Herd. Dionysus.

I glance around at all the mutilation, at the death. “This site is sacred to him. Not just a practice site.”

“It’s crude. A dumping place for failed attempts.” Halen steps onto a boulder between carcasses. “This is his first site. Where he started.”

“Every alchemist needs a lab,” I remark.

Unlike the other analysts skirting the perimeter, wary of falling into the hovel of decay, Halen walks the scene undaunted, snapping pictures, jotting notes. She goes somewhere inside herself, where all the noise and distractions of the scene fall away. Time and space bend for her as she reaches out to connect with the perpetrator.

Whether it existed before, or was cloaked by a life of love and happiness, she has a darkness inside her—one she taps into to see beneath the veil.

Most people are too frightened to look that deeply.

But this is where she fights her demons.

This darkness cried out to me across the abyss, where I was waiting for her. I’m still waiting for her. Last night, I might have chipped away at her doubt, but like the gorge we’re standing amid now, there’s still a chasm between us.

Halen slings her camera around to her back and rolls off a glove, then takes

her phone from her back pocket and holds it up to record her thoughts. “Nietzsche’s allegory described the Overman as a gift, an idealism to elevate humanity, which was rejected by society. If the offender’s gift is rejected by the herd, then just as with Socrates, the hemlock will come into play. But who is the poison intended for? There was always something off about the perpetrator consuming it himself in the initial profile.”

Lowering her phone, Halen finds me across the pile of bones. “Care to share your thoughts, Professor Locke?”

A wicked craving licks my restraint with a forked tongue at hearing her address me like that. “I’m just riveted watching you work, Dr. St. James.”

“Fine.” She gets to her feet. “You tell me when I get something wrong.”

If she keeps stroking my ego like this, she’ll force me to show her how rewarding I can be when she gets something right.

“I profiled the offender as devolving. Out of desperation, he’d resort to a primeval alchemy incorporating human sacrifice, thus sacrificing his higher humans as a more worthy offering to Dionysus. No more pity. No more humanity to bind him to the flesh. His ultimate weakness.” She hunkers and sets her notebook aside, then prods one of the stags with a stick. “Cannibalizing his higher men to consume the aspects of the Overman seems a more logical and direct route. But the offender wouldn’t need hemlock for this purpose. Rather, it would defeat it. You can’t cannibalize people who’ve just ingested poison.”

“Quite the logical deduction,” I say. “Seems like you’ve put the whole puzzle together.”

“Then what am I missing?” Agitation creeps into her locked frame. “Why go through the effort to confiscate the hemlock? It’s a huge risk.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You’re overlooking a vital piece,” I say. “You’re failing to consider that he may no longer have need of his higher men because he’s found *someone* worthier. In that case, it’s likely they’ve become a burden. Serving up hemlock hotcakes would remedy that.”

She can’t completely accept the danger she’s in, because she can’t trust the source. This is why she has to come to these conclusions on her own.

Trusting that I'm telling her the truth is a double-edged sword—or a doubled-edged tire iron.

If she believes what I tell her is the truth, then she has to contend with a much darker, frightening reality, one where she's capable of her very own monstrous acts.

That tendril of fear coils tighter, and she wraps an arm around her waist as she defiantly battles her doubts. Then, glancing at the sun-bleached skulls, she says, "Where are the antlers?"

"Maybe he's fucking with us."

She eyes me with a healthy measure of contempt. "There's something else here," she says, gloving her hand. "Start looking."

"You mean, like this?" I can't help the smug smile that curls my lips as I step aside to reveal the symbol.

PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

KALLUM

Scored into the hard-packed clay of the ravine wall is the symbol for the philosopher's stone.

The accusation in Halen's slitted gaze is adorable. "You really enjoy doing that."

"I don't have much else in the way of entertainment."

"You just let me ramble on," she shakes her head, "wasting time."

I shrug. "You were on a roll. Here—" I extend my hand as she steps across the blanched bones to help her over to my side. "You might be right about this being his first site."

"How's that." She moves closer to inspect the alchemic symbol. The philosopher's stone is depicted as a circle within a triangle, within a larger circle.

"At the first crime scene, we thought the pupils of the dissected eyes were positioned to point to the hemlock. But they were looking past it, at his sacred site, his beginning." I glance around the ravine. "This place holds his answers. That's why he used lemon to conceal the path here."

If he exposed it by removing the hemlock, he has something diabolical planned. As my gaze falls to Halen, unease crawls beneath my flesh.

"This is where he made a choice." I rest my arm on the clay wall as I lean over her. "Sitting here in this ravine, pondering philosophical thoughts."

She peeks up at me. "People really do that?"

"Don't you?" I give her my smoldering smile.

Returning her attention to the symbol, she brings her camera around and captures a few pictures. "Not if I can help it."

Beneath the banter—which I admittedly enjoy—is the sliver of truth found in her words. Pondering life for Halen would be a torturously cruel pastime. As

evident in the way she tried to conceal all reminders of her grief and heartache under the verse inked on her skin, right over the scar which reminds her of her loss.

“Maybe you just need something rousing to stir your soul.”

I’m so close to her, I hear the catch of breath in her throat. See the way she purposely tries not to blink to show the effect her pondering mind has on her. I imagine her amid the dancing firelight, an ethereal goddess with a crown of bone, her body beautiful and glistening with my blood, and feel the furious tempo of her heart.

I know she’s thinking about that moment too.

If I leaned in right now, one quick dip of my head, I could taste her. With her defenses lowered, the lure to steal inside her soul and stoke the flames higher is a demanding pulse in my veins.

Something feverish flashes in her hazel gaze before she says, “The beginning and the end.” She straightens, pulling away from the symbol and me. “If this is where it started, then something happened here. A person doesn’t just suddenly decide to immortalize themselves with an ancient wisdom. There was some inciting incident, a trigger...”

“*Birth of Tragedy.*”

Halen turns toward me, forehead creased in thought. “What?”

Shoulder leaned against the wall, I cross my arms. “Nietzsche’s first work, *Birth of Tragedy*. Where he contended, adamantly, that classic Greek tragedies originated from the union of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects. This is where he raised the argument to abandon Socratic thinking, and devote ourselves to the philosophies of Dionysus.”

“That aligns with the offender’s own place of origin,” she says, and I’m more than impressed with her deduction. “For instance, why the offender connected with Nietzsche verses another philosopher. Because, to be honest, from my long nights of research, there were other methods the offender could’ve invoked which seemed more enlightened.”

It’s fucking tragic we’re having this conversation in a ravine of rank death.

Hearing little Halen delve into esoteric philosophy is making my cock hard.

“It’s the art,” I say, and rub the back of my neck. At her drawn features, I clarify, “The artist’s soul. Nietzsche’s obsession. Other, more sound theories incorporating the Hermetic Tradition, Shamanism, the Primal Man, etcetera, are more fundamental, but are less...rousing to the soul.”

A swift breeze sends strands of her hair across her face, stirring my yearning to sweep them from her eyes in demonstration of my point.

“Nietzsche builds off those very core beliefs,” I continue, “and states that, in Greek tragedy, Apollo is necessary to provide humanity relief from our suffering.” I push off the wall and close the gap between us, where I clasp her chin and lift her face, then gently brush her hair behind her ear. “While Dionysus awakens us, enraptures us, with passion and ecstasy, that alone cannot stifle our immense suffering. It’s the unity of both, the primordial unity, where we reach divine madness and are able to transcend beyond our pain.”

Her mouth parts, and I daringly sweep my thumb across her bottom lip, a wicked craving sparked by the unity we can achieve together.

“You’ve said this before.” The slightest tremor leaks into her voice.

I nod slowly. “It bears repeating, because this is what your perpetrator sees in you, sweetness. They envy you this, your beautiful, exquisite suffering.” With panged regret, I release her, letting my hand fall away. “There is no greater destruction than one of self. And therefore, no catalyst more powerful to wield in alchemic creation. Destruction isn’t an end—”

“It’s a beginning,” she supplies, and my heart vaults to match the staccato beat of hers.

A smile tips the corner of my mouth. “You pay attention. Quite the studious student.”

“No, you just like to hear yourself talk, so you talk a lot.”

“*Hmm.*” I bury my hands in my pockets, curbing dark urges. “There are plenty of sounds I prefer to hear that only your lovely voice can deliver.”

She grips her camera, eyes alighted on me. “The chain is still broken on our door,” she says suddenly.

I shift my stance. “That didn’t do much to keep us apart before.”

“And neither will a chair under the doorknob.” She swallows. “You keep your word, so you claim. Promise me you won’t cross that door’s threshold, Kallum.”

I draw in a deep breath, tasting the sweet tang of honeysuckle in her anxious request. Nodding once, I say, “I won’t cross that door’s threshold.”

Her gaze holds mine a beat longer before she blinks and looks away. “Thank you.”

Before she finds an excuse to escape, I change the topic. “I did happen to notice you’re here, working the scene, instead of in a holding cell. That must mean you found a way around the system.”

Her drawn smile is knowing. “No one wants to believe a woman is capable of something so horrific,” she says. “It’s more comfortable to believe I made a mistake. Don’t have to find a way around when the system’s bias gives you a clear path.”

“So very true.” I drag my hand over my mouth. “But Alister still thinks he’s chasing two killers.”

“As I said, I’m cautious with what I tell him until there’s verifiable proof.” A hint of wariness touches her eyes. “And I’m not yet convinced we’re *not* chasing two killers.”

The uncertainty threaded in her statement makes me wonder what devils her mind is chasing. I don’t underestimate her. I’ve witnessed the horrific act she’s capable of—and it’s breathtaking. Her artistry should be worshiped as much as feared.

“Either way, this symbol is physical proof of something.” With a sigh, she punches out a text on her phone, I assume to Alister. “I need a way to explain all this in the profile that the task force can actually use.”

As the sounds of the scene bleed into our sacred cocoon, I send a purposeful

glance at the philosopher's stone. It was carved rather than branded, like the other symbols on the willow tree.

"Your guy desires to be a god, in essence, a creator. As art is born from tragedy, suffering, destruction, an act of violence will give birth to creation." I look up at the edge of the ravine, to where the hemlock grove lay bare. "Whether that's through a mass sacrifice of his higher men, or cannibalizing that which he envies"—I lock with her eyes—"only the mind of the creator knows their design. But you're safe to include his design will incorporate the hemlock, one way or another."

"That's helpful." She removes her gloves and stuffs them in her back pocket, effectively done with the scene. "I should be looking for a mental illness. The way the offender has delusionally associated the connections, finding ulterior, hidden meaning in everything... Another psychologist would profile a mental illness."

"But you disagree."

"It's all too closely linked," she says, shaking her head. "The pieces fit perfectly. Sometimes when I try to think about it from a distance, it feels too immense. And then...I don't want to think about anything."

With a lengthy exhale, she swipes a hand across her forehead. "Tragedy is the key here. Not mental illness. Although, through the offender's method and disassociation with humanity, there could be some onset now. But..." She glances around the ravine, at the death, the mutilation. "There's an anger here. If this is his art, it's a violent art. The emotion in this chasm rages."

My skin prickles at her assertion. The unnerving sensation made more apparent by her words, what I've sensed since I first entered the ravine.

"Everything links," I say, drawing closer. "Always."

"I know, you've told me. Synchronicity."

"When you're working a scene, the pieces don't materialize. They were always there, waiting for you to see the connection. Nothing is ever complicated until we make it so."

"Maybe that's true for a person with an IQ of ridiculous."

I chuckle unexpectedly, then tilt my head as I study her, seeing the smallest spark of her personality shine through the cracks. Halen is so beautifully broken, my chest aches at the immense thought of *her*.

Despite the gruesome scenery of our surroundings, or maybe because of it, I'm captivated by her all the more. She could slay me or redeem me with one command, and she still has no idea how much power she wields.

"However you want to define it for the heathens on the task force, you understand his design will be transcendent. His divine masterpiece. Even this dumpsite is a work of art. The macabre atmosphere. The depiction of anguish so gruesome. The feelings of dejected helplessness it conjures. It's a glimpse into what makes him vulnerable."

A flash of raw vulnerability registers in her features, but she quickly conceals this as she shifts to look at the sigils on my hand. "Some magical intervention would be appreciated to find the victims."

Her implication doesn't go unnoticed. She still believes I'm holding something back.

"The subconscious leads you to the answer, and when it suddenly clicks, it feels like magic." I run the pad of my thumb over a sigil. "But really, your mind has known it the whole time. Don't question the design, Halen. The universe never shares its secrets. Just trust the course."

I drink in the shadow of awe behind the judgement in her expression. She is the loveliest work of art, a masterpiece herself.

"It just feels too convenient," she says. "All the details, the associations. No case is ever connected this easily."

"Well then, imagine how difficult it would be if you didn't have your very own expert on the occult at your service." I give her the full, beaming wattage of my panty-dropping smile. "In every way your filthy little mind could demand to be serviced. You should really take advantage of me."

A laugh slips past her lips, the sweet tinkling cadence rushing my system like a potent aphrodisiac, and I swear to whatever higher entity lurks in the sky, my fucking heart damn near explodes.

If I can earn her laugh, then I can earn her trust.

Another gust of wind sneaks into the ravine to send her hair across her eyes, severing the moment, and she tucks the wayward strands behind her ear. “Damn, I really need a haircut,” she mutters.

“Don’t,” is all I say, stoking a heated ember amid her gaze as she looks up at me.

“Halen, here.” Devyn walks over from her zone to hand her a headband. “Use this.”

Halen accepts the gift. “Thanks. Mine snapped somehow.” The accusatory glance she directs at me is only marginally annoyed.

“So do we have proof all this—” Devyn waves a hand at the decomposing remains “—is connected to the same offender? Because Agent Alister is on his way over.”

Once her hair is tied back, Halen points to the symbol on the ravine wall. “We do. But all it confirms is what we already know. I’m not sure where it leads.” She holds up a finger and sets her notebook down. “Oh, and there’s this.”

After Halen locates a stick, she uses it to probe one of the deer carcasses. “Bite marks on the shoulder blade look to be human. I found a few more fresher deer in the remains with similar teeth marks.”

Her gaze meets mine, and the knowledge of what this means passes between us. A stag was found at the first crime scene that had been rend apart by a human.

Alister is texting on his phone as he approaches. “Show me the symbol.”

While Halen conveys the meaning of the philosopher’s stone to Alister, Detective Riddick finds his way over to the group. Suddenly this ravine is way too crowded.

“Did the 3D casts from the stag bite marks at the first scene ever come back with any definitive information?” Halen asks Alister.

Staring hard at the mutilated deer Halen pointed out, he shakes his head. “No

match. It was a longshot anyway. That's a defunct science."

"It nailed Ted Bundy," I say.

Halen sends me a warning glare. "Could the casts be used to compare to the teeth imprints on the deer here? To confirm that it's the same person."

This gains Alister's full attention, and he looks directly at her. "What are you trying to say, St. James?"

I can sense Halen's hesitation, and I see the moment she almost backs off. Then she lifts her chin to make eye contact with Alister, the blaze coming to life.

"Someone has been hunting and rending these deer—" she glances at me briefly "—what's the word?"

"*Sparagmos*," I provide.

"Which is a sacred sacrifice, and one the offender has obviously been practicing for years, according to the ranges of decomp in his open grave." She bites her bottom lip, then: "There are potentially a hundred deer here. Rend apart. All missing pelts and antlers. Sacred items used in Dionysian rituals."

"Spit it the fuck out, St. James," Alister snaps.

My hackles raise, and I go to step forward, but Devyn latches on to my arm. It's Riddick who bows his chest as he steps in beside Halen.

"The victim at the Harbinger crime scene had antlers implanted in his head." She pauses to allow her words to sink in. "The question has never been raised whether the missing locals are actually victims...or not. Maybe when these people went missing five years ago, they didn't want to be found."

The implication chokes the air from the ravine.

Mystery schools follow. Secret societies protect secrets. Little Halen has been keeping her conspiracy theories all tightlipped and hush-hush. And as she glances around anxiously, she's still not certain of her theory, but this is what she does; challenges the norm.

Alister parts the hem of his blazer as he braces fisted hands on his hips. “These people are losing body parts all over the fucking marshland. So as far as I’m concerned, anyone either forced or *willingly* sacrificed to become someone’s mystical dinner is a victim. Understood?”

Halen holds his severe glare a second longer, then nods. “Understood, sir.”

“If I hear even a whisper of this in the media...” He lets his threat trail off with the next gust of wind. “I want an updated profile including this scene before the end of the day.”

He turns to leave, but then says, “According to Agent Rana, the hemlock was likely raided by the second offender, your Harbinger killer. Get with her on this. Your profile better reflect that before the press conference tomorrow.”

As he stalks off in the direction of the agents striping the scene with caution tape, Devyn knocks into Halen’s shoulder conspiratorially. “Damn. You really get under the fed’s skin.”

Halen expels an extended breath. “It’s a talent.”

“One I respect.” Devyn picks up her bag, but then halts. She drops it to a boulder. “Look, I appreciate what you’re doing, spinning theories, trying to help. That’s why I pushed to have you here.” She touches her forehead briefly in thought. “But you should know, they are victims, Halen. They didn’t just leave, or join some cult. With no word for five years. My brother didn’t just decide to one day up and go, with no call, no future contact. He was taken. Someone *took* him. He wouldn’t hurt me that way. We were close...*are* close,” she corrects. “We’re twins. As close as two people can be. So, I know this.”

In a show of comfort, Halen touches Devyn’s arm. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I know. But that’s why I’m telling you now.” Devyn’s smile is tight, filled with the kind of resentful pain one tries to mask daily. “Now, I’m diving into the putridness of this scene. If I find anything important, I’ll let you know.”

As Halen watches Devyn walk off, she hugs her arms around her waist. “Oh, my god. I had no idea.”

“You couldn’t have.” Riddick moves into place beside Halen. “Dev keeps things close to the vest. She moved back here when Colter went missing, joined the department to help search for him. Even when the investigation stalled and all but became a cold case, she stayed on.”

Halen turns inquisitive eyes on the detective. “Has a match been made from the body parts to Devyn’s brother?”

Riddick shakes his head. “I don’t think so. But she won’t stop looking until she finds him alive.”

“Is there someone out there you’re looking for?” Halen asks.

“Me? No. I’m a lone wolf.” The charming smile he offers her torches my composure. He licks his lips in true predatory fashion. “But I could be looking elsewhere.”

Expertly dodging his advance, Halen swings her gaze to the remains of a deer and brings her camera up. “I still feel like an asshole. I should’ve been more sensitive.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” I speak up, my focus drilled on Halen. “Your theory is sound. When it comes to family, people are biased and willfully ignorant. They refuse to see the truth of just how dangerous their loved ones can be.”

Halen looks up at me through the thick fringe of her lashes, her camera held between us as if she could capture my image, and I realize I’ve said too much. Instead of masking my discomfort, I hold her insightful gaze, unflinching, letting the silence build into a crackling intensity. Then I reach out and depress her finger over the shutter button.

A sharp cry cracks against the walls of the ravine, slicing into the moment and turning all attention toward the other side of the gorge.

Riddick curses. “What is he doing here?” Without further explanation, he rushes to where a group is quickly forming.

“Oh, god. I think Detective Emmons just fell down the ravine.” Halen starts in that direction.

There’s a flurry of chaos as people crowd around to offer aid to the injured

detective. Alister orders an ambulance to the nearest marsh entrance, then commands one of the local units to wrap a ligature around his thigh. Riddick lifts Emmons' head to brace it on his leg, placing the wide detective's hat on his head.

Blood wells bright red from a gash above the detective's kneecap. Emmons hollers in pain at the pressure, and I get a strong whiff of alcohol fuming off him.

"Christ, Emmons." Riddick hands Emmons off to Devyn and snatches one of the First Aid kits from the supply setup. "Everyone, stand back. You can cancel the ambulance, Agent Alister. It's just a flesh wound."

I hang back near Halen as Devyn assists Riddick in handing him the necessary materials to disinfect and suture Emmons' wound.

As the urgency of the situation diminishes and the site clears, Halen remains, her focus centered on Riddick. "You're really good at that," she says, watching him insert the needle and stitch with perfect precision.

When Emmons tries to bat him away, Devyn takes hold of his hand. "Luckily, he's too drunk to feel much."

"He feels plenty," Halen mutters too low for anyone else to hear.

Riddick glances up at Halen. "I was a paramedic at one point. You learn to do a lot under pressure and in unfavorable conditions."

Devyn releases a noticeable sigh. "Jake's funeral was today," she says, referring to Emmons' brother. "He's in bad shape."

Halen caps the camera lens, then lowers her voice to speak to Devyn. "The body was released for burial?"

Devyn shakes her head. "No, but the family held a service anyway." Her frown is tight. "They didn't want to prolong it...any longer."

Halen nods her understanding, then focuses once again on Riddick stitching the wound. "Why would Detective Emmons come here?"

The detective groans. "I'm right here dammit," he says, speech slightly slurred. "And I'm not leaving."

Devyn consoles him. “I would try to work the case,” she responds, a defensive edge to her words. “If it was my brother’s funeral.”

A dark cloud rolls across the sky to blot the meager rays of light, warning of a bad storm hovering on the horizon.

After Detective Emmons is pronounced intoxicated but in stable condition, Halen starts the climb to the top of the ravine. I trail behind her, reaching the barren grove as raindrops start to fall and lightly patter her equipment.

She checks her phone briefly before she begins packing away her tripod and gear.

I hand her the case, holding on to one end so she’s forced to look at me. “Did you know there are three species of the death’s-head hawkmoth.”

“Agent Hernandez is waiting at the entrance.” She yanks the tripod case from my hand. “I’m not getting caught in the downpour again.”

She goes to shrug the bag onto her shoulder, and I claim the strap to carry the gear for her.

As we start out of the muggy marsh, she says, “You leapt to the Harbinger because of the hemlock grove. Because Alister wants to link a connection there.”

“Yes.”

“It’s terrifying that I’m starting to understand your train of thought.” She peeks over at me with an arched eyebrow. “There was never any correlation determined amid the species, or the victims, for that matter.”

“Maybe not when you keep the case isolated,” I say, earning a glare from her. “Atropos, Lachesis, and Styx.” I recite the species as I wade through the marsh water beside her. “All from the Greek mythos. All associated with death.”

“No,” she says adamantly. “I’m not discussing the details of the Harbinger killer with you, Kallum.”

“Why? Is there something else you’d rather us do for the next twenty minutes.” I wade closer to her. “I’m always open to suggestions.”

Halen turns her gaze ahead.

Discussing the details means she'll be forced to think about the victims, about her belief I'm the killer. About Wellington, and the memories she's suppressing.

"I know you probably tried to include your knowledge in your profile," I say, not trying to hide my deliberate baiting. "Where it was shot down, or ignored. No one else will understand the way I will, Halen. Pour your bleeding little profiler heart out to me."

She shakes her head. "Atropos is one of the Fates. She was the Moirai who cut the threads of life, bringing death. Lachesis measured the threads. And Styx is the river of the dead."

"But the genus *Acherontia atropos* was first derived—"

"From the Acheron river," she says, halting to turn my way. "Which denotes the underworld. Yes, I know. Thank you, professor, but I've done my research. In essence, it's not the labels of the Fates as to why the *Acherontia* moths are considered omens of death."

Her heated, sultry gaze narrows on me, and I could eat her alive right now.

"Your extensive knowledge on the moth isn't incriminating at all," she intones with the perfect amount of sarcasm.

I curb my smile. "You put me away for six months. I had ample time to research myself."

"What is it that you're dying to tell me that you think I don't know, Kallum."

I wet my lips and take a step in her direction. "The moth is attracted to sweet things." My gaze drags over her as I inhale a deep breath to pull her into my lungs. "It *loves* sweet things."

She says nothing, but I notice the way her swallow travels along her throat.

"They can mimic a honeybee to invade hives undetected. As they imitate the scent of the bees, they blend right in, and if they're discovered, the moth has this thick epidermis to protect it from stings." I let the sounds of the marsh fill the silence before I say, "It's got damn thick skin to shelter itself from

pain.”

“And the moth is nocturnal. Rarely seen because it appears late at night. It chirps if irritated, and likes to lay eggs in nightshade.” She adjusts her hold on her bag handle and exhales. “What is your point with all this?”

“Just that I find it interesting, little Halen, that you’re far more connected to the moth than me in attributes.”

Her gaze tapers further. “I never know whether you’re trying to tell me something, or derail me off a lead.”

I glance back in the direction of the ravine. “You picked up on something back there,” I say.

“You’re way too attuned to me,” she accuses. “You should be focused on the case.”

“Now who’s derailing?”

Blatantly ignoring my remark, she starts in the direction out of the marsh again. “If the offender is using the Harbinger to his advantage, then yes, I’ve considered he’s had to research the case, to learn what I know. And in doing so, the Harbinger could become a part of the Overman’s delusion, even a part of his path to ascension.”

A full smile tugs at my mouth. “I should really stop mocking psychology,” I say, peeking over at her. But it’s not psychology or profiling or anything else—it’s her. She’s the seer. “If the offender believes what you do and thinks I’m the actual killer, that makes me a bad omen for the Overman. You really should use *me* to *your* advantage.”

She expels a breath. “This whole town is a bad omen. You’re just one more evil thing.”

“That’s a bit scary then,” I say. At the divot forming in her quizzical expression, I add, “That I might be the only one here you can trust, *sweetness*.”

We walk in silence through the marsh, and I feel the press of Halen’s deep thoughts. Before we reach the path to lead us to where the black SUV waits,

Halen turns her gaze on me. “For the record, you bear more attributes to the moth than me, Kallum.”

“*Hmm*. I do love sweet things.” I send her a wink.

EKSTASIS

HALEN

Everything has an anatomy. Humans have this inherent need to break down even the most mundane objects in order to explain their existence. For instance, the empty space between the flame and wick on a candle is called the dark zone. The void that draws the eye despite the luminous flame.

I think it's in our nature to seek out the darkest aspect. Our desire to fill that negative space.

Or maybe it's our primitive warning system; the beautiful, dancing flicker will burn if we get too close.

In defiant challenge, I swipe my finger through the candle flame. The water on my hand from wringing my wet hair sizzles in the fire.

After the storm knocked out the power to the hotel, Iris provided candles to all the patrons. I heard more than a few groans in the lobby from media crews who need to charge their equipment.

Pulling my freshly washed hair over my shoulder, I seat myself on the corner of the bed and slip the unneeded sanitary napkin into my bag. My flow was light, and has since nearly stopped. The more I think about what Dr. Floris said, about how hormones and stress can cause bleeding, the more logical it becomes that I simply experienced a temporary upset to my system.

Now, I need a logical answer for what occurred during the ritual, for why I have two sets of memories. There is always a rational explanation for the unexplained. This is at the very core of what I do.

I eye the laptop on the console table, then look at the boxes lined along the wall. Aubrey had my case files delivered to a storage unit I've temporarily rented. I have a copy of the Harbinger case on a zip file, but what couldn't be stored in 1s and 0s, I've brought to the hotel.

I didn't expect CrimeTech to release my files so quickly, but as the news is buzzing with the newest Harbinger murder, they likely don't want to deal with the feds. Not because it's the right thing to do.

I sink down to the floor and pull a plastic file box toward me. Using the soft candlelight, I dig through the contents until I unearth my old cellphone.

An anxious flutter wings to life in my chest. I've listened to the recording so many times I have it memorized. That's why when Kallum told me to listen to our first encounter again, I didn't feel the need—there would be nothing new gleaned.

There's just enough juice left to power on the device. Like scratching open a healed over wound, I hit Play on the audio file, and Kallum's gravelly voice slinks over my skin.

"You're an intriguing little thing."

Just like all those months ago, the fine hairs along my nape lift away.

I listen to the back and forth as he asks me random questions about my job. Then: *"Are you afraid of me?"*

I push Pause.

I've now spent enough time with Kallum to know how he likes to intimidate. He uses his striking looks, his intelligence, even fear to deter people. And that's exactly what I assumed he was doing in this moment when he asked me such a jarring question.

As I resume the recording, I hear myself blame the New England weather for my trembling. Then he comments on how he sees me, drifting below radar, trying to be unseen.

"...here you are, the only one with actual, impressive credentials, the only one who can piece together what happened here, and you haven't spoken a word."

I can feel him, so close, the way he was that day. Breathing me in. His arctic gaze penetrating me and rattling my defenses.

"I'd like to know what thoughts you keep silent, what you're so worried might slip past those trembling lips."

I hit Stop.

A shiver racks my muscles, and I rub my forearm to chase away the chill. My fingers trace the scars beneath my long-sleeved shirt, the accident never far from my thoughts.

Placing our conversation in another context, of course I can hear an alternative meaning in his words. There's a million different ways to perceive his obscure comments. That's how Kallum operates.

Candlelight bounces along the walls, casting creepy shadows over the room as rain patters the window. I remember being so afraid of the dark when I was little, my mother soothingly explaining the monsters I saw in the dark corners were just my imagination.

I can't recall the color of her shirt when she told me this, or how she wore her hair, but I remember the scent of her apricot lotion, and that memory soothes me now as it did then.

Psychology spends a lot of time on memory.

The truth is, nobody remembers their past accurately. That's why people argue and fight with friends, children, spouses. One person recalls a matter happening one way, the other a completely different way.

They're both right.

And wrong.

It's a scary thought that you can't trust your own past.

As the mind wasn't meant to hold on to every memory, it's the most damaging ones our brains will obsess over, never letting us forget. Those painful memories define and shape our existence. Then there are the memories so shattering the psyche has to purge them or risk being damaged beyond repair. It's a defense mechanism.

The mind constructs and alters memories to protect us.

And Kallum understands all this. He knows how to twist and manipulate to make me question the fabric of my reality. That's why I'm sitting on my room floor, listening to our conversation and questioning my own mind.

I reach for my case and remove the camera. I flip through the images from

the ravine, numb at the sight of animal mutilation. Years of analyzing the basest depravity of human nature has desensitized a vast area of my empathy. I stop flipping when the image of Kallum crystalizes on the small screen.

While studying this case, I came across a line from Nietzsche that resonated with me: “There are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth.”

I don’t pretend to understand philosophy. I don’t even very much like it. But what is captured in this photo is the reason why we strive beyond our limited capacity to grasp a higher, more profound understanding of our existence.

There is a terrible depth behind Kallum’s beauty, a thick tar adhering to his soul, an agonizing darkness that stains his mind. In this blink of a moment where his truth was captured, we are the same. We are bound by our tragic suffering.

Maybe that’s all I need to understand.

“Dammit.” I tuck the camera away, then drop the phone in the box and seal the lid.

I’m falling apart.

No matter how I try to fend Kallum off, he slips right past every one of my defenses. When he looks at me, he looks *into* me. He sees me in a way no one else ever has, and it’s intoxicating, to really be *seen*.

All my memories of Jackson and I together are sealed tight, tucked away in a box like my old case files. Safely kept out of sight. Every once in a while, I’m tempted to pry the lid and take one out, but I don’t. I can’t. Because as long as he’s there, with that version of me, then it all can remain untouched, unblemished.

My life with him wasn’t perfect, but it was safe. There was love and trust and happiness.

Uncomplicated.

Until it wasn’t.

I’m not sure if I was ever really that version of myself...or, like the beauty only viewed on the surface, the truth of me was just submerged in the dark,

terrible depth.

To that end, Kallum challenges me.

There is something unsettling twisting my bones, gnarling me like the eerie marsh trees whenever he's near. The yearning to tear through his clothes and be skin-to-skin with him is a disease infecting my soul. I fear that loss of control over my mind...my body.

I glance at the broken chain lock hanging from the frame of the connecting door that opens to Kallum's room. The one he broke when he shouldered the door open while I was dead to the world with sleep deprivation.

God, and he wants me to trust him.

How can I trust the devil who takes advantage of me at every opportunity with an evil glint in his beautiful, deceptive eyes and lethal smile. His whole persona pulls you in, disarms you, until you realize too late you're tangled in his web.

I felt the gauzy threads ensnaring me last night as he gazed at me through the falling rain, his distressed expression so convincing as he pleaded for me to believe him.

I don't know whether or not I'm in danger from this town—but I was in danger that first day when Kallum approached me, when he baited and ensnared me in his trap.

And I was in danger today at the ravine, when it became so effortless with him, it was as easy as breathing.

Falling for a man who I can never trust...

That is the real danger.

My phone vibrates on the desk, mercifully distracting me from my spiraling thoughts. I grab the device and note the name on the screen.

"Mr. Wheeler," I say, my surprise at his call overriding basic etiquette. "Hello. How can I help you?"

"Miss St. James, I'm glad you answered. Have you had a chance to check

your email yet?”

On reflex, I glance at my laptop. “Not yet. It’s been very hectic on the current case.”

“I’ve seen the news.” His tone is commiserating. “Look, I won’t take up much of your time, but I did want to touch base with you on the file you requested.”

Kallum’s juvenile file.

My heart lurches to my throat. “Right, yes. Thank you. Has there been any progress?”

I get to the laptop and wake the screen, impatience clawing at my nerves as I wait for the Wi-Fi to connect—only to remember the power is out. “Shit,” I hiss.

“Is everything all right?”

“We’ve had storms here. There’s a power outage.” As I sling my wet hair over my shoulder, a low rumble of thunder sounds to further my claim. “I can check my phone email once we end the call.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up,” he says. “I haven’t been able to get access to the juvi file, but what I was able to uncover might be of interest to you. There’s a buried incident report on the deceased father, Malcolm Locke. He was hospitalized right around the time the juvenile report was dated. It might have no bearing, but I felt it was worth mentioning for your own investigative purposes.” A lengthy silence fills the line before he says, “Even obtaining access to this information was difficult.”

The way he says *access* makes me believe the information wasn’t acquired legally.

“I truly appreciate your persistence on this matter,” I say.

“Sure. It’s not much, I should add. Apparently, the Locke family has enough money to keep their secrets buried and sealed tight.”

I huff a derisive breath. “I’m aware of that. I’ve been trying to contact Mrs. Locke for months. She lives outside the country, and won’t respond to any

requests.”

“Mothers can be...challenging,” he says, as if speaking from experience. “I’ll keep working on Judge Carter to grant access to the file and keep you apprised. Good luck on your case.”

“Again, I appreciate it. Thank you, Mr. Wheeler,” I say, then end the call.

There’s a weighted moment where I stare at the phone screen, hesitant to open the email.

Over the course of the past six months, I’d formed firm opinions on the bad boy of academia. I can admit I was obsessed with proving him to be a killer, smugly hiding in plain sight, confident he’d never be caught as he mocked those he thought less intelligent. Which, when it comes to Kallum, happens to be everyone.

My thumb hovers over the paperclip attachment as I scan the lines of the email where one sentence stands out.

...patient suffered damage to the oculus...

I lower the phone and stare at the flickering flame of the candle, looking into the dark zone.

Once I open that file, I can never unknow this about Kallum. Right now, it’s a vague suggestion, a speculation.

I don’t have to ask the question of whether or not Kallum is capable of such an offense. As a teen, he was diagnosed with brief psychotic disorder with violent tendencies. The more terrifying question is: will knowing the truth change how I feel about him?

The answer whispers from the darkest recesses of my soul. Like fine parchment going up in flame, my resolve burns to ash.

I delete the email.

Rain raps against the window, the storm increasing in strength, and I feel the emptiness of the room swallow me.

Leaving my phone on the table, I step toward the door. I touch the broken

chain, my chest aflame at the feel of his presence I can sense just on the other side of the wood. Some desperation coils my viscera in a tight knot, and I let the chain drop.

I give the chair a single glance as I pass it by, then blow out the candle.

The dark presses against my skin as I remove my clothes and slide between the cool sheets.

One trembling breath to fill my lungs, then I reach beneath the covers and touch the sigil on the inside of my thigh. I trace the curved lines of raised, damaged skin. The tender pain resounds like a summons across my body, my heart beating so fiercely in my chest I know he can feel it.

My eyes have barely closed with sleep when I hear the door creek open.

Breath caught in my lungs, I sense Kallum before I'm brave enough to open my eyes.

He's the shadow creeping from the corner. The monster under my bed.

Cloaked by the dark, he stands at the threshold, his promise not to cross it there in the heated, defiant flare of his clashing eyes. The raw intensity in his steely expression pins me to the bed, his gaze a physical touch, like fire licking my flesh.

As a flash of lightning illuminates the room, my gaze roams the valleys and reliefs of his bare chest, mapping the dark ink covering his skin. The stag skull shaded in dramatic blackwork, the antlers branching up his shoulders and neck. My breath shallows as I trace the leanly carved definition of his strained muscles, made more apparent as he braces his palms on either side of the doorframe. A beautiful god barely restraining the demon within.

My heart tears at the cage of my chest as my gaze is drawn to the alluring V-shaped grooves cut diagonally along his abdominal muscles and the sight of his erection directly below.

I take in every inviting inch of his naked body, the monitor strapped to his ankle the only article, his desire a maddening, destructive force that threatens to devour me if unleashed. If I let him cross that threshold, whatever willpower I've sustained will shatter.

I'll be lost to him.

Kallum glances at the chair abandoned at the table, a knowing, savage curl to his lips. His animalistic hunger reaches out to me from his depths, a dare to deny I feel this wicked craving to surrender.

Inhaling a shaky breath, I push back against the headboard, allowing the sheet to slip down to my waist and reveal my breasts. He makes a move forward, but I hold up my hand. Kallum stops, held at bay by my silent command.

A taut stillness infuses the room, humming at the highest frequency. The vibration courses my blood, a current strung between us where, if either one of us utters a word, the spell will break.

The tension arcs between us in challenge to either give in, or deny ourselves. The agony of that denial is an empty ache in my core. The need to rake my nails down his skin and twine myself between his bones is an itch so deep I feel it dig beneath my muscle.

The intense way he watches me forces the throb deeper, the empty pain begging to be filled. He doesn't even have to touch me; he's already branded in my flesh. He hasn't left me since the moment he entered me during the ritual. A dark god I can beckon with my desire alone.

I'm connected to him in a way that defies logic. It's primal and terrifying, and I should escape now before I'll never be able to escape him again—but I'm caught in the entrancing lure of his eyes, helpless as I obey the command there to tow the sheet the rest of the way down my body and expose every mark and bruise to him.

He drinks in my fear like sickly-sweet nectar, laps at my wounds and pain like a starved beast. While the storm rages right outside these walls, he admires me, bared and vulnerable, like I'm the most beautiful creature in the universe to him.

There is no mockery, no innuendos. Only absolute, carnal lust. The power to corrupt, to be corrupted, and enticed into his frenzy.

To go mad with pleasure.

The words he whispered as he seduced me into a hedonistic dance. And I gave in, just as I'm caving under the seduction now, the lure into a moment of pure, decadent oblivion.

Ekstasis.

A form of ecstasy so transcendent, you feel as if you're outside of yourself. A depraved pleasure so debaucherously wicked, it takes over your body, your mind. Your soul.

Base desires are experienced in the dark, where we feel safely hidden. But I can't hide from Kallum. Pretending this is some sordid dream.

I've never been more awake.

Kallum widens his stance. Unashamed, he grabs the top of the doorframe and lifts his chin, staring down on me and thrusting his hips, his rock-hard erection impaling the air.

Adrenaline winds through my veins, the chambers of my heart burning from the force.

I feel it in my womb. The stabbing, needy pain that draws me to my knees. I'm tethered to the rock of his hips, the lewd sight of his engorged, erect cock fucking the air.

The sheet scratches abrasively across my knees as I spread my thighs. Gravity grips my spine, and I roll my hips in time with his, the sweet ache becoming a throb as it pinches deep in my core.

Kallum strains against the doorframe, the pronounced veins webbing his forearms a tantalizing aesthetic. The building drum of rain is a song, the crashing thunder his soundtrack. He owns the strike of lightning that illuminates his body to reveal the poetry scribed on his skin, becoming a piece of his art.

But it's the frantic way in which his gaze hardens on me, a threat to tear through superficial bonds and annihilate his prey. His fight to hold back so erotic, the control I possess over him a drug.

And I am drugged, slipping beneath an otherworldly trance where I harbor no

shame as I let the untamed, unadulterated lust rule me. My damp hair a wild tangle, it falls over my shoulders the way he loves it as I touch my body. Eyes fastened to the fiery embers in his, I draw my hands over my breasts, pinch my nipples. I scrape my nails across the bites and bruises covering my skin his teeth left behind, trailing down to my thighs. All the while, Kallum's thrusts intensify, his vulgar movements guiding me past the bounds of my limit.

He's a fever beneath my skin, cooking my blood and burning away the infection. Until all I can feel are his hands touching me, his mouth tasting me. His cock thrusting inside me.

At the dominant command in his darkened eyes, I slip my finger over my clit, nearly shattering at the white-hot, electric sensation that flickers across my body in time to the lightning strike. Fire curls in my belly as I swirl my fingers and undulate my hips in pace with his, dangerously close to breaking.

Racked with shivers, I strain to keep my eyes open and on him. It's more than the lewd, lusty sight of Kallum; it's the intoxicating enthrall, the freedom to be lost to pleasure that holds me captive.

Nothing outside this room is real.

I'm stitched to his body, a part of him, as he fucks me with his eyes. The crazed gleam there takes over, and his cock jumps, hips thrusting faster with each desperate stab to be sheathed.

Kallum feels what I feel. And it's heady, how he doesn't have to touch himself, how he's so close to shattering just by watching me. My pleasure slashes a wild tear through his resistance. But it's the very terrifying, visceral connection I feel with him that allows me to experience what he's feeling; the painful need to connect, the starved desire never to be satiated.

It feels like dying.

I fall forward on the bed, my arm stretched out as I curl my fingers into the coarse sheet. My hips thrust against the bed, my fingers slick with my arousal, my back rising and falling as I bear down to drive the throbbing ache deeper and latch on to that sweet, edging explosion teasing every cell of my body.

Euphoria sings the edges until the fire envelops me, and I go up in flames.

Kallum bares his teeth, every muscle clenched. The rock of his hips increases, his muscles flexed taut. He never touches himself as he thrusts his hips in crazed frenzy, his stomach muscles contracted, his cock so fucking hard I can feel the hot pulse of it against my inner walls as he relinquishes a groan, and a thick ribbon of ejaculate spurts forth, the erotic sight taking me right over the edge with him.

I'm ravished in his embrace, dragging in clipped breaths to fill my burning lungs, my body balancing on a razor-sharp edge as I slowly come down. I haven't taken my eyes off him, and I watch him now, caught in the mesmerizing way Kallum releases the doorframe, his shoulders and chest rising with each furious inhalation.

He wets his lips, then glances at the floor with a defiant smirk curving his mouth, as if stating I allowed him to cross the threshold, after all.

Drawing up to my knees, I grab my shirt and fling it to the floor to cover the mess. I hold his stare, draining my remaining strength to keep Kallum from entering.

The low *plink* of rain fills the tense silence, the storm weakening.

Without a word, he leans in and grabs the side of the door.

I hold my breath until the door clicks closed.

I curl into the sheets, my breathing still tearing at my chest, my mental state questionable, and reach for the pendant at my neck for comfort, only to remember it's no longer there.

I'm not sure what scares me more: How far I'm allowing Kallum inside me, or like the missing diamond at my neck, the guilt I no longer feel.

A stolen moment in the dark, a moment where I offered Kallum a part of me, and he didn't just accept a piece—he reached right inside and stole all of me.

There's no escape now.

I'm drawn to his negative space, the desire to touch the darkest part of him too seductive despite the beautiful flame I know will burn me to cinder.

Kallum is my dark zone.

CONJUNCTION

KALLUM

As dusk settles over the town, I spin the silver ring around my thumb one...two...three times.

It's an impulse more than a compulsion, the desire to feel complete, whole. As everything that comes in threes is perfect in its entirety.

Omne trium perfectum.

A truth I've believed without fail until my sexy little sprite.

There is no number that would equate complete and utter satisfaction when it comes to Halen. I can twist my ring into infinity and I'd still be left craving more.

As evident in last night's torture session.

Oh, but what sweet, delicious pain.

Whatever self-control I drew on to leave her room was the damn willpower of the gods. She made me a feral beast, dangerously close to breaking my word and taking her over and over until we were both ruined in perfect, fucking depraved bliss.

The image of her spread wide, touching herself, hair as wild as her lust as she gave in to our passion is seared into my damned soul. I would have traded whatever remains of that soul to the devil himself to taste her in that moment.

But as she held me trapped in the intensity of her gaze, invoking a power only she can wield, I was goddamn subservient to her every command. I once told Halen she had no idea how much power she possessed, and last night, she peeled back a corner of her arsenal.

Now, the yearning to see her completely unleashed is clawing at my cartilage and flesh from the inside.

As a consequence, I've been distracted, off my game. After Halen convinced Alister to issue a team of agents in her quest to process the gothic mansion, the full search of Landry's library commenced, which only uncovered his

fingerprints and DNA for the task force, and nothing more than the same tired connections that confirm Landry was an accomplice and pawn for the offender.

I know what Halen is searching for. At the ravine, she danced around the theory that the missing locals never really went missing. Finding evidence to support this theory will prove difficult without the victims themselves.

The expedition was monitored by more agents than necessary, I think, to keep a safe barrier between us, not trusting herself to be alone with me. A risk she took that accrued Alister's wrath at the wasted man hours. As a result, Halen's request to question the families of the victims was denied.

At some point, every pursuit, whether external or internal, is met with what feels like a dead end. A point where the quest stalls, no more answers are provided, and we're forced to either accept defeat, or be consumed by our obsession.

But this is also the point at which great breakthroughs occur.

While all eyes are narrowly focused on the search for the thirty-two victims, no one is looking at the offender's pursuit itself.

This person has an agenda, one that's been stalled for days, and I can sense the anxious energy surrounding the town as we coast through the timeworn streets.

The Overman is ready to force their own breakthrough.

Every day that stretches on, this person is an increasing threat to Halen and her secret—the secret I've sacrificed my fucking freedom to keep buried.

Since I can't allow the perpetrator to be caught and arrested with this knowledge, the only option is to make sure they're not. To do what Halen is not yet prepared to do.

It's time for the Overman to ascend and meet their maker.

For her, I can be the villain.

From the passenger seat, Halen expels an audible breath as she looks at her phone, lighting the screen to illuminate the interior of the SUV.

Daring to break the silence between us, I say, “Bad news?”

She hesitates a few seconds before she relents. “Agent Alister denied my request for the bite cast comparison for the deer remains in the ravine.”

Out of character, Agent Hernandez speaks up. “You don’t need his permission. You’re with the locals. You can issue your own lab requests to them.”

Shocked at his sudden suggestion, Halen stares at the agent. “Thank you, Agent Hernandez, but that’s not the whole of the problem. The lab is backed up, only processing urgent, time-sensitive evidence. Agent Alister is the authority on that, unfortunately.”

I sit forward to be closer to her. “It might not be a setback. You should push to get an outside lab to run the tests anyway.”

She shifts in her seat to look at me, her delicate features creased at the implication. I felt her wariness at the ravine; I know she’s questioning more than just the victims.

“There hasn’t been any evidence to suggest the perp is in law enforcement,” she says outright.

“But it *is* someone in this town,” Hernandez offers, continuing to be helpful.

I hike an eyebrow, amused. “He’s right, and it’s an ideal place to hide in a small town.”

“It’s also one of the most obvious for that reason,” she rebounds. “This is a close-knit community. You heard what Devyn said about her brother. If anyone suspected one of their own, they’d be the first to act.” She casts a weary look out the window of the moving vehicle. “They wouldn’t let the pain go on.”

I hear the tender truth beneath her words, her own experience with that pain bleeding through to taint her perspective. She’s more attuned than anyone on the case, and she has her suspects in mind, but she won’t give them up. Especially to me. I’m still too much of an unknown variable.

“With small communities,” Hernandez says, “the perp doesn’t necessarily

need to be in law enforcement to have access to the department. A spouse, sibling, another relative or friend... Small towns trust each other.”

As I watch Halen’s reflection in the passenger-side window, I see the deep crease form between her brows. Something else is festering in her thoughts. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “I just... I gave the lab something to run. I should probably get it back.” Her gaze locks with mine in the reflection.

The kernel of guilt I register in her eyes gives her away. Halen gave them the evidence from the ritual. She doesn’t need to say it; the way she tugs at her bottom lip confirms this.

I sit back and lace my hands behind my head, getting comfortable. “Well, if it is someone who has access to the lab, then there’s an abundance of my DNA at their disposal.”

That carving knife should be turning up soon.

“I won’t let that happen,” Halen says, tone resolute.

I tilt my head, for the first damn time at a loss for words. Little Halen, defending her devil. I think hell just froze over.

My dismal smile feels genuine. “I’m not worried for myself, sweetness.”

She tears her gaze away from mine in the window.

Regardless of who the perpetrator is or their access level, I won’t be roaming free for long. As I’ve likely been painted as the sorcerer from the allegory, I’m a threat to the Overman. But instead of the threat of turning the higher men against Zarathustra like in the parable, I’m a threat to turn Halen against the suspect. This person wants her to mistrust me so they can isolate her.

This person is also persistent. They have endless patience and years of practice trying to obtain an ancient philosophy.

And failing.

A whole ravine filled with their decaying efforts.

Then little Halen arrives, all pure grief and heightened emotions, her

beautiful suffering a siren's song to the *Rausch*. Utterly transcendent ecstasy.

I should know—I experienced her divinity for myself.

The Overman wants her. I'm an obstacle in the way.

Too bad for them, my obsession runs so much deeper.

Agent Hernandez steers the SUV into the parking lot of the police department, making Halen glance up from her phone. "Why are we here?"

The agent expels a breath, weary of his chauffeur duty. "The press conference."

"Shit," Halen mutters. "I forgot about that."

"Agent Alister said to remind you *not* to make a scene." Hernandez parks the vehicle, then sends her a measured look in warning. "You don't have to answer any questions."

"Did he give you the same order for me?" I say.

He directs a glance to the backseat, delivering his best intimidating agent face. "He said to keep the sociopath contained."

My smile doesn't meet my hard eyes. "Duly noted."

Halen pulls her hair over her shoulder and works the thick hank into a braid, securing the end with her hairband. "Let's get this over with."

I trail behind Halen as she weaves between news vans and police cruisers toward the building. At the entrance, I reach over her shoulder and take hold of the handle, trapping her between my body and the glass door. "You can't avoid what happened last night forever," I whisper near her ear.

She places her hand right over mine and pulls the door open. "Oh, but I will try."

A derisive smile curls my lips. Avoidance is a weak tactic when our defenses fracture.

My little Halen is cracking.

The sound of muffled voices guides us toward the double doors of the conference room. Halen slips through quietly, trying to be unnoticed as she locates a place along the back wall.

Agent Alister is seated on a metal chair at the front of the room, accompanied by two of his lead agents, and Detective Riddick to represent the local department, presenting a joint effort on the case for the media.

The room is congested with too many bodies. The muggy press of body heat requires the window fans to run at full blast. The whip of blades blends with the shutter click of digital cameras.

Even from the far back, I see the sad, despondent faces peppered throughout the crowd. The red, teary eyes. The wisp of hope on trembling lips posed for the cameras. The exaggerated snuffles and whimpers staged for the soundbites.

The sight pulls at some dark thread within me, and a plume of resentment wafts up like the noxious fumes from the ravine.

What Hernandez said in the SUV circles my thoughts as I absorb the saturated stench of the conference room.

Here's the thing: sociopathy and shallow affect are not a recipe for sinister nature. The melodramatic fucks who weep uncontrollably are the more troubling concern. Behind closed doors, their empathetic feelings suddenly disappear. Poof. All a show to garner sympathy for selfish reasons.

Those people are far more dangerous than your average sociopath.

I might not shed a tear at your funeral, but that's because I understand we're born to die. This is a purpose, the *only* purpose, we all share. What's the use in mourning an inevitable outcome? To be saddened by this is ridiculous, and frankly, contrived.

Maybe that in itself makes me a sociopath. I can't be bothered by the labels.

But I'm also not the one who's going to use your death as an online funding program so I can buy a ticket for a cruise.

A high-pitched screech of feedback emits from the speakers, and Alister taps

the microphone. Once he concludes the task force updates, he opens up the room for questions from the press.

A journalist in the front row kicks off the show. “Special Agent Alister, it’s been rumored that the criminologist who was attacked at one of the crime scenes was fired. Can you confirm this?”

Next to me, Halen bristles with unease. Alister looks even less inclined to allow this line of questioning, but he delivers a direct statement. “Dr. St. James was released from her position at CrimeTech for reasons unknown to the FBI.”

The same journalist follows up. “But Dr. St. James is still working the case, is this correct?”

Alister rubs the back of his neck before he answers, first glancing at Detective Riddick. “The local department has retained her expert services as a consultant.”

Another hand goes up, and Alister calls on the reporter. “Is Dr. St. James here to answer questions regarding the attack?”

I dip my head near Halen. “You’re legendary, sweetness.”

“I signed a nondisclosure agreement,” she whispers.

“So don’t disclose anything.”

She releases an annoyed breath. “I’m not as practiced as some in the art of cryptic obscurity.”

I cover my mouth with my hand to conceal a smirk.

Alister tries to deflect the question. “The details of the attack on Dr. St. James are confidential at the moment.” He points to a reporter to move the questions along.

This young, eager reporter goes right to the source. He turns toward the back of the room and singles out Halen. “Dr. St. James, was the man who attacked you into occult practices?”

She looks around as all eyes fall on her. “I apologize, but I’m unable to

answer questions about the attack or my attacker.”

Her rebuff doesn't deter the reporter. “Can you speak up, please? Also, can you offer any insight into what you and your partner have discovered about the perpetrators of the crimes?”

Halen pushes off the block wall and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “For the record, Professor Locke and I are not partners,” she corrects.

“But you are working closely together?”

She glances back at me, and I arch an eyebrow. “We're both working as tirelessly as all the professionals are on this case,” she answers. “It's a team effort.”

“Very diplomatic,” I say in a low tone.

Another reporter stands, bypassing Agent Alister to speak to Halen. “Dr. St. James, were you brought on by the local department because of the previous Harbinger killer cases you've worked?”

She hesitates, then: “I was already on-site, so it was a matter of convenience to acquire my services. The task force requires all the resources it can get.”

“Are the limited resources the reason why the FBI hasn't been able to apprehend the perpetrators?”

Halen blinks against the rapid-fire camera flashes. “No, that's not—”

“What can you tell us about the Harbinger crime scene? Is this the same killer?”

“I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the case,” she says simply.

The same deflection she once used with me. Effective, but the hard divot between Alister's furrowed brows conveys he's not impressed.

“We're leaving.” I grab her wrist and tow her toward the doors as the relentless questions follow.

“Dr. St. James, can you give us any update on what the task force recently discovered at a crime scene?” a woman asks. “What this new evidence might mean?”

Halen's steps falter, and her gaze snaps to Alister at the front of the room. "I haven't been made aware of any discovered evidence at the newest scene."

"Are you confirming there is a new crime scene, then? Has there been another murder?"

Alister makes an attempt to throttle the questions. "Dr. St. James is a psychologist and can only speak in a capacity relating to behavioral theories, not facts on the case."

No one buys that line of bullshit. Especially not Halen as her eyes narrow on the agent.

A bold reporter cuts right through the murky tension. "Agent Alister, then what are the characteristics you're looking at for the Hollow's Row Mangler? What areas are you searching for leads on the suspect?"

Alister waves his hand. "Any leads are confidential, and so are any suspect profiles."

That same reporter pivots to Halen. "Dr. St. James, it's been rumored the town's missing locals are being looked at as suspects. Are the victims being included in the profiles?"

Alister stares at Halen through the round of camera flashes that capture the animosity between the two task force members.

Halen gives the reporter an answer. "At the moment, the task force is only looking at the missing locals in connection to the suspect. Learning as much as we can about the victims may lead us to a suspect they were all connected to, that's all."

Despite her attempt to redirect the assumption, the reporters latch on to the juicy thread, pitching more questions in the same vein.

The squeak of Alister's chair emits through the speakers, drawing the attention of the room as he stands. "The FBI are looking into every possible lead, and considering every angle in order to apprehend the perpetrators and find the victims. Thank you for your time. This concludes the meeting."

As press reporters and journalists continue to demand answers, Halen ignores

their barrage of questions and starts toward the other side of the room, Alister in her sights.

I circle an arm around her waist and pull her to a stop. “Not happening here.”

“He’s keeping information from us,” she says.

“We’ll get it soon enough.”

Agent Hernandez uses his girth to cut a path through the crush of bodies, and I guide Halen behind him until we exit into the hallway. I direct us farther down to escape the trailing members of press.

Halen pulls free of my hold. “Where are we going?”

I look at Hernandez. “What is it that you want?” I demand. “Recognition? Praise? Name in the papers?”

His features draw together, but he knows exactly what I’m talking about. “I want to work the case,” he says. “I want to know what you guys know about the crime scenes.”

I nod slowly. “You stop anyone from entering this room—” I point to the interrogation room “—and you have a deal.”

Halen forces a derisive laugh. “Be careful of making deals with the devil, agent.”

After I get the agent’s confirmation in a firm head nod, I say to him, “Call around to your fed friends and find out what this confidential evidence is.” Then I grab hold of my little muse and drag her into the room.

Halen tries to pull away, but I don’t let her escape.

Once I have the door closed, my hands are on her, trapping her face and pressing her against the wall where I claim her mouth with mine. I swallow her cries of protest, kissing her with the hunger eviscerating the burning pit of my stomach. I kiss her until she’s breathless, until the taste of her fear weakens beneath her yearning.

Breaking away, I say, “You need to steer clear of Alister.”

She drags in a breath, chest heaving. “But we need to know—”

“We do know,” I say, cutting her off. “In less than five minutes, Agent Hernandez is going to knock on that door and tell us the carving knife was recovered.”

Her swallow drags along her throat. The anxious flare of her hazel eyes reveals she knows this is the truth. Soon as they pull the prints and DNA from that knife, they’ll come for me.

“So in the five minutes I have with you,” I say, coiling the lock of white around my finger, “I’m not wasting a single one talking.”

“You’re breaking your word...” She trails off.

I lick my lips and smile. “I said I wouldn’t enter your room. I made no promises about entering *anywhere* else.” My gaze roams down her body to make my point.

She presses her palms to my chest. “I can’t let you do this to me.” The pain etched in her face is so beautiful, my chest pangs. “Not yet...”

I clasp her cheeks between my hands and angle her face up to me. “The longer you deny us, the more pain you inflict.” My words fall to her lips in heated assertion. “It’s the balance of two powers, the union of Apollo and Dionysus. It’s cruel and torturous to separate them, and only serves to make us suffer.” I brush my lips over hers in tender beckoning, earning a seductive shiver. “Give in to us, Halen. Let me show you how.”

Her breaths tremble past her lips, her anguish scorching my throat. “I’m terrified.”

In the confines of the dimly lit interrogation room, I bring her braided hair over her shoulder and slip off the hair tie. I push the woven band into her pocket before I grip her waist and lift her into my arms. Then I have her mouth captured in a sensual kiss.

Her throaty little moans vibrate through me, setting me ablaze and making me fucking insane as she threads her fingers into my hair. I crush her harder to me, unhinged at the feel of her deepening the kiss, her tongue slipping over mine to claim her territory, her thighs locked around my hips.

I drink in her fear and heartache and surrender, a fiend demanding more.

Carrying her to the center table, I seat myself on the edge, allowing Halen to straddle me, her arms linked around my neck.

“Fuck. I need to taste you.” I drag the collar of her shirt off her shoulder and trail my mouth over her skin, kissing a needy path to the bite mark I branded in her flesh.

“I don’t want to want you,” she confesses, her voice raw.

“I know,” I say, and press my forehead to hers, our breathing tangled between us. With urgent conviction, I kiss her until I’m feral with desire, until I can no longer feel her confliction in the kiss. “Hate me later. Hell, I’ll even let you punch my face. But right now, I want you sitting on it.”

Holding her to me, I deny her any further debate. I flip her around and place her back to the table surface, where I hover above her. I reach between us and unfasten the clasp of her jeans, rewarded with a seductive flinch from her belly.

She pulls me to her and seals her mouth over mine in a brutal kiss. Goddamn, she gives in so hard, she damn near sucks my soul through her kiss. She bites into my lip, drawing a hint of blood that melds into a mix of pleasure and pain so lovely, I’m lost to her as our movements become frantic, the need unbearable.

Our planets finally fucking align, the conjunction of two heavenly bodies connect, and that rare feeling of harmony is transcendent.

I grip the band on either side at her soft hips and tow her jeans down her thighs. With a grunt, I raise up and yank them the rest of the way down her legs, then grasp the thin fabric of her panties and tear through them, baring her to me. I push her knees into the air and spread her thighs to position her where I want her.

Her body racks with shivers as I lower myself between her thighs, worshipful, savage, and unable to stop as I catch sight of her glistening arousal.

“Te adoro deam.”

“What are you saying?” she asks, voice unsteady.

A sly smile crooks my mouth. “It’s Latin for…” I bite into the fleshy mound above her sweet pussy before I lift my gaze to hers. “I’m going to eat you all up.” Then I claim what’s mine, licking a hard seam up the slit of her slick lips.

I waste no time devouring my muse and suck her clit into the hollow of my mouth, loving the breathy exhales that escape her, the way her belly flutters uncontrollably. I wrap my forearms around her legs and clasp her inner thighs as my tongue delves into the warm center of her perfect pussy.

I savor the sweet taste of her. The feel of the raised sigil hot beneath my fingers. The way she arches her back, hands in my hair. I lavish her clit with my tongue, nip at her soft lips, my hunger stirring at the slight trace of metallic blood that still lingers.

“Break for me,” I whisper over her flesh.

The need to be deep inside her and seal the connection is a demon raking claws over my bones. Her nails tear across my scalp, the pain satisfying as I feel her lose control. I close my mouth over her and revel in her pleasure as she comes. Her orgasm rips through her body and elicits a soft cry.

I reach up and cover her mouth, a curse bit through my clenched jaw as her teeth sink into the web of my hand.

Three quick raps sound at the door, and I growl in protest.

“Oh, god…” Halen latches on to my hand, her nails digging into the back.

With strained effort, I break away and hover above her. “Next time, I won’t stop until it’s my name you scream, sweetness.”

I clamp my hands around her waist and haul her off the table, where I lower to my haunches and slide her jeans up her legs, then stand to drop a tender kiss to her lips. “Time’s up.”

Her gaze fuses to mine. “You have an alibi,” she says.

She’s not talking about the weak alibi I orchestrated the night of the ritual by leaving my ankle monitor in the hotel room.

I cock my head, realizing she’s willing to confess that we were together. “Not

for the entire night,” I say.

And there in the depths of her wide, hazel eyes is the glimmer of doubt.

The knock sounds again, followed by Agent Hernandez announcing his entrance. He regards us quickly and clears his throat. “A knife was recovered in the bed of deer remains. That’s what Agent Alister is trying to keep out of the press until it’s been processed. He doesn’t want to spook the perpetrator.”

I comb my fingers through my disheveled hair from where Halen clawed her little nails.

I don’t have to say aloud what Halen and I both know.

There’s no chance the offender will be scared away. The discovery of the knife was every bit the design of the Overman.

“There’s more,” Hernandez says. “The antlers that were removed from the vic at the hunting grounds crime scene? They also turned up in the ravine.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” I say.

Halen pushes past me. “Thank you, Agent Hernandez.” Paused at the door, she glances back once. “We need to leave.”

We pass officers stationed at posts along the corridors as they keep loitering members of the press contained in one area of the building. A thick veil of silence descends as we enter the parking lot. The sky has darkened, the tranquil evening deceptively concealing the chaos that will ensue come light.

As Hernandez unlocks the SUV, Halen stops short of the vehicle. “Dammit,” she breathes. “I forgot something in the interrogation room.”

I lean down close to her ear. “I have your panties in my pocket.”

The incredulous look she sends me is cute. “My phone, Kallum. It must have fallen out of my jeans.”

I glance back at the building. “I’ll come with you.”

“No.” She holds up a hand. “Just... I’ll be quicker on my own if you’re not tempted to get...sidetracked.” A pretty flush tints her cheeks. “Wait here with Agent Hernandez.”

I watch Halen walk away from me, her steps hurried, the impression of her phone outlined in her back pocket.

I spin the ring around my thumb. One...two...three times.

Three is the divine number. It's why the Overman references this number in rituals. Three pairs of thirty-three eyes on three trees. Three symbols for the path to ascension. Three tributes to master and obtain their goal.

It's always three.

Yet the obvious flaw in their design is the first symbol, the philosopher's stone—the one that stands apart.

One is a conundrum. Strong in its singularity, yet vulnerable for the very same reason.

Just as my little Halen is right now.

Hernandez sidles up beside me, his arms crossed in mirrored stature. "You're not going to listen to her, are you."

I slide a look at the agent. "What do you think."

VIOLENCE OF THE STARS

HALEN

The press conference is over, but the task force hasn't yet resumed operation, as evident in the empty halls of the forensic department. The on-duty officers are posted at the opposite side of the building to handle the media, giving me a short window of time.

My footsteps echo against the cinderblock walls, sounding too loud in the stillness.

I realize what I'm about to do will answer that terrifying question: Knowing the truth about Kallum will not change how I feel.

I once accused Kallum of having no soul to sell. But the truth has always been that I'm the soulless one. When I lost my family—my parents, Jackson, our baby—my soul died with them.

The arrows on the wall guide me on a one-way course I initiated myself. Because once I do this, there's no turning back.

Yet I don't focus on what most other crime solvers focus on. DNA. Fibers. Fingerprints. Hard evidence that cannot be refuted in a court of law.

I find evidence in behavior.

And the behavior of the perpetrator who placed the carving knife in the ravine, in a location sacred to the Overman, says that Kallum is not the one who committed the Harbinger murder.

At least, not this one.

For once, I agree with Kallum. The antlers and the knife discovered together is the most conveniently recovered evidence I've ever witnessed. They might as well have been gift wrapped.

Hard, factual evidence can be misused. Can even be falsified. That is why we have to sometimes look beyond what we can touch and see as fact. We have to question the evidence itself.

What I know is that, at some point between when I placed the knife in my

bag and my hotel room safe, the knife was removed. Someone had a purpose for it, and the only logical purpose is to frame either me or Kallum.

I'm giving in to his way of thinking, which is terrifying all on its own, but it's also the only explanation. And since I have a near airtight alibi, framing Kallum to remove him from the case—from me—is the only other logical motive.

I can still feel the lingering burn of Kallum's touch. Still taste him on my lips. I completely surrendered to him and, this time, I have no mind-altering ritual to cast blame. There's a thread of uncertainty spun around my heart, tightening as the small voice of my conscience whispers that I'm acting on emotion and not reason.

Just as I made a conscious choice last night to delete that email, to remain in the dark about Kallum's past, I'm tangled in his web, yearning for the venomous bite that will shut out the world and its pain.

The fight to deny how he makes me feel, the inexplicable connection we share, has been bled from my veins.

I'm no longer slipping over the edge—I've leapt straight into the abyss.

Having Kallum locked away for murder has been my obsession since he first trapped me in his clashing gaze. All I have to do to escape is look away when the evidence comes back and Kallum is arrested. All I have to do is not speak up, not give him an alibi...

And he'll be removed from my life.

The most terrifying part is how hollow that revelation makes me feel.

Kallum can't be put away like this, with false evidence, without proving he's actually guilty. I'll never be free of him if that happens.

I draw closer to the moment of no return as I round the corner with persistent steps toward the lab.

I'm about to break the law to protect Kallum Locke.

The goddamn devil owns my soul, after all.

“Maybe after this I’ll commit myself,” I mutter under my breath, and the realization hits me with resounding clarity.

The hospital.

After the attack by Landry, the only time I can recall my bag not being in my possession was when I was admitted to the emergency room. It had to be stored in the front office.

Conviction speeds my steps until I’m standing outside the main forensic lab entrance. Through the glass partition, I see the evidence racks, but my canvas bag isn’t visible.

My gaze lands on the cart in the middle of the room. Bagged and sitting directly on top as priority to be processed is the carving knife.

I look up at the security camera, the bubble eye pinning me where I stand.

The excruciating interrogation I will be subjected to will pale drastically to the previous ones. I’m putting a lot of trust in my recent memories, which will force me to reconcile the memories I’ve been avoiding very soon.

But once that knife is processed, it will be near impossible to convince Alister and officials that the evidence was planted.

Inside a flawed system, sometimes you have to break the rules.

I try the doorknob, not surprised to find it locked. “Shit.”

As I scope out the office area, I wonder how right Hernandez is about small towns and trust.

Snagging my phone from my back pocket, I light the camera flashlight and hunt through the first desk for an extra set of lab keys. Coming up empty, I close the drawer with a muttered curse. I wrangle my nerves and quickly search the other three desks, feeling the urgent press of limited time.

A crackle of static sounds from down the hallway, and I duck beneath a desk. A local officer talks into his shoulder radio as he passes through the forensic sector.

Standing, I glance directly across the hallway at the darkened office. The one

Alister is using to head up the task force.

Before I can think better, I start in that direction. I circle my hand around the cool door handle and turn, a sense of relief flooding me as the latch bolt gives with a soft *snick*.

I enter the room, my steps immediately faltering as Alister looks up from his laptop screen. “Halen. What are you doing here?”

I hurriedly kill the flashlight and pocket my phone. “Sorry to bother you,” I say, tossing a glance at the closed blinds of the glass partition. “I need a word with you, sir. But... It’s late. I apologize. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“No. Stay.” He rises from the leather chair, and my gaze drops to where he slips his keyring into his front pocket. “I think you should see this.”

Something in his vacant eyes sets off an internal alarm, and my stomach pitches. I grip the door handle. “I think it should wait—”

“This is important. Close the door, St. James.”

Apprehension rears at the authoritative command. I ease the door closed and take two steps into the office, curious over what else he’s kept from me on the case.

“Was something important discovered at the ravine?” I cross my arms, daring him to deny it.

His smile doesn’t reach his tapered eyes. “You just can’t help it, can you?”

My head notches back. “Excuse me?”

He rubs the back of his neck in an agitated motion. “The way you dig right under my skin.”

My chest prickles in warning. “Maybe I should get someone—”

“We’re the only ones here, Halen.” Alister angles the laptop my way. “It’s the perfect time for us to have a private discussion, as I’m sure you don’t want to explain this publicly.”

There, displayed on the screen, is footage from the interrogation room. I’m positioned on my back on the table. Kallum removes my jeans, then spreads

my legs...

I look away.

“Oh, don’t pretend to be offended,” Alister says, and I hear the judgment in his voice. “You’re not the type of girl to be offended, Halen.”

He circles the desk, and I take a reflexive step back. “It really is late, Alister,” I say, making sure to use his name with just as much derision as he uses mine. “And this is inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate.” He chuckles mockingly, then wipes a hand down his mouth. “You planned what happened in the press meeting earlier,” he says, tone laced with heavy accusation.

I shake my head against the blare of my inner alarm, noting his gun harness draped over the back of the desk chair. “I did my best to deter the questions.”

“There seems to be a leak.” With another step closer, he crowds my personal space. “Someone is feeding information to the media. And I think it’s the someone who wanted to sabotage that conference.”

Hackles fully raised, I turn and make a dash toward the door. He seizes my arm and yanks me forcefully back. I catch myself against the desk, bracing the heels of my hands on the sharp edge.

Alister loosens the knot of his blue tie, his features cut hard by the shadows. As he draws closer, his expression creased in revulsion, I reach behind my back in search of a weapon.

“Don’t do that,” he warns. Movements fast, he locks his hands around my wrists and pins my forearms to my chest. “We’re just having a casual conversation. You like that, it seems. Being casual with colleagues.”

The fight within me stops instantly. He’s physically larger and stronger than me. I can’t fight him. I reserve my energy, taking slow, measured breaths to control my spiking heart rate.

“Don’t worry,” he says, breath hot against my cheek. “I deleted the footage from the department system. I have the only copy.”

Not a favor.

Blackmail.

It's true that for most people in law enforcement, they go into the field because of their desire to help others, the need to do good. But then there are those who gravitate to the field because they crave power, control, dominance. Ironically, the very same characteristics as rapists.

Having a badge does not elevate you above human nature.

Right now, Alister is looking at me like I'm an insubordinate nuisance to be dominated.

He wants to show me how much stronger he is than me, to punish me for his failure.

Adrenaline pours into my bloodstream. The caverns of my heart ache in pulsing fury. Fight or flight ricochets through my body.

My muscles tense against his hold as he lewdly thrusts his erection into my belly.

"I know you like this." He releases one of my wrists so he can track his hand down to my ass. My stomach roils. "The same way you like to cause ripples on the task force...at press conferences. You just love being a bad girl."

I swallow down the thick bile coating my throat. "I suppose the word *no* means nothing to you."

Eyes pitched dark, he smiles. "Not when you're walking around my office with no panties." Hostility edges his words. "You're a fucking tease, Halen, and I'm itching to work off some steam from being made to look like a fucking fool during the meeting."

His hand clamps hard around the nape of my neck, and my fight comes alive.

"You made yourself look like a fool." I claw at his face, aiming for his eyes. My nails rake across his cheek.

A roar tears free of his throat before he hauls me forward. Hands banded around my neck, he twists me and shoves my chest down against the desk. I swipe at the contents, knocking the laptop and objects to the floor. I grasp for the Glock in the harness just out of reach. I kick out, my foot landing a solid

strike to his stomach—but it’s not enough to fight him off.

Obscenities fall from Alister’s mouth as he reaches underneath for the clasp of my jeans and rips the snap open. His forearm braced across my back, he yanks at my jeans, and my heart lurches into my ears. All sound is muted against the roar of my blood. My vision wavers.

The paralyzing fear of being trapped grips me so fiercely, I break through the helpless desperation and lash out against the darkness closing in around me. The smell of crisp fall air raids my senses. The hazy glow of lampposts bleeds into the dark, and I feel hands tighten around my throat.

I scream only to have the sound muffled by a coarse palm sealed over my mouth.

The sensations come on strong. Beyond Alister’s attack, a montage of violence flickers across my vision. Unlike the ritual, there’s no comfort from Kallum to chase back the terrifying imagery. A memory is triggered from the depths of my subconscious, and it tears into my soul.

The flashback projects into the current moment as Alister restrains me against the desk, his cruel words slithering around me as he grabs at my clothes.

“This is how you want it, bitch.” The shrill sound of a zipper ripping threads my muscles, fear a living force inside my body. Then a sinister voice rises up from the trenches of my mind.

I’ll show you, bitch.

The two voices overlap, stretching the bounds of my sanity. Before my brain shatters, the weight of Alister’s body is suddenly gone. The racket of a struggle crashes against the ringing in my ears.

Legs trembling, I press my palms to the desk surface and drag in a full breath, then push onto my feet. When I turn to face my attacker, I’m met with the intensity of Kallum’s heated eyes.

It’s only a moment, one suspended second where he confirms I’m all right, then his lethal, sole focus is on the man held in his clenched grip. Kallum shoves Alister’s back against the wall, his fist following in pursuit as he drives inked knuckles into Alister’s face.

Delivered with relentless fury, the blows don't stop. Kallum unleashes a torrent of strikes on Alister, losing himself in the violence. He is a demon made of wrath, his brutality administered with each enraged drop of his fist. The sickening wet sound of bloody punches infuses the room.

The devious gleam in Kallum's striking eyes says he's going to destroy Alister—and he's going to revel in that destructive carnage.

Kallum throws the agent to the floor, sending a round of kicks to his rib cage, before he straddles his torso and drops his fists in relentless punishment.

And I know he's going to kill him.

Desperation scrapes my insides. I try to enter the fray to prevent what's about to happen, and arms bracket my waist. Agent Hernandez pulls me away from the scuffle as an officer rushes the scene.

“Kallum. *Stop.*”

Blood-stained fist held aloft, Kallum's eyes find mine past the haze of fury long enough for me to reach him. Then a handcuff is latched around his wrist. Kallum is hauled to his feet and thrown against the wall, where the officer shackles his wrists.

I watch in detached shock as Alister staggers on his way to his feet, then spits a trail of blood to the floor. He turns enraged eyes on Kallum, sending his fist into Kallum's stomach. Then he looks at Hernandez. “Put him in holding,” he commands the agent.

Face stained and swollen in patches of red, Alister locates me next. “I will have you removed from the case. I'll make damn sure.”

I lift my chin in defiance, barely containing the rage within that wants to finish what Kallum started.

Alister pins me with a challenging glare that translates: *my word against yours.*

I shrug out of Hernandez's hold. Then, bypassing Alister, I push close to Kallum. “I'll call your lawyer. Don't say anything in there.”

“I know my rights. Not my first time, sweetness,” he says. The smile he

forces clashes against the brutality I still see simmering in his depths. “Do not trust anyone, Halen. No one. Go to the hotel and stay there. I’ll be out by morning.”

“I think you’re overly confident on that,” I say.

“We’ll see.”

Agent Hernandez escorts Kallum out of the room, first sending me a guarded look over his shoulder.

“Get her the fuck out of this office,” Alister orders the local cop before he grabs his gun harness and follows after Agent Hernandez.

A chill envelops me, adrenaline still rampaging my system. I shove my hair out of my face, my breath sawing my lungs. Amid the chaos, something was unlocked inside me. I saw more. I *felt* more.

And the only person who can answer my questions has just been apprehended for assaulting a federal agent.

The officer in uniform lays a gentle hand on my shoulder, propelling me out of my thoughts. I flinch away. He’s the same cop I saw patrolling the hallway earlier. “Sorry,” he says. “Are you all right?”

Shaken, I glance over my disheveled clothes. The torn hem of my shirt. My unbuttoned jeans. I fight down the noxious mix of shame and anger that rises up to strangle my voice.

“I think I need a second to...” I tug at the clasp of my pants. The zipper is broken.

Mouth rimmed tight, the officer nods. As he turns to offer me privacy, I quickly snap my jeans and drop down to palm the keys on the floor.

“If you need to make an incident report or something...” He trails off, tone unsure.

I slip Alister’s keys into my pocket. “No. Not right now,” I say. “But I do need a restroom. To collect myself.”

He looks relieved not to have to be the one to issue a report against a federal

agent.

Once the officer has me escorted outside the restroom, I look down the hallway to see Kallum being taken to holding.

“Thank you.” I cross my arms over my midsection, pausing in front of the door.

Wariness draws the cop’s features tight. He glances around the empty department, as if questioning whether or not to leave me alone.

“I’ll be fine,” I reassure him.

He again inspects the condition of my clothes. His instincts tell him something more than a fight between a consultant and agent went down, and I’m that something, but there’s nothing he can do now.

I wait to see him push through the double doors before I exhale an aching breath.

I touch my stomach, feeling the tender bruising now that the adrenaline has started to ebb. Before this is over, I will have the final say with Agent Wren Alister.

Right now, I have to make sure Kallum won’t be charged with two crimes come morning.

I pivot away from the restroom and go straight to the forensic lab. I try three keys before I gain access, then I search the racks for my canvas bag. “Come on... Where is it?”

Not finding it on any of the evidence racks, I give up the search and snatch the bagged knife from the cart and slip it beneath my shirt. I tuck the torn hem into my jeans as I head toward Alister’s office.

Dropping to my knees, I flip the laptop around and exhale a tense breath. Alister is still logged into the department network. I delete the interrogation room footage of Kallum and I together, then I bring up the security logs. My fingers shakily hover over the keys as an internal battle wages.

Removing the security footage will erase any evidence of Alister’s attack on me. It really will be my word against his.

I stare at my fingers, inspecting the epithelial cells beneath my nails from scratching his face. There might be enough for a DNA match—but will it be enough proof to go up against a federal agent?

“Dammit.” I shove the sick feeling down deep into the pit of my stomach and proceed to delete all traces of me from the building after the conference. Then I toss Alister’s keys to the floor on my way out.

With every step that takes me closer to the exit, my forearm braced around my waist to conceal the knife, I shed a layer of guilt. Whatever shame I might have harbored for violating my morals, Alister remedied the moment he tried to violate me.

The fresh night air is a shock to my system, making it feel as if everything that transpired inside the building happened a lifetime ago, to someone else.

The sight of Agent Hernandez standing beside the FBI SUV stalls my steps. “You need to stay with Kallum,” I say. “You’re in charge of watching him.”

He squares his thick shoulders. “I need to stay with you, Dr. St. James. I promised I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.” The dismal certainty etched into his expression says more than he’s voicing. He knows what went down in that office.

“Kallum made you promise?”

He shrugs. “I offered.”

I nod slowly. “All right, then. Let’s go.”

When he unlocks the SUV with the key fob, I open the passenger-side door and quickly shove the bagged weapon under the seat. I climb into the cab and reach for the seatbelt.

Hernandez slips in behind the steering wheel, casting a concerned glance my way. “Are you all—?”

“Nothing happened,” I force out to cut him off. “Kallum stopped it.”

A tense moment of silence weighs the air of the interior, but mercifully, the agent cranks the vehicle without pushing the subject.

“I don’t know about you,” I say, trying to suppress the lingering tremble in my voice, “but watching a likely serial killer beat an asshole fed nearly to death makes me crave chocolate and caffeine.”

I peek over to catch a faint smile cross his mouth. As Hernandez drives toward the diner, I pull out my phone and conduct a search for Charles Crosby, the lawyer who harassed me on the witness stand during Kallum’s trial.

Kallum said we embody the violence of the stars.

His words envelop me, evoking both comfort and fear. Kallum embodies the violence of a damn supernova—and Alister better pray I fail at getting him set free.

INTERLUDE

KALLUM

The loud *clang* of the holding cell door unlocking fires through my viscera.
My muscles coil tight around my bones.

Then Special Agent Wren Alister enters the room.

Our eyes lock, and a slow, menacing smile spreads across my face.

OVERMAN

HALEN

A sickly film settles over Hollow's Row, cloying and thick, like the ring of syrup left behind on the diner table. There's a texture to the night, tactile, grainy. It coats my skin, making me feel unsettled, like an itch digging in beneath my flesh.

The storms may have passed, but the deceptive calm holds a dangerous charge in the air.

I'm not sure if I'm prepared for what's brewing just beneath.

While working the case with Kallum, falling into the beguiling intricacies of his mind, it's so easy to overlook the unstable current that flows below his cool demeanor. But it's there, simmering, volatile, a riptide strong enough to drag you under.

A shadow scratches at the sheer, beautiful casing—that explosive part of him that's always one unhinged heartbeat away from detonating.

Tonight, he lowered the veil, allowing me a brief glimpse of this side of him, a reminder as to the brutality he's capable of. It's not as simple as deleting an email to avoid the truth.

And while the sight of Kallum nearly beating Alister to death should disturb me—and, yes, it does—the more frightening realization is how badly I wanted him to do so.

Agent Hernandez sits across from me at the table, two booths away from where Kallum and I were seated the first day he joined the case. I can smell the lemon wedge hooked on the water glass in front of him, and the scent stirs a visceral reaction, an ache that rubs abrasively against my ribs, yet not deep enough to satisfy the itch.

“Watching it won't make it ring,” Hernandez says, referring to the phone I've been staring at absently.

I offer a half-smile, grateful for the interruption to my disturbing thoughts. I've left three voicemails for Kallum's lawyer already. With the ridiculous

retainer I'm sure he requires, Charles Crosby should answer his damn phone.

Because, as I glance through the diner window at the parked SUV, keeping a doubly obsessive watch over the vehicle with stolen evidence tucked under the seat, there's not much time to mount a defense. The lab will report the carving knife missing soon, then the calm illusion will shatter.

Tabitha the waitress approaches with our order, and I flex my hand to chase back the persistent tremble and reach up to accept the to-go cup of coffee. "Thanks," I say to her.

She says nothing in reply, her features impassive, as she places a plate of breakfast food before the agent. When she steps away, she pauses to look back and catch my gaze.

My cellphone rings. Startled, I break away from her eyes to grab the call. I answer on a shaky breath. "Mr. Crosby, thank you for returning my message."

"Yes, well," he says, "I was honestly surprised to hear from you, Miss St. James."

I rise from the booth and point to the diner entrance, coffee in hand. "I'm stepping out to take this." Hernandez nods once, not looking up from his dish of eggs and bacon.

Pushing through the diner door, I welcome the cool hit of night air, a soothing balm to my inflamed lungs.

"So tell me," Crosby says, "what has my client gotten himself into?"

While I launch into the difficult details, I pace the sidewalk, finding the cracks in the concrete a strange comfort. This town's ghastly framework leeches into its inhabitants, breaking down the structure like the decomposing skeletal remains in the ravine. Kallum saw a work of art in the macabre destruction, and I wonder if that's any different than how I view crime scenes.

I glance up at the night sky, at the dark circle that seems to rim the pale moon in eerie prelude, and I can hear Kallum whispering in my ear, calling me his moon goddess.

I shake off the phantom pang of his touch. “So, Mr. Crosby. What is your advice?” I say in conclusion.

“Halen, I am very sorry for what happened to you.” Crosby, for once, doesn’t sound patronizing, and I swallow past the ache in my throat. “You will press charges, yes? I can represent you in this matter as well.”

“I...um...” The search for words leaves my voice trailing off. “Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

“On the contrary, my client coming to your aid works in his favor,” he says candidly. “And, of course, this FBI agent needs to be prosecuted.”

Ah, there’s the lawyer I remember. “Fine. Yes, I want to press charges.” I used my kit to collect and bag what evidence I had on my person, like skin cells scraped from beneath my nails. I bagged my clothes, grabbing a change at the hotel, where I managed to take pictures of scratches and fresh marks.

“All right. Good,” he says, and I hear him make a note. “My client has been detained for allegedly assaulting a federal agent. But has he been processed yet?”

I shake my head out of habit. “I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.”

He scratches out another note. “Okay good. Let’s go over a few details before I arrive in town tomorrow.”

A sudden gust of wind whips strands of my hair across my face. With a frustrated sigh, I set the paper cup on the sidewalk and dig into my pocket to retrieve the hairband. I shoulder my phone as I pull my hair into a low ponytail, my fingers rubbing the hairband in search of the seam...and my movements stall.

“I need you to have someone trusted keep an eye on Kallum,” Crosby is saying. “Just please, don’t let him talk. Mr. Locke has a bad habit of... talking.”

But I’m barely listening as I feel the hand-sewn seam along the yarn. Releasing my hair, I bring the hairband closer and turn it over, examining the intricate patterned detail of threadwork, the precise stitching. The flawless technique.

Crosby's voice drones on in monotone in the background of my thoughts. My chest prickles as awareness floods me, rushing too fast.

I pick up my coffee and move off the sidewalk into the empty street, turning to look down the dark road toward the police building, to where a silver Honda is parked.

The driver behind the wheel flashes the car's high beams.

"Mr. Crosby, I'll need to call you back."

I end the call and pocket my phone, my feet already moving in the car's direction. The frantic pulse of my heart riots in my veins. The hairband wrapping my wrist is hot against the rope burn.

The sound of a car door opening reverberates against the darkness, then Devyn appears beside the vehicle. She drapes her forearms through the open car window, setting the door between us.

Her smile is soft, inviting, making me feel at ease. Safe even. The same way she made me feel welcomed that first day at the ritual crime scene.

Devyn tosses a glance at the police station. "I heard the bad boy got in trouble."

"That's kind of his reputation." I slip the hairband off my wrist. "How did you find out he'd been locked up?"

She shrugs. "This town has eyes and ears."

My mind flashes back to the moment Devyn quoted the proverb at the first scene. *The trees have eyes, and the fields have ears.*

I extend my hand, holding the hairband out to her.

"Keep it." She waves me off. "I make them, so I have plenty."

"I insist you take it back, Devyn."

Her head tilts inquisitively at the sharp note in my tone. "Laying it on a little too thick?" The levity of her persona falls away. She accepts the band, looking at it briefly before connecting with my gaze. "I was getting worried you'd never see me."

The warmth of the cup in my hand does little to lessen the chill crawling over my skin. A sickness pits out my stomach. “I see you now.”

“I’m not so sure. No one truly ever sees us, do they?” She reaches down and hits a button, popping the trunk of the car. “It’s like what you said at the ravine, how no one wants to believe a woman is capable of horrific things.”

“I don’t want to believe it,” I say, not masking the plea bleeding into my voice.

Her smile falls. “Just like you refuse to believe what you’ve done, Halen,” she says, presumably referring to what she overheard the night of Kallum’s ritual, his insistence that I’m the one who murdered Professor Wellington.

“That’s different.”

Her pretty features relax into a kind expression. “I think we’re more kindred than you realize.” She then turns away and walks to the back of the car. “We’re so easily disregarded on a daily basis. I mean, we could be angry about that fact, or—” she hauls my canvas bag from the trunk and shoulders the strap “—we can embrace the opportunity that disregard provides us.”

The coffee cup becomes heavier in my hand as I stare at my bag—the one I entrusted to her. The understanding of what Devyn has done...of what she’s capable of doing, sinks in fully.

I take a fortifying sip of coffee, needing the caffeine, the comforting warmth, the familiarity as I stare at my friend—the woman I thought I knew.

I still know her.

Sweat prickles along my brow as I mentally comb my memories. I see Devyn lining up her tools at the crime scene. An OCD tic I discounted as organized, proficient. I recall her at the house party, not questioning her claim about keeping an eye on the youth. Yet it’s where Kallum took me to spark the frenzy, a more logical reason for Devyn to be there, feeding that same desire.

Devyn has access to crime files. She’d have access to the Harbinger case, the details, to stage the crime scene.

I see her parked outside the hotel the day after I was attacked. I assumed the

carving knife was taken at the hospital, but it wouldn't have been difficult for her—a trusted member of the community; a friend of the inn owner—to gain access to my room.

I missed the obvious markers. From day one, she was the first on the crime scene. She pointed out the philosophical connection. She has access to the forensic lab. She could have tampered with evidence at any point, like transferring the rope fiber to the Harbinger crime scene.

All of which I should have noticed, if not for my obsession with Kallum.

Devyn hasn't been hiding herself from me at all.

“So is that why you're doing this,” I ask, needing the truth from her. “Because you feel unseen, unappreciated? Disregarded?”

Devyn huffs a derisive laugh before she tosses my bag into the backseat. “The psychology would be simple if that was the case, huh? But no.” She lightly shakes her head. “It's just not that simple, friend.”

As she approaches me, the guise effectively falls away. “I really thought I blew it on day one,” she says, a tenuous smile easing into place. “God, with that stupid Chaucer quote. I was being honest though, when I said I hated reading him. Everything I've told you, I was trying to let you see me, to make a connection, but he just kept getting in the way. Although, I guess, without him, I might have never really seen *you*, Halen.”

For the second time tonight, I feel violated. “You watched us,” I accuse her.

“You invaded my ritual ground.” She arches an accusatory eyebrow.

“I'm not whatever...link to some divine madness, Devyn.” I step around the car door to stand before her. “God, Kallum is insane. He used all that nonsense to his advantage to seduce me. He might have even brainwashed me. That's why I trusted you with the evidence, to try to help me understand *logically* what happened during the ritual. But none of it...it's not real. What *is* real is that I care about you, and want to help—”

“You will help, Halen,” she interrupts. “You already have so much.”

My lips thin, frustration searing my patience. “You tore apart a deer,” I say

slowly, soberly, trying to rationalize with her. “Devyn. A deer. Torn apart. By your own hands and teeth.”

“At the height of frenzy,” she explains casually. “Truthfully, I didn’t actually recall it right away when the hunters found my ritual site. I had to make sure I was first on-scene to eliminate any evidence. I steered Emmons away from the deer, but you wouldn’t let it go. Teeth casts? Really?” She sighs incredulously. “I didn’t have a choice but to botch the molds and contaminate the saliva sample. You left me very few choices.” She props a hand on her hip. “At least I’m going to offer you some.”

An ill feeling churns bile up my esophagus. “You killed people, Devyn.” I hold her gaze, trying to make a connection right now. “You killed Landry, and Emmons’ brother—”

“No.” She holds up a finger. “No, I didn’t. I’m not a killer. Leroy sacrificed himself. That was his calling. And Jake was already dead. I haven’t taken a single life.” Her dark gaze traps mine. “Can you say the same?”

Her words hold a menacing weight, the implication not directed toward Wellington, but the lives taken during the car wreck. The one where I was driving.

A crack fissures through my defenses, and I shake my head at her. “That’s low.”

“That’s life. Cruel, unfair. Full of secrets, and you have so many secrets.”

I reach out and take her hand. “Ones I would have told you about,” I say honestly to her. “But I don’t even understand what’s happening myself, Devyn. I’m lost, confused. But...we can both figure all this out together.”

She releases a breath, looks down at our clasped hands. “Maybe a few years ago,” she says, her hand pulsing mine in a reassuring squeeze, “that would have been possible.” Her gaze lifts to capture mine, and a hardness descends over her features.

A dull ache burns inside my chest. Dropping her hand, I step away. “What is the hemlock for, Devyn?” If what Kallum believes is true, that Devyn wants me in place of the victims, then there’s at least a chance I can reason with her here.

“Where is the knife, Halen?” She counters, cocking her head. Dread prickles my skin. If she knows about the missing evidence, then Agent Alister might already know, too.

“Oh, that’s right,” she says. “You don’t play by the rules, but you expect others to do so.”

I look back at the diner, waiting to see Agent Hernandez walk through the door, and a hazy glow stems from the florescent interior. The streetlights twinkle a little too brightly, and as I tilt my head, multicolored tracers streak the night.

“You could…” Devyn says, following my line of sight. “You could scream. You have a phone in your back pocket. You could call for help, or you could just run. I won’t chase you.”

“I won’t run.” Wherever Devyn wants to take me, that’s where I’ll find the victims.

When Kallum first told me his theory of the Overman, that I was in danger, a part of me was exhilarated. Knowing I could bait them. And that’s why Kallum hasn’t left my side. He felt that within me. He wasn’t fearful of the suspect—he was frightened that I’d risk myself to lure the Overman out.

Finally, a worthy sacrifice.

Through my fuzzy vision, her face blurs, and I blink hard. I touch my forehead as I stagger to the side, the sudden bout of dizziness increasing my heart rate.

I bring the coffee cup up, and realization grips my lungs in a vise. “Why didn’t you just—”

“Take you?” she says, eyebrows hiked. “Steal you away in the middle of the night like some brute? Attack you and force myself on you like that bastard Alister?”

My bleary gaze snaps to hers, and her features reflect her commiserating tone. “Yeah, I know what he tried to do,” she says. “Choice is the most powerful weapon we have, Halen. As a woman, you know this. I’m not taking your choice away from you.”

My laugh is clipped. “You’re not taking my choice away, but you drugged me. Do you see the faulty logic there?”

Her expression softens. “It’s meant to relax you. Not alter your decision making. You’ll need to be relaxed for what happens next.”

I force a swallow past the thickening of my throat. “You could have just come to me,” I say. “Talked to me. You’re my friend, Devyn.”

“I know this, Halen. And you would’ve psychoanalyzed me, and tried to make me see the logic. But this isn’t about right and wrong. Good and evil. This is so much bigger than all that basic shit.”

My equilibrium pitches sideways, and she reaches out to steady me. I hold on to her shoulder and find the gentle brown of her eyes. “Then where does that leave us?”

Reaching up, she traps the shock of white hair framing my face. She admires the lock, touching my hair the way Kallum would, before curling the length behind my ear. “You’ll come with me,” she says assuredly. “You want to know how I know this?”

I shudder out a breath, hating the layer of heartache encasing me at losing her.

“Because of that right there.” Melancholy touches her smile, affecting, sincere. “How long before the pain hits in the morning? A minute? Not even a full thirty seconds? How much reprieve do you get before you remember all the death, the loss...?”

A violent ache rips through my chest wall, the pain stealing my breath. The stinging pressure builds behind my sinuses, and a tear tracks down my cheek. I suck in a gasp, lips trembling. “Fuck you, Devyn.”

“I’m not your enemy, Halen.” She palms my face, her thumb swipes my cheek to clear the tear track. “Memory is your enemy. Consciously trying to heal from the pain hurts worse. So much worse. I can help you forget the pain. It’s easier to simply...let go.”

A surge of dizziness crashes over me, and I sway out of her touch. Coffee gripped tight in my hand, I say, “I’ve fought every goddamn day not to give

in..." I trail off to catch my breath. "There is no easy way out."

There is always hurt and pain left in the wake of death.

There is always someone left to suffer the loss.

She presses her lips together, features drawn tight. "Only through pain and suffering do we ascend," she says. "That's why it's you, Halen. Take my hand."

I wipe my face, lightheaded, as a laugh slips free. "Why would I ever do that?"

"Because, there's so much you want to know, *have* to know. And, where he merely dangled answers just out of your reach, I will give them to you freely."

I lock with her gaze. "Everything has a price."

"But it's the price to solve your mystery."

I look at the police building, to where Kallum is locked within its walls.

I came to this town to find the lost victims. But I was caught in a web, tangled in a bigger mystery, and I've since become the one who is lost.

A warm buzz courses my veins. Acceptance is solace. "What is there left to lose."

As long as no one conducts a search of the FBI vehicles, then Devyn's attempt to frame Kallum for the Harbinger murder will be faltered. If I don't make it out of this, I know Kallum will. Crosby will arrive in town tomorrow. And Kallum always finds a way to outsmart everyone.

Because I already know what comes next.

I bring the coffee cup to my lips. Holding Devyn's deep eyes over the rim, I drink.

"Good girl." Devyn holds out her hand. "It's time to go."

The lights twinkle brighter as my pupils dilate. Sounds are louder. Devyn is more beautiful than I've ever seen her, a siren luring me with her angelic

voice.

I slip my hand into hers. “Take me to them.”

CREATIVE GENIUS

KALLUM

Of all the deities on the Greek pantheon, Dionysus was the only god who demanded a violent ritual in worship. The rending of animal and human fed an innate, primal desire within, creating a link to the god himself.

Some scholars theorized this violence was not only acceptable but essential in order to balance our flesh and spirit, carnality and essence.

Jung expounded on this theory with his hypothesis that to balance the totality of opposites within oneself was to become liberated, elevated. The closest one can ever be to achieving divinity. If you don't go mad in the process.

A truly daunting undertaking, as Nietzsche lamented in his own words: *"I undertook something that not everyone may undertake: I descended into the depths, I bored into the foundations."* His harrowing quest into the abyss of his psyche, where psychosis claimed his mind.

And where all others have seemingly failed, the Hollow's Row offender has set out to succeed, to attain the unattainable primordial wisdom. Walking in the footsteps of the greats from the past three millennia. To become transcendent and ascend to the highest plane of human consciousness.

A path scored by the deepest pain, the most profound suffering. The destination only reached by breaking, most violently, through our very foundation.

I cast a look down at my hand. Dried blood gathers dark in the creases of my knuckles. The skin split over bone. A garish mix of red and violet bruises wrap the flesh. A throbbing hot ache flares beneath muscle and cartilage. The slashed flesh of my palms stings and demands I feel the pain.

And still, there is no physical pain that can rival the anguish which tore through me the moment I heard Halen scream.

Miguel de Unamuno wrote: Consciousness is a disease.

I flex my hand, lighting up the pain. To deny this inherently savage part of

ourselves is to deny our very existence, our consciousness—to allow the disease to creep in through the slats of our mind and rot us from the inside out.

Peace and violence cannot reside simultaneously; one is always the answer to the other.

Despite what my sweet muse claims she wants, my painful affliction is knowing exactly what Halen needs—and it's not the good guy.

When I wanted her to see the man, she saw the devil in me, and yet that's not what she fears.

The grim truth is, such constrained morals and actions can only result in violence.

As Agent Alister demonstrated tonight. With his tightly laced veneer in the FBI. Rule abiding. Law enforcing. Good doing. He is a man of high morals. He fights the evil in the world.

And when those tightly wound constraints snap, he becomes that very evil. I'm not here to be his judge or jury. He's already failed by the world's standards. But by succumbing to his weakness, he made a grave fucking mistake with me.

For that, I will be his executioner.

The agent eyes me now from across the fluorescently lit holding cell. Arms tensed at his sides, he balls a bloody cloth in one hand. His dress shirt torn at the collar, his pallid skin is sheened with nasty purple bruises from my fist and scratches from Halen's nails. His nose is broken; a dark-red seam slices across the bridge.

Standing before the cot, I stare at his busted face, my mouth twisted in smug satisfaction. My knuckles ache with throbbing heat as my hands fist, and I latch on to the pain, let it ground me, rooting me where I stand as the desire to commit carnage thrums through the cells of my body.

The need to end me is banked in the hollow pits of his eyes. Ego wounded, pride destroyed, he can't walk out of this holding cell and leave me standing.

Before I even entered the building, I tasted Halen's fear, a hit so pungent, the bitter aftertaste of clove still clings to the back of my throat. That alone is a violation he must suffer for.

Wrath resounds within me, and I see Halen all over again—his hands holding her down, tearing at her clothes—and I know before I leave this room, I will paint the off-white walls red with his blood.

“You want to finish this like men,” I say to him, stoking the waning flame of his damaged ego. “No authorities or rules. No bullshit interviews or paperwork. Just one primal man facing off against the other.”

He spits a stream of bloody saliva at the floor in answer.

My crooked smile stretches. I've derided psychology in the past, largely in part to Jung's absurd attempt to incorporate alchemy in his psychological theories.

After much reflection, however, I've realized psychology is not unlike philosophy in some regard. According to the architect of chaos magick himself, Peter Carroll declared when symbolism and terminology is stripped away, all methods of magick are fundamentally the same.

Belief in our will manifests our desires.

At its core, the psyche is a primal beast.

Our nature is to consume, to create. To hate, and love. Feel passion, and obsession. The totality, the balance. Death must exist so that life can exist.

There is nothing more primary than our desire for love—and our inevitability to destroy it.

All our lovely bad and beautiful things are derived from violence.

“The only people who know what happened in that office are you, me, and Halen.” Her name is a razor dragged across my bones. She's out there, right now, where I can't protect her.

Because of him.

I tamp down the fury vibrating my fucking sinew and say, “And the only

ones who know what will happen in this cell are you and me, Alister.”

“The only thing that’s about to happen is you’re being sent back to whatever fucking psycho facility you belong in. And Halen?” He takes a daring step forward. “That cunt is off my case.” Disgust curls his top lip as he glares at me through his swollen eyelids. “Hope she was a good fuck worth your freedom, Locke.”

Rage is a fire-hot branding iron shoved beneath my flesh. Alister turns toward the holding cell door, reaches for the handle.

“What’s wrong, Alister? Rules at the FBI made you soft?” My chuckle is mocking. “Damn, maybe I fucked the wrong pussy.” I unfasten the top button on the placket of my shirt, then snap the rest open, discarding the rumpled garment to the concrete floor.

His shoulders tense, the jab hitting its mark square in his fragile ego. When he turns to face me, all pretense is wiped from his hardened features. His gaze absorbs the stag skull inked on my chest, and a flicker of uncertainty registers behind his steely façade.

“When you show your face tomorrow,” I say, baiting him further, “all anyone will talk about is how you got a beat down by a fucking philosophy professor.” I touch the chaos star tattooed on my shoulder, feeling the pulsing drumbeat ricochet against my rib cage, the resounding demand for carnage. In a display of insult, I open my arms wide. “I don’t have a scratch on me.”

He grinds his molars against his feeble attempt at control.

“The whispers will circulate then,” I continue. “About how the asinine agent tried to rape—”

“Shut the fuck up,” he seethes, fury igniting his short fuse.

Monsters don’t like to be shown their reflection.

With a knowing sneer, I dip into my pocket and produce the pull tab from Halen’s jeans. I hold it up, my finger pressed to the broken prong.

Alister’s incensed expression wavers, the evidence of his attack on her held between us.

An interruption comes as three hard knocks at the door. Breaking his locked stare, I shift my gaze to the door. The sight of Agent Hernandez through the glass trips my heart.

“Where’s Halen?” I shout.

Alister reaches behind him to open the door, never taking his eyes off me. “What do you need, agent?”

Hernandez glances between me and Alister, his features contorted in confusion as his eyes land back on me, shirtless. “She’s missing,” he announces. “I can’t find Halen, or get her on her phone.”

I’m barreling toward the door before the last word leaves his mouth. Alister places his hand over his Glock fastened in his chest harness, issuing a nonverbal warning. My steps halt, every muscle in my body strung tight and ready to snap.

“She’s probably off getting herself into more trouble,” Alister says to the agent. “Get Agent Rana and the team on it. I don’t want to be bothered.”

My eyes narrow on him. He’s not concerned for her safety, nor does he think she could lead to the suspect. He wants the department cleared out. He wants us alone.

Curbing a dark smile, I move my focus past his shoulder to Hernandez hovering in the doorway. “Find Devyn,” I order him around my clenched jaw. “She’ll help locate Halen. Go now.”

With one last unsure glance between me and Alister, Hernandez nods and takes off.

Alister loiters in the doorway like a taunt. Tossing the bloody tissue to the floor, he pivots just long enough to shrug out of his gun harness and set it outside the cell. Then he closes and locks the door, sealing us inside. He places the key on the sill beneath the glass window.

Another taunt.

“She’s in danger.” The sharp tong of the pull tab bites into my fisted palm.

“And I sent every officer and agent out to search for her,” he says. “No one

will accuse me of not taking a concerning matter with a consultant seriously.”

I run my tongue across the smooth surface of my teeth, a flame of malice licking my viscera. It’s in Alister’s best interest for Halen to simply disappear.

And goddamn it, my little Halen took the first opportunity she got to put herself right in the path of the Overman. Her fucking logic and misguided belief in some ultimate good.

Holding the zipper tab between the fingers of my left hand, I press the broken edge of the tong to my right pectoral, breaking the skin. I carve a line into my flesh opposite of the sigil on my right, the symbol for my muse.

The revulsion overtaking the agent’s face spurs me on, and I drag the brass diagonally to complete the symbol, a line of Latin uttered beneath my breath as I charge the sigil.

“You are one sick, twisted fuck,” Alister says.

I lick the blood from the brass tab, my eyes boring into his. Blood is the most potent medium. Blood sacrifice is the most concentrated form of black magick.

I just need a sacrifice.

“I’m leaving this cell.” I take a determined step toward him. “First, I’m going to fuck you up, Alister, then I’m taking that key—” I nod to windowpane of the cell door—“and I’m walking out of here.”

A cruel smile pulls at his split mouth as he yanks his loosened tie from around his neck. “Now that my back’s not turned, I’d really like to see you fucking try, you arrogant prick.”

My nostrils flare, teeth gritted as the tangible image of him forcing Halen down against the desk surfaces hot and vile.

I want the fire. I beckon the flames, allowing the blaze to char the remaining fragments of my damned soul to resin and take me right down to the bowels of hell itself.

I may still harbor a loathsome relationship with the mad philosopher, but I

respect his fearless pursuit into the divine madness, where he stared his terror down in the depths.

I will meet him there tonight.

With the act of pure, bestial savagery I'm about to unleash on Alister, those gates of hell will open wide.

Chest heaving, I let Alister take the first swing. He nails a direct punch to my flank. Pain lights up my organs. His fist lands a vicious strike to my jaw next.

I spit the taste of copper from my mouth, turning a bloody sneer on him.

A red mist layers my vision, and I welcome the destructive force of chaos.

One must embody destruction to create—and I'm about to create a goddamn masterpiece.

GERARAI PRIESTESS

HALEN

L ights strobe against my shuttered eyelids. At times, I'm able to fight my eyes open to see the glare of streetlights through a blurred windshield, but I'm unsure of how much actual time has passed. I struggle to move, as if my body is submerged beneath a thick substance, trapped in a night terror I can't wake from.

It's like trying to breathe through cellophane when I finally come up for air. I'm aware I've been drugged. Rohypnol or some other hypnotic drug, although it's not strong enough to drown out the pain as I'm pulled right back under, drifting beneath a sea of memories triggered by the flashing lights.

The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. Pressure builds at my temples. My forearm is on fire. The blaring blue and red lights ache in my eye sockets, competing with the angry wail of a siren. Sluggish, I look over, and Jackson is there. But like being hit with the force of a tidal wave, I immediately know he's gone. There's no slow progression past denial. No hope to cling to. His unseeing eyes stare vacantly into mine, and I know he'll never see me again.

My first impulse is to cry out for my mom, to hear her soothing voice, feel her comforting embrace. Then the memory of losing her just months before detonates, imploding my entire world in a black hole.

I suffer the loss alone.

And pray the guilt kills me.

The flicker of light against my eyes grows stronger. I see the candle flame dancing in my room, Kallum's shadow lurking in the corner, and despite the fear his presence stirs, warmth touches my cold skin, and then I'm engulfed by the heat. The strobing blue and red fades, replaced by a sun so brilliant, I raise my arm to shield myself from the burn.

A heavy, rhythmic drumbeat vibrates against my skull. The tempo increases, pulsing inside the hollow cavity of my chest. My heart syncs with the furious drumming, luring me out of the void, and when my eyes finally open to take in the waking world, I want oblivion back.

A circle of fire blazes amid the darkness. The flames rise up all around, casting obscure shadows over dark walls. Through the smoke piercing my vision, I make out the jagged mouth of a cave, the opening wide and partly expanded along the ceiling to reveal a starry sky.

That's not right, my inner voice intones. There are no caves in Hollow's Row or the surrounding towns.

The drug haze shrouding my mind weakens enough to allow me to push onto my knees. I touch my face, my stomach, thighs, assessing my body. Anxiety barbs my chest as I find my clothes have been removed. Every probing touch is met with a numb, tingling sensation as restored blood circulation attacks. My mouth is dry, and I swallow past the vile taste coating my tongue.

As my vision clears further, the obscure shadows sharpen. Shapes become distinct and silhouettes surface through the undulating flames, and my breath stalls at the sight of bone-white antlers branching above the crackling fire.

Then I hear the guttural moans. The sickening, disembodied sounds echo against the walls of the cave.

The higher men.

The victims.

They move in closer to the circle of fire. Shadow and light emphasizes the grotesquely mutilated features of their faces. Eyes sewn shut, thick black stitches slash their discolored lids, the sockets concaved. Bodies unclothed, their bare skin gleams with sweat and blood. Fawn skin drapes the shoulders of many of the women. Men are clad only in armbands—and they're aroused, *erect*. Their movements are disjointed, enacting a disturbing dance to the rising drumbeat, which stems from a shadowed man striking some archaic drum.

They're not just terrifying figures, or victims, or pictures from files. Despite their marred features, I recognize Roni Elsher and Vince Lipton. Two of the victims I studied to interview their families.

These are *people*.

People who had lives. Families and careers.

Still dazed, I try to keep this thought central as a wave of sickness crashes over me at the sight of their horrifying presence. I touch the cool earth to calm myself. Before the fire, symbols have been carved into the hard-packed dirt to ring the magic circle.

And I realize, as panic rakes my insides, I'm at the center.

This is some version of hell.

And Devyn is its goddess.

Fearless, she walks through the flames unscathed to enter the circle. Adorned only in a necklace of bone, gauzy skirt, and armbands with the same sheer fabric, she holds her head high. The spiny antlers atop her head reach toward the cave ceiling. She's a Dionysian priestess, and every wicked fantasy from the underworld come to life.

This is her replica of the Dionysian Mysteries to support her delusion.

I can reach her.

I have to reach her.

Despite the heat from the perimeter fire, my skin prickles with a chill as Devyn approaches. Inhaling a steadying breath, I dig my fingers into the soil to feel the cool earth, something real and tangible to latch on to reality. "I'm here," I whisper to myself. I close my eyes and fist the dirt. "I'm here. I'm here..."

I find the scar on my arm, trace the inked words tattooed over the ruined flesh. Recite them over and over. *One must cultivate one's own garden.*

The garden is this moment in time.

And I, within it, is all I have control over.

The panic encasing my senses subsides, but only slightly. The drug coursing my system makes me feel as disembodied as the moans.

Devyn's consuming presence draws near, and I'm forced to open my eyes. My gaze travels up her naked body. In her right hand she holds a thyrsus, the god's staff coiled in ivy. In her left, she carries a silver chalice engraved with

stars, moons, and other symbols I'm unable to discern.

She drinks from the cup, sending a rivulet of red dripping down the corner of her mouth. As her eyes fall to me, her pupils are blown. She's not just intoxicated; she's drugged out of her mind.

"What did you give me?" I ask, my voice hoarse, my stomach pitching in need to rid the contents.

Her backdrop of flame and disfigured herd lends to her ethereal appearance. "A little taste of ecstasy," Devyn says, her persona fully absorbed in a frenetic state as she sways. "To reach our zenith, we have to submit to *ekstasis*."

Devyn snaps her fingers, and a woman with reedy antlers and her dark, naked skin decorated in red symbols walks through the fire. She's carrying the circlet of ivy, bone, and fawn antlers—the one Kallum designed for me to wear in his ritual, the one I gave to Devyn along with the other evidence.

Staring past the woman's shoulder, I see the same symbols on the wall that's marked on her skin...then the lifeless stag right below.

As Devyn offers her the chalice, I realize it's not filled with wine.

And the stag is not the main sacrifice tonight.

After handing off the staff to the woman, Devyn sinks down in front of me and, taking my face between her palms, she begins to rock us to the rhythmic drumming. "Don't look at them," she whispers. "Keep your eyes on me."

Body exposed and skin blanketed in gooseflesh, I surrender to her movements, letting her sway our bodies as I try to find her through our drug induced state. "Devyn, please listen to me—"

"The act of *sparagmos* was more than reenacting the god's destruction and rebirth," she says, cutting me short, her voice as immaterial as our scenery. "It's a sacred rite to summon the god into the animal." She rests her forehead to mine, intimate, comforting. "Rending and eating of the raw flesh is communing with the god, inviting him in. By consuming the animal, we in turn become one with Dionysus."

She breaks away, her mouth stretching into a captivating smile, and my heart pangs at the sight.

There is no greater destruction than one of self. And therefore, no catalyst more powerful to wield in alchemic creation.

“Destruction isn’t an end,” I whisper, Kallum’s words falling from my lips, “it’s a beginning.”

Her dark eyes gleam brilliantly in the dancing firelight. “Exactly.”

The loss I feel carves a hollowness through my insides. I fold my arms over my chest, feeling the raw ache of mourning as I cover my breasts.

I’d closed myself off from friends, colleagues, everyone in my life, never wanting to feel that pain of loss again. Then Kallum blew my barriers wide open. But Devyn...she opened up a passage inside me, a tiny ribbon of hope. “I don’t want to lose you,” I tell her.

“You won’t.” She strokes my cheek. “We’ll be connected forever. Two halves made whole through primordial unity.”

As she takes my hands in hers, she pulls me to my feet. I stagger before she helps me gain balance, then she turns toward the woman holding the crown of bone and ivy.

Devyn brings the crown up, holding it aloft before she places it on my head, detangling my hair from the stems as she coaxes my strands over my bare shoulders. The weight of the fawn antlers bears down on me, like I’m reliving a nightmare.

My mind spins as I again tip my face toward the open sky, trying to pinpoint our location.

Come morning, wherever this place is, the aftermath will be a crime scene. There will be evidence of the people here, the objects they handled, the substances leached into the ground.

As I look around to take in the site, I view it through the eyes of a profiler. I observe the behavior, read the motives and actions in an abstract part of me that breaks down each movement and object beyond its purpose.

I see the macabre artistry, the violence, the horror. I see the shifting of dirt beneath their stomping feet. I see the staff held in reverence. I see Devyn's core nature. I see the flickering flames rising higher. The spines on the antlers. My clothes thoughtlessly discarded in a heap.

I see the way out.

The moaning grows louder, becoming a haunting song with the intensifying drumbeat. If I can break through to just one person... A small measure of doubt is all that's needed to stop this.

I turn in a circle, catching myself on a wave of dizziness as I stare past the fire, trying to latch on to a familiar face.

The heaving, gyrating bodies dance and grope in a display of debauchery. These people have no eyes, no ears, no tongues, yet they're absorbed in every other sensation of the flesh, using their bodies to touch and entice. Hedonistic acts so base and depraved as they give in to their desire, I feel feverish at the lewd sight.

"Vince Lipton," I say, my voice trembling. Then, louder: "Mr. *Lipton*—" The man I identify from his file doesn't respond to his name. Antlers nearly as large as Landry's were, he's a massive man, currently in the throes of a vulgar act as he ruthlessly thrusts into a woman on her hands and knees, his rough grunts rising over the drumming.

"Did you really come here willingly to save them?" Devyn's question is whispered close to my ear. She moves in behind me and wraps her arms around my waist. "Or, deep down, is it you that wants to be saved?"

The implication of her words pits out my stomach as her palms drift over my belly. Incensed, I trap her, my dirty fingernails stabbed into the backs of her hands. "I don't believe in any of this," I say.

"You don't have to." She releases me then, moving around to stand before me. "The deer didn't believe, yet they were a pure vessel for the god. And you, Halen, are the purest vessel."

As the priestess lifts her chin, she turns her palms up, giving herself over to the rhythmic bass imbuing the air. A cold sensation prickles my flesh, the emptiness a physical entity invading my soul.

I lower myself to the earth, knees dug into the cold soil, and search out the mark on my flesh. My hand slides between my thighs, and my fingers delicately trace the sigil. Just as I'd done before, lost in the darkness, adrift in a vulnerable state, afraid of my feelings...I seek out a connection to the man who frightens me, who challenges me. Calling to him just as I did in that moment. My connection to Kallum is tangible—more real than my fear—and my pain is a summons to him.

Kallum can *feel* me.

And the fact I believe this shatters all my logical defenses.

I reach up to remove the circlet, and Devyn's hand coils around my wrist. "That's enough indulgence," she says, yanking me up to stand. "I've been patient too long."

"Devyn, if you do this...it won't change anything. You'll still be the same. Whatever you're suffering, whatever you're trying to heal, it won't be cured through me."

"Us," she stresses. Her eyes take on a furious edge, and that anger reveals a fault in her façade, if only for a heartbeat before she re-erects her guise. "We're the path. When I saw you dancing at the Lipton's house, I beheld your profound suffering. You were already so close to enlightenment, to experiencing transcendent *Rausch*...I was in awe."

I swallow past the raw ache. "What you saw was me being seduced by Kallum. What I experienced with him has nothing to do with any of this..." I glance around at the frenzy of sex and delusion. "This is monstrous, Devyn. What you've done to these people is monstrous."

Her dark eyes flash with firelight. "I've liberated them."

"You've *mutilated* them." I grab her hand. "This can't be what you wanted, what you imagined. I refuse to believe that." As I stay locked to her gaze, a tiny flare of hope springs within me. "What happened to you?"

What she allowed me to see within her at the ravine was real. It can't all be a part of her mask. The moment Kallum said the site was a glimpse into what made the Overman vulnerable, I felt the truth in his words.

Tragedy.

I recognized that fatal pain inside her right then.

And right now, I have to go for the jugular.

“Where is Colter?” I demand, gripping her hand tighter. “Where is your brother? Did you mutilate your own twin, your own flesh and blood for your vanity—?”

She breaks out of my hold, her palm striking my face in a sharp slap.

Head canted sideways, I feel the burn of her heartache, my skin alive with the searing sting. I focus on that pain, allowing it to sober me further.

Just as suddenly, Devyn’s hand seizes my throat in a firm clutch. Nails biting into my skin, she draws my face close to hers. For one second, I glimpse behind the perfect, beautiful mask she wears. In the quickening beat of a drum strike, I see the hurt, the grief veiled behind the drugs in her shimmery eyes.

“You think I give a *fuck* about some ancient god or his brainless followers,” she hisses. Shaking her head, she laughs breathlessly. “I wanted to give you all your answers, Halen. But—” She slowly and deliberately releases my throat. “I think you should die with your mystery.”

As quickly as I break through to her, she shuts me out. She’s a master.

A shiver coasts over my naked skin, and as Devyn backs away, she reaches out to the woman holding the chalice. Her eyes stay trained on my face as she brings the cup to her mouth and drains the contents.

When she drops the cup to the earth, her eyes are glassy, her features slack.

She’s gone.

Devyn raises her arms, the fire seeming to snap and rise higher at her command. “I will take it freely or by force, but I will take it, Halen.”

“What happened to choice?” I demand of her.

“You already made yours. Now you’re here. At least you were given one.” She whirls toward her devoted subjects. “Hear me,” she shouts. “We

willingly gave up our worldly possessions, our mundane lives. A test of our devotion.”

The horned people around the circle of fire groan and pound their chests in answer.

Devyn spins around and around, arms outstretched. “And you know the word,” she cries, her voice pitched high, carrying over the drumming. “I love those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice, but who instead sacrifice themselves for the earth, so that the earth may one day become the *Übermensch*’s.”

I recognize the recited passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Devyn uses the wordage, twisting the meaning, to control her higher humans.

“The Primal Man sacrifices himself, tearing free of worldly constraints, in order to be reborn, to recreate himself,” she says, her glassy eyes settling on me. “This is the way to our divine immortality.”

I push forward, staring her in her bloodshot eyes as I search my memory for a passage to combat hers, any purposeful words I can use to get through to these people. “Zarathustra stated, ‘This is my way, where is yours?’” I shout, “thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way,’ for the way, that does not exist’.”

I turn to face the victims, these people who have been misled, following *literally* blindly, offering pieces of themselves to achieve Devyn’s misguided wisdom.

“This is what you believe?” I ask of them. “Nietzsche defined it so damn clear that there is no formula or path to follow, that each person must seek their own way. But you’ve followed hers. You’ve *sacrificed* yourselves for her way. Can’t you see the failed logic in that?”

The eerie moans ascend higher, the flames popping against the dark abyss of this hell. The higher men fall to their knees in frenzied worship of their priestess. They’re too far gone, lost to depravity as they fuck and worship and submit to their will.

“You have no idea what they’ve suffered to be here,” Devyn says.

Then, with a defiant smile, she tilts her head. The dark tresses of her hair spill over her bare shoulders as she oscillates in sexy rolls of her hips to the rhythm of the swelling drumbeat. Her body gyrates, succumbing to the drug in her system, her movements becoming frantic, and a band of fear cinches my chest at the powerful sight of her.

She touches the antlers affixed to her scalp, caressing the bone as she dances closer to me. “Nietzsche was such a misogynist,” she says. “Overman. A ridiculous translation. I prefer *Over-woman*. As the *Maenads*, the fucking followers of the god themselves, were in fact women. Figures a man would try to rewrite history for his own *vanity*.” She spits the word back at me, her dark eyes alighting on my naked skin. “Your profile was wrong on that, profiler. My vanity has no place here.”

“Dance with me,” she urges, clasping my waist and drawing me toward the center of the ring of fire.

Smoke curls up toward the open ceiling of the cavern, and I follow the billowing trail, anxiety a claw constricting around my lungs as I breathe in the smoky air.

As Devyn coaxes me into an erotically sensual dance, I flash back to the ritual when Kallum endeavored to do the same, luring me into the frenzy.

“Where they have some,” Devyn says, motioning her head languidly to her higher men, “you have every aspect of the *Übermensch*, Halen. At first, I envied you that. Your connection to the primordial pain. But then, every path is unique, just as you said. And then there you were, amid my ritual ground, my answer.” Her eyes shine fiercely in the glow of the fire. “*My path*.”

She drapes her forearms over my shoulders, her eyes listless, her body rocking in seductive waves. For the briefest moment, I yield to her desire, allowing myself to be swept up in her embrace, trying to connect with her, where I can reason with her...

I stop, motionless.

The Overman’s ultimate weakness was always their humanity, what they needed to sever to fully ascend. I’ve been trying to reach Devyn’s humanity...but that’s no longer possible. She’s succeeded in concealing it

beneath drugs and her delusion.

Torn over the knowledge that I've already failed, the pain point is realizing I have to turn her over to authorities like this.

Her body stills as she looks deeply into my eyes. "I'm offering you eternal reprieve from your suffering. I even liberated you from the vile sorcerer, the wicked *pharmakeus*. I made it so he'll finally do the time you know he deserves. I'm giving you everything you wanted."

She braces my face between her palms. As her glassy eyes track my face, I allow her to press a tender kiss to my lips, embracing the connected sorrow between us, before I pull away.

"Devyn," I say, gliding my fingers over her soft features. "I promise, I'm going to get you the help you need. I'll be there. I won't leave you."

Her expression twists, a mix of uncertainty and her dazed state giving me the advantage to turn in her hold and elbow her side. Dropping to my hands and knees, I crawl toward the perimeter of the circle and rake my fingers through one of the alchemic symbols.

"No," Devyn shouts.

She drops to her knees beside me, her obsessive-compulsive nature triggered at seeing the defaced symbol. While she attempts to fix the marking, I claw the earth and pitch the dirt into her eyes.

She releases a furious, shrill scream that activates her herd.

"Fuck." I shove past her and dart toward the lowest hedge of flame. I blink hard, clearing my vision of the tracers streaking off the sparks as I glance around at the blind men and women feeling their way toward the center of the circle.

The woman holding Devyn's staff makes a sluggish move toward me, and I duck and grasp the long wand at the base, snatching it free of her grasp. I run toward the fire, holding my breath when I reach the wall of flame, then dart through to the other side, where my clothes lay in a pile.

Breath ragged and lungs searing from the smoke, I tie my shirt around the

end of the shaft. “Come on...” Once it’s secured, I thrust the staff into the flames. My shirt catches fire.

The ghoulish herd encroaches from all around, and disorientation chews at my mind. I reach up and remove the circlet, tossing it to the ground. Gaining balance, I grasp the staff with both hands and slash an arc through the air.

My attackers can’t see the fire, but they can hear the searing pop, feel the heat. I use the fire to push them back as I hedge along the wall. Their groans compete with the ringing in my ears, and I try not to look at their stitched eyes, to feel even a measure of sympathy that will hold me back.

The massive Vince Lipton closes his arms, making a grabbing motion as he forcefully barrels toward me. I plunge the fire into his chest, halting him and earning a furious roar.

As I fight my way toward the mouth of the cave, Devyn pushes to the front of the throng.

Wreathed around her neck is the chain of bone, and she unhooks a slender, pointed antler from the necklace and starts toward me.

I tighten my hold on the staff, the light of the flame illuminating her as she draws close. “I don’t want to hurt you—”

“Want is powerful, Halen.” She swipes the talon-shaped bone through the air, forcing me to back away. “I want to rip you open and wade around in your depths. My *want* is stronger than yours will ever be.”

Holding her fierce gaze—seeing even a sliver of what remains of the woman I know—I make a decision.

I drop the staff and run.

Making it as far as the opening, the pale moonlight spilling in to show the way out, I feel her hand snare my hair before she snatches me backward. I hit the ground hard on my shoulder. Pain flares through my bones.

Devyn descends on me, a wildness cast in her dark eyes. I block her strike with my forearm, keeping the weapon locked in my sight as she bears down.

A cold, despondent look passes over her face before she tears into the flesh of

my arm, coming away with skin and blood between her teeth.

A gritted scream rakes free of my chest. Adrenaline firing through my veins, pain isn't what ignites my rage. Fury tears a destructive path through my reason at seeing the damaged ink. Fight comes alive, and I dig my nails into her throat, squeezing her trachea until I hear her wheeze.

I gain leverage and roll her body off, where I mount her chest and capture her wrist. Eyes flashing wild, Devyn cries out, refusing to relinquish the antler as I pry it from her grip.

Chest heaving beneath me, a faint smile touches her mouth. "It's a delicate shift," she says, her voice coming out in a rasp. "Like walking a tightrope over an abyss. The choice to either take a life or sacrifice your own..."

Weapon clenched in my fist, I stare down into her face, at the blood smeared across her mouth. My heart riots in fluttering bursts against the wall of my ribs. I see the sharp tip of the antler impaling her neck; I see it so clearly... just as I stabbed Landry in his jugular.

I could kill her.

It feels so easy...

With that awareness, another vision fights for dominance, plunging me far past the depths. The horrifying imagery was stirred from the abyss when Alister held me trapped, the bloody face of a man surfacing to seize my mind.

The weight of the tire iron held in my hand.

No.

I'm not a killer.

"That's it," Devyn says. "Let it in. There's the answer, Halen. You see it."

Freeing the aching breath trapped in my lungs, I cry out, lashing back against the images shredding my mind. I draw the antler up, my aim fixed on her neck, and release a scream.

I throw the weapon.

Devyn rebounds the moment I surrender. She thrusts me off her chest and

commands her herd. “Take her.”

I flail as they grab my arms and legs, but my fight has been depleted. I’m lifted in the air and hauled back to the inner circle of the fire ring. The beat of the drum resumes, the disturbing cacophony of moans and wails filling the dark cavern.

I’m dropped to the earth, my back smashed to the dirt, my arms and legs stretched out. Chest rising as I try to grasp a breath not tainted with smoke, I struggle in vain against the banded hands around my limbs that pin me to the ground.

All will to fight lost, I close my eyes against the fire and surging bodies. I close myself off from the pain. I let the drug dull my senses.

Sharp pain slices into my shoulder. My eyes forced open, I see Devyn carving the point of the bone to draw blood. I bite into my lip, my arms braced against their brutal grip, a scream caught in the base of my throat. Then I feel the soft probe of her lips and tongue over the wound.

My head sways with the effect, my vision blurred.

She sinks her teeth into my shoulder. The piercing feels almost orgasmic, an answer to the constant, muted ache encasing me.

I’m about to be rend apart and devoured.

My system crashes into shock. I delve below the surface of my consciousness, searching for an escape, surrendering to the blackout...

And a shrill screech invades the dark.

A web of terror encases my body at the sound, the high-pitched chirp of the death’s-head hawkmoth. A distinct sound I’ve only heard while obsessively hunting a killer.

The Harbinger.

HARBINGER OF DOOM

HALEN

The horned higher men shriek in response to the ear-splitting noise. The drumming abruptly stops. A tense crack of silence follows before the pounding of my heart thunders in my ears. Then the screeching chirp sounds again, coming louder.

Devyn rises up, her hands mounted to my shoulders, as she follows the sound to the mouth of the cave. Through her drugged state, she sways, her movements lethargic as she seeks the source of the disturbance.

The hands fastened to my body slacken, the horrid moans and whines increasing until the men are forced to cover their mutilated ears. I take advantage of the interruption and roll onto my stomach. My fingers claw at the earth in an attempt to escape, and my gaze follows Devyn's through the flames to the dark silhouette outlined by hazy sky and stars.

A figure stands erect amid the night.

As he moves into the glow of the firelight, my breath stills. His face is contrasted in dark-red tones to depict a skull. His bare chest glistens in the vibrant blaze, skin washed in blood, as a fresh cut on his chest bleeds. He is the fabled bringer of death brought to life.

I sold my soul to a beautiful devil. And that demon has come to collect.

The threat of oblivion darkens my vision as I watch the Harbinger verge deeper inside the cave. Alarm thickens the air, terror curls up in thick tendrils with the smoke.

"You're not real," Devyn says, her words faintly slurred. She swipes at the air, as if she can dispel a vision. The closer he draws, the more corporeal he becomes.

"Run—" Devyn shouts. "Flee the false prophet. Do not hear his words of corruption."

The Harbinger's presence incites fear in the higher men. A bad omen, a doomsday to sabotage the Overman's ritual. Their screams climb above the

persistent screech of the moth.

The frenzy of chaos morphs into the blind fleeing deeper into the cavern. The straggling members of Devyn's followers stumble and grope as they abandon their priestess to escape.

Devyn rises to her feet, planting one bare foot to the small of my back. When his clashing gaze finds me through the flames, I'm drawn into him. He is beauty and death and destruction—and he's here, the Harbinger in Hollow's Row.

Kallum came for me.

With the barrier of flame crackling between them, Devyn stands facing her intruder. "You are him," she says. "I *see* you. You have revealed yourself to *face* me." I recognize Devyn's wordage taken from the Harbinger's letter she penned herself.

Not denying the accusation, Kallum leisurely removes a device from the pocket of his black jeans, and suddenly the chirping goes silent. As he narrows his gaze on Devyn, he says, "Do I look like a moth now?"

Devyn's heel grinds into the base of my spine. "I see your wings," she says, disoriented as she tips off balance. "I'll give you the offering, Harbinger. One we can share."

She reaches down and claws her nails into my hair. Gripping the strands at the roots, she drags me up to stand before her, securing an arm around my shoulders. In her other hand, she wields the honed antler, and she presses the spike to my neck.

Kallum's smile is deadly, the blood-red hollows around his eyes empty. "She's not yours to offer."

"The Harbinger isn't here to stop you," I say to her, trying to play into her delusion.

"You're my path." Her hold tightens. "She's my *path*," she says in challenge to him, digging the point into my skin. "I have *sacrificed*. I've walked the abyss. I have achieved what no other could. Not even you, demon of fate."

A calculating cruelty ignites behind Kallum's gaze, just as striking and lethal as the hardened features of the skull that masks his face. A shiver envelops me, the press of cold more bitter than the tomb surrounding us.

"Even the wisest among you is only a conflict and hybrid of plant and ghost," Kallum says, delivering a passage of the allegory Devyn has twisted for her delusion. "Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*! Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the *Übermensch*—a rope over an abyss." He takes a daring step closer to the fire. "What is lovable in man is that he is an over-going and a going under."

Devyn's hold around me weakens. Falling victim to the spell only Kallum can cast, she's racked with shivers. My entire body lit with pain and shock, it's too much of a burden to keep me held upright. Devyn removes her arm, letting me crumple to the ground.

Stepping through the fire, Kallum bares his teeth. "A *going under*, priestess," he says, his tone snapping as hot as the flames. "Going under is the sacrifice of oneself. I told you before—" he reaches out and touches the side of her face, his action tender, almost regretful "—how easily philosophy can be misinterpreted."

Tucking my wounded arm close to my body, I angle my face upward, catching a moment where clarity shines through Devyn's eyes. Hope hangs on a fragile breath, where I'm too scared to breathe.

Devyn follows me to the floor of the cave, her arms extended, her head bowed, tips of the antlers speared into the earth. "I've failed," she mutters against the dirt.

Relief fills the aching chambers of my heart, and I drag in a lungful of smoky air, letting my head rest on the ground. I'm not sure what this means for Devyn. Once she's apprehended, I won't have access to her. She needs help; deep psychological help. Not a jail cell.

Fighting the undertow dragging me under, I watch as Kallum drops to his haunches in front of Devyn and takes hold of the spine in her outstretched hand, sliding it away from her as he curls his fingers around the weapon.

Devyn looks over at me, the light lost in her eyes, a message delivered only

between us, and my heart thunders. I feel the volatile shift in the air, hear the drums echoing in my ears.

A cry shatters the reprieve as Devyn draws upward in a sharp arc. The curved tines of her antlers strike Kallum in the chest, knocking him off-balance. She attacks, attempting to impale his body.

The struggle ends with Kallum bracketing an arm around Devyn's neck, her face held by his palm. I see the spiked bone in his other hand...and fear twists my insides.

"You know things you shouldn't," Kallum says in her ear as he raises the weapon. "I can't let you remain a threat to her."

"Don't—" I say, my voice coming in a hoarse croak, but my command reaches Kallum, his attack halted in a heartbeat. "Kallum. *Don't.*" My eyes seek his beyond the dark hollows. "I'll never forgive you. Just...let her go."

A growl resounds from deep within the base of his chest before he flings Devyn aside. She reels unsteadily, the priestess righting herself to stagger to her feet. She doesn't glance back as she flees the scene.

My sight fading, I track Devyn to the entrance of the cave, waiting until she crosses into the night to let my head drop to the earth.

Then I plead for unconsciousness to claim me.

The arms of death surround my body, and I fold into his solid embrace. He carries me through the dark cavity of the cave, descending deeper into the darkness. As my eyes adjust to the absence of firelight, I make out a string of white lights ahead.

A stark realization washes over me, bringing a dose of reality. We're not inside a cave at all.

Track lighting runs along the ceiling. Guide beams line the walls, and below, rail lines run along the ground of the tunnel of a mine shaft.

A layer of lucidity breaks through, freeing my mind a measure from the hypnotic coursing my system.

I reach up and touch Kallum's face, trace the outlined hollows of the skull.

Feeling the dried blood. The monster that feeds off my pain, my personified daemon, presented as the killer I've obsessively hunted.

"The villain becomes a hero," I say, my voice weak.

His arresting eyes find mine and he looks into me, his smoldering, breathtaking smile an unbearable ache clutching my heart. "Sweetness, I'm your goddamn devil."

CHAOIST

KALLUM

Candlelight awakens the dark shadows of the mansion library. After I light the last pillar candle on the mantle, I drop the match to the kindling in the fireplace.

The weak flame threatens to extinguish, but just as the blue ribbon of flame snuffs out, the kindling catches fire. The crackling *pop* of tinder summons an image of the blazing ritual circle to the forefront of my thoughts, and I lower my gaze to Halen.

She sits before the giant brick hearth, her knees drawn to her chest. A threadbare blanket drapes her shoulders. A glass of water is clutched in her hand. Her gaze is fixed on the wispy flames, yet her eyes are vacant, unseeing.

I'd say she's in shock if I didn't know that she's endured far worse.

I stoop beside her and remove the glass from her hand. Wordlessly and without protest, she allows me to link her arm around my neck. I then lift her into my arms, and her body curls easily against my chest, unconcerned by the caked blood as I carry her into the bathroom.

"I'm loath to leave the one room that's uncluttered," I say, "but since forensics processed the house, I trust it's mostly sanitary."

"It doesn't bother me." Her tone is borderline apathetic.

I'm reluctant to uncurl my arms from around her blanketed body. However, she's wounded and needs treatment. What occupies her thoughts isn't shock or apathy, her injuries, or even the remnant of the drug in her system. It's the woman she set free.

There was a choice to be made before I brought her here. Whether to go straight to town and announce Devyn as the perpetrator.

"There's no urgency," Halen had said. "I came here to solve a mystery, and that mystery is solved. Soon as I make a report, they're going after Devyn."

The heavy confliction I still sense inside her is a battle she needs time to wage.

How do you measure good and evil?

Devyn was her friend, someone she trusted. Alister serves justice, an authority figure to respect.

I'm the fiend who seduces and corrupts.

With less than three hours till sunrise, I brought her instead to a place where she could hear her thoughts. She needs to assess the line between good and bad, right and wrong—or draw her own.

I place her on the vanity stool in the center of the marble room, leaving her only long enough to collect the supplies. One good thing about a hoarder's house? It has more than one needs.

As I set a candle on the vanity top, she says, "You discovered the mine shaft the first day we were here." Not quite an accusation.

"Technically," I say, uncapping the disinfectant, "I only discovered the mine on a map. I found the cellar access to the mine this morning while you and the team of feds cataloged the library."

She nods absently. She's still partially under the influence of the Rohypnol Devyn used to subdue her, but her logical mind can't stop analyzing, processing.

The digital mapping software the FBI use to search the town and surrounding area doesn't incorporate the old mines that were sealed off nearly a hundred years ago. One shaft of the mine which leads right to Landry's mansion, and that can be viewed on the old maps in the library. A convenient way to stay hidden for years. Devyn had her very own meditation cave for her and her higher men.

"You knew where to find them," she says, referring to the victims, the accusation more assertive in her voice now.

"I knew where to look," I admit. "Potentially."

"You were prolonging the case."

“Yes.” I set the rubbing alcohol on the floor and brace my hands on her thighs. “And I won’t feel bad about that. For wanting to be with you, to have more time. Those people are lost, but they don’t need to be found, Halen. You knew that at the ravine.”

She searches my face, trying to see past the mask of a killer in her pursuit for truth.

“Did you know it was Devyn?”

I hesitate. “No. Not for sure. I suspected everyone in this town, as I’m sure you did.”

She lowers her head, drawing the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “Figuring it out sooner wouldn’t have changed the outcome.”

“Logically, probably not.” I grab the cloth. “But it would have prevented a deeper connection to her, that feeling of betrayal.”

She looks away, trying not to feel the hurt. “That’s enough.”

I make a sound of agreement. Then, rising to my feet, I head toward the clawfoot tub and twist the brass handle. Water pours from the faucet spout, and I wet the cloth before I switch the lever to the overhead shower and draw the opaque curtain closed.

When I kneel before her on the stool, I say, “Give me your arm.”

Halen delays, clearing her hair from her face, before she finally relents. “I’m not broken,” she says, thrusting her arm from beneath the blanket. “You don’t need to stitch me back together.”

Her words strike deeper than any physical wound, her anger a mix of regret and humility. She allowed herself to trust and was betrayed, but she lays the blame on herself.

“I don’t want to fix you,” I say, taking her wrist in hand, a deviant enticed by the feel of rope burn on her delicate skin. “My motivation to mend your wound is entirely selfish.”

Steam thickens the room, the flickering lowlight of the candle flame softening the darkness between us.

Her swallow drags along the fine column of her throat as I stretch out her arm. My gaze drops to the crude gash torn into her flesh. The first two words of the scripted tattoo have been bitten away, destroyed.

A burn hotter than the searing flames of the underworld coils my viscera.

“She wasn’t...herself.” The hardness in her tone tempers, her words meant to diffuse my climbing fury at the woman who Halen still feels a kinship with.

“She tried to eat you,” I remind her, finding her hazel eyes amid the faint lighting. “Devyn is intelligent. Despite the fact I may hold a mote of respect for her devotion to the teachers and not the hacks, she made a choice to blatantly misconstrue a dogma for her own selfish reasons.”

“Kallum...”

I take her weary use of my name as a request to drop the matter.

“*Hmm.*” With delicate pressure, I begin cleaning her wound. For now, I’ll give her the time she needs to find her balance. But my clemency is temporary.

Halen demanded I spare Alister in his office, and I obeyed without question, regardless of the fact I was seconds from tearing his still-beating heart from his chest. She couldn’t live with herself if I ended Devyn, so for my muse, I let the priestess live. I let her flee into the night, taking our secrets with her. She’s still a threat.

Anything my muse asks of me, I do willingly. That’s how the muse works, after all. We must surrender to it, our incarnate force of inspiration, our guiding intuition.

But there will be a moment to come when I can’t surrender. When the ask is too high, the sacrifice one I won’t be able to make.

While her thoughts churn deeper, keeping her mind busy, I use the damp cloth to sanitize the gashed flesh. Then I sterilize the needle in the open flame of the candle before I thread the eye, prepping to stitch her wound.

As the needle pierces her skin, I lift my eyes to measure her response to the pain. Her gaze snags on mine. “Nerve damage,” she explains. “From the car

accident. I don't feel much. There..."

I rest my fingers along her inner forearm as I suture. Like the scar tissue dulling her senses, she wants to mute her emotional pain. Devyn went for the hurt by impairing the armor Halen uses to shield her psychological wounds from herself.

Her rising desire to replace that hurt with physical pain practically strangles me, and I have to grit my teeth not to deliver on command.

"I received an email," Halen says, blessing me with a distraction. "I had requested a copy of your juvenile file."

Needle held over her arm, I bring my gaze to hers.

"I didn't read the email," she says. "I deleted it."

I let the silence stretch as I begin the second stitch.

Halen inhales a sharp breath, her forearm tensing. "You said at the ravine that family are willfully ignorant, that they refuse to see how dangerous loved ones can be—"

"I got my eyes from my father," I say, pulling the thread taut. "Heterochromia, a trait passed down. There's nothing insightful to learn here, little Halen. Just an unoriginal story about a bastard with impossible expectations. When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I felt relieved, knowing he wouldn't be around much longer. That my mother would have peace, that I'd be free of his constant pressures to achieve, to be him. But then I realized..." I halt my actions to look into her beautiful face. "Every time I stared in the mirror, it was his eyes staring back."

The spray of the shower hums in the quiet stillness of the room before she says, "How dangerous was he?"

I lower my gaze and begin the final stitch. "Dangerous enough that I didn't want him able to see my mother in his last days...days spent in a toxic vacuum of his self-loathing and vile reprimands. Dangerous enough that I stabbed his eyes out with his twenty-four karat gold pen so he'd be buried without them, and I'd never have to see him in the mirror again."

I tie off the stitch and lean down to snap the thread with my teeth, placing a kiss over the black stitches before I draw upright.

She tucks her arm under the blanket. “Thank you,” she says, her words holding a deeper meaning to my offered truth.

I nod once. “I told you, sweetness. All you ever have to do is ask. No need to waste resources.”

But she did, and her actions speak so much louder than her words. Despite her obsession to prove I’m her serial killer, she deleted potentially damning evidence to reaffirm her theories.

And she wants me to know.

“All right,” she says. “Now tell me everything else.”

So I do. I tell her what she needs to hear to make the connections, to link the pieces together mentally and see the bigger picture of the puzzle. The digital recorder I took from the police department, making a recording of speaker feedback from the conference room to use as the chirping sound of the moth.

While the ankle monitor is water resistant; it’s not waterproof. A decisive difference that will prove beneficial when Agent Hernandez is required to inspect the bracelet I left in the holding cell for its malfunction, to be determined that a day-long trek through thick marsh waters shorted the receiver when it became submerged.

As the ascension ritual requires a certain level of intoxication, I knew that in Devyn’s inebriated state, her delusion wouldn’t be difficult to manipulate. I’ve had a little practice at that with Dr. Torres.

Halen takes a moment to process what I tell her, then: “How did you know... that—” she nods, indicating the blood skull I used to depict the death’s-head hawkmoth “—would work on Devyn.”

“You,” I say honestly to her. “You told me the Overman would incorporate the Harbinger into their delusion.” I tow the cover off her shoulder to inspect the cut there. The sight of the bite mark fans an ember of fury in my chest.

“Show people a reflection of what they fear,” I say, “and they will question

their convictions.”

She nods slowly. “It’s fine,” she says, trying to recover the mark. I keep hold of the blanket, forcing her to meet my eyes. “It’s not as deep.”

Reluctantly, I release the blanket. The desire to sink my teeth into her and deface the mark is a demon throbbing beneath my flesh.

“You nearly beat a man to death,” she says, shifting the topic, “and I almost let you. It’s my convictions that are questionable.”

“For hurting you.” I tip her chin up, not concealing the rage still fueled at the memory. “And I’ll always be that man, Halen. The one who will spill blood for you. I should have torn out his entrails and let Devyn feed them to her minions. If that makes me a monster, I have no quandary in that regard. I might have stormed the castle and swept the princess into my arms, but I’m not the knight in shining armor.” Forcefully, I push my hands past the blanket and palm her waist. “In fact, I would destroy that fucker to steal the girl.”

She wets her lips, and I track the sweep of her tongue across her mouth like a starved beast. “Neither am I,” she confesses, stilling my breath. “I’m not some saint. I stole the murder weapon. I stole the knife, Kallum.”

The reason why she went back inside the police building to begin with. I nod knowingly. “You still have time to return it.”

Pulling her lip between her teeth, she shakes her head. “I have no quandary in that regard,” she fires back at me.

My nostrils flare, her admission stirring a temptation to do bad, bad things to her—to show her exactly how the rules don’t apply to us.

She pulls my hand from her waist, holding it in hers. Her fingers lightly touch the bruises, trailing over the split skin of my knuckles above the inked sigils. “You really would have killed him.”

My jaw tightens. “You didn’t want him dead.”

“No,” she says, stroking the ruined flesh. She brings my hand up and places a tender kiss to my knuckles. When her gaze flicks up to mine, her eyes swirl with molten heat. “I wanted him to suffer. Then I wanted him dead.”

The chasm between us falls away...and she's so close, I can taste her on my lips, feel her tangled around my bones. I want her fully, wholly, no secrets between us.

Halen gauges me carefully. "You left out how you managed to escape from the holding cell to begin with."

I free a strained breath. "I won a bet," I say, withdrawing my hand from her waist to remove the key from my pocket and hold it up. Halen's eyes track the bruising along my jaw from Alister's fist. "Only issue now is, what to do with the key once I'm back inside the cell."

Her gaze holds mine and doesn't waver. "Swallow it."

A thrill courses along my veins, and I thread my fingers around hers.

There's my dark muse.

Pushing the key into my pocket, I let a wicked smile curl my lips. The dry blood feels tight on my stretched features, and I'm sure the skull looks fiendish. Halen confirms this when she reaches out and traces her fingers along my cheek.

"I'll remove it." As I go to stand, she catches my arm.

"Wait." She looks at the cloth and holds out her hand. With a furrowed brow, I place the damp cloth in her upturned palm.

I lower to one knee before her, arms braced on my other, absorbed in the flickering light cast across her ethereal features. That's where I'll always find her, there in the flicker. Every chaotic, malicious need of my nature is set to stasis when she captures me for even the briefest moment in her light.

She brings the cloth to the medial zone of my cheek and lightly sweeps my skin, removing a layer of the skull to find the man beneath. She repeats the motion, her strokes tender, following the contours along my face as she wipes away the blood.

"What Devyn said back there..." She trails off. Then, as her eyes fuse with mine through the heavy vapor insulating the room, her hand stills. "You're not the Harbinger killer."

My gaze solders to hers, unwavering.

I don't voice a confirmation. I let her read the answer in my eyes.

Silence suspends us amid the dancing candlelight, a charged current the only thing animating my heart that threatens to stop fucking beating.

The cloth drops to the marble floor to break the spell. Keeping her eyes locked on mine, Halen presses her fingertips to the freshly carved sigil scored into my chest. Gingerly, she traces the deep cuts. "Was this for me?"

"Yes."

"How are you the most intelligent person I know and yet you believe in the power of sigils."

The arousing feel of her exploring my open flesh summons a deviant craving to have her crawl beneath my skin.

"Quantum physics," I say simply. When she doesn't balk, and I sense no confusion or dismissal of this, I continue, "Change how you view the world. When you no longer see it as merely material, then the ability, or the power, to invoke a belief comes naturally. If you want a thing badly enough, are willing to plead for it, die for it, kill for it—" our eyes clash "—then your only limitation to mastering causality is how far you're willing to go to possess that thing."

Her eyes track the swirled antlers of the inked stag as her fingers probe my slashed skin, her touch becoming more forceful. Her nails drag over the scored flesh to deepen the wound, drawing fresh blood. My heart scrapes cartilage when she brings a blood-stained finger to her mouth and slips the tip past her lips.

My fucking body ignites. Blood thunders in my ears, muting the sound of the shower. My heart is a feral beast rattling the cage of my chest as my vision darkens around the edges and narrows to a pinhole, predatorily trapping her in the center.

As she touches the stitches on her arm with those same blood-tipped fingers, she says, "You told me before that Voltaire is the philosopher you would have chosen for me."

My hands grip either side of the stool, holding me back.

She glances at the marred skin of her tattoo, at the black thread stitched into her flesh, before lifting her gaze. “But what if you’re the philosopher I want branded on my skin, Kallum.”

Whatever restraint I held shatters.

I have her in my arms at the same time she pushes off the stool to take me to the floor. She straddles my thighs, her mouth sealed to mine. I meet her frantic kiss with ravenous, covetous need before any sane thought has a chance to break through.

I turn my head and issue a harsh curse, trapping her face between my palms. “You’re drugged, Halen. I can’t—”

“That’s a requirement of the ritualist, the seer. Right? To be intoxicated.” Her heated words drop to my mouth as her fingers seek out the sigil again, and I’m rock-fucking-hard at hearing my little Halen use sex magick terminology.

I drag my thumb over her bottom lip, entranced by her. “Fuck, you lie so pretty.” That moment in the library, of course she’d already done her research. “You’re the only one to ever surprise me.”

I called for her, and yet, I still never saw her coming.

“Maybe...” She pauses to nip my thumb. “I just want to hear you talk about things. You give a lot away when I let you talk.”

A savage yearning shreds my restraint. “I’m done talking.”

Her swallow is hard, the plea in her liquid gaze flaying the pitch-black tar of my soul. “Then unlock me, Kallum. Unravel me. I don’t want to be blind anymore. I want to see.”

“Goddammit,” I mutter. Her scent sears my lungs, the shower steam infusing the aphrodisiac notes of ylang-ylang into my fucking pores, and I’m all but drugged on her. She writhes on top of me in search of friction, making my fractured control nonexistent.

I band an arm around the small of her back and lift her against me, flinging the blanket away. “Fuck it,” I say as I take her to the shower. “I’m no fucking

saint, either.”

SORCERY OF THE SOUL

KALLUM

I shove the shower curtain aside, nearly ripping it from the rod. Not bothering to remove my pants, I climb into the tub with Halen in my arms. Her throaty whimpers guide me to press her back to the slab of marble, caging her body with mine.

I devour her mouth like a famished animal, every salacious desire rend from my being by the soft feel of her sultry lips. She needs me to chase back the darkness, and I'm the demon to do that. I'll swallow every bit of darkness for her.

Her palms braced against my chest, she wanders her hands reverently down the hard planes of muscle, washing my skin clean as the warmth of the spray rinses blood between us.

I break away to tower over her, splaying my hand against her slick skin, streaking the crimson between the valley of her breasts in worshipful pursuit to memorize every beautiful, enticing inch of her.

And I glimpse her in my mind's eye, with blood coating her hands, droplets splashed on her face, bathed in pale moonlight—a muse delivered to me to rouse my dead soul.

I had never wanted anything or anyone as badly as I wanted her in that moment, and I never stopped. Each day I waited for her, my hunger only grew. I want her just as badly right now, to the point I have to will myself to slow before I consume her in a fit of gluttony.

She yanks on the belt secured around my waistband, and I catch her hand. “Not a chance, sweetness,” I whisper across her mouth as I trap her wrists and push her arms above her head. “Let me work my magick and burn that drug from your veins, then I swear, I'll fuck you until you literally see god.”

If I can't make my muse commune with a higher power, then I'm not worthy of her.

Her gaze snares mine, a fiery current banked there affirming her own vow to break me. “The rite is to repeatedly arouse the ritualist-seer,” she says,

arching her back until I'm forced to relinquish one of her wrists and cup her perfect breast, "to bring them to sexual exhaustion...never reaching orgasm." She licks her lips in a sinful taunt. "Are you going to arouse me to near death, Kallum?"

I smile against her mouth. "Devious little sprite, if I deny you gratification for that length of time, that torture will damn sure kill me first." I lower myself to take her peaked nipple into my mouth, sucking until she releases a strangled cry, then I swallow that lovely sound with a demanding kiss.

"Eroto-comatose lucidity is only one method," I tell her as I clasp the side of her face, trailing my thumb down her wet lips. "I much prefer the practice where I exhaust you by bringing you to orgasm over and over."

A state between awareness and sleep, induced to bring on a trance. Enhanced when the seer gazes at a sigil during the rite. Yet no matter the chosen practice, it's the intensity of the act that conjures the magick, taking what's present in the conscious mind at the moment of orgasm and reaching far into the subconscious.

A flame of hope is stoked by the chance such a state could elicit her latent memory.

In mirrored conflict, Halen touches my face, seeing right down to my core. "It doesn't matter," she says, her tone grievously fragile. "Whatever is in the past...leave it there."

A raw ache chars my throat with the powerful hit of her melancholy. During our ritual, I could taste her desire and hesitancy equally as she battled her rational mind for control. Feeling Halen surrender to us now, here in this moment of time, is like the purest dose of aphrodisiac injected into my bloodstream.

Her hazel gaze beckons me to abandon my pursuit to bring her back.

She's here with me now.

"I'm at your mercy, sweet Halen." I dip down and taste her lips, then meet her eyes as I implore her, "Destroy me."

And goddamn, she is divine torture as she does.

I drown beneath the torrent of her heightened emotions as she steals my breath with a sensual kiss, her body melding against mine seamlessly. My hands map her body, exploring with aggressive deliberateness to learn every curve and plane.

I lavish her neck with my mouth, my tongue delving out to taste her skin. The water does little to dilute the heady mix of Halen and blood, and it sends me into a feral lust, awakening the hedonist within. I kiss and caress tenderly, chasing each sweep of my tongue with a bite and scrape of my teeth to balance the edge between pleasure and pain.

She rakes her nails across my shoulder blades, summoning the fiend to my surface. I fist her hair and tilt her head back under the spray, granting myself full access to sink my teeth into her neck, feasting on her like a demon of the night. My goal to mark her as mine and override the imprint on her shoulder is a vicious demand.

Hauling her ass away from the marble, I glide my palm down the backside of her thigh and bring her leg over my jean-clad knee, spreading her open to me. I first trace the sigil on her sensitive skin, my cock damn near tearing through the confines of my pants in aching need, before I push my hand between her thighs and swirl my fingers over her clit. All sanity nearly shatters at the slippery feel of her arousal despite the water raining over her body.

A broken moan catches in her throat. Her muscles gather tight as she rolls her hips in needy undulations to speed my strokes, and when I slip inside to feel her tight cunt pulse around my fingers, I release a deep growl against the pocket of her shoulder.

Halen works her hips in perfect time to my building rhythm, fucking my fingers in abandon and killing me at the sexy-as-hell sight of her. She pushes off the shower wall and links her arms around my neck, unconcerned with the stitches or pain. She licks the sigil carved in my chest, tasting my blood and unleashing a depravity within me from the basest corner of my soul.

The primal urge to taste her on my tongue rears hot and violent to drop me to my knees.

Through the hazy curtain, candlelight bathes her glistening body as I kneel before my goddess and surround my mouth over her sweet pussy.

Fingers splayed in my wet hair, she tugs at the roots to deliver a hint of pain, igniting a bestial hunger to feel her tear me apart.

Her moans fall freely from her lips as I suck her clit into my mouth. I release a rough groan against her sensitive flesh, feral as I take her to the edge, again and again, until she's writhing in delicious pain so deliriously intoxicating, I'm drunk on her. Her thighs clamp down hard around me as I feast on her, fucking her with my tongue as my goddamn cock throbs in pounding fury to feel her sheathed around me. I continue to consume her saccharine taste, punishingly bringing her to the edge of climax before battling my own animalistic desire and forcing myself to taper off.

I don't stop until her cries for release tighten my skin in a hot ache. I don't stop until her body is shaking and as wild as I feel. I don't stop until the shower water starts to run cold.

When her knees buckle and she can no longer hold herself up, I sweep her into my arms and haul her to the library, our drenched bodies leaving a trail of water on the hardwood.

I shed my soaked pants before I spread the blanket on the floor in front of the fireplace hearth, then lay her down in the center, where I prowl over her wet body like a feral beast catching its prey. And her eyes pin me right back, trapping me above her.

"You tied me to a tree during the ritual because you think I'm dangerous," she says, chest rising with her quick inhalations. "Capable of hurting you."

Palming the side of her face, I stare into the glint of her irises reflecting the blazing fire. In my periphery, I catch sight of the fire poker, an object not unlike the one I witnessed her wield to mutilate the face of my adversary.

"Hurt me or fuck me, Halen. I want all of you. Every bit of your sweet torture." I close the gap between us, kissing her lips tenderly before I bite into her lower lip so I can swallow her breathy moan.

As I rise up, I say, "Tell me what you want."

Her swallow is forced. "To let go," she says.

"You can let go." I caress her cheek. "You can get lost, Halen. I promise, I'll

find you. I'll always bring you back, sweetness."

To prove my vow, I shift onto my knees and reach over to grab my discarded jeans. I pull the leather belt from the loops. Keeping my gaze fused to hers, I deftly wrap the wet leather around one of my wrists, then I place the end of the belt in her hand.

Halen lifts onto an elbow, her hand gripped around the leather. A trace of fear flashes in her eyes, gifting me a hit of her tantalizing honeysuckle and clove, before she tugs the belt to bring me closer. The uncertainty I feel in her is replaced by yearning as she secures my wrists together, rousing the deviant monster within.

She pushes her palms flush to my chest and guides me to lie back. She's the loveliest thing I've ever seen as she mounts me. Straddling my hips, she drives my arms over my head, a silent command to keep my wrists bound.

Her mouth rests against my ear. "I never put the necklace back on because I've always belonged to you," she whispers, and my fucking heart riots at her confession. "Just like the sigil on my thigh was always there, waiting for you to uncover it, for me to see."

Carnal heat scorches my goddamn blood, my veins drumming with the ferocious beat of my heart, her words slaying me.

If I die tonight by her hands, I'll savor every wickedly brutal second of that sweet death.

As she arches back, my cock is an impatient, greedy fucker at the taunting feel of her slick pussy nestled along my shaft. She bears down just enough to wrench a sharp breath from between my gritted teeth, and this brings a devious smile to her mouth that fucking owns my whole being.

I buck my hips up against her, rewarded with the salacious sight of her perfectly slight breasts bouncing. "Make me fear you, baby."

She reaches above my head and grabs the glass of water. Dumping the contents to the hardwood, she then smashes the cup, selecting a shard of glass. I'm hypnotized by her every action as she methodically inspects the piece for slivers, then traces the soft pad of her finger over my chest, her gaze trailing behind the symbol she outlines. Her needy pussy grinding against me

all the while, seeking friction.

The desire to know the thing she wants so badly that she's about to brand it into my flesh is driving me right out of my frenzied mind.

Like the white flame burning at the hottest degree, we're at a combustible state of change, our fiery alchemy transforming our elements into an elixir to sear us together. Pain and pleasure collide, energy exchanged and heated to molten intensity to purify our souls.

Her lips fall to mine, sealing a promise through her tender kiss, right before she pierces my flesh with the glass. My muscles tense as she slices a figure into the skin of my sternum, right above the skull of the stag.

The bite of pain is pure, erotic ecstasy, and she's never looked more alluring delivering it. Her body sheened in firelight, the white streak framing the side of her face and daring me to wrap her hair around my fist and yank her down against me.

My wrists flex against the leather binding at the thought, and when she lowers herself to my chest and licks the beaded blood from my skin, I'm a man possessed, ready to tear through my binds and ravish her until she's screaming my name.

As Halen laves the blood, she flicks her gaze up to ensnare me, looking so fucking sexy I clench my jaw, finding the will to keep myself restrained. And as she brings her mouth to mine, delivering the euphoric taste of her mingled with my blood, she mercifully sheaths her sweet pussy around the head of my cock.

I groan against her mouth. "Halen, I'm seconds away from chewing through this belt—"

She kisses me harder and sinks down around my rock-hard erection, eliciting a heated curse from my mouth at the feel of her tight warmth sheathing me to the base. She's fucking perfect; designed by the gods themselves, made just for me.

Fighting the demand to grab her hips and rut into her like a depraved beast, I keep my knuckles pressed to the floor, driving my hips upward to meet each sexy roll of her hips.

And I'm so lost to her, spellbound. I can't tear my eyes off her as she rides me, expertly rocking her hips, her eyes shuttered closed and her hair falling over her shoulders in wild waves.

God, so damn beautiful and *mine*.

She takes me with her as she gives in to her desire, panting sighs spilling free, her hands roaming my chest, nails clawing my skin to tease at her promised pain. Her fingers smear the pooled blood over my skin, the burn of the fresh cuts sparking untamed need to meld that fleshly pain to the anguish I always feel drifting below her surface.

To take us to catastrophic heights, to hear my name chanted from her sinful mouth and conjure a force of destruction all of its own to unhinge me utterly.

Halen rocks me into her with sensually slow undulations, shredding any sane level of control. I swear she's fucking infusing herself beneath my flesh, tethered to my sinew. I follow her movements, an echo of my other half, to meet her on that higher plane.

"Do you trust me?" The words leave me on a rushed breath.

Her movements slow as she looks into my eyes, the question a bridge between us, my apprehension tangible and mounting until she lightly nods, whispering a simple, "Yes."

Her *want* to trust me should be enough.

Yet the maddening way in which I crave to have her fused to my damn soul grips me wholly, and I bring my banded arms over her head and capture her lower back, hauling myself up against her chest.

"We're about to find out," I say, stealing her mouth in a fiery kiss to burn away the last remnants of my control.

Wrists bound, I pull her hips against me, driving inside her with a desperation to ruin us both. Her moans gather tight in her chest, falling and tangling with mine with each deeper thrust. She arches her back as I rut into her from beneath, her thighs splayed against me, my cock spearing inside her tight channel until her walls pulse around me, her orgasm hovering on the brink.

She bears down on top of me as she meets my fierce rhythm, her skin licking hot against mine to match the swelling flames of the fire.

“Goddamn ...so fucking beautiful, you kill me.” I lick her breast, scraping my teeth over the peaked bud, loving the way she shivers in my arms.

“Kallum—” Her voice comes as a plea between clipped breaths, and I thrust harder, my body demanding her screams. She’s so close to breaking.

“Not yet, sweetness...” My voice is gravel as I deny her what we both crave.

Hands twisted in the hair spilling down the center of her shoulders, I tug her head back and drop my forehead to her chest, seeking the frenetic drum of her heart. I fashioned the idea of her from the most violent part of me, aware of the dangerous trade I was offering.

But my beautiful muse was so much more than I could have dreamed.

When she nearly slipped into the void, I used my own blood to charge that first seal on her shoulder. A damn hermetic seal, locking her up tight. But it’s what she needed at the time, after her mind refused to accept such a horrifying reality. The threat of her mental state unraveling was clear. So I made a choice to lose her in order to save her.

The most selfless I have ever been.

But I almost damned us both.

When our chaotic nature threatens to destroy us, we need a scapegoat.

There’s an exchange, the scales have to be balanced.

I would be that sacrifice. I would harbor the darkness for her. I would eat that pain to prevent her destruction.

“We are the high and low notes,” I whisper across her collar, fusing myself with her and invoking the dark spark of creation between us that can only be reached through violence.

And then violence itself becomes beautiful. It’s almost too lovely, like staring into the hottest flame of an ember, almost unbearably ineffable.

If she kills me in return, I hope she creates something just as lovely.

I tear a wrist free of the belt and whip the strap around her neck. I gather the slack in a fisted hand, choking up on her throat. Her striking eyes flare wide, her emotions strangle my lungs as she gasps for oxygen, sealing my throat shut.

Breathe, I mentally intone, allowing her to pull in a single breath past her constricted airway before I tighten the strap.

“Trust me,” I whisper over her lips, her fear and anguish choking my goddamn throat.

Halen doesn’t reach for the belt. Her nails dig into my shoulders, her inner walls clamp hard to nearly level me, but her gaze stays with mine.

I stay lost in her eyes as I fuck her, one hand fisting the leather strap, the other fastened to her shoulder from behind, forcing her down against me in ruthless need to sink deeper inside of her, delivering my ruthless offering to break my lovely muse.

It’s there in the spark that ignites in her eyes, the beauty in the chaos, the harmony, the melody, the burning ember I’m unable to define that I only ever see within her silvery gaze. The balm for her heartsick soul.

Peace.

Peace is the balance to violence.

One cannot exist without the other.

One *is* the answer to the other.

As Halen is falling under, asphyxiation dragging her beneath consciousness, the surrender to her peace overwhelms her senses, and serenity sweeps through her with such power, damn near taking me under right along with her. I hold strong, letting my muse be swept out by the current.

Her wet eyelashes glisten as tears gather beneath her shuttered eyelids. The demand to taste her sweet tears rips through me with annihilating force, and I choke up on the strap once more, stealing any hope for one last breath...and the tears spill over, trailing down her cheeks in enticing, shimmering streams.

I hold her there, suspended between sleep and wake, heaven and hell,

marveling at the tears streaking her face. So beautiful and serene, her features cast in unearthly perfection. I kiss her lips delicately before I lick the salty path of tears, tasting them on her skin and lapping at her like the fiend I am. I murmur a Latin chant, my vow to always find her in the darkness.

Then I release the strap.

She gasps in a breath at the same time I thrust deep inside her, shattering her from the inside out.

“Oh, god... *Kallum*—” she cries out as her inner walls clench around me, so goddamn tight, her orgasm spiraling her over the edge.

“That’s right, sweetness.” I groan and drive inside her in brutal demand, my fingers digging into her thighs to bring her down against me harder. “Commune with me, your fucking *god*.”

We *are* divinity.

An answer I’ve been searching for my whole damn life, found right here in her sweet embrace. The goddamn devil would need to rise from the bowels of hell to steal her away from me now.

Her climax climbs to a crescendo, her body trembling in my arms as I deliver relentless thrusts to destroy us in the purest state of ecstasy. The release of her pain is so fucking exquisite, it expels me right from the abyss.

As she begins to come down, her hips still writhing against me in desperate want of friction, her wetness a conduit to ignite my dark soul, I band my arms around her and thrash inside her throbbing cunt. My muscles are fire as she rends my orgasm from deep within me, my steel cock pulsing with my pending release.

“*Fuck...*” I groan. “Goddamn, I love your sweet, perfect pussy.” I drag my fingers down her back, feeling the tantalizing scrapes on her skin from where I bound her to the tree. I bury my mouth against the soft junction of her neck and shoulder, a growl wrenched from the base of my chest as I sink my teeth into her flesh. The sweet tang of blood takes me crashing to the depths, that pure hit of illusive satisfaction grasped for only a fleeting moment—but it’s fucking heaven as I come, spilling deep insides her, rocking her hips to fuck her deeper still and take all of me.

My skin aches, the fire in my chest dampened to a smolder as I caresses her back in gentle strokes, inhaling her sweet, addictive scent.

Her fingers curl into my hair as her languid body rests, draped around me. “I could stay here,” she says, clutching my heart in a vise.

I tighten my arms around her. “I’m never letting you leave.”

One reprieve where I kiss her slow and tenderly in maddening yearning, my appetite for her insatiable. Then I take her with ravenous hunger all over again.

I fuck her until she’s pliant in my arms and we’re a tangle of body parts, fighting to fuse closer, fading into one another. I let her shatter against me over and over, consuming her breathy cries, baring my soul to her and letting her fire cleanse me in a way no philosophical canon ever could.

I’m still inside her when exhaustion claims her body and she falls into a heavy sleep. I hold her to me for a while longer, memorizing the sensation of her skin against mine, the sound of her tiny breaths. Stroking the sigil on her thigh, unable to purge the desire for her from my mind.

This is my weakness.

I was never able to let her go.

Averse to remove my arm from around Halen and leave her like this, I place a gentle kiss to her forehead. But there’s unfinished dealings to address, and a holding cell I have to return to.

Using the dwindling candlelight, I stare into the mirror and reverently trace my fingers along the sigil she engraved in my flesh, a devilish smile twisting at my lips. My moon goddess branded me with her celestial crescent.

I blow out the flame and then toss the bloody cloth along with the rest of the used supplies in the fireplace, removing all traces from the mansion. Like the Harbinger never existed.

The darkest hour hovers on the horizon, a reminder that there are still things to handle before the light breaks. It’s always darkest before dawn—a summons to spark the blackest of magicks.

HERMETIC SEAL

HALEN

Daybreak over Hollow's Row offers less clarity in the light. The town remains in an obscure shadow, its deeper truths hidden beneath a veil of murky marsh waters and masked faces.

The fire in the pit burned out after Kallum vanished into the night. I awoke to a cold and empty room, my body strangely rested and recovered after a short but intense sleep that I haven't allowed myself to succumb to since before the accident.

The predominantly rational part of me attributes this to the drug I was dosed with—yet a truth I can no longer deny challenges that assertion. There's another part of me that was unlocked last night with Kallum, a side where the deepest, darkest thoughts and desires were thrust into the light.

Letting go, losing myself to him...the surrender to not only trust him with my body but my mind, I'm changed. Irrevocably.

There's not a place on my body that hasn't suffered an injury to some degree. Bruised skin and muscles, cuts and scrapes—and most of the damage I welcomed from Kallum's touch.

Which of his touches first set this course in motion? Was it the graze of his hand against mine in the courtroom? When his hand circled my wrist at the visitation table? Or is there another moment in time still locked away where the hellfire of his touch branded me as his.

The butterfly effect claims that one small, seemingly insignificant change can work as a catalyst for extreme outcomes. But the result is only possible if the starting conditions are sensitive enough to affect that change.

My starting conditions were more than fragile, presenting the perfect catalyst for a man of chaos to disrupt my course.

I may never unearth the full truth of the night Kallum believes we first collided. One of the questions afflicting me now is whether or not I can accept this.

As I try to peer through the stained-glass window of the library, I tuck the corner of the blanket beneath my arm, then touch the coarse threads stitched into my scar tissue, the only proof last night was real. Every article that bore any proof has disappeared, just as he did.

Kallum is the expert in his field. He's an expert at many things, in fact. But his needlework skills for mending wounds is rather lacking.

No one person can be perfect in every area, no matter their level of perfectionism.

I continue to probe the unsightly crossed stitches on my arm, my mind following a trail of thought as I contend with a number of realities still to come.

A loud noise reverberates through the mansion announcing the arrival of federal agents before they infiltrate the library. I'm approached by one of the agents seemingly in charge, questioned on my condition, and urged to answer a barrage of questions.

By the time Agent Hernandez enters the library through a corridor behind the inlaid bookcase, I'm prepared to confront at least one of those realities.

"Dr. St. James, are you all right?" Hernandez asks, his features bracketed by deep lines, highlighting his lack of sleep and stressed state. His gaze drops to my neck, where faint red stripes from Kallum's belt mark my skin.

Before I present an answer, Hernandez turns toward the questioning agent and says, "She's to receive medical attention before undergoing any interviews."

I hike an eyebrow at his authoritative tone. The other agent only nods once before he begins directing a team to sweep the library.

I draw the worn blanket higher as I watch a line of special agents emerge from the hidden corridor behind the bookcase. Apparently, there is more than one access point to the mine shaft.

"I'm all right," I assure Hernandez. "Devyn Childs is the perpetrator."

I say her name quickly, like tearing off a Band-Aid, or ripping out my

stitches all at once.

He nods with certainty. “The task force is aware of that.”

My heart knocks heavily against my breastplate as confusion draws my features together. The bookcase pushes open farther, and more agents file into the library, weapons drawn. They’re dressed in tactical gear, and one of them speaks into an earpiece. “Five more recovered, sir.”

“What’s happening?” I demand.

Agent Hernandez ushers me to a private corner of the library, where he removes his FBI jacket and drapes it over my shoulders.

I draw the jacket around me over the blanket. “Thank you.”

“I’ll have clothes brought in for you.” He retrieves his phone and sends a text message.

“Would it be out of the realm of possibility to get a coffee?”

His mouth twitches like he might smile. “I can probably make that happen.”

“Thanks. How did you find me?” I ask.

He touches the earpiece in his ear and looks away. “Dr. St. James is recovered.” After a beat, he replies, “Yes, ma’am. I’ll bring her in.”

He drives a hand through his disheveled hair. Then, taking in my body wrapped in a blanket, he says, “When I couldn’t reach you, I had your cell phone traced. The last pinged location was right near the diner. I located it behind the HRPD building.”

A web of anxiety spools around me, and I breathe through the tightness in my chest.

He continues, “As you were missing, I had to search your device—”

“It’s fine,” I say, knowing what he’s about to reveal.

His face hardens. “The last accessed app held a partial recording of a conversation with Childs. I forwarded a small clip of that to the task force,” Hernandez says, confirming my assumption. “She was placed as a person of

interest, and an APB was issued on her, as well as you. But as of an hour ago, an arrest warrant has been issued on her.”

I avert my gaze from the agent. There were things said in that conversation—personal things—that I didn’t want others to hear. Once I realized I’d been drugged, however, I did have the foresight and capacity to start recording Devyn, in the event I didn’t make it back.

Hernandez touches my shoulder, drawing my attention to the concern etched on his face. “Halen, what happened to you out there?”

“She didn’t hurt me,” I say, trying to school my facial expressions.

“You have stitches,” he says, tone pitched low. “You’re obviously hurt. I see the injuries—”

“She released me. She let me go.” The lie falls easily from my lips.

You lie so pretty.

By the deep groove notched between his brows, I can see he’s not entirely convinced, but the urgency of the situation around us allows the conversation to end here. Agents are bagging everything in sight, turning over the library in search of hidden access points and Devyn.

“All right. Okay,” Hernandez concedes. “But they are going to want answers, Halen.”

They. Alister, he means. My stomach roils at the thought of being interrogated by him. “Right. I know. I can handle it.”

An EMT arrives with clothes in-hand, and I accept the clean jogging pants and sweatshirt gratefully. She insists on looking my injuries over, refusing to allow me to get dressed in the bathroom alone until I’ve done so. I’m treated with a disinfectant cream for the stitches.

“Did you do this yourself?” the EMT asks me, eyebrows winged up as she applies the cream to the black thread.

I glance at the wound. “Doesn’t it look like it?”

She smirks, graciously dismissing my glib tone. I’ve learned a lot from my

time spent with Kallum, like how to answer questions without actually answering them.

“You need to get this treated and sutured properly,” she instructs me.

When I return to the library, I hand the jacket to Hernandez and am rewarded with a thermal of coffee.

“Bless you,” I tell him, uncapping the mug.

“It’s black.”

“It’s salvation right now.” I drink a few sips, my system welcoming the caffeine. Then, as I recap the thermal, I brace myself for another hard truth. “Why was the priority upgraded on Devyn?”

His brown eyes meet mine with a measure of caution. “One of the victims was recovered in downtown a little over an hour ago,” he says. “He was found wandering Main Street, naked, apparently in shock or under the influence of some substance. After he was taken in, a unit used hounds to track his scent to the mine.” He nods toward the bookcase, releasing a breath. “I’ve never seen anything like what’s down there. There’s a whole underground habitat or some shit.”

I mentally try to connect the pieces of last night with what Hernandez is saying now. I willingly let Devyn take me in the hopes I could somehow help the victims. I’m not sure that’s the outcome, but at least some might get that help.

“And more were found?” As he regards me curiously, I add, “One of the agents said five more were recovered. I’m assuming he was referring to the... victims.” I’m having a difficult time using that word to describe them, the disturbing image of the people I saw last night clashing with that terminology.

Hernandez confirms there have been six of the thirty-two missing locals found. All have been detained at a sequestered wing of the local hospital to undergo medical tests, treatment, and psychological evaluation.

“I should get you back to the hotel,” Hernandez says, turning to lead me through the warren of agents and forensic analysts. “I’ll give you some time

to freshen up if needed before I have to bring you in.”

As I follow him out of the library, I ask the obvious question. “Where’s Kallum?”

He doesn’t look back. “Uh... With his lawyer,” he says, distracted by a text on his phone screen. “Trying to get released from holding.”

I detect an edge of strain in his tone, and my inner alarm sounds. Since the moment Agent Hernandez entered the library, I’ve sensed his anxiety. This is a very tense and anxious situation unfolding, yes—but there’s something he’s holding back.

“How are the locals responding to the news of Devyn?” I ask him. She’s one of them, a local. A friend, part of the system that protects them. Feelings of betrayal often present as denial at first, and then anger. Things around Hollow’s Row may become more volatile.

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure,” he replies as he meets another special agent in front of a black SUV and accepts the keys, confirming his vehicle was left at the entrance to the killing fields when the search began.

As Hernandez hasn’t mentioned the stolen carving knife sealed in an evidence bag being discovered in his SUV, I feel safe in trusting it’s still there. I’m torn between my feelings of relief and guilt over that fact. What I don’t feel is wrong for having stolen the weapon Devyn tried to use to frame Kallum. Yet even doing what we inherently believe is right still causes a cognitive dissonance that results in pain.

Kallum said villains have a motive, and that motive is a virtuous one. At least, in the mind of the villain, that reason feels virtuous. What I believe is that there’s a motive for all acts, whether good or bad. I believe Devyn has her own reason.

There is an answer there, one that delves to the heart of the matter.

I see her through the darkness, her eyes flashing with firelight, as our gazes connected in that last moment.

I came here to find the lost people of this town.

What I saw in Devyn's eyes in that single second reaffirmed my own motive.

Devyn is the lost person I was meant to find.

As the SUV winds through the narrow streets of downtown, bringing us closer to town square, out of habit I search for my phone, only to mutter a curse.

Hernandez glances over at me. Then he reaches into his blazer and produces a device. "Here," he says, handing me the phone.

Surprised and a little wary, I stare across the interior at him before I accept my phone. "Apparently, I'm a bad influence on you, agent. Subverting procedures?"

"A lot has happened in a short time," he says, relinquishing a tense breath. "There's been some changes with the higher ups, and until I know exactly who I'm reporting to, there's no reason to confiscate your device. What's said on that recording is private to you, and it's your choice who knows."

I clutch the phone, offering him an appreciative smile. Earlier, he said he'd sent a clip to the task force. Hernandez selectively sent a section of the conversation which kept the details of Alister's attack on me private. "Thank you."

He nods once, clearing his throat to diffuse the sentiment.

I shift in the passenger seat, and the scratchy material of the sweatshirt rubs over the stitches, snagging on the cotton to isolate my thoughts. I touch my arm, feeling the sloppy needlework of the stitches through the sleeve.

Before we reach our destination, I angle myself toward the agent. "Hernandez," I say, my tone serious.

He briefly glances over at me. "Gael," he says, offering his first name.

I smile wanly. "Gael, there's something amiss here."

He makes a sound of amusement. "Yeah, there's a lot *amiss* here."

"The locals shouldn't be working the case. In fact, I think—"

"That Childs isn't acting alone," he says, reasoning.

“Yes,” I say simply. “And if I remain on this case, I think we should keep our theories to ourselves for now.”

Devyn couldn't have done everything on her own. She had to have had someone on the inside helping her. There was too much to access, to monitor and alter in the forensics department, for any one person to oversee.

Then there was over thirty people with semi-to-serious procedures—removal of eyes; partially severed tongues—who needed medical observation. The person who dissected the eyes, who removed the tongues, they'd have to have some kind of medical training and experience. They'd need access to blood clotting agents. Possibly pain medication, more than the wine of their god and ecstasy tinctures for their rituals.

There's the *why* Devyn is doing this that needs answered, but also the *how*.

There is someone else involved.

“Yeah, I agree,” the agent says, not offering anything further as he focuses on the road ahead.

I stare down at my phone, running my thumb over the crack webbing the corner. I light the screen and tap my email icon, feeling oddly out of touch with reality and needing some semblance of my routine.

The email at the top of my app doesn't offer any solace. I click on the message from Dr. Torres and scan the letter, reading the last sentence of the short missive twice:

There is something imperative you need to know about your charge, Dr. St. James. Contact me right away.

I exhale a breath and dim the screen. “How does he even have access to the Internet,” I mutter to myself. The last I'd heard about the head psychiatrist of the Briar institution, Dr. Torres had been remanded to his own mental hospital after suffering a psychotic episode.

Staring at the darkened phone screen, I feel a sliver of apprehensive curiosity rise up, but I tamp it down just as quickly. Doubt is a dangerous emotion. Whatever Dr. Torres needs to make me aware of about Kallum, it will have to wait. There are only so many delusional people I have time for on my roster

today.

I take a long swig of coffee, and as I hold the thermal in my palms, savoring the warmth of the mug, a sudden memory from last night flashes across my vision.

“Shit.” I touch my forehead. “Tabitha. The waitress from the diner.” I look at Hernandez. “She’s the one who handed me the coffee. It was laced with something. She might not be involved directly...but she needs to be questioned.”

My insides buzz at the thought the waitress could know how to locate Devyn.

Hernandez is already pulling out his phone. “I’ll have her picked up for questioning.” But he halts, sending me a guarded look. “Unless we should question her ourselves.”

Taking a moment to think, I glance out the window at the town. I push the tangled layers of my hair over my shoulder, my fingers brushing the sensitized marks from the leather along my neck. “I want to be in on the search for Devyn,” I say, admitting the truth. I want to search for her myself. “My expertise in behavior will be needed if she’s apprehended in a similar state as the victim in town.”

His silence pulls on the threads of unease banding tightly around my chest.

“But I don’t want to get you or anyone else reprimanded for my choices, Agent Hernandez. I also really don’t want to go through Agent Alister for approval.” I expel a lengthy breath. “However, I don’t have a choice in the matter. So, go ahead and make the call to him.”

Saying Alister’s name and the word *choice* in the same sentence raises my blood pressure. Once I speak with Charles Crosby, I’ll deal with what happens next.

As the agent halts at a stop sign, he turns darkened eyes on me. “You’ll have no issue remaining on the case,” Hernandez assures me. “Alister is no longer in charge of the task force.”

“Agent, tell me what’s going on,” I demand.

The SUV lurches forward, and Hernandez says, “There’s another crime scene.”

Gravity falls away, leaving me suspended in a violent heartbeat.

“Take me there.”

Yellow crime-scene tape marks the perimeter of the park in central downtown. The small wooden bridge where Kallum kissed me and swore to never let me go stretches across a winding stream that feeds into a marshland creek. A band of caution tape wraps a gothic-style post clock positioned at the front of the urban square, and a Do Not Enter sign hangs below the clock face, designating the site as a crime scene.

The bright-green terrain of the park clashes with the dark energy buzzing in the air. For the first time in days, the sun peeks past storm clouds only to illuminate the macabre underbelly of this quaint town.

Agent Hernandez allows me to borrow his FBI lanyard to grant me access to the scene. At this point, neither one of us are concerned with protocol or being reprimanded for subverting procedure.

As we near the main attraction in the center of the common, my breath hitches at the chilling sight of a decapitated male victim strung between the trunks of two ancient and gnarled black willow trees, the head resting at the feet.

The trees themselves sit off to the right of the bridge near the stream. The willowy limbs have been swept aside to display the victim. I recognize the woven, webbed technique where the wrists have been secured.

A moth caught in a web.

Where’s the spider?

I stop a short distance away to take in the full grisly exhibition. Every horrific detail captured in replica to the Harbinger crime scenes, except for one gruesome deviation.

The skin and muscle of the victim's face has been flayed away from the bone to reveal the skull. What remains is a gross and extreme depiction of the death's-head hawkmoth.

I stare into the empty eye sockets of the skull, my heart tearing a wild path through my rib cage as Agent Hernandez moves in beside me.

"Who identified the body?" I ask, my voice unrecognizable to my own ears.

"Special Agent Rana," Hernandez answers. "DNA testing still needs to be conducted for conclusive identification, but I'd say it's pretty damn conclusive as of right now." The agent averts his gaze, unable to stare at the mutilation for long. "His FBI badge was on his person, and a tribal band tattoo on his bicep was identified."

I nod slowly, absorbing his words along with the gory scene. The standard black suit could be any black suit, but the pale-blue tie hung loosely around the sliced neck is the same one Alister wore yesterday. Only now it's stained in blood.

"Agent Rana has been temporarily placed in charge of the task force," Hernandez continues, nodding toward a woman with dark hair and suit near the scene. "I figured... I thought this would be a bit too much after everything you've gone through."

"Don't think for me," I snap.

He bows his head and runs a hand over his mouth, nodding. "Yeah, you're right."

I fold my arms over my chest. "I didn't mean it to come out that harshly."

"This is a harsh situation," he reasons.

Forensic techs swarm around Alister's body, documenting the mutilation, cataloguing details. Out of habit, I search the scene, expecting to find Devyn. An ill feeling coats my stomach, and I blink several times to clear the lingering haze in my vision.

From this vantage point, I can make out a fracture to the bridge of the nasal bone on the victim's skull. *Alister's skull*, I internally correct myself. *Where*

are the eyes, the flesh?

A sickness grips my insides at the thought this was a countermeasure to dispose of the scratch marks made by my fingernails.

I take a step in the direction of the body, and the agent captures my arm. “Wait. Take these,” he says, then slips a pair of latex gloves in my hand.

“Thanks.” I slide the gloves into place as I walk deliberately toward the man who attacked me only the night before. Every cell in my body vibrates, my teeth ache at the chill infecting my bones.

A vise-like grip twists my viscera as I reach the edge of the scene. I’m not sure what I’m looking for until my gaze lands on it, forcing me closer despite the blaring warning that rushes blood to my ears in a deafening roar.

With an aching breath trapped in my lungs, I stare, unblinking, at the deeply scored mark in the forehead of the skull. I recognize the alchemic symbol of a triangle within a circle.

The philosopher’s stone.

A heavy drumbeat rises up from the abyss of my mind to mute the chaos around me, and I can’t look away from the symbol. I can feel him so close. Beneath my skin, inside my marrow. His heated words whisper in my ear:

I’ll always be that man, Halen. The one who will spill blood for you.

Last night, as I wiped blood from his face—blood I now realize wasn’t his—I told Kallum I wanted Alister to pay, to suffer. I said I wanted him dead.

Kallum threatened to carve his initials in Alister’s bones if he ever touched me again.

And he made good on his vow.

Despite the scene being deliberately devised to imitate a serial killer, the philosopher’s stone might as well be Kallum’s fucking initials.

“He’s insane,” I whisper to myself. “He’s really, actually certifiably *insane*.”

A shock of awareness hits hard, my head sways with the effect. I brace my palm on the tree, and Hernandez helps guide me aside when Agent Rana

orders him to remove me from the scene.

“Come on,” Hernandez says, urging me farther away. “I’ll take you to the hotel.”

“I’m fine,” I say, steeling my tone with conviction as I steady myself. I hold up a hand, then glance at the bridge. “Has the medical examiner identified the time of death?”

“Halen, we can look into that information later.”

“I need this *now*,” I tell him, desperation leaking into my resolve.

Hernandez huffs an impatient breath. “No definitive TOD yet, no,” he confirms. “Here’s all we know. Surveillance at the police station was wiped. Assumption is that Childs, or an accomplice like another Landry, did so to cover their tracks after taking the incriminating evidence. The knife in the lab was taken. Possibly right before you were abducted by Childs.”

Me. I’m the accomplice.

“Theory is right now that Alister got in the way. He was the only one at the department...while all units were out...”

“Looking for me,” I say, filling in the pause.

“And Childs,” he says. “This is the job, Halen. We all know the risk. But working theory is that the Harbinger and Childs are in on this together, that either of them could’ve done this.” He nods toward the body, disgust evident in his hard features.

“That’s absurd,” I hear myself say.

He releases a sardonic laugh. “Absurd fits this town well. There’s no footage of Alister leaving the department,” Hernandez says, and a micro-flash of uncertainty registers on his face before he conceals his expression. “Right now, all the footage around town is being pulled to comb through, to look for this fucking Harbinger psycho.”

A cold sweat blankets my skin, and suddenly the sweatshirt is too thick. The neckband too constricting along my throat. My forearm flares with a prickling sensation, as if my nerve endings have come alive. I rub at the

sleeve with the destructive urge to tear the stitches out and remove his brand from my flesh.

Kallum destroyed the evidence at the mansion when he burned it all. The only article of clothing he wore, his jeans, he made sure were rinsed clean to corrupt the DNA...blood that washed between our bodies as I touched him, kissed him.

Made love to him.

I'm sleeping with a deranged killer.

And ultimately, this is my punishment.

This is what I deserve. *He* is what I deserve. I had a beautiful life, with a wonderful man and a decorated nursery, before it was torn away in one vicious mugging. Life, the cruel thief.

Now I'm a killer's plaything. I am his obsession.

I turn and start toward the bridge. Agent Hernandez tries to halt me, and I say, "I just...need a minute."

When I reach the bank of the stream, I sink to my knees and whip the gloves off my hands. The air has no temperature, my lungs numb as I drag in breaths to calm my rampaging heart, my blood rushing too fast through my arteries.

I submerge my hands in the stream, seeking the cool water to further calm the fire flashing my skin. As I bring my palms up to splash my face, I stop, my breath hung on an exhale that will never come.

The morning sun glints off of a tiny golden object nestled in the stream bank. I shake off my wet hands and wipe a palm down my pants, then grab a discarded glove before I scoop the object out of the silt, turning it over to inspect.

Pinched between the latex and my fingers is a gold cufflink.

The drumbeat strikes with a thunderous boom, crashing through me with violent force. A blaze engulfs my chest, the fire searing around the edges of my darkening vision. I tunnel through a wormhole in time, all gravity lost.

I grip the object in my fist and seal my eyes closed against the imagery invading my mind, trying to close off the link—but it rushes like a tidal wave.

The Cambridge crime scene layers my vision like a thin veil—and I reach out and tear right through it to the memories flashing in luminous brilliance, dispelling the shroud around my mind.

White noise infects my eardrums as the beat of the drum intensifies, so overpowering I'm shaking, gasping for air to fill my burning organs.

The mental assault batters in merciless force, unrelenting.

And the dam breaks.

The grainy picture that has been plaguing me since the ritual with Kallum sharpens, coming into perfect focus. The bright edges of the initials engraved on a gold cufflink vibrate against my retinas, branding into the backs of my eyelids.

My eyes snap open.

And then with a deluge, every latent memory held at bay floods at once. I flatten my palm to the grass, drawing in breaths, a crazed laugh tumbling from my mouth around each inhale.

“Kallum...”

I push onto my feet, energy surging my veins like a pure hit of adrenaline injected straight into my heart.

My gaze sweeps the gathered gawkers formed beyond the caution tape, landing on Charles Crosby near the post clock first, then next, on the striking man sheathed in an all-black suit.

As I find Kallum amid the crowd, his eyes find me.

I hear his whispered words from the night we collided for the first time: *Breathe.*

“I'm breathing.”

I take off toward Agent Hernandez where he's conversing with the agent in

charge. I hold up the cufflink. “I think this belongs on that bastard’s suit,” I say, dropping the object in his upturned, gloved palm.

His features draw together in a mix of confusion and concern. “Hey, are you okay—?”

“Yes,” I say, bringing my hair over my shoulders the way Kallum likes it. “Never fucking better.”

Agent Rana steps in front of me. “Dr. St. James, I do need you to make a statement. The task force requires a complete account of the events of last night. I’m asking you to come with me right now.”

I meet her dark eyes, an eyebrow arched. “Am I in trouble?”

Her pretty features give nothing away. “Why would you think you’d be in trouble?”

I offer a disappointed grimace at her obvious tactic.

Her mouth purses in a thin line. “Not at this time,” she answers.

“Good. Then just as soon as I’m done being completely inappropriate with the expert consultant, I’ll come in to make a statement.” Seeing as I was hired by the locals at Devyn’s request, it’s doubtful the locals or the feds want me to remain on the case.

I then step around her, starting in the direction of Kallum, my steps sure for the first time in months.

I’ve always said: question everything.

Look beyond what you can see and touch, even reason. And somehow, I lost sight of that.

There’s always been another explanation for why the Harbinger killings stopped six months ago when Kallum was incarcerated. One that no one would think to question, the evidence hidden so perfectly right out in the open.

When the newest Harbinger crime scene was reported in Hollow’s Row, Kallum never suspected anyone other than the Overman suspect. That’s

because he *knew* the Harbinger killer couldn't be here in this town.

Kallum knew this...because the Harbinger killer is dead.

As I weave a path through the gathered crowd outside the crime-scene perimeter, I pass media crews, and a live report from one of the journalists reaches my ears:

“At this time, it's alleged that Special Agent Wren Alister has become the latest victim of the infamous Harbinger killer. The killer has advanced his technique. No longer satisfied with portraying a skull on his victims, the killer has devolved to a more gruesome depiction of the moth, removing the flesh to reveal the victim's skull in the likeness of the death's-head hawkmoth...”

As I near Kallum, his lawyer turns to address me, and Kallum nearly growls, “*Leave.*”

Crosby glares at his client, but dutifully takes out his phone and walks away, leaving us standing before each other, only a few feet setting us apart.

“Kiss me,” I order him.

Kallum tilts his head, gaze narrowed in question. Yet he eats the distance between us and grabs me by the nape, crushing his mouth to mine.

I melt into him, savoring the taste of his demand, before I break away. The sharp slap of my palm meeting his face rings out to draw attention.

Head canted to the side, Kallum's mouth curls into a wicked smile. Using his thumb, he wipes the bead of blood from his lip as he turns back my way.

“Now,” I say, releasing a shaky breath, “when asked where you got that bruise, advise your lawyer to say it's from when I struck you yesterday for trying the same shit.”

Then I push up onto my toes and wrap my arms around his neck, forcefully pulling him down to me. I kiss him hard, full of yearning, tasting the hint of blood as liquid fire pours into my veins. There's only a moment of hesitancy before he matches the urgency of my kiss.

Kallum lifts his head to stare down at me, looking deep into my eyes. “And

when asked about this right now?" he says, a taunt layered beneath his guttural tone.

I lick my lips. "Now... Now I've changed my mind."

A heated ember ignites behind his dark gaze, and he strokes his thumb across my jaw. "There you are, sweetness," he says, his rough voice abrasively striking over my skin like flint to spark a flame.

"I remember," I say. "I remember everything."

Taking my face between his slashed palms, Kallum angles my head back farther, sealing his mouth over mine in a devastating kiss. I taste blood and carnage and passion; I taste him, the man who kept my secret. Who was incarcerated for me, and who continues to keep my secret, to protect me.

As he pulls away a fraction, his captivating gaze sweeps over my features, my skin crackling beneath his electrifying touch. "Mine," he whispers across my lips.

A shiver encases my body as I blink up at him, my vision crystal clear, the dull heartache always present in the center of my chest alleviated by his desire. "That's your masterpiece," I say, referring to the flayed agent displayed in the scene behind us.

He kisses my lips tenderly before he smiles down at me. "What can I say. You inspire me, my dark muse."

"I am yours, Kallum. Truly," I say, knowing that when the time comes, I'll have to again break the rules to protect us. But it's what I owe him.

Faith consists in believing what reason cannot.

Voltaire's verse comes to me as truth. Arms linked around Kallum's neck, I trace a finger over my forearm, feeling the wound, the scar, the ink, the stitches. The layers of a life of tragedy and pain.

The night I first met Kallum Locke, he was witness to a violence born within me, one it's taken until now to finally reconcile, to accept.

When you fight monsters, you risk becoming one yourself.

But it takes a monster to hunt monsters.

That night, I took a life. I snuffed out that life with a vengeance that had infected me from the darkest moment of my existence. And when my mind fractured, and I couldn't cope with my reality, a professor of philosophy and a practitioner of the dark arts promised he could help me forget.

Kallum lowers my arms and threads his fingers through mine. "There's a conspiracy floating around that the priestess and the Harbinger are working together."

His use of the word *conspiracy* strikes a chord inside me, and I know what comes next. "We have to find Devyn."

A striking smile slants his mouth at my inclusive *we*. "I'm always at your command, sweet Halen."

The personification of my profound grief came to me in the form of a beautiful devil with clashing blue-and-green eyes and a smoldering, disarming smile.

I summoned this daemon. I asked him to cast out my grief and pain, to shelter my darkness, to siphon away my shame. To make me abstract. So abstract I no longer recognized myself.

And he's patiently waited for the fracture to mend.

We are the high and low notes, a madness and genius that fosters harmony. Alchemy and magick, or logic and psychology. The answer to the question is less important than the fusion which creates something darkly beautiful that belongs only to us.

With Kallum, I can face my trauma with a healing peace...or a tire iron.

Alister was a monster, and if Kallum had not destroyed him, I would have. I can no more judge him for his monstrous act than I can blame the woman inside me for hers six months ago.

I killed the Harbinger.

And I would kill him all over again.

EPILOUGE

SYNCHRONICITY

HALEN: SIX MONTHS AGO

The gold cufflink rests in the palm of my gloved hand.

Not just any cufflink—a personalized one, with a university insignia.

I recognize the crest and Greek initials, because my father had a similar pair that my mother had given him as an anniversary gift. And the university insignia is the college where they first met in Cambridge.

Just twenty minutes away from the Harbinger crime scene I'm currently working.

My heart drums against my chest, and I release an anxious breath and touch the diamond pendant at my neck, seeking comfort. I glance around the scene at the other caseworkers.

Tactfully, I send Aubrey a text: *I'm putting in my field report early, then I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off.*

Three dots immediately appear, and I have the urge to pocket my phone. But I wait for his response: *Does this mean you're actually going to sleep, Halen?*

I glare at the screen, my eyelids suddenly heavy. I send one simple word in reply: *Yes.*

Since the report of the newest murder came in a few days ago, I've been obsessively working the crime scene. It's been just as many days since I've had sleep...but the fear of overlooking a piece of evidence, of time running out, won't allow for one moment to be lost to sleep.

The cufflink clutched in my fist almost scalds my palm. Proof that supports my sacrifice. I'll get sleep when the Harbinger killer is caught.

I should bag the evidence. I should turn it in right now. But as I open my hand and stare again at the gold front face with the P and W initials, there's an energy, a current drawing me in, and I know once I submit the evidence, it will literally be out of my hands.

As mad as it sounds, this little link has given me hope for the first time. Against all logic and reason, it's like my parents are sending me a sign, pointing me in the direction I need to follow.

How else can I explain the connection to their alma mater and this case?

Today is my parents anniversary.

Coincidence, or fate?

Truthfully, I don't believe in either, and up until this moment, I didn't think the Harbinger killer would make a mistake.

What I do believe in is devolving offenders, and if the killer is in fact devolving, if he made such a grave error... Then there's not much time to catch him.

Once the officials go through all the red tape procedures, requesting an interview, getting warrants for his home and place of work, this offender will be gone.

I have a slight reputation for circumventing procedure, not adhering quite so well to policies. But, as I've reminded the director of my division at CrimeTech, isn't that why I was initially hired? To solve the stranger cases that require someone to think outside the box and operate outside the guidelines? Sometimes, we have to look beyond what we can see and touch and even reason. We have to question everything, even the rules.

I know the offender better than he fucking knows himself. I've studied his scenes, walked in his footsteps. I know once I lay eyes on him, I'll be able to discern whether this cufflink belongs to the perpetrator or not.

I just want to see the Harbinger killer with my own eyes.

I've never felt this level of conviction, and I'm trusting my instincts. Decision made, I bag the cufflink and drive the twenty minutes to Cambridge.

As I park across the street from the university in a community apartment complex, I sit behind the wheel, trying to recall the whole drive here. Parts are missing. I shake off the disconcerting feeling. Sleep deprivation can be

dangerous, I know this, but I'm so close...

Obsession can be equally as dangerous, and if I don't find this guy, I fear what that will do to my mental state more.

I lock my doors and slip my keys between the slats of my fingers to use as a weapon. I don't carry a firearm, and I came here completely vulnerable.

An inner voice intones that this is exactly why I'm here, this obsession with chasing a serial killer some sick need to seek out danger, something to distract me from the constant heartsickness that kept me in bed for a month straight.

Then the Harbinger struck again, his third kill, escalating the case to serial killer status.

And I buried myself in the hunt.

A reason to keep breathing.

The lampposts of the college courtyard guide me toward a side entrance of the student center, where a glass-encased bulletin board is posted, announcing a speaking event taking place tonight.

It can't be that easy...

I run my finger down the list of speakers, stopping when I find the name with matching initials to the cufflink in my pocket. "There you are..."

Locating the lecture hall, I slip inside and post myself at the back of the auditorium, where I wait until my target is announced to the podium. I almost reach for my phone to capture a picture—but I turned my device off, making sure I wouldn't be pinged in this location.

I can't take my eyes off him.

This is him—it *has* to be him.

As I listen to him talk, I note all the characteristics of a narcissist, which isn't telling on its own. Many of the foremost authorities in Western esotericism and the occult in academia have massive egos and exhibit a degree of psychopathy. My job requires me to know who these names are and to study

from their knowledge.

But this is the first time I've heard of Mr. P.W.

He's kept himself hidden well.

Something else is notable about him: he's inebriated. Slurring his speech, swaying off-kilter.

As soon as the thought strikes, his eyes connect with mine from across the hall, and a sliver of fear coasts over my skin, making me shiver.

I push through the doors and find a dark corner along the outside of the building, where I take a few steadying breaths to calm myself.

This is reckless.

My rash behavior is about to not only expose me to the suspect, but scare him off. Drunk or not, he's evaded authorities this long, and his outward appearance could be a part of his ruse.

I did what I came here to do. I found him. We have a suspect.

As I flatten my back to the brick wall, I close my eyes for only a second, but when my lids open again, the night has grown darker.

Shit.

I'm trekking back through the quad when I spot him exiting the building, a tumbler in hand.

Despite the danger—or maybe because of it—I follow him.

I just want to observe. Secure more concrete evidence. At least, this is what I convince myself of as the obsessive need to watch him thrums through me, canceling out all logic.

He stalks to the parking lot, where he stops at a black car.

“Son of a fucking bitch—” he curses, then smashes his glass to the asphalt. On reflex, I flinch. He hunkers over to inspect a flat tire on the vehicle. “That fucking prick.”

As I watch him open and search the trunk, an eerie feeling settles over me. Something's not right; I feel it in the air, a buzzing sensation prickling my skin. The hairs along the nape of my neck lift away. The warning flashes through my body, and instinctively, I turn and head in the opposite direction.

I've just reached the edge of the parking lot when his voice calls out.

"Hey! Are you following me?"

I don't look back. I walk faster. His heavy footfalls sound behind me, and I clutch my keys tighter between my fingers.

"Who sent you?" he snarls, his voice too close now. "Did that slut send you?"

Anger grips my insides, and I dig out the evidence from my front pocket and whirl around to face him. "This did," I say, voice shaking from adrenaline. "You made a mistake, and I found you. *I* found you." I swallow down the ache. "I know who you are."

He grips a tire iron in his right hand. His eyes narrow on me, the mask slipping from his face. Then a dark smile curls his mouth in a sinister grin.

The Harbinger killer advances on me.

What happens next will haunt my nightmares, it will change my course.

It will change me.

His hand fastens around my throat. Panic splays through my body. Time mutates, slowing, freezing to a stall. And during the slowest blink of my life, I capture the cruel features of Professor Percy Wellington. His is the last face I see before the world goes black.

Thank you, lovely reader, for reading my words, for joining me on this dark journey with Halen and Kallum. You need to know that it means absolutely everything to me, and you are truly the reason I breathe, to keep writing stories for you.

I want to offer one thing before we leave book two and embark on the last

book in the Hollow's Row series, *Lovely Wicked Things*:

Question everything.

Some answers were given, some questions were raised. But as Halen has advised, we have to always question everything. Even the answers.

Until next time, read madly <3

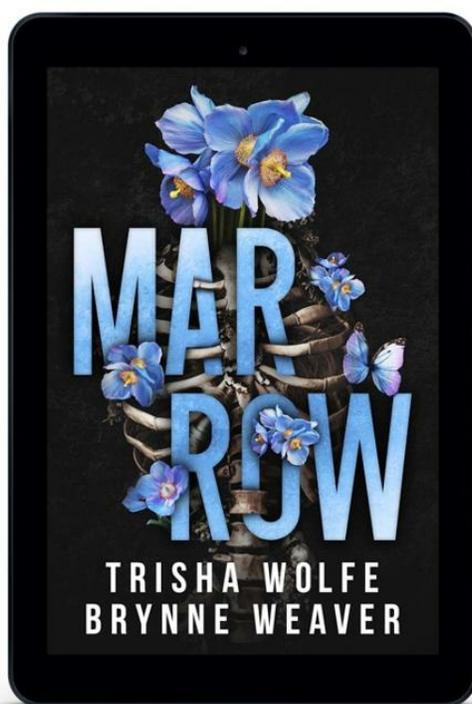
To be the first to see the cover of *Lovely Wicked Things* and receive a release notice, [join my VIP list here.](#)

Special gift to Trisha Wolfe readers! Click the link to receive a [FREE bonus story](#) featuring your favorite dark romance couple, London and Grayson, from the *Darkly, Madly Duet* .



We weren't born the day we took our first breath. We were born the moment we stole it.

~Grayson Peirce Sullivan, *Born, Darkly*



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Kyrie

We could have murdered Sebastian five times over already, but the truth is, I want more than just the anticipation of the kill. I can keep trying to push my feelings away, but I still want him. I want Jack touching me, kissing me. Worshiping me.

Devouring me.

I raise an eyebrow in a challenge.

In my next breath, Jack has me on my back, his palms a cool brand on my thighs as they slide beneath the hem of my dress. He pushes it up over my hips and his mouth is on my pussy before he's even tugged my panties down, his frustration with the thin fabric mounting until he whips a switch-blade

from his pocket and cuts them off in a single, fluid slice, much to Sebastian's delight. When they're gone, Jack parts my lips and drags his tongue across my entrance and he groans, groans right into the depths of me as though he's been starving for my taste.

"So sweet," Jack whispers against my clit before worshiping it with licks. One of his hands slides up my body to pull my dress down, exposing my breast to the cool air. A gasp leaves my lips as the tape tears from my nipple, its sting replaced with Jack's fingers as he teases it into a firm peak.

I'm burning. I'm desperate. I barely hold onto the sounds building in my throat as I raise my hips when Jack sucks on my clit, chasing my pleasure with his tongue. The more I try to keep from moaning, the more I fail, and when Jack pushes one finger into my pussy and then another to curl them in deep strokes that glide across my G-spot, I stop trying altogether.

"Your sounds are mine," Jack hisses, and before I realize what's happening, he's pushing my damp panties into my open mouth. I look down my body at the fierce command in Jack's eyes, whimpering at the erotic taste of my own arousal. He pushes the last of the fabric past my lips and holds my jaw shut with his thumb. "They are only mine. Now come on my fucking tongue and keep quiet."

Jack gives me a flash of a wicked grin.

And then he descends on my flesh.

He pumps his fingers and works my clit until my muscles are spasming, pulsing around him, sucking him in. Tiny bombs of sparks explode across my vision. Pleasure winds up my back and tightens it like a bow. My heart deafens every sound and thought and I don't even know if I obey his command. My eyes are still closed when Jack pulls the fabric from my mouth and kisses me, sharing my taste onto my tongue.

When the kiss slows and Jack pulls away, he stays hovering over me with one arm braced next to my head, the other hand working his belt buckle open.

"I've had a vasectomy," Jack says, keeping hold of my eyes as though we're the only two people left in the world. I hear each tooth of his zipper as it opens, each one like a tick of time. "I've been tested and I'm clean. But you

should know that condoms can be...difficult for me. Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes," I say, and though I want to ask what he means, I don't.

"Are you sure?" he asks. I nod until his eyebrows raise and I confirm it out loud. "This might feel...different."

I finally look down between us.

"Oh my God."

I take in the sight of Jack's erection, the base gripped in his hand, my orgasm-addled brain taking a moment to process what I see. There are pairs of studs trailing the length of the underside of his cock, with a Prince Albert piercing at the head, the titanium glinting in the dim light. Sebastian echoes my thoughts with sounds of surprise and words of approval. But it's like he doesn't exist to Jack."

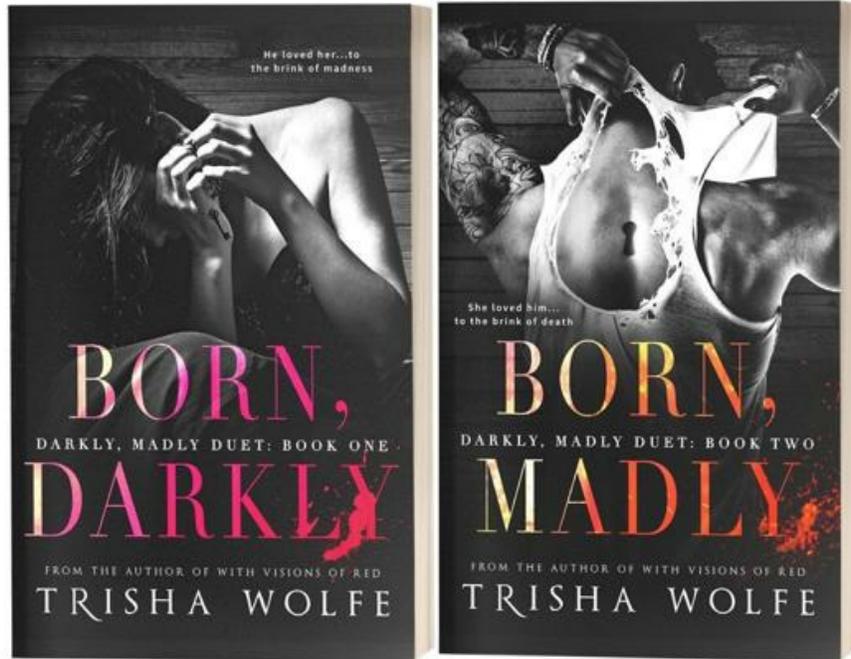
"Are you sure."

Heat floods my core, my pussy begging before I have a chance to.

"Definitely. Very sure. Very, very sure."

Jack smiles, and it's so wicked, so sexy, that I almost come again before he's even touched my clit with the titanium ball at the head of his cock. A desperate sound of desire escapes my lips and Jack's eyes narrow in warning.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From an early age, Trisha Wolfe dreamed up fictional worlds and characters and was accused of talking to herself. Today, she lives in South Carolina with her family and writes full time, using her fictional worlds as an excuse to continue talking to herself. Get updates on future releases at TrishaWolfe.com

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