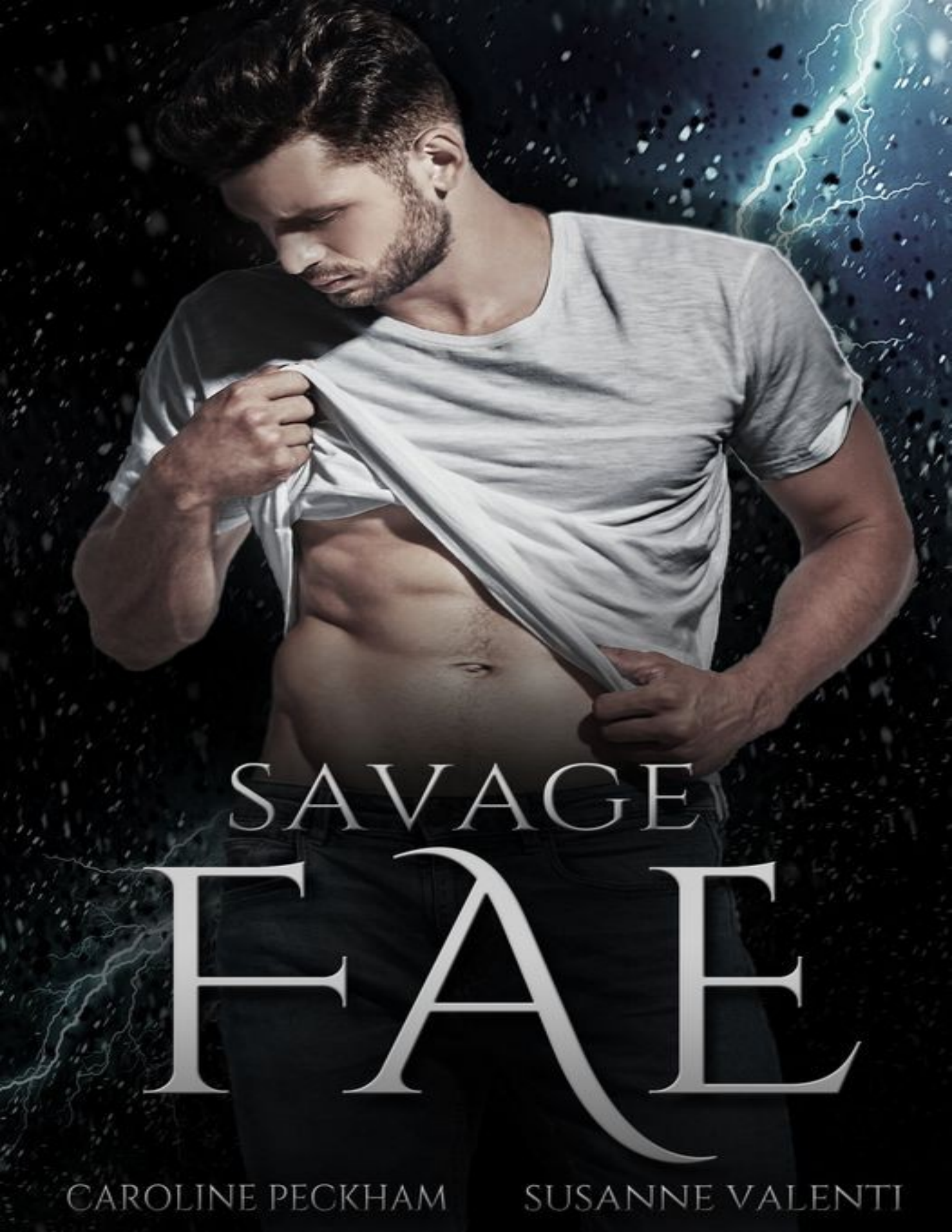
SAVAGE
FAE
CAROLINE PECKHAM
SUSANNE VALENTI

SAVAGE FAE

Ruthless Boys of the Zodiac

Book 2

Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti

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Welcome to Aurora Academy, here is your campus map.

Please take note of where The Lunar Brotherhood and Oscura Clan have claimed turf to ensure you don't cross into their territory unintentionally. Faculty will not be held responsible for gang maiming or disembowelment.

Have a great term!

Click the map to enlarge.

It was dawn. I'd opened the window, letting the light stream across my flesh to fill my magic reserves. Heat pooled in my chest as power sparked and bloomed deep within me.

Elise's shallow breathing filled the air as I perched on the end of the bed, my elbow propped on my knee as I ran a hand across my face wearily. She was bathed in golden light. Not that I was looking. Except I was. Continually.

Last night I'd brought her to my safe house in downtown Alestria. The penthouse apartment was in the heart of Lunar Territory in the west of the city. I could gain access through the skylight and come and go as I pleased. Falling Star's money had come in handy for one thing; a place to go when shit got rough. And last night was the definition of rough.

The apartment was made to let the sunrise in, the east side of the room just a wall of windows. The rest of the space sprawled out before the bed. It was all one open-plan unit except the bathroom. The décor was simple, the furniture pale grey and the walls and tables begging for ornaments I'd never bothered to give them. The bed was a nest of soft pillows and thick blankets and Elise was curled up in them like a sleeping cat.

I rubbed my eyes, barely having gotten an hour's sleep after what I'd witnessed last night. After nearly losing Elise. After my skin had itched and burned for her.

I didn’t know exactly what I’d witnessed in the woods, but I knew it was nothing good. And now I was in serious shit because of the way I’d reacted.

The stars were refusing to let me cut her out of my life. But I wasn’t done trying yet. I had a will of steel, though right now it felt flimsy, made of cheap plastic.

I eyed the empty glass of water on the nightstand beside her and stood, moving around the bed with the intention of refilling it. Her hand slid out from beneath the covers, curling around my wrist as she released a sleepy groan.

“Gabriel?” she rasped, another groan escaping her.

I didn’t answer, my throat constricting as words failed me. Emotions warred inside me after almost losing her. My relief had given way to a pit of anxiety which was building into something more aggressive. How could she have taken Kilblaze? Was she insane? Did I not know her at all?

Of course you don’t, you’ve been spending weeks forcing her out of your life.

Her fingers tightened on my arm and she tugged, drawing the covers back, still barely awake.

“It’s cold,” she whispered.

“I’ll close the window.” I went to move but her grip firmed.

“No…stay.” She reeled me down toward the bed and my heart beat an uneven tune. My will shattered as I slid beneath the blankets, drawing her into my arms as a shiver ran through her.

I stroked her hair, holding her tighter and breathing a sigh. She wore my pale blue shirt, her ruined dress discarded on the floor in a crumpled heap. She’d insisted on having a shower the second we’d arrived here last night and now her hair and skin smelt like male shower products. Which meant, more specifically, she smelled like me.

Her nipples had puckered beneath the shirt and I swallowed hard as she clung to me, trying to keep my body from reacting.

“Where are we?” she murmured.

“Don’t you remember?”

She remained quiet a moment then drew in a breath. “The woods,” she gasped, shifting backwards.

She blinked at me, her expression morphing into horror.

“Yes,” I said, an edge to my tone. “You could have died, Elise,” I growled, the thought eating me up from the inside out.

“Someone *did* die,” she breathed, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” I said. “I saw.”

I trailed a thumb over her cheek, knowing I shouldn’t. But I just wanted to hold her a while longer before I had to take her back to the academy. She must have been so confused after everything she’d been through and I just wanted to hold her until she processed it all.

“You came for me,” she said thoughtfully as she pieced last night back together.

“I knew you were in trouble.” I pointed to the mark of Libra tattooed onto my chest and her eyes fell to it with a frown. She leaned forward, pressing her lips to it and heat burned right through to my heart.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I don’t know what would have happened if…” She tilted her chin up, grazing her lips against mine and a hot liquid need built in my core.

“Elise,” I warned on a heavy breath as she trailed her hand down my chest. “I’ll always come for you when you’re in trouble but-” I inhaled as she reached my waistband, battling every desire in my body as I tried to force out the end of that sentence. “But we can’t be together.” I practically choked on the words.

She half rolled her eyes then slumped back onto the pillows. “By the stars, Gabriel. I’m sick of your mood swings. You’re a merry-go-round and I’m getting off the ride now. If you have feelings for me, you should just own them because honestly it’s kind of pathetic that you can’t.”

A growl rumbled through me and I reared over her, pinning her to the bed with my hips. “You don’t know anything about the reasons why I do the things I do.”

She stared up at me evenly, but her fangs snapped out and I knew she’d fight me if I pushed her to. “Then tell me instead of mind-fucking me, asshole.” She tried to move and I caught her wrists, pushing them into the sheets and trying not to focus on how good she looked beneath me or the way her thigh was pressing into my crotch.

“Fine,” I breathed, knowing she deserved something at least. “But this is all I can say. I can’t have ties. No bonds. No friends. Especially no girlfriends.”

“I didn’t ask to be your girlfriend,” she said coldly and my heart twisted uncomfortably.

“Regardless of what you feel for me, if people knew what I felt for you...” I shook my head. “It just isn’t worth the risk of you getting hurt.”

“What people? And why the hell would I get hurt?” she asked, like she didn’t believe a word that came out of my mouth.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully and she yanked at her wrists. With a jolt of her Vampire strength, she broke free of me then sped out of the cage I’d created around her with my body, racing across the room.

“Whatever, Gabriel. You should really see someone about all the bullshit that spills out of your mouth.”

I shot to my feet, my wings bursting free of my back as my Order form rose to the surface. “I’m telling the truth!”

“Then try telling it better,” she said, folding her arms and cocking a brow. I didn’t know how she managed to look so damn put together with her hair sticking up everywhere, mascara under her eyes and wearing a shirt which was so damn big for her, it nearly fell to her knees.

I balled my hands into fists, trying to drown my anger and speak to her rationally. “All I know is that there are bad people after me. And if I get involved with you, you’ll be at risk too. As my Elysian Mate-”

“I am *not* your mate,” she insisted, though her eyes skipped between the tattoos of Libra and Scorpio on my chest as if she wasn’t as sure about that as she once had been.

“It doesn’t matter what you think. The stars have decided it. But I’m trying to *un*decide it. Maybe we can dodge fate together.”

Her features softened and her lips turned down at the corners. “How?”

“We have to stay away from each other. It’s the only way we might have a chance at stopping the stars from drawing us out in the night to answer the question of fate. If it comes to that, I’d have to choose to be star-crossed with you and I really don’t want to spend the rest of my life pining for you, Elise.”

She pursed her lips then moved to a mirror on the wall, flattening her hair and licking her thumb to remove the blackened smears under her eyes. “I’ll stay away then. I don’t think it’s me who has the problem anyway; you were the one who came charging through the woods last night like a knight into battle.” She glanced at me in the mirror as if assessing my reaction to that comment and anger crashed through my chest.

“If I hadn’t, you’d be dead in a ditch somewhere right now,” I growled.

She shrugged one shoulder as if that idea didn’t bother her and it enraged me so much, I lost it entirely.

“How could you have been so irresponsible anyway?” I snarled. “What the fuck were you doing getting high on Killblaze?”

“Excuse me?” she hissed, spinning around to face me. “You can’t seriously be giving me the third degree right now?”

I strode toward her, fury encasing my heart. “You know what that stuff does, right? It’s not just some recreational buzz, it digs right into your soul and tugs on all of your deepest emotions, forcing them to the surface. It can make you want to fucking kill yourself if it latches onto something bad enough. Is that what you want, Elise?”

Her face paled and her jaw tightened.

“I didn’t take it,” she said indignantly, not answering my other question. “Someone drugged me.”

I tsked. “At least own your decisions.”

“Fuck you,” she snapped, her eyes flaring. “I wouldn’t take that shit. *Ever*.”

The weight of the truth in her gaze settled over me and a new kind of rage clung to me. Someone had drugged her on purpose? Who the fuck would do that?

A few sons of bitches sprang to mind and I bit into my cheek. “Well maybe if you stopped hanging around with the most dangerous fuckers in school, it wouldn’t have happened. You do realise that Dante Oscura and Ryder Draconis are killers, don’t you? Do you really think either of them would be above drugging some girl and dragging her into the woods?”

Her mouth fell open. “Oh now you’re telling me who to hang around with? What are you, my fucking father?”

She gazed across the room then stormed toward her high heels which were discarded by the window. She snatched them up and I folded my arms.

“You can’t leave, do you even know where we are?”

She pushed her heels on and I didn’t act quickly enough. She flipped me the finger then sped toward the door in a blur.

“No!” I roared, panic biting into my veins as she slipped through it and shot away with her Vampire speed.

“Wait!” I bellowed after her as I flew into the corridor. But I’d never catch her like this. I turned back into the room, running for the skylight and wrenching it open.

I spread my wings and launched myself out of it, kicking it shut as I swooped over the roof and circled around to gaze down at the streets.

I spotted Elise as she shot to the corner of the street then paused. I dove toward her and she glanced over her shoulder before speeding away. My heart nearly combusted as she disappeared into the heart of Lunar Territory.

Terror clawed through me as I swept over the rooftops in search of her. I refused to accept I’d saved her life just for her to die here in the darkest corner of Alestria. But if anyone in the Brotherhood caught her before I did, there was no way they’d let her go without her paying in blood.

I shot away down the road at full speed, refusing to stop until the spinning in my head almost made me fall and I was forced to grab hold of a low wall to steady myself.

I looked around, frowning in confusion at the unfamiliar streets.

Nausea pulsed through me and I scrunched my eyes shut as I tried to focus and regain my sense of balance.

Fucking Gabriel with his fucking wings would be circling in the sky above me at any moment. And a girl with lilac hair wearing a shirt for a dress would be pretty easy to spot from a mile off. I needed to get back to the academy, but I had no goddamn idea where I was.

I opened my eyes again, frowning at my surroundings and hunting for a sign of something familiar. I'd grown up in this city but there were plenty of dark corners which I'd never even visited and it looked like this was one of them.

I groaned. My magic had been devoured by the Killblaze and the empty pit in my chest was making me almost as dizzy as the lingering effects of the drug.

My mouth was hopelessly dry, my limbs shaking, I didn't even think I could face another run with my speed. I needed blood. Like yesterday.

I should have bitten my moody guardian angel before storming out on him.

The wind blew along the street and I stilled as an SUV slowed as it passed me. I may not have known this part of Alestria well, but I did know that the city as a whole wasn't a great place to be when you were fresh out of power, money and proper clothes. I didn't even have my Atlas with me. Didn't have anyone I could call anyway even if I had. Although as I thought that, my mind wandered to Leon and I smiled a little. He'd come for me, I was pretty sure. But I didn't know his number by heart and had no way to contact him so that was less than useless to me anyway.

"Fuck," I breathed.

My gaze lifted to the sky and I flinched back into the shadow of the building beside me as a winged figure swept overhead.

My luck held as he failed to spot me and I waited as Gabriel flew away.

"Asshole," I hissed, turning my attention back to my surroundings. I needed to get off the streets before he circled back.

I was so sick of listening to him going on about us being Elysian Mates and then following it up with a bunch of bullshit about that being the worst fucking thing that could happen to him. It was goddamn insulting. I wasn't asking to be his forever, but he seemed to enjoy telling me he had zero intention of letting that happen. Like being bound to me for life was some hideous fate. Well fuck him. I wasn't his and I never would be. And fate could suck my dick if it wanted to have any other say in the matter.

I looked all around, wondering where the hell I should go. The road was lined with bars, most of which were closed due to the early hour, but a neon open sign flashed in the window of one further down the street.

I headed straight for it, stumbling on my heels as pain shot through my skull. *Fuck this feeling*. Why the hell people thought taking Killblaze was a

good idea was beyond me. Yeah I'd laughed my ass off, I'd also been ripped open by the pain which lived in me, left vulnerable to a bunch of psycho cultists and had every drop of my magic devoured by the dark power of it. I was not at all tempted to repeat the process. In fact, the only thing it left me wanting was my bed. Like, right now would be great. But instead, thanks to fucking Gabriel, I was stranded in the middle of nowhere with no way of getting back to it.

I made it to the door with the neon light, wincing against the vibrancy of the colour as I shoved it open and spilled inside. Literally spilled inside thanks to a wave of pain that crashed through my skull as I tried to make it over the doorstep.

Someone caught my arm with a grunt of irritation to stop me from hitting the floor and I muttered a thanks as I glanced up at his face which was hidden beneath a scruff of brown beard.

The guy stared at me like I was a fucking ghost or something and I pulled out of his grip as I set my gaze on the bar.

The place was dark but big, most of the windows were closed off with wooden shutters and fires burned in several grates at the edges of the wide space. Dark leather chairs clustered around mahogany tables and I spied a few pool tables in a back room.

There were people all over the place. Way too many to be normal for mid-morning on a Saturday. And more than a few of them were looking at me in Gabriel's pale blue shirt and my stilettos like I hadn't gotten the memo about the leather jackets and dark denim dress code. Their expressions said I didn't belong. Which was fine by me because I wasn't planning on staying. I just needed to borrow a cellphone.

I closed my eyes for what I hoped was only a second as I took in a breath and tried to banish the pain in my skull just long enough to make it through

this interaction. I opened them again and stalked towards the bar with intent, dropping onto one of the only empty bar stools and gazing at the bartender to try and catch her attention.

Her back was to me, long, curling brunette hair hanging down to her ass. She was fiddling with the bottles lined up on a shelf and I drummed my fingers on the bar impatiently as I waited for her to turn my way.

I could feel eyes on me from the other patrons, but I couldn't give two shits about that. I just wanted to get out of here.

"Excuse me," I said almost rudely as I lost my patience with the waitress and her fiddling. "Is there any way I can borrow a phone? I'm kinda stranded."

The middle aged woman turned to look at me slowly, an eyebrow raising as she pursed lips painted blood red and eyed me like I was something unpleasant on the bottom of her shoe. She had a tattoo across her cheekbone of the Scorpio constellation and thick eyeliner rimming her brown eyes.

"And for some reason, you thought coming in here looking for help was a good idea?" she asked, stepping closer and placing a bottle of dark liquor down on the bar between us.

"It was my only idea. I dunno about a good one," I replied, ignoring her icy tone. "But if you let me make my phone call then I can get the hell out of here again before you have to worry about it."

Silence fell around me and a creeping sensation along my spine let me know that someone was drawing closer to me from behind.

"And why would she do that?" a deep voice sounded way too close to me. "When you trotted in here so willingly like a little toy just waiting for us to play with her?"

I stilled, pushing into my Vampire senses as I detected the thrum of excitement moving through the heartbeats of the people closing in on me.

There were at least five of them lurking nearer and I could see them out the corners of my eyes though I didn't turn my head to let them know that.

My gaze dropped to the bar where my fingers had been tracing a pattern in the woodwork without me really acknowledging it. A symbol sat beneath my hand. A crescent moon with a serrated edge. The Lunar Brotherhood symbol.

Well shit.

It looked like I'd just walked into a gang bar. The kind that didn't take well to random girls with lilac hair wandering in off the street and demanding to use their facilities.

I reached for my power on instinct and a spike of fear shuddered through me as the emptiness inside my chest echoed hollowly. I was tapped out, suffering the worst hangover of my life and reaching the end of a very short fuse.

A man's hand landed on my shoulder and I snapped.

With a shot of my speed, I grabbed the hand, yanking it forward and sinking my teeth into his wrist the moment it passed before my lips.

Gasps rang out around me and someone dropped a glass in shock as I felt a hundred sets of eyes on me, but I didn't give two shits. In a minute, when I was done feeding and all those angry gang members were looking to punish me for what I'd just done, I'd let myself worry about it. But at that moment, the only thing that mattered was the blood washing over my tongue and the power sliding into my veins.

I swallowed greedily but stopped once the ache in my gut had lessened. The man's blood was enough to fill my reserves and take the edge off, but it wasn't what I was craving. I wanted to drink from one of my Sources. Ryder and Dante's blood was like my own special kind of addiction. And drinking from this random Fae was like drinking piss in comparison.

I shoved his arm away from me and turned my attention back to the waitress.

“Phone?” I asked again.

Her eyes were on the guy behind me. The silence in the room was deafening. And if I was totally honest, my balls were seriously running out of steam. But I couldn’t back down now. I’d gone and walked into the viper’s pit, so I was going to keep pushing until my luck ran out. Which it might have already.

“In all honesty I don’t actually have the number memorised, so I’m going to need to do a quick search on the web too,” I added lightly. Like I gave no fucks. Some fucks were beginning to stir though, especially as the woman’s cold eyes slid back to meet mine.

“Well look what just wandered in here looking for an initiation,” she purred, her voice soft and all threat.

“No thanks,” I replied dismissively. “No offence but gang life isn’t for me. I don’t work well with others.”

Every fucker in the place growled at once and the blood in my limbs practically froze solid.

Probably not the best response.

The not-so-tasty snack behind me snatched me off of my stool in an instant and hoisted me off the ground.

I cried out, throwing my hands out and sending a shockwave of air tearing from me which knocked half the assholes in the room off of their feet but also burned through the entirety of the magic I’d stolen from him.

The big dipshit dropped me as he was knocked on his ass and I rolled across the hard wood floor before springing upright with my speed. Pain sliced through my skull at the jarring movement but I fought to ignore it even as I stumbled.

Members of the Lunar Brotherhood lay all around me on the ground and my heart lurched as I turned for the exit. Before they could recover, I shot towards the door using my gifts, heading for the vague promise of safety offered outside this bar.

My hip collided with a table as I misjudged a turn and I swore as pain spilled into my body. I almost fell, but just about kept my footing.

I nearly made it to the door before a hard body collided with mine.

A hiss escaped me and my fangs snapped out as I recognised another of my kind. The other Vampire bared her fangs too, her hand locking around my throat before she whirled me around and threw me back into the centre of the room.

I hit the ground hard and rolled across the floorboards, colliding with a chair and the feet of some of the gang members who had recovered from my air strike. My stomach lurched up into my mouth and holy shit I was going to puke.

I pressed my palms to the floor as I started heaving but my empty stomach had nothing to offer up.

Someone caught me around my waist and the world flipped upside down which was so not good for my headache and writhing stomach that it was untrue.

My back slammed down on the bar and the sound of shattering glass filled the air as drinks were sent flying. A slice of pain bit into my bare thigh as a sliver of glass found it but I couldn’t spare it any attention as I battled to get up.

Pressure crashed into my chest as a wave of air was cast to keep me down and with my magic tapped out, I couldn’t even try to gain control over it.

I kicked and snarled, the most colourful curses in my vocabulary pouring from my lips, aimed at all of the fuckers who surrounded me.

The air holding me down suddenly disappeared and I tried to lurch upright, only to find that ice had replaced its hold on me.

“Get the fuck off of me!” I demanded as the cage of frozen crystals spread from my chest over my arms and down my legs. The creeping cold of it was descending into my body and a shiver raced through me as I tried to strain against it.

“Do you wanna tell me who you were trying to call?” the woman behind the bar asked as she moved to lean over me, her fingers hovering between us and letting me know that I could thank her for the cage of ice. “I’d like them to listen while we gut you.”

My heart was pounding and my gaze wheeled around the sea of faces which leaned over me. There were pissed off expressions, angry ones, even a few who looked eager for the next part. Zero compassion, not a slice of empathy. I was royally, utterly screwed. I knew it. They knew it. Hell, even the fucking stars must have been in on it at this point.

The woman’s fingers tightened and the cage of ice holding me sharpened around the edges, cutting into my skin and pulling a hiss of pain from my lips.

“I’m looking for that answer, lavender, and I’ll get it from you one way or another,” she promised. “Who did you want to call?”

For a wild moment, my thoughts went to my brother. That’s who I wanted to call. But that option was long gone to me and I didn’t have anyone else I could rely on anymore. I almost told her as much, admitted that I was about to call the fucking administration building at the academy and see if there was any chance a teacher might come and help me out like the pathetic little girl I was, but my gaze snagged on the symbol tattooed on

her chest instead. A crescent moon with a serrated edge. The mark of the Lunar Brotherhood. And I just so happened to know one of the most - if not *the* most - important member of their entire gang.

I started laughing. Because I was so fucked. So, *so* fucked if I was going to try and call on him for help but I was straight out of options and it was the only idea I had.

“I was going to call someone you might know actually,” I said, smirking up at her.

A lock of lilac hair had fallen over my face and I blew it away irritably.

“Oh yeah?” the woman spun her fingers until a blade of ice formed between them. I watched her magic with interest as the dagger lengthened and curved, sharp ridges forming along one side of it until it resembled their symbol. It was pretty clever of her to make a murder weapon that she could just melt out of existence again once she was done stabbing. Bye bye evidence. Maybe I could shape air like that to use against my brother’s killer when I found them. If I didn’t die now.

“Yeah, he might not be too happy with the welcome I’ve received here either,” I added because, fuck it, if I was going to call on him then I might as well go all in on it. If he chose not to help me then I was dead anyway.

“I’m not scared of your boyfriend, lavender, wanna give me his number though? I’ll make sure you’re still alive until he gets here. I can cut off quite a few pieces of you while we wait. You’ll be surprised to find out just how much your body can take before it gives out,” she purred and I didn’t miss the excitement in her eyes at that promise.

“I can imagine,” I said dryly, my bravado staying in place through sheer force of will. I was just glad I’d peed in Gabriel’s apartment or I’d definitely be pissing myself now and giving away my terror. “But like I

said, I don’t know his number off the top of my head, you might already have it though. Presuming you’re important enough...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she leaned closer to me, trailing the tip of her blade up my bare thigh.

I clenched my teeth against the sensation of my skin splitting beneath the sharp point, the warmth of my blood trickling over my flesh.

“I want you to call Ryder for me,” I said slowly.

“Ryder?” she scoffed. “Ryder who?”

I gave her an eye roll because we both knew who I meant. “*Draconis*,” I said like she was slow or something. “He’s a friend of mine.”

She scoffed like I was fucking insane and lifted the blade until it was poised over my cheek, just touching my face.

“Do you think you’ll buy yourself some time with this bullshit?” she breathed. “Because you’re only buying yourself more pain.” She pressed down on the blade and the sharp bite of the cut was weirdly dulled by the freezing blade. But I didn’t miss the wetness that rolled down the side of my face and dripped over my ear as my blood was spilled again.

“Just call him,” I hissed in response. “Or you’ll regret hurting me when he finds out.”

She stared into my eyes for a long moment, a flicker of suspicion in her gaze. She was going to ignore me, but that little bit of doubt made her pause.

“If I call him and you’re lying, you won’t be any better off,” she growled. “If Ryder comes to finish you, you’ll die wishing it had been me.”

“Just pick up the damn phone,” I said impatiently. “I’m getting bored.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits and she slowly withdrew from my personal space.

Muttering broke out around the bar but I resisted the urge to look between the gang members, watching the woman as she unlocked her phone and dialled the number she clearly knew by heart.

An endless minute passed as she held it to her ear and I strained my Vampire hearing to listen as it rang.

“Yes?” Ryder’s voice came tersely and I could tell he was less than pleased to be disturbed.

“Ryder, we have a...*girl* here who claims to know you. She strolled right into the bar and caused a fucking brawl, I was going to teach her a lesson but-”

“What girl?”

“I didn’t catch her name,” the woman looked at me.

“It’s Elise,” I said, friendly-like and loud enough for him to hear me.

“Elise apparently,” she repeated unnecessarily.

Ryder didn’t reply for a long moment. “What does she look like?”

The woman’s gaze slid over me. “Purple hair, pretty, mouth like a sailor’s and clearly not one of us.”

“It’s lilac actually,” I corrected.

Ryder’s silence went on longer this time. I waited, heart in my throat, wondering if I’d been right to think he might just give the tiniest bit of a shit about me. Because if he didn’t, I was so screwed it didn’t bear thinking about.

“I’m coming,” he finally replied. “Don’t touch her, she’s mine.”

The line cut off and I swallowed a lump in my throat. That wasn’t exactly the most reassuring response. And I wasn’t his. But I decided to let that slide this once because it might just be the only thing stopping her from making any more moves with that knife.

“I didn’t catch your name,” I said with a smile as her assessing gaze dripped over me like she didn’t know what the hell to think.

“Scarlett Tide,” she replied slowly.

My heart thumped wildly at that name. Because she wasn’t just some random member of The Brotherhood, she was Ryder’s second in command. The woman rumored to have killed every man she’d ever screwed. The Ice Killer, Frozen Butcher, Cold Hearted Queen. In short, just about the worst fucking person I could be sat giving lip to right about now. I didn’t let any recognition show on my face but I knew who she was. Everyone in Alestria knew who she was and I was starting to realise I was in a whole heap of trouble right now.

She pursed her lips and the blade in her hand melted, slowly followed by the ice pinning me to the bar. Every drop of water was pulled away from my body and she directed it into a sink behind the bar where it swirled away down the drain.

I sat up and twisted so that I could slip off the bar. The gang members closest to me moved aside and I picked up a bar stool before planting my ass on it to wait.

Scarlett watched me for a long moment then nodded to a guy on my left. Vines curled up around the legs of my chair, hooking around my shins and up over my knees as they secured me in place. I guessed with my speed I was a flight risk but a strange part of me didn’t want to run. I wanted to wait for Ryder. I still had no goddamn idea where I was aside from the fact that I must have been deep in Lunar Territory and I still felt like shit, so the idea of him coming to get me was all I had to hold on to. I didn’t even care if he was mad with me. There was something between me and him and no matter how angry he might be with me, I didn’t think he’d really hurt me

somehow. At least not yet. Not while I still held his interest. If that ever wore off then we'd just have to see what happened.

"Any chance of a drink?" I asked as most of the other gang members sidled away from me and returned to whatever they'd been doing before my unexpected arrival.

"Do you have a wedge of auras tucked inside your panties?" Scarlett asked. "Because we aren't a charity."

"Not so much. But I do have one fucker of a hangover and a glass of water might just help me not puke all over your bar."

Lie. Putting something in my stomach might just be what it took to make me vomit after all, but my tongue was so swollen and my mouth so parched that I was desperate enough to risk it.

Scarlett picked up a dirty, overturned glass from the end of the bar and slid it towards me before conjuring water to fill it. Before she passed it over, she leaned forward and spat in it then placed it in front of me.

"Drink up," she said sweetly.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," I muttered, looking away from the glass.

I spent a few minutes gazing around the bar, wondering what the hell all these people did with their time. Were they planning gang strikes, sitting around insulting the Oscura Clan, or just hanging out chatting about their love of the moon and killing people? All I was really sure of was that I didn't see anything here that would remotely tempt me to join up.

Scarlett took a seat on the other side of the bar and it didn't take me long to figure out that she wasn't serving drinks. That job fell to a guy with way too much dirt under his fingernails for me to want him serving me anything. He shot me glares between serving the other punters while Scarlett just sat and fucking stared.

I had zero things to say to her so after a while I just tipped my head back and closed my eyes.

The pounding in my head lessened a little when I did that. Not enough. But it was better than nothing.

I still felt cold from her goddamn ice but I doubted she'd get a fire Elemental to warm me up if I asked, so I just tried not to shiver.

Eventually the deep purr of a motorcycle came from outside the bar and I looked up as Scarlett got to her feet before me.

The tightness of her posture was enough to tell me whose bike that was and I turned to the door just as Ryder stepped through it. He was dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt with a tear cut into the side of it, exposing a flash of his muscular stomach. He blocked most of the light coming in from outside with his broad frame but every inch of his body seemed coiled with tension.

His gaze fell on me and my breath caught in my throat at the cold, hard rage I found there. His right fist clenched tightly at his side, the word *pain* drawn tight over his knuckles and I was suddenly reminded of all the reasons that I should fear Ryder Draconis.

I bit my lip and waited for him to get over the shock of seeing me here. Because I was pretty sure that when he decided to speak to me, I wasn't going to like what he had to say.

I strode into The Rusty Nail with tension in my posture. How new girl had gotten all the way out here was a fucking mystery to me. But that mystery came closer to being solved as I found her on a bar stool in some guy's shirt, her hair screaming recently fucked. She smelled like male shampoo, her cherry gum scent entirely absent.

Scarlett nodded to me and the whole bar fell still as they realised who had just walked in. The future king of the whole damn Brotherhood. Their leader and the son of the man who'd made our gang legendary.

Elise glanced up and relief spilled into her eyes but not her expression. "Oh thank fuck. Tell them you know me, Ryder." As she turned her head, I noticed a cut down the other side of her face and acid spilled through my veins in response.

I remained silent as Scarlett raised a brow and every brother in the room waited for my answer.

"Now why would I tell them that?" I asked coolly and her eyes narrowed.

"Don't be an asshole. Just tell them." She jerked against the vines holding her legs in place.

I cracked my neck as my eyes raked down her. *So Elise wants me to be her saviour even though she refuses to be mine. The fucking nerve of her. And in some other guy's shirt no less.*

“She said she goes to school with you,” Scarlett offered. “That true?”

“That is true,” I agreed and Elise’s shoulders dropped a fraction. “But I wouldn’t say I *know* her.” I brushed my hand along the bar as I leaned against it, my fingers trailing over broken glass and irritation flashed through me.

She was trying not to show her fear, but her eyes gave it away to me.

“What are you playing at? Tell them we’re friends.” she hissed.

“I don’t play,” I said with a blank look. “And I don’t recall you ever being my friend.”

Her lips parted and her eyes bored into mine as she tried to crack me. I cast hypnosis to let her speak her mind without anyone else hearing, removing the sight of the bar and replacing it with a chamber of steel.

“Get me out of here, dipshit,” she snapped.

“Why should I?” I tilted my head, raising my brows.

“Come on, you’re not *that* much of an asshole.”

“I’m much worse than you can imagine, new girl. At school I’m bound by certain rules, but out here I’m free to be the villain I am.”

I released her from the hypnosis and Arkin and Fiona drew closer behind her, magic swirling in their palms. I jerked my chin which was enough of a signal to hold them off and Elise looked to me with her lips pressed tightly together.

“It’s your call then, boss,” Scarlett said. “We can have ten pieces of freshly butchered Vampire served up in the back if you say the word.”

A sharp sensation scraped over my heart as she said those words. Elise released a slow breath as she kept her nerve and I dragged my eyes down to her bare legs, one of which was sliced open. Poison pumped through my blood and drowned me in rage. She must have been tapped out or she would have healed herself by now.

“Maybe I’ll do it myself.” I lunged forward, grabbing her arm and severing the vines securing her in place with a wave of my hand.

“Hey!” she gasped as I dragged her toward the door.

“See ya, boss,” Scarlett called after me as I hauled Elise into the alley outside where I’d parked my dirt bike. I pushed her back against the brick wall and she bared her fangs at me.

“What the hell are you-”

I halted her words as I pressed my fingers to the wound on her cheek, her pain washing into me just before I healed her. Her lips parted as I knelt down before her, taking hold of the wound on her leg being not too gentle as I bathed in her pain.

Anger was a bloody red thing coursing inside me. I could barely enjoy the wash of power her pain gave me, knowing my own people had hurt her like this. *If they hadn’t called me…*

Elise’s fingers brushed my cheek and I glanced up at her with a feeling akin to my soul being put through a grinder.

“Thank you,” she whispered, no bullshit lining her expression just relief and some raw emotion that made me want to look away.

I grunted in response, realising my hand was still pressed to her thigh and her skin had long-since healed. Somehow, she’d brought the King of the Brotherhood to his knees in some piss-ridden alley and I still wasn’t getting up.

I dropped my hand and the spell was broken, the strange tugging in my chest replaced with abject rage once more.

How could she have done this? It’s a fucking miracle she’s still breathing!

I stood, grabbing her arm again while she narrowed her eyes at me as if trying to work out my mood. *Good luck with that, baby.*

“Get on,” I snarled, pushing her toward my motorbike.

She threw her leg over the seat with a huff and I got on behind her, crushing her between the handlebars as the shirt she wore rode up over her ass. She had panties on luckily for her.

“Ow asshole.” She elbowed me as I locked her between my arms and shoved her head aside with my chin. I drank in the pinch of her pain and growled my delight in her ear, twisting the key in the ignition.

“This isn’t much of a valiant rescue,” she snarled.

“Who says I’m rescuing you?” I pulled the accelerator and we shot off down the road at high speed.

Elise didn’t even squeal but she pressed back into me so her ass was practically riding my dick.

I took corners at speed, waiting for her to scream or even gasp, but she didn’t make a sound, her hands resting on the bars beside mine as she kept her head firmly in place against my shoulder.

When I reached the edge of town, I headed into The Iron Wood which spanned all the way to the fence ringing the Aurora Academy campus and beyond. It wasn’t far from here that I’d been fucking jumped by Felix Oscura. But I took a different trail this time. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice. I knew this forest like I knew my own pulse. And I wouldn’t ever be lazy in taking the same route through it again.

I pulled the throttle and we raced between trees, tearing toward the academy boundary at a fierce pace. Elise bounced in my lap every time we hit a bump and she swore angrily as there was nothing she could do about it.

We finally reached the fence and I increased my speed as I drove directly toward the red X marked on the solid steel surface.

“Ryder!” Elise gasped. “Stop!”

A smile pulled at my mouth as a scream escaped her a second before we reached the fence. We sailed through the magical barrier instead of hitting a damn thing, a hum of energy pressing in on us.

Her whole body relaxed as she sank back into me, but there wasn't a chance in hell she was going to stay relaxed for long. I took a right, racing alongside the fence as I avoided the Oscura Haunt and burned up a path toward the Lunar Pit.

When I reached the clearing where a charred fire pit sat at the heart of the ring of ancient trees, I pulled up sharply and kicked the bike stand down. I locked my arms around her in case she had any notions of running away with her Vampire speed and hauled her off the bike.

"What the fuck?" She shoved me away and I let her go with a grimace.

"Are you gonna run like a coward or are you gonna talk like Fae?" I growled, dipping my head as I glared at her.

"Talk about what?" She glanced around the woods, seeming unsettled, hugging her arms around her body.

"You insulting me," I snarled and a deep rattle emanated from my chest.

She swallowed, shaking her head as if she had no idea what I was talking about and that just made it all the more insulting. "How the hell did I insult you exactly?"

I hissed at her, striding forward and she planted her feet, refusing to recoil. I moved up into her personal space, breathing in the man product she reeked of. "I gave you one last chance to come to me last night and you didn't. Then I'm summoned by my brothers the next morning to come and pick you up from whatever guy's bed you've crawled out of. Do you think I'm just gonna continue to allow you to make a fool of me, Elise?"

Her eyes widened. "Ryder, you've got it all wrong-"

“Fuck you,” I spat, jerking back a step. “You stink of some other guy. Don’t lie to my face.”

“It wasn’t like that. Don’t you know what happened last night at the party?”

“The whole school’s saying you got fucking high on Killblaze.” I wrinkled my nose and she growled at me, stalking forward.

“I was drugged and dragged into the woods. If it hadn’t been for Gabriel, I’d be dead right now. Someone *is* dead.” She glanced around as if she half expected to find a body and I had to admit I was thrown by her act. “Hasn’t there been an announcement? A guy was killed by some hooded weirdos. He had sandy blonde hair and he…”

“By the fucking stars, Elise. you were off your face last night. No one died.”

“Yes they did,” she snapped, then her eyes trailed over me, confusion pinching her brows together. “I saw so many things last night…so many people. Where were you anyway?”

“You know where I was: waiting for you. Drop the bullshit. I ain’t buying it.”

“Gabriel was there, he saw it happen. He took me away to his apartment.”

Some cold, dead thing awoke in my body and slithered through my gut. *Nox. She’d stayed with Gabriel goddamn Nox last night.*

“Did he tell you that while he was fucking you this morning?” I narrowed my eyes, cracking my neck as I tried to process the image of his hands all over her body.

“Screw you,” she snarled and a black curtain of fury fell over me.

“What kind of man leaves you on the streets of Lunar Territory half naked?”

“He didn’t leave me anywhere, I ran away,” she huffed, turning to go.

I lunged forward, catching her hand as panic scorched my insides. “Did he hurt you?”

If he had, I’d have him in ten pieces before midday. I’d make him suffer and drink up every drop of pain his body could give.

Her expression softened and the tension ran out of her limbs. “Of course not. He just pissed me off that’s all. He started lecturing me about ‘staying safe’.” She rolled her eyes and I gritted my teeth.

“So you ran to The Rusty Nail? Really fucking mature, Elise.”

She prised my hand off of her with a snarl. “Now you’re starting to sound like him.”

“Well maybe he had a fucking point!” *By the pissing stars, did I just agree with Nox?* “You realise they would have killed you, right?”

Her eyes glazed in a way that told me she didn’t really care and that hurt me more than anything else had this morning.

“I’m going back to my room.” She started walking away and I knew she was about to use her Vampire speed at any moment. I caught her arm with a vine conjured from the nearest tree, tethering her to it. She practically spat venom as she yanked against it to try and break free, but the magic was powerful.

I had to end this. Had to regain control, because this feeling of total fucking humiliation was simply not acceptable for a guy like me. “We’re done, Elise. You’ve made that clear as fucking day. That includes *hanging out*.”

She used her Vampire strength to break the vine, glancing back at me with a scowl. “Good. I don’t need you in my life anyway.”

She sped away and something shattered inside me like glass. I grunted as pain spilled through me, filling up my magic reserves. I was ruined and

made at once.

I stalked over to my bike, swinging my leg over the seat and riding it back to the Kipling Cache. When I'd left it deep beneath the earth in the caves, I shed my clothes and shifted into my snake form, becoming the size of a python and moving through the undergrowth until I coiled against a cold, hard rock. My body was as frozen as the stone. We were one and the same. Between the ice and the dark, I remembered who I was. A man without a heart. A vessel made to destroy the Oscuras. I didn't feel anything but pain and lust.

Memories of my father and the boy I'd once been licked keenly against the inside of my skull. For him, I had to do as Felix Oscura had asked of me. And when he gave me Mariella and she lay wasted and bloody at my feet, I'd get my retribution.

Elise was no longer going to distract me from what I had to do. She was just a girl, one who'd managed to slide beneath my skin like a needle ready to inject poison. Ryder Draconis did not have weaknesses. There wasn't a single dent in my armour. And Elise Callisto was no exception.

Through pure force of will, I made it out of The Iron Wood and up the stairs into the Vega Dorms with a single shot of my Vampire speed.

By the time I reached my dorm, I could hardly even stand up straight and the pain in my head had increased from an aching throb to an all encompassing pounding.

I kicked my stilettos off as I stumbled through the door, groaning against the light in the room and looking up just as Dante stepped right into my personal space.

“Where have you been, carina?” he demanded, catching my shoulders and shaking me roughly.

“Ow!” I complained at the treatment.

My gaze was on his throat and I tried to hold out but I couldn’t. I lunged at him and though his eyes widened with surprise, he didn’t try to stop me.

I wound my arms around him, dragging him closer as my fangs drove into his skin and the electric ecstasy of his blood poured into me.

I moaned at the feeling, knowing it sounded really damn sexual but in that moment, I needed the taste of him more than any orgasm and it felt just as fucking good.

“Where were you?” Dante asked as he drew me closer. “I was only gone a minute to get you a glass of water and when I came back you were

nowhere to be found. I've been hunting for you half the night."

My heart skittered at that admission and I drew back as his electronic power settled within me, lending me strength.

"Really?" I asked in surprise as I looked into his dark eyes.

"Really." Dante brushed his fingers along the side of my face as his gaze raked over me. "Were you bleeding?" he asked, his thumb skimming my cheek where Scarlett had cut me open. Ryder had healed me but I guessed there was still some blood on my skin.

"I ran into a bit of trouble this morning on my way back," I admitted.

"What kind of trouble? And where have you been?" There was real concern in his eyes and for a moment all I wanted to do was soak myself in it. Bathe in the feeling of his protection and just let him look after me the way he kept asking to.

"Were you worried about me?" I teased gently.

Dante held my gaze for a long moment, his lips parting to respond just as the window was thrown open.

"There you are!" Gabriel growled as he dropped inside and glared at me.

I flinched at the loudness of his voice and recoiled into Dante's arms.

"Not so loud, asshole," I snapped.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, running off like that in Lunar Territory?" he demanded.

"*Me*?" I hissed. "You're the reason I-"

"What do you mean, Lunar Territory?" Dante growled, catching my chin to make me look at him again.

"It doesn't matter," I muttered.

"I'm surprised they didn't butcher you! Did you run all the way back here?" Gabriel demanded.

“No,” I growled. “You may not have noticed but I can barely fucking function thanks to that shit I was given. And all I want now is to try and sleep it off before-”

“I searched everywhere for you!” Gabriel shouted angrily. “I thought you might have ended up in the fucking Rusty Nail or something. I almost went banging on their door to see if-”

“That’s exactly where I ended up, actually,” I said because he was making my fucking head hurt worse and I just couldn’t help but be a smart ass.

“What?” Dante snarled, his grip on me tightening painfully.

“Ow,” I snapped. “What is it with assholes manhandling me today?” I yanked myself out of his grip and found the two of them glaring at me.

“How the hell did you survive walking into the Lunar headquarters and leave with your life?” Dante demanded. “They’d kill anyone outside of their inner circle just for hanging out near there.”

“That’s what I want to know,” Gabriel piped up because apparently they’d decided to side together on something for the first time ever and it was against me. *Brilliant*.

“If you must know, I got Scarlett to call Ryder and he came and picked me up,” I said, skimming hard on the details but my brain had no energy for the words required for a better explanation. “Now can I go to bed or-”

“You called that stronzo for help?” Dante asked, looking at me like I’d just taken a shit on his grandma’s birthday cake.

“Well I hardly think I’d still be alive if I’d asked her to call *you,”* I replied, rolling my eyes at the ridiculousness of that idea. *Oh hey Scarlett why don’t we call up your mortal enemy and see if he can come get me?* “And as I was dumped in the middle of their turf with no cash or Atlas by

that asshole I didn't have much choice." I pointed at Gabriel and he bristled.

"You're the one who ran off," he snarled but Dante had already shifted his rage around onto Gabriel, static electricity rolling through the air and making my hair raise around me.

"You did *what* to her?" Dante demanded dangerously.

"I'm not the one who left her alone outside the party so that she could get kidnapped," Gabriel growled, shards of ice forming in his hands.

"I've actually got a thumping headache, I feel like absolute shit and all I want in the world is to go the fuck to sleep and ideally wake up feeling better," I said loudly. "So if you two are going to keep arguing I'm just going to go."

"You fly around this place, acting like you're so fucking superior, Gabriel," Dante snarled. "But having two Elements only makes you more powerful. It clearly doesn't make you any more of a man."

Gabriel snarled at him, throwing a fistful of ice which Dante blocked with a shield of air. The ice shattered loudly against the wall and it was like every fucking fragment of it was piercing my goddamn brain. I flinched, scrunching my eyes up against the noise as they started throwing more magic at each other.

Fuck this, I need sleep not douchebags.

I reached up to the shelf beside my bed and snagged my Atlas before turning and heading out of the room without looking back.

My tongue was swollen in my mouth and pain was driving itself through my limbs like a thousand nails hammered into rotting wood.

For a moment I wasn't sure where to go but as I started walking, my gaze landed on Leon's roommate Sasha as she entered their room with a tray heavily laden with breakfast.

I groaned as hunger pangs spilled through my stomach and I shamelessly headed that way, hoping Leon would take pity on me in my fragile state and share.

“Elise!” Dante yelled from back in our room as he finally realised I was gone.

I reached out to knock on Leon’s door just as he and Gabriel made it out into the corridor.

“I need to finish talking to you!” Gabriel called, his gaze pinned on me.

“I think you’ve done enough, cazzo,” Dante snarled.

“Can you both just fuck off?” I asked as the door before me swung open.

I looked around to find Leon’s other roommate, Amy, looking at me in surprise. “Hi, Elise,” she said slowly, clearly wondering why I was here.

“Little monster?” Leon called excitedly from behind her and she opened the door wider so that I could see him perched on his top bunk. His shirt was off, exposing his golden skin and his mane of blonde hair hung loose around his shoulders.

“I feel like shit and my room is full of loud assholes, will you rescue me?” I begged, not even caring about the fact that I sounded desperate. I just wanted to escape and sleep and maybe steal some of that food I could smell…

Leon broke a grin. “I thought you ditched me last night?” he said. “Of course you can come in.”

“Elise!” Dante barked as I stepped over the threshold but I ignored him.

Leon hopped out of his bed with a frown, passing me so that he could block the door just as a pissed off Dragon and a dickwad Harpy appeared.

“Elise isn’t here,” Leon said cheerily as he stood in the doorway even though they could both see me.

“Just come out and deal with this situation,” Gabriel demanded.

“The only situation I want to deal with is my fucking hangover. Which you’re making worse,” I snapped.

“You heard her,” Leon said firmly, not budging from his spot before the door. “You four need to go away so that she can get some rest.”

“Four?” I asked in confusion but my question was answered as Amy and Sasha hastily gathered their things and headed for the exit.

“Wait!” I called after them. “I didn’t mean to get you kicked out of your room!”

They just waved happily as they went, not seeming to mind one bit.

Weird. So fucking weird.

Leon moved just enough to let them out and replaced his hand on the doorframe as soon as they were gone.

“Elise, just come back to our room,” Dante demanded.

“I only want to talk to you,” Gabriel added, glaring at me.

“You wanna talk to these two butt munchers, little monster?” Leon asked casually.

“No,” I groaned. “I just want sleep.”

“You heard the lady,” Leon said as he swung the door shut.

Dante planted a foot over the threshold and Leon released a deep growl that sent a shiver down my spine. I’d never seen him do anything aggressive like that and I bit my lip as I watched him facing off against the other two Kings on my behalf.

A tense moment passed and Dante’s gaze eventually slipped from Leon to me. “Dormi bene amore mio,” he said, his voice soft and even though I didn’t understand it, heat rose in my flesh at the intensity in his gaze. He turned and walked away and Leon slammed the door in Gabriel’s angry face before he could add anything.

“Thank you,” I breathed, leaning against the foot of Leon’s bed and releasing a breath of relief.

“I’ll always be here for you when you need me, little monster,” Leon replied gently, the tension draining from his posture as he moved to join me. “What happened to you last night?”

I looked up at him for a long moment and sighed. “I don’t really know where to begin. I was drugged, someone slipped me Killblaze and…do you mind if I tell you the rest when my head is in one piece again?”

Leon reached for me as he nodded, pulling me into his arms. He was so strong and solid, I felt like I could rely on him entirely in that moment. And despite the obvious concern in his gaze at the little I’d told him, he respected my wishes enough to hold off on the questions.

He shifted suddenly and hoisted me off of my feet, curling an arm around my back and one beneath my legs.

“Let me look after you, Elise,” he breathed in my ear and goosebumps rose along my flesh as his stubble grazed my neck.

“Just this once,” I agreed with a faint smile because I felt like shit and that sounded like heaven.

He lifted me up onto his top bunk and lay me down on the sheets. I rested my head on his pillow, breathing in the rich smell of citrus and summer that was him as my eyes fell shut.

I could hear Leon moving around and I smiled to myself as he cursed a few times and dropped something. There was a scrape scrape scrape sound then he swore loudly.

“Why did you have to go butter side down, you asshat?” he demanded in disgust and I snorted a laugh as the scrape scrape scrape began again.

Eventually he climbed up beside me and I opened my eyes as he presented me with two slices of buttered toast and a glass of orange juice.

The butter was weirdly thick in some spots and almost non existent in others. It had taken him about ten minutes to rustle up that masterpiece and I was pretty sure all he'd had to do was spread the butter on the toast that Sasha had brought in. I bit my lip on my amusement as I sat up to accept it from him.

"Thank you," I said and he grinned like I'd just told him I loved him, not shown gratitude for a bit of questionably prepared food.

I bit into the toast with a sigh of satisfaction and Leon held the glass of orange juice as he waited for me to be ready for it. I couldn't help but smirk as he watched me eat. His gaze slowly slid over the shirt I was wearing but he seemed more interested than annoyed like Ryder had been.

His gaze lingered on my bare thighs as I finished my food and reached for the juice. I drained it in one and sighed contentedly as I leaned back onto the pillows.

"All done?" Leon asked.

"Yes. Sleep now," I commanded, my eyes falling shut.

Leon took the plate and glass from me before jumping up and getting into the bed beside me.

He wrapped an arm around me, tugging the covers over us and I turned into him, laying my head on his chest as he drew me close.

"You can sleep with me, little monster," Leon murmured as he ran his fingers through my hair. "I'll guard you against any nightmares that come looking for you. They won't get past me."

"Okay," I breathed, a smile on my lips. "I trust you."

Leon released a deep rumble in his chest that seemed almost like a purr and I felt my smile widening as I curled against him, drinking in the heat of his flesh as a knot unfurled in my chest.

Somehow, in that moment at least, I really meant it.

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I woke with a thick tongue and a pounding head but the trembling in my limbs had finally subsided.

The sound of gunfire on the TV prompted me to peel my eyes open and I found myself curled against Leon as he watched some old gangster movie.

“You’re awake?” he asked, noticing my movements and flicking off the TV he had hanging on the wall at the foot of his bed.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, pushing myself up to sit beside him. I groaned at the pain in my skull and Leon reached out, placing his palm against my forehead and pressing a wave of healing magic beneath my skin.

I sighed as it got to work, driving the needles from my brain and stopping the light from hurting my eyes.

“Thanks,” I breathed.

“Do you wanna tell me what the hell happened to you last night now?” he asked gently and I could hear real concern in his voice. “Because one minute we were hooking up and everything seemed fucking great then the next you were beating on Cindy Lou and clearly off your face on Killblaze. And I can’t work out when you even managed to take a hit of that stuff between being with me in the locker rooms and fighting her…”

I sighed, leaning back against the wall and fiddling with the buttons on Gabriel’s shirt.

“I didn’t take it. At some point during that fight, someone dosed me with it.”

“Who the hell would do that?” Leon growled dangerously and I raised my gaze to meet his golden eyes, relief spilling through me.

“You believe me?” I asked because Gabriel and Ryder hadn’t and I didn’t like to admit it but that had hurt. Because I’d never willingly place that shit in my body. And the fact that someone had wanted to get me alone in those woods enough to risk drugging me during the middle of a party full of people was pretty goddamn terrifying. And I still had no idea who’d done it. Or why.

Had I tipped someone off with my investigations? Had someone realised who I was or what I was trying to do here?

“Of course I believe you,” Leon said firmly, reaching out to take my hand. “If you say something happened, then it did. No questions.”

He tugged on my fingers and I let him draw me into his lap, my knees pressing into the firm mattress either side of him. I trailed my fingers down his face into the golden stubble which lined his jaw, studying the perfect angles of his features in the warm light of a lamp which lit the room.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“So tell me the rest of it,” he encouraged, his gaze darkening with concern as I explained to him about the way Dante had brought me outside and then someone had taken me the moment he’d left me there.

When I told him about the cult in the woods and the figure hidden beneath the robe, he just listened without doubting me, his grip on my waist tightening as if he wanted to reassure himself that I was safe here now and nothing worse had happened to me.

“I don’t know who the hell it was out there, but they killed that boy and they stole his magic,” I finished, my heart pounding. “And I think they would have killed me too if Gabriel hadn’t shown up.”

“When I find out who they are, I’ll tear them in two,” Leon growled, his fingers digging into my skin. “I’m sorry I didn’t come looking for you…but

when you were gone after the fight I just thought you'd left. Cindy Lou had thrown that drink over you and I just assumed…"

"It's alright," I said, surprised to see such worry warring in his eyes.

"It's not. If something had happened to you, Elise-"

"It didn't," I interrupted, sensing how much he was beating himself up over not trying to find me. "I got away. I'm here now."

Thanks to Gabriel. I frowned to myself. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten so angry with him in his apartment. But I was just so sick of feeling like I didn't know what was going on. There was so much about the night that Gareth had died which was a mystery to me. And Gabriel kept too many secrets. He insisted that I was meant for him, but if that was the case then why was I here now in Leon's arms without the slightest desire to be anywhere else? Whatever the hell was going on with Gabriel, it wasn't my problem. But maybe I did owe him a proper thank you. I could manage that much at least.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this because my family *never* does this," Leon said slowly. "But you need to talk to the FIB. If there's a dead kid out in the woods somewhere…"

I dropped his gaze, letting my eyes trail over his bare chest as I thought about that. I knew he was right. But after the way they'd dealt with Gareth's death, it was hard for me to trust the FIB.

"At least speak with Principal Greyshine," he pressed. "Let him contact the police once you've told him what you know."

"I guess so," I agreed. Mainly because I was imagining that boy as my brother, thinking about his family who must be out there somewhere with no idea about what had happened to him. They deserved the truth even if the reality of it was going to crush them.

"Come on," he said. "I'll hold your hand if you want me to."

I smirked at him. We both knew I didn't need my hand held. "You can come if you want," I agreed. "But I'll hold my own hand."

"You know, relying on other people from time to time isn't the worst thing in the world," he teased.

"Well, everyone I've ever relied on has either lied, left or died. So I don't make that mistake anymore," I said simply, climbing off of him and out of the bed.

"You can't just go through life assuming people will always let you down," Leon said uncomfortably as he followed me, grabbing a white T-shirt to go with his sweatpants and kicking on his sneakers before we left his room.

I didn't answer him because I didn't agree. I had no intention of relying on anyone else ever again. I could look after myself and I'd never be stupid enough to tie myself to one man alone and open myself up to him ruining me if he left. No. I'd follow my own path and count on me.

I approached my room warily and breathed a sigh of relief as I opened the door and found it empty. Leon waited outside while I quickly changed into a pair of leggings and a warm sweater and I tossed Gabriel's shirt up on his bed for him to find.

A soft squeak caught my attention as we headed down the stairs and I caught a flash of movement in the corner of my eye as a rodent scurried away from us. A small, pathetically girly part of me almost shrieked in alarm before I realised it must have been Eugene. Though why the hell he'd choose to clamber up the stairs in his tiny rat form was beyond me.

By the time we got to Greyshine's office I was definitely dragging my feet, but Leon's arm stayed firm around my shoulders as he guided me right up to the door.

I knocked and there was a brief pause before an answer came from our Principal.

“Hey ho, guys! I’m a tad busy just now-”

“It’s important,” Leon cut him off firmly. “Elise needs to talk to you about a murder.”

There was a long pause this time and I frowned up at Leon who just shrugged before the sound of a lock turning came from the other side of the door and it was pulled wide.

Principal Greyshine stood before me, his bald patch gleaming and his glasses slipping down his sweaty nose as he looked between the two of us with a frown.

“What’s this hullabaloo?” he asked.

“I need to come in,” I said before Leon could reply. I could do this myself without needing him to mollycoddle me.

“Well actually Miss Callisto, it just so happens that I was about to send you a request for a meeting anyway so maybe we can kill two birds with one stone. Perhaps Mr Night can wait out here?”

Leon cast a wary look my way like he thought I might insist on him staying but I just nodded.

“It’s fine, Leo, you weren’t there anyway.”

“Spiffing,” Greyshine declared, gesturing for me to come inside.

Leon released me and moved to lean against the wall right beside the door with his arms folded. I gave him a faint smile before heading inside and Greyshine closed the door behind us.

“I’ve had a video brought to my attention from last night,” Greyshine said before I could speak.

His office was so full of books that I could hardly see the furniture. He hurried forward to lift a pile of thick tomes from a chair so that I could sit

and slid around his desk to drop into his own seat.

“What video?” I asked with a frown.

“Just high jinx I’m sure but obviously we have to have a meeting if we’re concerned about our students taking drugs on campus.”

My heart sank as he produced an Atlas and played a recording of me from last night as I fought with Cindy Lou and bounced about the place looking like a complete fruit loop. My pupils were full blown, laughter poured from my lips continually and I kept losing the thread of what I was saying. The highlight of the video was me getting Cindy Lou to call herself Cindy Poo. That shit was first class. I didn’t regret that part of it one bit. The rest however…I looked like a total addict.

“I was drugged,” I said lamely as the recording ended and silence fell. “That’s part of what I came to tell you.”

“Oh?” Greyshine asked, his eyebrows rising towards his sparse hairline.

“Yeah. And I was dragged off into the woods by…someone. When I got there, there were all these people in cloaks, chanting and using black magic. They’d brought other kids there too, but I’m pretty sure they weren’t students. They wanted us to kill ourselves and…one boy did. I saw it. And the ring leader stole his magic.”

Greyshine looked at me for a long moment, pity lining his features. “I’m so sorry you experienced that,” he said kindly but there was no concern in his voice. No panic. Had he missed the bit where I said someone had been murdered?

“I don’t think you heard me,” I said firmly. “A boy was killed! He-”

“I’m sure your hallucinations seemed very convincing,” Greyshine said, the pity in his eyes making me want to smack him.

“I wasn’t hallucinating,” I growled.

“I understand that Killblaze can make you believe all kinds of crazy things. I’ve informed Miss Nightshade about your drug habit and she will discuss it further with you in your counselling sessions-”

“I don’t have a drug habit!” I snapped. “I *told* you, someone drugged me! They took me out into the woods and tried to kill me. If it wasn’t for Gabriel rescuing me-”

“Gabriel? Are you saying Mr Nox can corroborate your story?” Greyshine asked, seeming more inclined to believe me if I had someone to back me up.

“Yes,” I said keenly. “He saw all of it. He rescued me and took me to his apartment in the city.”

“Okay. I’ll send him a message requesting his presence and hopefully we can clear this all up.”

“Good. You do that,” I said irritably, leaning back in my chair and folding my arms as he typed out the message on his Atlas.

Greyshine buried his nose in a book while we waited for Gabriel to arrive and I stewed in silence.

After a relatively short period of time, a knock sounded at the door and Greyshine called out for Gabriel to enter.

I looked up at him as he moved into the room, his dark eyes trailing over me as he tucked his black wings tight to his back in an attempt to keep himself from knocking any of the piles of books over.

“Ah, Mr Nox. I’m afraid Miss Callisto has been having a little trouble distinguishing facts from fiction about what happened to her last night. We are aware that she took…or was *given* Killblaze which causes hallucinations, but she assures me you saw what happened too. So if we could just get your account of things…?”

Gabriel looked into my eyes for a long moment and I stared right back, waiting for him to back me up. He pushed his tongue into his cheek then looked away from me, turning his gaze to Greyshine instead.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he said slowly.

“Miss Callisto said you found her in the woods. And that there was something going on there?”

Gabriel hesitated a moment before answering, his fingers curling into a fist as he did.

“Yeah, I found Elise in the woods. She was lost, screaming for help, crying about people trying to hurt her. But there was no one else there,” he said.

“What?” I asked, my mouth actually falling open as he stood there and just fucking lied. “You saw it! You saw them kill that boy, you-”

“Saw who? There was no one out there but you, Elise,” he said, frowning like I was confused and I wanted to punch his pretty fucking face until it was nothing more than a patch of pulp.

“Why are you lying?” I demanded, getting to my feet as I raised my voice.

“Miss Callisto, it seems clear that what you *think* you saw was really just a manifestation of the drugs you’d taken,” Greyshine said kindly.

“I told you I was drugged,” I snarled. “Someone drugged me and tried to kill me and you’re not going to do a fucking thing about it. Are you?”

Greyshine looked to Gabriel like he was asking for help and tears pricked the backs of my eyes as Gabriel shrugged like he thought I was crazy. How dare he? How fucking dare he??

“Fine,” I snapped, shoving my chair aside so I didn’t have to pass Gabriel to get to the door. “Don’t believe me. I don’t know why I convinced myself I’d be able to rely on you for help. Either of you.”

I headed for the door, ignoring the murmured conversation they were having behind me and storming straight out into the corridor.

“What’s wrong?” Leon asked as I almost barrelled straight into him.

“He doesn’t believe me. Gabriel’s a fucking liar. Can we just go before he comes out here?” I started walking but I wasn’t fast enough because Gabriel stepped out into the corridor a second later.

He cast a dark look our way then started walking fast, keeping his eyes on the far end of the corridor. I let him pass me, my gaze fixed on his black wings as he strode away without so much as a glance back in my direction. My heart was pounding and tears stung the backs of my eyes. I hated that I’d let myself think I could rely on him. I hated that I’d let myself feel anything at all for him. But the small, stubborn part of me that was tearing open at his betrayal couldn’t just let him walk away without explaining himself.

I shot after him, leaving Leon behind and skidding to a halt to block Gabriel’s way before he could make it out of Altair Halls.

“Why?” I breathed, locking my gaze with his as I kept my chin high in defiance.

“Why what?” he asked coldly.

“*Why*?” I demanded, hating the fact that I was almost crying. Last night he’d saved me, I’d actually convinced myself that maybe I could count on him, only to have him make me look like a goddamn liar and a drug addict the very next day.

Gabriel’s tense expression broke for half a second, his gaze sliding over me slowly as his lips parted to give me the explanation I needed.

“What’s going on?” Leon asked as he strode up behind Gabriel, looking around him to me with concern.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gabriel snapped, his gaze hard again as he sidestepped me, knocking me aside with his giant black wing before striding straight outside.

I could only stare after him as he took off into the sky and something ripped open inside me. When was I going to learn not to put my faith in people? Why did I always keep trusting in others when all anyone ever did was let me down? Even Gareth had abandoned me in the end.

“What was that about?” Leon asked softly, reaching out to take my hand.

I bit my tongue, fighting off the hurt and anger as I turned to look up at him. “Gabriel called me a liar. He said I imagined the whole thing and Greyshine thinks I’ve got a Killblaze addiction.”

Leon frowned, reaching out to trace a line down the side of my face with his fingers. “But you’re still sure of what happened to you?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” I replied defensively.

“Then fuck them. I believe you. And if Gabriel’s lying then maybe we should think about why. Maybe he knows more about what happened to you than he’s letting on or-”

I tiptoed up and pressed my lips to his, cutting him off as I fisted his T-shirt in my hand, dragging him closer. The heat of him coiled around me as his strong arms drew me in and I melted against him, the ache in my chest lessening as I lost myself in him. He was always so calm and self assured, like this perfect beam of sunshine which could never be breached by clouds. Maybe I never should have let myself trust Gabriel, but I was sure I was right to depend on Leon.

I broke our kiss and looked into his golden eyes as he ran a fingertip down my spine, making me arch into him with a shiver of pleasure.

“Let’s go get lunch,” I suggested.

“Lunch?” he asked like I was mad. And maybe I was. But that was okay by me. If the broken parts of me that had been left behind after Gareth’s death only formed a semi-sane person then who was I to question it? I was just pleased to make it through each day without falling apart completely.

“Yeah. I tried to deal with this the mature way and no one wants to believe me. So now I just wanna drown my memories of last night with a plate of something greasy and a mug of hot chocolate.”

“Just like that?” he asked disbelievingly.

No, not just like that. I’d be investigating all of the shit that had happened to me on the night of the party on my own, but Leon didn’t need to know that.

I shrugged. “I’m not going to go around shouting about it to everyone and anyone and have the whole school calling me a liar as well as a Killblaze addict,” I said. “I just want to move on and forget about it.”

“Are you sure? We could go to the FIB ourselves…”

“No. Thank you for believing me and for caring. But I’ve learned my lesson about trusting the FIB in the past and I don’t think I’ll be making that mistake again. If the boy’s body is found I’ll come forward with what I saw but until then, I just wanna go back to bed.”

“Okay,” Leon said simply, not even pushing me on why I didn’t trust the Fae Investigation Bureau to do their job. He pulled me under his arm and we started walking back toward the Vega Dorms.

My mind was whirling with everything that had happened to me combined with rage over Gabriel’s lies but I wasn’t going to let it shake me. Nothing had changed. I was still here to find out what had happened to my brother. And it was time I focused on getting back to my investigations again.

“*D*ammit,” I hissed, slitting my thumb open on the knife I was using to chop strawberries before quickly healing it. And it wasn’t the first time. Ten percent of the red juice coating the chopping board was probably my blood. And that might have been gross to most people. But luckily for me, the Fae I was preparing them for had a taste for blood. Not that she’d bitten me yet and she wouldn’t be doing so until I was ten inches deep in her. Alright nine. Gah *fine*. Eight and a half.

I’d used my skeleton key to raid the storage fridges in the Cafaeteria kitchen and was preparing a picnic for Elise in a big wicker basket I’d found just lying around. I mean all of those Rising Sun Foundation pamphlets sitting in it in the Cafaeteria were probably better off dumped on that table anyway. Or in the trash can beside it. Couldn’t quite remember where I’d shoved them. Anywho, Elise was gonna be so thrilled when she saw the incredible lunch I’d made for her. I’d told her to meet me up on Devil’s Hill at one o’clock which was - I checked my watch – ten minutes ago -*shit!*

I shoved the strawberries into a bowl beside the sandwiches I’d made then threw a dish towel over the basket and headed for the door.

I was soon striding through Acrux Courtyard which was quiet seeing as it was Sunday and all, but the Kipling brothers still manned their emporium.

I tipped my head to them as I passed by and they nodded back to me in unison like some creepy kids in a horror movie.

I jogged past Lunar and Oscura Turf which were empty and headed up the hill to where Elise was sitting under a tree. She was laying on a blanket taken from my room, holding a book above her as she read it, flicking through the pages, her expression thoughtful.

I slowed my pace, tilting my head as I read the name of the book. *Fate: Fortune or Fraud?*

My gaze shifted to her tits and I smiled dreamily.

"Stop staring at me, Leon." She rolled toward me, dropping the book with a smile pulling up one corner of her mouth. She wore her Pitball shirt and a pair of academy sweatpants and I vaguely wondered why I never saw her in her own clothes.

"I wasn't staring," I purred, dropping down beside her and placing the basket between us. "I was leering."

She laughed, reaching out to slap my arm playfully. I caught her hand with a grin, threading my fingers between hers. I was getting the serious feels for her. Like legit emotions. And I was okay with that.

"I got you something, little monster," I said, excitement bubbling in my chest. *She is gonna freak when she sees this. I've outdone myself this time.*

"Again?" She continued to smile and I released her hand, whipping the towel off the top of the picnic basket in a dramatic ta-dar moment. I held my hands out showman style, jazz fingers and all and her smile grew.

"Lunch?" she asked excitedly, sitting up and eyeing the food greedily.

I nodded and she reached for a sandwich but I snatched the basket away from her. "No. I'll be doing the feeding."

She raised her brows. "Come on, Leo, I don't need-"

I pressed a sandwich to her lips, tapping it against her mouth when she didn't open it.

She rolled her eyes then opened her mouth and my heart pattered as I placed it between her lips. She took a bite and a low growl escaped me as I watched.

Her eyes suddenly bulged and she reared forward, spitting it back out into her hand and making me lurch backwards. "What the fuck is in this – lava?!"

"What? No!" I shook my head. "It's just cheese and peppers. The green ones. And some red sauce."

"What kind of combo is that?" she rasped then flapped her arms, her eyes watering as she choked, "Wa-ter."

I grabbed a bottle out of the basket, tossing it to her in alarm and she took the lid off, glugging it down while her face faded from a bright red colour. A knot formed in my chest as I stared at the spat out sandwich.

She sucked in a breath as she stopped drinking and I apologised under my breath. She flicked the rest of the sandwich open and stared at the contents. "Holy shit, Leon, that's jalapeños and goddamn hot sauce."

"And that's…bad?"

She shook her head at me then burst out laughing. "That's *terrible*."

I frowned. "Lemme try again. The strawberries are good." I took them out of the basket and grabbed the bar of chocolate I'd tucked in there, ripping off the wrapper.

She continued to sip water as she watched me and I hoped I hadn't fucked this up completely.

When the chocolate was unwrapped, I encouraged fire into my hand to let it melt onto the strawberries, frowning as I immediately got covered in chocolate but I'd kinda done what I'd planned anyway.

The scent of burning filled my nose and the chocolate sizzled as it encased the strawberries in the bowl.

“Oh shit,” I gasped just as the whole lot went up in flames.

“Ah!” Elise screamed as it flared with my magic, consuming the entire contents of the bowl in a flash fire. I tossed it away from us onto the grass, grabbing another bottle of water from the basket and pouring it all over it, shaking out every last drop. The sizzling brown and red gloop remaining didn’t look in the least bit salvageable. But maybe if I…

No. It’s done Leon. They’re melted into a paste. Obliterated. Gone into a gloopy afterlife.

Unless…

No dammit. It’s fucked.

I sighed heavily, turning back to Elise and running a hand over my face in shame. The same hand which had been coated in melted chocolate.

Elise burst out laughing as I dropped my arm, tasting the sugary coating on my lips. “Oh fuck my life.”

Elise launched herself at me and I fell down into the grass as she used the full force of her Vampire strength. I released an *oomph* as my back impacted with the ground and I went to grab her wrists as I expected her to bite me. *Not yet, little monster.*

She ran the pad of her tongue up my cheek and I inhaled deeply, my dick tingling as she did it again.

“This is a better lunch anyway,” she said with a feline smile and I chuckled as she licked the rest of the chocolate from my face. Her mouth grazed mine and her tongue raked across my lips, causing an earthquake located solely in my cock.

“You’re terrible at doing things for people, Leo,” she said, her body vibrating as she laughed.

I caught her shoulders and pressed her back, a wicked smile pulling at my mouth. “Wanna bet?”

She gave me a questioning look. “I don’t need to bet. I just got proof. Like right then two seconds ago. Did you not see the chocolate and strawberries go up in flames. I mean, who would have thought they’d be so flammable?”

I rolled over so she fell off of me then jumped to my feet, catching her hand and dragging her after me.

“Wait – we can’t just leave everything.” She glanced over her shoulder at the failed picnic and I took out my Atlas, typing out a quick FaeBook post.

Leon Night*: Left my shit up on Devil’s Hill. Whoever returns it to my room will be my favourite.*

Sasha Mooncloud: *On my way!*

Amy Starling: *I’m closer! I’m at Altair Halls.*

Sasha Mooncloud: *I’m faster. Your legs are short. They always let him down.*

Dione Apollo: *I’m already there bitchessss. #Leonsfavourite #proudtobeinthepride*

I glanced over my shoulder, spotting the Mindy arriving at the top of the hill huffing and panting, but smiling her damn head off. I was such a philanthropist. Giving to the needy. Believing she really was my favourite was the purest form of kindness I could deliver to a Lioness.

I guided Elise back to The Vega Dormitories then tugged her to a halt on the threshold, dragging her back against me to whisper in her ear. “The

second we step through that door you're not gonna do a single thing for yourself."

"Leon, you really don't have to keep doing shit for me. I'm way past my hangover."

"I want to prove I can be good at this," I growled and she shuddered against me from the tone of my voice.

"Go on then," she breathed and I whipped her off her feet, cradling her in my arms as I elbowed my way inside.

She giggled as I jogged toward the stairs, my heart rate elevating as I started climbing, the sound of her laughter making me hard as hell.

I made it to the top floor and was practically sprinting by the time I reached my room, muscling my way inside and juggling Elise in my arms so I could close it behind me.

"What now?" she laughed and I threw her over my shoulder with a grunt.

I stalked toward my bunk, climbing up and tossing her down beneath me. She inhaled deeply, reaching for me, but I ignored her hand, taking hold of her shirt instead and toying with the hem.

She dropped her arms, biting into her lip. "Are you going to do everything for me?"

"*Everything*, little monster," I said, my eyes burning into hers and her pupils dilated. She slowly sat up then lifted her arms, a smile playing around her lips.

I smirked, hooking my thumbs into her shirt and dragging it up and over her head. I caught her thighs, tugging so she fell onto her back again and she laughed as I dropped over her.

I gave her a serious look which stalled the amusement in her throat, then dipped my head to graze my mouth along her jaw, keeping my body off of

hers as I tasted her flesh.

“Oh,” she sighed, lifting her hands to curl them around me.

I brushed my mouth down her throat and she shivered beneath me. “I’m good at a lot of things, Elise,” I murmured and her back arched as I placed a kiss against the swell of her breast, sliding my hand beneath her to unhook her bra.

“I don’t believe you,” she said breathily and I growled, grazing my teeth down to her nipple as I ripped the bra from her chest and threw it who knew where.

She clawed at me as I teased her with my mouth, palming her other breast as she writhed beneath me. She slid a hand into my hair, yanking then pushing my head lower and I grinned, soaking up the feeling of serving her.

I dragged my mouth down her stomach and I swear her whole damn body tasted like cherries and ecstasy. Fucking checstasy. It was going on my top ten list of things I liked to eat and I had a feeling I was about to crown a new number one.

Her hand fisted tighter in my hair and my shoulders flexed as she dug her nails into my skin with her other hand.

“Leo,” she gasped as I reached her waistband. I gave zero shits about that name anymore. She could call me Fanny Sackrider for all I cared and I’d still be thrilled to be here. Sidenote: totally knew a girl called Fanny Sackrider once.

I licked my way along her waistband until her hips were bucking and she couldn’t even say my name at all for how much she was panting, correctly or otherwise.

I was skirting the holy grail and I was pretty sure I was going to enjoy this almost as much as she was.

I tugged on her waistband and she lifted her hips to let me pull off her sweatpants and underwear. I sat up, making quick work of them and groaning at the sight of her completely bared before me.

“Stop staring, start doing,” she said with a devilish smile and I hooked her right leg over my shoulder, painting a line of kisses up her thigh.

“Oh – fuck,” she hissed and I grinned, taking my sweet time as I made my way north.

She caught a handful of my hair again and I let her guide me between her thighs, getting off on how good it felt to be hers, to do her bidding. I rolled my tongue across her clit and she moaned so loudly I immediately did it again. Her hand tightened in my hair demandingly but I didn’t need the encouragement. I swear this girl was made of skittles because she tasted like a damn rainbow. Always had wondered what a rainbow tasted like. Now I knew. And as predicted, it firmly took number one as my favourite taste.

I drove her wild with hard licks and soft bites, bringing my hand up to join the party and feel how wet she was for me. I groaned into her, shifting my hips as I got hard as hell, but I wasn’t gonna take this any further. This was her moment. I was proving my damn worth. That I was more than just a pretty face and a set of supremely stacked muscles. I might not have been able to make a sandwich right but I could sure as hell make a girl come. And this wasn’t just any girl. No, Elise Callisto was gonna get the best orgasm of her life.

I pushed two fingers into her and she locked her thighs around my head like I was officially serving time in pussy prison. And hell was I okay with that. In fact, it was the only prison I was ever gonna fucking serve time in. Fact.

“Ohmagawd,” Elise slurred as I settled into a steady rhythm with my hand and mouth, driving her towards bliss town.

One more sharp flick of my tongue sent her over the edge and she clutched my hair, rearing up and keeping me in place while she rode out her orgasm and I devoured every drop of it.

When she released me, I glanced up at her. Sweat beaded on her brow, her lips parted and her hair was heading in all kinds of directions. I was so horny for her I might as well have been injected with pure Venus juice right then. I swear that bitch was firmly in my star chart every time Elise was around. Even if that did defy the laws of the planetary movements. I had a feeling Elise could defy the laws of a lot of things. Like making a Nemean Lion bow at her feet. A beast created to be served, now readily serving her instead.

“Say it,” I demanded.

“You’re good at stuff,” she said breathlessly, then flopped back down onto the bed. “Now prove it again.”

Fourteen Months before the Solaria Meteor Shower…

***G**abriel finally bit the bait and it couldn't have come at a better time. I needed to make my next instalment to Old Sal and Dante's pay hadn't quite cut it. The light of the screen illuminated me in the dark, but I had a sheet pulled around my bunk so no one would see the burner phone.*

Gabriel Nox:

I'll give you a thousand auras a month. I'm not pouring my fucking bank account into yours. Besides, you think my account wouldn't flash up with dodgy activity if I did give it all to you? I don't know who you are, but I know one thing. You're a fucking amateur.

Tick-tock, Faeker. I'm going to find you.

Fear tangled with the relief I felt at knowing I was going to make another month's payment. I shot him the bank account details to send the money to – one I'd set up specifically for this transaction under the fake name. It was untraceable as far as I could tell. So I just had to hope I didn't

make any mistakes and let anything slip to Nox. Because I was beyond dead if he found out.

I stuffed the burner phone away in the slit I'd made in the base of the mattress above my bunk, sealing it with a concealment spell before I released a heavy breath. I felt too hot and was sure I wasn't gonna get any sleep at all. Tomorrow, I'd get that money and bring the monthly instalment to Old Sal.

I'd saved Elise for another thirty days. I just hoped I could keep this up.

***

"Your hair looks totally cute like this, babe." Cindy Lou brushed my hair back, practically sitting in my lap as we sat together at breakfast. I grinned stupidly at her, sensing eyes on us but not giving one shit.

How had I landed the hottest girl in school? She wasn't even a ten, she was a fucking eleven.

"Oh yeah?" I smirked, leaning in to steal a kiss and she giggled flirtatiously against my mouth. Her fingers knotted in my shirt, but I felt her attention drift and I pulled back, finding Dante watching us from the next table over.

Cindy giggled again, returning her attention to me. "We have an audience."

I brushed my fingers up her back, turning to snatch up a piece of toast, figuring I'd better stop this unless I wanted to head to Arcane Arts looking extra happy.

Cindy Lou started nibbling on my ear and I groaned, gently pushing her back as I felt Dante's eyes drilling into us. What was his deal?

When I glanced over, he jerked his head to beckon me and I sighed, realising what this was about.

I extracted myself from Cindy's arms and headed over to talk to him, the hairs raising on the back of my neck as his pack immediately gave me their attention. It wasn't like they were even that close to me, but I felt the threat in all of their postures. One word from Dante and they'd rip me to shreds for their Alpha.

"Hey man," I said and Dante smiled lazily before patting the spare seat beside him.

His Beta, Tabitha, released a low growl as I dropped into it, but she also shifted up to give me a bit more room so that was kind of a headfuck.

"Nice hair," Dante commented, looking at it with a smirk and I quickly flattened it down, unsure what the hell Cindy had done to it.

"My girlfriend messed it up." I shrugged one shoulder and his eyes shimmered with some thought.

"You two are an item now?"

"Yeah I mean…I think so. We haven't really said it though I guess."

"So you're not official," he said simply.

"Well not official *official…" I trailed off, knowing how lame that sounded. I needed to just ask her out but every time I considered it, I heard my own voice in my head and I sounded like such a douche.* 'Hey Cindy, wanna be my girlfriend 'cause I think you're super pretty and stuff.' *By the stars, why was it so hard to be cool? Dante seemed to find it as easy as breathing.*

"She's a nice girl," he pointed out. "So be nice to her too or I'll break your legs." He said it all with a smile but my stomach knotted as I felt the undercurrent of the threat.

"I will," I forced out, my throat overly tight.

“Good. Oh and I’ve got a job for you tonight, cavallo, I’ll message you when I need you.”

The school bell rang and Dante headed away, leaving me behind as his pack flowed after him.

Nerves inched into me as he disappeared from view. After the first job I’d done for him at the fetish club, I couldn’t help but worry about what he had in store for me tonight. But there wasn’t much point in dwelling on it. Whatever it was, I’d get it done.

***

The day crawled by and my mood only lifted by the time I left my final class. It was time to collect my first instalment from Gabriel and pay off my mom’s debt to Sal.

I checked my Atlas for any messages from Dante as I stripped out of my uniform in my dorm, but there was none just yet.

I stuffed a spare change of clothes in a bag I’d customised specially for travelling in my Order form – I was savvy like that – then turned to Leon who was in the midst of getting a back massage from Amy. He was face down on the floor on a fluffy blanket while Amy rubbed his back, working up a sweat as she struggled to knead out the kinks in all of his muscles.

“I’m going to town,” I told him, hanging the bag around my neck on the elastic strap.

“Pick me up some Faebury chocolate reindeers,” he asked and I felt his Charisma winding around me.

“You mean the ones they only make at Christmas?” I rolled my eyes.

“There’s a candy shop on Starfire Street that sell them,” Leon said in a way that almost sounded tempting to me. I blinked, shaking off the urge to

comply.

"No dude."

"I'll get them," Amy said brightly.

"You're busy," Leon said into the blanket. "And Gareth's going to town anyway…"

For a moment I thought of the pawn broker's arm he'd ripped off and that combined with his Charisma made me falter.

"Fine, sure whatever." I headed to the window, pushing it open before peeling off my boxers and tossing them across the room onto my bed. I climbed up onto the sill then jumped with a whoop of excitement, calling on my Order form. My glittering black Pegasus burst into existence from the confines of my flesh and I neighed to the sky as I kicked my legs and flapped my wings hard, climbing toward the heavens. I broke into the clouds and whinnied as they brushed over my pelt, filling my magic reserves.

I twisted through the sky, relishing the rush of flying before heading toward the city. I thought of Ella and hoped she'd be at the club when I dropped the money off to Old Sal. If not, maybe I had time to drop in on her afterwards before Dante called on me.

I made my way to the closest branch of the Bank of Solaria then circled down into an alley close to it, landing on all four hooves and folding my wings before shifting back into my Fae form. I changed into the clothes in my pack then shouldered it and headed out onto the street. My veins hummed with adrenaline as I headed toward the large, grey stone bank, slowing my pace as a prickling sensation ran up my spine.

Have I covered my tracks well enough?

What if Gabriel has tracked me somehow?

I glanced around as the awful feeling of being watched increased.

Call it a gut instinct but I had the sudden urge to turn and head in the opposite direction. But if I did that, I'd draw attention to myself if anyone really was watching me.

I kept walking, crossing the street and entering a café opposite the bank. I ordered a coffee, my eyes flitting across the road and back through the window. There was nothing suspect there, but it was like the stars were warning me, whispering in my ears.

I moved to sit on a long table in front of the window with my coffee, watching the Fae coming and going from the bank. The heavy smell of cigarettes wafted from a guy with a handlebar moustache a few seats down from me, a newspaper flattened before him.

I wrinkled my nose from the strong smell, sipping my coffee and drawing in a breath of it to chase away the scent.

I thought over the account information I'd given Gabriel. It was linked to the Bank of Solaria, but that wasn't particularly worrying. There were loads of branches in the city.

Although…this was the closest one to Aurora Academy. And if Gabriel suspected a student of blackmailing him then what better time for one to come to this particular bank than after school hours just after the transaction was made?

Maybe I was being paranoid, but I decided to play it safe. There were plenty of banks in the city and ATMs too. I'd visit them at random, never form a pattern.

I finished my coffee, heading back into the alley and flying toward the eastern quarter.

Within an hour, I was walking into The Sparkling Uranus with a wad of cash in my pocket, a bag of Faebury chocolate reindeers in my bag and my

heart pounding in my chest. I headed into the dimly-lit club, searching for Ella or Mom, but I couldn't spot either of them.

I walked through to the back and knocked on Sal's door.

"Come in," her croaky voice called.

I stepped inside, glancing around to check that no one else was there before taking the cash from my pocket along with the rest from Dante Oscura.

"Here's this month's instalment." I planted it down on the desk with a barely disguised sneer. This woman was threatening my sister and I hated her for what she wanted to take from my family.

"You've surprised me, Gareth," she said as she took the cash and started counting it onto the desk, a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. "I didn't expect you to be so resourceful. You'd make a fine manager at this place one day."

"You know, there are other jobs outside of your strip club, Sal. My sister and I plan on applying for them."

Old Sal released a throaty laugh. "You might get a nice white collar job out of that fancy academy of yours, but your sister's main asset will always be her body in a city like this."

"Well maybe we'll leave Alestria," I snarled, heat dripping down my spine.

"Maybe you will," she said like she didn't buy it. "But it's always good to have a back up plan. You're lucky to have someone like me offering you paid work. No one survives living out on these streets very long." She finished counting the money then turned to open her safe and lock it away with the mounds of cash in there. It made me kind of ill to know how much I was sacrificing for a debt that this bitch could so easily have absolved. Sal wasn't hard up, she just wanted Elise. But I'd never let her have her.

I headed out of the office with the intention of visiting Ella. I just wanted a few hours in the company of my sister to forget all about the stressful time I was having at the academy.

My gut sank as my Atlas pinged and I found a message from Dante under the alias I'd given his number.

Starhawk:

Meet me at the campus gates in fifteen minutes.

I sighed heavily, my night of freedom racing away on the wind. I'd have to see Ella another night.

I'm doing this for you my little angel. I'll see you soon.

The wind howled and dead leaves swirled around me as I ran down the muddy path through the trees. It was dark but up ahead the pale light of the moon shone at the end of the tunnel created by the towering trunks. If I could just make it to the light then I'd be safe. But no matter how fast I ran, I couldn't get any closer to the safety offered up ahead.

I threw a look over my shoulder and fear spiked through me as I spotted the cloaked figure drawing nearer. My heart thundered a panicked rhythm and I tried to run faster. But it was no use, a cold hand landed on my shoulder and I screamed as I was dragged back into their arms-

I gasped as I woke, trying to sit up but finding myself pinned down.

For a moment I cried out as the fear from my nightmare followed me into reality but the warmth of the body pinning me in place quickly banished my fear as I recognised Leon in the dark.

He'd rolled over in his sleep and his arm and leg were thrown across me as he still held me close and completely immobilised me beneath him.

I tried to wriggle free, but a soft growl escaped him and he only tightened his hold on me.

A breath of laughter escaped my lips and I caught his arm, trying to shift it. But he was like a dead weight. Around two hundred pounds of muscular Lion Shifter, oblivious to the world and sleeping on top of me.

“*Leon*,” I hissed, pushing again.

He reeled me in, nuzzling into my neck so that his stubble grazed my skin.

I almost laughed but Leon ran ridiculously hot and I was starting to sweat pinned beneath him like that.

“Leon?” I said louder. “You’re crushing me!”

“I wanna try the cheese filled ones…”

His leg shifted over mine and I swear I was actually more pinned down.

I grabbed his arm and shook him, gently at first then harder when he still didn’t wake.

“Put it in my mouth,” he growled.

I sniggered and shoved a little harder, managing to gain a few inches of space but he soon reeled me in again.

I was so damn hot that it was making it hard to breathe. I needed some space and Leon was so deeply asleep that I couldn’t rouse him to get him off of me.

With a surge of my Vampire strength, I half lifted him and managed to roll free. Leon flopped back down on top of the spot I’d just vacated and I wriggled back until I was sitting up at the foot of his bed.

His bare chest drew my attention for several long seconds as I remembered running my mouth all over it last night. Leon had asked me to stay with him again and I’d agreed because I was a little bit hooked on the way he made me feel and the laughter I managed while I was in his company.

And I couldn’t really deny the fact that I was happy to keep on avoiding Gabriel too. He was a liar and an asshole and if I never saw him again it would be too soon. I didn’t understand why he’d saved me the night of the party just to push me away and call me a liar right afterwards. If he really

cared about what had been done to me that night then why didn't he want anyone looking into the person who had done it? There was a killer in this school and Gabriel's lies meant no one was even looking for them. Well, no one but me anyway. And I was sure as shit going to find them on my own.

Before Leon and I had had time to explore the possibilities presented by sharing a bed yet again and with me decidedly less hung over, Sasha and Amy had arrived back to the dorm. Leon wanted to send them away again but that made me feel like a total asshat so he'd reluctantly agreed to let them stay. He'd then wanted to carry on fooling around with me despite the fact that they were in the room which I'd shut down. So we'd watched Faeflix and fallen asleep together instead.

But as much as I liked the warmth of Leon's arms around me, the single bunks just weren't big enough for two people to sleep in comfortably. Especially when one of those people was a huge ass Lion Shifter who ran about five degrees hotter than was normal.

Leon had gone full starfish mode the moment I'd vacated my spot and he was now taking up every inch of his bed.

His hand kept shifting over the spot where I'd been like he was hunting for me and I pushed a pillow into his arms as I watched him with amusement. He smiled in his sleep, dragging the pillow closer to him and nuzzling it like there was no tomorrow.

I bit my lip on a laugh and looked around for a moment at the darkened space.

It was the middle of the night and I needed to get back to sleep but it didn't look like I'd easily be able to do that in Leon's bed.

My gaze snagged on the empty bottom bunk on the other side of the room and my heart lurched as I thought of my brother lying there.

I slipped out of bed, my toes sinking into the carpet as I padded across the room towards it.

I wasn't entirely sure if sleeping there was a good idea or a terrible one. Would laying in Gareth's bed make me feel closer to him? Or would I feel his absence even more keenly if I was in his space? Maybe I'd feel nothing at all. It was just an empty bed after all. A place I'd never seen him. But it was still *his*.

I tentatively lowered myself into his space, my fingers sweeping over the cool sheets. Were these the sheets he'd slept in the night before he died? Or had the bed been stripped down and made up fresh as if he'd never been here at all?

The mattress curved beneath me and I continued to trail my hands across the sheet slowly, tipping myself back until I was lying in his place.

I let out a shaky breath, a single tear slipping from the corner of my eye and running away over my cheek to soak into his pillow.

What happened to you? How did you end up like this, Gare bear? You know you took the best of me with you when you died, don't you? Because I was only ever the better parts of me when you were there to bring out the light in me. Look at me now, look at what's left behind without you...

I curled my arms around my chest as I turned and pressed my face to his pillow, hoping to feel closer to him. But he wasn't there. There was no scent or feeling or sense of him at all. It was just an empty bed. This place had forgotten about him already.

Pain reared up inside me like it had just been waiting for this moment, wanting to devour me whole.

I gave in to the abyss for a while, letting the tears come and wishing for so many things that I could never have again.

Like the way he'd always hugged me with one arm but squeezed twice as hard to make up for it. Or the way he'd crawl into my bed and cuddle me when we were little and Mom was out working at the club. He always said it was to make sure I wasn't afraid. But we'd both known that the truth was that he was the one who didn't like the dark. And now he was lost in the dark forever. And I couldn't be there to hold him.

My soul ached for something of him, anything at all, just the slightest sense of him to remind me that he'd been here. My magic slid from my body, hunting, searching, seeking him out. And a tingle registered on the edge of my senses.

I drew in a shuddering breath as I rolled onto my back.

The tingling was still there, right ahead of me. I reached up instinctively, feeling the familiar trail of his power. My fingertips brushed against the springs of the bed above mine where Amy lay sleeping and I almost dismissed the idea as I found nothing there.

But a niggling feeling in my gut made me trail my fingers back and forth across the springs again as I searched for…something.

The tears stopped falling as I concentrated on the faint magical vibration that had called to me and I stilled as the echo of it tingled through my fingertips. I frowned in concentration as I pushed my power into my palm, looking for signs of magical concealment. My attention snagged on the tiniest hint of power and I latched onto it, tugging roughly with my own magic.

At the last moment, I sensed an alarm woven into the magic but it didn't matter. Only the person who'd set this spell would feel the alarm when it was tripped and I recognised the magic I was working with well enough to know it was Gareth's. If he could hear it in the afterlife then maybe he'd

know that I was still working to avenge him. But I doubted it. He would have left his magic behind here just as he'd left me. Forgotten and alone.

This spell was much more complicated than the one he'd laid over his stash in the wall but with a wrench of determination, my magic tore through his and a small slit was revealed in the mattress above me.

I pushed my fingers into it, careful not to disturb Amy, though if all Lion Shifters slept as soundly as Leon, I doubted I had much to worry about.

Something fell into my hand and I looked down at the disposable burner phone in surprise as I turned it over in my palm.

I flipped it open, pressing my thumb down on the power button, a trickle of adrenaline pouring through me as it came on.

It was a basic device, just made for calls and messages and I quickly opened up the message box to see what was hiding there.

My lips parted and my heart thumped a wild tune as I found a trail of messages back and forth from this phone to Gabriel Nox. I scrolled all the way to the top and found a message filled with images. I frowned at the list of alternative identities with Gabriel's photograph attached to them. He had said someone was after him…maybe these were part of his escape plans alongside that apartment he'd taken me to. But why would someone be looking for him? And how had my brother figured it out?

I read through the following messages, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I read over Gareth's demands for money. Was this where he'd been getting the money he'd been sending home? But then why had he been dealing Killblaze too?

It looked like Gareth had started off by demanding the entire contents of Gabriel's bank account but had eventually agreed to a payoff of a thousand auras a month. Once they'd agreed to that, there were just two messages a month. One from Gareth, reminding Gabriel to pay. One from Gabriel

confirming he had – and each of those messages were punctuated by promises that he'd find out who was blackmailing him one day and do all kinds of painful and creative things to him.

My gut lurched. Was that what had happened to Gareth? Had Gabriel figured out who was blackmailing him and made good on his threats?

The last messages were sent just over two months ago. Several days before Gareth's death. Gabriel had confirmed his latest payment had gone through and sworn to knock all of Gareth's teeth out when he found him before force feeding them back to him until he choked on them.

Why the hell would you blackmail someone as powerful as Gabriel Nox, Gareth??

I could hardly tally the idea of my carefree brother blackmailing someone at all. Why had he needed this money? He wouldn't have just done this out of greed. There was some bigger reason here and we sure as shit hadn't been getting a thousand auras sent to us on top of Mom's pay packet each month. Gareth himself didn't own anything particularly expensive. So this money had to be going on something. But what?

My mind was whirling and I didn't know what to do. I had the phone but what use was it to me?

I twisted it in my fingers, trying to come up with a plan. I needed to know if Gabriel had figured out who was blackmailing him or not. I started to shake as I considered the terrible possibility that I'd slept with my brother's killer. But I yanked that thought back by the hair, refusing to let myself jump to conclusions yet. I had to get proof first.

My gaze lingered on the phone in my hand and an idea struck me.

I was up and out of the bed in the next breath and I grabbed my Atlas and school bag before heading for the exit.

I glanced at Leon as I left but he was still out of it, so I just pulled the door closed behind me and headed down the darkened corridor to my dorm.

I paused outside, listening to confirm that there were three heartbeats beyond the door before I slipped inside.

I closed the door quietly and climbed up into my bed, keeping my attention on the heavy breathing around me to make sure none of my roommates had noticed my arrival. I positioned myself with the blankets pulled up around me and my eyes on Gabriel.

I didn't know how to feel about him anymore. One minute he was saving my life, the next he was lying about everything I'd witnessed, painting me out as some delusional junkie. And now I had this phone…maybe the answer had been staring me in the face all along. Maybe he didn't want to help me find the person in the woods because he had something to do with them. Maybe the two of them had been working together in their serial killer cult and he'd just saved me because he really did believe I might be his Elysian Mate. He said he'd come looking for me because he'd sensed I was in trouble but what if the truth was that he'd been there all along? Hiding beneath one of those capes alongside all the other freaks?

I released a shaky breath as I considered that. Letting myself consider the fact that he really could be a suspect again after dismissing him before.

I gave it five minutes to be safe then quickly tapped out a new message on the burner phone.

Faeker:

It looks like you've missed a few payments, you'd better rectify that before your files go public.

Gabriel’s Atlas pinged loudly and he rolled over with a groan. The light of its screen spilled into the room as he opened up the message and I caught the sharp inhale that followed.

In the next moment he was up and yanking on a pair of jeans. His wings burst from his back and he grabbed his Atlas before turning and leaping from the window, leaving it wide open in his haste to get away.

A shiver of fear ran down my spine as I waited and waited…and waited.

Gabriel:

Who the fuck is this??

I ground my teeth, sitting on the edge of the dormitory tower while gazing down at the sheer drop below. My eyes unfocused as my pulse elevated and hammered against my skull.

Shit!

Who has Gareth's phone? How can this be happening again?

What if they know what I did?

My Atlas pinged and my heart hit a frantic rhythm. I tapped on the message from Gareth's alias and prepared myself for the worst.

Faeker:

I think you know.

Before I could respond to that bullshit another message came through.

Faeker:

I’m still waiting for that payment. Looks like you missed a few since the Solarid Meteor Shower. Now why would that be…

“Fuck,” I spat, scraping a hand across my jaw as I tried not to panic. But I was in so much shit if someone had Gareth’s phone. If they knew what Gareth knew. If they had my file, the pictures…what if they started piecing things together? What if they knew who was after me and handed my goddamn information to them?

I took a steadying breath. The chances of that happening were slim. They had to be. What were the odds of them knowing who I was hiding from? *I* didn’t even fucking know. But shit, I had to sort this out fast.

Gabriel:

I know for a fact you’re not the real owner of this phone. And if you think fucking with me is a good idea, maybe you should think about how he ended up.

My heart hit a painful beat as I pressed send.

Back off, asshole. Get the hint. I’m not to be messed with.

A ping hit my ears as another message came in.

Faeker:

Maybe I’m a ghost returned to haunt you for what you did.

Ice crawled along my skin and bit deep into my veins.

They couldn’t know. No one knew. No one but Bill Fortune. And it wasn’t him fucking texting me, so *who?*

At the thought of my P.I. I shot a quick message to him.

Gabriel:

URGENT. Orbit. Now.

I replied to Faeker with rage and panic tangling inside me.

Gabriel:

I didn't do shit. Our business deal ended the night 'you' died. So go back beyond the veil, ghost.

I rushed to my tent and pulled on some sweatpants and shoes before tucking a shirt into the back of my pants. It was fucking freezing tonight, so I took a fire crystal from my stash then turned in the direction of Mars, spinning it in a slow circle before me. A deep crimson glow sparked within it and heat channelled into my veins.

I stuffed the crystal into my pocket as its heat continued to spread through my body. It would last for six hours then all that would remain was a pile of red dust. They weren't cheap to buy, but I wasn't exactly hard up. And though I tried to use Falling Star's money as little as possible, these were a necessity for flying on winter nights.

I headed out of the tent as the goosebumps on my arms settled down, double checking my Atlas for any more messages from Faeker.

Nothing.

Maybe they'd gotten the message. It didn't matter though. Even if they stopped messaging me now, I wasn't going to rest until I found out who they were. And I'd make sure they never leaked any of the information Gareth had on me. But what would it take to achieve that? What if I had to use force? What if I had to become a monster again?

Fuck, what if they're uploading my false identities to FaeBook right now?

I took a running leap off the edge of the roof, my wings stretching out and beating hard as I made a furious path through the sky.

I had to get to Bill. He'd handle this like he'd handled the mess I'd made the night of the Solarid Meteor Shower.

I flew across the city, climbing higher so my back brushed the clouds. The glittering lights of Alestria stared up at me like a twisted reflection of the stars.

I flew toward the most northern road which led out of the city, circling down as I spotted the Orbit Motel a hundred yards from the city border. A large silver sign sat beside the highway and since I'd last visited this spot, someone had graffitied over the first word in bright red letters. ~~*Thank*~~ *Fuck you for visiting Alestria.*

I landed in the parking lot of the grotty motel and passed a line of pick-up trucks to the row of doors beneath a long porch. The lights were flickering and a group of moths were trying to kill themselves by slamming into the only bulb which worked consistently.

I strode straight up to room eleven and rapped my knuckles on the door.

"Who is it?" a gruff voice came from inside. Bill's voice.

"Me," I answered and he wrenched the door open. His brown shirt was hanging open a few buttons and the stench of cigarette smoke wafted over me as he puffed on the one in the corner of his mouth.

"Hey, kid. Just so you know, I gave up a perfectly decent hooker for this, so it'd better be good." He tugged me inside and slammed the door.

I glanced around the room where we often met, the same old seventies décor staring back at me and reeking of a thousand dodgy customers.

“You could just meet a woman the normal way you know,” I pointed out. “Like at a bar.” I took a seat on a wooden chair in the corner and Bill dropped down onto the edge of the double bed, combing his fingers through his dark hair.

“Sex is much simpler when it’s a transaction,” he said, inhaling another lungful of cancer.

I thought of Elise and wondered if Bill actually had a decent point. She was anything but simple to me.

“So what’s going on?” Bill cocked his head, attentive.

I took out my Atlas, bringing up the messages from Faeker before tossing it to him. He caught it, frowning as he thumbed through them, his brows slowly inching together.

“I got those tonight,” I said.

“Yeah…I can see that,” he said thoughtfully. “Well fuck me, looks like you’ve got another asshole on your tail, kid.” He glanced up at me with genuine concern in his eyes, but it quickly vanished. I wondered sometimes what Bill Fortune really thought of me. He’d worked for me for years and as sad as it was, he was my only confidant in the whole world. My adopted parents didn’t tell me shit and spent more of their time lying to me than they did listening to me. Bill with his handle-bar moustache, no bullshit attitude and cigarette addiction was the closest thing I had to a friend because he was the only one I could afford to have. But he certainly wouldn’t ever be hearing that sentiment from my mouth.

“So what do you want me to do? I can’t track the phone this is sent from, we tried before-”

“I know,” I cut over him. Bill and I had had a plan to catch Gareth back when I didn’t know his identity. I’d agreed to send a thousand auras a month to Gareth– not enough to dent my bank account but enough to keep

him sweet. In the meantime, Bill spent every waking hour trying to work out who he was. Eventually, he got him and I just…flipped.

I wet my mouth, pushing a hand into my black hair as I wrangled my emotions. “I’m thinking that Gareth only had a certain number of people in his life who might have gotten their hands on that phone and would care enough to message me.”

Bill nodded slowly, releasing a line of smoke into the air and the harsh scent hit the back of my throat. “Makes sense. I’ll start with the kid’s family then. Maybe he had an angry brother or a pissed off cousin who’s stumbled across that phone and has big enough balls to make threats against you.”

“But why now?” I growled, frustration creeping into me. “What do they want?”

“My guess? Cold, hard revenge,” Bill said in a dark tone and I clenched my jaw.

“For what?” I hissed. “No one knows what I did, how could they?”

“If they found that phone maybe they have their suspicions now.” Bill shrugged one shoulder. “I told you that night would come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Yeah thanks for the reminder,” I said dryly. “Obviously I never would have done it if I’d known…”

“Known what?” Bill scoffed.

I shook my head, unable to finish that thought out loud.

“You did what you had to, kid,” Bill said. “I’d have done the same. You don’t last long in Alestria if you don’t neutralise your enemies.”

I sighed, rising to my feet and starting to pace. “I can’t have those identities posted online. It’s too fucking risky. Whoever’s looking for me could see them, the press could do an article on me. I could be thrown under the spotlight and be dead within a week.”

“If I find the culprit, I can make sure they don’t have the means to put anything online,” Bill said, his eyes flickering with darkness. I knew he’d killed people before but not on my orders. I didn’t know if he was insinuating that or not, but he was damn well capable of it.

I swallowed thickly. “No. If you find them, tell me. I’ll deal with them.”

“I’ll find them alright.” Bill tossed my Atlas back to me, giving me a hard look. “Just deal with them better than you did Gareth Tempa. No loose ends this time. We find them, we neutralise them and we destroy the phone they’re using to make sure there’s no evidence left.”

I nodded, heading to the door but pausing before I left. “Thanks Bill. Sorry about the hooker.”

Bill barked a laugh. “The night is young.”

I blew out a breath of amusement, opening the door and heading onto the porch.

A sweeping sensation ran through my body like charged starlight and my head moved of its own accord as the heavens seemed to guide my actions. It had happened a couple of times before, like fate’s path was suddenly visible enough for me to see. But what I saw just left me confused.

A woman exited a room a few doors down, her hood drawn up over her head. She glanced my way, her shoulders hunched and her head bowed a little. The stars hummed in my ears and I knew what to do. I plucked my Atlas out of my pocket, kicking my foot back against the wall and pretending to study the screen.

The woman drew closer, hurrying past and I flipped my eyes up just as she went by, frowning as I caught sight of a scarred face buried deep within her hood. One of her eyes was glassy and white, but I didn’t see it for long as she dipped her head again and hurried up to a vending machine at the far

end of the porch. She started pushing coins into it and I looked up at the stars in confusion, moving away from the wall and flexing my wings.

I took off into the sky, throwing a final glance down at the motel as I soared above it, confused by The Sight as always. It just never seemed to work right for me. If only I could figure out how to use it properly, maybe I wouldn't be lost in a sea of fragmented memories. Maybe I'd know who I was. And maybe I'd know who I really had to fear in this world.

By the time my Atlas rang to get me up and out of bed, I'd managed a grand total of three hours sleep all night, most of which had involved being pinned beneath a Nemean Lion Shifter. The rest had been spent waiting to see if Gabriel would message me again and trying to plot my next move against him.

He knew something. I just didn't know if he was entirely responsible yet or not and he was so powerful that I couldn't risk making a more direct move against him until I was sure. If Gabriel was the piece of shit who'd killed my brother then it was going to be really difficult to kill him. He was strong and his magic was potent, plus he was paranoid which meant he was always expecting an attack anyway. The Sight might even warn him about me coming for him.

I gave a little bit of thought to how I'd do it, but my gut lurched sharply at the mere idea of it. He'd saved me after the party. Risked his life to help me. Could I really hurt him when I owed him my life? But if he'd taken Gareth's then I had to.

I shifted uncomfortably in my bed as some part of me balked against the idea on an instinctive level. I frowned at myself then decided to put it out of my mind. I'd see how these messages played out, look for more evidence

and deal with it then. I wasn't going to let myself get worked up about anything until I was sure.

My daily horoscope flashed up on the screen and I read over it quickly, wondering if there was anything to say how this standoff with Gabriel over the burner phone might play out.

Good morning Libra.
The stars have spoken about your day!
Today, the planets are shifting through your chart and their influences may help or hinder you depending on your choices. Mars is keeping company with Venus for you so you should consider your heart before entering onto the path of war. If you choose to collide instead of coming to peace today, you may find it difficult to resolve the conflict created by your rage.

I imagined my rage would quite like an outlet though, so maybe conflict would be worth it if a collision came my way. I guessed I'd just have to see what way today played out before wondering if I needed to resolve anything.

I yawned widely as I slid from my bed.

Gabriel had gone quiet on me hours ago and I switched the burner phone back off before hiding it in my school bag alongside Gareth's journal. I was always carrying a hell of a lot of damning evidence around school with me, but I wasn't sure what my alternative was. I could find a hiding place somewhere on campus, but what if it was discovered? Or someone noticed me frequenting an unusual spot? I wasn't sure which was the greater risk. My concealment spells were pretty good but if someone was hunting for

them directly then I wasn't convinced they'd hold. I just had to hope no one got any ideas about snooping on *me*.

I dropped out of bed and grabbed a towel and clean uniform before turning to head for a shower. Dante stepped out of his bunk before I could leave.

"You're back?" he asked, a smile pulling up the corner of his mouth.

"Was I ever really gone?" I asked dismissively, my gaze wandering over his muscular body as he stood before me in his boxers. Hell, his thighs looked stronger than my entire body, even with my Vampire strength taken into consideration. And I didn't entirely hate that about him.

"Maybe Leon couldn't hit the spot then?" he teased, taking a step closer to me. "And you realised it was time you stopped dancing around me."

I shifted forward too, the air crackling in the inch of space dividing us as his electrical power spilled from his flesh. I took my time dragging my gaze up the length of his body and found him smirking as I made it to his mouth. Temptation didn't fully cover the way I felt around him and I had to bite down on my lip for a moment to stop myself from thinking about the way it might feel pressed to his mouth.

"Leon hit the spot," I purred, watching as his eyes flashed, though it wasn't with anger as I'd expected, it seemed more like desire to me. "Do you want me to tell you about it?"

Dante growled and the static crackled between us again, but his anger still didn't come. His eyes lit with a strange kind of hunger that made me wonder if he really *did* want to hear about it.

"Eww, no *I* don't want to hear it!" Laini called from the confines of her bunk and I couldn't help but laugh.

Dante chuckled too, reaching out to grab his own towel and following me as I left the room.

“Why don’t you come and tell me about it in the shower?” he asked in a low tone that sent a shiver down my spine.

“I didn’t know you were so interested in Leon’s performance, Dante,” I teased as we walked along the corridor. “Will I have to worry about you stealing his attention from me?”

Dante laughed. “Maybe,” he joked. “I’ve always had a thing for blondes.” His gaze travelled over my hair for a moment and he dropped his voice as he continued. “At least until I realised my new favourite colour was lilac.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. Are you coming to the Oscura party in The Iron Wood on Friday?”

My gut tightened at the mention of heading out into those trees. After watching a boy kill himself there, I had no real desire to ever go back. And there had still been no reports of a body being discovered. It was like it hadn’t even happened. But it had. I knew it in my heart. If fucking Gabriel had just admitted it maybe the guy’s poor parents could have some solace by now. Part of me was tempted to go looking for a body. But from the level of organisation that twisted cult seemed to have, I didn’t expect I’d find one.

“I didn’t know you were having a party,” I hedged.

“Invite only. You made the cut, bella.”

“Ooh should I swoon?” I teased.

“I won’t complain if you do,” he said and I grinned, attempting to push all thoughts of dead bodies from my mind.

“Can I think about it?”

“No. Do you want me to beg?”

“I wouldn’t hate it,” I admitted with a smirk.

Dante laughed darkly. “For you I just might. But not over a party. Come, have fun with us. You don’t have to sign up to the Clan, I’ll even tell the recruiters to leave you alone. You never do anything fun on the weekends.”

“Maybe I like the peace and quiet while everyone else is out,” I said weakly because the real reasons for me having no social life were a lack of friends and funds.

“Bugiarda,” he muttered with a grin.

“What does that mean?” I swear the guy spoke in Faetalian just to turn me on sometimes.

“*Liar*. I think you can party with the best of us.”

Something stirred in my gut at the challenge in his gaze. The Kiplings had asked me to help cause another distraction tonight so that they could get more products on campus so I could probably get something new to wear with my earnings if I decided to go.

“Okay,” I said lightly.

“Okay? You’ll be there?” he confirmed, not bothering to hide his smile at the fact.

“Unless I’m washing my hair,” I agreed. Which reminded me that I should probably get some more dye too.

“You have to come now,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Perché mi spezzerai il cuore se non lo fai,” he said seriously and my stomach fluttered as he spoke in his native tongue again. I had no idea what it meant but I had to admit it was really convincing.

I bit my lip as I looked up at him. “Fair enough. I’ll be there.”

Dante flashed me a smile which sent heat flooding through my limbs.

We’d reached the end of the corridor where the bathrooms stood on either side of us.

“Are you coming in to tell me about last night?” Dante asked again.

I offered him a teasing smile as I backed into the girl’s bathroom and he headed away into the men’s with a shrug.

“Next time, then bella.”

“Maybe,” I replied.

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My breakfast had consisted of a slice of toast and a coffee which I drank on the go. I’d spent enough time in the shower to put me in the Brotherhood breakfast slot and I had zero interest in being around Ryder any more than necessary today. His eyes had followed me as I’d walked right out of the Cafaeteria after I’d collected my food and I’d ignored him.

But as I headed for potions class, I had to resign myself to an hour in his company.

To make the agony as brief as possible, I hung out in The Rigel Library working on an Astrology chart until the bell rang to mark the start of class. Leon was always late and Professor Titan never chewed him out for it so I hoped he’d extend that leniency to me too.

The sound of laughter reached me as I was packing up my school books and I looked up to see Harvey Bloom and his Pegasus herd joking around in the far corner of the vast room. I pursed my lips, wondering if there was any chance I might still be able to get information from him about my brother and the Killblaze they’d both been dealing but us he looked around and caught my eye, I got my answer.

Harvey openly scowled at me, letting me know he hadn’t forgotten the fact that I’d tried forcing information from him about the Killblaze and who supplied it. If I wanted anything more from him I was going to have to take

it by force and I was pretty sure that would alert the manufacturer to my interest. It wasn't worth the risk. Besides, I already had reason to suspect Ryder after that interaction, so I probably should have been turning that branch of my investigation towards him.

I moved my attention away from Harvey Bloom and headed out of the library before I ended up being so late that I really did get into trouble for it.

I walked to class, hurrying as it started to rain while I crossed the Acrux Courtyard then slowing my pace again as I made it into Altair Halls.

I soon pushed open the door to the potions lab and gave the room a sweeping look. Gabriel wasn't in his usual seat at the back of the room which wasn't like him. That guy didn't do late and he certainly never missed class. I wondered if he'd show up at all or if I'd rattled him too effectively. The idea of that gave me a dark kind of satisfaction.

Cindy Lou spotted me as I walked in and quickly dropped her gaze to her desk, sinking into her chair as her cheeks lined with colour. I pursed my lips, wondering if our fight would be the end of the animosity between us. Because I really had no intention or interest in keeping up this ridiculous feud. I just hoped her humiliation and defeat at the party would be enough to finish it. But as I walked away from her, those hopes were dashed as my enhanced hearing caught the words she whispered to her friend Amira.

"That Vampire bitch is going to get what's coming to her."

I almost turned around and challenged her again but I just couldn't be bothered with her bullshit drama. She could mouth off all she liked. If she chose to come at me again, I'd happily make her call herself Cindy Poo in front of the whole school for a second time.

"Hey, uh…Elise?"

I turned at the sound of my name and found Eugene Dipper gazing at me intently from his desk at the front of the class. His white blonde hair was

standing up in all kinds of crazy directions and his eyes were wide like he'd shocked himself by speaking to me.

"Yeah?" I asked, drifting a little closer. I hadn't really had much to do with him up until now so I wasn't really sure what he might want from me.

"I just, er, wanted to say that…you were really impressive at the dance. The way you fought against Cindy Lou…just *congratulations* I guess." His face was turning redder by the second and I raised an eyebrow waiting for the punchline.

"What, no comment on me having a drug habit?" I asked when he didn't say anything else. "Or accusations that I've lost my mind?" The whispers around campus on both of those subjects had been plenty loud enough for me to pick on even without my enhanced hearing. And I'd seen more than a few FaeBook posts on the subject too. I was the psycho with the drug habit who had the Kings of the school fighting over her. I guessed it wasn't the worst reputation in the world but I would at least like to drop the addict label.

Eugene shook his head profusely and I snorted a laugh.

"Okay then. Thanks for the compliment I guess." I turned away from him and my gaze fell on my usual desk where Ryder already sat in his chair.

There was a girl perched on the desk before him and she was twisting a finger through her long, dark hair as she leaned forward to whisper something to him.

I looked away from them, keeping my eyes on my own seat as I drew closer but I couldn't help my inner nosey bitch from straining my ears to pick up what she was saying.

"-can have me any way you want me," she purred. "I like it rough, Ryder."

I bit my tongue so fucking hard that blood spilled into my mouth. *Gah*, why did I even give a shit about who he screwed? But the burning anger licking down my spine told me I absolutely *did* care and his next words pushed me right over into rage.

“Rough doesn’t even begin to explain it when it comes to me,” Ryder said. “But we’ll soon find out if you can take it.”

“I’ll take it any way you want to give it to me,” she replied suggestively.

I dropped my bag down onto my desk with a bang and the girl looked around at me in surprise, her gaze darkening.

“Do you wanna move your ass off of my desk or will I be shoving you off of it?” I asked sweetly, batting my eyelashes at her like I was super innocent even though I was pretty sure she could tell I was considering punching her perfectly made up face. The video of Cindy Lou being beat down by me had gone viral and there’d been a noticeable change in the corridors when I walked down them these days. If there was one good thing that had come out of that night, it had to be that. But apparently this girl hadn’t gotten the memo yet.

“One minute,” she said dismissively, her gaze shifting back to Ryder like I wasn’t a threat.

Wrong.

I flicked my fingers at her and hit her with enough air to knock her off the table though not enough to call it an all-out attack.

She snarled at me, revealing her Werewolf nature as her eyes flashed silver for a moment but she’d landed on her feet so it wasn’t like she could really claim I’d done anything that bad.

I dropped into my seat and leaned back like I didn’t have a care in the world as I turned my attention to the front of the room where Professor

Titan was still taking his time leafing through a large textbook in front of him.

The girl growled at me but I gave no shits nor any more of my attention.

“I’ll find you when I want you,” Ryder said to her by way of a dismissal.

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised before sauntering off.

Silence sat between us, thick with all the things we wouldn’t say to each other and I pulled a piece of gum from my pocket, pushing it between my lips just so that I had something to focus on.

Ryder shifted in his chair, his knee brushing against my thigh. A little shock of energy ran through me, but I refused to move away.

I could feel him scowling at me, but my eyes were occupied with trailing over the rest of our classmates and I refused to let them stray towards him.

He shifted again, his leg pressing to mine more firmly and I blew a bubble with my gum, letting it pop loudly and smirking internally as I felt a wave a tension roll through him.

I tugged at the collar of my shirt just to give my fingers something to do, loosening off one of the buttons too close to my neck. Ryder’s heart thumped a little harder and he turned to glare straight ahead too. He stretched his arm out on the table, pushing it half way across the desk so that he was definitely on my side of it. He drummed his fingers in the wooden table top, *pain* dancing on his knuckles as he did so.

Dipshit.

“Bing bong!” Principal Greyshine’s voice came over the tannoy and I leaned back in my chair, re-crossing my legs so that I was no longer touching the pissy Basilisk beside me. “What’s up home boys and girls? I hope you’re all feeling jazzy despite the drizzly day! Just a little reminder this mornaroo that the teachers’ lounge is a no-no zone. We all appreciate a jolly shenanigan or two but we do take exception to the Griffin who took a

dumpadoodle on our chaise longue and we did have to impose a rather hefty detention schedule following that hoo-ha. So hopefully the rest of you cool cats can learn from that example and stay on student turf. On a jollier note, we have managed to get a new chocolate pop-tart supplier and the Cafaeteria will have plenty available every morning for your munchie needs."

Dante barked a laugh and I turned to look at him in surprise. He winked at me like we were sharing a joke and I frowned in confusion before turning back to the front of the class.

"That's it for now gang, catch you on the flip!" The announcement cut off and I rolled my eyes at our weird Principal's attempt at being cool. I barely saw him around campus. He just appeared at assemblies or ducking through the hallways from time to time like some kind of weird 'down with the kids' ghost. And after our one and only meeting where he'd labelled me as a drug addict and a liar, I wasn't in much of a hurry to see any more of him anyway.

"Right class," Professor Titan called loudly to gather our attention. "Today's challenge is going to be brewing an Enlightening Draft. The instructions are on your Atlas, please gather anything you need from the supply cupboard and start brewing, I'll come round to check on your progress once you're underway."

Chairs scraped all around us as students got to their feet and I got up too, meaning to put some distance between me and Ryder. It didn't work out as he stalked after me and I ground my teeth as I ignored him.

I grabbed a cauldron from the cupboard and Ryder started tossing ingredients into it without bothering to talk to me. As soon as he was done, I turned and walked back towards our desk but before I made it there, I was intercepted by Leon who had just arrived nearly ten minutes late.

“Hey, little monster,” he said with a grin as he ran a hand through his long, blonde hair.

“Hey, Leo,” I replied with a smile.

Ryder snatched the cauldron from my hands as I lingered and turned for our desk.

“I woke up and you were gone,” Leon said with a sigh. “I was hoping to wake you up with a surprise.”

I opened my mouth to reply just as the sound of a cauldron hitting the tiled floor clattered through the room. I turned and found Ryder snarling at the two of us, his gaze hard with rage.

“Are you shitting me right now?” he snapped. “You and *him?”*

I rolled my eyes and cast air magic at the mess he’d made on the floor, gathering all of the ingredients together and depositing them back in the cauldron.

“Yeah, it looks like she decided to go for a man who’s more suited to enjoying life. Sucks to suck, bro,” Leon joked as he headed away from the two of us at a casual pace.

Ryder took a step as if he was going to follow him and I planted myself in his way. “What difference does it make to you what I do anyway?” I asked him. “You don’t give a shit about me. Right?”

“Too fucking right,” Ryder growled.

“Then we don’t have an issue,” I bit out before grabbing the cauldron and heading back to our desk.

Ryder followed me and I released a breath as I sank into my chair.

He dropped into his seat and folded his arms angrily as I tried to sort out the mess of our ingredients which had all gotten muddled up in the cauldron.

A few of the bigger things were easy to separate but I cursed beneath my breath as I found a crushed whisper fig. The jar of pine essence was dripping all over the sprig of hawthorn too. The instructions specifically said to keep them separate until the final step so I headed away to fetch new ones for us while Ryder continued to scowl at nothing.

He was in the exact same position by the time I returned to the table.

“I just don’t understand why you fought so hard against what we had but you have no problem jumping into bed with that fucking hakuna matasshole,” Ryder snapped as I dropped into my seat.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Shit, Ryder, you really do love The Lion King, don’t you?” I snorted.

“Fuck off. And answer my question.”

“I didn’t hear a question amongst your Disney based insults,” I replied.

“Why him?” he demanded, his voice breaking from angry to something that sounded a whole lot more raw on the last word and I looked at him more closely before replying.

“Leon likes me just the way I am,” I replied slowly. “He doesn’t want to cage me or change me or bind me to some way of life I have no desire for.”

“That way of life is all I am.”

“I don’t believe that. But if it’s true then I feel sorry for you,” I breathed.

“That’s how it is in the gangs. And you shouldn’t waste a second feeling bad for me over it. Your precious Inferno is just the same as me and he wouldn’t choose a different life either.” He glanced over my shoulder and I followed his gaze just as Dante ran past Leon’s desk and tossed something into his cauldron. Half a second later there was a loud bang and blue smoke poured out everywhere.

“Hold on! I’m coming!” Titan called from beyond the smog as Dante roared with laughter at Leon’s blue face.

Dante’s Wolf pack all started howling excitably, the room filling with the sound of them for a moment as electricity crackled through the air. Leon started laughing too and I couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re wrong,” I replied, turning back to Ryder. “Dante has joy and love in his life. His gang are his family, yours are just soldiers.”

A vision slammed into me so hard that I barely even registered what was happening until it had. I was in a cold alleyway with Ryder standing over me, a bloody knife in his hand as I bled out from wounds all over my chest. The pain of it felt so real that for a moment I couldn’t breathe, blinded by the agony he was imagining for me. He lifted me by the neck and slammed me against a brick wall so hard that my head rang from the impact.

“Don’t ever insult my gang again,” he hissed. “And if you ever fuck Inferno, I’ll kill you myself, *slowly*.”

The pain in the vision flared until I gasped and he released me from it.

The backs of my eyes pricked with unexpected tears as he looked at me like he fucking hated me and I got to my feet with my heart pounding in my chest.

“Fuck you, Ryder,” I snarled. “I’m so over this.”

I turned away from him and caught Professor Titan’s eye just as he finished clearing the blue smoke and managed to wave him over.

“How’s the potion going?” he asked as he reached us, leaning forward eagerly then frowning as he realised we hadn’t even started.

“I want a new lab partner,” I said, not bothering with anything else.

“Oh…” Titan looked between me and Ryder like he wasn’t sure what to say. “Well I did say no changes before the end of term-”

“I want a new partner or I’m leaving this class altogether,” I said firmly. “I’m sick of him abusing his Basilisk powers and being an asshole in general. It’s not a productive fucking learning environment.”

“She can pair with me, sir!” Leon called excitedly, obviously eavesdropping.

Titan hesitated again, worrying his hands together as he glanced at Ryder like he was gauging how he felt about this. I didn’t look his way because I didn’t want to look at his fucking face and acknowledge the fact that what he’d just done had actually hurt me. But he knew it had. He’d felt it. I just hoped that he’d mistaken it for the physical pain he’d faked with his illusion rather than the emotional flare I’d felt in response to his threat.

Professor Titan cleared his throat then finally nodded. “You can swap with Miss Pierce then,” he said. “I’ll just go and inform her.”

Titan headed away and I started stuffing my shit back into my bag. Ryder was frowning at me like he couldn’t quite understand what had just happened but I didn’t care. I was done with his bullshit. So fucking done.

Ryder snatched my wrist into his grip as I took a step away, his fingers biting into my flesh. “You’re really leaving?” he asked with a frown.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it?” I asked icily.

He held on for a beat too long, some emotion passing through his eyes for half a second before he stamped it down, clenching his jaw as he shoved my hand out of his grip like it burned him.

“Too fucking right,” he snarled.

“Well I’m pleased I can make you happy then,” I replied before striding away from him without a backwards glance.

Professor Titan was ushering me over to join Leon at his desk while the Mindy who had been there moved towards Ryder looking more than a little terrified. I felt bad for her, but I just couldn’t sit with him a second longer.

“*Fuck!*” Leon exclaimed as I approached him, a snarl of rage leaving his lips and stalling me mid-step.

“What’s wrong?” I asked in confusion.

He blinked sharply and raised his middle finger at Ryder over my shoulder. “Your old lab partner just sent me an illusion of him beating me to death with a rock,” he explained. “I guess he’s feeling jealous.”

Ryder hissed behind me and I turned to glare at him as I dropped into my new chair beside Leon. Ryder caught me in his hypnosis next, but I grabbed control of the version of myself within the vision before he could do whatever it was he had planned for me.

“This is a funny way to prove you don’t want anything to do with me,” I snapped.

“I’m just making sure you don’t come back,” Ryder snarled in response.

“No chance of that,” I replied coldly.

Ryder looked at me for long second before he broke off the illusion and a sharp pain shifted in my gut.

I turned to Leon as he grinned at me, his face still blue from Dante’s prank. “You just can’t keep away from me, can you, little monster?” he teased.

“I wasn’t the one bouncing up and down in my chair begging to be paired with you,” I reminded him.

Leon laughed as I mocked him and leaned forward like he was going to kiss me.

I turned my cheek to him at the last second and he groaned as he pressed his lips to my skin, his stubble grazing against my flesh in the best way.

“You’re not still playing hard to get, are you?” he begged. “Because I thought you were my girl now?”

“Where would you get a silly idea like that?” I scoffed.

“Because you…we…” His eyes clouded with confusion for a moment as he looked at me and I took pity on him, placing my hand on his thigh beneath the table.

“If you want to keep me, Leon, don’t try and cage me. I’ll only run.” I pulled my hand back and he let out a long breath as he relaxed into his chair.

“You’re hard work, you know that?” he teased.

“Too much work for one man alone,” I agreed, winking at him as I blew a bubble with my gum.

Leon huffed but he was half smiling too.

“Maybe I need some help then,” he teased and my smile grew.

“Yeah, maybe you do.”

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By the time the evening rolled around, I was well and truly done with the day but unfortunately, it wasn’t done with me.

I sighed as I stood outside Professor Titan’s door, waiting for him to turn up so that we could get this Liaison over and done with and I could crawl back to my bed. I may have gotten over the effects of my Killblaze hit, but it had definitely done a number on me and I felt absolutely exhausted. I just hoped that getting a good sleep tonight would be enough to get me back to normal because I needed to be functioning during my evenings so that I could continue my investigations. So far, I felt like I’d turned up a big fat nothing and I was more than ready to get back to digging into the mysteries surrounding Gareth’s death and find the fucker who’d killed him.

“Sorry I’m late!” Professor Titan called as he jogged towards me along the corridor.

He fumbled in his pocket for his key and managed to drop the stack of paperwork he was carrying.

“Crap!” he swore as he dropped to his knees, trying to gather everything up again and I knelt down to help him.

I shoved pages into a stack and paused as the title of one caught my eye. *How to assert control among the masses: a teacher’s guide to dealing with students with higher ranking powers to yourself.*

Titan reached out to take the stack of papers from me, clearing his throat uncomfortably as he retrieved the pamphlet on asserting himself.

“Greyshine has given those out to all members of staff,” he explained as he stuffed the key into his office door.

“Okay,” I said.

“Because there are a few particularly powerful students in your class, as you may have noticed,” he continued, opening the door and heading on in.

“Yeah, the gang kings are kinda hard to miss,” I agreed, pushing the door shut behind me.

“Yes. And of course the Night family are renowned in the criminal network of the city too. And Gabriel Nox is really *too* powerful to be attending this particular academy…but anyway you don’t want to hear about the latest topic of conversation at the staff meeting,” he said, shoving the pamphlet into a drawer. “And rest assured, we are confident that we can deal with them. No need to fear them taking control of the school or anything.”

I snorted my amusement and Titan smirked at me, the embarrassment seeming to fade from his cheeks as he did.

“Anyway, how are you?” he asked, stacking his fingers across his stomach as he leaned back in his chair.

“Erm…fine,” I hedged.

The last faculty member I’d told about the fact that someone had tried to kill me at the weekend had totally blown me off. And with Gabriel turning

out to be a lying sack of shit I'd decided to stop harping on about the dead boy in the woods.

Titan frowned as if he didn't believe me. "I've seen the video of your altercation with Cindy Lou Galaxa," he said slowly. "And Principal Greyshine mentioned what you told him in his office after the event…"

"Yeah, well…he didn't believe me. So…" I shrugged.

"But you still don't think you were hallucinating?" Titan pushed gently.

I pursed my lips, almost blowing him off. But keeping this secret was burning a hole inside my gut and I felt like I was ready to explode. I needed to say it. Spit it out and let him call me a liar if that was what he was going to do. At least I'd know he was wrong.

"I could tell the difference between the hallucinations and reality," I sighed. "And I *know* that those people in hoods were there. I *know* that that boy killed himself and gave his power to the cloaked figure. I don't care if you all want to call me a liar."

I folded my arms and looked out of the window to the left of the room. The sun was setting in the distance, sinking beyond the Empyrean Fields where the penis I'd burned into the grass still stood out as a dark outline.

"I believe you," Titan said softly and I turned back to face him in surprise.

"Really?" I asked, my heart beating faster at the thought of him having faith in me so easily.

"I feel we've gotten to know each other fairly well during these sessions, Elise. And though I don't think you're a perfect student or above playing pranks or causing havoc in your own way, I don't think you're a liar. In fact I've always found you to hold firm with your opinions and to speak your mind no matter who you may upset. Take today with Ryder Draconis for example. There aren't many people who would call him out on his

behaviour and specifically ask to be relocated away from him the way you did. You told him what you thought of his actions and you stuck to your feelings on the best way to deal with the situation despite the fact that he could pose a real threat to you. So no, I don't think you're a liar or an attention seeker."

"Then what should I do?" I asked. "Greyshine doesn't believe me about the boy so the FIB haven't even been called and-"

"I'll call them," he said with a gentle smile. "I'll tell them I've had a reliable tip off and relay what information I can. I'm sure they'll come and search the grounds and look into any missing persons reports to try and figure out who that boy was. Can I give them your name if they want to interview you?"

"Okay," I agreed, relief spilling through me. "I can write it all down for them if you like?"

"That sounds like a good idea to me. Get all the details down on paper and I'm sure they'll conduct an investigation and figure out what happened."

I gave Titan a genuine smile as some of the weight on my shoulders eased a fraction. More than a few of the nightmares that had haunted me the last few nights had been about that boy's family not knowing what had happened to him. At least this way there was a chance they'd find out.

Titan returned my smile then shuffled through the messy papers on his desk before finding what he was looking for and passing it across the table to me.

"I understand that you told Greyshine you were drugged but nonetheless, Killblaze is known to be powerfully addictive. Even taking it unwillingly may have given you a taste for it." He removed his hand from the pamphlet and I held back my irritation as I read the title.

Drugs are bad! How to say no to peer pressure and avoid addiction!

"Brilliant," I deadpanned.

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't give you this. Have you felt any urges to track down more of the drug?"

"Fuck no," I replied firmly.

"Good." Titan beamed. "That's great. It sounds like it didn't get a hook in you then."

"It didn't," I agreed firmly. "But you're still going to make me take that pamphlet aren't you?"

Titan nodded sheepishly. "Miss Nightshade will no doubt bring it up in your counselling sessions too…"

"Peachy."

Titan eyed me for a long moment. "You look beat, do you want to just call it a night? We've covered the important stuff so unless there's anything else you wanted to talk to me about…?"

"I'm wrecked actually," I agreed, getting to my feet. "So finishing up sounds like heaven. I'll probably be asleep in my bed within ten minutes."

Titan chuckled. "Are you making friends? Settling well?"

"Friends?" I asked curiously. I was conducting investigations, cosying up to suspects and fantasising over guys who I just might have to kill if I found out they'd been responsible for the death of my brother. So no, I hadn't found a whole hell of a lot of time for friends.

"I know that Vampires can be solitary by nature but it never hurts to have a few chums," Titan insisted. "Maybe in our next session we can talk about some friendships you're starting to form."

I snorted a laugh. "Sure thing. I'll work extra hard on getting chummy with people then."

"You do that." Titan chuckled and I left his office.

As I walked down the corridor, heading for my bunk, the weight in my chest felt a little lighter. Maybe there was someone I could rely on in this place after all. And it didn't feel awful to know that he had faith in me. I just wished his faith was more deserving. Because I got the feeling that when I dealt with my brother's killer, I was going to have to shatter every good thing left in me to do it. And I doubted anyone would be Team Elise after that. But if he was, it might be nice to have a visitor while I lived out my life in Darkmore Penitentiary. I guessed I'd just have to wait and see.

It was time to play a little prank on my Dragon friend. He'd gotten me good in potions class the other day; that essence of inkbark hadn't come out of my hair easily. I was the King of pranks, but he'd be prepared for a comeback so I had to be sly. Luckily for me, sly was my middle name.

I had a Mindy loitering out in the hall beyond my dorm, waiting to see when he appeared to head to the showers.

A ping on my Atlas told me he was leaving and I leapt off of my bed, tucking the bottle of Pegasus glitter into my sweatpants pocket alongside a small jar of staroak sap. Another message from Mindy said he was closing in on the showers so I snatched my towel and headed out of the room.

I moved along the hall, spotting Dante at the far end of it as he stepped through the door.

With a grin, I quickened my pace, slipping in behind him.

"Oh hey, dude," I said casually as he stripped off beside one of the shower stalls.

"Buongiorno, Leon, you're up early."

I stretched out my arms above my head. "Couldn't sleep."

Dante stepped into one of the stalls and I hurried into the one beside it as the sound of his shower running filled the air. He started humming a tune and I dropped down, stealing the bottle of shampoo at his feet and adding

the Pegasus glitter alongside some staroak sap. I had to contain my laughter as I slipped it back under the stall then stripped out of my sweatpants to have my own shower. I washed quickly, making sure I was back out in the bathroom to catch the moment Dante appeared.

I loitered by one of the sinks in my sweatpants, combing my fingers through my damp hair.

“Merda!” Dante cursed and a snort of laughter escaped me. “Argh it’s everywhere.”

The door to his stall flew open and he stood there butt naked with sparkling glitter stuck firmly in his hair, over his face and down his shoulders and arms too. He spotted me and his eyes turned to slits. “A morte e ritorno!” He charged me down and I was laughing too much to stop him as he Pitball tackled me. An oomph left me as my back hit the door and I crashed through it, slamming down on the carpet out in the hall.

Students gasped and laughed as Dante held me down and threw a punch to my gut, his hair glittering under the lights.

“Stronzo,” he started laughing and I threw him off me with a growl of effort, making my escape down the corridor.

Elise stepped out of her dorm, her brows jumping up as she spotted me. I grabbed her like a human shield, placing her between me and Dante with a grin.

Dante marched toward us as naked as the dawn and Elise started laughing. “What’s all that?”

“Pegasus glitter,” I supplied. “And a lot of it too. It’ll be stuck there all day with how much staroak sap I mixed it with.”

Dante uprooted me with a whip of air magic and my chest impacted with the ground. He prowled forward and Elise stepped aside to give him access to me.

“Traitor!” I called to her as she headed off toward the showers with a laugh - she totally glanced back to check out Dante’s ass though.

“Oh shit,” I gasped, gazing past Dante’s head and pointing frantically.

He glanced over his shoulder at absolutely nothing and I raced for my room, slamming the door shut just before the weight of a Dragon Shifter slammed against it.

“I’ll get you back for this, mio amico!” he shouted through the door, his threat lessened by the snort of amusement that escaped him.

I turned to find my Mindys ready with my uniform while I bathed in the glow of that win. I let them dress me, humming to myself then tucked into the plate of syrupy pancakes they’d prepared for my breakfast. I wolfed them down because I had something to do before class this morning. And my mood took a darker turn as I thought about that.

“Do you want to hear your horoscope, Leon?” Mindy asked sweetly and I figured I had a couple of minutes to spare.

“Go on then.”

She held my Atlas up, reading it out to me while the other Mindy watched me wistfully. “Good morning Leo. The stars have spoken about your day! With Mercury moving into your chart this week, you will find yourself very persuasive to others. Think carefully about what you want from the people around you though as you might just find yourself in deep faster than you expect. So long as you roll with the waves of fate, an unfolding plan could work out wonderfully for you. A warning though, Mercury can be a volatile planet, if you don’t make your decisions fast, you could find them being made for you.”

“Thanks Mindy,” I said brightly, mulling that over.

I sent them both away before I took out the note I’d found in the boys locker room, detailing Elise’s movements around campus. I’d gone to every

location on the list whenever I knew Elise was heading that way, but I'd had no luck catching the slippery fucker. I wasn't going to give up though. If some pervert was stalking her, I'd find out who and make them pay Fae on Fae.

As Elise was currently at the Cafaeteria, that was where I decided to be. I wanted to watch every student in the room and try to figure out if anyone was looking at her too much or touching themselves under a table – unlikely but worth a shot.

I had considered telling Elise about the note, but something held me back. I wanted to prove I could protect her and when I found this bastard, I'd lay him at her feet like a dead mouse. Then she'd definitely be grateful. What wasn't charming about that?

I gazed over the note again as I headed out of my dorm and started walking downstairs.

Alternates between Lunar/Oscura breakfast times. Route: Vega Dorms > Devil's Hill > Acrux Courtyard > Cafaeteria

Girl's bathroom. Altair Halls before lunch.

L/T Devil's Hill.

Kipling Emporium. Orange soda.

W/E stays on campus. Library pm (Sundays after dark)

My fist clenched as I reread it, committing it to memory.

I'm going to catch you, you creep.

I was soon walking into the Cafaeteria, doing a visual sweep of the room. It was Lunar's time slot in here but there were plenty of unallied around too. My gaze landed on Ryder at the head of the hall sitting on a

table alone. His gaze was pinned on Elise as she helped herself to food from the buffet and I wondered if the stalker was as obvious as him.

But he wouldn't leave a note. He was cleverer than that. And did he really have time to be stalking my girl when he had an entire gang to run?

Nah, as much as I would have liked to turn Elise off that douchehat, he didn't fit the bill.

I headed to the buffet line, grabbing a plate and piling it with eggs, toast, avocado, four strips of bacon – *oooh they have zebra sausages today* – and two more layers of meat. I'd eaten already so I didn't grab a banana at the end of the line as I veered toward an empty table in the corner.

Elise hadn't spotted me yet but that was okay, because I needed to observe the room anyway. I focused on the Brotherhood first, figuring they were a bunch of dodgy Daves and sneaky Susans.

A few people were looking over at Elise but they were chatting with each other in low voices too and I guessed it was because their leader was staring at her without blinking. One in particular stood out to me. Bryce Corvus looked like his eyeballs were about to pop out with how hard he was glaring at her.

A prickle of anger rolled up my spine and I narrowed my gaze on him. He was a mean bastard and a strong as shit Vampire too. But I could destroy him in a fight if it came to that.

I jotted his name down as a potential suspect then continued my search in case anyone else was acting suspiciously.

My gaze snagged on Cindy Lou who was pouting over at Elise before turning to her friends and talking in a hushed voice. She began to get more frantic, gesturing with her arms and it became obvious she was re-enacting the night Elise had fought her. When she was finished, she slumped onto the

table dramatically in a fit of sobs and her friends gathered around her, patting her back.

Conclusion: not a stalker. She was beat down hard since Elise had put her in her box. But that was the way of Fae. Cindy needed to move on with her life. It wasn't proper to keep dwelling on a fight like that. Most people in school got beat down at least twice a day. I'd know, I often did the beating.

It was how we claimed our position in society. No one was judging Elise for that. I'd found it hot as fuck. I just wished I hadn't lost sight of her that night, because maybe she wouldn't have gotten caught up in the shit that went down in the woods.

I shifted my gaze to her roommate, Laini, who was caressing the arm of her new girlfriend. She sat a few seats down from Elise and I realised they hadn't spent much time together since Laini had hooked up with that girl at the Spring formal. I eyed the empty seat beside Elise with a pinch of longing. I'd surveyed the room long enough. My girl wasn't going to sit alone.

I snatched up my plate, moving across the room and dropping into the seat beside her with a wide grin. Her brows jumped up in surprise and a smile pulled at her mouth. A mouth I definitely wanted a kiss from. I leaned in for it and grinned as she let me take one, my soul singing as she shifted closer so her thigh pressed against mine.

"You taste like chocolate poptarts," I noted, licking my lips.

"Well I like the cherry ones but I couldn't get to them under the mountain of chocolate." She shrugged but I puffed my chest out like a hero and headed over to the buffet.

She hadn't been kidding about the chocolate poptarts. I mean, holy shit, did we really need this many? I started digging through the pile, knocking

them on the floor and causing one whole hell of a landslide. Finally, I snagged my prize and strolled back to Elise to present it to her on a plate.

I placed it down for her, dropping back into my seat and she gave me the biggest smile. It did a lot of things to my heart (and my dick).

“Thanks Leo.” She took a bite out of it, drawing a moan of delight from her throat.

I’d stopped eating, full on staring at her devouring that poptart while wishing it was me. *When she bites me she’s never gonna want to drink from any other Fae in the whole of Solaria.*

The Brotherhood started filing out of the room and I glanced at the clock to see it was half eight, so the Oscura Clan would be along soon enough. They alternated their time schedules day to day and I wondered if they had special liaisons who sorted shit like that out for them so they crossed paths as little as possible. I couldn’t wait to see what Dante had done to cover up his hair. A beanie hat? A bandana? A beret? *Oh please stars, let it be a beret.*

The Oscuras appeared, filling the room with loud chatter. They were the opposite to the Lunars, all of them messing around together like a pack of dogs. Which most of them were to be fair.

Dante appeared amongst them and I was kinda proud to find he was just owning the hair disaster so its glittery glory was on show.

“Hey Tinkerbell, wanna go on a date with me later?!” I called across the room at him.

He turned to me with a smirk while his Beta, Tabitha, ordered the wolves about to lay out a spread of food for him.

“Only if you plan on putting out,” he called back. “Otherwise I’ve got another offer from a Captain who said he’ll put his hook up my ass.”

I burst out laughing and Elise smiled her amusement as she glanced between us. Dante sat down with his wolves and I took my Atlas out, snapping a photo of him while he wasn't looking. I uploaded it to FaeBook while Elise glanced over my shoulder and started giggling.

"How the fuck do you get away with this shit?" she asked. "He'd kill anyone else who tried it."

"Same reason you get away with winding him up." I glanced at her with a seductive grin. "He wants to put it in your ass."

"Leo!" she buried her face in my shoulder as she fell apart and I grinned from ear to ear.

"What? It's true," I said lightly and she thumped my leg, shaking her head as she continued to smile.

I loved making my little monster happy.

"He's going to destroy you at Pitball practise later," she warned.

"Naah." I took a bite out of my toast. "He's over it."

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"Bloom! Pay fucking attention!" Mars roared at Harvey on the Pitball pitch. He was gazing up at the sky like it fascinated him. *Fucking Blazer.*

I was running for Elise as she tried to get a Fireball into the Pit, casting air to keep the blazing ball above her hands as she ran with it. I charged at her like a freight train but someone took me out from the side and I hit the ground so hard something cracked.

"Dante!" I roared, swinging my fist for his sparkly head.

He laughed, shoving my face down in the dirt as the pain in my side immobilised me.

“You’re out, Night!” Mars called and Dante jumped off of me, holding out a hand to help me up.

I took it, wheezing as I clutched my ribs and healed away the wound. Elise had gotten the ball into the Pit and she stood to the side of it with a casual expression like it had been no effort at all. Girl was a natural and looked shit hot in those tiny sports shorts.

I strode off the pitch to sit in the stands, grumbling as I had to wait out the next round. It was only five minutes, but whatever. I still hated to be beaten at my favourite game in the whole world. We had a big match coming up soon. We’d made it all the way to the semi-finals of the inter-school league. If we beat Sunrise Academy in the next game, we’d be facing *Zodiac Academy* in the finals.

It would be a dream come true. A fucking miracle when you analysed it. Aurora hadn’t made it to the finals in half a century but to beat Zodiac it would take more than a miracle. It would take divine intervention from the stars. They were the top academy, full of elite assholes who had been privately educated since before they could walk. They’d had the best start in life, had access to professional pitches, the Solarian Pitball League had even brought star players from across the world’s finest teams to visit them last year. They’d toured a bunch of academies but none of them would ever have even set foot in Alestria. But if we won the tournament…we’d put ourselves on the map. They’d have to pay attention to us.

I took my golden whistle out from where it was hanging beneath my shirt.

Oh my stars, imagine if the Fireside of The Skylarks, Alid Kerberos, came to this academy. He could brand a burn mark on my whistle at long last. I could die a happy man then. Hashtag bucket list complete.

A heavy crash sounded out on the pitch and I looked up to find Dante pinning Elise to the ground. It didn't piss me off for once though, something about the sight of them like that sparked a purr deep in my chest.

I shook off the feeling, figuring I was losing my mind. But then again… they sure did look hot together.

Ryder Draconis was nothing if not a creature of habit. Eat, sleep, work out, repeat. A little threatening and general assholishness thrown in for kicks and giggles but essentially that was it.

So despite the fact that my plan was fucking insane, I was semi sure it would work anyway. And luckily for me, his room was on the ground floor.

I was lingering outside the Vega Dorms, seemingly minding my own business reading a Tarot book while really listening out for any sounds of Fae lingering nearby.

It was after class on Tuesday and that meant one thing: Ryder was in the gym, lifting weights until he half busted a gut. He'd have almost all of the other members of the Lunar Brotherhood alongside him as they took advantage of their time slot in there.

So I had a little window of opportunity to break into his room. That was made more difficult by the magic placed on all the dorm doors which only allowed their occupants to enter. Hence the lingering. Because in that moment, my attention was really fixed on the window about ten feet in front of me which I just so happened to know led into Ryder's room.

I'd taken yet another field trip to the Dead Shed and located myself a handy crowbar for window wedging which was currently super covertly concealed within my blazer.

It wasn’t the most subtle of plans but I hadn’t been able to come up with another one and it was time for me to look at the King of the Lunar Brotherhood more closely.

Ryder had practically boasted about knowing the ingredients in Killblaze despite the fact that the FIB still hadn’t managed to figure that out. Which had left me to come to the only conclusion which made any sense: the Brotherhood were responsible for creating and distributing the drug all over Alestria.

I scowled at the offending window as I thought about that. Ryder’s gang of assholes were almost certainly responsible for creating the very thing which had stolen my brother from me. And with Ryder’s love of potions and natural ability to create new and strange concoctions, I couldn’t help but wonder if he himself was the one who had created the drug in the first place. And if he had, did that mean I would hold him responsible enough to kill him for it?

I chewed on my lip as I turned that idea over for the thousandth time. The most frustrating thing of all was that I didn’t know. But I was hoping that getting into his room might result in me finding enough evidence to convict him in my eyes once and for all. I would settle on a punishment once I could be sure of the crimes committed.

I shuddered at the memory of that foul drug sliding through my veins, warping my emotions and tugging on the worst things I had hidden deep within my heart.

Everything around me fell silent at last and I got to my feet, shooting forward to take advantage of the solitude so that I could bust his damn window and get inside. I wouldn’t be able to repair the damage I did getting in so I planned on covering my intrusion with a theft, I’d just grab a few things, make a mess and then sneak back up to my room to give myself an

alibi when he came looking for suspects. Ryder had made it pretty damn clear he didn't think much of me these days anyway so I was hoping he wouldn't have any reason to suspect me. But in the meantime, I needed to get into his room and find evidence that his gang were the ones responsible for the plague of Killblaze flooding this city and stealing innocent lives. If I could confirm that much then I might just be getting somewhere.

I reached his window and quickly jammed the crowbar into the side of it, exerting my enhanced strength on it until it gave way with a heavy pop.

I grinned as I shoved the window aside, pushing the shutters open so that light spilled into his room. I tossed the crowbar in ahead of me and hoisted myself up onto the windowsill before dropping inside and landing on the floor.

For half a second I thought I sensed a brush of magic against my skin but the sensation was gone as soon as it had arrived and I quickly dismissed it as paranoia.

With my heart in my mouth, I hastily turned back to slide the broken window into place as best I could and threw the shutters closed again, plunging myself into darkness.

My eyes adjusted quickly and with the use of my gifts, I crossed the room to switch on the light.

I looked about at Ryder's private space as my heart pounded adrenaline through my limbs and I was struck with the strongest desire to run the hell away before he caught me. But what could he really do to me anyway? Would he kill me for breaking into his precious space? Probably not. And I was more than willing to die in the hunt for Gareth's killer anyway so any other punishment he might dish out upon me was irrelevant.

I looked around his room for a moment and quickly decided to check out his desk first. But as I took a step towards it, my gaze snagged on the corner

of a case which protruded from beneath the bunk on the right of the room.

Curiosity got the better of me and I dropped to my knees, dragging the suitcase out. A thick buckle held it closed and I made quick work of opening it and flipping the lid.

I inhaled sharply as I spotted the assortment of chains and whips there, my mind instantly thinking I'd just come across some kind of torture kit until I spotted what was undoubtedly a ball gag and a spanking paddle.

My heart thumped with a different kind of fear as I realised this was meant for a very specific kind of pain. The kind that some people enjoyed. The kind that Ryder clearly enjoyed. I bit my lip, my mind conjuring images of my body submitting to these desires for him before I could stop it.

A blush coloured my cheeks as I forced away the distracting mental pictures and I quickly buckled the case closed and kicked it back beneath the bed.

I shot across the room to his desk and started rifling there, hunting for anything to do with Killblaze or the Brotherhood that might link back to my brother.

I cursed as I found text books and sheafs of paper which seemed like potion instructions. They were all written out by hand in what I recognised as Ryder's neat handwriting from sitting beside him in class for the last few weeks.

I started pulling open drawers, my search getting more frenzied as I went, frustration prickling my gut as I failed to find anything at all which was even the slightest bit incriminating. Hell, even the box of razor blades I found didn't contain a drop of blood.

Just as I began to rifle through the bottom drawer of his desk, a soft creak sounded somewhere behind me and I froze in my tracks. I strained

my ears as I listened for sounds in the corridor outside his room.

My heart leapt as I heard heavy footsteps drawing closer, the papers I had clutched in my grasp spilling between my fingers as I shot across the room towards the window.

I shoved the shutters aside, forcing the window wide as I leapt up onto the windowsill, preparing to shoot away as the sound of the door unlocking magically came behind me.

“Boo!” Bryce shouted, his hands slamming into my chest as he appeared in front of me outside the window in a flash of Vampire speed.

I shrieked as I fell back, strong arms catching me before I could hit the ground. A hand wrapped around my neck just as Ryder drove me against the wall. The air was forced from my lungs and I gasped as I looked up into the cold green eyes of the King of the Lunar Brotherhood himself.

Vines snapped into place around my wrists, binding my hands and immobilising my magic as they were secured tightly in front of me.

My eyes widened as I looked at Ryder’s merciless expression and for the first time since I’d met him, I felt truly afraid of him.

“You wanna tell me what the fuck you’re doing in my room, new girl?” he hissed, his grip on my throat tightening for a moment before easing off again so that I could speak.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I spat back because apparently I had a death wish.

Ryder’s gaze flared with what I could have sworn was excitement at the bite in my tone. Bryce appeared behind him, leering over his shoulder excitedly like he just couldn’t wait to see Ryder tear me apart.

“Get out of here, Bryce, I can deal with this alone,” Ryder said quietly, not even bothering to glance his way.

“But boss-” Bryce began, his tone full of disappointment.

“Are you questioning my commands?” Ryder asked icily.

Bryce looked to me, his gaze full of hatred as he bared his fangs, hissing at me in a clear threat before turning and shooting out of the room.

Ryder threw a silencing bubble up around us before the door had even banged closed again.

“Last chance to tell me the truth,” he offered darkly.

“Fine,” I ground out, deciding I might as well confront him over my suspicions. I had more than one reason to be tracking the suppliers of Killblaze anyway, so it wasn’t like I’d have to reveal anything about Gareth to him. “I wanted to find evidence that you’re the one creating and dealing Killblaze.”

Ryder scoffed like that made zero fucking sense to him. “And why the hell would you think that? I don’t allow addicts in my gang.”

He said it so calmly, so lightly that for some reason I instantly believed him but that only made my frown deepen.

“So? Even if you don’t sell to your own people, that doesn’t mean you’re not distributing it,” I insisted.

“Why the fuck would we?”

“Why does anyone do any shitty thing?” I bit back. “Money. Power.”

“I claim more than enough of both without needing to sell that shit to anyone,” Ryder growled.

“Well someone is. And even the FIB don’t know how it’s made but you told me *you* do. And someone drugged me with it a few nights ago so excuse me for putting two and two together,” I snarled.

Ryder barked a laugh and abruptly dropped his hold on me. “If I wanted to kill you Elise, I’d look you in the eyes while doing it and use something far more painful than Killblaze to finish the job,” he promised.

I raised my chin, watching him closely as he stepped away from me.

“This is your cue to fuck off,” he said, his eyes narrowing on me.

“No,” I replied firmly and he raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I want answers Ryder. If you expect me to believe you then prove it. How do you know what’s in Killblaze if it’s not you making it?”

Ryder considered me for a long moment then shrugged. “Easy. Basilisks are immune to all poisons. I can’t even get drunk let alone high. But I *can* detect every ingredient in any potion I consume. I was curious about Killblaze so I took it to find out what it was. And let me tell you, that’s some pretty fucked up concoction. Whoever came up with it knows their shit and isn’t fucking around.”

I pursed my lips, unsure where to make my arguments next because that was actually a pretty airtight fucking answer.

“Prove it,” I breathed because just blindly believing him felt stupid.

For a moment I was sure he was going to say no but then the vines suddenly fell from my wrists. Ryder picked up an empty cup from his bedside table and tossed it to me. Only my gifted speed let me make the catch and I looked down at the cup in confusion.

“On the shelf behind you is about every potion ingredient you can imagine. Mix up whatever you like and I’ll drink it. I won’t die, won’t even feel the slightest bit unwell, and I’ll tell you what’s in it to prove my point.”

“Really?” I asked, eyeing a jar marked *belladonna* with a frown. I recognised more than a few things there which were lethal.

“You want your proof don’t you? And I don’t want you spreading lies about me so go ahead.

Don’t touch anything in a purple jar with your bare hand though or you’ll be dead within three hours,” he warned.

My lips parted at the casual way he admitted to owning that much deadly poison, but Ryder didn’t so much as blink. He turned his back on me so that I could choose some ingredients and I quickly tossed some things in the

cup, committing them to memory as I did so and tentatively shaking a sprig of rotwood from a purple jar into it last of all. I swirled the contents of the cup until it mixed into a bright yellow liquid.

“Okay,” I said, moving closer to Ryder and holding the cup out for him.

He turned and took it from me without a moment’s hesitation and raised it to his lips.

“Wait,” I gasped at the last second, catching his arm, my fingers digging into his bicep as I halted him. “I put something from a purple jar in it.”

Ryder smirked at me. “Are you worried you’ll kill me, baby, or more concerned you won’t?”

“You swear nothing can poison you?” I asked, wondering what had possessed me to put that rotwood in there.

“One way to find out,” he taunted, tipping the cup up before I could stop him.

I inhaled sharply, my grip tightening on his arm as if I expected him to collapse at any moment. He swallowed the lot and smiled darkly at me.

Ryder leaned forward slowly, his voice low as he spoke in my ear, listing off each and every thing I’d put in that cup.

“Crushed amethyst, horned toad eggs, moonweaver petals, honeycomb, waterlily, Pegasus hair, livewire nettles, ripened apple juice…and rotwood,” he added last. “Because a little fucked up bit of you wanted to hurt me, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” I admitted on a breath, turning my gaze to meet his. “You deserved it.”

“Oh I deserve much worse than that,” he assured me. “But does that satisfy your questions? Do you believe me now?”

I looked up at him for a long moment, finally nodding my head. Because he had proved himself and he was right too: if he’d wanted to hurt me he

wouldn’t have used something that made me laugh my ass off and then kill myself quickly. That just wasn’t the kind of monster he was. It was pretty clear to me that if Ryder Draconis wanted someone dead he’d kill them the hard way. Which made me rethink more than a few assumptions I’d made. Not least the idea that he was responsible for Gareth’s death.

“I’m sorry I thought it was you,” I breathed and Ryder frowned at me like he didn’t know what the hell to even do with an apology.

Before he could figure it out, I sped away from him, leaping out of the window and racing towards the trees in the distance. I needed some time with my thoughts. Because right about now, a lot of the assumptions I’d made didn’t seem right anymore. And I needed to think more clearly about my next move. I’d been sloppy breaking into his room like that. And I couldn’t risk making any more mistakes that would draw the wrong attention to me.

Because I was still sure there was a killer in this school. I just had to find out who they were before they caught up to me. And I was beginning to think they already might be getting close.

I was so consumed with my thoughts that I almost didn’t notice the fact that someone was running after me.

My fangs snapped out and I skidded to a halt just beneath the boughs of the trees at the edge of The Iron Wood, turning and baring my teeth at the Vampire who was following me.

Bryce hissed as he bared his fangs right back at me and a chill slid through my body as he dropped into a fighting stance, his gaze wild with rage.

“What do you want?” I snarled, bending my knees a little as tension coiled in my posture.

“A word,” he said, his tone anything but friendly.

“About?”

“Your Source.” His gaze darkened as his slid his eyes over me, giving off the distinct impression he found me lacking.

“Which one?” I tossed back.

Bryce hissed again. “The only interest I have in Oscura filth is in the desire to see them all dead at my feet. I’m talking about Ryder.”

“Well spit it out then,” I snapped, already growing tired of this conversation.

If he wanted to challenge me for my Source then he only had to say the word and I’d happily unleash some of my rage on him. I wasn’t even that surprised that this was happening. Vampires always fought for position when we were put into close quarters and me and Bryce were pretty much tied as far as power went so it was hard to be sure which of us would come out on top in a fight.

I liked to think I’d be able to take him though.

It was also perfectly acceptable for Vampires to challenge each other over ownership of their blood Sources under normal circumstances, but as I hadn’t claimed either of my Sources through brute strength it seemed a little pointless for Bryce to try and take either of them from me. Ryder and Dante were both powerful enough to fight him off if they didn’t want him biting them and I got the feeling they absolutely would do that if he even tried to. In fact, I imagined he’d be lucky to come away from that kind of interaction with his life.

Besides, I hadn’t bitten Ryder since we’d fallen out and I wasn’t even sure I could call him my Source anymore anyway.

“He doesn’t give a shit about you, you know that, right?” Bryce snarled, holding his aggressive stance but not making a move towards me.

“I don’t get the impression he gives a shit about anyone,” I replied lightly.

“He doesn’t. But especially not his whores. So don’t go thinking you’re something special just because he lets you feed from him. Once he’s gotten what he wants from you, he’ll toss you aside just like all the others. But I’ll still be here. Right by his side.”

“So why do you seem so threatened by me then?” I asked.

“Because it’s not right,” he snapped. “If anyone should be giving him the pleasure of a bite and tasting his power it should be *me*. Not some power hungry girl who sprung up out of nowhere and spends her time spreading her legs for Oscuras.”

“It kinda sounds like you should be having this conversation with Ryder,” I said, straightening my spine and moving out of a fighting stance. If Bryce had meant to attack me, I was pretty sure he would have done it already.

“I wouldn’t presume to try and tell my King what to do,” he countered.

“No. You’d just go behind his back and try to get your own way without having to challenge him for what you want. Are you a Fae or a mouse?” I mocked.

“Fuck you,” he spat but he still didn’t make a move towards me.

“You know what I think?” I said slowly, trailing my gaze over him. “I think you’re jealous.”

“Of course I am,” he replied darkly. “Ryder’s blood calls to me just like it does you. Any Vampire would want him as a Source.”

I nodded, licking my lips at the mere thought of the power of his blood but I got the feeling there was more to it than that.

“But that’s not the only thing you’re jealous of, is it?” I purred, stepping closer.

“What else would I want that you’ve got?” Bryce scoffed.

“I think you’re jealous of the way Ryder is with me. You don’t like the fact that he didn’t do anything to me for breaking into his room. You don’t like it when he talks to me or smiles at me or does things with me that have nothing at all to do with the Brotherhood,” I taunted.

“You’re right. I don’t. I don’t think our King should associate himself with someone who isn’t one of us. And worse than that, you fraternise with Oscura scum too. I don’t know what his fascination is with you, but I’m here to warn you that I see through the spell you’ve laid on him and I won’t be fooled so easily.”

I scoffed lightly. “Boo hoo. But lucky for me, I have no interest in underdogs so your opinion is irrelevant. I’m all about alphas and it just so happens that your top dog has chosen to be my Source. So cry me a river Bryce, because I don’t give a shit.”

I shot away from him without waiting for a response. I didn’t have time for Vampire hierarchy bullshit anyway. He clearly wasn’t going to challenge me yet and until the day he decided to try, he wasn’t worth my time.

The Oscura Haunt was to the east of The Iron Wood in a hollow near a winding stream. Fairylights were strung through the trees and where the branches parted at the centre, the moonlight spilling down on everyone at the party. Hammocks hung to one side of the Haunt and to the other were piles of blankets and cushions spread over the moss. The Oscura Clan members with earth magic had made the ground extra soft and dry and the fire Elementals had lit sconces attached to the trees. At the heart of the space was what was fast becoming a dance floor.

Pop music filled the air but I refused the dances offered to me by other girls, sitting at the heart of a large nest of blankets as I watched my friends and family thronging before me.

Cindy Lou was putting on a show with a couple of her friends, the three of them half dressed and grinding up against each other and earning the attention of a fair few of the wolves but they didn't interest me.

I leaned back against the huge mound of cushions behind me, sipping on my fourth beer of the night which I'd poured into my golden chalice.

Where is she? Vieni da me, carina.

I took out my Atlas, tapping the screen in hopes of finding a message there then clenched my jaw. I wasn't the type of guy who pined for a girl; I

was the type who had girls pining for him. And there were a lot in that category throwing me hopeful glances between the writhing bodies.

I clicked on my horoscope having only skimmed over it this morning.

Good morning Gemini.
The stars have spoken about your day!
Today you'll find yourself at a fork in the path of your fate. Choosing well could lead you to your heart's desire. Though it may feel like foreign territory, stepping into the unknown might give you a taste of something exciting to come. Be wary of your choices though, Venus is playing a dangerous game with your heart and it is unclear yet as to whether she wants it broken or whole in the end.

I contemplated that in my half drunk state. I liked the sound of the heart's desire part…

The moon was bright tonight and the wolves were getting excited. We always threw a party on clear nights and it tended to get wild. Their Order form made them overly tactile as it was, but their often polyamorous nature meant that there were probably already several orgies happening in the woods around me.

Another fifteen minutes passed and another chalice of beer was drained, I figured fuck it and got up, the sound of howls hitting my ears as the wolves noticed me rising.

I slipped into the crowd, letting their movements guide mine as I fell into a tipsy dance and tilted my head up to face the moon. Electricity crackled along my skin as I lost myself to the music and started to enjoy myself at last. Static built around me and the wolves brushed their fingers over my body to draw my energy into themselves.

A small hand wound around my wrist and my heart lurched with hope as I spun toward its owner.

My gut sank as I found Cindy Lou there, her eyes hooded as she sashayed forward in a way I guessed she thought was seductive. Maybe I'd thought it was once too.

I glanced over her head hopefully, but there was no one else there.

"Hey, sugar," Cindy Lou purred, taking hold of my chin and tipping my head down so I looked at her.

I batted her hand away with a half-hearted smile. "Hey Cindy."

"Me and the girls were thinking you might wanna come for a walk with us..?" She arched a brow, toying with a lock of ebony hair. She licked her lips, stepping backwards and trying to tug me with her.

"I'm good, cara mia." I flashed her a smile but she didn't return it.

"Is *she* coming tonight?"

"Who's she? The sun's mother?" I mused and Cindy Lou's scowl deepened.

"You know exactly who I mean: *Elise*," she hissed her name like a curse.

"Are you still mad at her because she beat you up in front of everyone at the Spring party? And then you burst into a Centaur and ripped your dress off?"

"And then Elise made her say her name was Cindy Poo!" my Beta, Tabitha, cackled as she appeared at my side. Her usually frizzy red hair was straightened and sleek and there plenty of wolves around vying for her attention.

"It wasn't funny." Cindy scowled and Tabitha nudged me with a smirk.

"It was a bit funny, right Alpha?"

"It was like one percent funny," I said with a slanted grin.

Cindy Lou looked at me like I'd slapped her and I shrugged innocently.

“Oh come on Cindy, it’s about time you got over one little Fae on Fae fight, isn’t it?” Tabitha said with a look of disdain. “How do you expect to survive in life if you can’t cope with getting beaten sometimes?”

“She didn’t fight me like Fae,” Cindy countered. “She jumped me like some common underground street fighter.”

Tabitha folded her arms and I pursed my lips. “My sister happens to be an underground street fighter, you think you’re better than her?” A growl escaped her throat and I stepped aside, wondering if Cindy had just bought herself another beat down.

“No, I mean – obviously that’s not what I meant,” Cindy spluttered and my Beta tossed her hair over her shoulder, walking away.

“Cindy Poo, Cindy Poo,” Tabitha started chanting drunkenly and I couldn’t help but release a laugh as more of the crowd joined in.

“*Dante*,” Cindy gasped. “You can’t let this stand. Tell them to stop!”

I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled sharply and the crowd immediately quietened.

Cindy Lou blinked back tears and I frowned. “Elise started all of this. No one would hate me if it wasn’t for her.”

“Elise was on Killblaze,” I explained. “She didn’t mean it. And no one hates you.”

“She *did* mean it, she bullies me all the time.” She sniffed and my brows knitted together. I couldn’t imagine Elise bullying anyone. But Cindy did seem genuinely upset.

“Do I?” Elise stepped out of the crowd with Leon’s arm draped over her shoulders. She was wearing low-riding skinny jeans which hugged her hips and a black crop top which showed off a stomach I seriously wanted to lick. My heart twisted at seeing them together. Arriving at *my* party which I’d invited her to. To-fucking-gether. It felt like a punch to the gut. And even

though I loved Leon with his stupido muscles and stupido nice shirt and stupido man bun, it was getting harder to accept seeing Elise spending all of her free time with him.

Are they a couple now? What happened to Fae before bae, Leon?

Cindy stepped away from Elise, glaring at her with eyes so narrowed I wasn't sure how she could even see. "Stay away from me." She pressed against me, looking for support. It was so unFae it made me kind of sick.

"Fine by me, I only came over to talk to Dante anyway," Elise said, shaking her head so her hair danced around her face. I noticed it had been recently dyed and shone with a brighter lilac colour under the firelight.

"Belissima," I breathed and her eyes widened. "You look beautiful."

"Ergh," Cindy shoved away from me, heading back into the crowd but I couldn't drag my eyes away from Elise to stop her.

Leon raised an eyebrow as a thoughtful look passed through his gaze. He dipped his head to Elise's ear. "I'll go get us some beer."

She nodded, her eyes still locked with mine as he released her and walked away. The crowd had formed a circle around us and I was kind of pissed, wishing they hadn't so we'd be pressed together by their bodies.

"So you and Leon…what's the deal, carina?"

She stepped forward and I remained in place, anxious about the answer to that question. But I needed to know. If they were together now, I had to do the right thing and let my friend have her. Even though that would feel as good as driving a rusty nail into my balls.

"There's no deal." She shrugged one shoulder. "I like him. He likes me."

"That sounds like a deal," I pointed out as she continued to drift closer until I could taste cherries on the air. My throat thickened and I half wished I hadn't had so much beer because all I wanted to do was grab her and devour the kiss I'd craved since we'd first met.

“He knows I don’t want to get tied down to one guy,” she said, her gaze dipping to my mouth.

I cleared my throat, considering that. Seemed like a dick move to shove my tongue down her throat though. She might have told Leon that, but it didn’t mean he’d be happy with his friend trying it on with her. It simply wasn’t cool.

Leon returned with three beers, handing them out and I twisted the cap off mine, pouring the whole lot into my chalice. It wasn’t that I thought my friend would poison me, but I knew never to take the risk of drinking from anything but my own poison-proof cup. I wouldn’t have put it past Ryder to figure out a way to get a deadly dose of aconite into a sealed bottle of beer destined for my hand.

One of my wolves took the empty bottle from me as I drank a long swig from my cup.

Yeah, more alcohol is a great fucking idea right now, idiota.

“Elise!” Laini appeared with thick eyeliner and a low-cut dress hugging her figure, her hand locked around an equally hot girl’s. “Come dance with us.”

Elise threw us a glance then shrugged, letting Laini guide her away deeper into the crowd.

Leon and I turned to watch as the two girls started dancing with Elise and my dick twitched as she fell into a rhythm with them, her hips swaying and her crop top riding up.

“What are the chances that will turn into a threesome?” Leon asked hopefully, moving close to speak in my ear.

“In your dreams or in reality?” I laughed.

“In reality. It’s a hundred percent happening in my dreams tonight, dude.”

I took a long drink of my beer and Leon glanced at me out of the corner of his eye when I said nothing.

“You good?” he asked.

“Perfetto. How are things going with you two?” I asked him, unable to hide the jealousy in my tone. But fuck it, I’d never hidden my desire for her. Leon knew it. And if things had been the other way around, I knew deep down I would have done the same as him.

“Well…” The doubt in his voice made me turn toward him and raise a brow. “They’re good, man, but…”

“What?” I tried not to sound too hopeful but it was fucking impossible.

Leon smirked at me as if he knew exactly where my mind was at. “We’re doing fine, but she keeps saying she doesn’t wanna be tied down. I ignored that shit at first but now I’m starting to think she really means it.” He drained his beer and a girl emerged from the crowd as if out of nowhere, taking the empty bottle from his hand and replacing it with a new one. He barely reacted to the entire interaction and I shook my head at him.

“So what are you gonna do?” I asked with a sigh, accepting that Elise would probably never be mine either even if she did break things off with Leon.

“Well…” He said conspiratorially, shifting closer to lay his arm over my shoulders. He leaned right into my ear and I frowned as the scent of his beer breath encased me. “Maybe she’ll stick around if there’s two of us keeping her satisfied.”

I barked a laugh, pulling away and turning to him. “That’s fucking hilarious, stronzo,” I deadpanned.

“I’m serious,” he said and his eyes said he really meant it. “Think about it. A girl like her clearly needs a change of scenery from time to time.”

“Are you seriously suggesting we share her, caro mio?” I laughed again, the beer in my gut making me heady. “Who says she’d even want that?”

Leon grinned darkly. “Tonight’s the perfect time to find out. You just need to go in for a kiss and see how she reacts.”

“Sei pazzo,” I laughed. “You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, but I reckon my little monster needs some crazy.” He turned to watch her dancing and I followed his gaze, my throat constricting at the thought of kissing her. Of really trying this out.

“She might tell me to fuck off,” I said, but excitement flickered in my gut and made electricity dart along my skin.

Leon brushed his hand over my arm with a smirk. “Looks like you wanna try though, stormy,” he taunted.

I pressed my tongue into my cheek, throwing him a grin. “Okay I wanna try.”

Leon smiled like I’d just made his fucking day and I tried not to think about how weird that was. He clapped a hand to my shoulder and we made our way toward her through the crowd.

The slight haze of alcohol around me made this easier to consider doing. Besides, the worst that could happen was her saying *fuck no* and she’d said that to me plenty of times before anyway.

Leon drained another beer and by the time we reached Elise, he had a new one in his hand.

Laini was making out with her date and Elise was dancing beside them, not seeming remotely bothered about dancing alone as she shut her eyes and tilted her face toward the sky. The beer she was drinking hung loosely between her fingers and my gaze scraped across her flat stomach which I ached to run my hands over. The way her body moved in time to the music

was fucking poetry. The stars only knew what song was playing right then, all I could hear was the electricity humming in my blood.

Leon slipped behind her, winding his hands around her waist and plucking the empty bottle from her hand, passing it to a Mindy. Elise leaned back into him, reaching her hand up to graze the stubble on his cheek. A girl drew me into a dance next to them, but my gaze never faltered from Elise.

Her eyes became hooded as she tilted her head to capture Leon's lips in a kiss. His hand splayed across her stomach, brushing the hem of her waistband and a deep growl emanated from me.

The girl I was dancing with yelped as electricity bounced off of my body and she quickly retreated in alarm.

I turned to apologise but she was already gone and I was still hypnotised by Elise as she swayed, grinding up against Leon as his tongue slid into her mouth. It felt like a damn sales pitch, like he was showing me how good it would be to stand in his place. And hell was I buying it.

Leon broke the kiss, moving his mouth to her ear and murmuring something to her. Her eyes snapped to me and he pushed her forward, his hands resting on her hips as he walked her toward me. She gave me a questioning look, giggling at something as Leon whispered to her again.

I took another swig of Dutch courage then passed my chalice to one of my wolves to look after. I waited for Elise to come to me, Leon's hands brushing her stomach, sliding up to graze beneath her crop top. She bit down on her lip, halting him and dancing again, swaying her ass against his crotch.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, figuring this was a no-go as my heart sank. Leon gave her a nudge toward me, stepping back and she glanced over her shoulder in surprise.

I froze in place as her gaze swept over me and my heart hit a powerful beat. Lightning flashed in the air above us and the crowd cried out in surprise.

Elise's lips parted. She hadn't even flinched.

Thunder crashed and I felt it right down to my bones as my power built around us in the atmosphere, dark clouds drawing in overhead to shadow the moon.

"Dante," Elise whispered, moving toward me and suddenly she was all I could see.

Lightning forked through the sky again as she laid a hand on my chest to feel my rapid heart. The hairs on her arms rose to attention and she inhaled deeply, the storm rolling off of me and flashing in her eyes.

"I cieli si scontrano per te, carina," I purred. *The heavens collide for you.*

She moved closer, moulding her body to mine, her hands drifting up and over my shoulders. She breathed heavily as I tried to rein in the amount of electricity flooding from my body. I didn't want to hurt her, and from the look in her eyes I was doing anything but that.

Her fingers grazed my hair at the nape of my neck and a soft groan escaped me. She sucked on her lip, tip-toeing up so her breasts pressed against me. I laid my hands on her hips right where Leon's had been and she gasped as more power rolled off of me.

"Is it too much?" I whispered against her mouth.

"No, it's not enough." Her lips crashed against mine and the full, warmness of them was everything I'd ever imagined.

I groaned as I dragged her against me, sliding my hand up the velvet smoothness of her back.

Her fangs snapped out and drew blood from my lips, a moan of delight escaping her as she pushed her tongue into my mouth. I swallowed her kiss

like rain and broke for her like a waiting storm. I stroked her tongue with mine, tasting blood and cherries and the tempest flowing between us.

I grew achingly hard for her as she ground against me and our kiss became filthier, more savage. I didn't care who was watching, I was getting the prize of a fucking lifetime and I was going to savour every drop of it. Her hands followed the lines of my shoulders, squeezing my hardened muscles as she tried to get even closer, breathy moans sounding from her and sending me into a frenzy.

Thunder crashed heavily in the sky and a cheer went up from my Clan. Someone turned the music up and Elise started to grind against me in time with the pounding beat. I was hard as hell and she knew it, driving me to insanity as friction built between our bodies.

Elise pulled back with a gasp and I found Leon behind her, his hands wrapping around her waist as he pressed up against her. He dipped his head for a kiss and she gave it to him, her hands still firmly locked around me. I knew we had an audience and I gave zero shits. Even when Cindy Lou's friend, Amira, got her Atlas out and started recording. Because fuck it. I was the King of the Oscura Clan. I didn't need to explain my actions to anyone. This girl captivated me and if I had to share her with a friend to get her attention then that wasn't the biggest sacrifice in the world.

Leon chuckled, lowering his mouth to her throat and I leaned in to take another kiss from her. She laughed against my mouth as the three of us danced like we had no fucking dignity and I didn't think I did right then.

When I was approximately ten seconds away from dragging her and Leon back to the dorm, Elise slipped out from between the pillars of our bodies and turned to face us. Her lips were puffy and reddened and the glint in her eyes made me groan.

"Come back to the dorm," I asked and Leon nodded hopefully.

Elise started laughing and I frowned, confused and horny as fuck.

“I’m good. But it looks like you guys could use a hand getting off so maybe you should go together?” She darted away into the crowd and I turned to Leon, my gaze falling to his raging hard-on while his gaze fell to mine.

I sighed, looking up at the storm clouds as they flashed above with expectant energy that was never going to be unleashed. “Fuck my life.”

Thirteen Months Before the Solarid Meteor Shower…

When Dante asked me to get him a try-out for the Pitball team, it had been a pretty easy job. Mars practically jumped for joy at the chance to get a Dragon on the team. Especially playing defence. I was actually starting to think we could really have a shot in the inter-academy tournament this year. There was still a bit of dead weight on the team but between the six strong players we did have, we were starting to become a real force.

I stood to the side of the pitch while Coach Mars sent our Earthraider, Lizzie Highcloud, sprinting for the Pit with an Airball in her arms. Dante charged her down like an oncoming tsunami, uprooting her and crushing her to the ground with all his might. She squeaked in pain and he jumped up when Mars finished the count, helping her to her feet.

Dante's pack had turned up to watch and were all cheering wildly from the stands. "Go on Drago!"

"King of beasts, his scales are so beautiful. So shiny, have you seen them?" I turned toward the voice, spotting Lorenzo Oscura down the far end of the bleachers, standing up on his chair as he clapped enthusiastically. The guy had been kicked out of the pack for Blazing but he

always hung around his old Clan on the outskirts. Never getting too close, but clearly never wanting to stray too far. I kind of pitied him as he cheered for Dante again and his Alpha shot him a scowl before turning back to face the pitch.

"You're up, Tempa," Mars called to me. "Show him what you've got. I'll give you an Earthball."

I nodded, stepping onto the pitch and heading to the earth quarter to receive the ball. The hole groaned and spat it out of the pipe running beneath the ground and I picked up the heavy ball, hugging it to my chest.

Dante stood across the pitch, setting me in his sights. I might have feared him outside of this game, but Pitball was the thing I was best at in the world. This was where I thrived. And Oscura King or not, I wasn't going to hold back.

Mars blew his whistle and cheers rang out as I sprinted toward the wide Pit at the centre of the pitch. Dante ran at me, his arms powering back and forth as he sped forward to take me down. I kept running in his direction, using a tactic I often saved for my strongest opponents. I might have been weaker than Dante, but I was much faster.

I threw the ball up with all my might, propelling it with air magic so it flew high up over Dante's head.

He glanced up and I dropped to the ground, sweeping out his legs so he tripped, stumbling forward and crashing to his knees. I was back on my feet in a heartbeat, my arms outstretched to catch the ball. I braced for the weight of it instead of jumping to meet it, knowing it would cost me valuable seconds. But with an Earthball it was always better to play it safe, because if I dropped it in a real game, I'd be out and my team would lose five points.

It crashed into my chest and I clasped my arms around it before pelting toward the Pit, hearing Dante take chase close behind. My team were

egging us on and Leon was singing the Solarian Pitball League Anthem as I made it to the Pit and slammed it down into its depths. A rush of air made me flinch as Dante collided with me, taking me down into the hole.

I cast air at the last second to cushion our fall and Dante rolled off of me with a bark of laughter.

"I love this fucking game," he said.

I stood, holding out my hand for him and he smirked as I pulled him up. We both used air to propel ourselves out of the Pit and the crowd noise rolled over me as I headed back across the pitch.

"Nice tackle, Oscura. Tempa is damn quick though, you'll have to get faster to take on players like him. Apart from that, you've definitely earned your place on the team," Mars said to Dante, barely concealing his grin. He clearly felt the way all of our team looked. Damn hopeful. Because Dante was the best Airsentry our team had seen in a long ass time.

I clapped him on the back and Leon accosted us a second later, wrapping his arms around us in a tight hug. "We're gonna beat Zodiac!"

"Dude," I laughed. "That is so optimistic."

"I'd love to see their Airsentry, Lance Orion, on his ass," Dante said excitedly. "I'm gonna make sure I'm as good as him when we play them."

The rest of the team followed Mars in the direction of the changing rooms while we stood there talking excitedly about beating the Zodiac Academy team. Their enthusiasm was intoxicating and poured over me in waves.

"A Dragon playing Pitball hahaha wooooooosh can you imagine? Him flying over the pitch with his scaly ass out. Wooooosh."

We broke apart as we looked up at Lorenzo who was impersonating a Dragon, standing up on the top of his seat, balancing precariously as his arms flapped either side of him. "Then he'd go zap zap zappety zap and zap

up all the Zodiac students. How many zaps do you think it would take? I think it would take ten good ones to bring down their stadium. Bang then poof." He waved his hands then jumped forward like he was about to fly off into the air but he definitely wasn't.

Dante threw out a hand, casting air magic to stop him smashing his face on the seat below him. Lorenzo scrambled upright and Dante's pack all shot him glares, baring their teeth and growling.

Dante sighed and we headed after Leon toward the changing rooms. As we exited the pitch, Dante plucked at the back of my shirt to halt me.

"A word, cavallo." He didn't wait for a reply as he moved behind the bleachers and I jogged after him as he slipped beneath them into the shadows.

I could still hear Lorenzo laughing wildly, clearly high as a kite as he started rambling about Dragons wearing different types of coats. And apparently that was hilarious. I mean okay, it was a little funny.

Dante cast a silencing bubble around us before giving me a taut look. "My cousin is a Blazer."

"No shit," I said, running a hand down the back of my neck.

"He's an embarrassment but…he's still family. And Oscuras don't give up on family."

I nodded, frowning as I wondered how this was relevant to me.

"But I'm the Alpha and I made my decision. I banished him for continuing to use Killblaze and it's clear he has no intention of stopping, mio amico."

"Yeah…maybe he needs to see the school counsellor?" I suggested.

"He already has," Dante sighed. "I think he's given up trying because he's cut off from the pack. He has no one to help him, no friends, no allies.

But bringing him back to the pack while he's still Blazing would show weakness. I have to stick to my decision on this."

I nodded, my pity growing for the dude. I wasn't the kind of guy who would ever take drugs, but I'd heard how addictive Killblaze could be. Lorenzo was in deep and he needed help.

"So I want you to be his friend," Dante went on, his eyes flaring with hope. "Help him, cavallo. Get him what he needs to break this habit so I can bring him back to the Clan."

I drew in a long breath, already shaking my head. "I don't think I'm the right guy-"

"You're the perfect guy. You're nice, people like you. And I'll pay you two hundred auras a month if you do this for me."

My mouth parted. I was already doing work for him but having some consistent pay like that would be peace of mind. And surely befriending Lorenzo was a much easier job than some of the things Dante had tasked me with already?

"Okay, deal." I held out my hand and magic sparked between our palms as we shook on it.

Dante visibly relaxed as we headed to the locker rooms together and I could see how much this meant to him. I decided to wait to talk to Lorenzo until another day, sure right now wasn't worth it as he was off his face. Tomorrow, I'd begin the process of becoming the best friend he ever had.

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I cornered Lorenzo at lunch the next day, having come up with a reason to talk to him rather than swooping down on him out of the blue. He was

standing alone at the end of the Acrux Courtyard, gazing wistfully at the Oscuras who were sitting on the picnic tables across the yard.

"Hey man," I said as I closed in on him.

His bloodshot eyes flipped to me. I could tell he wasn't high but it was clear the toll the drug was taking on him. His face looked gaunt and there was no spark in gaze, just a hollow kind of hunger that made a pang of sadness resound through me.

"Who are you?" he asked and I frowned. He'd been right there watching the Pitball try out yesterday but clearly he couldn't remember a damn thing.

"I'm Gareth Tempa," I said with a smile, but he gave me a blank look in return.

"What do you want?"

"Well I wondered if you could give me some advice. You're an Oscura right?"

"I was…" he said miserably, his eyes twitchy as he glanced out at the Clan again. "It's still my surname but I'm not with them anymore. Dante banished me."

"Oh…I'm sorry," I said gently.

"Yeah well, it's only temporary. I'm gonna be back in there soon. Like a day or two more. Maybe a week."

"That's good," I said brightly, though I didn't really believe him. "Maybe you could give me some advice then like…just between you and me?"

"What advice?" he asked, turning to me curiously.

"I'm thinking about joining the Clan, but I don't want to take the initiation until I'm sure it's the life for me. And I don't wanna align myself with anyone until I'm sure."

“Sì, most pledges are anonymous anyway so if they don’t make it into the Clan, the Lunars won’t beat the shit out of them for the rest of their days.”

“That’s good of them,” I commented.

His eyes glittered for a moment as he surveyed me. “Hey if I teach you how to act maybe Dante will forgive me. Maybe he’ll welcome me back in if I make you the best pledge ever, right?”

“Right,” I said brightly, though I had no real intention of taking the initiation. I couldn’t sign up to the Oscura Clan when I was working for Ryder Draconis too. Not that he’d offered me any work yet, but I didn’t get the feeling he was the type to forget about the fact that he’d offered. “So what’s the first thing I need to know? Teach me anything.”

Lorenzo smiled broadly like I’d just made his day. He probably hadn’t had anyone speak to him properly for weeks. “The first thing you have to know about the Oscuras is they’d do anything for each other. Anything. *If you can’t put someone else’s needs in front of your own, you’re already a bad match. So do you think you can do that?”*

I nodded in earnest because hell, if there was one thing I knew about myself it was that I could put someone else’s needs before my own. It was what I’d been doing for Ella all year. It was why I walked a dangerous line every day, just to make sure she didn’t end up in Old Sal’s clutches. “Yeah, I can definitely do that.”

“Bene, I’ll make an Oscura out of you then, Gareth. The best one they’ve ever seen.”

The Oscura party had gone on into the small hours and I woke to an alarm blaring out from my Atlas and a pounding headache.

I groaned as I rolled over in my bunk, checking the time on my Atlas and seeing that it was gone half ten.

I cursed as I shoved myself upright. I had a counselling session at eleven which had been especially arranged for me to have on a Saturday in honour of me skipping out on the last one and storming out of my first. I sighed. I really didn't want to attend but I had no choice; the sessions were compulsory and if I missed any more of them I could be putting my place at Aurora Academy on the line.

My daily horoscope was waiting on the screen for me and I let my eyes trail over it for a moment, not really having time to worry about whatever it said.

Good morning Libra.

The stars have spoken about your day!

Sampling forbidden fruit may come back to haunt you today. Mercury has shifted into your chart and chaos could be heading your way. The strongest boughs learn to bend so that they don't break. Compromise will be

your friend and help you through the storm. It's a good time to listen to the will of others and allow yourself to follow a different path for a while.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I had no time for confusing as fuck horoscopes so I tossed my Atlas down and dropped out of bed.

"Big night?" Gabriel asked from his bunk as he looked up from a Numerology book he was studying. Rain hammered against the windows as a storm pounded the academy and I guessed it wasn't a great time to be up in his roof cave.

"Something like that," I muttered, heading for the closet.

Dante was snoring in his bunk and he hadn't pulled the sheet around it. The smell of stale beer hung in the air and I spotted his golden chalice hanging from his fingertips where his arm hung over the edge of the bed. I wasn't sure what time he'd gotten in, but it was after me and I'd seen four am flash up on my Atlas before passing out.

"You're the talk of the school," Gabriel added casually although I was fairly sure I detected a hint of irritation hidden in the depths of his voice.

"Am I now?" I asked disinterestedly, not knowing what he was talking about and not having time for it either.

I grabbed at the closest thing to me and pulled another new pair of jeans out of the closet, stepping into them beneath the long t-shirt I'd worn to bed. I hadn't realised quite how well the Kiplings would pay me for my work and after a search online for some sale items I'd managed to stock my wardrobe with several new outfits after just one job.

The black jeans I'd grabbed had rips in the knees and I kept my back to Gabriel as I tossed my T-shirt aside and pulled on a black shirt with a knot tied over my navel and *can't quite give a shit* scrawled over my chest. I

didn’t bother with a bra because I was too damn late for underwear and Miss Nightshade didn’t seem like the type to take kindly to tardiness.

“You’re actually trending,” Gabriel pressed and I was about to tell him I didn’t have time for this conversation just as the sound of a video playing reached my ears.

I turned to look at him as he held his Atlas out for me to see. The video was dark but my lilac hair stood out as I danced between the two men who had dominated my time at the party last night.

Dante’s hand caught my face and he tipped my mouth up to meet his. The memory of that kiss made my lips tingle with the electric energy I’d felt at the time. My heart beat a little faster as Leon started kissing my neck from behind while my mouth stayed locked with Dante’s. Their hands were all over me and after a minute of full on kissing with Dante, he turned my head so that Leon could capture my lips instead. It looked even hotter than it had felt, which was saying a damn lot.

“Oh, that,” I said as dismissively as I could manage but my heart was pounding and my voice caught on the last word.

Gabriel shut the video down and I met his eye, my cheeks flaming at the memories though I refused to be embarrassed by them. I was pretty sure the two of them would have taken things further if I’d wanted to last night but I’d been drinking and although I was hardly some innocent girl, I’d never done anything like that before. I didn’t want to make that decision without a clear head no matter how good it had felt being pinned between their bodies.

“Are you trying to make me jealous?” Gabriel asked, scowling at me.

“You think I’d go to a party you weren’t attending and kiss two guys who aren’t you under the assumption that some random person would video

it and post it online for you to see just so that I could try and make you jealous?" I asked, scoffing. "Get over yourself Gabriel."

He frowned at me as I grabbed my Atlas and I started heading for the door.

"Don't you feel the pull to me?" he asked, the seriousness of his tone making me hesitate. "The draw of our bond urging you back my way whenever we're not together?"

I was about to tell him no, but that wasn't entirely true. I did think about him a lot. I fantasised about the night we'd spent together and the way his mouth had felt against mine the way his body had felt as it possessed mine... But then I spent a lot of time thinking about all of the Kings and plenty of other people besides. Because I was trying to figure out if any of them had had a hand in my brother's death.

"Why would I be drawn to a liar who won't even speak up for me when I ask him to? Or at least explain himself to me after the fact?" I countered, edging for the door because I really was going to be late if I left it much longer and I at least wanted to brush the taste of beer out of my mouth before I went.

"There's a lot about me I can't tell you," he said darkly.

"Well keep your secrets. I couldn't give a shit. Just don't expect me to pine for someone who isn't even real with me."

"But Dante and Leon are real with you, are they? They tell you all their dark secrets? They both come from criminal families, they've both done things that would give you nightmares if you knew about them," he growled.

I scoffed. "I don't think so, Gabriel. You've painted this pretty picture of me in your head as this poor innocent girl or something but the truth is, you don't know me at all. In fact you've made it your mission *not* to know me.

So don’t go telling me I don’t know anything about the darkness in them. Because that might just be what I like about them the most. And you have no right to make any kind of comment on what I do or who I see anyway. You’ve made it perfectly clear you don’t want me, so why are we even having this conversation?”

Gabriel let out a heavy breath and looked away from me towards Dante where he slept for a moment. “Just because it would be better for you if you weren’t mine doesn’t mean I like seeing you becoming someone else’s. I haven’t thought of another woman since the stars brought you to me, you consume my desires.”

My lips parted in surprise at that admission and I couldn’t deny I liked the way it sounded. But he couldn’t expect me to put my life on hold for him when he’d made it clear he didn’t want to get close to me.

“Well if you really are my Elysian Mate then you’ll want me for who I really am,” I said, grabbing my wash bag. “And I’m not the type to be tied down to one guy.”

Gabriel frowned at that but I didn’t have time for his answer and I shot out of the room with my Vampire speed.

My head spun dizzily as I came to a halt in the bathroom before the sink. I brushed my teeth as quickly as I could and splashed water over my face as I tried to fix the panda eyes my makeup had left behind. I spared a moment to use healing magic to clear my hangover and sighed as the headache slipped away.

A quick glance at my Atlas told me I had three minutes to get to my counselling session across campus and I shot back out of the room, tossing my wash bag into my dorm before speeding down the stairs.

I sped across Acrux Courtyard in the torrential rain, moving so fast that there was hardly any time for the rain to catch me. I came to a halt before

Miss Nightshade's door with thirty seconds to spare, moisture clinging to my cheeks and my boots leaving wet footprints on the carpet.

The door swung open and I came face to face with Eugene Dipper.

"Remember to work on your obsessive compulsions this week!" Miss Nightshade's voice called after him. "We don't want you straying into stalker tendencies again."

Eugene's pale cheeks flushed scarlet as he stared at me in surprise and I lifted an eyebrow at him as he failed to look away.

"I-I'll try," he muttered, pressing his back to the door and shuffling sideways to let me pass him.

"Come on in Miss Callisto before poor Mr Dipper has a heart attack!"

I frowned at that weird comment and stepped into the room.

"Hi," I said, my tone clipped as I pushed the door over behind me.

"I'm glad you could join me today, Miss Callisto, it would be such a shame if you had to lose your place at the academy because you were branded unbalanced," she said, softening the dig with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. Feelings of trust and safety washed from her towards me and I scowled.

Fucking Sirens. I didn't want her pushing at my emotions like that and I threw up a strong mental wall as I dropped down on the comfy couch before her.

"Heaven forbid," I said dryly. And unbalanced didn't really cover it with me. Hell, it was probably one of the better diagnosis I could have been branded with. *Obsessive. Vengeful. Shattered. Psychotic. Broken.* I could be given enough labels to fill a short book.

"I have agreed not to pry too closely into your thoughts after speaking with Professor Titan. He told me you have a few sensitivities when it comes to the power of my Order, will you talk about the root of that mistrust?"

I pursed my lips, looking about the room as I wondered how to answer that question. I could tell her a little about Old Sal but I didn't really want her prying into my family life much.

"My mom had a Siren for a boss my whole life, she isn't the strongest willed person you'd ever meet and I always felt that her boss manipulated her," I said with a shrug.

"And did this leave you feeling mistreated?" she asked.

I pushed my tongue into my cheek. "I survived. I'm just not particularly inclined to allow a Siren to manipulate *me."*

"Perhaps you're underestimating yourself. The young woman sitting before me seems anything but weak willed."

I snorted in amusement at that.

"I never said I was."

"But you *do* feel weak. Powerless…is that since the death of the person you're grieving?"

I bit my tongue against the rude response I wanted to give to that. She wasn't supposed to be pushing me on this subject, but I wasn't surprised that she was. I cursed myself for over sleeping, I was supposed to be prepared for this meeting, overloaded on strong emotions to stop her from snooping and catching more subtle feelings from me but I'd overslept and screwed up my entire plan for this.

"You don't need to panic," she urged. "This is a safe space."

Shit.

My gaze scoured the room and fell on a weird sculpture built out of brown blocks of wood all balanced together at strange angles to create a kind of nest.

"What's that for?" I asked, nodding towards it to distract her for a moment as I scrambled for a strong emotion to focus on. `

“It’s a Solarian Evernest,” she said with a smile. “It’s supposed to help you banish distractions and focus on the truest emotions you’re experiencing.”

She started explaining more about the way it worked and I zoned her out as I let my mind drift and my thoughts snagged on last night. Lust was a damn powerful emotion and I was easily able to tap into it as I remembered the way it had felt to have Dante’s mouth pressed to mine, static electricity spilling through my body and making my heart race.

“So do you want to tell me about your loss?” Miss Nightshade asked softly as she pressed at me.

I dropped my gaze to my lap. “My father…” I said in a small voice, thinking of Gareth just long enough to let some grief colour my words. Something about this woman put me on edge which should have been the opposite of the effect she had on me. I didn’t know if it was fear of discovery or just my instincts telling me there was something off about her but I’d be fighting against her intrusion into my thoughts every time I stepped into this room.

“The loss of a paternal figure can be devastating on a young girl,” she said kindly.

I wouldn’t know because I never had one but sure.

“Do you think you may have been acting out at all since then? Allowing your emotions to alter your behaviour?”

Had my grief altered my behaviour? Well I never used to spend all of my free time hunting killers and planning revenge with the most torturous and painful methods I could come up with, so I’d have to say yes.

To drown that out, I thought about how hard Leon had been for me as I ground my ass against him, the way his fingers had teased the line of waistband as he wrapped his strong arms around me.

“Maybe... I don’t really want to discuss my grief.”

Miss Nightshade nodded like she understood. “Acting out sexually is perfectly normal. It can be good to have the support of a lover, but it can also be a rather unsettled time for you. Forming a relationship on the foundations of grief can make for a crumbling house in the future.”

What the hell is this bullshit?

“I wouldn’t call it a relationship,” I said as my mind lingered on the way my hands had pushed beneath Dante’s shirt and ridden the lines and ridges of his abs.

Miss Nightshade nodded thoughtfully. “Being satisfied sexually is a good way to alleviate some of the tension caused by your grief. But you can’t obliterate that sense of loss entirely.”

“I know,” I agreed.

“So perhaps over the next few weeks you could think about restricting yourself sexually and giving some time to your grief? You need to work through it if you ever want the keenness of the pain to fade.”

I don’t want it to fade because I want to feel every inch of this agony inside me as I dole out revenge on the one responsible for it. I want their suffering to equal mine before the end.

“You want me to practice abstaining?” I scoffed. Why the hell would she want me to swear off sex?

“Not all the time but if you separate yourself from the object of your desire a few times a week and spend an evening or two just sitting with your grief, thinking it over, trying to process it, you may feel more able to discuss it with me by our next session.”

We continued to dance back and forth around the subjects she wanted to snoop into while I used lust to hide my feelings and I started to get the sense that she was growing frustrated by the time our hour was running out.

I'd had to endure the lecture on my use of Killblaze but to my surprise, she hadn't lingered on that subject for very long which I hoped as because I clearly wasn't an addict.

"Do you feel like we've begun to make some progress here?" Miss Nightshade asked, concealing the irritation I was sure she was feeling.

"Sure." I glanced at the clock, restraining my smile as I realised I'd made it through the session. "I'll see you in a few weeks then." I got to my feet and she pursed her lips at the eagerness I didn't bother to hide. I didn't care if she knew I hated these sessions, I wasn't here to bolster her ego.

"See you then," she agreed. "Don't be late."

I offered her a salute and strode out of the room.

As I pulled the door closed behind me, the sound of a phone ringing caught my enhanced hearing and I paused, focusing on my gifts as Nightshade answered the call. I lingered where I was for no other real reason than me being a nosey bitch, but I was intrigued to find out a little more about the woman who insisted on poking into my business all the damn time.

"Hello?" she said, a little breathlessly like she was excited about whoever was calling her. Or maybe afraid.

"Is it done?" a voice came on the other end of the line. It was almost impossible for me to make out at this distance even with my gifts and I couldn't be sure if it was a man or a woman.

"I think so," Nightshade said, dropping her voice. "I destroyed the referral records so no one will be able to connect him to me even if they did find the-"

"Good. Double check everything you did to make sure," the voice interrupted and I cursed as I failed to hear the next thing they said.

"Thank you, Card Master, I won't let you down."

Holy shit is she a member of the Black Card?

My mind whirled with the implications of that one little title spilling from her lips. What could that mean? Was she one of those psychos who had been there in the woods with me that night? Had she stood there while that asshole had tried to convince me to kill myself? Watched while that poor boy did just that? Was I spending hours of my time with a woman who was using her Siren gifts to sift through my brain searching for my secrets? For the one secret I held which might just have something to do with that cult of psychopaths?

What if she figured out I was looking for her precious leader? What if I was literally sitting in the company of someone who held the answers I was searching for every other week and I hadn't even suspected a thing?

I suddenly had a new lead and I was sure as shit going to follow it. If Miss Nightshade had any secrets, I'd make it my mission to hunt them down.

The person on the other end of the line replied but I didn't hear what they said as heavy footfalls came from beyond the corner at the far end of the corridor.

I flinched away from the door guiltily and started walking quickly, not wanting to be caught snooping by whoever was heading this way.

I turned the corner and found Ryder walking along the corridor towards me.

His expression tightened as he spotted me and I looked at him for a long moment, wondering if he even felt the littlest bit guilty about the way he'd threatened me. A more terrifying thought sprang to life following that; he'd sworn to kill me if I screwed Dante and now there was a video of me making out with him circulating all over the school.

Ryder didn’t seem to spend any time on FaeBook but if the story interested people enough for them to start talking about it then it wouldn’t be long before he found out what I’d done. Oscura or Lunar. I’d sworn I’d never pick one and I’d meant it. But I’d crossed a line with Dante last night, letting the beer and the excitement of the moment wash me away with it. Maybe it wouldn’t matter. But I got the feeling it would.

Ryder’s stride was steady as he walked right towards me, his gaze hard, jaw locked tight.

My heart beat faster as the distance between us closed. It was a narrow corridor, we’d have to pass within inches of each other, especially as his broad frame took up so much space.

For an insane second I wondered if he might apologise to me but as his cold gaze slid to mine I knew that was a hopeless wish.

Ryder narrowed his eyes and kept walking, his muscular arm brushing against mine as he swept right past like I didn’t even exist.

My gut twisted painfully at the treatment but I shrugged it off. If that was how he wanted it then fine. I’d wanted him close so that I could investigate him, but I’d just do it from a distance instead. And that was the only reason I was so disappointed by his behaviour. I wasn’t going to admit to anything else.

My Atlas pinged in my pocket and I pulled it out as I continued to walk away from Ryder and his sucky attitude.

My gaze fell on Dante’s name and a smile tugged at the corner of my mouth.

Dante:

I missed you this morning, bella. Come and meet me for lunch.

My stomach growled at that suggestion and I messaged back to say I'd meet him in the Cafaeteria.

I turned to look back at Ryder just as he reached the door to Miss Nightshade's room. He looked around too and for a long moment we just stared at each other. My heart beat harder and I tried to work out what he was thinking as he stared at me, but before I could figure it out, he snapped the door closed between us.

I shook my head to clear it of Ryder Draconis and turned away again, speeding out into the rain to meet Dante.

I moved to sit on the couch before Miss Nightshade, taking a razor blade from my pocket and twisting it through my fingers in my usual habit. I kept my gaze fixed on the window to my left, my pulse thumping heavily in my skull.

Fucking Elise. She was a nail hammered into my brain. A cold hard piece of metal driven deep and causing me unspeakable agony. But if I removed her I'd fucking die.

"Let's see your horoscope," Nightshade asked. She loved to start a session like that. Every scrap of insight she could get into me was like a piece of candy for her.

I took out my Atlas, bringing up my horoscope and tossing it to her impatiently, knowing she was going to have a fucking field day over this one.

She tapped her long nails on the screen then started reading it out loud. "Today you'll find yourself up close and personal with the object of your affections. Although these new feelings may frighten you, it could be a good time to lean into them. With Mars moving into your chart, it may feel like you are at war with yourself at times, but there is a more physical war coming. By embracing the softer vibes of Venus, you could find yourself at peace today. If not, you will likely shed blood before sundown."

I ground my teeth as I waited for Nightshade's verdict on that but for once she didn't give one. She just slapped a smug look on her face that said *I'm right about Elise*. And I wanted to peel it off of her with my nails. She didn't mention the bloodshed because frankly, my horoscope predicted that five times a week. But when Mars was in my chart it usually meant the fucker was going to lose more than a few teeth.

"Are you going to talk about her this week?" Nightshade asked, jotting down some notes before passing my Atlas back to me.

There were four *hers* in my life that mattered to Nightshade. My mom, Mariella Oscura, Professor King and now Elise Callisto.

"Which one?" I grunted, sliding the razor along my thumb, the blade threatening to spill blood. Nightshade always had a box of tissues on hand for people who shed tears. But she knew that wasn't what she'd be handing them to me for. She never told me to stop cutting myself though, just wrote notes on her fucking clipboard like I was a mildly interesting puzzle she wanted to solve. Sucked for her, because there wasn't a solution to this jigsaw. There were too many pieces missing and the ones that remained didn't fit together right.

"Let's start with Elise," she said, raising a dark brow, her pen poised above the page as she rested the clipboard on her knee. "Do you want to talk about those emotions you felt when you saw her just now? Lust… frustration…loss?"

I ran my tongue across my teeth, pressing the blade down a little harder but not enough to break the skin. Part of me wanted to send Nightshade a vision of me bashing her head against a wall and she shifted in her seat as she sensed that. Her mental shields were solid anyway. Wasn't worth my time.

“You can be angry at me all you like, Ryder, but who is it you’re really angry with?”

Myself. Elise. The world.

I shrugged one shoulder, watching a spider crawl across its web against the window. A fly was hovering near enough to be caught in its trap, then turned away at the last moment.

I know the feeling.

Nightshade cleared her throat to draw my attention back to her and I knew I had to give her something. She had the power to say I was unstable. A few ticks in the right checkboxes could have me looked at closer by healthcare professionals and I didn’t need the headache. So occasionally I gave her what she wanted. And it looked like today needed to be one of those days.

“Elise is a complication in my life I don’t need,” I stated. It was a simple fact, though Nightshade could no doubt sense my underlying feelings on that matter.

“Define complicated,” she asked and I sighed, weary of this conversation already.

“She won’t be mine. She wants other assholes in this school. What more is there to say?” I hissed.

Nightshade leaned back in her chair, pressing out a crease in her navy skirt. “Well…I sense there is something more you have to say. You want Elise and she doesn’t want you back, is that correct? Because you said it was complicated and that sounds fairly simple to me.”

Fucking checkmate. I hated the probing ways of this bitch, but I had to admit she was disgustingly good at her job. “What makes it complicated, is that she *does* want me back, but she wants other guys too,” I snarled the

words, rage ripping through me and making Nightshade draw in a slow breath as it crashed over her too.

“And you want to see her exclusively?” she guessed.

I frowned, the blade in my hand on the verge of slicing into my thumb. “Mostly I don’t want her anywhere near Dante fucking Oscura.”

Nightshade nodded in understanding. “Ah, now I see the complication. Perhaps it would be a good idea to talk to Elise. If you were honest about your feelings maybe-”

“What feelings?” I snapped, curling my left hand into a fist and aiming the tattoo across my knuckles at her. “It’s lust. I want to fuck her that’s all it is.”

She arched a brow again, jotting down something on her notepad. “Well Ryder, as a professional, it is my job to tell you that that isn’t quite true. I am able to sense your emotions remember?”

“How could I forget?” I said dryly. “Next topic. I’m done talking about her.”

She nodded in agreement and the tension ran out of my shoulders. Blood was oozing between my fingers though I couldn’t even remember making the cut.

Nightshade handed me a tissue, dropping it onto my knee where I proceeded to firmly ignore its existence.

“I’d like to delve a little deeper into your motivations behind your affair with Professor King. I have some theories I’d like to discuss with you and I need you to keep an open mind and let your emotions flow as naturally as possibly so I can get a sense of whether my assumptions are true or not.”

She liked to play this game with me. It meant I didn’t have to say much, which suited me just fine while she got a fun little look under the hood of my mind.

“Remember, if my suggestion is outrageous to you, you are not to react violently toward me. This is a simple exercise.”

I nodded curtly. She was still wary since the time I’d lunged at her for asking whether my mother had been a junkie.

Nightshade uncrossed her legs, placing the clipboard flat down on her thighs. “As we’ve established, Professor King fulfilled a need for you, allowing you to indulge in your masochistic and sadistic desires while in return she received pleasure in the form of sexual gratification and you as a blood Source.”

I gave Nightshade a blank look, not responding to the labels she would have loved to staple to my forehead.

“So here are my theories as to why you have this need based on the conversations we’ve shared here during the past year…” She cleared her throat. “At a very young age you were exposed to the trauma of losing your mother.”

My gut pinched and I tried not to let her feel that, but I knew she did.

“Though your father sheltered you from gang life up until her death, afterwards you began to witness more and more bloodshed even before your tenth birthday. Your father quickly became the only constant in your life. You shared your home with several gang members, witnessing both sexual and violent acts on multiple occasions.”

I fought an eye roll as she summarised my childhood, stuffing it into a nice little box wrapped up with a ribbon. She felt my disdain and quickly hurried on.

“The cataclysmic moment for you occurred when your father was brutally murdered by the Oscura Clan and you ended up in the hands of Mariella Oscura for thirteen months. At the sensitive age of fifteen, you

were susceptible to Coercion and in a fragile state due to the loss of your father."

"Fourteen months," I corrected sharply. Or more specifically four hundred and twenty six days.

She nodded, taking a breath and twitching a sympathetic smile at me. Anger twisted my organs and a deep rattle emanated from within my body.

She swiftly hurried on. "During your captivity with Mariella, you were subjected to torture which warped your view of pain. As she began to reward you for enduring longer and longer bouts of suffering, you became hardwired to start anticipating the release at the end of the torture."

My heart hit a frantic beat and I tried not to react as she continued to summarise my life like it was so simple. So fucking transparent.

"As you spent more time enjoying the rewards she gave you, from free time, to books, food and your own gym to work off your frustration, the lifestyle she'd created for you became your new normal. As you weren't yet Awakened or Emerged, you had no magic or Order to fight her off and therefore eventually fell into the role of her slave. Which was precisely where she wanted you. But, as is fairly obvious nowadays, you are not naturally submissive, so what she had created instead was a ticking time bomb."

I realised my right fist was crushed around the razor blade and blood was spilling onto my knees, the kiss of pain giving me some relief while emotions warred inside me.

"When Mariella's rewards became sexual-"

"*Enough*," I snapped, my breathing heavy, my chest tight. I couldn't go back there. I wouldn't. Nightshade had made me relive it too many times and now she was pouring it all over me like a vat of acid. And I was done.

I rose to my feet and her eyes lit up as she drank in the emotions flowing out of my body and into hers. I placed a mental shield between us but she already had a grip on me. Triumph gleamed in her eyes like she'd worked me out at last. Like she knew everything there was to know about me. And she had to say it. She just had to fucking say it, didn't she?

"Which is why you live between the boundaries of pleasure and pain, and why your relationship with Professor King was so fulfilling to you. But Ryder-"

"Stop!" I bellowed, blood dripping onto the carpet between us.

She rose to her feet, her gaze bright. "You are finally starting to move beyond the trap of those boundaries and I think it's because of-"

Magic crashed through my flesh and vines knocked Nightshade back into her seat, one wrapping tightly around her throat.

I pointed down at her with fury bubbling and spitting under my flesh. "There is no *beyond*," I snarled, hellfire raging through my body like an inferno. "Not for me."

She choked, raising a hand to fight me, but I severed the vine anyway, marching from the room and slamming the door behind me, making the walls shudder.

The blood was already drying against my right palm now I'd healed it and I shoved the blade into my pocket, needing more than my own pain. I needed someone else's.

I headed back to The Vega Dormitories in the hopes of finding some Oscuras straying into my path to sate this desperate need in me. But I had no such luck.

I shoved my way inside, finding Bryce walking down the stairs, cocking a brow when he spotted me.

“Guess you’ve seen it then?” he said with a dark scowl. “I told you that bitch was an Oscura whore.”

“What?” I growled as he halted before me, pushing a hand into his messy black hair.

“The video on FaeBook with Callisto and Inferno.” Bryce frowned and venom dripped through my veins.

“What fucking video?” I demanded in a deadly hiss and he quickly produced his Atlas, tapping on the screen before holding it under my nose as it played.

Elise was dancing between the fucking Lion King and Inferno, her body grinding into theirs. When Dante caught her chin and pressed his lips to hers, a switch flipped in my head. She pawed at him, leaning into his kiss and my shoulders began to shake. I was frozen in place, feeling like a gun was placed firmly to my temple with Elise’s finger on the trigger.

Bryce tucked his Atlas back away. “You alright, boss?”

I remained silent, my teeth grinding to dust as a toxic rage took hold of me. “Contact the Eyes,” I spat. “Get me both of their locations. *Now*.”

Bryce quickly started tapping out messages on his Atlas while I turned and threw my left fist into the wall, splitting apart the word lust. Because *fuck* lust. Fuck it. And fuck *her*.

“Boss er…” Bryce gave me a wary look. “Jake’s already got eyes on Inferno and he…well he’s with Callisto.”

“Perfect,” I growled, my rage cooling to a dangerous kind of calm.

“I’ve sent you the location. Do you want backup?” Bryce asked as my Atlas buzzed in my pocket.

“No. I need to do this alone.” I took out my Atlas, heading back outside and finding their location pinned on my campus map. They were down by

Tempest Lake. Which was ideal for what I was going to do. I had a promise to fulfil anyway. And it was time it was done.

I headed north, crossing campus, passing through the Empyrean Fields and slipping into the boughs of The Iron Wood. The icy calm I felt always preceded a kill. My split knuckles throbbed and I drew strength from the pain, letting it fill me up until nothing else existed inside me but power.

I am strong, unstoppable. And I am not any woman's plaything.

I made it to the edge of the forest where it met the rocky shoreline of Lake Tempest. I remained within the trees, willing my heart to slow to the barely perceptible thump of my Order form so Elise wouldn't hear me coming. With silent footsteps, I moved toward the sound of their voices, a predator stalking its prey.

Elise's laughter strummed against my ears as I halted close by, pressing my shoulder to the bough of a huge tree as I peered down at the beach.

They sat side by side, their backs to me, their hands locked together.

I let two vines grow from my palm, sliding down to the ground and slithering out onto the beach, one behind Elise, the other behind Dante. Every drop of my magic poured into them. I'd need it all to immobilise them both. But I was catching them unaware. So I was fucking capable of it.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent the vines spiralling toward them. Elise screamed as they were thrown away from each other, the vines growing and wrapping around them at speed. I pinned Elise against a tree while Inferno was held on the ground. I sped from the forest, racing toward my victim with a roar of rage.

My fist hit Dante's face so hard, the pain of it spiked right back up into my body. I held him down while he writhed against the bonds, his eyes wide with shock.

“Ryder!” Elise screamed, but I ignored her, cracking Inferno’s head back against the rocks.

“Fuck!” He thrashed hard, managing to get a hand free and I braced as air magic tore the vines to shreds and threw me from him. My back collided with the stones and my magic reserves soaked up the shot of pain.

I leapt to my feet, running at him again as a storm built around us. Lightning struck the water to my right and I knew I only had seconds until he cast it more accurately. I took out his legs with a vine and launched myself on top of him.

Lightning sent a flare of heat up my back as it hit the spot I’d just been in. The ground exploded behind me. Stones crashed into my back and the bruising sent another hungry wave of power through my body.

My hands locked around Dante’s throat as a powerful wind battered me. I wrapped vines around us, binding him to me so he couldn’t throw me off. We rolled and his head collided with the bridge of my nose as he landed on top of me. A snap filled the air and Elise cried out for us to stop once more.

“You’re dead,” I promised through bared teeth, crushing his neck tighter. He stole the air from my lungs, but I’d outlast him. I’d trained to hold my breath for several minutes. He’d choke before I passed out. I was prepared for every eventuality.

The sound of the world faded away as my fingers tightened and Dante remained stubbornly in place above me, my lungs compressing as he squeezed every last drop of air out of me.

Elise appeared, dragging Dante off of me with her Vampire strength and breaking the vines which bound us. I jerked upwards in fury, lunging after him as darkness curtained my vision.

Elise slapped Dante hard enough to break the power of his magic and I coughed heavily as air flowed back into my lungs and the sound of her

voice found me through the thickening atmosphere.

I rose to my feet, blood pouring over my mouth from my broken nose as I strode forward to get to Inferno. Thunder crashed above as he snarled at me, his eyes flashing with the reptilian slits of his Dragon form. I'd relish a fight as beasts.

Elise planted one hand on my chest and the other on Dante's.

"ENOUGH!" she commanded and the numbness washing over me peeled back, allowing me to focus on her for a second.

Her impassioned gaze found mine and I wondered if any of the emotions I found there other than rage belonged to me.

Dante bristled then fell as still as me, his jaw growing redder by the second from the hit I'd landed on him.

"You kissed him," I spat at Elise. "Maybe it should be *your* neck I wanna break." My heart returned to a normal pace and I tried not to feel anything toward those callous words as they spilled from my tongue.

"It meant nothing," she snarled and Dante's jaw ticked, but he didn't respond.

"Liar," I hissed.

She moved forward in a blur, her hand cupping my jaw and her mouth suddenly pressing against mine. I tasted the whole world on her lips before she pulled away just as fast, her eyes dark and wide with some emotion I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

"Like *that* meant nothing," she whispered, but it was loud enough for Dante to hear as he folded his arms, glaring at us. Her mouth was tainted red from my blood and as she realised it, she raised a hand to heal my broken nose, her brows knitting together as the soothing flow of her magic slid under my skin.

Nothing sure tasted a lot like everything. It was one pathetic, no-tongues kiss but I had sure as fuck been altered by that interaction. I moved back a step, turning away from those endless eyes which were capable of biting chunks off of my soul. I was nothing to her. Like Dante was nothing to her. And so long as we were the same, that knowledge was worth suffering through.

“Come on, carina, let’s go. And if you ever fucking attack me again, Ryder, I’ll retaliate with the full force of my Clan.”

I ignored him, waiting for her to go with him, wondering if she’d lied about her feelings for Inferno and was about to prove it.

Elise’s hand caught mine and she tugged to turn me around. I found her other hand wrapped around Inferno’s and nearly recoiled from the connection her body made between us. But it felt too good to have her skin against mine and it suddenly felt easier to breathe.

“I can’t keep going through this,” she said seriously, looking between us. “I’m *never* going to choose between you two.”

I remained silent, keeping my gaze on her face while Dante shifted closer to her in my periphery.

“So this is how it’s gonna be,” she said firmly. “I’ll be *friends* with both of you.”

“Friends can be construed whatever fucking way you want,” I growled and her hand tightened around mine as if she sensed I was about to pull away.

“I know. Which means we’ll need some rules,” she said and my gaze drifted to Inferno.

His jaw was set and he nodded in agreement, meaning I immediately nodded mine too, because fuck, I was so done not having Elise in my life.

And if this was the only way, then hell if I was gonna relinquish her to Dante Oscura.

“No more kissing,” Dante said and I nodded easily. I did not want her mouth anywhere fucking near Inferno’s ever again.

“No fucking either,” I added, glaring at him as I could see his conniving little mind coming up with loopholes.

“Fine. No blowjobs or handjobs,” he said, cocking a brow at me with a smirk.

“No touching Elise beneath her underwear,” I growled and Dante’s eyes lit up with the challenge of this game while Elise looked between us in confusion.

“No hurting Elise for pleasure,” Dante said, his smile widening and I ground my jaw.

“No overnight bed sharing,” I spat back.

“Guys-” Elise started, but Dante cut over her.

“And no jerking off over her while she’s in the same room.”

“Done,” I agreed, snatching my hand out of Elise’s and holding it out to him. His palm crashed into my mine and magic snapped between us as the deal was struck. I’d know if he broke it and he’d know if I did too. And not only that, the stars would punish us for weeks in the form of bad luck if we fucked it.

We both looked to Elise, her lips parted in surprise and her eyes flipping between us.

“Are you still my Sources?”

“Yes,” we replied instantly and I took a measured step away from Dante in irritation.

“And you’re both happy with the deal you just made?” She frowned, glancing between us.

Dante was grinning, nodding firmly as if he'd won by keeping me off of Elise. But it was *me* who'd fucking won something here today.

Although, as I thought about that brief mind-blowing, star-shitting kiss she'd given me, I realised I'd just screwed myself over too. I'd never get another kiss like that again, let alone any airtime with her naked body.

Dante's smile withered away as he realised it too and he shared a look with me as his eyes widened.

"Dammit," he hissed under his breath and for once, I had to fucking agree with him.

Thirteen Months Before the Solarid Meteor Shower…

***I** walked beneath the trees in The Iron Wood in my Order form with Cindy Lou at my side in hers. As a Centaur, she had the body of a horse like me in my Pegasus form, but the top half of her body retained her Fae form. And she didn't have wings. Not to boast.*

"You wanna see if you can run as fast as me?" Cindy teased, looking my way.

Of course with my horse head, I couldn't reply with words but I snorted my agreement enthusiastically and she laughed, stomping her front hoof in a clear challenge.

She wore a pink bikini top to cover her breasts but the rest of her ivory skin was bare and I couldn't help but keep looking at her as we walked. We were deep into The Iron Wood now and I had a bag tied to my back containing our clothes and a picnic for when we decided to stop.

"There's a clearing at the end of this track. First one there wins," she said, her eyes glinting with the game.

I whinnied excitedly, tucking my black wings tight to my back as I prepared to run.

“Three, two, one-” Cindy whipped her bikini top off and tossed it into my face, giving me an eyeful of her pert nipples before she laughed and sprang away from me.

I shook my head to clear it, leaping after her and driving myself into a gallop. My hooves thundered across the hard packed mud beneath me, leaves whipping up around my legs as I disturbed them.

Cindy was fast, her dappled legs pounding a fierce beat against the ground ahead as she fought to maintain her lead. But I was a lot bigger than her, my legs longer and muscles thicker.

I neighed excitedly as I drew level with her, my wings twitching with the urge to take flight. I kept them locked tight instead, keeping to the ground so that our race remained fair and urging my feet to move ever faster.

The clearing was bright up ahead and I set my gaze on it as I took the lead, my chest heaving, nostrils flaring and sweat gleaming wetly on my coat as I gave it my all.

I burst out into the clearing, my black fur shimmering with light as the joy of my win filled me and glitter began to form more thickly across my body.

Cindy Lou laughed as she burst into the clearing behind me, shrinking down into her Fae form as she arrived and looking at me expectantly.

It took me a moment to shift back as my gaze snagged on the sight of her naked body. I’d been hoping we might be moving on to this place and the look in her eye said she was done waiting too.

I retreated into my Fae form, rolling my shoulders back as I got used to the fact that my wings were gone. I removed the bag which hung around my neck, letting it fall at my feet.

I glanced at it, half wondering if I should ask if she wanted to get dressed. She bit her lip as I looked her way and I was pretty sure she

wanted her clothes back about as much as I wanted to cover her up again.

I took a step towards her and suddenly she was in my arms. Her mouth sought mine out and I laughed as I hoisted her off of her feet, her legs wrapping around my waist so that her skin was pressed to mine. A needy groan escaped me as her breasts slid against my chest, her hard nipples painting lines on my skin which instantly translated to my dick.

Cindy moaned as I moved my mouth from hers, tasting the skin of her neck, her collar bone, moving lower and lower as I sought out more of her body.

Cindy shifted her weight back and I lost my footing, just managing to twist so that she at least landed on top of me instead of me dropping her on her ass as we hit the ground.

She started laughing and I couldn't help but join in as I gripped her hips, eyeing every inch of her as she sat on top of me.

Cindy leaned down to kiss me again, a curtain of gossamer black hair surrounding us like we were sealed in our own little bubble of solitude.

I was jerked from the moment as my Atlas started ringing in my bag, the tone I'd selected for Dante Oscura belting out the music from the Darth Vader's theme, The Imperial March impatiently.

I stilled for a moment, glancing away from her towards the bag and she sighed dramatically.

"You're not going to ditch me in favour of a phone call, are you?" she teased, shifting in my lap so that my dick was firmly between her legs, though not actually joined with her body yet.

"No," I replied, ignoring the call as I pulled her down to kiss me again.

Cindy sighed as I trailed my hands down her back, exploring her body as my own flesh ached with the need to get on with this.

My Atlas rang out then instantly started ringing again. And again. The fourth time it started up, I paused long enough for Cindy to groan in frustration.

"Sorry," I panted. "But that's Dante and it's not like him to call so many times-"

"Dante?" she asked, the irritation slipping from her features as she moved to reach for the bag herself. "You'd better answer it then."

I raised an eyebrow at her then quickly unzipped the sports bag, grabbing my Atlas out and sitting up so that I could answer it.

Cindy Lou stayed in my lap but leaned back to give me room.

"Hello?" I answered, trying not to pant too obviously.

"You'd better be three inches deep in your girl if you're gonna take that long to answer me, cavallo," Dante's voice came in response.

"Three inches?" I scoffed.

"Oh sorry. I meant two."

"Is there a point to this conversation beyond you insulting me?" I asked, rolling my eyes.

"Yes. I've just sent a location to your Atlas using a burner phone. Go there and approach the house through the southern vineyard. Carlo will meet you there with a package. Once you've got it you get the hell away from that house. You bring it back to the academy and wait at the Oscura Haunt for the Kiplings. Then you make sure that it gets into their cache without any hitches."

"That sounds purposefully vague," I pointed out.

"I don't have time for any bullshit, stronzo. The FIB are coming for us and our inside man only just managed to get this tip to us. We have less than an hour before they hit the house and my room here at the academy so you'd better saddle up and get moving," Dante commanded.

A shiver ran down my spine. I'd been all for doing the odd job for the Oscuras to earn myself some extra money but this was serious. If the FIB were conducting raids, then that meant I could wind up caught in the middle of it. If I was found transporting this package then I'd be going to jail, no doubt about it. And when I'd promised Ella a life away from Alestria, I hadn't meant I'd be serving a term in Darkmore Penitentiary and enjoying her visits once a month.

"I err, I'm not dressed and-"

"Good. Because you're gonna need to fly there to get this done in time. I'll pay you three thousand auras, just get moving, mio amico."

My lips parted at that. That was some serious money. Enough to pay for one and a half of the instalments I owed Old Sal. Which would massively take the pressure off of me if I was struggling one month.

Holy shit I must be insane.

"Okay. I'm on my way," I agreed.

"Hurry, cavallo. The FIB will be there soon." Dante cut the call and I looked at Cindy Lou sheepishly.

"I'm so sorry," I began. "But this is literally unavoidable. Dante needs me to do something for him…like, right now."

"Then go," she said brightly, pushing out of my lap and jumping up. "I could hear what he was saying. I'll go and wait in the Oscura Haunt. Once you're done with the Kiplings we can stay out here for a while and then I can be your alibi if anyone asks where you were."

"I wouldn't ask you to lie for me like that," I said with a frown as I stood too, wondering why the hell she'd even offer.

"I want to. I want to help," she said, her eyes wide with sincerity. "Now go or you're going to be late."

“Okay.” I nodded because she was right about that. I quickly pulled up the location Dante had sent me on my Atlas, looking at the huge house set out in the centre of sprawling vineyards to the southeast of Alestria. At least it was the only building around once I got there, so it should have been easy enough for me to locate.

I pressed my lips to Cindy Lou’s, my gaze sliding over her naked flesh wistfully before I tossed my Atlas back into the bag which I handed to Cindy then shifted into my huge, black Pegasus form.

Cindy Lou reached out to push her fingers up the centre of my nose and I nuzzled into her in farewell for a moment before turning and galloping away into the clearing.

I spread my wings as I ran, air pushing beneath them as I picked up speed and one powerful beat propelled me into the air.

I climbed towards the bright sky and quickly turned south, speeding over Aurora Academy and heading out over the streets of Alestria.

I flew hard and fast, my lungs burning as I shot through the sky at full speed, determined to get there as soon as I could possibly manage.

It took me almost half an hour to make it to my location and I snorted in relief as I finally spotted the house ahead. It was set amongst acres of vineyards, a private drive leading up to the enormous building.

Around twenty huge, black FIB trucks filled the drive and fear shot through me as I spotted agents running into the house, the outbuildings, through the grounds and even starting to spill into the vineyards.

The high pitched howl of wolves came again and again and I noticed them racing around too, evading the FIB for the most part and tearing through the vineyards.

As I watched, an FIB agent transformed into a giant Artemis Bear and pounced on one of the Wolves. Another agent shot a bullet which must have

been laced with Order suppressant as the Wolf he hit instantly transformed back into a naked man who proceeded to scream at him in Faetalian at the top of his lungs.

I spun away from the house, keeping high as I headed for the southern vineyards and the position Dante had marked out on the map to meet Carlo.

Adrenaline was pumping hard and fast through my veins and I was struck with the desire to just fly the hell away from here before I ended up getting caught up in this madness. Only the thought of Ella being forced up on the stage at The Sparkling Uranus gave me the strength to land and see this through.

My hooves hit the ground and I slowed to a halt as quickly as I could, tucking my wings tight to my back as I looked around for any sign of the guy I was supposed to be meeting.

"You're late, cavallo!" a girl called as she stepped out between the vines. She was only about thirteen, her long black hair hanging loose down her back and the shorts and cami combo she had on looking suspiciously like pyjamas. "Well shift back into your Fae form or I can't check that you're the stronzo I'm waiting for, can I?" she demanded.

I looked around anxiously for a moment before doing what she said, cupping my hands over my junk as I retreated into my Fae form.

"Are you Carlo?" I asked with a frown.

"No idiota," she said, rolling her eyes and somehow making me feel like I should apologise for offending her, despite the fact that I was twice her height and about seven years older than her. "I'm Rosalie. Carlo got caught and they almost got the stash because he's a total lemming. Luckily me, Fabrizio and Lucia were close enough to see it go down. So they both attacked the agents while I grabbed the bag. It was my idea. The FIB can't shoot kids." She smiled proudly and I frowned at her.

“Kids?”

She sighed like I was a fucking idiot and I was struck with the urge to apologise again. Despite her small frame and youth it was pretty clear this girl was an Alpha in the making.

“Yeah. Fabrizio is five and Lucia is seven. Even the FIB won’t just shoot wolf pups. Now are you gonna stop asking dumb questions and take the stash or what?” She lifted a heavy looking bag and brandished it at me.

“What is it?” I asked but her smile only widened.

“It’s not your job to ask questions, cavallo. Horsey just needs to deliver. And feel free to tell Dante how I saved the day. Tell him he can take me out for pancakes on Sunday to thank me.”

“Pancakes?”

Why do I suddenly feel like I’ve stepped into an alternate reality where I’m somehow a part of a major crime family?

“Yeah. Bottomless *pancakes. Don’t forget. Now get your ass moving.”*

Gunfire rang out behind us and I practically shit myself as I shifted back into my Pegasus form as fast as I could.

Rosalie looped the bag over my head and turned to face the direction of the gunfire, a deep growl resounding in her chest.

I hesitated as the shouts of the FIB drew closer, wondering if I should really be leaving this young girl alone here to deal with them.

“What are you waiting for, cavallo?” she demanded. “Yah!” She slapped my flank like I was some common horse and I shot into motion as the sting of her hand print blazed on my flesh.

I spread my wings wide and leapt into the sky, looking back over my shoulder in time to see Rosalie shift into a stunning, silver wolf pup, shredding through her clothes and racing straight towards the three FIB agents who appeared at the end of the row of vines.

My heart leapt in panic for her as she howled, baring her teeth and not showing the faintest trace of hesitation.

More howls came in answer from the surrounding vines and a few cries of a morte e ritorno! *joined the call as the Oscuras fearlessly raced to help her.*

I stared in shock for a moment before a blast of energy was shot my way and I narrowly avoided the FIB bullet.

I whinnied in panic and flapped hard, climbing towards the sun and racing back north. Away from the Oscura stronghold and the FIB and back towards the academy where I might just be safe.

Fear drove me to fly faster and harder than I thought I ever had in my life as I tore through the sky back to the academy and I crashed through the trees above the Oscura Haunt with a surge of relief spilling through me.

I stumbled to a halt and retreated into my Fae form, panting hard as sweat gleamed on my skin and I pulled the heavy bag from around my neck.

“You made it!” Cindy Lou called excitedly as she jogged across the clearing to join me. She’d dressed herself in a pair of shorts and a thin shirt and she held out a pair of sweatpants for me which I took with a nod of thanks. I was breathing so hard that I couldn’t quite manage words yet.

I pulled the sweatpants on and slowly caught my breath.

“Holy shit, that was insane,” I panted, my grip tightening on the bag as I looked around for the Kiplings. I just wanted to get rid of the damn thing. Whatever it was was serious trouble and the sooner I could wash my hands of it the better.

“You wanna take a peek inside?” Cindy Lou whispered conspiratorially, her fingers brushing the back of my hand where I gripped the bag.

I bit my lip, taking in the excited sparkle in her eyes. Dante hadn’t told me not *to look.*

“What if it’s a bag of body parts?” I half teased, though at that thought a prickle of fear danced along my spine.

“Only one way to find out,” she dared.

I smirked at her, glancing around for the Kiplings once more before loosening the tie on the bag and looking inside.

I frowned as I spotted the heap of silk pouches within it, wondering what the hell they were. With shaking fingers, I pulled one out to get a closer look, easing the string open to see inside.

“Wow,” Cindy Lou breathed in amazement.

The pouch was filled with glimmering black stardust, the most valuable substance in the whole of Solaria. One pinch of it could transport you to anywhere in the world and beyond in the blink of an eye, using the stars to guide you. It could even transport you to the mortal realm if that was where you wanted to go. Only Dragons could create it, using their Dragon Fire to melt meteors. It was as rare as it was pricey.

“Oh shit,” I breathed. Because I knew who the Oscuras had stolen this from. It had been all over the news this week. I’d heard rumours that the FIB had been looking into Leon’s father, Reginald Night, for the theft which hadn’t even surprised me. The Nights were the best thieves in Alestria and quite possibly the whole of Solaria too. But I hadn’t considered the fact that they might have been working with the Oscuras.

Either way, Lionel Acrux, the Celestial Counsellor, Dragon Master and one of the four rulers and most powerful Fae in the whole world was seriously pissed about this going missing. On the news clips I’d seen, it seriously looked like he might murder whoever was responsible when he found them.

I swallowed thickly, cinching the pouch shut again and tossing it back into the bag. I wanted to get the hell away from this stuff and fast.

“We didn’t see that,” I breathed and Cindy Lou nodded her agreement.

A branch breaking drew my attention to the far side of the clearing and we spun around to see who was approaching.

I shifted the bag behind my back as my heart pounded with panic and I sagged in relief as the three Kiplings stepped out of the trees.

“Do you have it?” Kipling Junior asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, striding towards them and handing it over, just glad to be getting rid of the damn thing.

“Did anyone see you?” Middle Kipling asked.

“Some FIB agents saw me flying away. They shot at me. Not sure if they would have noticed the bag but hopefully not as it’s black and so am I in my Pegasus form.”

The three of them nodded in sync with each other which was creepy as fuck but I wasn’t going to comment.

“Okay. Thank you for your work,” Kipling Senior said and the three of them turned and walked away without another word.

I sagged in relief, turning to Cindy Lou as I released a heavy breath.

“Well that was…” I shrugged because I didn’t even have words for that madness and she giggled, her eyes bright with excitement.

“So erm, what did you want to do now?” I asked.

“I think you were going to tell me all about how you escaped the FIB and risked your life for a big, bad, Dragon,” she purred, slipping closer and trailing a hand down my chest.

“Was I?” I asked, swallowing thickly as she nodded, dropping to her knees in front of me.

“Yeah. I wanna hear all *about it,” she said seductively, pulling my pants down and moving to take me in her mouth.*

I inhaled sharply, my thoughts scattering as I tried to concentrate enough to tell her what she wanted to hear. Today had been a whole other level of insane. But I was beginning to think it had definitely paid off.

I stood in the shadows of The Rigel Library, flicking through pages in Gareth's journal absentmindedly as I waited for my prey. It had been over a week since I'd been drugged, dragged out to The Iron Wood and presented to some psychopath as a possible sacrifice and I was sick of feeling like I'd lost control of this situation.

I needed to follow some new leads. And the one solid piece of information I had was that the Black Card were up to something. The creepy cult were clearly following Mr or Mrs Psycho and helping them out with their dark magic and power stealing mumbo jumbo. So it was time for me to get some answers about what exactly took place in their clandestine meetings and who the hell had funded their little fellowship.

I'd spent a lot of time observing them this week, trying to figure out their hierarchy, their movements, patterns, anything that might help me figure them out. And I was pissed to admit I hadn't really gotten anywhere.

The wind howled beyond my spot in the shadows, a late storm rolling off from earlier. I wondered if Dante's effects on the weather actually did things to the climate in Alestria. Was he creating a safe haven for storm flies and lightning wasps? Or maybe the biggest effect he had was in ruining picnics and days out with his unpredictable rain clouds. In all honesty he could be the bane of children's parties everywhere. Who wanted

a magical storm appearing just as you'd laid out the paper plates and garden games?

A prickle ran down my spine as I waited and I got the sudden sense that someone was watching me. I stilled, my eyes narrowing as I listened and looked around with the full force of my gifts. There were too many people in the library for me to be able to distinguish any heartbeats which might be out here but for a moment I was sure I caught the sound of heavy breathing coming from somewhere on the far side of the path where a thick bush stood, swaying in the breeze.

The sound cut off abruptly and my sense of unease grew stronger as I narrowed my gaze on the bushes. I could have just been paranoid but I almost felt inclined to investigate further and figure out whether or not I was imagining things.

Before I could make the decision to check it out, a small group slipped out of the library.

There was something creepy about the Black Card, like their movements were too quiet, their voices too soft. Another shiver ran down my spine at the sight of them and I wondered if I'd just been on edge to suspect there was someone watching me.

In the centre of the group I spied my target. Adrian Moss. He was a big fucker, a Manticore with fire magic who towered over me by about two feet and had a good hundred pounds of muscle on me too. Not the easiest target. But then I wasn't really one for easy.

Though they didn't exactly advertise their leaders or head weirdos or whatever term they had for those of them that were higher up in their creepy organisation, I had noticed other members of the Black Card congregating around him. When they walked in a group as they were now, he naturally led the pack.

Several of the cult girls gave him the big doe eyes that tended to be reserved for Alphas. So I'd made an educated guess that he was at least in some part more important than the others. Hopefully important enough to know the identity of the cloaked figure. I really needed a name for my main suspect. Clarence maybe? *Not scary enough.* Justine? *No, she sounded like the kind of bitch who'd totally steal your best lipgloss but probably wasn't on the level of psycho required for all out murder.* Debbie? *The head honcho of this group of weirdos was definitely putting a downer on things but it still didn't really have that serial killer ring I was looking for.* Ace. *That's the one. Like the ace of spades.* The leader of the Black Card would be a black card after all and having an ace up your sleeve was definitely a psycho move.

So, with the cloaked figure who'd tried to murder me and steal my power or my soul or whatever the fuck they were after, now known as Ace in my mind, I tucked Gareth's journal into my pocket and began to stalk my prey.

There were six members of the Black Card clustered around Adrian Moss, talking in low voices, exchanging knowing glances. But what did they know? Were they just mindless pawns or something more sinister? Were they the key to unravelling this mystery? And why the hell had my carefree, cereal obsessed, doofus of a brother ever even considered joining their creepy ass ranks?

I trailed the group as they made their way towards the Cafaeteria. It was a little late for dinner but there would still be food available and this was the kind of thing the Black Card tended to do. They avoided the general population, stayed out of the crowds, kept to the shadows. But now one of the shadows had taken an interest in them and I wasn't going to be backing off until I had some damn answers.

I cast a few glances over my shoulder as I went, reassuring myself that I hadn't picked up a tail myself and dismissing the idea that I'd had someone watching me outside the library. All of this sneaking about was making me paranoid.

Just as the group reached the entrance to the Cafaeteria, the stars shone down on me with some good luck and Adrian announced his need to use the restroom.

I smirked to myself as my prey separated himself from the group and headed along the side of the building to the toilet block which stood at the back of it.

I slipped along behind him, dancing in the line of the shadows but he never even looked back. He just strolled along, his over full bladder on his mind as he cut a path straight for the men's room.

I strained my ears as I arrived outside the door and smirked to myself as I only sensed the one heartbeat inside, now accompanied by the steady stream of urine hitting the back of the urinal.

I waited a moment until the flow stopped. Far be it from me to attack a guy while his dick was out. Besides, I didn't want that thing flapping about the place while I was beating his ass. I shuddered at the thought and waited for the reassuring sound of him zipping up his fly before stepping through the door and throwing up a silencing bubble.

Adrian came up short as he almost made it to the door just as I planted myself squarely in the frame, blocking his escape.

"Ew, you didn't even wash your hands," I commented, a sneer tugging my upper lip back.

Adrian's gaze darkened. "Get out of my way, Vampire," he said like my Order was dirty. And I had to admit I'd noticed there weren't any Vamps in the Black Card but I'd just assumed it wasn't relevant. But maybe it was.

“That’s a bit Orderist,” I commented lightly, inspecting my nails as I stayed firmly in his way. “And I’d seriously feel more comfortable about us having this conversation if you’d just wash your hands first.”

“What conversation?” he asked, making no move towards the sinks. *Gross.*

I glanced around the room, double checking the space in case this descended fast. If it was going to come down to a fight then I wanted to have the layout memorised, possible weapons located in advance.

There were four toilet cubicles to the right of the space, the green doors ajar, though I couldn’t see inside them. Fairly easy to guess what they held though. The white urinal took up half the length of the wall on my left with two sinks beside it and a long mirror above. The tiled floor held a puddle because apparently no men’s restroom was complete without one and the distinct scent of eau de man piss hung in the air. *Charming*. I probably could have picked a better location for this rendezvous but here we were.

“I want to talk to you about your little club,” I said slowly, holding my position in the doorway as he squared his shoulders before me.

“What club?” Adrian narrowed his eyes.

“Oh so is it one of those things? First rule of weirdo douchebag club: we don’t talk about weirdo douchebag club?” I raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t worry, I can keep a secret.”

“Get out of my way or I’ll make you,” Adrian growled, losing patience with my wise mouth. Which was fair enough, I needed to get to the point.

“I’m looking for some information. I won’t tell anyone where I got it if you wanna play nice?” I offered.

“About what?” He sure didn’t look like he was planning on playing nice, but I barrelled on all the same.

“Last week, I was drugged, ambushed, dragged into the woods and thrown at the mercy of some hooded asshole while a cult of weirdos all chanted dark magic bullshit for him and he tried to convince me to kill myself,” I said, matter of fact, no need to tap into the terror I’d experienced that night for this guy’s sake.

“What does that have to do with me?” Adrian asked. *What, no ‘ohmygawd that sounds awful, are you okay??’* What a dick.

“Well you happen to be a member of a cult of weirdos, do you not?”

“The Black Card had nothing to do with that,” he said flatly. No flicker of deception in his gaze, no spike in his heartbeat, no reaction at all that I could glean even with my heightened senses. Either this guy was the best liar I’d ever met or he seriously had no idea what I was talking about.

I frowned, trying to figure out how I could get more from him than that.

“Okay, so let’s say I believe that. I want you to tell me about what you get up to when you all meet up for your little parties,” I tried.

“We don’t have parties. We study old magics and practice the art of group power sharing and co-conjuring. It’s not the sort of thing someone of your Order would be any good at.”

What was with the Vamp bashing? Okay so we didn’t tend to work too well with others but was it necessary to tar us all with the same brush? What an asshat.

“What kind of magic do you do in these power orgies?” I asked.

“None of your business,” he snarled. No surprise there.

“Dark magic by any chance?”

His heart beat a little faster there but he gave me no answer. That was as good as an admission for me though.

“Fine. Tell me about your leader. The man or woman in the cloak. Who are they? How did they recruit you?” I asked, planting my hand on the

doorframe as he looked inclined to try his luck at escaping.

“I’m not telling you shit about that or anything else. The whole point of a secret society is that we keep our secrets. Besides, we’ve all sworn a magical oath to hold our tongues so no outsider can get the information from us anyway,” he said, looking smug as fuck. *Well shit.*

“I want you to get out of my way now or I’m going to have to make you,” Adrian said, his voice low and threatening.

A trickle of adrenaline skipped down my spine as flames danced between his fingers.

“I’m not done yet,” I began but apparently Adrian was because he threw a fireball straight at me before I could finish that thought.

I gasped, sucking the oxygen from the flames with my air magic and putting them out half a second before they could hit me. I launched myself at him before he had a chance to make another move, my fist colliding with his chin as I threw my gifts into the blow.

A horrible crunch sounded and my heart leapt with excitement as Adrian cried out, throwing a punch at me in return.

He caught me in the shoulder, knocking me aside with the force of the blow and taking a step towards the door like he thought he was going to leave. But my blood was pumping, adrenaline tingling through my body on the back of my magic and I wasn’t going to let him go anywhere.

I yelled as I leapt onto his back, locking my arms around his thick neck and tightening my grip as I began to choke him out.

Adrian thrashed from side to side, trying to dislodge me but I clung on like a psycho limpet, my heart thundering with the joy of the fight and a savage smile lighting my face.

Realising he couldn’t dislodge me that way and fast running out of air, Adrian ran backwards. I braced as best I could as he slammed me into the

wall above the sinks, my back colliding with the mirror which shattered on impact.

A thousand cuts slit my skin open through my white shirt, shards of glass digging into my skin agonisingly and my grip loosened as pain ricocheted up my spine.

Adrian bellowed as he reached over his shoulder and grabbed a fistful of my hair, ripping me off of his back and throwing me to the tiled floor.

I rolled across the ground, scrunching my face up in disgust as I slid through the puddle and refusing to even consider what I'd just fallen in.

I was on my feet again in a flash, a snarl of rage spilling from my lips as I ran at him.

Adrian swung at me again but with my speed I was too fast for him to land the blow. I delivered a sucker punch to his gut and he doubled over with a grunt of pain.

I grabbed his tie, yanking it tight and kicking him in the back of the knee so that he crumpled to the ground.

Adrian rolled onto his back, grabbing his tie and using a flash of fire to break it so he could breathe again.

I dove on top of him, pinning him beneath me with my hips as I started punching and punching and punching. Every grunt of pain, every crack of bone and drop of blood lit a fire in my blood, calling to the monster which dwelled beneath my skin and feeding her this feast she'd been craving.

I knew I was losing it, going too far as the rage inside me finally had an outlet. It was like a dam bursting, all the anger and loss I felt over my brother's death boiling over as I gave myself to the bloodlust of my Order form.

My fangs snapped out but I didn't bite him. He didn't deserve that, I didn't want a drop of his foul blood in my body, he just deserved my fury.

“Bitch,” Adrian spat as he managed to get a grip on me and throw me off of him.

The side of my head connected with the urinal and my vision blurred as pain swept through my skull. Disgust mixed with my rage as something wet spilled through my hair. I just hoped it was blood, but I didn’t have time to inspect my injuries.

I fell to my hands and knees, fighting off the blurred vision just as Adrian grabbed me from behind, yanking me upright against his chest.

His massive palm landed square across my face, crushing my mouth and all I could think was *you didn’t wash your hands ahhh!*

I slammed my elbow back into his gut then swung my head back as hard as I could just as he reared away from me. The back of my head collided with his nose and a sickening crunch echoed in the small space.

Adrian dropped his hold on me and I spun around, shooting behind him and kicking him in the ass with every ounce of my gifted strength.

He crashed forward, colliding with one of the toilet stall doors and falling through it to land on the floor inside.

I darted after him, grabbing a fistful of his hair as my gaze fell on the shit stained toilet in front of me.

I was probably above giving him a swirly. *Right*?

Adrian reared up with a roar of rage and punched me right in the boob. Pain shot through me quickly followed by blind rage. I snarled as I slammed his face into the wall beside us and dragged him straight towards the toilet by the back of his neck. *Okay then, I’m not above giving him a swirly. This is what you get for punching one of the girls, asshole!*

I forced his head down the toilet as he scrambled wildly against me, trying to fight the inevitable. He gripped the rim of the toilet, rearing back

with a desperate cry of “No!” which I could totally have sympathised with if he hadn’t just sucker punched me in the nipple.

I snarled, driving my knee into the centre of his back and exerting every bit of my enhanced strength on the back of his head as I plunged his face into the brown water.

I hit the flush and dropped my grip on him as he started coughing and spluttering and I backed out of the stall before any of that poo water could touch me.

“What the fuck is going on in here?”

I turned towards the door and my heart leapt in surprise as my gaze fell on Ryder Draconis.

He was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and his black tank revealed his thick biceps.

I was panting, covered in blood and grime with my shirt ripped, tie hanging off and one of my long socks bunched around my ankle but he was looking at me like I was the most stunning thing he’d ever seen.

Adrian crawled out of the toilet stall, heaving himself to his feet as filthy water ran down his face, mixing with the blood from his broken nose. He was making a noise that was something between a groan of pain and a gag. Points to him for not puking though – I would have if my head had gone down that toilet.

“Did he hurt you?” Ryder hissed, his gaze darkening as he took a step towards Adrian like he was seriously considering butchering him right here in the middle of the men’s room.

“That bitch attacked *me,*” Adrian snarled, though I didn’t miss the look of fear in his eyes or the way his heart was pounding now he had the Lunar King to deal with too.

“It was a misunderstanding,” I said innocently.

Adrian clearly didn't know anything that could help me, but I couldn't deny the fact that I'd really enjoyed beating the shit out of him. Probably way too much. But then I'd known that I was broken. Gareth's death had fucked up something inside me and I actually craved violence now. It was one of the few things I could really *feel.*

"Are you done with him?" Ryder asked me. "Or do you want me to help you finish him off?"

I laughed lightly as Adrian damn near pissed himself. "I think I'll leave murder off my bucket list for today," I said. "I'll save that for someone more deserving."

Adrian sagged with relief and Ryder cast a look his way again.

"You heard her. Fuck off," Ryder growled and I arched a brow at his commanding tone.

Adrian glanced at me as he scrambled towards the exit.

"The Black Card have you marked, Vampire," he snarled at me as he reached the door.

"And the Brotherhood know your face, asshole. One move against Elise and I'll cut you into ten myself. And I've perfected the art of making sure you won't die until I cut the last piece off," Ryder hissed.

Adrian's eyes widened with fear and he turned and sprinted away.

Ryder turned to me slowly, his sneakers crunching across broken glass as he approached me.

My chest was still heaving, blood dripping over my skin and my flesh was alive with the thrill of the fight.

The way he was looking at me lit a fire beneath my skin. I should have been embarrassed to be seen like this. I'd lost my shit, given in to the basest, most undesirable qualities of my Order. But I just felt alive. Free.

Like a true part of myself had been set loose for once and she was bathing in the blood of the fight like she'd been born to engage in.

"Look at you," Ryder said darkly, moving so close that I could smell the scent of him. Earth and iron, the darkest taste of power on the air.

He reached out and brushed his fingers through my bloodstained hair, pain spilling through my skin as he touched the wound on my head.

"I like you like this, bloody and broken and bleeding from the inside and out. There's something so pure about you like this. So real," he said as his fingers pressed against my skull more firmly, a shot of pain feeding his power a moment before his healing magic took it away again.

"Aren't you going to ask why I decided to beat the shit out of some asshole in a men's room?" I asked.

Ryder's lips twitched in the barest hint of a smile. "Do you need a reason?"

He brushed his thumb over my lips, healing a cut there before sliding his hand down to my collar. He tugged my tie free of my neck and my heart beat more firmly as he dropped it to the floor.

"I shouldn't have threatened you like I did," he said slowly, the words so quiet they were barely there at all, but something unfurled in my chest as he made the admission.

"You don't want to hurt me then?" I asked, watching his hands as he unhooked my top button.

"I didn't say that," he replied, his fingers slipping down to the next button as he loosened that too. "I desire your pain more than you could possibly understand."

My heart beat harder at the words which should have terrified me but instead I felt myself growing calmer. Because despite what I might have liked to think about myself, I could understand that desire. I had so much

pain in me that sometimes I craved a physical outlet for it. It wasn't some sordid desire to hurt and maim people, it was a deep need in me to release a little of my own agony. And I knew that Ryder felt that too. He mirrored the darkest pieces of my soul and sometimes that terrified me but in that moment, I just wanted to drown in the darkness which bound us to each other.

I was struck with the desire to pull him closer, to press my skin against his until I found a way beneath his flesh and I could set myself free in his pain. But I held myself back. I still didn't really know what to make of him. And I kept letting myself get too close to the men who might have hurt my brother. Until I knew the truth about what had happened that night I shouldn't have been letting myself feel the things I was. But sometimes, in the quiet moments like this, it felt like even the stars just wanted me to open myself up to the possibilities presented by the Kings.

Ryder finished releasing my buttons and he moved to slide the shredded, bloodied material of my school shirt off of me. His rough fingertips danced along my skin in a touch so soft I found it hard to marry to the man standing before me. I made no move to stop him, my body frozen in place as he took control of me.

He was so hard and closed off from the world, living his life between the only two emotions he laid claim to. But I could see so much more than that in him.

My ruined shirt fell to the floor and Ryder's gaze trailed over me like he was drinking in the sight of me standing before him, bloodied and bruised in my black bra and purple checked academy skirt. I felt like hell, but he looked at me like I was something precious.

He turned me slowly, brushing his fingers down my back as he removed the shards of broken mirror from my skin. The pain of each piece leaving

was followed by the caress of his healing magic which sent shivers down my spine. The mixture of pain and pleasure mixing like an elixir of some forbidden potion I craved to taste.

I stood in silence while he worked, the thrum of violence slowly fading from my veins as he healed my battered body.

When he finally finished, he turned me back towards him again.

“Your eyes are brighter,” he said, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. Every touch he made on my skin was innocent, within the rules he’d laid out with Dante and yet utterly charged with sin at the same time.

“Brighter?” I asked in confusion.

“Because you let yourself feed the part of your soul that needs this.”

“There aren’t many people who would think me getting into fights was a good thing,” I commented.

“There aren’t many people who know what it is to be like us,” he agreed. “But that shouldn’t stop you from embracing it.”

I reached out to catch his hand in mind, running my thumb over the word *pain* on his knuckles as he watched me.

“And you shouldn’t be afraid to be *more* than this too,” I replied, lifting my eyes to meet his.

Ryder’s gaze darkened but he didn’t instantly rebuke my suggestion.

“Thank you,” I added, lifting his knuckles to my mouth and placing a soft kiss against the p on his little finger.

“For what? Healing you or seeing you?” he asked, watching me as I kissed each letter in turn.

“Neither,” I replied. “Or maybe both.”

Before he came up with a response to that, I shot out of the bathroom, leaving him behind as I headed back to my dorm.

I was going to grab my wash stuff and have the world's longest shower. Because no matter how good it might have felt to beat the shit out of that Black Card asshole, I would *never* choose to have a fight in a men's restroom ever again. And I intended to scald myself in the shower for a good few hours before I would even begin to believe I might be clean.

I stepped onto the porch of my family home, the cream stone pillars stretching up either side of me. Mamma had used her earth magic to cover the walls in ivy and white flowers clung to the vines that wound up around the bay windows. The property was perched up on a hill overlooking the miles and miles of vineyards which were used to make our famous Alestrian wine.

The rest of the kingdom might have ignored our city's existence, but they couldn't ignore the fertile ground which surrounded it. And us Oscuras had laid claimed to most of it a long time ago. Our wine was sent to the capital in droves where they repackaged it and sold it as Celestial Arucso. We didn't give a shit so long as our pockets stayed fat. And hey, it was still our name, they just flipped it backwards. It made me laugh to think of all those aristocrats sipping on the fine wine that had come directly from the ganglands.

I headed inside with my pack from the academy trailing behind me and was immediately rushed by a throng of Werewolves. My brothers, sisters and cousins howled excitedly, clinging onto me while I brushed my hands over their heads and received their wet kisses with a grin on my face. Tabitha accosted me in a hug and I complimented her pale grey dress before kissing her on the cheeks.

“Mossa! Mossa!” Mamma’s voice came from beyond them and she made the floor shift to knock everyone aside.

She stretched her arms wide, her eyes glimmering as she worked hard not to let the tears fall over her immaculate makeup. My Mamma was beautiful as always, her white tea dress covered by a blue polka dot apron and her dark hair pinned up in an elegant bun. “Dolce Drago, let me get a look at you.” She rushed forward, holding me at arm’s length while she inspected me before planting a kiss on each of my cheeks. “If you put on any more muscle we’ll have to widen the doorway.”

“*Mamma*,” I groaned as she pinched my face overly hard before wrapping me in her arms.

Mamma tip-toed up, holding me close and I crushed her against my chest, her familiar scent of rosemary and lavender sending a rush of homely memories over me. Someone was bouncing in my periphery and I reached out to scruff my brother Mika on the head. He was only ten, with bright, adoring eyes and the same dark hair as me. Tabitha gave me a teasing grin over her shoulder and I poked my tongue out at her.

Mamma released me and Mika hurried forward to take her place, licking my cheek. “It’s so good to see you, Alpha.”

“Dalle stelle, Mika! Call me Dante,” I corrected, knocking him back playfully while more of my siblings assaulted me.

“No no, none of that. You’re the Alpha,” Mamma said sternly. “We must remind everyone of that at all opportunities today.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a birthday party, not a Clan meeting, Mamma. Where is the birthday boy anyway?”

“Here!” a small voice called from amongst the crowd. A pointy red birthday hat marked my kid cousin moving through the group and everyone pushed him along, making way for him.

Fabrizio was half my height with short dark hair and deepest green eyes. I knelt down, resting a hand on his shoulder – I was still taller than him though. “Possa le stelle benedirti in questo giorno.”

His cheeks coloured and he nodded. “May the stars bless you too, Alpha.”

“Dante,” I whispered.

“Non oggi, Dolce Drago! Alpha, Alpha!” Mamma reprimanded and I gave Fabrizio a mischievous look, earning me one in return.

I knocked my knuckles against his cheek, standing and finding the crowd emptying out toward the kitchen. Mamma would have prepared a huge party for little Fabrizio; she boasted she threw the best parties this side of Solaria, and I hadn’t attended a better one yet.

“Oh mighty Alpha,” a soft female voice mocked and I turned toward my favourite cousin with a smirk as the last of the wolves filed out.

Rosalie curtsied teasingly on the staircase as she walked down them, obviously late to the party and wearing just a pair of black shorts and a crop top. She paired the look with knuckle straps and a Lara Croft braid that fell down her spine. I folded my arms, giving her a mock disapproving look.

“If my mamma sees you dressed like that, she’ll make you scrub the floors until your hands bleed.”

She jumped off the last few steps, bounding toward me before wrapping her arms around me. At fourteen, Rosalie was the youngest of Felix’s children and the one he paid the least attention to. More fool him. Maybe it was because she was as strong willed as me, but I’d had a soft spot for her ever since I’d first held her in my arms.

If Felix ever paid attention, he might realise she was an Alpha in the making. Young didn’t mean weak. Felix was an idiot for thinking that. But I wasn’t about to point out my biggest rival to him. If he realised one of his

own could match me one day, he might start paying her more attention. Of course, I was still a mother fucking Dragon. But she had other strengths. Like the fact she'd been training herself in all kinds of martial arts since she was fucking two. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration. But not much of one.

"Your mamma wants me to wear a sparkly pink *thing* with bows on it." Rosalia folded her arms, stubbornness pouring from her.

"But you haven't told her you won't?" I guessed.

"Oh she'll realise when she sees Lupo wearing it."

"Rosa!" I gasped, grinning widely. "You didn't?"

"I did." she beamed, snatching my hand. "I'll show you." She towed me upstairs and I jogged to keep up as we hurried down the gleaming honeywood floors. She led me out onto the huge balcony which overlooked the eastern vineyard and Lupo barked loudly from where he was laying on an enormous red cushion. The black Great Dane leapt to his feet, Rosalie's pink dress hugging his huge frame as he padded forward to greet me.

He leapt up, resting his huge paws on my shoulders and I laughed as I plucked at the sparkly atrocity he was wearing. "It suits him better."

"Aunt Bianca will disagree," Rosalie said, a wild glint in her eye telling me she was looking forward to the moment my mamma saw this.

Lupo barked again then raced off into the house, his paws thundering along the halls as he made his way toward the staircase. We fell quiet and two minutes later my mother shrieked, "ROSALIE OSCURA! Vieni qui in questo istante!"

Rosalie fell into hysterics and I locked my arm around her neck, pulling her close to roughly scrub my knuckles on her head. "Good luck, cugina. That woman will make you pay."

The click of high heels carried from the hall and Rosalie wriggled out of my arms, darting to the edge of the balcony and climbing over it.

“She has to catch me first!” She howled to the sky then swung over the edge with the agility of a cat, disappearing beyond it.

I shook my head in amusement as my mamma appeared with a rolling pin in her hand, huffing and fuming as she hunted for Rosa.

“That girl! Where is she?”

I shrugged innocently and her eyes narrowed on me. “Dal sole! She’s as bad as you were at her age.”

“She’s still living here then?” I asked, a frown pulling at my brow.

Mamma scowled, but love flickered in her gaze. “You know your uncle’s got no interest in her. Felix should have picked a true mate a long time ago but instead he kept on spreading himself between all the women in his pack and putting pups in all of their bellies. The other children do okay with their mothers still alive, but Rosalie…” She sighed. “Well, you can see she needs extra attention. She’s acting out.”

“Maybe she’s just different,” I said and Mamma looked over me before smiling gently.

“Like my Dolce Drago,” she said with an emotional smile. She was always like this when I hadn’t been home for a while, on the verge of tears and completely overbearing. A small part of me loved it.

Her eyes widened suddenly. “Oh come, follow me. A letter came for you.” She headed into the hall and I glanced over my shoulder, spotting Rosalie racing through the vineyards like a wild animal. I smirked, hurrying after Mamma as she led me into father’s old office.

The place was exactly as it had been while he was alive. A golden globe sat under the beam of a spotlight and cast the walls in a glittering light. The

mahogany desk was worn where his papers had once been piled and his chair was still dented where he'd sat.

His scent was present too, not as strong as it had once been, but enough to pull at my heart and make me long for the firm embrace of his arms.

On the walls were gold framed pictures of all the family, nearly a hundred of them, showing me and my siblings growing up, the parties Mamma had thrown every summer, the Christmases, the New Years, the Meteor Showers. I moved to look closer at the only one of just me and him. His hand rested on my shoulder as we stood under the dying sun out on the southern balcony.

He was pointing across the land, telling me something I couldn't remember. But I remembered the pride he'd showered on me that day, the way he'd tried to guess my Order. Turned out, none of his guesses had been right. But then who would have expected a rare Storm Dragon to spring out of a family almost exclusively made up of Werewolves?

"Here." Mamma nudged me and I jolted out of my memories, taking the large white envelope from her hand. Our address was written in golden calligraphy and in the centre of it were the words, *to the Dragon of Household Oscura*. In the top right corner was the Celestial seal and I frowned as I ripped it open.

Mamma seemed anxious as I took out the single piece of thick parchment inside, finding a fancy-ass letter written on it.

Dear Mr Dante Marcello Oscura,

Your presence is requested at the Court of Celestia to meet with and be initiated by your High Lord Councillor and Dragon Master, Lionel Acrux.

All Dragons of Solaria are encouraged to attend an audience with said Master to take the vow of the Dragon Laws.

It is his highness's pleasure and upmost honour to host you in his home thereafter the formal ceremony to present you with the noble crest of the Dragons.

His highness looks forward to welcoming you into the Dragon Conclave where you will be introduced to many of your kind and will be presented with abundant opportunities for your future.

We await your response with anticipation.

Secretary for High Lord Acrux,

Amelia Starfold

I released a low whistle and felt Mamma's breath on my arm as she pressed close to me to read it. Her grip on me tightened and she prised the letter from my hand.

"The arrogance of these people," she huffed, the parchment scrunching in her grip. "Dolce Drago, it is your choice of course, but I would not see my boy summoned by anyone. High Councillor or otherwise." She raised her chin and a grin pulled at my mouth. My mother would take on the whole world if it offended her. I adored that about her.

I took the letter back, letting the electricity in my blood rise to the surface and crackle along my hand. The page caught fire and I tossed it into father's wastepaper basket where it turned into a blackened pile of ash.

"No one summons an Oscura," I agreed and Mamma smiled conspiratorially.

"Unless his *highness* wishes to come knocking right here at my door, he will have no words with my son," she said with pride in her eyes.

“And Lionel Acrux would rather die than dirty his fine shoes in this corner of Solaria,” I said in a dark tone. I gestured toward the door as music started up downstairs. “Is it time to party?”

Mamma linked her arm through mine with a grin and we headed downstairs together and out onto the veranda. The spring day was only just giving way to summer so some of the fire Elementals had set large colourful balls of flames alight around the edge of the patio.

A band made up of a few cousins were playing an upbeat tune with violins and hand drums, the music infectious as everyone started dancing around me.

A huge buffet was set up on the table and I pulled my Mamma into a dance, talking into her ear to thank her for all the effort she’d put in. She must have been baking for days to prepare this feast.

Wine was passed around and I was soon lightheaded on our own brew, pulled into dances again and again by my family.

I eventually fell into a chair beside my Great Aunt Catalina who leaned in to plant two wet kisses on my cheeks. “Bel ragazzo, how handsome you are. When will you bring a girl home to meet the family?”

I smiled at her as the gold rings on her fingers clashed against my own. For a moment I thought of mentioning Elise before realising that was crazy. We were the furthest thing from a couple you could get. Though I wished I could change that, it looked like sharing her with my friend was about the closest I would get – which would definitely not be a suitable conversation to have with old fashioned Great Aunts.

Fabrizio was being bounced on the shoulders of several of our family as they danced past us while he threw glittering confetti over them. Before it hit the floor, it whipped up into the air again, circling back to fall over the crowd on a magical breeze.

“Maybe one day, Catalina.” I patted the back of her wrinkled hand with my free one.

“Are there no pretty girls at that fancy academy you attend?” She raised a painted-on brow and I snorted a laugh.

“There’s one at least,” I admitted.

“Oh per favore, you must go on. An old woman’s heart needs a kickstart now and then.” She nudged me and the playful glint in her gaze combined with the alcohol buzzing in my blood made me give in.

“Well she’s bellissima,” I said earnestly and Aunt Catalina’s eyes sparkled with joy, looking desperate to hear more. I sighed, dipping my head. “But we can’t be together. Things are complicated.”

I thought of the deal I’d struck with Ryder and thorns wrapped around my heart. I’d made the right decision. Keeping her away from that pezzo di merda was my number one priority. Apart from anything else, she was too good for him. She may not have liked it if she found out, but I extended my protection to her like she was one of my own. It was how I treated those I cared for and she’d be no different. No matter what personal sacrifice I had to make for the sake of that.

“The stars will make it work if she is meant for you, nipote,” Catalina said with a hopeful smile.

Before I got a word out in a reply, a loud bang made me jerk around.

The band stopped playing and the crowd stopped dancing and everyone turned to stare at Uncle Felix as he stepped through the door he’d just kicked open. Blood splattered his clothes and a sack hung from his hand as he sauntered inside like a fucking cowboy back from a raid. Aunt Gia and Uncle Luigi strolled in behind him, equally splattered with blood and dirt.

“Happy birthday to y-” Mamma was singing but her words died in her throat as she stepped out of the kitchen doors at the far end of the patio, the

cake in her hands alight with six candles, three of them going out as she exhaled in shock.

"*Uncle*," I snarled, rising to my feet as some of the younger children started crying in fright. "Speak with me in the hall," I growled, my temple pulsing as I took in their horrid state. He'd known there was a party here today and yet he still had the gall to disrespect my mother like this.

I strode forward with a warning growl and Felix looked to me with a disinterested smile. "Chill out, nipote. I'm bringing good news."

"Perhaps you should take a shower first before you deliver it," I snarled, electricity rolling off of me and making the crowd shrink back.

A small hand clutched onto my trouser leg and I looked down, finding Fabrizio there, gazing up at me for reassurance.

I rested my hand on the back of his head, glaring at Felix.

"*Go*," I hissed at Felix and my siblings started growling their agreement as they backed my decision.

Felix ignored me once more, strolling through the crowd and heading to the buffet table. Mamma jerked back out of his way to keep the cake from touching his bloody clothes as he helped himself to a large glass of wine. He tipped it down his throat and I made a move toward him, but Fabrizio's hands tightened on my trousers. The kid was staring up at his Alpha for reassurance and leaving him here would be like abandoning a pup in the forest.

"I said go!" I barked at Felix.

Felix released a low laugh and his companions echoed it. "The kid's six year's old, right Fabio?"

"It's Fabrizio," he corrected, leaning out from behind me and I had to admire his courage.

“Well that makes you a man in my books,” Felix said with a shrug. “Your old uncle here got you a present. Why don’t you come and get it?” He raised the sack and Fabrizio looked at it hopefully but I caught his collar to hold him back.

“Leave it with the rest of the presents.” I nodded to the table where a large stack was piled.

“As you wish.” Felix bowed his head to me, but there was a mocking to it that made my spine prickle. He headed to the table, tipping the bag up and a dull thud sounded before he stepped aside to reveal what he’d poured out of it.

A severed head stared at me, glassy-eyed, with his tongue lolling and swollen.

“Another Lunar is dead!” Felix roared in celebration.

I was on him in seconds, my fist connecting with his jaw while Mamma screamed orders to get the children off the patio.

The acrid stench of alcohol rolled from my uncle up close and he collapsed down on the ground with one blow. I pinned him down, growling in his face as pure rage raced along my spine. I was twice his size but his slim body was all muscle and he was a trained fighter. He threw hard and well-aimed punches at my ribs and I wheezed, cracking his head down against the concrete.

A few cries of distress rang our from my family and I cursed under my breath, holding myself back as I moved to pin him in place instead.

Water fell over my head, clinging to my eyes and blinding me as Felix cast it. I pressed my weight down on him but he wriggled free and his boot slammed into my side a second later. I leapt up, blind and swiping at my eyes to try and clear the water. He released a rasping laugh and I dove forward in the direction of the sound with a spike of adrenaline.

I collided with him and we crashed down on the buffet table, sending plates and glasses flying. Felix lost concentration on his magic and the water slipped from my eyes, giving me a view of his sinewy face which was smeared with tiramisu.

I grabbed his lapels, dragging him back to his feet with a roar of fury. “You’ve ruined Mamma’s dessert!”

Felix laughed coldly, wiping a line of tiramisu from his face and sucking it from his finger. “My mamma’s was better.”

I snarled at him, grabbing hold of his arm. “Go home, Uncle. And don’t show your face here until you’re ready to apologise to my entire family.”

Felix lifted a hand to pat my shoulder and I released my grip on him. I was a fucking idiot for it because a second later his other hand came up encased in ice and smashed into my cheek. I crashed to the ground and Felix swiped a bottle of wine from the table, dropping over me and raising it above his head to attack me with.

I threw a solid punch to his gut as my pack descended, but the first to get there was Rosalie, ripping the bottle from Felix’s grip and smashing it over his head. Glass and wine crashed over me as Felix slumped forward unconscious and I shoved him off of me with a grunt of effort.

I nodded to Rosalie, rising to my feet as my family grouped around me, checking me for wounds and whimpering softly.

“Throw him somewhere to sober up,” I ordered, spotting Luigi and Gia held back by two of my brothers. They hauled them away and my eyes fell on my little cousin Fabrizio as Aunt Catalina tried to tow him inside.

He threw his head back and howled to the sky, the sound quickly echoed by everyone in my family. I dropped my head back too, following suit and the ringing note filled the air, uniting us all as one.

Breaking into Gareth’s online banking had taken longer than getting into his Atlas. I had the account information for the payments Gabriel had made to him, but I knew that wasn’t his normal account. He’d obviously opened one just to receive that money and to conceal his own identity, but it had taken me over a week to track down which bank it was with then I’d had to get into his account to trace the money.

In the end it had actually been easy. Turned out when someone died their money went to the next of kin specified in their will - AKA *me.* So once I’d figured out what bank he’d used I’d only had to head down to one of their branches with a copy of Gareth’s death certificate and some ID to take ownership of it. He’d set it up under an alias but he’d still had to provide real ID to do that so once the bank confirmed it had belonged to him, it became mine.

I sat in a side room of the branch as I looked over the statements since the account had been opened.

Every month for the last seventeen aside from those since he’d died, Gareth had received one thousand Auras from a Mr G Nox. And during most of those months that entire sum had been withdrawn in cash within a few days of it being paid in. He’d never collected it on the same day of the month twice and he’d never used the same branch to take it out either. My

brother wasn’t stupid; he’d covered his tracks well and constantly changed his routine.

The last three payments had never been taken out of the account. I was now the sole beneficiary of three thousand auras which Gareth had blackmailed from Gabriel Nox. I wasn’t really sure what to think about that so I was focusing on the months when the money had been used instead.

Each month the cash had been withdrawn. Except one. There was one month where he hadn’t taken it from the account; he’d transferred it straight to a Mrs S Nudos. Old Sal.

I frowned at the transaction. The single clue I had to where that money was going every month. He’d been paying my mom’s old employer. But why?

I headed out of the bank and started down the street. The day was warm and I enjoyed the breeze which ran through my hair as I chewed on a piece of cherry gum and tried to figure out why the hell Gareth would have been giving Old Sal so much money. But I was coming up with nothing.

It took me half an hour to walk to The Sparkling Uranus. I could have done it a lot faster with my Vampire speed but I chose not to, using the time to try and figure out this money trail but I was still coming up blank by the time I made it to the strip club.

I pushed the back door open, finding it wedged that way with a brick as always. Sal was nothing if not a creature of habit. I’d spent more evenings and weekends hanging out here than I’d like to remember and the smell of sweat, money and sex gave me the most pathetic feeling of home. Hell, I didn’t even have a home anymore. I’d given up the lease on the apartment we’d lived in my whole life when I’d sent Mom off to stay in the wellness centre. I hadn’t even bothered to pack up half of our crap. The centre had let Mom bring four cases with her which I’d filled with what she needed and

most of Gareth's stuff, not wanting to part with it. When I graduated from the academy, I'd be officially homeless. Presuming I wasn't in Darkmore Penitentiary for murder. Or dead. And as both of those possibilities were pretty damn likely, I wasn't going to worry about it.

I weaved my way through the back corridors and dressing rooms in the club, nodding to the dancers who were working the early shift and accepting their warm or pitying looks with a hard smile. I didn't want to talk to any of them about Gareth or Mom. I just needed information on this money.

I knocked on Old Sal's door and it swung open to reveal her sitting in her tall, leather chair, puffing on a cigarette as always and looking up like she didn't want any interruptions.

The irritation slipped from her gaze as she spotted me and a wide smile lit her face.

"Elise! Baby, look how much you've grown. And that hair! So exotic… you could make a fortune on the pole you know," she said wistfully.

I snorted a laugh as I dropped into the chair opposite her.

"But strippers are always smiling and I'm really not cut out for too much of that," I teased.

"We can work with sultry," she said hopefully. "You'd be a star out there. I could pay top whack."

I laughed like she was joking though I didn't think she was. But fuck that. This life had ruined our mom. Or at least it had ruined what was left of her after my dad and Gareth's had broken her heart. Nope. Stripping wasn't for me. At least not in public.

"I'm actually here about something strange I discovered since…Gareth's death," I forced out. It was hard to say it out loud. I never saw anyone who knew who I was or what I'd lost. It fucking hurt. But it was a weird kind of

relief too, especially as a hint of grief shone in her eyes. Perhaps Miss Nightshade had a point about me opening up about my grief, bottling it up wasn't good for me. But I'd made my bed so I'd lie in it.

"I'm so sorry, Elise," Sal said in a low voice, reaching across her desk to squeeze my hand. "But I don't understand what it is you think I can help you with…"

"I've just been given an inheritance and the bank statements show some strange activity…it looks like Gareth paid you a thousand auras from it once. And possibly more than that as he withdrew the same amount of cash during other months too. Why was he paying you that kind of money?"

Sal shifted uncomfortably and for a moment I wasn't sure if she was even going to tell me. When she spoke, her voice held a little regret but no falseness that I could detect.

"I presumed you knew about the arrangement I struck with him and your momma?" she asked hesitantly.

"Obviously not," I replied slowly. "But I'd appreciate your honesty in what was going on. He's gone now and I can't ask anyone else. I don't want questions hanging over me as well as everything else."

Old Sal released a slow breath and nodded. "Very well. Around eighteen months ago, your momma got into some gambling debts with me. You know how she suffered with that addiction?"

I nodded. *I also know how you never once tried to stop her from placing a bet and indebting herself to you, knowing you'd always own her so long as she owed you.*

"Well she'd accrued a very large sum. Seventeen thousand auras to be precise-"

"What?" I gasped. How the hell could she have done something so stupid?

Sal nodded sadly. “She was desperate, unable to keep up with the payments and knowing that her performances in the club weren’t as popular as they’d once been… But I’m not a charity, Elise. I’ve always done good by her and you kids, but there was no way I could just forget about a debt that size. So she suggested a deal to pay her debt off. A deal I assumed you knew all about?”

I frowned, having no idea what she was talking about. “What deal?”

“She offered you up as a new dancer,” Sal explained and a weight filled with lead and poison dropped into the pit of my gut.

“What?” I gasped.

“I told her you were too young but she insisted, said you wanted to help and that you’d always dreamed of dancing for me. She said you could dance on the stage until you turned eighteen and then start on the lap dances once you’d built your confidence…” Sal looked uncomfortable as she realised I had no idea about any of this and I could only stare at her in horror. My own mom had tried to buy herself out of debt with my body? She knew that this place was more than just a strip club, the patrons here paid for whatever they wanted from the dancers. And though I’d never judged Mom for what she’d had to do to survive she’d known I never wanted this life. I thought she wanted to keep me away from it too. I’d never once suspected that she’d planned to sell me into it to save her own ass.

I could only stare at Sal, dumbfounded as the last of my faith in the only family member I had left came crashing down around me. Was this really true? Would she have really done that to me?

“Gareth overheard us discussing the contract I was going to offer you. He said you wouldn’t want that life and offered to take on your momma’s debt instead. We struck a deal. He even offered to pay interest.”

“So he started paying you a thousand auras a month?” I asked, trying to cling to the facts while pain sliced deep into my gut.

“Two thousand. I’m not entirely sure where he was getting it…he said he was working for some of the rich kids at that fancy academy of his but I’m afraid I never got any more of the details…” Sal’s voice was trembling a little and I knew it was in reaction to the grief pouring from me. As a Siren, she could feel it and this pain was sharp enough to cut me to ribbons so it couldn’t have been a walk in the park for her.

“Okay. Thanks.” I got to my feet before I could fall apart and shot out of the club using my Vampire speed.

I kept going until I was several miles away from Old Sal and the club and anything and everything to do with my old life.

I leaned against the cold brick wall of the final building I had to visit today and fought as hard as I could against the agony rocketing through my blood.

I couldn’t face it now. I couldn’t deal with any of this now. There was something I’d been putting off and I needed it over with. And once it was, I’d never come back to this part of Alestria again. I was done. It was over. I didn’t want to walk the streets I’d promised to escape with Gareth or remember the life we’d always wanted to leave behind. The only good thing I’d ever had here was gone forever now. It was time for me to leave it behind.

I headed into the Fae Investigation Bureau precinct at a fast pace.

The officer behind the seat looked up at me as I approached.

“Are you here to report a crime or confess to one?” she asked.

“Neither. I’m here to collect my brother’s belongings. His name was Gareth Tempa.”

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By the time I got back to campus it was dark and my soul felt hollow. I didn't want to face anyone and I wasn't sure I could even bring myself to return to my dorm at all tonight. I needed to be alone. Somewhere I could fall apart and no one would ask me any questions about it.

Dante had told me he was going back home to see his Mom and siblings today, no doubt working on some gang nonsense too. But that left me with somewhere to go. Somewhere I could be free and alone for a while.

I paused as I made it to the jetty outside the huge boathouse, listening to the sound of the water lapping against the shore for a moment, savouring the peace before I made the phone call I'd been dreading.

It was nearly nine, but they'd answer. There was always someone on the desk.

It took six rings before I got a response.

"White Haven Retreat, Linda speaking, how can I help?"

"Hi Linda, it's Elise Callisto," I said, holding back the emotion that was brimming to the surface in me. "Is my mom, Tanya Callisto, up for talking to me yet?"

The line was quiet for a long moment before she replied. "I'm afraid not, Elise. Tanya has made it clear she doesn't want to take any calls."

Something shattered deep within me. I had one family member left in this world. One person who knew the pain that was tearing me apart just as keenly as I did. And she didn't even care about me enough to talk to me when I needed her. When I needed to hear whether or not she'd been making a deal with Old Sal to sell me for her debts. I needed to know if I had anyone left in this world who loved me at all or if I truly was as alone as I felt.

“Right,” I said, steeling myself against the tears which were trying to surface. “Well perhaps you could ask her a question for me and tell me the answer?”

Another long pause. “Okay, sweety,” Linda replied. “I’ll ask. What is it you need to know?” The sound of her footsteps came as she headed down the corridor to my mom’s suite.

“I want to know… Ask her if she was making a deal with Old Sal to pay off her gambling debts. Ask her if she was arranging for me to work at the club.” My heart was pounding and my teeth dug into my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Okay. Gimme a sec.”

Piano music assaulted me as I was put on hold and I released a shaky breath as I looked up at the stars.

Tears were burning the backs of my eyes but they wouldn’t fall. Not yet. Not until I had no more reason to hold them back.

“Elise?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, waiting for the response like my whole world hung on the answer.

“She said she had to. And that if you’d just done it maybe everything would be different. I’m not sure what she meant by that-”

I hung up as the world carved in two. I’d always known my mom wasn’t the best mother in the world, but I’d always thought she loved me. I’d never realised that was missing as well. But perhaps I’d always just let Gareth blind me to her with his excuses and reasoning and all the love he gave me made up the difference anyway. I didn’t know. And it didn’t even matter. All I knew now was that I truly was alone.

The night air was cold, my thin shirt was making me shiver despite the fact that I was numb.

I walked towards the door without seeing it. My fingers curling around the fat evidence bag stuffed with Gareth's clothes and belongings as I hugged it to my chest, the only piece of him I had left.

I didn't cry. I wasn't even sure I had any tears left anymore. Or maybe they just weren't enough to express the emptiness in me now. Even my rage was absent. I just felt…nothing.

The boathouse was cold and dark as I headed inside and I chewed on my lip as I made my way towards the upper level where I'd sat when I came here before.

I started walking across the wooden floor then pulled up short as I spotted Dante sitting in one of the rowing boats, leaning back against the side of it as it bobbed up and down in the water at the centre of the huge space. The lapping waves and wind outside had hidden his heartbeat from me and my own heart skittered with panic as I spotted him, wondering if he'd heard anything of the phone call I'd just made. What had I said? Anything damning? Anything about Gareth?

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, falling still.

"Aren't you pleased to see me, bella?" he asked, arching a brow at me as he placed his hands behind his head. "You're the one coming to my spot after all."

"It's not that," I replied, shifting the thick black evidence bag in my hands. I hadn't opened it yet. I didn't want to go through Gareth's things at the FIB offices and I wasn't sure I could cope with doing it today anyway. But I had ripped off the label with his name which had been stamped to the front of it. I'd thrown that in the trash in the precinct before I'd even left.

Dante's eyes dropped to the bag and he pushed himself upright. "Who?" he asked, his tone gentle as he clearly recognised what I was holding. "I've

received a lot of those bags myself. Too many people die young in the Clan," he explained.

I opened my mouth then closed it again. I didn't want to lie to him, but I couldn't tell him the truth either.

"The worst was when I had to collect my father's," he continued like I'd asked. "My mother…well she took a long time to come to terms with what had happened to him. He was her Elysian Mate, her pack leader, the father of their ten children, the centre of her world. Un vero amore. So I went in her place to collect that bag."

Dante reached for me and I moved forward to take his hand, letting him pull me closer. I stepped into the rowing boat and it bobbed beneath my weight.

The base of it was empty but Dante had filled it with thick blankets and I moved down into them, curling against him as he pulled me close. I pushed the envelope filled with Gareth's things behind my back and rested my head on Dante's chest.

"Can I show you something, Elise?" he asked after a moment.

"Okay," I breathed because the pain in me was still holding me captive and I wanted him to drive it out.

He lifted the arm that wasn't holding me and directed a gust of air magic towards the head of the boat so that we started drifting away towards the opening which led out to the lake. We slipped out through the curtain of weeping willow fronds which covered the exit and they brushed over us lazily as we went.

I shivered as the cool air found me again and Dante pulled one of the blankets over us, creating a little cocoon just for the two of us as we drifted out into the centre of the lake.

My breathing was growing steadier the longer he held me and I closed my eyes as I concentrated on the steady thump of his heart beneath my ear.

“I’ve lost more people than I can count and my heart holds so many scars that sometimes I wonder how it manages to beat at all,” Dante breathed. “A morte e ritorno. But there is no coming back from death really.”

“Do you think they’re waiting for us beyond the veil?” I asked, that eternal question always haunting me. Was Gareth still out there somewhere, in some way? Or was he just gone? The best person I’d even know lost forever to a cruel twist of fate.

“Aspetterei per sempre quelli che amavo.”

A shiver ran down my spine at his words even though I didn’t understand them.

“I would wait forever for those I loved,” he supplied softly. “Open your eyes.”

I did as he’d commanded and turned my head to find the heavens looking down at us. The sky was alight with a blanket of a thousand stars and they all watched us from their perches out of reach.

The ache in my chest eased as I looked up at them and I found myself wanting to tell him about Gareth. I needed to speak about him, acknowledge him in my new reality even though I wouldn’t be able to tell him everything.

“My brother died,” I breathed slowly. “And I’m starting to think it was because of me.”

Dante’s grip tightened on me but he didn’t say anything, no contradictions or trite declarations of sympathy, nothing to belittle the emotions that were warring through me. He just held me beneath the stars and let me tell him what I wanted to and withhold what I needed to as well.

“And I just found out that my mom…that she…offered to sell me to pay her debts.” I didn’t know why I was telling him this but I just had to tell someone, I needed to say it out loud if I wanted any chance of accepting it myself.

A deep growl resounded through Dante’s chest and he shifted, rolling onto his side so that he could look down at me with the stars shining brightly behind him.

“Hai la forza di tutte le stelle e lo spirito di un guerriero, amore mio. Non hai bisogno di nessuno. Neanche tua madre. Ma tu hai me,” he looked deep into my eyes and the need to be closer to him reared up in me with a fierce desperation as the passion of his words fell over me.

I couldn’t kiss him with the new rules that he and Ryder had placed on us, but I could show him how I felt in another way.

I reached up to touch his cheek, peeling back the barrier which contained my magic as I urged my power to merge with his.

Dante dropped his own walls instantly and the pure, electric heat of his power washed through my body in a flood of euphoria. I gasped, my back arching as it raced to fill every corner of my body and Dante groaned as he leaned down to touch his forehead to mine.

I wasn’t sure how long we stayed pressed together with our magic flowing between us but when Dante lay down beside me again and our powers slowly withdrew, I found the raw edges of my heart hurt a little less.

“Can we stay here tonight?” I whispered. It wasn’t his bunk so we weren’t breaking any stupid rules if we did.

“Sto cadendo sotto il tuo incantesimo, Elise. We can do whatever you like.”

I smiled as he drew me closer again and let my gaze drift over the stars as I stole strength from the comfort of his arms. It didn’t fix any of the

things I’d lost. But at least for now, I felt a little less alone.

I gazed down into the water inside the obsidian scrying bowl in Arcane Arts. The classroom was perhaps the most enchanting one on campus. A tunnel beyond The Capella Observatory led all the way deep under the lake. Up a silver staircase, you arrived in the Arcane Sphere. A perfectly circular bubble of glass at the base of Tempest Lake.

The water was dark and deepest blue and the lakebed was thick with tall weeds reaching up toward the surface nearly half a mile above us. Barely any sunlight penetrated the glass walls, its entire design meant to amplify the celestial signals which carried through the atmosphere, making it easier to capture predictions. Every Fae in Solaria was able to learn to make simple forecasts through objects like crystals and scrying bowls, but for someone like me with the gift of The Sight this place was bliss. Though my visions were never any easier to wrangle, they were always clearer here. And Professor Mystice let me use it sometimes for extra study.

Everyone sat on square pillows before our bowls while Mystice lit sage and hummed to himself. His hair was a short afro and his shirt was off, revealing his dark chest and the bunches of charms he wore around his neck. His hands were covered in silver rings and he had a hoop in his left ear. His dark green trousers hung low on his hips and his feet were bare beneath them.

“Today we’ll be practising the art of scrying,” he said in his deep, melodic tone. He waved a hand and lit the candles in the jars sitting beside each scrying bowl with his fire magic before switching off the lights.

I turned my head, stealing a look at Elise a few rows behind me in the dark. The flames flickered in her eyes as she stared down thoughtfully into her bowl. Ryder sat behind her, his hand resting over his candle jar so the flames licked his skin, his eyes firmly on Elise’s back.

Looking at her made me think of my morning horoscope. I had to read them because I knew they gave me clues into the day’s events, but lately they were become repetitive. Torturous.

Good morning Scorpio.
The stars have spoken about your day!
The stars are aligned and waiting, all you need to do is let go of the binds that tie you. But with a great burden weighing on you, this may be a challenging task. With the planets constantly shifting and the complications surrounding you, the time may never seem right. And depending on which way the wind blows, it may never be.

Thanks stars, just another little chip off my soul. Why can’t you ever just be straight with me? Give me a fucking solution.

I turned away from Elise, focusing on Mystice as he turned on some soft meditation music to help us concentrate and I shut my eyes to try and block out any distractions. The Libra tattoo on my chest was itching and I pressed my lips together as I attempted to ignore it.

“We’ll try to see into the future, to glimpse any event that might occur before the week is out,” Mystice explained. “If I tap you on the shoulder you are to stand and swap with the other person who has been tapped. As

usual, keep your eyes closed and concentrate on the celestial signals flowing into the chamber of your mind. Only open them if you feel a tap."

I fell into the meditative state as Mystice rearranged the class in his usual way, using the stars to feel out who would best be suited to work together for this lesson. I focused on my breathing and the way my chest slowly rose and fell and definitely not on the tattoo that was driving me to fucking insanity with its incessant itching.

Movement sounded around me and I sensed the person beside me getting up. A tug in my gut and the scent of cherries preceded her arrival. I knew it like the stars knew it. Eyes closed or not. Elise and I had just been paired and the barely concealed sigh she released told me exactly what she thought of that.

Give me a break, stars. I told you, I am not bowing to your fucking will this time.

After another few minutes, Mystice directed everyone to open their eyes and I kept my expression neutral as I opened mine, glancing at Elise before turning to face the teacher again. Her expression was taut and I didn't know how we were going to get through an hour together.

"Please turn to page fourteen in your textbooks and complete the exercise in your pairs. Remember to keep your voices to a whisper so as not to disturb the atmosphere. It is crucial that you get into a detached state so that you might reattach to the celestial world."

I read through the exercise and saw Elise doing the same in the corner of my eye. Mystice drifted past us, turning in a graceful circle as he waved burning sage above our heads.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked, trying to break the ice, though her stiff posture said that was pretty pointless.

“Yeah, actually…” She leaned toward her bowl, her lips parting. “I can see something.”

“What?” I asked curiously, moving closer to gaze into her bowl and our reflection stared glassily back at us.

“It’s hard to tell but I think it’s a big…winged…dipshit, leaning over my shoulder.” She elbowed me back and I growled in irritation, turning away from her to focus on my own bowl.

“I see something too. It’s a stubborn girl who thinks she’s funny.”

“I am funny,” she said simply. “Hilarious actually.”

“I’m sure all of your friends would agree – oh but you don’t have any of those, do you?” I could tell I’d hit a nerve from her expression and a sick kind of satisfaction filled me at knowing I was getting under her skin. If I still affected her that meant she still felt something toward me. Which was the last thing I should have wanted, but I couldn’t just cut out the part of me that knew she was my Elysian mate. Even if I managed to resist her for the rest of my life, I might always pine for her.

“Well the difference between me and you, Gabriel, is I could have friends if I wanted to. I just choose not to,” she said, her pissy mask firmly back in place.

“I don’t happen to want any either,” I said with a shrug.

“Good so just-”

“Miss Callisto, Mr Nox, please concentrate,” Professor Mystice whispered as he swept toward us like a wraith. “I don’t see any scrying and I can sense a lot of negative energy coming from you both. Work together or I’ll have to dock rank points.”

Elise sighed and I fought hard not to do the same as Mystice drifted away.

“Let’s just get this over with. As soon as I walk out of this room, I’m going back to ignoring you,” she said and I nodded firmly, rejecting the tightness in my chest at her words.

We’re never going to be together.

Even though I knew that, it was somehow more painful in that moment than it had been before.

Fuck, why is this so hard?

“So it looks like we just have to stare at the water and focus,” Elise went on when I said nothing. “Sounds easy enough.”

I tsked, shaking my head.

“What? Is that wrong?” she asked, a trace of annoyance to her tone.

I still didn’t turn to look at her, dipping a finger into my bowl and stirring it once, removing it as I watched the ripples. I breathed in deeply, my eyes beginning to unfocus as the ripples settled and the dark surface gazed back at me. A pop sounded in my ear and I jolted out of my concentration, turning to find Elise peering over my shoulder chewing gum.

I sighed in defeat. “Sit back down, I’ll show you.”

She quirked a smile at me but I didn’t return it as she sat cross legged on her cushion and her skirt lifted enough to give me a view up it and anyone else who cared to look. I caught the hem, pushing it down between her thighs on instinct and her lips parted as I quickly extracted my hand.

“Touch me again and I’ll bite you.” She bared her fangs and something about that made my cock twitch happily.

For fuck’s sake.

I cleared my throat, gazing down at her bowl and stirring my finger through it in a circle. “The ripples help you focus,” I said quietly. “Watch them spread out to the edges and count down from ten. Once they’re gone, you should be ready to receive a vision if the stars are feeling generous. If

you get nothing, then picture the next few days in your mind but only bits and pieces. Feed the stars your routine, rising from bed, eating breakfast, brushing your teeth and they should give you a glimpse of something more specific that could happen."

"Could?" she breathed and the heat of her breath washed over my cheek.

I leaned away, gazing down at the surface of my bowl. "Visions are never definitive."

"Right," she huffed then fell quiet as she tried what I'd told her.

I let my eyes become hooded as I stared down at the water, the atmosphere pressing in around me expectantly. With my gifts, all types of forecasting came easier to me than most. But I never received the full visions Mystice had told me he often experienced. I had a meeting with him after class today to discuss it in more detail. He had some theories which interested me, the main one being that someone powerful had cast a magical block on my gifts to keep The Sight from fully revealing itself to me. He'd only mentioned it in passing. I couldn't tell him that my past was shrouded in mystery. That it was entirely possible that someone had done something like that to me. But today I planned on asking him if there was any way to break a spell like that.

"Oh – *Gabriel*." Elise elbowed me and I turned to her with a frown, but my expression cracked when I saw the excitement in her eyes. "I saw something."

"What did you see?" I asked, the itching in my chest settling down as I leaned in close to share whispers with her.

"It was like…like I was flying above the Acrux Courtyard." She shook her head in amazement and confusion and my mouth hooked up at the corner, her surprise having melted away her anger. Her gaze dropped to my lips as her smile fell and her throat bobbed.

“Well don’t go flying without me,” I said, cursing myself for the words the second they left my mouth.

What a fucking douchey thing to say.

She lifted a brow. “I have strict orders to stay away from you, so we can’t go flying.”

“Yeah and you’ve taken it pretty literally. Glad you’re moving on with your Dragon-Lion threeway by the way,” I said, unable to hide the bitterness in my voice.

She said nothing and I returned to gazing at the water, knowing I was never going to see a vision with the furious emotions churning through me.

A loud snore sounded somewhere across the room and I spotted Leon on his back, using his cushion as a pillow, his hand draped over his eyes. Mystice kicked him as he walked by and he jerked upright, spilling his scrying bowl everywhere while his work partner gasped in shock.

“Real catch,” I muttered under my breath and Elise prodded me in the ribs to make me look at her. Her face was illuminated by the candlelight and I sank into the flames in her eyes.

“You can’t have me but you don’t want anyone else to, right?” She rolled her eyes and I leaned toward her again in the dark so my mouth was against her ear and my heart was thrumming in my chest as her delicious scent washed over me.

“I want you every minute of every day, what do you expect me to do? Seeing you with other men is torture.” I pulled away but she caught my tie and yanked me back toward her, tightening it enough to choke me. I low growl escaped me, but she didn’t seem to care.

Her mouth moved to *my* ear this time as she delivered her reply. “You deserve a little torture after the way you’ve treated me.” Her fangs grazed my ear and for a second I thought she was actually going to try her luck at

biting me. Another growl emanated from my chest to warn her off, but part of me wanted to drag her closer.

Her breath fluttered across my neck and I turned my head to knock her mouth away from my veins. “No one drinks from me.”

“You might like it,” she purred and the almost playful tone to her voice made me wish things could stay like this. No matter how hard I fought it, she was becoming precious to me and with her this close, it was hard to keep up my walls.

“Go ahead and try,” I taunted, tilting my head to bare my throat. Mystice’s back was to us and her eyes glittered at the challenge.

She lunged forward with her Vampire speed, but I’d already tethered the back of her blazer to the floor with a vine. She jerked backwards and I smirked as she severed the bind with a wave of her hand.

“Dammit,” she hissed.

“Sucks for you,” I said with a victory grin. “I hear I taste angelic.”

“Who says?” she blurted then scowled as she gave away her jealousy over the idea of someone else biting me.

I didn’t reply, turning back to face my bowl, feeling her eyes tracing me like I was a hunk of raw meat.

“Oh well, I’ve got a Storm Dragon and a Basilisk on tap. AKA electric ecstasy and fuck-hot milkshake. You couldn’t taste better than them.”

I tried not to hate her for saying that. But I did. I hated that she bit them, I hated that their hands roamed her body while her mouth was on their necks. I hated that they shared something with her and that I’d never share anything with her again.

The rest of the lesson was spent speaking as little as possible and by the time we were packing up, I was feeling weak. Too long in her company gave the stars time to chip away at my willpower and I was already back to

wanting to steal her away to the rooftop for another night in my arms. But as she walked away without even a goodbye, I knew what my fortune was tonight without having to scry.

I'd be alone. Like always. Like I had to be.

The class filed out of the room and my eyes lingered on Elise as she fell in to step with Leon, sharing some joke as they walked out of the door. I held back, wanting to speak with Mystice and trying not to feel the ache that was invading my body over her and the Lion.

I helped gather up the scrying bowls as the last of the students emptied out, heading up to pour the water into the large basin at the side of the room.

"Your aura is heavy, Gabriel," Mystice broke the silence as he appeared beside me with another pile of bowls.

I nodded, my brows pinching as I looked to him. "Things have been… difficult recently." There was no point in lying to him. Mystice was a master of the Arcane Arts, he could read my mood and even pick up signals about what was causing it if he wanted to.

"I've been thinking about what you said the other day. You mentioned there could be a block on my powers…"

"That's not what's causing this weight on you though," he mused.

"No, but it is important. How can I break something like that?" I asked, desperation lacing my tone. If I could get a grasp on my gifts, I could make better decisions. I wouldn't have to hurt Elise like this if I knew which path to take.

Mystice surveyed me thoughtfully. "It would need to either be broken by the Fae who placed it on you, or…"

"Or?" I pressed, hunting his eyes for the answer before he gave it.

He dropped his gaze. “It’s possible you could break it on your own. You’re powerful, Gabriel. If you keep pushing into the visions and grasping onto the celestial signals-”

“It never feels any easier,” I sighed. “I don’t think that’s the way.”

“Keep trying at least. Important visions will be more vivid, you should find it easier to see them when you have an emotional need for them.” I thought over that as he started stacking the empty bowls together. The night Elise had been taken into the woods, I had found The Sight more accessible to me than usual. That gave me some hope at least that I might receive visions in future that could protect her.

Mystice glanced at me from the corner of his eye as if he expected me to say something else. “Are you going to tell me what’s really eating you?”

I combed my fingers through my hair, staring up at the swirling depths of the lake above. “I found my Elysian Mate.”

Mystice inhaled deeply in surprise. “How wonderful.”

“No,” I bit out with a sharp glare. “It’s not.”

“Oh. And why not?”

I released a breath of frustration. “It’s complicated. I can’t be with her. Please…tell me there’s a way to break the bond. I’m trying to keep away from her but sometimes it just feels so impossible.”

Mystice’s eyes flashed with concern. “By the stars, Gabriel, why would you want to do such a thing? You must be causing yourself immeasurable pain.”

I shrugged in response because what did it matter how uncomfortable this was for me? It was her I was protecting and I couldn’t explain that to Mystice. “It’s the way it is. You must know something that can help?” I was half a second from clutching onto him and shaking an answer out of him, but he gave one before I lost my mind.

“You can’t,” he said simply and those two words stopped air from flowing into my lungs. He placed a hand on my shoulder as I started retreating into a dark and hopeless place inside myself, forcing me to look him in the eyes. “If you go on like this, you will end up in a much worse situation than you can even imagine. The stars will draw you together and make you answer to the question of fate. When that happens and you make a choice not to be together, you’ll be star-crossed,” he breathed the term like it was a death sentence. “If you think you’re miserable now, you’re wrong. Being star-crossed would break both of your hearts. You could never be together, the stars would drag you apart if you ever tried to change your minds, but they’ll make you long for each other forever. They would never let either of you love anyone else.” His grip tightened. “You might be willing to shoulder that fate, but would you really place it on the girl you’re bonded to?”

My throat thickened and horror spread through me as I considered that. I hadn’t even thought about what might happen to Elise if I made that choice. If I kept forcing her away and we became star-crossed, her life would be ruined.

But what was the alternative? Give in to this feeling? Be with her?

I shook my head at the thought of it.

“Gabriel,” Mystice said gently, patting my arm. “Whatever reasons are holding you back, I think it’s time you considered the reasons to dive in. You deserve happiness just as much as any Fae and so does your mate. The stars have chosen her for you and that’s a good fortune. You’re reacting as though they’ve handed you a plague.”

“I just can’t let her get hurt,” I breathed, knowing I couldn’t explain it any more than that.

“Whatever it is you’re afraid of happening, you’re the only one who can protect her from it. You’re her mate Gabriel. Suited to her in every way imaginable. And the stars are on your side. You’re made to stand the test of time, no matter what trials may come your way.”

My pulse thumped unevenly in my chest. Then slowly, like a curtain being drawn back to let the sun in, hope bloomed inside me. It chased away the fear, the pain that had been drowning me as I let myself buy into his words.

Perhaps I’d been wrong. Maybe we *could* be together. Maybe Mystice was right...

“Thank you,” I said. “I have a lot to think about.”

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I was perched in the crook of a tree up on Devil’s Hill at lunchtime with an Astrology book resting against my knee, not reading any of the words as Elise consumed my mind.

I’d made a decision, one which made me happier than I’d ever been. One that shook the foundations of my soul and sent light pouring through my body.

I’d fucked our relationship up so much already, I knew I couldn’t go swooping in on her, asking her to be mine without a grand gesture. I needed her to forgive me, I’d beg for it, I’d wait and wait until she finally let her walls down. But first, I’d give her what she needed from me the most. An explanation. Everything I knew of my past and everything I didn’t. I’d lay it all out for her, bare my heart and get down on my knees if that was what it took.

I had hope again. A feeling that had alluded me for so many years.

I’m not going to be alone anymore.

I let a flower grow in my palm, willing it into existence with my earth magic. Its petals were softest lilac and glittered like stardust. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

My eyes slipped to her out on Devil’s Hill sitting with Laini, the two of them soaking up the sun’s rays. I moved to get up, planning to go over there and hand the flower to her with my first apology when my Atlas pinged.

Bill:

I’ve got some stuff I need you to look over. Place and time?

I had forty minutes left before I had to head to Combat Class, but if Bill had information for me, I needed to have it. I frowned over at Elise, figuring my apology could wait a little longer as I slipped the flower into my pocket. It was a shitty, cliché gesture anyway. I could do better.

I tapped out a reply.

Gabriel:

I can come to you now. Where are you?

Bill:

Can it wait? I’m kind of in the middle of something, kid.

Gabriel:

No. Where??

I waited, drumming my fingers on my book until Bill finally messaged back.

Bill:

3 Zodiac Street, East Quarter. Don't rush.

I tucked my Atlas into my pocket, pulled my blazer off and stuffed it into my bag with the book. I balanced on the tree branch as I wedged the bag in a hollow of the trunk then pulled off my shirt and tucked it into the back of my pants. I gave Elise a lingering look, hating that I had to wait longer, but it would be worth it. *She* would be worth it.

"Ohmagodd, look! Gabriel Nox is stripping in that tree!"

I looked down to find a group of freshmen girls all gawping up at me.

I ignored them, releasing my wings from my shoulder blades to a round of applause then dropped from the branch, swooping over their heads before climbing back toward the sky.

I journeyed to the eastern quarter, locating Zodiac Street which was ironically one of the shittiest places in Oscura Territory considering it was named after the area of the sky which ruled our entire lives.

I came to land on the sidewalk, startling a cat washing its ass in a patch of sun so it darted off into an alley with a hiss. I frowned, hurrying up the road, wondering why in Solaria animals were cursed to wash themselves with the same part of their body they tasted food with. It was fucking tragic.

I located number three and bashed my fist against the brown door while a grubby man stumbled down the road in my direction.

"Gettin' out my dongalongalong," he sang and I bashed my fist against the door harder. I hadn't exactly grown up in a palace, but this street was the lowest of the low.

He pulled up short beside me and I gathered magic into my palms, figuring I might have to knock him on his ass, but I never liked drawing

attention to myself. He was just some junkie on Killblaze though, I doubted he'd remember anyway.

"Hey, dude," he said and I turned, finding him talking to the ass-licking cat who was now perched on a wall.

I turned back to the door.

Come the fuck on, Bill.

"What Order are you?" the guy asked the cat.

"It's a cat, man," I said, unable to help myself.

"A cat man? Woahhh." He stumbled back a step, pulling out a shitty phone and moving in to take a selfie with the cat. It started growling and the second he looped his arm around it, the thing scratched one whole side of his face. The guy started laughing manically and I gave him a terse smile as I took out my Atlas to ring Bill.

The door wrenched open and the scent of sweat and smoke crashed into me. *Better than the unwashed sock smell lingering out here though.*

"Finally." I shoved my past him into what I guessed must have been one of his safe houses. I'd never been here before; our business was always conducted in various bars around the city. I wondered why he'd asked me to come.

I turned to him in the ashy hallway with ancient carpet, taking in his wife-beater and jeans. "What the fuck were you doing? Do you realise I just watched a junkie take a selfie with a pissed off cat?"

"Oh that's just Kyle." Bill waved a hand as if the guy often did shit like that and I shook my head.

"You didn't answer my question," I said as Bill slipped past me, leading me into a small kitchen. A woman in a tiny leather dress was pulling on knee-high boots over fishnet tights, rising to her feet from a chair beside a table.

She smiled at Bill then her eyes slid to me and widened. “I do hope you’re here to pay for a round too, you sexy winged thing.” She moved forward, running a finger up my bare chest.

“No thanks.” I stepped back, looking to Bill, suddenly realising why he hadn’t wanted me to come over.

“See ya, Billy boy.” She leaned in to kiss him and he gripped her ass then slapped it as she walked away.

“Bye Ginger,” he said with a smirk as she sauntered out of the room and the front door clicked shut a second later.

“Why did you text me if you had company?” I asked in confusion.

“’Cause I took a smoke break from Ginger and figured I’d let you know I’d gathered some intel. I didn’t expect you to come flying over here like fucking Superman now, did I?”

I snorted a laugh. “So what have you got to show me?” I asked, leaning back against the kitchen counter, wanting to move swiftly on from the image of Bill screwing that hooker.

Bill took a box of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one up. “Well,” he said on an inhale of smoke. “I’ve got a few potential suspects I need you to rule out. If one of this lot don’t have Gareth’s phone then I’ll start looking through the students in your class.” He headed to a grubby-looking wall beside the fridge and ran his palm across it, dissolving a concealment spell and revealing an iron safe beyond it. “Top of the range this is, kid. It takes a sample of your magic so only I can get in. Watch.” He placed his finger in a little hole and a red glow emitted from it then a click sounded it unlocking. He took out a file, walking to the table and sitting down.

I moved toward him as he held out a small stack of photographs. I took them, eyeing the pretty older woman in the first photo with dark blonde

hair. Despite her fine makeup, her expression was hollow like the light had long since gone out behind her eyes.

“That’s Gareth’s mom – totally my type by the way,” Bill said with a smirk. “You ever seen her before?”

I shook my head, thumbing onto the next photo and my heart turned to a solid lump of ice.

“That’s Gareth’s sister,” Bill supplied and I nodded mutely.

Gareth stood beside a girl with long blonde hair almost down to her ass. They were in a park in front of a tree with golden leaves. Apart from her hair and the carefree smile on her face, I’d know her fucking anywhere.

She was branded on my body. She was sharing a room with me at school. She was my goddamn Elysian Mate. Gareth’s fucking *sister*.

She had his phone.

The messages.

The death threats.

“Holy fucking shit!” I cried then sprinted from the room, flung the front door open and took off into the sky.

The sun was shining down on Devil's Hill and Leon lay with his hands behind his head, eyes closed, shirt off, bronze skin gleaming. The bell had already rung for our next class and everyone else was leaving but Leon seemed to have zero intention of following them any time soon. I approached him with a smile and kept walking until I cast a shadow over him.

"For fuck's sake, Mindy," Leon grumbled without opening his eyes. "I've told you, approach with the sun in your eyes so you don't block it."

I rolled my eyes at him, pitying his poor Mindys even though they seemed happy enough with their Lion King being an ass.

"Did you get my strawberries?" he asked, his mouth falling open as he waited for the missing Mindy to place one in his mouth.

I walked around him so I no longer cast a shadow over him and dropped to my knees beside him, leaning close so that my lips were almost touching his throat.

"Actually, I think I'm the one whose about to have a snack," I teased as my fangs snapped out.

My lips grazed his throat and his eyes shot open as he grabbed me, propelling me over him so that I was straddling his waist. I sat back with a

laugh, looking down at him with a smirk as his golden eyes brightened. He caught both of my wrists in his hands and pinned them behind me.

“Bad little monster,” he scolded teasingly. “I’ve told you, no biting until the main course.”

I shifted on his lap as I tipped my head to the side, considering him. “You know, I’m the one at an advantage here,” I purred. “I could bite you before you had a chance to stop me.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said firmly though his eyes betrayed a moment of doubt.

I ran my tongue over my teeth and eyed his neck hungrily. “Want a bet?”

His grip on my wrists tightened at the challenge and I gave him a predator’s grin.

“*Elise,”* Leon warned, shifting beneath me.

I pressed my weight down over his hips and growled at him, leaning forward as I bared my teeth.

“Stop it, little monster, I don’t want to have to fight you off-”

I yanked my wrists free of his hold with a surge of my enhanced strength, catching his hands in mine and slamming them down on either side of his head as I lunged for his neck.

Leon yelled something and heat built in his palms as he called on his magic but I’d already made it to his throat.

I ran my tongue straight up the line of the carotid artery in his neck where his pulse spiked, throbbing deliciously as blood danced just out of reach.

Leon growled but he didn’t release any magic to fight me off and I smiled against his skin.

“Aren’t you curious, Leo?” I asked as I continued to kiss his neck, moaning a little as his blood called to me, the darkest, best form of

temptation I knew.

He released another growl but this one sent a shiver down my spine. I was still straddling him and I could feel his arousal growing between my thighs, adding another ache of longing to the things I wanted to take from him.

“You know the deal, little monster,” he breathed, flexing his arms against my hold on them. But I didn’t let go. I quite liked having the king of beasts at my mercy.

“You might like it,” I pressed, my kisses moving lower. “Or I could bite you somewhere else?”

“*Fuck*.” Leon shifted beneath me again.

I grazed my fangs over his collar bone, my tongue following them and he groaned. “Are you sure the answer’s still no?”

“Come back to my room, we can miss our next class. Once I’ve claimed you with my body you can bite me as much as you fucking like.”

I laughed, moving back up so that I was looking down into his golden eyes. “*Tempting.*… But maybe I don’t want it on *your* terms. Maybe I want you to beg me to bite you.”

“Never gonna happen. Pain doesn’t get me off.”

I sighed dramatically. “Well, when you’re ready for me to convince you otherwise, I’ll be waiting.” I touched my lips to his in a sweet kiss that only lasted a second then shot away using my Vampire speed with a laugh.

Leon released a frustrated roar which chased me and I laughed harder as I headed away from him towards the Empyrean Fields and our combat class. I could make it in time with my speed but he’d definitely be late.

I slowed my pace before I reached the class, pushing a hand through my short hair as I worked on wrangling the bloodlust back under control so I could retract my fangs.

A dark shadow fell over me and I twisted suddenly, looking up at the sky just in time to see Gabriel shooting towards me on silent wings.

A scream escaped me half a second before he collided with me, snatching me off my feet and yanking me into the sky.

“What the hell are you doing?!” I cried as he beat his powerful wings and we sped upwards.

“You and me need to talk,” he snarled, flicking his fingers so that vines sprung into existence between us, binding my wrists together tightly and immobilising my hands and magic.

Fear slid into my bones as I strained against the vines. What the fuck was he doing? Why now? What had happened to make him turn on me like this?

We wheeled through the sky away from Combat Class and he shot towards the roof of the Vega Dorms moving just as fast as I could while running with my gifts.

In another second, his feet hit the flat roof and he slowed to a halt just inside his tent, tossing me down onto the heap of blankets in the centre of it.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, you psycho?!” I demanded as I tried to scramble back to my feet, my bound hands making it difficult to right myself.

Gabriel snarled at me, another wave of his hand conjuring vines which wrapped around my legs and pinned me in place on my knees before him.

He ignored my question, snatching my satchel from the floor beside me and tearing it open.

“Stop it!” I yelled, panic thundering through me. If he unraveled my concealment spell he would find the burner phone and Gareth’s journal. He’d know it was me who’d been threatening him. He’d realise-

Gabriel threw my bag down at his feet and held the burner before my eyes, shaking it tauntingly.

“You got anything to say about this?” he asked, his tone dark.

I glared at him, my fangs snapping out as I fought to use my strength to break through the vines which trapped me.

“How about *this* then?” he demanded, reaching into his back pocket and shoving a photograph before my eyes.

It was me and Gareth last summer, my hair long and blonde, eyes bright with a joy I rarely felt anymore. He knew. He fucking knew. Nothing I could say could cover my ass now. All I had was the truth. And if he knew who I was then maybe he’d give it to me. Because that was the least I deserved. Even if I only got it a moment to hear it before he killed me.

“Maybe you should be the one explaining yourself,” I growled.

“How the fuck do you work that out?” he asked, his wings flexing and blotting out the full sun behind him so that I was shrouded in shadow.

I was struck with the sense of just how much bigger he was than me as I knelt on the ground before him, totally at his mercy. He had my magic immobilised and his speed could match mine so there was no chance of me moving fast enough to get my fangs in him. I was beat. His to do whatever he wanted with. Waiting for the axe to fall upon my neck. But if that was my fate then I’d sure as shit go out swinging.

“I know he was blackmailing you. And I read all the threats you sent him too. A year of promising violence every time you sent him money. And now he’s dead,” I spat.

“You think I killed him?” Gabriel asked, his face paling.

“I know someone at this school did,” I snarled. “And from the evidence I’ve found, you look like a pretty strong candidate.”

“Candidate? You make it sound like you’re conducting a fucking investigation.”

I just scowled at him because that was exactly what I was doing.

Gabriel’s lips parted. “So you’ve just set yourself up as a private investigator? For what? He died of an overdose-”

“Don’t spout that shit at me,” I snapped. “Gareth *never* would have taken Killblaze willingly. Everything he did was to dig us out of this place. Our life. He wanted us to escape this shithole and he never would have risked his life for that crap.”

“Escape what?” Gabriel asked, a frown pulling at his brow. “Why did he want my money?”

“What difference does that make to you?”

“Because you say he never would have risked his life taking drugs, yet he obviously thought blackmailing me was worth the risk it could have posed-”

“He didn’t have a choice. He was doing that for me.”

“What? Why do you need the money?” he asked, clearly completely losing the thread of what I was talking about.

“I *don’t*,” I ground out. “Or at least I didn’t know I did. Our mom… It doesn’t matter now anyway.”

“It does to me,” he snapped.

I blew out a breath of frustration, sending a lock of lilac hair flying out of my eyes.

“Fine. If you must know, our mom was a stripper amongst other things. And she was a gambler too. She got into too much debt with her boss and was going to make a deal that meant I’d have to work at the club too to pay it off.”

“Your mom wanted you to start stripping?” Gabriel asked, judgment spilling through his eyes. “What kind of mother-”

“The *point* is that Gareth found out and took on the debt instead,” I interrupted because he was starting to look at me with pity in his eyes and I didn’t fucking want it. “I only just found out about all of this. If I’d known the lengths he was going to to clear the debt on my behalf I would have…I mean anything would have been better than what happened…”

“You would have agreed to working in the club?” Gabriel asked, a note of anger in his tone.

“Sooner that than this!” I shouted because look at what had fucking happened because of me. “He died because of the things he was doing to try and protect me. Because he lied to me about it and didn’t give me the choice to take on the debt myself-”

“But it wasn’t either of your responsibilities! A parent is supposed to-”

“Fuck supposed to,” I snapped. “What would someone like you even know about it anyway? You grew up with your cushy family and endless money. As if you’d have the faintest idea what it’s like to have to sell yourself to put food on the table for your children and keep a roof over their heads! My mother might be a shitty mother but fate dealt her a shitty hand. Two men broke her heart and left her with children she couldn’t afford to raise. She sold every piece of herself to pay for what she could for us until she had nothing left. Gareth’s death broke her. It broke me too. So if you’re going to kill me as well then why don’t you just do it rather than dragging it out?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? I didn’t kill Gareth!”

I glared at him but his eyes shone with honesty and I couldn’t help but believe him. My lips parted and something inside me shattered, only to rebuild itself out of the broken pieces of everything I thought I’d known

about him. Relief flooded me and tears welled in my eyes as I bit down on a sob before it could escape me. I half wanted to throw a myself into his arms and bury my face against his chest as he held me but I didn't. I still didn't know enough about what had happened, I might have believed he wasn't responsible for Gareth's death but there was more to it than that. And if he hadn't done it then I was back to square one and I didn't even know where to begin again.

"So tell me what happened between you and him then? You obviously figured out that he was the one blackmailing you. So what did you do about it if you didn't kill him?" I demanded.

Gabriel chewed on the inside of his cheek, his eyes flashing with something that looked a hell of a lot like shame and maybe even a hint of fear.

He turned away from me, shaking his head. "It's not important."

I stared at him, my lips parted as tears stung the backs of my eyes. So I just told him everything and he was going to give me nothing in return?

"If you're sure someone killed him though, I'll help you find out who," he added, his back to me now as he moved out of the tent. "And if you feel you need to do something to me in retaliation for my part in things then go ahead." The vines fell from my arms as he released me from his magic, leaving his back to me as he offered up this chance.

I stood, glaring at him as a tear slid down my cheek and rage coiled in my gut. My fangs tingled, my muscles tensed and the desire to hurt him flooded me.

I took a deep breath and expelled it again.

"Fuck you Gabriel," I hissed. "If you wanted to help me you'd give me the truth about what happened between you and my brother not fake promises of help. If you wanted to help then you should have done so when

Gareth needed you. But I guess you only help girls you have bullshit visions about. Although you really shouldn't worry about being my Elysian Mate. Because I'd rather be star-crossed than stuck with you for the rest of my life."

I shot away from him before he could respond, taking the fire escape off of the roof and heading for our room and my bunk.

He didn't follow me.

And for some reason, that hurt even more than his lies.

Twelve Months Before the Solarid Meteor Shower…

***I** jumped up and down on the spot, loosening up my muscles as the sound of the gathered crowd called to me beyond the locker rooms. My teammates were all in similar states of unrest and excitement as we waited to be called out to the pitch for our first Pitball match of the season.*

Leon was sitting on the low bench to my left while four of his Mindys fought for position to massage parts of his body while he kept his eyes closed, enjoying the attention. His hair was pulled up into a bun to keep it away from his face for the match and it was surprising how much of a difference that made to his features. With his hair up, the strong lines of his jaw and brow made it easier for me to see the beast that lurked beneath his skin.

Though I hadn't seen him flip out again since that night at the pawn shop, it was something that was pretty difficult to scrub from my memory. And although that made me about fifteen percent terrified of him at all times, I was secretly hoping his inner monster might just make an appearance for the match today. We needed this win and we goddamn deserved it too.

Dante's Atlas started ringing and he answered it with a wide grin, instantly starting up an animated discussion in Faetalian to whoever was on the other end of the line.

He ended the call and got to his feet with a wide smile. "Mia famiglia are here," he said, turning and striding towards the doors.

"Wait," I called after him, trying to ignore the fact that he'd told me a notorious crime family had just shown up for the match. "We're about go out on the pitch, you can't just-"

"The coach will wait for me," Dante said dismissively, waving me off as he headed out of the room and I cursed beneath my breath. Coach Mars would not *wait for him. He wasn't the goddamn King. And even if he was, Pitball waited for no man.*

I looked to Leon hopefully and he cracked an eye at me, shrugging one broad shoulder. "He'll be back," he said unhelpfully and I huffed.

The locker room door swung open again and I looked up hopefully, thinking he might have decided to come back already but instead, a stranger stood in the doorway.

He had the kind of intimidating aura that made me want to move out of his way, his golden eyes sweeping over the locker rooms like he had every right to be there and wasn't out of bounds at all. His long, dark hair fell all around his shoulders in a tangled mane which somehow looked totally cool even though on anyone else it would have seemed messy as shit. His muscular frame pressed against the confines of the expensive leather jacket he was wearing in a way that said he could crush me like a bug if the notion took him. In fact, everything he was wearing was black right down to the laces on his boots but instead of looking like an emo douchebag he just looked like a total badass.

“Hey little Leonidas,” the stranger said casually, turning his gaze to Leon with a lazy smile.

The four Mindys surrounding Leon suddenly stopped massaging him and looked around as one. Like a gaggle of meerkats who thought they smelt a predator. Or perhaps spied a feast. In a flash of movement, they all jumped up and scurried towards the new guy, one of them smacking into Leon in their haste to get away from him and knocking his hair out of its bun.

“Oh for the love of the moon,” Leon growled as he got to his feet, re-tying his hair as his gaze narrowed on the new guy. “What are you doing here, Roary?”

“Can’t I come and see my little brother have a go at Pitball?” Roary asked, ignoring the Mindys as they clamoured around him, trying to get his attention by pulling their shirts lower and skirts higher. He growled a little as one of them reached out to touch his arm and they drew back, staying close but not daring to touch him again.

“This is your brother?” I asked, taking a step forward with my hand outstretched in an attempt to cut some of the tension that seemed to be spilling from Leon. The last thing I needed was for him to get all het up right before the match.

“Yeah. I’m Roary Night, Nice to meet you,” Leon’s brother said, his gaze sweeping over me in a way that felt like an assessment.

“Gareth Tempa,” I said in return, grasping his hand in mine.

The moment my skin met with his rough palm, my breath caught in my throat and my lips parted as a tingle ran down my spine.

Holy shit this guy is gorgeous. I wonder if he’s ever made out with a Pegasus before? Maybe I should do something for him. Get him a gift or wash his car or-

Leon made it to us and yanked my arm by the elbow so that I dropped Roary's hand and I blinked to try and clear it of the thoughts that had just possessed me. Had I just been fantasising about ripping his clothes off of him?

Roary snorted a faint laugh as he looked my way and heat clawed up the back of my neck. I wanted to say something to him, but it had to be cool. Nothing dumb. This was my shot at impressing him and I didn't wanna fuck up my chances of being his friend. Or maybe more…

"I love your mouth," I said before I could stop myself and Roary cleared his throat, raising an eyebrow at his brother like I was nuts.

"Dammit, Roary, cut that shit out with my friends," Leon said.

"My Charisma is off," Roary said defensively. "But you know how skin contact makes our inner beasts win through."

"Well can you and your inner beast just go already? We need a functioning team captain if we're gonna win this match," Leon huffed.

"Sure, sure. I just wanted to say hey before kick-off. Mom wanted me to come as I was in town and you know I don't like to let her down. Catch you later Darren," he said to me with a nod before turning and heading off.

The Mindys hurried after him without so much as a backwards glance at Leon and he growled as his brother's footsteps faded beyond the door. I had to fight hard not to follow them too.

"Gah, he's such a douche. Sorry about the name thing, I swear he does that shit on purpose," Leon said, turning to me.

"That's okay," I said. "I think Darren is probably a better name for me anyway. Maybe I should just change it."

Leon growled again, gripping my bicep and turning me to look at him. "Listen Gareth, if you're any Lion's Mindy, you're mine, okay?"

His power swept beneath my skin and I found myself admiring the way his golden eyes sparkled like the sun. My gaze slid to his mouth and a sigh escaped me as I wondered what it might be like to earn a kiss from his lips.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked him. "A water? Hot towel? Sliced grapefruit?"

"Nah man, I'm good." Leon half laughed and released me, withdrawing his power and leaving me feeling a little like I'd just been passed through the ringer. But decidedly more like myself too.

I cleared my throat as embarrassment clawed at me and mentally slapped myself for letting their Charisma in so easily.

"Sorry about that," I said, running a hand down the back of my neck.

"Don't worry about it. Roary's Charisma is more refined than mine. If you touch him then you're pretty much guaranteed to fall under its power even if he isn't trying to use it. When he turns it on like he did then…" Leon shrugged, scowling at the door where his brother had just disappeared. "I swear he just does it around me to prove he can take my Mindys. Fucking Roary."

"Well who needs Mindys?" I asked, slapping him on the back bracingly. "If we win this match you'll have your pick of the girls, Mindy or not. Everyone loves a Pitball champion."

Leon's scowl turned to a smirk at that and he nodded. "You're right. Have you got anyone coming to watch?"

I shook my head, my stomach knotting guiltily. I had wanted to invite Ella but I hadn't done it. Somehow, inviting her to come and visit me at the academy always felt like a dick move. Like I'd be rubbing in her face how great it was here while she was stuck back at high school having a sub-standard magical education. It just didn't seem right to drag her out here

and make her take three buses just to sit on her own in the stands and see all the things she didn't have.

"My sister couldn't make it and this isn't really my mom's kinda thing," I said with a shrug.

"Shame," Leon said. "But then I'd really rather Roary wasn't here so maybe you're getting off lightly."

Before I could answer, a shrill whistle blew and Coach Mars appeared to usher us out to start the match.

My heartbeat spiked as we all headed after him and made our way up to the pitch.

The team from Everstar Academy were already lined up for the ball toss on the other side of the Pit in their black and gold kits and a smile bit into my cheeks as the crowd cheered us on.

Dante leapt from the stands where a huge crowd of Oscura Werewolves were whooping and hollering in support of him. I spotted Rosalie cupping her hands around her mouth and howling to the sky amongst them. Roary Night was sitting a few chairs along from her, talking to some of the older Oscura guys while a huge group of girls lingered as close as they could to him without actually climbing over people to get nearer.

We soon lined up in front of the opposition and I strode forward to meet the other team captain beside the Pit.

The crowd faded away as my focus zeroed in on the match and I gave every inch of my attention to the heavy Earthball in Coach Mars's hands.

Announcements were being made over the tannoy, our names listed as our positions were called out and the crowd slowly fell silent in anticipation of the kick-off.

The other team captain was a wiry guy called Finley with a mean glint in his eye and a pencil thin moustache that made him look like a villain from

the twenties. He smirked at me as Mars lifted the whistle to his lips and the whole world narrowed in on that exact moment.

Mars tossed the ball up, his whistle blaring and I leapt for it, casting air magic beneath me to shoot me higher and snatching the ball from the air.

Half a second later, Finley slammed into me and I hit the ground hard beneath him, the air driving from my lungs as I fought to keep my hold on the ball.

He slammed his fists into my side and I winced at the sharp pain which followed each of the blows.

With a snarl of determination, I managed to get my legs between us and kicked out at him, knocking him off of me. I twisted on the ground, throwing the heavy ball with all my might and yelling out in satisfaction as Leon caught it and raced away.

I got to my feet and sprinted after him, ready to help him make the Pit if he needed me as pain continued to blossom along my side.

The crowd screamed their encouragement as Leon raced for the Pit with the ball beneath his arm and his head low, crashing straight into every member of the opposition as they came at him and sending them flying.

With a Lion's roar, he broke between the two Pit Keepers and slammed the ball straight into the Pit, scoring the first point of the game to Aurora and sending the crowd wild.

I cheered with the rest of them, jogging away to the Air Hole in the north quarter of the pitch to wait and see if the next round would provide a ball from that Element.

Dante joined me at the hole as we waited for the timer to reset and I glanced at him with a smirk. He didn't return it, pointing at my side instead and I looked down to find blood pooling through my shirt.

I quickly tugged my shirt up, frowning as I spotted several wounds oozing blood across my ribs. The punches Finley had thrown at me had hurt but I hadn't realised quite how much. Nor could I work out how exactly he'd cut me open.

"Stronzo barare," Dante growled, reaching out to pull a sliver of ice from my side. The pain sharpened as he did so and I quickly placed a hand to the wounds to heal them.

"He stabbed me?" I asked incredulously. We were allowed to use our magic in tackles in the game but intentionally stabbing someone was against the rules. "We should tell Coach Mars-"

"No, mio amico. An Oscura handles their own problems."

"I'm not an Oscura," I argued. "And if he's cheating we should-"

"We can beat these stronzos even if they are *cheating," Dante growled, a clear command for me not to say a word to our coach. "And if they keep playing dirty, they'll find out exactly who they've been fucking with after the match."*

I opened my mouth to protest that idea but the whistle blew, sounding the start of the next round and an ice ball flew out of the Water Hole.

Dante raced across the pitch to intercept the Everstar player who had caught it and I fell into the game as I ran to play on too.

***

The crowd roared enthusiastically as the final score flashed up on the board.

Aurora Academy: 12
Everstar Academy: 11

We'd won. But fuck had it been hard. As soon as the Everstar team realised we weren't going to report them for cheating, their tactics only got dirtier. I was bruised and bloodied, magically drained from healing myself so often and pissed as all hell. I wanted to chew Dante out for not allowing us to tell Coach Mars about it. We'd damn near lost the game and it had only been my final, desperate race for the Pit that had saved us in the end.

"You look angry, cavallo," Dante said, wrapping an arm around me as we headed off of the pitch. "Shouldn't you be celebrating our win?"

"I am," I ground out. "I'm just…we shouldn't have let them get away with cheating like that."

"Who said anything about letting them get away with it?" Dante purred. His grip on me tightening as we drew closer to the locker rooms and instead of following the rest of our team inside, he steered me towards the Everstar lockers instead.

Leon smirked as he moved to join us, prowling forward on my other side, his eyes wild with that same danger I'd seen in them the night in the pawn shop.

"Where are we going?" I asked in confusion.

Dante chuckled, cupping his free hand around his mouth and howling for his pack. Tension grew in my gut as the Oscuras raced to follow us, pack mates from school and his family alike drawing in behind us.

Dante pushed open the door to the locker rooms and a prickle of anticipation ran down my spine as the Everstar team looked our way.

"So," Dante called out, his voice loud and commanding. "Who here thought it would be a good idea to cheat against the Oscura King?"

"Look, man," Finley said quickly, moving to stand before his team, his cocky demeanour fleeing in a heartbeat. "It's not personal. We cheat all the

time…and you won anyway so no big deal, right?"

Dante turned to look at his family who had clustered into the space behind us. "Do you think it's no big deal that they disrespected me like that?" he asked casually.

The wolves snarled defiantly, the hairs raising along the back of my neck in response.

A dark smile lit Leon's features and his hands clenched into fists as he stared down the team who had tried to cheat us out of our win.

"I don't think they agree with you, stronzo," Dante purred, his eyes back on Finley.

Finley backed up, bumping into a few of his teammates as if he thought he might flee but the wolves had already circled around them, penning them in and snarling low.

"I think you need to learn a lesson in respect," Dante said slowly, stepping forward with intent, guiding me along with him, a hand pressed firmly to my spine.

I resisted, my heels digging into the tiled floor as I shook my head a little.

Dante turned his dark gaze on me and all joking and playfulness had fled from him. There was nothing of the guy I'd begun to think of as my friend in his gaze now. I was looking upon the King of the Oscura Clan, Storm Dragon born of Wolves. And his dark expression said he meant business.

"You're with us or against us, cavallo," he warned as a sliver of fear raced down my spine.

"C'mon man," Leon encouraged, slapping a hand on my shoulder. "Don't you want to teach these assholes a lesson? They cheated, almost cost us the match, stabbed *you."*

I frowned as the Wolves all howled their encouragement and Dante kept me pinned in his gaze. They were right though; these guys had almost stolen the win from us just because they weren't Fae enough to play by the rules.

"Aren't you tired of letting life shit on you, cavallo?" Dante purred enticingly. "Don't you want to feel what it's like to take back the reins? Don't you wanna know what it's like to be an Alpha?"

Somehow his words were slipping beneath my defences, calling out to every little screaming part of me that had always been dealt a shit hand in life. They whispered of the way my mom had passed me this debt, and of the life my sister would be doomed to if I couldn't make these payments. Of the way I'd never once in my entire existence had anything easy. And then assholes like Finley came along and tried to cheat me out of one of the few things I'd earned for myself.

A growl tore from Leon's throat as he stalked forward, no longer waiting for me to join him as he tossed his filthy Pitball shirt to the floor.

"Last chance, mio amico, time to prove how Fae you are," Dante said.

Electricity crackled through the air as he turned to face Finley and the rest of his team of cheaters. The touch of Dante's storm power lit a spark of its own inside me and I found myself striding forward at his side.

He was right. It was time I stopped letting life crap all over me. Time I started standing tall and owning my own destiny. I wasn't going to let Old Sal ruin Elise's future and I sure as shit wasn't going to be the kind of man who stood by and let people like Finley take me for a fool.

A snarl of rage left my lips and the wolves all howled as the fight suddenly broke out.

I gave in to the bloodlust, letting my instincts guide me as my fists flew, pounding flesh and bone with a rage fuelled by all the injustice I'd had to endure in my life.

I cried out, punching, kicking, biting and tearing into my foe as Leon and Dante fought beside me. A few of the wolves joined the fray to even out the numbers and for a brief time I felt what it was like to be a part of a pack. And not just any pack, the most fearsome group of Werewolves in the whole of Alestria.

I lost all sense of everything around me aside from the pain in my limbs as blows were landed against me and the swell of my muscles as I fought back with the fury of hell.

"We've won, cavallo!" Dante's voice came to me as I continued to punch and punch and punch. It took me another few moments to realise that Finley had stopped fighting back beneath me.

Leon's hand gripped my shoulder and he pulled me up to stand beside him.

Blood dripped from my knuckles and my chest heaved as I looked around at the bloody and beaten members of the Everstar team.

The Wolves were howling their victory and Dante was laughing.

I glanced up and spotted Rosalie Oscura filming the whole thing with a wild glint in her eyes as her older cousins crowded close around her protectively.

A part of me wondered if I should have felt guilty for going too far. But in that moment, I didn't feel guilt. All I felt was the power of knowing I'd fought back. Of triumphing over someone who had tried to knock me down.

And as that power surged through me, a savage smile pulled at my lips. And I had to wonder if I might just like to feel this way more often.

Elise headed to The Rigel library on Sunday and I was prepared for a stake out to catch her stalker at last. I walked to the grounds outside the library and pretended to take an interest in The Weeping Well, the creepy clack clack clack noise sounding from within its depths. It was no fucking joke. The thing legit creeped me out. But it also had some new, delicious memories attached to it now.

I took out the little monster coin Elise had told me to keep, grinning to myself as the sun gleamed against the silver surface.

I gazed across the area, eyeing the students who were heading in and out of the library, wondering if I was looking at Elise's stalker amongst them. *Now why would someone want to follow her around..?*

Aside from the obvious of course. That ass was reason alone. But if someone was stalking my girl and jerking off over her in a bush, I was going to catch them today and rip their dick off for it. Might even throw it in the well too. Although, the kid who'd died down there probably wouldn't appreciate an eternity with a rotting dick.

I started flipping the coin off of my thumb and catching it, figuring I should probably find a more covert place to watch from. I was stalking a stalker. Lion style. And I wasn't even asking anyone for help. I could have had Mindys staked out here for days with no food or water, but I was

starting to see that maybe that wasn't entirely cool. And *maybe* maybe, doing things for myself could actually feel good. And doing things for Elise felt hella good. Especially when it came to her body.

I flipped the coin too high as my mind got snagged on her naked flesh and I cursed as it hit the wall of the well and bounced into it.

"No!" I lunged forward and a ding sounded as it landed on a brick jutting out of the wall a few feet down. "Fuck fuck fuck." I moved around it, leaning in and reaching for the coin, my fingertips barely grazing it.

"Come on, you sucker," I said through my teeth, pressing my free hand to the inside of the wall to steady myself. Rancid air blew around me and a horrible moaning wind carried up from the bottom of the abyss. I gazed into the pit, wondering if I'd lost my fucking mind as I pushed up onto my tiptoes in an effort to get my coin.

The scent of metal hit my nose followed by the faint smell of smoke. I grimaced, my heart thumping solidly in my chest as I tried not to think about the real possibility of a burned up little ghost kid at the bottom of this well. But I couldn't just leave without it. That coin was more than some trinket. Sure, I could have had another one made, but this one meant something. It meant Elise was mine in some small way at all times.

I caught it between two fingers, then lurched forward as I lost my footing. "Fuck – no!"

Someone caught me by the belt and yanked me backwards. My ass hit the ground and I turned to find Ryder standing there with a smirk on his face.

"I was really fucking tempted for a Scar – Mufasa moment right then," he said and I stared at him, unable to process the fact Ryder fucking Draconis had just saved my neck.

“What changed your mind?” I got to my feet, brushing off the seat of my pants and stuffing the coin into my pocket.

“Mufasa didn’t hang off that cliff by his ass.” Ryder shrugged and started to walk away.

“You wanna watch The Lion King with me sometime? It’s clearly your favourite!” I called after him, but he ignored me, heading past the library and slowing as he approached someone in the shadows.

I raised a brow, moving after him at a leisurely place, figuring that little chat looked dodgy as shit.

I wonder if it has anything to do with Elise’s stalker. If anyone in this school is stalker-material it’s Ryder with his snake eyes and shady personality.

I headed to the front wall of the library, moving to the far end and resting back against it, listening to the conversation happening around the corner.

“-you need a hell of a lot of it though, Mr Draconis.” I recognised Kipling Junior’s voice and frowned, intrigued enough to continue loitering there.

“You can get anything, why is this any different?” Ryder snarled.

“It’s not the getting it. It’s the timescale you’ve given us. It’s not long enough. It’s a very rare substance. We’ll have to acquire it from multiple sources.”

“So fucking acquire it,” Ryder hissed.

“We need an extra few weeks,” Kipling Junior demanded and Ryder sighed.

“I have things I need to deal with. Just get it to me ASAP.”

Heavy footfalls sounded Ryder walking away and I moved toward the library as if I was about to enter then did a circle when I spotted him heading past Voyant Sports Hall.

I didn’t know what Ryder was up to, but I imagined it had to do with his gang war with the Oscuras. I watched Dante’s back whenever I could, but I didn’t have much information to go on here. So what if Ryder was buying something dodgy? That wasn’t exactly a newsflash. He was always buying dodgy shit. And doing dodgy shit. And being a dodgy fucker in general.

I scanned the area, focusing back on the task at hand. *If I was a stalker… where would I be?*

My gaze landed on a group of bushes to the right of the library. It gave a good view of the doorway and no one would see you there if there was enough room to hide. I headed that way, circling the bushes and peering between the leaves.

Come out, come out little stalker. I’m going to break your legs and hang you from a tree.

I paused as I discovered a worn patch of ground, pushing the leaves aside to find a clear cubby hole. There were even a few old chocolate bar wrappers in there. So all I needed to do was hang around long enough for the stalker to show up. His creepy itinerary had said Elise stayed at the library late on Sundays so maybe he wasn’t going to arrive for a while.

I headed back across the lawn and set myself up beneath the cherry tree beside the well, leaning my head back against it and settling in for the long haul.

I’m going to catch you, stalky stalkerson. And you’re going to rue the day you ever thought it was a good idea to follow my girl.

***

I fell sleep. *Fuckballs.*

It was dark and as I checked my watch I realised it was almost ten o'clock. *Hairy fucking fuckballs.*

The grounds were quiet around me, but the library lights were still on. I just hoped Elise hadn't left already so I shot her a quick message on my Atlas.

Leon:

Where are you? I'm feline *horny.*

That would definitely get her attention.

Elise:

In the library. Feline *hungry.*

I rose to my feet, stuffing my Atlas away and mentally promising Elise a feast when I'd dealt with this. I just hoped the fucker had turned up and was waiting for me to rip his ears off and feed them to a crow. I mean, I'd have to wait until morning for the crows to wake up, but that just gave me time to rip off more body parts.

I prowled across the lawn, taking a wide arc around the bushes to make sure they didn't see me coming. On silent feet, I slipped behind them and heard a rustling which sent a spike of anger through me.

Now that I knew they were actually here, the thought of them watching my girl brought my Order form to the surface of my skin. A fierce protectiveness showered through me and my heart thumped harder and harder.

You're dead, asshole.

I moved behind the cubby hole and slammed my arm through the bushes, a shrill squeak sounding their alarm as I caught the bastard by the neck. I wrenched him full bodily from the bush and threw him to the floor at my feet.

Eugene Dipper stared up at me, shaking from head to toe, his eyes wide with horror.

“Dipper!” I roared, placing my boot on his chest to keep him in place. “Who are you waiting here for, *huh?*”

“N-no one!” he stuttered.

“Liar!” I bellowed, rage flowing through my veins. Pure fury was coursing through my blood, my desire to protect Elise from anyone and everyone overwhelming me. “What do you do in there? Wait for her to come out then touch your tiny dick over the sight of her perfect ass?”

Eugene shook his head frantically, raising his hands in innocence. “I d-don’t. I w-wouldn’t d-do that, L-leon I sw-swear it.”

“Then what are you doing?! Five seconds or I start pulling limbs off.”

“No p-please!” he begged and a urine stain grew around his crotch.

I lowered my head, peeling my lips back as I snarled at him. “Five… four…three-”

“I-I just want to be her S-source!” he wailed.

“What?” I balked, confused as fuck by that.

“V-vampires h-have to protect th-their Sources. I th-thought if I c-could pluck up the n-nerve to t-talk to her a-alone, I could convince her t-t-to-”

“To what?” I laughed coldly. “Why would Elise Callisto want you as a blood Source? You wouldn’t fill up a Vampire mouse with the amount of magic you possess.”

Hurt flashed across his face and his cheeks turned bright red. The ground rumbled beneath me then jolted violently enough to knock me off of him.

He shifted fast, his body disappearing, leaving a rat inside his shirt, squeaking in fear as he darted out of the neck and ran for his life.

“Oh no you don’t!” I tore my shirt off, but I didn’t have time to shed any more clothes. That fucker was fast and he’d get down a damn drain if I wasted another second. I leapt forward, shifting into my huge Nemean Lion form, my four paws hitting the ground and making the earth quake beneath my tremendous weight.

I chased after Eugene at full speed and with an almighty roar, I pounced, catching him under my front paws. I gave him just enough room to wriggle his head free, his whiskers twitching and his eyes bulging. I opened my mouth wide, letting him think I’d eat his whole head.

“LEON!” Elise shouted just before she punched me in the ribs hard enough to fucking hurt.

I whipped my head around with a loud growl and she stared at me in surprise. I was the size of a fucking tank and had teeth as big as carving knives, why was she not shitting herself?

Her eyes fell to Eugene caught between my paws and she hurried forward, kneeling down. “Give him to me this *second*,” she demanded.

I growled again, refusing to let him go, but Elise used her Vampire strength to wrench my paws apart and gather Eugene’s small white rat form into her hands. She hugged him to her chest, backing away from me. “What the hell is your problem?”

I stalked back and forth before her, hungering for a kill as my Order instincts took over. My brain was fuzzy with it, so I decided to change back, shifting into my Fae form and standing naked before her.

She kept her eyes firmly above my waist, lips pursed. “Explain.”

“He’s been stalking you,” I snapped, moving forward to grab the vermin from her grip.

She held him tighter to her tits and I bet he just fucking loved that.

“What the hell do you mean *stalking me*?” She shook her head and I turned around, striding back to the torn remains of my pants, taking out the folded piece of paper there and walking back to her. I unfolded it, waving it in her face.

“I found this in the men’s locker room and I’ve finally caught the rat responsible. He said he wants to be your Source but I think that’s bullshit, Elise.”

Eugene started squeaking in her hands, gazing up at her with his ears pressed back and an adorable fucking look I just prayed she didn’t fall for. She stroked his head and I scowled.

“Well I’ll ask him myself.” She snatched the page from my hand, stuffing it into her bag and walking away from me. I stepped after her, but she called, “Do *not* follow me, asshole,” and I released a low growl in frustration.

With a huff, I snatched my shirt up from the ground and headed back in the direction of the Vega Dorms with my dick out and my head hanging low. A failure and a guy who was definitely not going to have a hot Vampire to share a bed with tonight.

I headed into the dorms with Eugene still in my hands and started walking up the stairs.

“I’ll take you back to your room,” I said soothingly as he cowered against my chest.

He squeaked happily and I couldn’t help but smile a little in response.

“Can you er, squeak again when we get to your floor?” I asked as I kept climbing. I had no idea where his room was.

When we made it to the ninth floor, Eugene started squeaking and I turned off of the stairs. I placed him on the floor and he scampered away down the corridor before heading into one of the rooms which opened at the touch of his paw.

I leaned back against the wall, chewing on a piece of cherry gum as I waited for him, assuming he’d come back out to thank me and explain himself. As the minutes ticked by I began to wonder if that was the case and I moved to knock on the door.

“Eugene?” I called when no one answered. “If you don’t come out here and offer up an explanation I’m going to have to tell Leon that he was right. And I won’t stop him next time.”

I pursed my lips as I waited him out, wondering if I meant that threat.

I felt bad for chewing Leon out so hard when he seemed to have been trying to protect me, but I'd been shocked to see him acting so violently. Especially with the fact that his wrath had been aimed at Eugene. The guy transformed into a rat for fuck's sake. His magic was pretty powerless and his attitude was about as un-Fae as you could get. Petty bullying like that seemed beneath Leon. Unless I'd misjudged him completely.

The door cracked open and Eugene peered out at me sheepishly. He'd dressed in a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt which really only drew more attention to his pasty skin. He was slightly shorter than me and his shock of white hair stood up in all directions.

"What, no great declaration of your gratitude?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, umm, yeah," he squeaked. "Thank you. For stepping in like that."

"I probably shouldn't have really," I commented. "It was Fae against Fae after all. But I think we all know he had you beat by the time I intervened, so I guess it doesn't matter."

Eugene nodded and dropped his eyes to his shoes.

"So, help me out here, Eugene," I prompted. "Are you stalking me or what?"

I held out the timetable Leon had given me which noted all of my habits and gave me a damn good reason to change them up.

"Well…Miss Nightshade does think I exhibit stalking tendencies," he admitted. "But it isn't like Leon said. It's not because I'm trying to…that I think you might want to…or that I was going to ask you to…" He started gesturing back and forth between me and him and I had to fight hard not to recoil.

"No offence Eugene but ew. And good. Because I have my hands full with plenty of assholes at the moment and I'm not looking to add a Tiberian

Rat Shifter to the mix. So was Leon right when he said you wanted to be my Source?"

Eugene flushed bright red and he nodded. "I'm actually pretty powerful and I thought that maybe it could work out for the both of us."

He worried his bottom lip between his teeth and tipped his head to the side in offering.

My gaze flicked to his pulse and away again dismissively.

"Thanks but I've actually already locked down two Sources for myself and they're considerably more powerful than you. So this deal you're offering me won't really benefit me in any way. Besides, if you're so powerful why are you at the bottom of the leader board?"

"I err, I get nervous and it gives me performance anxiety."

"I'm not after the details of your sex life," I joked.

His face paled then flushed and he blinked way too often for it to be normal. "I wasn't… I didn't mean- I've never even…" Eugene's mouth parted like he hadn't meant to say that and I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing at his nervousness because I was fairly sure that wouldn't help his confidence issues.

"Nothing to be ashamed about there. Saving yourself is a good thing," I said seriously. And I actually believed that. I mean, I obviously hadn't, but I kinda admired people who did. Growing up surrounded by sex the way I had meant that had been pretty unlikely for me, but I liked the idea that it meant more with someone important.

"I'm actually ranking in the top quarter of the school power-wise," Eugene blurted, clearly not wanting to discuss his virginity.

I raised an eyebrow, surprised by that. "Then you really should work harder at harnessing that shit. Then you wouldn't need anyone to look out for you, you could do it yourself." I tipped him a salute, meaning to leave.

Panic bled into his eyes and he took a step forward as I started to retreat, reaching out to catch my hand.

“Why not just try it?” he pressed, his tone desperate. “Maybe you’ll prefer the way I taste!”

I barked a laugh, shaking him off. “Ryder Draconis tastes like fucking ecstasy whipped up into an ice cream and Dante Oscura is like drinking a pure shot of lightning which sparks life through every inch of my flesh. There is no better than that,” I assured him. “And I don’t have time to be running around protecting a Source who gets into as many mishaps as you do.”

Eugene’s bottom lip trembled and I sighed as bit of pity swelled in me. I was probably a sucker but I didn’t like to know he was miserable and just leave him that way.

“Look, why don’t you come sit with me and Laini at break sometimes?” I offered. “If people see you’ve got powerful friends they might leave you alone more often. Then you can work on wrangling your power and defending yourself better too.”

“Really?” he asked keenly, like so damn keenly I was pretty sure he would be hanging out with us every fucking day from now on.

“Sure,” I agreed easily. “I should probably go find Leon now, make sure he’s not still planning on eating you.”

Eugene’s eyes widened at that and I smirked as I headed away from him.

“See you later, bestie!” he called.

Fuck. I was going to regret that offer.

I looked out of the window at the end of the corridor, pursing my lips at the dark sky.

If I was a Lion Shifter in a mood where would I go?

The sun wasn’t shining so that pretty much ruled out the grounds of the school. Plus he’d been naked the last time I’d seen him so he probably needed to find some clean clothes. And when Leon wasn’t busy he was usually napping so I was pretty sure his room was a good bet.

I headed to the stairwell and jogged up to the top floor. I dropped my bag off at my room and glanced at my meagre supply of shit, wondering if I should offer him some kind of token by way of apology. He’d shocked me with his outburst but it turned out Eugene really had been stalking me, so I probably owed Leon a thank you for unveiling him. Hell, with all the dodgy shit I was looking into in this school, I was likely to start making enemies soon if I hadn’t already and having someone watching my back might actually be what I needed.

I sighed as I failed to spot anything that would do as a gift then smirked to myself as I came up with something even better.

I closed the door and headed to the far end of the corridor where Leon’s room was. As I drew closer to the door, the sounds of lots of girls talking in soothing tones reached me. The bubble of noise was hard to distinguish but it seemed to be coming from Leon’s room.

I frowned, wondering if Sasha and Amy had some friends visiting and almost walked away again but I guessed that they might know where Leon was even if he wasn’t here.

I reached out to knock on the door and it swung open before my knuckles hit the wood the second time.

I came face to face with a pretty red haired girl I didn’t know and her eyes brightened as she spotted me.

“Great! You can fetch the selection of cheeses,” she said enthusiastically.

“Nothing too stinky!” Leon’s voice came from somewhere within the room but I couldn’t see him beyond the throng of girls filling the space.

The redhead turned away from me as she grabbed a bunch of grapes and pushed her way into the crowd.

The girls were all murmuring and cooing in soft voices. One of them seemed to be singing a lullaby and they were all crowding around the bunk to the bottom right of the room, blocking my view of it.

Curiosity got the better of me and I moved further into the room as I tried to figure out what was going on.

“Poor baby,” one of the girls cooed.

“Life’s so unfair sometimes,” another one murmured.

I shifted between them, nudging them aside so that I could see what they were gathered around. Or rather *who*.

I fell still as I caught sight of Leon sprawled across the bottom bunk like a starfish. He was only wearing sweatpants but he also had a frilly pink eye mask on to block out the light. There were girls crammed into every available spot surrounding him. Four of them were massaging his hands and feet, rubbing vanilla scented moisturiser into his skin. Another was rubbing his shoulders, her full lips turned into a pitiful pout as she worked to try and relieve the tension in his muscles.

The redhead who had let me in was now peeling the grapes while sitting on the floor beside another girl who was feeding the freshly peeled grapes directly into Leon’s mouth.

I glanced around at the other girls, raising an eyebrow as I spotted three of them crammed around his desk, writing out his essays for the week. Two more were tidying up his closet and another was up on his usual top bunk fluffing his pillow so goddamn much that I imagined by the time he headed up there to sleep it would be as fat as four pillows combined.

A scuffle at the door drew my attention to five more girls arriving with arms full of chips, beers, fruit, the cheeses I’d been tasked with fetching,

chocolate bars and even a two tier chocolate cake.

“I’m going to hazard a guess that I’m not needed then,” I said loudly just so that Leon would know I’d come. “But when you’ve finished…hell, I don’t even know what to call this madness but when you’re done with it come find me and I might just give you an apology.”

I turned and tried to squeeze my way back out of the Mindys but I paused as Leon’s voice rang out.

“Elise?” he asked.

I turned around as he yanked a hand free from the girl massaging it and lifted the eye mask high enough to let me see one of his golden eyes.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling a bit awkward as all the Mindys turned to look at me. “It can wait though.” I didn’t know a whole hell of a lot about his Order but this weird ritual I seemed to have walked in on could definitely take priority over our chat.

“Wait!” Leon sat up and pulled the eye mask off altogether, tossing it away from him. Three Mindys lurched to catch it and the successful one smirked like she’d just won some valuable prize.

“I thought you were pissed at me?” Leon asked, cocking his head in a way that was so damn cute I couldn’t help but smile.

“I was. Well I kinda still am. You just flipped on that poor kid. But I spoke to him and he admitted he *was* stalking me so…look it’s really not important. I was going to offer to do something for you to make up for me snapping but it looks like you’ve got pretty much everything you could wish for covered here aside from an ass wiper and I’m not down for that job.”

“I can do it,” one Mindy offered instantly and I frowned at her. *Ew. Boundaries Mindy.*

“You were gonna do something for me?” Leon asked curiously.

I rolled my eyes. “Never mind.” I tossed him a salute and headed for the door.

“Leave us alone, Mindy,” Leon said and I gasped as a small stampede took place.

“I left first!” one girl cried triumphantly as she reached the corridor before the others.

“Well I was second!” another called and I gaped at them as they hurried away as fast as possible, the door swinging closed behind the last one to leave.

It was weirdly quiet in the wake of the Mindys and I shifted awkwardly as I was left standing before Leon.

“Sooo, you were saying…” Leon asked hopefully.

I pursed my lips as I regarded him. I was here to apologise but he should too. The way he’d gone at Eugene was uncalled for.

“I was saying I’m sorry for being so hard on you,” I admitted. “But I stand by the point that you went too far.”

“I know,” he sighed, pushing himself to his feet and closing in on me slowly.

I tipped my head back to look up at him as he took measured steps towards me. “You do?”

“Yeah…it’s my Order. We’re like super laid back, love to chill and just take life easy like ninety nine percent of the time. But if we enter the hunt we just kinda snap.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t happen very often but if I lose it, I go full blown Lion.”

“Full blown asshole more like,” I teased.

“I felt like a sack of shit for upsetting you and fucking it all up,” he admitted as he came to a halt a few inches away from me and the heat of his Element washed around me. “When I got back here, Mindy noticed I was

feeling down and called my pride to come cheer me up. They went code blue."

I snorted a laugh. "So if things don't go your way, you have to console yourself with foot rubs and being hand fed?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "It usually works, too. But this time nothing made me feel better until I heard your voice."

"You care way too much about my opinion of you," I teased.

"I do," he agreed. "Am I forgiven then?"

"Will you leave Eugene alone?" I clarified.

"Sure. That kid's not a threat to me. But I won't put up with him hiding in bushes to jerk off over you."

"Ew. I don't want that mental image, thanks. And I don't think you have to worry, I told him I don't need another Source but I said he can hang out with me sometimes if he wants to so I think he'll either approach me publicly or not at all now."

"Good." Leon reached out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear and I couldn't help but smile at him.

"So I guess my idea of doing something nice for you was pretty pointless then," I said, looking around at his room which was now completely clean and tidy. The food and drink that had been gathered for him was laid out on his desk. In short there wasn't one conceivable thing that he needed doing for him.

Leon shrugged one shoulder then his eyes sparked with some idea. "Well…there might be one thing you could do for me that the Mindys don't," he began hesitantly.

"What?" I asked. Wondering if he was about to ask for some kind of sexual favour. That wasn't going to happen if he did. Besides, I'd seen the way his Mindys looked at him and I knew they'd be more than willing to do

that kind of thing for him if he wanted them to. My gut twisted uncomfortably at that idea and I almost asked him if he was screwing any of them, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

He seemed nervous as he went on and my interest piqued. "You could… maybe…brush my hair."

I snorted a laugh. "What? Why won't the Mindys brush your hair?"

A low growl rumbled in Leon's chest. "Because that's a big deal in my Order," he explained, a touch of vulnerability lighting his gaze. "Male Lions don't just let anyone paw at their mane. In fact, I've never wanted a girl to do it before now."

"Really?" I asked, feeling weirdly flattered by the odd request.

"You don't have to," he said quickly, like he wasn't sure he should have said it.

"Do you really want me to?" I asked.

A slow smile pulled at Leon's lips and his eyes darkened with desire. "Yeah, little monster, I think I do."

"Okay," I agreed, feeling like I was actually saying yes to something much more important than just brushing his hair.

Leon's smile widened and he caught my hand, tugging me after him as he climbed up onto his bunk. He turned on the TV hanging from the wall at the foot of it and switched

on FaeFlix, setting a movie running without giving much attention to what he'd selected.

I arranged his super fluffed pillows behind me against the head of his bed as I sat up and Leon looked at me seriously as he handed over a hairbrush.

"Are you sure about this, Leo?" I asked because it was beginning to feel like a really big deal and I wasn't sure why but butterflies were writhing in

my stomach.

“Yeah. If you are?”

I leaned forward and gently touched my lips to his. A deep rumble sounded in his chest, almost like a purr.

“Come on then,” I urged, leaning back and crossing my legs so that he could lay his head in my lap.

Leon turned over and lay down, his head landing between my thighs and I drew his long, golden hair out from beneath him.

I lay the brush on his scalp and gently ran it all the way down the length of his hair. Leon closed his eyes and groaned with pleasure and I smiled to myself as I repeated the process.

Every time I ran the brush through his hair, his back arched a little and he shifted in my lap, a deep purr coming from him.

“By the stars, you’ve got no idea how fucking good that feels,” he groaned as I kept going.

“Shh,” I teased. “I’m trying to watch the movie.”

Though in all honesty, my gaze was fixed on him as he lay before me and I was absorbing the pleasure each brush stroke gave him as if it was my own.

“Okay,” he murmured. “Anything you want. So long as you don’t stop any time soon.”

I bit my lip as I ran the brush through his hair again. I probably should have been protesting against doing this for much longer but for some strange reason, I really liked doing it and I was quite happy to stay here for the rest of the evening if he wanted me to.

I lay on a bench in the gym on Saturday morning, pressing three hundred and sixty pounds of weight while sweat dripped across my scarred chest. I was the strongest motherfucker in the damn school because pain didn't stop me. I pushed beyond it until my body was forced to adapt. It all came down to mindset. And I had a lot of fucking experience holding out through pain thanks to Mariella.

With a grunt of effort, I racked the bar and wiped the sweat from my eyes with a towel. When I removed it from my face, I found a lavender haired treat standing over me with a hungry look on her face. Elise unashamedly raked her eyes down my body and I cocked my head.

"Friends don't check out their friends," I said dryly and she smirked.

"I think I recall it was you and Dante who made the rules on that deal. So I am sure as hell gonna look if the fancy takes me."

"Why don't you look a little closer then? You could get down here and let me see how many times I can bench press you?"

"Because you're a sweaty Betty right now. So ew." She backed up, her face saying she was anything but repulsed by me as I stood and towered above her. I snatched up my protein shake and gulped down several mouthfuls. While I was drinking the bland mixture, I noticed she had hiking boots on, a black rain mac and a pack slung over her shoulder.

"What's with the outfit?" I frowned.

“We’re going for a walk,” she announced and I grunted, heading past her in the direction of the shower rooms.

“What would be the point in that exactly?”

“To hang out,” she answered as she hurried along behind me.

“I told you how I feel about *hanging out*.” Several of the Brotherhood were throwing us curious looks and Bryce glared at Elise in a way that made me want to break his jaw.

“Okay well I’ll just wait out here while you shower,” Elise said airily.

I came to an abrupt halt and she walked straight into my back. I turned around as she pouted and I gave her a curious look, trying to work out her motivation for wanting to do this. But I came up empty.

She smiled playfully and something inside me melted like hot glue seeping between the cracks of my being. If Elise Callisto wanted to spend time with me, I’d be a fucking idiot to refuse, though I still didn’t really understand the point of what she had planned.

I gave her a stiff nod, then walked into the shower room and tugged off my shorts. It wasn’t long before I was washed and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, pulling on my leather jacket and checking my Atlas. I’d started my workout at the crack of dawn to get every moment possible out of the lunar allotted time and now my shitting horoscope had arrived, demanding I read it.

I tapped on it, skimming through it to check if there were any warning signs of an Oscura attack today, but instead find myself grumbling at what it alluded to.

Good morning Capricorn.
The stars have spoken about your day!

With the planets firmly in your favour, expect to have a great day, although not in the way you might predict. Though your mind is focused on work matters, your heart will drift elsewhere, causing you to forget about your upcoming plans. Today is a day of rest, peace, and of learning to embrace the tingling in your soul which will point you in the right direction.

I gripped my Atlas with a growl. I did not fucking *tingle*. And if my horoscope suggested it one more time, I was going to head to the horometer in the Capella Observatory and break it into a thousand pieces.

A message came in on my Atlas, taking my mind off of the stars prediction for my day.

Scarlett:

Any word on the delivery yet?

I frowned, tapping out a quick reply.

Ryder:

The Kiplings want more time. I'm putting pressure on them. I'll update you soon.

Scarlett:

We're only going to get one shot at this. If they can't get it, maybe we should consider other options?

Ryder:

They'll get it. Wait for my confirmation.

Scarlett:

Are you sure you want to do it this way?
I still don't understand why you changed your mind.

Ryder:

He's the only one who can keep balance right now and I don't want to bring a war on our people.

I stuffed my Atlas away, pushing business from my mind as I headed back out to find Elise.

She was sitting on a thigh press machine chewing gum and looking like a special brand of crazy I wanted to own the copyright to. I whistled to catch her attention and she looked up, frowning at me as she flipped her legs over the side of the machine then slung her bag over her shoulder and walked straight out of the gym.

What the fuck?

I hounded after her, finding her outside Voyant Sports Hall where a persistent drizzle hung in the air.

"Why'd you walk out on me?" My brows pinched together. I was never going to work this girl out.

"Because you whistled for me like a dog." She folded her arms.

"Oh." I thought on that. "And that's….not okay?"

"No Ryder. It isn't. It's fucking rude."

"Right," I said. "So you don't wanna go for a walk with me now?"

Her hard expression broke into a bright smile. "Of course I do, silly!" She grabbed my hand and towed me in the direction of the Empyrean Fields.

"It's raining," I noted.

“And?”

“And it’s raining.” I shrugged.

“Great. Thanks for the world’s most basic weather report, but maybe you should consider other career options.” She mock saluted me and I smiled while she wasn’t looking. The second she turned to look at me again, my face was set in its usual steely mask.

Her hand stayed firmly in mine and it felt so fucking good, I bet I could have come just from this touch alone. Which was insanity personified because I needed pain to come not fucking hand holding. That wasn’t my style at all. And yet I was still doing it, wasn’t I? Just holding it. Then she threaded her fingers between mine and my heart stopped pumping blood for a full second.

Why does she make me feel like my body is about to give up on me? I work my ass off in the gym not to be weak and she makes my heart stop just by holding my damn hand. Maybe I need to up my protein doses.

We wandered into The Iron Wood and Elise kept slowing me down as I upped my pace.

“Why are you dawdling?” I glanced over my shoulder as I tried to tug her along again. Her head was tilted to look up at the thick canopy above and she breathed in the fresh piney air with a smile. Rain dotted her cheeks and clung to her hair, making her look like some mythical fairy creature I wanted to capture in a jar.

“There’s no rush. Just take it all in,” she sighed, looking to me with a teasing grin like she knew I didn’t know what the hell she meant by that.

“Right. I’m taking in that brown tree stump over there,” I said sardonically. “And that brown puddle there and that brown leaf over there.”

“You’re so uptight, Ryder. Don’t you ever just *enjoy* stuff?”

“I enjoy you,” I said, immediately cursing myself for letting the words slip out, but her eyes brightened like they’d made her happy. And that felt good. Too fucking good.

“Well okay, I’ll gaze at the forest and you can gaze at me.” She giggled and I smirked, figuring that sounded like a decent compromise.

We walked on toward Tempest Lake and out onto the pebbly shore that ringed it. Elise released my hand, taking the lead as we picked our way across the stony beach.

“How far are we going?” I called as she continued on and on.

“As far as we want to go!” she called back with a laugh.

I smiled again and let it sit there on my face while her back was to me. Smiling wasn’t something I allowed myself to indulge in often, but around her it was difficult not to give in to it. Not that I’d let her see when I could help it. Smiling was a weakness. And if Elise realised I had those, she’d probably cast me aside. I had a reputation and that was what most girls were attracted to about me. Because in all honesty, I didn’t have much else going for me when you dug beneath that. So whatever Elise liked about me, it probably had to with the arrogant bravado I wore like armour.

I followed her around the lake until we’d made it all the way to the other side. The clouds floated low across the water, hiding the view behind us, cocooning us in a world of our own. From here, it looked like the academy didn’t even exist. Just the clouds, the forest, the lake and us. Which seemed like perfection to me.

She moved into the trees and I headed after her as she began to climb a steep hill higher into the woods. I soon caught her up and shot her a glance, her eyes sparkling with life.

“I’ve got something for you at the top of this hill,” she said with a grin.

My ears perked up at that and I quickened my pace, her laughter following me as she jogged to catch up. With her Vampire speed she could have sped to the top of the hill and waited for me, but for some reason she didn't, labouring on at my side.

We finally broke through the trees at the top, entering a clearing that circled back onto a wide ledge which overlooked the lake. A gigantic oak tree stood at the edge, offering us shelter from the rain as we moved under it. Elise dropped her bag, taking out a large blanket and placing it down on the ground before dropping onto it and patting the space beside her.

I eyed her on that rug with my heart thumping. We were alone out here and she was all mine.

"You either trust me a lot, Elise, or you're not as clever as I thought." I moved to sit beside her and my arm brushed against hers.

"Why's that?" She arched a brow, placing her bag in front of her.

"How many people in that school do you think would want to be alone with me up here?"

She blew out a breath of laughter, reaching out to brush her thumb across my cheek and painting a line of heat beneath it. "You don't scare me. Besides, I'm fast. You'd have to catch me if you wanted to hurt me."

"I do want to hurt you though," I said in a gravelly tone. "I just happen to want to make you come at the same time."

Her lips parted and her pupils dilated. "Those don't sound like the words of a friend." A blush lined her cheeks and my mouth hooked up at the corner.

"Well I'm learning on the job seeing as you're my first one." I rested my head against the trunk of the oak tree and Elise frowned.

"That's pretty sad, Ryder."

I shrugged and she crawled toward me, taking something from her bag with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I brought lunch.”

“I’ve got a protein shake in my bag,” I said dismissively.

“Yeah, that shit needs to stay in your bag and preferably end up in the trash later on today. You’re gonna eat what I give you.”

“I’m only agreeing to that if your pussy’s on the menu.” Not that I could actually have that if it was.

She smacked my arm with a smirk. “Nope. Something better.”

“Impossible,” I remarked and she shook her head at me, hiding a smile as she lifted a pot of strawberry ice cream under my nose.

My body turned to cement as I stared at it, my throat constricting as fear held me hostage. She knew what it meant to me. She’d seen it in my vision; me sitting with my father as a boy eating that very flavour from a cone. But I wasn’t that kid anymore. In fact, I was so firmly detached from him, his memories might as well have been artificially planted in my head.

“Elise,” I rasped as she peeled off the lid, moving onto her knees before me and brandishing the spoon like a weapon.

“You can say no,” she said gently. “But you *should* say yes. What have you got to lose?”

I couldn’t hold her gaze.

I had everything to lose. That tub of ice cream was a symbol that dented my reputation, that allowed her to see the boy I’d once been. And I was terrified of ever marrying myself back to that version of my being because I didn’t know what would happen to me if I did.

I got to my feet, moving to the cliff edge and letting the wind press against my back, the teasing push and pull of it making it seem as if it wanted me to fall. Maybe the stars held my death in their grip and had that fate waiting for me. I didn’t buy into any fate but that one. I’d always

known the universe was conspiring against me. That I'd eventually pay for all the blood I'd shed in every drop of my own. A man who was nothing returned to nothing. It was the only way the stars would let me leave this world.

"It's just ice cream, Ryder." Elise appeared beside me empty handed, leaning her head against my shoulder.

I tentatively slid an arm around her as we stood in the rain which started to beat down harder. Elise drew a shield of air around as she moulded against me with a deep inhale, her nose burying into my leather jacket and I glanced down at her in fascination. Her fingers intertwined with mine and she glanced up at me under her long lashes where droplets hung like jewels.

"It's what it represents," I said in a low tone and she squeezed my hand as if to comfort me. I tried to pull away but she didn't let go, clinging to my jacket with her free hand.

"Why do you always run when you feel something outside of your tattooed bullshit?" she demanded, her jaw tight as she locked eyes with me, daring me to give her the truth.

Fuck, she knew. She saw through Ryder Draconis, King of the Lunar Brotherhood and gazed upon the worthless creature hiding beneath his skin. I pulled back once more but she clung on like a limpet, stepping into my path and forcing my eyes to stay on hers.

The truthful answer pushed at the base of my tongue like bile, but I swallowed it back. "I don't know what you're talking about," I snarled, letting my temper flow, concealing everything else beneath it.

"Liar," she stated, still staring at me, willing me to break.

My anger hit a peak and set off the rattle within my bones. "Why do you want that answer, Elise? So you can run back to your other boyfriends, satisfied that I was never what you wanted anyway?" I tried to prise her

fingers off of my jacket but she still held on, like if she let go I'd vanish. And maybe I fucking would.

She gaped at me. "Is that seriously what you think? That if you show me something real about you I'll stop wanting you?"

My heart shuddered as I processed those words, mostly only hearing the last few. That she wanted me. I didn't think she'd ever really admitted it to me so frankly.

"You want me?" I murmured and she pushed her lips out, defiantly owning her words as she nodded.

"But I want the real you," she whispered. "The bits no one else gets. The ones I see shining through the cracks in that mask you wear all the time."

"You do?" I asked uncertainly, because maybe she thought she did, but if she really knew me, I couldn't imagine why she'd stay.

"Yes," she swore, marking a cross over her heart then pushing my jacket aside to paint the same cross on mine. I felt it like it was cut into my flesh, marked there forever. "So just eat the goddamn ice cream!" she said in exasperation.

She tugged my hand and I gave in, following her back under the tree and dropping down beside her, soaking wet and happier than I'd been in too many years to count.

She dipped the spoon into the bright red ice cream and I held out my hand to take it. She moved it out of my reach, her eyes sparkling with the game as she crawled into my lap and held it to my lips.

I didn't hesitate this time, I opened my mouth for her with a burning kind of heat in my chest. As the ice cream slid onto my tongue, I was transported back to my childhood where a thousand good memories arose. Ones I'd forgotten I was capable of still feeling. But there they were, still living in me, still shining as brightly as they had when I'd made them. All

those days spent in parks with my mother and father or playing in the woods. I was surprised to find I was relieved to know that boy was still attached to me. Because perhaps it meant that I wasn't an entirely lost cause. And all because of Elise.

Dammit, fucking Nightshade was right.

I opened my eyes as Elise raised another spoonful to my lips and I curled an arm around her waist, holding her close as I let her feed me. I wanted to kiss her so badly it was starting to become painful to endure and I cursed that fucking deal I'd made with Inferno. How stupid could I have been to swear her off? But at least it meant he wasn't getting her either.

I could do something within the rules though, something she would never expect from me and I was kind of curious to how she'd react.

Fuck it.

I caught her chin, turning her head away from me and running the icy cold pad of my tongue up her cheek.

"Ryder!" she laughed and I grinned, letting her see me happy.

Her eyes gleamed with an idea and she dipped her finger into the ice cream, painting a line down my neck.

"I'm hungry," she purred and my mouth dried up, lust burning in me as I exposed my throat to her.

"Then take a bite, baby."

She dipped her head, licking the trail of ice cream from my throat and making my cock harden for her instantly. She shifted in my lap to draw a low groan from me before ripping into my throat with her fangs. I clutched her against me, sucking in a sharp breath as she drank from me mercilessly. It was the perfect point between bliss and pain and I rode the high, aching to take her.

She finally pulled away and desire flared in her gaze as she unzipped her rain mac and tossed it aside, quickly followed by her sweater to reveal the swell of her breasts in a dark purple push-up bra that made me groan with need.

I was about to break every fucking term of mine and Dante's agreement when she squeezed the ice cream pot to loosen the melting goop and laid back, pouring it all over her tits and stomach.

My jaw went slack as I realised she was bending the rules for me, keeping within the boundaries of the deal. She gave me a heady look and I didn't need any more encouragement, crawling up her body and raking my tongue up her stomach, my piercing icily cold and rising goosebumps along her flesh. She moaned as my strokes became heavier and the thick, sweetness of the ice cream flooded my senses, now permanently linked to everything good in my life.

I licked between the valley of her tits and her hips bucked as I pressed my weight down between her thighs, showing her how fucking hard she made me. How much I wanted to tear into her flesh and bury myself in her body until she fell to ruin.

She slid a hand into my hair, guiding my mouth to where she wanted it and I resisted the furious urge to bite her as Dante's part of the deal kept me from hurting her for pleasure.

When every drop of ice cream was gone, I rolled beside her, panting like I'd just fucked the life out of her even though I hadn't even gotten beneath her underwear.

I am royally fucked when it comes to this girl.

Elise sat up, pulling on her shirt and flicking her hair from the collar as she shot me a wicked grin. "Did you enjoy that?" she asked teasingly.

“I would have enjoyed it more if my dick had been inside you at the same time.”

She rolled her eyes, reaching into her bag and pulling out a jar of peanut butter. She crawled forward and swung her leg over me, making me rear up with a grunt as she slammed herself down on my hard on.

“*Fuck*,” I croaked and she shifted forward to straddle my stomach with a totally innocent expression like she hadn’t done that shit on purpose. If there was one pain I didn’t like it was having my goddamn dick crushed while I was fit to fucking blow.

Elise dipped the spoon into the peanut butter, holding it to my lips while I narrowed my eyes.

“You’ll like it,” she promised.

I opened my mouth with an empty expression, but inside I felt as whole as the kid in my memories. Before Father died. Before Mariella broke me. And though I knew it was only temporary and the moment Elise was gone I’d sink back into the chaos of my defective being once more, for now, I wanted to pretend I was healed. Just for her.

I finally had the dorm to myself and I was out of valid excuses. I needed to open the evidence bag containing Gareth's things.

I sat on my bunk with my legs crossed, staring at it in my lap like it was a ticking bomb just waiting to go off.

I didn't even know why it was so hard to open it. I'd packed up his old room at home, gone through the boxes they'd sent back from the academy when they'd cleared out his bunk. And yet there was something about the clothes he'd chosen to wear the day he'd died that made me wary.

Knowing that it was the last outfit he'd ever put on…some of the last small choices he'd ever made. That these things had been there in his final moments when I hadn't been…

I released a long breath and ripped open the seal at the top of the black bag.

I pushed my fingers inside it hesitantly and pulled out his favourite sneakers. There was still a bit of mud caught in the tread, the neon orange laces making me smile for a moment as I remembered telling him they made him look like a flashy douchebag. A pair of black socks were balled up within one and his boxers were in the other.

A snort of laughter left my lips. I'd just spent weeks agonising over the emotions I might awaken by opening this bag only to find myself recoiling

from my brother’s underwear. If he could see me now he’d be laughing at me for being such a wimp.

I removed a pair of black jeans next, my fingers dipping into the pockets just in case but finding nothing there.

The blue T-shirt was harder to dismiss as the scent of his cologne washed over me. For a moment I was transported back into his arms and I closed my eyes as I held the material to my face, soaking up the feeling of him being close for a fleeting second.

The ache in my heart throbbed and I chewed on my lip as I fought back any tears which might show themselves. Privacy never lasted long in this place. I didn’t want any of my dorm mates to discover me sobbing over an old shirt.

I folded the T-shirt carefully and placed it on my lap before pulling out his wallet.

It was faded brown leather, the same one he’d had for years. I flipped it open finding his bank cards, eighteen auras, a photo ID which made my heart lurch and a few sticks of gum. Not cherry. I pushed my fingers into the back pocket and wrangled out a few battered photographs. There was one of me and him at the beach about four years ago. We’d gone to celebrate him Emerging as a Pegasus. He flew me there and back between his glittering black wings and I’d smiled all day long as we swam in the sea and ate so much ice cream we’d almost puked. That was when we’d decided to move near the water one day. When we escaped Alestria and the gangs and the strip club and all the things that had made this place anything but home to us.

I smiled at the memory, fighting against the urge to turn from it as I tried to just appreciate it and keep the grief away. I didn’t want the hurt of losing him to make it too difficult for me to remember the joy of having him in the

first place. I needed to be able to remember all the good things I'd had with him without falling apart each time I tried. I had to be able to smile about them instead of just lamenting their loss.

I tipped the bag up to make sure I hadn't missed anything and a glittering white crystal fell into my hand. A warm feeling seemed to flood from it, whispering promises in my ear and making me want to hold it closer and closer to my heart.

"You opened it then?" Gabriel's voice made me jump and I slammed my fist shut as I turned to glare at him over my shoulder. The open window was a clear sign of how he'd gotten in and my jaw tightened as he managed to shatter the small moment of peace I'd found.

"Well I thought I had some time alone to deal with it," I snapped.

"Do you want me to go?"

I didn't bother to respond to him as I hastily replaced Gareth's clothes in the evidence bag. I re-stuck the seal down but it didn't hold like it had before.

The wallet and crystal I kept out, slipping them into the pocket of my school bag alongside Gareth's journal.

I dropped out of my bunk and stalked across the room to place the evidence bag in the bottom of my half of the closet. They were just clothes and I didn't see why anyone would pry into that anyway. The only one who might was Gabriel and there was very little I could do to stop him if he chose to.

"Are you alright?" Gabriel asked as I turned back to the room.

"Are you ready to stop lying to me about the night Gareth died?" I asked in return, my tone icy.

Guilt flashed in Gabriel's eyes and he slowly shook his head.

"Then I've got nothing to say to you."

“Wait,” he called and I didn’t know why, but I paused at the door and scowled at him.

“I’m sorry,” Gabriel said roughly, his dark eyes brimming with what looked like pain but I couldn’t for the life of me understand why. “For lying about the night you were attacked.”

“Why did you?” I hissed and he dipped his head.

“I can’t have the FIB asking questions about me. I told you, someone wants to find me. I can’t risk my name or my photograph being associated with anything like what happened in the woods.”

“Got it. So you threw me under the bus to protect yourself.”

“That’s not how it is,” he said, moving forward and reaching for me like he thought he’d try and comfort me.

“Touch me and I’ll rip your fucking arm off,” I growled.

“Elise, please-”

“For someone who insists on me keeping away from him you sure have a hard time following your own advice. Now let me go and just keep the fuck away. And you don’t need to worry about me being your Elysian Mate. I’d sooner jump off a bridge than be tied to a lying asshole like you for the rest of my life.”

Something shattered in his gaze and for half a second I didn’t walk out on him. But I couldn’t afford to just let him get away with this.

I headed out of the room, hoisting my bag over my shoulder as I shot away to Pitball practice. I was running really damn late but I’d needed to take the chance to open that evidence bag while I could.

My heart was jittery and unshed tears burned the backs of my eyes but I fought against them, unable to give in to the warring emotions in my gut now that I was out on campus again.

But now that it was done, I felt lighter. It hadn’t even been so bad. I’d managed to drag up some happy memories to cling to as well as the dull ache of grief. But that never really went away anyway so carrying it was no greater a burden than usual.

I just wished Gabriel had given me another few minutes to wrangle my emotions back into check but of course he hadn’t. He liked to show up whenever I was feeling emotionally fragile, probably hoping to find a crack in my walls so that he could disarm me again. But it wasn’t going to happen. I might have been willing to believe that he hadn’t been the one to dose my brother with Killblaze that night, but it was obvious something had happened between them. And all the time he insisted on lying to me about it, I wasn’t interested in anything else he had to say. Which shouldn’t have surprised him really. Surely his visions could show him my anger clearly enough. But apparently that wasn’t enough to stop him from approaching me altogether. Maybe this time he’d take the hint properly and back off.

Thunder crashed through the sky as I headed down toward the Empyrean Fields and the pitch, lightning forking across the clouds soon after.

I upped my pace as the first raindrops spilled from the heavens, dashing against my cheeks and soaking into my hair. I shot down to the pitch with my enhanced speed in hopes of avoiding getting drenched, wondering if Coach Mars would make us play on in a downpour.

As I reached the pitch, the rest of the team met me, heading back off of it and answering my question as the rain pounded down at full force.

“My bad!” Dante called, a booming laugh following his apology as Leon cracked up beside him.

“Nice of you to show up, Callisto,” Coach Mars commented in his gruff tone as he spotted me.

The rain was falling thicker now, fat drops pounding down on us and drenching everyone.

I cast an air shield and noticed Dante had done the same for him and Leon to keep the rain off of them.

“Sorry, sir,” I said. “I had something personal come up and-”

“We can’t play on in this storm anyway,” he cut me off. “So just be on time for the make up session tomorrow night and we can pretend this never happened.”

“Sure thing, Coach,” I agreed easily, tossing him a salute.

He strode away with the rest of the team, heading for the locker rooms and the safety provided by heading out of the rain. Harvey gave me a wide birth as usual now and I suppressed an eye roll in response.

Dante and Leon were shoving each other back and forth, play fighting like little kids and I grinned as I watched them.

“Little monster, tell this cheat there’s no sucker punches allowed!” Leon called as he spotted me and Dante threw another playful punch at his side.

I laughed at the childish display, always enjoying it when Dante dropped his mask and just let himself live in the moment.

“Did you cause this bad weather, Dante?” I asked and he smirked as he looked up at me.

“Leon was cheating and it pissed me off.”

Leon growled and managed to hook an arm around Dante’s waist before throwing him down in the mud. They were both covered and I grinned as I watched them wrestling, not entirely hating the way they looked covered in mud with their muscles flexing as they fought for dominance.

“You just need to be doing this in bikinis and we’d have a real show,” I teased.

Leon barked a laugh and Dante managed to flip him over so that he was pressed down in the mud instead.

“Maybe we should call this match a draw?” I suggested as they both continued to try and choke each other out.

“Okay, okay,” Leon panted and Dante smiled as he released him, offering a hand to pull him up.

Thunder boomed overhead and I looked up as more lightning forked through the sky.

“Do you like it, carina?” Dante purred, moving to walk beside me.

“It’s not bad,” I hedged with a smirk.

Dante growled and the thunder boomed so loudly that the earth trembled with its power.

“Fuck,” Leon breathed, slinging a muddy arm around my shoulders as my eyes widened in wonder.

“Okay, it’s fucking incredible,” I admitted and Dante smiled wider at the compliment.

Leon dragged me closer and I recoiled as he squelched mud all over me.

“Eww,” I complained. “You need to have a shower Leo.”

His eyes lit up with that idea. “Maybe you should join me,” he suggested and I bit my lip as we headed into the locker rooms.

The rest of the team and Coach Mars were leaving already and we found ourselves alone in the open space as the door swung closed behind them.

“So what do you say, little monster?” Leon pressed as we rounded a corner and found ourselves standing before the showers.

The tiled space lined with drains held a row of six shower heads which were all currently switched off. Blue tiles covered the walls and the floor shone wetly after their last use. My heart beat faster as I considered Leon’s suggestion and I couldn’t really deny the heat that prickled along my spine.

My gaze drifted from him to Dante who stood close to us. He pulled off his muddy shirt and headed over to his locker.

I looked back up at Leon, but found he'd followed my gaze.

"You wanna pick up where we left off at the Oscura party?" Leon asked curiously, dipping his mouth to my ear, his lips brushing my skin and sending a shiver dancing along my skin.

"Do you like sharing me, Leo?" I teased as I turned to look at him over my shoulder.

"Maybe there are worse things in the world," he joked, wrapping his arms around my waist as he drew me back against his chest. "And I'd rather have a piece of you than none of you at all."

The storm crashed outside again and I turned in Leon's arms, tiptoeing so that I could brush my lips against his. Hearing those words from him seemed to make a barrier fall down between us. He wasn't trying to cage me anymore. He was accepting me for who I was and I'd never felt so drawn to him as I did in that moment.

His kiss was hard and devouring, his hand coming up to catch my face as he held me there, his fingertips biting into my jaw.

His stubble grazed my flesh in the most delicious way and I wound my arms around his neck as the kiss deepened, his tongue invading my mouth as my body ached for him.

A tingle along my spine made me draw back and I turned to find Dante looking at us, his gaze heated.

Leon's hands slid down to my waist and he walked me back a step, closing the distance between us and Dante as his friend's gaze travelled over the two of us hungrily.

My arm brushed against Dante's bare chest as I found myself between the two of them, memories of the party tumbling through my mind and

making my thoughts whirl with insane possibilities.

“I can’t touch her,” Dante said, taking a step back, his jaw ticking with frustration as Leon brushed his fingers down my spine over my Pitball jersey.

“Why not?” Leon asked with a frown.

“He struck a deal with Ryder,” I explained, pursing my lips.

“Why the fuck would you agree to something that kept you away from Elise?” Leon demanded, his grip on me tightening.

“To keep him away too,” Dante explained like it wasn’t fucking ridiculous. He looked at the two of us for a long moment, an idea sparking in his gaze. “Kiss her again.”

My heart leapt as Leon instantly caught my chin and captured my lips with his, his kiss bruising as he pulled me against him. My fingers curled into his long hair as I drew him closer and I lost myself in the feeling of his lips on mine before pulling back to look at Dante hesitantly.

Instead of leaving us to it, he’d taken a step closer, his eyes alight with desire and static electricity crackling from him.

He held my eye for a long moment and heat tingled beneath my skin at the intensity of his gaze.

“Take his shirt off,” Dante said slowly, daring me to follow his commands.

My heart leapt at the thought of giving in to this game. It wasn’t breaking any rules. They’d never said anything about watching me do anything. But was I really going to do this?

Electricity crackled through the air again, dancing up my spine and making me inhale sharply.

I turned back to look up at Leon, wondering if he wanted to do this and found him gazing back with the same dare in his eyes.

I reached out slowly and caught the hem of Leon's shirt, my heart pounding as I pushed it up, my mouth falling to his chest the moment it was exposed.

Leon tugged the shirt off of his arms and tossed it aside as I ran my lips over his skin and he growled with desire low in the back of his throat.

"Kick your shoes off and get in the showers," Dante's voice came again and a thrill raced through me as I did as he said, stepping out of my sneakers and pulling off my socks before letting Leon lead me after him towards the showers.

His mouth found mine again and he kissed me hungrily as he backed up, hooking his fingers into my waistband to tug me along and sending heat rushing between my thighs.

My heart was pounding expectantly and I looked around at Dante, wondering just how far he was going to go with this. The desire in his eyes said he wasn't going to leave and a thrill rushed beneath my skin at the thought of that.

Leon twisted the dial for the shower and the sound of rushing water filled the air as cold droplets splashed over me where they bounced off of the blue tiles.

I shivered a little, more from anticipation than the cold and Leon tugged my waistband again, his fingers brushing the top of my panties in a silent promise before jerking me forward a step as he claimed my mouth once more. My breathing hitched as I wrapped my arms around his neck and he hoisted me up into his arms.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and he turned me around, driving me back against the wall and pinning me in place with his hips as he kissed me so hard it hurt. And it still wasn't enough.

The heat of Leon’s fire magic was blazing beneath his skin and everywhere my body met his was alive with heat and need.

The water from the shower had warmed up and it cascaded over us as Leon shifted us under it. My white Pitball jersey was plastered to my skin, turning transparent to reveal my black bra beneath it.

Leon shifted his mouth down my neck and I opened my eyes to look at Dante as he leaned forward over the low wall which separated the showers from the rest of the locker room, resting his forearms on it. His dark eyes were blazing with desire and I bit down on my lower lip as I fought against the urge to go to him too.

He clenched his fist and the muscles of his bicep tensed, making my pulse spike as Leon’s hands slid beneath the hem of my shirt.

“Take it off of her,” Dante growled and I lifted my arms as Leon peeled the soaking white shirt off of my body, leaving me in my shorts and bra.

My chest rose and fell as my breaths came faster and Leon growled as he looked down at my body. He dove on the newly exposed flesh, painting kisses down the centre of my chest. I arched my back as his mouth brushed the edge of my bra, his fingers tightening around the strap as he prepared to tug it down, a moan of longing escaping me.

“No,” Dante said and Leon hesitated at the command, clearly caught between his desire and the thrill of the game. My eyes shifted to him and he smiled darkly, licking his lips as he held us in suspense. “On your knees, take her shorts and panties off.”

I released a groan of frustration as the aching need in my nipples was denied any satisfaction but soon forgot about it as Leon’s mouth drifted lower.

He dropped to his knees as he’d been told and I looked over at Dante, running my own hands over my breasts as he watched me, teasing at the

edge of the material while still leaving it in place until he told me otherwise.

Every kiss Leon planted on my flesh left a burning imprint on my body as fire magic flared beneath his skin and my eyes fell closed as I lost myself in the sensation of it, waiting for him to get where I wanted him.

Leon trailed his hands down my sides, painting promises on my flesh as he drew ever closer to his goal, his teeth grazing my waistband before dragging it down.

I inhaled sharply as he caught my shorts and panties in both hands and tugged them down, rolling them off of my legs until I stepped out of them for him.

I tipped my head back against the tiles as Leon slowly drew his fingers back up my legs, sparks of energy rushing through me at the subtle touch.

"Fuck, *please*," I begged, unable to keep waiting as he toyed with me.

Leon's laugh was echoed by Dante's and heat spilled down my spine at the knowledge of him watching this. I kept my eyes shut as I waited for Leon to put me out of my misery, unable to peel them open again knowing Dante was watching all of this.

Leon caught my left leg in his grip, lifting it with a silent demand before hooking it over his shoulder.

I gasped as his mouth fell on me a moment later, the kisses he'd bruised my lips with seeming tame as his tongue worked an untold magic between my thighs.

A moan escaped me as he circled his tongue, an aching pressure building in my body as he devoured me and I could only fight to stay upright, my fingers clawing into his hair as the water thundered over us.

"Eyes on me, bella," Dante commanded and my eyes whipped open so that I could meet his gaze. A fierce heat spilled through me as I caught sight of the hunger in his eyes, the low wall parting us seeming more like a

lifeline to him in that moment than a row of bricks. “And when he makes you come I want you to say my name.”

My eyes widened as I looked at Dante, my heart pounding a wild tune as the feeling of him watching us set energy writhing beneath my flesh. I could see how much he wanted to join us, feel it crackling through the air as his electricity raised goosebumps all over my skin.

“Asshole,” Leon growled, his mouth moving against my clit as he spoke and sending a vibration through my body which made me moan again.

“*Fuck*,” I hissed between my teeth which only urged Leon on and made more electricity build in the air surrounding us.

Leon continued his sweet torment, his tongue circling, teeth grazing, lips kissing in all the right places as I continued to moan my encouragement and my gaze stayed locked on Dante’s. It was so fucking hot. I didn’t know what I was getting off on more, the skill of Leon’s mouth or the ache in Dante’s gaze.

Leon gripped my ass, pulling me against his mouth with more force as he pushed his tongue inside me, drawing a line back up to that perfect spot and sucking hard. I gasped and pleasure crashed through my body like a breaking dam, my back arching as I called out Dante’s name just as he’d commanded.

Electricity crackled through the room, sparking along the moisture that coated my skin and intensifying the orgasm that was ripping through me so that I cried out again.

A dark smile lit Dante’s stunning features as he watched me fall apart and Leon growled with satisfaction from between my thighs.

My head tipped back and my legs felt weak but as Leon rose before me, I knew we weren’t even close to done. I’d been dancing around this with

him for weeks, but I was finally past teasing him. I wanted him, every inch of him and I didn't want to wait anymore.

"Take him in your hand, bella," Dante growled but I didn't need the encouragement. The bulge in Leon's pants had all of my attention and I reached for him eagerly. I unzipped his fly, his eyes darkening as I pushed my hand beneath his boxers.

Leon growled as he pressed forward, kissing me again and drawing a pleading moan from my lips.

"See what you're doing to him, carina?" Dante asked. "What you're doing to both of us."

My heart hammered at his words and Leon groaned as I shifted my hand up and down along the length of him.

Before Dante could say anything else, Leon stooped to catch the backs of my thighs and lifted me off of my feet. I pushed his boxers out of the way to free him from them, our need taking over as our bodies begged to be joined.

Dante stayed silent as he watched us but the electricity in the air sparked with his arousal, little flashes of it hitting my skin where the water still poured down on us.

Leon's mouth moved from mine as he lined himself up to claim me and he trailed a path to my ear, taking my earlobe between his teeth and tugging lightly before releasing it so that he could speak.

"This time you're screaming *my* name, little monster," he purred before pushing into me and stealing the breath from my lungs. I gasped as the hard length of him filled me completely.

Leon groaned at the feeling of us finally coming together and his gaze met mine for a moment, a deep hunger burning in his golden eyes.

With a growl of desire, he captured my lips again and shifted his hips back before slamming into me once more. I cried out, my nails digging into his shoulders as I clung to him.

My eyes met Dante's and his jaw clenched as he drank in the movements of our bodies, demanding more from us and getting it as Leon thrusted into me again.

I moaned and cursed, my nails gouging lines down Leon's back while Dante's eyes never left us and I was drunk on the feeling of his unwavering attention.

Leon devoured the sounds I made, his tongue pressing into my mouth as his body took possession of mine and he started up a relentless rhythm which had me clinging to him as the water continued to tumble over us.

His fingers bit into my thighs as he held me in place, pounding into me again and again as my body rose to a new high and every inch of me was filled with the burning heat of his flesh.

I was clawing at his back, his broad shoulders, his arms, everywhere I could get to as he took total control of my body, feeding me pleasure until I could hardly take it anymore. My back arched into the movement of his hips as he tore through the barriers I'd placed between us and finally took what he desired from me.

I could feel my muscles tightening around the length of him as he drove me towards oblivion and I wanted more of it, every piece of him.

My fangs snapped out and I caught a fistful of his wet hair in my grip as I yanked his head aside and drove my teeth into his neck.

For a split second it felt like all the power of the sun was pouring from him into me, his magic burning inside me like a living flame and washing through me as a wave of bliss burst through my flesh. I moaned into his neck, my head spinning and light flashing beneath my eyelids as he tore me

apart and I forgot what way was up or where we were. All I could feel was his body against mine and the tremors tumbling through my skin.

Leon cursed as the spike of pleasure and pain from my bite finished him too and his grip on me tightened as he spilled himself inside me, his body crushing mine back against the wall as we clung to each other and rode through the wave of ecstasy.

Electricity flared through the room from Dante, kissing my flesh and intensifying everything I was feeling so that my toes curled and I cried out again.

I withdrew my fangs from Leon's neck, panting as I fought to catch my breath and he kissed me like the whole world stopped and started in that moment.

My grip on his hair loosened and I ran my fingers along his jaw as I kissed him gently, the dizziness passing and allowing me to open my eyes.

"You'll be the ruin of me, little monster," Leon swore as he slowly lowered my feet back to the ground and I smiled up at him.

He ran his fingers along the side of my face, looking at me like he was drinking in this moment so that he could hold onto it forever once it was passed. For a moment I forgot to breathe as I looked up into his golden eyes and the heat burning there immobilised me.

He finally stepped back with a satisfied smile and pushed his pants off properly before moving further beneath the flow of water beside us so that he could wash the remains of the mud out of his hair.

My eyes found Dante's again, and his mouth pulled into a dark smile as I bit my lip. I pulled my panties back on and crossed the space between us, advancing on him slowly and ringing out my hair as his eyes moved over my body, drinking me in.

"Da dove vieni, amore mio?" he growled.

I smiled at the sound of him speaking to me in his language. It set a fire burning in my soul and made desire coil in my core even though I had no idea what he was saying.

“I’m still hungry, Dante,” I breathed as I moved around the low wall which divided us and he turned to face me.

The glimmer of excitement in his eyes was the only confirmation I needed as I moved into his personal space.

I pressed my wet hands to his bare stomach and slowly slid them up the hard lines and ridges of his chest.

“I think I may have acted too quickly when I made this fucking deal,” he groaned as I wrapped my arms around his neck and tiptoed up to brush my lips along his throat.

“Silly boy,” I breathed before driving my fangs into his flesh.

Dante groaned, his hands finding my ass and pulling my wet body flush against his so I could feel exactly how much he wanted me in every hard line of him.

The electric taste of his blood spilled into me and I moaned as energy zapped through my body, finding every nerve ending Leon had left tingling and shooting more pleasure through them.

My grip on him tightened and his dark laugh sent energy racing down my spine.

I finally pulled back, licking his blood from my lips as I backed up and his hands trailed from my flesh reluctantly.

I wasn’t sure if I’d lost my mind by letting the Kings get so close to me, but I couldn’t help it. Every time I drew back, they reeled me in again and I’d decided to stop fighting it.

I could take this pleasure from them while still investigating what had happened to my brother. My will was iron, my motive intact. If it turned out

that one of them had been responsible, I wouldn’t blink. I’d do what I’d sworn to and damn the consequences. I might have been willing to share my body with them, but they wouldn’t get my heart. It was too broken to hand out to anyone anyway. And as I looked between Leon and Dante, I couldn’t bring myself to regret a second of what we’d done.

The light of my Atlas bathed me in a blue glow which bounced off the white sheet encasing me within my bunk. Elise shifted on the mattress above me and a soft *hey* made me roll over and pull back the sheet at the head of my bed. Elise was hanging upside down, her lilac hair swaying beneath her and I grinned at her hungrily.

“Hello vampirina.” My smile widened and she returned it, her full lips giving me flashbacks about the other day when Leon had fucked her right in front of me. I’d done a lot of filthy things in my life, but that was hands down the hottest thing I’d experienced and I hadn’t even been touching her. I couldn’t stop thinking about me in Leon’s place, making her body bow to the power of mine. *Bet I could make her scream louder though, amico.*

“Wanna come on a job with me tonight?” she whispered so as not to disturb Laini.

I’d had to close the window after Gabriel had abandoned his bed for the night. So there was no chance of him snooping in on our conversation.

“For the Kiplings?” I asked and she nodded, her head bobbing as blood flowed to her cheeks.

She flipped herself upside down, landing silently and catching my hand, tugging me out of the bed. I went willingly, shoving my Atlas into my sweatpants pocket and heading past her to grab a shirt. I tucked my

medallion beneath it, the gold resting warmly against my chest and slowly restoring my power reserves.

“You’re gonna have to start cutting me in, carina,” I toyed with her. “I don’t work for free.”

Her hands landed on my waist and she tugged the hem of my shirt down where it was caught up on my stomach, her fingers lingering beneath it on my skin. A low growl escaped me as I surveyed her in the dark, electricity sparking between us and flashing in her eyes.

“You do for me.” She giggled, catching my hand and dragging me out into the hallway. A pair of my best sneakers were in her hand and she tossed them at my feet before shooting away to the top of the stairs and resting back against the wall. “Come on Dante, you’re holding me up.”

I yawned broadly, pushing my feet into my shoes as I surveyed the fitted black yoga pants and snug sweater she was wearing. She popped a bubble of gum then ran off down the stairs and my heart jolted.

Don’t leave without me, bella.

I chased after her, taking the stairs two at a time until I met the bottom floor. I wrenched the front door open, but no one was there and I huffed in frustration, figuring she’d gone without me.

“Gotcha!” Elise landed on my back and I caught hold of her thighs as she locked her arms around my neck. A grin pulled at my mouth, my heart pounding from the surprise.

“Did you just jump from the top of the damn doorway?” I asked her through a laugh.

“Yes.” She leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Like a ninja mouse.”

“You’re crazy.” *And I fucking love it*.

“Giddy up, Drago, to the front gate.” She plucked at my shirt like reins but I didn’t move.

“Did you just call me Drago, carina?” I teased.

“Pfft might have,” she said airily.

“You’ve been learning my language, amore mio,” I stated, electricity rolling from my body and making her thighs clench around me.

“Your Clan are always calling you Drago this and Drago that. It wasn’t much of a stretch to figure out it meant Dragon. Now, *yah*.”

“Where are you heading?” I asked, still not moving and sensing she was about to lose her patience with me.

“I’ve got to get to the farmlands, Dante. Let’s go to the bus stop.”

“Yeah…no. I don’t do busses.” I smirked, knocking her from my back and she stepped around me, folding her arms.

I pulled my shirt over my head, handing it to her, kicking off my shoes and pants next. She wordlessly took my clothes, seeming to be enjoying the show especially when I tugged my boxers off and smirked at her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” She dumped my clothes on the ground and I growled.

“Put them in your bag,” I commanded and she reluctantly slid her pack off one shoulder, her eyes widening as she realised what I was about to suggest. “Are you sure? The Dragon laws don’t allow it.”

“I told you, carina.” I backed up, pressing my tongue into my cheek. “I don’t obey laws.” I turned and leapt forward, letting the enormous navy-scaled beast housed within me rip free of my flesh. My talons crashed into the ground and energy rippled along my spine.

Elise backed up and I realised I should have explained she wouldn’t be harmed by my electricity while she was riding me. I could control the current so it flowed through her body and never hurt a single hair on her head. But it sure would give her a rush.

I nudged her with my nose and she stumbled back with a small gasp. Slowly, she moved forward again, her expression shifting to fascination as she rubbed the soft spot between my eyes.

She leaned in, moving to my ear and breathing words to me that made my heart thump with happiness and surprise. “Mi fai sentire vivo.” *You make me feel alive.*

She’d learned that phrase just for me. And she’d waited until now to say it because I could say nothing in return. I nuzzled into her and she trailed her hands across my scales, her lips parted in awe.

I nudged her toward my shoulder, lowering my wing to give her room to get on. She climbed up using my front leg and rested between my wings and my neck. She curled her hands around the spine which sat at the top of my backbone and I flexed my wings, giving her a moment’s warning before launching myself into the sky.

She inhaled sharply but didn’t scream and I bared my teeth in a grin as I took that as a challenge, racing for the clouds above and bursting through them at speed. I released a roar that sounded like thunder and her thighs tightened just before I spiralled through the air, making her cling on for dear life and drawing a scream of surprise from her lips.

Amusement filled me and a zip of electricity crashed down my spine as I soared north, heading toward the farmlands which stretched for miles at the edge of the city all the way out to the base of Fable Mountain.

I soon dipped below the clouds and Alestria spread out beneath us, the network of darkened streets like rivers of ink flowing between the buildings.

I beat my wings harder and we soon sailed over the northern most point of the city to the farmlands. The perfectly square crystal paddy fields stretched for miles, each glowing with the colour of the crystals forming

within the watery depths of the magical solution that encouraged their growth.

I swept across them to give Elise a view of the beautiful sight, the shining fields forming a rainbow of colour for miles in either direction. Finally, I circled back, heading for the warehouses where the crystals were processed and stored, flying down to land on a grassy knoll concealed behind the warehouse at the far end of the row.

I waited for Elise to climb down before retreating into my Fae form. She tossed me her bag, her hair swept back and her eyes bright.

“That was insane,” she breathed, flattening her hair as I tugged on my clothes.

“Have you never ridden on a flying Order before?” I asked and she frowned.

“I have... My brother was a Pegasus,” she said quietly and my heart twisted. As I pulled up my sweatpants, I moved toward her, pulling her into a tight embrace. She resisted for half a second before going slack in my arms. There was something fiercely protective in me when it came to her and the thought of her grieving over the loss of her brother pained me to my core. I knew what it was like to lose family. There was nothing worse.

“Come on,” she said eventually, pulling away and taking hold of my hand. “The Kiplings will be here soon.”

She led me out from behind the warehouse onto a long road and the sound of a vehicle soon caught my ear.

Elise tugged me down behind a bush at the edge of street and we waited in silence. A black van came into view, its headlights off so it was barely visible. It stopped close to us and Kipling Senior jumped out of the driver’s seat.

Elise jumped up with a breath of relief, guiding me out of the bushes with her. Kipling Senior glanced at me then back to Elise.

“We thought it would just be you,” he said.

“Dante just came along for the ride.” Elise shrugged and Senior nodded, sharing a glance with his brothers as they poured out of the van. When they’d seemingly had some silent conversation, he tossed Elise the keys.

“We need you to circle the area, keep a lookout for the farmer or any other busy bodies coming this way. If you see anyone who looks like a threat send the three of us a message.”

Elise nodded, taking out her Atlas. “Got it.”

The three Kiplings silently reached into their pockets, taking out balaclavas and pulling them on at the exact same time. Those guys were weird as fuck, but just as useful.

I raised my brows as they jogged across the street and disappeared between two of the warehouses.

Elise turned to me, biting down on her lip. “Can you drive?”

I barked a laugh. “You can’t?”

“I never had money for a car, let alone lessons to drive, asshole.”

“Lucky you brought me along then, isn’t it, carina?” I plucked the keys from her hand, jumping up into the driver’s seat while she climbed into the passenger side.

“I’ve got heightened hearing, super speed and night vision. I reckon I could have managed without you,” she said airily and I smirked.

“But you didn’t want to,” I pointed out and she shrugged, a smile dancing around her mouth.

I started the van, turning it around and following the long road. After a beat, I cast a silencing bubble around us to quiet the engine noise and Elise cocked a brow at me.

“You’re not just a pretty face.”

“Nah I’m mostly a pretty face.” I shot her a grin and she returned it before glancing away to look out the window.

All was still in the area, the workers having gone home, but in the distance was a large house where the lights glinted in the windows and I wondered if the landowner lived there. There were no other cars out this way, but we’d see them a mile off if any did head toward us.

Silence fell between us as I circled the roads around the farm, wondering how long this was going to take. I kinda hoped it lasted hours, because so long as the Kiplings were busy, I had Elise alone.

“I guess you’ve been on a bunch of stake outs before?” she asked.

“Bella, I was always the one on the job. I don’t wait in cars.”

“Except for today,” she teased.

“It’s not *my* job.” I grinned and she shifted across the bench, laying a hand on my knee and making my cock jerk to attention. But I couldn’t go there thanks to the fucking deal I’d made with Ryder, no matter how great the image of Elise getting me off in this van was.

I scooped her hand off my knee, placing it back in her lap and could feel her stare burning into my skull.

“You make me wanna forget the deal, carina. But I’m never gonna do that.”

She released a breath of laughter. “You and Ryder need to sort your shit out.”

A snarl ripped from my lips and she sat up straighter in surprise. “There is no sorting it out. We’re Astral Adversaries like our fathers were. It will be that way until one of us kills the other.”

She withdrew into her seat. “That’s crazy,” she muttered.

“The stars chose it, so take it up with them if it bothers you.”

“It seems pretty mindless to me. The stars told you to hate someone, so you did. It’s not much of a reason when it comes down to that.”

I shook my head, releasing a hollow laugh. “It’s much worse than that, carina. The stars make good on their promises. They gave us the reasons to despise one another. We’ve both done terrible things to each other’s people. To each other’s family.”

“It seems like your ancestors did that shit and now you’re just carrying it on. Why not break the trend?” Elise offered like it was the easiest thing in the world. She had no fucking idea.

My palms bit into the steering wheel as I pressed my foot down on the accelerator, turning a corner past a polytunnel which was lit up like moonlight from the inside. “No, carina. I’ve done despicable things. Things that would make you look at me differently. Things that haunt me.”

Silence brushed my ears, but it only lasted a second as Elise broke it.

“Tell me. There’s nothing you could have done that would make me see you differently.”

“Pah,” I laughed. I turned to look at her, taking my eyes from the road. “You keep telling me you don’t see the ruthless Clan leader I am, that you can’t see my dark side. And I think it’s best to keep it that way.”

I turned back to the road and Elise shifted in her seat.

“I want to know, Dante. Tell me what you’ve done,” she whispered, like she was slightly afraid of the answer, but I could sense the need in her voice.

She wanted to know who she slept above, who she sat next to in class, who was driving this vehicle right now. And maybe it was time she knew. Maybe it was the right thing to do by her, rather than let her believe the lie that I was this friendly Dragon she could poke and jibe. She was the only one in the entire school who got away with that. And I liked playing up to

it. But we were supposed to be friends now and friends didn't lie to each other.

"I've got a request before I tell you this," I said in a dark tone, a line of electricity rolling off my body and crackling around the steering wheel.

"What is it?"

"Don't pity anyone in this story," I growled, my jaw clenching and I saw her nodding in my periphery.

"I won't," she whispered. "Tell me."

I drew in a deep breath. "It starts with my father and Ryder's father. I was thirteen when shit got bad. Their attacks on each other were escalating in the city. Barely a day went by without the Lunars hitting our territory. The moon would only just be rising by the time the Oscuras fought back. Do you remember it, carina?"

She nodded, inching closer. "The mayor tried to set a curfew. No one unallied was supposed to be out after dark. People were always getting caught up in the crossfire. Mom thought about moving for a while, but I don't think she ever really meant it. We just kept our heads down and tried to ignore the danger."

"Yeah. Well for us it was all out war. My magic hadn't been Awakened then so I felt fucking useless most of the time. I didn't get my Order until later that year either, so all I could do was stay at home while my cousins shifted into their Werewolf forms and went out to help." Jealousy prickled under my skin at the thought of it, even after all these years. "Anyway, one day there was an ambush in a coffee shop around the corner from my home. Papa went there regularly-" I forced down the serrated lump rising in my throat, trying to keep breathing as I relived that day. "Ryder's father came with a huge group of the Brotherhood. They killed everyone in that place then carved up my papa into ten pieces. Ryder's father lost an eye for it and

three fingers. But it wasn't enough." I gritted my jaw as Elise reached out to touch me.

"No pity," I snarled as a reminder and she withdrew her hand with a nod.

I cleared my throat, forcing out the rest of the words as the space in my chest started closing. "Mamma was too distraught to go and identify him at the morgue, so I went in her place." Flashes of that day filled my vision. The ice cold room that smelled like metal and chemicals. The bright blue sheet covering his remains. The wolf tattoo on the back of his hand as the mortician pulled the sheet aside. The hollow thump in my chest. The taste of bile. The distorted features on his severed head. The mouth that had kissed me goodnight when I was a boy. And in that moment, I had shed away what remained of that childish part of me. I became a man. A man who was determined to be worthy of taking my father's place and seeking out the vengeance he deserved.

I realised I'd stopped driving, the van idling as I blinked out of the vivid memory.

Elise had moved closer, but she kept her word and didn't show me pity.

"My father's brother, Felix, stepped up to take his place while my mother fell apart with grief and I waited for my Order to Emerge. But I grew tired of waiting on the sidelines so I asked Felix for his help. He took me in, decided to mentor me and while Mamma was barely paying attention to the world, I put my life at risk by joining Felix on his runs."

"Without magic?" Elise gasped and I nodded.

"I wanted to be on the frontline. I wanted to know every one of the Lunar's faces. I was so filled with rage and hate, I never stopped to think how dangerous it was." I shrugged.

"Dante," Elise breathed, a note of fear in her voice.

I went on before she could stop me, “Felix taught me to be ruthless, merciless. That it was the only way to win against your enemy. We had to be more terrifying than they were, we had to spill more blood and strike fear into their hearts. I believed that back then so fully, it devoured me. It was the way I dealt with the grief of losing my father. I saw Felix murder a hundred Fae and I knew that I had to follow in his footsteps if I was ever going to get revenge for my father. I had to be ready to kill even though when I did, it might take a chunk of my soul with it.”

Elise’s hand curled around mine but I knew this wasn’t sympathy. This was understanding. But how she could ever understand this, I didn’t know. It seemed she did though.

“A couple of months after my father’s death, Felix summoned me to meet him at his house. He took me to the stables on his land, but the horses had been put out to pasture. In their place were fourteen men and women, their hands bound in thick blocks of ice and their bodies wrapped in chains.” I could still see all of their faces as clearly as if they were knelt before me now. The fear, the confusion, the hate, the resilience. “Felix placed a bone dagger in my hand. It was dark magic, the blade still infused with the Element of the Fae who’d possessed it and my uncle whispered in my ear, *this bone belonged to your father, his fire still lives in it. Use it to destroy those who destroyed him.”*

I shuddered, that memory gripping onto my soul and tearing it to shreds. “Felix told me who they were. They were from the Brotherhood, they’d helped Ryder’s father kill mine. They were *responsible*.” My chest tightened and I didn’t look at Elise as I spoke my next words. “I killed them. And I liked it. I relished the feeling of their lives ending by my hand because of the justice it served me.” I took a shaky breath, knowing I had to finish this story now I’d come this far. Elise would see me differently now

she knew I was a killer. Maybe she'd known before but had never really let herself believe it.

"Even before the last body hit the floor, the stars themselves seemed to shrink from me. I'd done it, I'd killed all of those who'd ended my father and there was only Ryder's father left. But I just felt…empty. Hollow. Like there was no heart left inside me to pump blood around my body. Then Felix spoke at last and his words folded around me, wrapping me up in them, binding me to them forever. *Well done, Dante, all Lunar followers are guilty. All of them deserve this death whether your father's blood is on their hands or not."*

"They weren't the ones responsible?" Elise gasped, echoing the same words I'd said to Felix in response that day.

"No," I confirmed through my teeth, a well of anger opening up inside me for what my uncle had made me do. How the people I'd killed hadn't laid a finger on my father. And how, for the first time in my life, I'd seen the members of the Lunar Brotherhood as more than just enemies from my nightmares. They were us in reverse. Fae with lives and families and loved ones. And I'd just ripped all of that to pieces with a vengeance that had never been meant for them.

I bit my lip as I thought over Dante's words, my gaze unfocused as I looked out of the windshield at the farmland ahead of us.

My Atlas pinged in my pocket and I glanced at the confirmation that the Kiplings had made it into the warehouses with little interest. The first half of my job was done. We'd just have to drive the van back to collect them once they were ready and my payment would be waiting in my room when I got back to the academy.

"I know how it feels to want vengeance like that," I said slowly. "If there was someone I could blame for my brother's death then I wouldn't hesitate to make them pay."

Dante shifted in his seat behind the wheel, pushing a hand through his black hair as he released a sigh.

"I don't think you would though, carina," he said. "I don't think you'd do what I did. I don't believe you'd spill innocent blood."

My mind shifted to Lorenzo Oscura, Dante's third cousin who I'd tracked down before coming to Aurora Academy and beaten in a dark alleyway until answers began to spill from his lips. He'd died at my hands in a way. He'd chosen to take his own life rather than turn on the man responsible for Gareth's death and give me a name. But he never would have killed himself if I hadn't been there. If I hadn't been threatening him. I

knew it made me culpable in some way. But I hadn't spared a moment of my time feeling guilty over the fact. Did I regret it? Yes. But only because he'd died without giving me the answers I'd needed.

I rolled my tongue over my teeth, choosing not to answer Dante's statement. Because there was still a chance that I was sitting beside the very man who had taken everything from me. Still a possibility that I'd have to take his life in payment for Gareth's. I'd heard what he'd said about the deaths not making him feel any better even when he'd believed that those Fae had been responsible for his father's death. But that wasn't the point. It didn't matter to me if killing the person responsible for Gareth's death made me feel any better. I wasn't doing it to try and fix the shattered pieces of my heart. I was going to do it to get justice. And damn the consequences. If it meant my soul burned without peace for the rest of time then so be it. Because my brother had deserved more from life than he'd been given. And I certainly wouldn't allow him to be short-changed in death.

"You say that that's the worst in you," I said slowly, wondering if I might be able to get the answer I really needed out of him. "So does that mean you haven't killed anyone since then?"

Dante drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Not like that. Not in cold blood. Not intentionally."

My heart beat a little faster at those words. But they weren't any kind of declaration. He was saying he'd been somewhat responsible for someone's death since those murders but how? *Who??*

"So if you killed for vengeance the first time, what drove you to it since?" I asked.

Dante looked at me for a long moment then sighed. "In my family, there is always some reason for someone to hurt you or for you to hurt someone. But the worst kind of blow you can strike against me is betrayal. I cannot

let deceit and duplicity go unpunished. I could not let someone paint themselves out to be my friend, mio amico, and then spit in my face. Bring shame on my family. There will always be repercussions for such wounds. The stars would demand it even if I wanted to look away."

"Who betrayed you?" I whispered.

"Qualcuno di cui ero pazzo di cui fidarmi.. I won't make the same mistake again."

"What mistake?" I asked with a frown, for once not liking the way he used his native tongue. It usually felt like he spoke to me in his language out of passion, this felt like he was using it to withhold information.

"Fidati solo del sangue. Famiglia per sempre."

I pinned him in my gaze, narrowing my eyes a little to force a translation from him.

"It means: only trust blood. Family forever. The Oscuras are my family and I won't ever trust anyone who isn't one of us again." His tone was dark and unwavering and a shiver ran down my spine at the certainty in his words.

I could tell he wasn't going to offer up any more on the subject so I guessed I'd just have to try and figure out if he'd been friends with Gareth or not before working out if my brother could have betrayed him in some way.

I decided to drop the subject and break the tension, sidling a little closer to him across the seats.

"So you don't trust *me* then, Dante?" I asked, dropping my voice as I said his name.

"Not even a little, carina," he replied steadily, his gaze trailing over me.

I blew out a breath, pouting like I was disappointed.

"Do you *want* me to trust you?" he asked slowly.

“Maybe,” I replied.

“Then perhaps you should tell me more things about yourself that are real,” he said.

“Like what?” I asked.

“What’s your favourite colour?”

I rolled my eyes. “Blue, like the kind of blue the sky is on a perfect summer day. What’s yours?”

A smile tugged at the corner of Dante’s mouth. “Lilac.” He reached out and twisted a lock of my hair between his fingers for a moment before dropping it again.

I looked into his dark eyes and smirked. “Do you trust me now then?”

“Even less than before,” he replied.

“Why?”

“Because I think if I gave you my trust, you’d use it to steal my heart and once it was yours you’d never give it back.”

The air in the cab suddenly felt a lot thicker than it had a moment ago and I leaned back slowly, wetting my lips with my tongue. Dante followed the motion but didn’t make any moves himself.

“Do you want to play a game with me, Dante?” I asked.

“A game? Like what?”

“Catch,” I said simply, grinning at him as I curled my fingers around the door handle.

“And what am I trying to catch?”

“Me.” I yanked the door open and hopped out, shooting out of the truck and around the back of it.

The sound of Dante’s door opening and closing came as he followed me out of the truck and I smiled to myself as I pressed my back to the metal doors behind me.

“And just how am I supposed to catch a vampira when she runs from me using her gifts?” he called, his footsteps crunching on the gravel as he walked away in the opposite direction.

I slipped off of the path and ducked down a row of blue crystals which were growing in the paddy fields there.

Dante was striding forward purposefully, his gaze sweeping back and forth as he tried to locate me in the fields which surrounded the road.

I stalked him through the shadows, my senses sharpening as I drew on my gifts.

The steady thump of his heartbeat called to me like the pounding of a drum. My fangs lengthened as I drew closer to him, my own pulse rising as I felt the simmering heat of electricity in the air.

He drew to a halt at the edge of the road and let out an irritated breath.

I smiled to myself as I slipped closer, my steps silent on the wet soil and my lips tingling as I prepared to launch myself at him.

I stayed low, using the shadows to hide me as I got ready to pounce.

I leapt at him with a spurt of my Vampire speed, my gaze fixed on Dante’s throat as I lunged forward to claim my prize.

At the last moment, he whirled around, strong arms catching me in his hold as he pulled me flush against his body.

“Nice try,” he laughed, twisting me around so that I couldn’t get my fangs into him and hoisting me over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I cried, thrashing against his grip as he started walking.

His only response was a laugh and a slap on my ass which made me cry out again, though this time I wasn’t entirely telling him to stop. “Bad vampira, you need to learn some manners.”

My toes curled at the feeling of him spanking me again and my stomach knotted as I tried to break free of his hold.

Dante’s laugh was dark and full of secrets as he continued to walk, my weight not seeming to cause him the slightest bit of trouble.

The world twisted around me as I swung upright again and my ass landed on the hood of the truck with a dull thump.

“What do I get for winning?” he demanded, nudging my thighs apart with his knees so that he could stand between them.

“How about, I bite you gently?” I offered, my gaze trailing over his throat again hopefully.

“You’re always trying to show me your power, bella. Don’t you want to feel what it’s like to wield mine?” he suggested.

My eyes lit with the idea of that and I nodded eagerly, looking up to the moonlit sky above us. The thick clouds still dominated the sky but there didn’t appear to be any sign of rain amongst them.

Dante shifted closer to me, his hand moving to cup my cheek and his power dancing along the point where our skin met in a silent offering, the barriers around his magic already lowered as he waited for me.

“I thought you said you didn’t trust me?” I teased as I reached out, laying my hands on his biceps to maximise the points of contact between our flesh. Power sharing wasn’t something that was easy to do with just anyone, it was unnatural to lower the walls that contained your magic to let someone else invade it. Doing so was supposed to be the greatest sign of trust or it proved that the person doing it had a very high level of control over their own magic. But each time I’d done this with Dante it had somehow seemed like the most natural thing in the world. More than that, it was a heady kind of rush, like our magic delighted in each other’s company, aching for the caress it felt when we allowed it to blend together.

“Press your magic into mine, carina, and we can summon a storm together,” Dante purred.

My gaze caught his and I urged my power forward, losing my own barriers far more easily than should have been possible with someone I harboured suspicions for. The rush of our magic colliding sent a shiver coursing down my spine and a moan escaped me as his pupils dilated.

“Merda santa,” Dante growled as he welcomed my power into him and a wave of static energy twisted through the air around us.

My skin tingled with it and every hair on my body stood on end.

Dante tipped his head back to the sky, a smile lighting his stunning features as he turned his attention to summoning a storm.

I followed his gaze, a swirling knot of energy building in my stomach as the clouds swept together overhead, merging, coiling, blending into one as they darkened and banished the light of the moon.

A crash of thunder sounded dead overhead and I felt it resounding through every inch of my body.

My lips parted as I watched the clouds curling into a dark ball above us and a flash of lightning spilled through them, making them glow with power from the inside.

I gasped as the jolt of electricity spun through my flesh, my back arching and my grip on Dante’s arms tightening.

“Too much?” he asked, his gaze falling back to me though I couldn’t tear mine from the sky.

“No,” I breathed. “I want more.”

He growled deep in the back of his throat as he looked up at the heavens once again and the next time the lightning zigzagged through the sky an actual moan left my lips. The electricity roamed freely through my flesh, filling me with its power for the briefest of moments before fading away again and leaving me breathless.

Dante’s link to my magic tightened and he pulled on it, demanding more of me. I complied willingly, letting the trickle turn to a flood, a spike of pleasure tumbling through my body in response.

Pressure built around us and Dante moved closer, the hand he had pressed to the hood of the truck moving to my back, pushing at the hem of my sweater so that he could lay his palm against my flesh instead, increasing the flow of my magic into his.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his voice low like the darkest temptation.

“Yes,” I breathed, the word sliding from my lips like honey.

Dante tightened his grip on my cheek, tipping my face back up to the sky and following my gaze as thunder boomed once again.

A huge fork of lightning crashed from the sky directly above us, the light of it blinding as it carved a path right down to the earth.

It slammed into the soil a few meters to the left of us and a scream escaped me as the force of it rattled through the ground and the power of it slammed through my body like a tsunami.

My nails bit into Dante’s flesh and his dark laughter accompanied the raindrops which cascaded from the clouds.

My heart finally remembered how to beat again and I released a shaky laugh too, my tingling skin delighting in the feeling of the fat raindrops which pelted us.

“Fuck, Dante, that was incredible.”

“Incredible,” he agreed but his gaze was on me instead of the storm and the intensity in his eyes made heat rise to my cheeks.

“We should head back,” I breathed, the rain soaking us, though neither of us made a move.

“We should.”

“Just a little longer,” I added as the thunder crashed above us again, no longer needing Dante’s magic to prompt it into action.

Dante’s lips curled into a knowing smile and he tipped his head back to let the rain run over him, enjoying the feeling of his storm as it washed him clean. And as the rain spilled over us, plastering our clothes to our bodies and drowning out the rest of the world, I couldn’t help but think that there was something truly magical in the heart of a storm. Especially one born from a Dragon. And I could only hope it might wash me clean too.

I headed into The Iron Wood just before sunset, wanting to do right by Elise. I knew she didn't trust me, and I hadn't given her any reason to either. But if I told her what I'd done to Gareth…

My throat thickened and a dark mist clouded around my mind.

Why did I do it? Why couldn't I control myself that night?

I shook off the grip of that memory, trying to break free of the collar around my neck which bound me to it forever. If I'd known he was in trouble, if I'd known why he wanted the money…

Would I have given it to him? If things had been different, if he'd been honest. If he hadn't blackmailed me?

Questions circled in my mind but I had no answers. I would like to think I would have helped the guy, especially now I knew Elise. But I didn't know for sure.

I took a shuddering breath, clenching my jaw. *I would have helped… right?*

The problem was, everything I knew about my nature pivoted around that night. I didn't think I could do that to someone, but I had. So how could I really know how I would have acted if things had been different? If I'd known what he was going through.

Maybe I would have been a selfish prick. Maybe I would have refused to help him anyway.

I can't make that right, but I can try to find out who attacked Elise on the night of the party. I can help her with her investigations as best I can. But I fear they'll all lead her right to me.

The wood was dark, but the soft hues of twilight pooled down between the branches, lighting the path just enough to see by. I headed deeper between the trees where the silence was thick and even the birds didn't sing.

I eventually came across the cabin where Elise had been taken. Where the Black Card had gathered and where I'd seen the body of the boy who'd killed himself. Whatever magic had occurred here was dark, I could sense the remains of it tingling through my skin and heightening my senses.

I moved up the wooden steps onto the porch, heading to the door and twisting the knob. It swung inward with a loud creak which sent a tremor rolling through my body.

The scent of must and blood tangled with the air as I slipped inside. There was nothing there but a long table and moth-eaten curtains on the windows. The quiet pressed in on me and I felt The Sight tugging at my mind, trying to guide me somewhere. I was almost in control of it for once, stepping eagerly into the vision that awaited me. Mystice had been right, when I need The Sight the most, it was easier to wrangle. My desire to help Elise was so strong it was able to overcome the powerful magic that held my powers in check. I wondered if that was because she was my Elysian Mate.

A hooded figure stood at the heart of the cabin, their face shrouded in shadow. As I tried to make mental notes about their height and build, their form seemed to change. They were shorter, wider, then taller again. I blinked against the strange magic and realised the culprit was hidden beneath a powerful concealment spell.

One by one, members of the Black Card stepped past me, approaching the figure and kneeling before them.

The voice that came from within that deep hood was feminine then masculine. It was the voice of a friend, a relative, a stranger and I cursed them for hiding so well. But one thing I did know, was they were hidden beneath powerful magic. And there were only so many Fae in this school capable of that.

"*Forget this night. Forget the faces you have seen. Forget the deeds you have done. Forget the boy who died and the power I gained from him,*" the voice sent a quake through the floorboards with its strength. This piece of shit was using Dark Coercion. A forbidden magic which forced those who heard it to comply with their commands without question. It was incredibly powerful and required an iron will to achieve but I had no doubt that that was what I was witnessing. The figure repeated the words as the members of the Black Card queued toward him then drifted back out of the cabin when it was done.

I stepped away, moving outside to look for signs of the body, but there were none. The other girl who'd been brought here to die alongside Elise and the boy was queuing in the line, held tightly by the members of the Black Card. So this ritual had only required one sacrifice…a willing one. Killblaze could taint the mind and feed on your darkest thoughts. If the boy who'd died had been depressed or ever considered taking his own life, the drug would have latched onto those emotions and quadrupled them, forcing his hand.

I stepped off of the porch and the vision faded, the world brightening around me slightly as the sunset dripped through the canopy.

I hadn't gleaned much except that the Black Card were useless. Dark Coercion couldn't be undone, so it looked like the killer's helpers were no

good for information. The only magic I'd ever heard of breaking a bind like that was Phoenix fire. And the Phoenix Order had been extinct for a thousand years, so there was no chance of using that.

I shed my shirt and stuffed it in the back of my jeans before releasing my wings and launching myself skyward. I pushed through the branches and broke into the light above the trees, the cool wind rushing over me as I flew back toward The Vega Dormitories.

When I landed on top of the tower, I texted Elise everything I'd learned. When I was done, I moved to perch on the edge of the building, watching the sun sink below the horizon and paint the sky in a thousand pastel tones of beauty.

I doubted whether she'd answer at all. I hadn't given her any more leads. If anything I'd only made things more difficult for her, knowing that the Black Card had nothing to offer.

My Atlas pinged and I glanced at it on the wall beside me in surprise.

Elise:

Where are you?

I considered not replying but an ache grew in my chest and a vision drove into my skull of Elise in my arms. I fell apart as I drank it in. She was curled in my lap, her fingers trailing along my jaw and her eyes ringed with silver. I leaned in to kiss her and she kissed me back with a moan of pleasure.

I blinked to clear the fantasy, growling under my breath. My hand was on my Atlas and tapping a message to her before I even decided to do it.

Gabriel:

The roof.

She was at my side in a blur of motion a single blink later, her hair swept back from the speed she'd travelled at. She dropped down beside me, dangling her legs over the ledge and biting her lip as if it made her nervous to do so.

"I'd catch you if you fell," I said quietly.

"I know," she said, her fingers curling around the edge of the bricks. "But I won't fall."

"Even angels fall," I pointed out, quoting her tattoo.

"Lucky I'm no angel then," she said stiffly.

We sat in silence while the need to touch her burned through me. But I didn't deserve that after what I'd done to her brother. It was eating me alive. No one in the universe could change it, not even the stars.

There was something I *could* offer her though. It wasn't much and she might not want to hear it. But it was worth a try. "I didn't know Gareth that well but…he was happy here. That much was obvious."

Elise sucked in a breath, her grip tightening on the wall until her knuckles turned white.

"He had friends," I said. "A girlfriend."

"A girlfriend?" she balked, turning to me with wide eyes. "Who?"

"I thought you knew," I said in surprise. "It didn't work out between them but I'm not sure why. I witness a lot around the school, I notice things."

Elise grabbed my arm. "*Who* Gabriel?" she begged, the need for this knowledge blazing in her eyes.

"Cindy Lou," I said thickly, knowing they weren't exactly close.

I wasn’t sure how she would react to that but I didn’t expect her to scream. She threw her head back and fucking screamed at the sky like it was falling down on her head.

I grabbed her, clamping a hand over her mouth and pulling her into my chest in alarm.

“Not her,” she said through her teeth as I eased my hand away. “Why would he want *her*?”

I stroked her hair, resting my chin on her head and drinking in the feel of her so close as I tried to comfort her.

“I don’t know, Elise,” I said gently. “Maybe you should ask her.”

“Oh I will. I’ll rip her heart out if she broke my brother’s.”

I raised a brow, leaning back to look at her face as my heart pounded harder. “You really will kill whoever hurt him, won’t you?”

“Yes,” she snarled, the fierceness in her eyes driving a hole into my chest. “Even if it kills me to. I have nothing left anyway.”

“Don’t say that,” I breathed, horrified that she was willing to throw her life away for this.

An awful thought occurred to me that she might turn this rage on me one day. And who would I be to stop her? I deserved what was coming for me. I certainly didn’t deserve to be sitting there with her cradled to my chest. And maybe she knew that because she pulled away, turning and dropping back onto the roof. She started pacing and I swung around to face her as thoughts ticked through her eyes.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, maybe I can help,” I offered.

She spat a laugh. “You’re one of my main suspects, Gabriel,” she said. “Do you think I’ve forgotten that you’re still lying to me?”

“I didn’t kill Gareth,” I growled powerfully and she turned to face me, her eyes flickering with hope.

“Swear it,” she hissed.

“I swear,” I said through clenched teeth, knowing she needed this. “On everything I am, on every star in the heavens, on every shred of ink in my skin and on every ounce of magic in my veins. I did not kill Gareth Tempa.”

She stood there for an endless moment, her shoulders rising and falling with each breath she took. Then she lurched forward, wrapping herself around me and coming apart in my arms. Tears rolled down my chest and I gasped, holding her tighter. As far as I knew, she didn’t show weakness to anyone but me and now she was letting me see it once again. Letting me in enough to crumble right in front of me.

“No one knows but you. You’re the only one I can talk to properly and I’ve been so alone. I still don’t know if I believe you but I want to, Gabriel. I really do.”

I cupped her cheek and she glanced up at me through watery eyes. I hushed her softly, wiping the tears from her cheeks as my heart fell apart for her.

She pulled away, turning to hide from me. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“Why?” I growled, moving around her to block her way.

She glanced up at me through wet lashes, her cheeks smeared with two horizontal black lines of mascara where I’d wiped away her tears. I’d painted her as a warrior and she needed to know that that was what she was, right down to her bones.

“Tears don’t make you weak, my little angel,” I said and more tears fell as I called her that name like it meant something to her. “It’s brave to cry over what you’ve lost. It means you feel it, it means it meant something, and it means you don’t shy away from those emotions even when they hurt the most.”

Elise reached out, sliding her hand around my neck and tip-toeing up, brushing her salty lips against mine. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“I know who you are,” I breathed, my hands curling around her waist as I drew her against me.

She kissed me again and I groaned, giving in to the darkest temptations inside me. I cupped her face between my hands as my tongue met hers with hungry strokes. A fierce need scorched my will and begged me to take her. I forgot the reasons why I shouldn’t. There was nothing but us and a haze of bliss caressing my soul.

She moaned against my lips and clutched onto me like the world would fall if she didn’t. I feared how little control I had right then as I gave in to the desires of the mate bond. It felt like the stars had threaded rope around my arms and were moving me like a puppet. But it was so good to give in to their call for once. Fucking divine.

“Tell me,” she begged as she kissed me again.

“You’re Elise Callisto,” I breathed. “An angel of vengeance.”

She pulled away and I missed the contact of her skin. She was the sun and I was the moon, the two of us forever cycling through night and day as we tried to evade one another, but eternally chasing the other too.

“You’re right,” she whispered, drawing in a deep breath. “And I can’t forget that again. I have to go.” She shot away from me and I called out to her as she disappeared down the fire escape.

The sun sank the moment she disappeared and I wasn’t sure if the horizon had shaded all the light in the world, or if Elise had taken it with her.

I headed down the fire escape stairs with my lips tingling from Gabriel's kiss and my skin prickling with unease. Why did I let myself do that with him so easily? Time and again he lied or pushed me away but at the slightest prompting, I found myself in his arms again. I was half tempted to go back to him, half tempted to keep walking and never look back.

Maybe he was right about us being Elysian Mates, soul mates, true love…but then why did I feel such a pull to the other Kings of the school too?

Maybe I was more fucked up than I thought. Like one of those kidnap victims who got Stockholm Syndrome and fell for their captors. Except my brand of crazy probably didn't have a name. I doubted there were many people who had gone undercover to try and find their brother's killer and then started to feel things for all four of their main suspects.

I blew out a breath of frustration. Callisto Syndrome aside, I still wasn't any closer to any answers. All I ever seemed to find was more questions.

My Atlas pinged as I sat in my bed, trying to make sense of what Gabriel had told me about the Black Card and cursing my luck for the fact that they were useless to me now. Their leader had done everything possible to hide their identity and I just couldn't figure out how the hell I was supposed to get to them now.

Aside from that, my mind was now filled with images of my brother and fucking Cindy Lou which I just couldn't erase no matter how hard I tried to scour it from my brain. I half considered confronting her but how could I do that? What plausible explanation could I possibly come up with for wanting to know about her dead ex boyfriend apart from the truth? But I sure as shit would be looking at that bitch a little more closely. A scorned ex could have motivation to kill after all.

I huffed in frustration and hooked my Atlas off of the nightstand, glancing at the notification as it flashed up.

Miss Nightshade:

Good evening, Miss Callisto. Your counselling session with me has been rearranged to tonight due to unforeseen circumstances. Please proceed to your session immediately.

Fuck that. I'll just say I never saw the message.

Miss Nightshade:

Lack of attendance could result in expulsion.

Bitch.

I ground my teeth and shot out of my room with my speed, not bothering to slow until I made it to the couch outside her office.

I sank down onto the worn leather cushions as I heard her talking within the room, my attention sharpening as I recognised Ryder's voice.

"-told you. I don't see why we have to keep rehashing this shit," he growled, the tenor of his voice sending a prickle down my spine.

“Because the nature of your relationship with Professor King is something that you should really look at more closely,” Miss Nightshade replied.

My lips parted and I sat up straighter in my chair, listening so hard I could hear their heartbeats. *Did she just say Professor King??*

“You know the nature of it,” Ryder growled. “Why do we keep having to go over this?”

“Because I wonder if the relationship you had with her was about more than just sex.”

Ryder was screwing a teacher??

“It wasn’t a relationship, it was a transaction,” Ryder replied, his voice void of emotion.

“Explain to me how you’ve come to that conclusion,” Nightshade pressed.

“Because the bitch was desperate for my blood and she wanted a man who would punish her while fucking her, so I made her work for both.”

My lips parted at the way he just discussed this like it meant nothing to him. How long ago had this happened? The faculty obviously knew about it so I guessed this Professor King had been sacked and power shamed. There would probably be newspaper articles I could look up. I finally had another lead but I hadn’t even considered the fact that there might have been another King in this school for me to look into before.

“And you still believe you were the dominant party in your relationship?” Nightshade asked.

My skin was tingling and a sick feeling in the pit of my gut was filling me with a sense of unease. I didn’t want to put a name to the sensation but I had the crazy feeling that I did *not* like the idea of Ryder screwing anyone else. Which was fucking ridiculous on so many levels.

“Of course I was,” Ryder scoffed. “She was marking Inferno down in all of her classes, making it seem like he was going to fail. She damn near made it seem like he was so thick he’d have to be expelled,” he said. “And then after doing all of that for me, she came begging for me to fuck her while tying her up and whipping her. In what part of that scenario am I not the dominant party?”

“I believe you weren’t dominant because she was the one who orchestrated the whole arrangement. *She* propositioned *you.* She used her position to manipulate you into-”

“No,” Ryder interrupted. “No one manipulates me. You think just because she was the one to keep me back after class and suggest we start fucking that somehow I felt I couldn’t say no? I can get plenty of girls, I don’t need to jump at every opportunity I get. I could have just as easily said no.”

“But you didn’t,” Miss Nightshade replied softly.

“I did actually,” he replied. “I told her I didn’t need the drama of fucking a teacher and when she pushed I told her she’d have to make it worth my while. Which is why she started sabotaging Inferno.”

“She knew you would do whatever it took to hurt Dante’s chances of success. She knew that offering to get him expelled would press the right buttons with you.”

“No,” he snapped.

“She was a predator,” Miss Nightshade pushed. “And you were her prey. She laid a trap and you fell into it.”

Silence fell in the room.

“Are the walls back up again then, Mr Draconis?” Nightshade asked eventually.

“If you’re just going to spout a load of shit and expect me to buy into it then I’m not participating. Professor King was *my* pawn. If anyone was taking advantage of the situation, it was me. I hardly even enjoyed screwing her. It was just a means to an end.”

“So she got to enjoy your sexual prowess and to feed on your blood while you didn’t even enjoy it? And yet you see yourself as dominant still?”

“When you bend a teacher over a chair and whip them until they beg you for sex you feel pretty dominant,” he deadpanned.

“Do you?” Silence rang out again. “Think on that for next time.”

“Not likely.”

My mind was whirling with that information. When had Professor King been expelled from the school? How hadn’t I known that there had been another King here, one more literal than the others? She sounded like she was certainly ruthless enough to hurt someone who got in her way if she was willing to risk the wrath of the Oscura Clan by persecuting Dante.

There were so many questions and suspicions whirling through my mind that when the door swung open, I gasped in surprise.

Ryder stepped out, his dark gaze falling on me for a moment before he made to walk away.

“Why so nervous, Miss Callisto?” Miss Nightshade’s voice came from within the room and my heart leapt as I realised she was picking up on my fraught emotions already. I needed to hide them, needed to dispel the suspicion and curiosity, the hurt and grief beneath something powerful enough to disguise them. I didn’t want her realising I’d caught onto her connection to the Black Card. I needed to be able to figure out what she was doing without alerting her suspicions.

I jumped up and moved into Ryder’s path before he could walk away, reaching out to press a hand against his chest.

His dark green gaze found mine and I held it, silently begging him to snare me into his hypnosis.

With a slight frown, he complied and the corridor surrounding us slid away to be replaced by a plain, white room.

“What?” he asked, clearly still pissed about his session with the counsellor.

“I don’t want her prodding about in my head with her Siren bullshit,” I breathed. “Give me something strong to overwhelm me.”

“Like what?”

“Like lust. Show me your worst, Ryder, exactly what you’d do to me if you had the freedom to.”

His eyes lit with a deep flame for a moment but he didn’t give in to it, suspicion filling his gaze instead.

“Why are you so desperate to hide from her?” he demanded.

“*Please,* Ryder. I don’t have time to explain anything now.”

The white room around us suddenly melted and we were in a stone chamber instead. Ryder was behind me and he shoved me down, bending me over a cold, stone table.

Manacles locked around my ankles and my legs were spread wide. He secured my wrists together at the base of my spine, tying them tight enough to hurt.

I was wearing a leather dress which pushed my breasts up and hugged my figure but I had no panties on beneath it.

“You asked for it,” Ryder growled behind me as he caught a fistful of my hair in his grip.

He slammed into me and I cried out as he shoved me down onto the stone table with the same motion.

The side of my face was pressed against the rough stone as his grip in my hair tightened painfully and he drove himself into me again.

I was completely immobilised, at his mercy as he continued to fuck me as roughly as he could and I cried out in pleasure.

Heat pooled between my thighs and my breathing came faster as the lust of the illusion slid beneath my skin and real desire unfurled within me like a beast begging to be sated.

I didn't try to fight anything he was showing me, soaking in the lust and desire he was feeding me despite the fact that my nature made me want to break free of the ties he'd placed on my limbs and throw him down onto this table beneath *me*.

"That's enough, Mr Draconis!" Miss Nightshade's voice burst through the illusion and Ryder released me from it, his gaze trailing over my face as he drank in the way he'd just made me feel.

My hand was still pressed to his chest and I'd shifted closer to him so that only a few inches divided us. He knew I'd enjoyed that even if I wouldn't admit it out loud and the smug light in his eyes made me want to knock him down a peg or two.

"That was fun," I teased in a low voice. "So cliché though, don't you think? Dressing me in leather and taking me to a sex dungeon? You'll have to do better than that next time."

His lips twitched with what I could have sworn was amusement and I stepped around him, sliding my fingers down his chest until I touched his belt and my hand slipped off of him. I didn't miss the way his heart leapt beneath my palm and the heat he'd built in my skin grew at the thought of me affecting him that much.

Miss Nightshade sighed as I stepped into the room, her lips pursing with irritation. "He's gone and buried your emotions beneath a layer of lust," she

complained.

“Oh?” I asked innocently, focusing on the way the illusion had felt and wondering if I’d ever really let him do that to me. Not that there was any chance while he kept to his deal with Dante, but I had to admit I was curious about the things he showed me. I certainly wasn’t submissive by nature but maybe pretending to be for an hour or two wouldn’t be entirely awful…

“Now all you’re thinking about is sex,” Nightshade tutted irritably. “And I’ve been thinking a lot about ways we can work on your grief. Do you feel ready to discuss your father today at all?”

I quickly shoved my mind onto Gareth, remembering the way he used to ruffle my hair and get glitter in it. It was really fucking annoying and I missed it more than I could put into words. A spike of pain followed the memory and I let myself feel it for a moment so that she would sense it too.

“No,” I replied simply and she nodded as she took in a tendril of grief.

I thought about the way Ryder’s hand had fisted in my hair, the tightness of his grip giving away his own desire, showing me exactly how much he wanted to do that to me.

“Oh for the love of the moon,” Nightshade grumbled. “I feel like you already indulge in lust too much without having Basilisks feed you more of it!”

“I indulge in lust too much?” I questioned.

“Yes. You use it to help you bury your other emotions. You’ve taught yourself not to feel the pain of your grief too sharply. You avoid looking at it. But in order to maintain that you need to feed your body other emotions to distract you. Joy is hard to come by and even harder to hold onto in the face of grief. But lust is all consuming, giving your flesh to the act of love

is the ultimate way to forget your pain. And I believe you indulge in it too much."

"Well there are worse things in the world," I commented, my mind on Ryder's body possessing mine. "Is there any reason why you had to change my session to today instead of tomorrow?" I asked just to give myself something to say.

"Oh it's nothing really," she said dismissively but the beat of her heart made me sit up a little straighter because that was a lie.

"So I'm less important than nothing?" I asked with a sigh like that was exactly what I expected from life even though I couldn't give two shits about whether she saw me as less important than a wasp turd or not.

"No, no. I just had an unexpected change to a meeting I can't miss so that's where I'll be tomorrow night. Nothing to fret about."

"Oh. Is it a date?" I asked, wondering if this had anything to do with her shadiness.

"Erm…yes. A date. Yes," she said. Lying again.

"Nice," I commented, smiling politely and turning my mind back to the way Ryder had made me feel in that hallucination so she didn't catch on to my interest in her secret meetings. I bit my lip at the thought of the way he'd pinned me down, his fingers biting into my hip hard enough to bruise…

Silence fell for a long moment and Miss Nightshade threw her hands up. "I don't wish to spend an hour in the company of lust. Before I know it, I'll be all het up myself and I have things to do tonight to prepare for my meeting…I mean *date* tomorrow. I think it's best if we leave this session here."

"Really?" I asked excitedly. She clearly caught that emotion and scowled in response.

“Yes. I’m going to request that you do not engage in any sexual activity on the day of our next session so that we can get deeper into your mind than lust. Agreed?”

I shrugged because I did not agree but whatever. I was free! That had gone even better than I’d hoped it would.

“Off you go then.” She waved me towards the door and I practically sprang out of my seat.

I headed out with a quick goodbye and pulled the door shut behind me.

My gaze instantly fell on Ryder where he was sitting on the couch outside her office, clearly waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said brightly. “My session ended early. What are you-”

“Talking to you,” he replied without letting me finish my question. “Because we have a few things to discuss.”

Ryder got to his feet and pointed towards the end of the corridor, clearly meaning for us to start walking and I chewed my lip as I fell into step with him. He obviously wanted an explanation and it was going to be pretty damn hard to give him one without telling him about Gareth.

At the end of the corridor, he led me left and up the central staircase in Altair Halls, guiding me along until he chose a door and opened it. I followed him into the dark classroom and looked around at the abandoned desks in the dim light which filtered in past the closed window shutters.

“Am I here to learn a lesson?” I teased, hopping up onto the teacher’s desk and looking at him expectantly.

“I’m not just going to let you use me to fool Nightmare without an explanation,” he said, folding his arms and leaning back on a desk at the front of the class. He fixed me with a hard stare, the word *pain* aimed towards me on his knuckles where he gripped the thick muscle of his bicep.

“Nightmare?” I asked with a grin. “You came up with a cute little nickname for her?”

Ryder’s scowl deepened. “I don’t do cute. And that’s what *everyone* calls her.”

“I dunno, Ryder, I think you could be pretty damn cute if you wanted to be,” I protested, my eyes trailing over his huge frame as he towered over me. Every thick muscle in his body seemed permanently tense and the scowl on his face might as well have been fixed there full time. His eyes were hard and his jaw tight. Everything about him screamed *run the fuck away* and cute was probably the last adjective anyone would ever attribute to him. But I wasn’t everyone. I was Elise Callisto and I was beginning to think I was actually capable of piercing his armour sometimes.

He didn’t reply, his gaze darkening and I smirked at the challenge he presented.

I slid off of my desk and walked towards him slowly, feeling like a mouse approaching a cat. Or a snake was probably more accurate.

He didn’t move as I closed in on him and I had to tilt my head back to look up into his dark green eyes.

“You just need to loosen off this asshole posture you’ve got going,” I said, reaching out to try and unfold his arms.

His muscles tensed as he maintained the pose and I pouted at him as he refused to play.

He let out a breath of irritation and relaxed enough to let me uncross his arms. My hands lingered on his biceps for a moment as I tried to rearrange him into a more relaxed pose and he watched me like he had no goddamn idea what to make of me. Which was exactly how I liked it.

I huffed when he continued to look just as tense with arms uncrossed as he had before and reached up to unzip his leather jacket.

I stood on my tiptoes and made an effort to mess up his hair, my chest brushing his as I had to reach as high as I could and he made zero effort to make it easier for me. His dark hair was so short that it was pretty much pointless but the tension in his shoulders eased a little as I tried and I smiled triumphantly at the minor change.

“Now stop scowling,” I commanded.

“I’m not scowling,” he replied obnoxiously. Because he absolutely *was* scowling. He had the frowniest fucking face I’d ever seen which was a damn shame because it was a pretty fucking gorgeous face too.

I rolled my eyes and ran my thumbs over his eyebrows in an attempt to smooth out the furrows there.

“You’ll give yourself premature wrinkles frowning so much,” I said.

“Why would I give a shit about that?”

“Because your face is so nice, it shouldn’t be all scrunched up so often,” I shot back.

His gaze softened a little as I ran my fingers across his forehead again and his hands skimmed my waist as he almost held me for a moment before dropping his arms again.

I’d been so intent on my work at making him look cute that I hadn’t realised quite how close I’d gotten to him. Our faces were inches apart, our bodies brushing up against each other and the space between our lips almost non existent.

“Are you done?” Ryder asked, his voice rough as his gaze slid over my features.

I looked into his eyes for a moment then sighed dramatically. “You’re a lost cause,” I said, feigning disappointment. “There’s no way to make you look cute…*unless…*”

I pulled my Atlas from my pocket, snatching it out and opening up my Snapdragonchat app.

I turned and tilted my head close to Ryder's, smiling as I aimed the camera at us and he looked up at it in surprise as the selfie was over imposed with a bunny rabbit filter. We both had floppy pink ears, little twitching noses and long whiskers as I took the photo.

"What the fuck is that?" Ryder asked as I released him and turned my Atlas to show him the photo of the two of us as cute little bunnies.

"It's a filter. And now I win because the Ryder in this picture is most definitely *cute."*

"Delete it," he demanded, reaching for my Atlas and I held it away from him with a groan.

"No! Let me keep it!" I begged as he caught my wrist and stole my Atlas from me. "*Please*," I added as his thumb hovered over the trash button.

"Why would I let you keep a picture of me looking like a fucking rabbit? I'm the King of the Lunar Brotherhood and I don't-"

"Oh come on, Ryder, I won't show anyone. I just want to keep it."

He paused for a moment, frowning at the ridiculous fucking picture. "Why?"

I sighed dramatically and shrugged. "Because…" Hell I didn't even have a good reason for that apart from the fact that it was true. It was dumb and pointless but it was also of the two of us and was so *not* Ryder that I couldn't help but kinda love it. "Because I do. It's you and me…I just… want to keep it."

Ryder stared at me like he was waiting for the punchline and I moved away from him in defeat, perching back on the teacher's desk as I waited for him to delete it.

He stared down at it for longer than was necessary like he was drawing out the torture then tapped a few buttons before the sound of a message sending hit my ears.

“Who did you send that to?” I asked curiously.

“Me. And now I’ve deleted your copy. So if you want to look at it you’ll have to ask.” He said before offering my Atlas back to me.

“You don’t trust me?” I asked, reaching for it as he stepped closer.

“I don’t trust anyone. And you’re still lying to me so why would you be any different?”

“About Miss Nightshade?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“If it’s so ridiculous then why not tell me?” Ryder challenged.

“*Fine.”* I patted the desk beside me and after a slight hesitation, Ryder sat down.

He left a few inches between us and I sidled along to fill them so that my side was pressed against his. He eyed me curiously and I took his hand, skimming my fingertips along the callouses which lined his palm.

“I have a thing against Sirens,” I said eventually. “Well, not against them as a whole but against them using their powers to dig into my emotions and them pushing their powers onto me. My mom has been manipulated by a Siren my whole life and she almost sold me into… It doesn’t really matter. Point is, I don’t want to share my grief or heartache or any of my personal business with her. Why should I anyway? Why should I have to justify every fucked up thing about me to her? The only person I want to answer to is myself.”

“What did your mom try to sell you into?” he asked darkly, his gaze fixed on me though I didn’t return it, watching my shoes instead.

I bit my tongue, the pain of my mother’s betrayal like a flesh wound on my heart. Ryder inhaled deeply as he absorbed my heartache, feeling how

keenly I'd been cut by this. He knew the pain she'd caused me anyway so I guessed it didn't matter if he knew the reason.

"She had debts and her employer owned a strip club. So she was trying to arrange for me to work there to pay off what she owed." I cleared my throat, not looking at him.

"Without asking what you thought of that?" he growled, the anger in his tone a tangible thing.

I shook my head and let the pain of that knowledge wash through me for a moment. The point of contact where Ryder held my hand only drew the pain into sharper focus but I let it come, knowing I had to deal with it if I wanted to try and let it go.

"If you ever find yourself in trouble because of money or anything else you can come to me," he said in a low voice. "You won't ever have to make a choice like that while I still draw breath."

I looked up at him in surprise. "I don't need someone to rescue me," I protested.

"I know. You can look after yourself, earn your own money. You've got it sorted with the Kiplings, but if there was ever a time when you needed me, I'd be there. That's all I'm saying."

I turned to face him and the sincerity I found in his gaze halted any further protests. I frowned at what he'd said, wondering how he knew I was working for the Kiplings as suspicion crept into my mind.

"Did you set me up to work for them?" I asked, pinning him with my gaze and tightening my hold on his hand so he couldn't escape the question.

"You set yourself up with that first job you did for them. There's still a fucking cock burned into the Empyrean Fields because of you." He snorted a laugh.

I opened my mouth, meaning to tell him off but he went on before I could.

“I only pointed out what a good job you’d done the last time. I didn’t tell them to hire you,” he said.

I turned that over in my mind, wondering what I thought of it and whether or not it seemed like a handout… It didn’t. And actually, the idea that Ryder had even noticed the fact that I had zero money and had considered the situation enough to know I wouldn’t *want* a handout meant a lot on its own.

“Thank you, Ryder,” I breathed, leaning close to press a kiss to his cheek. He turned to look at me like he didn’t even know what to make of my thanks, a frown tugging at his brow yet again. I reached up and smoothed it away with a faint smile. “You’re a good friend.”

“Friend?” he asked, a laugh slipping from him before he could catch it.

“I’m not the one who made the rules,” I teased.

Ryder released a breath of frustration and I smirked at him for a moment before shooting away.

I kept going until I made it back to my dorm and smiled to myself as I lay on my bed. Ryder Draconis might think his armour was impenetrable, but I was pretty sure I was finding my way in. I just wished I didn’t have to do so with an ulterior motive. But maybe the stars would shine kindly on me and I’d find out he had nothing to do with Gareth’s death. Because I had to admit that the closer I got to the Kings, the harder it became to shield my heart from them. The connections I was using to hunt for the person responsible for Gareth’s death were starting to worm their way past my armour too.

I was left in the wake of Hurricane Elise once again. It was a day later and a frown was still permanently stamped on my face as I tried to process what the fuck had happened between us. That girl was an enigma. Every second I spent with her felt like I was getting close to an answer but by the time she left, I felt further from understanding her than ever.

Friends. That word was alien to me. Even as a kid I hadn't had anyone my age to spend time with. Father had taught me to be wary of people who got too close to you if they weren't blood. It meant they had another motive. Although if Elise had one, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it was. But the simple possibility that she just liked me was more insane than her plotting to assassinate me.

I scratched the stubble on my jaw, making my way to Potions Class before the end of lunch bell rang. I needed to have a private word with Professor Titan.

I made my way downstairs of Altair Halls and into the basement before pounding my fist on the door. Titan always ate lunch in his classroom. He spent the time marking papers but I suspected he really did it to avoid lunch duties and keeping the students under control. Couldn't really fault him for that. There were too many assholes up to too much dodgy shit in this academy. I preferred to keep away from it all too.

The door wrenched open and Titan's expression betrayed his fear of me for half a second before he shielded it behind professionalism. "Oh Mr Draconis, can I help you? You're a little early…"

I stepped forward and he backed up, giving me room to kick the door shut behind me.

He had a bib stuffed into his collar and mayonnaise on the corner of his mouth. He quickly tugged the bib off, wiping his lips and balling it up in his hand. He cleared his throat, folding his arms and giving me his sternest expression. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes actually," I growled and he leaned back against his desk, crossing his ankles as he tried to look casual.

"What can I help you with?"

"Elise Callisto. She's my lab partner again as of today."

Titan's jaw clenched and some protectiveness flashed through his gaze. "She chose to be partnered with Mr Night. I'm afraid I can't put her in a position she isn't comfortable with."

"We've resolved our differences," I hissed. "And this isn't debatable." My rattle sounded through the air and Titan shifted nervously. The hair on his face began to thicken as his Minotaur Order rose to the surface. But he wouldn't shift, he wouldn't dare.

Titan cleared his throat, nodding. "If you're sure things between the two of you are settled..."

"They are." I turned my back on him, walking to the store cupboard and opening it. I started thumbing through ingredients, taking what I was low on while Titan tried to ignore the fact that I was openly stealing school supplies. When my bag was full, I headed to my desk, dropping into my seat just as the bell rang.

Titan was grading papers at his desk, firmly keeping his attention away from me. I flexed my fingers, clenching and unclenching my fists. *Pain* and *Lust* shone on my knuckles and I frowned as I stared at the blank spaces on my hands. Those empty parts of me seemed fuller than usual, like more emotions were trying to crawl out of my skin and brand themselves on me.

Students started filing into the room and I lifted my chin, my eyes landing on Elise as she shot to her seat at Mufasa's table. The Lion wasn't present yet. He'd turn up late or not at all. Since he'd been paired with my girl he hadn't missed a class though. But maybe it was time he started skipping lessons again because I was about to reclaim her.

The girl I'd been re-paired with dropped into the seat beside mine, throwing me a nervous glance before reaching into her bag with trembling fingers. I shifted my gaze to Professor Titan and captured his eyes. I cast my hypnosis and I was suddenly in his face wielding a meat cleaver at him. "NOW!" I bellowed and he nearly fell out of his seat in the vision.

I withdrew from his head and he leapt to his feet, pointing at Elise. "Miss Callisto, I'd like you to re-pair with Mr Draconis again."

The girl beside me – whose name I hadn't cared to learn – jumped up from her seat like there was a fire under her ass, smiling her head off as she practically ran across the room and hovered behind Elise.

"What?" Elise questioned. "Why?"

"*Now*, Miss Callisto, or I'll start docking rank points," Titan commanded and I smirked as she rose from her chair, gathering up her shit with a huff and trailing toward me. The other girl dropped into her seat, practically hugging the table as she laid out her things.

Elise fell into the chair beside mine and I hid my smirk by resting my thumb on the corner of my mouth.

She looked to me with her brows raised and her head tilted. “Did you do this, Ryder?”

My emotional spectrum was having a pissing meltdown. I didn’t feel pain or lust right then. But the airy feeling in my stomach wasn’t something I had a label for. If I had to name it though, I’d call it cloudfuckery.

“What if I did?” I grunted, flipping open my textbook and glancing away from her.

She continued to pout at me until I finally dragged my gaze back to hers.

“Why?” she whispered, leaning in close so I got a taste of her on the air.

“I’m the best potions student in the whole fucking school. You need to catch up, don’t you? So it makes sense for us to be paired.” I shrugged.

She laughed, shaking her head as she retreated. “You can’t just say it, can you?”

“Say what?” I asked stiffly, flicking the page over and picking up my pen to correct a mistake in the recipe for the Elixir of Regeneration.

“That you liiiike me,” she sang, prodding me in the ribs.

I glanced up with my lips pressed into a tight line. She was right in a sense. Why *was* it so fucking hard to admit that? So what if I liked her? Was that really such a goddamn crime?

Bryce entered the room the moment my mouth opened to say the words. I closed it tight as he nodded at me and I gave him a stiff nod in return. His eyes narrowed at Elise sitting beside me and he gave me a questioning look that said *why is she back there?*

I cleared my throat, ignoring him. He was my second in command not my fucking babysitter. But I couldn’t let him see me with any weakness precisely for that reason. If he figured out I had a soft spot for Elise, he might start to think I wasn’t a strong enough leader. Of course, I’d just beat

his fucking head in if he tried to suggest that to the Brotherhood. But I still didn't like the way he was looking at us.

"Ryder?" Elise pressed, her brows pulling together with concern.

I couldn't say the words now that Bryce was here. He was a Vampire just like her and if his ears were trained this way, he'd catch it.

Inferno swept into the room, his eyes seeking out my girl in an instant. I was getting challenged left, right and centre for Elise and it got my back up. Especially when Nox walked into the room and sought her out too. I bared my teeth, my hackles rising as the Lion King walked in too.

"For fuck's sake," Leon snarled, making a move toward me.

"Mr Night, if you don't take your seat this second, I will ensure you lose your spot as twelfth on the leaderboard. Do not test me," Professor Titan demanded.

The Lion moved to his seat, dropping into it with another growl. None of Elise's other stalkers said a word. It was done. And I wasn't going to have her taken from me in this class again.

"Today we'll be learning a new potion," Titan announced as he moved to the board and wrote the name across it.

Everlasting Adhesive Balm.

It wasn't new to me; I'd been making potions practically since I could walk. My father had taught me everything I needed to get a grasp on the art. He told me I'd inherited my mother's talent. It was the one thing about myself I valued above all else. That piece of her that lived in me was still intact. Even after Mariella.

The rest of the good either of my parents had given me was lost. Though sometimes Elise fixed a few of my broken shards, holding them together

long enough for her to get a glimpse of that person I'd been. And I hated to admit it, but those times when she did draw my shattered parts back together felt like breathing a lungful of the purest, crispest winter air. It felt like none of it had ever happened.

But it had fuckwit, so live with it.

The most excruciating thing about Elise was that she reminded me of that whole person, triggered memories of him. I'd spent too many nights drowning in them recently, suffocated by the reminder of what I'd lost. But I was starting to relish those glimpses too.

Elise fetched the ingredients and I corrected her as she started brewing the glue. She didn't seem to mind, adding notes to her page where the textbook made a mistake and I filled in the gaps. When she had to stir it three hundred and thirty eight times clockwise, I checked my Atlas for messages from my Eyes. There was a bunch of trivial shit. Dante's movements this week, how his new recruits were performing and which of them might pose an actual threat. When I was done, my thumb drifted to my photos and I brought up the one of Elise and I as fucking bunny rabbits. A softness filled my chest which I decided to mentally term *Elisery*.

Elise suddenly plucked the device from my grip with her free hand, tapping something on the screen. "If you're going to stare at it, you might as well set it as your screensaver."

"What? Fuck no." I snatched my Atlas back, finding she'd already done it and my heart crashed into my ribcage. "How do you undo it?" I'd never set a fucking screensaver in my life. How was I supposed to get rid of it?

Elise started laughing, clearly having no intention of telling me.

"*Elise*," I snarled in warning.

"Atlas away, Mr Draconis," Titan called over to me, his eyes threatening a rank dock. But I was currently beating Inferno on the leaderboard and the

stubborn part of me simply couldn't allow him to take the lead. Dante glanced over at me hopefully and I shoved my Atlas into my pocket with a hiss.

"Um…P-professor?" Eugene called from the front of the class.

"Yes, Mr Dipper?"

"I th-think someone m-maybe accidentally spilled their potion onto my seat when I went to the supply cupboard." The kid looked ready to cry as Bryce burst into silent hysterics, clearly the culprit.

"Oh," the Professor breathed in concern. "You're entirely stuck?"

Eugene stood up to prove his point, his chair firmly stuck to his ass. The class lost it as laughter filled the air and I glanced at Elise, finding her frowning.

"Well you'll have to take your pants off," Titan said, not bothering to try and quieten the class.

"It's s-soaked through!" Eugene wailed and Titan sucked in a breath.

The Professor swept toward him, planting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid you'll have to go to the ward, Mr Dipper. But the Everlasting Adhesive Balm is, well, *everlasting*. If it's stuck to your skin there may have to be some…removal of the area."

Eugene stumbled, looking ready to faint as Titan led him to the door. The chair swung back and forth on his ass like some screwed up duck tail, smacking into tables and other students as he went.

Bryce recorded the entire thing on his Atlas and I smirked, serving me with an elbow from Elise.

"Oh don't tell me you like the rat kid?" I rolled my eyes.

She folded her arms. "I just don't think there's any need to bully him," she snipped as if *I'd* fucking done it.

"Bryce-" I started but she cut over me.

“Is *your* second in command, right?” She raised an eyebrow then turned to face the potion as she continued stirring.

I gawped at her, but she didn’t turn to face me again. I racked my brain as I stared at her, confused as fuck. And I realised that *confusion* was officially going to join pain and lust on my emotional scale. Because Elise Callisto left me feeling fucking perplexed every time I ‘hung out’ with her.

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The Kiplings had delivered my order at last and I finally had the powdered red cinnabar crystals I needed to get on with my potion. It was complicated as shit but I was more than able for it.

I fetched the Hawthrax bone that I’d left baking in the sun for seven days hidden in a grove on the edge of the Empyrean Fields. I wanted this potion finished. Because as soon as it was done, I could finally put my plan into motion. Death was coming on swift wings and I was its deliverer.

I returned to the Vega Dormitories, stalking through the students who were milling about after class and making several of them scatter away from me with nothing but a glare. I soon stepped into my room, locking the door and heading to my desk, switching on the lamp there and leaving the rest of the space in darkness. The potion I’d been brewing in my cauldron looked like tar and was just as thick.

I pulled on a pair of gauntlets, checking to make sure my window was still cracked open for ventilation as I lowered into the chair, taking out the stockpile in my pocket. The thick bag of crushed cinnabar crystals shimmered like blood in the low light. Just one of those crystals was powerful enough to stop a Fae shifting into their Order form for a full hour. But the amount I’d bought could take down a fucking army for an entire

day. It was mainly used in prisons like Darkmore Penitentiary to stop inmates from transforming and it wasn’t something that was easy to get hold of legally.

I carefully poured the contents into the blackened sludge within the cauldron, stirring slowly as I folded the glittering powder into the mix. When all of the crystal powder was added, I took out the Hawthrax bone and broke it in two. I dropped the two pieces in at the same time and the potion sizzled, devouring the bone. I started stirring anti-clockwise and the brew became less viscous, thinning out, colour draining from it by the second until it was entirely clear. Odourless too.

I smiled darkly, checking my watch. My test subject was about to arrive. Not that he knew what he was coming here for.

I used a pipette to syphon some of the mixture into a cup and set it aside, placing the iron lid on top of the cauldron to seal it. The fumes slid out of the window while I placed the utensils into a metal box for my people to clean for me.

A knock came at the door and I smirked, picking up the cup. One drop of water would turn the liquid into gas. And I had a pipette stashed up my sleeve. It wouldn’t affect me. No poison did. I was fucking immune to all potions thanks to my Order.

I headed to the door, opening it with a grunt and finding Bryce there in a tank top and sweatpants.

“You wanted to see me, boss?”

I swung the door wide, moving to give him access and he strode into the room, glancing around curiously.

I nudged the door shut, turning to him and finding him investigating my work desk. My Atlas buzzed and the screen brightened, drawing his gaze.

Claws ripped at my gut as Bryce snatched it up and rounded on me. “Woah, what the fuck is this?”

The bunny picture of Elise and I stared at me on my fucking screensaver. I’d forgotten all about trying to change it and now one of my goddamn Brothers had seen it.

“Nothing, give it to me,” I snarled, striding toward him and holding out my free hand.

“That girl is trouble,” Bryce hissed, passing it to me, his words causing my jaw to clench dangerously. “She’s making you weak.”

It took everything I had not to slam my knuckles into his fucking face. I held back for one reason alone: he had more to say on the matter. I could see it in his steely gaze and I was going to get every ounce of the truth from him before he paid for his words.

“First you let her bite you, now you’re what? A couple who do sappy shit like this? What would the Brotherhood think?” Bryce shook his head and his fangs lengthened, his eyes flashing with some emotion I couldn’t place. Not until he looked up and his gaze raked over my throat.

Jealousy.

My muscles bunched and my jaw started to tick. He gazed warily across my expression, dipping his head.

“I’m only looking out for you, boss. I don’t mean any offence. It’s just…”

“Jusst?” I hissed, letting my snake rise to the surface of my flesh.

“Well if someone’s going to feed from you shouldn’t it be…your second?” He glanced hopefully up at me, a hunger in his eyes begging me to allow him to feed from me. The rattle started up in my chest, but he swallowed, looking like he might try and lunge at me, barely restraining himself. If he did, I’d break every bone in his body.

I squeezed the pipette up my sleeve into the beaker in my hand. I let the fumes fill the air, knowing they wouldn't affect me. Bryce frowned, glancing at the beaker then gasped as his fangs retracted and the gleam in his eyes faded.

I smiled, but it was a wicked, hollow thing. "Good. It works," I purred to myself, closing in on him and placing the beaker down.

I caught him by the throat, slamming him against the wall and snarling in his face. He grabbed my wrist, his fire Element searing my skin as he tried to break free but I relished the lick of the flames, sneering at him as he continued to struggle. Panic filled his eyes when he realised his Vampire gifts were gone, stolen by the potion until it wore off. With the strength of the concoction it would be hours before he got them back. And he'd have paid severely by then.

"Elise is not your concern," I snarled. "From now on, you don't breathe her name or even look in her direction."

Bryce nodded frantically, clutching at my arm in desperation. "Yes, boss," he choked out. "I won't. I promise. Just let me go."

"The leader of the Lunar Brotherhood doesn't show mercy," I snarled as I drank in his pain, tightening my hand around his neck. I could feel the ache in his lungs, the swelling of his tongue. It caressed my magic reserves and pulled a satisfied sigh from my lips.

I threw my first punch into his gut, then another to his ribs that made bones snap. He screamed, but no one would come. There was a silencing bubble in place and it had been almost a day since I'd filled my reserves. Bryce had just given me the perfect excuse to punish him and feed on his pain.

And I'd feed and feed until he got the message.

I was not fucking weak. And Elise Callisto was not to be used against me.

If Miss Nightshade didn’t think there was any issue with her using her Siren gifts to dig around in my head without permission, then she really couldn’t complain about me using my Vampire gifts to follow her to her precious secret meeting. Whatever the hell she was up to tonight, she’d clearly felt the need to lie about it to me which was suspicious in itself. Why pretend she was going on a date unless what she was really doing was shady as fuck? So I’d taken it upon myself to find out exactly what the truth of her little evening rendezvous was.

I was wearing black jeans and a black sweater and had even gone to the effort of covering my lilac hair in a black beanie hat. All in all I looked like your catalogue copy of a bank robber; all I needed to do was cut a few eye holes in the hat so that I could roll it down over my face and I’d be on to a winner. And it wasn’t like I’d done that…but it wasn’t entirely like I hadn’t either. Because if she went somewhere with CCTV then I’d have to hide my face if I was going to keep following her. And I had no intention of letting her escape me. That bitch was up to something. The evidence I’d gathered kept pointing me back to her. I was almost certain she had a hand in the Black Card. I just needed to figure out her angle. Could she be the person I was looking for? Or was I just grasping at straws?

It turned out Miss Nightshade's idea of an incognito vehicle was a lime green hatchback. Not very psycho brainwasher of her but handy from my point of view. I'd never used my Vampire speed to chase down a car before and this was going to be a challenge. I couldn't stay close enough to her to draw her attention, but it wasn't like I had a way to slow down my gift. It was pretty much all or nothing. So I was going to have to shoot from spot to spot, taking cover between runs and keep an eye on her car from a distance without letting it get out of sight.

My first challenge was waiting for her to appear. I'd set myself up in the branches of the huge oak tree which sat to the right of the main gates that led onto campus. I had a clear view of the parking lot and had been perched here since classes had finished at the end of the day.

But now, at half eight she'd finally appeared. All fast strides and worried expression.

My heart beat a little faster as she got into her car and I strained my ears to listen as she lifted her Atlas to make a call.

A robotic voice answered and I perked up as I realised the person on the other end of the line was using a voice scrambler. It was harder to trick technology with concealment spells so the use of a scrambler was a pretty good tip off that whoever she was calling didn't want to be identified. But did that mean Nightshade didn't know who she was speaking to either? Had they hidden their identity from her or was it just a counter measure against snoopy assholes like me?

"Location D," the voice said. "Twenty minutes."

"I'm in the car already, I'll be there," Nightshade replied and the call cut off.

Well if that wasn't shady as fuck then I didn't know what was.

She began backing out of her parking space and I shifted in my hiding place, ready to drop out of the tree once she made it beyond the gates.

The red glow of her brake lights caught my attention and she pulled the car forward, adjusting the angle of the vehicle before trying to back up again. I pursed my lips impatiently as she edged forward and back for a third time. Then a fourth. If her mystery meeting required her to be there on time I was beginning to think they'd be disappointed.

She spun the wheel frantically and my heightened senses picked up the insistent beep beep beep of her parking sensors as she looked over her shoulder to back out again. Except she hadn't put the car in reverse so it lurched forward instead and she slammed her foot on the brake half a second before she could total the SUV parked alongside her.

I bit my lip, half wondering if she'd ever get the car out of that spot. Hell, I was tempted to offer to help her out and I couldn't even drive. But watching her bunny hop back and forth in that space was damn painful.

She finally managed to back out of the spot without taking out the cars either side of her and I rolled my eyes as she drove the long way around the parking lot before heading for the gates.

As she pulled out onto the road, I dropped out of my hiding place and shot to the gate, hanging back to make sure I wouldn't be noticed in her rear view mirror if she checked it.

The lime green car made it halfway down the road before turning right, heading towards the city. I sped after it the moment she turned the corner, pulling up short behind a wall before the turn and peering down the next road to see where she went next.

When she turned off again I raced after her, repeating the process again and again as she drove further into the city, heading towards the rabbit warren of apartment blocks and office buildings on the east side. She was

dancing close to the Oscura/Lunar divide and I grew more nervous as we closed in on the war zone that parted their territory. Unallied members of the public did cross over but there were certain places where it was safer to do so and I didn't have enough knowledge of this part of town to know if this was one of them or not. The last thing I needed was to be seen crossing over and to be taken for an enemy gang member. Assassination due to mistaken identity was not on my to do list for today.

Thankfully Nightshade turned her car off of the street and took a ramp into an underground parking lot before I had to deal with the shift in territories.

I hesitated in the shadows between two of the huge buildings which lined the street, looking around to see if there was anyone watching that lot from out here or if I was safe to follow.

I couldn't spot anyone so I took a deep breath and sped after her.

There was no sign of a lime green hatchback as I made it inside so I strained my ears and detected the purr of an engine and the faint squealing of tyres on tarmac coming from beneath me.

To my left was a ramp which spiralled down and had a sign that said it led to parking levels A, B, C and D.

A quick sweep of the surrounding space rewarded me with a look at the stairs which led down there too and I took a punt. That robo-voice had said to meet in location D so I was going to guess that could have referred to the bottom level of the lot which held that title.

I sped towards the stairs, listening for a moment to make sure there was no one waiting beyond the door before pulling it open and heading inside. I shot to the bottom level where a large D sat above the door which led back out into the lot.

Adrenaline was trickling through my veins and I slipped through the door, opening it as little as possible before closing it again softly once I was through. A black truck was parked to the right of the door and I slipped behind it, crouching down as the sound of Nightshade's car drew closer down the ramp.

Thankfully, the lot was mostly empty so she pulled across two parking spaces without any trouble and I didn't have to endure the agony of watching her try to park up.

I waited, holding my breath as I listened intently for any sign of someone approaching in the dimly lit space.

Nightshade's Atlas rang and I flinched, a spike of fear catching me in its talons as the sound took me by surprise.

"I'm here," she said as she answered the call.

"I took the liberty of letting myself into your office," the robotic voice said dryly.

"I'll be right up!" Nightshade cut the call and leapt from her car.

She hurried across the darkened space, her high heels clicking loudly as she half ran towards an elevator in the far corner.

I cursed as I spotted the keypad system used to access it and inched myself higher, using my enhanced vision to watch as she punched in the code.

264- *Dammit!* She shifted into my way as she hit the final button but her hand had dropped low so I guessed it was a seven eight or nine.

The elevator doors slid open as it arrived with a ding and she headed in. I could only stay where I was as the doors closed again and it ascended with my prey in tow.

I cursed as I shot across the space and stood before the closed doors with my heart pounding. I was so damn close. I couldn't give up now but getting

into that metal box was a hell of a lot like caging myself in. If she'd figured out she was being followed I could find myself facing her and whoever she was meeting the moment the elevator doors opened again. I probably should have bailed. But finding out what had happened to Gareth was all I really had to live for now and I just couldn't let this opportunity slip away from me.

I took a steadying breath and punched in the code 264…*9.* I bit my tongue as I took a guess at the final digit and my fingers trembled just a little. The light above the keypad switched from red to green and a moment later, the elevator arrived.

I tugged my beanie hat down over my face, using the holes I'd cut into it to see out, just in case there was CCTV in the elevator. I now looked suspicious as fuck but that couldn't be helped. I couldn't risk being seen and if I was caught here then I was in deep shit anyway. Better that I hid my face.

I slipped inside the lit up metal cube, keeping my head low and resisting using my Vampire speed to make identifying me all the more difficult if I really was on camera.

My gaze slid over the buttons inside and my gut took a nose dive as I realised I had no goddamn idea which floor she'd gone to. And worse than that, she'd probably already started her meeting. I was missing out on whatever information she was exchanging with this mystery person and all I could do was stare at the buttons angrily.

My gaze slid to a framed plaque hanging on the wall of the elevator. It was a list of the floors and the people whose offices resided on them. I scanned it quickly and spotted *Miss L Nightshade – Therapist* listed on floor twenty six.

I hit that button and a moment later the elevator was ascending.

My heart banged against my ribs as I drew closer and closer to my target. Could this meeting really be as important as I was hoping? Was she meeting the King I was hunting?

The thought of that alone sent anticipation coursing through me. Maybe I could finish this right now, burst in there and beat the fucker who'd killed my brother until they begged me for death.

A savage smile tugged at my lips at that thought and my fangs lengthened to deadly points.

The elevator dinged as it arrived and I stilled, heart thumping, muscles poised as the doors slid open.

An empty, dimly lit corridor awaited me and I released a shaky breath as I stepped out.

I closed my eyes for a moment, concentrating on my sense of sound alone until I was fairly sure I made out voices coming from further down the corridor to my right.

The dark carpet muffled my steps as I hurried along it and I slowed as the voices got louder.

A wooden door with *Miss Nightshade* stamped on it stood a few doors away from me and I quickly slipped into the office beside me as I focused on my snooping. I didn't want to get too close to her in case she sensed my emotions with her Siren gifts. I couldn't let her figure out someone else was here.

"-slim pickings, I'm afraid," Nightshade's voice came to me through the wall. "I'm awaiting a new list of referrals so hopefully I'll uncover more hopeless souls for you then."

The sound of rifling papers followed.

"I suppose this will do," a voice replied and for a moment I was sure it was the soft tone of a woman. "I'll get the dealers working on them. There

are a few who seem suicidal from the last batch you provided anyway so they should suffice for the coming full moon," the voice now sounded deep and rough, entirely masculine and I suppressed a growl of frustration as I realised they were under a concealment spell.

Did Nightshade even know who she was meeting?

"Yes, I agree. And given a month or more, the Killblaze addiction should prove strong enough to tip at least one of these new candidates over the edge. There are a few there who seem very promising," Nightshade said. "One whose family was killed in a house fire she accidentally started after her Element was Awakened and another who has been bullied his entire life and has long since given into the hopelessness of his situation."

"Good. Continue to feed them negativity and suicidal feelings in your sessions and we should have something to work with."

My heart leapt. I'd known she was a dodgy bitch but using her power to make the people who came to her suicidal? What the actual fuck??

Magic tingled through my fingertips. There was no doubt in my mind that the person she was meeting was the same fucker who'd killed that boy in the woods and tried to kill me too. I didn't care if it was technically suicide – these assholes were clearly driving people to that action which made it murder in my book. But was that what had happened to Gareth? The police report on his death had been clear: he died of an overdose. He didn't kill himself. I'd read the report back to front. I'd seen his body. So if these monsters needed their victims to take their own lives for their black magic to work then why would they just kill him with the stuff? Was there a chance that I'd stumbled onto some other crime? That this wasn't what had gotten my brother killed at all?

Fuck.

Did it even matter? They were clearly dealing Killblaze. Clearly killing innocent people albeit by strange, roundabout methods. So they deserved my wrath, right?

But what if they weren't the ones responsible for Gareth's death? I'd seen the mystery figure take the magic from that dead boy in the woods. If they were able to harness the power of their victims, then I was going to find myself seriously outmatched if I went storming in there. Two fully trained, possibly insanely powerful Fae against one pissed off half-trained Vampire. I knew how that story would end. And even though I was more than willing to trade my life for vengeance, I wasn't going to risk it on taking down the wrong culprit. I needed more evidence. I had to hold back.

"I'll keep you updated," Nightshade agreed heartily and I held my breath as her office door clicked open.

"Good. Then I'll be off."

Muffled footsteps sounded in the corridor and I leaned back against the wall, peeking out through a gap in the blinds which hung over the window looking into the corridor.

My heart hammered a wild tune in my chest as a cloaked figure passed by mere feet away from me. As I watched them go, I tried to get a handle on the way they looked. Tall then short, broad, skinny, thin, fat… it was fucking useless. Every time I blinked they looked different, the power of their magic cloaking them from prying eyes.

My fingernails bit into my palms as I considered following them, but that idea was squashed as they paused at the end of the corridor and drew out a silk bag before throwing a handful of stardust over themselves and disappearing into the ether. I just stared at the place where they'd been in shock. Stardust was insanely expensive, travelling like that was for the rich and famous, not the kind of Fae who lived in Alestria. The only people I'd

ever even heard rumours of having any of it were…the Oscuras. There had been a huge stockpile of stardust stolen from a Celestial Councillor last year and none of it had ever been recovered. No one had ever been arrested. But the FIB had gone at the Oscuras hard over it and the story had been all over the news for a while. My brow pinched as I filed that thought away for later, focusing instead on my current predicament.

I almost groaned aloud but the sound of Nightshade rummaging about in her office made me pause. Perhaps there was more I could find here. I could search her office, look for something, *anything* that might allude to the identity of the cloaked figure. It was a long shot but I didn't have much else to go on.

The minutes ticked by and I listened as Nightshade typed something on her computer, sighing to herself like the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. I kept my mental barriers locked up tight and made sure I stayed at the far end of the office I was using to hide out in, so there was no chance of her catching even a tendril of emotion from me. She couldn't know I was here. She might even recognise the sound of my emotions just as I could recognise a voice. I didn't know if that was how it worked for Sirens or not and I wasn't looking to find out.

Eventually, a chair rolled over carpet and the jingle of car keys came just before she walked across the room and headed out into the corridor.

I shrank against the wall furthest from the door as she walked away from me and waited until I heard her descending in the elevator before releasing my breath.

I slipped back into the corridor and moved along the dark space until I stood before her office. The moment my fingers brushed the door handle, I sensed a magical lock and alarm in place and quickly withdrew my hand again.

Well shit.

For half a minute I considered trying to disable the lock before my gaze lifted to the ceiling. There were metal ventilation shafts running along the roof and one of them headed straight into Nightshade's office.

I grinned as I jogged down the corridor, hunting until I spotted a grate above my head. I quickly retrieved a chair from one of the unlocked offices and climbed up, pushing the grate aside with my fingertips.

I leapt up, catching the lip of the hole it left for me and hoisting myself inside with a grunt of effort.

A shit eating grin captured my lips as I started crawling, the dull thunk, thunk, thunk of my movements sounding like a klaxon in the silence. But I didn't slow down. If my ears couldn't detect anyone lurking close by then I was pretty confident I was alone up here.

I made it into the vent above her office and looked down at the wide space beneath me as I eased the grate up and out of my way.

Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker.

I dropped down onto the carpet and fell still as I looked about, my skin prickling with the knowledge that I was doing something utterly insane. But it felt really damn good too.

Behind me was a couch where I guessed her patients would sit, a comfy armchair set up beside it for her. A box of tissues sat ready on a small table for the weepers.

To the far side of the room was a desk with her computer. Framed certificates hung behind it, detailing her qualifications in mind fuckery.

My gaze snagged on a filing cabinet in the corner and I headed for it, finding it locked.

I chewed my lip, looking around with my enhanced vision until I spotted a book on the heavily stocked bookshelf which wasn't tucked back into

place properly. I pulled it out quickly and grinned as I snagged the little silver key from behind it.

The moment I opened the top drawer of the cabinet I found it stacked with files, each labelled with a name in alphabetical order. The next two drawers held the same and I skimmed my gaze over them, hunting for anyone I recognised but coming up short. I guessed she didn't keep her academy records here and wondered if it might be worth trying to break into her office at the school too.

I opened the bottom drawer last and found a bunch of files which seemed to be in a completely random order.

I hooked them out on instinct and flipped open the first one. A photograph looked up at me alongside the name Aubrey Hawkins but I didn't recognise her. I scanned the first page of notes, the word *suicidal* jumping out at me as well as the fact that she had no contact with her family.

I frowned, closing her file and pulling open the next.

My heart skipped a beat as I looked into the face of the boy who had died in the woods. The one no one would admit had even existed. The one they told me was a figment of my fucked-up-Killblaze-tripping imagination.

Luke Thompson. He had a name. A real honest to the stars *name.* I whipped my Atlas out and took a photo of his file with all his personal information included. Then I followed suit with the other files in that drawer. There were eighteen of them in total. Was I looking at a list of victims? Was it possible that all of these people were dead because of Miss Nightshade and her accomplice?

I placed all of the files back in the drawer and closed it again, locking it up and putting the key back where I'd found it.

I gave the rest of the room a sweep, but I couldn’t find anything else and her computer was password protected.

I finally accepted that I wasn’t going to discover any more clues here and leapt back up into the vent from her desk.

I didn’t relax until I’d made it back to Aurora Academy with my newfound evidence. Now I just had to look into the rest of the people in those files and figure out if I was on to some kind of pattern. And what the hell it meant if I was.

Eleven Months Before the Solarid Meteor Shower…

***I** hurried across the Acrux Courtyard as I ran for my Elemental magic lesson with Professor King.*

I took the curving path down to the Empyrean Fields where the class was held, spotting the rest of the students already lining up. I cursed beneath my breath as her gaze narrowed on me.

"That's minus five rank points, Tempa," she purred, her deep brown eyes raking over me.

"Sorry," I muttered, joining the line of students and finding myself beside Dante Oscura. I was just glad she hadn't decided to bite me as punishment. Some other sucker must have gotten that fate today.

It wasn't that I had anything against Vampires biting me on the whole. It was just the way that Professor King did it always made me feel really uncomfortable. She liked to grab hair and drive you up against something or bend you over something and bite your neck from behind. And she wasn't horrible to look at either so having a beautiful woman rough you up and bite your neck could do strange things to a teenage boy.

She was in her thirties and always wore deep red lipstick and styled her brunette hair like she was off on a night out, not here to teach a class. She was also the strictest teacher in the whole damn academy. Crossing her was not fun. I'd heard a rumour that she actually hung students from the ceiling in ropes built out of her air magic during her detentions. Then she left them there until all the blood in their bodies ran to their head so that she could get a faster flowing drink from them before she let them go again. Was that bullshit? Possibly. Did I want to find out? No thank you.

This term, the freshmen were having two Elemental lessons a week alongside us sophomores. It hadn't been said directly but it was obvious why. Between Gabriel Nox, Leon Night and Ryder Draconis, there wasn't a freshman who could equal their magic. Professor King wanted to challenge them by pitching them against more experienced students.

I had thought that Dante would be just as capable as them too. But for some reason he was really struggling in this class. A fact which generally meant I kept the hell away from him during it as he often lost his temper and started punching things. I didn't want to end up being one of those things. We may have been kind of friends – though I really wasn't sure about that – but I got the feeling if he lost it, he'd really lose it. And I had no intention of being on the receiving end of his temper.

"Today I'll be assessing all of your progress," Professor King said, not raising her voice. She didn't need to, no one dared speak to each other while she was talking in her lessons. "I'm going to come along the line and I want to see a demonstration of controlled Elemental magic. Fire balls, shaped vines, water orbs, hand held vortexes and the like. This is an assessment. Some of you-" her eyes narrowed on Dante "-are treading a thin line. If you cannot achieve basic control of your Element, I may be forced to recommend your removal from this academy. We have students

who have remained on in high schools for their magical education who would cut off their right arms for a place at this institution. We can't let hopeless cases stay on."

Dante growled beside me and a hum of electricity filled the air at her implication. It prickled against my skin almost painfully and I side stepped to try and escape it.

"Wait in line until I reach you." Professor King headed to the start of the line a few students along to my left and I glanced at Dante uneasily.

"Hey," I said, keeping my voice low so as not to piss off our teacher.

Dante flipped his gaze to Professor King then turned to look at me. "You have air, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," I agreed.

Dante raised his palm between the two of us. "So perhaps you can help me prove something I'm growing suspicious of, mio amico?"

I nodded and Dante flicked his fingers, causing a little whirlwind of air to come alive in his palm. It started spinning faster and faster, coiling together tightly and taking on some of his storm magic so that it glowed grey like a tornado, utterly contained within his hand.

I raised my eyebrows. It was perfect. Beyond perfect. He had total control over it. The entire thing stayed central in his palm and I couldn't even feel a flicker of wind against my skin even though I stood barely a foot from it. He was creating all the air it needed to keep up the magic, containing it entirely, not taking any from around us. He closed his fist and the magic dissipated instantly.

"Does it seem to you like I should be failing this class?" he asked, his voice a seductive purr which held the barest hint of a threat.

"No, man. I mean, in all honesty I don't think I can match that level of control and I've got another year of education on you." I knew the gang

leader took his education seriously and I'd been surprised when he'd started failing this class. It was no joke either, you really could lose your place at the academy if you couldn't claim control of your Element.

"So why…" I began but I trailed off, not wanting to say so why are you failing so terribly *just in case he lashed out.*

"I have a theory that you may be able to help me with," he said, looking beyond me to make sure Professor King wasn't listening. With her Vampire ears she easily could have been.

Dante pulled his Atlas from his pocket and typed something out before showing it to me.

I want you to try and sense the air magic around me during my assessment and tell me if that Vampira bitch is sabotaging me.

My lips parted with surprise and I looked up at him, frowning as I tried to figure out why the hell a teacher would do something like that.

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

"Of course. I'll try," I said, not entirely sure if I'd even be able to do as he wanted but I'd give it a shot.

He nodded once and pushed his Atlas back into his pocket just as Professor King made it to me.

"Impress me, Tempa," she commanded almost lazily.

I cleared my throat, casting half a glance at Dante then lifting my hand between us. My heart was thumping unevenly at the implication he'd made but I had to ignore it. Even if Professor King had something against Dante, it wasn't my problem. It wouldn't affect my assessment.

I stooped down and plucked a blade of grass from the ground by my feet and dropped it into my hand before I began.

I released a steadying breath and summoned a tunnel of air into existence in my palm. I exerted my will on it, forming a current which gathered up the blade of grass before circling my wrist and then weaving it back and forth between my fingers. Once I got used to the way the air was flowing, I increased the speed and watched as the grass spun around and around my hand in the current I'd created.

"Nice control," King commented. "Steady rhythm." She marked something down on her Atlas. "But I can feel a breeze on my face."

I cursed as she moved on, releasing my hold on the magic and letting the blade of grass fall to the ground.

My heart beat a little faster as Dante gave me a pointed look. I hadn't had a lot of practice at sensing the use of others' magic but I'd sure as hell give it a shot.

I kept my gaze fixed on Professor King's free hand as she dropped it to her side.

Dante lifted his hand and summoned a miniature tornado just as he'd shown me. For a moment it seemed to be going well but then a breeze knocked against my arm.

Professor King shifted back a step and moved her hand. Or had she? She could have cast magic then but maybe not. She was a damn Vampire so the movement had been so fast that I couldn't be sure. I thought she twitched her fingers again just as Dante's magic fell apart.

Eugene Dipper was standing on his other side and he caught a smack of powerful air magic to the face which knocked him on his ass.

Dante growled loudly and Professor King sighed. "Still no improvement," she commented. "If anything, you might be getting worse*."*

Dante outwardly snarled at her and Ryder Draconis laughed loudly from further down the line.

Professor King didn't seem to care that she'd pissed off the future leader of the Oscura Clan and moved on to assess Eugene as he clambered back upright again.

Dante swore and stormed away, striding out of the class without a backwards glance.

I watched him go with my heart hammering, not looking at Professor King.

My Atlas pinged in my pocket a few moments later and I found a message from Dante under the alias I'd given him.

***Starhawk*:**

Well?

***Gareth*:**

I'm not sure. Maybe. She moved her hand, but with her Vampire speed I couldn't say for sure if she cast anything and it was hard to figure out exactly what magic was taking place. It happened too quickly.

I didn't get a reply and my heart kept on thumping a warning beat. Was he pissed at me? Had I failed him somehow? I needed the money he was offering me for working for him. I chewed my lip. I needed to make sure I wasn't on his shit list.

Gareth:

I'm sorry, man. If there's anything else I can do to help then I'm all in.

***Starhawk*:**

If you want to prove your loyalty then you'll figure this shit out for me.

***Gareth*:**

How?

Starhawk:

Search her office. Find something incriminating. I want photos or footage of something I can use to bend her over a barrel.

I inhaled sharply as I read that. How the hell was I supposed to get into her office? In fact, forget that, how the hell was I supposed to snoop on a Vampire??

Gareth:

Yeah. Of course. Anything. Just…not really sure how to go about that…

Starhawk:

Figure it out, cavallo. Prove your worth.

Shit. Shit, shitting, shit.

I scraped a hand into my hair, glancing at Professor King as she continued to move away from me with her assessments.

So how was I gonna do this?

Of course, I did happen to be very close to a Vampire who might just give me some tips.

***Gareth*:**

Hey, little angel. I need some tips on sneaking up on a Vampire…

***Ella*:**

Why??

Crap, I should have thought of that. Of course she'd have questions. *I hurriedly came up with an excuse and shot a message back to her.*

Gareth:

Got a friend I want to prank. He makes it difficult by being super fast and having bat ears. Very inconsiderate…

***Ella*:**

Well, we are the best Order after all, wouldn't you agree?

***Gareth*:**

Second best. Now are you gonna help me out or what?

***Ella*:**

Keep your panties on! You're gonna want a silencing bubble around you to keep your pounding heartbeat and elephant feet hidden. And I'd suggest lying in wait rather than trying sneak up because our superior eyesight means we see any movement. And don't even bother trying to overpower him…we're much stronger than you hahaha xxx

***Gareth*:**

Thanks, asshat x

***Ella*:**

No problem, dipshit x

Right. So I just had to cast a silencing bubble and sneak into her office when she wasn't about. Easy. Not. But fuck it I had to try because I needed Dante Oscura's money. I still hadn't had a job from Ryder despite him claiming to want me to do something for him and the next payment was coming up.

The staff had their own section of the Cafaeteria to eat their meals in and Professor King was often there. I'd just have to make sure she was eating dinner and then head to her office and hope I could find something.

***

Professor King had been walking to her table with a tray full of food when I'd looked into the Cafaeteria and I'd come straight here. To her office. Like I had a goddamn death wish.

I lingered at the door, glancing up and down in case any other professors were around. They weren't.

I raised my hand to knock even though I knew she wasn't there. But I wanted to sound out any magical locks she might have placed on the door. To my surprise, there weren't any.

I reached for the door handle, swallowing a lump in my throat and…it turned. The door swung opened silently and I gaped at the darkened space before me.

Shit. That was easy. Too easy.

I wanted to run the fuck away. But Dante would beat me shitless if he knew I'd gotten this far and bailed. And she was eating dinner. So...

I took a breath and paused to cast a detection spell in the corridor outside. I'd already set one at the start of the hall and if someone passed

through either of them, the magic would warn me they were coming without alerting them to it. I'd have a very short span of time to get the hell out of here but hopefully it would be enough.

Steeling myself, I stepped inside.

The office was fairly big and pretty empty. A mahogany desk sat in the centre of the space, the top of it oddly bare. There were a few lamps in the corners of the room but I didn't risk switching one on. An office chair was rolled back against the wall and a few weird, abstract paintings hung around the place.

I tried the desk drawers and found them locked.

I sighed, looking up and noticing a large closet on the far side of the room. I walked over to it and pulled open the slatted door before stepping inside the small space.

Books lined the shelves on the walls, all seeming pretty inconspicuous to me. I was about to head back out and take another crack at the desk when I noticed a cardboard box shoved into the back corner.

I dropped down before it, lifting the lid and frowning at the stack of papers inside. There were all sorts of things from bills to newspaper cuttings, old photos and even a graduation certificate. I sifted through all of it in case I might find something useful, but it didn't seem like I would.

Just as I was nearing the bottom of the box, a warning prickle of magic slid down my spine.

Oh, shit on it!

I started shoving the papers back into the box as fast as I could, tossing the lid on before jumping to my feet just as the second magical warning ran along my spine.

I was out of time. She was right outside! So I did the only thing I could and yanked the cupboard door closed, hiding myself inside it.

My heart was thundering with panic and I double checked the silencing spell I'd cast was tight around me half a second before the office door was thrown open and Professor King sauntered in.

I held my breath even though the silencing bubble made it unnecessary, watching her through the slats in the cupboard door and hoping against hope that she didn't need to come in here.

She walked across the room, slipping her blazer off so that she was left in her sleeveless white shirt and black pencil skirt. She took a mirror from her purse and touched up her dark red lipstick, glancing at the door like she was waiting for someone.

I didn't have to wait long to find out who, as the door opened again a moment later.

Ryder Draconis strolled into the room looking half bored and half pissed off. He'd changed out of his uniform into a black T-shirt and a pair of faded jeans and Professor King bit her lip as she waited for him to close the door behind him.

She waved her hand and the sound of the door locking came just before she threw up a large silencing bubble. Luckily for me it encompassed the closet too so I could still hear her as she spoke.

"I've been bad again, master," she breathed, her voice husky.

My eyes widened as Ryder looked at her for a long moment before reaching over his back, hoisting his T-shirt off and tossing it on the floor. His chest was criss-crossed with faded scars and I frowned as I looked at them, wondering what the hell had happened to him that was so bad it couldn't be healed away with magic.

Ryder took a step closer to Professor King and she bit her lip as her gaze raked over his exposed, muscular body.

My lips parted as my brain refused to accept what I was seeing, but it wasn't like there were many plausible explanations for this interaction. Was he here for a mole check? No. Did he have a spider down the back of his shirt and had to rip it off to escape its scrambly legs? No. Did she just call him master because he's actually secretly her…master…in a totally non-sexual way? She started unbuttoning her shirt so I was gonna go with a hell to the fucking no.

Oh shit.

My shocked and horrified brain finally realised I was supposed to be here getting dirt on her and a sex tape was obviously exactly the kind of thing Dante would want. A sex tape of her with a student even better. Her and Ryder Draconis? I'd probably be a fucking millionaire if I got him that.

I yanked my Atlas out of my pocket, lined it up with a gap in the slats and set it to record. Because fuck, this was fifty shades of screwed up, but it was also probably the ticket to Elise's freedom for at least another month.

"Tell me what you've done," Ryder growled, vines springing to life between his hands. I watched as he slowly wrapped the end of one around his fist, letting the three vines trail to the floor like a whip.

"I disrupted Dante Oscura's magic in his assessment," she breathed huskily. "I told Principal Greyshine I think he should lose his place at the academy."

Ryder smiled darkly at her words, his fist tightening on his makeshift whip, the word lust *standing out across his knuckles.*

"Safe word?" he asked, almost like he didn't give a shit.

"Caterpillar," Professor King whispered, her fangs lengthening.

My stomach clenched. It wasn't like I was afraid of sex, I'd grown up surrounded by it at Old Sal's, but whipping? And the look in Ryder's eye did not say he was going to be offering up light spanking either.

“Skirt off. Bend over the desk.” Ryder stalked closer and Professor King dropped her skirt, revealing a lacy black thong beneath it.

That was way more than I’d ever wanted to see of my teacher and yet here I was, standing in a cupboard with a camera rolling like some kind of pervert. At least I didn’t have my dick out. But I had the horrible feeling that Ryder would pretty soon.

Professor King hurried to comply with Ryder’s commands, keeping her head low as she moved to bend over the desk and grip the edge of it. She was looking right at the cupboard where I was hiding which I guessed was good from the point of view of the video but made me feel so goddamn uncomfortable I wanted to scream.

“You’ve been pretty fucking bad, haven’t you Professor*?” Ryder growled. “So I’m thinking ten.”*

“Yes,” she gasped, an ache of longing in her voice. “I’ve been so bad.”

Ryder didn’t waste another moment before striking the whip straight across the backs of her thighs. She cried out and his eyes lit with a dark hunger as he raised his hand again.

“Count!” he commanded.

“One,” she gasped.

He struck her again.

“Two!” her voice was filled with pain but the unmistakable growl of lust too.

As he raised his arm a third time, I closed my eyes. The camera was still recording but I didn’t wanna fucking see that. I wished I could close my ears too.

When she finally gasped ten*, the sound of the whip dropping to the carpet made me open my eyes again.*

“Did I do well, master?” Professor King panted and despite my better judgement, I opened my eyes.

Curiosity was an asshole because my reward was a clear view of Ryder’s massive hard on as he released it from his fly.

He caught Professor King by the shoulder and yanked her upright. As her ass was pointed my way I spotted the bright pink stripes marking her flesh from the whipping, a few of them oozing blood.

“Did I earn my reward?” she begged as she turned to face him.

“Yeah.” Ryder caught her by the throat and slammed her down onto the desk.

A gasp parted my lips but the moan of longing that came from her mouth said she was all for this.

Ryder reached out and ripped her shirt open, the buttons popping off in all directions and exposing her pert nipples to the room at large as she wasn’t wearing a bra.

By the stars how am I supposed to look at her in class after this??

Ryder yanked her panties off and claimed her body with one powerful thrust of his hips. She screamed in pleasure as he started up a fast pace and she writhed on her desk beneath him.

She got louder still and he leaned forward, wrapping a hand around her throat and squeezing.

My lips parted as she grabbed at his arm, her nails gouging into his flesh as he continued to pin her down. My hand made it to the cupboard door handle and I was about to burst out and stop him from killing her just as a word spilled from her lips.

“More!”

Ryder growled as he reared over her, getting rougher still which she clearly wanted.

When she finally screamed her climax to the walls, he fell over her too, breathing heavily for a few moments before moving off of her and refastening his jeans.

Professor King shot upright with her Vampire speed and Ryder offered her his wrist without a word.

She groaned as she bit into his skin, drinking deeply as he let her have his blood.

When she was done, he pressed a hand to his forearm, healing her bite and the scratches she'd left on his skin before heading for the door.

"Same time next week?" Professor King called after him and he grunted a response as he shrugged his T-shirt back on. It almost seemed like he hadn't even enjoyed that.

He headed out the door and I waited as Professor King healed herself too and slowly got dressed. To my everlasting gratitude, once she'd buttoned up her blazer to disguise the buttons that had been ripped off of her shirt, she left the room in a spurt of speed.

I sighed in relief as I shut off the recording and scurried out of her cupboard, out of her office and out of the goddamn building.

I needed a shower to wash off the dirt of what I'd just witnessed.

But before that, I was going to make a Storm Dragon's day.

Leon:

I’m taking you out. Wear something low-cut, short as shit and pair it with your fuck-me eyes.

Elise:

Are we going to a brothel?

Leon:

Better.

Elise:

A sex club?

Leon:

Better (but put a pin in that idea, little monster)

Elise:

Where then?

Leon:

It's a surprise.

Elise:

You and your surprises…

Leon:

Meet me at the front gate in ten minutes.

I was already on my way out of the gate at that moment, wearing a pale grey shirt and my best jeans. I was gonna present Elise as mine mine mine tonight. Okay not *all* mine. But a little bit mine.

Mindy pulled up in front of me in the gleaming yellow Faeyota I'd stolen from the next town over last week. She jumped out, tossing me the keys and I caught them out of the air before sliding into the driver's seat and pulling up to the curb along the road.

Eyes were drawn my way as I revved the engine and listened to her purr. It was a sweet fucking car, one of my best steals yet. Almost as good as the Mantorghini Faeventador I'd been dreaming about all year. Yeah, I could really enjoy one of those babies. But they were primed with the best magical locks Solaria could buy. It was termed the unstealable car. But soon, I would damn well be the first to get my hands on one of them.

Elise appeared on the sidewalk having done exactly as I'd hoped for and not obeyed my outfit request at all. She wore a pair of jeans and a fitted black sweater paired with her do-not-come-and-fuck-me eyes.

Haha sucker. You're right where I want you.

I beeped the horn and she frowned, moving toward the car as I lowered the passenger window. She leaned inside with a smirk. "This is your car?"

“It has been since I stole it,” I said with a roguish grin. “Get in.”

Elise rolled her eyes but pulled the door open and dropped into the seat. She popped a bubble of gum and the scent of cherries filled the air. I leaned in closer, pressing my lips to hers to taste it too and she grinned against my mouth.

I drew back before I could get carried away with car sex fantasies because we had somewhere important to be – *wait, is there time? No, no time.*

Unless…

No.

I closed the window then drove off down the street, slamming my foot to the accelerator so Elise was pressed back into her seat.

“Are you not going to complain about my clothes?” Elise asked lightly, her tone teasing.

“You look perfect, little monster,” I said, my smile betraying me because it just continued growing and growing until I was laughing my ass off.

“What are you laughing at?” she demanded, throwing a playful punch into my arm that actually fucking hurt.

“Nothing,” I said, another laugh racking through my chest.

I took corners at speed, driving us east and out of the city. We were soon sailing along the winding road that led down into Ivory Vale which sat between a nest of hills on the outskirts of Alestria. The moon appeared as if it was perched atop the furthest hill in a delicate crescent.

We eventually reached an iron gate which ringed the property and I lowered my window as I coasted to a halt beside a booth manned by a security guard.

“Where the hell are we? If I didn’t know we were hundreds of miles from it, I would have guessed you’d taken me on the world’s most

dangerous field trip to Darkmore Penitentiary."

"This is no prison, little monster," I said with a grin, turning to the security guard as she leaned out of her booth to get a look in the car. "Hey Beatrice."

"Oh, hi Mr Night," she said brightly. "It's so good to see you again. Are you still ruffling feathers at that academy of yours? I bet you're top of the class." She batted her eyelashes as my Lion charisma washed over her.

"Sure am," I said cockily.

"Ha." Elise leaned across my lap to gaze out at the guard. "Hey Beatrice, he's definitely not top of the class and do you mind telling me where I am? He's kidnapped me."

Beatrice laughed heartily, waving a hand at her as if she'd been joking. "Good one, girl." She continued to laugh as she buzzed us in. The tall gate parted before us and I drove onto the drive which cut through a dark woodland.

"It's not funny anymore, Leo," Elise said and I glanced over at her, finding her gripping her seat, her fangs on show as she glared at me. "Tell me where I am or I'm out of here."

"*Jeeeez*, chill out, little monster." We broke into a clearing and a tall house rose up before us, large glass windows giving a glimpse of the chic interior beyond.

I jumped out of the car, racing around to get Elise's door for her but she was so damn fast she was already out by the time I got there.

"Tell me," she demanded, planting her feet and snarling.

I held out my hand, giving her my softest eyes. "Well we're-"

"Leonidas?" My father's deep, rumbling voice came from the house and I turned to find him standing there, haloed by the amber glow of the hallway light. His hair was a swaying sea of gold, flowing over his huge

shoulders and brushing against his square jaw. His eyes were pure lion, glinting gold even in the darkness.

“Hey Dad,” I said and Elise shot me a look of alarm.

“What way is that to park a car?” Dad asked, shaking his head. “Your brother always parks at a ninety degree angle to the house.”

I glanced back at the diagonal way I’d parked with a flash of irritation. “I can move it.”

“No, don’t bother now. Come inside, let’s meet her.” Dad turned back into the hall and I gave Elise a pleading look.

Her jaw was clenched and her eyes were spitting venom at me. “Have you brought me home to meet your parents?” she hissed and my gut lurched.

“I knew you wouldn’t come if I asked so…” I shrugged guiltily, unsure what to say.

Please don’t leave, you’ll just give my dad more things to pick at me about.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not your girlfriend.”

Tension spanned through my body as I dropped my hand, realising how stupid I’d been to do this. I’d wanted to show Elise off, to prove how amazing she was, to brag about the first girl I’d been nuts about my entire life. But I’d ignored the blaring detail that she didn’t want to be that girl.

I glanced at the door again, just hoping they would spare me from telling Roary about this when I took her back to the academy. I’d made sure my brother wasn’t home tonight because he was the biggest asshole in the world. But if he got wind of this…

“What’s going on?” Mom’s voice carried from the hallway as she addressed my dad.

“Looks like the girl doesn’t want to be here.” His disappointed sigh reached me and my heart hurt. “He probably convinced her to come with his Lion Charisma. I knew he lied about her being unaffected.”

“Sorry, I’ll take you home,” I muttered, opening the passenger door for Elise with my eyes downcast and my stomach ripping to shreds.

Elise didn’t move and I glanced up, finding a frown lining her brow.

“What?” I asked and she moved toward me, taking my hand.

“Come on then, Leon, I’m dying to meet the couple who raised such a powerful son,” she said loud enough for them to hear and convincingly enough to bring a smug smile to my lips.

I mouthed a thank you as I shut the car door, locking it before leading Elise into the house, my heart falling into a frantic beat.

Mom stood beside my father, fussing with his tie then turning to us as we approached. Her shimmering blonde hair was wild and free, her eyes sparkling with excitement as they landed on Elise.

She moved with the grace of a queen, her head held high as she moved forward, hugging me tightly and brushing her fingers through my hair. “Oh my! Have you gained more muscle? You’re getting so big. Where’s my little cub gone?” She pulled back to admire me and a wide smile pulled at my mouth. “You’re just the most handsome boy in the world.” She kissed my cheek before reaching for Elise.

I grinned as Elise was dragged into Mom’s arms and she began to purr happily.

“That’s enough Safira, let me see her,” Dad said and I stuffed my hands in my jeans pockets as he inspected my girl. Or what he thought was my girl. And maybe tonight, she was.

“Nice to meet you,” Elise said sweetly, holding out her hand.

Dad raised his brows, moving forward to take it and glancing between us. “Reginald Night.” He squeezed her hand. “My son says he doesn’t use his Charisma on you, is that true?”

“Well I think he tried to at first,” Elise laughed and heat rose up the back of my neck. “But I guess I’m immune.”

“Immune…is that so?” Dad chuckled and sunshine shone through me at the noise. “Well you must have a very strong will indeed. Of course, if a more powerful Nemean Lion were to turn on their charm, you would no doubt have a bit more trouble than with our little Leonidas.”

“I doubt it,” Elise said, still smiling and I hoped that was true.

Dad laughed again and I started to relax a bit.

“We won’t put it to the test anyway. I don’t use my power unless necessary. It’s the mark of a true Lion.” Dad gave me a pointed look that dragged over my clothes like he expected more of them.

“Come on into the dining room, we’re having warthog stew,” Mom said brightly.

“Oh, Mom, I told you on the phone…Elise is vegetarian,” I said and she blinked several times like she didn’t quite understand the words that had come out of my mouth and said she clearly hadn’t taken that conversation seriously.

Dad looked at me like I’d stabbed his first born with a rusty fork then sighed and walked away into the dining room. Mom lingered in the hallway, looking to Elise as if waiting for her to admit this was all some big joke. I caught Dad muttering under his breath in the other room. “A Lion Shifter with a herbivorous girlfriend? It’s insanity.”

“It’s true,” Elise said to Mom with an innocent smile. “Just Fae blood or veggies for me.”

Mom’s lips moved wordlessly then she nodded quickly, her eyes filling with light. “Not to worry. Marie hasn’t added the stock yet. Leon’s father will ensure she makes a meat free portion for you.”

“Thank you,” Elise said, not seeming bothered by my parents’ obvious stress over this. I didn’t really care either. It was who she was. And I was into all of it.

We followed Mom into the dining room and she dipped her head to father’s ear. He growled, rising to his feet from the head of the table and disappearing in the direction of the kitchen.

Elise took in the paintings on the walls of all the Nights who’d come before us. The men all shared our signature long manes, each of them surrounded by their three beautiful wives. Three was the optimum number, my father always said.

Marie strode into the room with her dark curls and soft features.

“Hey Mom,” I said to her and she beamed as father headed out to the kitchen.

Elise shot me a look of confusion as I moved to embrace her and Marie squealed her excitement as she hugged me back. Safira was my birth mom and one of the most infamous thieves in Alestria, but as I’d been raised by Marie and Latisha as well, I felt as strongly towards all of them. Latisha arrived from the kitchen a second later, seeking me out. Her hair was cropped short and the dark skin of her neck was highlighted by a golden choker above her fitted dress.

“My cub!” She wrapped me in her arms too and I was soon squashed between all three of my mothers as they combed their fingers through my hair and cooed at me, their voices filling my ears.

“He’s so strong.”

“So handsome.”

“Look at these muscles, have you seen, Latisha?”

“Yes, he’ll be as big as his father one day.”

“And just as powerful!”

Elise stood back, looking between us with a bemused expression. Marie and Latisha fell on her a second later, showering her in compliments and stroking her hair. She took it all in her stride and I swear I fell a bit harder for her.

Dad had returned to sit at the head of the table and cleared his throat heavily. “Shall we eat?”

“Of course, my love.” Marie swooped down to kiss him on the cheek, flattening a crease in his shirt as she did so. Latisha went next, kissing his other cheek and arranging his golden hair over his shoulders. My mother dropped down beside him, taking his hand. She wasn’t the best cook and Dad never expected it of her. He didn’t even use his Charisma on his wives, they were just so damn in love with him that their Lioness natures caused them to fawn all over him.

My Charisma was pretty much constantly switched on and I knew dad disapproved of that, but he disapproved of everything I did so what was the difference?

Elise and I took our seats on one side of the table and she immediately found my hand, squeezing encouragingly. It felt so good to have her here. Dad wasn’t even being that bad. He usually found fifty things to be disappointed with me for before I’d even made it in the door. So far, this night was a serious success.

The rumbling of an engine caught my ear and I frowned as headlights flashed through the window.

“Who’s that?” I asked just as the front door opened and the sound of heavy footfalls carried this way.

My brother Roary strode into the room and I almost busted a tooth as my jaw locked tight.

For fuck's sake I had one request for tonight! Him not being here.

His hair was dark and shining with more body than mine; he had half an inch of height on me and a constant war hero expression on his perfectly chiselled face. His leather jacket strained against his muscles and his aura screamed dominance.

"Hey little brother," he said as he spotted me, then he bowed his head to Dad like a douche. A low purr emitted from Dad and I growled in response, tightening my grip on Elise's hand.

Safira jumped to her feet, rushing to embrace him, cooing louder and more enthusiastically than she had done for me. And she was my damn birth mother. Marie was his.

"Don't mind if I drop in for dinner, do you Mom?" the way he said *Mom* was so fucking possessive. Like she belonged to him more than she did to me. And from the look in her lovestruck eyes, she felt the same way.

Fuck a duck.

"Of course not, darling," she said sweetly, pulling out a chair for him opposite me.

He dropped into it, resting back in it and slinging his arms across the seats either side of him. His gaze arrowed in on Elise and fear crept under my skin. Elise might not have fallen prey to my Charisma before, but Roary had more control over his and the vibe he gave off was seriously powerful. I hated when he came to visit me at Aurora Academy because all of my Mindys dropped me like a sack of shit to serve him instead.

Please don't take Elise from me.

My hand was locked so tightly around hers I was surprised she hadn't yelped in pain yet.

“And who’s this?” Roary asked, his eyes raking down her in a way that said he was sizing her up as a potential mate.

I opened my mouth to answer but choked on the words. Because what could I say? If I told him she was my girlfriend she might laugh and tell my whole family that she wasn’t. And if Roary’s Charisma was already affecting her, she’d probably be in his lap within the next thirty seconds, stroking his damn perfect face anyway.

“I’m Leon’s girlfriend, Elise,” she said and my heart melted, my grip relaxing on her hand.

I smirked confidently but a challenge flashed in his eyes that drove panic into my heart. He wasn’t done yet.

“Are you now?” he asked in a deep growl, one brow arching. Then he leaned forward with a conspiratorial grin. “Are you sure my little brother can handle you, buttercup?”

A growl rumbled through my chest and Elise squeezed my fingers.

“My name’s Elise, not buttercup. And he handles me just fine.”

Roary grinned like he’d won something but I had no idea what and it pissed me off to no end.

“Yes well that’s quite enough about that,” Dad cut in, throwing a frown at me as if the tension in the air was my goddamn fault.

Roary rolled his shoulders back, shedding his jacket to reveal the taut muscles straining against his black shirt. *There are other colours on the spectrum, asshat.*

Marie and Latisha appeared, nearly dropping the trays of food they were carrying in their excitement to get to Roary. They planted them down on the table, falling all over him while he gazed at me intently with a grin pulling up one side of his mouth.

“That’s enough, we’re all starving,” Dad said firmly and they hurried about passing out large bowls of stew and hunks of freshly baked bread for everyone.

Marie and Latisha sat either side of Roary, one of them stuffing a serviette into his collar while the other attempted to spoon feed him. He waved her way with a grin, digging into his food.

“You know it’s rude to use your Charisma at the table,” I pointed out and Roary cocked his head.

“I’m not using it.”

“Liar,” I growled, looking to my mothers who seemed desperate to get close to him again.

Roary shrugged his huge shoulders, giving me a blank look before returning to eating.

Dad didn’t say a word. But if I’d used my Charisma on our mothers, he’d have scolded me and dismissed me from the room. Roary got away with everything. Always had. My whole life, he’d been the golden child. And I was always chasing to catch up.

“Did you see my latest steal out there?” I looked to dad hopefully and he nodded.

“Yes, it’s a nice car,” he said and a grin bit into my cheeks.

All three of our mothers jumped up and rushed to the window to have a look and I beamed proudly, stealing a glance at Roary’s expression. He swept a hand through his hair, saying nothing but our mothers were about to rub it in his face anyway.

“Oh my gosh, it’s beautiful!” Marie cried.

“And what a colour,” Latisha cooed. “Would you call that marine or navy?”

“What? It’s yellow,” I said in confusion, rising to my feet as Roary stretched his limbs languidly in my periphery. I headed to the window and my heart fucking broke as I realised what they were all looking at.

“*No*,” I gasped. It was Roary’s car. *The* fucking Car. The one I’d spent the last year planning on stealing. The one I’d dreamed about, jerked off over, fucking cried about. The unstealable car. And my brother, my fucking *brother* had gotten it first.

“How did you get it?” I rounded on him with a snarl.

“Get what?” Dad rose from his seat, moving to the window to have a look himself before taking in a breath of shock. “My boy! This is the proudest moment of my life.”

Pain speared through me at those words and Roary just shrugged – just fucking *shrugged* like it didn’t mean anything.

“It wasn’t that hard,” he said, not even cockily, just like it really wasn’t that hard.

“You knew how much I wanted that car.” I pointed at him accusatorially.

“The opportunity arose and I took it,” Roary said calmly. “It’s not a personal attack.”

“Everything you do is a personal attack,” I snarled.

“Oh come on, you can’t really think that.” Roary yawned, checking his watch like I was holding up his day.

Our mothers started clearing the table and Latisha pulled the serviette from Dad’s shirt collar, dabbing his mouth before heading away into the kitchen with the others.

I was about to rage out further when Elise stood up, drifting to the seat next to Roary’s and dropping into it with a sexy as fuck smile.

“How did you steal it?” she asked, resting her hand on his arm and he grinned, widening his legs as he gave her a look that said he was going to

fuck her. But I'd take him to the grave before I ever let that happen.

He could have the Mantorghini. He could even have my father's respect and my mothers' position as their favourite. But he could not fucking have *my girl.*

Roary slid his gaze over me with a cocky as fuck look in his eyes and leaned close to whisper in my ear.

“I just lifted the key from the owner,” he purred. “I don’t over think things like little Leonidas does. When I see something I want, I find the easiest way to achieve it. Follow the path of least resistance.”

My smile widened and I shifted a little closer to him. “So Leon’s smarter and you’re simpler?” I asked, batting my eyelashes.

“Yeah, I…wait, what did you say?” Roary frowned at me, his golden eyes swimming with suspicion but I just kept my expression neutral.

“Do you work out?” I asked, my hand sliding around his bicep as I inched closer to him again.

Leon stalked around the table and lowered himself into the seat beside mine, a growl escaping him that had the hairs rising along the back of my neck. I could feel his eyes on me but I didn’t look his way as I waited for Roary’s answer.

“Yeah. I can bench two-eighty,” he said with an air that said that was nothing, flexing his muscle beneath my hand.

“Wow. That’s almost as much as Leon,” I said, gushing as I continued to stare at him.

Roary’s brow pinched and he threw a look at his brother across me.

“What are you pressing now, then, little Leonidas?” he asked, like he didn’t really give a shit but he was still flexing his bicep beneath my hand so I was gunna guess that was bullshit.

“Three twenty,” Leon replied smugly and I was glad I’d been right about that.

“Nice,” Roary said dismissively. “But I don’t like to skip leg day,” he joked, pushing a hand through his dark hair.

I dropped my hand to his leg as he said that, squeezing the top of his thigh. He shifted in his seat, dropping his arm around the back of my chair and leaning closer to me with a smirk that said he thought he had me. I moved my hand, almost skimming his junk and he cleared his throat, tossing a glance at his dad as he rearranged himself. The second he moved, I shifted my hand with a spurt of Vampire speed, hooking his car key out of his pocket and tossing it beneath the table into my other hand. I caught it neatly and pushed it into my own pocket, all without him even feeling me withdraw my palm from his thigh.

I really loved being a Vampire.

“Oh yeah, I can tell you work on these too,” I said, doing my best to sound impressed as I pulled my hand back.

“*Elise*, would you like to come on a tour of the house?” Leon asked, reaching out to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear. My skin tingled where he touched me and I turned his way with a sweet smile.

“Okay,” I agreed, getting to my feet and taking his hand as he practically dragged me from the room.

Leon tossed an irritated glance back at his brother before the door swung shut behind us but I pretended not to notice. We started walking along the wide corridor at a fast pace and I let him lead me as I gazed at the family photos on the walls and took in the sheer size of the place. You could have

fit my old apartment inside one of the rooms here on its own. I hadn't even realised people really lived in places like this.

"Sorry about Roary," Leon muttered. "He uses his Charisma like a damn sniper rifle. I didn't know he'd be here tonight or I wouldn't have brought you. I didn't mean for him to lure you in like that."

"Like what?" I asked innocently. "He wasn't doing anything to me."

Leon frowned at me like that was somehow worse and I bit my lip against telling him about the car key yet. He'd brought me here under false pretences after all so he was really due a little punishment.

"You never told me you had a brother," I said curiously just as we reached a door at the end of the corridor.

"That's because I wish I didn't," he muttered before pushing the door wide and leading me into a bedroom which I guessed was his.

"Don't say things like that," I muttered, a flash of pain driving through me at the offhand remark.

Leon seemed to realise he'd said the wrong thing and blew out a breath of frustration. "I don't mean it," he said. "It's just my whole life, Roary's made me feel, somehow…*lesser.* And the worst thing is I don't even think he does it on purpose."

I wandered into Leon's room, brushing my fingers along a shelf filled with Pitball trophies and eyeing another filled with action figures.

"I get that," I said slowly, hiding my smile as I looked around the room, preparing for my payback. "He is very…you know…"

"What?" Leon demanded, stalking after me.

"Well," I said, looking over my shoulder at him as I reached his bed, my fingertips skimming his Solarian Pitball league duvet cover as I drew out my answer. "He's very…*tall*."

“*I’m* tall,” Leon said indignantly, stalking closer to me. “I’m six, two. Being taller than that is unnecessary.”

“I guess,” I agreed like I didn’t agree at all. “He’s also really strong…”

“You literally just pointed out that I can bench more than him,” Leon huffed.

“Yeah. But he doesn’t skip leg day,” I teased, reaching out to brush my fingers over Leon’s strong thigh.

Leon growled but there was a light in his eyes too as I kept my hand on his leg.

“And he does have really nice hair,” I added.

“What kind of Lion has dark hair?” Leon scoffed, though I could tell my comment had pissed him off.

I reached up with my other hand to twist my fingers through Leon’s golden mane with a smile. “There is *one* thing about Roary that was absolutely better than you,” I said in a low voice and Leon growled in frustration.

“*What?”* he demanded.

I leaned closer to him, tiptoeing so that I could whisper my answer in his ear. “He didn’t lie about me being his girlfriend.”

Leon groaned, finally catching on to why I was tormenting him as his hands caught me around the waist and he pushed me back down onto his bed.

I laughed as his weight fell over me and his mouth moved to my neck. “Okay. I deserved that,” he said between kisses which set my skin alight for him. “And I promise to work *really* hard at making it up to you.” He shifted lower, pushing my sweater up so that he could paint kisses down my stomach and I moaned softly in encouragement as he continued to head

south. “It’s just that I never seem to be able to do anything good enough for my dad. And I knew he’d be impressed by you…”

My heart leapt at his words and I reached out, stopping his descent as I pulled him back up so that I could kiss him instead.

“You should never think of yourself as not good enough, Leo,” I breathed, cupping his cheek in my hands. “You’re one of the best people I know.”

A deep purr came from him in response as he pressed his mouth to mine and I drew him closer hungrily.

A knock sounded at the door and we broke apart a little breathlessly as Roary entered. He arched an eyebrow at the sight of the two of us tangled on the bed and Leon sighed as he stood up, offering me a hand to pull me up too.

“Dessert is just about to be served,” Roary said lightly, his gaze sliding over me like I was a puzzle he was trying to figure out. “Do you like sweet things, Elise?”

“Oh I’m a sucker for sugar,” I agreed, walking across the room to join Roary and looking back at Leon with a smirk.

Roary offered me his arm and I took it, letting him lead me back to the dining room while Leon followed along behind us. I could practically feel his tension returning and I got the feeling he still wasn’t convinced that Roary’s Charisma wasn’t affecting me.

Roary led me back to the chair beside his as we entered the dining room and I dropped into it willingly. Leon sat on my other side, frowning faintly as I kept a sweet smile slapped on my face and I reached out to place my hand on his thigh beneath the table.

“Can I get you another drink?” Marie offered and I nodded as she refilled my glass with wine. She didn’t even ask the men at the table before

hurrying to top them up too and I had to admit that the three women of the household seemed particularly content with their roles fawning over the males.

“Are you still working that bank heist?” Reginald asked Roary as he took a long drink of his own wine.

“All finished,” Roary said with a shrug. “That’s actually why I’m back early. I needed to get out of the city before the FIB came looking for me.”

“What was the take in the end?” Reginald asked conversationally like robbing a bank was no big deal.

“Just under one point two million by the looks of it.” Roary shrugged. “I’ll have to pay my Undercats a cut of course. After that it’ll probably be about nine hundred grand. Give or take.”

All three of their moms started clapping and fawning over Roary, praising him on doing such a good job while he accepted their attention like it was silly of them to be impressed by such a little thing.

Leon’s posture had tensed to the point where it looked like he might just smash his wine glass if he gripped it any tighter as he watched them.

I rolled my eyes like Roary didn’t impress me one bit and Leon’s gaze softened, though not enough for my liking. I leaned forward, slipping my hand right up Leon’s thigh until I felt his dick twitch and he sat up straighter in his seat.

He opened his mouth but no words came out and I smiled knowingly before withdrawing my hand.

“Roary’s been away for a few weeks, visiting Cobalt City,” Marie said dotingly as she returned to her seat. “And we’ve all missed him dreadfully.”

“I’ve missed you guys too,” he said fondly, leaning back in his chair again. “Even little Leonidas.”

“I knew a girl from Cobalt City when I was growing up,” I said enthusiastically.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, she called it *the* city to visit.”

“It sure is,” Roary agreed, smirking like his life was so shit hot it didn’t even need explaining.

“I mean, it is if you’re on the look out for good hookers,” I finished.

Leon barked a laugh and looked at me in surprise. I offered him a small smile. No one was going to make him feel shitty while I had anything to do with it and if Roary wanted to bait him then I was ready to play his game.

Roary scoffed, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t really know about that. But the hotel was right by the marina-”

“Where the fishermen bring in their stinky catches?” I asked, wrinkling my nose.

“Well I can’t say I particularly noticed,” Roary replied with a frown like he wasn’t quite sure how to deal with me.

“I just googled it,” Leon interjected, holding out his Atlas. “There’s only one marina and that’s where they hold the fish market.”

I snorted a laugh and took a gulp of my wine as Roary pursed his lips, seeming to finally realise I wasn’t under his spell.

“I could make us a nice fish broth for lunch tomorrow,” Letisha said, cutting Roary off before he could add anything.

“So tell us, Elise, what are your family like?” Reginald asked, leaning back in his chair and running a hand through his mane of golden hair.

“Dead, mostly,” I replied with a shrug, refusing to acknowledge the sting of that admission.

A beat passed where uncomfortable looks were exchanged all around me and no one decided to pitch in on that.

“And do you see yourself as a possible candidate for one of Leonidas’s wives?”

“Wife?” I snorted in disbelief before realising he wasn’t joking. “If only the stars would be so kind to me,” I added hastily, though I couldn’t banish the teasing tone from my voice.

“Or you could get really lucky and land yourself a true king,” Roary purred, leaning closer to me like we were sharing a secret.

Leon’s family seemed to have no inclination to reprimand him for trying to steal my attention from Leon and I pursed my lips, sensing his discomfort growing again.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, dipping my voice as I held his eye, daring him to try and back up that claim.

“Yeah,” he replied, trailing his eyes over me slowly before cutting a look over my shoulder at Leon.

Roary slung his arm around the back of my chair seeming unperturbed and I sat back, looking around at Leon. He was frowning in a way that said he didn’t like this despite my game and I smirked at him, winking as his moms got up, promising their return with dessert.

He tilted his head in confusion but Roary tugged my chair an inch closer to his and leaned in to speak with me again.

“So, what drew you to my little brother?” Roary asked. “Do you have a thing for Lions?”

“Well…” I said slowly, keeping my eyes on Leon as I spoke. “When we first met I wasn’t really sure what to make of him. He was so loud and lazy and had all these girls running around after him all the time so that he didn’t have to do anything for himself.”

Reginald released a low growl like he didn’t approve of that and I didn’t miss the flash of discomfort in Leon’s eyes in response.

“But then,” I went on. “He cut the bullshit, and I realised he was actually really sweet and funny, he’s thoughtful and kind and strong and powerful. And he makes me laugh even though for a while I thought I’d never find a reason to laugh again.”

“I’m surprised that Leonidas was capable of forming a true bond like that. I’d begun to believe that he’d never find a real connection with a woman and would just rely on his Charisma to help him coast through life,” Reginald said thoughtfully.

“I think Leon hides his true capabilities behind the Charisma and the bullshit,” I replied with a shrug. “But it’s all just a front so that no one figures out exactly what he’s up to. It’s damn cunning is what it is.”

Reginald looked at Leon for a long moment, tilting his head as he considered that, a small smile pulling at his lips. “Wouldn’t that be something,” he said eventually.

“Did little Leon just flash his wiener at you to get that laugh?” Roary joked.

“Is that what usually happens to *you*?” I asked, widening my eyes at him and shooting a not so furtive look at his crotch.

“No,” he replied on a growl before tugging me close beneath his arm. “You can come to my old room and find out how wrong that statement is for yourself if you like?”

“Why? Do you have a magnifying glass there that we can use?”

Leon started choking on his drink and I shot him a dark smile.

Roary growled and caught my chin, turning me so that I was looking right into his golden eyes.

“I think your gaze is straying away from the main prize at this table,” Roary purred, his Charisma flowing around me, the gold in his eyes swimming with promises as he tried to tempt my attention away from his

brother. But there was only one Lion for me and I was more than happy with that choice.

“It is right now,” I agreed. “Because you’re making me look at *you.*”

Roary growled in frustration and I jerked my chin out of his grip just as the moms arrived with dessert. There was a steaming apple crumble, a towering mound of profiteroles and a mouthwatering cherry pie with vanilla ice cream.

Reginald laughed loudly, cutting through the tension between the two brothers as he eyed me with what I could have sworn was genuine fondness.

“Looks like you really are immune to Charisma. There’s not many people who can resist Roary, especially when he’s touching them,” he said with a smile. “I’m glad Leonidas managed to prove his worth to you without it.”

“He did,” I agreed, turning my gaze back to Leon as he grinned at me.

Leon purred deep in his chest and I moved closer to him, scooting my chair over and taking his hand beneath the table.

Marie offered me first choice and I pointed at the cherry pie with a smile. “I’ve got a bit of a weakness for cherries,” I admitted.

“Me too,” Leon agreed and his mom instantly placed a huge slice in front of him first.

He filled a fork with pie and ice cream and I watched as he lifted it towards his mouth, reaching out to snag it from his fingers.

Leon grinned as I continued to move it towards his lips. He leaned forward, opening his mouth and I smirked at him before turning the fork sharply and delivering the food to my own mouth instead.

I laughed around my mouthful as every Lion in the room stared at me in shock and Leon growled playfully.

“That’s how you want it, is it little monster?” he rumbled, catching my wrist as I speared another piece of his pie, ignoring my own plate.

I laughed as he tried to force me to feed him by guiding my arm higher and I reached out with my free hand, grabbing the piece of pie right off of the fork and pressing it into my mouth quickly.

Leon gaped at me like I was insane and I grinned at him with a fat cherry held between my teeth tauntingly.

He growled as he lurched forward, catching me in a kiss as if he intended to steal it right back out of my mouth. The heat of his lips on mine sent energy skittering through me and I caught his fancy shirt in my fist as I pulled him closer for a moment.

I drew back before he did, remembering our audience with a soft laugh. Leon hadn’t managed to retrieve his stolen pie from my mouth so I quickly swallowed it before he got any ideas about trying again.

“Immune to Charisma, unwilling to feed you *and* a natural born thief, wherever did you find this little treasure, Leon?” Reginald asked, seeming amused by our display.

“She just strolled right into my life like some kind of goddess of chaos,” Leon said, his eyes on me.

I snorted a laugh and stole another bite of his pie. “I can agree with the chaos part of that statement though it’s not by choice.”

Reginald chuckled and his wives instantly started laughing too. Roary seemed somewhat less impressed with me but that was fine. I wasn’t going to sit back and watch him be a shit to my Leo.

“We should probably be heading back to the academy,” Leon said as we finished our dessert, pushing his chair back and offering me his hand.

I let him pull me to my feet and smiled around at his family. “Thank you for dinner,” I said.

“Thank you for joining us,” Reginald replied with a warm smile.

“It was nice to meet you, Roary,” I added sweetly, his car key burning a hole in my pocket.

“Mmm,” he replied, not looking our way.

Leon’s moms fell on him, showering him with hugs and kisses before we managed to escape out into the hall.

Leon kept hold of my hand as we walked down the long hallway to the front door and the moment it shut behind us, he caught my face in his grip and kissed me with a fierce passion that sent heat flooding my veins.

“Thank you, Elise,” he breathed against my lips and I smiled as he used my name for once.

“Don’t thank me yet, I haven’t even given you your present,” I said enticingly.

“What?” Leon asked in confusion.

In response I pulled the key from my pocket and pressed the button to unlock Roary’s car which was parked at a perfect ninety degree angle to the house. A bleep sounded and the headlights flashed twice in response like it was saying hello.

Leon’s lips fell open in surprise and for a second he could only stare at the lit up car which was waiting for us.

“How did you-”

“I just lifted the key from the owner,” I said, mocking Roary’s gravelly voice. “I don’t over think things like little Leonidas does. When I see something I want, I find the easiest way to achieve it. Follow the path of least resistance.” I spun the key around my finger and Leon burst into laughter.

He caught me around the waist and kissed me hard, his lips punishing as they took possession of mine and I coiled my arms around his neck as I

drew him closer.

“LEON!” Roary’s shout of rage came from inside the house and Leon broke our kiss sharply.

“Oh shit, he’s gonna lose the plot – he’ll shift on us.”

I barked a laugh and shot forward with my Vampire speed, hoisting Leon over my shoulder with my enhanced strength and zooming towards Roary’s car.

I had the driver’s door open and tossed Leon down on the plush leather seat before he’d even realised what I’d done. In another heartbeat, I threw his door closed behind him and shot around the car to the passenger side.

I tossed Leon the key and he caught it with a bark of laughter, jamming it into the ignition and starting the car just as the front door burst open and Roary leapt out. His shirt was off, his muscles bulging with tension as he ripped his belt open and screamed Leon’s name again.

Leon slammed the car into gear and we shot away down the drive.

I swivelled in my seat, looking out the rear window just in time to see Roary shift into his huge Lion form. His mane was black like his hair but the rest of his coat was golden, shining in the moonlight as he pounded across the gravel drive.

He raced after us down the drive and adrenaline spiked in my veins as I took in the enormous size of him.

Leon cursed as he checked the rear view mirror and changed gears, pressing his foot to the floor so that we shot forward even faster.

The gate swung open up ahead of us and we slowly started to put some distance between us and Roary. My heart thundered as an earth shattering roar spilled from Roary’s mouth and I got a good look at all those Lion teeth.

We flew through the gate and Leon barked a laugh as I whooped in triumph and we raced away into the night.

We sped down dark roads and Leon's smile was bright enough to light up the whole car.

"I keep forgetting how *big* you Lions get when you shift," I teased as I relaxed back into my seat.

"Pfft, I'm bigger than him," Leon joked.

"Hell yeah you are," I agreed and his eyes sparkled as he looked my way for a moment.

My heart was pounding and my flesh tingling with expectant energy as the thrill of the theft started to leave my body. But I didn't want it to go, I wanted to ride this high for as long as I could.

"Pull over," I said in a low voice, reaching across to place my hand on Leon's thigh.

He looked at me in surprise before turning the car off of the road at a sharp angle.

We pulled up on a side road and Leon cut the engine, darkness falling over us instantly. It didn't matter to me with my gifts and my eyesight quickly adjusted so that I could look at him.

I unclipped my seatbelt and leaned forward to kiss him hungrily.

Leon growled his own excitement as his hands caught my waist and he tried to pull me into his lap.

There wasn't much room in the flashy sports car and I huffed in irritation as I immediately hit my head against the roof.

With a shot of speed, I leapt out of the car and was around at his door pulling it open before he even realised I'd left.

Leon climbed out, hooking me into his grip and lifting me off of my feet so that I wrapped my legs around his waist.

He walked me around to the hood of the car and kissed me hard as he sat me down on it.

I groaned against his lips, my fingers finding his belt and fumbling with the buckle in my haste to have him.

“Bad little monster,” Leon purred in my ear. “I can’t believe you stole Roary’s fucking car.”

“No one gets to make my Leo frown,” I breathed as he trailed kisses down my neck.

“*Fuck*, if you say that again, I think I’ll come already,” Leon growled.

“Say what?” I asked as his hands found the hem of my sweater and he tugged it off of me. The cold air instantly found my skin but Leon’s hot flesh worked to banish it again just as quickly.

“The part where you called me yours,” he said, his mouth moving down to tease at the edge of my bra.

I laughed and pushed his fly down as I pressed my hand beneath his boxers, freeing the hard length of him and taking him in my hand.

Leon growled hungrily at me caressing him and tingles ran down my spine at the knowledge that I could affect him so much.

He dropped lower as he unbuttoned my jeans and I lost my hold on him as he pulled them off of me.

The clouds shifted in the sky above us and moonlight spilled free, bathing us in silver as Leon stood upright again.

“Shit, little monster, you’re so beautiful,” he breathed as he looked down at me where I was perched on the hood of the car in my underwear.

“Less talking, more doing,” I commanded.

I reached for him, catching his shirt in my grip and unhooking the buttons as I drew him closer to me.

My heart was pounding a heady rhythm and I didn't want to wait any longer. Every inch of my flesh was alight with want and need.

Leon leaned down to kiss me again as I loosened the last of his buttons and I pushed my hands beneath his shirt, feeling every hard line and ridge of his muscular torso.

He pressed me back, his teeth catching my bottom lip and tugging on it as my back met the cold metal hood of the car.

His weight fell over me, the length of his arousal grinding between my thighs demandingly.

I kissed him hard, begging for more as his tongue took possession of my mouth.

Leon's hand shifted between us as he found the edge of my panties. He didn't even bother to pull them off of me, pushing them aside roughly a moment before he thrust inside me.

"*Fuck, yes,*" I gasped as my body bucked beneath his.

He laughed darkly, kissing me harder as he pushed into me again, drawing a cry from my lips as he started up a merciless pace.

I hadn't even gotten his shirt off of him and the open material fluttered against my exposed flesh as he took my body hostage.

Each thrust of his hips was met with a cry from me and Leon growled his satisfaction against my mouth as the rough bite of his stubble drove me insane.

He kissed me harder, hooking my right leg into his grasp and lifting it over his shoulder.

I cried out as his next thrust hit the perfect spot deep inside me and my nails bit into his skin as if I could somehow drag him even closer.

My skin was buzzing with energy and I gasped as each thrust pushed me closer and closer to the edge, my body begging for release as he continued

to torment me.

Leon growled hungrily, the raw power of his nature surrounding me and for a moment I felt like one of his Mindys, bathing in the glow of pleasing him and reaping the rewards of his flesh for it.

I gripped his broad shoulders, my fingernails biting into his skin as I tried to pull him even closer to me, wanting more and more of this heat he was building in my body.

“Bite me,” Leon begged, his hand finding my breast as he tugged my bra aside and freed my nipple for him to tease.

My fangs snapped out at his plea and I shifted my hand to grip his golden hair which spilled around us. I pulled his head aside, finding his throat and running my tongue straight up the side of his neck, toying with him.

Leon growled with need, thrusting into me even harder and drawing a cry from my lips that echoed into the night.

My fangs drove into his neck and he groaned, gripping my hips with a punishing tightness as he slammed into me again and again.

Leon’s blood slid down my throat like a pure shot of sunshine, the heat of it burning and blinding and *everything*.

I felt drunk with his power, my head spinning as his thrusts kept hitting the perfect place deep inside me and my skin tingled as he pushed my body to its limits.

I withdrew my fangs, running my tongue up his neck and seeking out his mouth with a desperate moan.

Leon kissed me so hard that it was like he was trying to devour me. He upped his pace further, gripping my leg where it was locked over his shoulder and pinning me in that perfect position as the tension in my body became unbearable and my muscles tensed around him in expectation.

I swore again as he drew back once more and the world fell apart around me as his next thrust sent me tumbling into oblivion. Leon growled in satisfaction, kissing me to taste my cries of pleasure as I fell apart beneath him.

But he wasn't done yet and his pace increased again as he demanded more and more from my body.

I gripped his broad shoulders as tight as I could as he took what he craved from me, my nails drawing blood on his back as I clung to him like I'd fall right off of the world if I let go. The pleasure in my flesh was blinding me so that the whole universe narrowed in around the movements of his body inside mine.

"Leon," I gasped as my muscles tightened around him again, unsure if I could take any more of this.

"Say it, little monster," he purred in my ear, moving faster, thrusting harder like he'd never get enough, his body owning mine as I bowed to his desire beneath him.

For a moment my scrambled brain couldn't figure out what he wanted me to say and he growled as my moans were the only response he got.

"Tell me I'm yours," he demanded.

"Ah, *fuck*, yes," I gasped as he slammed into me again. "You're mine, Leon. *Mine*."

His grip on me tightened and he cried out as his release poured through him and the pleasure crashing through my body overwhelmed me yet again.

I could only cling to him as his weight pressed down on top of me in the most deliciously satisfying way. He released his grip on my leg and I let it fall from his shoulder to rest on the hood of the car as I tried to remember what we'd even been doing out here in the first place.

Our heavy breathing filled the air and Leon nuzzled his jaw against my neck as we stayed locked together for a long moment, bathing in the pleasure we'd just given each other. My limbs slowly relaxed enough for me to release my hold on his shoulders and I trailed my fingers through his golden hair, drawing a purr of contentment from my Lion which made me smile so widely it almost hurt.

"Shit, Elise, I don't think I'll ever get enough of you," Leon said against my skin, his hand trailing up and over my breast.

I only laughed, because I didn't know what to say to him. I shouldn't have been letting myself get close to him like this. I still didn't know what had happened to Gareth and I didn't know what it might take for me to claim vengeance once I figured it out. I couldn't promise him anything even if I wanted to. And I didn't think I had enough good left in me to be making promises anyway.

Leon's hand moved beneath my bra and I moaned softly as he teased my nipple between his fingers, sending aftershocks of pleasure dancing over my skin.

"I can't keep this car," he breathed. "It has to be gone by the time Roary comes looking for it."

"Then let's go dump it in a lake," I said with a grin. "Let the fish have it so he can't."

Leon pushed himself up so that he was looking down at me. "You're a savage, little monster," he joked.

"He deserves it," I said defiantly. "No one hurts my Leo and gets away with it."

Leon's eyes lit with heat as I called him mine again and I smirked in response. "Come on then. Let's go drown his car."

I laughed as he moved off of me and we started to put our clothes back on.

Leon Night was becoming my new addiction. He was joy and laughter and sunshine and even though I couldn't offer him the world, I decided not to overthink offering him anything else.

He accepted me the way I was and wanted me even more for it. So if a broken girl was good enough for him then I wouldn't fight it. Because I needed some joy in my life like a starving man needed meals. And I planned on gorging myself on him for as long as I could with whatever time I could steal with him.

Eleven Months Before the Solarid Meteor Shower…

***I** headed down to the ground floor of The Vega Dorms on my way to the Cafaeteria to look for Dante. He wasn't in his room and I was seriously anticipating the look on his face when I showed him the video I'd just recorded of Ryder screwing Professor King. I shot him a message to try and get his location but he hadn't replied to the last three I'd sent.*

Gareth:

You'll really want to see what I got for you on King! Where are you dude??

My heart lurched as I was accosted by strong hands and dragged through the door that led to the basement.

Bryce Corvus pinned me to the wall with a hungry grin on his face, his fangs on show. "Word is you wanna help out the Brotherhood, so here's your first job, pledge."

"I'm not pledging, I just agreed to help out Ryder for some extra cash," I choked against his tight hold on my throat. Didn't know why I had to

clarify that right then but my stupid mouth ran away with me.

Bryce slammed my head back against the wall then slapped a piece of paper onto my chest. "Whatever. If you fuck this up, you're dead. And I don't mean that in an empty threat sort of way. I mean it in the ten pieces in an alley kind of way, got it?"

"Got it," I breathed, fighting hard not to shake as he released me and shot away with his Vampire speed, leaving the door swinging slowly closed behind him.

I breathed heavily, reaching for the post-it note he'd stuck to my chest. Peeling it off with my heart in my throat, I gazed down at the instructions.

21 Moonshine Street

Collect the Star Rover there and take it to the address logged into the satnav.

Key on the front left wheel.

Thirty minutes and counting.

"Shit," I hissed, running out of the door into the night air and stripping off my clothes as I went. I stuffed them in my bag, hopping along to get my right shoe off before doing the same with the other.

Lorenzo Oscura was walking up the path and he waved as he spotted me, his eyes glittering excitedly. "Hey Gareth, I've got some more pointers for you!" he called.

"Not right now, Lorenzo." I continued to strip and when I was butt naked with the elastic cord of my bag strapped around my neck, I released my Order form. I raced along the concrete to pick up speed on all four hooves and Lorenzo turned to watch me go with a look of disappointment.

Students dove out of my way as I spread my wings, flapping them hard then launching myself into the sky.

Panic gripped my heart as I sped toward the address. Moonshine Street was way across town in the west quarter, deep in Lunar territory.

I spent ten of my precious thirty minutes flying there then landed on the quiet street where grass sprouted from the pavements, trotting toward number twenty one.

Outside the abandoned looking house was a dusty Star Rover. I shifted back into my Fae form, hurriedly getting dressed before hunting for the key on top of the front left wheel.

I knelt down skimming my hand across it, snagging out the key and unlocking the door. I dropped into the car with a breath of relief, tapping the satnav and bringing up the saved location. It was deep in the heart of The Iron Wood along an old track. I had fifteen minutes left and the satnav said it would take sixteen to get there.

I kicked it into gear, heading up the road and driving the huge vehicle as best I could. Harvey had been teaching me to drive on and off for the past year, but I definitely wasn't licensed and I sure as shit still needed a few more lessons.

I drove over a speed bump and my stomach swooped as I took it too fast, but the vehicle was built for off-roading so I didn't do any damage. A dull thump in the trunk drew my attention for a second before I swore in alarm as I nearly drove straight through a stop sign.

The car idled and I turned slowly down the next road before picking up the pace again.

Do NOT get pulled over by the cops, Gareth Tempa.

I drove as fast as I could without breaking the speed limit, but as my timer ticked down I had to throw caution to the wind and give it some gas.

I sped toward The Iron Wood, spotting the thick trees rising up the nearest hill beyond the city border.

“Come on, come on,” I growled at myself.

I finally reached the outskirts of the city and turned down the dirt track which led deep into the woodland. I raced along it, driving flat out as adrenaline ran through my veins like jet fuel.

A whoop escaped me as I tore over bumps and raced through the dark trees. Something was crashing about in the trunk and I started to get curious about what exactly I was delivering in this car. Because this Star Rover sure wasn’t worth stealing, so there had to be some contraband onboard.

“Hey! Let me out!” a male voice came from the back and I slammed on the brakes as I sucked in a breath of horror.

The engine grumbled and my breathing quickened as I tried to convince myself I’d just imagined that voice.

“Hello?! Please! Let me out of here!”

My eyes flicked to the time till arrival on the satnav and my chest crushed. I couldn’t get any oxygen in at all.

There’s a guy in the boot.

If I let him out, I’m fucked.

If I bring him wherever I’m going, *he’s* fucked.

If I don’t earn enough money this month, Ella’s fucked.

I kept driving, swallowing the hard ball in my throat. I didn’t blink as I continued on, driving so recklessly over the bumps that it nearly drowned out the screaming in the trunk. But not nearly well enough.

A light grew up ahead and I finally emerged in a clearing where a dirt bike stood in the centre of the track, its headlight glaring at me. It was

darkest green, the paintwork designed to look like reptilian scales and I didn't have to guess who it belonged to.

I stopped the car, my mouth dry as I jumped out and moved around to the trunk. I didn't know what I was doing, but I planted myself in front of it, needing an explanation before I let this happen.

But shit, I was supposed to just do jobs and walk away with the cash. I wasn't supposed to get involved more than that.

Why am I standing here and where the fuck is Ryder?

A terrifying hiss made all the blood in my body turned to ice. Something huge was moving through the canopy above. The branches were swaying, leaves scattered and fell at my feet. The moon was hidden behind the clouds and the glaring light of the bike was only making it more difficult for me to spot whatever was up there.

I cupped my hands around my eyes, a soft whinny leaving my throat as I considered turning into my Order form.

"Hello?!" The guy in the trunk started hammering on the side. "Please let me out!"

The trees groaned as some huge beast moved through them and sweat glided down my spine as I waited for it to appear.

The bushes to my left rustled as whatever it was descended into them. My heart stopped altogether as a gigantic snake head pushed through the foliage. Ryder's tongue flicked out, tasting the air as he slithered toward me. He was as thick as a bus and as long as the tree he'd just climbed down.

I shuddered as he wound his way across the ground, lifting his head high enough to look me in the eyes.

"I made it on time," I said, but why I said that I had no idea.

Ryder dropped to the ground, disappearing beyond the vehicle, his tail flicking out of sight.

A minute later he appeared in a pair of jeans with a baseball bat in his hand. "Let him out."

"Fuck, Ryder this is…I dunno, man." I pressed my back to the door of the trunk. Apparently I had a death wish.

"You wanted work, didn't you? Here's your job."

I eyed the baseball bat in his hand with fear crushing my organs. "Are you gonna kill him?"

"Let. Him. Out," Ryder said in a dangerous tone, his eyes flashing to their reptilian form as he swung the bat in front of him to point it at me. "You defy me again and I'll make sure you regret it."

My shaking hand managed to open the trunk and I stepped back as I pulled it wide. A man was curled up into a ball inside, his hands bound behind his back in glowing blue cuffs. Ryder cracked his neck, waiting for the guy to exit but he didn't.

"Get out," Ryder spat. "You weren't so shy when you crossed the Brotherhood, Micky. Now get the fuck out and face your fate."

"Ryder," I breathed, but I regretted it the second his gaze swung onto me again.

"Get him out. Be useful or leave," he barked and I jerked forward on command, reaching into the trunk and pulling at the guy's shirt.

He rolled fast, throwing a kick at me and catching me in the chin.

"Ah!" I stumbled back, raising my hands to cast air, but Micky wasn't focused on me anymore. He was out of the trunk, staring at Ryder, his eyes wide. His hair was thin and his face gaunt, sheer panic written over his features.

“Get the cuffs off him,” Ryder ordered me, tossing me a key which I fumbled to catch. “Let him fight me with magic and see if he really is Fae or not.”

My lips parted. Those were magic blocking cuffs? How the hell had he got his hands on some of those? Because he’s the King of the Lunar Brotherhood, idiot.

I stepped toward Micky and he looked at me with a wild glint in his gaze that said he was about to bolt. I reached for the cuffs and he watched as I hesitantly slid the key into them.

I twisted it and the glowing blue light died in an instant. Micky shook them off and I raised my hands, casting a tight air shield around me, but he didn’t fight. He ran.

Micky fled into the trees and Ryder threw his head back as he laughed. “You’re only prolonging the inevitable!”

He strode around to his bike and I shook like a leaf as he started it and rode it past the Star Rover, halting it in front of me as he rested the bat across his knees. “Are you with me or not, brother?”

Shit shit shit.

With him? I wasn’t fucking with him. Except I was. I had to be. I needed this job. Because if I said no, I might just make an enemy of Ryder Draconis. And judging by the baseball bat, the scary ass look in his eyes and the terrified man running away through the trees, I reckoned that was the stupidest idea in the history of the world.

I hurried forward, swinging a leg over the back of his bike. He took off before I’d found anything to hold onto, figuring I couldn’t just wrap my arms around his damn waist. He wouldn’t like that at all.

But when he put on a burst of speed and a yell of fright escaped me, I wrapped my arms around that motherfucker like he was my damn grandma

at a Christmas party.

He didn't stop me, he just drove faster into the trees, the two beams of light slicing the dark apart as he hunted for his prey.

Why does he even want me with him?!

He churned up the ground as the bike raced along and Micky soon appeared up ahead. Ryder held the baseball bat out with his right hand, swinging it in preparation as he chased the guy down. He could have used magic, but he clearly wanted to do this the personal way.

The bat connected with Micky's head and he hit the ground with a solid thump. Ryder veered back in a sharp circle and I gasped as I nearly came off the seat. He shot forward, then jolted to a halt, kicking the stand down as he cut the engine. He was off the bike in a heartbeat and bringing the bat down toward the Brotherhood traitor.

Micky cast a shell of ice around him and Ryder's bat collided with it, a dong ringing out through the woods. The ice was thick and Ryder's chest and arms were taut with muscle as he beat the bat against it again and again, grunts of effort escaping him with each swing.

Micky tried to reinforce it but Ryder's blows were too powerful. He soon made a big enough crack then discarded the bat, punching a hole through it and dragging Micky full bodily out of the cage of ice. He launched him against a tree then pinned him there with vines, striding toward him across the mossy ground.

My heart thumped in my ears and I was only half aware of sliding off the bike and moving after Ryder.

"You think you can sell out my people and not pay for it? You've been giving Felix Oscura locations and times when the strongest members of my gang would be absent so he can obliterate our people at every attack. So he

could murder innocent civilians!" Ryder's fist slammed into Micky's gut. "Say it." He punched him again. "Fucking admit it."

"I did it, I'm sorry, so sorry," Micky coughed blood, going limp in his binds. "I needed the money. Ma was sick and I couldn't pay her hospital bills. But she didn't make it-"

"Then you should have come to me!" Ryder bellowed. "I wouldn't have let a Brother's family die. But you sold me out. All of us." He punched him again, sighing as Micky's pain fuelled his magic reserves.

"I-I didn't think, boss," Micky spluttered.

"I'm not your boss anymore." Ryder spat on his chest, his saliva mixing with the blood pouring from Micky's mouth. "I'm your comeuppance." He waved a hand and a vine wrapped around Micky's throat.

"Wait no st-" Micky's pleas were cut off as the vine yanked his head sideways and a loud snap sounded his neck breaking.

My heart ceased to beat.

Ryder breathed heavily as we stood in the wake of Micky's death. Silence closed in on me, making the world seem horribly small. Like just me, Ryder and this murder were the only things that inhabited it.

"You killed him," I breathed and Ryder turned to me with pure darkness in his eyes.

"Traitors die. That's the law in the Brotherhood. You're not going to forget that now, are you?"

I shook my head, fear keeping me from saying another word. This was why he wanted me to do this job. He wanted me to see what happened to the people who crossed him.

Ryder raised his hand, carving a hole in the ground and using his vines to draw Micky's body deep into the dirt.

I'd never, ever betray Ryder if I could help it. But the horrible, terrifying truth was I already had.

I was working for his enemy. Double crossing him just like this guy had. And if he ever found out, he would put me in the ground without mercy, without remorse, without blinking. Just like Micky.

I couldn't show Dante that video of Ryder and Professor King. I couldn't go against Ryder so absolutely. But not doing so would be betraying Dante too.

For a terrifying second I realised I might soon end up in a grave…and maybe it just came down to which one of them would dig it.

“-Draconis! Mr Draconis pay attention!” Professor Mars shot a blast of water at me and I stumbled back, blinking out of my stupor.

Eugene Dipper was buried in the ground at my feet, the tip of his white hair peeking above the disturbed earth.

“Get him out before he suffocates,” Mars demanded. “But you can have two rank points for exceptional magical skill.”

I grunted, waving a hand to drag Dipper out of the earth by a thick vine, my gaze fixed on Elise and Mufasa across the field. He kept tickling her and she laughed wildly, wriggling in his arms and begging him to stop. She could have just used her Vampire speed to escape, but she didn’t. She rubbed up against him while his hands roamed all over her.

Eugene took in a huge lungful of air as I deposited him above ground, his body trembling from head to toe as mud fell from his clothes.

“Almost…*died*,” he panted.

“But you didn’t,” I pointed out dryly.

Mars had walked off, not having re-paired us, but I really didn’t see the point in me training with someone so weak.

I strode away from him, making a direct path for Elise and the Lion asshole, hissing beneath my breath.

“Swap pairs,” I snapped, jolting the earth beneath them so they were forced to stumble apart.

Elise looked to me with a pout and Leon surveyed me with annoyance.

“Fine, Ryder, I’ll pair with you,” Elise said, stepping forward.

“No thanks, I’m pairing with the Lion.” I moved toward him hungrily and Elise snorted a laugh.

“Great, but I’m staying for the show,” she announced.

“Even better,” I growled.

Leon cast a fireball in his hand, letting it twist around his arm as if he gave no shits in the world. I squared up to him, letting a vine lengthen in my palm and setting him in my sights. I wanted him on his ass, bleeding, pain pouring from his wounds while I drank it in.

“You look a little green, Ryder,” Leon said with a smirk. “Is that your Order form showing through or just jealousy?”

“Why would I be jealous of you?” I spat a hollow laugh and Leon’s smile widened.

“Because you want Elise and she’s not yours,” he said simply and rage settled in my gut.

“I’m not yours either,” Elise sang from the sidelines.

“Miss Callisto please pair with Mr Dipper!” Mars called and she sighed her disappointment before heading away.

“Oh hey Elise!” Dipper called excitedly and I frowned over at Elise as he hugged her in greeting – *okay what the fuck is that about?*

Leon stepped forward and I dragged my thoughts back to the fight as we started slowly circling one another. I had the patience of a saint and the anger of a sinner. I’d wait for him to strike then cut him down to size without mercy.

“You just can’t handle it, can you? Me and her, kissing, fucking-”

I begged the ground to swallow him and a crater tore the ground apart, my patience lost to my temper.

“Fuck you!” I roared, churning up the earth as Leon tumbled into the pit I’d made.

I dove down into it with him, throwing a fist into his face. He was ready with a counter punch, slamming a fiery blow into my gut and burning through my clothes. My skin singed and pain rang through my body like a gong.

I smiled darkly, throwing wild punches, forgetting my Element as I devoured the feel of ripping into his flesh first hand.

I brought him to the ground as he burned me again and again, but I was wild, lost to the rage of picturing her with this piece of shit thief.

He threw me off him with a grunt of effort, rising to his feet and casting a wall of fire between us. “You crazy motherfucker!”

I leapt through the fire, the T-shirt of my kit nothing but burnt scraps of material. My skin was angry and red, bleeding from burns as I lunged at him. I locked a thick vine around his throat, but he burned it to ash, grabbing my arm and throwing a handful of flames at my chest in retaliation.

The scars put there by Mariella blistered as fire rushed over my skin and I blinked away the dark curtain pulling at my mind, feeding on the pain but not stopping to heal myself. I caught Leon by his golden hair then slammed my hand against his mouth, casting soil down his throat, mounting it up and up in his lungs.

He fought wildly, throwing punches which broke ribs, singeing more of my skin and finally casting an explosive fireball which threw me into the wall on the opposite side of the pit.

I hit the ground, bleeding profusely and suddenly too weak to get up. Leon coughed and spluttered and Professor Mars was suddenly in the pit with us. I tried to rise again, my sights still set on my target but Mars

slammed a hand to my shoulder to keep me down. Healing light spread over my body and Mars caught my chin, trying to get a look at me as my head lolled against my chest.

“Fucking…Lion,” I ground out and Mars relaxed, dragging me up to stand when he’d finished healing me. My pants were still just about intact but the rest of me was bare.

Leon had already climbed out of the pit and Mars caught my arm before I could follow. “Watch that temper of yours, Draconis. You kill a student and you’re out of this academy.”

I nodded stiffly, looking up to find Elise staring down at me with worry in her eyes. Leon tried to draw her away but she shook her head, murmuring something to him and he sighed before walking away.

I cast a pillar of earth to lift Mars and I out of the pit, then waved a hand to fill in the hole. I moved to walk past Elise but she stepped into my path so we knocked into each other.

The bell rang from all the buildings across school. It was lunchtime but I felt anything but hungry.

“Ryder,” Elise said gently, taking my hand and I blinked out of my stupor to look at her. All I could see was Leon’s body claiming hers and I grimaced, pulling out of her hold and walking away across the field.

Elise was at my side again in a spurt of Vampire speed and I pointedly ignored her.

“You can’t seriously be annoyed with me,” she said in irritation.

“You’re fucking the Lion King,” I snarled, my chest tightening as flashes of heat hit my skin.

“So what?” she said. “You’ve probably fucked half the girls in this school.”

“Not since-” I stole the air from that sentence, anger pounding through me at almost saying something so fucking stupid. Because why hadn’t I screwed anyone since I’d met Elise? It didn’t make any fucking sense. She wasn’t mine. And now I’d made that deal with Inferno, she couldn’t be mine. And meanwhile, I got fucking blue balls and for what? So she could go off screwing Lions and skipping about school giving no shits who that hurt?

“Oh,” Elise breathed, meaning she’d picked up on that shit-stained piece of info I hadn’t wanted to give.

“Yeah,” I growled, having to own it.

“Well I didn’t ask you to do that,” she said, but her voice had softened and she’d shifted closer to me, her arm brushing mine.

I shrugged and she moved closer still and we fell silent as we walked across campus. I couldn’t find any words to give her, but eventually she spoke again.

“You were the one who made that deal with Dante.” There was a seductive note to her voice and I realised we’d walked all the way to my dorm room without me even noticing.

“And if I hadn’t?” I asked, my throat bobbing as I gazed down her curves hungrily.

She tip-toed up, whispering as she moved into the arc of my body and causing my heart to pound painfully. “I’ll never commit to one man. That’s just not me. So if you hadn’t then…” she placed her hand on my bare chest and the heat of her skin set off a fire in my body. She trailed her fingers lower and my cock twitched desperately, practically full mast already. If I did fuck her, I’d last about five shitting seconds right now. Real impressive.

I opened the door to my room, pushing it wide and heading in. I left it open for her to follow, not responding to what she said and feeling the

tension building between us.

I stripped off my charred pants, heading to the closet and taking out a spare uniform. The door clicked shut and my pulse elevated. I was in my room, practically naked with Elise and I wasn't about to get laid. It was a sad fucking future for my balls.

I dragged on a clean uniform before turning to her and finding her laying on my bed with a wicked smile.

A groan escaped me and I shook my head. "Get up, baby, or I won't be held responsible for what I do next."

"That sounds like something you'd have to take a lot responsibility for actually." She swung her bare legs around as she sat up and I thought of Leon again, getting to grind his naked body against hers.

"Did he make you come?" I blurted and her brows jumped up in surprise.

"Ryder…"

"Just answer me," I demanded. I didn't know why I needed to know, but I did.

"For the star's sake, Ryder, is it really important?"

I considered that, grinding my jaw, ready to pop a tooth.

"No," I finally decided, striding toward her and leaning down close to her face so I could almost taste her. "Because one day, I'm going to figure out a way past this deal with Inferno then I'm going to fuck Leon out of your memory. You won't remember your name let alone his."

She rolled her eyes, ducking out from under me with a burst of Vampire speed. I turned to find her on the top bunk across the room, swinging her legs like a child as she shook her head at me. "I like you, Ryder, but I like Leon too. And trust me when I say, you wouldn't make me forget him. He's important to me."

“Why?” I hissed, though maybe I knew deep down. Leon was everything I wasn’t. He could offer her something normal, something sweet. I didn’t do normal or sweet. I did twisted and bitter. If Leon was her type, I was never going to be.

“Well for one, he makes me laugh and sometimes I really need that,” she said, her eyes glittering with truth.

I moved toward her again like a predator, resting a hand on her knee and causing her to inhale deeply.

“Am I not funny?” I scrubbed my rough chin against her thigh and a smile pulled at her lips.

“No you’re not.” She laughed though and that brought something of a smile to my own lips. “Hey….do you wanna help me with something?” She flipped her legs over my head and leapt to the floor like a cat.

She was at the door in half a second and I was already moving after her. Wherever she was going, I was going.

I stepped into the hallway behind her and she snatched my hand, dragging me along at speed. We were soon slipping into Altair Halls and Elise towed me upstairs to where the faculty offices were located. She led me down to Miss Nightshade’s office and I shot her an inquisitive look.

“She’s not working today, I checked,” she whispered. “I want to search her office.”

“For what?” I asked in surprise, but she ignored me, moving forward to try and open the door.

Chatter carried from the stairway and I pushed her aside, casting a slim piece of wood into my hand and pushing it into the keyhole. I had it picked in less than ten seconds and pushed the door wide, tugging Elise in behind me.

I clamped a hand over her mouth as the chatter grew closer and I recognised Principal Greyshine talking on his cellphone. “I just don’t want the chocolate poptarts running low, you see? If we could order extra boxes – well yes I understand I ordered the maximum last time but - okay well just send me what you have.” His voice drifted away and Elise peeled my hand from her mouth, casting a silencing bubble around us instead.

I turned to watch as she headed to Nightshade’s desk, dropping down behind it and pulling drawers open.

I folded my arms, leaning back against the door.

“Help me,” she encouraged.

“Not until you tell me what you’re looking for.”

She paused, glancing up from her knees on the floor and yes I liked how she looked down there.

She sighed, balling her hands in her lap. “Do you believe me about the night of the party? That I was drugged and saw someone get murdered?”

I surveyed her for a few seconds then nodded firmly, no doubts finding me. I’d been angry the first time she’d mentioned it and frankly I didn’t want to be reminded of the argument we’d had that day. “Yes.”

Her eyes brightened like that meant a lot to her and her shoulders relaxed marginally. “Well…the other day I followed Nightshade to a meeting at her office in town. She met with the same shady freak I saw that night in the woods. But they’re hiding their face with a concealment spell. When they left…I broke into her office and went through her files. I found a picture of the boy who died.” She took out her Atlas, tapping something on the screen before tossing it to me.

I caught it out of the air with a taut frown, eyeing the picture of the boy in the file she’d photographed. I didn’t recognise him and I moved to stand

beside her, handing it back. “You followed her and broke into her office?” I asked with a smirk.

“Yeah,” she said with a shrug and I dropped down to sit in the office chair behind her. “Now I’m looking for more leads.”

“Well any excuse to fuck with Nightshade,” I said with a wild spark igniting in my chest.

She grinned, continuing to rifle through drawers and I pulled open the top one, finding a laptop inside and taking it out. I opened it up on the desk, trying a few failed passwords.

“Hmm her password isn’t satanic bitch, any other ideas, baby?” I nudged Elise with my knee and she looked up at me with a grin.

“Have you tried sour-faced trout?”

I barked a laugh, typing it in. “Damn. I was sure you had it.” She stood up, dropping straight into my lap and making me inhale in surprise as her ass connected with my dick. I wrapped my hands around her waist, pushing her onto one knee to relieve my throbbing cock.

She pulled the laptop closer and typed in *loser-whore*, *can’t drive for shit*, and *invasive fishlips*.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “We’re not going to guess it,” I said against her ear and she wriggled back into my lap, making me groan with need. I was in actual pain right now. If Elise wasn’t going to give me the relief I needed it was me and my right hand for the foreseeable future. I could have just screwed another girl. Elise was seeing other men anyway, but somehow the idea just didn’t appeal. I needed to get off over Elise. No one else was going to cut it.

“I’m beginning to think you torment me on purpose,” I growled.

“Who me?” she asked innocently, turning so her mouth was half an inch from mine as she batted her lashes.

I swallowed the lump pushing at my throat then knocked her from my lap and stood up with a conspiratorial grin. I gazed around the room, spotting a coffee machine on a table against the wall and moving to set it up. I took my time brewing a cup, pouring in sugar and creamer before walking back to the desk. It looked like Elise had given up, all the drawers now pushed back into place while she stood contemplating the laptop.

“Do you give up?” I asked and she nodded.

“She probably doesn’t keep anything but our files on the laptop anyway,” she sighed.

“My thoughts exactly.” I tipped the coffee all over the keyboard and sparks shot out of it.

Elise laughed wildly, hurrying forward to rest a hand on my arm as I continued to pour it all over the machine until it was deader than dead.

“Well you may not have found anything but that felt fucking ace.” I placed the coffee cup down and Elise grinned up at me, her eyes sparkling with joy. “Are you sure I don’t make you happy too?” I breathed.

A key sounded in the lock and fuck fuck fuck-

I thought on my feet, flipping Elise back onto the desk, pushing her skirt up and unzipping my fly in the same instant. I fisted my hand in her hair, dragging her firmly against me the second the door swung open.

The janitor stood there in shock, his magical cleaning products stacked up on a little trolley which coasted into the room as he released it in surprise.

“You’re not allowed in here!” he gasped.

“The door was open now get the fuck out!” I barked and his face paled.

“Two minutes or I’m calling Professor Mars,” he countered, hurriedly shutting the door.

Elise gazed up at me with her lips wide and I glanced down at her bared panties between her thighs, fucking desperate for her as her legs tightened either side of me.

“Trust you to come up with this plan,” she teased, knotting her fingers in my shirt as she pulled herself upright.

I didn’t move, drinking in the feel of her so close, my heart pounding frantically where her hand was fisted against me.

I was out of breath for no other fucking reason than her proximity and how much I ached for her.

“One minute!” the janitor’s voice sounded outside the door and I sighed, stepping back to let Elise up and missing the contact of her the second she moved away.

When we were decent, we headed to the door and Elise threaded her fingers through mine, tugging me toward her before I could leave. She tip-toed up to brush her lips over the shell of my ear and a hungry growl escaped me.

“You do make me happy, Ryder.” She skated her lips to my jaw and I clutched her against my side with a groan of lust. “I wish I could show you how much.”

The door wrenched open and I tugged Elise past the angry janitor standing there. She saluted him and we hurried off down the hallway as he grumbled to himself about spilled coffee and horny students.

Elise kept her hand in mine as we headed back downstairs, laughing like two naughty school kids.

I couldn’t erase the grin tugging at my mouth and decided I might as well admit the obvious truth to Elise. “You make me feel happy too, Elise. Forget pain or lust. Just happy. Are you going to tattoo it on my dick or am I?”

She laughed again, leaning into me. “That would make an interesting date.”

“It would make a messy one. If you touch it, it’ll go off. Especially if there’s a needle involved.”

“I thought you were going to make me forget my own name?” she teased.

“I will on round two.” I knocked my shoulder against hers and she looked to me with her cheeks colouring and her eyes bright. And I was pretty sure it was the best way anyone had looked at me in my entire life.

I sat in Cardinal Magic class, leaning back in my chair as I attempted not to doze off. I'd stayed up late into the night on my Atlas looking into the boy who'd died in the woods, hoping for some kind of answers as to how Nightshade had selected him. If I could just come up with some kind of proof that she'd been involved in bringing him to the woods that night then maybe I could give that information to the FIB and force them to start an investigation.

Titan had spoken to them for me like he'd promised but after an extremely brief sweep of The Iron Wood and a discussion with Principal Greyshine about my drug habit, they'd quickly decided against investigating. When Professor Titan had sheepishly explained that to me in our last Liaison meeting, I hadn't even been surprised. I'd lost my faith in the FIB when they wrote of Gareth's death as an accidental overdose anyway.

Even after hours of trawling online, I hadn't come up with much about my mystery victim. One inactive FaeBook page, a cellphone number that had been cut off and a mention in The Celestial Times about a kid who liked to eat cheez-its so much he'd set a record. I got the feeling the cheez-it kid was not the guy I was looking in to but as there weren't any pictures accompanying that delightful story it was hard to say for sure.

Either way, cheez-it records aside, I hadn't found anything at all to help me out.

I let my eyes fall shut with a sigh and listened to our Professor as she discussed the pros and cons of illusions. I was pretty excited to start working on that magic but as this was a theory lesson, I could afford to let my attention waver. I'd just research it more thoroughly in my own time, maybe ask Laini to give me some pointers on the subject. Being friendly with a smart ass Sphinx in the class above me had definitely gone a long way towards helping me catch up on my education and I hardly even felt like I was lagging behind the other students in my class these days.

"Oh, sorry!" Cindy Lou gasped as she stumbled and banged into my desk.

I jolted upright, narrowing my eyes at her as she bent down to push my bag back under my desk.

"I tripped on it," she said innocently before heading down to the front of the room and taking a seat by her friend Amira. Her heart was beating faster than usual and I frowned in confusion as she glanced back at me then looked away just as quickly. .

What was she up to?

"You look almost as tired as me, little monster," Leon said, leaning across the aisle to talk to me in a low voice.

"I stayed up too late studying," I said through a yawn.

"That's a pretty lame reason to be missing sleep," he teased. "I'm sure I can give you a better one if you wanna come stay in my room tonight?"

I laughed, biting my lip as the professor scowled at us.

A screwed up piece of paper hit Leon in the side of the head and I looked around to see who had thrown it but no one was looking our way. Ryder seemed suspiciously still though so I wondered if it was him.

“But then you’ll just send Amy and Sasha away from their beds and it makes me feel like an asshat,” I whispered.

“It’s okay, it makes them happy to please me,” he assured me.

I opened my mouth to tell him how screwed up that was but the door burst open suddenly before I could get a word out.

“Everyone stand up, don’t touch your bags and line up along the back wall!” Professor Mars shouted as he strode into the room.

Cindy Lou shot to her feet, her gaze falling on me for a moment and her mouth pulling up into a little smirk.

I frowned as I did as commanded, slipping out of my chair before walking to the back of the class with Leon.

I stood with my back to the brick wall, exchanging a confused look with Leon that told me he had just as little idea of what this was about as I did.

Gabriel moved to stand on my other side and his arm pressed against mine, sending a shiver along my skin.

“Hey,” he said, glancing down at me like he wasn’t entirely sure what reception I’d give him.

“Oh, talking to me in public are you?” I teased. “What is this, my birthday?”

“Must be,” he agreed, the corner of his mouth twitching with amusement.

I rolled my eyes dramatically and blew a bubble with my gum.

Professor Mars stalked to a desk at the front of the room and glared at all of us. He didn’t say a word as he proceeded to up end a student’s bag onto the desk in front of him. He rifled through the contents before moving on to the next and I sighed as I leaned back against the wall, waiting for this to play out.

“So, I was thinking,” Leon said, leaning close to me. “That maybe if you come back to my room, you could bite me again…”

My heart leapt at that suggestion and I bit my lip as I turned to look at him.

“So you’ve come over to the dark side, have you?” I teased, eyeing his neck with more than a little lust. “I told you you’d like it.”

Leon flexed his fingers and they brushed against the back of my hand. “Only the way you do it,” he replied in a low voice.

Gabriel growled in the back of his throat beside us and I huffed impatiently in response.

“Something you’d like to say?” I asked him, arching a brow in his direction.

“No,” he replied simply, eyes still to the front of the class.

“So…?” Leon pushed, ignoring Gabriel entirely.

“Maybe,” I shrugged like the suggestion of drinking his blood wasn’t making my heart beat harder and saliva pool in my mouth. My fangs were tingling with the idea of it and a reckless part of me didn’t even want to wait until tonight to taste him.

“Maybe?” Leon frowned. “I want a bit more enthusiasm please, little mon-”

“Callisto!” Professor Mars barked and I flinched at the sound of my name.

He was standing at my desk, the contents of my bag strewn in front of him and three vials of bright blue Killblaze gripped in his hand.

“Care to explain yourself?” he demanded.

“They’re not mine,” I said with a frown, my lips parting in confusion.

“So I guess the sugar plum fairy just dropped these here on her way to the crack den then did she?” Mars deadpanned.

“No,” I replied, my mind spinning as I tried to figure out how the hell they could have gotten in my bag.

A soft snort of amusement caught my heightened senses and my head snapped up as I spotted Cindy Lou sniggering with her friends. My gaze locked with hers as I remembered the way she’d ‘tripped’ on my bag earlier.

“You!” I snapped, pointing at her as I strode forward. “She planted that in my bag!”

“What?” Cindy Lou gasped, clutching at her chest like I’d mortally wounded her. “Why are you always bullying me like this? What did I ever do to you?” Actual, honest to the stars tears swam in her eyes and she looked over at Dante like she was expecting him to help her. He only frowned in response, his gaze skipping between me and her like he was trying to figure something out.

My lip curled back as I glanced at Mars, wondering if he was seriously falling for her bullshit.

“She did it!” I insisted. “Get a Cyclops to check her memories if you don’t believe me. She’s pissed that I made a fool of her at the spring party and she’s trying to get payback.”

“You mean the party where you were off your face on Killblaze and attacked me for no reason?” Cindy Lou asked.

Sniggers rang out around the room and a snarl left me as I realised people were buying into her act. I looked around at the sea of faces, finding Dante still frowning at us like he didn’t even know what to think. The idea of him buying into her bullshit set a fire burning in my gut and my anger just stoked the flames.

“That’s enough, Callisto, you’re in detention. Hopefully we can scare you straight before you get too hooked on this stuff,” Mars said, shaking his

head like he was disappointed in me. “Head down to the auditorium where you will watch an educational movie on the long term effects and risks of taking this toxic substance. Drugs are no joke. If after attending the screening and counselling sessions you continue to flout our rules on this you may find your place at the academy in jeopardy. Do you understand?”

Rage bled beneath my skin as I opened my mouth to protest but no words would come out. I was too damn angry to form a coherent argument so I just stood there gaping like an idiot.

“It’s okay, sweety,” Cindy Lou said, taking a step towards me and laying a hand on my shoulder. “Addiction is nothing to be ashamed of.”

I snapped. The stars had gifted me with a short ass fuse and I was way beyond the point of blowing it anyway. My fist collided with Cindy Lou’s perfectly made up face with every bit of my Vampire strength thrown into the blow.

She collided with the desk behind her and her legs flipped right up over her head before she fell to the ground with a crack that spoke of something breaking. The silence that followed was punctuated by a collective intake of breath as it became painfully apparent that I’d knocked her out cold. I could still hear her pulse though so I wasn’t concerned with the idea of murdering her. Not that I’d have felt bad if I had, it just would have been kinda hard to get away with it with so many eye witnesses about.

The silence was broken as Amira shrieked in concern and raced forward to heal her friend.

Adrenaline pumped freely through my body as I turned my angry gaze back to Professor Mars, half tempted to turn my rage on him next as he opened his mouth, ready to scream at me.

“The drugs are mine, Professor,” Gabriel’s voice averted world war three and I paused the coming tirade as I turned to stare at him.

“What?” I said at the exact same moment as Mars.

“I asked Elise to hold them for me but I don’t want her getting into trouble on my account,” Gabriel continued, moving to my side.

“Bullshit,” I said, my gaze narrowing on Cindy Lou again as she pushed herself upright. Blood stained her pretty face and I smirked triumphantly even though the damage had already been repaired.

“I don’t need lies from you, Nox,” Mars said irritably. “Save the Romeo and Juliet shit for after hours.”

“It’s not a lie,” Gabriel insisted.

“It *is* a lie,” I countered, glaring at him.

Mars threw his hands up in defeat. “I couldn’t give a shit. You both want detention? Fine. You can kindly head on down to the auditorium where you’ll be watching the movie. And I’ll be signing both of you up for drugs related counselling with Miss Nightshade too.”

I groaned loudly at that. “Can’t you just cut off my arm or something instead? Anything would be less painful than spending more time with her.”

“This is not a negotiation, Callisto! Get the hell out of my sight – now!” Mars bellowed.

I held my tongue as I moved forward to claim my bag from my desk, stuffing my stuff back inside it and taking a moment to check that my concealment spell was still in place. Luckily Mars clearly hadn’t detected it and all of the important things I’d gathered in my investigation were still hidden away in the pocket at the back. I threw my bag over my shoulder before sweeping from the room with Gabriel one step behind me.

I set a fast pace to the auditorium, not looking his way though I could feel his gaze on me.

When we arrived, we found the door already open and some students from other classes sitting inside waiting for the movie to start. Harvey

Bloom caught my eye for a moment before turning away again just as quickly. I wasn't surprised to see him here with the druggy populous and I guessed I couldn't blame him for avoiding me after I'd tried to force information about King out of him. I still wanted to know who the hell he got the drugs from though, it just wasn't a wise move for me to keep pushing the way I had.

I stopped walking abruptly as I spotted Miss Nightshade waiting at the front of the auditorium, my blood running cold at the sight of her as I cursed myself for not realising sooner that she'd be the one holding this little shit fest.

"What's the hold up Miss Callisto?" she called as I stopped dead, seriously considering what the hell she could do to me if I just turned and ran for it.

Before I could make a decision that might have gotten me expelled, a large hand took mine and I flinched in surprise as I looked up at Gabriel.

"Come on," he said, tugging my hand and drawing me after him into the room.

I was so shocked by his behaviour that I didn't even resist as he led me straight up the stairs at the centre of the auditorium and took me to the back row. We kept going until we were in the corner of the room and he dropped down into a chair, tugging me down with him.

We sat in silence for a long moment as more students trailed into the room and I watched Gabriel as he stared straight ahead, acting like him holding my hand wasn't strange as fuck. And also weirdly nice. Not that I'd admit that. But then I hadn't pulled my hand away either.

"Okay everyone, you all know why you're here. I want you to pay close attention to the following movie on the effects of narcotics such as Killblaze and you'll all have sessions with me following up on what you learn here.

Remember guys, drugs are bad!" Miss Nightshade took a seat at the front of the room and the lights dimmed as the movie started playing.

"So what is it?" I asked Gabriel in a whisper. "Do you just get off on being the knight in shining armour or something?"

The corner of Gabriel's mouth twitched and he turned slowly to look at me.

"Only when it comes to you apparently."

"Convenient," I sighed.

"Not really," he countered. "You make it very difficult."

I snorted a laugh at that, earning me a stern look from Nightshade at the front of the room.

"Are you ever going to tell me how you figured out who I am?" I asked when he didn't seem inclined to break the silence again.

Gabriel hesitated for a moment then sighed, his thumb trailing over the back of my hand. I wasn't sure why I hadn't reclaimed it yet but I kinda liked the way it fit in his.

With a flick of his other hand, he cast a silencing bubble around us and I leaned in a little more, wondering if he might be about to tell me the truth about something for once.

"I have a P.I. who works for me from time to time. I asked him to find out who had the phone. He was the one who'd figured out Gareth had it in the first place so it wasn't much of a stretch for him to presume the person in possession of it now might have been related to him."

I nodded slowly. "I guess that makes sense."

I was also more than a little relieved that it wasn't something anyone else was likely to do any time soon so my cover was still pretty tight.

"So why do you have a P.I.?"

Gabriel looked at me for a long moment like he was weighing his response, finally shrugging. “For this and that,” he said vaguely.

Of course he didn’t give me a real answer.

I exhaled slowly and tried to pull my hand out of his but his grip tightened to stop me from reclaiming it.

“Elise…” he began in a low voice. “I want you to know that my reasons for trying to avoid our fate were never anything to do with you…”

“I still don’t believe in fate,” I breathed, though my heart beat a little harder in denial of those words.

“Then tell me that I’m crazy,” he said, twisting in his chair so that he could speak into my ear. The distance between us was disappearing, the walls I’d put in place crumbling apart with the slightest movement of his mouth. “Tell me that I’m wrong…that you don’t feel this.”

I breathed in the rich scent of him, my gaze colliding with his as the tension between us spilled over. The space dividing us felt like it was filled with static that crackled between us. I ached to lean closer, press my mouth to his and run my hands over every inch of his flesh. Maybe Mars had been right to send me to this detention because I *was* an addict. But Killblaze wasn’t my drug of choice. The Kings were. And no matter how hard I tried to hold myself back, I kept finding myself in positions like this.

“Gabriel,” I said slowly, either a warning for him to stay away or a plea for him to move closer. In that moment I had no idea which.

“-prolonged use of drugs such as Killblaze and Corkscrewer have been known to have side effects such as magic impairment, Elemental deterioration and even *anal leakage*,” the narrator on the screen said loudly and I coughed out a laugh as I turned to look back at the badly acted educational movie just as it faded into a hospital ward.

“By the stars, why do they make these movies so fucking dull?” I asked. “It’s like they want kids to take drugs just to alleviate the boredom invoked by watching them.”

I turned my gaze back to Gabriel and raised an eyebrow as I found him *smiling*. Like, full on, actual teeth on show, smiling. The difference it made to his face was astonishing. He was already painfully good looking before but without his smoulder in full effect he was just plain captivating.

“You know, I think that’s the first time I think I’ve ever seen you smile,” I pointed out.

“Well I wouldn’t get used to it,” he joked, his gaze sliding over me.

“Why?” I asked seriously. “Don’t you like having fun?”

“It’s not that,” he said, his frown returning. “I just have to study a lot. Research, practice…I don’t get much time for anything else.”

“Like fun?” I pushed. “Do you ever do anything reckless?”

“You mean like trying to take the fall for someone who’s had drugs planted in their bag?” he teased.

“Touché.” I turned my gaze back to the front of the room. “How good is your control over your water element?” I asked conspiratorially.

“Pretty damn good,” he replied, matter of fact, not even bothering with being cocky.

“So why don’t you fry the DVD player so we can get out of here?” I suggested.

“I can’t do that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“Because you’re no fun?” I pushed.

“No. I just…”

“Don’t wanna get in trouble?” I guessed, sighing as I leaned back in my chair.

“I just don’t like drawing attention to myself,” he countered.

“Well if you’re as good as you say, you won’t get caught,” I pointed out, daring him with my gaze.

Gabriel held my eye for a long moment then turned to look back towards the front of the room.

The movie played on for so long that I was convinced he wasn’t going to do it when all of a sudden a huge spark came from the DVD player, closely followed by a bang that caused a girl in the front row to shriek in fright.

Smoke rose from the machine as the screen went black and we were plunged into darkness.

“It’s okay! Settle down!” Miss Nightshade called out as she moved away to hunt for the light switch and murmurs broke out all around us.

While she fumbled for the switch in the dark, I flicked my fingers in the direction of the smoke which had risen from the DVD player, taking control of it with my air magic and sending the whole lot straight up towards the sprinkler on the ceiling.

It only took a few seconds of holding the smoke in place around the sensor before a loud bell rang out and the sprinkler burst to life.

Students screamed as they were drenched and I laughed, grabbing Gabriel’s hand again and hoisting him to his feet as everyone began running for the exit in the dark.

Someone threw the door open and everyone flooded outside, ignoring Nightshade’s cries for us to come back.

I kept hold of Gabriel’s hand, dragging him outside as we were drenched by the sprinkler and running on down the corridor. All of the students from the detention had formed a crowd so I tugged on Gabriel’s hand and yanked him away from them around a corner where I found a window ajar.

I released my grip on his hand and shoved the window open before jumping out to land on the grass outside.

I laughed as I sprinted away from Altair Halls and across the sweeping lawn which ran around the back of it. Gabriel kept pace beside me and we didn't slow until we'd slipped into the cover of The Iron Wood.

I started laughing as I leaned back against an ancient oak tree, catching my breath while dripping a puddle into the dirt at my feet.

Gabriel pushed a hand through his soaking black hair with a grin, drawing the water out of it with his control of the Element. He siphoned the liquid away from his body, dispensing it onto the dirt before moving closer to me with his hand held out to offer me the same.

"What's the matter, Gabriel?" I joked. "Don't you like me all wet?"

His gaze slid over me slowly and he almost smiled. "I like you like this," he admitted. "But not because you're wet."

"What am I then?"

"Happy," he said simply.

My smile faded and I pushed my wet hair away from my face, lilac strands dripping everywhere.

"No," I replied, the ache in my heart sharpening as he drew attention to it. "I'm not that."

Gabriel's brows tightened and he moved closer to me, reaching out to cup my cheek in his hand. "Feeling happy sometimes doesn't mean you loved him any less," he said slowly.

Something cold and dark was growing in me at his words and I took a step aside, breaking his contact with my skin.

"I can laugh and smile and have fun from time to time," I said. "But the pain never goes. I can cover it up a little here and there but it still rules me."

"The girl you are hasn't changed," he protested. "Just because you've had to live through-"

“The girl I *was* is long gone, Gabriel,” I countered. “And if you really have to question the truth of that then why not take a better look at that photo you have of me from last summer? She’s practically a stranger to me now. The things I’ve done…the things I’m *going* to do…she wouldn’t understand that at all. And I can’t even begin to remember what it was to live without this pain in me now.”

“But there’s so much more to you than that,” he protested, stepping towards me again, but I backed up.

“There isn’t. The only reason I get out of bed in the mornings is because I haven’t figured this out yet. Because I can’t let Gareth’s death go unanswered. If it does, it’s like he didn’t even matter. Like he wasn’t the only good thing I ever had in this world and he hadn’t deserved better than that. And I refuse to let that be the case. So I’ve gathered all the broken pieces left of the girl he loved and bound them together to seek vengeance for what was done to him. That’s all I care about.”

“And what about after that?” Gabriel asked, his frown deepening like he didn’t know what to think of me at all.

I shrugged. “I’ll figure that out if I get an after.”

“What the hell does that mean?” he asked, a bit of anger colouring his words.

“That I’ll do whatever it takes to bring down the person who took my brother from me. I’ll give anything, sacrifice *anything.* So if it takes every piece of me, my freedom, my future, my life and my soul then that’s what it takes. I don’t care. I’ve just got to get justice for him.”

Gabriel’s face paled. “Surely he wouldn’t want you to do that?” he demanded. “If Gareth loved you like you clearly loved him, he’d want you to have a life, be happy. He’d want-”

“The dead don’t want anything,” I interrupted. “Because that was stolen from them alongside everything else. So I’ll decide on my own fate and that’s this: I *will* find out what happened to him that night. Every. Little. Detail. And once I’ve figured out who took him from me, I’ll make them pay in pain and death.”

Gabriel’s lips parted in horror and he reached for me again but I just shook my head before speeding away from him and heading back to my dorm. I didn’t want comfort or kindness, compassion or pity. I just wanted blood. And I’d get it whatever way necessary.

Dante Oscura

Cindy Lou Galaxa

Harvey Bloom

Leon Night

Lorenzo Oscura

These were the students in school I'd seen Gareth hanging out with regularly. So could they possibly have a connection to what had happened to Gareth on the night of the Solarid Meteor Shower? If she was this determined to find this guy, I'd do everything in my power to help her. Especially if I wanted any chance of her accepting me as a mate. I had to do right by her and though I still couldn't bear to tell her what I'd done the night of Gareth's death, I would do everything in my power to help her figure out who'd murdered him before she got herself killed in this hunt for justice.

I eyed the list I'd made on my Atlas again. Lorenzo was dead too which seemed like a pretty big coincidence. I'd asked Bill to get a hold of the FIB records of his death and I was still waiting on him delivering them.

If any of the others were linked to Gareth's death, it could save Elise finding out the truth about my own whereabouts that night. So I needed to dig up the dirt. And though it was dangerous as hell, I decided the Oscuras

were most likely to have done something bad when it came to Gareth. *If* they had a motive.

It was early evening, but night had fallen already as I sat up on the roof of the Vega Dorms. Now it was dark, it was time for action. I released my wings from my back and leapt into the sky. A cool updraft pushed against my wings as I spread them wide and soared across the academy grounds.

There was only one place in this entire school where Dante Oscura would keep incriminating evidence. I'd been practising the spells to permit me access all week and hoped I was strong enough to manage it. If anyone was capable of it in this school, it was me.

I already had my own storage area in the Kipling Cache where I kept emergency supplies in case I ever had to run from this place so gaining entry to the main cavern wasn't the problem. It was getting into the Oscura stash that was going to be a real challenge. But I'd stay there all night if that was what it took.

I circled around The Iron Wood, the moon flashing on my wings as I lowered down into the north eastern corner of the forest. I dropped below the canopy, silently landing on the soft earth and gazing around the dark trees.

I kept my wings out in case I had to make a quick exit. There were plenty of Fae in this school who could be slinking about in the woods at night.

I located the large boulder which marked the entrance to the cache and rested my hand on it, my magic slipping through my skin and granting me access. A hatch appeared in place of the boulder and I bent down, flipping it open and descending into the dark space. Sconces on the walls burned eternally up ahead and as I arrived in the circular chamber at the base of the ramp, my vision was fully restored. Tunnels led off in all directions, but I

moved to the one marked with the symbol of a wolf on the wall beside it. The Oscura Clan symbol.

I raised a hand, feeling out the edges of the magical barrier which stopped me from entering. It was strong, created by the magic of each Kipling, but I'd studied this type of spell. I could undo it, though it would take a lot of my energy. And even then, there could be an alarm set to trigger the Kiplings or even Dante Oscura himself. I couldn't sense one, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

I brushed my fingers along the wall, pushing at the barrier as I released a wave of my power against it. A hot amber glow built under my palm as I pressed harder, working to control the flow and direct it to pick apart the chains of magic binding this place.

After several painfully long minutes, I felt the first chain fall and gasped my relief. Another layer of power ran beneath it and I took a moment to catch my breath before lifting my hand and starting over again. I could feel my reserves draining and that was saying a lot considering how powerful I was. The Kiplings must have been adding magic to this barrier for years. I just hoped I could hold out long enough to make it through.

The second layer finally fell and I knelt on the ground, panting as my magic flickered and waned. I could do it. I'd fucking make sure I did it. For Elise. And Gareth. And all the guilt that choked me up and made me wanna puke. It pushed at the base of my tongue like bile as flashes of that night ran through my mind.

His blood spilling across my skin, the way he'd groaned and flailed. The way I'd held him close and spoken those awful words in his ear. *You're nothing.*

Oh fuck fuck fuck.

I was on the verge of a panic attack, my mind buzzing as The Sight showed me that night like I was reliving it all over again.

Stop, please fucking stop.

My heart thumped, missing beats, totally wild as I tried to draw breath.

I'd do anything to take it back. How could I share a room with Elise knowing what I did to her brother? How could she ever forgive it?

The cold, hard truth descended on me like a ton of bricks. She couldn't. If she found out, she'd want to rip me to pieces. And who could blame her? I'd do the same if I had a sibling. Who wouldn't?

I blinked away the grip of that night, climbing back out of the void which had sucked me in and made me bleed on the inside. I rested my hand against the final barrier and put everything I had left into snapping the forcefield blocking my way.

It crashed down with a sound like a dying engine and the humming in my ears ceased. I rose to my feet, pushing my black hair out of my eyes and taking a shaky breath. I leaned forward, reaching ahead of me as I felt for any more magic blocking my path. There was nothing.

I waited for several long minutes to see if anyone would come. No footsteps sounded, no roar of an angry Dragon. So I assured myself there was no alarm.

I breathed a sigh of relief, walking inside and following the winding tunnel to a large chamber full of stacked wooden boxes. A huge tapestry hung on the wall picturing the Oscura crest in black and silver. The eyes of the wolf seemed to follow me as I started to move methodically through the room. The hardest thing about this was, I didn't know what I was looking for.

I drew on The Sight, asking for its assistance even though it had just drowned me in the black pit of the past. It felt more like an enemy right

then, but I needed its help if I was ever going to find something useful here. Something which might incriminate an Oscura for Gareth's death.

I let my eyes fall closed, feeling the pull of its power deep within my chest. It was like sifting through grains of sand, trying to find the one I needed, a heap of visions burning on the edges of my mind, but never quite close enough to grasp. Something slipped through the net and a small golden box blazed in front of my eyes. It was gone as quickly as it had come, but it was enough.

I hunted the room, finding a whole chest of treasure full of gold and jewels, even a massive broadsword. I went through the entire box before I lifted my head with a grunt of frustration, having wasted nearly an hour. Then my eyes fell on the tapestry hanging there and I stood, gripping the edge and wrenching it aside on instinct.

A rectangular hole was carved into the wall and silk pouches were piled up in it around the golden box I was searching for. I snatched the box, flipping it open and finding a flashdrive staring up at me. Beneath it was a photograph, crumpled with lines as if someone had scrunched it up in their fist. My heart thundered in my chest as I recognised Gareth, his hand clasped with Ryder's, the picture having captured the moment a flash of magic had passed between them as they struck some deal.

I swore under my breath, pushing the photo into my pocket with a promise to give it to Elise. I took the flashdrive too, closing the box. Out of curiosity I picked up one of the silk pouches and pulled it open, eyeing the substance inside.

I inhaled sharply as I found a portion of glittering black stardust. This shit was the most expensive substance in Solaria. And from the looks of the stash Dante had here, he was hiding at least a million auras worth.

Enough not to miss one pouch.

I stuffed it into my pocket, my jaw tight. Who knew when I might need a quick getaway? I wasn't gonna pass up something that could transport me half way across Solaria in a blink of an eye. It was invaluable.

I dropped the tapestry and headed out of the chamber, pausing at the end of the tunnel. There was no way I could replicate the magic the Kiplings had cast on this cavern with the amount of power I had left in my reserves. So instead, I spent some time wiping any trace of my presence here with a cloaking spell before heading up the ramp to exit the cache.

It was only when I was flying through the sky toward the roof of the Vega Dorms that I started to relax. No one had seen me go in and no one had seen me leave. The Oscuras wouldn't know who'd stolen from them. It was impossible.

I landed softly on the roof, stepping into my tent and letting my wings retreat, slumping face down onto my bed with a breath of exhaustion. I'd need the sunrise to replenish my magic in the morning, so I'd stay here tonight.

In the meantime, I was too damn curious not to find out what was on that flashdrive so I took my Atlas from my pocket and plugged it in, laying it on my pillow.

A long list of files appeared and all of them were named after Fae. Some of them I recognised, others I didn't. The list went on and on and I paused as I spotted one with the name Randall Greyshine.

I clicked it, a frown knitting itself into my brow as I found myself looking at a low-lit room with the school principal kissing a guy covered in green lycra - *and oh fuck me is that a giant strap-on dick?*

I stopped it one second before our principal got fucked up the ass, grimacing as I turned it off.

Why the hell would Dante want this?

I'd barely had the thought before the answer came to me. It was obvious. This was collateral. All of it was. I scrolled through the list again, my heart jolting as I found the name Katherine King. Our former Elemental Magic teacher. She'd gotten fired from the academy and power shamed after it had come out that she'd been screwing Ryder Draconis.

The video started playing and I supposed I could have guessed what it was gonna be. Ryder held her over her office desk, fucking the life out of her, his hands locked tightly around her throat as she gasped for breath and clawed at his arm.

I swallowed thickly, closing the video and searching through the names again. Nearly every teacher in school had a file and I wondered if they even knew that Dante had these or if he was just waiting for them to piss him off enough to warrant threatening them with it. They weren't all sex tapes either.

One showed Professor Mars in an alley, paying for something from a figure shrouded in shadow. Another showed Professor Titan kneeling before his daughter's grave, the short video ending with nothing but a picture of a shovel and a threat to dig up her body. Another showed Miss Nightshade's lime green car on the driveway of a suburban house at night. A hooded man walked up to it, waving something at the camera which had a red light blinking on it before sticking it to the bottom of her car – *is that a fucking bomb??*

I kept scrolling, glad when I didn't find my name amongst the endless list. But my heart jolted when I found Gareth's.

My finger hovered over the button before I clicked on it, fearing what I'd find. Then I tapped the button and the video started playing.

A guy was on a tiled floor covered in blood while someone punched him again and again. My mouth fell open as whoever was filming stepped to the

side and Gareth was lit up standing over the unconscious man on the ground as Leon Night drew him back. I didn't recognise who the victim was as he lay curled in Gareth's shadow. Blood speckled Gareth's face and his eyes were wild with something dark and forbidding. The sound of a pack of Wolves howling came just as the footage ended and I ran a hand over my eyes, making a decision I hoped I wouldn't regret.

I'd show Elise the photograph I'd found, but not that video. It would kill her to see what her brother had done. Never to have an explanation for it. I was already hiding a thousand things from Elise anyway. So what was one more lie?

I lay on my bunk, my mind whirling with questions and coming up with jack shit in place of answers. I was obsessing. I knew it. And as much as I needed to figure this stuff out, I wasn't getting anywhere by turning it over and over and over in my head. I was flogging a dead horse. I needed new ideas, another perspective, a fresh outlook…

I glanced over at Gabriel's empty bunk wondering if I should shoot him a message and ask him to meet me. He seemed invested in helping me figure out what had happened to my brother but he was also lying to me. It was hard for me to ask anyone for help anyway; I just wasn't wired that way, but asking someone who was lying to my face was a damn bitter pill to swallow. And I didn't think I could quite suck up my own pride enough to go there yet.

I sighed, my thoughts twisting in the same loops as I wished I had something else that I could do to take my mind off of things. If I could just get out of my own head for a while then maybe I'd be able to come back and look at all the evidence I'd gathered from a new angle.

Laini's sheet was up around her bed and the soft amber glow of a magical light shone through it letting me know she was deep into a book. There was zero chance of me enticing her out of her Sphinxy book cave once she went into it so I didn't even bother to try.

The door opened and I looked up as Dante strolled in with a towel wrapped around his waist and his muscular chest gleaming with drips of water. His hair was wet and his eyes dark as he headed for the closet at the back of the room, barely sparing me a glance.

I twisted onto my stomach and watched as he rifled through the closet before picking out a navy suit and white shirt to match.

He kept his back to the room as he pulled the towel from his waist and quickly dried off the rest of his body.

“You know there are ladies present, right?” I teased while happily checking out his ass.

Dante chuckled and I bit my lip at the deep tone of it.

“No, bella, I don’t see any ladies here. Laini seems to be shielded by her sheet and I don’t think you count.”

I smirked at that comment. “What does that make me then?” I asked as he pulled on a pair of black boxers before stepping into his suit pants. He turned to face me as he fastened his fly, his gaze capturing me and drawing my eyes from his chest.

“I’d call you temptation,” he growled. “Of the darkest variety.”

My smile widened at that and I pushed myself up onto my hands and knees, crawling closer to him so that I could rest my chin on the end of the bed. “Where are you going?” I asked as he pulled the crisp shirt on next.

“I need to check in with some of my people at one of the clubs my family owns,” he said.

“Take me with you,” I begged because I was so damn bored that I didn’t even care about seeming desperate.

Dante paused mid way through buttoning his shirt. “I would, carina, but this isn’t the kind of club to take nice girls to on a date.”

“I’m not a nice girl,” I protested. “What kind of club is it?”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice like we were sharing a secret. “The kind where men and women live out their fantasies. *All* of their fantasies without any limitations or judgement.”

My heart beat faster at his words and I sat up. “It’s a strip club?” I asked excitedly and Dante’s eyes lit up as he realised I wasn’t offended.

“The Black Hole is a little more than just a strip club, amore.”

“Your family own The Black Hole?” I asked, adrenaline trickling through my veins at the mere mention of the club which was said to have no limitations, no rules, just pleasure in any and every form you ever wanted to take or give it. I’d spoken to one of the strippers from Old Sal’s about it one night after she’d been drinking. She’d had a trial shift there but had decided against working for them even though the money was better. She was a Werewolf and she’d been told that people might want her in her Order form or on a leash or to participate in ‘pack activities’ and she’d decided she preferred a job where she could set her own limits. But all the wild and wonderful things she’d told me about the place had left me insanely curious.

“We do,” Dante confirmed. “We use the back rooms to conduct other kinds of business but the strip club is a good front.”

“Well now I’m coming with you whether you want me to or not,” I insisted, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed.

Dante’s smile had turned into something dangerous and I couldn’t help but shift a little closer to him, wanting to bathe in the fire in his eyes.

“There’s no backing out if you come, bella,” he said. “I’ve got things to do there so you’ll have to stay with me. I don’t want you getting all precious about the place once you see it and change your mind.”

I scoffed, shifting forward so that I could drop off of the bed and land before him. “It takes a hell of a lot to make me blush, Dante,” I breathed. “I

think you saw that for yourself in the Pitball locker rooms."

Dante's pupils dilated with that memory and I smiled up at him as I moved towards the closet.

"So I'm guessing baggy sweats aren't going to make the dress code," I said casually. "Any recommendations?"

My wardrobe was considerably fuller since I'd found employment with the Kiplings and I smiled as I thumbed through genuine options instead of the pathetic scraps I'd been dealing with when I'd first come here.

Dante leaned around me and tugged out a little black dress which still had the tag on it.

"This," he commanded and I smirked as I pulled it out. I'd bought it on discount down to eight auras even though I didn't really have much call to wear such a thing but now I was beginning to think it was fate.

"I'll go and pull the car around," Dante said. "Don't keep me waiting too long."

"I'll be there in a flash," I promised.

The moment he left, I ripped my casual clothes off, tossing them in the laundry hamper before hunting down a matching set of black underwear and pulling on my new dress. It fell to my mid thigh, the skirt swishing around my legs and it hugged my figure from the waist up to show off my curves.

I quickly re-styled my hair and did my makeup then kicked on the lilac stilettos Leon had bought me for the dance. They were the only fancy shoes I owned but with my hair they worked.

I didn't really have anywhere to put my Atlas so I left it on my bed, said a quick goodbye to Laini then headed out of the door.

I almost walked straight into Leon as he raised his hand to knock and his mouth fell open as he took in my outfit.

“Shit, little monster, it’s like you read my mind. Did you get all dressed up like this just to come see me?”

I laughed, rolling my eyes as I pulled the door shut behind me.

“You wish. I’m just on my way out actually.”

“On a date?” Leon asked, looking me over again.

“With Dante,” I said, not confirming or denying the date thing because I doubted gate-crashing his gang affairs counted as a date. But I also didn’t want Leon thinking I wouldn’t be dating other people now just because we’d hooked up a few times.

Instead of the anger or jealousy I might have expected from another man, Leon only smirked. “Maybe I need to set up a schedule with him,” he teased. “So we can have you on alternate days.”

“That wouldn’t work,” I replied.

“Why not?”

“Because then I’d never get to have you both at once,” I teased.

Leon’s smile widened at that idea and that act alone had me pushing up onto my tiptoes to steal a kiss from him.

He groaned as he tugged me closer, his hands sliding around my back as he drew my body flush against his. His tongue raked against mine hungrily and my pulse picked up as I slid my hands along his tense biceps.

I forced myself to pull back before I got carried away, offering him a smile and reaching up to wipe the pink lipstick from his mouth.

“See you tomorrow, Leo,” I promised.

His laughter followed me as I shot away from him, speeding down the stairs and across campus until I made it to the parking lot just as Dante pulled up in a huge black SUV.

“Sembri abbastanza buono da mangiare,” he said as I hopped into the passenger seat and I smiled at what I guessed was a compliment.

“You clean up pretty nicely yourself, storm boy,” I replied. He’d tossed the suit jacket on the back seat so I was gifted a view of his muscular frame pressing against the confines of his shirt.

Dante chuckled and I clipped my seatbelt on as he drove us out of the academy and into the heart of Alestria. He had one hand on the steering wheel while one hand sat in his lap as he absentmindedly thumbed through a tarot deck.

He noticed my attention falling to it and held the deck out so that I could pick a card from it.

I traced my fingers over the cards until the energy of one seemed to sing to me then teased it free.

“What did you get?” Dante asked, his eyes on the dark road ahead of us.

I flipped it over and smiled as I spotted the naked man and woman standing beneath a heavenly figure.

“The Lovers,” I said simply, my gaze drinking in Dante’s profile.

He blew out a laugh, his gaze cutting to the card for a moment as if he had to see it for himself to believe me.

“The stars are certainly testing my commitment to this deal,” he grumbled.

“They probably think it was a stupid deal,” I commented lightly.

Dante laughed again but didn’t say any more on it and he dropped the tarot deck into the cup holder which sat between our seats. I added The Lovers to the pile, leaving it face up so that they could mock him too.

Dante pulled up on a side street and got out of the car, circling it to open my door for me and offer me his hand as I climbed out. I smiled indulgently as he kept hold of me and pulled me towards what looked like the back entrance to the club.

“Buona serata, boss!” the big guy on the door called enthusiastically as he spotted Dante. “You never tell me when you’re coming!”

Dante embraced him fondly, the two kissing each other on the cheeks before he presented me to the him.

“Good to see you again, Fabio. This is Elise a…*friend* of mine,” Dante explained.

Fabio grinned and swept on me next, brushing right past my general aversion to tactile behaviour with strangers and planting two kisses on my cheeks like we were old friends.

“Quale stella ha dato alla luce una creatura così celeste?” he asked Dante.

“I don’t know, but for tonight at least, she’s mine. So hands off, mio amico.”

Fabio chuckled as he turned to open the door, handing Dante two masks as he stepped closer.

We moved inside and the door closed behind us, leaving us alone in a dark corridor lit with dim red lights.

Dante deftly tied his own black mask in place over the top half of his face before looking to me. I turned my back, allowing him to place the black lace over my face and his fingers sent prickles of electricity skittering along my scalp as he gently tied it for me.

“Qui possiamo essere chiunque vogliamo essere,” Dante breathed in my ear and I turned to look up at him.

“What does that mean?”

“In here we can be whoever we want to be,” he explained seductively.

“Maybe I like just being us,” I replied, reaching out to skim my fingers along his jaw.

His eyes darkened as he leaned into my touch and he shifted forward to speak into my ear.

“And maybe I like to pretend I’m more than just an Oscura when I’m with you.”

“You’re not *just* anything, Dante,” I whispered.

The air between us crackled with his power and I turned my head just enough to catch his gaze. The tiny space between our lips was a torture of its own design and we danced closer to the edge, both of us knowing we weren’t going to cross that line while both of us wishing we could.

“Sometimes I wonder how it is that you manage to see so much of me,” Dante said slowly.

“It’s because I’m looking, Dante. Not at a gang leader or Storm Dragon or an Alpha. I’m looking at *you.”*

He took a deep breath and I tasted electricity on the air, rolling down the back of my spine and making my skin tingle with expectation.

A cry of lust-filled pleasure came from somewhere along the hall and we shifted away from each other, a laugh tumbling from my lips at the exuberant interruption.

“Come on then, bella, you can show me what your darkest fantasies are.”

Dante wrapped an arm around my waist, drawing me further into the club and I walked at his side with a smile playing around my mouth. If he wanted to know my darkest fantasies then he might be surprised to find that he starred in a lot of them recently, alongside a Basilisk, a Lion and a Harpy…

At the end of the darkened corridor, we stepped out into a bar full of small tables with red lighting illuminating the dark wood décor. Girls and guys strolled between the punters, eyeing them up for private dances or offering up time alone with them in one of the bedrooms. Some of them

were in strange and wonderful costumes like a guy with a fake Pegasus horn on his head and an even bigger one hanging over his crotch. Or the girl who had half transformed into her Order form so that her skin was coated in shaggy brown fur even though her body retained its human shape.

Dante tightened his grip on me as he led me towards the bar where several men and women were drinking together, their eyes trained on a wiry man in the centre of the group.

“Good evening, Uncle,” Dante said loudly, interrupting him just as he waved his hands exuberantly at some part of the story he was telling. They all laughed but their attention slipped to Dante and they each bowed their heads, murmuring greetings to their Alpha.

The wiry guy turned to face us last, emptying the contents of his drink and slamming his tumbler down on the bar before turning to us with a wide smile.

“Nipote!” he exclaimed, gripping Dante’s face and pressing kisses to his cheeks in a way that seemed somehow mocking.

“Don’t tell me you’re already drunk?” Dante asked, seeming to resign himself to that being the case.

“Me? Never,” his uncle scoffed. “I’m just drunk on the feeling of success! Five more Lunar bastardos fell at my hand today!”

I inhaled in surprise and Dante’s grip on me firmed as a deep growl resounded through his body.

“I thought I told you not to initiate any more conflict without my approval?” he snarled and the other men and women surrounding us all dropped their eyes to the floor submissively at his tone, a few of them whimpering.

“And I’d never go against you, Alpha,” his uncle said, shaking his head sadly and adjusting the mask over his eyes. “But we were only out for a

drive and the Lunar scum attacked us in our vehicle. What would you have us do?"

Dante's jaw ticked angrily. "And did you take this drive through Lunar Territory by any chance?" he asked, his voice at a deadly low level.

"Who's to say for sure? We may have taken a wrong turn…"

Dante growled and a wave of static energy raced from him, rising the hairs along my arms.

I placed my hand over his where it rested on my hip and squeezed reassuringly.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely lady?" his uncle asked innocently, his gaze shifting to me.

I looked up at him, my eyes meeting the cold, grey depths of his gaze and my heart stuttered with fear at the emptiness I found there.

My fangs snapped out and tension coiled through my body as if some base part of me recognised the threat this man posed even while I didn't fully understand it myself.

"This is Elise," Dante said tersely, not putting any kind of label on me aside from my name. "Elise, this is my uncle, Felix."

My lips parted but for a moment, no words escaped me. Dante's family was so large that I hadn't even considered the idea that this man might be more than just any old uncle of his. That it would be *the* uncle. Felix Oscura, long since branded the most dangerous and cutthroat mobster in the whole of Alestria. I'd once read an article in the news which claimed they suspected he was responsible for nearly two hundred deaths. They called him The Reaper, Death's Advocate, they said he bathed in the blood of his victims and delighted in causing as much pain as physically possible in those he sent to the afterlife.

This was the man who had tricked Dante into becoming a murderer by playing on his grief at the loss of his father. And for that fact alone I hated him, regardless of all the other reasons I had to do so from his reputation.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, bella,” Felix said with a smile that didn’t touch his eyes as he reached out to take my hand.

I put my fangs away through pure force of will so that he didn’t think I was threatening him.

“Thanks,” I replied, not returning the sentiment because I’d never in my life ever had the slightest desire to meet this monster. The touch of his palm on my flesh made my skin crawl and I snatched my hand back with a fake smile of my own.

“Your mamma will be thrilled to hear you have a girlfriend, nipote,” Felix mocked. “No doubt you’ll be filling her house with pups before long.”

“If only the stars would be so kind,” Dante said with a hard laugh and I chose not to comment. “So what was so urgent that I had to come down here right away?”

“Oh, I should have sent another message – it was nothing in the end. Isabella made a mistake, she thought she spotted Scarlett Tide making a move in our Territory but it turned out not to be her. You needn’t have rushed down here,” Felix said with a sigh. “But as you’re here now, I suppose we could go over other business.”

Dante exhaled irritably, seeming to find his uncle’s behaviour tedious and I looked up at him, wondering why he even associated with this piece of shit at all. I got that they were family but Dante at least seemed to live by a code of honour. Felix Oscura struck me as little more than an animal.

“Fine. Lead the way,” Dante gestured towards a door in the shadows by the bar but Felix hesitated, his gaze sliding over me again.

“There’s no rush, nipote. Go and have a drink with Elise, take her to one of the back rooms if you like. We can deal with business later.” Felix waved him off dismissively and Dante straightened his spine.

Static crackled through the air and for a moment I thought violence might break out but then Dante smiled widely.

“I can think of nothing better than spending time with, mio amore,” he said. “I’ll find you in a while, Uncle.”

Felix bowed his head in that mocking way again and the other Wolves all followed suit as Dante drew me away from him.

We didn’t say anything as we walked away but Dante released a heavy sigh which spoke of his irritation.

We stepped out of the bar and into what I guessed was the main room in the club. Little tables filled the space around a huge, T shaped stage with three poles on it, one at each point of the T. My gaze was instantly snagged by the three dancers on the stage and I fell still as I stared at them.

“Take a seat if you want to watch the show, bella,” Dante offered, leading me to a booth which was on a raised platform to the side of the room. A red curtain was pinned aside before it which I guessed could be lowered if the occupants decided they wanted privacy.

A bouncer was standing with his arms folded before the VIP space but he obviously recognised Dante despite his mask and let us pass.

I dropped into a red cushioned chair, my eyes still on the stage and Dante headed away to get us drinks.

The girl swinging from the pole closest to me was in her Medusa form. Her legs curled around the pole and she swung herself in a graceful loop, the snakes which made up her hair reaching out to twirl around the pole too.

Beyond her on the other side of the stage, the girl there had transformed into her Sphinx form, her golden cat body gyrating against the pole while

her rhinestone bikini stayed in place over her fur.

But the girl drawing most of my attention was at the front of the stage. She was a Vampire like me so the only sign of her Order form was the elongated fangs she was baring as she danced.

Men and women in the front row of the audience were offering up their wrists for her to bite between moves and she let their blood spill out of her mouth to trickle over her chest. She was beautiful with dark skin and seductive eyes which turned my way as she felt my gaze on her. She hissed at me in challenge, recognising another of her kind and I bared my teeth right back. My heart beat a little faster as she smirked, dropping down the pole and removing her bra so that blood could run straight over her perked nipples.

"See something you like, carina?" Dante asked as he fell into the seat opposite me.

I shifted my gaze away from the stage with a knowing smile.

"I mean…the idea of your blood running over my naked body doesn't exactly turn me *off,"* I said in a low voice.

His gaze passed to the stage then fell back on me and he pushed his tongue into his cheek as he looked at my chest for a long moment.

"It doesn't exactly turn me off either, bella," he teased.

Heat ran through my body at that implication and I sighed dramatically. "But you can't touch me, Dante."

"No. I can watch you though."

"Watch me what?"

He shrugged, his gaze sliding back to the stage as the three girls finished up their set and members of the audience started bidding for time alone with each of them.

“Have you ever given dancing a go?” I asked, taking a sip of the cocktail he’d brought me. It was strong and the fruity taste of it was punctuated by the roll of burning along the back of my throat.

“You want to see me get up there next?” he asked with a laugh. “Do you have a Dragon fetish?”

“Sometimes,” I replied with a grin. “But I was thinking more of a private dance.”

Dante laughed and the sound of it was deep and dark, making me want to bathe in the sin filled promises it held. He took a long drink from his golden chalice which apparently he brought everywhere and I smirked at him.

“I’m sure I could give it a decent try for you, bella,” he replied. “I’ve spent my fair share of time here to know how it goes. But what would I get in return?”

“What do you want?”

“Well if we’re trading lap dances…”

“Who said anything about a trade? I just want to get hot under the collar for you.”

“Tit for tat, amore mio.” Dante grinned, his eyes sparkling with a dare I couldn’t refuse.

“Okay… So who goes first?”

Dante’s eyes spilled over me for a long moment and he pushed himself to his feet.

He knocked back his drink and pointed at mine so that I followed suit.

While the alcohol continued to burn its way down my throat, Dante placed my glass and his chalice on the floor. He leaned close to the bouncer who was still lingering nearby and murmured something to him that sent the guy striding away.

I looked up at him expectantly across the table and he caught the edge of the wooden tabletop, lifting it so that it folded against the back wall where he secured it in place with a golden chain.

“Wow, they’ve really thought of everything here,” I joked as the space between us was left empty.

Dante only smirked at me as he moved to drop the red curtain outside the booth so that the two of us were hidden within the small space.

The light dimmed as the red glow of the club was cut off and the sounds beyond the thick curtain were muffled so that it felt like we were completely alone.

Dante reached out to touch a panel on the wall which I hadn’t noticed and glimmering golden lights brightened above us just enough to see him properly. Not that I needed help with that but I guessed he did.

He hit another button and music started up as Dante turned to look down at me with a dark smile.

I laughed as I instantly recognised the song that came on from the very first beat.

“You gonna channel Channing Tatum for me?” I purred as Pony by Ginuwine conjured images from Magic Mike to mind.

“I thought I’d go with a crowd pleaser,” he confirmed, stepping back.

I bit my lip as he held my eye and started moving to the music. Pushing his hands back into his hair as he thrust his hips in time to the beat.

I almost laughed but he was actually really good. Good enough to make me think this wasn’t the first time he’d tried this.

Dante’s knowing smirk had heat rising through my body as he teased me with his movements and his fingers fell to the top button of his shirt.

I drank in each slip of his fingers as the buttons fell open to reveal the stacked muscles hiding beneath. Dante rolled his hips, his muscles flexing

as he gyrated in a way that was so damn sexual I had to press my thighs together to try and fight down my desire.

The cocky smirk on his face never slipped as he kept his focus on me, clearly finding this whole thing amusing as fuck but that only made it hotter somehow. He was so confident, not at all embarrassed or worried about what he was doing.

He released the final button on his shirt and spun in a circle, making the material part to reveal more of his body.

As the music hit the chorus he was suddenly right in my face and I gasped as he leaned over me, his hands gripping the back of the chair either side of my head as he ground his hips inches above mine.

I sucked in a breath as the scent of him caressed me, cedar and ash combined with something almost spicy.

Electricity crackled in the space dividing us and my nipples hardened in response to its touch, rubbing against the lacy material of my bra in a mockery of the way I wished he'd touch me.

I couldn't resist the urge to reach for him, my fingers trailing down the perfect curves of his abs as he writhed above me.

The moment my fingertips brushed his waistband, he was gone again, cool air brushing my cheeks in his absence.

Dante smiled tauntingly as he rolled his shoulders back slowly, drawing the material of his shirt back off of his huge arms. My eyes were glued to his movements as he peeled it off of him before taking the material between his fists and stalking closer to me.

I giggled as he hooked the shirt around the back of my neck, drawing me to my feet and trapping me in a cage created by it and his arms.

Dante continued to roll his body in time with the music and my pulse pounded headily as his chest brushed against mine.

I reached out to touch his abs again and he whipped the shirt back over my head before winding it around my arms, shaking his head teasingly. He dropped down to his knees in front of me and I bit my lip at how good he looked down there.

Dante pressed his hands to the floor, grinding his hips as he leaned back, looking up at me with a dare in his eyes. I shook the shirt from my arms, tossing it away as I watched him.

He stood suddenly, catching my thighs in his grip and hooking them around his waist before driving me back against the wall.

Dante growled as he leaned close to my ear and a soft moan of longing escaped me as he pressed his hand to the wall beside us and thrust his hips against me in time with the music.

I could feel every hard inch of him pressing against me between our clothes and my nails bit into his shoulders as I panted with desire.

The song came to an end and he stopped suddenly, a cruel grin lighting his features as he leaned back to look at me.

My head was spinning with the closeness of him and I pouted in protest to the sudden end to my fun.

“What’s wrong, bella?” he teased. “You look like you were only moments from me finishing you off.”

I laughed, tipping my head back against the wall as I untangled my legs from his waist.

“You wish, amore mio,” I replied, smiling as his language on my tongue set a fire blazing in his eyes. “But if that’s a challenge, I’m sure I can rise to it.”

“You think you can dance well enough to get me off?” Dante taunted. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Challenge accepted.” I ran my tongue over my lips as I laid my hand on his bare chest and pushed hard enough to make him walk backwards.

I shoved him down into a chair and backed up as I turned to choose a song from the controls on the wall.

Dante may have spent enough time in this club to learn a few moves but I’d grown up helping my mom choreograph her dances. I knew exactly what worked and what didn’t, the crowd pleasers and the things that earned her hundred aura tips.

If Dante Oscura wanted me to show him what I was made of then he wasn’t going to be disappointed.

I tried not to notice the excited whinnying going on in the booth next to ours, but all distractions left the goddamn building as Elise picked a song to dance to. She gave me a look which was as hot as a volcano and sent liquid magma pouring into my core.

The intro to Dirrty by Christina Aguilera brought a wicked grin to my lips and I leaned back in my chair, spreading my legs and resting my hands on my thighs. I gave her an expectant look as her gaze whipped to me beneath that lacy mask, the burning heat in her eyes driving a line directly to my already hard dick.

Oh mie stelle…

The beat dropped and she dropped with it into a low squat, her hands on her knees and spreading her legs wide enough to give me a glimpse of her little black panties.

I groaned, my boxers growing tighter as she rose upright again, tilting her ass out and planting a hand on her hip. In a flash of Vampire speed, she was straddling my lap, holding her weight off of me as she pressed her hands to my bare shoulders and arched forward to rub her tits up my chest then right into my face. I leaned in to graze my tongue over her cleavage but she spun around and I was gifted her ass instead as she danced to the

beat. Her dress grazed my crotch and I grabbed hold of her hips with a needy breath, pulling her down onto me.

My dick was so hard I was practically busting out of my pants and Elise ground against it so perfectly I had to bite down on my knuckles, trying to force my mind onto pain rather than how close I already was to blowing my load.

“Merda santa,” I breathed and Elise was gone, retreating to dance for me while a hungry growl rumbled through my chest.

The static in the air was intensifying and Elise’s eyes danced with flashes of my power as it scattered over her skin. *Feel it all, carina. That’s how much I want you.*

She danced like a fucking pro and I had to wonder how she’d gotten so good at this. With moves like that and a body that made me ache, she would have made top aura in this club. Not that I’d ever have let her dance for anyone but me.

I took a deep breath and a heaviness filled my lungs. The electricity in the air disbanded suddenly, but I was too heady with desire to wonder why.

Elise fell to the floor in time with the music, crawling along and licking her lips, making me breathe out curse words in my language. I hated Ryder in that moment more than I ever had. Because he was keeping me from her. The fucking deal prevented me from kissing her, fucking her, even jerking off over her while she was right in front of me.

Her hand slid up my thigh and ran over the hard ridge of my cock, making my head spin as I instinctively snatched a handful of her hair.

She gazed up at me with want in her eyes, her gaze slipping to my zipper and I was ready to fuck the deal. Fuck everything to let her follow the line of thought she was on.

A scream hit my ears, the shrillness of it telling me something was wrong. Really fucking wrong. Another scream and I was on my feet, dragging Elise up beside me. Her eyes were wide as she looked to me for an answer but shit, there was only one that came to mind.

I hurried to the curtain, pulling it open just enough to glimpse out into the club. Men and woman were pouring through the entrance, their faces covered by gas masks and their hands swirling with magic. My jaw locked tight as Ryder appeared amongst them, his eyes endlessly dark. He was the only one of the group without a mask in place. It took me a second more to figure out what the fuck was going on. There was some poison here I couldn't see, something in the fucking air.

A snarl tore from my lips and I ripped the mask from my face. Elise followed suit, revealing the anxiety creeping into her expression.

Strippers were running around naked, all in Fae form darting for the back exit and I suddenly realised what the poison was. I felt it like a missing limb, but I'd been too hooked on Elise to sense the strange barrier drawing up inside my chest.

I dropped the curtain, turning to Elise and finding her brushing a thumb over her canines with a look of fear. They were short, no sign of her Vampire fangs there at all. My eyes flicked up to the vent at the top of the back wall and anger pulsed through me, a black shadow drawing across my vision as rage enveloped me.

"The Brotherhood are here," I told her in a dark voice that made her still. "And they've blocked our fucking Order forms with some poison."

"Shit," she hissed as the sound of a table being turned over reached us from close by. More screams followed and the crash and bang of magic colliding drowned out the music in the club.

My mind whirled as anger stacked up in my gut, building and building until my muscles were bunched and coiled. I'd counted at least thirty of The Brotherhood and more had been pouring in behind them.

"You said you wanted to see my dark side, carina. So don't judge me when it's over." I gripped the edge of the curtain and Elise hurried to my side.

"Maybe you're about to see mine too, Drago." She tried to move past me, but I threw her down into the seat behind us with a firm stare.

"Stay out of this," I demanded before tossing the curtain aside and conjuring a vortex of air between my fingers. I couldn't capture the power of the storm though and that infuriated me.

My eyes locked on Ryder across the room, fighting with one of my cousins while blood was shed all around him by his people.

In my club.

On my turf.

Hurting *my* people.

I charged forward, catching hold of a muscular man. One of the strippers was dead at his feet and her death had sealed his own fate. Darkness consumed me and I uprooted him with a flick of my hand.

I rubbed shoulders with my Clan members and snatched a blade from one of their hands before descending on my victim. I drove the blade home before he could move to fight me, slicing through skin and bone with brute force until I reached his worthless heart. His eyes met mine and he mouthed the word *Inferno* just as he died.

I wrenched the blade free, spilling blood as the fight surged around me. A fireball shot right for me, but I lifted a hand, stealing the oxygen from the heart of it until it fizzled away into nothing but smoke. I willed the cloud

into the eyes of the Lunar Brotherhood, blinding a group of them and racing forward to press my advantage.

A vine latched around my arm, but I severed it with a hard yank before locating the culprit and cutting her throat. The men beside her fell just as swiftly, my air magic holding them down while I ended their miserable lives. Their blood flowed over their clothes, mixing with the blood of my Clan, my family.

“Ti ammazzo tutti!” I roared.

Hooves thundered my way as a dark blue Pegasus charged me down. Adrenaline poured through my veins as I lunged aside, narrowly missing its horn before slamming my blade into its back flank and losing my grip on it.

Whatever poison had been in the air must have been gone, because almost all of the Brotherhood were shifting, discarding their gas masks on the ground. But it was still in my blood, holding my Dragon down in chains.

A Minotaur swung for me and his huge fist crashed into my temple. I hit the stage, my limbs bruising as I caught myself and stole the air from his lungs with my power. Despite being unable to breathe, the beast kept coming, all eight feet of him. He lowered his bovine head, aiming his sharpened horns at me.

I cast air at him full force to keep him back, but the distraction cost me everything as a fist impacted with the side of my face. No pain bloomed; all I felt was cold, hard rage.

I twisted toward my attacker, aiming the gust of air at them instead. The Minotaur was still choking, but he was free to run at me again as I locked my arm around the Medusa who’d hit me. Her snakes hissed and dug their fangs into my skin, poison blurring my vision as every one of them on her head bit me again and again. Blood rolled along my flesh but I didn’t slow,

locking my arm around her neck tighter and tighter until a sharp crack sounded her demise.

As I dropped her, the shadow of the Minotaur rushed at me. I stumbled away, my limbs weak from the Medusa's poison as I collided with the stage. I was still choking off his air supply and the beast finally fell to his knees as my power stole his life.

My face was becoming numb and my limbs heavy. If I didn't get the Medusa antidote soon, I'd be paralysed. It usually lasted several minutes but with the dose I'd had, I'd be out for half a fucking day.

By some miracle I made it to the bar before losing feeling in my legs, clutching onto it and dragging myself over the top of it, barely staying on my feet. We stocked the antidote right here. Plenty of people loved to be fucked under the paralysis of a Medusa. Although I knew I was close to the refrigerator I needed, my heart was thumping out of rhythm, my bones felt brittle and my muscles were wasting by the second. But what weakened me more than all that was the sound of Elise screaming.

I turned to look for her, but found a man behind me, smiling demonically as he cornered me behind the bar and latched his hand around my wrist.

I stumbled back, trying to conjure air, but my fingers wouldn't move.

Fuck no no no. Come on.

Fire blazed in his free hand and he brought it toward my face as I clung onto the bar so I didn't fall.

"Say bye bye to that pretty face and all the skin on your body, Inferno." He swung the flames toward me and I jerked backwards, losing my grip on the bar. His hand released me and I hit the floor. Something burning hot poured over my chest from above and I blinked up at the man now sprawled over the bar, blood rushing from him in torrents from a gaping wound in his neck.

Elise leapt over him, landing beside me. A broken bottle in her hand was smeared with blood but I couldn't conjure the smile I wanted to give her. My face was jarring, my lips barely able to twitch. My body was succumbing to the coma and I knew that meant I only had a certain amount of time until I was found and killed by the Brotherhood.

"Get…out…of…here," I forced my tongue to work.

Elise dropped to her knees, panic flashing through her gaze as she eyed the many snake bites marring my skin. "I'm not leaving." She lifted her hand to heal the bites but I managed to shake my head half an inch.

"Anti…dote. Re-frig-er-ator," I said, my mouth feeling like it was full of cotton wool. I rolled my eyes sideways to look straight at the silver refrigerator at the far end of the bar.

Elise gasped, keeping low as magic flashed and exploded overhead. She scrambled toward it, whipping the door open.

The battle was raging on beyond the bar but it didn't look like anyone else had seen us come this way. I just had to hope our luck would last.

Elise darted back to me, rolling my head to one side and jamming a needle into a vein in my neck – *trust the Vampira to know where to find that.*

The antidote flooded through my body like ice melting in my blood. I could feel it spreading into my frozen limbs, my numb face. But it could take minutes to work and we could be discovered at any second.

Elise tried to heave me along to somewhere safer but without her Vampire strength she couldn't do it.

"Go," I begged as my tongue loosened just enough to release the word.

She knelt down beside me, her jaw set stubbornly. "And let the Brotherhood kill my Storm Dragon? I don't fucking think so."

“Yours?” I sighed, sensation returning to my lips so I could manage a cocky smile.

She rolled her eyes, but there were tears of relief rimming them too. “Mine,” she confirmed, her fingers locking around my hand. “Now hurry up and get the feeling back into every muscle in your damn body.”

“I think my dick’s working again, can you check?” I croaked.

“This is so not the time for jokes, Dante,” she hissed, lowering down and covering me like a shield as a loud bang rang out in the room.

I waited, frustrated to my core as my body slowly regained feeling.

Finally, I pressed Elise back and rose to my knees. The club had grown disturbingly quiet and I shifted forward to peek over the edge of the bar.

I stifled a snarl as I spotted Ryder standing beside his second in command, Scarlett Tide, their backs to me as they stared down at the twenty or so members of the Oscura Clan they had lined up on the floor on their knees. I tried to spot my uncle Felix amongst them, but he was either dead or he’d run for it.

My gut frayed as I lowered back down behind the bar, drawing Elise closer to me by the arm and whispering, “A morte e ritorno, carina. To death and back.”

“This is a transaction!” I called out to the quivering strippers and bar staff on the floor at my feet. There were two Oscura Clan members amongst them. I knew them by their faces since Scarlett had ripped off all of their masks. “Your leader’s life for yours. Tell me where he is. And if you breathe a single fucking lie in my direction, I’ll have no mercy.”

Three of the strippers were hugging and silently sobbing together. I nodded to one of my men and he dragged them apart, keeping them in line. I wouldn’t be fooled by tears and weakness. If they were touching, magic could pass hands, weapons too.

No one answered my request and I hissed, stepping forward and making everyone flinch. I walked down the line, taking my time as I approached the nearest Oscura Clansman. His eye was blackened and one of his arms was pissing blood, but his gaze held a fire in it that said he wasn’t done fighting. He raised up on his knees as I stopped before him, his shoulders pressing back and a growl rumbling through his chest.

“You got something to say, scum?” I snarled.

He spat at my feet and I smashed my fist into his face, breaking bone on impact. I swallowed his pain as the blow ricocheted up my arm and his agony seeped into my blood.

“If I don’t get an answer in five seconds, I’m going to start detaching limbs.” I cracked my neck, my hunger for pain growing into a tangible

need.

“Five…four…three-” The Oscura at my feet dove at me with a cry of rage. He slammed into my chest, but I was ready, my hand splayed across his stomach to cast sharp daggers of wood into his flesh.

He choked and I drank from his pain, his eyes locked with mine as the shards dug deeper, driving into his body until they found his heart. He jerked and went limp and I let him fall to the ground.

A small blade was protruding from my shoulder and I yanked it out with a breath of pleasure.

I glanced at Scarlett, drawing in a heavy breath as I spotted the other Clan member lying dead at her feet, frozen in ice.

“Fuck,” I gritted out. Because now we were only left with civilians. Even if they were employed by the Oscuras, that made them pretty fucking useless. If they knew where he was, they would have given him up by now. Of course…there was always the chance one of them was being overly loyal.

“Where is-” I spluttered, the air in my lungs suddenly vanishing. Everyone before me held a hand to their throats too alongside all of my men. I moved up and down the line, hunting for the perpetrator, but no one had made a move. I turned my head, scouring the bar as the first of my men fell unconscious. The civilians started to pass out too and I started stalking through the club, kicking chairs aside, ripping down curtains and breaking tables to try and find who had stolen the air from the room.

By the time I was done, everyone was on the ground. My pulse thudded a slow beat, my snake abilities combined with my training keeping me awake the longest. And I’d fucking still be standing by the time I found who’d done this. There was no chance in hell I was going to be murdered while I was out cold.

Fucking coward, I'll break you one bone at a time.

Scarlett gave me a desperate look from the floor before her eyes fluttered closed.

Someone's weight collided with me and I stumbled before throwing a hard punch in their direction. Dante shitting Oscura came at me with a wild look in his eyes. He locked one of his powerful arms around my throat, yanking backwards to try and bring me to the ground.

"Co-ward," I croaked through my lack of air and his eyes narrowed.

"And where's *your* honour, pezzo di merda? You took our Order forms and attacked innocent people!" He threw me into the edge of the stage and a small shadow caught my eye, hurrying toward the civilians I'd captured.

Dante came at me again, claiming my attention once more and I released a wave of earth magic to make the ground rock beneath his feet. He managed to launch himself back at me, throwing a fist into my face.

The pain blossomed across the bone and a dark smile pulled at my lips. His other hand remained raised as he kept the air from flowing into my lungs. I blinked away the darkness drawing in around me, casting a web of vines to tangle around his legs. He crashed to his knees and I booted him in the head so his pretty face poured blood.

Fae were moving in my periphery and I stole the chance to look over at my captives. My eyes found Elise like a magnet was dragging me toward her. The strippers were darting away from her as she gave them air, waking them and telling them to run. Half had already made it to the exit, peeling up the stairway.

Dante threw his arms out as he noticed where my attention lay and I was thrown back with the force of a vortex, skidding across the stage and catching one of the poles to stop my momentum.

His magic faltered and I sucked in a lungful of oxygen. I rose to my feet with triumph burning through me. Dante's jaw was set as he raised his fists to fight me. But his magic was out. He was nothing but a hollow tree I was about to cut down.

I stalked across the stage as Elise encouraged the last of my captives from the room. Then she turned to us with a look of horror in her eyes as Dante hoisted himself up onto the stage to meet me.

"I'll give you one minute without me using magic," I told him. "I want to feel your bones crack under my bare hands."

"Stupido bastardo," he laughed, wiping the blood from a deep cut beneath his eye, but it kept coming.

I closed the distance between us, raising my fists. A broken spotlight fell from the ceiling and exploded into pieces beside us. Neither of us even blinked. I would never admit it, but Inferno was the only worthy opponent I'd ever had, even if he *was* a lowlife piece of Oscura shit.

I let him make the first move and he drove a solid punch into my gut that sent a wave of delicious agony through my ribs. I bashed my fist down on his skull before my elbow rammed into the soft flesh of his kidney.

His teeth sunk into my shoulder and I wrenched his head sideways before smashing my forehead against his. He stumbled back and I blinked as blood poured into my eyes, the attack having injured us both. It dripped onto my lips and I tasted my own pain as it tangled with his in the air.

Dante came at me in a tackle, his arms locking around my waist and uprooting me in a fierce move. My back hit the floor and I let my arms fall beside me as he threw punches at my face while I laughed and fucking laughed. The more pain he delivered me, the more my magic reserves filled. I'd let him have his fun then I'd rip him into ten pieces and leave him on this stage to rot.

“Stop!” Elise’s voice reached me, my ears still ringing from the blows Inferno had landed.

I stopped taking the pain and started delivering it instead. I tugged a razor blade from my sleeve and punched his gut, his arm, his chest, cutting fast before he realised how badly injured he was.

Elise was suddenly behind Dante, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling him backwards.

She’d been here tonight with *him*. And that thought alone built acid in my gut.

“Lend me your power,” Dante begged of her, blood seeping through his shirt in crimson patches. “And heal me so I can finish him.”

“No!” Elise practically screamed. “Don’t hurt him.”

I swallowed a mouthful of blood, staring up at Elise with my chest squeezing like it was in a vice.

“Give me your power!” Dante pleaded and I took the opportunity to get up, rolling my neck.

“I’ve got hardly anything left,” she said, panic shining in her gaze as she eyed his wounds.

“Your minute without my magic is up, Inferno. Stand back, Elise.” I let two ropey vines grow in my palms, preparing to wrap one around Dante’s throat and end our lifelong hatred for each other in death. Though tonight had been a fucking disaster, at least I’d be free of our feud. My father would be proud of me for killing the son of the man who’d finished him.

Elise suddenly leapt between us and I was reminded of the day on the beach when Dante and I had struck our deal over her. But this wasn’t on academy grounds and I had the upper hand. It was an opportunity I wasn’t going to miss.

She moved forward, her eyes burning with an endless fire as she cupped my bloodied cheeks.

“Don’t follow us,” she breathed, before slamming a blast of air into my body that sent me flying across the room. I smashed into a table and it broke beneath my weight, leaving me in a pile of shattered wood.

I leapt to my feet, spotting them running through a curtain beyond the stage hand in hand.

This plan was a fucking failure, but while I still had air in my lungs, I’d try to finish what I came here to do. There was a chance I’d find him before the FIB showed up.

I started sprinting across the room, tugging a jagged piece of wood from my arm. Every part of my body ached, but it only fuelled me on as I ripped the curtain aside and took chase.

There were rooms lining the hall and I kicked open the doors of every one of them as I made my way down the corridor.

If I find you, it’s fucking game over, Oscura.

I yanked on Dante's hand, trying to make him move faster despite the blood streaming out of his wounds. He stumbled, banging into a wall and smearing it with blood as he started coughing.

"*Fuck*. Come on, come on," I urged, pulling him again.

"Just go, bella," he wheezed. "It's my fault you're here. You need to run."

"Of course I'm not running," I growled, looking back over my shoulder at the darkened hallway.

In the silence that followed us, I could make out the sound of doors banging open beyond the last corner we'd taken. Ryder wasn't giving up and I had no fucking idea what he'd do if he caught up to us again. The only thing I *was* sure of was that I wasn't leaving Dante here. "Your car's in the alley out back, we just have to get out there."

Dante grunted, forcing his feet to keep moving, but he wasn't going fast enough.

"That's it," I encouraged. I'd never appreciated my gifts like I did in that moment when I couldn't access any of them. If I'd had use of my Vampire speed and strength I could have slung him over my shoulder and run us all the way back to the academy. Without them I was left painfully aware of

just how fucking big Dante Oscura was and how much all that damn muscle weighed.

“Are you gonna run from me like a coward?” Ryder yelled from somewhere behind us.

I heaved Dante’s arm around my shoulders and gritted my teeth as I dragged him through the closest door.

I squinted at the darkened space, cursing the poison that had stolen my gifts for the thousandth time.

Dante coughed again and blood splattered my hand where I held him. I lifted my fingers to my mouth but there wasn’t a drop of magic in his blood, even the taste of thunder was missing and I’d used up the last of my own magic to get Ryder away from us.

His shouts got closer in the corridor we’d just escaped and I dragged Dante further into the room.

“Kitchens,” Dante wheezed just as I bumped into a counter.

“Okay. And is there a way out through here?” I asked, supporting almost all of his weight as we began to skirt the counter.

Dante groaned and collapsed beside me. I tried to hold him up but I was almost dragged down with him.

My heart thundered with panic as I dropped down next to him, my hands fumbling over his blood soaked skin.

“Dante?” I whispered.

He didn’t respond but my fingers found a wound on his side which pulsed blood in time with his heartbeat.

I grabbed the hem of my dress and ripped a strip of material from it, winding it around his waist and cinching it tight to stem the bleeding. My eyesight was slowly adjusting and I could just make out the lines of his face in the dark.

A loud bang came from the corridor outside and I looked around in alarm as Ryder drew closer.

“Fuck, *fuck!”* I slapped Dante in an attempt to wake him up and he growled as he came to. I slapped him again.

“Ahi che male!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll che male your ass if you don’t fucking move it,” I hissed. “C’mon, Dante, show me some of that Dragon iron.”

“Alright, bella, but only because you asked so nicely,” he ground out.

He caught the edge of the counter and heaved himself up, a hiss of pain escaping him as he did so.

“Okay,” I breathed, relief spilling from me as he started moving again. “Good. Which way is out?”

Dante grunted, pointing to the far corner of the room.

“Come on then big boy, I need you to help me.” I caught his arm and slung it over my shoulders as I set my gaze on that corner.

Dante grunted again as he clung to me and we took staggering steps towards the far side of the room.

The warm wetness of his blood was seeping through my dress where he was pressed against me and fear coiled in my gut at just how badly he was hurt.

“Come out, coward!” Ryder bellowed from the corridor behind us.

Dante stilled and my heart leapt.

“He’ll kill you, Dante,” I hissed, tugging on his arm. “It’s not cowardly to want to live. If you stay here you’re just waiting for death. Do you *want* to die?”

His gaze fell on me, a heavy frown lining his brow. “No, amore mio.”

“Good. So *move.”*

I found some small reserve of strength and heaved him along again, relieved when he let me.

My hand met with the door in the corner of the room and it swung away from us so suddenly that I stumbled. Dante's weight was too much for me to take on one leg in a stiletto heel and I cursed as we both fell forward, hitting the rough carpet hard on the far side of the door.

Dante growled something in his language and managed to roll his weight off of me.

I kicked off the damn shoes and scrambled up onto my knees, grabbing Dante under the arms and heaving him away from the door so that it could swing closed behind us again.

I glanced around to find us in a huge room laid out with round dining tables. Moonlight poured in from the windows which ran the length of the righthand side of the space and I was finally able to see better.

I dragged Dante further away from the door, my muscles bunching and heaving with the effort.

"Maybe when you survive this you could lay off the workouts," I hissed through my teeth. "A little less muscle would be appreciated in this situation."

Dante chuckled, blood spilling between his lips as I worked to pull him into a corner.

"Where now?" I whispered as Dante managed to sit himself up and lean against the wall.

His chest was heaving and glistening with blood. He needed to be healed. Fast. I wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out like this.

"You might be one of the most confusing women I've ever met, carina," he breathed. "But I'm starting to get the feeling you care about me."

A humourless laugh fell from my lips as he accused me of that. And the worst thing was, he was right. I didn't have to be here, I could have run. He could be responsible for Gareth's death. He could be due this fate. And yet here I was, risking my life to save his. I must have been insane, but I also knew there was no way in hell I could leave him behind and live with myself.

"Don't get carried away, Dante," I joked. "You're just my ride home. I can't drive, remember?"

He coughed a laugh and my heart leapt as more blood dripped from his mouth.

"I'll rip this place apart until I find you!" Ryder bellowed from the kitchen behind us and I spun around as the door was thrown open.

He stepped into the room and fell still as his gaze landed on us.

Panic held me in an iron grip and I did the only thing I could think of. I got to my feet, planting myself in front of Dante.

"You've won, Ryder," I breathed. "Just let us go."

His hard gaze swept over me in my ripped dress, bare feet and bloodstained skin. I looked like hell but I wasn't done yet. I would place my life between his and Dante's.

"You'd put yourself at risk for him?" Ryder asked, stalking closer, his eyes hard and without mercy.

"I'd do the same for you," I said honestly.

He paused at that, his gaze raking over me, his fist tightening so that *pain* dripped blood onto the carpet.

"I could end the Oscuras tonight," he growled. "End this feud, this hatred, the death, the sacrifices, *all of it.* But you'd have me, what? Walk away? Even though I've already won? Why the hell would I do that?"

I took a step closer to him, then another. He remained in place, watching me approach like a wolf eyeing a hunter.

“Because you’re better than that,” I whispered, reaching out to catch his hand in mine, my fingers tightening over his split knuckles.

“You’re determined to see things in me that aren’t there,” he snarled.

“You’re determined to deny what lives in your heart,” I countered.

“Get out of the way, bella,” Dante growled behind me and I looked over my shoulder to find him standing up. “Let this end here. I won’t die cowering behind you. I’ll be on my feet, staring death in the eye. A morte e ritorno.”

I shook my head desperately, my gaze locked on Ryder’s, pleading, begging him not to do this, my grip on his hand tightening painfully.

Ryder hissed between his teeth, a low rattle sounding in his chest.

Magic built in his other hand and I could only shake my head as his gaze settled on Dante over my shoulder.

“Please, Ryder,” I begged. “Don’t.”

His eyes slid to me and for a moment I thought he was going to use his hypnosis on me but instead all I found was a different kind of pain in his dark green eyes.

Some of the tension slid from his shoulders and he squeezed my fingers, his cold blood dripping over my skin from the wounds on his hands before he let me go and stepped back.

“I didn’t come here looking for you, Inferno,” he growled. “I came looking for the man who asked me to kill you. The one who wants you gone so that he can take your place without having to fight for it like a real Fae.”

“Who?” I gasped, backing up towards Dante.

“You know who. The one who’s been leading your gang in your place.” Ryder’s words were for Dante and he held his eye for a long moment before

turning and stalking back into the kitchen.

Deathly silence fell over us as his footsteps pounded a path away from us and my heart remembered how to beat again as I realised he'd left us. Left Dante. Let him live.

I spun to look at Dante, my eyes wide with hope just as his body gave out and he collapsed to the floor.

"No!" I gasped, racing forwards, aching for my magic, my Order form, something, *anything* that could help us.

My skin tingled with panic and I reached out to cup his face in my hands, calling his name, demanding he wake up. Ryder's blood smeared across his cheek and my heart leapt with a different emotion as my eyes widened on it.

I lifted my trembling fingers to my mouth and sucked on them. Sin and darkness, desire and temptation danced over my tastebuds and the smallest tendril of Ryder's power slid into my chest.

I stuffed my fingers into my mouth, sucking every drop of his blood from my skin, licking it from the back of my hand and from Dante's cheek. I was an animal, desperate, feral and hungry and I lapped up every single drop of it until the smallest reserve of magic settled in the darkness of my chest.

I pressed my shaking fingers to the worst wound on Dante's side and willed the healing magic to bring him back to me.

A faint green glow spread beneath my hand as the magic danced its way free of my flesh and into his, searching, hunting, healing as it went.

Dante groaned as he came to and I kept pressing at the magic until the small reserve I'd gathered was all gone, leaving me bone dry in a desert of nothing again. But that didn't matter, not one bit. Because my Storm

Dragon was pushing himself up, a fierce look lining his features as he caught my fingers between his and pulled me up too.

“Ti devo la vita, bella,” he growled, looking into my eyes. “And I’ll pay that debt back one day.”

A hysterical laugh tore from my chest and I threw my arms around his neck, a tear slipping down my cheek as I clung to him in relief. He grunted in pain at my assault and I was reminded that he wasn’t completely healed, not even close. But it was enough. Enough to get us out of here.

“Come on,” I caught his hand and started pulling.

Dante didn’t hesitate long, soon leading the way as we jogged through the lavish restaurant. He was limping, his other hand pressed to the wound on his side but he was moving. We were getting the hell out of here.

Instead of heading for the front of the restaurant, Dante led me left, through a door hidden behind a curtain and down a narrow passage with a glowing green emergency exit sign at the far end.

Dante’s grip on my hand was like iron as we jogged through the dark together, our feet hitting the hard floor the only sound.

When we reached the exit, Dante slammed his hand against the bar securing the door and we sped out into a dark alley, the cool night air kissing our skin and silvery moonlight spilling down on us. I didn’t know where we were, turning my head back and forth as I tried to get my bearings.

Dante stilled beside me, his grip on my hand tightening painfully just as a rough voice sounded in the shadows to our left.

“Dante! I thought you were dead, nipote! How did you escape?”

The tension in Dante’s posture increased as the man stepped from the shadows. His weathered features and the cruel gleam in his eyes would have been enough to put fear in my soul even if I hadn’t recognised him.

But Felix Oscura was the most notorious gang member alive. His face was plastered all over the news week in week out and now that he'd removed his mask he was all too easy to recognise. He was a monster, out of control, a sadist, psycho, madman.

I trembled a little as Dante squared his shoulders.

"A morte e ritorno, Uncle," Dante growled. "I just made it back from hell."

Felix tilted his head as he regarded his nephew and my heart leapt at the cruel assessment as it took place.

"Barely though, by the looks of it," Felix purred, stepping closer. "Do you even have any magic left? I'd guess not by the state of those wounds…"

Everything fell very still around us as Dante held his uncle's eye, the threat in his posture clear. One Alpha challenging another.

A cold wind gusted through the alley and a faint tingling rang in my fangs despite the fact that I couldn't call on them.

Felix glanced up and down the dark alley before stepping closer again.

His hand was fisted at his side, a dagger forged of ice growing in his palm.

"We will sing your praises at your funeral, nipote. The Clan will bathe in the blood of the Brotherhood in the name of vengeance for your death," Felix hissed, stalking closer again.

Dante growled, squaring his shoulders as he pushed me aside out of harm's way.

Felix spared me a glance for all of half a second before dismissing me as he continued to hound towards his nephew.

"Dante," I gasped but his focus was on Felix.

A shiver raced across my skin as I looked between the two of them.

“A traitor earns himself the worst kind of death,” Dante promised. “My people will cheer as I tear you limb from limb and leave the pieces to rot for the crows.”

Felix smiled cruelly. “That’s a threat I’m willing to face for the power of the Oscura Clan. I’ll lead them to greatness without you here to challenge my claim.”

He leapt forward with a burst of speed and I screamed as he collided with his nephew.

Dante yelled out, one hand catching Felix’s wrist as he fought to keep that dagger away from him while he threw punches with his other fist.

I ran forward, grabbing Felix’s arm and trying to drag him back. His elbow collided with my face and I fell to the concrete, pain ricocheting through my skull as I hit the ground hard and blood poured through my hair.

The strong iron tang of blood on the air spoke to me as I rolled onto my hands and knees, the tingling in my fangs intensifying. I reached for the monster inside me, calling her, coaxing her out to come to my aid.

My fangs snapped out and I leapt forward with a spurt of Vampire speed before I even gave the move any consideration.

I slammed into Felix’s back, my teeth driving into the flesh of his shoulder and his blood rushing into my mouth.

I snarled like the beast I was as I locked an arm around his neck, wrenching him off of Dante and drinking deeply, feasting on the dark power that lived inside him.

Felix cursed as I held him in place, my power immobilising his magic and stealing the strength from his muscles.

Dante got to his feet, his eyes glittering with the promise of death as he stalked towards his uncle and I held him before me like an offering.

“Vampira whore,” Felix snarled. He swung his hand back with all the strength he could muster, the ice dagger still clamped in his grip.

Pain drove through me as the blade pierced the flesh of my stomach and I fell back, releasing Felix as a scream of agony left my lips.

Dante’s eyes widened as Felix leapt straight for him, dagger raised with my blood flying from it in an arc of red.

I screamed my defiance to the stars, throwing my hands up and sending a whirlwind of air magic from my palms straight into him.

Felix bellowed as he was thrown away from us, tossed to the farthest end of the alley where he slammed into the ground.

Darkness came for me, tugging at the edges of my vision and promising oblivion.

I gritted my teeth, ignoring the pain that blazed through my gut and channelling my nature.

With a surge of defiance, I shot forward, wrapping my arms around Dante and throwing him over my shoulder before speeding out of the alley and getting us as far from Felix Oscura as I could before my strength gave out.

I ran further and faster than I’d thought possible before finally collapsing.

I dropped Dante, a hiss of pain escaping me as I fell to the concrete and my eyes closed, promising me an escape from the torment of my injury.

“Elise!” Dante demanded from somewhere close and far away at once. “Elise! Stay awake, you need to heal yourself!”

He grabbed my hand and pressed it to the warm, wetness of my blood which pulsed from my stomach.

"*Now!"* he commanded and somehow I managed to concentrate enough to do as he'd instructed.

The pain receded and the tension evaporated from my muscles as I managed to peel my eyelids open again.

"Dante?" I breathed, looking up at him as he was silhouetted by the moon above me. "Did we get away?"

"We did, amore mio," he replied, brushing my hair from my face. "Thanks to you."

"And Felix?"

"Gone. For now."

"What does that mean?"

Dante's gaze darkened, his fingers sliding along my jaw as he looked at me.

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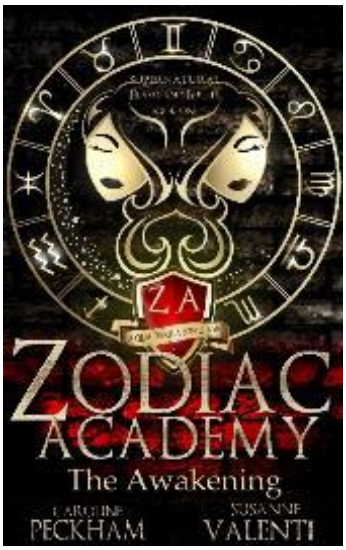

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