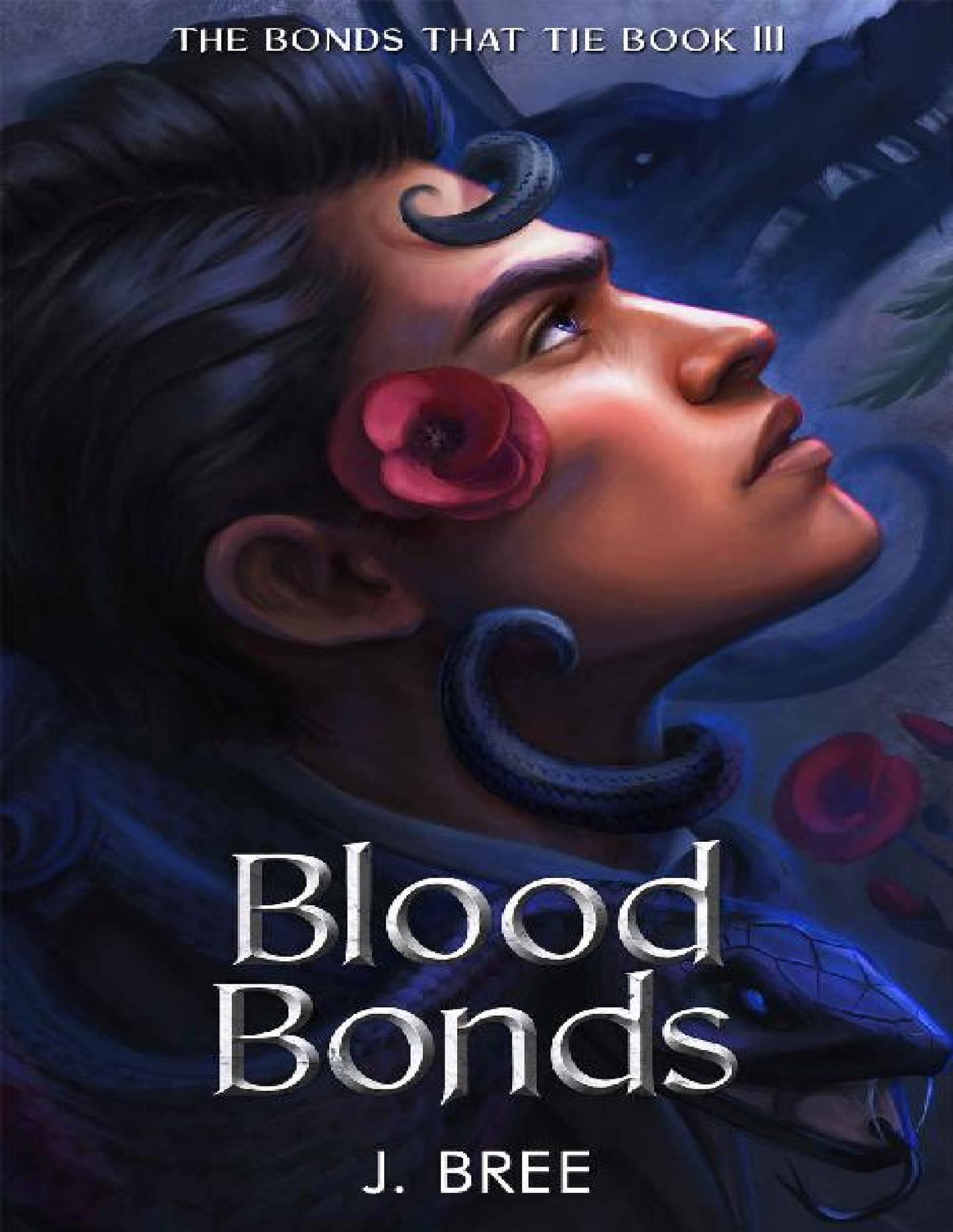


THE BONDS THAT TIE BOOK III



Blood Bonds

J. BREE

BLOOD BONDS

THE BONDS THAT TIE #3

J BREE

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[Prologue](#)

PROLOGUE

Oli

THE HOSPITAL IS loud and cold.

My bond is quiet in my chest, as though the surge of it coming out to protect me has sated the constant thirst for blood it seems to have for now, but I already know it won't last long. The craving, the wanting, the overwhelming need to consume... it never goes away for long.

“Oleander? Oleander Fallows? God, you look like a pretty little thing sitting up there in that big bed. All of that long, blonde hair, your Bonds are going to be so happy to know that you made it out of that car wreck unharmed.”

I can't look up at the nurse who is speaking to me, her tone warm and kind, and instead, my eyes focus on the long tendrils of my hair that are over my face. Blonde, it's not though. It's silver now, but yesterday it was black. Whatever happened in that car, it had bleached the color from my hair.

I struggle not to let the tears brimming in my eyes fall.

The nurse clicks her tongue, perching on the bed beside me and gently patting the back of my hand. “It's okay, I spoke to the head nurse, and she said your Bonds are on their way here. It's all very secret and hush-hush around here, so they must be important. I know that at least one of them is old enough to sign for your care, he's the one who got you moved into this big, private room, so he must be from one of the upper society families. Don't be scared, with a Bond like that, you're going to be okay.”

The more she talks, the more furious my bond gets.

I didn't understand it then, but the woman is trying to get me to talk to her, to figure out who it was that I belong to, so she could sell me out. My bond knew it, and so it urged me to keep my mouth shut, and even though I hate it most of the time, I listen when it tells me something like that.

“Belinda? What are you doing in here? Leave Oleander alone!”

I glance up to see Nurse June scowling in the doorway, one fist propped on her hip like she’s ready to drag the other woman out of here at a moment’s notice. When I woke up in the emergency room, she was the first person I’d seen, and she had been the person to tell me that my parents were killed in the accident. I’d already known, but the way that she had broken the news and treated me ever since, it made me like her and, more importantly, trust her.

Her eyes soften a fraction when they land on me and she says, “Your lunch is on its way up now, and the counselor will come in to speak with you as soon as you’re done eating. He took a little while to get here, but he’s the best in the city. Your Bond made sure of that.”

Belinda’s eyes snap over to me again but when she opens her mouth, Nurse June steps into the room and cuts her off. “I will be writing you up with a warning, now get out of this room, and stop sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong!”

With a huff and mumbled complaints, Belinda gets up from the bed and stalks out of the room with a sneer at Nurse June, who barely bothers to glance her way.

I tip my head back finally and look at the older woman, my words stilted and faltering, “I don’t want to talk about my Bonds.”

She nods and pulls the curtains open a little wider, the midday sun bright as it streams into the room, “It’s for the best if you don’t, not until they get here. Too many prying ears and eyes in this place. All you need to remember is that everything is going to be okay once they get here.”

I nod and watch her fuss with things a little more, hoping she’ll stay here until the food arrives. I want to speak to her, to tell her what the hell is going on right now, but my tongue is frozen in my mouth. After another moment of checking over my paperwork, she smiles at me and leaves without another word.

My eyes squeeze shut the moment the door closes, terror racing through my veins when the voice in the corner starts to speak again, “I thought they’d be in here forever, deadly little Soul Render. Now, where were we? Ah, of course... I was telling you about all of the things you’ll do to your Bonds if you stay here with them. All of that pain and suffering, all of the destruction, just for being with you. It’s much safer for you all if you come with me.”

CHAPTER ONE

North

BODIES FALL to the dirt around us in unceremonious heaps, limbs torn away and chunks missing from their torsos, thanks to the hundreds of nightmare creatures roaming the camp.

All three of the TacTeams working with us today are forming a perimeter, careful not to move in while the carnage is taking place because the infamous Draven nightmares don't distinguish friend from foe when they're in a feeding frenzy like this. No, there's only bodies to consume and tear apart until blood and gore is dripping from their jaws as their eyes shine with an eerie and unnatural light.

The camp is an older one, more established and full of heavily brainwashed Gifted who'll take months to process and deprogram. I want to be noble and say that we're here to save them, that we've watched this camp for months and planned out this rescue to bring these people home to their families, and on paper, that's all true.

But as an older camp, it's also full of records, and Gryphon has become obsessed with sifting through Resistance data. It's not hard to figure out his motives. There's something he knows about our Bond that he's choosing not to share, but when he finds whatever he's looking for...

We might all finally get some answers.

There's a static sound in my earpiece and then Gryphon's voice comes through, "Prisoners are in the biggest tent on the east side. Bravo team, move out."

I unholster one of my guns and then hold my palm out to call my nightmare creatures back into myself now that the majority of the Resistance here have been dealt with. There's still a chance that we've missed some, thus the gun, but the risk of killing innocents is too high to keep them out and consuming.

Most of the creatures melt away back into me as though they're obedient, others go back in snarling and screaming. The biggest of them all, the one that I *refuse* to call August, stops short to stare at me with its glowing void eyes.

It stares at me like it is the docile puppy Oleander seems so intent on it being. It stares at me like it's pissed off she's not here, dropping to her knees to shower it with love and affection.

It stares at me like it knows something is wrong.

"Is he still giving you shit thanks to Oli?" Gryphon says as he walks up behind me, bolder and less cautious now that he's seen the creature heel to our little Bond.

"*It* is, yes. There's something... off about the camp. Keep your eyes peeled, and stick close."

He smirks at my distinction of the creature, enjoying riling me up on Oleander's behalf, which is both new and completely typical of him.

He's going to be a nightmare going forward, especially if he stays the only Bonded of us all.

I have to wrench my mind away from that particular path, something that could occupy me for days if I really wanted to follow that thought process. Maybe being stuck in council meetings has been a blessing in disguise, keeping me distracted and busy so that I don't have to think about our little mysterious Bond, who might just have had a real reason to run from us after all.

I hold my hand out to the creature again, a battle of wills and mental strength, until finally, with a soundless huff and snort, there's a pop sound as he disappears back into me. My bond rears its head in my chest, not so eager at being forced to heel, and I take a deep breath as Gryphon calls out again to get everyone moving.

Nox doesn't call his creatures into himself at all, but they've always been completely obedient to their master. Once he starts moving through

the tents and clearing them, the other members of the Alpha team are happy enough to follow his lead. They're still cautious but no longer stuck standing rigidly like statues, like they are around mine. Something about the size difference, or the very obvious way that mine are rabid, reinforces the general rules of staying the fuck away from them nicely without any of our Bond Group having to say a word.

Gryphon takes his backup second with him to scout out a cluster of smaller tents that we already know from intel are the lodgings of the higher members of the Resistance. His second, Harrison, is Arthur Rockelle's son, and a highly trained Flame who has always been loyal. He's the easy choice to back Gryphon while Kieran is on Oleander's protection detail.

I follow Nox to the torture camp.

He always goes to the questioning and processing areas first. He finds the men and women working there himself, just to make sure that they die a very messy and painful death at his hands, because the idea of a bullet between the eyes for their kind just doesn't sit well with him.

Or me.

I'm just a little less zealous about it.

Sure enough, we find an Empath and two Neuros in there, huddled together. Their panicked, whispered plans are useless and redundant, and I watch with a cold sort of interest as Nox stalks towards them with his palm outstretched, the black stains of our curse darkening his skin as their screams fill our ears.

He always does play with his food before he lets his nightmares eat them.

An hour later, we're climbing into the back of the truck with the knowledge that every Resistance member here is now dead. Gryphon calls out to the driver to get us back onto the road and headed back to the rendezvous point, blood covering us all from the knees down.

The Bravo team will stay behind and move the recovered Gifted to our version of the processing camps, only instead of poking and prodding at them to figure out what use they'll be to our manic mission, we'll be starting the long process of undoing all of the programming and torture they've endured since they were taken.

Some of them will die there.

It doesn't sit well with me, it never has, but sometimes they're too far gone, the damage is too much to come back from.

I blow out a breath and tip my head back against the seat, enjoying the quiet moment without having to think about council meetings or political moves. As much as I didn't want to leave my Bond behind, definitely not after the revelation of more Resistance interference, there's something about getting away from all of the trappings of being North Draven the Councilman that I desperately needed.

It all feels like bullshit, like sand slipping through my fingers while the world burns around us all anyway.

William would've known what to do, more than I ever have.

There were fifty captive Gifted here and we got thirty-eight out alive. It sounds like a terrible amount of casualties, and in other situations, heads would be rolling about losing twelve Gifted, but these sorts of recon missions... twelve is right about average.

We've never gotten everyone out alive before. We're outnumbered and always running on the defensive, our greatest weakness as a society, and with that comes far too much blood being spilled. It's easier to digest the numbers here on the ground, watching the TacTeams work their asses off to get the worst of the brainwashed victims restrained before they become a danger to themselves or others, but in my office back home when I get reports, those numbers burn a hole into my deepest marrow. It's never enough. Nothing we do ever is.

With those morose thoughts, I almost miss it.

It starts with Gryphon's fingers thrumming against the leather seats, a small outlet for his frustration. The calm over Nox's face, something I've barely seen before and that had only taken place when his own bloodlust had been sated, slowly melts away until the furrow in his brow is firmly back in place.

Blood and pain.

My bond hasn't stopped whispering to me all morning, telling me all about the darkest and most blood-soaked things it wants to do to every member of the Resistance we come across today. It makes it harder for me to notice that same tension entering me that has taken hold of the other two, but once I see the scowl on Gryphon's face, I take stock of myself.

My skin feels tight with irritation, as though it's pulled tighter over my frame now than it was ten minutes ago, and my entire body feels restless. There's a tension in me that wasn't there before. Something is happening within our Bond.

Oleander.

I don't have my phone with me, protocol on this sort of mission, and I try not to sound panicked or desperate when I murmur to Gryphon, "Contact Oleander. Tell me where she is right now."

His eyes flick to mine, the frown still firmly in place, and there's the slightest pause before he curses and his eyes flash white as he calls on his gift for an extra boost.

It's all I need to see to know that I'm not wrong, that something is happening right now that even with hundreds of miles between us, I can feel her there under my skin. We might be Unbonded but it doesn't matter, she's there in my blood and the deepest, darkest corners of my soul.

The panic gets worse.

Nox is watching us both keenly, not faking his usual indifference when it's only the three of us, and when Gryphon curses again, he drawls, "Where is she? Are we about to go running after our little poisonous Bond again?"

Gryphon ignores him as he grabs out his comms, a feat because even I want to snarl at his jabs and I'm sure being Bonded only makes this feeling a million times worse. When he doesn't get an answer on the comms, he unbuckles his seatbelt and lurches into the front of the truck, coming back with his phone and a vaguely sick look on his face.

I take a deep breath and count down from ten to keep myself in line, forcing my bond back from lashing out.

"Kieran isn't answering me," Gryphon says as his scowl deepens, and I want to reach across the backseat and choke the answer out of him, another sign that something has gone wrong in the hours since we left the mansion.

My bond is *writhing* with bloodlust.

"She's not answering me either. Get Gabe on the phone, call Bassinger too," Gryphon snaps, throwing the phone to me as he presses both of his palms against his temples like he's in pain.

Nox's eyes meet mine, but he looks as though he's about to tear the driver out of the seat and turn this truck around. "What's wrong? Why do you look like you're about to puke?"

"Because I pushed to get her to answer and she's not... there. She's not ignoring me, there's something in the way. Something is wrong, get Gabe on the line *now*."

Except we left a lot more than just the other Bonds behind to keep an eye on her.

As I start dialing, Nox's eyes shift to black and Gryphon watches him check in with the... *Brutus*, like it's the only lifeline in the middle of the ocean while we're all drowning.

"She's alive. She's breathing, I can't see much else, but he's with her, so no one will get within spitting distance without him consuming them. Take a breath, Gryph, she's alive."

He doesn't look any better at that news. "Well then, where the fuck is she? Don't tell me to calm down when she's gone again."

When the phone finally clicks as Gabe answers, I hear Bassinger snarling down the line, “So *now* you lot want to call us? Well, you’re too fucking late!”

Gryphon’s eyes snap to mine, too wide and glassy, thanks to the push he’d given his connection with his Bonded.

I snarl into the phone, “What the fuck has happened? We’ve been gone less than twelve hours—”

Gryphon cuts me off, snarling, “Where the fuck is she, Bassinger? I will come back there and tear your fucking spine out of your throat, if you had anything to do with this!”

Bassinger scoffs at him, a savage sort of sound, and snarls back, “Your useless, fucking asshole second took her, and they haven’t come back! I will fucking kill you all if she’s hurt. I’ll gut that fucking dickhead Black too.”

CHAPTER TWO

Oli

I WAKE up strapped to a chair, the smells of smoke, body odor, and despair hitting my nostrils, and my stomach turns as I squeeze my eyes shut tighter. There's rustling and quiet murmuring of two women in here, the noises a sign of them cleaning something here in the tent up, and I don't want them to know I'm awake yet.

It's hard to keep the disgust off of my face.

The stench here is familiar, a particular blend of gross that I'd been hoping to never come across again, and I have to choke back the bile that creeps up the back of my throat. Kieran and I were separated right away but not before I'd been forced to watch three guards beat the shit out of him.

No one lifted a finger against me, but I already knew they wouldn't.

Once he was bleeding from about ten different places and there was a rattle in his chest that suggested some serious internal injuries, Kieran had been dragged away to one of the holding tents unceremoniously by a couple of low-level thugs.

I had been escorted to the priority tent, somewhere I've spent way too much time.

"Why the fuck are we waiting on some sheep-bitch? It's demeaning, she should be eating slop in the cages with the rest of them."

There's a quiet grunt and then the other woman replies, quietly but in a rougher, aged voice, "She's a VIP. Her gift means she gets real food, a bath when she needs it, and she's off-limits to the men for a bit of fun. Don't worry about it, she'll be torn up good by Davies just the same as they all are."

Gross.

For one, I do *not* want to hear his name, but there's also something about the women talking so casually about the horrors that happen here, like

it doesn't even matter to them what happens here after dark and in tight quarters, that makes my blood run cold. I guess I don't have to feel guilty about killing them all when the time comes. Does that make me just as bad as them?

I hope not, but I'll also accept it if it does.

"VIP... what does that even mean? Is she a Neuro? Davies doesn't usually keep those around for long."

Of course not, they're competition for him. Okay, they're not at all, because I've never heard of another Neuro who can do the shit he can, except Gryphon. As strong as my Bonded is, he's no match for *that man*.

I'm no match for him either.

It's terrifying.

I know how much power is pumping through my veins, so much that my body still can't use it without taking a three day nap to recover, and he could end my world without a second thought. Our gifts might be eons apart in ability but there's too many parallels with the destruction we're both capable of.

The woman with the rough voice mutters, reluctantly and somewhat reverently, "This girl, this little white-haired bitch who looks like nothing special, she's the Infinite Weapon. They're going to use her to end the war and finally let us Gifted take control of this country like we deserve. No more making nice with the non-Gifted. No more living shackled to laws that shouldn't apply to us because we're above them. No more sheep in control, living in their mansions while the rest of us struggle to survive."

Fucking hell.

I'd almost forgotten how delusional they all sound, as though they're going to love living in the Wild West Dystopia that they're all gunning for when really... they'll all probably die for the cause. That man wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice them all to get what he wants.

Ultimate power.

There's more movement and then I hear one of the women walk away, rustling the tent flap, and then the smell of hot chicken and gravy hits my nose. My stomach rumbles and a wave of nausea hits me, the same as it always does when I wake up from one of these power-use naps.

I blink my eyes a few times as they stream against the harsh lighting and I get a look at both of the women. I don't recognize either of them, but I catalog their features anyway, storing away as much information as I can, in case I need it later.

Doing that has saved my life many times before.

The older woman is holding out the plate of food and with a downturned mouth, she says, "I'm not going to free your arms to eat, but if you try to stop me from feeding you, I have orders to force it down your throat with any means necessary."

I shrug and open my mouth. As obedient as it may look like I'm being, the eyes she gives me says she doesn't believe it one bit.

Hilarious, because I'm too hungry to bite the bitch or attempt to mess with her.

The other woman, who only looks a few years older than I am, watches us both with her hands fisted at her side as though she's ready to fly over and break my jaw the second I prove myself to be the unruly 'sheep' they think I am.

They really have no idea.

I eat the entire plate without a word or complaint, chewing the delicious chicken and gravy while keeping my face blank. I don't want them to know how much I'm enjoying it, how much I wish I could have seconds. Once the plate is clean, the woman holds a bottle of water to my lips and lets me down the entire thing. It feels like the elixir of life to my dry tongue and chapped lips.

Then the women both leave without another word.

I take a second to look around, but the tent is bare, completely empty, other than me and the chair I'm chained to. It feels a little too familiar. I wouldn't put it past these assholes to have brought in the exact one I'd spent two years parked on just to mess with my damn head a little more.

That's kind of *ugh*, Silas Davies' thing.

As if my thoughts conjured him, the tent flap parts and the man, the nightmare, himself steps into the space with me.

After so long of forcing myself to not think about him, to not even acknowledge that he exists in the world, it's weirdly uneventful to see him standing there in his carefully put together outfit. I know for sure that he puts in a lot of thought about how he dresses, a lot of thought on what color he'll be donning for the day, because I never wanted to see him on days where he'd wear white.

He enjoys the patterns of blood spatters, and there was always a sense of pride in him when he would leave the torture tents covered in the fruits of his labor. I think it also helped keep the other Resistance members in line because between that and the manic grin on his face, he definitely looks like the crazed torturer you wouldn't want to mess with.

"Little Soul Render... not so little now though, are you? You've grown up a lot since you ran off on me."

His voice is low and melodic. I keep my eyes on his boots for now while I focus on getting my heart rate back down to normal levels and not where it's currently sitting... which is pounding out of my chest.

I hope Gryphon can't feel this.

It's too dangerous to so much as think about him and my Bonds right now, even though I can feel him trying to contact me at the edges of my mind. Of course I know that he'd attempt it, the quickest and easiest way for him to find me is to just ask, but to speak to him now, with Silas in the room? That's a huge no.

It's also hard to block Gryphon out without making it too obvious.

Everything is a freaking mess.

“Are we really going to go back to the silent treatment, Weapon? I thought you might have grown out of this.”

I smother the shiver that runs down my spine, forcing my shoulders not to move and give away just how much the mere sound of his voice scares me. I hate this man, sure, but I’m also completely aware of just how terrifying he truly is.

I need to keep my head together.

At my continued silence, Davies steps further into the tent, his footsteps slow and measured. He’s an expert at drawing out the terror in the room, and I’m not entirely sure if it’s a natural talent or the copious amount of experience he’s had ruining people. I can’t help but tense when he steps behind me, but then he steps back into my eyeline with another chair, carefully shrugging out of his jacket and slinging it over the back as he takes a seat.

He has this very careful and measured way of folding himself into it that makes my skin crawl. Ever the gentleman, but it’s only a mask, a ruse he wears to cover the sadistic creature he really is.

I know I’m a monster, and I hate myself for it, but this man loves being this way with every fiber of his being... and that’s why he scares the absolute fucking shit out of me.

Finally, I meet his eyes.

He smirks at me, enjoying just how much I hate looking at him, but it’s actually easier to stay a blank canvas when I’m staring into the deep, evil abyss that are his eyes. There’s nothing normal or human in them, nothing but the cold-blooded, sadistic man that he is shining there.

He doesn’t say another word to me for a full minute, and then he leans back in the seat again, crossing his arms. There must be a camera in here, because the action triggers more people to enter the tent.

Two heavily armed men, to be precise, dragging a bleeding Kieran behind them, one of his legs jutting out at a very *wrong* angle.

Well, *fuck*.

The men drop him at my feet so that he's wedged between Davies and I and then walk out. I take a very slow, and hopefully discreet, breath.

Davies sighs and tuts at me again. "I have to say, it hurt my feelings, you know?"

I keep my eyes trained on his, because I *cannot* look at Kieran. You don't last here in the camps if you show your weaknesses, and all they know about the two of us so far is that we came here together.

That's already too much.

Davies drawls on, "You never spoke to any of the Gifted here, not the loyal or the sheep, and yet you came right back to us with some weakling Transporter? It cuts me deeply."

I am an expert at blocking this man out though. I think I would've gone crazy in the two years I'd spent stuck in the camps if I hadn't learned how to just tune his honeyed, poisonous monologues out. I hope Kieran is doing the same down there in the dirt, otherwise he's going to die a thousand slow and crazed deaths listening to it all.

"I guess we'll have to do something about him... something extreme. The punishment should fit the crime. How dare a lower-tiered Gifted befriend our Little Soul Render when she's spat on the rest of us, time and time again? How about the rack?"

Oh, *fuck*.

My eyes flick down to Kieran's bloodied and bruised form on the ground without meaning to, a reflex at hearing Silas' favorite torture machine mentioned. You'd think with all of the power pumping through his veins that he'd torture people with his gift, but no... he prefers machines that belong in the Middle Ages, you know, when they were invented.

No one survives the rack, not a single person in the two years I was here, and if I don't do something, Gryphon's second is about to die, all because I asked him to bring me here.

My voice cracks, "You can't."

I finally look down at Kieran but he's glaring at me, a soundless command to shut my mouth and let him take the pain and suffering for us both. He probably knows he's about to die, but typical macho man shit says he wants to do it honorably.

I'm not built like that. He should know that by now.

Silas turns and smirks at me, his handsome face curling into a ghoulish mask. "And why is that, Little Render? Give me one good reason why I should change my plans for the Transporter."

He really thinks he has this over me, he really thinks he's going to use Kieran's death to mess with my head... Well, trump card, asshole.

"He's my Bond."

THE BEST THING about my bond is that it understands a life or death sort of situation and toes the goddamned line when I need it to, so when I look down at Kieran again and see the horror in his eyes, my own don't shift in retaliation. It's a win.

How the hell am I going to get him to play along here?

"You stood there and watched him get beaten. You expect me to believe you're Bonded to him?" Davies' voice drips with derision but when I glance back at him, he's tense, his body practically vibrating at the carrot I'm dangling in front of him.

How long had they tortured me for the names of my Bonds?

How many times had he promised me things, evil and glorious and kind things, if only I'd tell them who my Bonds were?

It's another piece of the puzzle that makes no sense to me, especially now that I know that someone in the Resistance has been messing with the labs and the Bonded groups, but it's clear that they still don't know about my Bonds.

I wonder why that traitorous bitch Giovanna hasn't told them? And how could Atlas' dad be here, very obviously a part of the Resistance, but hasn't told them?

Too fucking confusing.

Davies snaps his fingers in front of my face, and I shift my eyes away from the scowl on Kieran's face to mutter, "You said it yourself, you have to be cold-hearted to rip the souls out of people and watch them die. Besides, we're not Bonded yet, and you weren't killing him. My bond was happy to watch you test him out a little. The rack is too much. If you break him, you'll break me, and I'm not signing up for that."

I watch as the feverish glee fills his body. Me, his beloved weapon, back in his grasp and now with one more round of ammunition with me. A Bond.

He straightens up and turns on his heel to stalk towards the entrance of the tent, his usually fluid movements jerkier with his excitement, and I take the moment to do something incredibly risky. Risky but necessary, because Kieran looks like he's a second away from chewing me out for lying about him like this just to save his freaking life.

My eyes shift to black, and I send up the tiniest of prayers that Davies really is too busy having his world rocked by getting me and one of my Bonds that he won't notice what the hell I'm doing.

I need you to tell Kieran to play along.

Gryphon's response is immediate and desperate sounding, *WHERE ARE YOU?*

I take a good, hard look at Davies as he turns back to us, my breath catching in my throat, but he's too busy eyeballing Kieran like he'll find my name branded on his skin if only he looks hard enough at him, so I take the

chance to keep the conversation going for a moment longer. *Life or death situation here, Bonded. I need you to hack into Kieran's brain RIGHT NOW and tell him to play along, or your second is dead. Do it. I'll contact you again the moment it's safe. I swear on our Bond.*

There's a slight pause and then Gryphon says again, his blinding rage at me and this situation we've found ourselves in making my ears ring, *How did you know I can reach him? How did you know my Gift had grown that much?*

I want to slump in the chair against my restraints in relief but that would be too obvious, so instead, I send one last message before I block him out entirely again. *A lucky guess. I'll keep him safe, Kyrie too. I'll let you know the moment it's safe for you to come get us. I'll come back to you all, I promise. Tell North I didn't run.*

I don't know why it's so important to me to tack that onto the end there, but I do, stupidly thinking that at least if Silas loses his mind and kills me off, at least North might... believe that I wasn't the worst choice for a Bond.

God, what a depressing thought.

I see the exact moment Gryphon gets through to Kieran. His shoulders square up, ever the obedient second in command. It's a much better look on him than the pissed off, bloodied TacTeam member who wants to murder me, that's for damn sure.

Davies finally decides to actually do something and walks over to Kieran, grabbing him by both arms and pulling him onto his feet. His bad leg doesn't support any of his weight, lolling out, and he grunts a little as he's probably blinded by the pain. I wish so badly that I could heal him, or take his pain away from him, but he's not actually my Bond, no matter what I tell Davies, so there is nothing I can offer him.

Davies doesn't notice his leg, or doesn't care, and starts one of his usual honeyed monologues. "A Transporter. I'm a little disappointed at how

mediocre that is. I was expecting something *magnificent*, to be paired with a beauty like you. I suppose I'm stuck with a Healer, so it makes sense that we can't all be once-in-a-lifetime powers. Still, I can't say I wasn't hoping for more."

My bond flashes to the forefront of my mind again, not liking the way he's speaking about our Bonds, even if he's got the wrong guy. It doesn't throw a tantrum or act spoiled the way it has for weeks back at the Draven mansion, and for once, I feel *safer* with it taking the reins for a bit. It always did do whatever was required to keep me alive, whole, and sane.

Kieran stares at Davies blankly, nothing showing on his face now that he's playing the good soldier and following Gryphon's orders. I feel oddly proud of him for not cowering in the face of this terrible man... but he also probably doesn't know the extent of his evil.

Not the way I do, anyway.

Davies shoves him to his knees at my feet again and though he grimaces, Kieran doesn't make a noise at the pain that's very obviously shooting through his body. I look at him now that my bond is at the helm, safer now that Davies can see the cold and aloof look of my void eyes because he's never seen the hungry look in them before... he's never seen me look at my Bonds and make demands of them.

Mine.

God, I miss them all already. What I wouldn't give to be sitting in a stupid Gifted 101 class with Nox snarling up at me, or sitting in the dining room with North making demands and Gryphon ignoring my existence. I'd take all of their bullshit right now to be back there with them.

I really have fallen.

Davies stares at me, watching my bond peruse Kieran and deciding it's not just a show put on for him, and the victory in his grin makes me feel sick. "Little Render... you're going to Bond with him, and then we're going to test you out all over again. God, how I've missed your screaming."

And then he leaves the tent, leaves Kieran on the ground at my feet, and me chained to my chair with cold, black, void eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Oli

KIERAN HAS TECH HANDCUFFS ON, the type that will send volts of electricity tearing through your body if you step out of line to kill you, so I'm not surprised that Davies has just left him behind with me. I'm also aware that there's a camera on us. While I'm confident that it won't have a mic, I still don't want to be sitting here chatting about what's really going on.

When he looks up at me with a glare, I shush him and then I cast out my gift to feel who is around us, whether anyone will overhear his pissed off tirade that I'm sure is just bursting to get out.

Davies is over in the main tents with a handful of his strongest and most trusted men. None of them can hear shit from this far away though, so I'm safe there. There's a lot of new people here, but I can't sense any Neuros or Telekinetic-type gifts, so I decide it's worth the risk and call my gift back into myself, meeting Kieran's eye and giving him the go-ahead to speak.

I shouldn't have bothered.

"I'm not having sex with you."

I snort at him and snap back, remembering in the last second to keep my voice down and my head ducked despite my outrage, "That's never been the plan, Black! Get your head out of the gutter."

He huffs at me like *I'm* being the unreasonable one, and then winces as he jolts his leg, shifting slightly to attempt to relieve some of the pain he's obviously in. I hope it's not broken. I'm not sure how long it's going to take me to get the hell out of here, and Franklin is still here for some unknown reason, so the thought of having to drag Kieran out on my back is just too much.

"So what is your grand plan then? You heard Silas Davies, he's going to expect us to '*Bond*'."

I roll my eyes at him, extra petulant because I'm stuck in the chair with a numb ass, but also to hide the thrill of terror that jolts through my veins at him saying the name. "I know exactly what the next few days are going to look like, so calm down. We just need to be patient, and then I'll get us out."

He blinks at me for a second and then curses under his breath, shaking his head. "Contact Shore. Tell him where we are and get an evac, because there's no way you're going to get us out of here."

My bond floods me at the sound of his name, and I have no control of my body as it takes over and my eyes shift to black, leaning down to hiss at Kieran, "I have endured too much for you to speak his name here. Don't *ever* speak of *any* of them."

He pauses for a second and then he gulps.

He honest-to-God gulps like I'm terrifying, which my bond loves, but it releases its grip on me, and I slump back in the seat with a gasp.

"You're a crazy fucking kid, you know that?"

I shrug and let out a quiet, slightly shaky, laugh. "I thought you were looking forward to watching me ruin everyone's lives? Come on now, don't give up on me over something so small. My bond barely spoke to you!"

He shakes his head and me and looks away. "And I'll do my best to never speak to it again, thank you very much."

I scoff at him, giggling a little, which is stupid, but there's also this weird sense of relief in me that we're trapped here together... that I have someone with me this time, and I'm not going to be completely alone. Plus, if it had to be anyone, I'm sort of glad it's him.

I'd be beside myself if it were Sage again. I'd be too worried about her getting hurt or assaulted to concentrate on my plans, and if it were truly one of my Bonds? Jesus, the bloodshed my own bond would have over them being in danger is just too much to even think about. A Technokinetic is no help, and Sawyer's smart mouth would get him in way too much trouble.

Felix would've also been helpful but, again, I'd be too worried about my bestie's Bonded getting himself killed to focus, so Kieran Black is the best goddamn choice here.

If only Kyrie wasn't also in the freaking camps with us.

There is a moment of silence between us while I try to figure out how the hell to get Kyrie in this tent with us before Kieran speaks again, his voice barely more than breath. "You're protecting them."

It feels so obvious to me, but I guess he assumed the same as the rest of them, that I'd hated my Bonds and run from them all rather than have them.

I duck my head again so whoever is watching that camera can't read my lips. "Always. Everything I've done has been to protect them. Every action, every word I've bitten back, every minute I spent running from them. If you're not terrified of that man, then you don't have good enough intel... or you haven't been paying attention to it. He's evil incarnate."

He doesn't answer for a second, his breathing even and slow, and then he murmurs back, "He tortured you. The IW... I read what they did to you. They tortured you. You didn't give them your Bonds' names. You didn't break."

I swallow and desperately want to change the subject. "I did break. I let my bond take the pain for me. I let it become the monster instead of me."

I REFUSE to speak about anything else with Kieran after that, too much honesty freaking me all the way out until I'm a jittery mess. I spend the time talking quietly with my bond to see if we can actually do something about how much pain Kieran is in but I'm not a Healer, no matter how well I can repair the men who belong to me, and my bond has nothing to give.

I wonder if I can convince someone else here to heal him for me?

There's a rustling and more noises outside, and then the tent flaps open again as the older woman from before bustles in again, this time with two plates filled to the brim with more of the same food. I'm not surprised to be getting a second helping. It's well known that I need the extra calories post-gift usage, but I'm guessing he's been given the slop they serve the so-called sheep. The steaming plate of roast chicken with all of the sides, smothered in gravy, is a sight for sore eyes.

Or growling belly.

She walks over to us both but ignores Kieran, instead meeting my eyes with an authoritative look and says, "I've been told to loosen your restraints so you can eat. If you attempt to move in any way, I will zap your ass into next year."

Ah.

So she hasn't been told that her gift won't work on me thanks to my bond being the second biggest monster in this camp? Poor woman. I play along nonetheless, mostly because I know it irritates that man when I do.

He never understood why I wouldn't just kill everyone he sent my way, and I'm sure he picks them all carefully. Choosing the most annoying, the sleaziest, or the most arrogant of his underlings that he can get his hands on.

Once my hands are bound in front of my body and I can feed myself, the woman hands me my plate and then finally turns to Kieran, shoving his plate at him as though he's dirt beneath her shoes, and walks back out.

"What the fuck is this? Are we being poisoned?"

I shake my head at him and shove a forkful into my mouth. "Welcome to VIP life in the camps, Black. As my Bond, you'll be fed three hot meals a day. You won't be beaten or attacked in the showers, and if anyone attempts to incapacitate you, they'll answer straight to the top man himself. All it will cost you is daily torture sessions and being forced to put up with lines of questioning that will have you considering suicide just to get it to end."

He blinks at me and then when he's watched me shove half my plate into my mouth, he finally picks up his own fork and gets to work on the chicken.

"It's flavorless," he gripes, and I scoff at him.

"It's the Resistance, were you really expecting something different? Who knew you were so spoiled?"

He shakes his head at me and keeps eating, with far more decorum than I have, goddamn him. There's a lot of noise in the camp around us, they're preparing for something big, some mission they're about to set out on to tear Gifted families and Bonded groups apart.

I loathe the lot of them.

We eat in silence for a few minutes longer, right until Kieran is using the last of his bread roll to sop up the gravy, and then I finally ask the question I've been working my way up to, afraid of the answer. "Have you seen Kyrie?"

He sets his empty plate down beside himself and stretches out his bad leg, wincing again. I curse under my breath, but he shrugs it off. I'm sure it's incredibly painful... I wonder if there's Tac training for learning how to ignore that level of pain or if he's just built like that?

I learned after many, many torture sessions.

Kieran grunts and then murmurs softly, "She's in the cages with the other women. They haven't sorted them or tested any of them yet. Davies has been too focused on having you back. He was positively gleeful about it."

I nod and look around the tent again as though a key or weapon is going to jump out at me to get me the hell out of these frustrating restraints. The forks are both plastic, and the tech in the restraints would just melt them if we tried.

Maybe Sawyer would be useful to me right about now.

I try to ignore Kieran's eyes on me, but they bore into my skin until finally he says, his voice low, "You're too calm. If this is the place you were tortured as a kid, for two years, you should be more... worried. What's your plan? Why are you so calm?"

I shove the last of my potatoes into my mouth so that I don't have to answer him for a minute, chewing slowly. How do I answer him without giving away too much? Is there such a thing anymore?

There's not really any secrets left... except one, and there's no amount of torture that could pry that out of me.

"I'm not calm... I'm sure. There's enough happening here that's the same as last time, so I know how this is going to go. I know what has to happen to get us out. We just have to be patient and, probably, take a little pain. I'm sorry about that part, but there's no avoiding it. Does your bond help out with that stuff? I'm not really sure how other people's bonds work."

He turns to keep his eyes trained on the opening of the tent like he's keeping watch, but I know all too well that we'll hear the woman coming. There's no mistaking it.

"My bond doesn't protect me like that. Mine is more... placid compared to yours. I'm the one in control, not it."

I hand him my plate so that he can set it down, because my restraints won't let me do it myself. "I'd love to think I'm in control, but I'm pretty sure my bond is just humoring me. I think it lets me run the show, but the second I'm in danger, it takes over. It's handy until some little jealous bitch starts throwing perfume around."

I shouldn't bring it up, not here, but there aren't enough details to tell the Resistance anything.

Obviously Gryphon didn't give his second all of the details, but he knows enough to smirk at me and shrug. "Could be worse, Fallows. Could've been your arch-nemesis. Or his brother."

I snort at him and mutter, “I’m not actually sure which one you’re referring to, but yeah, I guess you’re right. It could’ve been *much* worse.”

The smirk slowly melts from his mouth and he glances at the camera one last time before he turns his body into mine a little more, covering his mouth from sight as he murmurs, “You need to warn them... about who we saw here. You need to tell them sooner rather than later that there’s a potential sleeper cell.”

Atlas.

He’s talking about Atlas, because we’d seen his father here. The likeness between them both was striking, absolutely no doubt of their relation, but then Davies had turned to him and called him ‘Bassinger’ and sealed the freaking deal.

I still don’t know what to think of it.

I don’t know why I didn’t tell Gryphon while I was speaking to him.

I hope to God that I haven’t fucked up royally by not saying something, but I just... I couldn’t. I can’t believe that he’d betray me like that.

My spiraling thoughts are interrupted by the woman coming back to collect our plates. She grumbles under her breath about the waste of good resources on us sheep, and I roll my eyes at her. They’re all the same here. The more I can cultivate a spoiled brat persona with them, the more that they’ll underestimate me.

It’s how I got out last time.

I wait until her back is to us both, scraping off the plates into a scraps bin, before I cast out my gift to find Kyrie. I need to find my way over to her sooner rather than later, and when I find her in the showers tent, I try not to shiver in disgust.

It’s the worst place in the entire damned camp.

I pitch my tone to be whiny and demanding. “I need a shower.”

Kieran scowls and glances up at me, but the woman doesn’t react to him. I’m sure he just looks like an overprotective Bond, so it’s probably a

good thing he's acting up.

"The others are in there now, you'll have to wait."

My eyes shift to black and I watch the color drain from her face as I smirk at her, letting my bond take over to snark back at her, "I'm not going to wait."

Her mouth opens and shuts soundlessly for a second before my eyes flash back to their usual violet hue and she recovers enough to croak, "I need to get more men here. I can't take you both over there by myself."

I shrug and make a dismissive noise. "I don't need my Bond to hold my hand in there, leave him here. I smell, and I need to get some of this filth off before I puke at my own stench."

I'm hamming it up because I barely smell, only a little bit of the clean sweat scent of sitting around in a hot tent for days while I slept off my gift usage.

The woman glances down at Kieran, unsure at what the hell our dynamic is because we're obviously not acting like the Bonds she knows. Of course, she's probably totally submissive to her own Bond, the good little Bonded woman following orders, and for a fleeting second, I think about being sorry for her.

"You're going to just let her leave like that?"

Kieran grits his teeth at us both and then snarks back at the woman, "I'm not worried about my Bond's safety. You should ask yourself why that is."

She doesn't question either of us again.

THE SHOWERS ARE in another smaller, darker tent on the other side of the camp. I'm sure they're not lit up with appropriate lighting like the rest of

the camp for nefarious and disgusting reasons, but I already know that the women are alone in there.

For now.

“Clear out of the far stall! There’s a VIP here.” Sarcasm drips from her words, and I roll my eyes.

The women all look over at us both and shuffle away from the stall, and I turn to get my restraints loosened. I still can’t do all that much with my hands, but in theory, I’ll be able to undress my lower half and wash off. My shirt won’t come off, but I’m not going to go over the semantics with this woman right now.

All I care about is that, by some insane stroke of luck, Kyrie is in the next stall over.

I walk into the tiny space and snap the curtain closed as though I’m actually going to shower. The Resistance woman stands so close to the stall that I can see her feet poking through underneath the curtain. I want to punch her through the fabric, just to catch her unaware and serve the bitch a little justice, but I’m sure she’ll get what’s coming to her soon.

Patience, Oli.

I have to repeat that word over and over again until this is all over with.

I don’t bother undressing or tuning the water on. I’m not even going to bother with that sort of farce here. Instead, I walk over to the far end of the stall and crouch down to wave my hand under the small wall until Kyrie notices it and crouches down as well. I stick enough of my arm under there so that she can see the clothes I’m in and can hopefully tell it’s me. The gap is big enough that I can see that she’s still in her underwear, just rinsing off the same way I did for two freaking years. It’s smart.

You don’t want to get caught completely unaware in here... by anyone. The women are just as bad as the men, jumping each other in the showers in power plays. It’s stupid, and they shouldn’t bother fighting amongst themselves like that, but they do. Something about desperation and fearing

this place brings out the worst in them all. I can't really talk. If I were in their places, I'd be the same.

Once again, my bond saved me from that. Now I'm going to use the knowledge and the resources I have to keep Kyrie safe from it all too.

I pull Brutus down from my shoulder; his form is more smoke than solid. He doesn't attempt to play or nuzzle me, completely subdued from the boisterous puppy that he usually is.

I wonder if Nox is watching me through his eyes right now?

He mustn't have seen anything that would lead them to me, because there's no doubt in my mind that Nox would be first in line to drag me back, if for no other reason than to have his favorite verbal target back.

It occurs to me that I'm just squatting here in the showers, silently staring at a nightmare creature while Kyrie is probably assuming I'm having a breakdown of some kind.

Hell, I might be.

I bring him up to my lips and whisper softly, "Keep her safe. No one touches her, jumps her, without your protection. Leave no evidence behind."

When I drop my hand back down to usher him over to Kyrie, I see her startle and hesitate, her hand slow to come out and accept the little bundle of smoke, but Brutus moves to her without question. I have to believe that if Nox is watching, he'd be happy to know that I'm trying to keep Gryphon's sister alive and safe while we're stuck here.

I wait for a moment, and then I let our fingers grasp together for a second, squeezing them in the only reassurance I can give her right now, before I pull away and stand back up, rubbing my hands over my legs to brush away the soap suds and dirt from the muddy ground of the shower.

When I snap the curtain back, the woman is waiting there for me, her ear pressed close to the fabric like she was trying to figure out what I was doing in there without the shower on.

Good luck with that, bitch.

“I’m ready to go,” I drawl, and she scowls at me.

“You didn’t even wash anything. What’s the point in me getting you over here?”

I shrug at her and enjoy the huff of frustration I get back, not even caring when she’s rough about tightening my restraints and jerking me around to get me moving again.

Kieran is safe because of my lie.

Kyrie is safe with Brutus.

I’m as safe as I’ve ever been thanks to the bond growing angrier and more savage by the hour in my chest.

We’ll survive until I can get us out.

CHAPTER FOUR

GRYPHON

IT'S GETTING HARDER by the day to keep my face passive and the contempt off of it while dealing with Gifted that we know are members of the Resistance. Daniella Jordan is no exception.

I've never trusted the slimy lawyer, and though North has always said I was just being difficult for the sake of it, it feels good to know that I was right. She doesn't like me standing in on their meetings, especially when I stand on North's side of the desk in his home office, behind his seat like I'm preparing to take a bullet for him as though he's not the most dangerous man in our entire community. She doesn't like the advantage it gives me, or that I'm looking down on her.

Well, I've never been looking down quite so hard before because this fucking bitch knows where my Bonded is. I know it. North knows it, and while she's sitting there talking about asinine Council bullshit, she knows it too. We're all just playing our parts and pretending the giant elephant isn't in the room. It's making my skin itch.

There's no way her sister was working alone to mess with Bond Groups. There's no way that Daniella has wormed her way into the good graces of

North Draven for innocent reasons, and how much confidential information has she gotten directly from him in the last five years?

I'm going to call dibs on killing her, no matter how badly Nox wants it. There's a reason he's not here today. He's terrible at keeping a poker face in this kind of situation.

Daniella paints a frown onto her face, the picture of a concerned lawyer worried for her boss' Bond, but there's something about the very careful way that she speaks around me that's always flagged on my radar. Now we know why.

It takes everything inside of me to stop myself from reaching across the desk and choking the life out of her, at least until some useful intel falls from that sharp tongue of hers.

The way she smiles at me, she knows it too.

"I'll get these documents drafted up for you, North. The Alpha and Bravo Teams will find her. They found her last time. I'm sure they have her scent already, it's only a matter of time," she says as she collects the papers in front of her and slips them into her briefcase.

North stands and runs a hand down his suit jacket as though he actually gives a shit about looking professional in this moment, just another part of the act, and then walks her out to Rafe, who will see her all the way out of the mansion.

I count to five after the door locks behind her before I murmur, "I have no idea how you put up with her. I would have killed her long before we figured her out."

North shrugs and shakes out his hand, the one with the thin black ring of smoke circling it, one of the many little warning signs that he's riding the edge of his control. "Being on the Council is exclusively dealing with people I don't like. It's that or I give up the seat, which I couldn't do while we were looking for Oleander. Now I need to keep it so we can find her every time she disappears on us."

It's the first time he's mentioned it without putting his fist through something, so I'll call it progress.

He moves back to the desk and unlocks the drawer to collect his own stack of papers, all of it relating to Oli and her code name.

The code name that Atlas Bassinger conveniently knew without her telling him.

North checks his watch. "It's dinner time. We both skipped breakfast and lunch today. With what we're doing tonight, we'll need the fuel."

No argument from me there, though I don't really want to deal with half the people coming to the table anymore.

The Benson kids and Felix Davenport have moved into Draven mansion with us. While there's a part of me that takes great pride in caring for my Bonded's closest friends in her absence, there's a part of me who resents having them here while she's gone. Salt in the wounds of her being taken from me again while we're stuck here, sitting on our goddamned hands, because they're not in any of the known camps.

When Atlas handed me her GPS chip, I wanted to strangle the life out of him with my bare hands. That feeling had only gotten worse when Gabe had debriefed us fully on how much Atlas really knew about her... right up until Gabe got to the part about Noakes' treachery.

North also didn't take it well.

He hasn't taken any of this well, and the more information we get about Oli's time with the Resistance, the closer to losing control I see him getting. It's been a very long time since I've seen him this close to the edge. The last thing that set him off, well, no one blamed him for losing it on his brother's behalf like that.

I certainly didn't.

With every day that she's gone, we're all starting to unravel. I'd thought it was bad the first time around, but back then, we'd lost the idea of a Bond. The hopes and dreams we'd all had about her, not the girl herself.

Losing the real, flesh and blood Oleander Fallows is like dying a death of a thousand tiny cuts.

Hearing her voice in my head had almost brought me to my goddamned knees in the middle of a debrief with the TacTeam we'd left behind, Team Delta, who had one fucking job. That was to keep her safe. The fact that she'd given me absolutely nothing to go on is both infuriating and completely expected. I'd had to point out to North that she survived in those camps as a fourteen-year-old for two years. We need to stop with the bullshit and just... trust her. For a few days, while we use every goddamned resource at our disposal to find her and bring her the fuck home.

We don't really have much choice about it. The moment I'd done what she'd asked and spoken directly to Kieran, Oli had blocked me back out. I'd been frustrated until North had pointed out the obvious.

"There are a lot of Gifted who can pick up on that sort of communication. She's keeping herself safe. She's keeping you both safe."

It's the only level-headed thing I've heard him say about this entire fucking mess, and it gives me just a little bit of hope for the two of them, that maybe they'll figure their shit out when we have her back.

When.

There are no ifs here.

When we get to the dining room, Nox is already there. His nose is still buried in a textbook as old as the Draven bloodline itself, the way it has been since he found out about Oli's gift. I knew he'd be this way, that he'd research and track every little part of her power until he's absolutely sure of what we're dealing with.

I wish him good luck, because I've never heard of a Soul Render like her before.

We take our usual seats and start to fill our plates, the usual spread laid out with fish and lobster as though my Bonded were still here to enjoy it. I

fill my plate with it just to feel some sort of connection to her, like a fucking sap, but no one says a word to me about it.

When the doors open again and Gabe joins us, he looks as though he's been dragged through the mud. There are dark circles under his eyes and some streaks of blood down his throat and chest, peeking through the holes in his shirt. He's been down at the shifter fight clubs again, biding his time and working some of the frustration out, but he's obviously getting sloppy with his wins.

I don't mince my words. "You look like shit."

He shrugs and slides into his usual seat, his brows tugging together as he glances at Oli's empty seat. When he scrubs a hand over his face, his knuckles are bloodied and dirty too. "I don't give a shit."

There isn't a whole lot of information that can be found at the shifter fight club, but if it's keeping him out of trouble and getting some of the aggression out of his system, then I'm all for it. There's not a huge amount he can do for the search here until we have a location.

Then, we'll all be going after our Bond and killing anyone responsible for keeping her away from us.

As the door to the kitchen opens, the others arrive for dinner. Sawyer walks into the room with a laptop open in his hands, his eyes glowing white as he works through the very classified and incredibly above his clearance-level data that North has him working through. Sage and Felix follow behind him, both of them looking exhausted and frazzled. It seems no one in the house is sleeping well. That's also soothing somehow, that we're all a little lost without my Soul Render Bonded.

Felix gets one look at Gabe and reaches out to heal him, until Gabe stops him with a curt, "Don't."

Felix gives him a wry look back, his hand still hovering in the air between them. "Punishing yourself with bleeding knuckles and scratches is just stupid, Ardern."

Gabe shakes his head at him, his eyes on his plate still. “Oli doesn’t like us being healed by anyone but her. If it’s not life threatening, just leave it.”

Felix’s face drops and he glances over at Sage ruefully, obviously regretting saying anything, but she just takes a breath and says, “Oli always let Felix heal her. She wouldn’t mind it if it were him doing it, Gabe. We both know it.”

He just shrugs and tucks back into his plate without another word. The table falls silent again, only the sounds of cutlery scraping on plates and the clicking of keys on the laptop to be heard. It’s stupid, and I know I shouldn’t, but I try to reach out to Oli again, not to speak to her but just to feel that she’s okay. I can tell she’s alive. We’d all know if she died, but there’s a lot of bad shit that can be happening to a girl without killing her.

I try not to think too much about that because my bond starts acting up about it otherwise.

Sage clears her throat and then steels herself to speak to North, “Is someone going to let Atlas out of his cell sometime soon? We all know he’s not a Resistance member.”

Nox scoffs and lifts his glass of whiskey to his lips. “Do we? Because he’s a Bassinger. Nothing here makes more sense than him being part of that scum.”

It’s like watching Sage grow a spine in front of my very eyes. I’m careful to take in every second of it so I can share it with Oli later. Soon. I’ll share it with her soon.

“I watched him dote on her for months. If I was going to believe anyone in her Bond was trying to hurt her, it would be you, *Draven*.”

Oof.

I share a look with North, expecting him to come running to Nox’s defense, but he just looks back down at the transcripts we’ve found of the experiments on the IW.

The Resistance records of the torture sessions of my Bonded.

Nox smirks back at Sage, oblivious to the nightmare that his brother is sifting through, and says, “And that’s how the Resistance keeps winning, by putting on a kind and loving face to win simpering women over.”

Gabe slams his knife and fork back down onto the table, and Sawyer shoves his laptop away from himself with a snarl. There’s clearly about to be a brawl. Nox just smirks and his eyes flash black as he prepares to get them all off of his back with his creatures but instead, he stiffens for a second, and then he snaps at North, “She’s given the creature to Kyrie. He’s not hers to just give away.”

North’s eyes snap up at him, but then Nox curses under his breath and mutters, “She handed him off... for protection in the camps. She knows what happens to the women there.”

There’s quiet for a moment and then Sage throws a hand at him in a cutting gesture, snapping, “What a terrible, ‘simpering’ woman she is, running off to save people! Even when she’s trapped in one of those fucking camps, she’s thinking about others. So you go right ahead and tell me what idiots we both are for believing Atlas, because your word means nothing to me. Nothing, Draven! You’re just a bitter, twisted man who needs a fucking therapist and to sober the hell up.”

Still, North does nothing to intervene.

Whatever is going on between the brothers, I’ve never seen them act this way before. Never. North has protected, cared for, coveted, and coddled Nox through his teenage years. He has never let him fight his own battles like this without stepping in and throwing his gift into the mix.

Gabe ignores Nox and turns instead to North to snap, “Are you going to speak to him or are we just... leaving him in there to rot until we get Oli back? Is there a plan here, or are we just hoping he disappears?”

Nox shoots me look from the other end of the table, but I don’t want to talk too much about it in front of the others. Sawyer glances around at all of

us and leans back in his seat as he waits for an answer, shifting closer to his sister protectively.

North chooses his words carefully but doesn't back down. "He's proven that he has knowledge that only someone with connections in the Resistance would have. He's lied to us, or at the very least, omitted the truth.

Gabe shrugs in that very youthful way of his. "Oli did too. None of you are suggesting we lock her up when she gets home."

North's eyes narrow back at him. "Oleander is not a part of this discussion, and she was *taken* by the Resistance. She's a victim, not a possible conspirator."

Sage stares at him and then lets out a breath and butts in, "Oli would be pissed, and you all know it. There's nothing I can do to get you guys to let him go, but I'm warning you, she'll go eight different levels of terrifying Bond on you all when she finds out—"

North interrupts her, "He's in isolation. He's in his own room, being fed three square meals a day, with access to all of his usual amenities, except for his phone and the internet. He is in no way suffering, and I can assure you that *when* Oli is home, I will speak directly to her about it. I've taken her thoughts and feelings into consideration, don't doubt it."

After saving her from the burning building and covering for her, North has clearly won some brownie points from Sage, and even though she gives him a stern once-over, she nods and gets back to her food.

It's the worst dinner since Nox stopped dragging women in here to antagonize our Bond. I finish my plate as quickly as I can choke it all down. The moment I'm done, North packs away his files, his own plate still half filled as he abandons it without another thought.

We leave through the kitchens and into the service hallways that run through the building for the staff to use. As I move to follow North, Nox

grabs my arm to stop me, his eyes dark in the muted lighting. I urge North on without me and then turn back to Nox.

He's not drunk, but he's definitely drinking more at the moment. We're going to have to cut him off soon.

"North told me about your gift, the extra that you can do now that you've Bonded with her."

Her.

He says it like even just her name is poison on his tongue. It never bothered me before, I know all of the reasons why he's like that, but right now it's like a thrill of acid in my blood, burning everything it touches.

I give him a nod, not trusting my voice, and he takes it as a cue to go on.

"Don't *ever* practice that on me. I say this as your oldest friend. I will kill you if you look inside my head, even for a second."

I don't have to look at him to know that he's telling the truth. I also didn't have to be warned by him.

I know what horrors are hiding in there.

I shrug and murmur, "I won't. I've spoken to North about it, and I'll work my way up to getting into his. You'll be let out of this."

THERE'S ONLY one elevator that goes downstairs in the house, for good reason.

You don't want house guests stumbling on the work we've done down here, or the captives we've brought back from the council offices. And we definitely don't want any visiting council members to see Noakes chained to the floor, covered in blood, and trying to free the traitorous, despicable piece of shit.

He's looking in particularly bad shape tonight. I suppose three days down here without food or water will do that to a man. When he hears the

elevator and the sounds of our footsteps on the concrete, he jerks against his chains.

“I have nothing else to say!” he mumbles, thready and weak, and North scoffs at him.

“We’re not here to question you. We’re past all of that now.”

What little blood is left in Noakes’ face drains away, and he scrambles up onto his knees. His voice is barely more than a croak as he rushes out with, “I had one job. Find your Bond and get her tracked. That’s it! They were going to kill my children! What was I supposed to do?”

North’s eyes don’t even bother flicking to me. We’ve done this type of interrogation more than a thousand times by now. He knows how I move when I’m hearing lies. I shift on my feet, exactly how I am right now, because they taste wrong in the air to me.

North blows out a breath and straightens his tie, the picture of calm and control. “You should really know better than to lie in front of Gryphon. You were on the committee that picked him for the TacTeams. You put forward the recommendation for him to become the Lead. Have you forgotten this in your betrayal of us all?”

Noakes’ nose scrunches up and he simpers, “He’s got it wrong, I’m telling the truth. They’ve only asked me to track the girl. I didn’t give him anything else!”

I crouch down so that I’m at eye level with him. “You knew about the explosive though, didn’t you? You knew you were putting my Bonded’s life in danger.”

He whimpers and sputters out, “I thought they were lying about that! I didn’t think they’d be crazy enough to do that to some girl. They’re not complete monsters.”

North scoffs and holds out his hand, his palm slowly turning black. “No, but we are. Isn’t that right, old friend? You were happy to help cultivate the rumors of the Monster Bond.”

North's gift feels a lot like Oli's does, a tightness in your chest as he calls on it, and a slow smirk stretches over my face. He usually disposes of prisoners once we're done with them by using his death touch. Quick, efficient, and clean. That's him down to a T. Oli disappearing again has snapped his control, and I, for one, am glad to see it.

Glad that she's dug her way as deeply under his skin as she's burrowed under mine.

Noakes sputters and coughs in response and mumbles, "I did no such thing!"... lie, "The community was worried about what you were capable of, all of you! There was nothing I could do to stop the spread of misinformation,"... lie, "You can't blame all of that on me without credible evidence! I don't deserve to die like this!"... the biggest lie yet.

I scoff and meet his eyes one last time as August pops out of North's palm, salivating and snarling already, to say, "A monster sticks an explosive in a nineteen-year-old girl's head just to save his own skin. A monster walks into a fourteen-year-old girl's hospital room after her entire family was killed in an accident to threaten her into captivity. You think we've been monsters so far? You haven't seen what we're truly capable of yet... but now you will."

When his scream finally dies out, the crunching of his bones follow us out of the basement.

CHAPTER FIVE

Oli

I WAKE up with a stiff neck and an aching ass from the chair. It's frustrating that my body has already forgotten how to sleep sitting up like this, especially since I slept in my car a lot while I was on the run as well, but months at the Draven mansion have spoiled me, apparently.

I groan under my breath and shift as much as the restraints will let me, wiggling my legs out to attempt to get some feeling back with little success.

"How the fuck did you actually sleep like that? And how has no one killed you yet for how badly you snore?" Kieran snarks from the ground at my feet where he's still huddled up, his hands resting awkwardly on his chest.

I yawn as I shrug. "I don't usually snore, this is extenuating circumstances, and you learn to do a lot of shit in this place. How long have you been awake?"

He rolls his eyes at me. "Long enough to know that the sun rose at least two hours ago, and we've missed the breakfast round. It smelled like bacon. I thought about waking you just to get some."

I scoff at him with a grin, rolling my shoulders back and staring right at the camera so they can see I'm awake. Being a VIP here has its perks, and I'll take the sleep in. Gryphon never let me have them, and hopefully it'll mean less time with that man today.

Doubt it, but a girl can hope, right?

"Stop grumping, they'll bring us something."

He pulls himself up into a sitting position without using his hands at all, like he's doing a crunch in hard mode, and it makes me miss Gabe and Gryphon like a hole in my chest. I've drooled over the both of them doing that about a million times in TT and training. Shirtless too, which I really

shouldn't think about or my bond will start whining about getting them back.

“If they bring us slop, I'll remember it and get you back once we're home. Mark my words. Tell me why they leave you to sleep and feed you so well? Just because you're a Render? That seems like an even better reason to deprive and torture you.”

I wiggle my toes in my shoes, trying not to think about how stinky my socks will be in there, and my ass starts to get some feeling back. “They want me whole, undamaged, and at peak performance. I get tortured here plenty, just not like that. I'm sure you'll get to see it so just, like... prepare yourself for that. It's going to suck.”

He stares at me and then says slowly, like I'm dense, “Suck... That's the best descriptive word you can come up with for actual torture? Is this a coping mechanism or something?”

“I compartmentalize like a pro and, well, you'll see once it happens. Davies won't make us wait for it for long. He never could keep his hands off of me.”

I'm saved from having to explain much more than that to him by breakfast arriving. Both of the women I'd seen when I'd first woken up bring the plates in, except this time, the younger one is more subdued. She doesn't speak to either of us. When she leans down to hand Kieran his plate, I see the scratches and bruises forming on her cheek.

Once she's loosened my restraints and hands me my plate, I jerk my head at her and ask, “Fighting in the camps? Or did someone smack you around for your smart mouth? You should probably learn to keep it shut.”

Her lip curls at me, but the older woman butts in, “Don't answer her, Zarah. We're not supposed to talk to her. She's just fishing for information. We'll leave them to eat our food that we're being so kind as to share with them.”

I scoff at her and Zarah looks as though she's going to snarl something at me again, but the older woman snaps her fingers and they both walk out.

Kieran, who hadn't spoken but watched the entire interaction keenly, breaks off a piece of bread to dip into the egg yolks and then mumbles around his mouthful, "Something happened last night. It was a long time before dawn, probably closer to midnight. Lots of yelling and screaming. I was surprised you slept through it all. There were enough footsteps that whatever happened, they called in for backup. I didn't hear Davies specifically, but Franklin was there to stop any gifts in the mix."

I nod and get to work on my own plate of eggs, dipping the bacon in the yolks because I wasn't given any cutlery to eat with so I'm making do.

Kieran grunts and says, "Are there fights here a lot? Have you ever been in them? I thought you were green when you started at TT."

I huff at him, because of course he wants to talk about it and not just stuff our faces. "There's usually beatings and ambushes in the shower stalls, all sorts of shit you don't want to hear. Fighting where the Resistance gets hurt? I've only seen it happen once before, and the guy who managed to get the hit in was put on the rack... publicly. They're really good at making you watch people die in terrible ways here."

He nods slowly, scraping up the rest of his eggs with the last little hunk of bread, and then says, "We're getting you in therapy when we get back. I'll make sure they all know how much you need it."

Over my dead body.

I don't know why I feel so adamant about that. Talking through my issues would probably be for the best, but my bond in my chest instantly rejects the very idea of it.

"And what about you? Are you going to go talk to someone about getting the shit kicked out of you by Resistance assholes?" I mumble. To my surprise, he nods.

“All TacTeam operatives have mandated counseling sessions. Every last person who serves has to go to debriefs with their higher-ups and then a minimum of monthly sessions with an appointed psychologist.”

What the fuck?

North and Nox both work in Teams when there’s a need. Do they both go as well? Why do I suddenly want to burst into inappropriate giggles at the very thought of Nox sitting there talking about his feelings? I mean, if any of my Bonds needs therapy, it’s that one.

I actually do giggle as the image of North lying on a couch, talking about his day, filters into my brain. How the hell would that go? The greatest control freak I’ve ever encountered just... spilling his guts to some suit.

I wonder if his psychologist is a man?

Oh my God. North has without a doubt fucked his female psychologist. He totally would. He’d bone her so he didn’t have to talk about shit.

“What the fuck are you thinking about, Fallows? Rein it in!” Kieran hisses, breaking me out of my spiraling descent into madness. My eyes haven’t shifted, but when I glance down at him, I can see the hair on his arms standing up and the whites of his eyes are bright as he freaks the hell out.

I blow out a breath and slow my racing heartbeat down as best as I can, murmuring, “Sorry. Shit, *sorry*. I just... I’m starting to lose it, being away from... being here. Fuck, I’ll stop doing that.”

He watches me carefully, almost gently, like he’s handling a bomb with a hair-trigger, and that’s the exact moment that the women decide to come back for our plates. Neither of them say a word as they grab them but when they stalk out, it’s only a minute before they’re back, carrying a bucket of soapy water and a pile of clothes each.

Ugh.

Wash time.

Zarah puts the bucket down in the center of the tent and snaps, “The showers are out of commission for a few days, but since you’re both our *important guests* here, you’re getting access to water and clean clothes. Strip and get to it, you both have places to be.”

Another piece of the puzzle for us both to stew on; the fight happened in the showers. It’s warm enough wherever the hell we are that it’s going to be a sweaty, stinking nightmare here soon if they don’t get it repaired and back in action in the next few days.

“Wash him first, I’m happy enough to wait,” I say, jerking my head at where Kieran is at my feet.

I need to get him a chair.

Or a Healer.

“Why can’t you both just do it together? You’re Bonds, right?”

I roll my eyes at her and gesture between us. “You really want my bond getting an eyeful of what he’s offering and wanting to complete the Bond? You know what? Hell yeah! I’ll probably end up strong enough to pull your souls out through your nostrils, even with Franklin here. Go on, Bond. Get your pants off for me.”

Kieran smirks, putting on the cockiest demeanor as he pushes himself up onto his knees and reaches for his pants zipper. I give him serious kudos in my head for playing along with me without question.

The older woman darts in front of me, getting the closest to touching me as she has this entire time, and waves her hands around. “No! No, turn around. Both of you face the opposite directions. Zarah, get the Render another bucket.”

Thank God that one worked.

I mean, I’m not scared of seeing Kieran naked, but I don’t know how to explain that to Gryphon and I’ve had just enough of a taste of his jealousy before to know that he wouldn’t take it well. Even if it was his second-in-command and for a really good reason.

I'm surprised at how much I truly care. Me, not my bond. I don't want to upset Gryphon or any of the rest of them by looking at another naked man. Jesus, this Bond shit is unbelievable because six months ago, I would've gone to an all-male strip club just to mess with them, and now the very thought of that gives me hives.

The guys all better feel like this or I'm going to castrate the lot of them.

After my restraints are loosened, I get up and let Zarah cut my shirt away from my body, but I lose my pants myself. I refuse to let them take my underwear off and I use the washcloth to scrub around them.

I can hear Kieran washing up behind me, but there's no other sounds from outside the tent to alarm me, so I just focus on my scrubbing.

"If she's been here before, where's her scars? You said she got the same," Zarah murmurs, and the older woman grunts under her breath.

I can't help but play with her, but it also works in my favor for this stupid woman to be unsure of me, so I let my eyes shift to black and snark out, "You ask too many questions. No wonder you got smacked around. Too bad they didn't do a decent job of it."

The older woman slowly lowers her bucket to the ground and then fumbles at her waistband until she pulls a coms handpiece out, pressing a button and murmuring, "Her eyes have gone black again. How should we proceed?"

I grin slowly, showing off my teeth in a very predatory way, and Kieran turns his head, not enough to see me, but just so he can get a bit more of an idea of what's happening behind him.

There's a static sound down the handpiece and then Davies' voice comes through loud and clear.

"Get them dressed and bring them to my work space. If her bond wants to play, then I'm ready for her."

SIX HEAVILY ARMORED guards escort me through the camps while Kieran is dragged between two others, his leg still not holding any of his weight. I'm going to have to get crafty about finding him a Healer and getting it patched up, or at the very least, in working order again.

He's kind of a dead weight right now, and dead weights just become plain old dead in this hellhole. I've worked too damn hard to keep him alive for the asshole to die because of a snapped freaking leg.

This camp is bigger than the last one I'd been in with Sage and Gabe, but from what I can see, it's smaller than the one I was held in for the longest time during my two year stay with Davies. When we walk past the shower block, I count eight different guards standing around the perimeter. Two of them are using their gifts to study the grass and canvas like they are about to find a giant sign spelling out what happened there overnight.

I have a few guesses on what actually happened, but I'm still sort of hoping I'm wrong.

There is an entire section of smaller tents that the guards and grunt workers all camp in. They separate Davies from the sheep. It's very strategic of him to make sure that he's never going to be caught unaware overnight by an escapee, but I'm surprised he's keeping Kieran and me so far away.

I used to sleep in the tent over from him.

It was literally my worst nightmare, and it took a full year on the run before I stopped waking up in a puddle of sweat and panic. Thank God I was past it before I had to start sharing my bed with my Bonds. I couldn't have hidden that from Gryphon's gift. He would absolutely have 'tripped' over those feelings with his Neuro-snooping ways.

God, I miss him.

I miss North's caring and domineering ways, Atlas' complete acceptance and love for me, and Gabe's loyalty to me, kind and savage and

sure.

I even miss worrying about Nox's loathing and his dream-like bed with a hundred nightmares keeping watch over us both, and I fucking miss Brutus like a hole in my heart.

"For the infamous IW, you look kind of pathetic," the guy holding my arm says. I shrug at him, because if I'm going to be stuck dealing with these assholes, then I might as well have some fun with it.

"It doesn't really matter how I look though, does it? You'll still be the first to die when I take this camp. Next will be mouthy Zarah. Then, whoever the fuck broke my Bond's leg will go next. He kinda needs it to keep up with me."

The guy scoffs, but the older, bigger guard beside him smacks him on the back of his head and snaps, "For a Neuro, you're pretty stupid, Cam. She was taking out more people than an atomic bomb at fourteen. Shut your mouth before it gets you killed the minute Franklin gets sent out."

Cam scoffs some more, puffing his chest out and putting some extra swagger in his step like he's a big man, but he doesn't say anything else. No one else tries to speak, and they all clutch at their weapons as we walk through the busy camp. There's a lot of people bustling around but they scatter away from us with either looks of concern or outright fear.

This is how I know that I really am a monster, no matter what my Bonds have to say otherwise.

When we reach Davies' tent, we stop outside while the older guard steps in first, probably to announce our arrival and get orders on where to put us, and I take a second to glance back at Kieran and check out how he's faring with all of the movement.

The answer to that is not well at all.

His usually tanned skin is sallow looking. There's a fine sheen of sweat over his forehead, and even with his mouth in a firmly controlled line, he looks like he's about to pass out.

I turn back to face the mouthy young guard again and say in a quiet, low tone, “If he dies from that broken leg, I will trigger every last one of your darkest nightmares until your brain breaks down inside your skull. I’ll use every single trick that Davies tortured into me to prolong your death until you die *writhing*.”

He gulps.

I’m starting to get addicted to that response.

I hear the tent flap pull back again and then I hear his voice say, “Who would’ve known that all it would take to bring out the darkness in you would be to have your Bonds here too? You delight me, little Render.”

Don’t react to him, Oli. Don’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how much you hate having his approval.

The young guard snaps to attention and jerks me forward, acting as though he wasn’t just shitting himself over my words, and he directs me into Davies’ work space. We should count our blessings that it’s this one and not his actual torture tent, but now isn’t the time to point that out to Kieran.

It’s easily five times bigger than the tent we were being kept in and there’s lights hanging from the higher ceiling, making the space bright and inviting. It’s all a farce, the careful way that Davies plans out everything to seem as though he’s a good and decent man and not the utter freaking sadist he is.

There’s a wooden desk at one end of the space near an operating table, complete with restraints and stirrups. I glance over to see Kieran scowling at it. When he meets my eyes, there’s a question there that I can’t really answer right now. He’s probably coming up with all sorts of ideas about what happens on that table, and I’m sure that at least half of them will be correct.

Davies steps back up to his tool desk and then sweeps a dramatic hand towards the table. “Help our guest up onto the table, and leave her broken

Bond over at the restraint point where he can observe all of my hard work.”

I walk over myself, not giving the guards the satisfaction of dragging me, and even though it’s awkward with my restraints, I climb up onto the table. They’re extra cautious when they tie me down, securing the new straps on before they remove the old ones, and I want to scream at them because *of course* I’m not going to do anything.

Davies is without a doubt stronger than I am. I’m not a freaking idiot.

“No, you’re not. They’re all going to underestimate you, little Render. They’re all going to look at you and see some pretty little girl forever. The only reason they look so worried is because I’ve missed you, you know? When you ran from me... the things I did to the men and women who let you escape, well, it’s become a bit of a legend around here. They don’t understand your power, what you can do... You really will be my weapon, just as soon as I’ve collected all of your Bonds. How many were there again?”

Nothing.

I think of nothing and I pray Kieran is smart enough to think of nothing as well. We might be screwed here, but I can keep—no, don’t let him in, Oli, fuck—nothing.

There’s nothing.

Davies tuts at me, lifting off the top of his desk to reveal what he keeps inside it. I can’t see it from the angle I’m lying at, but I don’t need to. I already know what’s in there, and if he’s brought in anything new... I don’t need to freak myself out over it.

“I have acquired some new tools. I can’t wait to show them to you, but we have time. No matter what your Bond is thinking about getting you out of here, we both know you can’t. I’ve made better plans. Franklin is staying here with you from now on. Did you tell your Transporter that Franklin is also stronger than you are? For now. I’m sure that once I find all of your

Bonds, you'll be stronger than him. I have so many plans for you, but let's stop talking and start with the fun, shall we?"

He snaps his fingers and the guards all finally clear out, leaving Kieran chained to the restraint point at the other end of the tent where he can see everything that Davies is about to do to me.

Fuck, I hope he has a strong stomach, because shit is about to get rough.

CHAPTER SIX

Oli

THE OBSESSION that Davies has with his set of knives is disturbing. I have to remind myself that he's absolutely getting off on prolonging his fondling of them in the tool desk. The sounds they make as he runs his fingers along the handles are like the world's most twisted and macabre bells, warning me of all of the pain he's about to put me through.

"There's something I need to discuss with you before we start, something that you gave to one of the women in the shower block yesterday. The cameras can see you both interact but not what you handed her. Tell me what it is, and I'll refrain from killing the girl."

I think of nothing.

Blackness.

Inky nothingness in a desolate and barren wasteland of oblivion.

Nothing makes Davies angrier than my faultless ability to empty my brain out. He had no idea that one of my fathers, Vincenzo, had been a Neuro. He was the stay-at-home father with whom I'd spent the most time with, and even as a small child, he'd played this simple game with me—how many different ways can we empty our minds to utter blankness? Even as a very little girl, I'd be quizzed and tested until I could become a calm, blank canvas.

I wonder often if he'd known that someday I'd be facing this man, if my mother's dreams of oleander flower-filled cribs also showed a madman obsessed with breaking inside my mind to destroy my life, and that's why Vincenzo had been the one chosen to primarily raise me.

It makes more sense than I want to admit.

Davies picks a knife, the long carving knife that's sharper than a surgeon's blade, and steps towards me. "These games grow so tiresome, little Render. Must we always play them? The woman is strong enough that

we were planning on keeping her, but that's not all. Her brother is a leading Tac operative, a pain in my ass."

Her brother is nothing.

Her brother is absolutely nothing.

Nothing.

I am a blank slate of zero thoughts about him.

"Did you meet him in your time away? Is he the reason you gave her something? She's not going to escape, you know. If you're hoping Shore will come after you, I can assure you that he might be strong and have tricks up his sleeve, but he's no match for me."

I need a subject change, and fast. "I didn't give her anything. She gave me a job, and I went to check she was okay. I came here in an apron and work sneakers, it's pretty obvious I'm not lying."

He grins at me and waves the knife. "Then why is it that a simple, Neuro-gifted woman could make three fully grown men disappear into thin air? Two of them were Shifters and at least twice her size, and when they approached her in the shower block for a little fun... gone."

It's easier to be blank about this. I'd already guessed what had happened in the shower stalls, and I'm incredibly glad that I'd been able to get to Kyrie before it happened.

I shrug and roll my head on my shoulders to look back up at the fabric panels of the ceiling. "I'm a little confused about why you're bringing this up with me. All of that chaos is outside of my skill set, and you know it."

He grins at me, his eyes wandering around the room before he snaps, leaning over me on the table and snarling in my face, "And we both know a little Neuro sheep couldn't *devour* grown men alive and leave nothing but a little DNA matter behind! So what *did* you do, Render? You know better than to make me angry."

I know better than to end up here again, and yet I walked right in here after that woman, so I'll be damned if I'm going to sell her out to save

myself a little pain. “I know nothing. I’m still the same little stupid girl you had here last time, so you really shouldn’t bother with all of this. It’s a waste of time.”

The first press of the knife to my skin doesn’t actually break it, it’s more of a warning that he doesn’t appreciate my tone, and he snaps, “I saw you hand her something in the showers. The camera didn’t pick up on what it was that you gave her, but you *will* tell me. Whatever you’ve done while you’ve been gone, whatever you’ve become, you’ll never be stronger than I am. If you don’t tell me what it was that you gave her, I will bring her here, and I will do everything to her that I’ve done to you, little Render. You’ll repay that woman’s kindness with pain and a slow death.”

Nothingness.

Hold on to the nothingness because it’s much harder to stay blank when there are other people in this stupid fucking hellhole who I want to protect, but if he brings Kyrie here, then I’ll find a new plan.

There’s always a way through this.

He clicks his tongue at me like he’s disappointed and pulls the knife away from my skin. His favorite form of torture is edging, and I loathe him for it. I’d rather he just freaking stabbed me already.

He steps back over to his tools and puts the carving knife down, fussing with the handles again as he says, “Cold little Render, I should’ve known you wouldn’t care that much about some useless woman. But what about your Bond, hm? I can heal him. Let your bond out to play with me now, answer the questions I have, and I’ll heal your Bond. He’s starting to look a little green over there. Linda and Zarah said the wound over the break is looking infected too. Blood infections can move quickly, you know.”

I can go back to ignoring him, because there’s no way he’ll let Kieran die right now. He’s spent too long trying to find my Bonds. He’d never let one die without experimentation first. It’s the whole reason I lied in the first place.

Davies sighs, making a big show of it, as though I'm an unruly school child he's being forced to deal with. Then he straightens back up, finally selecting a new knife from his tool desk as he runs a hand down the side of it lovingly.

My heart starts to beat a little faster, panic slowly working its way down my spine, and I have to start focusing on my breathing to stop myself from hyperventilating.

Be blank, Oli. Be nothing.

He leans over me again to murmur right in my face, "I already know you won't break so easily, Render. I'm just making sure your Bond knows it too. Let's see how long it takes me to break him though, shall we?"

The moment the knife touches my skin, I start to disassociate. My bond creeps up to the forefront of my brain, ever watching what's happening and waiting for the right moment to step in for me, but simple cuts are easy enough to block out. When Davies really starts to get creative with his slicing, my leg begins to shake involuntarily and a pool of sweat starts on my lower back. I can almost keep it blocked out, almost, until he starts cutting off my pants and working his way up the sensitive skin of my thighs.

My control slips for a second and my body is instantly flooding with Gryphon, his bond reaching out to me and breaking down the last of my barriers in a single sweep, and his voice is booming in my head.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?!

I watch as Davies' eyes flash wide and I slam my barriers back up, cursing myself a thousand times over for slipping and letting my Bonded in. One split second and I've ruined *everything* that I've spent five years guarding and protecting with my goddamn life.

Fingers as cold as ice and spattered with droplets of my blood trail over my cheek, leaving behind a red trail as Davies leans down to whisper to me,

his lips touching the rim of my ear, “And who was that, my precious little Soul Render?”

TWO YEARS.

I was a prisoner in one of these camps for two whole years, and not once did I so much as *think* their names. I knew them, *oh my God* did I know their names. The moment I’d woken up in that hospital with Nurse June standing over my bed with teary eyes and a file tucked under her arm, I’d memorized their names. I remember thinking how scary it was that North was almost a decade older than I was. The five years between me and Gryphon and Nox seemed like so much as well. I wanted so badly to know Gabe and Atlas because they were only a few months older than me, and I wanted friendship until we were old enough to Bond.

I spent a few short hours in that hospital planning and hoping and wishing that they’d hurry up and take me away from the horror of what had happened to my family.

And then I never thought of them again.

I never let myself.

And with three desperate words sent through our Bonded link, Gryphon has revealed himself to the biggest threat our Bond Group will ever know.

On instinct, I think of nothingness. I let the panic ride me even as I force myself not to think of the details, the exact reasons why I’m panicking so badly. I triple check my barrier to my Bonded, and then I check on my bond because I might have to let it take over to distract Davies from what he’d heard.

My bond is ready and eager to be let out.

I’ll take the pain for as long as I can and then I’ll let my bond take over to finish this session off. If Davies forces me to kill innocent people then...

well, I'm a monster, because if it keeps my Bonds and our loved ones safe, then I'll fucking loathe it but accept it.

I hate myself, but it's the line I've drawn here.

"Fine. Fine, insist on being a stubborn little shit. I have more than enough tools to bleed it out of you. If I need to have you screaming to find out who he is, then I guess we're going to need a bigger, *blunter* knife. How do you feel about being hacked to pieces with a butter knife, little Render? It'll be hard work for me but, oh, the satisfaction."

Deep breaths.

Deep, long breaths—in through the nose, hold for two counts, out through the mouth.

I can survive it.

I manage to convince myself of it too, right up until he actually starts hacking at my thigh, and then a scream rips out of my mouth, ragged and hoarse. Gryphon is pounding at my barrier, my head thumping with it, and I need to puke.

This is also when the entire scene becomes too much for Kieran and he shouts at Davies, startling me because I'd almost forgotten he was in here with us thanks to all of the pain, "Get your hands off of her, and I'll tell you where he is."

The knife buried in my thigh stops moving, but Davies doesn't take it out entirely. The muscle clenches around it like my body is trying to force it out, but his hand is firm on the handle.

I blink my eyes open finally, but Davies is focused on Kieran. When I glance over to where he's chained, he still looks like he's halfway to his grave, but there's a determined gleam in his eyes as he says, "Her other Bond, the one in her head, you'll want him. He's stronger than I am. If she Bonds with him, she'll get the kick of power you want from her. He's a Neuro, like you... he's a lot like you, actually. From the moment they met,

he's been in her head. If anyone will be able to help you control her bond, it's him. Just stop fucking cutting her up, and I'll tell you where he is."

I want to scream at him to shut the fuck up, but I can't speak around the lump in the back of my throat caused by all of the pain and the moment I think that I see the triumph in Davies eyes. He knows that Kieran is about to give him another piece of the puzzle, another toy to play with to make me the weapon he so desperately wants. After years of getting nothing from me, there's no way he's going to even question Kieran about it.

He'll just take it and find my Bond, drag him back here to live through all of this right alongside me.

Davies decides to prove a point and presses the knife down harder, slicing through the muscle there, and my bond finally kicks in, taking over for me to spare my mind from the agony, and then I finally feel nothing. My bond soaks it all up for me like the greatest sponge in the world.

My eyes don't shift though. My bond knows better than doing that here.

Kieran has no idea that the pain just ended for me though and snaps, "Massachusetts. He's in Massachusetts. Give me a pen. I'll write down where, just stop cutting her."

There's a horrific spurt of blood that comes out of my leg when Davies finally pulls the knife out. Kieran's brow furrows at the sight of it, but Davies grabs a cloth and one of his tourniquets to staunch the bleeding. He's an expert at directing blood flow, but usually he uses it to keep me conscious for as long as possible during this process.

He wipes his hands off on a cloth and then he steps over to where Kieran is restrained on the other side of the tent, staring him down as though he'll be able to tell if he's being lied to.

He doesn't have that ability though.

Kieran plays his part well, staring back at him with no signs of deception as he lists off an address and even coordinates of a place that I've never heard of.

Davies smirks slowly, deciding he's been victorious, and steps back to his work desk. "If you're lying to me about this Bond and where he is, I'll come back here and I'll really torture her. This? This is just a warm up, but if you send me away for no good reason and I don't come back with this Neuro? I'll amputate her leg. No pain relief either, she doesn't need both legs to be my weapon. It was my next course of action when I last had her to get her to talk. I'm excited to give it a try."

I want to pass out at the very sound of that, but then he's back at the table and pushing a needle into my neck, injecting me with something that kicks in immediately, my brain fuzzing out.

"Extra insurance to keep you here, little Render. I'll be back with your next Bond soon. Be a good girl and wait here for me."

Then he walks out, and I lose track of what the actual fuck is going on here. I don't know up from down, the table feels as though it's spinning into space, and my skin begins to crawl as though a thousand fire ants have just been injected into my veins.

I lose my shit entirely.

There's a cracking sound and a muffled scream, like someone biting down on fabric to stop themselves from making noise but failing kind of miserably, and then there's some retching. My stomach doesn't like that sound one bit, protesting immediately, and I turn my head to vomit. My restraints are too tight to move much and I'm sure there's vomit running down my chin, but I can't feel anything, nothing but the sensations that the drug fills me with.

I think I'm crying.

Not that I want to, not that the tiny slivers of my sane brain are feeling that sort of emotion, but my breath is sawing out of my chest and I start to taste salt.

There's grunting and the sound of a heavy sack dragging along the dirt, and then somehow Kieran's face appears in front of mine. I have no idea

how the hell he's here—it's probably a hallucination—and I think the sobbing gets worse.

He's trying to speak to me but his words are distorted, because even though I can see his mouth is moving, the words are all coming through wrong.

“Kill... just him... get help... Oli, please... kill... know you can...”

I scowl at him and finally take a gasping breath, but whatever the fuck Davies shot me up with turns my stomach again and bile rushes up my throat.

There's a moment of darkness, nothingness I want to climb into and stay in forever, and then there's Kieran's face again. There's vomit on his shirt and pants, my vomit, I think, but he's not angry or disgusted.

He's desperate.

“Kill him, Oli... kill Franklin...”

I don't understand what he's saying.

But my bond does.

And then there's nothing but death and pain, blood and destruction. I might be utterly fucked from the drugs, but my bond has always been stronger than *anyone* will ever comprehend, and *no one* threatens me without facing the dark god living inside me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nox

THREE NIGHTS.

She's only been gone this time for three nights, and yet the chaos she's left behind is insane. Gryphon's foul moods and obsessive behavior makes sense to me because the idiot was stupid enough to fully Bond with her, but the rest of them?

Pathetic.

We all knew she'd run the moment she had a chance. Gabe and Bassinger were the ones without a shared coherent thought between them that wouldn't have possibly strung together the idea that maybe they should leave the GPS tracker in her.

Then there's the small fact that I think North's bond is going to take over and wipe out the entire country to get her back, and after decades of playing the gentile councilman, cultivating the sedate and moral man that he is, he's about to ruin it all for her.

Fucking Bonds.

Of course there's no sign of her or the other dozens of Gifted who were taken. The moment we'd gotten back here from the aborted mission, we found Gabe shifted into the biggest wolf form I've ever seen him in, snarling and snapping at Atlas like he was hoping to rip his throat out.

After we'd split them up, it had taken a good hour before Gabe calmed the fuck down enough to shift back, and then he'd told us all about Atlas' extensive knowledge of Fallows' time in the Resistance.

And what they named her.

I never liked him, and I've made my thoughts on his situation widely known because we've already lost one Draven to a Resistance sleeper cell this year. Keeping him around for the sake of a Bond who never wanted any of them in the first place is just plain stupidity.

North doesn't listen.

He never listens anymore, another strike against her.

But even after Bassinger is locked away, we've spent three entire days sitting around, trying to find where they're all being held, with no luck. All of the monitored campsites and residences are running business as usual, and there is no new intel. Zero. They know we're listening, so the moment they have Fallows, the lines all go dead silent.

So we're back to working through the old intel and searching for some clue or little sign that we might have missed about where they are. Gryphon is better at strategy than paperwork, and he spends his time keeping his Teams on standby for the moment we have something, so it's up to North and I to sift through it all with a fine-tooth comb.

There's only two things that pop out, and neither of them are enough to go on.

Alaska, in the highest and coldest area that would be an absolute logistical nightmare to attempt an extraction.

Or possibly in the middle of the Sahara desert, which would also require a lot of communication with the local authorities and Gifted community to go in and get them back, so either way, we need to be sure about it before we move in.

It doesn't come down to that.

At dinner on day three of her being gone, while we're all arguing viciously about what to do next because Gabe is furious that we're not going to just traipse around in a desert or a frozen tundra until we trip over her, Gryph lurches away from the table with a bark, his chair crashing to the ground.

The blood drains from his face as he feels *it*. The ghost of Fallows' pain as if it's his own. My bond begins writhing in my chest, that terrible thing it does now around her, but whatever is happening in the Resistance camps, Gryph can sense it stronger, thanks to their connection.

Then he lets out a roar and goes down to his knees as his legs buckle underneath his weight. I haven't heard a sound like that out of him since the last time he was shot while on duty, and North almost loses control of his own bond in response as he bolts over to him with a snarl. Gabe shoves away from the table, but his hands are shaking and his face is unnaturally pale.

Someone is hurting their Bond.

I know it because I can feel the echo as well, the sensation of pain that isn't my own, and my palms immediately break out in a sweat. My bond wants to find her, to save her, to take the pain for her and tear apart whoever dared lay a hand on her.

She's not mine. I shouldn't feel this way about her.

I should feel this way about anyone. I know better than to fall for these tricks, and there's no way I'm ever putting myself back in that situation.

Never.

"What is it? What's happening to her?" North snaps as his phone starts ringing on the table. We all ignore it but the moment it stops, Gabe's starts up, and he grunts at it.

"It's Bassinger. He must feel it too."

Gryphon takes a gasping sort of breath. "She's being tortured. I got into her head, but she shoved me back out. Someone is carving her up."

Kill them all. Filthy heathens, touching what's ours.

I shake my head as though it'll clear the sound of my bond away. My creatures don't like sharing, not even with the others, and no matter how much I tell them that I won't have her, they don't want someone touching her either.

Gabe shoves up to his feet and snaps, "Where the fuck is she then? We're going to the desert, send a team to the snow. We can't just sit the fuck around anymore—"

He's cut off by the audible *pop* of a Transporter arriving, and then Kieran Black is groaning on the ground at Gryph's feet, looking as though he's been beaten by the entire population of the Resistance. From the look on both North and Gryph's faces, he'd better have been.

Because Fallows isn't with him.

"Get me a Healer. Now," he says through clenched teeth, and Gryph drops to his knees to grab at his vest, pulling him up into his face.

North is already on the phone and calling Felix Davenport down, his second phone in his hand as he starts calling in the TacTeams to be ready to move out.

"Where the fuck is my Bonded, Black?"

Kieran turns green, his teeth clenching in pain as Gryph manhandles him, and he chokes out, "Get me a Healer and I'll go back for her."

I check in with Azrael, the shadow that stays with her that she's doing her best to domesticate, to figure out what the hell is happening there. Kyrie is still in one of the cages, unharmed, but trapped nonetheless. There's no sign of danger or trouble yet. I tell Azrael to be on high alert and he whines a little at being away from Fallows if there's danger, his soft spot for her a mile wide.

"You left her behind?!"

Gryph snarl makes it clear that he might actually kill Black for this, but anyone with eyes can see what the hell is happening here. Black is good enough about laying it out there for him though.

He snaps out in a pain-filled growl, "I have two breaks in my leg and a raging blood infection. I didn't have enough power to bring her back with me. The second a Healer is done with me, I can take you to her. Just get me one *now*, because she's on her own."

Felix bursts through the door with both of the Bensons and rushes straight towards Black, not waiting for an order to heal him. He curses under his breath at the state of Keiran, but his gift is strong enough to do

this. He's the top of his class and a prodigy amongst his peers, not that you can tell from how humble he is. He's one of a select handful of Healers that I'm willing to let touch me.

Gryph moves aside to let Black be tended to, stalking back over to the table and grabbing the weapons that he'd unstrapped from himself to eat. Gabe moves to stand with the Bensons, murmuring to catch them up on what's happened, and North is practically vibrating with his phone to his ear as he snaps out orders to mobilize the Alpha and Bravo teams. I can feel his relief that both of them are already on standby, because we've been waiting for this moment.

"You can talk while he heals you. Tell me what the fuck was happening to her," Gryphon snarls as he does one last check that his weapons are secure, and Black grits his teeth while the thigh bone is reset.

"Silas Davies is what happened to her. Silas Davies is what happened to her last time as well. He's fucking obsessed with her. He was... butchering her, that's when he heard you in her head. I had to think quick to stop her from getting herself murdered just to keep you all away from him."

Silas fucking Davies.

Only the fabled super villain of the Resistance, the boogeyman whose exploits are whispered about in the darkest corners of the Gifted world.

North looks over at me and I know that it's game over for him. That's the last puzzle piece in the mystery that is his Bond. Now he knows everything he ever needed to know about her. He's done for; hook, line, and sinker. He belongs to her now, whether he's admitting it to himself yet or not.

The Healer lifts his hand away from Black's chest and moves to roll up the leg of his pants to get a better look at his mangled ankle. It looks as though there's no bone structure left in there, like someone took a mallet to it and ground it to dust. Felix grimaces as he braces his hands on either side to start the reconstructive healing there too.

I have to swallow the bile down at the echoes of trauma in the back of my mind at the sight of it. I need to distract myself, to remind myself that this is something very different to what happened to me. I have to work at it to make sure my voice comes out bored. “What happened to you?”

North and Gryph both see through my attempt, but everyone else sends dark glares my way, as though their disapproval means anything to me.

Black glances at me, sweat still pouring down his face even as he’s looking less sickly, and snaps, “The thigh break happened when we arrived. The blood infection is because they wouldn’t treat it. I snapped my own ankle about a half hour ago to get out of the restraints to get Oli to take out John Franklin, the Resistance’s strongest Shield, so I could get back here. She did, by the way, her bond finally kicked in, and I got her off the torture table before I came here. I checked her bleeding and made sure all of the tourniquets on her were secure. She’ll be fine there as long as Davies doesn’t get back before we get her out. Not to be an asshole, Davenport, but you need to get a move on.”

The Healer shoots him a rueful look and says, “You had sepsis, your kidneys were shutting down, and you were about twelve hours away from complete organ failure. Sorry it’s taking a minute to stop your impending death.”

Sage makes a little gasping sound in the back of her throat, lifting a hand to cover her mouth and muffle any other sounds of horror that she might have.

North curses and snaps, “Just tell us where Oleander is. You can stay here and receive treatment, there’s no need for you to be going back out there. We have enough Transporters to get to her and take control of the situation safely.”

Black grunts and lets out a low groan as the crunching sound of his bone resetting bounces around the room, panting to answer, “I can’t... I

don't know exactly where it is... I just followed the insurgents back there. I can map back, but I... don't have coordinates or a location."

I curse under my breath, because of course it couldn't be that easy for us, and snap, "How much longer until Davies is back at the camp then? We're running out of time while you're being pieced back together."

Black grunts again as there's another crunching of his bones, and snarls at me, "I sent him to the Hail Mary to buy time. I'm not a fucking idiot."

Fuck.

That'll just about do it.

I watch as half the room takes a breath, because Black is right, he's definitely not an idiot if he sent Davies there. The Hail Mary is the safe house in Massachusetts, and it's a rabbit warren of traps, barbed wires, and security surveillance. I know the place intimately, thanks to my uncle William dropping North and I both off there when I was a teenager over a security issue. Even with all of my nightmare creatures, I couldn't make my way out.

North meets my eye across the room as he pulls his suit jacket off, revealing just how many different weapons can be hidden under a Tom Ford, and then says, "If you're coming with us, then you need to be in full Tac gear. You too, Gabe. We leave the second Felix is done and Kieran can move."

THE MOMENT our feet hit the ground at the camps, it's very clear that things have changed dramatically since Black left here. I pull the gaiter up over my face and let my nightmare creatures out, checking in with Azrael, but Kyrie is still in the cages. Except now the tent's guards are all dead in a heap on the ground and the other women are shaking and sobbing at the trauma of what is happening around them.

Kyrie isn't.

A typical Shore reaction to this. She's sitting on her haunches, waiting for an opening to get the fuck out of there and take out whichever Resistance she comes across.

I lean towards Gryph and murmur, "Tell Kyrie we're here and heading to her. The prisoners are all looking shaken up."

He turns to look at me and scoffs, flinging out a hand. "We've just walked into a massacre and our Bond is lying injured in here somewhere... you're not even going to attempt to find her first?"

I look over at the piles of bodies, dozens of them lying wherever they've fallen in death, and then back at him. "I'm not an idiot. This? This is our little poisonous Bond. She's doing *just fine*. There are other Gifted here who can't kill people at will."

North pushes past us both, his own creatures coming out in full force, and he snaps, "Find our Bond first, then we'll take in the prisoners and any survivors."

Gabe stalks after him, looking a little shell-shocked, even though he's the only one of us to see her death powers up close, but he's also unwavering as he hunts for her. Gryph barks out commands to his team before he goes after the two of them, completing the triad of lovesick idiots going after a girl who does not need to be rescued.

Taken from here before Silas Davies gets back? Sure.

Rescued from the Resistance thugs he left her behind with? No. Anyone with eyes and two brain cells knocking around in their skulls can see she's got it handled. The only part of me desperate to get back to her is currently standing guard in the women's prisoner tents, so I'll be heading there to check that nothing has actually happened to Azrael or Kyrie before I trip over myself after some Bond.

Rahab, Procel, and Mephis follow closely after me as we work our way through the tents, all of them taking on their savage Doberman forms. The

other creatures are all scouting in various shapes and sizes, checking for the moment Davies arrives back here so they can devour the piece of shit. There's no real need for concern about the Resistance left behind though.

Everyone is already dead.

She's good, I'll give her that, and to be able to kill this many without burning out? She's more powerful than any of us had given her credit for. The small amount of reading I've been able to do, around the intel-sifting North and I were elbows deep in, was entirely focused on what little we know about Soul Renders, and nothing I read comes close to this scale of destruction.

The void eyes make a lot more sense now.

Mine.

I curse and pull the gaiter up further, obscuring my face so that none of the Alpha team freak out at how furious I look when it's just my bond and the creatures I'm dealing with. Bonds are dangerous, I'm not leaving myself open like that, and even if every last one of my creatures fall into obsession with her like Azrael has, I still won't have her.

Not even for a taste of that power.

Kyrie jumps onto her feet the moment she sees my outline, and I see her deflate a fraction when she realizes it's me and not her brother. I'm not going to be offended. They were close growing up and losing their parents only made them lean on each other even more.

She slumps back against the bars and groans, "Thank God. Please tell me you've gotten Oli out already?"

Why is everyone so single-mindedly focused on getting her out when she's strong enough to hold her own here?

"The others went to get her. I thought you'd be more worried about getting out of this little cage you've found yourself in?"

She scoffs at me and reaches up to pull her honey-colored hair away from her shoulder, revealing where Azrael is hiding in his smallest form.

“She gave me this, even though I’m sure he would’ve been helpful to her. He saved me from being gang-raped in the showers by Resistance scum, so excuse me for worrying about the kid.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I step up to the cage and motion for Rahab to get the door open. He’s the most brutal of my creatures and with one yank, he breaks the lock and gets Kyrie free. The moment she steps out, Azrael jumps down from her shoulder and lands at my feet in his full-grown Doberman form. The others all snap at him, their own way of greeting him, but he sniffs at my feet like he’s scenting everything that’s happened since we were last together.

Which is nothing but a ton of frustration and Resistance intelligence records.

Kyrie does a little shiver, like she’s shaking off a bad case of the creeps, and drawls, “No offense, but I’m glad to not have it anymore. Gimme a gun and a switchblade over a nightmare any day of the week.”

I scoff at her and then I unstrap a Glock from my shoulder holster to hand over. She was a TacTeam operative for five years, only quitting to take over her mother’s cafe when it was clear that Gloria was out to undercut it and drive them out, so she’ll be more than up to scratch to cover my back as we get the others out.

I glance up at the other women, all still huddling and eyeing me like I’m a monster. Kyrie glances over her shoulder and scowls, snapping, “This is Nox Draven, here to rescue us, so you had all better treat him with respect, or I’ll assume you’re Resistance sympathizers and put you down.”

I shoot her a look, but she just shrugs. “Gryph taught me how to deal with that monster bullshit early on. Nip it in the bud and move the fuck on. We don’t have the time or energy to baby them through this.”

She stalks over to frisk the corpse of one of the guards for keys and then gets to freeing the now-sheepish and quiet women. There’s still a tent here of men to get out, and then the clusterfuck of getting everyone transported

to deal with. I have no idea how long it's actually been since Davies went to the Hail Mary, but we must be running low on time.

We need to get a move on.

Azrael looks up at me with soft eyes, ones he should not be so open about showing in mixed company, and whines like a pup. She's ruining him. The more time he spends with her, the more he craves the gentle and loving tones she gives him. All of the belly scratches and soft pets... he'll be useless in a fight soon.

He whines again and I roll my eyes. "Fine, you can go find her. Don't eat anyone on the way."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Oleander's bond

IT'S TOO easy to wipe out the camp.

Too easy and unsatisfying. I wish there were more challenges or people to torture but, aside from Franklin, there's only the women who were talking shit about me and the few guards.

Triggering their nightmares gives me a little something, a small thrill, but not enough, and I find myself eager to just tear their souls out and be done with it. Unsatisfying.

The little girl who is usually in control, she's there somewhere at the back of my consciousness, but the best way to do what needs to be done is to keep her out of it completely. She's too sweet for this amount of destruction.

I relish it.

I feel when they come for me, the edges of where I've cast out my senses tingling as they appear in the camp, but I'm too focused on the three Resistance idiots in front of me to go after those Bonds of mine.

I already know they'll come to me. Even when their petty, human differences were getting in the way, they were still coming after me and the girl I live within.

Zarah, Linda, and the mouthy guard, Cam, are all strung up on the tent poles by their wrists, their feet dangling a little off of the ground. I have to say, they sure do make these structures strong. It had been an absolute bitch to get the three of them up there but worth every moment of that pain.

Linda and Zarah are both dead already, their minds breaking far too quickly, which was honestly predictable for the type who would believe the Resistance propaganda. The moment they'd become blubbering shells, nothing left but a heart still pumping in their chests, I'd finished the job.

There's nothing satisfying about a body going through the motions in a slow decay.

But Cam is holding out, a real sport.

He's jerking about as he slowly chokes on the blood pouring out of his eye sockets and into his open mouth. It's gory. I make a note to hide this memory from the girl, to tuck it so far back into the deepest recesses of her mind that she'll never feel that useless spike of guilt over it. She will, she always does over the things I do to protect us both, but I don't. They dared lay hands on us, so they're dead.

I hear the tent rustle behind me but I don't turn to look, because I don't want to miss a second of Cam dying. I can sense something entering the enclosed space with us, but it's not a Gifted, not even a human, and I finally force my eyes away from my prey to get a look at what is here, disturbing my work.

The serpent is as black as the darkest, starless night, though his scales still shine. It's unnatural and dangerous and *mine*. I stare at him, transfixed at his beauty, with my feet rooted to the grass underfoot. A dark god in his own right.

He rears up until his eyes—void perfection—are level with mine. We stare at each other for a moment, a moment of recognition because we were made for each other, made out of each other before we were separated and put on this Earth, only to seek each other out eternally.

And then he strikes.

Not me, obviously. He'd never harm me or the girl. No, he strikes and tears Cam from where he's hanging. Blood sprays over the tent walls, and I enjoy the sight of watching the Dark One's creature devour those who dared to touch me.

The tent flap rustles again and they arrive. Three pieces of my soul, only one who has given me what I want, the other two just as resistant as the girl is. A ripple of irritation runs down my spine, but I step forward to stroke a

hand over the shining body of the serpent, reveling at the gleam of its unnatural scales against the blood-spattered ruin of my hands.

My Bonds and their abilities are magnificent.

“What the hell is she doing?” the Shifter whispers, and the Dark One hushes him, his footsteps rustling as he approaches me. I don’t turn to face them. Instead, I watch as the last pieces of Cam are consumed in a bloody, fleshy mess. The way that he just disappears is comforting, because he deserves to be wiped from this earthly plane entirely.

The snake turns to stare at me again, its eyes taking in every inch of me but they get stuck on my leg, where the damage that Davies had done to the girl is soaking through my pants. It’s not a concern to me, nothing to get in the way of the destruction this place needs that I *finally* get to wage.

I’ve waited a long time inside of the girl for this moment. No injury would stop me from getting what I’m due.

When the snake slides past me, bumping along my side and back over to his master, I stand and finally turn to face my Bonds. They all stare at me with very different expressions on their faces. Shock, horror, contempt, concern, disgust. I know most of it is for the men and women here that I’ve killed, but still, I preen a little at the awe. It doesn’t matter if it’s a horrified awe, they still look at me like they know I’m a god.

Finally, the Dark One speaks, “Oleander, you’re bleeding.”

I look down and see that the tourniquet has indeed shifted, but the pain is nothing. The blood loss might affect me, but we’re not there yet.

My Bonded stops the Shifter from darting forward to me with a palm to his chest, his eyes shifting to bright white as he says, “Bonded. Let me fix it.”

I don’t really want it fixed. I want them all naked and writhing here with me, my blood covering us all and marking them; to stop playing these childish, fearful games.

His head tips back a little as his breathing deepens, his chest expanding as he reacts to my lust, and this is exactly what I want.

The Dark One steps forward past the other two without hesitation and offers me a hand, his own eyes staying the deep blue color as he keeps his own bond under control.

I want to break it.

I want to break him open and pry my Bond out of his careful casing, get the power that belongs to me unleashed and revel in our shared Bond.

He reads me a little too well and speaks slowly, measuring every word as he lets it out of his mouth, “Let us get you home and then you can have whatever you want. Whatever you need, whatever whim you have, it’s all yours. You’ll die if we don’t get the bleeding under control soon.”

I curse the useless meat casing I’m trapped in, and then take his hand. I let him move me over to the desk and lift me gently onto it to assess the damage and make adjustments to the tourniquet.

The Shifter comes back over and, hesitating just a little, he takes my other hand, threading our fingers together like he’s trying to... comfort me. I won’t break it to him that I do not need comfort.

I need to complete my Bonds and destroy *everything*.

My Bonded clicks his tongue at me and murmurs, “And I’d wager that’s the exact reason Oli doesn’t want to. Maybe you should calm down with the murder plans, and then you might just get what you want.”

I give him a look, but he just shrugs back at me. Infuriating. The Shifter glances back at him with a confused look, but I move my focus back on the Dark One. His fingers are firm and sure as he looks at the mess my leg is in, his body shielding the other two from the sight of it. When he notices me watching him, he murmurs, “We need to get you to a Healer. The cuts are close to the artery, and you’ve been walking on it too much. Let one of us carry you to a Transporter, and we can get you to someone.”

I cock my head at him and sigh. “The Fire girl’s Bonded. No one else.”

The Dark One nods, reaching out to stroke a hand down my cheek. “We’ll take you to Kieran, and he’ll get you to Felix. We’re only trusting our inner circle right now. I’ll get you out to him now.”

I want him, but I need strength right now and it flows through my Bonded and into me easier, thanks to our connection, so I say, “No. I want him.”

The Dark One nods without hesitation, stepping back, and my Bonded steps in to lift me up into his arms. He’s careful about the wound, one arm cradling my thigh protectively to his side, and he tucks my chest into his closely.

There are far too many layers of clothing between us for the power shift I need, but we’re moving out of the tent before I can demand he strip down and give me what I need.

The moment we’re out in the open, there are too many eyes on us.

The survivors and the cavalry alike, they all stare as we move through the camp. It’s obvious why we’re having to step over dozens of bodies to pick our way back over to the Transporter, but all of it is irrelevant to me. I don’t care about their thoughts on what I’ve done here, but from the shuttered look on my Bonds’ faces, they do.

I feel like I should point out that I’m a merciful god and I only kill those who torture, maim, and murder for their own nefarious gains. The little beings living quietly mean nothing to me.

“Jesus fucking Christ, be glad none of you can hear what’s happening in her head right now. A lot more shit about our Bond and her fear of *this* is making sense,” my Bonded says, and I fight the urge to reach into his chest and pull his heart out.

“You wouldn’t. You need me and we both know it.”

Still. It would be fun to do.

When we get to the edges of the tents and the small clearing, we find the Transporter waiting there for us with the other Dark One, the *damaged*

one.

He doesn't react to our arrival, barely looks my way, but the Transporter fumbles over himself in his relief. "Oli! Thank God! I thought—Jesus, Gryph, what happened to her?"

"She needs to get out of here, and now isn't a great time to talk to her."

"Oli isn't really in right now, and her bond is trying to plan how to take over the world, so maybe give her a minute," the Shifter says with a smirk, cocky and confident now that he knows what's going on.

I turn my face against my Bonded's chest to meet the Transporter's eye, acknowledging that his words have pulled me out of the girl and wrought this destruction, and he looks back at me with such relief, like he really was sitting here with bated breath, waiting for them to find me.

I decide to keep him alive. The Fire girl, her Bonded, and this one. Maybe the mouthy Techno boy, maybe. But I'd choose them to die last, right before my Bonds and I, if it were to come down to that.

"I'll be sure to let Sage know that too, Bonded."

I give him a withering glare that does nothing to remove the smirk on his lips. "Get out of my head, nosy Bonded, or maybe I'll rethink my plans of tearing your heart out."

He chuckles under his breath. "I have to admit, it's fun seeing this side of you. I can't help it. Besides, you ran off into danger again without any of your Bonds. You owe me a little fun."

There's no time to tell him exactly how that is not the case, that I owe all of them nothing and they should all be worshipping me for merely existing, because the Transporter walks back over to us and with a steady, bloodied hand offered to me, he says, "Let's get the fuck out of here before anyone else gets cut up."

I'M EXPECTING to go back to the Draven mansion, but instead we *pop* back into existence in a large warehouse full of men dressed in Tac gear and Healers wearing white coats to make them easily distinguishable. There are already freed prisoners being looked at by Healers and when they notice our arrival, a group of them come rushing at us.

I don't like that.

Even knowing they're not Resistance, I don't like being rushed, and especially not with four of my Bonds standing here with me. The moment I tense, my Bonded turns on his heel, putting his back between us and the Healers, and he snaps, "Back up! You're about to get fried."

"Or eaten," the other Dark One drawls, three of his creatures baring their teeth at the approaching men, and though they look like perfect beings to me, all three men gulp from where I can see over my Bonded's shoulder.

Pathetic.

The Dark One steps out in front. "We need Felix Davenport. We brought him with us specifically to see to our Bond."

One of the men sputters indignantly and snaps, "He's a third year student! A councilman's Bond should be seen by—"

"She will be seen by Davenport and no one else. It's not your decision to make, Payne."

A Healer called Payne? I feel like the girl would enjoy that greatly. There's a lightness in my head and I rest my forehead back down onto my Bonded's chest, taking slow breaths to stop the swirling there. His arms tighten again and then he snaps, "Get the fuck out of the way before I hack into your brain and dredge up enough information to bury you."

There's more murmuring but then the Healer calls out, "I'm here! I was just getting Kyrie settled with some fluids, where's Oli—Jesus fucking Christ. Put her down; that's enough blood to kill a man, and that position is just making it worse."

My Bonded steps over to one of the stretchers, but instead of putting me down, he takes a seat, moving my legs around so that the Healer will have access to them. One of his big palms slides under my shirt to flatten over my spine, holding me securely against his chest, and it heats up as his gift spreads through my body.

The pain I know is there but don't actually *feel* disappears.

I sigh and turn to look at the Healer who is eyeing me carefully. My Bonded's arms tighten around me protectively, the palm almost scalding on my bare skin. He's very sensitive about everything in this room, the eyes and the words, everything is getting him ready for war.

I wonder what he's hearing that our ears can't.

"Watch yourself, Davenport. I'm not in the mood for excusing disrespect after everything we've been through today," he snaps, and the Healer throws his hands up like he's anticipating a fist to the jaw.

"This isn't being disrespectful. I've healed her enough to know exactly what she can do and how much power she has. I'm being cautious in case she's having some problems with control. We both know that's been an issue."

This makes him pause a little, just to look at me, but my void eyes give him nothing back. I feel my power winding down, the threat taken care of and none of the Gifted here a concern to any of us. Any one of my Bonds could crush these people like wet paper.

The Dark One glances down at me and then crouches down until he's back at my level, his voice firm as he says, "Give Oleander back so we can heal you."

I scowl at him. "No. I'm not giving her back while there's still pain. I don't let her feel it."

The arms tighten again, and then the Healer crouches down next to the Dark One. "If you can promise you'll be in control while I do what I need

to, I'll do it. I'll take your word for it, because Gryphon will have to stop blocking the pain while I do."

My Bonded answers for me without hesitation, "No. You're not healing her while she can feel it."

The Healer shakes his head. "I can't pinpoint all of the damage if she can't feel the pain, I'm sorry. If I miss something, it could kill her later. I'm not willing to take that chance. Other Healers might, I won't. There's too much at stake here, and I'm not losing Oli because you're concerned about her feeling pain. I get it, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm sorry."

I lean forward to be sure that I have his full attention, which I perhaps didn't need to do because I think I have the entire room's full attention right now, and say, "I won't harm you so long as you don't harm me or mine. Not now, not ever. The pain is nothing, only the girl feels it and she's sleeping right now. Do what you need to."

He nods, taking me at my word, and then he pulls up a seat next to the stretcher and gets to work. He explains where he's putting his hands and why he's touching me each time he moves and he gets my consent, the ultimate professional, and some of the tension leaves the space as my body slowly knits itself back together with his gift's guidance.

When he shifts again to press a palm over one side of my neck to check for brain injuries and any damage the drugs might have done to me, he drawls to my Bonded, "I don't know what you're fussing over her for. She's taking this better than anyone I've ever healed. Ease up a little, Shore. She still needs to breathe."

"I saw your face when you showed up to Draven's the day Benson set a building on fire for you, don't pretend like you're above Bonded behavior," he snaps back.

After another few minutes of work, the Healer pulls his palm away from me and shifts in his seat, glancing over his shoulder at the audience of

Healers and TacTeam still crowded around our perimeter before he shrugs out of his jacket.

“Gabe, give me a hand. I’ll cover her and shut my eyes, so *don’t* break my arm, but she needs skin-on-skin to finish the healing. Get her shirt off. Gryphon, you strip down too. Just to your waist.”

The Dark One steps forward as well, taking his own jacket off and moving the Healer aside to take his place. Then the three of my Bonds all move me and fuss until I’m half naked and straddling my Bonded’s thighs, our naked chests pressed together, with a jacket thrown over my back and my Bonded’s strength flowing easily into me, thanks to our connection. I can feel my body breathing him in, taking everything I need from his vitality while he takes the same from me, a sharing of our resources, until I have everything I could ever need from him.

I finally take a deep, fulfilling breath.

“Holy shit, is it supposed to look like that?” the Shifter mutters, and the Healer side-eyes him with a small shrug. I let my eyes flutter shut as I soak in the power, the girl’s body slowly shutting down after the use of power. It always does, not used to channeling so much because she never lets me out.

The Healer’s murmured words drift into my head slowly. “It’s not usually so dramatic but yes, they’re sharing power. It looks more... bright because she’s so strong.”

I drift off into unconsciousness, my hold on the girl still strong because I don’t want her waking up while the healing is still underway, and I lose track of time. I only become aware of things happening around me when my Bonded speaks again, the sound loud in my ear that’s pressed against his chest.

“Take your shirt off. She’s scenting again and needs more. We need to get Bassinger to be ready for us back at the house as well. She’s going to need us all.”

The stretcher moves as someone else sits down, and then I'm moved over into the Shifter's arms, pressed firmly against his bare chest next. He smells warm, goosebumps exploding along his skin as I bury my nose into the crook of his neck.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, knowing that when they open again, it will no longer be me in charge and the girl will be back to deal with the consequences of my actions to save us.

But we're alive, mostly unscathed, and she won't remember the brunt of it. That has to be enough.

CHAPTER NINE

Oli

I WAKE up surrounded by delicious Bond scents, my nose buried in warm skin and with arms tight around me. I'm naked from the waist up, and so is North where we're pressed tightly together, though there's something thrown over my shoulders to cover me up, and my legs are wrapped around his waist.

When I sigh, totally content with how I've found myself because my brain isn't processing at all the 'what the fuck' of this moment, his arms tighten around me and he turns his head into mine a little more to murmur into my ear, "Ten more minutes, Bond. Then I'll get you to a bed."

Goosebumps explode over my skin and I shiver, my nipples tightening until they're pebbled where they're pressed into his chest, and his hand drops back down to grip my thigh, pulling me in closer to his body. My bond purrs in my chest, humming with pleasure at having him desperate to keep me close, because there's no other way to describe the grip of his hand.

There's voices around us, some I don't recognize, but I let my face stay buried in his neck as I ignore it all. I'm sure if there were danger, he would have shared that information with me already, and I doubt he'd have me half naked if there were.

The longer we sit there together, the more my brain begins to work and information filters in. This man doesn't trust me, sitting here on top of him is going to cost me big time the moment I get up, and I'm going to have to move soon because nature calls.

There's also a lot of talk happening about whether or not the Resistance is going to retaliate against us in the next seventy-two hours that has me tensing and an icy bead of sweat rolling down my spine.

What if I've led them here, to my Bonds and my friends, and we're about to be wiped out?

My panic must be obvious because the chatter stops around me and then there's movement. I turn my head just as Gryphon reaches us, bending until he's at eye level with me, his gaze sharp on my face as he assesses me. "What's wrong, what do you need? Anything, Bonded."

I can't say it out loud. I can't admit what it is that's tearing me in half right now, so I take the coward's way out and send the words directly to him as I squeeze my eyes shut. *I don't want to leave him, but I need the bathroom. I don't want to lose this.*

There's a moment of quiet and then I hear rustling, the tight arms around me gently falling away. I have to swallow the whimper that creeps up my throat, and I keep my eyes shut until Gryphon's hands tug me away from the warmth and security I'm clinging to.

The air in the room is cold against my exposed skin, and he's quick to get a sweater over my head that smells like Nox. I take a deep lungful of that scent and finally open my eyes, just in time to see the furious look on North's face as Gryphon slides my arms into the sweater. His body acts as a shield from the rest of the room so that no one can see me. This time I'm choking down tears at the next round of rejection I'm going to face from my Bond.

Don't think like that. He's pissed that Hannity and Rockelle are insisting on the debrief happening now so that he can't just tend to you like he wants to. No one is rejecting you, Bonded. Not now, not ever.

I don't even argue with Gryphon for reading my mind. I can't let myself believe what he's saying. I can't afford to open myself up to that kind of pain, but then North's eyes flick back down to mine and I watch them soften.

Soften.

He leans forward until my breath catches in my throat. It feels like he's about to kiss me, right here for the first time, in front of God knows who, and my cheeks heat, but instead he murmurs to me quietly, "Go with Gryphon. I'll get this wrapped up as soon as I can."

His hands hold onto my hips as I stand, keeping me steady until I'm sure my legs won't give out, and the second I wince at my first step, Gryphon wraps an arm around my waist. I allow myself one last glance at North's face before we leave him behind, and if I thought his hands felt desperate on me earlier, they had nothing on the dark possession in his eyes now.

He's staring at me like I'm prey.

I glance quickly away and let Gryphon lead me out of the room slowly. I keep my eyes on the ground so that no one can see the shock I'm experiencing. When I curse at the pain in my freshly healed thigh, Gryphon murmurs, "Felix said you need to stretch the muscles out, otherwise I'd just carry you. He's told me not to take the pain away so that he can check up on it again and get more accurate in the healing, but if it's too bad, I'll just carry you. Fuck what he says."

I shake my head and grit my teeth. "He's a Healer, we should do what he says. It's not so bad, more of an old ache than pain anyway. Please tell me there's a toilet nearby though, because it's about to get awkward as hell if we have to make it back to my room."

He shakes his head at my stupid attempts at humor, walking me over to a bathroom only two doors down, and then I spend way too long convincing him to leave me alone to pee. He tries to talk me into letting him stay in there with his back to me, but there's no freaking way I could pee like that. No way, and he's crazy for even suggesting it.

Brutus pops out from behind my ear and jumps down onto the tiles in front of my feet. Tears fill my eyes because I'm tired, emotional, and so fucking relieved to have him back. Seriously, the few hours we'd been apart

were too much for me now, and it occurs to me that Nox now holds a massive trump card over me.

If he takes this puppy away from me, I will break in half.

The moment Gryphon hears the toilet flush, he's rushing back into the room, his eyes raking over me like he's checking for any damage I might have taken while sitting on the goddamned toilet, and I huff at him.

"Stop being ridiculous. I'm healed up and perfectly safe here. I have Brutus with me and, I'm not sure if you know, but my gift is to literally rip people's souls out, killing them instantly. I think I can handle a toilet break without you having a complete meltdown over it."

His eyes narrow at me but I turn my back on him as I wash up. Brutus curls around my ankles and supports me like he knows that the ache in my thigh is now more of a burning sensation that has my knee buckling a little.

"At least I know you've woken up as yourself again, no mistaking that sass."

I turn to grab a hand towel and flash him a grin. "You missed it though, right? You hate to admit it, but you missed my smart mouth."

He steps forward and grabs my wrist, pulling me into his arms and ignoring Brutus snapping his jaws in irritation. "I'll admit to every part of what I'm feeling. You left here again, but this time it was worse because you weren't just the idea of a Bond to me anymore. You're *you*. You're mine, and you walked away from us again."

I snap, "I went after your—"

"I know. You went after my sister for me, and I can both love you for it and be fucking furious at you for doing it. I'm never leaving you behind again. I'm never trusting anyone, not even our own Bond Group, to watch you *ever* again."

I'm just going to skip over the usage of the L word, because I'm sure it's just a little slip up, so instead I nod to him. "I like that plan. The feeling

of you leaving was... let's not do it again. There's no real reason we can't just stay here together from now on, right?"

His eyes narrow like he doesn't trust what I'm saying, which is ridiculous because he can literally sense my lies and I've never been so honest with him in all of the months we've known each other. But after a minute, he gets over whatever it is that's bothering him and pulls me back into his arms to get out of the bathroom and back into... whatever the hell the room we just left is called.

Hell, maybe?

Purgatory, or maybe even Limbo because I'm stuck there not knowing what the ever-loving-fuck is going on with North Draven and the soft eyes he just gave me.

Soft.

I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't been inches away from them and staring up at him like he was the goddamn sun. Hope that maybe he believes me now blooms like a weed inside of me, impossible to kill off, even though it could choke the life out of me if it turns out to not be the case.

I need to stop myself from thinking about it.

Embarrassingly, as we step into the hallway, we bump into none other but Kieran and Kyrie, my Bonded's sister.

Kyrie smirks at us both wobbling along together, or maybe the fact we just walked out of a bathroom together, which is a little bit cringe-worthy.

When Gryphon just stares at them both, a slow grin stretching across his face at the sight of his very alive and unharmed sister, she huffs at him and snaps, "Let your Bonded go so I can hug you. It's also creepy seeing you smile like that, tone it down a little."

Gryphon helps me brace myself against the wall and then tugs her into his arms, squeezing his eyes shut as he sighs a little in relief. "How about you never let yourself be taken again so my goddamned Bonded doesn't go charging after you? Such a pain in my ass, Ky."

She makes a watery sound and then shoves at him. “I didn’t ask her to! Although, she’s handy to have around. You should hear how they all talk about her, like she’s the harbinger of death or something. It was freaking weird... until I saw people dropping dead everywhere. It made a little more sense then.”

Gryphon makes a dismissive noise under his breath and snaps, “They deserved a much slower death after everything they did, but at least, for once, there were no survivors.”

Kieran makes an equally pissed off sound, butting into their little tirade, and says, “Yeah, except that the asshole who is responsible for all of this got away. He’s still out there and still obsessed with your little murderous Bonded, Shore.”

Then the three of them turn to look at me, where I’m slowly shuffling down the hall away from this conversation, and I grimace. “Listen, I wasn’t going to be able to kill that man anyway, so it was leave him alive or die trying, and I know that I, for one, am happy with how it turned out.”

Kyrie steps over to me and is a little bit faltering and cautious as she gives me a hug, but it’s clear she’s more worried about hurting me than touching a Soul Render. “Thank you. The little beast at your feet saved me instead of stopping you from being carved open, and I’ll never be able to repay you for that.”

I have no idea what to do with someone’s thanks.

Awkward.

So I deflect like a pro instead. “I knew I was safe from certain things in those camps that you weren’t, it wasn’t a hard choice to make. Besides, who hasn’t been sliced and diced a little in their spare time?”

None of them so much as crack a smile at my lame attempt at a joke, but it seems they’re all falling flat today. I glance at Gryphon and say, “Not to be a pain in the ass, but I need to sit down.”

He's immediately hauling me up into his arms, and when I try to protest, he snaps, "You've been walking for long enough. Davenport can come at me over it; I'll deal with it."

Kyrie starts cackling behind us, but Gryphon ignores her, stalking back into the room that I now see is North's office. I slide out of Gryphon's arms as we step through the door, not wanting to be inappropriate around people I don't know, even though Gryphon mutters a protest about it.

North is still sitting where we left him, his dress shirt only half buttoned, with a thunderous look on his face as he faces two older men that I vaguely recognize from that cursed dinner we'd attended a lifetime ago.

The moment we step into the room, one of them glances back at me and says, "Well, she's here now—"

North cuts him off with acid dripping from his words, "Attempt to address my Bond right now, Hannity, and I'll not be held responsible for what happens."

I freeze, but Gryphon just slides in front of me, his arm tucking behind his back to hold me close to his body but clearly shielding me from sight of anyone in the room who might want something from me.

Hannity clears his throat and then chooses his words carefully. "I'm just trying to say that only one person knows exactly what happened. If we could hear it directly from your Bond—"

"No. You will hear *nothing* from her, and neither will any of the rest of the council. You're sitting here because Gryphon has vetted you. If that status changes, if he finds even the slightest whiff of deception from any of you, you'll be dealt with."

"And how are you planning on achieving that, North? You're strong, but you're not a god."

I should just let it go, but them questioning him like that? My bond isn't happy about it. Gryphon's arms tighten around me as he feels my bond take over and my eyes shift. I lean in his arms just enough that Hannity and

Rockelle can get a look at me and say, “Me. He won’t get the chance to set August and his creatures on you, because I’ll have you dead on the ground before they get the chance.”

I watch as two fully grown, Top Tier, Gifted men gulp at the sight of my void-like eyes. The look of exaltation in North’s eyes only draws me into him even more.

It feels too damn good; my bond preens in my chest.

THE MOMENT HANNITY and Rockelle finally give up on their questioning of North and leave us behind, he grabs his phone and demands that Felix comes to have another look at me. I want to protest, but I’m now sweating over the very sharp pains in my thigh and there’s no hiding that from either of my Bonds. Gryphon directs me into a seat while we wait for my only trusted Healer friend.

Felix arrives in under a minute, looking harried and completely fried, but gets straight into healing me. When our eyes meet, there’s a very clear look of relief in him that has me cringing.

“You met my bond, huh?”

He huffs out a laugh as he presses a palm to my bare ankle and his gift floods me. “Sure did. Wouldn’t have thought something that terrifying lived inside of you.”

I roll my eyes back at him as the door opens again and the room becomes very crowded with my Bonds, our friends, and some more people I don’t know. “I tried to warn you all, but no one believed me. It’s a cantankerous bitch at the best of times.”

Gabe comes straight over to me and cups my cheek, ignoring Felix’s disapproving protests, and he kisses me softly. “Thank fuck you’re awake.”

I swipe my tongue over my bottom lip, chasing the taste of him absentmindedly. “I didn’t really... sleep the way I need to. I give it maybe another hour or two, and I’ll be out for a few days. I did sleep the first three days at the camp away as well, that helped get me through the boredom.”

He nods and then steps away to get out of Felix’s way as he finishes up on whatever repairs my thigh needs. Sawyer has an arm over Sage’s shoulders, and I can see the effort it’s taking him to keep her away from me. I give her a smile anyway, knowing I’ll be throwing myself at her for that hug the second I can.

She looks freaking exhausted.

Kieran scoffs at me and takes the seat next to me, waiting his turn to be looked over by Felix, and snaps, “You slept most of the time away. Slept like a fucking baby, even strapped to a chair.”

“Are you still complaining about that? At least you could lie down and I got you decent food, you could say thank you, you know.”

He stares at me for a second and then says sullenly, “The chicken was shit.”

I laugh back at him. “The chicken is always shit. The slops are worse though, so, again, you’re welcome.”

Felix finally removes his hand from me and when he shuffles over to Kieran, there’s a wobble in his gift that wasn’t there before, and he’s clearly nearing the end of his power source for the day.

Sage senses it too, of course, they’re Bonded after all. She eyes him, her brows drawn together in a frown, and then I watch as her bond bursts out of her and into him in a wave. He grunts a little and rocks back on his heels, but the lines of tension melt away almost instantly.

“Shit, sorry! I’m still figuring out how to do that!” Sage stutters, and Felix steps back over to reassure her, but my attention is drawn elsewhere.

Mainly over to where Kieran is staring at Sage with something close to... wonder.

What the fuck is that?!

He notices the daggers I'm staring into the side of his head. When his eyes swing in my direction, my own eyes drop down to his leg, where his Tac gear is still cut up. Where the long gash that had only been partially healed in a rush job before they came for me should be, there's now nothing but freshly healed skin.

My jaw almost hits the goddamn ground, but then Kieran glares at me savagely and my brain kicks back in. Of course it isn't my place to freak the fuck out about this, in a crowded room full of people we definitely don't trust, because there are TacTeam people here, waiting on orders from North, and some other men in suits.

North's assistant, who I hadn't noticed had arrived and who is hovering in the corner, is watching him obsessively, and nothing about my time away has lessened my urge to gouge her eyeballs out.

I've just been pulled off of him while I needed him, to pee and be healed, but having this bitch staring him down is unacceptable to me.

"Pen, you should head home now that we have this all under control," Gryphon says as he pulls me back out of the seat and plants himself in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest and his tone very firm. He's a lot less friendly with her, a very welcome change, and my bond settles a little in my chest at his loyalty.

Gabe steps in, flanking me as though he's prepared for this to all go very badly, but I like having him close to me again.

She makes a disgruntled noise, like she's pissed at him, but then North cuts her off with a no-bullshit sort of tone, "Go home, and don't come in tomorrow either. I'll arrange a time for us to meet at the council offices. The manor is going down to minimal contact, and you're not on the security list."

Oh.

Oh, I like that *a lot*.

I try to keep the smug look off of my face at his words, but Gabe snorts at me and shakes his head, so I'm obviously failing. Well, who cares really, because she was more than okay with walking into his room with me in his bed. With a key. Picking out his clothes.

His underwear.

"Take a deep breath. Another one, Bonded," Gryphon murmurs, his head turned slightly my way but his body is still between me and the room. I'm now not entirely sure if he's doing it for my protection or theirs.

I should do the right thing and get the fuck out of here.

I fumble around until I get a hold of Gabe's hand, sidestepping until I'm tucked into his body. He accepts me without question or hesitation, turning towards me and wrapping his free arm around me protectively.

When I rise up onto my tiptoes, he bends down to meet me halfway, tilting his head so I can whisper into his ear, "Take me somewhere, please. Somewhere on this level where we can be alone but still close. I can't... I can't handle—"

He looks at me like he's expecting me to burst into tears, with a vague sort of panic, and then he murmurs in a placating tone, "Okay, I can do that. C'mon, Bond. I know where to go."

He leads me down a hallway I've never seen before—the place is ridiculous—and then we duck into a small alcove that is carved out of one of the walls. There's a large potted plant in the entrance that partially covers the loveseat built into the wall, and there's a small bookcase with old tomes on it.

The Dravens really love their books.

Gabe tugs me over to the loveseat, which is the size of a double bed really, and covered in European cushions, and when he sits on it, I glance around the space a little more. It's too open, more open than what I was hoping for, and my bond starts getting pissy in my chest all over again.

I make an unhappy sound in the back of my throat, and Gabe grins lazily at me, even if it feels a little forced, and says, “There’s not a lot of options here, Bond. I’m working with what we have.”

When my eyes flash back to black, the grin falters and he gulps, but I move to tug his shirt back over his head and shove him down on the chair. I want to strip and press our bodies together. Hell, what I really want to do is fuck him against the wall until his scent is all over me and his cum drips down my legs in the most brutal and obvious branding, but my senses are still too aware of all of the extra bodies in the house and the giant opening to this little alcove he’s brought me to.

I don’t want anyone to see what’s mine.

So instead, I curl up on his chest, pressing my ear against the steady beat of his heart, and burrow into his warmth. He moves slowly to wrap his arms around me and hold me, as though he’s worried he’ll trigger some animalistic response from me that loses him a limb. My bond enjoys that sort of respect from him.

The fact that he’s so sure of how dangerous I really am is comforting somehow.

I huff, frustrated at the layers still between us, and lean back to pull the sweater off of myself. Gabe swallows roughly, color bright and high on his cheeks as he sees me bare to the waist, but he doesn’t attempt to stop me. When I press myself in tight against him again, he grabs the sweater and covers my back up. Another point in his favor. My bond likes him coveting me just as hard as I covet him.

“Can you change back? If I promise not to move away or cover either of us up? Gryph’s going to kill me if he sees you like this again,” Gabe mutters, and I wrestle my bond back into the background of my mind again.

He takes a deep breath when he feels my bond ease away, his hand rubbing down my spine in one long stroke that almost has me melting all

over him. Weeks of sitting in a Resistance camp has every inch of my body tense and sore.

“Ugh, I probably smell. How can you stand me being this close to you right now?” I mumble, and he shrugs.

“Maybe if I shifted you’d be bad, but the need to have you here is greater than your stink so far. Besides, keeping your bond happy is more important than a bit of dirt and sweat.”

He chuckles quietly at me grumbling under my breath, but when I attempt to pull away, he just tightens his arms and gets back to stroking my spine until I turn into putty right there on top of him. I might be desperate for a shower and a proper sleep in a comfortable bed, but this little moment between us? It feels like pure magic, and I know the moment my bond starts pulling from his energy.

“You’re glowing again. Shit, I think I am too.”

My eyes feel as though they weigh about a million pounds as I murmur, my voice slurring with fatigue, “Sorry about that. I think I’m stealing your energy.”

His answer comes through to my brain like a dream, whispered but still meaningful. “Take it. Take whatever you want, just don’t fucking leave me again.”

I startle awake to two very terse Bonds speaking over each other at us both some unknown amount of time later.

“What the hell is going on?”

“You’re in the open. Where the fuck is her shirt?”

Gabe’s chest moves underneath me like he’s motioning with his arm, but my eyes stay glued shut. I’m tired, too tired to deal with any of them, and he’s so warm and comfortable.

He whispers, “Her bond came out again. I did whatever I had to, just like we all agreed, to stop her from a full-blown reign of bond terror on everyone in the house who isn’t her Bond. She’s still healing, maybe, or—is

this nesting? Or something like it? She needs skin and scent, and her bond does *not* want to be argued with.”

It’s quiet for a moment, and then Gryphon says, “Good work. Everyone else has left now, and it’s only a skeleton staff on, so we can get her upstairs without bumping into anyone.”

I hear movement again and then Gabe says, “If you’re going to take her, you need to get your shirt off. She’s not interested in clothes right now.”

Smart boy, I definitely do want skin.

Horny, tantrum-throwing bond. I huff a little, and Gabe stiffens again like he’s afraid my bond is about to wreck their shit, and his hand strokes down my spine again. He’s very good at this whole calming, petting thing he has going on for me right now. I could honestly start purring.

“I’ll take her up, Gabe. You go ahead and make sure no one uses this hallway or the elevator.”

“Is she staying in your room? She’s been very vocal about not doing that.”

North’s arms are tight around me as he lifts me up, and Gabe rolls up onto his feet, immediately grabbing the sweater to cover my back up. I tuck my face into the column of North’s neck and breathe him in, taking in everything I could ever need from him as well.

I just need Atlas back, and then maybe I’ll be whole again.

“I’ll kill my assistant if I have to, no one is going to burst into *any* room in this house going forward. We’re on a security lockdown, and if Oleander wants to sleep somewhere else, she can when she wakes up. Until then, she’s staying with me.”

Oh, I like that too. I like that a lot.

CHAPTER TEN

Oli

MY EYES FLUTTER open at the sound of the shower turning on, and North's arms tense around me as he readjusts his hold to stick his hand under the stream of water, checking the temperature. I'm still wearing Nox's sweater but my pants have been stripped off, leaving me in my underwear, and my face is pressed into his neck so that I'm surrounded by his scent once again.

I clear my throat and try not to sound like an embarrassed child as I say, "I'm awake. You can just put me down."

He doesn't answer me as he steps fully into the shower stall and then sits down on the built-in marble bench that runs along one of the walls, still holding me close to his chest. I really should get my face out of the crook of his shoulder and face the man, but we're in a *shower stall* together and I feel a little light-headed at what's happening here right now.

Especially the part where I have *no fucking idea* of what that is.

I clear my throat again and finally he says, "Do you need something to drink? When did you last have something? Your bond wouldn't accept anything from us while it was in control."

Holy shit.

How long was my bond in control, and what the hell did it do if he's in here cuddling up to me and pulling me into a shower?

"This morning... or how long was I asleep? Maybe yesterday."

He nods and starts to tug at the sweater to get it off of my body. "This morning. You've only been asleep for an hour. I thought you might sleep through the shower."

The moment he gets the sweater over my head, I realize I have nothing on underneath the damned thing. I finally sit up a little in his lap to unwind

myself from him and freak out about this, wrapping my arms around my chest and shooting him a very scandalized look.

His face doesn't change, and his tone is kind but also very matter-of-fact as he says, "There isn't a single one of your Bonds who hasn't seen you bare to the waist, Oleander. We all held you while you healed."

I groan and shove my face into my hands, desperate to pass out again and forget that the conversation is even happening. "Is there anything else entirely shameful I did? Did my bond attempt to assault any of you again, or am I going to be spared that particular horror this time around?"

"Whatever you need, it's our duty and honor to provide."

I have no words to even attempt to answer that, and it doesn't really answer anything for me anyway. "What the hell happened while I was gone? Where is all of this coming from? The last I knew, you didn't trust me. Now, you're in here with soft words and offering me whatever I want... I'm so fucking confused right now. Which one of us has a head injury I need to freak out about right now?"

He's way too calm about my rambled word vomit. So calm that he doesn't react at all, except to shift his grip on me to my hips to hold me steady, and once he has a good grip, he opens his mouth and all of my secrets come out of it. "You were kidnapped from the hospital. You were held in a Resistance camp for two years while they tortured you for information about your gift and your Bonds. You gave them nothing. You escaped when Silas Davies left, and your bond took over to get you out. You then spent three years on the run to lead them away from us. You slept in halfway homes, sublets, and the streets while you were barely more than a kid because you didn't want them to get access to us... or your gift. That's what's changed."

My mouth opens and then closes with a snap, because that's a whole lot more information than I was expecting him to have. That's a lot more than

knowing my Resistance code name would have gotten him, but I guess it was a good enough starting point for him to hunt down the rest.

My cheeks heat again, and when I slide off of his legs, this time he lets me, though his hands stay over my hips to brace me and hold me up. “You’re making it sound heroic. It was mostly me being terrified and trying to flee.”

He stares up at me with those same broody eyes he’s been giving me throughout this entire conversation. “You were sixteen when you escaped them, of course you were terrified. How you endured what they did to you without murmuring a single word is beyond me, but it was more than the *something* I asked from you before you left.”

I swallow roughly, trying not to feel self-conscious about my basically naked state, and mutter, “I didn’t give it to you though. Atlas told you, and you’ve figured it all out from there.”

He shrugs and then his fingers hook around the elastic waistband of my underwear, drawing them down my legs without a single word, and my dumb ass just stands there and lets him. I’m kind of stunned at his presumption, that it’s just totally fine for him to undress me completely and I’ll just... be fine with it.

I guess this is the most North action I’ve seen out of him since I returned, and that’s why my brain hasn’t caught up with the situation fully.

He stands up and motions to the marble bench. “Sit down. Davenport has had to fix your leg in stages, and you still have one last session before it’s fully healed.”

Again, I just do it because I think the information dump has broken the small, sassy part of my brain that woke up with me, and now I’m on autopilot while shit reconfigures in there.

Then, with a rapt sort of focus, I watch as he strips down, peeling off his Tac gear and dropping it on the ground outside of the shower stall. He

doesn't hesitate or pause until he's standing there completely naked in front of me.

I force my eyes to stay very firmly above his waist, a feat that I'll go to the grave being proud of considering that I'm sitting down and my eyeline is, of course, dick level.

I can't speak, my voice has dried up, and he either doesn't notice my meltdown at the magnificent sight of his chest, or he's choosing to leave me in the puddle he's made of me as he turns his back on me to test out the water again. Then he ducks his head under and gives himself a quick scrub down.

Blood and dirt I hadn't noticed before muddy the water, and the strong, masculine scent of his soap fills the air until he's practically glowing with cleanliness.

Then he turns back to me and holds out a hand.

I take it, and a deep breath, and let him pull me up and under the blissfully hot stream of water. Because he doesn't make a comment or even a sound while he works, I manage to get through him cleaning me without too much awkwardness.

He uses all of his own supplies, his soaps, and then he massages his shampoo into my hair with fingers that might just be magic. I have to hold in a moan of pure pleasure as goosebumps explode over my skin.

When he takes the handheld showerhead down to wash out the shampoo, I get self-conscious again, though this time it has more to do with the fact that my nipples are pebbled up and betraying just how much I'm enjoying this little moment of his ministrations, and I try to grab the showerhead from him. "My leg should be okay, I can do the rest."

He's at least a foot taller than I am and easily moves it out of my reach. "No, stay right where you are. Just shut your eyes and enjoy it."

Goddammit. His fingers slip easily into my hair, massaging my scalp again as he rinses out the shampoo, and I just give in. I'm still tired, and I'll

use that as my excuse later when this all inevitably bites me in the ass.

Is it going to?

It has to, right? There's no way that hearing the sad little story of what they did to me would have him changing his tune this drastically... right?

Once my hair is clean, he goes over my body one last time with the soap, which I'm sure it doesn't need, but I do what he told me to and just keep my eyes shut for it all. When he shuts the water off and opens the door again to grab a towel, I stay where he left me, my arms wrapped around my waist and his scent overwhelming me.

I feel safe and secure and loved for the first time since my parents died.

I have to take some very long and deep breaths to stop myself from bursting into tears. I'm sure I could pass them off as exhaustion or some sort of bond reaction, but I think North has seen more than enough of me for one day. If I haven't scared him off so far, then I'm sure it'll be me weeping over a fucking shower that'll do it.

His feet are almost silent on the wet tiles but not quite so when a huge, luxurious towel wraps around me, completely enveloping my small frame in its sheer magnificence, I'm not startled and I keep my eyes shut for another moment.

Then his lips brush over my bare shoulder and I let a single tear roll down my cheek unchecked.

No matter what else happens between us, I'll remember this small gift of kindness he's given me for the rest of my life. This will go down as the moment I let myself admit how much I want North Draven. How much I crave his domineering and assertive nature, how much I need him, even if he does act on my behalf without ever asking me what it is that I want.

That even while I was determined to hate him, he's worked his way under my skin and I don't want to dig him out.

"Turn around on your good leg. I'll get you out of here."

I do as he asks and let him scoop me up into his chest. There's another towel wrapped around his waist, but without the styling he usually puts into his hair, I can see the same tight, dark curls as his brother falling over his forehead. His eyes were always striking, the deep blue depths of them against his tanned skin, but there's something about the way he's looking at me tonight that has my breath catching in my throat dangerously.

Am I about to fall in love with a Draven, over a shower of all things?

He sets me down on the bathroom countertop and carefully dries me off without another word, his hands reverent and gentle over the miles of soft skin on display. I watch as he catalogs every last one of my injuries, every bruise and broken patch of skin that Felix hasn't bothered to heal up yet, thanks to the more devastating thigh injury. If I wasn't so sure about him right now, I'd assume the murder in his eyes was a warning to me.

It's not.

It's a plan he's putting together to go after any Gifted who might have touched me and is still breathing. There's plenty from my first time in the camps, but only Davies made it out this time around.

I don't want to think about that man anymore. I force my eyes to follow the droplets of water cascading down his chest instead, the way that there's the smallest of dimples on his cheek that I've never been close enough to notice before, and the strong muscles of his throat that flex as he works so diligently to getting me dry. He's fucking gorgeous, always has been, only now I'm letting myself take note of it.

The problem with looking at all of those details is that it wakes my bond up and, my God, does it want him to push me back and fuck me until my legs don't work. The exhaustion that was filling me up moments ago in the shower burns away, and my pussy throbs between my legs. I have to swallow a whimper that creeps up the back of my throat, and my body feels as though it's on fire.

North's nostrils flare and he drops the towel, bracing his hands on either side of my thighs as he leans into me, careful not to touch me, but taking up every inch of my personal space nonetheless.

"You can stop the Bond, can't you?"

It takes my brain a second to process his words, the lust and sex thickening the air around us taking over me completely, and when I finally make sense of him, I swallow roughly all over again.

He doesn't mention how he knows that I've done it before, because bringing up his brother's actions right now probably isn't for the best. I lick my lips, watching in awe as his eyes get stuck on the action and his pupils blow out and swallow his irises, almost looking like the void eyes we share.

It's a heady feeling, to have this power over him, and when I arch my back a little, stretching out on the bathroom counter, his teeth grind together as he holds himself back.

I could get addicted to this feeling.

"I can. It... hurts, but I can do it."

When I meet his eyes, he pins me there with a smoldering look, trapping my gaze so that I can't bear to look away. "Tell me how it hurts. Which parts and how bad?"

Fuck. Me. "After. It hurts when I come and I stop my bond from coming out to... claim you as my Bonded. I feel like I'm burning up from the inside out. It lasts a few minutes, and it's bad but not unbearable."

A scowl tugs his brows together and he pushes back from me, leaning until I'm sure he's about to step away from me and leave me to get dressed. I curse myself under my breath, but then one of his hands comes up to run a thumb over my bottom lip, pushing against the plump curve of it as he watches the movement obsessively.

His words catch me by surprise. "So if I edge you for the next couple of hours, you can enjoy it and only feel the pain at the end? Not ideal, but I'll take it."

Edging? Jesus. Do I want that? The rough feel of his palms over my body, his lips on my soft skin, hours of pleasure that never truly reaches its peak?

Wait, that sounds fucking amazing. A little frustrating, but if that isn't our relationship so far down to a T, nothing is. I want so badly to say yes to him and just spend the night getting lost in him, but there's still something there.

Something holding me back.

My legs can't help but part as he slides in closer, his eyelids dropping down a little so that he's practically smoldering at me. "Do you want this? Stop overthinking it and answer me."

"Of course I want it—"

"Then Bond or don't. I'm not waiting to taste you any longer. If you're hesitating about the power exchange, then just don't do it. I'm not waiting."

I open my mouth to argue with him, because it's not that easy, but he tugs my thighs forward until I'm balancing somewhere between my elbows and his shoulders. He moves like he's about to eat me out, and I have one last stupid thing rushing around my head that won't let me enjoy this moment.

"Wait! Wait one second. I need something first, just one thing."

He scowls at me, stopping the second I'd spoken, but not moving away from where he's got me balanced.

"Whatever it is, you're sure it can't wait? I'm not entirely above begging, Bond."

Interesting.

I attempt to sound confident. "Your bond is like mine, right? It's... more than the others. It's not just a force inside you. It's a living thing, right?"

The scowl grows on his face and he gives me the tiniest of nods, the smallest gesture, and I plow onwards like this is all fine and I'm not freaking out about even asking this. "Let me talk to it. There's something I

want to ask it, and then we can... I mean, I think I want to Bond after. Properly. We can save the edging for later.”

I think it’s the mention of actually Bonding that gets him to agree because he’s already shaking his head until that part slips out of me. I’m not bribing him, not exactly, because if he says no, I think I might still be Bonding with him tonight, but I have to at least try.

He carefully moves me back onto the countertop, gently and mindful of my thigh, and then he takes a step away, as if putting distance between us again will stop his bond from hurting me or attempting to approach me.

As if a single step away is all it will take to keep me safe.

“If it tries to bond with you, kill me. Or get Gryphon to knock me out. You can still contact him, can’t you?”

I pull a face at him. “I think I’ll lead with knocking you out. No need to kill you over a little bit of sex, North.”

He raises an eyebrow at my sass and blows out a breath, muttering about how much of a bad idea this is, but after a minute, his eyes shift into the voids.

All emotions and humanness wipes clean from his face until there’s nothing but the bond left behind.

It might happen to me on occasion, but it’s still weird to see it like this. It’s kind of hot though, especially the way it immediately fixates on me and rakes over every inch of my bare skin like a branding possession.

I like that a whole lot.

It takes a step forward, and I hold up a palm to stop it, surprised when that’s all it takes to slow it down. Fuck, if only *my* bond were that obedient.

“One second! I need to ask you something, really quickly. I promise.”

I sound like an idiot, but it doesn’t notice, or care, and it just continues to stare at me like I’m so freaking fascinating.

“The creatures, they come from you, don’t they?”

He nods and lifts a palm up as though he's about to summon them, and while I'd love nothing more than to check in with my baby August again, I know North will have a freaking aneurysm over it, so I reach out and cover his palm with mine.

The bond stills and takes in a breath before pulling my hand up to his nose and taking another big ol' whiff of my newly scrubbed skin. I wonder if it sees the soap and shampoo as its scent the way North does, or if he's about to throw a bond tantrum over how foreign I smell.

So I keep talking, hoping to distract him. "Are they going to hurt me? North is worried they will. He's worried about losing control of them around me, and I need to know if that's actually possible. If it's not, I want to keep August... ahh, the puppy. The Doberman-looking one. You know which one, right? Of course you do."

He takes in another lungful of my scent, and I start to think maybe he's getting high from it or something because he's not really keen on letting me go, but then he speaks.

His voice is sort of terrifying.

It sounds otherworldly. There's no other way to describe it. It sounds as though I'm speaking to something that does not belong here. Not in this room with me or on this planet, in this timeline, none of it. He doesn't belong here at all, and yet the pull in my chest that aches for him says he's *supposed* to be with me. No matter where that is.

"*Mine*. You're mine. No one will hurt you again. Not me, not the others, not anyone. The shadows cannot harm you, they belong to you, as I do. We all do."

My heart starts thumping wildly in my chest.

I look into those beautiful voids, as dark and beautiful as a starless sky, and murmur, "Can he hear me? Is he listening to us? I can hear it sometimes. Not always."

North's bond tilts his head like it's considering. "What secrets do you want just between us?"

I smile, because the bond talks just like mine does and it makes it easier to speak to it. "None. I just think he'll be upset at me for asking why he's so worried about you being around me. If you're this ready to protect me then... Why is he scared?"

The bond leans down until his nose bumps against mine softly, like it's afraid even now of hurting me. "The lie. He believes the lie because the truth is too painful. Even now that it's started to unravel around him, he can't let it go."

The lie?

Whether he sees my confusion or just chooses to keep going, I don't know, but the words keep coming out of him nonetheless. "Bonds cannot hurt each other. They cannot kill each other, not with intent or by accident. But if he believes the truth, then everything he has held on to for all of this time will be meaningless."

My eyebrows bunch together, but then the bond pushes forward again, sealing our lips together, and I'm kissing North for the first time. Only he's not the one kissing me. His bond is pushing me backward on the countertop and his tongue is sweeping into my mouth, taking over me and branding my very soul with his mark.

I panic a little, only because of what North will think of this, but he breaks away from me without pushing for more.

His palm takes hold of my chin, and he speaks to me one last time. "No more running."

THE MOMENT the bond slips away from North, he's grabbing me, pulling me up and into his arms desperately, and hauling ass into his bedroom as

though he can leave his bond and everything said between us behind. For a second, I think he's going to throw me out of the room for talking to his bond and accidentally uncovering a family secret.

One I'm still wrapping my head around.

But when he spreads me out on his bed, his body immediately covers my own, and this time when his lips touch mine, I know that it's all him in there and not his bond taking over.

They kiss differently.

Is that a weird thing to notice? Probably. Where the bond was a dark possession, North is a consuming force. He wants me, there's no doubting it, but he wants everything. I can barely stop myself from getting swept up in him, losing myself when we've barely even started.

"What did it say to you? What did it do?"

I blink up at him, and then a slow smile stretches over my cheeks. "It's devoted to me. It's not going to hurt me. North? I believe it. I know that neither of you will hurt me."

He stares at me, his eyes locked onto mine, and there's a need inside of him that I can see so clearly, a need for me to trust him and believe exactly what he's capable of.

I already know it.

He moves slowly to pull the towel away from my body, as though he's still giving me time to change my mind and put a stop to this. I'm not going to, even with the impending freak out over my power growing, I know that this is exactly what I need right now.

I can worry about the consequences later.

When he kisses me again, shoving the towel off of the bed as though he's worried about it jumping back onto my body and covering me up once again, I forget about everything except his lips on mine. I forget about the Bonding and the beings who live inside us, even now straining towards

each other. I forget that we're anything more than humans who want each other.

Then North's gift joins the party and shatters any chances of pretending that we're anything but Gifted Bonds.

The lights are on in the bedroom and bright through the open doorway to the bathroom, but the moment his gift bursts out of him, there's nothing but darkness around us both. I expect to be surrounded by his creatures, to find August staring at me and waiting for pets, but instead there's only darkness.

A surprise but not a bad one. I can totally handle Bonding in his shadows.

His eyes stay blue, his level of control even in this situation is completely insane to me, but it's as though this is the small part of his bond he's willing to share me with right now, and I can get on board.

The tug on my ankle takes me by surprise.

I glance at North's hands first just to check that he's not messing with me, but then I feel the thing slide up my calf to circle my thigh and spread my legs out even further.

Before I have to chance to freak the fuck out, more of the shadows come out to grab me, one over each limb and splaying me out for North's viewing pleasure. He watches it all with rapt attention, an air of smug male surrounding him.

This is all at his command.

The shadow limbs might as well be restraints for how firmly they hold me down. Living ropes that move at North's every whim. I should have guessed he'd be full of these sorts of surprises in the bedroom.

When he moves to lick and suck his way across my chest, one of his hands slipping down between my thighs, I want to move my arms to bury my hands in his hair but the tendrils of smoke tighten around my wrists,

pulling until my back arches off of the bed. North's lips close over my nipple as his teeth nip at the sensitive nub.

I'm in sensation overload.

How the hell he thought I could handle this without ever reaching my peak and Bonding with him is baffling, because his fingers barely graze over my clit and my entire soul begins to shake.

Then he moves his freaking hand.

"Not yet. We're coming together too, Bond. Be patient."

The sullen child inside of me, the one I've been so careful about hiding from him, wants to kick him and cuss him out.

"I've been patient. How you ever thought I could survive edging is stupid. Fuck me or make me come some other way. I don't care, just do it."

He huffs out a breath at me, and then he *ignores my demands*. Ignores them. Just goes back to his very slow and methodical exploration of my body until every inch is cataloged inside that impossible brain of his.

I might resort to murder, no matter what his bond just told me otherwise.

The worst part is that I can feel his cock, hard and hot against my thigh, a tease of what's to come, and yet he's still perfectly happy to be taking his time.

I attempt to tug my wrists free, but the shadows only tighten their hold, sliding down to wrap around my forearms as well so I lose even more of my mobility as a punishment for trying to rush him.

I might die if he doesn't hurry up.

Finally, with one last swipe of his rough tongue over my nipple, he pushes up and away from my body to sit on his heels between my legs. I try not to think about how obscene his view is, how my pussy is spread wide open for his eyes, thanks to the shadows. As if spurred on by my thoughts, another tendril appears out of the darkness and moves to slide through my slick pussy lips. I tense a little, half terrified and half hoping that it will

push inside of me. The adrenaline rush it gives me is like a shot of heroine straight to the brain, my entire body shaking with pent-up desire.

I can feel my juices gush out onto the bed between us.

His nostrils flare as he fists himself, stroking his cock leisurely as he watches his shadow play with me. I feel my clit begin to pulse every time the shadow brushes against it in a cruel tease, just a whisper of friction, but nowhere near enough to give me what I want.

I whimper, a pathetic sound from deep in the back of my throat, and finally he shifts forward, adding his cock into the torturous teasing. There's a thin line of black over his irises that I know is his bond, watching over me while its host slowly drags his cock over my clit, teasing me with the hot flesh I desperately crave. I find that I also might not be above begging.

What a glorious thing to share.

"If you don't fuck me soon, my bond is going to come out. It's already right on the edge."

He smirks and pumps his hips, still teasing my most sensitive parts. "I think our bonds want to meet, but I'm not letting them have this before we do. You deserve to fuck each of your Bonds yourself before your bond takes her turn."

I reach down and take a hold of his cock, thick and hot in my palm, giving it a squeeze before pushing my hips up. His shadows wrap around my wrists but he doesn't pull me away, just a reminder that I'm touching him because he's allowing it. Goosebumps break out over my body at the thought of him shifting them again, pulling me apart and spreading me out on this bed and starting his torture all over again.

I like this side of his control issues.

"Stop telling me what I deserve and give it to me instead. I'm just about ready to cuss you out and find someone else to make me come."

His eyebrow rises at the taunt, but when I grin at him, enjoying the hell out of this, the shadow over my wrist finally tugs my hand away from him.

Before I have a chance to pout about it, his hips finally pull back fully and then he's slamming into me; no gentle easing into it.

I never really wanted gentle.

I want desperate and raw. I want to know that they've been craving me just as badly as I've needed them. I want to know that the great councilman North Draven has been dreaming of what my pussy would feel like and that having it now is everything he's ever wanted.

I want to be the center of his fucking world, the only thing that matters to him.

He feels bigger inside of me, the girth of him stretching me almost to the point of pain but riding the line instead until I'm sure I'm about to feel him between my legs for days. That feels right to me. It feels as though that's exactly how things should be between us.

If only I could make him feel the same way.

The long tendrils of smoke around my body move me until I have my thighs wrapped around North, his arms braced over me and my arms splayed out wide. His eyes can't stop moving between the pleasure on my face, my lips bitten raw and my hooded eyes, and the enticing way that my tits move with every one of his thrusts.

One of the shadows slips over my clit as it moves my hips, adjusting me so that North's strokes can go even deeper until I feel as though he's about to come out of my throat. How the fuck did I survive without this? How did I go so long sleeping with this man wrapped around me and not inside of me?

How could I have ever been scared of this?

His strokes are even and deep, his hips are sure in their movement, and with every minute, I can feel my body climbing higher and higher. I can't even attempt to bite back the whimpers of pleasure, the sounds of the almost-pain I'm in with overstimulation.

I need more.

I pull my wrist against the shadow, sharp enough that North's eyebrows drop down as he frees my hand. Before he has the chance to do something insane, like stop, I grab the back of his neck to drag his lips down to mine, tilting my hips more to meet his thrusts as I hitch my legs higher on his waist.

He groans into my mouth, his eyes squeezing shut as his movements get more frenzied and rough. I dig my nails into his nape, and the tendrils of smoke tighten around my thighs until I'm sure I'll be waking up bruised with his marks.

When his hips slam into me one last time, locking us together as we both finally break apart, the *relief* and euphoria flood me. His eyes shift, but the ecstasy stays on his face as he stays in control.

My own bond reaches out to touch his, but not the same rough claiming it had done with Gryphon. It feels more like two halves of a soul coming together again.

Like my bond has known about him forever and been waiting to feel whole again. Like the shadows have gone feral waiting for me and now that we're together again, maybe the storm in North's heart will calm.

I hope he can finally have some peace.

He leans down to press our foreheads together, and then his voice sounds in my head. *I have been waiting for you forever, little Bonded.*

My pussy tightens around him because there's nothing so arousing as a sex-drenched confession straight into your very consciousness.

I waited for you too. I waited for all of you.

I know there's a good chance that Gryphon is listening to us both right now as well. I haven't figured out how to shield my inner thoughts from him yet without blocking him out entirely, and I think he'd have an aneurysm if I pulled that on him again right now, but he's good about leaving this moment alone.

There's no stampede of Bonds arriving outside the door either, no one trying to interrupt this moment, which makes me think that maybe they were all expecting for this to happen. Whether through placating my bond or if North's revelation about what my motives were made it obvious that he was going to do whatever he had to to tie himself to me once I returned home.

Now I just have to deal with whatever power surge I end up with and try not to fry any poor, unsuspecting people who don't deserve it.

North turns to lie down on the sheets next to me, not caring at all that they're a bit gross now. "You won't. Stop thinking about it. If there's anything that I'm sure about, Oleander, it's that you're not going to hurt anyone. You're not a monster."

I'm not sure I agree with him. It's a testament to how much has shifted between us that I answer him without second-guessing myself. "I can barely control the power I have now. If it gets stronger... I don't think I can handle anything else."

He brushes a hand over my forehead, moving the silver strands away from my face. "We'll see what happens when you wake up again and face whatever it is together. You're not leaving here for the time being anyway, not until we're sure it's safe again. We can keep your contact with people outside of our Bond to a minimum. We can do this, Oleander."

He sounds so sure of that, so sure of me, and I want to believe him. I want to, but I'm not sure how yet. Baby steps, I guess.

What will the others think about us Bonding? Especially if I say that I'm still not comfortable Bonding with anyone else... at least not right now.

Once again, I find myself in a mess of my own making.

I should just pass the hell out and lose the next three days like I know I'm going to, but I feel wired after the Bonding. I roll onto my side to face him and grin when his eyes track my every movement even in the dark safety of his room. "I feel like I need another shower after that."

He stretches one hand up behind his head, his chest flexing deliciously like a private seduction. “Anything you want, Bonded. You should enjoy having me at your disposal while it lasts.”

I don’t want to think about the real world, all of the death and horror that we’re going to have to deal with when we leave here, so I keep it light. “You really want to lug me around all over again? Because my legs are out of action and not because of the healing.”

He smirks at me and scoops me up without another word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Atlas

STARING at the same four walls for days on end is enough to drive me insane, especially in a room as barren and poorly designed as the sedate spare room the Dravens shoved me in when I arrived here. There's too much blue, terrible fucking shades of it, and the bed is uncomfortable as shit. If I manage to fix things with Oli, I'll be buying a new mattress.

I don't want to think about what I'll be doing if I can't fix it.

There's nothing to do in here except stare at walls, do homework for classes I'm repeating anyway, or jerking off at the thought of the perfect Bond I've managed to alienate, even though I tried everything to avoid it.

It might be wrong, but I go with jerking off.

There's two ways we could look at this; either I'm a creep for doing it while thinking about a girl who probably thinks I betrayed her in the worst fucking way, or I'm a devoted Bond who couldn't even get it up for anyone else at this point. Both of those things are true. I'm done trying to make sense of this.

I feel her the moment she pops into my head.

How can you feel an out-of-body experience when it's not happening to you? Fuck knows, but one minute I'm lying there with my dick in my hand by myself, and the next I can sense Oli's shock and confusion about where the hell she is and what she's seeing. It's as though I've summoned her here with the sheer force of my longing for her.

The spike of lust that comes from her is a great ego boost, not that I needed any help.

How the hell did I end up here?

I grin, hoping she can feel that I'm doing it even if she can't see it. *I'd guess you got a little power bump, Sweetness. But however it happened, I'm glad you're here.*

There's a throb of longing there in my chest, a sign she's been missing me just as bad as I've missed her, and it makes me angry.

If you need me, I'll break down this door to come find you. I've been toeing the line because I didn't want to start an argument and put you in the middle of it but, baby, if you need me, I'm coming to find you.

She glows inside my chest, preening about my need to be with her, and sends back, *It's okay. I've mostly been sleeping. I'll come find you when I'm awake properly again... if I can get back out of your head, that is.*

The grin turns into a smirk. *Well, while you're here, I guess I better finish what I started, Sweetness.*

She sends through a feeling of fake outrage that has me roaring with laughter like a crazy man, but then she moves my hand, stroking my dick for me, and the mechanics of it don't mean a fucking thing. I don't care that it's my hand, I nearly blow my load knowing she's a part of this.

Don't you dare make me come so fast and shame me, Sweetness.

Her answering giggle is fucking perfection, and I want to lock the memory of it down forever.

I don't like to be kept waiting, Bond. If you want to show me how good you can be, then get a move on.

Who thought having a wank could be this erotic, but the emotions and little threads of lust she sends to me only stoke the fire as my fist slides up and down my cock. I can feel her testing me, checking what I'm doing and how I'm moving, like she's taking notes for later. Fuck, I hope she is. I need her to come find me and take over because this might be the best fucking experience of my life, but having the real deal here?

I'd take that over this a million times over.

I hold out for long enough that she's not going to have doubts about my stamina and not a second longer, her presence watching as I spill out all over my fist, grunting and trying to hold back a roar that would have Gabe banging on the wall.

It's the best fucking orgasm of my life, a small taste of what I'll have if I ever get to have my Bond.

The moment the lust clears, I can feel her hesitance and awkwardness creep in. She's here, in the possible traitor's head, while no one else in the house knows it.

I leap to reassure her.

You can see everything here. Whatever you need to believe me, take it.

She hesitates and my heart breaks a little. I don't blame her. I don't blame her for a fucking thing, but I'm so fucking desperate for her to believe me that the chance that she doesn't want to look into my memories breaks me.

I try again, trying to keep the desperation out of my tone. *There is nothing in my life that I want to keep from you. There's a lot of ugly, a lot of bad shit, and shit I'm ashamed of. But I would never hide it from you, not even if I thought you might think less of me. I'd rather you hate those parts of me and never doubt what I'm saying, than for us to live with this thing between us. Not having you and your trust isn't an option for me, Bond. It's not an option.*

She grows even more quiet in my chest, and I leave her alone. I can't push her, no matter how much I want to, because if she doesn't come to the decision herself, then what's the fucking point of it?

I grab a towel off of the ground next to the bed and wipe myself down. I get up and walk into the bathroom, avoiding the mirrors because I don't really feel like staring into my father's face right now. He's the entire fucking reason I'm in this mess, and the fact that I could be his slightly-younger-looking twin grates on me.

Oli stays quiet through the entire shower, her mind just sitting with me while I get myself clean. After I'm dried and back in a pair of clean boxers, I put a movie on, something mindless that I've seen a thousand times, and climb back into bed.

Once I'm settled, it's clear that Oli has something she wants to say, but she stays quiet throughout the movie. I don't want to fall asleep and miss out on her being here, but there's something so comforting about her presence that the fatigue of countless shitty sleepless nights slowly creeps up on me.

Right before I pass out, she finally speaks.

I don't want to look. I want you to tell me yourself. I want to hear it from you.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oli

THE BED IS TOO toasty warm to want to wake up, but I instantly know that I've made it back into my own body once again. I don't want to open my eyes or exist today, every bone in my body aches, but there's an oddly temperature-less weight against my back. It takes me a second to realize that Brutus is back in the bed with me.

Which means that North is both awake and no longer in here with me because last night he'd been very firm on the 'no puppies in the bed' rule, no matter how hard I'd pushed it.

My senses are dulled thanks to how deep I was sleeping, but I know that some of my Bonds are here with me. I can't tell which ones, which is frustrating, but I'll take what I can get.

There's a rustling sound next to me and then Gryphon murmurs into my ear, "Stop frowning, Bonded. It makes me want to murder something for you."

I squint one eye open in his direction. "What time is it, and do you have food?"

He smirks, his eyes shining at me like I'm being so damn amusing. I hear more movement on the other side of the room, and then North starts ordering food from the kitchens. My stomach rumbles at the list of things he asks for.

I want those goddamn scrambled eggs and waffles, extra bacon, and some hash browns, fuck yes. And coffee, a whole jug of it, with extra whip and sugar.

I move to get up and then realize I went to sleep naked after North had fucked me in his shower. I squint around the room, and while I could totally handle being naked in front of both of my Bonded at the same time, Gabe is sitting in one of the ornate chairs with his phone in his hands, and Nox is

arguing with North over building schematics at a desk that has suddenly appeared while I was out cold.

I clutch at the duvet like some scandalized maiden, only to realize that I'm once again wearing silky pinstripe pajamas. North Draven is a sneaky asshole who takes the weirdest liberties while I'm passed out.

Gryphon starts cackling like an asshole and I shove my pillow in his face as I stomp off to the bathroom to pee. No one fusses over me walking, but they all watch me carefully, even Nox, though he's got his usual, distasteful look on his face.

When I wash up, I take a good look at myself in the mirror, checking my color and the general look of my skin and hair. The silver is even lighter. I swear the color drain there is getting worse. I do a very gentle check-in with my bond, just to see how we're tracking along there, and though it has a lot of feelings about missing Gabe and Nox, dammit, it doesn't seem to be getting any new weird tricks or power surges.

Small mercies for now.

I rummage through the drawers until I find one full of very girl-specific shit. I'm very proud of myself when I stay calm, sending him a quick, *Whose stuff is this?*

His answer is instant and amused, *Yours. If you want something that isn't there, just tell me.*

I will not swoon over such basic kindness, dammit. *This is enough. Thank you.*

I brush out my hair so I no longer look as though North and his shadow tentacles fucked the life out of me and then I throw it into a high ponytail. I feel breathless already from such a small amount of movement, and when I head back into North's room, I beeline for the bed. Gryphon helps me in, tucking the blankets around me and shooing the shadow puppy away from me until I'm settled in. I'm a little surprised he lets him but the moment he steps back, Brutus covers me again.

Gryphon hands me a glass of water and snaps, “I will get him sent home right the fuck now if he’s too heavy. Davenport will be up later to look at your leg and finish off the healing; let’s not injure it all over again because you’re spoiling the creature.”

I shrug at him and eye Gabe from across the room. He’s wearing a sweater that I want to steal, and when he glances up at me and notices me staring, he grins back at me.

Gryphon waves a hand in front of my face as the knock at the door interrupts us all and I snap, “He’s made out of shadows and smoke, which weighs *nothing*. Brutus is just fussing with me like you are. Leave him alone.”

He scowls at me as North opens the door, and then his attention is pulled to that situation.

The food smells incredible, but I feel bad for the kitchen staff bringing it in. Every last one of my Bonds that are here turn to watch her every move. When she’s got it set out on the table for North, she turns to the door, only to be stopped by Gryphon.

I open my mouth, ready to defend the poor woman, when he says, “Has anyone but you and the chef touched any of this food?”

She answers straight away, “No, sir.”

“Did you do anything to this food, add anything, or slip anything into it?”

“No, sir. No one has touched or tampered with any of it.”

Jesus freaking Christ. Is this where we’re at now? Questioning everything, even in the damn manor?

As the door swings shut behind the woman, Gryphon answers my very private thoughts, “Yes, that’s exactly where we are now. No one in or out without speaking to me first. No one but your Bonds and select friends are allowed in a room alone with you. No one but the chef is touching your food.”

I have no words, none except, “Get out of my head.”

“Stop thinking so loudly.”

I snap back, “Well, if I knew how I was doing it, I would stop. Buy some earplugs or something!”

I don’t bother trying to get up or picking out what I want. North gets there first and picks everything out for me. He still glares at everything like he’s not so sure that Gryphon’s questioning did enough. It’s crazy, but my heart does a super weird thumping motion over it anyway.

I pull myself up to sit propped up against the pillows and when he hands me the plate, he moves to pour out coffee. There’s two cups, so one must be for me, right? He wouldn’t withhold it from me after that huge glass of water I just gulped down.

Thank the fucking stars, North hands me a coffee and then heads back over to where Nox is still scowling at the papers. They start the same argument as before about security holes and how to ensure occupancy survival. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to me, because it sounds as though they’re arguing over a bomb shelter and that doesn’t seem like the right sort of priority for us all right now.

Gryphon pulls a chair up to sit next to me with a plate of his own, and I get back to the more important questions. “Why are we staying here if we’re so sure there’s about to be another attack? Can we... evacuate? Jesus, what would that even look like?”

North nods and shares a look with Nox. “It’s something we’re looking into. We can’t just leave the lower families behind to be picked off though, and there is a lot that would go into relocating this many Gifted at once, but it has been done before. We can do it again if things continue to get worse.”

It’s been done before? I didn’t know that, but there’s a lot about this community that I don’t know about, so I just nod and nibble at my toast some more, avoiding Gryphon’s grumpy looks because he’s clearly in a

mood today. One that has absolutely nothing to do with me because I've been asleep for... wait.

"How long did I sleep this time?"

North answers without looking up from the paperwork, "Fourteen hours. We weren't expecting you to wake up. You seem to be getting better at handling the power usage."

Huh.

I'll be happy if I don't need to use my gift again any time soon, but I guess it's good to know the three-day naps might be phasing out. The moment that his plate is clean, Gryphon takes my plate to refill it with more fruit and then leans down to kiss me soundly on the lips.

I'll be in the gym training with some Tac guys. Call me if you need me.

I don't know why he's talking just to me, but I nod and let him give me one last peck before he's out the door without another word. Whatever the hell is going on with him, I hope he beats it out of one of the guys downstairs.

I pick through the fruit and then put the empty plate on the bedside table, settling back down against the pillows to enjoy the last of my coffee with my Bonds around me. Gabe finishes off his plate and then collects mine, putting them back on the food tray and pushing the whole lot back out the door for someone to pick up.

North checks his phone and then walks over to me, kissing me soundly on the lips right here in front of everyone. I mean, Gryphon did too, but it still feels infinitely fucking weird for North to be doing it.

"We'll be downstairs. Just stay here, or in your room. If you want something, call me. Don't go wandering."

I quirk an eyebrow at him but he gives me a very don't-fuck-with-me look, and I roll my eyes at him. "Fine. But you can't keep me trapped up here forever. Once I'm back to full health, I'll get bored and become a nightmare."

Nox scoffs as he heads for the door. “You’re already there, Poison.”

North’s eyes narrow at his back, and I grab his chin to tilt his head back toward me. “Stay out of it. I can fight my own wars with him.”

He gives me a look that says he definitely won’t be doing that, then straightens up to follow Nox downstairs. I’m sure they’re about to have a lovely trip down in the elevator, but I ignore it.

I have Gabe to myself.

He smirks at me and drawls, “Thank God, I thought we were going to be stuck in a full-blown Draven war for a second. I’d rather go to the gym and have Gryph kill me there instead.”

I giggle at him. “Come here and lie with me. If I’m going to be trapped here, I should at least get a cuddle out of it.”

Gabe stares at me for a second and then climbs up onto the bed carefully, moving as though he’s expecting me to fall apart underneath him or something, and when I scowl and tug him down on top of me, he grumbles back at me. With my legs bracketing either side of his body and his head cradled on my belly, he’s barely even on me. The small amount of weight that is there is comforting rather than... smothering.

I take a long, deep breath and feel whole again.

“No more running off,” Gabe says, his tone almost sulky, and I thread my fingers through his hair.

“I didn’t want to. I knew where Kyrie was going, and I couldn’t leave her to that. I survived. I’m fine, and Keiran will heal. I feel guilty about dragging him along, but we’re all going to be fine, because I went there too.”

Gabe huffs and his hand spans over the side of my thigh, gently brushing it through the duvet like he’s imagining all of the damage that has been wiped away thanks to Felix’s care. There’s still a small ache there, but it’s nothing compared to the blinding pain I’d succumbed to, letting my bond take over and wreak its blood-soaked vengeance on the camps.

Gabe's fingers are gentle as he strokes over the duvet. "Black is going to wish he'd never woken up that morning by the time Gryphon and North are done with him. They both have some very *creative* plans of punishment for him."

Jesus freaking Christ.

GABE FALLS asleep on me and we spend most of the afternoon napping with Brutus between us, after he'd slowly inched Gabe away from me and taken his place. I doze off and on, watching the shadows cross the room as we waste away the day. Sometime in the late afternoon, I fall into a much deeper sleep, only to wake and find Gabe missing.

North is sitting at the desk, reading more of his endless paperwork with a glass of whiskey in front of him.

"There's a sandwich on the nightstand. If you want something more substantial, I'll call the chef for you."

I stretch out and struggle to sit up, pushing up until I'm once again drowning in the pillows. I've never met a man who enjoyed sleeping with a hundred pillows like a princess, but then there's no one quite like North out there.

"The sandwich is good. I feel horrible, the napping is only making it worse."

He glances up to frown at me. "Do you need Felix now? He checked in on you earlier but when he saw you were sleeping, he left you to it. He said sleep is more important right now."

I shake my head and grab the plate. "No, I just feel like I'm lazing around here, doing nothing, while everyone else is busy... doing things to keep us safe. I'm a liability and I hate that."

He huffs at me, draining the last of the whiskey in the glass and moving more papers around. “Do you know how many survivors we recover on average from the camps?”

I shake my head, taking another bite of the sandwich. It’s cheese and ham, with the perfect amount of mayonnaise, and I want to marry the chef for it.

North ignores the sandwich-gasm I’m having and continues, “If we can get to the camps in the first twenty-four hours, it’s twenty-two percent. After forty-eight hours, that drops to fifteen. After four days, as in the case of what happened when you went after them? Three percent. Do you know how many survivors you brought home? Because it was all on you, we just came and picked you all up.”

The door opens and Gryphon steps through, not bothering to knock. He’s in his training gear, the full coverage stuff he wears around his team and not the teeny tiny shorts he saves for me. He doesn’t blink at North’s monologue, just comes over to get a look at me and take a seat back at my side.

“Thirty-three people were taken. Thirty-three came home. Only one was injured, and the reports said that thanks to Nox’s creature protecting Kyrie and shutting down the showers, only one woman was assaulted in that time. That has *never* happened before, Oleander. You’re the farthest thing from a liability.”

Gryphon turns to give me a look, and I shove the last of the sandwich into my mouth to avoid speaking to him about it. There’s a lot I need to say to him and fighting my position on being useless to them all right now isn’t it.

He turns to share a look with North that spells trouble for me.

It finally occurs to me that I don’t know how to do relationships. I barely know how to function as a Central Bond, and having both of my Bonded, very alpha men here together is literally overwhelming for my

poor brain. It was fine this morning with Nox and Gabe here too because they felt a little bit like a buffer, stopping any of this stuff from happening.

Now I'm at their mercy, and I already know they're both more than happy ganging up on me.

But I have to at least try, because if I shut my eyes and think about it hard enough, I can still hear the cracking sound of Kieran snapping his own ankle to save my life and the lives of my Bonds.

So once I swallow, I clear my throat and plead for Black's life. "Please... don't take everything that happened out on Kieran. I was the idiot who thought we'd get in and out without Franklin being there. I should've known better."

Gryphon's eyes narrow at me in a way that I'm so not used to being pointed in my direction. I gulp a little, mostly because he looks like he's about to give me the same punishment as his second is going to get. I was kind of hoping the leg injury would get me out of the pre-dawn training for at least a week. Two would be better. I guess his terrible mood is still around, which is just great news.

I don't look in North's direction.

I'd wager he's less reasonable about this shit than Gryphon is, so the longer I can keep him out of this, the better.

Gryphon snaps, "Wrong. North has only ever been unreasonable about you. Now that you're Bonded, he's probably going to go back to being the good councilman again."

My cheeks heat but my temper also flares and gets my mouth running. "Get out of my head! I will start avoiding you if you can't stay out of it."

He leans forward in his chair and says in a low and dangerous tone, "Try it. I'm about to chip you all over again just to make sure you don't fucking disappear on me."

I make a very embarrassing squeaking noise of outrage and snap back at him, "I went after your sister. I didn't run away. I went after someone you

love, because I couldn't bear the thought of you losing her. Don't stand there and act like I'm a liability when I was doing it for you. I don't care about that man or what he did—"

He snarls to interrupt me, "You can't even say his name! I can see it now. I can see the trauma spots in your mind—"

"Then get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. Head. I don't want you in there. I deserve some goddamn privacy!"

He smirks but before he can open his mouth and ruin me even more, a solid body slides between the bed and the seat, in the tiny amount of space there, and North snaps, "She's still healing. Walk it off before you say something you regret. Get out of here. *Go.*"

Gryphon leaves without another word, shutting the door a little harder than required, and I roll my eyes at the sound. North doesn't move. He just stands there with his back to me and legs pressed against the bed like he's expecting Gryphon to stomp back in for round two.

It makes me feel like an absolute asshole. "I'm sorry I thought you'd be unreasonable."

He makes a dismissive noise. "I deserve it. I told your bond I'd regain your trust, and now I'm saying it to you too. I'm under no illusions that Bonding with you was a magic cure, it'll take some time for me to prove myself to you. Gryphon is... he's feeling guilty. It's making him lash out, and he's going to be sore about it later. I was trying to stop him from really digging himself into his own grave."

I frown and lean back on the bed, exhaustion still creeping up inside my body even though I've barely been awake. Maybe I'm not past the sleeping forever phase like we were hoping. "What does he have to be guilty about? Jesus, he's got a savior complex, doesn't he? Typical."

North carefully rolls his sleeves back up his arms and then starts to loosen the top few buttons, revealing the tanned and smooth skin there. He's a fucking tease, and thank God Gryphon is no longer here to read all

of the dirty thoughts running through my head, because I'm ready to spread out on the bed for him all over again.

"He's feeling guilty because it was the first time he had to think about the choice between his family and his Bonded. If he had to choose between saving the two of you... He's never had to think about it before and, like most men in his position, he always assumed he'd be able to stop there ever being a choice. You running after Kyrie made him aware that he'd rather you be safe here. That wasn't such a terrible thing until she told him about Brutus saving her in the showers. If you weren't there, she would have been assaulted."

That cuts into my dirty thoughts a bit. "Well, that's just stupid. Why worry about 'what-ifs' and made-up scenarios when there's only one situation that did happen? We're fine. Kyrie is safe and I just... I need a little more rest, but I'm fine."

He flicks a hand at my leg with a raised eyebrow. "You were hurt badly. You were much closer to death than any of us ever wanted to think about."

I roll my eyes. Men. *Bonds*. Bonded men with their heads up their asses. The list goes on. Honestly, my life will never be carefree again, and that has nothing to do with the Resistance chasing me and everything to do with five hot-blooded men that are fated to be tied to me for all of our lives.

North walks around the bed to shove the paperwork into a file and switch off the lamp over on that side of the room. "Do you need anything else? Hungry, thirsty? If you want another shower, I could be persuaded."

I can't cope with caring and attentive North Draven. Domineering and commanding North, sure. Asshole North? Not my favorite, but I've got him sorted.

This one?

Nope.

I could definitely go for another shower with him, and round three of playtime with his shadows, but the haze in my head still hasn't lifted. "I

think I need more rest, but I'm bored of lying around. Why don't you have a TV in here so I can distract myself with something stupid on there?"

He looks over at me where I'm splayed out on the bed dramatically and then comes back over to press a button underneath the lip of the marble-top, very luxurious looking bedside table.

The end of the bed *opens* and a TV slowly rises up out of freaking nowhere.

"You have too much money. Seriously, that is ridiculous! Why not just have it on the wall like the rest of the bedrooms?"

He shrugs and goes about meticulously stripping out of his suit, firmly distracting me from my outrage. "It would ruin the room. Besides, it's fun to watch you freak out about simple things."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oli

I FALL ASLEEP WATCHING the world's most boring documentary because North refuses to watch trashy reality TV with me. I only suggested it in the first place to test just how far I could push his kindness. His retaliation of an old man droning on about deforestation was brutal.

I wake hours later in total darkness, and at first I think that I've jumped into another of my Bond's minds without intending to. It takes me a minute to realize that I'm not dreaming, that there's a warm body lying against my back with hands wandering over my body and a hard dick rubbing against my ass.

Is it strange that I can already tell which one of my Bonded it is? Because it's definitely Gryphon. The way he moves is like night and day to North. My brain takes a little longer to process what's happening and so instead of pointing out to him that this is someone else's bed and he for sure cannot be teasing me like that, I arch back against him, enjoying the grunt he lets out as my ass grinds down on his dick.

Then his fingers slip into the front of the silky pajama shorts North had dressed me in and plunge straight into my pussy, barely checking to see if I was actually wet or not.

I am dripping, just for the record.

My bond seems to think that merely being around my Bonded is enough of an aphrodisiac. I'm finding myself permanently ready for either one of them, which feels like it's going to be a problem for me. I can't spend my whole life panting after these men.

I need some autonomy again, dammit.

"Don't think about it," he murmurs, and before I can snap at him and point out how freaking impossible that is, he kisses me again until my bond floods my head with a chant of *yes, yes, yes* like the needy bitch it is. If he

wants to get me off in front of North as some sort of apology, I guess that's fine. It's not like they haven't both seen me come, or heard the sounds I make. It's dark enough that neither of them should be able to see the mess I am.

I let him say everything he needs to say to me in the way that he worships my body.

It's probably not a good thing, and something I should not let slide in the future because it's me coming up against five strong-minded, alpha men. They'll walk all over me if I let them, but for tonight, I'm still recovering from the power surge, and I just want to feel something.

I just want to feel how much my Bonded needs me.

So I let him kiss me until I forget where we are and who else is here. I forget my own damn name, and I let our bonds come up to the surface to be with each other again.

It strikes me somewhere in the back of my mind that I'll have to think about later, that this feels different than when my bond was with North's.

But the moment I think about anything that might draw me out of this moment, Gryphon changes things up, the pace or the position or how far down my body his hands are working. When he turns me over to start kissing down my back, I'm forced back into the present and the fact that there is, in fact, a third person in this bed.

I should *not* enjoy the feel of North's eyes on my body this much, watching everything that Gryphon is doing, but when our eyes collide, a whimper tumbles out of my lips at the flare of heat I find there. He's enjoying the show we're putting on for him, not an ounce of jealousy in him, but a need that's building up instead. A need to have me under him as well.

Gryphon moves us both, just enough that he can look at the expression on my face, and his eyes twinkle as he grins. "You wanna be watched? You want him seeing you come all over my cock, gushing down my legs and

screaming my name, baby? I thought I was pushing your boundaries here, but you need it... Don't you, Bonded?"

My eyes roll up into the back of my head and his lips wrap around my earlobe, his teeth sharp as they tug on it, and if this is how I die, then I will gladly go.

"Don't be so dramatic, Bonded. Like we'd ever let you leave us again. You'll have one of us with you at all times from now on."

Fuck.

I really need to figure out how the hell to keep him out of my head, but as his fingers slip into the front of my silky sleep shorts again, it doesn't seem like much of a priority anymore.

The darkness in the room intensifies, deepens, and becomes a living thing, and I tip my head back to watch the changes in North as his bond fills the room. I'm addicted to it already, addicted to the way that his lust and need visibly clouding the room makes me feel.

Gryphon uses my distraction to switch positions again, pushing the silky shorts down and hovering over me as he peels them off of my legs. He leans down to bite at the soft skin of my belly where my shirt has ridden up until I squirm underneath the weight of him.

I want more. I'm in luck, because so do they.

Neither of them stop to think about condoms or birth control, something I really freaking need to figure out for myself or we'll have a whole new problem to deal with, and when Gryphon hitches my legs up a little higher to get me right where he wants me, I smile up at him. This is my favorite part, the stretch and pressure of his big cock filling me up. It feels like fucking heaven.

We both groan as he pushes in.

One of the black tendrils catches my thigh and tugs my legs open wide so that North can see better, see every thrust of Gryphon into my dripping pussy, and his eyes shift to black.

Gryphon's hips falter a little, but when North's eyes meet mine, I'm not worried about his bond coming out to play. Not after his declaration to me earlier. I want him just as badly as I want the man he lives inside. The bond doesn't look angry or jealous, he looks hungry while he waits for his turn to have me.

More, more, more.

His fingers lift to push between my lips, stroking over my tongue. I've never sucked anyone off before but now feels like a great time to start.

"Good girl. Good fucking girl with this pretty Bonded pussy."

It tips me over the edge and I shudder out my orgasm at his dirty mouth, his lips brushing the curve of my ear as he whispers pure filth to me.

I'm going to die like this.

Five of them doing this to me? I won't survive it.

I whimper as Gryphon moves me, positioning me until I'm on my hands and knees between them, groaning as he pushes back into me.

North's bond strokes my hair away from my face, his fingers gentle until he grabs a fistful and tugs my head back to look up at him. The black voids of his eyes are addictive to stare into, so easy to get lost in the depths of them, and my pussy clenches around Gryphon instinctively.

I want to come again. I want to take him down my throat and taste him; I want to swallow every last drop of his cum and—

"If you don't fuck her throat right now, she's going to come without you just thinking about it, so hurry the fuck up before you miss out."

North's bond smiles at me, a dark and dangerous thing with his eyes still dark, unnatural voids, and he fists himself to direct his cock between my lips. Probably best to be doing this for the first time with my Bonded who enjoys being in control because he directs my every move. When he finally lets his dick go to rock his hips further into the wet heat of my mouth, he cups my jaw possessively. Even his bond treats me with a desperate sort of possession that has me whimpering around his cock.

Gryphon's hands are tight around my hips as he holds me still while he drives into me, so all I have to do is focus on not using my teeth and ruining the whole damn night. My jaw aches a little with how wide my mouth needs to be to fit North's cock in, but the sounds he makes have me wanting to do more, be more, just to please him.

I want him to want this as much as I do.

And I think he does. He acts like he does as he takes what he wants from me without question. He pushes further and further, testing my limits and then pushing them out for me, until I'm having to concentrate on my breathing as I'm deep throating him just like I wanted to. I thought it would take longer to pick this skill up, but North's bond knows exactly how to direct me into giving him what he wants.

His fingers squeeze my jaw in warning right before he slams into me one last time, coming with a roar down my throat so that I have no choice but to swallow everything he's giving me. As my throat flexes, his cock pushes down even further and my nose bumps softly against his pubic bone. I didn't think it was possible to get him all the way down, but I did it.

The moment the bond pulls away, Gryphon's arm snakes around my chest and pulls me up, until I'm kneeling in front of him, his cock still buried inside of me. He bites down on my shoulder and comes, his hips still pumping inside of me as I come with him one last time. It almost hurts, my pussy is so sensitive, and I whimper when he pulls out.

He grabs his shirt from beside the bed to clean me up, wiping away his cum from my legs, and then gently moving me to lie back down between them both. North's bond watches us both carefully, still naked and half-hard, and I smile at him softly. I'm not sure I could take any more, but I'm definitely not opposed to sucking him off again if that's what he wants.

He leans over me, ignoring the careful way that Gryphon is watching him, and his fingers trace over my face carefully before he kisses me, deep and sure, like he's chasing the taste of himself. It's hot as fuck and my

hands drift into his hair as I kiss him back with as much fire as I can muster after having the life fucked out of me by them both.

I feel the moment the bond slips away and leaves North behind, but he doesn't break away from my lips until he's had his own turn. I sigh when he finally pulls away, stretching out next to me and curling an arm behind his head.

It's quiet for one blissful moment between the three of us, I'm completely content, and then North and his big, bossy mouth ruin it.

"Get up and go to the bathroom."

I huff at him and turn towards Gryphon, giving him the cold shoulder in the most literal sense of the term. "Stop worrying about your sheets, they're already ruined. I just wanna sleep; leave me alone."

He slides a palm under my arm and levers me into a sitting position like I'm made out of air, not at all listening to my demands. "You'll regret it when you get a UTI. Just go pee, and then you can spread out all you want."

I huff at him and throw a pillow at his head while my face heats up. "Never say the word 'pee' to me again, Draven, or I'll go find somewhere else to sleep."

Gryphon chuckles as he bends down to pull his boxers back on. "You should be glad he's not insisting on following you in there to watch."

I immediately regret fucking the both of them, both separately and together.

Once I've peed and washed up, trying not to wince at just how abused my pussy is feeling after coming that many times and taking Gryphon's dick until I was goddamned rubbed raw, I take a small moment to breathe before stepping back out into the dark bedroom. I want to leave the bathroom light on so I don't bump into every piece of furniture between here and the bed, but then North raises his palm and August appears, trotting over to me in his full Doberman size.

I make an embarrassing squeaking noise as I drop down onto my knees to give him all of the love he deserves.

“Dogs do not belong on the bed, even ones made out of shadows,” Gryphon grumbles, and I scoff at him.

I speak in my puppy-love voice as I reply, “And for that, August can sleep on your side and you can cuddle with him instead of me. You love cuddles, don’t you, baby? Yes, you do. Let’s get your brother out too, let him have some snugs too.”

When I lift Brutus out of my hair, he doesn’t snap or fight with August for my attention, both of them now very secure in my love because they know I’ll give it equally to both of them.

I turn the bathroom light off and let the puppies lead me over to the bed safely, their heads butting into me when I get too close to sharp edges and Gryphon’s boots. Neither North or Gryphon argue about me having the creatures wrapped around my legs, and August even rests his head against North’s thigh in the most affectionate gesture I’ve ever seen between the two of them.

Maybe I can fix whatever issue North has with his creatures.

I fall asleep with Gryphon warm against my back and North’s hand resting under my cheek, his thumb tracing over my face in rhythmic strokes that send me off to a peaceful and dreamless slumber.

I WAKE up after the threesome of my wildest dreams feeling like myself again, finally.

So much so that I spend a good twenty minutes staring at North’s sleeping face and trying to figure out how the hell he went from barely tolerating me to being all in on the Bonded front. I mean, that’s not even the strangest thing that’s happened in the last few days of the recovery fog but

staring at his long, sooty eyelashes as they rest against his high cheekbones I can forget about it for now. I've never really let myself look at him for this long and never this close before, so the image distracts me for a good three seconds before the rest of the 'what the fuck' situations filter into my head.

Like the whole waking up in Atlas' head mess. I really need to figure out what the fuck happened there without actually telling anyone about it because they will freak—

“What the hell do you mean you woke up in Bassinger's head?”

Fuck.

A frown appears between North's eyebrows the moment he wakes up, and I elbow Gryphon in the ribs, both for doing that and for meddling in my head again.

He grunts and catches my elbow, turning me slightly to face him more fully. “It's not meddling, you're practically screaming in my ear with your thoughts. It woke me up. I'm not doing it on purpose.”

I roll my eyes and murmur back to him, hoping North will go back to sleep, “Well then, teach me how to stop mind yelling at you. I should be allowed a little privacy, right?”

He raises an eyebrow back. “I would say yes, but I just found out you've somehow managed to astral project and weren't going to tell me, so maybe we'll keep you like this until you learn to trust me a little more.”

“Did he just say 'astral project'? I need a coffee,” North says in a sleepy rasp that does things to my body. He shouldn't be able to do these things to me without even trying, that's not fair at all. I watch as he rolls out of the bed in one smooth movement and walks into the bathroom, the tiny boxer briefs he's wearing doing nothing to help with calming my raging hormones.

This has to be a Bonded thing, right? I'm not going to be this horny forever... right?!

I glance at Gryphon and shove a pillow in his smug face when I find him smirking at me. “Shut up. Shut up and tell me how to get you out of my head. My brain has been shitty the last few days and... well, if I had’ve ended up in Gabe’s head or Nox’s, I probably would have told you about it, but you’re all on Team Atlas-Is-A-Spy, so I thought maybe we should figure that out first.”

Gryphon glances towards the bathroom door and then murmurs back to me quietly, “If you have any control over the ability at all, don’t ever try it with Nox. If you never listen to another word I say, Bonded, just listen to this; stay out of Nox Draven’s head.”

Even with the quiet, gentle tone he’s using, a chill takes over me as I nod back at him, swallowing roughly. “I didn’t do anything to end up in Atlas’ head in the first place. I just went to sleep and then woke up staring at his bedroom wall feeling so goddamned bored my skin was crawling. It took me a full minute to realize where I was and... I just spoke with him for a minute. That’s it.”

Gryphon nods slowly and North reappears from the bathroom, still looking tired and frowning over being conscious. It’s weird to see him like this because even when he slept in my bed before I went to the camps, I would always wake up first and head down to the gym before he woke up. I don’t even know what time he usually wakes.

Except for that one time that Penelope showed up—

Gryphon nips that thought spiral right in the bud and interrupts me. “Nope, we’re not thinking about her right now, and you’re definitely not going to get out of this conversation by thinking about things that make your bond murderous and send you both on a rampage.”

North moves a panel on the wall and a coffee machine appears, Rich Man Syndrome at its finest, and I make grabby hands at him just so that he’s clear on whether or not I want some. I highly doubt he has any decent flavors or creamers in there, but I’d take a black coffee at this point.

That's how I really know that the power fog has lifted.

"It probably didn't help that you Bonded in the middle of healing, that would've slowed things down. What extra powers do you have? Can you feel anything yet?"

I struggle to sit up, careful not to disturb August from where he's lying on his back with his paws in the air and snuffling in his sleep. Brutus is tucked into his side and even though he's awake, he's not moving or disturbing his brother. It's very sweet, and I fish around under my pillow until I can grab my phone and attempt to take a photo of them both.

The photo comes out black.

Like, completely black, as though I was holding my finger over the lens. I frown at it and try again, but the image still comes out with nothing. What the hell is that?

"Oli, this is important."

I huff at Gryphon and take the cup of coffee that North holds out to me, juggling my phone around a bit. "Nothing. Nothing except waking up in Atlas' head. Like, fully inside his mind. I could hear everything he was thinking and, if I wanted to, I could've seen any of his memories. Before you ask, I didn't look at anything. That's a gross invasion of privacy, and even though he told me to, I didn't. I believe he's on our side. I might not know all of his story yet, but I'll hear it from him, not by rustling through his mind like a freaking psycho."

North shares a look with Gryphon and then takes a long gulp of his own coffee, stalking back over to the bathroom with the cup still in his hand. When the shower starts up, I have to sigh at the sound of it, hot water and a coffee. He's living my dream right now.

"You could live your dream too, you know. You'd probably be making a bunch of his dreams come true too," Gryphon murmurs, and I shove another pillow in his face.

Then I take my coffee and do exactly what he suggested.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gabe

PULLING my bike up to my parents' house gets weirder and weirder the longer I live at the Draven's mansion.

It's not home anymore.

I feel guilty even thinking that, because my parents did everything to give me the best possible childhood. You only have to look at half the kids around me in my classes at Draven to know that I'm lucky. Half of them were brought up by parents so traumatized by what happened in the riots that they became overprotective to the point of smothering.

Grey can barely breathe without his dad's permission, even at twenty years old he lives under their rules.

My parents were protective but wanted me to experience a normal childhood. They took me to football games and let me go out with my friends. Once I shifted for the first time, they'd relaxed the rules even more, because they knew I could defend myself better than most.

They were great parents... until they weren't.

Home, for me, is always going to be wherever Oli is.

I send a text to North to let him know that I've gotten here without incident and try not to feel like a child about it. I have to remind myself that we're all checking in with him at the moment. He's staying at the mansion, and everyone is answering to him so that we're all accounted for, but it still prickles at my skin a little.

I have to remind myself that it's for Oli, because that makes it worth it. She's the reason we're all staying close, staying connected, and staying vigilant, because there aren't just people out there who could hurt her, there are people specifically targeting her, which is a whole different beast.

Losing her is *not* an option.

So I'll toe all of the lines without question, the texting and checking in and all of the extra security shit, because if it's keeping her safe, then it's worth every fucking second.

The front garden of the house is perfectly manicured and maintained; the gardener is doing his usual exemplary job. There's nothing out here that would suggest that anything had gone wrong inside over the last four years. There's no sign of the breakdown I'm about to face head on and hope to come out without feeling like having one of my own.

I fuss around with my keys until I get the door unlocked, wiping my feet on the mat and glancing around as though there's any chance of something being different here, as though maybe there was some life in the place again. Nothing. Of course.

I sigh and call out, "Mom? Are you home?"

It's a stupid question. She never leaves the house now. The housekeeper, Nina, spends her time keeping my mom fed and alive more than she actually cleans anymore. There's only really dusting to be done now that mom has taken to her bed.

I'm not being dramatic there. She's literally taken to her fucking bed.

I grab the pile of mail in the basket where Nina leaves it for me. It's tough to admit to myself that it's the only real reason I came here today. If I don't stay on top of shit around here, it's not getting done.

There's a fresh bunch of flowers in front of the family portrait in the foyer, the shrine that Nina keeps so that mom doesn't lose her shit on the off chance she walks down here. It's a good photo of the three of us, taken a few weeks before Oli's disappearance, and we're all genuinely happy in it. Fuck.

I let my eyes drop away and take the stairs two at a time, avoiding the creaks out of pure habit because there's no real need to be sneaking my way up here. I did that enough as a stupid teenager, coming in from parties and football tailgates that went on a little too long. Back before this shit.

I knock softly on my parents' bedroom door, pushing it open a little because there's no chance of catching mom in an awkward situation. She'd have to exist for that to happen. "Mom? How are you feeling today?"

The curtains are pulled shut and the room is only lit up by a soft lamp. I'd guess Nina turned it on this morning to attempt to get her up, but even the tray of food at her side has barely been touched.

"Mom? It's Gabriel. I'm home to see how you're doing."

There's a sigh from the lump on the bed, and I try not to let it dig under my skin. That tiny sound makes my skin shrivel in shame, like I'm a burden to her for being here to see her. Like she just wants to be left here to waste away to nothing and I'm forcing her to stay.

Am I?

Probably.

"Gabe, Mommy is tired. I'll come and play with you after a nap."

My stomach sinks even lower, practically in hell now. She does this sometimes, loses track of where and *when* she is. Like her mind is reverting back to when her life meant something and it wasn't this endless hell without either of her Bonded.

I fight to keep my tone even but, fuck, it's hard. "I don't need you to play with me, mom. I just need to know that you've eaten something today. Nina called me to say you were refusing food again."

She huffs and throws out a hand, but it's so frail that it barely makes a sound against the soft duvet. "She's meddling again! I need to let her go and find someone who will just leave me."

I shouldn't, I really fucking shouldn't, but my temper is shorter than ever at the moment. I have real shit to be thinking about, not this endless state of grief she refuses to leave. "To die, mom? You need to find someone who will let you waste away until you actually die? Because you're not far off. You can't fire Nina. I have power of attorney over you, remember? I

hired her. I pay her. I take care of everything around here, because you can't!"

I stop myself, biting my lip until the words stay trapped on my tongue. I feel the moment she shuts down again, my anger sending her back into the empty space of her grief-stricken mind.

When she doesn't answer, or even move, I stalk back out of the room. She's alive, that's all I really needed to see, and I make it the entire way down the stairs before it hits me. Mostly because my father's portrait is still hanging there, staring at me like he can see me and knows exactly what I'm thinking.

The guilt might eat me alive.

Because if dad were here and mom was gone, he'd be mourning her just as hard, but at least he'd take care of himself.

Sometimes I wish it was her who died.

WHEN I GET BACK to the Draven mansion, I head straight up to Oli's room to find my Bond. I need to get the hell out of my own head and back to reality, where we all function and work on our shit instead of running from it in our own goddamn heads.

I take a breath before I knock on the door.

She calls out to me straight away and when I try the door handle, I find it unlocked. That's new. That feels big too, because she's always been extra jumpy about keeping it locked at all times. Whatever went down with North before they Bonded, it's definitely got her trusting us all a little more.

I'm not sure we *all* deserve that trust.

When I step in, I find schoolwork all over her floor, and Oli's wearing the tiniest pair of shorts I've ever seen as she's sprawled out in front of it

all. She's alone, except for the two creatures, and there's a scowl on her face that means I know exactly what she's working on.

I don't get why she ties herself in knots over her Gifted 101 shit when North would pass her no matter what, just for being his Bonded, and Nox will never pass her for the exact same twisted reason.

They're both beyond fucked up over her, but I'll take North's brand over Nox's any day of the week. I don't need to know the exact reasons for it to know that whatever the hell happened in the Draven house messed with him in a very particular way.

She looks up at me with a soft smile, one that reaches her eyes, and I attempt to not trip over my own feet at the sight of it. She's fucking gorgeous, made perfectly just for me, and the more she opens up, the more of her perfection I find.

She props her chin up on one of her hands and tilts it to one side at me as she looks me over. "How was your mom? Did you get what you needed?"

I nod and drop my own bag by the door, toeing out of my shoes and coming over to sit with her. I definitely don't want to talk about my mom or the trip over there, so I focus on the good shit instead. Like how fucking gorgeous she looks today.

I trail a hand over the swell of her ass and she hums under her breath happily at the touch. The waiting to Bond might mess with us all, but there's something about the anticipation that makes me enjoy the fuck out of it.

Knowing she's just as desperate for me as I am for her is everything I ever needed.

She heaves herself off of the floor with a grumble, but when she tucks herself into my side, I sling an arm around her shoulders to pull her closer into me and she hums happily. I dig my nose into the soft, silvery locks of her hair and something eases in my chest that had wound up tight over at

my parents' place. Something that would have taken me weeks to undo myself, she does without even trying.

I love this girl already.

She mumbles quietly to me, her eyes on the shadows, "August is being pouty. I told him I'm sleeping in with Gryphon tonight, and he won't let the creatures on the bed."

I chuckle under my breath and lean into her. "You can always come back to my room. I might not love them like you do, but they're always welcome."

The grin she gives me is like looking directly into the sun, brilliant and bright, and August turns to sniff at me like he's checking to see if I'm being honest. It's still a little bit jarring being this close to North's meanest and most vicious creature, but I'm adjusting well enough.

Then the grin falters a little and she sighs under her breath. "If I didn't need a power up from him, I might've taken you up on that. I'm... struggling. Not having the pups makes it harder."

I scowl and lean back into her, pressing our foreheads together how she likes. Something about our noses being pressed together makes her grin like a child, so I do it as often as I can.

"What's wrong, Bond? What can I do?"

She sighs again and mumbles, "You all keep trying to help, but it's... a lot has happened and I'm trying to figure it all out. How to get through this next stage without completely losing it that you're all in danger. I got through the camps because it meant you were all safe. Now—now you're not. And it's hard to not feel responsible for that because if I had just stayed away—"

"No. No, this life of knowing we're all in danger is a million times better than the life without you."

Her lip quivers. "I feel selfish for thinking the same thing."

I shake my head, our noses almost colliding thanks to how closely we're pressed together, and murmur back to her, "Never. We need you as much as you need us. We all need you, Bond."

She swallows and nods, looking demure for half a second before her sass kicks in and she rolls her eyes at me. "I'm blaming Gryphon for this. I didn't give a shit until he started in on me with his guilt trip, and now I'm wallowing in it."

I pull her into my chest, damn near preening when she just moves into my lap to wrap herself around me and rest her head over my heart. She's tiny there, I can barely feel the weight of her, but when I bury my nose in her hair, I get a lungful of her scent that calms my bond inside me.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep her right the fuck there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Oli

I BULLY GABE into grabbing his own homework to get through his assignments with me. He tried to argue that we're not going back to Draven any time soon, but I need the distraction from everything going on around us, and I don't want to be caught slacking by Nox, so there's no real downside to keeping up with it.

Gabe cracks his back as he gets up to grab his bag from where he'd left it by the door, kicking his shoes out of his way in that very *boy* way of his. When he stalks back over to me with his arms full of books, he swoops down to give me a kiss. Brutus huffs at him but August moves over to sit between us, scooting Gabe away from me, and then turns his back on him to ignore him entirely.

It's cute.

Gabe shoots me a look and I giggle, burying my face in August's neck and taking a breath. It's been a very long, confusing, ever-changing week.

"You're sure you're okay now? You don't need anything?" Gabe murmurs, and I shake my head, pulling away from August and clearing my throat.

"Just you and the pups... and, well, I also need to find Sage and see how she's doing. Plus, I need to speak to Atlas, but I have no idea how North is going to react when I tell him I want to speak to him alone."

He smirks and shakes his head. "You mean more alone than projecting into Bassinger's head? I'm not sure that's possible, Bond."

Ah. So word has gotten out about that then. I desperately try not to think about that moment again as my cheeks heat up a little. "I want to stand in front of him and hear what he has to say. I don't want to be in his head for it."

He nods and slides down to join me on the floor. “You’re better than me. I would’ve looked through every fucking second of his life to make sure he’s not a spy.”

He shrugs and scowls at August. “Any chance you can get him to move over a little so that I can get back to comforting my Bond? I’ve barely been able to see you since you got back, and now you’re being guarded by these grumpy jailers.”

I give August one last kiss and then snap my fingers to get him to swap sides, watching as he huffs about the move. He likes being between me and anyone else in the room, even North. He prefers to be a wall in front of me. It’s cute and I adore him for it.

The moment August is out of the way, Gabe slings his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. I tuck my face into his shoulder and get a good lungful of his scent—clean and masculine. I’ve missed him. I’ve missed Atlas too; the ache in my chest at the distance North has put between us is like a wound.

“It’s all going to be okay. Once you’re back on your feet, we’ll figure something out for you to do. Gryph is already working with some operatives about... something big. Things aren’t going to stay like this for long.”

I clear my throat. “Have you been in to see Atlas? Is he okay?”

Gabe nods against my cheek. “He’s fine. He’s made it clear that he’ll do anything he has to do to prove that he’s not here to harm you. I believe him. I’m pretty sure Gryph does too, thanks to his lie detector, but the Dravens need more than that. They always have. He did... give North something that’s bought him some favor though, so you’ll be back with him in no time.”

“What’s that?”

“A list. A list of everyone Atlas has ever known in the Resistance and what he knows of their gifts. There’s a lot of names on it. He proved that

it's real by telling North how they got you out of the hospital in the first place. The invisible guy? Turns out he's a scout for the Resistance, and now that North knows how to look for him, they've found him in a lot of meetings and intel spots. Atlas might have just moved the needle in our favor."

I nod and rub a palm over my chest. "I get that he's helping, and I'm glad he is, but—"

I break it off there, but Gabe nods. "But he's betraying his family, and you feel terrible for him? You should speak to him about it. I did and... I understand his reasoning. He's wanted to talk to you about it since he got here, but he was scared you'd hate him the second he opened his mouth about it."

I give him a watery chuckle. "I'm surprised you didn't! You've been fighting with him since he got here."

He shrugs and says, "I knew he was too good to be true. No man, Bond or not, takes being run away from like it's nothing. I didn't trust him one bit. When I realized he knew, he knew your code name in the Resistance intel and he knew what your gift was, I beat the shit out of him. Not that it did all that much, he's indestructible, but it helped get some of my anger about it all out. Then once I heard Gryph interrogate him, had it confirmed as the honest truth... he's in this Bond Group. He belongs to you as much as I do. It would be a pretty shitty thing for me to cause shit just for my own feelings about it. I'm not going to do that to you."

I want to burst into tears.

I don't deserve him or any of them. I don't deserve that amount of consideration and care. He just pulls me into his body tighter and tucks his face into my shoulder.

"You smell like North."

Ugh.

My cheeks heat up because this is the first time anyone has mentioned it. “Sleeping in his bed and using his shower will do that.”

Gabe grins at me and murmurs into my ear, his voice a tease, “Bonding with him would too. Have you changed your mind about it yet, or is North just *that* good at convincing you he’s all in now?”

He doesn’t sound like he’s pushing or anything, just curious and clearing the air, so I’m happy enough to answer him. “He had some good points. My bond was also pretty strongly in favor and his bond was too. I’m... less worried about what it means to stay here. It’s just the power boosts that are still a problem.”

He nods and kisses my cheek again, not worried or concerned about it at all. I would feel insecure about it, except his hands are all over me, pulling me into his body closer, like he’s trying to get under my skin, so there’s no chance of me thinking he doesn’t actually want me. I think he’s just so sure that we’ll figure it out that he’s willing to wait.

There’s a buzzing in his pocket and he moves me a little to pull it out, rolling his eyes at the screen and cursing under his breath. My stomach drops a little but he drawls, “It’s just Sawyer, blowing my shit up for more help with moving Grey’s shit in. I told him I was coming to see you first, and he’s being a dick about it.”

I glance up at him, surprised, and he nods. “Yeah, North is moving them all in here with us. Anyone we trust is being brought in so that we’re not targeted separately. More power under one roof is a good thing right now, and Grey’s parents are all about the move.”

Relief floods me. “Did they come too?”

He shakes his head, scowling a little. “They’ve taken Briony to Switzerland. They were taking Grey as well, but North stepped in. There’s a safe house there that only three people know the location of. They’re leaving in the dead of the night, so they’re going to be safe. Sawyer lost his

shit about it and when the retesting of their bloods came back, Grey's dad finally broke and let him stay."

My jaw drops. "They're Bonds?!"

Gabe grins at my excited squeal and shakes his head. "No, but they're in the same Bonded group. They haven't found their Central yet, but the new testing is still going through the old samples. Sawyer has become *very* motivated to help with it."

I chuckle. "I'm sure he has. Nothing like a little skin in the game to get you working. God, I wish there was something I could do to help. Instead, I'm trapped up here like a princess in a tower. Stupid."

Gabe's phone buzzes again in his hand and I kiss him. "Go help him. I'll find Sage and see her, and then I'll come sleep in your bed tomorrow night. We'll be the masters of patience by the end of all of this."

SAGE SHOWS up at my door, Felix trailing behind her, three minutes after I message her.

How she can navigate this place so freaking seamlessly is beyond me, but apparently I'm the only one who struggles with that.

She takes one look at me with a frazzled sort of look in her eyes and throws her arms around my shoulders, squeezing me tight as she mumbles, "Never do any of this shit again, Oli. Not running off, or going full terminator, or coming home and being holed up for days where I couldn't come and see for myself that you were alive. I thought I was going to have to burn the place down around North to get him to budge. He was not having it."

I giggle, feeling oddly teary about the ragged tone of her voice, and when we pull away from each other, Felix leans in to give me a very sedate

side hug as well. I'm not sure if he's worried about upsetting his Bonded or the many overprotective Bonds of mine in this house, but I can respect it.

I usher them both into my room, and Sage carefully steps around the pups to take a seat on the floor with me while Felix takes a seat at the small, never-used desk that's covered in books I've already used for my studies today, as well as all of Gabe's stuff. The small stack of Atlas' books acts like a little beacon to me, pointing out how badly I need to go find my Bond and hear from him.

I clear my throat, looking back at Sage and say, "So catch me up on what's been happening since the world as we knew it ended. What's been going on?"

I'm expecting to hear about everyone officially moving into the mansion, but that's not quite what I get.

Sage shoots me a look. "Oh, nothing much. Except that I'm definitely a Central Bond. Kieran is one of my Bonds, and I have *four* that flagged in my dad's very secure, very secret retest. So, you know. Business as usual around here."

Four.

Holy shit.

I suddenly care about nothing more than finding out about her Bonds. My own bullshit just evaporates out of my brain. "So, Kieran, Felix, Riley, and... some other guy? Do you know him?"

She huffs and leans herself back against the bed, tipping her head back dramatically, which I can totally get behind, and says, "Yeah, I know him. He already graduated from Draven a year ago and moved interstate for work. He's from one of the lower families, but he came to Draven on a scholarship because his gift was so strong. Gryphon tried to get him to join a TacTeam, but he wanted something that paid more."

Understandable. When you come from nothing, you're going to go for your best option. "So... are you going to contact him now or later?"

She groans and props herself up on her elbows to look back at me. “My dad and North are discussing it, as though I'm a child who can't make her own decisions on these things. They're also monitoring the Riley and Giovanna situation from a distance until it's safe to get him out of there even though I'm dying inside thinking about what is happening to him right now but my opinion on that matter is also very low on the list of priorities.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Felix pulling a face, chewing on his lips like he's keeping himself from butting in, and I point at him. “Don't you even think about talking rationally about this right now, Davenport. We're here to hate on the controlling men in our lives, not their very sound and good reasoning for it.”

He grins and shakes his head at me while Sage groans again. “I know it's a security risk thing and nothing to do with how they see me, but why does it always have to be this way? Why can't something, *anything*, be easy or normal for me?”

I stack up my homework to make more room for us to spread out on the floor, and August uses the opportunity to wedge himself more fully between Sage and I. I give him a scratch and he settles onto his belly, tucking his face into my legs as he watches the room keenly.

Brutus is on his back, fast asleep by my feet with zero cares.

Sage prods at the paperwork, drawling, “You'd think a near death experience would get us out of assignments, wouldn't you? I doubt your Bond will allow it though. We're going to be forced to hand shit in for him at least.”

There's a pang in my chest as I think about Nox, a craving for him that is going to mess with my plans to sleep in with Gabe tomorrow night. I know that North said I'd been 'tended to' by all of them after my bond went on its killing spree, but I wouldn't be surprised if Nox wasn't actually on that list.

Or if he did the bare minimum possible.

Felix looks over at me again, and I raise an eyebrow at him until he says, “I can’t help but notice that there’s two creatures in here with you now.”

Sage glances over and shrugs at him. “That’s August, one of North’s creatures. We met when Oli came to grab me from The Great Fire Incident. You really think after Oli was captured and hurt he wasn’t going to add his own little spy to the mix? I’m surprised he only gave you one.”

August looks up at the sound of his name and I give him a scratch to settle him back down. Brutus wakes up and immediately asks for some love too, which he gets like the precious baby he is. “I might ask for the snake as well. My bond liked that one a *lot*.”

Sage fumbles with her phone a little, gulping as she nods at me. She’s clearly got a phobia but doesn’t argue with my hopes because she’s the best.

Felix does though. “You can’t complain about being stuck here and in the same breath, say you want a fucking snake following you around. Jesus Christ, Oli, that’s pushing it. Even for you.”

I giggle at the strain in his voice. “Scared of a widdle snakey? This changes everything I thought of you, Felix. Seriously. He’s cute, and he ripped some guys' arms off for me. If that isn’t the most precious thing I’ve ever seen, I don’t know what is.”

The memory floods me without warning and, though my hands shake a little at the ferocity of the moment, I don’t feel guilty for all of the death and pain. They came for innocent people. They trapped a monster instead and that’s their own stupid fault. I tried to warn them.

Where are you? What’s upsetting you?

What’s happened?

Gryphon and North speak over each other in my head, and I try not to roll my eyes at them both fussing. It still feels weird to have them in there like that, let alone having North being so... sweet.

Oleander, if you don't answer, I'll leave this meeting and come up there after you.

Ah, that's much more North-like.

I had a flashback to what my bond was doing in the camp, not a big deal. Can you guys stop freaking out about me, especially while I'm safe in the mansion?

I'm careful about my tone, trying to tamp down my inner bitch so I don't start a fight, but I need to establish some boundaries with them, and fast, or they'll be walking all over me in no time.

My uncle was murdered in his bed. I'm not going to trust any households with your safety. Come downstairs so I can see you're okay.

Ridiculous.

Okay, he has a point about William's death, but I'm busy studying. So instead, I concentrate so hard I almost burst my brain wide open, but I manage to send him the image of Brutus lying over my legs and August sitting where I'm leaning against him, watching over me while I pretend I'm studying.

I'm safe with these two. Also, Sage has been known to set entire billion-year-old buildings on fire when provoked, so I'd put money on her in a fight.

Gryphon, who can also hear all of this because what is privacy, adds in, *We both know she wouldn't get the chance because your bond would deal with the danger. North is just trying to get out of his meeting. Go back to studying, Bonded.*

"Are you flirting with your Bonded right now? The carpet should not have you grinning like that, it's not interesting or funny," Sage grumbles, and I shoot her a rueful look.

"They're mother-henning me. Honestly, remember when we thought Bonds were bad? Bonded men are infinitely worse."

Felix shoots me a look. “You mean we want our Bonded safe, secure, and happy at all times? Terrible. The worst. Monsters.”

Sage throws a pencil at him. “Don’t say the ‘m’ word. Brutus will eat you.”

“Now who’s flirting? Gross, keep that out of my room,” I say in an exaggerated tone, and Sage rolls her eyes at me with a grin.

Felix flicks the pencil at me and says, “We’re all going to have to sit through dinner with you and your Bonds, so don’t try for the higher ground here, Fallows. I’m expecting someone to attempt to fuck you over the potatoes the moment they get a chance.”

I hold a hand up to my chest, feigning horror, and Sage cackles at me. It’s stupid and ridiculous and everything I needed after all of the weird in my life right now.

Sage gives me a sly sort of look and murmurs, “We should take bets on which one. My bet is North, I’ve never seen him like this before. It’s sort of... weird.”

Felix opens his mouth, probably to place his own bet and embarrass the life out of me with some quip, but I’m saved by his phone buzzing. There’s a lot of that going on today.

He barely looks at it, shooting Sage a look, before he says to me, “My parents are video calling in five, so we need to go. They’ve been extra freaked out since I refused to come home and North won’t let them over here. Not that I blame him.”

I don’t even have to ask why, because it’s very clear to me that it’ll be about Gracie. After her perfume stunt provoked my bond to come out and Bond with Gryphon, they were both swift in their actions to get rid of the girl. I feel slightly bad about it, only because that’s Felix’s sister, but she also made me lose my v-card in a pretty animalistic and brutal way.

So fuck her and her silly little games.

I give him a look and he shrugs, packing away the last of his supplies. “I’m not mad about it. She’s an adult and made choices; she can live with them. My parents, too. As long as Sage is safe and we’re together, I’m happy with wherever that puts me.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Oli

THE MOMENT SAGE and Felix leave, I decide to put my big girl panties on and go see Atlas finally. I can't deal with the ache in my chest for Nox, but I can definitely do something about the mess in my head over my confined Bond.

I take the coward's way out and speak to North directly through our minds so that I don't have to argue with him face-to-face. *Is Atlas in his room? I want to see him. Without a guard or whatever, I want to see my Bond.*

I'm met with a very charged form of silence, one where I know he's hating this idea but wants to have a good argument on why I can't go see my own Bond. I stay quiet for a minute, but when I feel him hesitate, I push it a little further. *I don't... feel good and I need him.*

It's the truth, but it still feels like I'm being manipulative saying it because North immediately relents, agreeing for my own good to get over his concerns and fears of Atlas' motives if it means I'll feel better.

Take the creatures with you. I'll tell Nox to stay out of his, so long as you're not asking for help. Know that I'm only okay with this because Gryphon is sure about him, even if we're not. If he showed any deception so far, I wouldn't be doing this, Bonded.

The words sound controlling, but I'm seeing him clearer now. He's attempting to reassure me and tell me how much I mean to him, he's just not the best at wording it.

If anything feels wrong to me, I'll tell you. Is Gryphon close too? My bond isn't entirely opposed to killing Bonds if I'm in danger, so don't worry about that either, I send back, aiming for my own personal brand of reassurance, but he's not a huge fan of it either.

I change into pants and pull on one of Nox's sweaters to help push back the longing there for a little longer. I usually avoid Nox's things around Atlas if I can, but my skin is extra tight on my bones today.

I sigh and talk to Gryphon on my way down to Atlas' room, the puppies walking alongside me nicely with each other. *I think I need to sleep in Atlas' room tonight and not yours. Is that... okay? I also need to sleep in with Nox again, tomorrow if I can. Is it possible or will he get mad about it?*

When I get out of the elevator and attempt to take a wrong turn, August bumps my thigh to get me back on to the right path, the perfect guide through this ridiculous house.

I'll sort it out. Don't worry about him, Bonded. Just focus on Bassinger for now. I want to know what he says to you, so come see me after.

When I get to Atlas' door, I take a second to collect myself. It's stupid. I was in his damn head yesterday, but it still feels like there's something between us now. Something that's changed him from the Bond I was closest to, could rely on without question, to now being someone with secrets and a very questionable past.

It also makes him more real to me.

Gabe wasn't wrong, there was always something about Atlas that put me a little on edge. Something about how all in he was that was a little disconcerting. It just didn't add up, but now that there's a reason for it all, I feel like it makes sense. It's still an issue, but I feel better about getting past it together.

Just as soon as I can knock on this door.

I lift my hand up right as it opens and Atlas drawls, "Do you need another minute, Bond, or do you wanna come in?"

I roll my eyes and step into him, scooting the puppies around him while I give my Bond a bone-crushing hug. Well, my bones feel crushed, but I'm sure his super strong and indestructible self is breathing just fine.

I tuck my face into his chest as he takes a step back, pulling me into his room with him and kicking the door shut behind us both. The puppies both sniff around in the space, though August stays within touching distance of me at all times. I know North promised not to spy on us both, but his creature is just as surly and overprotective as the Bonded, and I refuse to admit how endearing that is to me.

“I missed you so fucking much. I used to think sleeping separately four nights out of five was bad but, *fuck*, Sweetness. I can’t go that long without you again.”

I nod into his chest and rub my nose against the soft fabric of his shirt. He smells clean and warm and *mine*, which is my favorite combination, and when he tugs us both towards the bed to sit down together, I don’t fight him.

When we finally pull away from each other, I look around the room a bit and blush, which is stupid, but the last time I saw his bed, I was in his head with him, jerking that glorious dick of his off until he came all over his fist.

“Wanna go again, little Bond?” he drawls, and I duck my head.

“Don’t tempt me. It’s been—it’s a lot. All of this. It’s a lot to process and go through. I also don’t want to get stronger still, and everything is sort of messy.”

He pulls a face, reminded of exactly what I’m here for, and I nod my head with a sigh. “I came here to hear it all. To hear from you about your family and... how you’ve decided to not be a part of the Resistance with them.”

He swallows and nods, clearing his throat nervously. “I’ve been planning how I’d do this for months and now that it’s time to do it, I feel like I’m about to fuck it up. Please just... hear me out. It’s not all wonderful and virtuous. I’m a shitty human for big chunks of it, but I came home to you. That’s what counts, right?”

I refuse to nod, mostly because I can't agree to it until I have the details.

"I grew up in Resistance propaganda. My family is pretty high up in the ranks. My dad is even close personal friends with Silas Davies."

I nod. "I know. I saw him when I got to the camps with Kieran."

He grimaces and nods. "He was always leaving to check in on various different camps and going through the Gifted who had been taken. He knew they were after you for years before Silas took you. There had been rumors about your gift, but your parents moved you around a lot to keep you hidden. They were smart but outmatched by Silas' arsenal."

This isn't new to me.

Silas had told me all about this, about how I'm responsible in every way that counts for my parents' deaths. About how we moved constantly because I couldn't stop using my gift or showing off my void eyes at the worst of times. I know it, but it still hurts that he knows it too.

I swallow and nod so he'll continue, to get this story out faster, as though he's ripping a band-aid off of my soul.

"When we were called about my blood flagging in the same Bond Group as the Dravens, there was an entire family meeting. My dad was cagey as hell about it and Aurelia's Bonds all had opinions to throw into the mix, but my mom just got wasted. I've never seen her drink like that before, but she just downed glass after glass of wine as though it were water."

He takes another breath, shifting on the bed and scratching at the back of his neck like he's uncomfortable before he continues, "This is the part that I'm ashamed to tell you about, and the part I didn't tell the others, because it's none of their business. So, I found out right after that you'd gone missing. My dad made a fuss about it, but he was actually happy that I wouldn't be coming here and being around the Dravens. I... thought the same as the rest of the Bonds, that you didn't want us, and I acted like a fucking idiot. I went out with my friends a lot, drinking and partying, and

I... slept around a lot. I thought I was getting back at you for leaving me behind before you'd even met me. I was a stupid, selfish dickhead."

I mean, I knew that all of my Bonds hadn't waited for me. Even the two closest to my age had very obviously chosen to sleep around before they'd met me, but I don't really want to hear about it, and knowing that he ramped it up in retaliation for something I'd never done... yeah, this isn't my favorite moment for us to share.

He looks at me closely and when I don't say anything, he continues, his voice a little stronger now that he's gotten that part over with, "This went on for a couple of years. Right up until about six months before North and Gryphon found you while you were on the run, actually. My parents were all out of town for a Resistance function. Yeah, the Top Tier families in the Resistance throw galas and shit to raise money for the cause. It's a whole different world on the East Coast than it is here. It's... really different than it is here, actually. So, anyway, they were out of town and my mom changed the password to the butler's cellar. It's a passcode thing, and she did it so I couldn't drink while they were gone, so I went snooping through her shit with one of my friends who knew enough about coding and hacking to be useful... On her computer, I found videos. I got my friend out before he saw anything really, but then I sat for two days while my parents were gone and watched the recordings of Silas Davies torturing you. My fourteen-year-old Bond being carved open as though you were nothing but a slab of meat to a butcher."

My heart stutters to a stop in my chest.

I never knew there were recordings. I knew there were cameras, so of course there was a chance that there were tapes but, fuck, I hadn't even thought it through that far.

I swallow roughly and he takes my hand, carefully so I can pull away from him if I want to. I don't want to though. I want him to hold me

because... I don't even remember half of what was done to me thanks to my bond. To think that he's seen it all—nope.

What's happening? Oleander, I'm coming up.

I blink back the useless tears in my eyes and answer North immediately. *Don't. We're just talking and he told me about the tapes. I'm guessing he's told you already?*

He is slower to answer but the urgency is out of his tone. *I've seen them. Take a break and come see me. Leave this alone until later.*

But I can't. I need to know everything so that I can have my Bond back and know exactly what else he has on me that I didn't know about. Fuck, North's seen the tapes now too?

"You have them here, with you? Have they all seen them?" My voice is more of a croak, and when some of the tears spill out of my eyes, I hastily wipe them away.

He looks devastated when I pull my hand away from him but shakes his head. "No. Just North and Gryphon. I wouldn't let them keep the footage because I didn't want Nox seeing them. I know that you're still on the fence with him at least, and I wasn't letting him... see you like that. The other two had to see them to understand why I won't ever side with my family. *Ever, Oli. I would never side with people who did that to you.*"

I can believe that, even without Gryphon's lie detecting ability, because I can feel just how badly he needs me to believe him pouring out of his soul in my direction. He's being very careful about keeping his bond away from mine, obviously so that I don't assume he's using it against me, but I can still read him like a book right now.

He means every word.

He also told me about sleeping around when I'm sure he'd rather not have talked about that but he's being completely transparent.

So I nod again and murmur, "What happened then?"

He takes a deep breath and tips his head back to stare at the ceiling. “I confronted my mom about it. She didn’t want to tell me anything, but when I told her I was going to the Dravens to help look for you, she broke and admitted that she knew about them taking you. She’d lied to me about you so I wouldn’t go looking for you, and she ‘forbade’ me from finding you because of what Silas wants from you. The problem with her plan was that I was already nineteen at that point and had access to my trust fund. There was nothing she could do to stop me, not without telling my dad or the others what I was doing. So I planned out how I was going to find you and be with you on the run, and when I say that I had everything planned out, I mean *everything*, Sweetness. From moving my trust fund into an offshore account so that my dad couldn’t trace the money to knowing the exact whereabouts of all of the Resistance camps and having them mapped out so we could stay away from them.”

My jaw drops, but he just smiles ruefully at me. “Getting you a passport without it flagging with Silas was hard, but I did it. I was going to try to talk you into going to Singapore with me. They have really strong anti-Resistance measures there, lots of security and surveillance. While I didn’t love the idea of being monitored all of the time, I’m all about keeping you *out* of those fucking camps.”

Tears start up in my eyes again, but this time it’s because my heart is pounding in my chest like he’s just declared his undying love to me. Well, I guess he sort of has. Running away together? To a whole other country just to keep us both safe which, in turn, would have kept the other Bonds safe as well?

As much as I need them all, I sort of wish it had gone that way.

“Except then Shore and his TacTeam found you. I have no fucking clue how they managed it when Silas couldn’t, but they did. All of my planning went down the drain. I had to pivot to being here with you and hoping you’d want to run away with me. The GPS chip was in the way, and the

sheer amount of security North has on you makes it really fucking hard, but I could've made it work... but then you started scenting and nesting. You Bonded with Shore thanks to that Davenport bitch. I knew we couldn't run without taking everyone. That would have been impossible, so now I'm working on giving the Dravens as much information as I can to keep you safe. Dad and Silas haven't figured out that I'm the one giving it to you all yet so, for now, it's useful."

I give him a look because this is all part of the story that has never made sense to me.

How did they not know that I was his Bond? They had all of the pieces and information and yet—they just didn't know? It's the one part that makes the story seem... like a story and not the complete truth.

Atlas nods slowly without me saying a word and answers the unasked question without hesitating, "My mom. That's how. She knew that Silas and my dad would both sacrifice me for their goals without second thought. My mom might be a part of the Resistance, but she's my mom first. She hates you, hates the Dravens, hates every part of this situation, but she loves me more than she hates. So, the day you escaped, the reason Silas finally left the camp? My mom. The reason you stayed a step ahead of them all the way? My mom. Every time something went your way that shouldn't have, my mom was behind it. She manipulated security footage, organized holes for you to slip through, and used her own gift to take out lower Resistance members to keep an eye on you. Then, once you were captured by the Dravens, she had the coordinates for the GPS chip sent to her as well so that she could keep an eye on you easier. Before you ask, I didn't know about it until Sawyer mentioned it. I knew it had to be her, and I called her to ream her about it. She just won't give up."

I blow out a breath and nod to him, looking away as I process that.

Well, it does neatly fix all of the holes in my story. Too neatly? Only time will tell, but when I think about it, I really did have too many close

calls and lucky moments in my time on the run from them all. Holy shit. A reluctant and hateful guardian angel. Just my freaking luck.

I hum under my breath as I think, and he stands up from the bed, stretching out his back and stalking over to the closet, bringing back bottles of water for us both. I shoot him a look as I take the cold bottle and he grins. “I decided that if I’m going to be stuck in here, then I’m going to make the place more comfortable. I got a mini bar and some other shit so that I could stop calling the kitchens and dealing with the chef’s attitude.”

I drink some of the water and then put the bottle on the bedside table before I finally bridge the gap between us. I’m sure there’s more to talk about. I’m sure more shit will come up between us in the future, but for now, I’m satisfied. For now, I just want my goddamned Bond.

I lean forward to press my face back into his chest, and I can feel the instant relief in his as he pulls me into his arms. The buzzing feeling under my skin settles a little. It’s strange the different ways that my bond protests being separated from each of them. Gryphon and North are different now that we’ve Bonded, but my need for Nox is a slow itch, Gabe is an ache in my chest, and Atlas is this energy that won’t leave me, egging me on to find him and wrap myself around him.

He takes my hands as though he can read my mind as well and rubs his thumbs over my pulse points where my blood is thrumming with excess energy. “You Bonded with North.”

Just like Gabe, he’s not saying it as an accusation. He’s just putting it out there into the air, and I nod. “I did. It was my choice this time and... I don’t regret it.”

He nods back. “I don’t want you to regret it. I’d kill any of them for pushing you. But what did it do to your power? Did you have a surge or anything new pop up?”

I tilt my head to the side as I consider it. I’ve thought about it, of course I have, but the only answer I’ve come up with seems fake and like wishful

thinking.

“I feel stronger. Not more powerful or anything, I just feel more sure of myself and what I can do.”

He nods and squeezes my hands. “I’m not just saying this because I want you. I do want you, nothing will ever change that, but after you and Gryphon Bonded, I’d been watching for some big change that never happened. Oli, have you ever considered that maybe your bond won’t grow in power because it’s already at full capacity?”

I frown and he scoots back on the bed, tugging me until I’m straddling his thighs. My bond purrs in my chest at having him this close again. The distance between us has been the hardest part of all of the changes we’ve been going through. He lets go of my hands only to span his palms over my hips, pulling me down into his core a little more. He’s hard underneath me, his dick reacting to having me this close to him, but he just continues on like this is all business as usual for him.

“You’re the strongest Soul Render in recorded history. I know, I spent a long time researching it. What if Bonding with us is just going to make your bond more settled and secure? You were tortured. You were so young when Silas got his hands on you, your bond came out to protect you. I think that has changed the way things are happening. That and... the color of your eyes. That isn’t Soul Render specific. The Dravens are the only other family I’ve found with black bond eyes. There’s something there that we’re missing too. I hope now that we’re all on the same page about things, that maybe we can figure it out. Together.”

He kisses me softly, slowly, but not pushing for more. “Just think about it, Sweetness. Just think about it, and we can talk more later. I’m not pushing you, but if you can think of anything that means I’m wrong, I want to know about it. This is all I care about right now, getting you settled and secure in your gift and your bond. You shouldn’t be running scared

anymore. I won't have it, Sweetness. I can't stand the thought of how long you've been doing this by yourself."

I nod and lean forward to press my face into his shoulder, something settling inside of me now that I've had my fill of them all. Nox is the only one I haven't spent any time with, but my constant connection to him thanks to Brutus means it takes longer for the cravings to hit me when it comes to him.

"Everything is going to be okay."

I scoff. "Why does everyone keep saying that to me?"

He chuckles at me and rubs a hand over my spine. "Because you're going to worry about every little part of this. You care about us all, you miss your freedom, everything seems terrible. Of course we're all going to try to reassure you, because it *will* get better."

I quiet down and enjoy the safety of his arms for a little longer, our heartbeats syncing up because we were made for each other. Maybe—maybe someday I will be able to Bond with him. Maybe he's right and we'll get this forever, this safety and security and *love*.

Eventually, he moves me over into his bed properly. He helps me strip off the sweater I'm wearing, and the yoga pants because I prefer to sleep in my underwear or shorts, and then he stalks over to his own side of the bed, shedding clothes as he goes. He's still hard, his dick not getting the 'no Bonding' memo at all, but after spending a morning in his head while he jerked off, it doesn't seem like a big deal to me anymore.

I have more experience handling men and their desires now, so much so in such a small amount of time that my head is still spinning from it.

I curl up in his arms and let him fuss with our position until he's happy with how we're lying. August stays on the floor next to the bed, watching me carefully until it's clear Atlas has fallen asleep, and then he lies down to sleep there. I know that he's here for North's peace of mind, but there's still

something comforting about having him with us and I let myself drift off to sleep.

God knows how much later, I wake up at the sound of the door, but August doesn't move from where he's curled up on the floor by my side of the bed. Of course not, it's North coming in to check on us. When I lift my head, he steps over to give me a soft kiss, stroking my hair, as he pulls up another chair to sit in.

“You're going to watch us sleep?” I mumble.

He unbuttons his sleeves and rolls them up. “You. I'm going to watch over you.”

I WAKE up with my bond feeling far more content in my chest about the proximity to Atlas. I try to convince North to let him out of his room for the day so we can go watch something in the giant home theater. When he doesn't budge, we lie around in bed and watch the normal-sized TV instead. It's less showy, but Atlas calls the kitchens and orders up a feast for us, telling them it's for me so that no one dares to question him about it, and we eat fish tacos and chicken quesadillas in bed like the best of heathens.

It's a little bit magical.

Gabe comes looking for me sometime after lunch to drag me away, and Atlas makes a big show of kissing me senseless at the door. Gabe barely bats an eyelid at the display, just waits until I pull away from him, red-faced and breathing a little too hard, before he slings an arm over my shoulders and directs me back down the hallway to head up to my own room.

I send Sage a text message and we agree to meet up at dinner, then I climb into the shower in an attempt to straighten myself out a bit.

I feel like I'm stuck in a time loop.

Like the days are stretching on and I'm just... lying around in a fucking bed all day with one of my Bonds, being absolutely useless while people like Davies are out there hurting, torturing, and murdering innocent people.

I'm a monster.

I try not to sound shrill and a bit psycho when I step out of the bathroom and say to Gabe, "I'm going to go crazy in this house if I'm not allowed out of it soon. I'm not trying to be a pain but seriously, Gabe, I can't stay in here like this forever."

I leave out the part where I have, indeed, already gone a little crazy.

He nods and takes my hand, threading our fingers together as he tugs me towards the door. "There's a plan for that. North is working pretty much nonstop on it, but I'll leave it to him to tell you. I'm not going to steal his thunder there. You just focus on getting better—"

I cut him off. "I am better! I'm all healed up and ready to use my gift and my terrifying bond on whoever I need to. Let's get out of here for the night. Go hunt something."

His eyebrows shoot all the way up his forehead and he blinks at me. "Go... hunt something? I thought you didn't want to use your gift? You change your mind too much for me to keep up with, Bond."

I huff and roll my shoulders back, the jitters taking over with how stir crazy I feel. "I don't want to go around killing people but... I guess it felt good to get a lot of people out of that camp. I'd just sort of run away from it all and tried to forget about it, but being back there and seeing what's happening to people there... I can't keep my head in the sand over it. I need to get off my spoiled ass and go help out."

He tugs me into his chest and reaches down with one hand to give said ass a firm squeeze. "It doesn't feel spoiled to me. It feels fucking perfect, and maybe you should just slow your roll a little. You have no real Tac training, only the few classes that you were giftless for, mostly anyway, and Gryph will knock you back the second you attempt to bring it up. Don't

even think about running off. North has extra security on you, and there's no chance that Black will take you anywhere again. He will be killed if he tries, and that's not an exaggeration. North has made it clear that he'll face the shadow creatures if he ever transports you without one of them again."

Huh.

That seems a bit extreme, and I groan dramatically until Gabe grins down at me again and says, "Let's go down for dinner. That'll keep your mind away from *hunting* and wiping out the Resistance."

He's not wrong.

Dinner is a lot louder with this many people sitting around the table. Sawyer and Grey both attempt to butter up the creatures by feeding them pieces of steak, and I'm shocked when it works. Brutus is sitting at their feet with big, round eyes while he waits for his next piece. August stays at my side but happily takes the pieces Sawyer throws over to him.

"They don't really have taste buds or stomachs. You're just wasting food," drawls North, cutting his own steak up like an aristocrat.

I roll my eyes at him and snark, "You have a magic TV in your room that appears out of thin air. We can feed the babies steaks without worrying about the food bill."

Gabe smothers back a laugh, choking a little on it, and Gryphon grins at me from across the table. August rests his head on my thigh and licks at my fingers, enjoying the lobster juices even if it's not really doing anything nutritionally for him.

I wait until they all look happy enough with their meals before I very carefully say, "So what are the plans here, long term? I'm about ready to start tearing walls down if I'm holed up for much longer."

Gryphon raises an eyebrow at me. "Training starts again at five a.m. tomorrow. Do you still need me to come get you, or can you make it to the gym on your own now?"

Oh, that's definitely not what I was after.

Gabe roars with laughter at the horrified look on my face while I struggle to think of a good reason to get out of it.

If you're healed enough to fuck North and I at once, then you can train, Gryphon says. Although I want to murder the asshole for saying it, I can acknowledge that at least he didn't make it public.

The tiniest amount of brownie points to him.

Nothing that will strain her legs. Go easy on her.

My cheeks heat, because of course they're both happy to run free in my head while I'm trying to eat my goddamned seafood.

"Why are you the exact shade of tomato soup right now, Bond?" Gabe murmurs, and I startle back into myself, looking around the table like a criminal who's been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Gryphon has no table manners, and that's all I'm saying. He's dragging me to training. You'll come too, right? Save me from his sadistic ways."

Atlas' hand is gentle on my thigh under the table, stroking reverently over the perfectly healed skin there. They all keep fussing with it. North wanting me to go easy on it makes no sense. I've healed up fully, so well that there's no scar, but I also won't argue about it. I don't want to do squats and burpees.

Running is taking it easy though, right?

Totally.

Kieran looks at me over the table and shakes his head slowly. "She needs to see a Tac Psych. You should put off the training until she has."

I poke a fork in his direction. "Shut your mouth, narc. I'm fine. I've healed, and there's nothing I need to talk about."

He cocks an eyebrow at me, the bastard, and says, "That man knew exactly where to cut you to get your bond out. You knew what was coming before he even opened the tool box. None of that comes without a lot of sessions. If your Bonds give a shit about you, they'll get you in therapy."

North looks over at me and I feel everyone's eyes on my skin, but I talk directly to him because I already know that it'll be him forcing me into it. "My bond is the one who deals with that shit. If you send me to therapy, it'll have to be the one to talk. Do you really want to do that to some poor woman?"

Shit.

Don't think about it being a woman, don't go down that thought spiral again, Oli.

What thought spiral?

I roll my eyes at Gryphon. *Are you ever going to get out of my head? Why am I even asking? Of course you won't. The spiral about thinking of how many people you lot have all fucked.*

He raises an eyebrow at me. *Why would thinking about a psych do that to you? Why exactly are you so convinced that North has fucked every woman he comes across? And why don't you feel the same way about the rest of us?*

Stupid Bonds.

I turn away from him and back to Kieran. "I don't need therapy. I need a nap and for everyone to leave my bond alone so it doesn't go on another soul-eating binge again. That's it. So just drop it."

Sage meets my eye across the table and nibbles on her bottom lip a little, looking guilty.

"Don't do this to me, Sage. Don't throw me to the wolves like this. We're supposed to have each other's backs here!"

She scrunches her nose up with a smile and says, "I love my psych. Maybe you can see him?"

North cuts in before I can whine about my bestie's betrayal. "Who do you see? I'll arrange for him to come here once he's been through the security measures."

Sage opens her mouth but I cut her off, snapping at North, “I definitely do not need another man in my life trawling through my head. I have enough of that shit happening right here!”

All of the other chatter at the table stops at my outburst, and one of the kitchen staff who was putting out extra plates scurries back into the kitchens as though she’s worried about what’s going to happen to me for being so rude.

I’m not.

Sort of. Okay, I’m sure there’s still plenty of shit that North will be more than willing to do to me as punishment for not just happily going along with his plans, but I draw the line here. I don’t want to speak to someone. I don’t want to pour my heart out to some stranger. I’m not ready for that sort of thing yet.

I barely want to talk about it with my Bonds, who are supposed to love me and accept me no matter what.

Sawyer leans into his sister’s side and mock whispers, “Are we about to see them fuck over the potatoes? Because while I didn’t ask for that on the menu, I’m down to have a front row seat.”

The look that North levels at him makes me want to die on his behalf. I shove a spoonful of vegetables in my mouth so I look too busy to get involved, as though I can ignore this entire mess of a conversation and it’ll just disappear. Grey just groans and covers his eyes with his hands like he’s preparing himself for what shitstorm Sawyer has brought on him by default.

Sawyer excuses himself from the table shortly after, apparently too chicken-shit to deal with North now that he’s pissed him off. Grey leaves with him, and shortly after, Sage gives me an apologetic sort of smile of her own as she heads out with her Bonds as well. I was hoping to actually speak to her but the tension in the room is thick, and I don’t blame her for wanting to get the hell outta Dodge.

It’s quiet for a minute, and then Nox opens his fat mouth.

I should've seen his attitude coming from a mile away because it's been too peaceful around here lately, so of course he wants to ruin it for us all.

“So Bassinger failed to convince you to Bond with him as well? Or are you only interested in Bonding with the more powerful Bonds in the group? You're a lot more calculating than I was expecting, Poison.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head at North when he death stares his brother down the long expanse of the table. I don't need him fighting this war for me. If I let them all fight over me right here at the start, it'll never end.

Instead, I sigh and turn to face Nox. He's not drinking for once, but there's also a focus in him that hasn't been there for weeks, like whatever it was that knocked him off-kilter has passed and he's back to being the stable professor again.

I fight back all the same. “I'm not going to sit around and let you talk shit about me or try to make me feel bad about Bonding with North. Not now and not ever, Draven. So you can just give up on it. And not that it's anyone's business what I choose to do with my own goddamned body, but I'm going to see what my gift does now. If it gets stronger, then we'll make decisions from there. But again, it's none of your business or anyone else's. Being one of my Bonds doesn't mean I owe you shit, Nox.”

Gabe's hand slips onto my thigh and squeezes gently, a silent show of support, but naturally Nox picks up on it anyway and sneers at us both. “Picking favorites? It appears panting after her like a lovesick puppy isn't doing you any favors, Gabe. You should really change tactics if you want her that badly.”

Gabe turns to stone next to me and my eyes narrow in Nox's direction. I'm mostly fine with him taking swipes in my direction, but I'm learning that there's nothing that pisses me off faster than him taking a swipe at one of my other Bonds.

Especially the one who has accepted me and my reasons for wanting to take things extra slow.

“The only person around here who needs to change anything is you. I don’t know what the hell has happened between us that makes you this twisted about me, but I don’t owe you anything. Gabe doesn’t owe you shit.”

“So you’ve just been lying and manipulating all of your Bonds to get what you want? I tried to warn my brother that this is what would happen —”

I cut him off before I have to hear anymore of his twisted version of things. “Oh yeah? What if I bond with you all and suddenly my power gets even stronger? What about if I sneeze and kill everyone in our town? Fuck you, Nox. Fuck you and your *unbelievably* privileged life. At least your shadows heel when you tell them to. You can stop whenever you want. I don’t have that option.”

His lip curls at me, but North has obviously had enough of listening to us tear into one another and says in a cold tone, “Nox, walk it off. You’re not doing yourself any favors right now.”

He stares North down for a minute and then grabs one of the linen napkins and wipes his hands, shoving his plate away from himself and pushing his chair back without another word.

I reach for the chocolate cheesecake that’s sitting in front of me, because I’m done eating real food and now is the time for a sugar coma to kick in. I throw all of my sass into my tone, just to cut him down a little more as I snark, “Such a good little boy, doing just what you’re told.”

The reaction is instant and severe.

An emotion that I can’t believe flashes across Nox’s face right before his bond kicks in and his eyes flash into the voids as it takes over. Shadows begin pouring out of his body in a slow, ominous stream.

Stop.

North's voice echoes in my head, but I don't know what the hell I've done to trigger Nox's bond. The black curls wrap around his wrists and the creature that has come out of his chest to stare at me has its jaw wide open, its teeth glistening as he snarls soundlessly in my direction.

What did I do?

North answers immediately, firmly and with a no-bullshit air that helps the panic in my chest ease a little. *Nothing. This is just a problem for him, and you need to leave it alone. He can't control his reactions to... this sort of thing.*

I try to meet his eye across the table but he's focused entirely on Nox, his own eyes shifting to black as well.

"Fuck," Gabe mutters. He braces a hand on the table across me like he's preparing to cover me entirely. I want to think that it's just overprotective Bond shit, but Gryphon is moving slowly on the other side of the table, clearly trying not to provoke either of the brothers, but he's moving towards me as well.

What did I do?

There's a cold press of a wet nose on my ankle and I look down at Brutus. He looks miserable, sadness pouring out of him, but he's still checking in on me to see if I'm okay while his Gifted is having a very man-version of a meltdown at the dinner table.

Thank God Sage and the others aren't here for it as well.

Gryphon answers me. *You didn't do it on purpose, but don't talk to him like that, Oli. I know that's not fair because he was crossing the line already, but you just hit a trip line inside him and he can't stop himself from this sort of reaction.*

I barely even remember what I'd said.

When Gryphon finally makes it over to me, he continues to move slowly as he pulls me up out of the chair and into his body, shifting until he's covering me entirely. The problem is that what North's bond said to me

in the bathroom keeps swirling around in my head. I don't want him between me and the shadows, even when they're snarling.

But when I try to step around him, Gryphon's arm tightens around me and Gabe moves to begin pulling me towards the door as well. I don't want to leave either of them, not when it's my fault this is happening. I'm not going to beat myself up about it but, fuck, I should help, right?

You'll only make things worse. You're his Bond. That's enough to break what shred of control he has left.

They both bully me out of the dining room, but I hold firm about staying in the hallway, listening to the murmuring of North attempting to firmly talk his brother down from whatever the fuck I've caused here.

When Gryphon tries one last time to get me moving, I stand my ground. "I'm staying here until they're done in there. I'm sleeping in Nox's bed tonight anyway. I have to wait for them."

Gryphon gives me a look but nods, sliding his hulking form down the wall until he's sitting with me, and Gabe folds himself into a pile on the other side of me. I don't feel tired but as the minutes stretch into an hour, I let my head drop down onto Gryphon's shoulder and my eyes drift shut.

I wake up to North murmuring quietly, "He's fine. He's gone down to the gym. Maybe you should go and keep an eye on him."

I blink to try to clear the sleep from my eyes, but North is good about helping me up and getting me back over to the elevator without much effort on my part. With a gentle hand, he directs me the whole way there, opening Nox's bedroom door for me and then holding my hand up the stairs. He perches on the couch while I climb into the bed.

"I'll stay until you're asleep, Bonded. Just rest, and Gryphon will be here for you in the morning."

It shouldn't be that easy, but my bond trusts him implicitly, so I'm drifting off in minutes. Nox is on the couch instead of North when I wake a few hours later, his creatures surrounding me except for the one who had

snarled at me at the table who looked as though he'd rip my throat out at the drop of a hat. No, that one is sleeping across Nox's chest in a savage looking smoke form that is still more teeth than anything else. I get the feeling he's there to make sure I don't get close to his master.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

North

I SHOULD LEAVE them both alone.

I already know that. I know that they have their own Bond to work out for themselves, but when I leave Nox's room for my own, there's a dull fog of dread clouding up my brain. The moment I lie down in my own bed and shut my eyes, all I can see is the haunted look in my brother's eyes right before they void out.

I can't sleep like this.

So instead of even trying, I get up and throw on one of the sweatshirts my Bonded left behind in my room that smells like her. She has a good point about the scents calming bonds down. Then I make my way over to Nox's room. The door is unlocked, it always is, and I don't bother knocking. His creatures will tell him that I'm coming up and, sure enough, when I make it to the top of the stairs, he's blinking up at me from the couch.

Oleander is asleep on the bed, alone and looking safe enough.

"You really don't trust me, do you?"

I glance at him and step over the sleeping pile of shadows by the landing to join him on the couch. The biggest of his shadows, the meanest one now that Oleander has tamed Brutus, lifts his head from Nox's chest to growl in my direction. It's always been protective but what happened at dinner has opened up old wounds.

"I'm here for you both. I'm here because, while you might not ever want it, I want to help you. No matter what you need. I said that to you and I meant it."

He huffs and runs his fingers through his hair, tugging at the ends of it like he's really trying to tear it from his head. He's usually better about keeping up the front, acting like the put together professor he's emulating,

and I attempt to take it as a sign of progress that he's allowing himself to crack a little with our Bond so close to him.

Even asleep, she's still within touching distance of him, which is a trigger of its own.

"You're here for her, don't lie to me. It's okay. I knew when Gryph brought her back here that you'd fall over yourself for her. A little thing like that who needs all sorts of your help? She's built to break you, Baba."

It's been years since he called me that, and my chest tightens at the sound of it. Baba Yaga, the boogeyman, the old tale of protection I'd given him as a child that he'd held on to for years.

He's not wrong about Oleander, but he is wrong about himself. I gave him my word that I would stand by him, protect him, provide for him if he couldn't do it for himself. I swore that I would do everything I could to... fix him.

I know now that I can't, but I will *never* leave him behind.

"She was made for you too. You're not there yet, and that's okay, but maybe you should stop hating her for things she hasn't done. Maybe you should think about finding level ground with her."

He sneers at me. "And how can I do that when she's in my fucking bed every week? I can't forget about her for five minutes with my sheets stinking of my Bond."

I take a deep breath, breathing in her scent on the sweatshirt, and his eyes flick down to the fabric because he can read me like an open book. He always could. We're two sides of the same coin and always have been.

I cut him off before he can start a new rant all about my weakness for her. It's nothing new, and I'm not ashamed of it. She's my Bonded, and she's proven that she's more than worthy. I'm the one who needs to prove myself here, not her. "Just leave it. If having her sleep in here isn't working out, then we can make changes. There's always another solution. I went

with this one because I thought it would be the least... *invasive* for you. If you have any other ideas, just tell me.”

He snorts and pets at the creature on his chest, scratching behind his ear. He’s not usually affectionate with them around me. I’ve known that he has a better, stronger connection with his creatures, but I’ve never actually seen that affection in action before.

More of Oleander’s influence.

My own bond itches under my skin, August wanting out to be with her, but with all of Nox’s arsenal around us, this isn’t the place for him right now. Brutus might tolerate him but the others won’t. They know a rabid shadow when they see it, and while he might have tamed a little, I don’t trust August fully. I still keep a very tight leash on him, especially when Oleander isn’t awake.

No matter what my bond told her, I can’t take that chance. Not with her.

“Go to bed, brother. You look like shit, and now you’ve seen that your little poisonous Bonded is alive and well, you should get some rest.”

I roll my eyes at his jabs at her, the little barbs that do nothing to *me* but dig under her skin, exactly the way he wants them to.

I rub a hand over my face and try to stifle the yawn threatening to take over me. “I’ll never sleep well again. Not with the sheer amount of threats we’re facing. The Sanctuary isn’t going to be ready in time.”

Because we both know the biggest of my concerns is getting us all out of the path of the Resistance, to stop them from being able to just pop into our community and pick us off one-by-one. Though I’ve been working on a solution for *years*, now is the time to move.

He glances at me, stroking a hand down the creature's back. “You’ll get it done. The problem is going to be convincing people to move into it.”

I might be the monster that everyone thinks I am, because when it comes down to it, I don’t care about whether or not we get the Top Tier

families out there. I care about the vulnerable and the poor, those who can't get themselves out of the Resistance's path.

I care about my brother and the rest of the Bonded Group.

And, more than anything else, I care about making sure that Silas fucking Davies never lays his sadistic cunt eyes on my Bonded again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Oli

I NOT-SO-SLOWLY BUT very surely lose my mind being stuck in the Draven mansion.

I mean, I knew it was coming, but with every day that I'm feeling better and needing less sleep, the itch to go and do things gets worse. Gryphon tries to tamp it down by thoroughly destroying me in the gym, but that only pisses me off. North's attempts are more about coaxing more information about the five years I spent alone, firsthand accounts, because he wants to know everything in case we've overlooked some vital information.

That only makes me feel useless and morose about leading the enemy to my Bonds.

Gabe does the best job of distracting me, but only because he offers to chaperone for Atlas and I to hang out, and the three of us spend hours trying to figure out how the hell to get out of this place. Atlas is good at this game, mostly because he has so much experience in escaping from well-connected people, and some of his suggestions astound Gabe and me.

Nox disappears again.

I'm not surprised, but I am a little envious that he's allowed to just come and go freely. I have the ability to literally rip people's souls out, and yet I'm the most protected person on the freaking planet at this point, I'm sure.

One incredibly slow and boring week after I come home, the Resistance finally make their next move against us.

I find out mid-training session at the gym a little before dawn while I'm sweating my ass off on the treadmill. Gabe and Grey are on the weight machines while Gryphon is sparring with Sawyer, Felix, and Sage. Well, Sage is mostly trying to get out of the sparring, but every time she inches towards me, Gryphon sends her a look that terrifies her into going along with his sadistic circuit of evil.

She's getting pretty freaking impressive at taking down men twice her size though, so I'm not going to fight him over her treatment.

North arrives at the door with Kieran in full Tac gear and three other TacTeam operatives the same time that Gryphon's phone starts blowing up. I hit the stop button on the treadmill and climb down, grabbing a towel to wipe off my face as I stalk over to the crowd. Sage glances over at me and comes up to my side, eyeing Kieran. It's still super freaking weird around them at the moment while they figure their shit out, but I also like him a lot after our time in the camps. I'm all for them figuring this shit out together.

I'm more for him than I'll ever be for Riley, even knowing he's been manipulated. I can't just forgive and forget, that shit isn't in me.

"There's been an attack at Draven and in the surrounding township," North says. Gryphon is cursing viciously under his breath as he stalks over to the changing rooms to get into his gear.

Sawyer shares a look with North and walks out without a word, which seems weird to me, but I'm too worried about what is about to happen to ask about it right now. "Is it still happening or is this a cleanup? Let me grab a shirt. I'm going too."

North steps in my path with a look right as Gryphon walks back out of the changing room, fully dressed in record time as he adjusts the straps on his holsters by feel alone. Both of them are death glaring at me like I'm being an unruly child right now, and I'm not. I'm being totally reasonable.

"It's a cleanup, and only fully trained, active TacTeam operatives are going, which means Gryphon is the only one in our Bond Group going. We also don't want to be moving in large numbers at the moment unless there's a good reason for it, so you'll be staying here with me and everyone else."

Gabe grabs my towel off of me and uses the dry side to wipe his own face down, knocking my arm with his in his quiet show of solidarity, but it only itches at my skin today.

My bond is also *hungry* right now, which makes the irritation a million times worse. “I’m more help out there than I am in this stupid house!”

North shakes his head and Gryphon just turns on his heel and moves to stand with Kieran, the two of them disappearing with a *pop*.

I want to scream.

“We’re all staying here for now, Oleander, but you can all come to my office and watch the reports come in until we decide what the plan of action will be.”

I share a look with Sage and we both nod, following him out without another word. Everyone chooses to come as well and when we get there, Sawyer is already set up at North’s desk with a laptop, tapping away furiously. North grabs one of his spare chairs to direct me into with a hand to my shoulder, giving it a squeeze as he gets his phone out and starts texting someone.

“What’s happening? What are you doing?” I murmur, nosy and grumpy at being left behind in this freaking house, but he’s good about it.

“I’m calling Bassinger down to watch with us. He has been very good about giving us information, and there might be something here that flags with him. I’ll use every resource at our disposal if it will keep you safe.”

My cheeks heat and Sage perches on her chair, holding a hand out to me for comfort. I take it, giving her fingers a little squeeze. When North finds an extra chair for himself, he pulls it up to my other side. Grey stands behind Sawyer and watches him work, while Gabe and Felix both grab chairs from the dining room to sit by the wall together, murmuring quietly about what this all means for us. I try not to think about it too much.

Atlas arrives after a few minutes, ignoring everyone and making a beeline for me. The office chairs aren’t really big enough for the two of us to share one, but when I stand up to give him a hug, he just maneuvers us around until I’m perched in his lap.

North gives him a *very* unimpressed look. Atlas just shrugs it off, drawling, “You’ve kept her as far away from me as you can manage without it hurting her, you can get over it for now.”

Sage bites her lip to stop herself from smirking and then Sawyer clears his throat. “I’ve got it. I’ll get the streams on the big screen. Shore, Black, and Rockelle are all wearing cams, so we can see what they’re seeing. They all have comms as well, so if you need them to backtrack on something, just tell me.”

Atlas nods and North shoves his phone away to watch as the large flatscreen on the wall lights up and we can see the footage of three cameras up there.

The area hasn’t just been raided...

It’s a massacre.

We all sit there in silence as the three operatives walk around the area and we see the carnage. There are bodies everywhere. Top Tier Gifted and the lower families alike, there are corpses littering the streets for everyone to see. Kieran walks past a Non-Gifted reporter trying to get past the barriers and talking a whole lot of bullshit about the situation, not surprising, but the Tac guys there won’t let her through.

After a few minutes of watching, North says to Atlas, his voice low, “Do you see anything?”

I feel Atlas shrug. “I can only guess for most of it... except the scorch marks. That’s absolutely Peter, one of my sister’s Bonded. The patterns? A dead giveaway for his gift. Wait! That, there. Sawyer, can you pull it back? Three seconds. Yeah, pause it. That injury? That’s pretty specific. My father was definitely a part of this too. Fuck. Okay, that helps. He has a team of people he won’t work without, so that narrows the list down greatly on where they’d be taking people. Dad only works with three camps. Oli took out one of them, and I can make an educated guess on which of the other two he’d pick.”

I lean into him. “Has your mom told them? That you’re in this Bond Group yet?”

He glances at me and shrugs. “The last I heard from her before I gave up my phone, she hadn’t. Things could have changed. North would know more if she attempted to contact me about it.”

We both glance at him, and he shakes his head. “She hasn’t sent anything through. If we all go to the camp for a clean out, you’ll have to be prepared for them to know.”

“Can’t we just... keep Atlas here? Won’t they change things up if we go now?”

North shakes his head. “We’re already about to change everything around, this raid has just sped that process up a few weeks. As long as Bassinger is sure he’s given us all of the information we need, then it’s a risk we’re taking.”

Atlas nods. “It’s everything I had stashed away as important and everything else you’ve asked for. If I think of anything else or something comes up, I’ve already said I’ll give it to you. Whatever keeps Oli safe, it’s yours.”

My heart spasms in my chest like I’m having some sort of episode over his words. He’s so loyal to me, even before he met me, and I feel so unworthy.

North glances at me and shakes his head. “You withstood two years of torture without ever giving any of us up. No one deserves our loyalty more, Bonded.”

I blanch and then groan under my breath, “Don’t tell me you can see in my head now too. I can’t take much more of this.”

He sends one last text on his phone before he slides it into his pocket, loosening his tie as he prepares himself for the change into the Tac gear that’s about to happen. “No. I’m just getting better at reading your facial

expressions. You really don't see yourself the way we see you, not at all. We're going to have to change that."

I don't have anything to say back to that, so I turn back to the screen and keep watching the bloodbath. When Gryphon turns to the grassed area, all of the air leaks out of my lungs.

There's a white sheet covering some of the carnage, but the little row of legs sticking out are clearly small, grade school and under. The Resistance wiped them out as easily as they'd murdered the grown men and women who had chosen to stay behind.

"I'm going to be sick," Sage mutters, and Felix jumps up to grab the wastepaper basket and shove it under her nose. She retches a little, and while my stomach cramps and roils as well, I choke down the bile creeping up my throat.

I already knew this sort of retaliation was coming, we all did, but to see it is something else. To know that... that I'm responsible for it in some way is truly horrifying.

The children.

Of course he's gone after the children. This is Davies' way of letting me know personally.

"How? How does this let you know?"

I didn't realize I'd said it out loud.

I glance up to find that not only are all of their eyes on me, but that Nox has snuck into the room as well while I was transfixed by the horror on the screen.

I try not to lash out at any of them because of how uncomfortable it's making me. "Towards the end... of my time with him, Davies figured out that the best way to get to me was through kids. I couldn't handle what he would do to them. My Bond took over without the pain it usually took because I would let it just so I didn't... have to watch."

The disgust on Nox's face has me wanting to curl up and die. I get it entirely. I hid from the pain and the horror of what was happening and was no use at all to the children—

North snaps, "Stop it. You didn't do anything—"

"Yes, I'm aware, please don't rub it in."

He grabs my arm and jerks me around to face him, almost pulling me out of Atlas' lap in doing so. "Listen to me, Bonded. You were a child as well. You were fourteen when he took you and sixteen when you got out, no one here thinks you're responsible in any way for what that man did. No one."

My eyes flick to Nox because, well, he's the one who judges me as harshly as I judge myself. If anyone was going to tell the complete honest truth here about my responsibility, it'll be him.

He doesn't even bother to return my gaze.

"Well, Black caught wind of their Transporter's trail, right? Let's go kill the sadists and get this over with. They all need to die screaming, and I think we can do something about that," Nox says, turning his back on us all and walking out of the office.

North stands up and helps me to my feet with a warm hand on the base of my spine, murmuring quietly to me, "I'd rather you stayed here but if you want to come and do your part, then we need to move now."

I glance up at him, but I already know what my answer is.

I'm going to let my bond kill as many of them as we can find.

Gryphon's voice pops into my head without warning. *That's my girl.*

I WANT to wear what I've already got on, but my Bonded are having none of it. I'm manhandled, coerced, snapped at, and forced into a full set of Tac

gear by North, which I complain loudly about because I'm sure I look like a toddler in her dad's wardrobe.

It also doesn't help that when I step out of the changing room and into the foyer where everyone is waiting, Gabe cackles at the sight of me, slowly dissolving into full belly roaring laughter.

I shoot North a savage look, but he ignores me. Gryphon, who had returned with Kieran to transport us all in, smacks Gabe in the back of the head and snaps, "Shut up, idiot, before she starts whining about it all over again."

"What are you talking about? She never stopped," North drawls, and I discover the advantages of the heavy-soled boots when I stomp on his foot and the surly Bonded actually winces.

I'm taking the win.

Atlas walks out in a modified Tac suit, mostly because there's less protective panels on it, and my heart skips a beat for a second until I realize that he's indestructible and there's no need for them.

"If you get shot, does the bullet just, like, bounce off, or do you just heal faster? How much am I going to have to worry about you?"

He grins at me and slings an arm around my shoulders. "It bounces off, which is another reason why I'm allowed to come today. I'm your human shield for the trip, your Gifted shadow following your every move."

I blink up at him for a second, trying to imagine bullets just bouncing off of his skin and then grin, grabbing his hand and tugging his body close to mine. "Perfect. Get ready to meet my bond. Try not to judge me too harshly when she starts torturing everyone in our general vicinity."

He smirks back at me, dropping his head down to murmur, "I told you before, I already know all about your bond. There's nothing that could happen that'll scare me away. You and I, nothing can come between us."

If there weren't a million other TacTeam operatives swarming around us in the tight space, I would kiss him, but it feels wrong to start making out

with him around them all, so I take a little step back and a deep breath.

Gabe glances between us both and then steps up to flank my other side, making me feel tiny between them both. Gryphon finishes up his planning session with Kieran, barking out orders to each of the teams, and North is having a quiet discussion with Nox in the corner. They look as though they're both itching to go and, sure enough, there's a dark ring of smoke around North's wrist, one of the few signs he has of being close to the edge with his power. He feels just as responsible for the attack as I do, but from the other side.

He's the councilman who is being hamstrung at every turn, trying to get as many people out of this situation alive as he can, but the other Top Tier families want to hide in their money and do nothing. They want to waste their Gifts and Bonded power because they feel above this sort of work, no matter what he's said to them all.

Still, he feels like he hasn't done enough.

Get your head in the game, Bonded, or I'm leaving you behind.

I snap my attention back to Gryphon and raise an eyebrow in his direction. *I am. Nothing will make my bond angrier than Resistance scum upsetting my Bonded and my Bonds. It's very touchy about what belongs to us.*

His mouth quirks up just a little at that and then he's barking out more orders, reeling out jump times that have everyone preparing around us. We're going with Kieran, naturally, and jumping as the third wave. All of these terms I've never been taught before and am learning on the fly are kind of fun, and when both of the Dravens walk back over to our group so that we're all going together, I feel a little rush of adrenaline in my blood.

Look at me, getting worked up about being a monster for good.

No monster talk either, Gryphon says. I answer him out loud. "I'm harnessing the monster for good. Like I give a fuck what anyone else thinks of what my bond can do."

Kieran glances at me, then around the group, before murmuring, “That’s the spirit! The more you take out, the less of them out there killing innocent little kids. Kill them all, Fallows.”

I just might.

Then we’re all being thrown into space by his gift, popping back into existence on the edges of a camp, the sun already set in this part of the world and visibility shitty.

Gryphon comes to my side and murmurs to both Atlas and me, “Stay where I can see you at all times. Black will take you home the second either of you step out of line.”

I nod, trying to look as obedient and solemn as I can while Atlas just gives him a curt nod.

Harrison scoffs and snarks, “We all saw what she did to the last camp, Shore. She’s the best defense we have. You should really ease back on her a little.”

Gryphon gives him a look that I’m sure is shriveling his balls and North steps up to my side, pulling his own riot helmet over his perfect hair, and snaps, “Get your eyes and your opinions off of my Bonded before I set a nightmare on you, Rockelle.”

He blanches a little, freaking out even more when August bursts out of North and immediately turns to heel at my feet, his jaws opening so his tongue can loll out as he gives me a silent plea for pets.

I bend down to give them to him as I bring Brutus down from behind my ear at the same time, stroking them both and murmuring about all of the bloodshed and horror we’ll be doing here together for the night.

There’s a moment of dead silence around me and then Rockelle mutters, “That is fucking terrifying—”

Kieran cuts him off. “I told you! I told you to just stay away from her. You have to be the idiot that sticks his nose in where it doesn’t belong. Shore will reach down your throat and rip your spleen out with his bare

hands if you so much as look at her again, just keep out of her way. In fact, all of you should just treat Fallows as though she's a shadow creature as well, because if her bond decides to join the party, she might as well be a rabid, bloodthirsty shadow, because she'll kill you just as easily as they do. Keep. Fucking. Clear."

The group murmurs their compliance and then scatters obediently, moving into the formations that they've all been trained into by my Bonded. I watch them go and then straighten up, snapping my fingers to get the pups to follow me, which they do like the perfect boys they are.

"Tell me if you recognize anyone," I murmur to Atlas and he glances down at me, faltering just a little. He thinks I'm doubting him, and I immediately feel guilty as hell about it.

I rush to reassure him. "I just mean that if there's anyone worth keeping alive for North or Gryphon to question. Most of these people are worth more to us dead but... if there's someone who might know what's being planned, Gryphon should talk to them."

He nods and pulls his helmet off, throwing it to the ground. "I can't see as well with that thing on. Let's go burn this hellhole to the ground. Preferably, with my father still in it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oli

I'VE NEVER BEEN to this camp before which is both a blessing and a bit annoying. A blessing because there's no hidden memories about to jump out and paralyze me and annoying because how many of these stupid things does the Resistance have hiding around the place? How many innocent Gifted have they kidnapped, brainwashed, tortured, and murdered?

How many little girls have been hurt and assaulted here?

"Don't think about it; I don't want your bond triggered right now. We're going for stealth. We don't need an outright massacre here just yet," Gryphon murmurs, and I glance at him with a slow nod. He's right, but it's hard to shake those feelings. The ghosts walking around here with us are thick in the air, and the ominous feeling has my bond on high alert.

The camp either doesn't have Gifted-sorting people, or there's still so much chaos happening with the new arrivals that no one sounds the alarm that we've arrived. Gryphon uses mostly hand signals to move his teams through the small amount of swampy bush cover that's here, and I just follow his instructions that he gives me directly through our Bond connection.

Just let the Teams do what they're trained to do. We're here as support, not to do the heavy lifting.

I glance at North and nod, tucking into Atlas' side a little tighter to visibly show them all that I'm playing by the rules. Not because I've lost my spine or anything, I just don't want them getting hurt from being distracted by me running off for no good reason.

I trust Gryphon and his team. I trust Kieran because he's already proved himself to me, and I trust the rest of them because anyone trained and vetted by Gryphon is good enough for me.

He's sort of a hard-ass, and no one could skate through under his watchful eye.

There's a few minutes of quiet where only noises from the camp can be heard as we creep forward through the scrub as one, and then there's an explosion on the other side of the camp as one of the tents goes up in a giant ball of flames.

My bond takes the helm immediately, my panic at the unexpected fire show kicking its protective measures into action. I'm still in there enough to know what's going on and to argue with my bond if I need to, but it's definitely in control. The shadows both come to heel at my feet, ready to protect me from anything that might come my way.

The Everlasting One notices straight away but stays close, dipping his head at me respectfully. He's known about me for a long time, learned all of the ways to court a bond like me, and when I smile back at him, it's all teeth.

"We should kill them all now. The only good Resistance soldier is a dead one."

There's movement around us as the operatives all move into the camp, gunfire and shouts ringing in the air, but the Everlasting One ignores it all. He inclines his head to me as though he agrees but says, "Mostly yes, but information is key right now. Someone here might know where Davies is, or what they're planning next, and we want the man who dared to touch you gone."

A carrot on a stick, effective because it's true.

I want that man dead. I want to be fully Bonded and tear him apart slowly. I want to feed him piece by piece to the shadows at my feet.

A voice sounds in my ear through a small machine. "Bassinger, stop riling her up and keep clear of the rest of us until we've secured the area."

I don't like hearing them in my ear like that, but when I move to bat the earpiece out, the Everlasting One grabs my hand to stop me, gently moving

me over to where there's cover for us to watch the operatives work.

They're efficient.

Outnumbered ten-to-one, they pick off the runners and what Transporters they can. I watch as they work and the Everlasting One takes out a gun of his own, checking the safety as he holds it at his side. He offers me one, but I shake my head. I'm a god, a gun means nothing to me.

We need to have a conversation about this 'god' stuff sometime soon, Bond.

I ignore my Bonded and watch as he directs his people into the camps to flush out more of the enemy soldiers. There are stragglers everywhere, a few of them making it to the scrub before the operatives take them out. I don't think we're expecting much from it but when the Everlasting One curses viciously, I look up to find a blonde woman staring back at him, shell shocked.

When her face finally twists into a snarl, the girl inside of me whispers that it is his sister.

She takes a step towards him and I move in front of him, raising my own arm, only to have him press up close to my back, murmuring to me, "Don't kill her, Bond. We can take her in and deal with her however North decides, but just—"

His sister turns on her heel and runs, bullets hitting her body and bouncing off of her because her gift is the same as her brother's.

The girl tries to take control again, to force me into submission, but I keep the helm. "Agreed. The shadows will take care of this for us."

The Everlasting One looks over at me, but I snap my fingers until the shadow pup comes to my side. "I need her alive and as untouched as you can manage without being hurt yourself. Fetch her for me."

The shadow blinks at me and I know that the Dark One is seeing through his eyes, that's why he is pausing.

The girl inside speaks directly to him before I deal with it myself. *Atlas didn't attempt to hide her or talk her way out. He just asked to take her in instead of killing her, for now. I think we can give him that, right?*

There's a pause and then the shadow is off, moving faster than my eyes can properly track as he chases the enemy girl down. The Everlasting One takes a deep breath and watches but doesn't attempt to interfere. I feel a deep need to destroy his family once again, to hunt them all down and feast on their souls until they are nothing but ash and dirt beneath our feet.

The Dark One speaks directly to us again. *I'll have August bring her to Kieran for an immediate jump. I don't want her talking to Atlas and attempting to manipulate him. Let's keep it as clean as we can for now, Bonded.*

I look out at the carnage around us and say, "The Dark One is getting her out now, taking her back to be detained. She's alive and will stay that way."

The Everlasting One gives a curt shake of his head. "I don't want to see her. I don't want to see any of them. Let's finish this and get the fuck out of this shithole."

There's another explosion of fire and he wraps his arms around me again, ready to cover my body with his own to protect the girl from the heat and damage. There's a Flame there controlling the fire, making sure to only burn the enemy and their camp without taking out our own. My Shifter is in full wolf form and tearing through the camp, snapping and tearing men apart with nothing but his powerful jaws. Pride swells within me at the magnificent sight of him.

I want to be involved but I also want to watch them work, to know what my Bonds are capable of and to know that they're worthy of the Bond Group they're in. It's good to see that they are.

Then I feel it.

One of my Bonds is hurt.

My eyes shift and it's game over on the whole night, the mission, these men and women. My bond just wipes the entire camp clean of them all as I cast out my web to find which one of them has been hurt and where *the fuck* they are. Tearing their souls out is easier than breathing and there's a satisfaction to the unanimous thump nose as they all fall to the dirt as one.

There's shouts and chaos around me from the TacTeams but I ignore them, single-mindedly stalking through the mess.

Gabe, the girl whispers, and my heart skips a beat. I mean, rationally I know that it has to be the Shifter or the damaged Dark One. If it was one of my Bonded, I'd know exactly who it was and how they were hurt, and the Everlasting One is bullet-proof.

Where is he? What happened? I send out to both of my Bonded, but neither of them have an answer for me. He's out there somewhere by himself.

My web finally finds him in one of the larger holding tents and I take off at a sprint in that direction. The bodies are thick here, most of them my kills, but there are a few with bullet holes and visible Gifted wounds. There's a Flame doing some serious damage around here and I quietly admire his work even as I move towards my Bond.

I can appreciate these people feeling some pain before their inevitable deaths.

The girl doesn't like me thinking like that, she doesn't like what that means for her morality, but such pettiness belongs to me. What use are morals to a God of Death? Nothing. They are nothing to me or mine.

When I duck into the tent, there's rows of cages filled with haggard and terrified-looking prisoners and a large pile of dead men in front of the Shifter. He's been shot, a through-and-through wound on his arm that looks painful but not life-threatening. It still makes me furious to see him bleeding, and I stalk over to him with a scowl.

He looks very alarmed to see me, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead as he holds his good arm out as if to stop me. “I had two choices. I chose the one that had us all surviving. I’ll heal just fine, Bond. Calm—”

I roll my eyes at him as my gift bursts out of me and into him as I cut him off. “No. No more being hurt. Not for anyone, do you understand? I will not tolerate it.”

He stares at me, looking into the depths of my eyes before he nods slowly, pressing the fingers at the end of his freshly healed arm to the comms earpiece and muttering, “Oli is in full bond mode, are you all aware of this?”

I hear it in my own earpiece, and then the damaged Dark One says in a drawl, “The piles of dead bodies everywhere did give that away, yes.”

My dark Bonded says, “Just keep her with you and don’t let her near the abducted Gifted. I’m not sure what she’ll read off them, and I don’t want her killing anyone who might be useful.”

The Shifter watches me and when I cock my head at him, he mutters, “That’s easier said than done. She is listening to us right now.”

The damaged Dark One says, “Figure it out.”

Then the Everlasting One says, “I’m coming to you both. I’ll help get her out of there.”

The Shifter stumbles on one of the bodies and mutters, “How many of them have you taken out? Jesus.”

The Everlasting One scowls at him and moves as though he’s going to strike the Shifter, then glances at me and changes his mind. “Don’t talk like that. Her bond might be at the helm but Oli is still in there, and she doesn’t need to hear you making fucking comments.”

I ignore them both but the girl has a lot of feelings about the conversation. Feelings mean nothing to me.

We arrive at the clearing and find that the men and women wearing black and vests with lots of weapons are standing around taking stock of the

damage here.

It's mostly my work.

The Shifter and the Everlasting One direct me over to a group and begin talking to some of the men, all of whom are watching me from the corners of their eyes like they think I'll be taking them out next.

What fun that would be, but not right now.

As my bond finally leaves me with that last little delightful thought, slipping back into the inner recesses of my mind, I shake out my limbs until I feel more like myself again. There's some pain in my legs that I'll need to stretch out later but, otherwise, I'm okay.

We got through that experience *okay*.

"If you're about to lie down and take a nap, lemme know. I'll call Shore to come carry you around again," Kieran snarks at me and I shoot him a look, rolling my eyes.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine. Look at us getting a camp cleaned out without having our asses handed to us first! Not a broken bone in sight. I'm proud of you, Black!"

The guys around him all snicker under their breaths, but they shut up quickly when he turns to give them all a death glare. They might not revere him the way they do my Bonded, but he's clearly still respected.

I can see why.

Atlas moves to stand a little closer to me as we wait everyone else out. I can see every last one of my Bonds, except North. I'm not worried, because I'd know if there was something wrong with him, but it still makes my skin itch a little.

Where are you?

He's quick to answer. *In the holding tents. Are you back now, or is this just another small moment of clarity?*

I roll my shoulders back and glance around. The holding tents are close, and I tell Atlas where I'm heading. He turns to watch me but stays behind

easily enough, trusting me.

I duck into the space and find that while the cages have been opened, most of the healing and assessment is still happening inside them. Some of the Gifted who have been here for a long time are so frail that they'll need to be carried out, and some look too sick to be moved. My chest tightens at the sight of them. I walk over to where North is watching them all, his face giving away the sheer amount of disgust and loathing he has for the men and women responsible for this.

I clear my throat and murmur, "I'm back. Properly, I mean. Sorry for going off script."

He nods. "It was for the best. They had a lot more on their side than we originally accounted for. They always do, no matter how much extra we throw in."

That does seem to be one of the Resistance's many advantages. Because of their unscrupulous ways, they'll just kidnap and brainwash a whole new set of soldiers that they're willing to sacrifice to get through to us.

Silence falls between us as we watch one of the women in the cage break down and start screaming at the operatives who approach her. She's terrified, clawing at her own skin like she's trying to dig something out that we can't see. When the operatives switch so that it's a woman approaching her, she breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably in a heap.

I want to cry with her.

It takes me two attempts to get my voice to work. "What happens to them?"

North grimaces. "You don't really want the answer to that, Oleander. Those who can be taken home, are. Hold onto that instead of the alternative. It's what I do."

Looking at the crowd... I'm not sure any of them can really go home.

"Who does it? Who has to put them down if they can't be saved?"

His eyes narrow at me. “No. Don’t ask, and don’t think like that. That’s not what your gift is going to be used for.”

“I’m already a monster, North. What’s a few more souls when I’ve already taken thousands? Yep, there it is. It’s in the thousands, thanks to my time in one of these camps. What does it matter?”

He tears the helmet off and shoves the gaiter down the column of his neck so that I can clearly see the blinding rage written all over his entire face, but he speaks quietly so that no one further inside the tent can hear us. “It matters because your voice is shaking, Oleander. Don’t you hear it? It matters because you’re writhing with guilt over it all.”

I shake my head at him but he gets a hand up to grab my chin and stops me, leaning in close and snarling, “It matters because you’re mine, and I’d never let you do it. Killing to protect yourself? Fine. Killing to wipe out the enemy who hurt you? Great, do it. Them? Never. Not you, not ever.”

I want to scream at him, argue with him, because why shouldn’t it be me? Why should I get to live untouched by all of this ugliness just because I have them as my Bonds, but he gets a hold of my arm and drags me back out of the tent and into the clearing where everyone else is waiting for us to get back home.

KIERAN WAITS for a second and when my eyes stay their usual color, he holds out his arm for us all to grab.

When we *pop* back into existence again, my stomach roils rebelliously and I clap a hand over my mouth. Gryphon shoves Atlas out of the way just a little more forcefully than he probably had to as he reaches out to get a hand on my neck, the heat searing me as he manipulates my nervous system and stops me from puking everywhere.

The sweats and shaking stop immediately, and I almost profess my undying love to him out loud in front of all of his friends and subordinates.

Like I'd care if they heard, Bonded.

My cheeks heat and I knock his hand away from my skin as I duck my head. I listen to him chuckle at me and he pulls me in close to his chest for a quick hug before he's off barking orders at people again.

Atlas reaches out to give my hand a squeeze before he follows North out of the room. I assume he's going back to his solitary confinement because he's doing it without question.

I hate it, but I'm not going to call North out about it right now in front of all of these people.

I take a breath and let my shoulders slump down a little, checking in with my bond and my body, but I don't feel the usual impending three day nap coming. I'm tired, but only the same amount as if Gryphon had run me into the ground in the gym, so a good night's rest should cover me. When I open my eyes, my surroundings finally filter into me and my brows drop down. "Where are we? This isn't the mansion. North said to take us home."

Kieran gives me a lopsided grin and holds his arms out. "This *is* home now, Fallows. The raid got us here quicker than was planned, but the Sanctuary is home now."

I glance up at Gabe and he slings his arm around my shoulders to direct me over to the large set of doors, opening them and directing me out to look out over... the Sanctuary.

It's a whole-ass city.

Okay, it's more of a town or a village really, but there's dozens of houses and buildings here and people *everywhere*. The sun is barely setting, so I'm guessing we're back in the States, but there's mountains on every side of the clearing and a slight disturbance in the air around us that says we have Shields working overtime to keep this place off of the maps.

I stare around it all in wonder.

“What the hell is this place?”

Gabe kisses the side of my head and murmurs, “William and Nolan Draven started building it forty years ago. When North was old enough to take the seat on the Council, he started helping with it too. It’s been the Draven family’s mission for a lifetime. It wasn’t due to be ready for another decade or so, but when North found out about you, he moved the deadlines up. He’s poured literally hundreds of millions of dollars into it since he took over the build. He’s been recruiting to get the best and strongest Gifted here, all of them vetted by Gryphon so we know that you’ll be safe here. Except North refused to leave behind the Gifted communities who couldn’t get out by themselves so that’s why it’s this... big. He brought everyone who would come and could pass the testing. The Resistance will never find us here. North has made sure of it.”

I stare around at the people, the *children*, around us in wonder. They're all looking a little shell-shocked but moving their personal items into the houses and smiling at each other happily enough.

“How do you move that many people at once without leaving a trace?”

I feel a Bond walk up behind us and then Atlas says, “Transporters. A lot of fucking Transporters. This is the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen.”

I spin around to face him. “I thought you were going back to your very comfortable and humane prison cell?”

He smiles at me but it’s not his usual warm and open grin, the day has clearly worn him down. “I went with North to see about the actual cells here and make sure they’d be able to contain my sister. I’m back to being free. North believes that I want you more than I’ve ever given a shit about the family business.”

He spits out the last few words like they’re poison on his tongue, and I pull fully away from Gabe to go to him. It’s hard to see him like this, hard

to think about everything he's going through while he faces that his family aren't just the enemy, but they're *his* enemies as well.

They'd all kill us in a heartbeat to further their campaign, everyone except his mom.

And Lord knows what she's going to do now that Atlas has disappeared on her entirely.

Atlas tucks his face into my neck and breathes me in a little shakily, and I try to be strong for him. I try to be everything that he was for me when I first got here and I didn't know who I could trust. I know I'm falling short, but I try.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gryphon

AFTER YEARS of coming to the Sanctuary to test out the security measures, help with building the houses and setting up the facilities, stocking the stores and building an arsenal big enough to take out an attack from literally any of the world's biggest militaries, it's something else to finally be here and know that it's home.

With Oli here, it actually feels like it.

The house that North built for our Bond Group isn't ready yet, so we're in one of the smaller houses that was put aside for other council members' families, though only three have chosen to join us. There's only four bedrooms, so Gabe and Bassinger volunteer to share. Oli doesn't get one to herself, which she says she's fine with, but I know she's already getting frustrated at not having her own space on the very first day.

She doesn't breathe a word about it though, and I keep my mouth shut about what's going on in her head to the others. She already has no privacy, no need to make it worse by airing out what's going on in her head.

Two peaceful but busy days after we arrive here, I wake up with a very naked Bonded in my arms, still asleep and dreaming of nothing but warmth and comfort. She'd been reluctant to have sex in this house with us all sharing walls, and I'd only managed to persuade her by eating her out until my entire face was dripping with her cum. My shoulders were clawed up and her hand was bleeding from where she'd bitten it to stay quiet.

I don't have the heart to tell her that all of her Bonds could feel her last night. Her climax at such close proximity? Every last one of them was squirming over it, and Gabe had taken an hour-long cold shower when she'd finally passed out.

Except Nox, who left the house the second I peeled her panties off and got wasted in North's offices, where I assume he's still sleeping it off.

“Why do you look so smug?” she murmurs, her voice still rough with sleep, and I want to go for another round instantly, my dick already hard and rubbing against her pert ass.

“A man can’t help it when he’s made his Bonded come eight times on his tongue. I’m thinking about doing it again.”

She blushes so prettily, but her eyes flick down to my mouth as she grins. “Don’t you have a meeting to go to this morning? You told North you’d be leaving here at seven, it’s already a quarter to. I don’t think you can make me come that quickly and still get out the door in time.”

I grab her chin and tilt her face up to meet my lips, kissing her deeply as my other hand slips down to her pussy and finds it still as wet as it was last night. “You’re assuming that I’m going to shower, but I’m going to smell like you all fucking day, Bonded. I’m going to sit in that stupid fucking meeting with your pussy all over my face, and it’ll be the only thing that gets me through the day.”

She blushes again, her hips moving to grind on my hand as her breath stutters in her chest. She’s so responsive, so ready to take what pleasure she wants from me and, fuck, if that isn’t perfect.

She was made for me.

I have her shuddering out her release on my fingers in under a minute, whispering filth in her ear about everything I’m going to do to her when I get her next until she’s writhing.

When she finally comes down from her high, I take her chin again, prying her mouth open and shoving my fingers into her mouth until she’s licked them clean again. When I pull them back out, I kiss her, chasing the taste that’s even better on her tongue.

I make it to the door with two minutes to spare, my boots laced up and my dick still hard as fucking nails at the sight of her spread out on my sheets. Her hair is a mess and there’s still dark circles under her eyes that shouldn’t be there.

I lean down before I leave to kiss her one last time, murmuring, “Go back to sleep. There’s nothing you need to do until after lunch, so just get some more sleep.”

She nods and lets her eyelids flutter shut, but her mind is already busy with shit to do today and I doubt she’ll actually manage to do it. I send a text to Gabe to get him to leave her alone until she comes out and he cusses me out in the reply.

I can’t help but feel even more smug about it.

North meets me at the front door, looking me over as his nostrils flare. He doesn’t say anything until we’re out of the house and pacing to his office in the next building over.

“You smell like her.”

I look him dead in the eye and smirk. “Good.”

He bristles, and I know that it's got nothing to do with cleanliness or decorum or jealousy over my night with our little Bonded. He doesn’t want anyone else catching our Bonded’s most intimate scents because he’s a possessive bastard about her. He always has been, and while he’s perfectly fine sharing her with the rest of her Bonds, the idea of anyone else so much as smelling her on me?

Unacceptable.

I already knew it. He’s assuming I’ll let anyone close enough to me to get a whiff of her. I already know what my scheduling looks like and if I put a savage enough scowl on my face, everyone will steer clear of me. I’ll get to wallow in her all day, and that might just get me through until she’s back in my bed, soaking my sheets and coming like a good girl for me.

When we arrive at the offices and one of the office workers approaches, North steps in front of me like a buffer. I snort at him, enjoying the fuck out of watching him have a little petty fit over this. The fact that Oli misses out on seeing this side of him half the time doesn’t elude me, and I seriously

consider sending her the image of it, except when I check in with her, I find that she has actually gone back to sleep. I'm not waking her for this.

I'll save it for later.

When the worker finally moves away, North snaps at me, "I'm glad you're enjoying this."

I shrug. "It's been too quiet around here. I need something to keep me amused."

"Well, go build something with Gabe. Lay some carpets. There's tiling in Oleander's bathroom that needs ripping up, that'll keep you busy."

The *tiling*. He's being a fussy about the colors of tiles. It's going to drive us all mad. I swipe my card after he's done with his to get us both in the elevator and headed into his office. The security here is the best money can pay for. Aside from housing North's offices, there's also a bomb shelter panic room in the basement with concrete walls that are six feet thick on every side. It could withstand Unser going off.

We know. We've tested it.

North waits until the elevator closes behind us before he starts his usual debrief, starting with the Bonded Group. "Bassinger is on his way over. He went for a run this morning and has already volunteered to help Gabe with the housing over in the third quarter. Obviously because Oleander will be there as well, but it's a good sign."

I nod and then broach my least favorite topic. "Is Nox still here? Do you need me to step in, or are we just going to... continue to let him spiral?"

North's eyes flash over to me. I'm his biggest, and only, ally when it comes to his brother and all of his issues. Our friendship had started the day North brought Nox home, and because of that, I know pretty much everything there is to know about the brothers. Every twisted, fucked-up thing.

And so long as it doesn't hurt my Bonded, I'll keep helping to manage the situation.

“He’s back to drinking and training. The camp cleanup was good for him. We’ll need to send him on some more missions with you to keep him level. I’m taking him leaving the house last night as a good sign. He’s getting better at spotting his triggers and leaving before it becomes a problem. Just... leave him to me for now.”

“If he goes after her again—”

He cuts me off, probably because he doesn’t want to think about it either. “He won’t. I’ve spoken to him.”

I shake my head slowly as the doors open in front of us again and we find Nox passed out on the small couch in the corner of North’s office. One of his shadows is resting over his chest and two more are lying on the floor in front of him, but they stay put as we walk over to North’s desk. They watch us though, obsessively. They’re waiting for the moment we dare to step towards their sleeping master.

The moment *anyone* dares.

“Did we bring a psych with us as well? Did you find the guy Sage was seeing?”

North cringes and starts his computer up, plugging in his laptop and getting all four of the screens on the desk set up. “I found him, and he’s already left the country. His family decided on an extended stay in Singapore, not that I blame them.”

The elevator dings again and then Bassinger steps out, his cheeks still pink from the run, and his hands shoved into his pockets as he comes over to slump in the chair beside me.

North ignores us both for his emails for a second, scowling and muttering under his breath in a furious tone, and I take the moment to look Bassinger over. His leg is bouncing under the desk, a sign of agitation that he’s struggling to hide.

I pitch my tone to be something friendly enough, which is something that he doesn’t always take kindly to, and I ask, “How are you doing? The

run doesn't seem to have helped."

He stares at me for a second and then says, "It's still hard for me to talk to you guys about it. I'm not used to... this sort of Bond Group dynamic. It messes with my head sometimes."

North nods from behind the desk but doesn't add anything, so I try instead. "This is the way that we keep Oli safe. Even when we don't like it, we talk about shit and we're honest. If something happens to her because we're acting like dickheads with each other, we only have ourselves to blame."

His jaw flexes a little but he nods. "I'm just still... surprised that my father would be involved in the killing of children, but that's probably just me being naive. It's fucking with my head, but I'm dealing with it. It's not going to be a problem."

Truth.

Solid truth, and I'll respect the hell out of that sort of honesty any day of the week.

North's eyebrows inch up just a little at the admission but he nods again, taking a second before he murmurs, "It's hard to see people crossing lines that we assume would be unfathomable to ever consider, especially someone we think we know so well. Don't be too hard on yourself."

This feels like progress.

It has to be, right?

AN HOUR LATER, Bassinger and I step into the elevator together, ready to be transported back to the council offices to finish up after the raid and dismantling of the Resistance camp we took out. We've already had an influx of intel thanks to the chatter in the aftermath, and Bassinger has been pivotal in recovering it. There's always the chance that he's a deep cell spy,

someone sent in to us to sacrifice his own family just to get to Oli and take us all out, but I'm starting to really believe the kid.

There's something about his single-minded devotion to her at the expense of everything else in his life that is very convincing to everyone except Nox, but he's not exactly known for being reasonable about anything Bond related.

Bassinger is quiet for a moment while the elevator doors close, but once it starts moving, he clears his throat, his voice coming out steady enough. "I don't want to see my sister. I know you're probably going to try to convince me, and I get it, it makes sense to have me in there to get her talking and thinking shit but... that's my line. If it's not about Oli's safety, I'm not doing it."

I look at him and shrug. "It might come down to that. I'll talk to her and see what I can get, but if I need help with it—"

He cuts me off. "If you need it, I'll do it. If Oli needs it, I'll always do it, but not unless it comes to that."

I can respect that.

I can respect a lot of what he's said actually. If it weren't for his last name, his parents, his entire upbringing, he'd absolutely be climbing his way up to my inner circle of people I trust.

I can't do that though, not right now, and not with so much at stake.

I nod at him right as the doors open to reveal Black and Rockelle waiting there for us, both of them in full Tac gear. Heading out of the Sanctuary means needing at least three fully trained operatives per group, and there's no one I trust more than these two.

Even if they are the mouthiest assholes on my damn team.

"So we're not taking the harbinger of death this time?"

I already know Rockelle is attempting to stir shit about Oli, but I'm not going to let him. "North is dealing with the council bullshit as remotely as

possible these days, so he'll be here. Or did you mean Nox? He's sleeping off a hangover."

He grins at me and shrugs it off, easy and friendly as always. "Sure, those two Death Dealers were the ones I was talking about. I've already been warned."

Bassinger stares him down. "Obviously it didn't sink in."

Black and I share a look. Bassinger is never going to make friends with the blunt and cutthroat treatment he gives everyone when Oli isn't with him, but I'm also starting to figure out that he doesn't really give a fuck either. He doesn't want friends. The weird companionship he's found himself in with Gabe seems like the only concession he's been willing to make... that and the truce he just declared with North.

Anyone outside of our Bond Group is fair game to his acid tongue.

I motion for him to step in closer to the other two so that we can get this job over and done with. Rockelle is grinning at him with an edge to it like he's itching for a fight. They're as bad as each other, and I'll need to remember to keep them apart in the future.

As we get within touching distance of each other, Black cocks his head at me before shaking it, clapping his hand onto my shoulder to transport me a little more forcefully than usual. "New cologne?"

My eyes narrow. "Don't breathe a word. I have enough shit on you to bury you."

He just smirks at me and motions like he's zipping his lips shut, which is the biggest fucking lie because the asshole just thinks everything he *would* say, which is just as effective.

He knows how to send me information, has for years, and it's been useful in our line of work, so I find him thinking in my direction. *I'd call you a degenerate but... I guess you're Bonded and it's to be expected.*

I answer out loud, "You shouldn't call me anything as your superior and definitely not in Councilman Draven's hearing."

He has been friends with North almost as long as I have been, and I don't have to say anything else for him to get what I'm saying, loud and clear. He snorts and shakes his head again. "They're both as jealous as each other, and yet neither of them have figured it out yet. Fucking hilarious."

Bassinger doesn't like any of this conversation, and the smirk he gives Black is all sorts of venomous. "How's your Bond Group treating you?"

Black has gone toe-to-toe with Nox for decades; Bassinger's shitty attitude is nothing to him. "Well, there isn't a Resistance snake in mine, so better than others for sure."

Bassinger just raises an eyebrow at him and snarks back, "Are you so sure about that?"

No one here wants to think about the Riley and Giovanna mess we're still attempting to untangle for Sage, or what doing so is going to cost us.

Black grimaces and transports us without another word, the *pop* loud enough to ring in my eardrums and scramble my head for a second once our feet hit solid ground again. He's brought us to the underground parking space of the offices, right in front of the elevator to the basement. There's no one else around us, nothing to say that anything is happening here that we'd need to worry about, and a pit of unease starts in my gut.

It always does when things go smoothly.

I don't trust that shit at all.

As per protocol, no one else speaks or moves until I've cast my gift out to check for other Gifted around us. There's no one in the parking lot or the first three upper levels of the building. The raid has made sure of that, and when I push my gift to its limits, I only find the prisoners and other Gifted we have held down in the cells.

"We're clear. Let's get this over with."

Black nods and takes point, letting Rockelle fall behind and cover our backs. Bassinger watches their movements with keen eyes but keeps his

mouth shut, following along with the rules and guidelines he's been told about coming along today.

Nox had railed hard about having him here, still so sure that he's a spy, but North and I had agreed. Whatever we need to do to get the upper hand on the Resistance, as long as it's not sacrificing innocents, then we're doing it.

Anything to get Oli clear of Silas fucking Davies.

When we make it to the lower levels and the doors of the elevator opens, Black and I both watch as Bassinger steps out and gets a good look at the cells. It feels a little like *deja vu*, like I'm back to a few weeks ago when Oli had been here for the first time and Carlin Meadows had gotten an eyeful of her.

Render.

Fuck, when I'd heard her spit that word at my Bonded, I didn't believe it. Not until Oli had immediately freaked the fuck out and run away like she was being chased by the devil. Every pore of her being was terrified.

Of me.

Me hearing it, me rejecting her, me telling the others and them all turning on her. My head had felt as though it was about to split from everything screaming out of my Bonded, and every protective instinct in me kicked in. I wanted her safe and secure in my arms, a million miles away from this place, and I'd barely made it through watching the interrogations without dragging her out.

Bassinger walks slowly down the hallway, oblivious to the memories of Oli assaulting me. The Gifted inside the cells are all thin, haggard-looking men and women with blank sort of eyes. They are all fed and taken care of, but most go on hunger strikes to attempt to kill themselves.

I usually end up here forcing them to eat with my gift.

I get my head back into the game. "Any you recognize?"

Bassinger is slow and methodical as he checks them over slowly. He's taking this seriously, and I'll give him credit for that too.

He points between two of the cells. "Him. And that woman. They're both familiar, but that's it. I'd have to look through the footage to pinpoint it exactly. Well, them, and I know Carlin, but you already know that. You should kill her for what she did to Oli."

She does deserve it, she deserves a lot more than we've done to her so far, but she's still being processed for now.

One day she'll face North's nightmares, and I'll enjoy nothing more than watching her being consumed into nothingness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Oli

WHEN I FINALLY CLIMB OUT of Gryphon's bed close to noon, I drag my ass into the shower and attempt to look as though I slept well and didn't have my brains eaten out by him last night. I was kind of under the impression that guys only really went down on girls to get their dicks sucked, but Gryphon just blew that theory out of the water.

I turn beet red when I think about him walking around right now, smelling like me and honestly being smug about it. Literally, my skin is glowing and hot as I brush my hair out, and the color of it looks even more bleached out, more white now than silver.

I need to do something about it before it sends me into a full spiral and my Bonded freak out about the mess my head is in.

Brutus sits by the door with me, but August is nowhere to be seen. Gryphon refuses to let them sleep on his bed, and while Brutus will sleep on the floor, under protest, to stay with me, August mostly goes back to North when he's not allowed to be all over me while I sleep. I miss him and need to go rescue him from North later.

When I leave Gryphon's room, I can feel one of my Bonds in the living room, and I find Gabe sitting there with the TV off and his phone in his hand as he scrolls aimlessly. He looks up at me and grins the moment I walk in, holding out a hand for me to take as he draws me into him.

"North had breakfast and lunch sent up for you if you're hungry. Everyone is working. I'm heading into the fifth zone to work on the houses there if you want to come with me."

I nod and give him a quick kiss, moving over to the small kitchenette to poke around in the fridge until I find the loaded steak sandwich wrapped up in there for me. The chef and kitchen staff are all working in the huge communal food hall for now while the food supply chain starts working and

people can go back to eating in their own homes. One of the many things that North is working on at all hours of the day and night. I still can barely believe that this is something he's been working on for literally ten years, and his uncle for decades before that, just to keep us all safe.

It makes me very proud to be his Bonded, and also a little guilty for not being the perfect Bond for him. I'm too much work, too hard, and too freaking emotional for the good councilman. But I can try to help out and, at the very least, not be a burden to him.

Thank God Gryphon is working this morning and not tripping over my thoughts, I'd never hear the end of it.

I grab the sandwich and take a bite as I walk back over to the couch, thanking all of my lucky stars again for the chef who was clearly blessed by the gods themselves, because this sandwich is orgasmic. Gabe smirks at the look on my face, moving a little so I can join him on the couch and then dragging the coffee table closer for me to put my plate down.

I clear my throat and attempt to look civil as I tear into my food, murmuring around my mouthful, "How are the houses coming along down there? Are they close? I know we're struggling with occupancy."

He shrugs and shoves his phone away. "It's not so bad. The families are mostly bunked in double, but everyone has enough rooms to handle it. This place is about making do and keeping everyone safe, so mostly the lower families are just grateful to be here. The Top Tiers are giving North shit, but he's put Nox in charge of complaints, so they've all shut the fuck up for now. His attitude does come in handy for some situations."

I snort with laughter at the thought of Nox dealing with those spoiled assholes. "I'm sure he's loving the work too. Telling people how pathetic and useless they are is kind of his superpower."

Gabe pulls a face and takes the other half of the sandwich when I offer it to him. There's so many different fillings in it that I can only manage half, and what a beautiful thing that is.

“He’s been worried about North, so he offered to help the best way he knows how. We all are. Atlas and Gryphon are working through the Resistance stuff, I’m helping with the buildings, and you’re—”

I cut him off. “I’m sleeping in and being hand-delivered food by men who have better things to do. I might go crazy here, Gabe. I can’t sit on my ass doing nothing just because my Bonds would prefer to keep me somewhere safe at all times. I can’t be useless.”

He scowls back at me. “You took out another camp and then came back here to recover from it. Now we’re going to go build some shit. That’s helping out, Bond. If you have anything else you want to do instead, just tell me and we’ll go find North.”

The problem is that I don’t have anything else I can do because I’m a high school drop out who has only ever worked as a damn waitress. I guess I could go work in the kitchens and help feed people, that’s important work. But then North would move security around so I have a TacTeam operative with me, and I don’t want to move people away from other areas just to babysit me.

So building with Gabe it is.

I wash up my plate and grab a Coke out of the fridge to take over to the building sites. I’d love a coffee, but I feel like I’ve taken up too much of Gabe’s morning already, so the Coke will have to do. Gabe pulls on a set of work boots and pulls out a brand new pair for me as well, grinning at me when I sputter out a thank you. It always catches me off-guard when my Bonds buy me things, even just basic necessities, and it takes me a minute to get them laced up properly. They feel like clown shoes on me, big and bulky, but I’d rather have the protection because there’s nothing quite like the pain of a broken toe.

I’m already wearing jeans and one of Gabe’s plaid work shirts over a tank top, like a dress-up doll of what a Builder Barbie would look like. It’s

funny, and when Gabe gets a proper look at my whole outfit, he cackles at me, taking a photo that I ham it up in.

When we leave the house on foot, he catches my hand in his and threads our fingers together, sliding on a pair of aviators that make his look unbearably cool. Ridiculously hot too, like almost too much to freaking look at.

How can I feel this way about more than one man? I do, and I don't feel guilty about it either. I just feel like maybe we need to head back into the house for a quick minute.

Fuck.

Right, distraction. I need one and quick. "I'm dying my hair again. I'm thinking hot pink. Or maybe some lime green streaks. Which do you like better?"

Gabe pulls a face at me. "I thought you were good with North now; who are you trying to piss off with that choice?"

I roll my eyes at him and make kissy noises at Brutus until he comes to walk behind me, butting into the backs of my thighs with his little comfort nudging that he does. He's always extra affectionate in the mornings, as though me sleeping and not being awake to love on him makes the nights unbearable. "No one. I hate the silver, and now it's almost freaking white. Black won't stay in, I've tried it before. The purple washed out fast, but at least it stuck around for a few days. I just... don't want to look at the white for a few days. Maybe I should just shave it off."

He looks incredibly alarmed and starts rummaging around in his pockets for his phone in a very obvious display of calling in backup. It's almost comical and, with extreme effort, I keep my face straight as I watch him fumble around for words.

"I don't think you need to do that—I mean, you can do whatever you want, obviously, it's your hair but—pink is good."

He gives me a shaky smile, tapping on his phone without even looking at the screen, and I start counting, because he's about as obvious as a smack in the face. Honestly, if it wasn't so freaking funny, I'd be chewing him out for it.

Don't you dare shave your head. I don't care what color your hair is, but do not shave it.

I giggle at North's stern tone and shake my head at Gabe, who doesn't even attempt to look innocent.

"You're lucky you're hot, Ardern, because you're also a total freaking narc."

He shrugs. "I work with what I have, and you can't deny that North is the best person to convince you to do *anything*. If being an asshole is Nox's superpower, then this is his brother's."

It's true, and when Gryphon chimes in, he goes for a very different and effective tactic, one I'm not going to tell Gabe about because I don't need him setting Gryphon on me more regularly.

What am I going to wrap around my fist when I fuck you from behind if you so much as trim it? You'd look good with the pink, the purple was hot too. Just don't touch the length.

Well.

That sounds very reasonable.

WATCHING Gabe help with the construction is a great way to spend the afternoon, and I can see why this is where he's most useful. He's strong, smart as hell, and knows exactly what the builders need when they start with the framing on the new structure. There's six other houses on this street in various stages of being built at the moment, and I help with the one

that is at the lock-up stage, carrying in supplies and holding up giant sheets of drywall for the guys working there.

At first they all eye me like I'm just there to get in their way, but after a couple of hours of good, honest work, they're including me in their stories and joking around. It's hard, but it clears my brain out to actually be helping out. By the time Gabe comes looking for me, I'm up on a ladder having a go at one of the nail guns and whooping with joy when I actually get a piece of the ceiling fixed in place without any new holes in my fingers or hands.

He grins at me like I'm the sun, warming him right down to his core.

I stare back at him the same way, both of us looking like sappy idiots in love. I know this for sure because Elliot, the foreman, tells me so with a hell of a lot of snark in his old, gravelly tone.

"I'm not sure if you noticed, but she's my Bond. There'd be something majorly fucking wrong if I wasn't a sappy shit over her. Besides, look at her with all that dirt over her and that big grin. Can't blame me," Gabe drawls. Elliot waves us both off for the night, demanding we show up on time tomorrow *morning*.

"No promises. I'm a delicate princess about my sleep," Gabe calls back, draping his arm over my shoulders. He's just as dirty and sweaty as I am, so I don't feel self-conscious of how bad I must smell.

We walk together through the almost empty streets, it's mostly dirt and loose gravel on this side of the town because the houses are not move-in ready yet. Eventually, there'll be cars and all sorts of vehicles here, but we're not quite at that point yet. The logistics of starting a whole new town and community makes my head hurt. I can't think about it too much without wanting to puke on North's behalf.

How is money going to work here?

Job allocation, education, what do we do about crime and neighborhood disputes? I'm fairly certain we're still in the States, but does the

government know about this place? Taxes?

Too much for me right now.

So I focus on the small stuff, the questions I can ask and get simple answers for instead. “How did you learn how to build houses? Or are you just a natural at it?”

He scoffs at me. “I’m not sure there’s any such thing as being a natural at framing, but my dad was a partner in the family construction company. My great-grandfather started it, and it was sort of a tradition that all of the family worked there during the summers. My dad took over the business side of it, but one of my uncles is still on the tools. He’s finishing a job in Nevada and then heading over here, but his family is here. What’s left of it, I mean.”

I grimace, that seems to be a recurring theme with everyone here in the Sanctuary. Loss of family, loss of Bonds, loss of the people that matter most to us all.

He hesitates for a second and then asks, “What did your family do? Before the accident?”

It throws me for a second, but of course he’d ask about my family. Of course he’d be interested. We’re Bonds, and I’ve told him basically nothing about my life before the Resistance took me. Very, very little.

“We mostly moved a lot. I didn’t understand why but now—now I’m pretty sure that Davies knew about me. I think my parents were on the run to keep him away from me. But my father, my biological father, he did something with the stock market. Andrew was an engineer; he ran a business remotely and always had his computer with him while he did consulting work. Vincenzo was once a chef, but gave it up to stay home with me and mom. He was a Neuro and spent a lot of time training me on how to manage my emotions and my bond. My mom... I don’t actually know what she once did. I never asked.”

My voice breaks a little as I say that and his arm tightens around me, bundling me into his warmth a little closer. “You were a kid. You didn’t get the time to grow up and ask her all the shit you wanted to. Nothing to feel guilty about, Bond.”

I nod, but it’s there nonetheless. It always will be.

When we get back to the house, I duck into North’s room to use his bathroom. No one else is home yet, and when Gabe offers to grab dinner for us both, I shake my head.

“I want to find North. It’s Nox’s night tonight, and I need to... make sure it’s going to be okay. I always do.”

Gabe scowls but nods, walking me over to North’s offices without another word. He sees me all the way to the elevator before kissing me goodbye soundly. It’s only been two days since I slept in his bed, but without being Bonded, it still feels like an age.

I’m not sure the ache will ever really go away. I’m doomed to feel incomplete forever.

I scan my card to get access to North’s level and when the elevator doors open back up straight into North’s office, he’s on the phone, frowning and rustling papers in a very frustrated-looking way. He glances up at me and his frown eases a little. August comes out from behind him and bounds over to me joyfully.

I stoop down to give him scratches, cooing at him in a hushed tone so I don’t interrupt the phone call, but North’s tone gets snappier as it goes on, clearly trying to get it over with so he can speak with me.

I feel bad for interrupting, but not quite enough to leave. I’ve barely seen him since we got here, and I’m already missing those long days of being trapped in his bed in the post-Bonding haze.

“Councilman Rockelle, I’m done for the evening. We can get back to this tomorrow. I’m not having another late night. Even I have limits.”

When I take a seat on the other side of his desk, August tucks his head into my lap as he sits on my feet, a weightless bundle of smoke that is still comforting as hell. North glances up at me again and scowls at the distance between us, pushing his seat back a little and then motioning to his lap like he really expects me to get up and climb onto him, no matter that he's on the phone doing important councilman things.

Well.

That's exactly what I do.

The frown melts right off of his face as my ass settles in his lap, his hand closing around my thigh to pull me right into his body. I almost make embarrassingly happy noises about being with him again.

I'm not sure Councilman Rockelle would like that.

I lean forward to bury my nose in his neck and North hangs up on the councilman, throwing his phone down onto the desk and leaning further back in his chair and winding his arms tightly around me until I can barely breathe.

"I'm quitting the council. I can't keep playing the docile role and being kept away from you."

I laugh into his neck, more breath than noise, kissing the skin behind his ear as I murmur, "We both know you'd be bored in under a minute... or I'd run away. I can't take the full force of all of your bossiness."

He huffs and then groans. "The Council should be about doing what's right for the community, not arguing about what to name things and how many lobster tails each family should be allocated each fucking week."

I pull back from him a little to make a face. "Seriously? That's what the Councilman is talking your ear off about? Tell him to come build houses with Gabe, Elliot, and I. We'll have him too busy to worry about stupid things. Can I get a nail gun? Is there room in the budget for that?"

He raises an eyebrow at me and then rubs a hand over his eyes. "Of course they gave you a high powered weapon to play with, because that's

the latest nightmare I need to occupy myself with.”

He genuinely looks like he’s about to start yelling at people, so I attempt to distract him and save Elliot. “So you’re working overtime on lobster tails and names? Should I be leaving you alone more? Sleeping elsewhere so you’re not distracted?”

He doesn’t move his hand from his eyes as he drawls, “Wherever you sneak off to on my nights, I’ll just come to get you. If you want me to fuck you on Atlas’ sheets while he watches and sees exactly what he’s missing out on, then go right ahead, Bonded.”

My cheeks heat and he knows he’s managed to embarrass me a little, his casual and filthy flirting is a little harder to wrap my head around than Gryphon’s. I’m not sure why, but when he says *fuck*, my knees go a little weak.

His nostrils flare and he glances down at me, a dark ring circling the outer rim of his irises like he’s desperately holding on to his control. “Do you want me to fuck you here instead? You smell like sex.”

I take a deep breath, but all I smell is his very expensive cologne, the musky undertones of it like an aphrodisiac to me now that I know what his cock tastes like. I swipe my tongue over my bottom lip before I say, “Let’s just say it’s a good thing you can’t read my mind like Gryphon can. You’d know way too many embarrassing things about me now.”

His eyes drop down to my lips and he murmurs back, “If it were anyone else’s night tonight, I’d spread you out on this desk and fuck you until you couldn’t walk straight.”

I swallow and nod. We both know that’s not a good idea on Nox’s nights. Not that I know exactly why, but I know enough about his careful lines with his brother to understand that he won’t cross it. I’m not sure if it’s for my safety or Nox’s, but I’ll play along.

I’m getting awfully good at it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nox

THE BEDROOM IS quiet as I slip in, trying not to bleed everywhere as I do. The late night training sessions that have taken over from my late night drinking sessions aren't any easier on my body, and blood is still pouring out of my nose from the lucky shot Black had gotten in.

My knuckles are a bloodied, raw mess from the beating he'd gotten in return.

He's going back to his rooms with access to the best Healer of our generation, so I don't feel an ounce of guilt. Azrael lifts his head from my bed, and I feel his relief in my presence. North's creature is there as well and when I scowl at him and gesture to the door, I can feel my brother's frustration. I don't need a fucking babysitter. If he wants me to let the girl sleep here, then he'll have to just trust that she'll make it out alive.

The creature leaves, his legs being snapped at by Rahab, who is my most savage creature. I have to step between them to make sure they don't wake the girl up with their childish bickering.

I move slowly into the space, my eyes shifting so that I can see clearly. There's nothing out of place. There never is when she comes here. She just slips into the bed and sleeps on my pillow, burying into the scents of me as though they're the only thing keeping her heart beating.

It's strangely respectful, and more than I've ever offered her in return.

If I didn't know my brother better than he knows himself, I might guess that he'd told her. Even something small, just a tiny detail about the absolute mess that he calls a brother, but he wouldn't.

He never even told William, his closest blood relative after our father was put to death. No, I was the one to spill out the truth to him in one of my episodes. I'd feel a little more self-loathing about that moment but I was

nine, and there's been enough therapy poured over my soul by now that I'm past that phase of my life.

Now I just try to forget it all, drink it out or fight until the pain replaces the memories.

Once I get out of the Tac gear I'd worn down to training, a shirt and utility pants, I find an old towel to wipe the blood away from myself. As I loosen my muscles and take some deep breaths, my creatures slowly pour out of me. Mephis stops at my feet and stays with me, even as the others all come out and spread out across the room. I shouldn't be surprised that more of them are adopting the form of puppies and other sweet creatures.

They all want her to love them.

It's sickening.

Literally, my gut turns at the sight of them all trying to fight their way onto the bed to be near her. They're fierce enough with it that she sighs and rolls in her sleep, her hair spilling out of the tie she had it in and falling out over my pillows in an enticing way.

I look away and get to pulling a pair of sweats on, digging through the small collection I'd brought with us until I find one of the soft tees to throw on with it. They're the only ones I like sleeping in and, sure enough, they've become the girl's favorite to steal from me as well.

I rub a hand over Mephis' head, ruffling his ears a little and enjoying the way he preens under my attention. Both Mephis and Rahab wait for me to decide where I'm going to sleep before they move, always staying close to my side. As much as they also want the girl, they would never leave me for her.

I *should* sleep on the couch a safe distance from her. It's comfortable enough. I should, but the bed is too tempting, and it's not like I haven't already slept in it with her before.

Always when I'm sure she's out cold and only on rare occasions.

It's easier to do now that I've spoken to her bond. Now that I know exactly what it wants from me and told it what it can't have, we've reached an agreement between the two of us and, sure enough, when I slide between the sheets, the girl's eyes are open.

But the bond is who stares back at me.

I stare back at it, not really in the mood to talk, and it doesn't move towards me. It knows better.

When Mephis crawls up to slip between us, the bond finally speaks. "Do you need the pain to sleep? I don't like it."

I reach up to press a finger against my nose and enjoy the throbbing pain of it. "I don't need it. It's cleared my head already. I'm fine now."

Her gift floods me instantly and the pain disappears all at once. There'll be questions tomorrow from Gryph and Black about where the injuries went, and with the girl having no recollection, it'll be harder to dodge them, so I'll need to find work away from them for a few days.

Avoiding them all has become a great skill for me, keenly honed.

As I roll onto my back and attempt to get comfortable now that I'm not babying sore points, the bond speaks again. "They're coming. They won't leave us alone."

I nod up at the ceiling. "Of course. They'd be stupid to leave someone like you behind enemy lines."

She is quiet for a moment and then says, "And you? When they find out about you, what do you think they'll do to get their hands on a dark god like you?"

Dark god.

It is obsessed with that line of thinking, but I've spent a long time trying to avoid the other being who shares my skin. North might be worried about the creatures, but I've always known it's the voice, the other soul, that's the real thing to be feared.

I know our bonds are not like the others.

“Let me speak to him. I miss him.”

I side-eye the bond but it hasn't moved, it hasn't crossed any of my very carefully established boundaries.

It never does.

I'm the one who breaks things, not the bond trapped in the girl who looks as though she was dragged out of my deepest, darkest fantasies and splayed out over my pillows.

I don't trust either of them. “If you two Bond while she sleeps, they'll kill me, you know. They'll never believe that I didn't do it.”

The bond smirks slowly, looking somehow older than the nineteen-year-old's face it's wearing. “I'll be on my best behavior. Let me have him for a little while. Just sleep and leave us to it.”

I shouldn't, but my own bond wakes up from the darkest recesses of my mind to let me know that he wants to speak.

No fucking. North will kill us both.

My bond prickles at the ruling but answers, *No Bonding. I want my Bond for a night.*

It's reckless, but I let go of my control and leave them to their reunion. I try to stick around enough to at least know what they're doing, but my bond blocks me out so they can be left alone.

I wake, hours later and only just before dawn, with the girl splayed out over my chest and her nose pressed against my neck, my heart thumping the second I come to and feel her there.

The only reason I don't throw her across the room to get her the fuck off of me is because I don't want to have to explain to any of them why I'm in the bed.

I manage to get her back onto her pillows and the bed straightened up before I lurch into the bathroom and get the shower running to cover the sounds of my retching. Once that part is over with, I climb under the hot spray still in my clothes. I can't stand the sight of myself right now, not the

scars or the reaction to waking up with her on top of me that hasn't been deterred by the vomiting.

Rahab sits at the bottom of the shower, the water moving through his body as though he were a ghost, and Mephis keeps watch at the door. His head sticks through the solid wood every now and then to see what's happening in there.

Gryph comes to collect the girl while I'm scrubbing my hair. He scowls at the bathroom door and Mephis when she mentions needing the bathroom, but leads her out to use his before they train. I should feel bad. I should have some level of empathy for how my fucked-up brain ruins everything, but I can't.

I'm too busy trying to scrub her off of me before I completely lose my fucking mind.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU? Wasn't Oleander supposed to be in with you last night? You look like shit.”

I don't stop to speak to him on my way to the coffee pot, picking up the biggest cup in the collection and pouring out the black liquid until it hits the rim. The bonds obviously spent the entire night speaking to each other, and while my mind 'slept', my body did not.

North's new office looks exactly like his old one layout-wise, but with none of his usual decadent luxury. I'm sure if we're here for long enough, he'll find a way to get some marble installed in here.

“Nox? Do I need to go find my Bonded and check if she's okay?”

I send him a dark look. “Sleeping on a couch so that *your* Bonded can get what she needs isn't very restful. If you're so desperate to pant after her, then I'm not stopping you. Go be pathetic elsewhere.”

His eyes flash black at me for a split second, a tiny slip of his control, and I smirk at him. I will never not enjoy watching him crumble over a little girl made of poison.

How the mighty fall. It really is pathetic.

“Stop taking your bad mood out on me. If you want the day off to hole up with your books, then just say it. No one is forcing you to be here.”

Ah, but he’s wrong about that. I’d had to open up all three of the windows in my room to attempt to air it out and get her sweet smell out of there. My bond refused to let me change the sheets, it threw a bitch fit over it if I’m being honest, so I was forced to just get rid of the rest of it as much as possible.

I’m going to have to drink tonight. The only way I’ll get through sleeping in there is if I’m wasted, and for once, my bond agrees with me.

“The water supply has been compromised.”

My eyes snap up from my cup of coffee to meet North’s scowl. He nods at me and continues, “There are only two points of the line that aren’t covered by security, it had to happen there. The filtration system picked up the foreign bacterias there and automatically shut down. Sawyer was woken by the alarms and called me at seven. He’s already been through what footage we have, but it looks like there’s someone living here that is a plant.”

I curse under my breath. We’d always known it wasn’t just possible, but probable that we’d be bringing a sympathizer with us.

“Any guesses on who it was?”

North rounds the table and slides a tablet towards me with a list of names on it. “These are the people who weren’t in their beds at that time. Sawyer has been slowly tracing their movements, but it’s a big job for one man, even a skilled Technokinetic. We are very lucky to have him. We need to recruit another.”

Easier said than done. Technos are rare. Second only to Renders and Death Dealers, we've somehow managed to start this little community with a very special set of skills. A Shifter who can take any form and an insanely strong Neuro with the ability to sniff out lies also helps immensely.

Indestructible Boy can still disappear for all I care.

North takes a seat in his chair and opens up his laptop, frowning at the screen like he's just been assaulted by the onslaught of bullshit there. I have no doubt that he's being harassed by the remaining members of the Council and the other Top Tier families who want him to deal with their problems even though they refused to come here with the lower families.

Scum, the lot of them.

I memorize the list of names and say, "I'll look into it. I can set up creatures in the blind spots until we have them covered with cams."

North nods and clicks around on the keyboard without looking up at me. "We need to go on a supply run as well. Get bottled water to get us through until the clean out happens."

I nod, sipping at my coffee again.

The door swings open and Gryph stalks through, jerky in his movements, like he's frustrated. I would've thought a morning on the mats with the girl would've fixed that, but apparently not.

He takes one look at me and says, "Oli healed you."

It's not a question and I'm careful with my answer. "She was asleep when it happened, but yes, she healed me."

Gryph nods, hearing the truth in what I'd chosen to say, and it's only when he turns to the coffee pot that North shoots me a look. He doesn't need to be a Neuro to hear what I'm not saying. He's good about keeping Gryph out of it though, ever the loyal brother.

I don't really give a shit though.

"Her bond spoke to me. I said it could heal me if it needed to. That's it, brother. That's what happened. Your Bonded won't remember it, and I

never attempted to touch either of them.”

He doesn't look at Gryph, but when he doesn't interrupt to call out a lie, North nods and gets back to whatever he's doing on the computer.

“Who's going on the supply run? If there's a plant, then we can't all go.”

North shrugs. “You and Gabe can stay. You can keep looking for the plant, and Gabe can keep going with the building. He's better than any of the rest of us at it, and he's a good backup for you.”

Gryph nods and takes the list from me, looking it over. “Half of these names are lower families who are training with me in the mornings. I can give Sawyer some ideas on where to look for them to rule them out.”

North nods and then pauses, letting out a slow breath. “Show them to Atlas. The list and then point out the people to him. See if anything rings a bell.”

Over my dead body. “No. Absolutely not. I'm not going to give what little information we do have to someone we know is a part of the Resistance.”

Gryph and North share a look, but I shake my head at both of them. I don't care what they say, I don't care if he's part of the Bond Group, he's a fucking Bassinger.

He was the first sign of the poison the girl is.

“I'll take care of it myself, so leave him out of it. I'll have the sympathizer by the end of the week.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Oli

AS MUCH AS building houses is actually fun and rewarding, going on a supply run with three of my Bonds is exactly what I need right about now.

I'd slept in Nox's room, and even though I'd gotten in a solid eight hours of sleep, I'd woken up feeling as though a truck had backed over my decaying corpse, so I chalk it up to an uncomfortable atmosphere and get to training with Gryphon when he comes for me.

An hour later, North arrives, not yet in his suit, to tell us about the water contamination issue. It's a little concerning because I'd showered and already drunk a coffee brewed with that water but as far as Sawyer can tell, the contamination happened between six and seven in the morning, so I should be safe.

North and Gryphon still drag me to Felix for a check up, just to be sure. I point out that Gryphon also drank the coffee, but neither of them give a shit about that. Felix, who was asleep when we showed up to the house he's sharing with his Bond Group, Sawyer, and Grey, slaps a very gentle but tired hand over mine for half a second before declaring me fine and stomps back to bed, still wearing nothing but a pair of haphazardly shoved on boxer shorts.

Sage pokes her head out of the room but when I tell her I'm fine, she stumbles back to bed without a word, still half asleep and not coherent enough yet to form words.

I chew North and Gryphon both out using our mind connection as we leave, but neither of them seem to care.

"Someone who knows our morning routines did it. They know that you're an early riser," North says, pulling his sweater off and shoving it over my head. It's still warm enough, even in my gym gear of a tank top

and a pair of shorts, but Gryphon helps him to straighten it over me until I'm covered to my knees.

I don't get why he's trying to cover me up until I see the hordes of workmen walking along in the opposite direction, all of them waving or tipping their heads respectfully at North, who I'm sure is absolutely thrilled to be wearing nothing but sweatpants right now.

Gryphon shakes his head slowly, grabbing my hand when I lose my balance a little on some loose gravel. "It was a test. The Resistance don't actually want Oli dead. They want to know how secure this place is and what we have in the way of failsafes. They'll be watching our reactions to things and how we pivot when they attack, even on smaller scales like this."

I scoff at them. "Well, they've learned that you both panic and find me a Healer, and if they want me alive, then they'll be extra pleased about that."

Gryphon shrugs again, refusing to let go of my hand as he directs me up the path to our house and says, "This is the one time I'm fine with doing exactly what those assholes want. Safety above ego, always."

I nod and wait for North to get the door open, stumbling over my feet into the house and trying not to get frustrated at the fact that Gabe leaves his shoes at the door. North doesn't give out the same courtesy and curses under his breath, striding off to snap at him and wake my poor Bond up.

Living in such close quarters is harder than any of us thought, and there are a lot of alpha males in one spot here.

"Stop worrying about it. It's not your problem to deal with, and they've had years to figure out a friendship that you have no responsibility over," Gryphon murmurs, directing me over to the breakfast bar in the kitchen and helping me up onto the stool.

I nod and tuck my arms around myself, taking a deep and calming breath of North's scent on the sweater before propping my chin up on my fist as I watch Gryphon move around the kitchen. He's still wearing his gym gear and I get to enjoy the flexing of his arms and shoulders in his

harshly cut out tank top. I barely notice that he's getting out frying pans and all of the fixings for scrambled eggs and bacon. It's only when he slides the plate across to me, that I realize he's made us both breakfast.

I stare down at it for a second and then back up to where he's shaking his head at me. "I'm not the chef, but I can make eggs. I worked in the cafe with Kyrie for a few years during college, they'll be edible at the very least."

I blush a little and grab the knife and fork he's also slid across the counter to me. "I'm sure they're delicious. I was more shocked that we have the food. I thought we weren't at the rationing stage yet?"

He shrugs and digs in to his own plate. "We're not. I grabbed them when I had to go into the Council offices. There's occasionally perks to dealing with the Resistance assholes we bring back here."

I nod and eat along with him, impressed as hell that he not only cooked them to the perfect consistency but he seasoned them well too. They're freaking great eggs.

"I didn't think we got any prisoners? I thought my bond took the entire camp out."

He nods, his mouth full, and waits until he's swallowed before replying, "It did. These were those we'd grabbed and transported out before you joined the fight. We got a handful, a few higher ranking Gifted so that was helpful."

I nod and North stalks through the kitchen, his hair still a little sleep ruffled where he hasn't bothered fixing it too much, but his suit makes him look far more like himself. He nods at Gryphon and then swoops down to give me a kiss, snapping his fingers at August who appears at my side obediently. The change in their relationship has been dramatic since I spoke with his bond. I've noticed that even when August returns to him, North will mostly leave him out to guard whatever space he is in.

It makes me fall for him just a little more every time I see it.

“Stay with one of the Bonds at all times today until we get this under control.”

I nod, because I was already planning on it, and let him kiss me again as his hand cradles the back of my head possessively. When he straightens, he shares one last look with Gryphon and then he’s gone, out the door and dealing with the newest crisis here.

I get back to my plate of delicious eggs and to the conversation with Gryphon. There’s too much I want to know about the happenings of the Resistance. “Have you gotten anything useful from the people you took back yet? Did Atlas know anyone?”

He nods and scrapes the last of his eggs onto his fork, still standing in the kitchen like he can’t even take the time to sit down. Thanks to North crashing our training session, we’re over an hour earlier than we usually are, but he’s moving like he’s halfway out the door already.

Before he answers my questions, he cocks his head as his eyes flash, his gift reaching out to check where Atlas is. When he finds him sleeping away, he murmurs to me, “Bassinger’s sister is a mess. I’ve spent two days sifting through her memories, but the inside of her head is like looking in one of those mirrors at a sideshow. The world through her eyes is distorted and misshapen. Growing up in Resistance propaganda and then having four Bonds with the same opinions? She’s... a mess. She’s also being abused by most of her Bonded, physical and mental abuse. That isn’t uncommon in the families from the East Coast Gifted community, but the fact that her parents both know about it and do nothing for her is fucking disgusting.”

My heart breaks a little more for Atlas, the stuff he didn’t want to have to tell me but that he was willing to if it meant I’d believe him. It feels a little bit wrong to be talking about it with Gryphon, but he’s also my Bonded and I know this is weighing on him too. Everything he has to see and experience in his work as a TacTeam leader, it’s a heavy load to carry.

Isn’t it exactly my job to help lighten the load?

“I wouldn’t ask you to, Bonded. I would never put too much of this shit on you, your own burdens are heavy enough. I’m heading into North’s offices to sort out what we’re doing about the water issue. You just get on with your day the same way you would normally. Just keep Bassinger and Gabe with you at all times, okay?”

I nod and grab his plate, hip bumping him out of the way as I load them and the other dishes into the dishwasher. He kisses me soundly and heads off to get dressed for the day, and I enjoy the view of his ass in those shorts the whole damn way.

I ALMOST FORGET and climb into the shower when Gryphon leaves, but instead I text Sage and apologize about the rude early morning wake up. She gets back to me straight away, calling me to say that she’s totally fine about it because she’s the best and we spend a good hour on the phone.

Mostly gossiping about Bonds, which is annoyingly fun.

When we get to the fun shit, I break Sage’s poor brain with my own little updates, and it’s the funniest freaking thing. “Both of them at the same time?! Oleander Fallows! That feels... scandalous. And they were just... fine with that?”

I snort and prop the phone up on my shoulder. “Well, it’s not like I suggested it! I was more... convinced that it was a good idea. Listen, once the Bonded ones start having creative ideas, you’re going to be swept up into crazy shit that no one warns you about. We might need other friends in Bonded Groups, just for, like, a heads up for this shit. It’s not like we can just ask your parents—”

She makes a gagging noise and cuts me off with a squeal. “Shut your mouth right now! I do not want to think about my parents in an orgy. Fuck,

I could vomit. Why would you even say that? They've only done it twice, just for me and Sawyer. That's it! Gross."

I hear Sawyer's dramatics in the background, cussing her out for so much as talking about something so gross, and I cackle at them both. They're such typical siblings in a really normal family dynamic, now that her family isn't being obnoxious to her about shit outside of her control, and it's nice to just experience it vicariously through them both for a minute.

Sage clears her throat. "Okay, so now that I need my entire brain dipped in bleach, what is the plan for today's incident? Are you going to help out with whatever they do about it?"

I flop back onto Gryphon's bed, tucking my nose into his pillow a little bit just to get one last whiff of him before I get on with my day. "No news yet. There's a meeting happening now about it, but I've just been told to stick with Gabe and Atlas today."

Sage hums down the line. "Kieran said the same to me. He wants me with someone in this house at all times."

I could make a joke about possessive, overprotective Bonds, but there's a knock at the door and then Atlas' head is poking through. "Shore called, we're heading out of the Sanctuary on a run. You're coming with... as long as you want to."

Hell yeah I do. "Gotta go, Sage. I'll call you when I get home."

I bounce off of the bed and straight into Atlas' arms. He looks tired, he has since we got back from the camps with his sister in our custody, but he grins down at me.

"I don't think your bond is going to be needed much today. I hope you're not bounding around because you think it's going to be... fed."

I snort at his teasing, because I already know he's not actually serious, and shrug. "You never know, one of the Tac personnel could piss me off and end up as lunch."

He chuckles at me as we get to the front door together, pulling on shoes and grabbing jackets. “I know which ones I’m voting for. Rockelle is a fucking dickhead and deserves his soul to be gobbled up.”

I shrug with a smirk, but I already know that he’s one of Gryphon’s closest friends and trusted personnel, so even with his smart mouth and irreverent jokes, he’s safe for now.

We don’t have enough trusted people in our circle as it is. I can’t take out the few we do have.

We make our way over to North’s offices, but the crowds of Tac operatives are waiting outside, already dressed and fully armed. There’s no way I’m going to be allowed to go out in the jeans and sweater I’m currently wearing, but I guess there’s no way to get used to the gear unless you wear it.

I just feel like some sort of fraud when I’m in it, like a civilian pretending to be a superhero.

Kieran spots us both coming and snaps at the stragglers of the group to get out of our way until we can make it into the building. There’s only a handful of people waiting around in the foyer, all of them the higher-up operatives, and I get the feeling they’re waiting on my Bonded so we can head out.

We stop when we get to Kieran, happy to wait with him for now. He’s looking good, about a million times better than when we were rescued from the camps, and I have to fight to keep the smirk off of my face.

I can’t help but comment about it, messing around a little with him because I feel like we’re practically family now that he’s watched me get carved up by the most terrifying man in the world. “Bonded life treating you well?”

He raises an eyebrow at me, his face completely straight as he says, “About as well as Gryphon’s new cologne is faring for him, yes.”

It takes me a second to get what he's saying, and then I want to die a little. Scratch that, I want to die a whole lot.

I groan and bury my face into my hands as though I can disappear if no one can make eye contact with me anymore. "I'm going to murder him, right after I find a nice hole to die in."

Kieran shrugs at me and eyes the murderous look that Atlas gives him for so much as mentioning something that embarrasses me, though he doesn't really have a clue as to why I'm dying. Thank God, because Kieran knowing is bad enough.

Freaking Bonded.

When the elevator chimes and opens up to reveal North and Gryphon, I turn my back on the asshole and cross my arms, in full shameful pout mode and giving zero fucks about it. August bounds over and sits at my feet, looking up at me with his perfect void eyes as though he can tell I'm ready to stab someone.

"You're in deep shit," Kieran drawls and Gryphon scowls back at him, striding over to me like he can fix this, but I'm already so freaking embarrassed that I don't want to discuss it anymore. It was hot as fuck at the time but now, standing around here thinking about it? No, thanks.

Kill me.

"Something about cologne," Atlas snarks, grabbing my hand tugging me away from them both, "Come on, Sweetness. We'll go get changed so that we can get out of here."

We turn our back on them as North snarls at Gryphon in a very non-Draven way. Nope, I glance back just to check that his bond hasn't burst out of him in the middle of the freaking foyer, but I just find both of my Bonded squaring off about me.

Atlas drags me into one of the gear rooms, joining me in the women's area once he's grabbed his own stuff, and then he flicks the lock so we won't get anyone walking in on us. I'm still too far in my own head to give

a shit about changing together and when I pull my sweater and shirt off, he doesn't bat an eye, just gets to changing as well.

My scent, all over Gryphon while he went about his day.

I blink back into myself, coming face-to-bare-chest with Atlas and, man, is it a good sight. I'm not sure if his gift makes him extra cut or if he's kept up a brutal training regime without me knowing, but he is cut. Like, professional bodybuilder levels of cut, and the delicious looking V that draws my eyes down to the top of his jeans looks incredibly inviting.

I clear my throat, mostly to attempt to find my voice, but it gets his attention. Atlas mistakes my nervous actions for me stressing over Gryphon and shakes his head at me. "I know enough to make a guess about it, Sweetness. Don't try to explain it. I already want to tear his arms off and shove them up his ass for having everything I want. I don't need any more details."

I blush again and duck my head as I nod. "I don't think—I don't feel any stronger. I think maybe you were right."

His eyebrows shoot up and I bite at my lip, unbuttoning my jeans and watching as he swallows, his eyes dropping down to follow their path down my legs. I'm wearing a simple black thong, nothing flashy or anything, but it might as well be crotchless, lacy lingerie for how he reacts to the sight of me. His legs buckle a little and he takes a step forward, taking a deep breath and groaning softly like he's been wounded.

I could fuck him right here. Bond with him and take him for my own. Shit, is this really me thinking this?! Not my horny bond? Nope, it's me practically dripping for him in a very inopportune moment.

His eyes flare and flash white for a second, returning to the clear green in an instant as he reins himself in. "Don't tease, Sweetness. Not when there's a whole fucking horde of Tac operatives out there listening, because I'll do a helluva lot worse than Shore ever did. Fuck, the thought of them all out there listening to me Bond with you, it's too tempting."

My voice is barely more than a rasp as I reply, “I’m sorry. I’m not thinking straight. I just—I think North would kick the door in and murder you anyway.”

He nods and steps back again, his movements jerkier, like he’s really struggling to let this heated moment pass. I am too, no matter where we are or how many people are waiting on us to get ready.

I scramble around in the locker that was put aside for me, swiping my card to get through the security to open the damn thing. I grab my Tac gear and start pulling it on. The pants hang a little looser on me now that I’m back at training and spending less time eating creamy seafood sauces on my ass in North’s bed.

Once I’m dressed and ready, I move to the door, only to have Atlas stop me, gently grabbing my upper arm to tug me back into his body. I go to him easily, lifting up onto my toes to kiss him back when he ducks down to meet my lips.

He kisses me like a vow of what’s to come for us, a branding promise that I can’t wait to fulfill.

When we walk back out of the changing rooms together, I meet North’s eye across the room and he gives me a nod before he speaks to all of the team leaders there, briefing them on what we’re doing today.

“We’re after water, mostly, and there have been some other requests that we said we’d look into. Mostly comfort items, but there’s also some ‘scripts we need to fill. Felix has been busy doing diagnostics and basic healing that a simple ‘script could take off of his plate.”

He continues through the protocol and I nod along, all of it the same stock-standard stuff we followed last time. I’m not surprised that we’re going after things to help Felix out. Every time I’ve seen the Healer, other than this morning’s early wake up, he’s been run off of his feet and haggard looking. Sage has also been super worried about how much he’s working, but the other Healers have refused to work without pay, even though they’re

being housed and fed for free, so everything is currently landing on his shoulders.

North is going to end up killing someone and making an example of them for sure. Well, actually, he wouldn't, but I for sure will because there's nothing quite like rich men being on their high horses about unimportant things while there's an actual crisis going on.

Typical Top Tier bullshit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Oli

WE'RE TRANSPORTED into a pickup area full of Tactical vehicles. I'm wedged between Atlas and North, with Gryphon, Kieran, and Rockelle closing the tight circle we make together. Gryphon's eyes flash as he checks out the area and, just to be extra sure, I cast out my own gift. North's eyebrows draw down a little as he watches me, not in a bad way though, just like I've taken him by surprise.

Gryphon mutters, "I'm not picking up on anyone. Oli?"

I shake my head. "Closest is half a mile away, in a car driving in the opposite direction, so I think we're good. I didn't sense anything 'wrong' either. Like shit that shouldn't be here."

Kieran gives me a look. "How does that work? You can just tell if something is... what, *bad*?"

I wriggle out from between my Bonds, stepping around until I'm taking in the surroundings with my eyes and not my gift. I roll my shoulders back, poking around at the warehouse a little as the other teams start filtering in. "I don't know how it works, really, just that my bond can tell if things are there to hurt me."

Atlas stretches out his arms, like being transported has run through his muscles and left an ache behind. "That's how it knows who to take out when it's Rending. It just takes the souls of people there to harm you."

Rockelle nods along and then grins. "So we're safe so long as we wish you no harm? Noted. Shore better grovel before anything goes down."

I roll my eyes at him and then follow Atlas over to the vehicles. We're all going to be traveling together and we're going to be the third car in the convoy. I feel bad for whoever is lead car, the most dangerous spot, because if someone is contaminating our water supply, then there's every chance

that this entire trip is happening on the Resistance's whim. They could be anywhere, at any time, and I need to stay sharp.

Gryphon has clearly learned that the best way to approach me is the one where no one will ever know it's happening and just talk to me through our mind connection. *I'm not groveling. Black was being a dick, but I'm not ashamed of my Bonded or what we do together, and you shouldn't be either.*

I duck down to check the undercarriage of the truck North points out for me, pushing at my gift just to be extra sure there's nothing under there. *Then why was North so pissed off about it? If it's all just a proud Bonded moment then that isn't at all embarrassing.*

If he had his way, North Draven would have you locked in a tower right now, completely unreachable to anyone who isn't in our Bond Group, and even then, he'd only give the rest of us access to you because it would hurt you not to. He's a jealous, possessive dickhead, and I'm not. I want everyone to see what's mine and know that they'll never get to have something as fucking perfect as my Bonded. I'm a smug asshole, but an asshole all the same.

Damn.

It's a very good explanation, even if I really want to stay pissed at him, I can't. I can't because I've known he was smug, and *proud*, about having me. I knew how much he loved being the first to Bond with me, no matter the circumstances, and it's always made me feel like maybe I could have this.

Maybe I could keep them all and not become a mindless killing machine.

Are you still pissed? I'll slit Black's throat and bleed him out right now.

I straighten up and give him a very sassy look. *No the hell you won't! That's not just your friend and colleague anymore, he's Sage's Bond. But fine, your soul can escape the next killing round. I'll let you live to make it up to me later.*

His eyes smolder back at me, fiery depths beneath the calm facade he's putting on for everyone else. I love those depths and the stream of filth that comes out of his dirty mouth when he leans into it.

If you two are done, can we get back to what we're supposed to be doing here?

I startle at North's haughty tone and duck my head, climbing up into the backseat of the truck without another word.

"Are they giving you shit again? You'd think they could leave you be for a couple of hours while we work," Atlas grumbles as he slides in next to me, pulling on his seat belt before helping me with mine.

"Gryphon was just apologizing. He's not great at it, but it'll do," I tease, ignoring the way Rockelle overhears and cackles as he climbs into the back section. He's got a gun in his hands, and when he clips himself down to the floor and sets up like he's about to be shooting out of the back of the truck, I give North a look.

"Why does this feel like we're entering a war zone? It's a trip to Walmart for water," I sass, wiggling my ass a little to get settled.

North climbs in and takes up all of the remaining room in the backseat so that I feel as though I'm being crushed between him and Atlas again. Weirdly, it's more comforting than problematic.

Bonds are fucking weird about this stuff.

He doesn't bother with his own seat belt, just grabs the bar that runs above his door frame and holds on while Kieran gets us on the road. Gryphon's in the front seat, his eyes still white as he monitors everything around us.

North has to speak loudly so that I can hear him over the truck's engine, even with all of the windows sealed shut with bulletproof glass. "We have supply runs and incoming resident drop offs every day, and at least sixty percent of them have been attacked or raided in some way. Since this trip has been forced by the Resistance, I'm betting it's not going to be a smooth

ride. There's a reason we're all coming along. Water is too important to hold off on, but with our gifts, we should be able to minimize the fallout."

Interesting.

"Is there any chance that you guys would let me be involved in the supply runs and incomings? I could be really useful here, more useful than learning how to build houses."

All three of my Bonds speak over each other in agreement.

"No."

"Absolutely not."

"I didn't want you coming today, these two insisted."

I glance at Atlas, surprised at his reply, but he just shrugs. "I'm a lot happier with you being in the Sanctuary. I'm not going to lie and say this is all fine with me, but there was also no way that they were bringing you and leaving me behind."

I sputter over my words, "I—my bond is more than capable of handling shit if things go wrong!"

"Yeah, and yet you still spent two years being tortured by Silas Davies. I don't doubt you, but I also don't doubt that he's a fully Bonded Neuro with the ability to shut your brain *and* bond down."

I cross my arms. "He's powerful, but his range is shit. Gryphon's gift is better."

Atlas nods and shrugs again. "And yet, Silas is still our biggest threat. Maybe, and I really mean *maybe*, the Draven nightmares could deal with him. If North or Nox's ranges are as good as they seem to be, we *might* be able to use one to take him out."

I already know their range is phenomenal, Brutus came to the camp with me, and while Nox couldn't tell where we were, he could still see through his creatures' eyes. Gryphon had told me that and told me how worried they'd all been when I'd given him to Kyrie.

Still the best decision I'd made in that stupid camp.

I glance up at North, but he's still scowling at the road like he's expecting trouble, so I take a small breath in and call on my bond.

Let me out.

I internally roll my eyes. *I just need to know if there's danger. I don't need you going full death god on this mission.*

I can feel the ripple of frustration and then it speaks again, *Let me out and I'll keep them safe. All of them, even the non-mine ones.*

Is it strange of me to be jealous about my bond being that possessive over my Bonds? Probably. Maybe I do need that therapy.

My eyes void out and the Everlasting One stiffens in his seat, his hand on my thigh tenses but doesn't move. He's not scared, just ready to move should he need to.

The Dark One doesn't react, just turns to speak to me. "Is there danger? Is she safe?"

Still very devoted to the girl.

I like that.

"Not yet. She's going to be fine, whatever that takes."

He nods and makes a hand motion at my Bonded. My *first* Bonded, the one I finally got to taste. The one who unlocked more of my power, more of the potential living inside the girl, until I could access more and keep her safe and alive.

I want *more*.

"No more of that thinking. You're not going to keep her safe like that," he says in a tight voice, and I smile back at him, all teeth and sharp edges.

"You're no fun. Give me my Bond instead."

The girl disagrees with me. She attempts to wrestle back some of the control as the driver curses under his breath, hitting the gas and getting the vehicle moving faster underneath us. I look out, but there's nothing there. Nothing but miles of farm land and livestock around us. This place we've been brought to is somewhere remote enough to barely exist on a map.

“How far away are we?” the Everlasting One says.

The driver snaps back, “Too far with her doing *that* back there. Can you get Oli back now?”

The Dark One cuts in. “No. If her bond is out, then she’s taking this seriously. Just get us there and don’t worry about her. You’re on her safe list anyway. Rockelle is the only one who needs to be sweating.”

There’s quiet in the cab for a moment, only the roar of the engine to be heard, and then the Gifted in the back says, “How do I get on that safe list? Is there an application process, or do I just have to break my own leg? I’m not against it or anything, just not exactly my first choice.”

I turn to look at him and smirk at the sheer terror that flits over his face before he regains control of himself, tightening his grip on the gun.

When I turn back to the front he mutters, “Fuck. It’s so much worse when it looks at you.”

The Everlasting One turns to snap, “Stop calling my fucking Bond an *it*. She’s Oli, and she’s trying to keep your worthless hide alive, so keep your mouth shut.”

I don’t feel the need to show affection or prove my connection to any of my Bonds, but I cover his hand with mine on my leg as a form of praise. His loyalty to me and our Bond has never been in question. It’s not his fault he was born in a pit of snakes. He came home the moment I called to him. He came for the girl and offered her comfort when she needed it.

The Everlasting One leans down to kiss my cheek, murmuring to me, “You’re glowing. It’s cute as fuck, but Black is sweating in the front over it, so you might want to work on it.”

I shake my head. “He can work to get over it. I’m perfect as I am.”

THE WALMART PARKING lot we pull into is in the middle of nowhere. Literally, there's fields full of cows surrounding us on all sides, and then a massive superstore just appears out of thin air.

When we park, Gryphon gets out first, doing the initial sweep. It takes a lot longer this time, mostly because he's vetting the hordes of people who are here shopping, and filtering through that many brains the way he does takes longer than searching out an empty warehouse or a road ahead of us.

When he meets my eye and jerks his head at me to join him, the Dark One gets out to open my door, his body shielding me as I work. There's no one here from the Resistance. There's no danger here at all, which I feel is more of a warning than a relief.

Where are they hiding, lying in wait for us?

Why won't they come out and play with me?

My Bonded looks down at me and when I nod at him for an all clear, he starts barking out orders to the Gifted surrounding us. They move the moment they have their directives, but when he gets to me I shake my head.

"Oli will go—"

"No."

Both of my Bonded turn to look at me, but my eyes stay on the side of the building where there's a driveway to the back for the receiving area. There's a large truck already around there being unloaded, and while there's nothing there so far, that is a warning to me. I don't like it.

I don't like it at all.

"Okay. Oleander, Draven, and Bassinger will stay here and help with the perimeter patrol while we get the supplies. No one get in my Bonded's way or approach her, especially when she's working. You don't want to catch her bond's interest, trust me."

There's a murmur of agreement and then they all move out. I couldn't care less about them or what we're actually here for.

I want that truck.

There's no need to say that out loud or to discuss a plan, I just stride over there, secure in the knowledge that mine will follow me. Of course they will, where else would they need to be when I am in their presence?

So they follow me and we walk together over to the loading area at the back of the huge building where the truck has caught my attention. I can't focus on anything else, which is all that needs to be said because I am a god.

I am never wrong.

The communicator in my ear makes a noise and then my Bonded's voice comes through clearly to me. "Do not leave her side. Whatever ambush they're planning, she's feeling it. *Do not leave her.*"

The Dark One answers, "We already had that figured out. No one is leaving her. Get the stock and get out of there. Keep your head in the mission."

I come to a stop in the center of the road about ten feet away from the truck. Both of my Bonds attempt to move me, but this is the spot. There is nowhere else to be right now and if any vehicle approaches, then that's an issue for them to deal with.

I cannot be moved.

We stand there and when either of my Bonds attempt to speak to me, I ignore them, waiting for the moment. I know it's coming. I know it as surely as I know that I must protect the girl. I will not be swayed from this spot until it comes. Whatever it is, whatever is coming for us, this is where I will deal with it.

I lose track of the passing of time.

I know that there's movement around me, a lot of Tac personnel approaching us and being redirected in their rounds as they patrol the area. I can feel their tension, the way that my *strangeness* and *otherness* is getting them all rattled. Even though they're all very well trained and aren't reacting to it, I can feel it.

I can taste it in the air.

My Bonded's voice comes down the comms again. "We're loaded and ready to go. I'll send the other two groups, ours can stay until Oli is done."

The driver speaks again, "I'm packed and ready to move, just give the word."

The Dark One replies, "She's fixated on the truck. We're not going to move until she's ready. We trust the bond above all else."

I almost preen at that, almost, but then there's a *pop* sound five feet in front of us and three men appear out of thin air. I don't recognize any of them, but I know who they are and what they're here for.

Me.

The girl *and* the being inside her.

My Bonds as well, if they can manage it.

"Little Render, you are proving to be quite the pain in the ass now, aren't you?" the older man in the middle says, his pockmarked skin stretching over his toothy grin a little too tautly.

I wave a hand and the souls of the other two men tear out without any real effort, their bodies falling to the ground with twin thuds.

The Dark One steps into my body a little closer, his shadows falling from his body like dark smoke on a lake in the clearest night. He looks like death immemorial and pride swells in my chest at the magnificent sight of him.

The Everlasting One is struggling to hold himself back, struggling not to throw himself over me because the urges to protect his most beloved Bond are so strong. I want to reach out to him, to comfort him and remind him that all of this is meaningless to me.

I just want to know what else the Transporter has to say because why else would they send us three men? Granted, the one still breathing is strong. Very strong, strong enough that I'm not just going to waste a good soul and tear it out.

No.

He's a delicacy, something worth taking and consuming slowly, piece by delicious piece.

"Well, well, not strong enough for me? You probably should have counted on us sending someone higher up than Franklin for you. He was the lowest of what we have. You're going to regret running. Oh, the things Silas is going to—"

"I'm done with this," I interrupt and reach out a hand, something to call the soul over to my body with. I don't need to do this when I cleave the souls out, when I'm just doing this to kill people. No, I let them disappear into nothing just like they deserve.

But this one looks yummy.

"What the fuck is she doing?" the Everlasting one mutters, but the Dark One doesn't answer. He's too busy watching me rend the soul away from the body and tuck it into my being for later.

As the last man's corpse lands on the ground, my Bonds both stand there for a second and then, when no one else *pops* into existence around us, the Dark One steps over to turn the body using his foot. His shadow walks around it with him, sniffing at the corpse as though he can get more information that way.

"That's Giles Andrews. He's one of Silas' favorites, a Transporter who has never been caught before. He doesn't have to touch you to move you, and his range is... *was* unmatched," the Everlasting One says, and the Dark One nods.

"He's been on our list for years. He was pivotal in the riots back in the seventies. He just removed half of the Resistance when things weren't going their way."

I step around the Everlasting One. "He's testing the girl and me. He's testing to see how much stronger we have gotten. Killing Franklin proved to him that we've Bonded and gotten stronger, but he's not going to come

himself unless he's sure he's still stronger, so he's sending in the others. Sacrificing them for information, and they're following his orders like the good little brainwashed sheep they are.”

The Dark One stops to look at me, his shadows still moving forward. “We need to talk about this.”

The answer to that is simple, especially with the voice that shares my mind chiming in. “The girl says no, so I will not. She says not right now, and you will agree to that.”

He blinks at me once and then nods slowly, and the Everlasting One looks between us in shock at the interaction.

I can feel the soul wriggling in my belly, waiting for me to take the time to properly consume it, but I will not take the risk while the girl is still out here in the open.

“Take us back to the safe place now. I’m hungry.”

They do as I say without another word shared between us, flanking me as we walk back over to the truck that is already on and ready to leave. My Bonded stares over the hood at me like he’s trying to pry everything out of my mind, but I just need the girl safe so that I can eat.

He nods and gets in the car, then we’re off, back on the road at breakneck speeds, leaving the bodies of the Resistance men behind like the worthless trash they are. No one speaks on the trip back, not any of my Bonds or the other two, not even the mouthy one.

I stay focused on my prize, right until the driver parks the truck. We get out as one and he Transports us back to the safe place. I can finally leave the rest of this to the girl.

Dinner time.

My bond leaves me in a rush, like a balloon deflating, and I double over as I retch. It hasn’t ever felt like this before, like the power of tearing that Transporter’s soul out and... *consuming* it has messed my stomach right the hell up.

I feel strong hands sweep my hair up and hold it away from my face. Even though nothing is actually coming up, it's sweet of North to attempt to help out with this.

When I stand back up, he tugs me into his arms, his hand moving from my hair to the nape of my neck to hold me close. "Motion sickness? Or the bond?"

"The bond. I think I'm processing the soul, which is the most horrifying sentence of the week. I can—it's *in* me. I can feel it there while my bond is snacking on it. Gross. I'm officially a mon—"

"Don't. Don't even mutter that word around me, Oleander. You just took out another key player in the Resistance arsenal, another Gifted we no longer have to factor into our plans thanks to you and your bond. I hate that you're going through this, but it will *never* make you a monster."

I want to believe him, and my bond agrees with him completely, but as I feel the squirming in the pit of my gut, it's not exactly easy. There's a living soul in there.

Someone's essence, their life force, the thing that makes them a human, and my bond is chomping away at it like a kid with a hefty slice of chocolate cake.

I don't want to think about it anymore.

I don't want to think about anything.

NORTH WALKS me back to the house and hands me one of the bottles of water we'd brought back, pressing it into the palm of my hand and then standing over me until I've drunk the entire lot. I have to threaten him to get him to leave me here alone and go back to his office, mostly because I don't want him hovering over me if I'm going to actually be sick.

Once he leaves, I climb into Gabe's bed and pull the blankets over my head, wallowing in his scents like a lovesick brat while I attempt to ignore the happy munching happening deep in my gut.

It's really disgusting.

Atlas finds me in there an hour later, huffing and rolling about like an idiot. When I glance up at him, just a little embarrassed about the state I'm in, he smiles at me, leaning against the door frame.

"How are you feeling? Are we about to take an epic nap?"

I sigh and pull myself up into a sitting position, shaking my head. "No, I'm trying not to have a freaking meltdown about this new and improved party trick my bond has pulled out. You can't even act like it's normal and fine, Atlas. I was still aware in there. I saw your face."

He grimaces a little and then takes a seat next to me, slinging an arm over my shoulder and pressing a kiss into my hair. "I was just shocked. It's not... something I've heard of before. I thought—I don't know what I thought it was doing, to be honest. What can I do, Sweetness? What can I do to make this better for you?"

I sigh and lean my head back to look at him properly. "I'm tired. I don't want to face everyone once North tells them all what happened, and they'll all want to talk about it. I'm also sick of living on top of each other. I'm irritable, and I know that none of this matters because we're safer here and protecting vulnerable people, but I'm so fucking sick of this shit."

He nods slowly and brushes the hair away from my face gently, looking so deeply into my eyes that I almost feel shy about the intimacy of it. "Use your mind link and tell North we're going for a ride on the ATVs. Tell him you're safe and that we'll stay in the view of the cameras the whole time. I know where they are; we can drive in their path. I think we all know that your bond has you covered even if something happens to me."

I raise an eyebrow at him but when he doesn't say anything else, I do as he asks. North is good about it, only replying, *Tell me when you're on your*

way back so that I know you're safe. Don't do anything stupid, Bonded.

Atlas shoos me out of the room and tells me he'll pack for us both and to go grab the ATV. I give him a curious look, but he just shoos me out of the house entirely.

I duck into the garage, looking for the keys I need, and find Gryphon already there with a helmet for me. When I roll my eyes at him, he just puts it onto my head for me and drawls, "As if I'd let you sneak off without saying goodbye. Bassinger is probably going to find a cave to hole up in for a month and I'll have to come looking."

Hmm.

I'd probably be okay with that. I let him buckle the strap before I reply, "You're not going to be mad at me for running away?"

He shrugs and adjusts the straps until the helmet is snugly in place. "Nope. I heard everything going on inside your head when it happened. You need a minute to figure that out, and you're going to get that minute, even if I have to use every trick in the book to keep North from coming out there after the two of you."

Well, shit. Now I want to break down and cry over his thoughtfulness. "I just need a break. I love you all, but I really need to breathe. And, like, a whole day of just dealing with one of you and not the whole bunch arguing about rationing and Tac bullshit."

His eyes are hot as he swoops down to kiss the life out of me, a blistering show of force that nearly sweeps me off of my feet. I have no idea of what prompted it but, hell, maybe I want Gryphon to come along for the ride too.

When he finally breaks away from my lips, he trails kisses from my shoulder up my neck to just under the strap until he can murmur into my ear, "I love you too, Bonded, but maybe you should have saved saying that to me for my night, because now I'm thinking about stealing you away and leaving Bassinger to himself."

I flush, realizing now what I said, but I snark back, “I don’t want to sleep in the hut, that’s the whole point. I feel like I’m... on show, twenty-four-seven, and it’s so freaking uncomfortable. I’m— it’s— I need a break.”

He nods and sucks on the skin under my ear. “We’ll figure something else out. We’re already doing what we can to get the big house done as soon as possible. Once you’ve Bonded with everyone, you’ll feel less... exposed.”

I scoff at him and snap, “Well, that’s never going to freaking happen, because Nox would rather cut his own dick off than sleep in the same bed as me, let alone Bond. Shit. Forget I said that and don’t you dare narc on me. I mean it, no Dravens.”

He bites the inside of his cheek like he’s stopping himself from speaking, but when I glare a little more, he nods. “Your secrets are safe with me. Even the ones in your head.”

He glances up as though he’s checking the door for anyone coming in to spy on us both, then leans down to whisper my deepest, darkest fantasies to me. “Like how much you want that orgy you’ve been dreaming of.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Atlas

I WATCH as the tension leaks out of my Bond's body more and more the further we get from the town site of the Sanctuary.

I have no real idea of where the fuck we are, other than the fact that we're still in the States, but there's a sandy sort of desertscape on the edges of the town and a warren of caves out here that I spent a few days walking through after we'd found my sister. I've been struggling just as much as Oli has been with the close quarters, especially with not having any sort of alone time with her thanks to Ardern sleeping a foot away from us in his own bed.

Not that I'm pushing for anything with her.

Never, and especially not while she's still battling the bond living inside her that is nothing like mine. I'm nothing like the men in my family, and I'm definitely not a fucking Draven.

Not that North has turned out so bad, but his brother? I'd kill him in a heartbeat if Oli gave me the word. I've been watching him closely enough to know his weak points, and those nightmares of his? They can restrain me, sure, but they're never really going to do damage.

I'd have his fucking neck snapped in a second.

"What's wrong? You're breathing like you're trying not to kill someone," Oli murmurs, her voice pitched low and sweet.

I calm down the second she opens her mouth. Her voice is more than enough to break me out of my murderous thought spiral.

"It might seem like I'm doing something extra thoughtful for you, but it's also pretty selfish. I needed this as much as you did."

She nods and looks out over the mountains that surround us, their peaks casting shadows over the entire valley. "I get that. The others all grew up

together and have had a whole lifetime to get used to living in each other's pockets. We're both sort of on the outside with that."

I catch her hand in mine and bring it up to my mouth to kiss the back of it. "It's worth it. All of it. Having you here safe is worth it all. As much as I loathe admitting it, Draven outdid himself with this place. It's like he knew that we'd need it for you, and he just did it. He just poured all of that Draven wealth into keeping our Bond safe... I can get behind that. I also didn't have to learn a new language just to keep you safe, which is handy because I barely passed Spanish at school. I'm really shit at pronunciation."

She giggles at me like I'm telling a joke, but I'm really not.

We get over the last of the small ridges to the opening of the first big cave, the one we'll be camping out in tonight that the cameras cover the opening of. It's clean and dry and secure, everything we need for a night out in the wild.

While also being completely safe at all times.

"How the hell did you ever find this? And are we taking bets on how long it takes someone to come find us, because I'm not sure we're going to make it the whole night." She giggles at her own joke, which is cute as hell, her eyes lighting up like she's already feeling giddy about our time alone.

That makes two of us.

I park the ATV and kill the engine, sitting back in the seat a little and letting the cool afternoon air wash over us both. "I took one of these things out when we brought Aurelia back from the camps. I just needed to clear my head, and then I found this place. I've been planning on bringing you out here since I found it, I just wasn't expecting you to be needing it so badly."

She looks over at me and grins, pulling off her helmet and getting out of the ATV to walk around the rocks. I point out the cameras to her so that she knows we're being watched and are safe enough here, and she waves to Sawyer.

And I'll bet North has a live feed of us directly into his office as well, but at least we have complete privacy inside the cave.

I grab the bags I'd packed from the back and follow her up to the opening. There's a small outlook there that is the perfect viewing point for the town lights and the giant, fortress-like concrete wall that North put up at either end of the valley to keep this place a secret from anyone who might stumble upon it.

I watch as the awe settles over Oli's face, and it's a fucking beautiful sight. Her eyes light up and she sort of backs her way up the path so that she doesn't have to look away from the view. The sun is already starting to fall into dusk, low over the trees, and the brilliant burst of oranges over the sky warms her skin in a gorgeous glow.

I take a photo of her.

Then I make it my background on my phone like a complete sap, because she looks like a fucking model, absolutely breathtaking and *mine*.

She glances over to me and blinks a little like she forgot what we were doing here. "Did you happen to bring dinner? I forgot about food during my bond's weirdness, but now it's taking a nap and I'm starving. I should've thought of that."

I grin at her and brush past her to put the bags down a little further into the cave where I'm sure they can't be seen by the camera. They're my maker, my way to know if I've set our bed up too close to the opening and Sawyer is getting a free show of my Bond sleeping.

Or of us at the very least making out, which would cause me to kill the man. He should never know the way that her cheeks pink up or the fall of her chest when she's struggling for breath because she'd rather the taste of my lips than oxygen.

I pull out the sandwiches I'd thrown together for us both as I'd packed and take one to her, holding it out and watching her face light up all over again. She's sweet behind all of the sass she throws at everyone. I feel smug

that I get to see it so often, a perk of being her safe place when the others were still up their own asses about her.

She giggles at the overloaded state of the sandwiches, the only way to eat them, and opens hers up right away, acting as though it's a big deal as she takes a bite. "My bond is having a field day right now. Two of my Bonds cooking me food in the same day? This is practically the dream."

Ah.

The old trick North had used to his advantage back when he was pretending to hate her. I'm still not convinced that any of his bad feelings were real because the way her treats her hasn't really changed, just the delivery and how it's received.

She's a lot better about doing what he says now they're Bonded.

"What are you thinking? You're frowning again," she mumbles with her mouth still full.

"You. I'm thinking about how to make things better for you here."

She walks over to the small ledge and sits down, hanging her legs over the edge and kicking them out. There's a small drop, only a couple of feet, but I park my ass next to her straight away in case she falls.

She'd probably barely scratch herself on the way down, but I'm not taking the risk.

She swallows her mouthful and says, "Things are fine. They're good, really. I'm not as scared anymore. I'm— okay. I mostly feel guilty now, but I keep telling myself that everyone is safe here, thanks to North pulling the trigger on the move. I don't think he would've if I wasn't in danger, so those kids running around that new school? They're safe, thanks to his need to protect me."

I scowl at her. "Why would you feel guilty?"

She groans and shoves the last of the sandwich half into her mouth like she wants to avoid the question. I wait her out, patient enough to plow

through the rest of my own sandwich while she chews at the pace of a geriatric.

“I’m not an idiot. I know that Davies will have a list somewhere with my Bond’s names on it. Yours? Not so much, thanks to your family, but the rest of them? A Shifter who can become any living animal? A Neuro like Gryphon, whose range is better than his? The Dravens, who need nothing more said but their name to strike terror in the population? Yeah, he knows about them all, but he’s never hunted them before. Not the way that he will now that he knows they’re in my Bond Group. Andrews was the very first, easiest test. They’re going to come, thick and fast, and I brought that on you all. I’m no real help around here because all of the work I’d be good at, North refuses to let me do because he’s... overprotective of me. I’m a liability with a bond who *eats souls*.”

I nod slowly, taking the last bite of my own sandwich and balling up the paper wrappings to pack away for recycling back in town. “Are you pissed at me as well then? Because I’m finding safety here too. My mom couldn’t keep my being here a secret forever. I’m sure now that Aurelia is gone, my dad and Peter have figured out that I’m here too. They’d have found me and killed me if I weren’t here. I know exactly nothing about building houses. I’m a security risk for joining a TacTeam, so I’m only allowed to go if I’m your protector. Other than my knowledge of the Resistance, I have nothing to offer this place, and even my knowledge is starting to run out. There’s not a huge amount of intel left to tell North and Gryphon. I’ve gotten all of the important shit out already.”

She frowns and bumps my shoulder. “There’s a million things you can do here. The best I can do is wash dishes in the food hall, which is fine! That’s work that needs to be done, but it also makes me feel like I’m letting everyone down. Gabe is literally building houses. He was tiling a bathroom while we were gone. We’ll have more space for people soon.”

I nod. I've been impressed with what he's been doing as well. I'm probably going to go over there to help out in the next few days as well, but my building knowledge is at a zero. I'm not great at taking instructions from surly, asshole men who think I'm an idiot, so I'm not expecting great things.

When I say this, Oli giggles and hands me the last of her sandwich. "Elliot is pretty great. He let me use a nail gun, and it's definitely the highlight of my building career so far. Is there a job where that's all I do? Just nail things?"

It's so cheesy, but I can't help it. "Yeah, nail me. That's literally the only job you really need to do here, Sweetness."

She snorts and rolls her eyes, the tiny dimples at the edge of her cheeks deepening beautifully, and I feel like I'm a fucking hero for getting them out of her like that.

"You're playing your cards right. If there's a comfortable bed in that bag of yours, I might even be tempted to second base."

Fuck second, I'm getting her naked and begging underneath me. Fuck, then I want to have her naked and begging *on top* of me. I want every variation of my Bond fucking me that I can get right now.

Her eyes flare and I know I'm doing a shit job of keeping my thoughts off of my face, but she's mine and it's impossible to not want her. Every part of her was made for me in a way that I've never really experienced before.

None of my family act like that.

My dad barely tolerates my mom's presence. Thomas is the same way. Three out of four of Aurelia's Bonded treat her like a power source and a pair of tits. It's why I hated them all so much, even before I figured the Resistance shit out for myself and realized that my family are the bad guys in every superhero movie ever.

None of them act with the worship I feel when I look at my Bond.

I take her hand and help her off of the ledge and back over to the cave. I get her settled on one of the small boulders there with a bottle of water and get to work unpacking the bed rolls and pillows I've brought out. There are solar lamps in there as well, and I set a couple of them up to light up the space for us. I do a quick sweep of the place just to be sure that no animals or creepy-crawlies have set up camp since I was last here because I'm not sure how Oli would react to a furry friend creeping up on us.

She watches me with a little smile, glancing over her shoulder at the view and the cameras every now and then. "Are you sure we're not going to be giving Sawyer a free show? He's a little *too* interested in all of my Bond's dicks for my liking, and I don't really want him getting an eyeful."

I shoot her a grin over my shoulder and nod. "I'm sure. I made him go through all of the cameras to map this place out. Is he still talking about us like that? I'll kill him for you."

She scoffs and slides off of the rock. "No. He hasn't in months, but you never really forget that sort of thing. We also can't kill one of our most trusted friends over a small amount of voyeurism."

I could.

I would, but I let it drop.

"How do you know so much about camping? I thought the Bassinger's were the type of filthy rich that comes with ski resorts and hotels on the water in the Bahamas."

"They are, but Jericho, Aurelia's one decent Bond, grew up on a farm. He took me camping a lot after they Bonded, mostly as an excuse to get away from my family. He's probably the only one of them who is actually missing her. I don't exactly feel sorry for her. She was at the camps and there's only a few things she'd be there to be doing, but she followed everything our parents told her to. Then she did everything her Bonds said. I guess... meeting you, knowing everything you've done, it's made me judge her a lot more harshly. You would never have let any of us talk you

into joining the Resistance. You'd... break your own heart to do the right thing. I know it. We all do."

She ducks her head like she's trying not to cry, and I move to duck down and fuss with the pillows to give her a minute. Normally I'd be up in her space, pulling her into my chest and trying to fix everything for her, but we're here because she's feeling like she's under a fucking microscope, so I'll cool off for a day.

I can handle a day.

"That's an awful lot of pillows," she says as she slides off of the boulder to come over.

I nod. "My mattress wouldn't fit on the ATV, I've already measured it."

She scoffs as she steps over to me, checking for the camera, so I pull her another step closer to be sure that it can't see her. I try to keep my expectations low, but she bites her bottom lip and I almost haul her up into my arms to find a good cave wall to fuck her against.

Calm down, Bassinger. Don't ruin it now.

Except I don't need to keep going with that pep talk because she tugs my hand until I duck down to meet her lips, my hands moving to her ass to pull her back into my chest. She feels so tiny against me, so fucking fragile, and it's been years since I worried about losing control of my gift and crushing someone, but when I feel her bond come out and brush against me as well, calling out to mine, I almost snap and lose my shit on her.

She feels too fucking perfect.

I barely break away from her to speak, and the whimper she lets out is my new addiction. "Tell me I can get you naked now, Sweetness. Tell me that you want this as much as I do, because I'm going to have to take a walk otherwise."

She giggles against my lips and nods. "I want you. I want this. I want to Bond with you and keep you forever. Even if it's selfish—"

I cut her off with another kiss, no more of that shit, and my hands move to get her shirt over her head. Her hands fumble against my clothes as we scramble at each other desperately. There's nothing practiced or suave about us, just two idiots who need each other more than they need air.

I've already seen her mostly naked. I had her in my arms with our chests pressed against each other as she pulled power from me to recover, but that moment was all about getting her well again. I'd had to threaten my dick so that I wasn't getting hard over my unconscious and mostly lifeless Bond.

Seeing her naked with her consent and participation is about a billion times fucking better, especially when she grins at me as she steps back to shove her jeans and underwear off in one go, kicking them away.

She grimaces when they end up a little too close to the cave opening, but I smooth down the silvery locks of her hair as I try to distract her back into us again, to forget about cameras and discretion and Sawyer's monitoring, because none of that shit matters.

I'm definitely not going to let that asshole bother her about it.

I run a reverent hand down her chest, between the swell of her breasts, and watch as she shivers, her nipples tightening up like an invitation. Everything about her is inviting actually, every inch of her is open and here and wanting.

Wanting me and what I'm so fucking ready to give her.

I finish unbuckling my jeans and belt, getting them off and placed a little closer than hers are, just in case. Just in case some fucking idiot shows up here and thinks about getting anywhere near my Bond.

She bites her lip again and I break, using my thumb to swipe along it and get her to stop. If anyone is biting that plump, pink flesh, it's going to be me.

I'm already as hard as fucking stone and I reach down to give my base a squeeze, something to hold off the load that is already growing heavy in my

balls at the mere sight of her.

Her eyes flick down to the movement and she grins at me. “Well, I already know how you like it.”

I grin back at her, groaning when she reaches over to knock my hand away as she wraps her fingers around the base of me. Her grip tightens and twists just how I like it. Her hand is smaller and softer than mine, and it does all the right movements. She’s seen how I like it, but my Bond actually doing it? I’m going to be lucky not to shame myself here.

“Turn around, Sweetness,” I say, grabbing her wrist and moving her around until she’s where I want her to be, braced with both of her hands flat against the rock wall behind us and her back arched perfectly.

Fuck, the sight of her smooth legs and pert ass pulls a groan out of my chest, bringing me to my knees behind her to finally get a taste of her. She makes a surprised sound and moves like she’s going to pull away from my mouth, but I get a firm hold of her hips to keep her right there while I feast on her until her slickness coats my tongue.

I might hate myself for fucking around while she was in the camps, but knowing how to make her legs shake like this is a definite perk.

As I eat her out from behind, her arms collapse until her face is pressed against the smooth rock of the cave walls, her hips pushing back against my tongue as she rides my face. Next time, I’m going to lay back and have her sit on my face so that I can watch her expressions and play with her tits while she rocks and grinds on my tongue exactly how she wants to.

When I slap her ass with one hand, the other keeping her spread open, she groans and rocks back, her body begging for more. She doesn’t have to beg, I’ll give her whatever the fuck she wants.

When I move to roll her clit with my tongue, her thighs clenching around my shoulders like she’s trying to pull me in closer, she starts begging, her words more moans than anything coherent. “Atlas, fuck, I

can't— I need to come with you. I need to Bond with you, please, please, fuck, *please*—”

I can go straight to hell right now as a complete man. Her words ring in my ears as I stand up, my hands staying on her hips, before I move her over to the blankets and pillows, her back tight against my chest even as I curve over her to kiss her again. She's not worried about her wetness all over my lips and chin. If anything, I think she likes it. When she tries to turn around in my arms, I stop her with a hand on her chest until I get us both kneeling on the bedroll amongst the pillows and blankets.

I hold her there with that hand on her chest as I use the other one to line my dick up with her dripping pussy, pushing in as easy as fucking pie because she's already shaking with her need to Bond. Her need to come with me, to come on my cock and seal us together for the rest of time.

One last kiss and then I push her down until she's on all fours, my hips picking up the pace until I'm pounding into her, the wet sounds of us echoing around the cave. Thank fuck the cameras don't have microphones because neither of us are even trying to keep it down, her moans like music to my ears.

I run my hand down her spine, enjoying the way that she flexes up into it, and when I get to her head, I grab a fistful of her hair, jerking her head back to bend her back to my lips as I kiss her, my tongue fucking her mouth the same way my that cock is pounding her pussy.

She makes the best noises, like she's been surprised to be taking everything I'm giving her, but also terrified that it's going to stop before she comes.

Her bond is ready to burst inside of her.

I can feel it growing and swelling inside of her, racing to get out of her and take me over the moment we come together and Bond. My own bond is pushing at my skin, reaching out for hers and ready to be tied to her forever. I'm almost angry that it's happening so quickly, that they're both so

desperate to be with each other that they're pushing us both right to our limits.

I don't want this to end.

Oli's arms wobble a little and then she ducks down to rest on her elbows, biting the pillow when I slap a pink patch on her ass again. The skin there is hot when I rub my hand back over it, but the rhythmic clenching of her pussy on my cock tells me everything I need to know about whether my Bond likes a little pain with her pleasure.

It also pushes me right over the edge, my hand slipping around her hips to brush over her clit and pull her right over with me, into the greatest orgasm of my life. Not only because it's with her, my Sweetness, but because the euphoria in my bond at finally connecting with our other half has me seeing stars.

I almost pass the fuck out.

That's embarrassing, but Oli just collapses underneath me into the blankets, my body following hers like she's the goddamn sun. Her body trembles as her breaths come out in sobs and her skin glows unnaturally as my bond washes over her and gives her *everything*. Fuck, she writhes there on my cock and I almost come again.

I didn't even know that was possible.

I wait until I can see again and then I pull out, taking her into my arms and bundling her into my chest, kissing her soundly on the lips even though she's still barely coherent. The haze settles over her eyes and, fuck, it's incredible to see. As much as it had grated on me to see on her after she'd Bonded with Gryphon... when it's my Bond she's settling into, it's fucking amazing. When it's my neck she's wrapping her arms around tightly so that I won't even let her go... I could die the happiest Bonded on Earth right now.

There's a moment right after our bonds settle and slip away from us that I see the panic rise a little in her, the terror of what might happen if she gets

stronger, and I have to clamp down my own feelings about her bond in that moment. I have to shut down the frustration that it's scared her this badly with everything that it's done, because it was all to keep her alive and as safe as it could manage.

It's my family that I should hate.

She blinks rapidly, trying not to let the tears fall, and scrubbing at her cheeks when they do regardless. "You promise not to regret this, right? Even if— even now that my bond will get stronger and start something else new and gross?"

I stoop down a little so we're eye to eye, grabbing the back of her neck in one hand gently so that I'm sure I have all of her attention. "Oli, I need you to listen to me right now, because I've never been so fucking serious about anything in my life. You're my Bond. If you get stronger and burn the whole world to the ground, then I'll be there at your side, watching it burn. I'm not the good guy, Oli. I'm not one of the Dravens or Shores of the world. It's you and me, and *nothing* else matters to me."

She ducks her head back down into my chest and I can feel the tears there. She's had a long day, but it still rips me apart that she's feeling like this. "Don't cry, Sweetness. Don't cry, because it makes me feel violent, and this whole town is going to end up rubble around us if I lose my shit right now."

My lips chase the hot stream of tears down her cheeks and, fuck, I would do anything to take this fear and pain away from her. Anything to stop this world from hurting her any more than it has. Every time I shut my eyes, I can see her laying on that table with Silas fucking Davies standing over her with a knife, and I can't take it anymore.

"Oli, I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life... except for how badly I want you to be safe. I want you as strong as we can get you, even if that means your bond starts eating every soul it comes across. Does that make me as bad as my father and the rest of the

Resistance? Maybe. Maybe, but that's the price I'll happily pay. The road to hell for me is paved with everything I would do for you, and that list never fucking ends."

I WAKE up just before dawn to pee. I hate to leave the comfort of the blankets and my Bonded, but when I get back to the cave entrance, the dawn sky brightening around us, Oli looks perfect laying there on her stomach amongst the blankets.

There's one thrown over her waist and ass like she was attempting to be modest as we fell asleep together but failed miserably at it. Her hair is fanned out and her cheeks are a little rosy from the warmth of the cave. It was the perfect night, one I don't want to leave behind any time soon.

I want to remember this moment forever.

I would take a picture of her there, but I'm monitored by the Dravens and Benson so much that they'd end up seeing it, and this moment isn't for them. This is for me and my beautiful Bonded, glorious and dangerous that she is, and I wouldn't share it with any of them even if my life depended on it.

I grab my phone out from my jeans where they lay forgotten on the cave floor after I kicked them off last night. There's a voicemail from an unknown phone number blinking there, and dread pools in my gut.

I have no loyalty to my father after everything the man has done. I have nothing for my mother's other Bonded either, but my mother... she tried. For the wrong reasons, but she's the same brainwashed human that my sister is too.

Aurelia.

I don't want it to be one of her Bonded on the line either. I've been chasing my own demons for so fucking long that it's almost impossible not

to feel shitty over every little part of this.

There is a little bit of guilt too because I know I'm on the right side of history now, and I will always choose my Bonded. I will always choose my Bonded, no matter what happens here.

I glance over my shoulder at her again and enjoy the sight one last time without the bullshit waiting for me on my phone clouding the moment. She sighs in her sleep as though she can feel my eyes on her, rolling over onto her back, and the blanket slips away from her body until she's completely bared to me.

Fuck, she is magnificent.

I know that it's natural for a Bonded to think that way, but Oleander Fallows is the most gorgeous woman I've ever laid eyes on. Every inch of her was created to draw me in, and there was never a world in which I'd choose my family's suicidal ideology over her.

I turn back to my phone and step out of the cave, wearing nothing but my boxer shorts in the sticky night air.

"Son, you need to stop and think very carefully about what you're doing here. I get it now. I understand what you were so angry about, but we need the girl. You're thinking with your bond too much. Take a step back and look at the bigger picture here."

Useless fucking drivel.

How he ever thought he'd be able to convince me to sell out my own Bonded with this is unfathomable. Is this all it would take for him to sacrifice mom? Cold fingers of dread creep down my spine. Thomas would never. I take a deep breath, secure in the knowledge that even if my father has fallen this far from what is right in the world, at least mom's other Bonded wouldn't.

He's loyal to the Resistance, but not above her.

I can hear someone trying to get through to me while I listen to dad's voicemail one last time, hoping for some indicator of what he's got planned,

but I let it go to voicemail as well.

The moment I play the newest recording, I wish I'd picked the damn thing up.

Mom's voice is strong down the line. "Call me. Your father is coming for you, and he's not thinking straight. Peter is with him. Neither of them are thinking straight, Atlas. Call me back and... keep the girl away from them. If they get her, they'll use you both."

Peter.

My sister's asshole Bonded that I once caught slapping her. When I confronted him about it, he laughed at me, told me she was indestructible and could take a hit.

I broke his skull in four places.

It took three Healers hours to stop his brain from being permanently damaged. Aurelia didn't speak to me for a month. She told me I'd understand when I found my Bonded, but the very idea of *anyone* raising their hand to Oli makes me sick.

There's no way they can find us, no way that they can actually make it through the Shields, but I hit dial on North's number anyway, my loyalties firmly with the beauty over there on the floor of the cave with me.

In the distance, with the sun rising slowly over the wall, I see the massive gates swing open right as Draven picks the line up. All the security measures in the world mean nothing when they have someone on the inside.

"They're here, and someone has just let them in."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Oli

I WAKE TO ATLAS' stern voice, my brain taking a second to process exactly what he's saying.

“Oli, get up and get dressed. The gates are open, the Shield is out, and we need to get moving right now.”

I jolt up out of bed as he hands me my clothes, his jeans on but still unbuttoned and his shirt tucked under one of his arms as he throws himself together.

Unfortunately, it's not the worst joke Atlas has ever told because North's voice floods my head in a demanding sweep. *Stay where you are, Bonded. Stay there until we have this taken care of. Stay safe with Bassinger.*

I wrench myself to my feet, stumbling a little on the blankets and stuttering over my words. “How? Someone had to let them in, have you called—”

He cuts me off, shoving his shirt over his head before he starts helping me with my clothes. “Sawyer and I both called North at the same time. The TacTeams are already mobilized. We just need to get dressed and be ready if we need to move out. You heard North, we're staying put.”

It takes me a second to realize he's heard North talking to me, that he is also a part of the mind connection I share with the other two, which is both daunting and a relief.

I like the connections, but he's the most likely to argue with the other two about the things that they say to me using that form of silent communication.

The moment I'm completely covered, I follow Atlas back to the mouth of the cave to look back over at the town. If I had any doubt about what Atlas was saying to me before, I certainly can't deny what's happening right

there in front of my eyes. We watch in horror as the Resistance pour through the open gates, dozens of trucks and more than a hundred armed and lethal Gifted soldiers here to kill, abduct, and maim.

Our Shield has betrayed us... or someone has taken them out. Either way, hundreds of enemy Gifted are here and the entire town are sitting ducks, sleeping in the early morning in the so-called safety of their new homes.

There's children in the town.

A lot of the lower families who had come along were mostly Bond Groups with kids who were rattled after the last raids, none of them are prepared for this sort of thing.

"We can't just... sit here and wait. *I* can't do that."

Atlas turns to me, but my eyes have already shifted to the black voids. My bond hasn't fully taken over and it won't unless I am in pain, but I'm not going to run away from this fight. No matter how much my Bonds would like me to.

Good girl, my bond purrs to me, and I feel all three of my Bonded have very strong reactions to that.

"Oli, if we go back to the town, you're only going to be a distraction to your Bonds and Bonded. We need them all focusing on taking out the Resistance—"

"No. They can watch me do it," my bond says, and I shake my head a little to clear it, my eyes shifting back so I can speak for myself.

"Sorry, I'm not going to wait around here while people die. If there's one thing you should know for sure about me by now, Atlas, it's that I'm not going to sit around and wait to be rescued."

He doesn't like that answer one bit, but he walks over to the bags that he'd brought out with us and pulls out the same guns that he'd been assigned when we were on the supply run. I have absolutely no interest or use for a gun, so when he tries to talk me into one, I just scowl at him and

lift my hand up as though he can see the soul-sucking gift writhing under my skin at the prospect of the carnage we're about to walk into. He nods without another word and climbs into the ATV, buckling me into it before he takes off.

“Can you do the net thing you do? Just to be sure they haven't started scouting for us yet? My dad was the one who called this morning, there's a good chance he's here looking for me.”

Shit. Is now the time to talk about the fact that I might have agreed to keep his sister breathing... but his dad? Dead and gone the second I can get within gift usage distance, which is relatively far away these days.

When I mention this to him, he rolls his eyes and snaps, “Well, obviously, Bonded. Anyone who came here today is fair game, even my mom if she tagged along to work her diversion bullshit.”

With that shit out of the way, we get to work, him driving like a maniac and me scouting. North feels it the second I cast it out, thanks to his creatures and shadows already being spread out throughout the town, taking down Resistance soldiers like the good babies they are.

Tell Bassinger I will make his death a painful and messy affair.

I press my lips together to keep the giggle in. *He can hear you. Also, he's just doing what my bond told him to, can't blame the man. It's persuasive.*

He doesn't find that funny at all. When we get within a mile of the town's edge, I motion for Atlas to park. Good thing I've been training with Gryphon for all of these months, because I can run an eight minute mile without completely dying, so we're going to get into this town and deal with anyone and everyone we come across.

Stay with me, Oli. We're doing this, but we're doing it together.

I turn to look at him and hold out my pinkie finger, something stupid to break the tension out of the air. I feel calm about this for once. I'm not a liability or the one doing the harm here.

I'm going to *save* people.

He scoffs at me but links his pinkie with mine all the same, using it to tug me into his body to kiss me one last possessive time, and my body has a little flashback to the earth shattering orgasm from last night.

I was hoping for at least two more this morning, and that disappointment is enough to kill a whole army of Resistance soldiers.

Atlas keeps pace with me, and we make it three minutes into the run before we come across the first soldier. My gift net is still out and even without it, my bond flags the guy wearing black with blood on both of his arms as the enemy.

He moves to lift his hand, but before my bond can deal with him, a black mass the size of a bear appears suddenly out of the shrub and devours him, its jaws opening to the size of a small car and just swallowing the guy whole.

Atlas gets an arm around my waist and yanks me behind him, lifting me clean off of my feet, but I'm too busy trying to fight off a nervous giggle to be really worried.

The black mass turns to look at us, the form shimmering and folding in on itself until August is left standing there, his tail wagging behind him and a mysterious green liquid dripping from his jaws.

"*Baby!*" I whisper as I drop down to greet him, Brutus coming down from behind my ear to sniff at his brother while I give them both pets and scratches. Atlas pokes around the area like he's expecting to find pieces of the guy left behind.

I already know there's not anything to find.

Not there, anyway. But the group of four more soldiers coming our way need to be dealt with.

I straighten back up and step over to his side, murmuring quietly, "There's more coming. I'm just going to deal with them and anyone else that comes our way."

He straightens up and comes over to stand with me, just a little in front of me before he nods. “Do it. Leave no one behind, but let me know when you’re starting to tap out.”

I swallow roughly, his words rattling me, but not for the reasons that he would guess.

I don’t tap out. My gift *never* taps out.

The souls I take just give me more power.

I swallow again and reach out to kill the men, taking their souls without another thought, and my bond doesn’t attempt to eat these ones, thank God. The moment their bodies hit the ground, I tug on Atlas’ hand to get us moving.

We’re close enough now to hear the chaos and screaming coming from the town.

“Stay at my side, Oli, *please*,” Atlas says with the low level demand that I’m starting to read a little more clearly from them all.

They’ve figured out that I’m a do-it-my-own-way kind of girl, and they’re all alpha men who don’t really want to have to play along nicely with that sort of attitude.

In the mix of the gifts flying around, it’s hard to clearly pick out who is Resistance and who are the Tac personnel, especially since most of them are wearing civilian clothes, thanks to the dawn ambush. I duck behind an overturned car to dodge a giant ball of electricity that is thrown my way, and Atlas moves with me to cover, zigging at the last second to avoid being burnt by the retaliating stream of fire a Flame sends back. We’re separated, but only by a couple of feet.

It’s not so bad.

When another car goes flying, right towards a group of Gifted who are huddled behind a half-destroyed wall, he lurches up and catches it mid-air, as easily as you’d catch a tennis ball.

It’s fucking incredible.

I've got them, just focus on the net. Take them out, Sweetness. The faster you do it, the safer we all are.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to focus, asking my bond to kick in just a little and help out with this, and even through the deafening sounds of the fighting, I hear the click of a hammer pulling back on a handgun a few feet away from myself.

I turn, but then there's a hot spray of blood over my face as a bullet hits the woman directly between the eyes, instant lights out for her. It's a little bit traumatizing, just a smidge, but only because the death I would've given her was less messy.

Harrison grabs my arm and jerks me out of the way. "If you're not going to go full death demon on us, then you might want to go wait somewhere safe. Where's Bulletproof Boy gone?"

Brutus stares up at him, waiting for my command to kill the operative for touching me, but August is a little more trigger-happy and snaps at his ankles savagely. I try not to giggle at the sound Harrison makes. He stays standing, apparently catching a bullet to his own head is preferable to crouching down closer to the pups.

I duck at the sounds. "My bond is very pro 'death to everyone' and I'm trying to make sure we don't lose anyone to friendly fire. Where the fuck are the rest of my Bonds?"

I could just ask them with our mind connection, but I really don't want to distract any of them and get them hurt. Plus, that would only get me my Bonded.

I'm also itching to know that Gabe and even Nox are okay and have backup in this freaking mess.

Atlas uses the hood of one of the destroyed trucks to barricade the Gifted into one of the houses, securing them the only way we can here, while I pick off the Resistance in this area of the town methodically. I'm careful, and with my bond's help, I'm sure of my choices.

Harrison's murmur of praise at my work as he watches over the truck reinforces my choices.

"Good work, kid. If only you were Bonded to someone other than Draven, you'd be a fucking massive asset."

Atlas stalks over and helps me back onto my feet. "Draven doesn't decide what Oli does. If she really wants to, then we're here cleaning up. Now, where the fuck is Ardern? We're going after him next."

I like his choice, and I let them talk through town routes while I extend my nets, slowly reaching out and cleaning up more of the soldiers on the edges of where we are.

I feel Sawyer in the security room at the base of North's office, the elevator going down to the basement there, and there's no question that I need to get a look at those screens.

Could I use them and clear everything out? Maybe. It's definitely worth a try.

WE FIND Sawyer in an absolute mess in front of his computers in his underwear, blood still dripping from a gash on his forehead. He doesn't look up as we walk into the room. He's the one who opened up the security door for us, so he knew we were coming.

The moment we step into the room, my mouth drops open at the sight of the screens in front of us.

The town has been blown apart.

Either there's been explosives used, or the Resistance has sent in someone with a truly destructive gift, because there are entire buildings with holes in the side of them and paths with giant craters in them, as if a bomb had gone off.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, and Sawyer doesn’t look up from his keyboard to answer me.

“North is clearing out the first five zones, his creatures have it under control. I’ve never seen someone last this long but every time it looks as though he’s flagging, something happens and he gets a kick back.”

Atlas glances at me and I raise a finger to my lips.

I already knew it was happening, I could feel it. The more souls I take, the more power there is for me to send his way.

“Gryphon and his TacTeam are moving through six to ten. Nox is with them, but he’s in full Draven nightmare mode and torturing everyone he comes across.”

I nod and step forward to stand right behind him. “And Gabe? Where’s he holed up?”

“The schoolhouse. He got out of the house early, grabbed everyone he could, and got them over there. He’s protecting at least a third of the town population there. North and the others have been finding people and sending them over to him, escorting when they can or just getting them to make a run for it. We’ve had casualties in the civilians, but it could have been a hell of a lot worse. Kieran found Sage early on and has her holed up in one of the trucks, and Felix is barricaded in the medical rooms.”

I take a breath, a deep one, and then he finally looks at me. “Oli, I need you to find Gray. Everyone else is accounted for. I can’t see him, but he was in the kitchens helping out with the changes with the water supply, please just find him—”

That I can do. Sawyer has been here the whole time keeping my men safe, there’s no way I’m leaving family behind. “I’ll get him here, don’t worry about it. Sawyer! You keep my Bonds safe, and I’ll get your man here safe, I swear it.”

He looks at me for a second longer and then nods, turning back to the computers and putting on his earpiece again to listen in to the Tac chatter

there. I know he'll keep everyone as safe as he can, but I also know that he's going to prioritize our family.

Our family, because that's what we do.

So now I have to get Gray back here safely. I already know he can hold his own, but the Resistance only ever sends in their biggest and best fighters, so he needs some goddamned backup.

Atlas, who is standing at the door, cursing under his breath, mutters desperately, "Oli, please stay here with Sawyer and let me go. This place is a fort and you can just guide me—"

Absolutely not. "No. I'm the biggest weapon we've got. I'm not running scared anymore."

Atlas scoffs and lets his head drop back against the wall behind him, muttering under his breath, "You never did. You never fucking did, Sweetness."

Atlas grabs another gun from the cabinet next to Sawyer, and throws the holsters over his shoulders. There's a full Tac uniform in there but it'll be too small for him, and I refuse to change now. I don't need the superhero outfit, I need the range for my arms, but I do take an earpiece. Sawyer does too, shoving an extra one in his pocket, and then we get our asses out of there.

I keep the net out and kill every Resistance soldier that I come across the second I hit them. Word that I'm here and that I'm hunting seems to spread quickly, and through the comms I hear comments of Transporters making speedy exits. They haven't taken anyone with them so far, but we're on guard nonetheless.

We get through the debris and corpse-filled streets easily enough and find Gray in the kitchens, exactly where Sawyer had last seen him, holed up in one of the walk-in fridges along with the chef and half a dozen other kitchen staff. Atlas gives him the spare comms and then we all regret it

when Sawyer cusses him out very openly and unabashedly for daring to be somewhere that wasn't covered by the cameras.

I have no doubt that North will be finding room in the budget for more in the very near future.

We make the choice that Gray is safer here than us trying to move him, and with a way to get intel from Sawyer and a gun from Atlas, he'll be able to protect himself and those with him.

He's also Telekinetic and could for sure kill a man if he needed to, we have no doubts.

I take the risk and open up to call out to my Bonded, praying that I'm not going to get either of them killed.

We're going to find Gabe now. Do either of you need anything?

Gryphon answers first, *Come grab Sage and get her over to the schoolhouse. She's a distraction for Black, and he's useless to me with her here.*

Easily done, I definitely want her out of the firing line anyway. *On my way.*

North takes a second longer to reply and I feel the tendrils of guilt in my stomach at his words. *Should I expect my power to go on forever? Or just until the Soul Rending is done? Exactly how strong are you, Bonded?*

Atlas glances at me again and shakes his head, more than happy for there to be secrets for only us to keep. I already know we can't live like that.

There is no limit. Or at least, I've never found one.

Atlas curses under his breath again, but I move forward, taking all of the right turns towards zone six. I might be freaking horrendous at directions, but my bond is good, and it can follow the invisible strings that connect me to my Bonded easier than breathing.

It almost becomes soothing, the sounds of the bodies dropping to the freshly poured pavement. I become completely numb to the meaning of it,

my bond quietly pleased as we take the energy and funnel it to our Bonded. Atlas' skin begins to glow softly next to me, but he's too focused on protecting me to notice it.

The moment we get to where the last of the fight is, I let my eyes flash to the voids and trust my bond to take out the last of the Resistance soldiers there. I can see the relief on half of the TacTeam there, all of them looking a little haggard and worn out.

Except, of course, for Nox, who looks up from the corpse he's now holding in place of the man he was *creatively questioning* and sneers at me.

Great.

He stands up in a rush, beating Gryphon to me, and Atlas pulls me back into his arms like he's trying to get me away from the Bond.

"Why the fuck are you risking yourself out here? Do you want the Bond Group to fucking implode just because you're bored and don't want to sit somewhere safely for an hour while we sort it out?" he snarls at me, shoving his gaiter down his throat so that all I see on his face is the significant rage thrumming so clearly through him.

"Because it's my fucking fault! Do you think I'm going to let them take other people just because I escaped? They were killing *children* the last time."

Nox snorts and my eyes snap up to meet his. There's a ring of black around them, his bond sitting just below the surface, and the smirk on his face is savage and mocking. "You think this is the first time they've killed children? Well, I suppose usually they just grab them. Half the Resistance is made up of stolen and brainwashed kids. Davies started taking them thirty years ago. Those Gifted you killed today *are* those kids... they're just old enough now that you didn't think twice."

My stomach drops so quickly that I think I'm going to puke all over Atlas' shoes, my head spinning and my moral compass once again taking a hit.

Gryphon's temper snaps and he gets right up in Nox's face, crossing the invisible lines that they usually leave securely in place. "Don't fucking say that shit to her! If you're worried about what's happening, then deal with it. She is not your fucking punching bag. North won't save you this time."

Atlas' arms tighten around me, and I realize I'm shaking. I killed all of those men and women. I killed them. Without thought, I just ripped all of their souls out of their bodies. They could have been anyone.

Children and parents, siblings, every last one of them have family somewhere, and I just... didn't fucking care.

I really am the monster they all called me.

I'm the fucking monster.

Gryphon pulls me around again and cups my chin. "Go find Gabe. We'll finish off here and get the gates secured again. We have another Shield on the way. You go to Gabe. Ignore all of this shit, Bonded. It's all just bullshit that doesn't matter anyway. They came here to kill us all, you've done nothing wrong."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Gabe

I CAN'T SEE Oli from where I am in my shifted form, but Gryphon's reassurance filtering into my brain that he's heard from her, that she's alive and ripping people's souls out left and right, is the only thing keeping me from abandoning the people here and running to her. The impulse to find and covet her is strong, but I have a job to do and I need to trust the rest of the Bond Group.

It's a good thing too, because there's a lot of Healers and low level Neuro types running towards me for safety that would be decimated by the gifts being thrown around.

There's a Charge around here somewhere, blowing holes in the sides of buildings, and I'm feeling particularly shitty about it after a week of working on the damn things.

I have to shift back into human form to call out to the terrified crowd and direct them to safety. They blink at me like rabbits caught in headlights, a giant naked guy will do that to a person, but I open the doors up to the school to usher the newcomers in and they go quickly enough. I send them down to the storm cellar underneath the building with the rest of the Gifted that I've found and stashed under there. It's mostly women and children and Top Tier idiots who are too scared to fight for our town and our community.

There are going to be a lot of changes around here once we've dealt with this nightmare.

The moment I get the door shut and barricaded behind them, dragging a slab of concrete from the debris in front of the door for extra protection, I shift back into my largest panther form and jump down from the small porch to join the other shifters, sniffing at the air as the next wave rolls in.

North and the others are doing a great job of keeping most of the fighting away from us, but there's a group of Transporters here bringing in

wave after wave of soldiers, and there are too many slipping through to us for me to leave and join the fight.

In my fully shifted form, I can tear through three men at a time, which is helping keep the crowd at bay. Ezra shifting behind me into the tiger form he has and being able to take out one at a time also helps. Elliot stoops down to place his palm on the ground, sending a sheet of ice that grows out of his fingers to cover the ground and freeze the approaching soldiers, making them easy game for me to rip in half.

It's messier than the other deaths, but there's something very satisfying about doing it.

There's a quiet moment, a lull in the hordes of insurgents around us, and then I turn towards the footsteps coming up quickly from behind. Kyrie has a scrape down one of her cheeks, a split lip, and a child she's found somewhere tucked under one of her arms, but her eyes are clear and she's still sharp as she looks around the side of the school building, spotting me and deflating a little in relief.

She helps the kid onto the porch and then winces a little as she pulls herself up. "Tell me you have guns here as well? I only had three in my room, and I'm already out of ammo."

I jump up to lead her over to the pile of clothing I'd torn off to shift, and she stoops down to grab two of the guns and some clips that I'd grabbed and brought with me when North had called.

She sweeps her hair back into a ponytail, all business and looking so much like her brother with the no-bullshit look on her face. "There's some houses on the edge of zone three, just over there, and there's people trapped in there. They have kids, and they're too scared to move them without an escort. I'll go now. I have an earpiece, and that Benson kid has been directing me."

I drop my head down in a nod, because I'm not going to shift back and have this conversation butt-ass naked with her. My bond ripples in my chest

at the idea and the seething sort of jealousy that Oli's bond had shown around us makes it a non-option.

If her bond is out here tearing souls out, I'm not going to provoke it into hurting Kyrie.

There's a boom as the Charge takes out another building, one of the trucks they'd rolled in here lifting into the air and landing a few feet away in a charred and smoking mess. I jerk my head at Kyrie to get her moving and jump back down to where the others are waiting.

The next wave of Resistance arrives in front of us, guns and hands raised as they begin firing at us but the bullets bounce off of an invisible barrier. We might not have a Shield hiding in the school strong enough to protect the entire Sanctuary, but there are three mothers and a father in there doing everything they can for their kids, and I would protect them over the Top Tier Flame bureaucrat shitting himself next to them any day of the fucking week.

The barrier isn't enough to keep them away from us though, but we've been at this for over an hour, so we know how it works. I focus on the bulk of the soldiers while the other two grab whoever I miss. It's bloody work, but it's also cathartic, taking out every last ounce of my frustration on these fucking pieces of shit who came here after our most defenseless population.

When I've taken out the six men who crossed the barrier, I look up to find the Charge there, hand out as if he's about to blow a fucking crater into the ground where I'm standing.

Except then Oli strides around the corner with her hand up and her eyes voided out. There's nothing here that my Bond can't handle. Dozens of the Resistance fall as one until there's no one left for me to deal with. I watch Ezra and Elliot both drop back, moving away from her with a look of fear in them so strong that even shifted, you can tell they're shitting themselves.

I think she just looks hot as fuck.

"Ugh, what was that? That guy there, what was his power?"

I glance down and then shift back to my human form, enjoying the little squeak she lets out at the sight of me. I glance around but there's only the building workers still out here, and I don't think she'll give a shit about them. "He was a Charge. A living bomb. He's the one doing all of the damage. He flipped a truck over on a few of Gryphon's guys early on, and North has been working at pushing him back this whole time. He had a Shield working with him but... well, that's the other guy you just took out."

Oli looks around, very scandalized about my dick still being out, and says, "Shift back! There's cameras everywhere, and I don't want Sawyer talking about how fantastic your ass is."

Bassinger snorts and shakes his head, drawling, "I don't think it'll be his ass—"

"Don't even suggest his dick right now! I'm doing what I can to distract my bond, and talking about it isn't helping, Atlas!" she snaps, and I shift back, easy as breathing, to butt my head against her legs. I'd shifted to talk to her, sure, but also because I wanted to take a second to just hold my goddamned Bond.

Alive and massacring the enemy like they deserve. We're all fucking *blessed*.

She crouches down to wrap her arms around my neck, burying her face there. "Sorry. I want to talk to you but... you're also mine and I'm not sharing."

It's a good thing too because right as she sighs with relief at having me back, Kyrie pops back up with a couple of families, at least a dozen kids between them, and starts moving them back towards the school. Brutus jumps over to sniff at them as they walk and a couple of the kids squeal and burst into tears at the sight of him, their parents scooping them up in fear.

Kyrie nips that in the bud. "The beast is back again? Shit. It's okay, kids. He's a friendly pup. That's his mama over there. She wouldn't let him misbehave. He won't hurt you, he's here for the bad guys."

Everyone who has an earpiece turns to stone for a second, hearing something from Sawyer, but my feline hearing can only pick up the high frequency noise of the technology.

Oli lets out a sigh and tucks her face back into my neck. “I got the last of the Transporters. North just took out the last of the soldiers in his zones, and Gryphon has the gates back in place.”

Atlas nods and takes a step towards the corpse of the Charge. “They got the new Shields in. We have three backups now, instead of one. That should help.”

Oli’s stomach makes a noise and I move back a little so that I can look at her, ready to go hunt for something to feed her if she needs it after all of the power she’s used, but she looks sick.

“Ignore it. My bond... is eating the Charge’s soul in there. He was the strongest Gifted here, and even stronger than Andrews. I guess we just passed the next strength test.”

Well, fuck.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Oli

WE WAIT in front of the school with Gabe and the other Shifters until the Shields have the Sanctuary completely covered. Sawyer gives us the all clear before we let the families out of the school and start moving people to the medical center.

Gabe, who is once again dressed in his sleep sweatpants and one of Atlas' sweaters that he'd grabbed in his rush to get down here, has a kid on each of his shoulders as he helps to move people who are injured or low mobility. Atlas has a man draped over his own shoulders who has been shot in the leg and very crudely patched up by one of the useless Healers in the storm shelter. He is still doing his best not to groan at every little movement.

None of the families want to touch me.

I'm okay with that, but both of my Bonds take it a little personally on my behalf.

Kyrie snorts at them and jiggles a little to adjust the toddler on her hip. "The Dravens get the same treatment. It's just fear. Even knowing you were the pivotal piece of our victory, they can still sense that something *else* is walking with them."

I shrug and pet down August's back, ruffling his ears a little, exactly how he likes it. "I know. That's survival instinct for you, I would stay away from me too."

I don't tell her that I'm fine with it because Nox verbally tore me a new asshole less than an hour ago and that shit is still stinging like a bitch, because then Atlas will drop the guy he's holding and just go full kamikaze on him for my honor.

I don't need that.

So I put a smile on my face and keep the puppies close to my legs. There's no point in scaring people more by letting them roam freely.

When we get to the medical center, which is in the main area of town and across the way from North's offices, we find the TacTeams mostly congregating there, and I can duck off to find my Bonded.

I need to find North and see him alive and well for myself, thank you very much.

He's easy to spot, being the most highly sought after person in the town while also being terrifying enough to require a two foot personal bubble from everyone while the memories of what nightmares he was inflicting on the enemy is still strong. I'm not exactly kind or tactful in the way that I use the puppies to get people the hell out of my way as I make a beeline to him.

The relief on his face at the sight of my dust-covered, sweaty, gross face is exactly what's on my face as well. I don't need to see it to know it.

I'm not sure if he's really into PDA, but I throw myself in his direction and he catches me without hesitation, his arms tight around me as he pulls me in as closely as the laws of physics will let him.

"You really couldn't stay somewhere safe, just to stop me from having a heart attack?"

I scoff at him, but his arms stay tight around me so I can't move. "Kyrie just called me pivotal to our win here. Pretty sure you guys needed my help. Besides, we both know the Charge was sent for me."

There's murmuring behind us, and I feel my Bonds approaching. All of them, even Nox, surprisingly.

I get tugged out of his arms gently, even though he doesn't want to let me go, and Gryphon snarks at him, "Stop hogging her, you possessive shit. You have people to speak to and important councilman shit to do."

North glares in the general direction of Foggarty and the other two Healers gossiping amongst themselves just a few feet away, staring at him like they're vultures.

I tuck myself up back into his side to murmur, “Which one do you want me to scare the shit out of? I can totally kill one of them if you want me to.”

When he shoots me a look, I grin at him innocently with a little shrug, teasing, “For the greater good, I can do what’s necessary.”

“Liar. You wouldn’t, but your bond would. Maybe you should let her out for a bit longer, thin the overfed and over-important crowd a little for us.”

Gabe scoffs and kicks his sneaker into the dirt a little, but he’s caked in it already from the fight, so it doesn’t make a difference. “Just throw them out. You owe them nothing, not safety or comfort. If they’re not going to help, then get rid of them.”

North rolls his eyes and rubs a hand over his face, smearing more of the blood and dirt around. “It’s not that easy. Nothing is ever that easy.”

I pull a face but nod, because that’s a big part of growing up. Learning that everything comes with consequences, some of them too devastating to contemplate.

So I change tactics. “Where did Kieran end up stashing Sage? I need to keep doing my rounds and check over the whole family.”

Gryphon huffs, still pissed as hell at his second, and says, “They’re in with Felix.”

North gives him a look and then nods like they’ve come to an agreement. “You can head right over there and be checked by Davenport as well. Gabe and Bassinger too. I have this to deal with, and Gryphon can go through the security processes one last time, then we can regroup. Don’t go anywhere alone.”

WHERE ARE YOU?

I roll my eyes at the sound of North's voice in my head because he was the one to tell me not to leave this room without backup, so naturally I'm right where he put me.

The man should trust me a little more.

Oli, who is with you right now? Don't say anything out loud or react, you need to be discreet.

I fight to keep a scowl off of my face at Gryphon chiming in. I still don't fully understand how this mind-talking thing works, and the fact that they both talk over each other makes me sure that they're both hearing each other.

Atlas glances over to me and that confirms it, they're all in my head right now, talking to me, but at each other as well.

I glance up to where Kieran is holding Sage, petting at her hair and murmuring to her quietly about the blood he's covered in. She doesn't actually seem phased by it at all, she's more worried about getting as close to him as she can get, and my heart does a little tug at my own Bonded.

I'm in the medical center, exactly where North told me to be. I have Gabe and Atlas with me. Kieran, Sage, and Felix are too. I'm safe.

There's a pause and my stomach begins to churn. It's only Gryphon's warning to stay discreet that keeps me in my seat. If I'm being watched somehow, like a hacker in the security system, then I can't just run out of here like my ass is on fire.

But what if one of my Bonds has been hurt?

Would I know? I'd have to, right?!

Tell me now. Whatever it is, tell me now.

I send it to both of them and I attempt to sound firm, but I'm not sure how well that translates to them when I'm met with silence.

I could scream.

"What's wrong? Your heart rate just hit the roof," Felix murmurs, obviously trying not to startle me in my entirely freaked out state.

I swallow roughly as I try to figure out how to warn him that something is going on without speaking about it, in case the room is bugged. It's impossible. There's no way without Gryphon's Neuro ability to do it. So I just sit there and wait, trying not to lose my shit.

Then Gryphon sends me through a perfect image.

I don't know how the hell he does it, it almost killed me to send North the image of the shadow pups, and yet Gryphon is sending me through a series of images that play in my head like a film reel.

My palms break out in a sweat.

I can handle a lot of things.

So I already know how much bullshit I can survive.

Seeing Sage slit our first Shield, Dara's, throat and then opening the gates to the Resistance, might not be one of them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J Bree is a dreamer, writer, mother, farmer, and cat-wrangler. The order of priorities changes daily.

She lives on a small farm in a tiny rural town in Australia that no one has ever heard of. She spends her days dreaming about all of her book boyfriends, listening to her partner moan about how the wine grapes are growing, and being a snack bitch to her two kids.

For updates about upcoming releases, please visit her website at <http://www.jbreeauthor.com>, and sign up for the newsletter or join her group on Facebook at [#mountygirlforlife: A J Bree Reading Group](#)

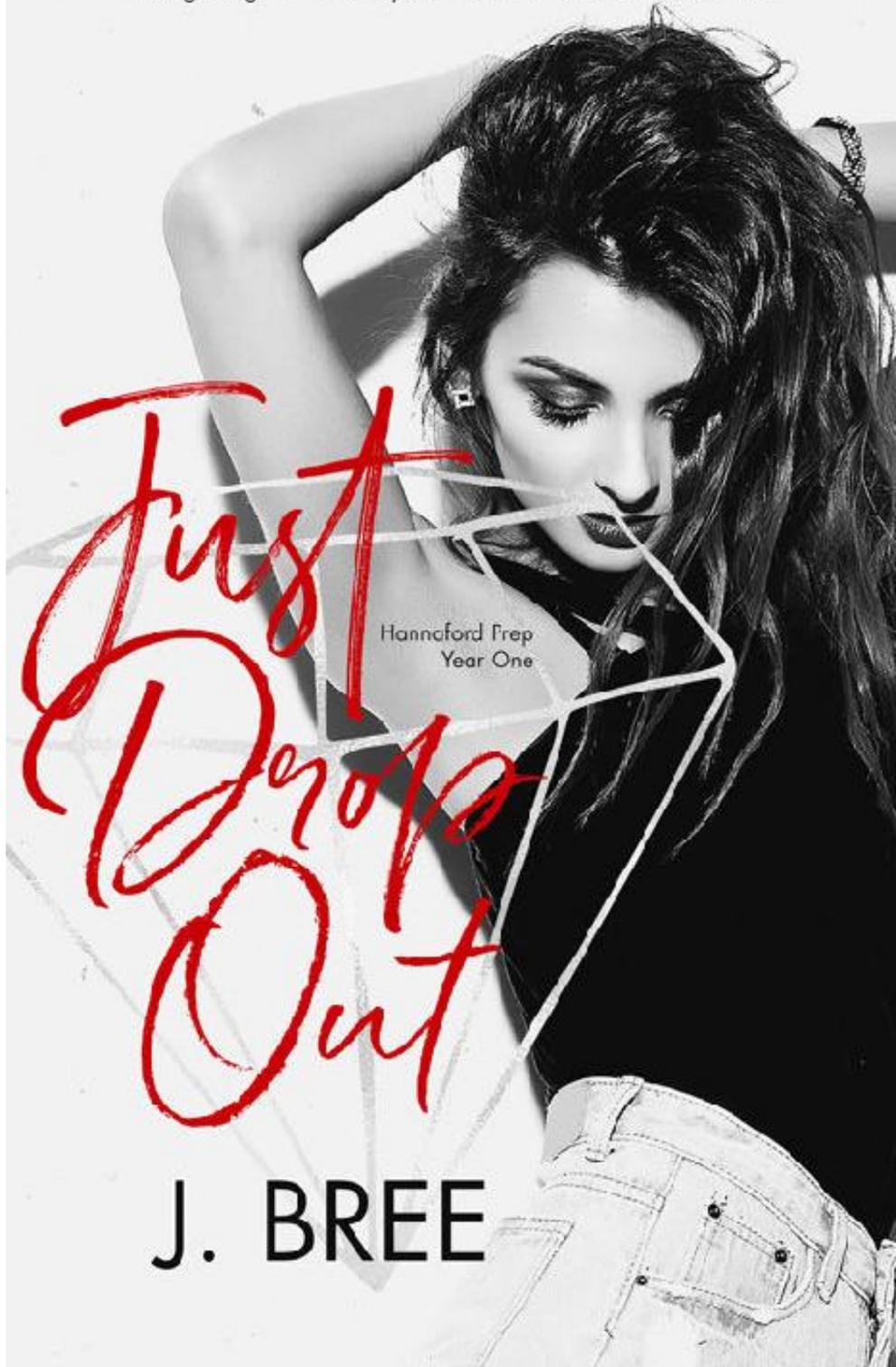


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J. BREE

PROLOGUE

THE FOREST at the edge of the Mounts Bay, California, city limits are well known for being haunted.

The kids at the local high school have spent generations whispering about the bodies buried in shallow graves, waiting for the wolves to scent them and dig them up for food. There's even more legends about the souls that walk amongst the towering redwoods. It's quiet, not silent, but compared to the ever-present sounds of traffic and human experience, it's eerie and adds to the haunted feel.

While I don't believe in ghosts, I can feel the souls that linger here.

It's probably just my guilty conscious giving me the heebie-jeebies as I look over the corpse of my opponent. His blood is still fresh on my hands, cold and congealed, and I wipe them uselessly down my jeans. My clothes are just as stained as my hands, even my face is spattered with the red stains of his life ending. I look like something out of a horror movie, which is about right considering I've just bashed a man's skull in with a rock while a whole crowd of people looked on in sick fascination. There isn't a person watching that dares to make a noise. The vise-like grip of the Club holds their tongues.

I'm not afraid of being caught.

I'm small for my age. Years of food insecurity have taken their toll, and I was the youngest contender in the Game this season. None of that matters, though; I've won. I've beaten thirty men and teenage boys to take the victory and the spoils of this war.

I stumble toward the men at the perimeter of the fighting ring. They're all cloaked in black, hard looks on their faces and black ink etched over their cheeks. My hands tremble at the thought of wearing those same marks. The marks of the Twelve. But I've earned them. I've earned the right to stand with them and be one of them.

To be free.

"Congratulations, you've won the Game," the Jackal speaks, and I shiver at the cold tones of his voice, so unlike the warmth he usually extends to me.

I nod my head. I want this over with. I want a hot meal and an even hotter shower.

"Welcome to the Twelve. You're replacing the Hawk. Who do you choose to be?"

Free. I guess a hawk is a good embodiment of freedom, but it feels strange to take a dead man's name, like climbing into his bed with the sheets still warm. I look around at the other men that make up the Twelve. Their names are what they're known as on the streets, what their gangs cover themselves with as protection and a warning. I could have that too. I could make myself a queen of my own empire. I could rule the streets and never go hungry again.

I could escape the cycle of poverty my mother has left me in.

My eyes land back on the Jackal, and I lift my chin until I no longer feel like I'm looking up at him.

"I am the Wolf."