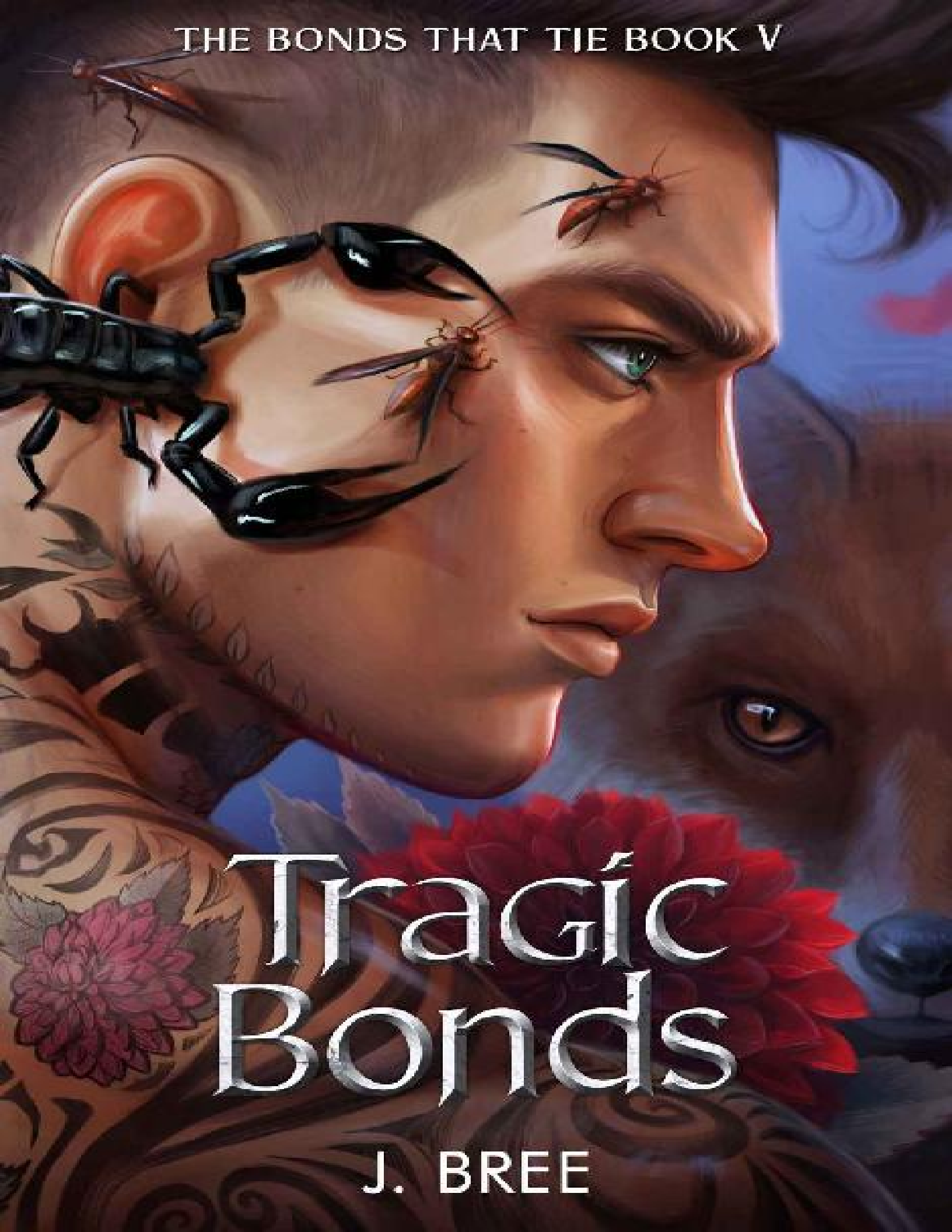


THE BONDS THAT TIE BOOK V



Tragic Bonds

J. BREE

TRAGIC BONDS

THE BONDS THAT TIE #5

J BREE

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PROLOGUE

North - Sixteen Years Old

The house looks haunted.

I'm too old to believe in ghosts, guys my age don't have time for such things, and having the ability to manipulate shadows into savage beasts in any form does nothing to change that fact. Looking up at the house my mother was raised in, the one she grew up in with her sister and family, it's as close as I'll ever get to believing that spirits and ghosts that might still wander this plane of existence after their body has gone back to the earth.

If anywhere is haunted, it's this place.

"This is no place for a boy to grow up. I can't believe Emmaline has been living here with Nox. What is she thinking? What was *Nolan* thinking?" William mutters under his breath, sounding sedate as always, even with the accusation in his words.

William was raised to be a peacekeeper.

He was the calm and civil opposite of my fiery and passionate father, the younger and far more cultured figure in the Draven family. I used to think he was soft and too weak to lead the family, but after my father's death, he's proved me wrong time and time again.

There are many ways to be a strong man, and I hope that William can teach me to control my anger, to stop myself from lashing out the way my father did, to stop me from hurting those I love the most.

To stop me from becoming a monster.

“Leave Emmaline to me, North. I don’t want you to lose your cool with her today, even if it is... challenging. We need to tread carefully if we want to see Nox more often. Think of your brother.”

We’re only here because it was my father’s dying wish.

I had spent years trying to convince my parents to let me see my brother, with no success. But on the day that my father lost control and the council had come to make sure he paid the ultimate price for that deadly slip, it had been the last thing he’d said to William. His last living words to his family before he was put to death for his crimes.

Find Nox and bring him home. Whatever it takes, brother.

I nod at my uncle, because I have no other choice, and then we walk up the crumbling and dilapidated steps together. There are vines growing up the side of the railing, covered in thorns and spindly twigs that catch on the legs of our trousers as we walk past them, and that feels like an ominous warning.

I know better than to look past something like that.

I don’t need the voice of my bond in my head to confirm it, the thing in there that shouldn’t exist, and yet it does. A god of my own making.

The inside of the house is just as decrepit and horrifying as the outside, and I glance back to find our footsteps clearly visible in the thick dust on the ground of the entryway.

Clearly, my aunt hasn’t been seeing many guests.

William follows my eyeline and cringes at the sight, murmuring to me, “North, I see it too. Just, *please*, leave it to me.”

The idea of William begging me to hold myself in grates on me, and I can’t keep my temper, no matter how hard I try. I snap back, “I’m going to! I’m not an idiot.”

William stops us both, turning into me slightly and shielding me from the rest of the room, even though we’re alone. “Take a breath, your eyes have shifted and the shadows are crawling up your arms. You need to get a hold of yourself, and quickly. I’m not doubting you right now. I’m seeing the same dire situation you are, and I’m trying to make sure neither of us make it any worse. This is about much more than just fulfilling your father’s wishes; there’s a *child* living in all of this who we need to think about.”

Dammit.

I hadn't even noticed but, sure enough, I looked down at my arms to find the inky black stains creeping up from my hands to my forearms. Usually I can feel it, the amount of anger that I need to be filled with isn't exactly subtle, but this time I'm too distracted by the uneasiness in my gut to focus on what my bond is doing.

It's furious at everything, that murderous rage of it spilling over into my mind as it sees something amongst the dust that William and I are missing.

I shut my eyes and work through the breathing exercises that have been drummed into me from the moment I was old enough to follow instructions. My father had been sure to teach me this type of control long before my eyes ever turned black, somehow sensing that I would need it.

It's been years since I needed to focus on it like this.

"Emmaline! Lovely to see you, my dear. You look striking in that dress; it's the perfect shade of gray for your complexion."

I have to fight the smile that tugs at the edge of my lips. There's nothing about William's tone that would give him away, but he'd spent the whole car ride over telling me all about his theories of my aunt being a ghoulish witch of a woman. It's clear he's teasing her, without her ever being able to call him on it.

He's a disgustingly apt politician, and I'm sure under his guidance, I will be too.

"William. I was wondering how long it would take you to come here, snooping. There's nothing here for you; not me, and certainly not my son. We're happy being left alone."

I open my eyes just in time to see William step towards her, shifting slightly as though he's covering me even more, as though he knows the very sound of her voice is eating away at my control.

Instead of watching the two of them spar, I take the opportunity to slip away.

I've never been in this house before, but I'd spent the last few days practicing with my Gift as much as I could to prepare for this. I usually avoid the shadow creatures as much as possible, even more so after my mother's death, but I knew that my time here would be limited.

I need to use every tool in my arsenal here.

I wait until I'm out in the hallway, and then I let out one of my shadow creatures, the nightmares of my community appearing beside me as a dog

with a wide, snarling jaw of razor-sharp teeth and empty void eyes that somehow see right through you.

I would do anything to carve these things out of myself.

The creature stares up at me for a second, as though it's judging my commitment and my ability to call it back into myself, like it's trying to figure out if it can run through this house and kill everyone on sight without me being able to stop it.

It's hard to lie to something that is a part of you.

Impossible really, but whatever it sees in me when I direct it to find my brother, whatever strength and limitations, it only hesitates for a second before it moves at my command. It moves so quickly that the edges of the form blur, looking more like smoke than beast, and I tuck myself into one of the nooks in the hallway to shut my eyes and see through the shadow creature's eyes instead.

The house is just as dark and forbidding on the inside as it seems on the outside. The curtains are shut in all of the rooms on the first floor. There's rotting food in the kitchen, plates and cups piled up in the sink, untouched, that have clearly been there for weeks, if not months. While I can't smell anything through the connection with the shadow creature, the flies and maggots everywhere are both disgusting and telling.

Something is terribly wrong here.

I move the shadow creature out of the kitchen and up the stairs to work through the rooms until finally, it ends up in the large, dusty attic space.

Nox doesn't flinch or react to the sight of my shadow creature.

He has one of his own sleeping at his feet, as though it's nothing more than a docile pet.

I call the shadow creature back to me as I navigate my way over to him, wincing at the plumes of dust that spring up from my steps and the thick layers of filth on every surface. I put it all out of my mind until I get up to the attic and finally lay my eyes on my little brother after six years of living apart. Six years didn't seem like such a long time until right now as I stare down at this little stranger who looks so much like me that there's no mistaking that we're brothers.

He's so... small.

Unnaturally so, like he's being underfed or is sickly. I don't remember my father saying anything about health issues, but there's no way that my brother is healthy right now. There's no way this is acceptable. I've only

been allowed to see him a handful of times since his mother moved him out of the Bonded Group manor, but he'd been perfectly fine then.

What is happening in this house?

I ease forward towards him, slowly and carefully, as though I'm approaching a skittish animal. The shadow creature sleeping by his feet lifts its head to stare at me with its empty but strangely *knowing* void eyes.

It's too placid.

My own creatures are rabid beasts, vicious and out of control the moment they're released, and to see one sitting there like a well trained lapdog is jarring in the worst way. How does he have that much control, and at such a young age? How does he have a better behaved creature than any of mine?

Something is wrong.

My bond, the voice in my head that I will never admit to having just in case someone locks me up in an institution or simply kills me for the anomaly, speaks to me in a stern voice, one that it doesn't usually use. The type my father would use if I was acting up in my classes or threatening people with my void eyes just for the hell of it.

I don't need the warning though; I'm well aware that something is wrong here. I'm well aware that no matter what our plan had been when we arrived here today, William and I will not be leaving without my brother.

This is no longer an opening to a negotiation.

This is a rescue... or an abduction, depending on which side of the interaction you're standing on.

I aim for a calm and reassuring tone as I speak to my brother, but he doesn't react to the sound of my voice at all. "Can I come sit with you, Nox? Is it okay if I just... sit with you?"

He shrugs, his eyes still down on the shadow creature at his feet. He stares at it as though in a trance and not at all like he's waiting for it to savagely attack anyone else in the room.

That's the way *I* stare at mine.

"I can stay over here if that would make you more comfortable. Do you remember me?"

Do you remember any of your family, other than your fucked-up mother who tore you away from us all? Except I can't say that to him. It's not fair, and it's not right of me to try to drive a wedge between them. William had been clear on that, clear that I wasn't to even say Emmaline's name in

Nox's presence. We both knew I wouldn't be able to keep the venom out of my tone.

I loathe the woman for leaving my father behind.

I hate her even more for taking my brother with her when she left, splitting our family up and being the first of the cracks that splintered everything apart.

Would my mother still be alive if she hadn't left?

Would the madness that took over my father have existed if he'd have had both of his Bonded with him?

Would the shadow creatures—

"Nox! There you are! I see North found you first; I'm not surprised. He's been very eager to spend some time with you."

I don't turn to look at my uncle as he steps into the attic with us, but his calming presence fills the room as though it's a physical thing. I keep my focus on my brother as William starts to go on and on about all sorts of happy and genteel things, all of the ways he knows to fill awkward silences and make people fall under his honeyed spell, but the pounding in my head drowns him out, because I've finally found something wrong on Nox. Something so absolutely wrong that there's no way anyone can talk their way out of it.

His fingers are *crooked*.

My eyes are stuck on the sight of them, the way that they're jutting out in all of the wrong directions with lumps and bones poking out through the skin. An old injury that wasn't healed properly.

Our family is richer than God.

That's not just something I'm bragging or gloating about, it's a fact of life that my father and William have both spent their entire adult lives spending hundreds of millions of dollars per year on every type of charity and luxury for their family, and our collective net worth has only increased. We're a pillar of our society because we're the type of old money that will never run dry. All of this is to say, why the fuck didn't someone look at Nox, heal him before his fingers set like that?

Why did no one call our father?

"Is this... your room, Nox? It's quite cozy up here. I used to build forts up in the attic when I was your age. I used sheets and pillows from all of the beds in the house. It used to drive my mother insane. I see a mattress and

pillows; your shadow creature looks very happy on them. Can I come give you a hug, or will that upset the two of you?”

Nox doesn't lift his head, but the shadow creature does, its void eyes staring William down as though daring him to touch the little shrinking boy in front of us. I start to wonder if maybe he's in a trance... or if he's inside of his creature right now as an escape from the room, a way to disconnect from us without actually running away or having to confront us to get out of this.

Is he scared of us?

Or of what will happen if he speaks to us?

I want to scream and unleash all of my worst nightmares and shadows into this house and everyone in it out of pure frustration. I hate the lies and whispers, the deceit and veiled ways of doing things when it should be simple.

Nox should come home with me and William, leave behind whatever the fuck has been happening in this place.

I'm about to snap when the door behind us opens again, ricocheting off of the wall as my aunt bursts into the room, her voice shrill as she snaps, “What are you both doing in here?! I told you I would bring him down to speak to you, William. You are not welcome here.”

I can't turn and look at her, not right now with my eyes shifted and so much anger inside of me. Why would she leave him to heal like that? What mother would deny their son medical attention?

I didn't think it was possible to hate her any more than I already did, but she's proving me wrong.

“Nox, come here. We'll speak to these men in the parlor for a few minutes, and then they can leave.”

For the very first time, Nox moves, but only his lips as he murmurs with a robotic monotone voice two simple words that fracture my world in half, a break that will never repair.

“Yes, Bonded.”

All of the oxygen in the room disappears.

My world very quickly shutters down to focus with pinpoint precision onto that word coming out of my little brother's mouth.

To his mother.

Bonded.

Emmaline steps forward towards Nox, but the sinking feeling in my gut has grown into a cavernous crater, and now pieces that should never fit together are falling into place in my head.

My father's last words to my mother before his creatures devoured her whole.

You knew.

"North—" William cautions, as though he didn't hear what Nox said and he's not having the same devastating revelation that I am right now, so I ignore him entirely.

My bond ignores him entirely.

"Why did he call you that? Emmaline, why did *your son* call *you* Bonded?"

William makes a noise behind me, and then I hear the thump of his body hitting the ground as my aunt hits him with her Gift, the grunt pulled out of him almost an afterthought. I feel that same power wash over me as well, brushing at my skin as she tries to get inside of my head and break my mind open with the Madness she wields.

I'm stronger than her.

It means *nothing* to me; it's only kindling to the fiery rage burning inside of me.

The shadows around the room twist and grow, bigger and bigger until they all bend towards me and this nightmare I'm finding myself in. The shadow creature sitting obediently at Nox's feet doesn't react except to snap its jaws when my shadows get a little too close, but still, my brother doesn't have any reaction to the maelstrom around him. That is damning enough for me. That this chaos is nothing to him at all... what the *fuck* has been going on in this house?

Bonded.

The moment Emmaline finally gives in and her eyes flash back to their usual blue color, so like my own mother's, she raises her head to look at me, and the guilt-soaked fear there is confirmation enough.

My shadow creatures burst out of my chest, a mirror image of what my own father's had done to my mother.

I am the same monster he is, but I will happily burn in hell for this.

And now I know my father died feeling the same way.

CHAPTER ONE

Oli

There's nothing that can be heard around me but the thudding of my feet against the ground and the harsh sounds of my breathing as the sobs rip out of my chest.

There are bodies littering the ground of the camp *everywhere*, all of them killed for the boost it gave me and mine. My bond keeps searching for more, anything that it can take to give more power to our Bonded as we run towards the danger that they're in.

They're still in pain, still facing that unknown person who just murdered Nox.

He can't be dead.

There are dozens of faces in the piles of bodies that I recognize from my time here, so many people who had been a part of the horror that I'd experienced, but I don't get to feel the vindication of wiping them from the planet.

No.

All I feel is my heart pounding in my chest and the cold sweat breaking out over my skin that has nothing to do with how fast my legs are moving.

He can't be gone.

He can't be, not when I'd done everything I could to protect all of my Bonded. Not when I'd finally accepted them all into my heart and decided to use my horrifying Gifts to keep them all safe, to make peace with the

vicious god inside my mind if it meant they'd all survive the Resistance. Not when I have the ability to give them unlimited power. Not when I've done everything I can to find a bridge between Nox and I, and *fine*, I definitely haven't done that yet, but I feel like I'd finally gotten a foundation put in place.

Something for us to build on.

I can feel Gryphon's pain coming through the Bond still. The physical is still there, of course, but now all I can feel is the anguish in him, having just watched his best friend die, sacrificing himself to ensure his brother's safety. Whoever is there causing them this pain... I'm going to deal with them myself. I don't care what it takes. I don't care if I have to stand in front of Silas Davies myself. I'm going to tear the other person to shreds with my bare fucking hands, if that's what it takes.

The closer to the tents I get, the more that I feel my bond reaching out. The net gets wider as it looks for more souls to consume to do what we need to do, stretching and stretching and stretching. It desperately wants to sacrifice the TacTeam personnel, to take their souls and as much power as they have to win the fight, but I cannot let us become that monster either.

As I get closer to the tents, I finally see the first of North's shadow creatures, the perimeter that he had set around them to keep them safe from anyone approaching. The creatures all ignore me entirely, not even glancing my way as I move around them towards my Bonded. I start to feel the pain then myself, the pain no longer being through that connection to my Bonded but something that is in my own head, my muscles contracting and coming alive as though I'm being hit with thousands of volts of electricity, my brain wanting to shut down but my bond pushing me forward.

No matter how I cast out my ability, I can't feel who is in that room. I push and I push, but I can't feel anything about the person. Nothing.

My eyes drop down onto the body of my Bonded, soulless and empty and dead.

I want to lie down next to him and die as well.

The pain stops. I feel it at the same time as I feel the Transporter *pop* back out of existence. Silas Davies, his Bonded, Lydia, and the person responsible for all of this leaving with him. There's a wave of nausea that runs through my head, a moment of discomfort at suddenly no longer feeling the intense pain that had been radiating through me.

From the corner of my eye, I see North go down to his knees, catching himself on the dirt with both of his hands as he looks over at his brother's body, tears streaming down his face. It takes four footsteps to reach them both, and then I find myself on my knees as well, staring down into Nox's sightless eyes as he stares unknowingly back at his brother, the last sight he'd had before his soul was torn from him.

We need to move quickly, girl. We need to move quickly, or we're going to lose him.

I choke on my sobs. My hands come out to hover over his chest where I desperately want to throw myself down, but he never wanted me to touch him and it feels like a violation to do it now, even in his passing.

You're not listening to me. You need to listen. We need to move now.

My eyes screw shut tightly against my bond's useless chatting in my head. *Of course I'm not listening! My Bonded is dead!*

Gryphon pulls himself over to Nox, kneeling at his other side and not hesitating as he pushes his hair back away from his face and neck, checking his pulse as though there is some form of hope that we're not both staring at a corpse right now. I don't feel the same way.

I can feel just how empty he is right now, the gaping void in his chest where his soul should be and the quiet in myself where his violent and vicious energy should be.

The vessel is broken, the bond is not.

I fall back onto my ass in the dirt, mud splashing up all over myself as the sobs cleave out of my body. *He was more than a vessel! Don't you dare call him that, he was more than just—*

My bond cuts me off, *I'm not calling the man a vessel. I'm calling his body that. Our Bonded— both of them— are right here. Fix the vessel, girl.*

I press the heels of my palms over my eyes as I follow my bond down into the depths of my stomach, down into the deepest parts of myself, where it hides in the small secret places within me, where it sleeps, where it eats strong bonds, where it throws a tantrum and hides away when I do not follow its every little whim. It's there that I find, as faint as butterfly wings against the wind, Nox's soul.

I've never held a soul inside myself before that wasn't there purely to be consumed by my bond, so, naturally, I panic.

Full-blown, sweating and shaking and heart-pounding panic.

How long can he stay inside us like this? How did you get him... here? Does he know that he's here? What the hell is going on? I ramble, absolutely freaking the hell out, but my bond is nothing but sure and calm.

I can keep him in here for as long as we need, but you need to fix the vessel so it has somewhere to go.

That's fine, I can totally fix the vessel. That's kind of my jam, right?! I have fixed my Bonded a million and one times—this is a cakewalk.

Except the moment I attempt to fix him, it becomes clear that while my bond is sure that none of this damage is irreparable, my Gift is definitely not, and no matter how hard I push, I can't get it to heal Nox.

I can feel my bond's anger at me, and I snap, *I know I need to do this. I am trying, but it's not as easy as you seem to think it is!*

It snaps back, *You don't really believe that we can bring him back, it's stopping you from doing what's required.*

Well, of course I don't think we can raise somebody from the dead!

Even the voice in my head is shrill. I can tell that my bond is frustrated at me, but it's holding on so tightly to the soul inside me that it doesn't have much choice but to let me panic about what is going on, to flounder and panic my way through this nightmare situation.

We need the Healer. Send the Transporter to get the Healer.

Okay but, *again*, easier said than done. For one, they're gonna look at me like I'm fucking insane for wanting a Healer to heal a dead body. And for two, if I can't heal Nox in the state that he's in, what's to say that Felix will be able to?

Would you stop with your useless human panicking and do as I say? Girl, I have been around this earth for more than a million years, you think I don't know what to do when something like this happens?

It still feels as though it's feeding me hope in a situation that cannot be anything but tragic, but finally I open my eyes and face Gryphon. "We need to take him back to Felix."

The shocked and blank look on his face cracks a little at the sound of my voice, and I think I'm about to see two of my Bonded start crying. I can't focus on anything except what is going on inside my body right now. I can't lean into him to try to comfort either of us.

If Nox has a chance here, even the smallest of chances, I'm going to do whatever I have to do.

"Bonded, it's too late for Felix." The softness of Gryphon's voice, the way he's trying to be gentle with me, even now, hurts me.

I nod my head, because there is no arguing with that, not really. My voice cracks as I say, "I know it is; I'm not stupid. But we need to go to Felix now. Please just... listen to me."

Gryphon looks up at North, but I can't turn to look at him right now. It's not that I'm angry that they didn't listen to me when I'd begged them to turn back, even though they absolutely should have. They all tell me to trust my bond, and yet at such a crucial moment, none of them had trusted it. But it's not about that.

No, if I look at North grieving his brother right now, the last of his family members left on this earth, there is no way that I'll be able to keep myself together enough to give restoring Nox a proper go, so I keep my eyes away from him and focus on Gryphon, who is doing a little bit better at keeping himself together.

He looks at me very carefully and then glances around the area, so it has just occurred to him that we are still technically on enemy land, potentially surrounded by the enemy.

There's footsteps behind me as Gabe and Atlas finally catch up with us, both of them asking a million questions over each other and themselves all at once.

"What the fuck was that?"

"Why weren't you listening when Oli spoke? We're supposed to listen to her!"

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

"Holy fuck, what the hell happened?"

North doesn't react to them or say a word. He doesn't move from where he is stuck still, and I turn the other way, making sure I don't catch a glimpse of him as I meet Gabe's eyes. "I need Kieran. I need you to get him and bring him here *right now*. I need him."

Gabe's eyes drift down to Nox and then back up to mine, pausing a little on the tears still streaming down my cheeks. "I'll get him, Bonded. Give me one second."

Then he's off, moving through the inky blackness of North's shadow creatures who are all just standing still, as though in a trance.

Atlas steps over to me, careful not to touch me or Nox as he kneels at my side. His eyes take everything in, none of his snark coming out about Nox, for once.

“What the fuck was that?”

Gryphon glances up at him with a glare. “You really think now's the time for this?”

Atlas nods, not biting back at the vicious tone directed at him. “If it could come back and kill us all at any second? Yes, I do think it's the time for it. It just wiped out a fucking Draven. It might've killed all three of you if Oli hadn't been here feeding you power.”

The sound that tears out of my chest is inhuman, a wrenching and terrible thing, and the tears are still coming down my cheeks without me taking much notice of them. I try to focus on the soul inside myself and coax him into staying put until I can heal him.

I don't know if he can hear me, but I try anyway.

Just a few minutes longer, and I'll get you back. We can figure this all out. Just stay with me. I know you didn't want to, but just stay with me, and we'll figure this out.

He doesn't answer me, of course. I don't know if he can. I don't even know if he can hear me or if I'm just talking to myself right now, but I try.

I try because I don't want him to wait until next time to figure out how we can love each other. I want to figure it out in this lifetime. I want to know *everything*. I want to see everything and accept whatever it is that I need to accept. I want to learn how someone like Nox Draven can be loved and accepted, and then I want to spend the rest of my life doing it.

I want to learn whatever I need to, and I want to figure it out together. He might be the most arrogant, infuriating, manipulative, vicious man I have ever met, but I also know without a doubt that he's mine. Whatever battle it is that he's fighting within himself, my place is at his side to fight it with him. Someday, we will get to a place where he'll accept that and he'll accept me.

Maybe I'll even get an apology out of him for the things that he did while dealing with everything he was going through.

“Holy fuck,” I hear Kieran hiss as he and Gabe approach us, and I glance up to see him staring at Nox's empty eyes, still staring at his brother sightlessly.

All of North's shadow creatures are still standing around us as if they're waiting for my Bonded to come back from the ledge he's currently on, the grief overwhelming him entirely. Every inch of my being aches to go to him.

But I can't.

Gryphon stands up and walks over to North. I can hear him muttering to him, trying to break him out of the trance that he's found himself in, but North doesn't answer him.

I stay on my knees with Nox. I couldn't move away from him even if I tried.

"I need you to take me to Felix," I say to Kieran, and he glances down at me, shellshocked.

He's covered in mud and blood from where he has been moving through the camps and transporting people out. There's a weariness in him, a kind of defeated nature that comes with fighting a losing battle.

"Fallows... I don't think there's anything that Felix can do for him now," he says in the most gentle tone, one that makes my chin wobble all over again even though the tears still haven't stopped streaming down my face.

"Do it for me. *Please*," I say, my voice cracking. He swallows roughly, heartbreak in his eyes for me as he nods.

He grabs Gabe as he walks over to me, holding an arm out for Gryphon and North to grab as he plants a hand on Nox's chest.

I grab his wrist, the closest I've gotten to actually touching Nox at this point, and I stare down into his sightless eyes as we *pop* back out of existence.

I hold onto Nox's soul with an unbreakable death grip.

CHAPTER TWO

Oli

Kieran is smart enough to transport us directly to the medical center, bypassing our usual spot at North's offices completely. When we arrive, we find Felix sitting at his desk filling out paperwork and Sage in the corner working on some schoolwork that I didn't even know she was still taking seriously as the world comes down around us.

The moment that we appear, Felix shoots to his feet in shock, lurching towards Sage as if to shield her. When he realizes who has appeared in the room, he visibly relaxes, only for as long as it takes him to see Nox.

"Holy fuck."

North stumbles away from Kieran, hitting the wall and sliding down it. I hear the motion and see some of it from the corner of my eye, but I force my eyes to stay on Nox.

Gabe attempts to coax me away from him, but even after I let Kieran's wrist go, I stay in the same position, kneeling at Nox's side.

This is going to be the difficult part.

My voice is nothing more than a rasp. "Felix... I need you to heal him."

Felix looks around at the rest of my Bonded as though he's looking for some injuries, but when he finds them all perfectly intact, he glances back down to me and says, "Who, Oli? Who do I need to heal for you?"

Sage stands up from her own chair, walking around the table as she approaches me, tears brimming in her eyes at the sight of me. I also get the

feeling that she knows what impossible task I'm about to ask of her Bonded, and wants to show her unwavering support.

Deep breath. "I need you to heal Nox."

The room goes eerily quiet, the type of silence that comes from everyone not knowing what the fuck to say back to the crazy lady.

I understand it. If there were any way to explain it to them without getting their hopes up, I would tell them, but I am acutely aware of the breakdown that North is having right now. I also think I might just crack under the pressure if North finds out there's a chance his brother could be saved, and I need my wits about me.

I don't want to lose Nox, and I don't want to compound the grief of his brother by giving him a glimpse of hope only to disappoint us all by failing at this.

I can't fail him any more than I can look at him right now.

"Oli, I can't heal someone who's already died. I would do anything I can for you, but that's... impossible," Felix says, and I open my mouth right as the door opens again, another man in a white coat walking through.

I recognize him from around the Sanctuary, but it's only when Gryphon's body fills with tension that I know that he isn't somebody we want in the room during this moment.

"You can't just transport into the medical center. There's a protocol that should be followed," he snaps. Gryphon rises up onto his feet, stepping over Nox to plant himself between the man and the rest of the room.

There's no one that can get past him when he's like this, and I feel a swell of pride for my Bonded, the strength and determination to take up for us all and to lead when it's required.

North doesn't move away from the wall.

He's as empty as the void eyes we share.

Both of Gryphon's hands flex into fists at his sides, and I know he's teetering on the edge of control. He's not someone who wants to talk shit out with people. If he gives a command, he expects it to be followed without question. Politics is not his strong suit and having to do it now, with Nox dead at his feet... this man might not make it out of here alive.

"Get out of here, Payne. You don't make the decisions around here, and this is a private matter."

As much as I'd like to, I don't have time to listen to watch Gryphon deal with this man.

I turn back to Nox's body and let my hand hover over his chest, careful to not make contact but still feeling the chill that's taken over his body.

I want to scream, but my voice stays level as I murmur, "Felix, I need you to listen to me. I need you to heal him. I can't explain how or the specifics but... please."

Sage comes around Nox's body to sit at my side, careful not to touch either of us but staying close as she mirrors Atlas' pose as he flanks my other side. Both of them are offering me what comfort they can right now, which is admittedly very little.

I appreciate it anyway.

Felix kneels down at Nox's other side, looking over his body with the sort of detached calculation that a Healer has to have even when staring at somebody they considered their friend. The type where he's separated himself entirely so that he can be objective about this and run the numbers.

It occurs to me that I don't actually know if these two have ever exchanged words.

Nox had once said that he trusted him, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they'd had a good rapport or had even really spoken to each other. All of this is useless information that doesn't matter at the moment, but my brain just can't stop filtering through the facts and stats of things I know, focusing on things that it can process and conceptualize.

My Bonded being dead is not one of those things.

Felix shakes his head, his eyes still scanning Nox's body. "I can't heal a corpse. I know that already, and Oli... I also know my Gift won't even *attempt* to heal a corpse, so I can't just... try it for you. I'm so sorry."

I want to vomit.

I want to empty what little is in my stomach at his blunt but gentle words, but my bond seems to think it's possible, and I can't ignore it. I can't, even if I wanted to, because Nox's life might just depend on it.

I have to push.

I eye Felix for a minute and make a quick decision. He's always kept my secrets, even before we'd known that he was Sage's Bond. He'd healed me a dozen times before anybody knew what my Gift was or about the bond that lives inside of me. He knew the depths of my powers and what was growing inside of me long before anyone else, and he'd never said a word to anyone.

I take a deep breath and then I make the leap to trust him to act the way that he always has before, to trust that he's going to believe me no matter how freaking insane this all is. I reach out and take his hand, ignoring the way that every eye in the room shifts to us both. Felix frowns at me for a moment, especially when my grip tightens, but when I nod at him encouragingly, his eyes flash white and his Gift floods me.

My bond is relieved to finally have him in our presence and happily shows him the way to our secret cargo, lighting up like a beacon to take him all the way into the depths of my stomach where Nox's soul is hiding, safe and secure.

Felix's hand snatches away from mine as he gasps, his eyes still white. When I open mine back up, I stare back at him, my eyes a complete juxtaposition of his where they've voided out.

Then, without hesitation, he leans over to shove Nox's shirt up his body.

I want to cry with relief, squeezing my eyes shut as I feel Felix's Gift leave my body and force its way inside of Nox's empty shell.

I'm the only one who seems to feel that way.

"You can't heal a corpse, Davenport! Stop that right now, or I'll have your medical license taken off of you," Payne screeches, and my bond rears up furiously in my chest, so close to reaching out and destroying him.

But Felix snaps back before it has to, "It's not a corpse, it's a vessel," and shoves his hands against Nox's clammy, white, dead skin a little harder like he's trying to get the heart beating again through a massage or something.

I still don't like him being touched like this.

"Vessel? What the fuck does that even mean?" Atlas snaps, and my bond turns my head to stare him down.

It speaks again, using my voice, but there's no doubt whose words they are. "I will not lose my Bonded. He has to fix the vessel."

Gryphon turns his head just enough to look at me, and the bond and I both watch as the cogs in his brain slowly put it together, cursing under his breath. "You have his soul. You have his soul, and Felix has to fix Nox's body so you can put it back in there."

My bond speaks once more. "I will not lose my Bonded."

Clearly Payne is the only person in the room who doesn't understand what it means that my bond is talking, and he attempts to stop Felix again. "Davenport, I just told you—"

Felix cuts him off. "Take it. I'll go without a medical license, and I'll work exclusively for the Draven Bonded Group and my own, because I'm sure that none of them will give a shit that I'm ignoring you and fixing the fucking vessel."

Atlas moves forward a little to look at Felix's glowing hands where they meet on Nox's chest. "Can you do it? Do you actually think you can fix him? Fuck, this is insane, what even is a vessel anyway?"

I can see that Felix is trying to push his power into Nox's body, but it doesn't want to do much. "I'm calling him that because Oli's bond was calling it that. I don't understand the semantics of it, but her bond is currently housing Nox's soul inside of her, keeping it alive and safe, and we need to fix the vessel to put it back into it."

Again, every eye in the room turns to me, but all I can focus on is the glow around his hands that doesn't seem to be spreading or doing much right now.

Is it going to be too late?

"Can you do this, Felix?" I ask, and even though my bond is still in control, there's no question that it's my voice coming out of my body at the moment.

He swallows roughly. "I don't know. It's true that I can't heal a corpse, but to put Nox's soul back in before we've healed some of the damage... I don't know, Oli. This isn't something that I have any experience with, and I'm winging it but... I have to try."

It's a very reasonable thing to say, and I can't argue with it.

The longer we watch him struggle to force his power to do what he wants it to do, the more frustrated my own bond gets until finally, I feel it release control of my body again as it goes back into the pit of my stomach after Nox's bond.

I feel my heart breaking inside of my chest as though it is a physical thing. To think that we've gotten this close to bringing him back and *failing*, failing with everyone in the room watching us and knowing what we were trying to do, is an indescribable pain. The tears that had dried up start flowing down my cheeks again.

Now isn't the time to cry, girl. Now is the time for something big.

I swallow and shut my eyes again, ready to listen to my bond and hear whatever it is that it's going to direct me to do, trusting it in ways that I don't even trust myself.

Except then it moves my hand onto Nox's chest, breaking that boundary I had been so careful in respecting, my skin touching his. Before I have the chance to snatch it away or berate my bond for doing so, it shoves its way through the connection, pulling not only Nox's soul, but *mine* and my bond itself into his body, sealing us inside of a corpse, and then everything goes dark.

Time slips away from me.

I don't know how long I'm out, or where the hell my soul is, except that suddenly I'm in a living room. I glance around, disoriented, but I don't recognize the house or any of the furnishings I'm staring at.

I can *feel* that this is a memory, a sensation that I can't really describe beyond that, but it takes me a moment to realize that it's not my own. Every part of it feels familiar and alien at the same time.

It belongs to my Bonded.

This is something that's been *burned* into Nox's soul, something vital and so intrinsic to who he is that I'm watching it in high definition.

It takes me a moment to realize that while I don't have a body in this memory, I can still direct my vision to where I want it to go, and I find a little boy sitting next to me in a living room in a very luxurious house.

He's very obviously my Bonded. The dark curls falling like a little crown around his head make my chest ache. He looks paler than I'm used to, more subdued as he stares down at his feet. He's deathly still, I have to really focus on him to see his chest gently rising as he breathes, and there aren't the slightest signs of him fidgeting or twitching.

He's so young to be sitting so still.

I glance around to see what could possibly have him so scared, because there's no doubt in my mind that fear is the only thing that can make a child act like this.

There's no questioning that we're in a Draven mansion.

Not the one that we'd spent so much time in before fleeing to the Sanctuary, but the levels of wealth and luxury in every inch of the space is a clear indicator for the family.

It's also *very* clear to me that I'm right, and the boy sitting next to me is definitely Nox and not North.

The brothers have always looked incredibly similar to me, similar enough that it probably should be much harder to distinguish them as children, but I know without a doubt who it is that's sitting with me. The more that I look around the room, the more concerned that I am.

There are dozens of pictures framed on various different surfaces, all of them in platinum frames or gilded with gold, and some of them go as far as having diamonds and other precious stones in them.

All of them show North and his parents.

There's no sign of Nox in this room.

I know that the brothers share the same father, the Central Bond in their family Bonded Group, but that they have different mothers. Regardless, it's alarming that there's no signs of the youngest sibling or the other Bonded from the Bonded Group in any of them.

My own family photos had always had a mixture of me and my mother and all of her Bonded in them, everyone taking an interest in how I was raised and being a part of my life. I never questioned my place in the family or whether I was loved equally by the adults who were all parenting me in their different ways.

From the look of the room, there is only *one* child in the family and only really *one* Bonded.

I startle at the sound of a door opening at the far end of the room, two women walking through. One of them is dressed in a sleek Chanel coat and a pair of designer heels, her hair carefully pinned back and pearl earrings in her ears. This is North's mother.

The woman who follows her in is almost an exact match of her, their features are so similar that they have to be twins, though she looks far more unkempt than her sister. Her clothes are still designer but she's not as sleekly put together—they hang from her thin frame. Her hair hangs lank around her long face.

Every inch of her is ghoulish, but I feel guilty for even thinking that.

"You're not supposed to be here, Emmaline. You promised you would stay away."

I frown and turn to look at the little boy. But he doesn't react to either of them being in the room. His eyes stay firmly on the polished toes of his shoes. I take a much more critical look at him, but there is no sign of

neglect or foul play on him. There's no bruises or cuts on him, and at the last moment, I remember to check his fingers.

They're still straight, so whatever happened to him, it was after this memory.

Still, the unease in my stomach grows.

"I know it upsets the perfect little family that you have established here, Marceline, but Father came to the house. He had a lot of questions about why we were living there. I didn't know what to say."

North's mother turns back to her sister, an ice-cold smile on her face as she shrugs back at her. "Tell him the truth. Tell him that you can't stand your own Bonded and you ran away. Tell him you did your duty by giving him a son, and then you snatched him away from the family because you can't stand the thought of your own Bonded being around his son."

Then she leans in a little closer and murmurs, "You should tell him everything, Emmaline. You should tell him about what you do with that little son of yours."

I don't know what that means.

It doesn't make any sense to me, not even with the dark cloud that hangs over the little boy's head, but then the memory twists and distorts until we're in a new setting.

This house is much less luxurious.

There's dust covering every surface, and when I look a little closer at the walls around us, there's fingerprints and grime all over them too. Cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling and moth-eaten curtains over the windows, it looks as though it's some old, abandoned Victorian-style house, though I have no idea why Nox Draven would be somewhere like that.

He couldn't possibly be living here.

But I find the little boy huddled up in the corner, his head ducked down and his knees pulled up tight to his chest. His hands are covering his ears and he's rocking gently, a small, self-soothing motion.

He's terrified.

I look around the room, but there's nothing there, no signs of something harming him or coming after him. The way he's acting, I'd imagine someone was beating down the door or waving a weapon around, but there's... nothing.

I'm drawn to him, drawn in by his pain and desperate to take away his distress. There's nothing that I can do in this form, it's a memory after all,

but I squeeze myself into the tiny space with him. I jam myself under the window into the tiny crevice where I can be close to him, even as useless as the gesture might be.

There's footsteps on the stairs, slow and steady, and a small shadow leaks out of the boy's chest at the sound of it.

Brutus.

The puppy version of him, but he's also smaller, less powerful than I've ever seen him, just a tiny puff of smoke.

The door opens again and his mother steps into the room, glancing around until her eyes fall on him.

She doesn't seem worried about his distress. She doesn't move to comfort him or show any reaction to his extreme terror at all. My own mother would have fallen over herself to get to me, to pull me in tight to her and rock me until she healed every little wound on her precious child.

Nox's mother doesn't even notice the state her son is in.

And just when I think it couldn't possibly get worse, she speaks. "Come here, Bonded. It's time for bed."

Bonded.

The word enters my consciousness like a bullet, tearing a hole through everything I thought I knew about this family and the strange dynamics of the Dravens, because that word is only ever spoken between Bonds. Between lovers.

Why *the fuck* is she calling him that?

I glance at Brutus, his void eyes staring at the boy as he waits for the command, and there's a moment where I think that maybe he'll tell him to lunge. He has to. He has to protect the little boy, because there's no way that the sinking feeling in my gut is wrong here, no matter how much I don't want to believe it.

Bonded.

North's mother had said, *What you're doing with the boy.*

She couldn't be... to her own son.

But she did.

And I'm forced to watch it all.

Every moment, every trauma and horror and sickening second of it all, until William Draven comes to call and North Draven figures it out, his own rabid shadows tearing the rapist apart.

I watch that memory too, except I watch that part with open eyes and a vicious sort of pride in my Bonded, even while my heart bleeds out for the little boy with a halo of dark curls on his precious, broken head.

CHAPTER THREE

Nox

I wake up in a car.

It's hard to explain exactly where in the car I am. Every seat is already occupied, and I don't actually have a body, but I know that my consciousness exists somewhere within the confines of the vehicle. I shouldn't be this calm. I should be concerned about how the fuck I got here and where my physical self is, but there's no question in me that this is where I'm supposed to be.

I'm safe here.

I've never really felt this sort of security before, this amount of *rightness* and contentment.

Once I get my bearings a little more, I look around at my surroundings. I only recognize one of the people in the vehicle, and even then it is a shock to see my Bond looking so young and so... fragile. That stubborn strength that shines out of her isn't there yet, the little girl still untried and whole, none of the cracks and splintered pieces taped back together that she wears so nonchalantly.

Her hair is also black.

It's the first thing that strikes me, the fact that the usually silvery halo around her face is the same dark color as mine. There's a sort of innocence in her eyes as well that makes it obvious that I have fallen into a memory of hers that happened long before she was taken by the Resistance.

Something important changes inside of me.

Something I will never be able to doubt again, because that safe feeling is seeping into my bones, warming me from the inside out. No matter how much my mind would like to rage against that, to question it and poke holes in it, there's no arguing with a soul-connection.

She couldn't hide anything from me right now, no matter how hard she tried, and all I can feel is how right she is for me. Made for me, carved from the same stone and separated to walk the earth in search of each other. All of the feelings that I'd hated my brother and best friend for having, all of them fill me at once.

I don't know what to do about any of those feelings, so I focus on what I can learn from this memory instead.

Oleander is crying.

They're the angry sort of tears, the type where frustration bubbles up inside of you and without another outlet, the only way that she can let it out is the silent stream of tears down her cheeks. She doesn't say a word even though the woman sitting in the car next to her is trying to speak to her. She's very obviously her mother; the gentle hand that she strokes down Oleander's cheek is so warmly affectionate that it's entirely foreign to me.

Oleander doesn't flinch or shy away from the affection even though I can tell that her frustration is aimed directly at her mother. Something has happened to get them all into this car that has broken my Bond's heart.

The protective urge in my gut is foreign and deeply unsettling.

The men all sitting in the car are tense. They surround Oleander and her mother in a protective circle, each of them darting looks in their direction constantly, as though checking in on them. This is what a real Bonded Group looks like, a healthy and loving one.

Something is wrong though.

The driver keeps checking the rearview mirror constantly, as though he is looking out for someone following them, and the man in the passenger seat with a laptop on his lap is barely concentrating on the data and finances in front of him. His eyes keep drifting somewhere between the road in front of us and the side mirrors. They're all sitting uncomfortably as though they're preparing for an attack.

Oleander hasn't noticed the danger that they're all in. I'd never asked her when her bond had kicked in and started talking to her, and North had never mentioned it, but it's obvious that it is not here in the car with us right now.

Oleander would be prepared for the impact of the SUV into the side of the car if it was.

The sound of her scream echoes throughout my consciousness, and I no longer need my lovesick bond whispering inside of me to know that it is a gut-wrenching sound.

I already knew that her mother and fathers had died in a car accident, one that was orchestrated by the Resistance, so this isn't something that is shocking to me.

Oleander's bond manifesting and tearing the souls out of everyone within a ten-mile radius is.

Her entire family included.

The tent is hot.

The air is humid, sweat dripping down Oleander's face as she stares blankly at the canvas walls around her. She's chained to a chair with the tech handcuffs around her wrists, the type that will send volts of electricity tearing through your body if you attempt to free yourself. I've seen the remains of prisoners who've died that way before, and it's enough to turn even the strongest stomach.

She's a little older now than she was in the car, at least a year has passed, and the silver of her hair is more familiar to me, though it's a little darker than it is now, more gray than the whiter shade of the girl I now know as my Bond.

The more of these memories that I'm thrown into, the less that I can call her the other word, the one that turns my stomach and has panic run through my veins like the worst type of drug. The more of the broken pieces of her that are given to my unwilling and undeserving soul, the more that I find myself turning towards her and falling under her siren's call.

It isn't as terrifying as it once felt.

There's still a part of me that doesn't want this, that will never want this, but I feel the shift within myself. I don't deserve a Bonded. I don't deserve someone fated to be with me, to love me, to want what's best for me and to build a life with me. I'll never be able to fully give myself to someone that

same way, and no one should have to be saddled with my levels of broken and dirty and savage.

Least of all this young girl with a spine of steel and a heart that doesn't give up, not even when it's been lashed and torn up by my own damage.

We exist in this hot tent together for what feels like an eternity, the sweat still dripping down her face and memories of hers filtering into my consciousness as I take in every boring second of this moment that is one of her worst, though I don't see why.

Then the screaming starts.

I know what it is. One look at Oleander says that she knows what it is too, and she screws her eyes shut as though that might block the sound out some for her, a single, lonely tear rolling down her cheek.

The tent flap opens just wide enough for Silas Davies to slip through the gap, his body moving in that casual way of his that speaks so clearly about him. He's self-assured and confident, totally at ease walking around the camps, even as the horrors are echoing through the night.

All of this I know from the years of working in the TacTeams and going through the intel North had recovered, but now I also know it from Oleander and her memories. Everything I knew in theory is backed up by her experiences.

"Give me your bond. Let me talk to it, and I'll make it all stop for you, little Render."

She doesn't.

Even with the blinding terror coursing through her body, the knowledge of what he's going to do to her an intimately detailed list in her young mind, she doesn't give him what he wants. Instead, she lies there and tries to muffle her own screams as he carves her body up with his sick arsenal of blades and medieval devices that should never have seen the light of day again.

This is only one of hundreds of torture sessions this man puts Oleander through, one day of the life she was living for two years while we searched for her, no one as vehemently as my brother.

And I'm forced to watch it all.

I mark Silas Davies for death.

I don't need my bond to kick in and make its own assessment of this situation known; I take in every inch of this man until this image is burned into my consciousness as deeply as it's burned into Oleander's. This is

terrifying to her. This is a trauma that she's had tucked away deeply in her mind for years that this connection she's managed to form between us both has pulled out and ripped open into the light of day.

This is something that she never wanted to think about again.

Now it belongs to the both of us.

I wake up on my side in an unfamiliar bed.

Panic rises in my chest when I try to move but find myself restricted, my breathing going from deep to choppy inhales and shaky exhales. I have to squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to calm down before I can make a proper assessment of where I am and what the fuck is going on.

I was dead.

There's no question in my mind about what had happened to me, because it was so perfectly clear to me what was happening. I felt my body shut down, all of my faculties disappear, and even my shadows slipped away from me. Even now, I can't... feel them the way I should be able to. My bond is still in my chest, but it's sleeping, dormant in a way I've never felt before. It's a relief, but I still feel unmoored by the absence of my creatures.

When I open my eyes again, I blink until my vision adjusts and clears enough that I find Oleander sleeping peacefully next to me.

She's dressed in the same medley of clothes she always is, everything stolen from her Bonded, and her hair is fanned over her pillow in silvery waves that beg for me to wrap around my fist. The image of what exactly that would look like flashes in my head, the feel of the silky strands so clear to me that my fingers flex instinctively from where they're bound.

I glance down at my body and find that I'm wrapped up in a blanket, swaddled up like a child, and it's clear they were trying to warm me up. I'm fully clothed and even wearing socks, heat packs tucked into the layers of fabric around me.

They've clearly done a lot to get me alive again.

Oleander is tucked in close to me but isn't touching me anywhere, her careful respect of my boundaries even now a jarring experience. Was it her decision or my brother's to maintain that distance? I get the feeling it was

both of them, some unspoken agreement of understanding that I both need and loathe.

It's slow work, but I manage to work my way out of the cocoon I'm wrapped in. There's no one behind me in the bed, but Bassinger is wrapped around Oleander with Gabe snoring away on the other side of him. Gryphon is asleep on a chair in the corner, his head thrown back and his legs folded out in front of him. He's still dressed with his weapons strapped all over his body, as though he's waiting for someone to burst in here and attack us.

North is nowhere to be seen.

That's unexpected and highly unusual for him.

Usually, if anything happens to me, or something that could potentially affect me, he hovers like a mother hen. Even after I'd grown out of my childish idolization of him, he'd still remained the one constant in my life, no matter how hard I pushed him away and, boy, did I push him hard. It didn't matter though, North Draven was nothing but a pillar of unerring love and support to me.

Even after Oleander showed up and became the fixation for my rage.

Even when he fell so far into her that I'm sure every word I uttered against her cut him like a thousand sharp blades, and my constant loathing of their Bonding was an acid over those wounds.

Will I fall into her too?

Is that even... possible for me?

Heaving myself up is impossible for a solid three minutes, but eventually, I get it done, swinging my legs over the side of the bed until the world stops spinning. I sit there on the edge of the bed until I can feel my hands again. The pins and needles I have to get through first are extreme enough that I consider cutting them off. My hands have always been a source of distress for me, any pains or stiffness a reminder of the damage my mother had done.

A punishment for trying to stop her from her sick ways.

Oleander knows it all now.

I know everything about her now too. Every broken and beaten inch of her soul is clear in my mind now. There's no questions or veiled secrets. There's only the heart of the girl and the god living inside her that belongs to me as surely as the sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening.

The moment my legs are strong enough to hold my weight, I stagger to my feet and stumble towards the door, but I only make it two steps before I

stop again.

Without thinking too much about it or questioning myself, I move back to cleave Oleander away from Bassinger and into my arms. The warmth of her against my chest has my bond stirring in my chest, only waking enough to give its approval before it goes back into its unnatural slumber.

Bassinger frowns in his sleep, but I use my Gift to send him back to a deep unconscious state. When I'd completed the Bond, my Gift of the Madness had grown into a full spectrum of emotions I could give people, and though I'd rather slit Bassinger's throat rather than comfort and reassure the idiot, I'm not in any shape to deal with him right now if he wakes up and finds me standing here with Oleander in my arms.

I need my own bedroom and my own space.

And I need her there too.

I'm not going to question it any longer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Oli

I wake to the booming sound of someone's shoulder hitting a door.

I'm disoriented, dehydrated, and a little dizzy as I blink open my eyes, the grainy feeling of them like sandpaper. The room spins around me, and it takes me a second to realize that the ceiling hasn't been painted here yet. I'm definitely no longer in my own bed.

I only have to inhale to recognize Nox's scent covering everything.

I've always wondered what part of being Gifted has made me so sensitive to the scents of my Bonded Group, because I haven't really noticed any of my friends acting this way around their Bonds. Sage doesn't cover herself in Kieran and Felix's clothes like a little hoarder. Even while she was still nesting, she was reasonable about shit, not at all a psycho about demanding to sleep in their beds and steal their clothes.

The next booming thump on the door startles me out of my existential crisis.

Try as I might, I can't find the energy to get out of the bed.

Rolling onto my side is hard enough, and I let out a terrible groaning sound, something a dying manatee might make, and when I meet Nox's eyes, he raises his eyebrows at me in a very sarcastic and unwelcome way.

I brought him back from the dead, dammit. I'm allowed to feel like shit after that amount of work!

"They're here to rescue you from me."

Right.

Now isn't the time for dramatics because, well, shit is already dramatic enough.

I swallow, my throat still drier than the Sahara, and nod slowly. "Do I... need to be rescued? I can just leave if you don't want me here."

Fuck, how did I even get in here in the first place? Why would Gryphon and North put me in Nox's bed with him and then leave us alone while we were both unconscious?! That feels like a bad idea no matter what the circumstances are. Unless my bond came out and told them to, but I can feel it still sleeping away inside of my chest, peaceful but drained.

Nox stares at me for a second, his eyes so dark that I think for a second that maybe his bond has come out, and then he says slowly and oh-so-carefully, "If I didn't want you here, I wouldn't have brought you with me."

Well.

That makes a whole lot of sense while also making none whatsoever.

I finally heave myself into a sitting position to find Nox sitting on the floor in front of the door as though he's bracing it.

His shadow creatures are everywhere.

Rahab, Mephis, and, of course, my precious Azrael. He still looks more like a Brutus to me, but when he pads over to bump his nose against my chin in a very affectionate greeting, I suddenly can't imagine calling him anything but Azrael. Things are different now.

I know all of their real names.

The names given to them by that little boy with a dark halo of curls around his head who sat far too still when there were adults around. The boy who used the library of that dilapidated house as his only escape, reading whatever books he could get his hands on to keep his mind busy and away from the abuse he faced when his mother came calling.

No wonder the names of avenging angels called to him.

Azrael bumps my chin again, and I bury my face into the soft wisps of his shadowy fur, my tears falling straight through his body as though there's nothing solid that I'm leaning into even though I can feel the warmth of him against my face.

"If you don't open this fucking door, I will take the whole fucking wall down, Draven! *This is your last warning.*"

Oh shit.

Atlas really does sound as though he's going to start with the demolition, and I tear my face away from Azrael to shoot a look at Nox.

He's back to staring at the ceiling as though this is all so boring to him and not at all troubling that his life and the integrity of this room are being threatened. I groan a little more as I move to the edge of the bed, trying to lever myself up and into action, and he looks over at me.

Keeping eye contact with me, he calls out to Atlas to egg him on like a complete asshole. "Gabe will be furious if he has to fix your mess, Bassinger. You might want to rethink that plan of yours."

Oh my freaking God, that is not helpful.

My brain feels as though it's going to explode, but I reach out to the rest of my Bonded Group, casting out my bond to feel them all and speak to them all at once. Gryphon, Gabe, and Atlas are all at the door, but North is in the kitchen with a bottle of bourbon, no glass.

That's deeply troubling.

I'm fine. Please don't take out a wall, because I'm not in any danger.

The relief from them all is overwhelming, and when it floods through the mind-connection to me, I groan again and clutch at my head. Whatever I'd had to do to get Nox's soul back into his body, it has messed me the hell up. My Gift feels exhausted inside of me, my bond is still sleeping, and every inch of my body feels heavy and achy.

If anyone attacks the Sanctuary right now, we're screwed.

Nox's eyes are still bright on mine and he nods at me, already completely aware of this fact, and his shoulder bracing the door suddenly becomes just a little bit more sweet.

He's guarding us both right now.

North needs to sober up; we're exposed right now.

I hate thinking it. I hate that it even crosses my mind, because he's always the responsible one for us. Clearly watching his brother die in front of him has rocked him, but the fact of the matter is that we're being targeted, *hunted*, and our Bond Group is already two Gifted down.

We can't afford to lose a third to inner demons.

I've already spoken to him, there's no getting through to him right now. I've... never seen him like this.

Nox speaks directly to me, keeping the others out of this because it feels like something within the family to deal with. The family I'm very much a part of now, in Nox's mind, and though I get the feeling he'd allow

Gryphon to help him with North, there's no way he'd open up to Gabe and Atlas about this.

Progress, not perfection, I guess.

Oli, come back to your room where we can all be with you and know you're okay.

I feel a pang of guilt at Gryphon's words, but I also don't want to do that. I'm absolutely sure of where I stand with each of them, even North in his spiraling freak-out. It's Nox that I need to be with right now, it's with him that I need to find stable ground.

It's him that I need to be with.

I'm staying here tonight. We'll come out tomorrow and debrief.

I feel Gryphon hesitate, but he accepts it. Gabe is the same, happy enough to hear my voice and let me do whatever I need to do.

Atlas does not want to leave me here.

In fact, he raises a fist like he's going to get to work tearing the wall down, and I have to take a calming breath to not get angry about it. The last... however many hours this has been going on have obviously been hard on them all.

I work at keeping my voice level and calm. *Am I not allowed to make my own decisions about MY Bonded?*

There's a very uneasy sort of silence in my head back to that, and I glance back over at Nox to see something wondrous and magical.

He smiles at me.

An actual smile stretches over his lips without a hint of sarcasm or derision. He just enjoys the hell out of me calling my other Bonded out on his hypocritical actions.

You are, but I'm not sure you're thinking straight right now, Sweetness.

I huff at the sound of Atlas fussing over me and stretch back against the pillows. *I'm a big girl; I can get up and walk out of here the moment I choose to. Now, leave me alone for a bit so I can sleep. I feel as though I was hit by a bus.*

It takes them a minute, but eventually, they all move away. Gabe and Atlas both head back into my room to sleep, each of them grabbing one of my pillows and surrounding themselves in my scent just like I do with theirs. Gryphon, though, heads to the kitchen to sit with North in silence, watching over him as he gets royally wasted.

Please don't do anything dumb while I'm sleeping. I need you whole and happy, Bonded.

He doesn't answer me except to send through a snapshot of what he's feeling. Regret, devastation, and a lot of pain at the thought of losing Nox and I. I think that's all he's capable of saying to me in his current state, and even though I'm desperate to go to him, I know there's nothing I can do for him right now.

Tomorrow I'll be with him again, hold him until he's reassured that I'm not going anywhere. That, and I'll have to try to talk Nox into spending the day with him as well, for long enough that he remembers how much his little brother can get on his nerves.

"I don't, though. He's never once gotten pissed off at me."

"Not even when I showed up?" I say with a smile, trying to delicately start the conversation we so desperately need to have, but his face stays solemn.

"Not even then. He just sunk deeper into his loathing for his aunt... my mother."

Ah.

The woman who has always stood between the two of us, invisible to me but so clear to him. I find that I might join North in that loathing, because that woman deserves to be cursed by every last one of us, every day until the end of time.

"You saw everything."

Deep breath. There's no point trying to lie to him. "I did."

The room is so quiet that I can hear the very slow and controlled way that he's breathing, the way that he's forcing himself to stay calm. I already know that if he loses control right now, he's going to lash out at me, and he's trying not to. Funny, now that I understand it more than ever, he's finally trying to break the habit, but that just makes my heart ache even more.

"Why aren't you looking at me any differently?"

I swallow and shrug slowly, carefully thought-out movements so as to not ruin this moment. "Why would I? You didn't do anything wrong."

His head rolls on his shoulders until he's staring at the ceiling, avoiding my eyes, even though there's nothing in them for him to be worried about. "The shadows could have killed her. They could've killed her years before North came for me. I... never did protect myself like I could've."

I hate that he thinks like that, and I can't stop my words from coming out soaked in sorrow and sympathy. "You were a child."

His words are like ice. "So were you."

The air gets knocked out of my lungs. Knocked out in that permanent, I'll-never-breathe-again sort of way where I think that I'm actually dying.

I could've handled just about any answer, except that one.

My vision blacks out a little as I attempt and fail to get oxygen into my body, until I feel hands on my cheeks, long fingers framing my face as a low voice speaks to me softly. The bed moves next to me as a large body lies down beside me, but even with my eyes open, I can't see who's attempting to soothe me.

I assume that it's North, finally here to rescue me, that finally Nox's brother, the man who knows almost all of his secrets, has decided to put an end to this, and he's taken down the door to get to me because my panic has broken down his restraint.

Except it's not North.

Nox murmurs quietly, nonsense things that don't really string together to form proper sentences but slowly, painfully, begin to calm me down anyway.

A shuddering breath ekes out of me, and he presses in closer, still not quite touching me other than the hands framing my face. It all feels deeply intimate though, the way that we're sharing our breaths and staring into each other's eyes so openly. There's nothing hidden between us, our souls have been stripped bare to each other, and I have no questions left about this man.

Every broken and scarred inch of him is known to me.

And I love it all.

Even when he tries so hard to break me open just to soothe the demons in his head and the parts of him that could never trust a *Bonded*, not ever.

His eyes drop down to the tears still streaming down my cheeks unchecked, but he doesn't move to wipe them away. He's not afraid of seeing the raw emotions. If anything, it's comforting to him to see the way he's unintentionally hurt me.

To know that I have the capacity for remorse and guilt is comforting.

He's arguably more messed up than I am... or maybe not, because knowing this about him isn't a red flag at all. It's a sign that he's just as

jaded as I am. There's no rose-colored glasses skewing his view of things, and he would never let someone take advantage of him again.

I've already forgiven him, even as my chest aches so badly that every breath burns as though my lungs are on fire. It takes me a minute to get myself under control, but Nox's fingers don't stop stroking my face, his lips still move with the low, comforting murmurs. He stays with me until I can breathe again.

When he does finally explain himself, it's in fractured pieces that are strung together haphazardly. "I didn't... mean it like that. I meant that you protected yourself. You were young, but you did it. I... didn't."

Tears spring into my eyes, the trauma of what he went through still so fresh in my mind, and I'm careful about moving slowly as I cover his hands with my own. "She was all you knew. You had no one else, not that you knew of, and you would have died in that house without her. I *murdered* my parents. It doesn't matter that I didn't mean to... that's exactly what I did."

I stop talking because every word feels as though it's a razor blade, slicing me up and bleeding me out as they tumble out of my mouth. Nox doesn't push for more, he just stares at me for a second longer, then slides his hands away from my face, breaking that small connection between us as he rolls onto his back beside me. "I'll take it to my grave, Oleander."

It's an oath I can trust, one that I don't feel the need to say back to him, because of course I would never breathe a word of any of his past. The thought of betraying his trust like that, a trust he's been forced to give me thanks to his death and our soul-bonding, leaves me feeling sick to my stomach.

I also know that it would make my bond feel nothing but bloodlust and violence, all of its most dangerous feelings.

We fall into a charged sort of silence, one where we're both clearly stuck in our own heads, dealing with all of the information and trauma we've been forced to delve into and dredge up from the deepest, darkest hiding places within ourselves. The longer the silence goes on, the more uncomfortable I get. Nox doesn't make a move, and his face gives away nothing, but the guilt of what I did to my parents has rattled me. I want to climb out of my own skin the longer the silence stretches out between us both.

When I can't take it any longer, I blurt out, "Should I leave?"

Nox lets his eyes fall shut, his head dropping back against the pillows. "Do whatever you want."

It's a very nice way of letting me off of the hook, and I don't deserve such kindness. Instead of taking the pass, I poke at him a little more. "What's changed? What did you see in the soul-bond that changed... all of this for you? Or are we going to walk out of this room tomorrow and forget that all of this ever happened, go back to you hating me for ever existing?"

He lies there with his eyes shut, his face turned up towards the ceiling as though he's praying to some god of his own design, without speaking for so long that I assume he's never going to answer me. I let myself snuggle back into my own pillows, telling myself that I'll get up and leave him alone in just a minute. Just a minute longer of enjoying this space with him before I leave him alone.

He shouldn't have to put up with me like this.

"You saw every part of me, and I, you. I have no questions left, no unknowns. You can leave now if you want to, but don't go for my sake because... I'd rather have you in here."

Jesus.

Okay.

How many times am I going to force this man to tell me he wants me here before I believe him?

"Being Bonded to you isn't... what I thought it would be. It messed with my head a lot, brought up things I didn't want to have to deal with all over again, but the soul-bonding answered the questions that I wouldn't—couldn't—just ask you. I would've never believed you anyway, no matter what your answers were. That fact that we're Bonded isn't... the worst thing imaginable anymore."

I nod slowly, my stomach curling, but not because of what he's saying to me. He's not being cruel or mean with what he's telling me. This is honesty, pure and raw and terrible.

The more I think about it, the more I feel like puking, and I scrunch my nose up. The word 'Bonded' for the two of us is now poison in my mouth, acrid and bitter to the point that I want to go find my toothbrush to clean the taste away.

"I don't want you to call me that word. I know you probably weren't ever going to, but I need to say it. I'm fine with Oli or Oleander. 'Poison' is also fine—if that's what you need."

He shrugs. “I’m the poison. I’m the one who will seep into this group and destroy everything I touch. I told North that. He won’t listen, even now that he’s drinking himself into a grave because of me.”

It’s then that I see, more clearly than ever, that no matter how much Nox Draven has hated me in the past, no matter how much he might still resent me now even despite himself, that the person he hates the most is himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Oli

The exhaustion hits us both again, and I fall asleep in Nox's bed beside him, his shadow creatures surrounding us as they sleep in their dark slumber more deeply than ever before as we all recover from the effects of the soul-bonding and Nox's death.

I wake up to his face as close to mine as it can get without actually touching me, something that used to make me feel so desolate and alienated but has now become a sign of trust between us.

It wasn't his bond that put us this close together.

It wasn't some secret, midnight moonlighting between the gods living inside of us both. It was just Nox going to sleep as close as his own boundaries would let him get to me. I had never really considered how intimate it would be to be so close to someone that we're sharing breaths but not actually touching anywhere.

It moves something in my chest that I'm not sure will ever be moved back, some secret puzzle piece that suddenly fits nicely inside of me as though it always had.

If I shut my eyes, I can still feel his hands pressed against my cheeks and the soft cascade of his breath as he whispered quiet calming words to me. The change from Nox Draven, the damaged scholar who loathed my very existence, to Nox Draven, the man I have committed my life to and share a soul-bond with, is both dramatic and subtle.

The same intensity that I had always felt in him is still there, the same seething anger at the world, and even at me. Being so completely in tune with each other hasn't taken any of that away. There's no healing the things that were done to him, in the same way that there's no healing the things that were done to me. Recovery isn't about wiping the board clean. Recovery is learning how to function around all of the scars and open wounds inside of us.

There's nothing I wish for more than being able to heal the inner child inside of Nox, the one who was betrayed in the worst possible ways by the one person who should have been protecting her son from such things, but I can't. Just as Nox can't go back in time and stop my bond from coming out in that car, or to rescue me from the Resistance camps, no matter how much he wishes he could take the knife out of Silas Davies' hands and shove it into his chest instead.

I move slowly to look around the room at all of the shadow creatures sleeping amongst us, named after the angels and demons that Nox had spent so long praying to, desperate for them to rescue him.

I know them all now.

Each one of them meets my eyes as I look around the room. I had never felt any threat from any of them before, only once had any of them shown any sort of interest in defending Nox against me at that awful dinner that I had misspoken at, but even then, I knew that they wouldn't hurt me, just that they wanted me to stop.

Azrael is tucked into my chest and stomach, the short puffs of breath rustling at my hair a small surprise because usually he doesn't have enough form to have such a thing. A breath I didn't know I was holding is finally released at the sight of him there.

"Don't ever leave me again," I whisper against his nose, pressing my face into his as silent tears track down my cheeks and into his shadowy fur.

The small part of Nox that his bond had given to me, the tiny part of him I was allowed to love for months before this moment, means more to me than I could ever say.

Nox sleeps through my silent sobbing into Azrael's fur, and I have to force myself to calm my breathing down enough to pull myself together.

I slip quietly out of the bed and into the bathroom to clean myself up. The tiling still isn't finished in here, but the toilet and basin both work well enough. Azrael follows me in there to sit at my feet and guard me. It's as

though he's worried something will happen to me five steps away from my Bond.

I still can't think the other word in reference to Nox.

I'm not sure I ever will, but I'm okay with that.

I make my way back into Nox's room and find him still fast asleep in his bed, so instead of disturbing him by climbing back in there, I take a moment to look around at the towering bookshelves that cover every wall.

They're filled to the brim, double-stacked and with more boxes of books everywhere. Even then, his rooms back at the Draven mansion had, at least, double the amount of bookshelves in them. If he has the intention of bringing it all here, we're going to need a lot more storage for them.

I use the light on my phone to look over the titles of them even though I already know not only every book in the collection, but the contents of them as well, thanks to the soul-bond.

Graduating college, if that's even still in the cards for me, is going to be a *breeze* now.

I have to smother a giggle at the thought of how angry Nox will be at this accidental cheating of mine but, damn, does it feel good as I run my fingers down each of the spines and the knowledge within them comes to mind. There's a lot of ancient texts here about the history of Gifted and their bonds, a lot of information that I will need to actually process to see if it'll help us in any way with my own prior knowledge, but then it occurs to me that Nox will now have that knowledge as well, and the weight of that responsibility is shared with him.

My hand lands on one of the tomes that we had brought back from the Hail Mary with us. The spine feels warm to the touch, the leather old and cracked but surprisingly well-maintained for the age of it. Nox had spent many nights translating the ancient and dead language that it was originally written in to be able to carry out the research necessary.

There's something about the book that calls to my bond, and it wakes slowly from the slumber that it had been in. It's hard to explain, but it feels as though it yawns and stretches inside of me, preparing itself to assess the situation and speak to me. For once, I am happy to sit and wait it out. Something about the way it had fought for Nox and his bond so intensely, without question, has shifted something in my relationship with it.

I'm no longer afraid of it.

There is a seed of guilt in me for even saying that, because the original reason I had been so wary of it in the first place was because of my parents' deaths. To think that I might have forgiven it for something like that is unspeakable to me, but there's also a part of me that knows that whether or not I forgive it, my bond is a part of me.

I can't get rid of it.

Maybe the guilt and horror at what had happened is no longer serving me. It's also not going to bring my parents back, no matter how badly I wish for that, and now more than ever, we need to move carefully.

No more missteps.

Okay, that isn't the profound knowledge I was hoping for, but I keep my temper in check. *Agreed. Do you have any advice on making sure that our next move is the correct one?*

It's quiet for a moment, and my eyes drift back over to the mountains of blankets and pillows that surround Nox. He sleeps in his own little cocoon, and my chest aches with a deep need to go and climb into it with him, but I'm trying to not make any missteps with him either.

Everything about my life right now is carefully thought-out moves so as to not have everything blow up in my face. I'm so close to a united Bonded Group, so close to having a family again. One that might not be the picture-perfect, happy group, but one that's more genuine and real than anything I've ever known before.

I'm terrified of fucking that up for myself and for us, because I also know how desperately North and Gryphon want this all to work out. Gabe too.

Atlas? Not so much, but it's a work in progress.

No splitting up. No more letting anyone run off into danger by themselves, and no more missions without us present.

Okay, that's all very doable, and if I tell North and Gryphon that my bond has made its demands, they should both agree to it. On the off chance they don't, I can always get my bond to speak to them on my behalf.

It has a particularly forceful way of getting them to agree to its whims.

Not that they are pushovers, of course. I've seen them all tell my bond no when required, but I doubt they'd argue with this demand.

I glance back over at the bed, and this time, I find Nox staring back at me. His eyes are dark but not voided out in the shadows of the room.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his voice still rough with sleep. I shrug, shifting my weight to either of my feet a little awkwardly.

“Just talking to my bond, trying to figure all of this out. I know that we’re happy enough hiding here in the peace of your room for a little while, but we do have to remember that someone managed to *kill* you a few days ago. I doubt that they’ll be happy to find out that I was able to bring you back. But, again, there’s someone out there strong enough to take out a Death Dealer. If that isn’t concerning, then I don’t know what is.”

He heaves himself up onto his arms, popping his top half off of the bed, and I glanced down to where Azrael is nuzzling at my thigh, as if pushing me back towards the warmth and comfort of the sheets.

“It was aiming for North. It didn’t give a shit about me or Gryphon. It only cared about killing him.”

My heart stops in my chest.

I didn’t know that.

“Have you told North?”

Nox raises an eyebrow at me, motioning to the empty side of the bed, and I stumble over to join him there. “He’s already trying to drink himself to death. There’s no point adding any fuel to his guilt-soaked fire.”

Jesus.

He’s not wrong. I don’t need to reach out to feel how intoxicated North is right now. None of my Bonded have really properly gotten drunk since we’d completed the Bonding, except Nox, and he’d never opened up enough for me to really feel it.

North isn’t in a state to hide this from me.

Nox holds one of his hands up to stare at his fingers, flexing them slowly as he assesses the damage that is no longer there. “They went after the strongest member of the Bonded Group first... after you, of course. They only want you alive and cut off from the rest of us.”

I don’t like the sound of that, and neither does my bond, stretching and flexing inside of my chest as it wakes up again. It doesn’t want to take over or throw a tantrum though, only to listen in to what Nox is saying.

I have my own concerns here. “Is North the strongest, though? I’d argue that you’re all strong but in different ways.”

Nox gives me a dry look, and I shake my head at him. “I’m not trying to play peacemaker. I’m being serious. Other than you and North both being Death Dealers, everyone’s Gifts are very different, and all of the Bonded Group are the strongest at what they are. No Neuro can do what Gryphon can. Atlas’ family have the same Gift as him, but none of them can transfer it like he can, and we’re still figuring out the limits to his strength. Gabe can turn into a *freaking* dragon. All of those Gifts are on a different playing field than our peers.”

Nox shrugs. “The shadows have always been a threat to the Resistance. The Draven name alone is a threat, and I’m not surprised they targeted North before me. He’s the councilman, and he’s been at the center of every big win we’ve had against them. He’s always deflected away from me and painted the target on himself.”

I don’t like it.

It’s a no-win situation though. If they hadn’t been targeting North, then they only would’ve chosen another of my Bonded, and I’d hate that just as much.

They need to die. All of them.

I startle at the sound of another bond in my mind, one that speaks like mine but... isn’t.

I glance at Nox. He’s staring back at me, his eyes so dark that I’m not entirely sure who’s at the helm right now. His head tilts just a little and I find some blue in his eyes, just enough to know that Nox is still in there.

I hum softly under my breath as I think, listening to my own bond’s vehement agreement, and then answer his bond out loud, “We need to step things up. Stop reacting to them attacking us and start making our own plans.”

Nox nods slowly. “You need the others to stop coddling you. You need your bond to be let out to its full potential, because you’re still letting your fears of what we’ll all think of you get in the way.”

It’s a critique, if a kind one, but I can handle it. It’s something I already know all too well about myself. The moment I came to terms with wanting to keep them all was the moment the fear in me had shifted.

I *am* scared they’ll leave me if they see with their own two eyes what I’m capable of.

I clear my throat, mostly a nervous action because he's called me out perfectly, just like he always does. "It's my own fault. I'll work on my trust issues. It'll be easier now that I have... you."

He stares at me intently for a minute, not arguing or denying that I do, in fact, have him now, but I'm not surprised that he doesn't just drop the issue. "Bassinger was trying to knock a wall down because you weren't napping in your own bed under his obsessive eye. There's more than just *your* trust issues to deal with."

I cringe a little because that might be what had happened earlier, but he makes it sound so... wrong. Atlas is only trying to take care of me, something that a Bonded should do, and he's always been so doubtful of Nox's intentions.

With valid reasons too.

"He's just... afraid you're hurting me. Emotionally."

I don't know why I tack that onto the end there, but Nox sends me a dry look anyway. "I'm sure he's got a lot more concerns than just how I'm speaking to you."

The mood in the room shifts.

I feel like a creep for it, and for noticing it, especially after everything that's been said and shared between us. It feels wrong to even be thinking about sex right now, but my mind can't stop replaying our bonding, and then my bond pipes up with its own desperate demands for him.

Maybe I *am* a monster.

"Stop it, Oleander. You already know it's not about sex."

Okay, *ouch*. I did not want the reminder.

The part of the soul-bonding that I had been very careful about not thinking about so far, no small feat, were all of the memories of his sex life before I'd returned here. The years of figuring out exactly what he likes and reclaiming the parts of himself and his sexuality that his mother had broken—I know them all now, intimately.

Doesn't mean I have to like it.

Okay, so that might make me sound like a bitch, because he also was in a lot of therapy and going through it was part of the healing process, but I'm a very possessive sort of Bond, and seeing all of that had hurt more than anything else he's ever said or done to me... everything except the reasons why he's so broken.

He knows it too.

Fuck, this is kind of a mess.

I clear my throat and pray that he doesn't think I'm trying to be a controlling, manipulative Bond, the exact thing his mother had played and distorted reality with. "I'm trying to be cool right now, but I'm not. Like, at all. I'm very not cool and not fine about any of my Bonds having sex with other people. I'm not going to lie about it or try to play it down."

I keep my eyes squeezed tight so I don't have to see the moment he decides to be done with me. His words startle me. "Are you pissed off at me because of that?"

Am I?

It takes me a second, but I find the truth. "No, but I might need to avoid some women for a while because I could very much rip some hearts out or set my bond onto them, which isn't fair or okay either. Just, you know, being honest here."

I'm brave and take a quick glance at him just in time to see him nod slowly, lying back to stare up at the ceiling again.

He doesn't snarl at me or leave me here, so maybe I haven't ruined everything with my irrational emotions. At least not yet.

I let my eyes fall shut again as I think about exactly how I'm going to convince everyone to let me step up in the fight, not just easing up when my bond comes out to play, and I'm so busy in my own head that I barely notice when a shadow wisp wraps around my ankle, jerking my leg towards Nox.

I startle a little, my eyes flying open, but another shadow wisp wraps around my wrist to move me until I'm in the middle of the bed facing him. His eyes are deep, dark voids of deep blue that have me constantly questioning whether it's him or his bond in control, but when I open my mouth to say... Lord knows what, Nox speaks over me, "Don't move or say a word. Your bond isn't in control here."

The wisps come out to wrap around my body, covering almost every inch of me until I'm bound tightly, only the steady rise and fall movement of my chest allowed. It's then that I know that I really do trust him. I must, because I don't freak out. I'm calm as I stare back at him.

He's setting a clear boundary, and when he raises his eyebrows at me, I nod, a small jerk of my head. That's all the wisps of shadows will allow, my lips pressed tightly together in a clear sign of my compliance. His pupils

blow out, swallowing up the last of the blue. When he moves over to press in close to me, a whimper works its way out of my chest.

His bond *purrs* at the sound of it.

I stare up at him, splayed out underneath him like a sacrifice just how he wants me— or maybe not, because I still have a lot more clothing on than either of us would like.

The moment I think that, the shadows start to move. They're nothing like the shadows that North controls. His shadows were like a caress, firm but loving as they had pleased me. These shadows are about control, holding me and moving me this way and that at the urges of their god.

I feel as though I'm merely an object that belongs to him, something he owns for his own desire, but the idea of his pleasures finally being mine to sate is more than exciting. It feels right, as though this is how it always should have been.

The shadows begin to pull and tear at my clothes, stripping them away from my body until I'm naked, my legs tugged apart for him. When he steps away from the bed, his eyes drop down, flaring at the sight of my pussy spread open for him.

"Watch me, Oleander. Watch what you're doing to me, and what I'm going to do to you."

His voice is low and rough, drenched in sex already, and my body reacts to it before I can obey his demands. My back arches, straining against the shadows even as they hold me in place.

I want him so badly.

I want to tell him that, to tell him everything on my mind until I'm begging for his touch. I have to bite my lip to keep the words from bubbling out and breaking his rules already.

Nox has no idea of the internal war I'm fighting right now as he strips, slowly revealing his perfectly toned body, the smooth planes of his muscles like a vision for my eyes to drink in as he moves fluidly. He looks every inch like the god that he is, never mind the one living inside him. When he turns back towards the bed, I see that his cock is hard and heavy where it curves up towards his belly, no mistaking how ready he is to fuck me.

My mouth waters at the sight of it.

My bond pushes at my mind, desperate to take control and demand things from him, but I push it back, a feat more difficult than keeping my own mouth shut. Nox sees it all though, sees the battle I fight with it. When

I win, he smirks at me, just a hint of pride in his eyes that I'm playing by his rules.

He doesn't fight his bond the same way.

My cheeks flush at his obvious approval, and the smirk stays put on his face as he climbs back onto the bed to sink down onto his elbows between my legs, his shadows moving out of the way without needing his commands, seamlessly obeying his every whim. They're more than just shadows he controls, they're a part of him as much as any of his limbs.

His lips are hot on my thigh, his teeth sharp as he nips at the soft skin there, and I'm lucky that squirming under his shadows isn't off-limits because I writhe out my need for him. I need... more. I need him to eat me out, or fuck me, or spank my ass until I can't sit for a week.

Pain or pleasure, I need something only he can give me right now.

I feel his breath brush against my throbbing clit, and I almost break. I almost sob at him to give me something, anything, touch me, *anything*, but his teeth sink into my hip in warning, a sharp reminder to hold myself in check if I want my reward, and I clamp my teeth shut until my jaw aches, a whimper breaking through.

His lips touch my pussy at the same time that his fingers slip inside of me, filling me up but not quite enough, stoking the fire inside of me without pushing me over the edge. I find myself greedy for it, greedy to come, because I've waited so long for this.

The shadows pull at my body, moving me and making adjustments until I feel something stroking my thighs that isn't Nox... at least not his hands. The stroking moves higher until it slips down to push against my ass.

My eyes fly open, and I glance down my body at him, his own eyes shifting to voids as his bond looks back at me with an unerring stare. There's obsession in his eyes, a dark and twisted sort of love as they both take what they want from me.

They both want to fuck me.

I'm tense, a little unsure of how the hell this is going to work, but I trust them both completely. When my eyes flutter shut, Nox's bond growls at me, a sound deep in his throat that my own bond strains inside of me to answer.

He fucks my pussy with his tongue until I forget my own name, the shadow of his bond slipping inside me easily, and my first orgasm washes over me. It's intense, especially as my body clamps down and my entire body heats up like I'm burning inside.

I haven't done this before, not like this, but the dark voids of his eyes as they both pleasure me, the way I open up to them both perfectly, all of it adds to the pleasure building in me. It's as though they're both marking me as theirs, testing me and the limits of what I'll give them, but I've already decided there is no limit.

I want everything with this man and his bond. I want to give them both everything, and I want Nox to take his pleasure, giving it back to me tenfold.

I want more.

When his fingers slip out of me, his knees drawing up until his shadows are moving me again, he pushes my knees up to my chest for him so that he can line his cock up to slowly push into my pussy at the same time that his bond takes my ass.

"*Mine*," his bond hisses, and I glance up to see it watching my body open up to them both, hands grasping at the inside of my thighs alongside the shadows as they hold my legs wide open.

His shadow grows impossibly bigger inside my ass, big enough that I have a small moment of panic that I'm going to split in half. The moment I think that, his hips meet mine, and his cock is all the way inside my pussy while his shadows fill my ass.

I can't breathe in the best way.

He's everywhere all at once, covering me and consuming me. When his hips start to move and his bond's shadow works in tandem, I can't help but writhe and moan underneath him, my body taking over as my mind narrows to know nothing but the pleasure he's giving me.

His hand creeps up my chest to sit at the base of my throat, pressing me deeper into the pillows as his hips surge inside of me, pumping slowly as he fucks me. The pressure makes it harder to breathe, harder to think and overthink every little thing, until all that exists is the thick lengths of his cock and shadows as he stretches me to my limit and beyond. I squirm underneath him, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as a moan ekes out of my chest from under the heavy weight of his palm.

I want more.

I have to bite my lip to stop the words from coming out, the mantra of my greedy bond and the words that it's muttered and snapped and moaned at all of my Bonded at some point between the sheets.

But not this one.

This one demands my silence, needs my body to be his for the taking without any demands or directions. And for my silence, I'm rewarded with pleasure that has my toes curling and my lungs giving out.

"Mine, this is all mine."

When his hand moves down my body, his fingers finding my clit again with ease and working it over, I come so hard that my vision whites out.

When my mind comes back online, I have to blink to see straight again. I find Nox still fucking me through my peak. His eyes are so dark that I have to really look to check that his bond is no longer in control, but when his fingers curl around my chin to turn my face up to kiss me finally, I know it's him in there. It's Nox at the helm as he pounds into my pussy until I want to scream, his hips brutal as he gives me everything he's got.

It's as though I'm having sex with two men here and not just one, both of them checking in and out as they fuck me senseless. The shadows pull at my limbs, dragging me deeper into the bed until I feel as though I might break open, the power of him filling me until I'm dying to scream out my pleasure.

He watches it all, the darkness of his eyes still shining back to me. When I bite my lip to keep myself from moaning or whimpering again, he leans down to speak to me, his bond murmuring in a voice that isn't of this world, *"Not even death can keep us apart. Every part of you belongs to me, and I will tear any man apart who dares to get in my way. Bond or not."*

I don't need the reaction of my bond to those words to know that I'm close, my orgasm building up from the tips of my toes and rolling over me like a wave until it takes every last ounce of my control to stay silent as my body breaks into a thousand shaking, blissful pieces. My pussy gushes, wetness soaking my thighs as I fall apart in his arms, only his shadows wrapped tightly around me holding me together.

I want to cry, to sob at the overstimulation as he fucks me through my orgasm again, his eyes watching every second of my pleasure before he comes too, but only after I'm done. I watch as his eyes roll back and his lips curl, looking furious as he snarls out his own pleasure.

A shiver runs down my spine at the sight of him, stunning and twisted and gorgeously broken. He moves to collapse on the bed next to me with a grunt, the wild curls falling over his forehead in a sweaty mess, and my heart clenches at the sight of it.

He's still the same vicious and cruel man, only now he's mine, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him, nothing I haven't already done for him.

There's a moment of quiet between us, the inches that separate our bodies on the bed are such a small and insignificant thing now. I wait until the shadows have completely receded before I think about using my voice again.

I don't have any words for what just happened between us anyway.

So I let my eyes fall shut, and I enjoy the silence instead.

I think that Nox is just going to lie there in silence with me, but then his hand slips onto my cheek, pulling me closer until his lips meet mine. I know the moment that his bond interrupts and takes over, the way that the dark obsession bleeds through, and when I pull away to breathe, it murmurs, one last time, "*Mine.*"

Eventually, Nox gets up to clean himself, moving slowly through the room without bothering to cover his nakedness. I sneak a look at his ass and bite my lip at the sight of it.

Just as great as North's. I'm the luckiest Bond to ever live.

When the bed dips with his weight again, he finally breaks the silence. "I can show you how to keep Gryphon out of your head."

I turn my face just enough that I can meet Nox's eyes, but I find that he has them closed, his dark eyelashes fanning out over his cheeks, and I enjoy taking a moment to stare at him, marveling at the dark beauty of him.

"I don't think I'll be able to learn, no matter who's teaching me. Gryphon tried to, but I just... can't. It's literally impossible for me to push him out of my mind."

Nox shrugs, his face barely changing. "It's because you're too emotional about him. Your mind is bending towards him always because of your connection to him. If you can control your emotions, you can keep him out."

I don't feel insulted by what he's saying, mostly because there is no accusation or venom in his words, for once, but there's also a part of me that doesn't want to do anything about my emotions to my Bonded.

“I’m not telling you to stop feeling towards him. I’m just saying that if you can control the emotions more in the heat of the moment, you will be able to have a little more privacy.”

I nod at that, slowly rolling my body closer to him and enjoying the heat of him even without our bodies touching. Having him lying next to me like this is like we’re finally able to get the nesting that we were both denied thanks to his trauma. I find my bond incredibly smug at finally having the opportunity to just soak each other up.

“It’s not that I mind having him there. It’s more that I’m afraid of accidentally betraying my other Bonds’ privacy,” I say slowly, my words carefully thought out, even though I’m starting to relax about accidental missteps.

Nox nods slowly. “I would rather Gryphon not know every little detail of what was shared between us.”

My cheeks heat, and even though I know he’s probably referring to the soul-bond and the sharing of every moment of our lives, there’s a part of me that can’t stop thinking about our Bonding, the way that his bond had taken over and kissed me as though it owns me.

It was as perfect as this time between just the two of us, so different, but both times perfect in my eyes.

“Listen to what I’m telling you, Oleander, and do exactly as I say. I know you can do this; you can do anything you put your mind to.”

CHAPTER SIX

Gryphon

Falling asleep after Oli and Nox had disappeared from her room is almost impossible. When I wake up the next morning, I feel as though my head is full of air and not much else.

I lie there for a minute, looking up at the unpainted ceiling of my half-finished room as I get my shit together enough to get into the day.

There are a lot of reasons I don't want to get moving right now.

When I'm dangerously close to being late, I head back over to Oli's room, to the only working shower in the house, to get ready for my morning session at the Tac Training Center.

There's an itch under my skin at my Bonded's absence, the same one that had been there when I'd woken up in the chair and found them both gone. As badly as I want the two of them to figure out their Bond, for Nox to come to terms with the fact that they are tied together no matter his feelings on the matter, there's still a large part of me that just wants to hold her and be reassured by the steady beating of her heart.

The moment that she had saved Nox's life by shoving his soul back into his body and taking hers with it, starting the soul-bonding process and doing what was necessary to save his life, had been the most terrifying experience of my life.

One I *never* want to experience again.

I'd felt the moment that her body had begun shutting down. I'd felt her heart slow to a stop and her breathing get shallower as her body no longer had the essence of life in it required to go through the mechanics of staying alive. We had all felt it, being her Bonded, but something about my ability to read her and connect with her mind had amplified the entire situation into a living nightmare for me, one I'm sure will haunt me for the rest of my life.

I take twice as long as I usually do in the shower as I try to scrub the memory away. I had barely bothered showering over the last few days while our Bonded Group had been dealing with Nox's death and subsequent resurrection, so I'm careful about making sure I do the job right this time. My head is under the hot stream of water so I don't hear her coming until the shower door opens and Oli's body slips in beside mine.

I'm not used to her being the one to initiate, usually I'm the one demanding her time and her space and her presence, but I'm sure my longing for her had called out to her bond like a siren, something that she couldn't ignore. As tired and worn out as she looks, I can't feel guilty about it.

She's alive, and she's here.

"You're not gonna get all weird on me now, are you?" she says with her usual brand of sass. All I can do is stare at her with a sense of awe and marvel for a full minute.

I scoff at her and grab her, pulling her into my body until I can feel every soft and perfect inch of her against the hardness of my chest. "I'm pretty sure you promised me that you would stop running off to your own death, so I'm allowed to be as weird as I want to be."

She scoffs right back at me and does that little wriggling, squirming thing against me that drives me insane. "There was no running involved, I will have you know. It was all very passive, lots of thinking. If I can do it lying down, I don't think it counts."

I kind of want to shake her, but I also don't want to piss her off and have her walk out of here. So instead, I clamp my hands around her thighs and pick her up, enjoying the small squeal that lets out of her lips as she wraps her legs around my waist.

"Stop trying to die early, Bonded. Can we just have a few weeks of you not trying to die and kill us all with you? Because I had a full five minutes

of knowing what life felt like without your heart beating, and I am never going to live in that world.”

She sighs as though I have made some romantic declaration to her, not just laid down the honest-to-God truth, and then buries her head into the crook of my neck. As badly as I would like to press her back into the tiles and fuck her against the wall of this shower stall, something I have already done at least a dozen times but will never be enough for me, I'm already running late for my morning sessions, and I already know who is down there waiting for me.

It's something I need to speak to my Bonded about, but I also want to protect her from it for as long as possible because this is going to be a nightmare situation.

“I'm late,” I murmur, regret drenching my voice, and she sighs again as she unwraps her legs from around my waist, ducking her head under the water as she pulls away.

She arches her back a little until I have to use every inch of my will to not fall to my knees and eat her out as I watch the water run down her incredible body. She grins at me as though she's reading my mind and pushes forward to press a kiss on my chest.

“Maybe tonight can be your night,” she says with a saucy little wink, and I give her a quick slap on her ass as I step out of the stall and grab a towel.

“I doubt anyone is going to let tonight be my night, but I'm more than willing to share.”

She giggles at me and quickly gets back to washing herself off. I get dressed in my Tac gear, arming myself and pulling my boots on before I take the time to pull my hair back away from my face, using a hair tie to secure it.

Oli knows something is up the moment I do it.

The longer we're Bonded and the more time we spend together, the easier it is for her to read me and know when something is off. I'm not going to lie and say I don't love it, the fact that she's going to know everything there is to know about me and how I act over the years that we're together; it's exactly how things should be.

She shuts the water off and climbs out of the stall, a frown tugging at the corner of her lips. “What's going on? What happened?”

I could lie to her, even if it tastes like shit in my mouth, or I could dodge the truth fairly easily, but I want her to feel secure in our Bond. I want her to know how much I value her and her opinions in our Bonded Group, even if the truth sucks.

“My parents got here last night. I avoided seeing them because of everything happening here, but I have a debrief with them this morning. They’ve been working with a few of our TacTeams to dismantle the Wastelands that are cropping up on the East Coast like a plague.”

Oli blinks at me.

I stand there and try not to burst out laughing at the mini crisis that filters over her face as she realizes that we’ve never discussed my family beyond my sister.

I also haven’t told her that Kyrie is the only person in my family who I can speak to without wanting to stab myself directly in my eyeball just to get away from.

“You didn’t think I had parents?”

She looks at me sheepishly. “You never mentioned them so... I guess I assumed they were dead. Sorry, that sounds so shitty. I’m the worst Bonded ever!”

I tug her a little closer to me and kiss the top of her head. “Don’t say that, and don’t worry about it, Bonded. I don’t exactly talk about them, and the rest of the Bonded Group try to avoid reminding me about them too. They’re not... abusive or anything, just a pain in the ass that none of us want to deal with.”

She nods and rubs at her hair with the towel, biting her lip a little and still looking way too guilty for my liking. “Are there... any other relatives I should know about? Does Gabe have a secret brother or something?”

I grin at her and take one last minute to check over my weapons, more of a soothing action than really suspecting I’ve forgotten something.

Right as I’m about to leave, Oli bends down to dry off her legs, and I spot the bruises all over her lower back and her ass, a small smattering of fingerprints over the pale skin there that leave very little to the imagination of how her night went. There’s a moment of gut-wrenching fear in me before my brain kicks in and I remember that Oli is standing here with me, whole and grinning widely. So if anything had gone... wrong between them, I would know about it.

There's a reason I was there when they'd Bonded, and it had a lot less to do with seeing Nox through with it than making sure Oli wasn't hurt than Oli probably believes.

I run a hand over her ass and say teasingly, "You might not want Atlas to see you naked for a few days, Bonded, not unless you want him to fuss over you like a hot rash."

She gives me a startled look before spinning around to check herself out in the mirror, groaning and blushing when she sees the marks Nox left behind.

"Shit," she mutters, and then another sheepish grin stretches over her lips. That's all I need to know about what happened between her and her most damaged Bonded.

The rest really isn't my business.

I kiss the top of her head, trying to avoid getting water all over myself, something else my father would bitch at me over, and I take one last second to reassure her.

"There's nothing wrong with being with any of your Bonds. Don't let Bassinger bully you into thinking that you owe *anyone* an explanation. It's none of his business."

She sighs and nods. "He's just protective. He hasn't come to terms with the fact that I don't need to be protected from Nox."

I nod back and swoop down to give her one last, blistering kiss before I leave her in the bathroom to get herself ready for the day and finally face my fate of dealing with my parents at four a.m. on a Tuesday morning.

The Tac Training Center is more alive than I've ever seen it, bodies moving around the spaces with a frenetic energy that only ever happens when the big players are back in town. Usually, when the world isn't going to shit so completely, this only happens once a year at most, but over the coming weeks, we'll be seeing all of the strongest Gifted we have on our side.

Lucky *fucking* us.

The moment I walk through the doors, Kieran meets my eyes across the room and grimaces at me, a very overt action to let me know just how fucking obnoxious it is to have these people in our home. We've worked

together and been friends for long enough that he knows exactly how I feel about my family. He's not looking forward to dealing with any of this any more than I am.

It's not that I don't love my parents.

They were good parents. They took care of me and raised me without any of the trauma that my friends and Bonded Group all seem to have, but once I was old enough to join the TacTeams and work my way up to the top, things changed. Working with them has become a nightmare, *especially* since the revelation of exactly who is in my Bonded Group.

There was a reason I hadn't been quick to call them home to meet Oli.

I walk across the foyer area, letting the savage look on my face part the sea of bodies for me, because no matter how excited the TacTeam personnel might be, none of them want to get on my bad side.

When I finally reach Kieran, he slaps me on the back and steps in to murmur to me, "They're in with Unser now. The medical personnel finished up with him and discharged him last night, but I don't think he should be down here yet. He's not in the right frame of mind for this. Vivian agrees with me, but there's sweet fuck-all we can do about it when the General asks to see him."

The General.

The code word for my father, who is definitely *not* a General, but we enjoy calling him that behind his back anyway. Kyrie had started it back when we were kids and I didn't yet understand why she was pushing back against him so hard. He'd always treated her differently than me, and I'm ashamed to say that it took a very long time to see where my sister was coming from.

The doors of the center open again, and I glance back, expecting to see North striding in but finding Kyrie there instead, as though my thoughts had summoned her. She's looking as though she's been hit by a train.

I frown at her as she tucks her coat into her sides a little closer and stomps her way through to me. The crowd of people part just as easily for her as they do for me, and I feel a small glow of pride at her for having these trained personnel so terrified, even though most of them have never seen her shoot before.

They'd be shitting themselves if they had.

"What the fuck is the General doing back?" she snaps as soon as she reaches us, and I raise an eyebrow at her attitude. It's a lot more pointed

than I thought she'd be, more venomous than her usual attitude.

Kieran chuckles under his breath and leans into whisper to me conspiratorially, "Kyrie has been enjoying the attentions of some of the builders Gabe has been working with, and finding that she might have to explain some of these actions to mommy dearest and daddy dearest is not going over well with her."

I groan and rub a hand over my face as she shrugs at both of us, completely unrepentant. "I don't give a shit what they think about what I'm doing. It's no one's business but my own. I'm Unbonded, remember? The problem here is that we're trying to pretend that everyone in the Sanctuary is so united and happy to be here, and putting the General in the mix is not going to be a good thing. Have you warned Oli of what's about to go down? Hell, has anyone thought to tell her bond about him? Because it can't even handle any of us side-eyeing any of her Bonded, let alone when North and Nox end up in the same room as Dad."

I drop my hand away from my face and give her a look. "I *have* considered that, obviously, but what am I supposed to do? Tell him he is not allowed to come here? Because that would be so easy to do. North agreed to let him here to give his latest debrief. He's only supposed to be here for a night or two. It'll be just long enough that we can wave Oli in his face *briefly*, and then continue on with our lives."

Kieran nods along as though I am giving him so much ammo for later ribbing, and Kyrie presses both of her hands against her temples as though she is suffering from a giant headache, though I doubt it could possibly be as big as mine.

"And how exactly are you convincing the Draven brothers to let their Bonded be in the same room as the General without them? Because the only way that we're going to stop her bond from coming out and tearing his soul out through his nostrils is for her to not know about their issues."

Kieran glances between the two of us and then chips in. "I don't think we're gonna have to worry about Nox giving a shit. He seems to be pretty fine with Oli doing anything that might get herself murdered, maimed, or kidnapped."

This is not how I was planning on having this conversation with either of them, but I murmur, "That might not be true anymore."

Both of them look at me, startled, and I shrug. "She saved his life. It involved a soul-bonding, and they seem to have found some common

ground.”

Kieran snorts at me as though I've told a great joke and claps me on the back again. “Sure, sure. Nox Draven gives a shit about his Bonded. I believe you, one hundred percent. It's definitely what's happening here and not just that he wasn't thinking clearly post, y’know, *death*.”

Kyrie seems a little bit more hesitant to argue with me, but she shrugs and glances around the room, her back straightening with a snap as her eyes fall on our parents as they walk back into the room. Vivian and Unser are with them, both looking as though they’ve been chewing on sour grapes, though I'm sure Unser’s appearance has more to do with the fact that he isn't even twenty-four hours out of the medical center.

“Yeah, it can't be that bad. We’re going to be fine here,” Kyrie mutters under her breath, and I shrug because it doesn’t matter. We’re going to have to speak to them whether we want to or not.

The doors to the training center open again and North steps through, confirming that today is going to be a complete shitshow for me.

Surprisingly, he doesn't look as though he's just spent the last three days at the bottom of a bottle of bourbon, none of the horrendous hangover he must be experiencing showing on his face. His suit is perfect, his hair is slicked back in the very structured, councilman way that he has, and only the thin band of black smoke around his wrist shows that he might not be so happy about this situation.

Kieran leans into me again to murmur, “Ding ding, round one.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oli

After finding out that Gryphon's parents are both in the Sanctuary and down at the Tac Training Center, I abandon my original plans of going down there to work on my training. I am a little surprised that Gryphon hadn't mentioned that I was able to keep him out of my head, but I chalk it up to him being preoccupied.

I feel embarrassed that it hadn't even occurred to me that his parents might still be in the picture, and I feel a little bit off-kilter about it. I consider going back to Nox's room and climbing back into his bed with him, but I think that maybe that is what's keeping me jittery as well.

I need to breathe, get some space, and figure out my new normal. A new normal of having all of my Bonded at my side, loving me and protecting us all, no matter who it is that's coming after us.

So instead, I get dressed and head into the kitchen, even though it is way too early to even be thinking about food. I rummage around in the cupboards until I have everything I need to make pancakes, a comfort food for me. I've never been all that good at cooking, but I have fond memories of getting up early on Saturday mornings with my dad and making pancakes together while my mom slept in.

I'm not sure if talking with Nox about their deaths has rattled me, but I find myself calming down in the easy practice of making the pancakes.

They're practically foolproof to make, and as long as I can stop myself from getting lost in my own thoughts, I won't burn them either.

I make way too many for just myself, so I chop a platter of fruits up as toppings and grab the honey and maple syrup out before I reach out to Gabe and Atlas to see if they want to join me.

By this time, it's getting closer to five a.m., so I don't feel quite so guilty about waking them up. Neither of them mind, of course, and Atlas is standing in the kitchen with me before his eyes are even properly open, his hands framing my face as he presses our foreheads together.

He takes a deep, deep breath before he murmurs, "Please don't disappear like that again."

I sigh out a small giggle that's more breath than substance and murmur back to him, "Do you mean the soul-bonding part or the part where I slept in someone else's room?"

He gives me a wry look without leaning away, very aware of the fact that I'm purposefully not saying Nox's name, before he mutters back to me, "Both. All of it, everything. Let's not do any of that again."

I press in to him, closer to wrapping my arms around his waist, as Gabe finally stumbles out of his room, half-dressed and sleep-rumpled in all his glory. "I'm never going to tell you that I won't do it again, because if something happens to any of you again, that is exactly what's going to happen. I'm not sorry about it either."

Atlas nods and then releases me with one last kiss, happy enough to share me with Gabe as my Shifter bundles me up into a warm hug. I inhale deeply, my lungs expanding with the delicious scents of him as Atlas grabs the platters of food and moves them towards the table.

Gabe doesn't feel the need to question why I had ended up in Nox's room or why I had been so willing to sacrifice myself for him. Instead, he tucks his head into the crook of my neck and just enjoys the embrace before we head over to the table to the food.

Eating with the two of them is a rowdy and fun experience.

They bicker with each other about building and fighting prowess, and I'm happy enough to stuff my face until I feel as though my stomach is going to explode. Using my Gift has always left me hungry, and I've been using more of it lately than ever before. Even as my plate slowly empties, I start thinking about what I can make for myself next, or maybe a trip down to see the chef is in order.

I wonder if I could convince him to make me some lobster rolls?

"I thought you were heading down to the training center?"

I startle at the sound of Nox's voice, but only because I'm still not used to them being able to sneak up on me. Atlas frowns at the movement, but when I smile at Nox, he eases up a little, just enough that I don't begin to panic that there's about to be an all-out brawl in the kitchen.

I swallow my mouthful of pancakes and with a shy smile, I say back, "I was, but then Gryphon told me that his parents were going to be down there. He didn't seem very happy about it. I got the feeling that he didn't want me to be around while the debrief was happening, so I made food here instead. There's still heaps left, if you want some?"

Nox's face, that was as calm and placid before as he ever gets, sets into a foul grimace as he turns on his heel and stomps back to his room.

My heart sinks a little bit, but then Gabe's face looks about the same, and I realize it's got nothing to do with me. Atlas looks between the three of us and then says, "What's the deal with his parents? Why haven't we seen them before?"

Gabe grimaces and shoves the last of his pancakes into his mouth, talking around them without a shred of shame. "Gryphon's dad is an old school TacTeam leader. He used to be in the top dog position here, but when Gryphon worked his way up the ranks, he couldn't handle his kid having such a high position and moved to work remotely."

I scowl, and Gabe nods in return. "He doesn't like the Draven brothers either. He insists on starting shit with the two of them, just to prove a point. North used to be able to deal with him civilly, but the last time they had it out before he left, he made shitty comments about Nox and basically said that Gryphon used his Bonded Group as a way to move up the ranks. He completely ignored the fact that his son is the best TacTeam member that we have and deserves to be in the highest position of power."

Gryphon had conveniently left all of that information out of his quick explanation this morning.

I swallow and glance over my shoulder at the empty doorway where Nox had stood, chewing my lip a little as I think.

"Gryphon wouldn't have told me all of that because he would have been worried about my bond," I say slowly, and Nox steps back into the room, now fully dressed, Mephis and Procel at his feet.

“Exactly, but I think that meeting your bond is precisely what the General needs, Oleander. Would you like to join me?”

This feels incredibly mischievous, and a smile tugs at the corner of my lips, even as Gabe and Atlas both shoot me disapproving looks.

Like hell am I going to let someone disrespect my Bonded Group. After everything Gryphon does for us all, there’s no way I’m going to have someone questioning him or undermining his authority, especially someone who should know better.

Gabe curses as I stand, but my voice is nothing but sweetness as I reply, “Sure, why not? Just give me a second to change into something a little more appropriate for the training center.”

Gabe and Atlas both insist on coming with us, though Nox has no interest in waiting around for the two of them to throw some clothing on so that they’re not running through the town in their boxers. I don’t want my Bonded being on show like that though, so I take my time finding shoes and getting my hair tied back to give them both time to get covered up. Azrael sits at my feet with big eyes and his head cocked as he huffs at me in frustration.

He is *not* happy about the delay.

When we finally step out of the house, Nox directs me over to one of the ATV vehicles that only has two seats, smirking as he plans to leave the other two behind. Gabe shakes his head at him and starts stripping, ready to shift into something with claws and fur that runs quickly.

Atlas just rolls his eyes at him as he steps over to the garage, opening it up and revealing another ATV vehicle for the two of them to use, rolling his eyes some more when Gabe laughs, shoving his shirt back on in a haphazard way.

I can’t help but laugh with him, surprised at how light and joyful I feel now. There’s a part of me that knows it isn’t just having Nox that has lightened my spirit.

The fact that he knows what I did and is still choosing to be with me has lifted a huge weight off of my shoulders.

There's a part of me that believes that my other Bonded wouldn't be so quick to forgive me for literal murder, the worst sort of crime because there was no one more innocent in that moment than my parents, and knowing that Nox wouldn't leave me even if the others might is incredibly freeing.

I have someone who has seen all of the ugliest, darkest, and worst parts of me, and instead of hating me— *continuing* to hate me, even— he's chosen to love me instead.

For the first time since I was fourteen, I can breathe without the crushing weight of my guilt and the what-ifs.

Nox drives like a maniac through the quiet streets, only pausing to let children cross the road, because he sure seems happy enough to run down the workmen and early risers that we come across without a second thought. I duck my head so none of them see me grinning like a madwoman at his antics, North and Gryphon's disapproving faces clear in my mind.

Neither of them would care if we took out a council member or two though.

Gabe calls out apologies to everyone, even the peacekeeper. I work hard at not looking quite so joyful because, technically, I'm Nox's accomplice if he does 'accidentally' murder someone with the vehicle right now.

It wouldn't be classed as an accident, Nox says directly through our mind connection, and I shoot him a look.

Stop reading my mind, it's creepy even when you do it.

He takes a corner a little too quickly and my body jerks against the seatbelt, shoving me at him, but he braces at the right time, catching me and holding me in the seat perfectly as he straightens up. He answers me without missing a beat, *Push me out, then. You know how to do it, so do it. You need all the practice you can get before we're facing that Gifted again.*

I groan, but he's right.

I really do need all of the practice that I can get, and even though it makes my forehead break out in sweat, I do manage to shove him out of my head.

Fuck yes, I'm going to be unstoppable!

Well, more unstoppable than I already am with my crazed and monstrous bond, the ability to mess around with people's souls, and, apparently, bring people back from the dead.

Just your regular Gifted shit.

I feel a little queasy as we pull up to the training center, and I'm not sure if it is motion sickness at his crazed driving or the efforts of getting him out of my head, but I take a second to breathe before I step out. He doesn't offer me his hand or try to help me out of the vehicle, but the way that he stands and watches me so closely is enough for me to know that if I asked for help, he would.

It's actually a small breath of fresh air to have one of my guys not falling over himself to fuss over me, though I guess Gryphon is the same way. Quietly reassuring while happy for me to do my own thing, and it occurs to me that they're all varying shades of protective in their own ways.

As we step out of the ATV together, Gabe and Atlas park behind us, jumping out in their haste to reach us. Both of them look pissed off at Nox's obnoxious driving, and Atlas mutters under his breath viciously as he gives me a once-over.

I'm not sure what wounds or bruises he could possibly expect to find, but I give him a reassuring grin nonetheless.

I don't want to admit how much fun I'm having, mostly because I don't want either of them to think that I'm laughing at their expense, but really it feels good to be on the same side as Nox, for once.

I've never necessarily thought that he had a poor judgment on things, just that he was overly antagonistic. He has always had a good head on his shoulders about anything that didn't relate to me, and there's a reason that Gryphon and his brother trust and seek out his opinion.

He's also a walking encyclopedia on all things Gifted and Bonds.

Atlas sidles around the ATV to get to me, throwing one last shitty look at Nox as he does, but aiming for a very gentle tone with me as he says, "Sweetness, you need to stop for a second and think about this. Maybe Gryphon doesn't want you and Draven coming here to antagonize his family. If he didn't tell you about all of the bad blood between his family and the Bonded Group, maybe there's a reason for that. Maybe he doesn't want shit to be started with his family. Just because his dad has shitty opinions doesn't mean that he needs to have his soul ripped out."

I stop for a second to consider this.

I wasn't really planning on killing the man, but I also don't want to embarrass my Bonded by running in there guns blazing when his dad is just kind of a dick. I look over at Gabe, but he is staring at Nox with an accusation in his eyes, as though this is all his fault.

It kind of is.

I glance at Nox, and a smirk stretches over his lips as our eyes meet. “The General said that Gabe should have been locked up for attacking Gryphon the first time that he Shifted. He also suggested that he should potentially be put down, like a rabid dog. He had a lot of opinions on what should happen in our Bonded Group.”

Nope, not going to let that sort of shit fly.

Maybe I *will* tear the soul out of this man.

“For fuck’s sake, Draven!” Atlas snaps as my eyes shift to black for just a second.

My bond pushes to come out to play, but I wrestle it back until my eyes are once again blue. No one really wants a bloodbath here, or the consequences of that murder, but I’m all for putting the fear of *my* god in this man. The things that my bond could do to him if he ever made those threats to us again... the things I could talk the Dravens’ shadow creatures into doing, all of it more horrifying than the last.

I stride forward into the Tac Training Center, Atlas cursing behind me and Gabe quick to follow us both, but I have a pretty firm hold of my temper by the time the doors slide shut behind us all. The foyer is full of people, and I search through their faces to see anyone familiar, but they are mostly Gifted that look at me with terror, which is a sign of someone who doesn’t know me very well.

Or someone who knows me a little too well.

“Jesus fucking Christ, you know better than to bring her down here!” I startle and Atlas shifts in closer to my side, but it’s only Vivian, standing there with a grumpy look on his face as he crosses his arms over his chest at us as though we are rowdy children who are disobeying orders.

“I’ve brought Gryph’s Bonded down here to meet his parents—how is that a bad thing?” Nox says with mock innocence in his voice, and again I have to bite back the grin that wants to burst over my face.

It's something else being on this side of his snark.

I open my mouth to send a snarky retort back to Vivian, when Gryphon’s voice filters into my mind, *Why did Gabe just tell me that you're all here to meet my parents, and why exactly can I not hear you coming anymore?*

I bite my lip and try to concentrate on what is happening around me so I don't look like a lunatic, but it's impossible when Nox answers for me, *After*

how many months of you and North insisting on me finding common ground with Oleander, now you're going to have to face the consequences of that. I taught her how to keep you out of her head, and I let her know some truths about exactly who your father is.

I can feel North and Gryphon's irritation at him, and that does put a dampener on my attitude a little bit.

We can go back to the house if you don't want us here, I say slowly, but I'm surprised when Atlas is the one that butts in, We're here to make sure that your father knows exactly who his son's Bonded Group is. If he thinks that Oli and the rest of us aren't good enough for you, then he has another thing coming.

Vivian is staring at us all as though we're insane, but Nox steps in closer to me as he sends Gryphon one last snarky message, *Would you look at that? Bassinger and I agree on something.*

It makes me a little bit nervous to think about how much Gryphon might be pissed off at us for showing up, but when he steps out of the meeting rooms, he only shoots a savage look at Nox before coming over to pull me into his arms. I tuck myself into his chest and let some of his strength soak into me, the hard planes of his chest just as comforting now as they were a few hours ago back in my bathroom.

"Your bond is not going to like the way that my dad speaks to the Dravens," he murmurs to me quietly enough that I'm sure no one else around hears it.

I let my eyes slip shut and I check in with my bond to let it know that we're not in any real danger, that this is family politics and it's nothing that requires death or destruction. It's not happy about it, but I think it's still tired enough from the soul-bonding with Nox that it agrees to sit this one out. Small miracles.

"I'll be fine."

Gryphon pulls back to stare down at me and scoffs a little. "You won't be fine. I'm not fine. North isn't fine, and in a shocking turn of events, Nox is not fine, though I think he enjoys finding ways to horrify and enrage my father more than the last time that he had to be around him."

I smother a smile—not wanting anyone to think I've gone insane at how much I'm enjoying the attitude that had once driven me so close to insanity—before I shrug again. "It's up to you. I am happy to head home if you would rather me not meet them."

Gryphon shakes his head at me slowly, the corners of his mouth downturned. "It's not about you meeting them. It's about them pissing you off. I don't want anyone upsetting you, and your bond just adds an extra layer of 'bad idea' into the mix. It doesn't matter how much we warn him to keep his mouth shut, my father can't help himself."

Atlas moves towards us, linking his fingers in mine and tugging me towards the meeting room. "Then let's get it over and done with so we can get Oli back to the house. She shouldn't be on her feet so soon after the soul-bonding anyway."

I don't want to point out that I've never felt so alive or in control in all of my life, because a nap with him and Gabe actually does sound amazing.

If only this meeting doesn't spoil it for me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Oli

Gryphon's father looks a lot like you would imagine a man who is nicknamed 'the General' would look like.

I've seen him before, thanks to the framed photo of him in Gryphon's room back at the Draven mansion, the family shot of Gryphon, Kyrie, and his parents smiling and looking so happy in it, but there's none of that smiling man sitting in front of me right now.

North had insisted on wedging me between himself and Gryphon, and for once, Atlas doesn't argue with him at all about it. It occurs to me that he is playing into the same game that the rest of my Bonded Group always do, showing nothing but a united front in front of anyone who might use any weaknesses against us, and for a second, I feel a little bad for Gryphon that we're treating his family this way.

One look at the General tells me that he would *definitely* use any weaknesses to harm some of my Bonded Group.

His face is impassive and a lot like Gryphon's when he looks at his son, that blank slate that is almost impossible to read as he assesses the situation, but the moment he looks at Nox or North, there is a loathing there that he doesn't even attempt to mask or hide.

No wonder they both struggle to act civilly with him.

The moment we'd walked in, he had blanked Gabe out as though he wasn't even important enough to acknowledge, something that had set my

teeth on edge. The look of disgust that he gives Atlas is the final nail in the coffin, as far as I'm concerned.

Thank God I'd spoken to my bond before we had entered this room.

If it hadn't gone to sleep in my chest, continuing the recovery process it needs after so much power expended, we would probably be cleaning intestines off of the walls or something, because I doubt it would have even made it a clean, soul-tearing sort of demise for this man.

No, it would've called Azrael and August out of our Bonded and asked them sweetly to deal with this problem for it. They would've done it with their sweetest, toothiest grins on their little shadowy faces too. I know it.

"Another Death Dealer," the General mutters loudly enough that we all know he's trying to piss us off.

It's probably a test for me to see how my temper handles his assholeness, but I don't rise to the bait. Instead, I look at the two women sitting on that side of the table with him, trying to figure out which one is Gryphon's mother, though it's pretty easy to guess. She has the same eyes as Gryphon and Kyrie, and there's a maternal warmth in her gaze as she stares at her son as though he's the only person sitting in this room.

The other woman gives him a quick assessing glance before she stares back at me as though I am dirt beneath her shoe.

It's going to be a long day.

North acts as though the General never spoke and shuffles some papers in front of him. "Is there anything else you need to report?"

He glances between us and then his eyes fall on his son, dismissing North's question. "Just because they are your Bonded Group doesn't mean they have clearance for this sort of information. I'm not going to just hand over our intel, that we lost so many good men to get, in front of a Bassinger just because he showed up in a blood test."

I don't need to look at Atlas to know how this will be pissing him off, but Gryphon doesn't give him the opportunity to lose his temper. "Every person in this room has the same level of clearance. If you don't think that our screening processes are rigorous enough, then you'll need to discuss that with the council."

"Luckily, we have a representative in the room," Nox tacks onto the end, and he leans forward in his chair to gesture to North. "Go right ahead and make your case."

The General doesn't react to his words, just continues staring at his son as though the rest of us don't exist. I find it fascinating how a man could have loved his son so deeply but loathed the people he loves most like this, because it's clear to me that he is hurting Gryphon. He might not show it on the outside, and I don't have the ability to read his emotions or his mind the way that he can with the rest of us, but I'm his Bonded, and I know it just as well as I know how much it's pissing me off.

"Funny you should bring up the blood tests," North starts, leaning back in his chair and smoothing a hand down the front of his suit in a very leisurely way that I'm sure sets the General's teeth on edge.

He looks as though he is a playboy sort of councilman when he does it, the type who doesn't have any skin in the game and couldn't really care less about those underneath him, the exact opposite of who I know North Draven to be, another weapon he is wielding against this man.

"While you're here, you should stop by the medical office and have your bloods redone."

All three of them frown at us, and Gryphon's mom is the one to reply, "What's that supposed to mean? Why would we need to do something like that?"

Gryphon clears his throat and looks between the three of them. "We have recently uncovered a Resistance plot to break up the strongest Bond Groups."

The General rolls his eyes and waves a hand. "Of course they are, that's what they've always done."

Gryphon nods and speaks through gritted teeth, barely holding onto his own temper. "Yes, but we found out their long game. They've been messing with the blood testing and the Bonded Groups, specifically. We uncovered that they had specifically miscategorized a Central Bond and had one of her Bonds assaulted by a Resistance member and had him thinking that she was his Bond."

There's a moment of silence in the room and then the General smirks. "Have you all had your bloods retested? Am I finally going to get my son back?"

I would like to kill this man.

I clench both of my hands into fists underneath the table where no one can see it except Gryphon, who glances down at them and then sends

through our mind connection, *We can leave if you need to, Bonded. We don't have to sit through this.*

I'm surprised when it's North who loses his temper first, and the way that he does is, I'm sure, the worst way that he could possibly think of.

The small band of smoke that circles his wrist grows until August appears at his side in his largest form, the rows of sharp teeth in his jaws bared as he smiles at Gryphon's family.

I don't want anyone to panic or get into an argument about this, so I hold out my hand and beckon the shadow pup until I get his attention. It's not easy, because he would very much like to eat the General, but I get him over to me and sitting in my lap like the perfect shadow puppy that he is, his tongue lolling out of his head as I scratch him behind his ears. His giant head rests on my shoulders as he snuffles at my hair and just enjoys being out with me again.

"I've missed you, sweet boy," I murmur as he butts at my hands for more scratches, and I giggle as I give him everything that he wants. "I have missed you so much. We need to talk to North about letting us hang out more, because you are so perfect and you shouldn't be cooped up so much. You're so sweet for the kisses. Thank you, my sweet boy."

"And that is why I don't need my bloods rerun," North snaps. I startle and look over at him, taking a little bit more notice of what's happening in the room around me while I was distracted by August. I find the General and both of the women staring at me in absolute horror.

"The creatures tore your mother apart," the General says in a voice that doesn't quite shake, but I'm sure that has more to do with his control than the level of fear that is pumping through him.

North nods. "They did that because she wasn't really my father's Bonded. The Resistance has been messing with the blood tests for a *very* long time. You don't have to have them rerun if you don't want to, but I have made the suggestion to all of the Top Tier Gifted, just in case. Do with that information what you will."

I try to catch North's attention as we leave the meeting room, but he stalks ahead of us all as he hurries off to his office, late already for a council

meeting that I'm sure he would rather not attend.

I feel a little sad to have still not been able to see him properly since everything happened with Nox, but I also don't want to interfere with the work that he's doing. He's got a permanently full plate being a member of the council, the only currently serving member actually doing anything to help the community, from what I can tell. I'm not about to throw myself a pity party over him doing his job.

Even when I *really* want to.

August stays behind with me, and that is enough for now.

Nox stalks off in a bad mood, thanks to everything that was said, and I leave him to it, knowing that he's going to go back to his books. He's still obsessively researching everything he can find about our bonds to try to find a link that might get us closer to knowing what it is that they're really here for.

The possibilities seem endless and terrifying.

Gabe and Atlas both follow behind me slowly, ready to bundle me into the ATV to go back to the house, but Gryphon waves them on. "I need to speak to my Bonded. We'll head up to the house once we're done."

It's such a firm and no argument sort of command that neither of them bother to question it, simply pressing kisses to my cheeks as they stalk past, laughing and joking with each other now that we're out of the suffocation of the meeting room.

I shove my hands into the pocket of the jacket that I'd borrowed from Atlas. It's three sizes too big on me to even be considered a loose fit, but I enjoy being swallowed by the fabric. It smells like him, and nothing makes my bond more happy and content than being surrounded by them, even when they aren't here physically with me.

"Dad and Serena are going to refuse to meet you, but my mom wants to at least have a conversation with you before they leave."

I nod and try not to feel awkward about the fact that I don't actually know what his mom's name even is, but once again, he proves that you don't necessarily need to be able to read someone's mind to know what they're thinking.

He smirks at me and murmurs quietly, "Her name is Allison, and she definitely falls in line on what the General says, but me and Kyrie are her exception. We always have been."

I can respect her a lot for that because children *should* be the exception to everything, and I glance around the room. “Where is Kyrie, or does she not get the same welcome that you do?”

Gryphon groans a little under his breath. “No, she gets it too, and it’s possibly worse than I do. She got it out of the way first thing this morning, before the meeting. Mom has been harassing her about moving over to the East Coast to the Gifted community there. Mom thinks that’s the reason her blood tests have come back without any Bonds so far, but Kyrie has always been happily independent. I think she’d prefer to stay single for another decade or so before she’s tied to someone.”

I nod at that just a little too enthusiastically, and he gives me a look, his eyebrows creeping up his forehead. “The single life is *not* for you, Bonded. You are far too good at running into danger head first. I think you wouldn’t survive if you were left to your own devices. Better off with all of your Bonded covering your ass when you get some idea of running off.”

I roll my eyes and glance around quickly, finding us alone in the foyer before I push forward and wrap myself around my Bonded. “You guys all survived pretty well without me. I’m sure I would have been fine. Besides, you can’t miss what you don’t know. Kyrie is happy being single because she doesn’t know what she’s missing out on. When she does eventually find her person, or people, she’ll wish she had it sooner.”

Gryphon gets a handful of my ass as he hoists me up into his arms, ignoring my squealing and protests as he presses his lips into mine unrepentantly. “What a terrible thing to miss out on,” he murmurs as I pull away from him, and I smile at him like a lovestruck idiot.

“Good thing you don’t have to,” I mumble back, and this time, I swoop in to kiss him until the sound of footsteps stops it from going any further.

Thank God, because Gryphon’s tongue is a wicked, *wicked* thing. I’m sure he could have convinced me to do just about anything in that moment. By the time his mom rounds the corner, I’m back on my own two feet with one hand tucked into Gryphon’s tightly, the only connection between us now, and even then I feel like blushing when her eyes drop down to them.

She’s holding a large box, and Gryphon’s mouth sets into a firm line at the sight of it.

“Thank you for picking them up,” he says, and his mom nods before she sets it down at our feet.

“It was no problem, baby,” she says, smiling at him with such pride in her eyes.

I will not make faces at Gryphon's mother and her fussing over him, though it's difficult not to and incredibly adorable to see.

He lets go of my hand a little reluctantly as he steps forward to give his mom a hug. She's a tall woman, but he still has a good five inches on her, and she almost disappears in the hulk of him.

“Your father is considering moving back here. I've told him I don't want to, which is a bald-faced lie, but I don't think it's a good idea until he comes around a little more,” she says quietly as she pulls away from Gryphon's arms.

Her eyes shine a little brighter, the way they do when someone is fighting back tears, and I almost feel as though I'm intruding on a moment that I should not be witnessing. I'm about to step away and make a run for it when she turns to me.

“It's nice to meet you all. Gryphon has told me so much about you and, though I'm sure it doesn't look that way, I'm glad the two of you have found each other. *Finally.*”

That last word stings a little, but I smile at her and duck my head. “It's lovely to meet you too. I'm sorry that I might not be the ideal Bonded, but I promise that I love your son, and I'm doing my best to be what he needs in a Bonded.”

Gryphon frowns at me, but his mother smiles a little and nods her head. “Every mother wants their child to be safe and loved. Seeing that shadow creature sitting on your lap as though it was a docile puppy actually gave me some hope that my son will get those things. That wasn't always the case, so I'm grateful for that.”

I kind of want to point out to her that I recently brought one of my Bonds back to life and that there is no one else that we know of who has been able to do that, but I also don't want to freak her out any further. Instead, I just nod and shake her hand when she finally extends it to me.

Baby steps, right?

Gryphon is quiet as we bundle ourselves into the ATV together, and he gets us on the road towards the house.

The box that his mother had given him rattles a little in the back. I find myself intensely curious at what exactly he wanted her to pick up, but I keep my curiosity to myself for now. I just enjoy his company for a moment.

There's still a lot of people on the paths despite how early it is. Most of them acknowledge us in some way, waving or calling out good morning to us, and I find myself relaxing back in the seat a little. They might all be afraid of me, but at least we're now getting to a place where they can be civil. I'm sure this is how things had gone for the Dravens after what had happened with their father, but I find myself completely okay with receiving the same treatment.

August just sits at my feet, his head tucked into my leg protectively as he stares up at me with clear adoration. I rub his head between his ears and coo at him affectionately.

"I don't think I like that Nox has taught you how to keep me out of your head," Gryphon says quietly. His voice can barely be heard over the loud motor, and I grin back at him like a lunatic.

I sass him because I was put on this earth to mess with this man, I swear. "I'm supposed to work at making sure no one can get into my head and set me off like a bomb, right? I thought you'd be proud!"

He gives me a side-eye because we both know that he is, but he's also incredibly fussy, bordering on codependent, with his need to know where I am, what I'm doing, and every last one of my innermost thoughts at all times.

Okay, I'm sure it's not that bad, but that's what it feels like.

When we get to the house, I'm surprised when Gryphon keeps driving, taking the small path that leads behind the house and up a small incline, until eventually, we're looking out over the entire valley.

The town of the Sanctuary is below us, and the mountains that protect the space are looming around us. I find the air knocked out of my lungs a little at the sight of it. It's a stunning view. For a second, I think that Gryphon is being incredibly romantic with me, until he shuts the engine off and sighs deeply.

It's not a happy sound.

"What's happened? What's pissing you off?"

I'm convinced he's going to tell me some terrible dark things about his father or some guilt-ridden story of how this is all tearing him apart, but instead, he reaches into the back to open the box with one hand, pulling out a small plastic box and hesitating for a second before he places it on my lap.

"I asked my mom to stop off in Maryland before she came back. A few months ago, I'd started calling around until I found where your parents' ashes were being held. No one had come to claim them yet, so they were still at the funeral home that had cremated them. I knew that you would want to bring them home, and I didn't trust anyone but family to get them here safely."

My breathing becomes unsteady, but I can't force myself to fix it as I look down at the small box. There's a white label on it with my mother's name, her date of birth, and a serial number that I'm sure means something to someone but nothing to me.

I glance back at the box and find more plastic tubs, each one with one of my fathers' names on it.

Gryphon has brought my family home to me.

"I didn't tell you about it... just in case we couldn't find them. North and I have been looking for a few months, and then once we found them, we had to get my mom to go collect them. There was some red tape, but North knows how to cut through that shit."

My own words have dried up completely, but I think Gryphon knows that. He knows it, and he's happy to fill in the silence for me while I get my head back together somehow.

"North has been talking about putting in more permanent roots here, how to bring in more infrastructure and businesses so that it becomes a proper town and not just this temporary refuge for us. So if you want this place to be permanent, then we can bury them here. Or we can just take their ashes with us wherever you want to go, Bonded, once we've dealt with the Resistance. I know we're going to now. Without a doubt, we're going to win this. I always knew, but watching you bring Nox back... there's no doubt in my mind that we're going to win this fight. Your parents would be so proud of everything you've done."

I nod and wipe away the tears from my cheeks, one of my hands sitting over the little plastic box protectively, as though it'll disappear into thin air if I let it out of my sight for even a second.

When I finally find my words, they come out as a croak, but they're probably more meaningful that way.

“Thank you, Bonded.”

CHAPTER NINE

Atlas

Watching Sawyer and Gray fumble around like idiots in front of their Central Bond becomes a highlight of my day.

Aro is being kept in the cells underneath the Tac Training Center for processing, since technically she was an armed member of the Resistance when we had found her and Oli had demanded we bring her home.

It usually only takes a couple of days for Gryphon to work through everything that he needs to to make a decision with North and the other higher-ups on whether people are going to be deprogrammed and sent back into society or if there is no hope for them. But with the time that was spent watching Oli bring Nox back to life, and then the fraught days of freaking out while the two of them slept and recovered, completely unaware of the time that was passing, he hasn't had the chance yet to start the process with her.

It sends Sawyer slowly but surely spiraling off the deep end.

He's mouthy at the best of times, completely unrepentant and irreverent no matter who he's speaking to. When I find myself within earshot of it, I stupidly try to reason with him.

"You can't blame him for taking care of his Bonded first and foremost," I say, and Aro nods her head from inside the cell, her arms still tucked around her brother tightly.

They don't normally let people room together either, but Sawyer had campaigned pretty strongly with North until he'd gotten his own way. I'm glad he did, not that I would say so to him, but the tiny slip of a girl had taken on a fierce and protective facade since her brother had arrived, no longer looking quite so haunted and desolate.

Unfortunately, I know what happens in those camps all too well, and I am a little worried about Sawyer's brash and impulsive nature around someone who might need something a little softer. From the side-eye he's getting from Gray, I know that the third Bond in their Group might agree with me, even if he isn't saying it out loud. The two of them have been in love with each other since forever, according to Gabe, so seeing how exactly this is all going to work out is going to be entertaining at the very least.

"I get that, but you also have to understand that she is my Bond and maybe I want her to be a bit of a priority too," Sawyer says with a lot of hand gestures that are entirely unnecessary, and Sage sighs from where she's sitting in the corner with Felix.

From the moment that she had heard about her brother's Central Bond being found, Sage has spent most of her free time down here getting to know the girl. She'd brought Felix with her, but Aro has refused to be seen by anyone yet, no matter how much we had promised, begged, and pleaded with her that she was safe with Felix.

She had, however, let him check her brother, but only under her watchful eye. I'm not sure she's aware that the rooms are shielded and that there's no way for her to use her power against Felix in that state, but I can appreciate her protective nature and respect it.

Oli opens the small hatch that's cut out of one of the giant, thick glass panels on the wall and drops a bag full of snack foods and candy into the siblings. The door shuts with a thud, and we all just stand there and listen as the bags rattle around in the space.

Oli breaks the silence, happy to just talk and fill the void to clear away some of the awkwardness. "I didn't really know what you like, so I just grabbed everything I could that looked good. You know, without the chef or the kitchen staff noticing exactly how much I was stealing and throwing me out of there."

Gabe snorts and rolls his eyes. "North funds this entire town. You can't steal from your own Bonded Group."

She waves a hand at him dismissively but with a wry smile. "They have resources there that are for *everybody*, so technically it is stealing, but I am also very secure in the knowledge that I could sleep my way out of any trouble that I get my way into."

Sawyer grins at her and then tries to smother it, shooting a guilty look at his Central Bond, but the girl doesn't notice any of our antics as she opens the bag with the same sort of hesitancy you would imagine someone opening a bag of snakes would. There's enough sugar in there to send five grown men into diabetic comas, and I find myself praising my Bonded internally as we watch the girl's willpower and stubbornness crumble, tearing open a bag of Snickers and devouring one in a single bite.

It's the first time she's taken something that anybody has offered her.

Gray looks at my Bonded as though he's going to weep with relief or possibly dedicate his life to her or something. A week ago, that would have made my teeth clench hard enough to break them, but now he's in the same boat as I am.

Hopelessly devoted and grateful to anyone who might make our Bonds' lives just a little bit easier.

He doesn't have to worry though, because Oli has always been able to communicate with the most traumatized of people, and his Central Bond is in the best of hands. Hell, she somehow managed to tame Nox *freaking* Draven, so I have no doubt that Aro will be a fully functioning member of our society in no time.

Oli beckons Sage over to sit at the glass wall with her, the two of them making small talk, just a random filler conversation, but I know exactly what my Bonded is doing. She waits until Aro has eaten enough of the sugar to have some dopamine in her brain before she addresses the girl, completely ignoring all of us men in the room and just quietly coaxing her into a conversation with the two of them.

"Is there anything that you need in the cell that we can get you? Gryphon is coming down this afternoon, and it should only be a couple more days before we can get you out of here."

Aro shakes her head and sits down against the wall so that she's mirroring Oli's position. She's only a few feet away from her but separated by the thick wall of glass. Her little brother takes a handful of Skittles from the bag and climbs back up onto the bed, grabbing the small computer game that Sawyer had smuggled in to him and leaning back as he plays the game.

Aro watches him just enough to know that he is settled and comfortable before looking back at my Bonded. “We’re being fed and no one has been allowed into this cell with us without there being one of you guys present, so no, I think we have everything we need.”

It's as close to a thank you as I think we're going to get, but Oli smiles like the sun regardless. “When we get you out of here, I've spoken to Gryphon about where we can house you. There are a few options that we can talk about. The community here is still being built, and we don't have enough houses yet for you and Lahn to live by yourselves, but you also don't have to live with any men that you don't want to at the moment. Just because we’ve found your Bonds doesn't mean that you are being forced to do anything. You can live in one of the women-only houses, or you can move into the house that your Bonds share with Sage and her Bonded Group so that you'll have Sage with you at all times. Or you can temporarily move into my Bonded Group house.”

My eyebrows creep up my forehead and I shoot a look at Gabe. I wasn’t expecting our house to be opened up to anyone, but it also makes a hell of a lot of sense. Sage and Sawyer and their Bonded Groups are as close to family as we're ever going to get. Oli was always going to do everything she could to help them out and, honestly, we owe them all a lot.

Aro looks between Sage and Oli and quirks an eyebrow at them both. “So there's not enough houses for me and Lahn to have a house to ourselves, but your Bonded Group has one to themselves?”

Oli grins and Sage chuckles quietly under her breath. “Yes, it's nepotism at its finest, but the Sanctuary has been a project that my Bonded—North and Nox—and their family have been working on, and funding, for generations, so we did get a priority on a house. Plus, there are six of us living under one roof just for my Bonded Group. There are only five people living in Sage and Sawyer’s house between the two Bonded Groups there. At some point, we would become a fire hazard if we let more people into ours.”

Sage giggles again and then shrugs at Aro. “It doesn't really matter to me where you decide to live, but if you want to move into our house, there is a spare bedroom that you and Lahn can sleep in. I spend most of my time either at the training center or at home. So if you were to move in with us, I would be there with you at all times. I also know all of Sawyer's weak spots and Gray's greatest fears, so if you had any concerns about me potentially

picking them over you, I should warn you that I would destroy them in a heartbeat if I thought you were going to get hurt.”

Aro’s lip quirks upwards for the first time since we reunited her with her brother. I glance over to find both of her Bonds watching this interaction as though it is the most fascinating thing they have ever encountered, obsessively soaking in every word said between the three women. I want to be able to give them shit about it, but I would tear my own beating heart out of my chest if Oli asked it of me, so I don’t have a leg to stand on.

“I’m not worried about my Bonds or being hurt,” Aro murmurs, and Oli nods casually, as though this isn’t groundbreaking information for everybody in the room.

Sawyer and Gray both exhale as though a great weight has been lifted from them both as Aro continues, “I’m more worried about what will happen to my brother and I if the Resistance comes back and where is safest for us to be. They’re not just going to let us go... they’re not the type to just let people go.”

Oli nods solemnly and glances around the room at each and every one of us until she clears her throat and starts pointing.

“Sage over there is a Flame, and she’s the strongest Flame I’ve encountered. She once set a building on fire by accident, but I’m not going to rat her out and give you the details. Gabe is a Shifter who can shift into anything, and I mean *anything*. If he can imagine the creature, he can become it, so his latest trick is the dragon that everybody here in the Sanctuary is obsessively gossiping about. Atlas is Indestructible and strong enough to move a building if he had to, and he’s now working on being able to push that Gift onto other people and share his indestructibility with others. Felix is a Healer who only days ago, helped me bring one of my Bonded back to life. I would raze cities to the ground for him in return. Sawyer is a Technokinetic and has used this Gift to hack into the Resistance. His work with North is currently giving us enough intel to protect this city from anyone who might try to come after us. And Gray is a Telekinetic who, rumor has it, threw an entire car at a group of Resistance when they showed up here a few weeks back.”

Aro looks around at each of them and then turns back to Oli.

“And your eyes turned black and you kill people,” she murmurs, and Oli nods slowly.

“My eyes turn black because of the god that lives inside of me. I'm a Soul Render who hasn't yet found a limit to my power. I'm also Bonded to a Neuro who has not yet found a part of the brain that he can't get into or manipulate, and his limits have just been pushed to the point that he now doesn't tap out. Then there's the two Death Dealers, both of them two sides of the same coin and feared amongst the Resistance so much so that they sent an assassin into one of the camps to attempt to kill them. There's no safer place for you in the world than here with us.”

When we finally leave the underground cells, Oli and Sage walk ahead of the rest of us, their arms linked as they gossip amongst themselves, and we're happy enough to leave them to it. Their laughter and giggling is like music to my ears, my bond happy and calm at the joy and contentment oozing out of my Bonded, and everything feels right in the world for a moment.

Felix looks worn out, more so than he usually does, and Gabe claps him on the back as he asks, “Are you okay, man? Is there something that you need or anything that we can do for you? You just gotta ask.”

Felix gives him a wry grin back and shakes his head. “The Medical Board are deliberating over whether or not I am going to get kicked out of the program for helping Oli with Nox. I'm having a little bit of a personal crisis over it. I can't decide whether I want to continue with an organization that would penalize someone for doing what they were put on this earth to do... or if I should just stick with it because I've already spent half my life studying for this.”

“What the fuck?” I sputter out, and Felix nods his head at me.

“It's not like I need the certification. I'm Gifted, and that's the whole point of what I can do, but having an understanding of the human body and how it works is very helpful to me when I'm using my Gift. It means that I can use the minimum amount of power for the maximum amount of good. When we're in situations with a lot of people needing help... that's important. We're heading into a war with the Resistance. I mean, we're already in one, but the casualty tolls are just getting higher and higher every time the TacTeams are going out, and I don't have the option of getting

power boosts like you guys do. So is it selfish of me to give it up just on a point of pride or ethics when my community needs me?"

Gabe groans and rubs a hand over his face. "Fuck, man, I wasn't expecting something so fucking deep when I asked. I was hoping you needed extra supplies or a new bathroom or something, shit I can actually do."

I can't just let this go though, not for this man who's been in Oli's corner every step of the way. "Can't North just tell the Medical Board to fuck off or something?"

It has to be that simple, right?

The Dravens own the Gifted community of the West Coast, the same way that my family owns the East Coast. When you're the longest established family and richer than any of the playboy billionaires that show up in magazines, there's not a lot that people can do to stop you from getting your own way.

I don't imagine that North would have any reservations about doing that for Felix after everything that's happened.

Felix shrugs and scratches at the back of his neck. "It's not as easy as that, man. You've also got to remember that in the last couple of months, my Bonded Group has had a lot of eyes on us. There are people on the Medical Board who believe that I'm conspiring with you and the others to undermine and break down the Gifted community from the inside."

Gabe frowns at him and Felix shrugs. "Everybody knows that Sage was possessed or influenced or whatever the fuck it was that happened. Kieran has disobeyed direct orders on several occasions. Even though he was doing so to save lives, it's still questionable behavior. Then there's everything that went down with Riley and Giovanna. Now that I've gone against Payne's directions, my superior's direct orders, it doesn't look good."

Gabe groans and mutters, "Plus, they all know that you're close with the Draven Bonded Group. If there's anything that the council hates more than their own inability to keep themselves alive, it's North and the power that our Bonded Group has. The day Oli came back, they all started actively trying to figure out how to get rid of us. It's only a matter of time."

I blow out another breath and give Gabe a look. "I thought being on the good guys' side meant that I didn't have to keep watching my back for knives."

Gabe snorts at me and says back in a sarcastic tone, “Nah, man. Now you are *absolutely* going to be stabbed in the back by someone. Only difference is that you have an entire Bonded Group of people who are watching it as well, ready to gut the asshole the moment they try.”

When we finally make it up to the house, Oli immediately takes Sage for a tour, proudly pointing out all of the work that Gabe and I have done on the place. She forgets to mention that she also helped with the tiling and painting, but Gabe glows like an idiot when she sings her praises of his workmanship. I want to give him shit for it, but he's also basically given up having any sort of a social life or downtime to get this place finished, so I let him enjoy the moment instead of being a dick about it.

I check out the fridge and find our family dinner already sitting in there, waiting to be heated up, thanks to someone from the dining hall. I, once again, find myself just a little bit grateful that I ended up in North Draven's Bonded Group.

It does have its perks.

Felix helps me to get everything in the oven, following the instructions that were taped on the boxes, and I find dishes to plate everything up. There's plenty of food with the cold salads and sides, and my stomach rumbles at the smells of it all.

Gabe gets to setting the table, and by the time the girls get back—cackling with laughter between them both that makes all three of us guys smile like idiots at them—the entire feast is waiting on the table for everyone to enjoy.

Oli reaches out to the rest of the Bonded Group to let them know that we're all set for dinner, but only Gryphon answers, saying that they have all been caught up with something at the council offices and they'll be home when they can be.

When Oli tells Sage and Felix this, Sage frowns and mutters, “Kieran said the same thing. I wonder what the hell's happened this time.”

None of us really want to think about it.

Instead, we dig into the food. Oli tries to play it off as though none of this is worrying her, but as time ticks on, she gets more and more agitated as she watches the clock. I don't blame her. My own leg is bouncing under the table as I try to keep my cool and stay calm, for her sake more than my own, and Gabe is chewing on his lip more than he is chewing on his steak.

Finally, when I think I can't take it anymore, Gryphon reaches out to Oli again, but does it so that we can all hear him.

We have a new prisoner in the cells back at the council offices, and we need you guys to come down so that we can all go in for the questioning. Kieran is on his way to you now.

Oli sets down her fork and murmurs this to Sage.

Who is it? I ask as I stand, reaching for the plates of food to get them put away before we leave. North answers for me.

Jericho. Your sister's Bonded handed himself over to us in search of asylum and his Bonded.

CHAPTER TEN

Oli

I'm not expecting much from the interviews with Jericho, but I hurry to get changed into my Tac gear just in case. I had luckily left a set of the standard issue pants and shirt in my room, so we don't have to waste time down at North's offices.

Sage and Felix both leave and head back to their house together hand-in-hand and looking a little bit more peaceful now that we had gotten to hang out for a little while.

I'm worried about my best friend.

The amount of setbacks and situations she's had to deal with in such a short amount of time is scary. I know that her mental health isn't the best right now, especially since Riley has returned and the full extent of healing the damage that Giovanna has done to him is setting in.

Felix isn't sure he will be able to make a full recovery.

Sage is freaking *devastated*.

Once I'm fully dressed, my boots laced on my feet and the few weapons I am allowed to carry strapped to my body, I head back out to the kitchen to find Kieran now standing with Atlas and Gabe.

Both of them give me a funny look at my outfit and I shrug. "I'm prepared for anything to happen tonight. I'm surprised you two aren't."

Atlas shrugs and flexes a little playfully. "Like I care if my jeans get shredded. Nothing can touch me anyway."

Gabe shoves him and then gives me a sheepish grin. “Any clothes I put on just get taken off the second I need to shift, so who cares?”

Kieran rolls his eyes at them both, but when I step up to him, he gives me a firm nod. “This isn't how I was planning on spending my evening.”

I cringe for him, thinking about how excited Sage had been for us all to eat together and just hang out, for once. She'll be missing her Bonded because he's working late, once again. “Sorry that you're having to drag us around again.”

He holds out his arm for us all to grab and snaps back in his usual, snarky way, “It's not you, it's the fucking Resistance. Do none of them have shit going on besides ruining our lives? Can they not take a fucking nap instead of sending people over to us? At some point, I would like to see my Bonded's face again.”

My chest warms just a little at that, knowing that even though he's usually pretty quiet about his Bonded, he's still just as devoted to Sage as she is to him.

I always knew Kieran was a good guy... except for that one time he tackled me in a cafe and dragged me back to my Bonds, kicking and screaming. That one time, he was a complete dick.

When we *pop* into existence at the old council buildings, I take three deep breaths to stop myself from losing the delicious steak sandwich I had just eaten and try not to whimper when it becomes clear that I'm not going to be able to save myself from vomiting. Thankfully, the cool palm that slides over the back of my neck is my saving grace as Gryphon eases the motion sickness for me.

“You're really never gonna get used to that, are you?” Kieran says with a dry tone, and I swipe a hand over my forehead to clear away the sweat that is beading there as I try not to turn green.

“I don't know how anyone is supposed to get used to being transported. It's *unnatural*,” I croak, and Kieran rolls his eyes at me.

“It's about as unnatural as ripping souls out, Fallows, so pot, meet kettle.”

He's enjoying this way too much. I shrug and then take Gryphon's hand as he leads us down to the elevator, a frown still over his face. Whatever has been said already in this interview room has him concerned, and I don't like the sound of that.

When the elevator doors shut behind us all, he tugs on my shirt. “Going on a mission I was not clued in on?”

I shrugged back. “You tell me. If Jericho has told you where Davies or his Bonds are right now, feel free to instruct Kieran to take me to him. I have a score to settle, and I made sure I’m dressed for the occasion.”

Kieran shakes his head at me but Gryphon smirks. “Hell hath no fury like your bond when someone touches something that belongs to it.”

Damn straight, and I'm not going to apologize for it either.

We'd come so close to losing one of our own and, though there's a part of me that is grateful for the soul-bonding and for the chance at gaining Nox's trust, a fragile and fearsome thing, I still want to rain down bloodshed and violence on the person that had done this to us. As well as on Davies for facilitating it. Fuck, I don't even care about what he did to me anymore. I care that he went after these men who belong to me.

He tried, and succeeded, in killing Nox.

I'm not going to take that shit lightly, and neither is my bond.

When the doors open again, I find North and Nox waiting for us, their heads together as they mutter heatedly to each other about something, only stopping when they see us all standing there.

North barely looks at me before he turns on his heel and stalks off towards the cells.

Instantly, I want to cry.

But he always could read me like an open book, and even without looking at me, he says to me through our mind connection, just between the two of us, *I can't right now, Bonded. Not with everyone here, because if I look at you right now, after what you did for my brother... after what he did for me... I will make an absolute fool of myself. I'm supposed to be the strong one for us all.*

I have to blink away my own tears at the broken tone of his voice, the raw edges of it tearing at me. He just said he needed space, but I need him like I need air right now. I need to hold him close and ease away the guilt and pain that he's feeling, to reassure him that everything is okay now.

We're all going to survive this, no matter what it takes.

As we make our way through the hallways, I find that there are more people than I expected there to be in the holding cells. The last time we had come down here to speak to Atlas' sister, she was the only one that was left

after the processing but, as we walk down the long hallway together, every cell is occupied.

I want to duck my head and hide, to pretend I'm focused on what we're actually down here for to save face, but I can't. If there's anything I can do to help North and Gryphon, then I'll do it.

They both deserve a strong and capable Bonded.

So instead, I look in every single glass pane at the horrors that wait for me there.

I know a lot of the people here.

I look into the faces of soldiers and grunt-work Resistance members mostly, but there are also some higher-ups that I recognize. A shiver runs down my spine as I spot one of Davies' advisors staring back at me.

Ray Branston, an Elemental nightmare.

"You recognize him?" Atlas says, and I nod my head with a sigh.

"Branston. He was one of the decision makers in the camp that I was held in."

He also used his Gift to torture the prisoners, forcing water into their lungs and dry-drowning them. I'd also seen him suck all of the water out of a victim's body with the flick of his wrist, killing them excruciatingly in an instant. He got off on it too, enjoyed the acts of killing innocent men and women.

He deserves to die down here.

I want Azrael and August to eat him.

Atlas nods and scratches the back of his head a little, looking sheepish as he says, "He's my godfather, one of my dad's closest friends. Gryphon warned me that he would be down here, but I didn't know how much of him you saw in your time there. I should've said something."

I shrug and step forward, leaving the man behind. Atlas struggles to tear his eyes away from the man he had known all of his childhood, the guilt of it all eating away at him until Gabe claps him on the shoulder and leads him away with a few snarky comments.

I don't listen in on any of it, mostly because I already know that it's not my job to police my Bonded and their interactions with each other, but also because Gabe and Atlas have found their own sort of friendship. It's been built on ribbing each other and making rude remarks over the stupidest things.

Guys are weird.

“We're at the end,” Gryphon says to me, and I nod, carefully steeling myself as we pass Aurelia, still sitting in her cell.

She's even thinner than the last time we saw her, something I didn't quite think was possible, but there's a light in her eyes now as she stares at the thick concrete that separates her from her Bonded.

She can feel him here.

Even with all the shields and precautions that have been put into place, she can feel her Bonded's presence. She's my enemy, but there's a small part of me that feels sorry for my Bonded's sister and the indoctrination she had as a child.

She never stood a chance.

But maybe she did, because Atlas got out of there. He found out about me and he ran, never looking back, except to use everything that he knows about those evil people to keep me and our Bonded Group safe.

I can't keep thinking about her, or I'll drive myself insane.

As we get to the last cell, I stop and look in at her Bonded. Jericho looks exactly as I imagined he would from Atlas' description of a man who enjoyed camping and the simpler things in life compared to that of his Bonded Group.

He's tall, at least as tall as Gryphon and North, and there's a carefully rustic beard that covers the bottom half of his face. His eyes are a warm honeycomb color that make him look approachable and not at all like the enemy that we're fighting so hard to dispose of.

He's covered in dust and there are holes at the bottom of his shirt, a warm jacket thrown over the top of his outfit, as though he has been traveling for quite some time. The only thing on him that looks well maintained is the ring on his finger. I would wager it is a symbol of his bonding with Aurelia, a treasured symbol of what they share.

He stares at me through the glass with the same assessing keenness that I am showing him, but he is the first one to speak.

“The little girl who broke the Resistance camp in half and destroyed the great dynasty of the Bassingers. I wasn't expecting you to be so... small.”

I raise an eyebrow and glance back at Atlas who is hanging back towards the table, standing closer to Gabe and Gryphon. I'm glad he's nowhere near Nox because I can feel the pent-up anger in him that is just looking for an outlet, and I don't want my Bonded fighting right now.

“I’m sorry that I don’t meet your expectations, but it’s not my fault you pledged your loyalty to a cause that’s so fragile it can be taken out by a single *girl* and her Bonded.”

Jericho shrugs and takes a seat on the single chair in the cell. “I didn’t pledge my allegiance to anything but my Bonded. Why the fuck do you think I’m here?”

I shrug and glance over my shoulder at where Aurelia is pressed against that concrete, her eyes shut as her palms lie flat on the ground beside her. It’s a power position if I ever saw one, and a trickle of dread runs through my mind.

The cell can hold her, Gryphon says directly into our mind link, and I take a steadying breath.

The cell can hold her, and even if it can’t, there’s nothing any of them can do to us. We already know what they’re capable of, Atlas chips in as well, and I remind myself that he knows absolutely what his sister and her Bonded can do.

A small, dark part of my mind that has nothing to do with my bond pops in with the small, helpful detail that Atlas has been gone from his childhood home for a while.

A lot of things could’ve changed in that time.

August butts up against my leg as though he’s reassuring me as well, and Jericho’s eyes flick down to stare at North’s shadow creature as though the Doberman-like creature has come from the depths of hell itself.

Kinda rude considering August is the sweetest boy ever at my side, a living embodiment of North’s protective love for me. He doesn’t even attempt to eat anyone around me anymore.

“I think it’s kind of sweet that you wanted to come here and die with your Bonded. It’s more than I can say about any other member of her Bonded Group, so kudos to you. Well, I guess we can’t blame Peter... I already took care of him.”

I don’t look back at Atlas as I say this, mostly because I’m baiting Jericho. I don’t want the man to know that we’re stuck in limbo of not wanting to kill Aurelia for Atlas’ sake, so she’s just got to waste away in the cells here instead, being fed properly but dying of her own volition slowly nonetheless.

The move pays off when a slow smirk stretches over his face.

“I’m not here to die. I’m here to make a deal.”

Jericho refuses to speak to us about the deal he's proposing until he is let out of the cell and able to see his Bonded, even if it's just through the glass. Nox is keen to just let the shadow creatures in there to convince him to start talking, but I shoot that down pretty quickly.

He already knows what Atlas is capable of, as well as the rumors about the Draven Bonded Group. If he's come all of this way, he either has something very big to offer us or he's underestimated our abilities greatly.

Atlas chews on the inside of his cheek for a minute before he finally shrugs, saying, "He's Resistance. He joined my sister's Bonded Group and was happy enough to go along with everything that my father has said. There's no excusing that. It's not like he didn't know any better, but unless the Resistance has created some sort of 'super soldier serum', he's not going to be a threat to any of us. If we get him out of the cell, Gryphon could get inside of his head and shut off his Gift instantly. Oli could rip his soul out of his body, and the shadow creatures could easily tear him limb from limb. He's not really a threat to any of us."

North looks around at everyone at the table before he signals to Gryphon to open the cell door. He uses his Neuro Gift to shut Jericho's brain down as they maneuver him over to the interrogation table, locking him into the seat with his hands bound behind his back with the tech handcuffs on. They're another layer of security for us all, and I'm not really worried about what Jericho has planned anymore. Atlas is right, we're stronger than him, which means that whatever he's planning on offering us must be big.

Aurelia watches the entire thing with tears in her eyes, but she stays in the same position, her back against the concrete wall and her palms flat on the ground.

It's creepy as fuck.

We have to move to find more chairs, but once we're all seated in a haphazard half circle around the table, Gryphon finally lets Jericho's mind go, the white ring around his eyes slowly disappearing until he blinks rapidly, as though he's clearing his vision. The moment he is aware enough to know that he has been moved, his head snaps towards his Bonded, his eyes drinking her in obsessively, and his lip curls at the state she's in.

When he turns back to North, my Bonded shrugs. “She won't take anything we offer her. She has been sent three solid meals a day, medical assistance, and her brother has been down to speak to her. If she won't take what's been provided to her, then what are we supposed to do?”

We had discussed the ethics of Gryphon using his mind control to force her to eat, but I had no intention of asking that sort of thing of my Bonded. Forcing a woman to do *anything* isn't a pleasant experience. In the end, Atlas had been the one to say that she should be left to the consequences of her own choices.

North waits another heartbeat of silence before he says, “I’m not a very patient man, and I have no time for games. Put your deal on the table, and be done with it.”

I cross my arms over my chest as I lean in slightly, eager to hear what the deal is, what it is that he could possibly be offering us.

Atlas’ palm is warm on my knee, even as his face shows none of the frustration and disapproval that he’s filled with right now. He'd been quick to suggest that I sit between him and one of my other Bonded so that he could shield me if anything does go wrong here, always extra cautious, and I didn't feel the need to argue the point.

I don't really want my bond to come out right now, because I have no doubt that it'll simply destroy everyone in the cells rather than bother to extract information from any of them. I don't want to mess with the processes that North and Gryphon have in place like that. The tiniest scrap of information could turn the tide of the war.

We need every chance we can get.

“First, I will tell you the terms of the deal before I let you know what I'm offering you. I want to take my Bonded to Singapore. I want you to release us and let us leave the country together.”

Atlas’ hand jerks on my knee, the only sign of his reaction to this news, and North immediately cuts Jericho off. “Absolutely not. We don't just let Resistance prisoners go, especially not high profile ones such as yourselves.”

Jericho’s lip curls. “We’re not though, are we? Aurelia is a Bassinger in name only. Her father sold her off to the highest bidders. The only reason she got to have one of her actual Bonds is because I was willing to sacrifice everything to have her.”

I frown and look around at the rest of my Bonded Group, but they're all staring at Jericho intently. Only Nox seems distracted by the shadow creature at his feet. His head is ducked down as he strokes a hand over Procel's head gently.

"I have no interest in listening to Resistance lies; we're done here," North says, and Jericho jerks forward in the chair, his bindings rattling at the sudden movement.

He looks fearsome, his eyes narrowed at North like he's imagining ripping his throat out with his bare hands. "You've already figured it out. You've already figured out what the Resistance has been doing for generations, splitting up Bonded Groups and using the entire population as a breeding science experiment. Very few Bonded Groups are left as they should be, and only if the testing slips through the cracks. You *will* let me and my Bonded go to Singapore, and not only will we abandon the Resistance fight, but I will give you whatever information you need to kill them all."

North shakes his head slowly, his mouth a grim line. "You don't think that every Resistance prisoner that we've had in this place hasn't offered us the same thing for their freedom? I have no interest in playing these games with you, Jericho. You've turned yourself in, and it's all been for nothing."

North moves as if he is going to stand, and Jericho snaps, "It's about the god. The breeding experiments are about the void-eyed being, the one that lives inside *your* Bonded."

That gets everybody's attention.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Oli

He's bluffing.

I can barely hear Nox's words over the pounding of my heart in my chest, thumping so violently that I feel as though my ribs might crack.

I don't think he is, Atlas replies through the mind link, and I risk looking over at him. His face is still completely unreadable, not showing any of the spiraling panic that I'm sure we're all feeling, or maybe it's just me. Maybe my own freakout is consuming me so goddamn much that I can't sense any calm in the rest of my Bonded Group.

North replies, his voice full of steel and sharp edges, *Of course he is. He stumbled on some document about Oli, and he is trying to use that information to get his Bonded out of the cells. Admirable enough, because at least he gives a fuck about her, but it's not going to work.*

Surprisingly, it's Nox who finally addresses Jericho. "Tell me what you know about the god. Tell me everything, and tell it to me truthfully. Maybe we'll spare your life."

Atlas glances over at me, his eyes round with shock, but I focus on what Jericho's answer is. Nox is the one who had spent hours and hours trawling through every history book he could get his hands on that referenced void-like eyes or gods living amongst us, so I'm not shocked that this has caught his attention.

I'm also very aware that Jericho only mentioned the god living in me and has not put together enough clues to know about the Draven brothers.

"I know that the breeding experiments were about making sure that the god was born into the Resistance. They were hoping for it to be born into one of the higher families. That's why they chose the bloodlines very carefully. The Bassingers were hoping it would be born to one of them, but when the rumors started of a young Gifted girl who could kill people at will, with eyes that changed to black, they knew that they had failed and that it was born outside of our inner circles. When they approached her, the entire family ran. The Fallows knew what we were going to do."

"And what exactly is that?" North cuts in, but Jericho keeps looking at Nox, his eyes sizing up the younger of the two Draven brothers. Maybe he sees something in my most damaged Bonded that makes him think he has a chance of convincing him.

"The god that lives inside her is not something that you can tame. Just because it's playing along now, doesn't mean it will forever. It always turns on its host and kills everyone around it."

My blood chills in my veins, but my bond doesn't come out to play or even to reassure me that it isn't planning my demise right now as we listen to Jericho spout on and on about all of the things that it will do to us.

All of the things it has already done to my parents.

"Davies will stop at nothing to win. He truly believes that the only world worth living in is the one where the Resistance rules and the non-Gifted are wiped out. The attacks that have been taking place in the larger cities are just the beginning. Once they have the god back, they won't be stopped. They're going to offer it whatever it wants to get rid of the girl and work with them."

They cannot offer me anything, my bond speaks up, and I try not to startle at the sound of it. *I have my Bonded. I want nothing else.*

Why do they think that you will kill me? Why is he so sure of this? I'm expecting it to brush me off, to say that Jericho is grasping at straws to get Aurelia out of here. I might even have believed it to be the truth, but my bond has always been nothing but truthful to me, even when it hurts.

Because I always have. Every last time, I have been forced to take over the vessel to get what I need. The other vessels were different. The other vessels were power-hungry or too stupid to speak to. You are different. You're the vessel I was waiting for, and now we're going to have it all.

I glance over only to find North staring directly at me, the first time his eyes have touched me since I had woken up in Nox's bed. As he looks at me, I can see the bone chilling fear that he was speaking about written clearly on his features. Luckily, his back is turned to Jericho and our prisoner isn't seeing the crisis.

My bond is speaking to me but letting the rest of them hear it, filtering all of this through our connection to him. I can feel all of their reactions to what it's saying, but I can't process any of it while I'm busy trying to figure out if I'm about to be murdered by my damn bond.

Gryphon takes over the interrogation seamlessly, not letting the whole new levels of what-the-fuck derail the interrogation and negotiation. "You're not giving us anything that we don't already know. You think that we've Bonded with Fallows and didn't already know what was going on inside of her? We're not some stupid Resistance grunts, just Bonding with whoever we're told to."

Jericho glances over his shoulder at Aurelia again, and the love there is absolutely the real deal. There's no way to fake that sort of devotion. If he's here to deceive us, it's definitely not going to be at her expense. "Davies thinks that he'll be able to get the god out of her. He thinks that the Gift of rending souls extends as far as the god being able to choose who it inhabits. He thinks that Oleander was either chosen by the god, or it's just biding its time inside of her until it can find someone else, someone *stronger*."

He knows nothing, my bond says. Atlas' hand squeezes my knee again, this time in reassurance. *I couldn't leave you any more than I could let one of my Bonded die, and I would rather raze this earth to nothing but ashes than let that man control any part of me or us.*

I take a deep breath because I know that it's telling me the truth, and Gryphon glances back at me with a small nod, reassurance that he doesn't detect any lies either.

A year ago, if you would have told me that my bond confirming that it was staying with me forever would have filled me with such relief, I wouldn't have believed you. Back then, I would have done anything to dig it out of me, but I've grown a lot.

"Of course. Davies is an idiot. Who could possibly be stronger than Oli?" Gabe says, and when I glance over at him, he grins at me with a wink.

Jericho levels him with a much harsher look, one that says that he thinks my Bonded is an idiot, but Gabe is smug and asshole-ish as he smirks back

at him unrepentantly.

I think it's likely my bond would take the powers with it if it left me, and I wouldn't be so strong anymore, I say back full of sass, and Gabe shakes his head at me.

I'm not talking about tearing souls out, Bonded. I'm talking about the fact that you were strapped to a table by Davies and tortured and didn't break once. I'm pretty sure I would have broken in the first week.

I smother a giggle, but Jericho notices it anyway and shakes his head at me, clearly pissed we're not as somber and moody as he is.

"Davies is stronger than you think," he says, his voice getting shrill, and Nox cocks his head at him in that very sarcastic way that he has.

"If Davies is so strong, then why did he have to kidnap a child and torture her? Why are all of his victims so young? He never takes anyone after their Gifts have fully formed. Is he attempting to get to them before they have fully formed self-identities? Or is he just trying to seem stronger than he really is?"

Jericho turns to look at me again, and Nox's temper snaps, his hand snapping out to grab his hair and slam him face first into the table. Atlas jerks in his seat, and Gabe makes a grunting noise of shock, and maybe just a little bit of sympathy, as Jericho's nose crunches and blood pools underneath it.

"Stop. Looking. At. Her."

I freeze in my seat.

Nox has never really acted protective of me, not until he'd barricaded us both in his bedroom after the soul-bonding. To have it happen now, in front of our entire Bonded Group and some wheeling-dealing Resistance member, is jarring, to say the least.

Even Gryphon looks shocked.

Nox leans down to murmur quietly to Jericho, directly into his ear, though it's quiet enough that I can hear him well enough.

"Keep your filthy Resistance eyes off of her. That's the difference between you and I. Once we Bonded, there was nothing that was ever going to keep Oleander away from me... not the Resistance, not the god inside her, not even death itself. You came here to bargain, but you've given us nothing. Now you're not getting your pathetic little Bassinger girl out of here, and you'll both rot in our cells. You've lost."

Atlas and Gabe escort me home after Kieran transports us back to the Sanctuary.

We're quiet as we walk through the dark streets, the half-built houses all looming over us with patchy shadows, and my heart feels heavy that we've left the others behind.

North and Gryphon were still questioning Jericho, pulling apart all of the information he'd given us until they find something that might actually be useful, but Nox had stayed behind just to fuck with him. Not that he said that, he'd barely reacted when Gryphon had told Kieran to bring us home, but there's a way that he holds himself that gives away his dark intent.

Jericho will probably be torn apart by shadows by the end of the night.

My chest still aches to leave them though, and I find myself unable to bear the silence any longer. "Do you think they'll come home tonight?"

My voice is too thready for my liking, my emotions coming through a little too raw and weepy. Even though I know that these two Bonded would *never* call me out for it or make fun of me, it's still too much for me to take.

Gabe runs a hand through his hair as he blows out a breath, his arm flexing beautifully and his shirt rising up a little to show a sliver of golden skin around his hips that I want to taste.

I swallow roughly and glance away, catching Atlas' eye as I do, and he's smirking at me. I guess I am sort of drooling at Gabe as though he's a piece of meat right there in front of him.

At least he doesn't look pissed off about it.

"I doubt they'll be home tonight, Sweetness, but we can keep your mind off of them."

He says it in a playfully innocent tone, the smirk still going strong on his face, and my cheeks heat up at the implication.

I've already had group sex.

One by one, four out of five of my Bonded Group had fucked me until my legs had shaken and my pussy throbbed, but it hadn't been so... planned out. I didn't have to think about it or wrap my head around the logistics of more than one man in my bed, it had just sort of happened. Even the threesome with North and Gryphon had been spur of the moment, on my behalf, at least.

There's too much time for my own head to get in the way here.

As we get to the front steps of our house, Gabe gives me a sidelong look when I haven't immediately replied to Atlas' offer, checking in with my hesitation. When he opens his mouth, Atlas cuts him off. "What part of us distracting you is freaking you out, Bonded? If Nox has—"

I can't bear any Nox hate tonight. "He hasn't done anything. It's just—I'm still getting my head around some aspects of the bonding and... part of me still thinks you guys are going to get jealous or pissed off or that I'll do something if we're all together that will ruin things. Bonding doesn't just magically make the insecurities disappear. Real life doesn't work like that."

I don't know who I'm trying to convince here.

We're thankfully ducking into the house and kicking off our shoes at the door in a haphazard pile that will absolutely piss North off when he does eventually make it home, so I'm saved from hearing Atlas' answer to my mini meltdown. I turn to head off to my room, happy enough to just let it all go and watch some trashy TV in bed, when a hand clamps down on the back of my neck and stops me.

My bond always did like it when they act possessive and just a little brutish and, sure enough, it hums happily in my chest at the move.

Atlas tugs me closer to the heat of his body, his free hand twisting around my waist until I'm trapped in his arms, his lips hot against my neck as he murmurs, "I'm not jealous of any of the other Bonded. I might still loathe the ground Nox fucking Draven walks on, I probably will forever, but I'm not jealous of him. There's nothing that you're going to do with Gabe that's going to ruin anything between us, Sweetness. So just get that shit out of your head. Better yet, get those pants off so that I can get to taking care of my Bonded."

I don't need to be asked twice.

There's still a flutter of nervousness in my belly as I fling my clothes from my body, the heat of both of their eyes like a physical thing on my body. The moment I shimmy out of my lacy lingerie, Gabe groans and catches my bra mid-air as he starts towards me.

"That one is my favorite, don't throw it away. What are you trying to do to me here, Bonded?"

It melts some of my worries away, just enough that I can spin on the spot and skip off towards my bedroom with a shake of my naked ass at them both. Gabe groans again, stomping after me. When I look back at him, I find him leaving his own trail of clothes behind. That'll be a fun find for

the others when they make it home, but then the last of my nervousness disappears when Atlas laughs at us, stalking after us both.

Maybe this *can* just be fun.

I'm two steps away from the bed when Gabe catches me, his hands firm on my waist as he spins me up into his arms with the sort of casual ease that he has. It's very smooth and, if I didn't know better, I'd think he'd had just a little too much practice at swinging girls around.

I like that he hasn't.

The playing field is a little more even between us both.

He ducks down to catch my lips in a blisteringly hot kiss, his naked body plastered against my own and his hands clutching at me in a hot demand. I wrap my legs around his waist, hitching myself more securely to him and trying not to wriggle down to impale myself onto his cock like I so desperately want to.

A girl needs to be wooed first.

Well, at least I should be thinking like that, but when his lips move against mine in another scorching kiss, I find myself less interested in the teasing dance, the push-and-pull of our foreplay so far, and instead I want them both naked and worshiping me.

Is that a little too greedy? Maybe. Do I care? Nope. I'm sure they'll enjoy it just as much as I will.

A second set of hands press against my back as Atlas directs us both to the bed. Gabe is happy enough to take the direction without breaking away from our kiss, especially when Atlas tugs my legs until he can crawl in-between them, and all sorts of happy noises claw their way out of my throat until I'm moaning into Gabe's lips.

One of his hands drops from my cheek to stroke at my neck, working slowly down my soft skin until he's groaning as he tweaks and pinches at my pert nipples. I'm on fire for them, reacting to every stroke of Atlas' tongue and every tease of pleasure Gabe gives me as I lose myself in them both.

"What do you want, Sweetness? I could stay here and eat you out all night if that's what you want."

Yes. No. Fuck. I don't know what I really want right now, especially not when he gets right back to work with his tongue.

I could do this all night... except there's nothing quite like being stretched open wide by my Bonded's cock, and the idea of missing out on

that tonight doesn't sit well with me.

I reach down to run my fingers through his hair, waiting until his eyes meet mine. "I want more. I need you to fuck me."

He doesn't need to be asked twice.

I find myself being lifted and flipped over, a quick kiss from Atlas before he gets me on my knees in front of him, and a hand running down my ass as he enjoys the view.

I look over my shoulder at him with a grin that slides off my face and tumbles into a moan as he lines himself up, pushing in as his eyes squeeze shut.

"So fucking tight, Sweetness. This pussy was made for me."

I flush with pleasure, but his words only remind me that I have another Bonded here with us, splayed out and leaning against the headboard as he watches Atlas take me.

I want them both.

"You can fuck my face if you want to," I say with a grin, enjoying the way Gabe smirks back at me with a light in his eyes at the thought of getting his dick sucked.

It's still such a novel thing for him.

It makes me lightheaded, just a little giddy at the thought of all of the things that we get to experience together, all of the things that will only belong to the two of us and no one else.

Atlas catches my chin in his hand, turning my face so he can kiss me one last time before I drop down onto my hands, glancing up at Gabe through my lashes as I open my mouth for him.

He doesn't waste time.

Gabe groans and thrusts deep into my throat, all the way down until I'm fighting my reflexes so that I don't choke on the length of him. I love it, love the burn of it, love the way that tears spring into my eyes and run down my cheeks as he mutters and moans under his breath about how perfect my mouth feels around his cock.

More.

I want to ignore it. I want to ignore the dark whispers of my bond in my mind so badly because this moment should just belong to me and my Bonded, but there's a part of me that knows that we'll always be sharing these moments. Also the allegiance that my bond had shown to me when

Jericho had talked about it killing me had sort of changed things a little as well.

I think I trust it more now.

I'm also completely aware that it could've been lying, and I might be a naive idiot about to be killed off by the god that shares my body... the damned vessel.

Gabe's fingers curl around my chin as his hips pull away from me, tilting my head up as he wipes the tears away from my cheeks with a scowl. "What's happened, Bonded? What's going on in that head of yours?"

His fingers are soft as they stroke over my cheek and my eyes flutter shut at his gentle care. There's a quiet possessiveness in the way he's handling me, no hesitation as he pulls me back up so that I'm kneeling, Atlas' cock still hot and hard as he pumps slowly, lazily into my body, and then he catches my lips once again. He can't stop touching me, his hands running over my body as he memorizes every little freckle and scar there as though we haven't already spent hours doing it alone together. He's just as obsessed with me as I am with him, and it only makes my bond purr with happiness in my chest.

Atlas' fingers bite into the soft skin of my hips, his movements speeding up as we both race towards our peaks, ready to tumble over the edge together. When it becomes clear that I'm too distracted to really keep up with his kiss, Gabe pushes me back down onto my hands with a firm but gentle hand.

I open my mouth back up wide for his cock to slip back into my mouth and down my throat, groaning as the salty taste of his precum slips over my tastebuds. The only thing my bond wants more than to have my Bonded coming down my throat is them filling my pussy up, and there's no way I could fit two of them in me at once.

Not that I can think of that right now with them both inside of me like this.

When it's clear that Atlas is getting close, one of his hands slips down to where we're joined, his fingers running through my juices as they gush down my thighs before he rubs my clit, pushing me to follow him over the edge. My whimpers are muffled thanks to Gabe's cock, and my arms begin to shake as I attempt to keep myself upright even as my body turns into liquid.

A few more pumps and Gabe comes with a groan, his hips stuttering as he pushes in deeper, and I have to swallow around the girth of him so that I don't choke, listening to Gabe's groans turn into moans at the sensations as my throat works him over.

I glance up in time to see Gabe's eyes flash to amber, but they're different this time.

They're darker.

Definitely not voids, there's no extra being living under his skin, but the warm honey color has deepened into a burnished brass. Something is changing in him, our Bonding has shifted some part of his Gift, and now he's becoming more than he once was.

More than the other Gifted will ever be.

A shiver runs down my spine at the sound of my bond in my head, the words rattling around in the space that feels emptied out thanks to the ripples of pleasure still working their way down to my toes.

I probably should take more notice of what it said, the puzzle pieces clicking together, but with two naked Bonded in my bed gearing up for round two already, I don't have time for that.

Not tonight.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gabe

I'm dreaming.

There's no question about that, but I already know that something is *off* about this dream. The moment that awareness hits me, I can feel her here. It's not that I feel like there's something wrong, like there's someone intruding on my mind space, because she's the other half of my soul who walks this earth beside me, as perfectly right in this space as I myself am, but it's still different to have her here in my mind like this.

I'm so primed to sense her here that I'm aware of her instantly. It takes her a little longer to recognize that she's wandered her way into my mind, the fog of sleep taking a moment to lift before she's blinking around at the space with just a little bit of panic.

"Jesus. I'm so sorry, Gabe," she says with a groan, and I have to concentrate to reach her in the murky darkness of my unconscious state, but when I do, some of the tension eases out of her.

She's sitting there on what appears to be a small rock. I don't know whether I imagined that rock for her or whether she has the ability to manipulate this state as well. All of this is so far beyond my own ability to rationalize, but I take a seat next to her.

"Don't worry about it, Bonded. You're welcome to every part of me, sleeping or awake."

I watch as, even in this dream state, a blush creeps over her cheeks at my words. I've discovered that she reacts that way to soft and kind words, even when they're the truest ones that have ever passed my lips.

"It's still an invasion of privacy," she says, her voice gloomy and upset. I wrap an arm around her shoulders.

"Stop beating yourself up, Bonded. I already know that you didn't mean to. But even if you did, I would have welcomed you here."

She sighs, burying her face into the crook of my neck as she murmurs under her breath, "Just because we're Bonded doesn't mean that I am entitled to every little facet of your lives. You deserve to have some privacy, and I've already ripped that away from one of my Bonded... I don't want to do that to anyone else."

I shrug at her but tuck her further into my body. "Honestly, Nox is the only one who was ever going to have an issue with that, and you guys have sorted that out between you, right?"

She sighs again and nods, the tiniest movement of her head. "I don't think he wants me to see his nightmares though. I don't think anyone in the Bonded Group would want me seeing their nightmares."

When she's in this type of state, I already know there's no talking her out of it. The guilt is eating away at her regardless, so better to distract her than try to argue with it. "Anything you want to see while we're here? Any of my memories you want to spelunk with me? I'm an open book, you know. Nothing to hide."

She huffs out a laugh and pulls away just enough to look up at me as the corners of her mouth quirk up and transform her face in the most gorgeous of grins.

She's heartbreakingly beautiful.

"I'm sure there's something I could find that you wouldn't want me to see. You're not actually a saint, you know."

I clutch my chest as though she's mortally wounded me, and though there is the tiniest of truth in her words, there's not a lot of shit I'm embarrassed about or regret, and there's also nothing that I wouldn't give her.

I'm happy to sit here and banter with her for the rest of the night, keeping her mind safe and loved within my own until we wake, but there is a small growling noise off in the distance that has me stiffening around her protectively.

“What the hell was that?” Oli mumbles as she tries to look around me. I take a deep breath to resign myself to the truth.

“That would be my dragon. He's obviously figured out that you're here and wants some attention.”

She glances up at me in shock. “Your dragon... he talks to you?”

I groan and rub a hand over my face, the action just as soothing in my dream as it is in real life, as though I am able to clear away all of the terrible thoughts with the action. “It couldn't before. My bond wasn't like yours or the Dravens', but after my dragon first appeared... it now has a voice.”

I stopped for a second and think about it before tilting my head. “Well, not a voice, exactly. More like demands— *feelings* that it transfers through to me, and it's very clear, even without actually speaking the words.”

Oli stares at me as though I've kicked a shadow puppy right here in front of her. I try not to squirm, but it feels like I've done something terrible to her, and fuck if I can figure out what is it.

Her voice comes out like a croak. “So, by Bonding with me, your bond changed. That doesn't seem right. That's not what's supposed to happen, Gabe.”

Ah.

She's worried that she's hurt me unintentionally. That I can deal with.

I shrug and smooth a hand down her face affectionately, a mirror of what I had done only a few hours ago when she had been on her knees for me, and a deep blush blooms over her cheeks as she remembers the action as well.

“I'm starting to learn not to question things, Bonded. Nothing about our Bonded Group is following the ‘rules’ of the Gifted. It's easier if we all just learn to roll with it.”

She shakes her head at me. “We can't just *roll with it*. This affects everything, and if there's the potential of your bond changing then... what's to say that Gryphon and Atlas' won't change as well? Is it only within our Bonded Group, or have other people's bonds changed? What does this mean for us all?”

I'm not sure it's all that deep, but I don't want to argue with my Bonded when she is looking this upset. Instead, I stand up and take her by the hand to pull her to my side as I move through the dream space with her, leading her to the darkest recesses of my mind until we are faced with the dragon.

My bond.

It looks and feels differently in here than it ever has before. I've never noticed anything different or unusual about it, and I certainly have never felt as though there was a god living inside of me the way that Oli or the Dravens have. But now, staring up into the amber eyes of the dragon, I get the sense of *otherness* here.

It's never felt like that before.

Oli stares at the dragon the same way that she stares at the shadow creatures, with love and affection that borders on obsession, like she can't wait to get her hands on the shiny scales and long snout of the dragon just to pepper kisses onto it as though it were nothing more than an adorable little creature. As though it's as harmless as a mouse and not a mythical, fire-breathing nightmare.

"Gabe, it is so beautiful! How could you not show this to me before?"

I let her slip out of my arms as the pull of the dragon becomes too much for her, and she has to get closer to it. My chest swells with pride at the way she mumbles happily under her breath, cooing and fussing over the beast, and it laps up the attention.

"It wasn't like this before, Oli. None of my creatures were like this before. I was always in control, but now I feel as though I'm just sitting on the sidelines when it takes over. Like my body—"

I pause, but she fills in the space for me. "Is a vessel? I told you, Gabe, this *changes* things."

"I know," I say, because there isn't really any arguing with her. The more I think about it, the more that she has a point.

The dragon pushes forward into her hand to get more of the gentle strokes she's giving it, pushing and pushing and pushing until she is laid out flat on her back with its entire head covering her chest and stomach as she giggles and loves on it.

I'm not controlling it in any way.

I can't stop it from doing any of this, and for the first time, I understand North's panic over his own creatures. The dragon is huge, even in this space, and it could easily tear her to pieces right now. Would that hurt her or just send her back into her own body? Would it trap her mind here so that part of her life force died here in my mind?

This is all way too confusing for me. This is the type of theoretical philosophical bullshit that is far more up Nox's alley, and I desperately want

us both to wake up and get out of this space and away from any potential danger, back to where I know how the world works.

“It’s not going to hurt me, Gabe,” Oli mumbles from where her face is pressed into the scaly cheek of my dragon.

I groan at her. “Are you reading minds now too?”

She sighs and mutters soothing words to the dragon as she pulls away from it, rolling up to stand back on her own two feet. “I’ve become very good at reading the panicked silence of my Bonds. Unfortunately, it happens all too often. He’s not going to hurt me, the same way that Brutus isn’t going to hurt me, the same way that August isn’t going to hurt me.”

She stumbles a little over Brutus’ name, and it makes me wonder, once again, what happened in that bedroom of Nox’s that had changed things so completely between the two of them.

“The Dravens both have much better control over their creatures than I have over the dragon that just appeared in my mind. Come on, let’s try to wake up and get out of this place before something happens and I have to try and explain to everyone... this. Fuck knows how I’d do it.”

Oli giggles at my hand flinging around at the dragon as though this is all so amusing to her, but she follows me anyway.

I don’t know how we get out of the space, only that we keep walking hand in hand until eventually, we both wake up in her bed once again.

Atlas is not happy about the dream walking.

Oli had woken up, kissed me quickly, and then crawled out from between the two of us, heading over to the bathroom to shower and get ready for the day. It’s early, the sun’s still not up yet, but she’s been so focused on keeping up with her training that I already know exactly where she’s going to be heading.

Atlas didn’t wake up until I had shaken him, quietly explaining what had happened. The moment I mentioned the dragon, he jumps up out of the bed to pull on a pair of boxer shorts and stomp into the bathroom after Oli, a savage look on his face that he usually reserves for Nox.

Oli is scrubbing the shampoo out of her hair, her eyes shut as the water runs over her, and it strikes me right in the chest again how utterly stunning

she really is. My breath squeezes out of my lungs, and I have to hold in an embarrassingly squeaky sound, one that I wouldn't mind Oli hearing, but Atlas doesn't need any more ammo on me.

He's looking too pissed to notice me though, and though his voice is still level and calm, his words as he confronts Oli aren't. "How did you know that his dragon wouldn't hurt you? How could you know that? The dragon isn't a fully formed creature like the shadows are. You have to take this stuff more seriously, we've got too much happening already without you being careless with the creatures of your Bonds."

She props one of her fists on to her hip and shoots him a grumpy look of her own, one that I'm sure would be more effective if she wasn't completely naked and soaped up. There's no way that Atlas is reacting to the sight of her any differently than I am, and, honestly, all I want to do right now is fling open that shower door and do a replay of last night.

Jesus, get a hold of yourself, Ardern.

Neither of them notice me losing my shit. Oli just snaps at Atlas, "I know the same way that I always knew that the shadow creatures wouldn't hurt me. I can feel it."

Atlas nods at her with just a hint of sarcasm that is definitely going to get him into trouble, but I let him dig his own grave, standing there quietly enjoying the view and the privilege of being able to see it. The way that she's relaxed around both of us in here together is exactly what Atlas had been aiming for last night, to break down the last of the barriers that she had, the last vestiges of shyness in her about this Bonded Group so that we no longer have to tiptoe around her. I'm sure that Nox will still be a problem, but I never expected anything different. I doubt soul-bonding has been enough to change him.

"I'm sure you're the one who told North and Gryphon that they needed to learn how to trust my bond. Well, this is part of that as well. My bond says that I am safe with the dragon, so I'm safe."

Atlas groans and rubs a hand over his face. "The same bond that we just found out might want you dead to take over your vessel? I'm sorry, but I am not so quick to trust what it's saying if it thinks that we're just going to stand by and let it take over fully."

Oli shakes her head as she cuts off the water, opening the shower door and grabbing a towel. I feel pissed off at that small piece of fabric for just as

long as it takes her to start to dry off, bending down to reach her legs, and I'm once again struck down at the sight of her perfect ass.

"I trust it, Atlas. It's always been honest to me, even when the truth hurt and damaged the relationship between us. If it says to trust the creatures, *all* of them, then I'm going to. Besides, the dragon just wanted a cuddle."

Atlas turns to send me a savage look, but I'm both unwilling to get into this argument with them and utterly unable to as Oli starts to pull on her Tac gear, her body twisting and flexing in a way that has me needing a cold shower.

He rolls his eyes at me and steps towards her once more. "I'm not going to apologize for worrying about you, especially now that everyone else seems to have forgotten how much danger there is still in the unknown."

Oli pulls the shirt over her head and then steps towards him, bridging the last of the gap as she winds her arms around his waist. "I'm sure everybody else will freak out about it as well, but the way I see it, we have more weapons on our side now. The fact that my bond brought out a dragon in Gabe isn't a bad thing, and we need everything we can get our hands on to deal with Davies and the rest of the Resistance."

She doesn't say it, but we're all thinking about his family, the other people that we're going to have to deal with.

Atlas is completely aware of this fact, of the threat that his family is to us all, but it still feels like an asshole move to point out that we're going to have to deal with them just as much as we're going to have to deal with Davies.

Oli pulls away from Atlas to finish getting ready, tucking her shirt in and pulling her hair into a messy ponytail. I finally regain control of my legs and stalk forward to climb into the shower, still completely unabashed about being stark naked in front of them both. Oli sneaks me a sidelong look with just a hint of pink on her cheeks.

"If you wait for me, I'll come to training with you," I call out as I soap up my chest, smug as fuck at the way that her eyes linger on my movements.

"I'm not going straight to training," Oli says before her eyes flick back up to mine. "North slept in his office last night, and I'm going to go see him."

Well, fuck.

Atlas and I both exchange a look. It hasn't been a secret that North has been acting completely out of character since Nox's death and resurrection.

I do not envy my Bond having to go and sort that situation out.

I'm not worried about her in the least, more that it could really go one of two ways. Either North is going to have a complete breakdown over everything that happened, or the two of them are going to have screaming, angry, rough sex in the office. Okay, maybe I am a little bit jealous about that part because even after spending the night with her and worshiping every inch of her perfection, I still haven't had enough.

I don't think I'll ever have enough.

“Give me a minute then, Bonded. I'll walk you over there.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oli

Gabe walks me to North's offices, but I make him leave me in the elevator so that I can go up to see North by myself. Gryphon had checked in with me when he and Nox arrived back at the house just before Gabe, Atlas, and I had gone to sleep. He'd been the one to break it to me that North was sleeping in his office again.

North's words down in the cells when he'd walked away from me still echo in my head. I don't want him to think that I am trying to ambush him now with Gabe, so I send my Shifter Bonded home with a kiss.

I still can't believe I had jumped into his head overnight and met his dragon.

The possibility that my bond had done something to his when it'd demanded he shift into something bigger is terrifying to me. We already have three bonds with the potential to make their own personal brands of trouble. We can't really afford to have another. I can't stop thinking about the way that Gabe's eyes had shifted to amber when we were together, and the way that his hands had changed from the consistent and desperate sort of touch to the branding demand.

I've been with North and his bond enough to know the shift between man and god.

What had happened with Gabe cut a little too close for comfort.

It's something I need to speak to Nox about. His research parameters need to be widened a little more because... well, he's looking for 'born' gods.

What about '*made*' gods?

All of this just brings up more questions. Where did the gods come from? And how were they made? Because if Gabe has been changed, then what's to stop it from happening again? What's to stop the Resistance finding out about it and finding a way to shift some of their own as well?

There's also the chance that they already know. They knew enough to have the breeding programs that have been going on for generations now, at least two, because the Dravens' had been messed with, and there is the potential that Atlas' parents had been selected rather than found with the blood tests.

The fact that the Bassingers just went along with the Resistance's plan of abandoning who they were supposed to Bond with and 'selectively breeding' astounds me. The idea of building a life with someone who wasn't part of my Bonded Group makes me feel sick to my stomach.

I'd literally rather die.

When the elevator doors finally open up to the office, I find it dark, only the glow of North's television illuminating the room. It's playing the news, a non-Gifted woman is talking, though the sound has been muted. She's standing in front of a grocery store that has been torn in half by either a hurricane or a very powerful Gifted. I know what my money is on.

There's papers and boxes of files strewn everywhere, piles of books next to the couch that Nox usually sleeps on, and the clutter of a man refusing to leave everywhere.

I carefully make my way over to the desk where North is sleeping, his head slumped down onto the flat surface, and I'm grateful to see August sitting at his side.

At least he hasn't been alone here.

There's also a part of me that feels relief that he is finally trusting his shadows enough to have them watch over him while he gets some rest. I know that only a few short weeks ago, North wouldn't even trust them in my presence while he was awake. Me, his Bonded, who tamed all of the shadow creatures the moment I'd laid eyes on them.

Even Nox's snarling, savagely perfect pups had loved me right away.

I stroke a hand over August's head and let him give me a quick sniff as he checks in with me, his bottomless eyes shining at me like a thousand stars in the inky black void. It's impossible to describe what the shadow creatures really look like or how they *shine* when every part of them is blackness, but they do, and they're even brighter for me.

I press my face against his and coo at him affectionately until some of the tension leaves his body. He knows that I'm here to help North however I can, that finally the distance that he's demanded between us is going to be bridged.

However I can possibly make that happen.

I move aside some of the papers on the desk and then slowly ease myself up onto it, careful not to disturb North until I can wrap myself around him a little more securely. It would be much easier if he'd have gone to sleep on the sofa. I could have just crawled up there with him, but, as always, he is determined to work himself to death. Quite literally, right now.

I stroke my hands down his back, feeling the tension in his muscles that isn't just from holding this position. He doesn't immediately wake, but his body knows mine as surely as I know his, and he leans into me, breathing in deeply as he slowly awakens.

"What are you doing here, Bonded?" he murmurs, his voice a little broken and dry. When he lifts his head, his eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion and probably a little bit of a hangover too.

I scowl at him and mumble back quietly, "No more drinking."

I don't mention the theory that Nox and I share about now being the perfect time for the Resistance to come after us, especially if North is down for the count. I also don't mention that it breaks my heart to see him this way, but this man always did know the innermost workings of my mind, even long before we had Bonded, and he groans as his forehead hits my thigh.

He's slumped over once more and looking miserable. The words that tumble out of his mouth sound as though they're being torn directly from the darkest depths of his heart. "Feeling your soul leave your body was the most painful thing I have ever felt, and I didn't think that was possible after I just watched Nox die."

It's hard for him to talk like this, even though he's refusing to meet my eye, so I bury both of my hands into the silky locks of his hair, massaging

his skull until he groans again, this time in the sort of pleasure that borders on pain.

He's done so much for us all, he deserves better than this. Better than anything I could ever give him, but I try anyway.

"I'm not going to apologize for saving him, the same way I'm not going to apologize for saving you if it comes to it. We're all getting out of this alive, North, no matter what it costs me. I'd give my life for my Bonded without hesitation."

He doesn't answer me or react to my words at all, his head still resting on my knee as I scratch up his scalp and attempt to calm him wordlessly. I'm not going to sugarcoat it though. I'm not going to try and lie to this man about what the future holds for us all. Lord knows, it's not going to be easy for us.

I can give him time though.

I lean forward to speak softly to him. "You've been the strong one for all of us from the very beginning. No one is going to think badly of you or begrudge you for taking a few days to recover from what happened. Nox and I are both fine."

He groans again and rubs his face against my thighs. "I'm going to judge me for this just as soon as I'm sober again."

I want to tell him to stay drunk for a day or two longer, just because I know that nothing that I say will stop him from hating himself for all of this, but Nox's conversation with me still rings in my ears. I'd promised him that I'd change things up.

I'm not going to break that.

"We have to get on the offensive, North. No more letting them corner us into traps. No more walking into our own deaths. No more taking the safe route. We're going to take the fight to them, and we'll do it together. *All* of us."

He's silent for a moment and then he lifts his head, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I guess I better catch a shower then, shouldn't I? We'll need to find Gryphon and make a real plan."

I press my hands onto either side of his face, leaning down to murmur to him, "I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. You've had your moment to get your head around this, and now we're going to figure it out."

He takes one last steadying breath and then cups my face in both of his hands, tilting my head until I'm looking into his eyes and trying not to cry

at the desolate look there.

“I cannot live without you, Oleander. I won’t. I thought Nox dying was the worst thing that could’ve happened and then your heart stopped beating, and I knew that I couldn’t go on without you at my side. I love you too much to do that. It was only my bond keeping me from going after you.”

Going after me.

As in... “North, don’t talk like that. I’m never going to leave you, we’re all going to be okay. My bond just proved that. Death can’t part a Soul Render from her Death Dealers. Or any of my other Bonded, no matter what.”

I say it with a smile, but it’s true.

No matter what, they’re mine forever.

The problem with going straight into a meeting with Gryphon and the higher-ups at the Tac Training Center about what our next moves are is that his parents are still in town. So we once again find ourselves sitting across from the General.

He is determined to pick holes in our plans.

“Three of your Bonded Group haven’t even gone through formal TacTraining yet. It is *incredibly* dangerous, not to mention stupid, to even consider taking them. You can’t just skate by relying on your Gifts during active combat.”

“I feel like we *can* rely on our Gifts, considering what they are,” I mutter to Gryphon, leaning into the solid wall of his chest where he’s sitting next to me.

I’m no longer attempting to rein in my snarky self around this man, because he isn’t attempting to play nicely with anyone I love, not even his own damned son. Vivian shoots me a look from across the table. I give him the most innocent eyes that I can muster back, but he knows me well enough to not be fooled.

Bonding has changed exactly none of my mouthy nature.

Ever the neutral force, Vivian chimes in with his own answer to me, the only person who can give me that tone of paternal disapproval without me wanting to unleash my bond on them. “Your powers don’t work in bringing

back hostages, Fallows. That is an important part of what we do. Killing indiscriminately isn't what we want to be known for."

I nod along and fight the urge to let Brutus down from my ear as visual proof, instead using my words because Vivian is worth it. "You know that I have two shadow pups with me at all times. They obey my every order, just as well as they obey my Bonded. If I really *needed* someone brought in, I'm sure I could get Brutus or August to convince them politely to surrender."

Vivian rolls his eyes at me with just a little bit of affection showing through, enough that it doesn't piss off any of the men sitting on my side of the table, but it also placates the General, who really thinks I'm getting scolded.

It doesn't stop him from running his mouth though. "The shadow creatures shouldn't even be allowed out. Uncontrollable, rabid beings should not—"

I have to interrupt him before my bond wakes up and makes this everybody's problem. "They're not though, are they? One incident that happened fifteen years ago, does not mean that my Bonded's shadow creatures are uncontrolled. Have there been any cases of them killing someone they shouldn't have? Or is this all about prejudice?"

The General's eyes narrow at me, and I fight the urge to smirk at him just to really get his blood boiling. "Everybody knows North has trouble controlling his. Nox has never even attempted to stop his beasts from terrorizing anyone who dares to go near him. Why should we give them the benefit of the doubt?"

I already know why both of those things had happened, and I feel overly protective about them both.

"If anyone in this room has an uncontrolled, dangerous Gift, it's me. You should be warned that I don't like you talking about them like that," I say in a very slow, careful voice.

Gryphon crosses his arms over his chest as he stares at his father. He doesn't try to interrupt any of our arguing, but the way that he stares the General down is pretty telling about whose side he's on here.

I think that infuriates his father more than anything being said.

"We should get back to what we're really here to discuss, and that is your opinion on which one of the Wastelands needs to be taken care of first. If you don't have anything helpful to give us here as input, then we'll end this meeting now."

The General glances over at Vivian, but when he doesn't get any backup from him, he waves a dismissive hand at North. "Leave then. I have nothing to say to any of you. I'll take the prisoners and get back on the road."

North smiles and leans back in his chair, the picture of an arrogant councilman. There's no sign of the hangover or anguish anymore. He'd gotten out of the shower at his office and looks his usual, put-together self in his freshly pressed suit, as though he had wiped away the entire week with nothing but some soap and expensive shampoo.

"You won't be taking any of the prisoners anywhere. Certainly not the Bassinger girl and her Bonded."

My heart clenches in my chest on Atlas' behalf.

North and Gryphon had both agreed to keep her alive and in the cells until Atlas figures out for himself what he wants to do with her.

I'm not sure how any of this really works, but it looks as though the General is attempting to take that decision out of our hands, and I really don't want that to happen.

"You don't have the authority to tell me whether or not I can take prisoners, *Councilman Draven*," the General says, mockingly dragging out the words, but North doesn't react to the disrespect.

That same cold smile is still firmly sitting across his lips.

The General's own lips curl up into a sneer. "You might think that you're the only person who can make decisions, but there's an entire *council* of families, and your vote is just one."

North shrugs and glances over to Nox, sharing a look with him before he turns back to the General. It's a move clearly designed to piss the man off, and it works like a charm.

His hands clench into fists on the table before him.

I don't know how he got so far up in the TacTeam ranks if he's this quick to anger, nothing at all like the infallible calm of his son.

"I think you'll find that they are *my* prisoners, held in the cells underneath *my* Tac Training Center, in *my* town. They were put there by *my* TacTeam after they were found by, you guessed it, *my* Bonded."

The room goes silent.

Not once has North ever thrown his weight around or used his immeasurable wealth against anyone that I've seen. He would never, and definitely not in front of the very people he's helping, free of charge. He's done everything he can to make people feel welcome and like part of a

community in the Sanctuary. It's never felt as though it was his place that we were all just staying on. The fact that he's doing it now to protect his word to someone in our Bonded Group, with all of the support of both Gryphon and Nox, is all I need to know about the integrity of my Bonded.

There had never been a question in my mind in the first place.

The General's cheek clenches as he once again glances at Vivian, but the older man just shrugs. "What do you want me to do about it, Shore? It's not like he's lying. If push came to shove, he would still win the vote of the Council, considering more than six of the families sitting on it are housed here. Currently, none of them are working or paying their own way, either. Hell, Hannity just sits in his house and weeps half of the time at losing his yacht in the move over here. The man's an idiot, but he wouldn't side against the Dravens. The families that would are all under suspicion, thanks to Giovanna and what little information we've gotten out of her. Did you know the entire lake house district is Resistance sympathizers? That includes some of the non-Gifted families that own property out there as well. All of them with their own motives for wanting the Resistance to win, dumb as fucking rocks."

He's not wrong about that.

It doesn't seem very wise to side with people who want to rule over you with their abilities, but greed and power do stupid things to people.

When I mumble that under my breath, the General looks up at me with unadulterated hatred in his eyes, enough that Nox leans forward in his seat and dark rings appear around his irises.

The General takes no notice of him as he snaps back at me, "Your *Bonded* isn't any better. He's taking the choices away from people with nothing but the dollar amount that doing so costs him. Sounds like we're just as bad as the Resistance now."

I only have to look at North to know that he is wrong, but not even the General's relationship with Gryphon is enough to change my opinion on this man.

He's nothing but an obstacle in our way to defeating the Resistance.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Oli

The decision is made to go back to the same Wasteland we'd already been to, the one that Gryphon had nearly died in when we'd gone back to rescue Unser and found the second Trigger.

The one Gabe's dragon had come to life in.

There's intel now to say that after we'd left the area, it had only gotten worse. More Gifted were being brought in to die, and even some non-Gifted were being lured in to be used as cannon fodder. That had been horrifying enough to me, the cruelty of using people who have no chance to fight back or defend themselves, but then North says, grimacing, "We suspect that they're also experimenting on the non-Gifted. We don't have any solid proof of it yet, but my guess is that whoever was in the camp and killed Nox is responsible for the deaths that we are finding there. If we go to the Wastelands now, we need to go in prepared to face them again."

A chill runs down my spine.

We're ready to face them, my bond whispers to me. I let my eyes slip shut as I concentrate on it for a moment, blocking the room out to focus.

How are we ready? How has anything changed from a few weeks ago? Other than Nox and I soul-bonding, we know what we're facing this time, and we're all going in together.

Okay, well, now that I list it out, I guess a lot has changed. It still doesn't feel like enough. I'm not sure it'll ever really feel like enough.

The others are nearly ready.

Why does that feel ominous? I most certainly do not know what the hell is going on here, but my bond shuts up, and I guess that's all I'm going to get out of it today.

There's a gentle hand on my elbow, and I open my eyes to find Sage standing with me. She's already dressed in Tac gear, and my eyebrows fly towards my hairline as I take in the sight of her.

"You're coming with us?"

She smiles and nods, glancing over to where Kieran is glaring us both down, and I try not to smile teasingly back at him. "Tac numbers are down. When Gryphon and Kieran were discussing how best to go about this, Gray and I decided that enough is enough. We can't just sit around here in the Sanctuary any longer while you all go out to keep us safe."

I turn around to find Gray laughing with Gabe as he shrugs into a jacket. "Holy shit. How is Sawyer taking this?"

Sage shrugs and lifts up her hand, a small ball of flames appearing and then just resting there against her skin without leaving a mark. "I'm a Flame and he's a Telekinetic. There's not a huge amount that Sawyer could do to stop us from helping out, and even Kieran couldn't argue now that our abilities are getting stronger."

I give Gray one last sidelong look before turning back. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

I'm not doubting her at all. I know she can do it, but Sage has always struggled with her opinions of herself, and she hasn't had an easy time lately. After Dara's death, she had taken weeks to feel comfortable enough to walk around the Sanctuary again, even with her Bonded at her side, so I'm mostly gauging where she is mentally.

She nods quickly and drops her hand back down, snuffing out the flames without even trying. "I'm ready. I'm definitely ready to stop watching Kieran walk out the door and wondering if he's going to come back. After what happened with Nox, I'd rather stay close to him. Also, things are getting better with Riley and, once he gets the all clear from Felix, he wants to join too."

That's news to me.

The last I had heard, they still weren't sure that Riley would be able to make a full recovery. I reach forward to grab Sage's hand, squeezing her fingers gently. "I'm so glad he's feeling better."

I mean it too.

There's a layer of guilt in me whenever I think of Sage's other Bond, but it's grown and become more complicated now. I'd hated him, loathed the man, for how he'd treated her, when really he was being controlled.

Abused.

If I think about it too hard, I'll puke.

Sage gives me a small smile and nods her head, glancing down at her feet. "He's different, very different from the guy I loved growing up. But he's also ready to channel the anger in him at what happened to us all into joining the fight. Felix offered to come too so that we had a medic on site, but North and Gryphon didn't want to risk him. He's still the best Healer we have, even if the Medical Board wants to throw him out."

I huff and roll my eyes, still just as furious about this as I had been the first time she'd told me. When everything is said and done with the Resistance, I am completely on board with North firing all of them. I still sort of think he should kick them out of town and let them fend for themselves if they're all so high and mighty.

"They're all gutless, fearmongers who are trying to grasp desperately at power," Gray says as he steps up behind us, fidgeting with the straps over his chest that hold the gun holsters at his side. I notice that he has two more guns than I do, and I shoot a look at Gryphon.

He shrugs at me with a smirk. "You don't need them. I've never actually seen you draw a weapon before. You only have them to distract people from the real weapon you wield."

I know he's just trying to flatter me to distract me from my anger, but I refuse to let it work.

"I need more guns," I say in my most insistent voice, and Gryphon shakes his head at me.

"Start using the ones you've got, and then I'll think about it. We're not wasting firepower just to look good."

I raise my eyebrows at him and bounce on the balls of my feet a little. "You think I look good in them?"

Sage giggles beside me and Gray makes a huffing noise, like we haven't spent months watching he and Sawyer fall over their feet at each other, so he doesn't really have much of a leg to stand on here.

"Right, we'll go through the plan one more time, just to be sure that everybody is on the same page here," North says as he walks over to us.

At this point, I've seen him in his TacTraining gear a million times, but it still sends flutters through my belly. His hair isn't slicked back like it usually is. Instead, there's a few errant curls resting at his temple, and I have to physically resist the urge to tuck them back behind his ear.

As he begins to speak, Nox walks over to join us, looking analytically over every TacTeam member who has been assigned to come with us, as though he is making his own decisions on them. His eyes bounce over Sage and Gray without much thought, and it warms me a little. While neither of them have ever tried to hide the fact that they didn't like him much, he knows that they're both good at what they do.

"This is a clean out. We need all of the Shields taken out and every last member of the Resistance to be dealt with before we leave."

Rockelle nods from across the room and clears his throat to get North's attention, interrupting, but in the most respectful way I've seen him act. "I just want to confirm that this is a 'no prisoners' mission before we move out."

North nods at him and then speaks again, looking around the room. "These people have nothing that we need, so unless there are extenuating circumstances, we're not planning on giving anyone a ride home today."

A ride home.

The politest way that North can say that we're going there with the intention of killing them all.

It doesn't bother me. I'm not squeamish about this and, if anything, it will be good to get my bond back into the swing of things after the soul bonding. It's been quieter and less bloodthirsty, which should be a good thing considering how much I normally hate its demanding and vicious ways, but honestly, I'm a little freaked out at how docile and sleepy it's been.

Maybe the energy boost of the souls we'll consume there is exactly what it needs.

I swallow around nervousness that is a lump in my throat and tuck my hand into Gabe's, leaning into his side a little as we both listen to the tactical plan that North lays out. I already know it by heart, having spent most of the last two days going over it all with my Bonded, but watching him explain it all to the TacTeam gives me the opportunity to watch how they all process it.

These are the most trusted men that Gryphon leads, and even Rockelle is hanging on to North's every word, no messing around or added attitude out of him at all as he listens to what is expected of his team.

"The most important thing here is that we are not leaving until the Wasteland is shut down. Leaving them open is about the worst thing that we can do, and we've had our hands tied the last few missions, but that isn't going to be happening anymore. We go in, we take them out, and we leave no survivors behind. Any questions?"

When no one raises their hands, he nods again decisively. "Then let's move out."

When my feet hit the ground at the Wasteland, it's as though we've traveled to a different planet.

It looks nothing like it had before.

Although it has only been a few days since we were last here, it might as well have been months. The bodies that are still strewn around, left behind wherever they died, are in various states of decomposition, the process sped up by maggots and whatever other wildlife has managed to survive in this place. I try not to gag at the sight of them feasting on the fallen Resistance here. Thankfully, the TacTeam members who had died here when the Trigger attacked us all had been brought home, and I'm not about to see any familiar faces in the fields of dead.

Gryphon's hand brushes my neck slightly to relieve some of the sickness pooling in my gut. When he's finished with me, he does the same for Sage, who has a hand clamped over her mouth as she tries not to breathe in any of the horrific smells around us.

Kieran stays tucked in close to her side, as though he is desperate to transport her back home, but the moment that Gryphon steps away from her, she drops her hand away and gives her Bonded a curt nod.

Now isn't the time for me to smile at her or acknowledge just how amazing my best friend is. I always knew she was stronger than anyone gave her credit for. She isn't reacting to any of this any worse than I am, and I have been around a hell of a lot of death.

Gryphon starts making hand signals to disperse everyone. Once his team is in a formation, he looks back, nodding to me. I let my eyes slip shut as I reached down to speak to my bond.

I hope you're hungry, because we have a big job to do today.

It's slow to answer me, *They're all pathetically small. Not worth my time.*

A meal's a meal, right? Our Bonded deserve some power.

That piques its interest a little more, just enough that it reaches out to each of our Bonded to check in with them, and it stays with Nox for longer than any of the rest.

They're not in danger.

Honestly, I could kill it for acting like this. *I know, but you said it yourself, we need to bring the fight to the Resistance.*

This isn't fighting. This is cleaning up and they're not worth my time.

I sigh and open my eyes back up, meeting Gryphon's gaze and shrugging. "There's no one here strong enough to be a concern."

Sage exhales like I'm saying something reassuring, but Gryphon knows exactly what I mean and nods back at me slowly, signaling once more to the teams around us, and then we're moving. It would be much easier if my bond would just take everyone out instead, but I guess there's nothing wrong with getting a good view of everything that has happened.

There's a lot we can learn from the destruction.

The giant craters that we come across make my stomach sink, each of them a monument to how close I'd come to losing Gryphon. As we move, I watch the air shimmer around us. The power of the Wasteland slowly begins to fade as the Shields get taken out, one by one.

It's clear that the Resistance has given up using this space for anything other than a place to send their enemies to die.

At first, that was all I thought that the Wastelands were, but with Nox's memories and experiences in my head, I now know better. These places are used as a training ground, a place to test powers and as somewhere they can bring their prisoners to be broken and turned into soldiers. It's exactly why they'd brought Aro here, a young girl they needed to see death and destruction so that she would lose herself enough to join them. It's a wonder that they had never brought me to a Wasteland, though I suppose Davies planned on breaking me in a very different way.

He got closer than I'd like to admit.

When we get to the drop-off zone that had been used to funnel people in and out, the landscape around it is even more bleak than anywhere else that we have been today.

The area that had clearly once been a road is nothing more than rubble, and even the bodies that had been left behind are nothing more than bones loosely wrapped in clothing. My stomach dips in warning at the same time that my bond finally decides that something here is worth its time, but before it can say anything, I hear another voice in my head.

They're here. I glance over to see Nox's eyes shift to black as his bond takes the helm, shadow creatures bursting out around us.

I glance over to North, and the last thing I see before my bond takes over, are his eyes shining back at me; black, depthless voids as his own shadows come out to play.

Oleander's bond

The soul-bonding had drained more energy than I care to admit, and it was my own anger that had stopped me from just devouring the souls of our enemies here. It doesn't help that the Gifted currently here in the Wasteland are nothing more than crumbs to me.

What I really need is a *feast*.

The transporting area is still live. Our appearance here, along with the deaths of the Shields, has clearly sounded some sort of alarm to the Resistance, chiming like a dinner bell and sending them into a flurry to strike back at us. It's nothing more than a carelessly laid trap, because I'm ready to deal with them all personally.

I'm ready for all of my Bonded to benefit from the power I can give them.

The first wave of people through the Transporter zone are instantly consumed by the shadow creatures, the sounds of their screaming and tearing flesh like music to my ears. I'm not upset to miss out on their deaths, especially not when the strongest among them is brought to me by August,

his large jaws clamping around the Gifted's neck as he drags him across the rubble to me.

My Dark Bonded looks down at it with critical eyes and then back up at me, quirking an eyebrow and gesturing down to it. "Is this a declaration of love? Am I watching the gods court one another right now?"

I sink down onto my knees as I scratch behind the shadow creature's ear, giving it the same affection that the girl always does and watching as it melts beneath my touch. I have never interacted with the shadows the way that she has, but I find myself wanting them to love me the same way they love her, exuberantly and with everything they have.

"Thank you for the meal," I murmur, and then I tear the Gifted's soul out without another thought, consuming it whole and letting the energy fill me. Well, it's more like a small trickle into a dam, nowhere near enough to actually fill me. However, as more and more Resistance transport here in an attempt to stop us from taking out the Wasteland, I start to have my fill, until there is a pile of bodies at my feet.

Finally, *finally*, I feel as though I am truly alive again.

The next wave that comes through, I take out myself before the shadow creatures can reach them, quenching their life forces with nothing more than a thought. This time, I filter all of the power to my Damaged Bonded One, sending him what extra I have. I watch as his back straightens a little more, the heavy weight that was on his shoulders easing as the last of the damage done to him is repaired.

Now we're ready. Now we can go hunting.

The Damaged Dark One turns to look at me. His shadow creatures are running around us all, still feasting on the bodies of our enemies around us in a perfectly vicious massacre. He ignores everyone as he steps towards me, the black, inky stain of his power creeping up his arms as he reaches for me.

Oh, how I've missed him.

I let him take me into his arms, but when he leans down to me, instead of kissing me, he murmurs quietly, "Finish it. Take everything from them like they tried to take everything from us."

With renewed energy, I cast out my Gift to feel everything within the Wasteland, every living creature, and I focus on those Shields that are keeping this place running. Most of them are nothing more than shells themselves, their minds broken by the torture they were subjected to. One

by one, I snuff them out. I take the essence of their lives and pull it into myself, however small, until finally the shimmer of their Gifts fall away from us, and we can once again see what lies outside of the barren battlefield.

The girl is shocked to hear the sounds of cars and life around us. We find ourselves standing in the middle of a busy town, one that the Resistance had no problem tearing a hole in.

It's banal and completely normal-looking, except for the edges where the death and destruction begins. It looks like the everyday sort of country town where nothing ever happens.

Nothing until our enemy came here.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

North

It's difficult to wrestle my bond back into the recesses of my mind, but as the shields come down and the non-Gifted town comes into view, I have no choice. There's already markers everywhere around the perimeter where the law enforcement had clearly been trying to stop anyone from interfering with the monstrosity of the Wasteland. There are also men lining the edges of the destruction, their weapons pointed in our direction.

I reach up to remove my helmet and pull the neck gaiter down my face when Gryphon grabs my arm to stop me.

"They don't look as though they're ready to have a rational conversation, better that we get out of here and contact them in a more formal manner," he says.

I glance down at my Tac uniform and grimace at the mud, grime, and blood that coats me. I had been further away from my shadows when they were attacking, but there's no stopping them from spreading their meals around everywhere when they're dealing with our enemy, particularly now that the full extent of what had happened to our Bonded has come to light. I nod to Gryphon and then glance back at Nox to where he's standing just behind Oleander, hovering over her in that particularly protective way that he has now.

When he feels my eyes on him, he glances my way, and I'm struck with the alarming fact that it's his bond in control and not my brother.

“It's going to be tricky to move them,” I murmur. Gryphon nods, flicking a hand signal at Kieran to get his attention. When his second-in-command comes over, they're quick to mete out a plan.

Kieran moves over to where Sage has been helping to dispose of the bodies, burning them away to nothing more than ash, and he makes quick work of getting his Bonded and Gray back to the Sanctuary.

Both of them did well today.

This was more of a trial run to see how everyone would do working together and whether or not Sage and Gray could handle being on a mission. As expected, they'd both passed with flying colors. Even at the sight of the rotting corpses, Sage had done little more than swallow back bile before she got to work. I didn't expect anything less from the girl who has stood by my Bonded from the very first moment they met. Though I'm worried about her safety, I'm also happy to have another trusted and capable body alongside us in the fight.

Gray has always been a contender for TacTeams, only his parents' obsessive protection had stopped him from joining years ago. Now that we've found his Bond, he has enough skin in the game to really become an asset.

Things are finally falling into place for us.

Kieran *pops* back into existence and nods at us that he's ready to take our Bonded Group back as well. I join Gryphon in attempting to coax Oleander back out of her bond. Nox doesn't react to our words, his bond just staring down the law enforcement only a few hundred feet away from us, but we're all careful not to touch him anyway.

Brutus sits patiently at Oleander's feet, snapping a little at Gabe when he steps over to help out, and August is quick to join in. We move cautiously to not startle the bonds, so it's slow work. We're making good progress until the shouting begins.

I don't know whether someone has recognized one of us or if they just assume that all Gifted are the Resistance, here to hurt them, but in the blink of an eye, there are dozens of guns pointed in our direction. Non-Gifted men are shouting for us to surrender and sirens sound as more cars arrive around the perimeter.

Atlas is quick to slide in front of Oli, and his body widens as he stands firm as a barrier. Her bond doesn't react any further than placing a warm

palm between his shoulder blades, a small acknowledgement of his protection of her.

Nox's bond looks down at her, and I do *not* like the look that they are sharing.

"You can't kill the non-Gifted. They're not a real threat here," I say firmly, and they both ignore me for a minute. I'm about to say it again, to start a full-blown argument with a god who wears my Bonded's body as a damn vessel, when it finally turns her face towards me.

"We need to leave then, because if any of them dare to hurt my Bonded, I will not contain myself."

I nod and gesture at Kieran to come closer, all of us moving around until we have circled around him. The movement seems to alarm the law enforcement, and the shouting gets louder, more demands for us to turn ourselves in. I look up, but I can't see anything that might need my attention, my shadow creatures staying put inside my chest.

Right as we all move to touch Kieran and get out of here, a single gunshot rings through the air.

Before I have the chance to panic about where that bullet ended up, Atlas grunts, wincing as the small lead pellet bounces off of his shoulder as though it was nothing more than a penny being thrown at him.

I sigh at the argument I'm about to have with my Bonded's bond, but I don't get the chance to. I don't get the chance to do anything.

I'm expecting hundreds of bodies to hit the ground. I'm expecting to deal with the aftermath of dozens of non-Gifted being killed. I'm expecting the emotional aftermath of Oleander waking up to the devastation of what her bond has done.

I'm not expecting it to be Gabe's eyes shifting as his own bond kicks in.

I'm *definitely* not expecting them to shift to black either.

The only thing that saves us is Kieran's quick thinking as he slaps a hand on Gabe's shoulder and transports us out of the Wasteland. He's smart enough to take us directly to the Tac Training Center and into one of the meeting rooms.

We must have some good karma out there in the world because no one spots us as we reappear. The moment that our feet land on the cleanly tiled floor, Gabe lets out a roar as his body begins to shift.

I yank Oleander away from him and behind me at the same time as Gryphon and Atlas both dive in front of her, but her bond is still in control.

It stares at Gabe with the unnatural blankness that it has, its eyes rounded as it takes in the gruesome sight of Gabe's arms and legs snapping and elongating, his skin giving way to black, shiny scales, and giant wings bursting out from between his shoulder blades. His clothes are shredded into pieces and the sound of his labored breathing and groaning slowly turns into an animalistic snarl and in only a few short minutes, we're left staring down at the dragon.

The dragon with black void eyes.

I glance around at the rest of the room, but any words I might have dry up in my throat at the sight of the beast. There's no point in speaking to anyone about it anyway. No one but the three gods amongst us might actually know what the fuck is going on here.

None of them are reliable in answering though.

What the hell is that? I have to try to ask my own bond the question, even if I'm expecting nothing from it.

It's quiet for a moment before it answers, *It awakens*.

I stare over at Gryphon. He is splitting his time between looking at me, processing my bond's words, and staring down the dragon as it begins to pace, its eyes glued to Oleander without blinking.

Its void-like eyes are the marker of the god now living within him.

No matter what we try, we cannot get Gabe to shift back.

Nox and Oleander are also both still in their bond state, standing and staring at the beast from where it paces on one side of the room, barely able to take three steps before it's turning and taking three steps back. It's clearly agitated but unwilling or unable to be reasoned with.

After we get Kieran out and Atlas positioned next to Oleander, ready to pounce in case something goes terribly wrong, we decide to just wait them out, but after an excruciatingly long hour, nothing has changed.

"Can you get into his head? Can you see anything?" I mutter quietly to Gryphon, and he shrugs back, a white ring around his irises as he stares at the beast.

"I can get in there just fine, but there's not much I can tell you about what's going on. All I can tell you is that his bond is different now. It's *more*

than it was before.”

I groan and look between the three bonds, eyeing them as the dragon huffs and it continues its pacing. “How exactly does a bond suddenly become *more*?”

Gryphon hesitates for a moment before he shrugs. “Did Oleander do this? She told him to think ‘bigger’, and suddenly he can turn into a dragon. Did her bond somehow spark this?”

I’ve never heard of something like that happening before. Never. Not even in the worst of the Gifted rumors or whisperings of the Resistance urban legends.

I reach out through my mind connection to Oleander, but her bond shuts me down before I get very far, my own bond clawing at the edge of my consciousness as it tries to get out to be with her.

Gryphon and Atlas couldn't handle my bond right now, let alone mine, Nox's, and Oleander's all at the same time with the new complication of Gabe's dragon.

“It's different,” Gryphon mutters.

I nod. “You said that.”

“No, I mean, it's different than Oli's bond. It's not thinking in human terms, only in animal needs and desires. It only wants her.”

I don't even want to think about what that means though. The predatory look in its eye tells me more than enough, and I don't like it one bit.

“We need to get the three of them back to themselves before this gets out of hand,” I snap, my frustration finally boiling over.

Atlas shrugs from across the room where he's standing half covering our Bonded, and he leans into her ear to murmur something to her quietly. The bond finally looks away from the dragon to stare at him before her eyes flutter shut for a moment. When they open again, Oleander's beautiful blue irises stare back at Atlas. The animation is back in her face as she moves, her arms winding around his neck as she tucks herself into him closely.

“What did you say to her?” Gryphon asks, his tone a little harsh with relief.

Atlas shrugs and then watches as Oli slips her hand into Nox's without a word, leaning into his side without touching him, and slowly his eyes shift away from the voids until his lip turns up in a snarl and my brother is back in the room with us.

“A Soul Render can't just turn someone into a god,” Nox says as he watches the dragon pace, diving straight into the issue before us.

Gryphon runs his hands through his hair, irritated. “Well, what other explanation could there be? Bonds don't just become more.”

My Bonded chews on her lip for a moment, and it's clear she's keeping something from us, the guilt in her an almost palpable thing. Finally, Atlas takes her free hand and faces us. “Oli ended up in Gabe's head after they went to sleep the other night. She hadn't had the chance to tell anyone yet, and now she's feeling guilty about it.”

She huffs and throws her hand out around the room. “Appearing in his head didn't just make this happen though. I don't have the ability to do this. Even if I did, I think I'd remember it. Right? Or at the very least, my bond would remember it, and it swears that it hasn't done anything. I did meet his dragon in there though. I met it, and we both knew that it was different. It was *very* different to his wolf and his panther.”

The beast stares at her with unblinking eyes and moves towards her slowly.

The first step we allow.

It could just be a deviation in the circuit he has been walking up and down the meeting room, but the second step is too much, and we all make some sound of caution to get him to stop. Atlas shifts more fully in front of Oli, and a dozen extra shadow creatures burst out of Nox, his hands flexing at his side as though he's preparing himself to physically grapple with a mythical creature come to life.

Oli is the only one who doesn't seem concerned.

“I think he just wants to talk to me.”

Gryphon turns and pegs her with a stern look. “And if you think that we're going to allow that to happen, then you have another thing coming. We're not going to just throw you in its direction and hope for the best, Bonded,” he snaps, and though she looks a little more subdued about it, she still ducks around Atlas.

“Let me at least try to talk to him.”

“Stay right there. Do *not* move even an inch further, Bonded,” I snap. She nods, raising a hand up as though she is trying to placate the dragon.

“What do you need? Tell me what's bothering you, and I'll fix it,” she tries, but the dragon only cocks its head at her.

With the void-like eyes, there is none of Gabe left in him, nothing familiar about the form at all. I have to struggle with myself to remember that the Bonded Group's golden child is somewhere underneath all of those scales and fire.

She tries a few more times, but when it's clear that the dragon either cannot understand her or refuses to speak to her like this, Oleander reaches out to him through the mind connection instead.

That catches its attention.

It lets out a long breath that smells of sulfur and heats the room around us. Gryphon shoots me a look as he steps towards our Bonded, but the dragon speaks as though none of the rest of us are there.

Mine, it says in a voice that is nothing like Gabe's but everything like my own bond's and the one that lives inside of my brother.

Mine.

It takes another full hour before Oleander can coax the dragon into letting Gabe back out.

It's difficult, but we have to get him back up to the house to sleep off the shift without anyone noticing our change in transport zone and the way that he's so fatigued, and we all tuck in early for the night. I can't spend the next few days watching over him for more changes though.

I have to leave that to Oleander and Atlas, thanks to the new situation we have to attempt to sweep under the rug.

With the revelation that my Bonded may have the ability to change the bonds within her Bonded Group, the last thing that I want to do is to go meet with the non-Gifted senators and law enforcement to run damage control about the Wastelands. Unfortunately, part of keeping my community and, more importantly, my Bonded Group safe is putting out these sorts of fires.

It's a tough choice, but I decide to leave Nox behind in the Sanctuary and take Gryphon with me. The decision had already been made for us to operate in pairs, especially now that there's the potential for Gifts to be changing. Although Nox argues with me, Gryphon is still the better choice to take.

The Resistance might not know that my brother survived their killing attempt, and any sort of element of surprise that we might have over them is worth an argument with him.

Meeting with Senator Oldham would also likely test Nox's very limited patience.

The woman is a thorn in my side. No amount of charity work or self-sacrifice is enough for her to trust the Gifted community. If it were up to her, I'm sure she would start an all-out war to get rid of us. Humans are drastically outgunned when it comes to the Gifted community. However, what they lack in firepower, they make up for in numbers. Realistically, humans are still a big threat to us. Unless, of course, Oleander's bond could wipe them out completely.

It's one of the reasons I think the Resistance wants Oleander so badly.

A Gifted with an unmatched range to dispose of the non-Gifted and Gifted alike, she's everything they could've ever wanted.

Gryphon fidgets in the seat next to me as Rafe directs the car over to the private parking lot. This is an emergency meeting, and there's very little press that we'll have to make our way past, only a few men holding cameras, taking photos, and a couple of reporters with microphones. They're clearly the only people in the area, and with such a short lead time, the usual vultures couldn't make it, thank God. Usually when we meet, all of them show up, hundreds waiting for us, ready to stick their recorders in our faces to misconstrue the slightest thing that we might say wrong.

It's concerning, to say the least, but I'm grateful that I might have a little more wiggle room with what I can say to the woman, because if anyone needs some home truths, it's Oldham.

"Remember not to say anything. She's going to do everything in her power to turn you into the horrible monster that she has fantasized we are, including talking about our Bonded."

Gryphon shrugs, easily staring off into the distance as though he's focusing on some conversation I can't hear. His ability to read minds is also a plus here. Another tick in the box of why he's escorting me and not Nox.

"I kind of figured that. If I snapped at every person who tried to use my Bonded against me, I wouldn't have any hours left in the day for her. Don't worry about me; just focus on your bond and keeping him in line."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Are you so sure it's mine we need to be worried about? Have there been any changes with yours that you might

need to tell me about?”

He sends me a dry look. “I’m not the one who keeps secrets about my bond.”

I hold back a wince as I mentally give him a point on a scoreboard that I never really keep track of.

He's not wrong, I did lie to them all about my bond. To be fair, I was doing my best to lie to myself about it, just as much as I was lying to them. My own fear of what lived inside of me and the potential of what it could do to my Bonded and every other person I came in contact with had overridden my loyalty to my Bonded Group.

I’m not proud of it, but I won’t try to lie about it either.

“My bond is fine. Its number one concern right now is Oleander and making sure she never has to soul-bond with anyone ever again.”

He winces and nods. “Yeah, I think we can all agree on that.”

No questions asked. Neither of us have discussed what that moment felt like or the fact that I had completely shut down, but I also don't feel any embarrassment with him about it either. Gryphon isn't the type of man to judge me, and I have never felt any sort of extra shame around him any more than I have ever felt around Oleander or Nox.

He knows what that moment had cost me the same way I know what that moment cost him, and what's the point of a unified Bond Group if we don't have each other's backs during the worst possible moments of our lives? He's seen mine, and he knows all about Nox's. I hope for his sake that we never have to see his.

Rafe pulls the car up as close to the building as he can get. Gryphon steps out of the car first, slipping easily into the old practice of him acting as my security.

We're trained at the same level, we're in the same Bonded Group, and his life means just as much as mine, but the non-Gifted don't understand that, and it's easier to act this way around them.

Rafe opens my car door at Gryphon's signal, and we walk into the building together. The white ring is clear around Gryphon's irises, and I murmur to him quietly, “Probably best if we don't walk in there like that. Oldham will start running for the hills if she sees it. We won't get the chance to explain that what you're doing is for her safety as much as ours.”

Gryphon shrugs with the slightest smirk curling up his lips. “It'll be a quick end to the day if we clear her out of the building though, won't it?”

I shoot him a look. “We need to convince the non-Gifted that we're not a threat here. If we just wanted to scare them away, I would have brought Nox.”

Gryphon looks around the building one last time before the white light fades from his eyes. “There's no one here who is a threat. No one except the senator herself, who is convinced that we're all trying to kill her, so have fun talking the crazy bitch out of that.”

I sigh deeply and roll my shoulders back before I open the door to the assigned conference room.

Give me a battle on the field surrounded by my own shadow creatures, with my Bonded at my side and the rest of our Bonded Group, any day over this verbal bullshit.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Oli

One of the many advantages of my bond finally coming out to help deal with the Wasteland is that I wake up the next morning feeling energized and ready to take on whatever the world throws at me. It's a far cry from what life used to look like after I'd used my Gift, but now that my body has adjusted, I no longer need to take three-day naps.

I bounce out of bed easier than any of my Bonded and, God, is it freaking *magical*.

North and Gryphon leave to travel to a meeting with the non-Gifted, and my bond and I take a good hour to come to terms with that fact. North assures me before they leave that Kieran will stay on high alert, ready to go after them should he need to. In the end, my bond makes the call that they're safe enough for now.

The Resistance will want to fight back against us, and we already know that North is one of the highest targets, but Gryphon reassures me that he will hear them coming from a mile away and will return home to us immediately if he needs to.

Instead of spending the day freaking the hell out about them both, I text Sage. We agree to meet at the Tac Training Center for an early morning workout. Gryphon had made a comment about sticking to my training just in case before he'd left and, despite Atlas' protests, I convince all three of my Bonded left behind to come train with us for the day.

There's still no love lost between Atlas and Nox.

Gabe is bouncing like a schoolboy as we leave the house together, and I insist on jogging down there to warm up, sending a quick text to Nox to make sure that he is still meeting us down there after his night of research at North's offices.

I'm not sure how there could possibly be anything that he hasn't gone through at this point to research what has been happening to Gabe's dragon, but he's been relentless nonetheless.

The newest wave of Gifted who have been allowed to join the Sanctuary had brought with them more textbooks and ancient tomes, relics of their families, and everything had been passed over to Nox.

I feel bad and as though we should be helping him, but North had reassured me quickly not to be concerned when I'd mentioned it to him last night after Nox had left the house.

"He would want to read them himself no matter how thoroughly you were explaining it to him. So, honestly, you'd just get in his way."

It doesn't make me feel any less guilty, especially when we arrive at the Tac Training Center and find Nox standing at the front with a coffee in one hand and his phone in the other, looking as though it's been days since he last slept. My bond tugs in my chest, unhappy as it reaches out to him, and he glances over at me when he feels it caress against his own.

"You have to sleep sometimes," I say, trying not to sound too displeased or commanding, but it comes out more like a whiny teenager than anything else.

He dismisses my words and pushes through into the building, a move that I know sets Atlas' teeth on edge, but I see through his grumpy demeanor.

There's nothing really that he can say back to me right now that won't be too revealing or piss my other Bonded off. So instead, he says nothing.

I can respect that.

Gabe slips his hand into mine with a gentle squeeze of my fingers. "Maybe we should make sure those two don't end up sparring, because we both know they will egg each other into a fight."

I raise my eyebrows at him and peg Atlas with a look. "Neither of them would dare, because my bond would get involved. None of us want to be dealing with the aftermath of that situation."

Atlas shrugs, a grin tugging at the edge of his lips. "I don't know... I think it's been a while since we've shown this town what we're capable of. There might be some people here that need the reminder."

Something deep in my gut clenches as I look around, finding the General standing over one of the sparring circles, his arms crossed and a sour look on his face. When his eyes glance up to us, his face transforms into that of a man who's just stepped in dog shit.

Nox's teeth grind a little before he murmurs, "I hate agreeing with a Bassinger."

The door opens again behind us, and Kieran steps through, slapping a hand on Nox's back as he nods at me in greeting.

"Are we ready to show the new blood a thing or two about the sparring mats?" he says with a grin, and Nox scoffs at him.

"I have no faith in any of the new recruits the General brought with him. Half of them were rejected by North and Gryphon, only for them to go simpering after that old fool. He might choose to build his teams with only his ego and nepotism, but I'm not going to let that get us killed."

I glance around at the crowds of TacTeam personnel, a lot of new faces amongst them, and it only takes me a moment to spot Zoey.

"Fucking perfect," I mutter, and Gabe frowns at me before he spots her as well.

"Why *the fuck* would the General let her in?" he snaps, as though Kieran or Nox will have an answer for him.

Atlas looks between us both with a question, and Nox carefully slides in front of me, as though he doesn't want Zoey looking in my direction either. Even Atlas can't deny that the move is protective, and my heart flutters a little at the action.

"Her family went straight to the Shores after Gryphon tossed her out. They're high enough up the food chain that it wasn't hard to convince the General to let her in."

"And what exactly did she do?" Atlas says through gritted teeth, shuffling a little closer to my side as he says it.

I don't really need all of these protective moves of his, but it does have my bond purring in my chest with pleasure.

"She enjoyed torturing me when I first arrived at Draven. She used her Gift against me a fair bit, and it got her thrown out of the TacTraining

classes because of it. She dropped out shortly afterward.” I glance around Nox to see her smirking in our direction now she’s finally spotted us here.

Her eyebrow quirks at me as she starts to stalk over to us, ready to start shit, and I find myself grinning back just a little maniacally, because that dumb bitch has forgotten one vital thing. I'm not powerless anymore.

Her Gift can't touch me.

Sage and I head into the girls’ locker room together to change into sparring gear, leaving our Bonded to deal with the confrontation with the General’s new recruit. I was totally ready to just knock the bitch out, but Kieran had shoved at us both, and then Sage had decided to play the peacemaker and drag me in here.

It doesn’t matter.

I’ll just beat her on the mats if I have to.

I don't want to distract Gryphon from what he and North might be dealing with in the non-Gifted community right now, but I also would love to explain to him just how much of a dick his dad is for allowing that girl to join after she'd already been vetted and found wanting by his own son.

“God, things never stop getting interesting around here, do they?” Sage mumbles as she strips out of her shirt and fumbles around in her locker for the standard issue tank top.

I groan a little under my breath and glance behind myself as I hear the doors swing open again, exhaling sharply when I find Aro walking through, her footsteps a little hesitant until she sees the both of us.

“I doubt that even after we've dealt with the Resistance and we’ve found ourselves in peaceful times, that we’ll ever stop dealing with this kind of crap. Unfortunately, just because we're on the same side doesn't mean we're actually, you know, all on the same side.”

Aro is a little hesitant and slow as she opens her locker, given to her by Gryphon only a few days ago when she'd expressed an interest in joining us here, but she remembers the code well enough and is quick about getting into her own Tac uniform.

“I’ve already heard the stories of that new girl from Gray. He said she's walking chloroform. I'd rather not go up against her,” Aro says, and I nod

my head.

“You don't have to go up against any of the new people. Just stick to your normal training. I'm going to deal with Zoey myself.”

“Deal with her?” she replies, her eyebrows rising. “Aren't we supposed to be training all together as one big, happy family?”

“As if I could *ever* be family with a Soul Render.”

We turn to find Zoey standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips and a savage look on her face. Sage groans under her breath, but she's quick to turn around and step a little closer to my side, very much having my back no matter what. We both already know that I can't exactly kill the girl unprovoked, and, unfortunately, the majority of my powers are lethal. Even the one thing I can do that isn't lethal would eventually kill her.

Sage could definitely set her on fire though.

Is that considered too far? Fuck it, I don't care!

“Wow, Zoey. I didn't think you would be so vocal about your own limitations, but more power to you, girl!” I say with a smirk and a shrug as she takes two more steps into the room, dismissing Aro and Sage completely as though both of them are beneath her.

Mistake number one.

“You know, everybody was aware that the Draven Monster Bond Group would have to have some *really* fucked up Central Bond to call all of those men her own, and it all seemed like one big cosmic joke when you showed up with no Gift. To think that they would be cursed for the rest of their lives with some useless, Giftless bitch was hilarious and exactly what they all deserved... But now, finding out that you're a bigger monster than the rest of them? Well, you should all be put down before you can become a problem.”

Mistake number two.

Her words wake my bond up from where it is slumbering in my chest. It doesn't need any sort of encouragement in wanting this girl dead, but hearing her discuss the killing of our Bonded so casually—as though she wasn't discussing the murder of a councilman and other respected members of our community—my bond is pretty keen on disposing of her as well.

It doesn't take too much to convince it to let me deal with her though, especially once it knows my plans.

“Well, come on then, Zoey,” I say, flicking my hand out. “Come and show me exactly what you think should be done to me then. I'll even let you

get the first shot in. A freebie, for old times' sake."

She smirks at me and steps forward, crossing the last few feet before she's standing in front of the single row of benches, her eyes flashing to white in front of us. My bond doesn't bother tensing or seeming concerned at all. I know why, as her power washes over me without causing so much as the slightest of yawns.

This is when I really feel like a god.

Her brow furrows just a little before she aims it at Sage and Aro. To my delight, it washes over the two of them as well.

"I'm fully Bonded now," I say as I let my Gift out to play. "Sage and Aro too, you know. You probably should have taken that into consideration before you decided to follow me in here. But like I said, I'll let you take the first swing."

I step forward, planting my feet shoulder width apart and letting my body relax the way that Gryphon had drummed into me a thousand times.

Relax and let your opponent show you what they're capable of first. Watch them and be ready, but don't show them your hand until you're ready to crush them with it.

She might have been taught sparring at Draven, but she hasn't had the personal lessons that I have, and when she takes a swing at me, it's easy enough to deflect. I dart out of the way and at the same time, take a swing at her, my fist connecting with her cheek hard enough to send her stumbling back, and a red mark blooms against her skin instantly.

Beyond the dull ache in my fist, there's no sign on me that she even attempted anything, and a cocky smirk stretches across my lips, one I don't intend on losing anytime soon.

"Seriously, that's all you've got? That's pathetic! No wonder Gryphon was so ready to throw you out."

She pushes up onto her feet again and darts at me faster than I want to give her credit for but, still, I'm quicker. And I'm ready for it.

I sweep her legs out from underneath her and take her to the ground, enjoying the screeching sound that bursts out of her. As I grapple with her on the cold, concrete floor, Atlas' voice floods into my mind.

Do I need to come in there? Gabe told me to leave it to you, but now I'm hearing things that make me very sure that I should be in there with you right now.

I grunt a little as her knee connects with my side, but I get a forearm across her throat and press down to restrict her airway, sending back to him, *I'm kind of busy at the moment, Atlas, but I'll be two more minutes. No need for a rescue team.*

I'm true to my word, and in two minutes Sage and Aro hold the doors open for me as I drag Zoey out of the girls' changing room by her feet, her unconscious body a dead weight as I move her across the training center.

The conversations around us die out as I get her all the way to where the General and Vivian are having a heated argument. They both stop to turn and stare at me as I drop her in a heap at the General's feet.

"You should really vet your recruits a little better," I say with a bite in my tone. "She has shitty technique and thinks that her Gift is enough to get her out of any situation, but anybody with a brain knows that you can't rely on that in hand-to-hand. I just wiped the floor with her. If your teams are just going to be a dead weight, then I'm not going to allow you to come on missions with us."

The room goes from quiet to deafeningly silent, the tension of everyone around us amping up. I feel the heat of my Bonded's bodies at my back as they stand behind me, ready to pounce on the General as his eyebrows draw down at such a public spectacle.

"You can't tell me who goes on missions, little girl," he snaps at me, and that same cocky grin appears back on my face, the one that helped me fake my way through TT and every other obstacle I've come across.

"I think you'll find that I can, and I will. It's a hard lesson to learn for a man like you, I'm sure, but you're not in charge here."

The General glances at Vivian, whose face is very carefully blank, before he turns on his heel and stalks down the hallway.

Vivian waits until the door swings shut behind him before he crosses his arms at me. "What did you do to that girl?"

I shrug innocently. "She took the first swing. She started the fight. All I did was end it."

His eyes narrow at me before he nods, his eyes slowly glancing around at the room until everybody gets back to what they were doing, normalcy easing back into place around us.

He waits until we're not the center of attention before he says, "Good job, kid. I'm sure that felt good. I've only been waiting months for you to

finally put someone on their ass. I already know Gryphon will be furious that he missed it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Oli

We spend the next five hours sparring with the rest of the Tac personnel, both our own and those recruits that the General had brought with him. Not all of them are as useless as Zoey had been. When she had eventually come to, Vivian had called down somebody from the medical center to take a look at her, but she was fine, except for the bruised ego.

I go up against three other women, one of them easily twice the size of me, but manage to win against them all, which leaves me feeling pretty damn smug and thankful that all of my time working out and getting my ass handed to me by Gryphon has paid off.

The best part of the day is that I get to watch my Bonded.

None of them fight each other, at my request, which means I get to actually enjoy the sight of each of them working their way through most of the male population of the TacTeams. Exactly *one* woman tries to enter the sparring ring with Gabe. She is immediately yanked out by Vivian, who gives her such a stern talking to that I'm fairly certain she wishes the ground would open up and swallow her whole. I think that this is incredibly considerate of him, until Sage points out to me that Azrael is growling at my feet and my eyes have shifted black in response.

Oops.

In my defense, Gabe is wearing a standard issue TacTeam tank top, but the arm holes have been cut open wider, and there's an obscene amount of

his skin on show right now. He's hotter than any man has any right to be. The idea of him rolling around on these mats with anyone who isn't me is upsetting. The idea that it could be a woman, one who might enjoy it just a little too much? Absolutely intolerable.

I don't need my bond to chime in to tell me that it's out of the question.

Sure enough, watching them gets me amped up, but the thing that really gets me going is watching Nox.

Even Atlas, who is sitting at my side with a bottle of water while he takes a breather after his own conquests, can't help but be impressed at my Death Dealer, my most damaged Bond, as he obliterates any man brave, or stupid, enough to go up against him.

He is fucking *brutal*.

There's no arguing that. Vivian, who trained Gryphon and both the Draven brothers and is fully aware of their abilities, insists that Nox spars against three men at once. I'd like to say that he does this because of the nightmare creatures joining in, but they don't. There isn't the slightest sign of any of his creatures except for Azrael who sits at my feet with August, both of them watching over the room with sightless void eyes.

I didn't intend on having them out, but after Zoey's attempt at an ambush, they'd refused to be put away, both of them acting like a small barrier between my family and anyone who might approach us.

No one here would be bold enough to try.

Nox moves like a dream, though I'm sure his opponents think he's a nightmare come to life. He's effective as he takes them down one-by-one, or sometimes three at a time. I find my mind drifting off to dirty, sexy thoughts at the sight of him.

I *definitely* wouldn't mind him throwing me around like that.

He doesn't stop either, not for a break or a drink of water. Every time his opponents tap out, he stands and nods at Vivian again. Over and over and over again, until dozens of men are clutching at the sore points of their body, gasping for air as they crawl out of the sparring ring. He shows them all what it means to be the pinnacle of Gifted perfection, the true danger living amongst them all.

"He's kind of terrifying," Aro says, her chin propped against her fist as she watches Nox with a small frown.

She's staring at him intently the whole time, but there's something calculating about it, like she's trying to work out how to recreate his moves

and be as effective in her fighting as he is.

My bond doesn't react to it at all, and I know that she has no real interest in him beyond what she can learn from him. The way that he fights, there's a lot that we could all learn from watching him.

"He's kind of perfect," I say in a dreamy voice, and Sage loses her shit laughing at me.

"How quickly your tune changes!" she says between gasps, and I shrug at her.

"I'm pretty sure you offered to set Kieran on fire for me, glass houses here."

"One time." She holds up a hand. "One time, and that's because I found out he tackled you to the ground, like a brute. Unnecessary force used. I'd set anyone on fire for that."

Kieran gives me a look for reminding his Bonded that he'd been the one to bring me in, and I flip him the bird because he deserves to cop a bit of shit for that asshole move.

My eyes drift back to Nox as he sweeps his opponents' legs out from underneath them, their bodies hitting the ground hard. I can't help but be drawn back to him as though he's a beacon calling for my attention. "I'm not going to apologize for finding any of my Bonded hot, especially not while they are pummeling people into the ground for us."

"Don't rock the boat, Sage. We're enjoying the peace and quiet too much to ruin it just for the sake of splitting hairs," Gabe says as he approaches us, wiping his sweat on a towel and looking deliciously mischievous as his arms flex in my direction.

"We weren't that bad," I grumble under my breath, even though it's a total lie.

At least Gryphon isn't here to hear it.

"You are *both* a nightmare, perfectly paired to ruin everyone's peace of mind," Kieran says, and he slings an arm around Sage's waist as he tugs her closer, attempting to get her back on his side. "I'm pretty sure the two of you gave North stress ulcers, and half of the TacTeams still have nightmares about the training sessions Gryphon put them through as his own stress relief."

I wince a little and glance around. "Is that why everybody hates me? I feel like I should apologize or something to them all for that, because

there's nothing worse than Gryphon on a mission to destroy you in training. I know—I've been through it enough."

Kieran shakes his head. "Better for them to face him and sharpen their abilities against someone who doesn't want them dead than sending them out against the Resistance green."

I nod, a good reminder of the real reason we're here.

After a while, Sage and I decide we should probably get to working out as well, as good as it is to watch my guys wipe the floor with everyone around them. We move off to one of the smallest sparring mats to work on our own training together. Kieran comes with us and critiques both of our forms for us in the stern and gruff way that he has, firmly guiding us both through our paces without a hint of favoritism towards his own Bonded.

Sage is quick to groan about that fact when he instructs me on how to best throw her over my shoulder as she rushes me.

"You need to get better about how you land, and Oli needs to get adept at facing off with people her own size instead of just using her enemies' body weight against them, thanks to all of her training with her Bonded. You can't just rely on everybody to be bigger than you when we're facing off with the Resistance."

Sage groans from the mats where she's splayed out on her back. "You could try sounding a little less happy about it is all I'm saying. With any luck, I will just set everyone on fire before they get near me, and I'll never have to do this."

I scoff and reach down to help her up. "Let's be real. We're hoping that between my bond and the shadow creatures, no one ever gets within a hundred feet of us. But if going to the Wastelands and the camps has taught me anything, you can never really be over-prepared to face off with these idiotic lunatics."

She nods and uses the bottom of her tank top to wipe the sweat off of her forehead. I giggle at the way that Kieran whips around me to cover her up, glaring around the room as though somebody might look at the few inches of skin his Bonded inadvertently showed off.

No one would dare, and we both know it.

Bonded men can be impossible about their women.

When Kieran has to leave to transport North and Gryphon back home to us, I'm both exhausted from our training and relieved that we're all going to be back in the same spot again. Sage and I decide to grab dinner from the

dining hall to split with our Bonded at North's office, happy to continue spending the day together after so much uncertainty and unease.

Once we have our bags piled up from the chef—who promises me emphatically that he is doing his best to get me some seafood like the national treasure he is—we head back to meet up with the rest of our families. Gabe meets us halfway, insisting on carrying the bags for us both, laughing and joking with Sage about everything he had done to his opponents in the training room.

They've known each other their entire lives, having grown up in the same Top Tier family circles, and I find myself enjoying the easy banter that they have together, both of them calm and relaxed after their intense workouts.

When we get back to the office, we find everyone waiting there for us. Though Gryphon comes straight up to me to greet me with a kiss, North hangs back a little bit. When I finally reach him to hand him a serving of the food we had brought with us, he presses a kiss to my cheek without much of a greeting, directing me over to sit with him, but I can feel the tension in his body.

It freaks me out.

I feel like I've been on this awful roller coaster with him, like every time we've found each other in the tumultuous waves we're drowning in, something else will happen to pull us apart again.

I hate it.

We get through dinner easy enough, even if I do have to choke down every bite as I keep glancing at my Bonded, and most of the group disperses immediately after. Nox heads back to his little fortress of texts and translations to continue his studies. Kieran and Felix insist on taking Sage home straight away, the two of them looking weary after the long day. Gray and Sawyer joke and laugh with Aro and her little brother, coaxing them both back to their house with the promises of a movie night and popcorn. The show of calm and ease they have with each other in front of the little boy is easy enough to see through, but Aro seems to appreciate it nonetheless.

Fake it until you make it. Sometimes it's all you can do while the world is in chaos.

North waits until they're all gone before he speaks to me about what has been eating him all night, speaking directly through our mind link, where

he's careful that no one else can hear it.

I spoke with a human senator today. She had a lot of information about the latest attacks on Gifted families.

I'm sorry you had to do that, I say, ready to comfort him from whatever atrocities he's been forced to see.

I'm not prepared for the horror of what he's discovered.

There are a lot of historical deaths as well. She brought up your parents, the car accident, and she mentioned that a lot of the deaths of the Gifted and non-Gifted alike are hidden in other accidents so that no one would realize the true cause of death.

My heart stops in my chest.

She has a file on your parents' death. She was trying to use you against me, and I don't think she realized what she had really found. Your parents didn't die in a car accident, Oli, did they? The coroner's report said their hearts just stopped in their chests, as though their souls had simply left their body.

I panic.

There's no other way to describe the way that one minute I'm standing in North's office, my Bonded all moving around me as they head off to where they're needed for the early evening, and then the next, I'm running, fleeing from the worst part of me that's been cracked open and put on display. It's like my nightmares have come true.

North's words still bounce around in my head as I reach the house, my fingers almost numb as I scramble to get the door open. I can hear the footsteps behind me, pounding as though one of my Bonded is running after me, but my head feels as though it's filled with air, light and floaty, like I might pass out at any second.

I need to get somewhere safe.

I can't think about anything else, just the desperate need to flee the rejection that's about to tear my world apart. I need to be somewhere where I can process everything that's happened without having to face the reality of all of them knowing this about me now.

Do they all know?

North wouldn't lie to Gryphon. They wouldn't keep this from Gabe or Atlas, not after how much they've talked about being a cohesive Bonded Group.

They wouldn't let them unknowingly stay with a murderer.

My feet move without me really thinking about it, and I only realize that I have locked myself in Nox's room when the pounding on the wood starts up behind me. I hear the voices of people yelling through the closed door, but the ringing in my ear is too loud to decipher it.

My back slowly slides down the door until my ass hits the ground so hard that my teeth rattle, my arms shaking as I draw my knees up and hug them. The shouting abruptly stops before there's a soft, wispy nuzzle at my cheek. I slowly raise my head to find Azrael staring at me, his bottomless void eyes seeing everything and nothing, all the time. In the expanse of the voids, I can feel Nox in there as well, and my eyes fall shut as I try to calm my breathing down.

I can't even bear to look at him right now, the one person who already knew and hasn't judged me for it. I don't deserve the solace of his calm presence.

Murderer.

I can feel pushing at the walls in my mind, but I keep them strong, pushing everyone out so I can keep being a coward here for just a minute longer. I take this moment to tell myself that I can get through this. There's every chance that they're going to want to leave me now, and I need to have my walls back in place, the cold, calm exterior I had walked into Draven with. I need to be unfeeling before I have to face them. If I go out there right now as raw and as open as I am, I'll be destroyed.

There's a quiet, dark place inside myself that knows no matter what, I'm going to be destroyed, but I can lie to myself for a little longer.

Eventually, I make my way over to the bed, sliding between the sheets and pulling the blanket up over my head. My mind is a spinning, swirling vortex of shame and anxiety, making it impossible to go to sleep, but I lose track of time in my own meltdown.

It's not until I hear the door lock click and door open that I come back into myself.

I hear Atlas' angry voice as he snaps, "You can't just keep us out here —"

I cringe and curl in on myself that he is that angry at me, but then I hear Nox reply, “It’s my room. If she chose to be in here, then there’s nothing you can do about it. Cross that line and I’ll unleash the shadow creatures on you, and we’ll see just how indestructible you really are.”

Then the door shuts again, the lock clicking back into place and the room falling back into silence.

Nox moves so quietly that I can barely hear what he’s doing. It’s as though his body is made out of shadows, not just his powers, but every now and then, there’s a rustle of fabric, the quiet *thunk* of his phone being placed on the bedside table, and the shuffling of papers as he puts away his research.

Still, he says nothing.

And still, even though he already knew what I’d done, the shame keeps my mouth sealed shut when the door opens to the bathroom and the shower cuts on.

I let go of the breath I was holding in, melting into the bed with the sheer relief that he isn’t going to force me to talk about this or to force me to get out of this bed and face the fact that my Bonded are sickened by me.

The sound of the shower slowly lulls just enough calm into me until I’m finally able to doze off to sleep. I wake up to the feeling of Nox sliding into the bed next to me, cautiously bundling me up into his arms until we’re twisted around each other. It’s as though he’s not quite sure of what he’s doing or if he’s doing it right. If I wasn’t already completely shattered, that would have finished the job.

A low sob bubbles up out of my chest, but he just presses my face closer into his chest, the steady thump of his heartbeat under my ear a mesmerizing sound that once again gets me back to sleep.

Hours later—how many, I’m not sure. The complete darkness of Nox’s room is disorienting. I feel the bed move again, and I crack an eye open to find North climbing in.

The shadow creatures around us are no longer sleeping, all of them watching him carefully as though they’re waiting for him to strike, but he doesn’t reach for me or attempt to speak in any way. He just lies down in the bed next to us silently, until eventually the shadow creatures all lay their heads back down to sleep.

The silence stretches on for so long that I start to panic again.

I think it's that panic that finally gets North talking. "I know what it's like to kill someone without meaning to. It's a heavy weight to carry, Oleander."

If I didn't already know the amount of trust that Nox has in his brother, this moment would confirm it because he sleeps through the sound of his voice. I'm not sure he'll sleep through mine, so instead, I speak to North directly through our mind connection.

She deserved to die. My parents didn't. There's a very big difference between the two, North. I know that this changes things—

He interrupts me and even the voice in his mind is harsh, *This changes nothing. Not with me or any of the rest of your Bonded, who are all out in the hallway, freaking the hell out about your reaction to this. I misjudged how you'd react. This is all my fault. All I've done since you brought Nox back is mess things up.*

Tears fill my eyes, but when the first one threatens to fall, he reaches over to catch it. Even in the darkness of the room, I can see the heartbreak in his eyes. I want to reach out to him to fix it the same way that he has soothed every fear and pain and trouble in my life from the moment he decided to let me in.

Some long before that.

But I don't want to pull away from Nox. The sound of his heartbeat is the only thing holding me together right now, and I'm terrified to let that go, even for a minute, but North knows.

He always knows.

He nods at me without me saying a word, giving and giving and giving to his brother without question or judgment, giving everything he can to him, as though he is attempting to fill a void. He'd give everything to me as well. Even in my panicked state, I can't deny it now with him lying here with me. He'd give everything until he had nothing left for himself, I'm sure of it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nox

I don't like sharing my bed with *anyone*.

There's never been an exception to that rule.

The idea of having another body lying with my own all night is abhorrent, exposing in all of the worst ways, and I was never going to take the risk of having a nightmare and my shadow creatures tearing someone apart just because of the demons in my head. The only person I had ever let enter my rooms before all of this Bonding shit was North, and only because there's a small part of me that feels as though I owe him.

He carries a lot of weight on his shoulders, thanks to me.

The only reason I had allowed Oleander to sleep in my bed, both back at the Draven mansion and here in the Sanctuary, was because my bond had insisted on it. I'd fought it every step of the way. In the end, the threats it had whispered to me, the things it had promised to do the moment it took control of my body, all of it was more than enough to have me conceding on this one issue, cracking the door open just the tiniest bit to let her peer into the space I take up in this dark hellhole of mine. I was so sure that I would stay firm in my beliefs and keep her out of my head.

I was wrong.

I'm also glad I was wrong.

I wake up next to Oleander, her face turned in towards mine even with North wrapped around her like a blanket. Her lips are so close to mine,

close enough that when she sighs in her sleep, I feel her breath like a caress over my skin. The neck of the shirt that she's wearing is pulled low on her body and shows off the smooth lines of her neck and shoulder.

I want to ruin the skin there, mark her up, make sure that when she walks out of this room, everyone knows exactly who it is that she belongs to. I want to keep her here all day, to own her time and her body and every last one of her thoughts the way that she's come to own mine.

I want all of those things to myself, and my brother lying in the bed with us is the only thing that stops me.

There's a text message from Gryphon waiting for me on my phone, a reminder that we have a debrief waiting for us this morning about the meeting with the non-Gifted leaders. I've found more than enough references to the void-eyed gods in the new documents that need to be discussed, so as much as I loathe sitting around talking about shit instead of doing something about it, I'm eager to get to this debrief.

We can't ignore what I've found any longer.

We can't just sit around on our thumbs waiting for things to happen to us instead of taking action, no matter how cautious everyone else wants to be. Better to go in with everything we have at our disposal, and with Oleander, that's a lot of fire power.

I carefully get out of the bed and make my way to the shower, avoiding the shadow creatures still sleeping away happily. They've become more docile and sleepier since my death, but the power that Oleander's bond had sent me at the Wasteland had perked them back up. I know that it's temporary, that getting back to wielding my own Gift will right things, but it's still jarring to see them act like that.

The fact that they allowed North and August in here last night without a fight is telling.

When I step back out of the shower, my hair wet and Procel sitting happily by the door waiting for me, I hear it. I wait for the burn of repulsion in my throat or even the curling pressure of jealousy in my gut, but there's nothing there. No reaction except for maybe desire to join in.

A foreign concept, if there ever were one.

The bathroom door is still open where I'd left it like that, another anomaly, and with a single step forward, I can see them both there in my bed, Oleander's head thrown back as she bites her lip to hold in her moaning. She's grinding herself against North's hand where it disappears

into the front of the boxers she's stolen from one of her Bonds. My brother's face is hidden, tucked into the crook of her neck as he gets off on the pure experience of pleasuring his Bonded.

She looks magnificent.

Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are red where she's biting them. Her body moves on its own as she writhes uncontrollably, liquid and wanton as she climbs higher and higher. Her eyes meet mine across the room, her eyelids flaring wide as another moan ekes out from between her lips. I hold her gaze until her eyes roll back in her head as she comes, her head falling back onto North's shoulder and her thighs clenching against his hand as though she's trapping it against her clit.

North's fingers fuck her through the orgasm.

He doesn't stop pleasuring her, doesn't falter as he ruthlessly drives her back to the edge and keeps her mindless with ecstasy. One of his shadows moves to tug the fabric of the shorts down her legs, stripping her lower half until she's on display. I'm trapped in my own body as I watch North's fingers plunge into her cunt, the wet sounds of her pussy echoing through the room and drawing me over to her.

She's keening in his arms, practically weeping as he keeps going until she's begging him for mercy, the overstimulation leaving her a twitching mess amongst my sheets.

I'm expecting him to fuck her.

I wouldn't even get angry at him for doing it. When he finally stops and lets his fingers slide out of her, he turns his face to murmur something in her ear, brushing her hair away from her face as he coaxes soft kisses out of his Bonded. This feels more intimate than watching him fuck her, something softer and more private, but neither of them seem concerned that I'm still watching them together.

When North gets up and leaves, I finally find myself able to move again.

I can't stop myself from going to her, from taking her by the ankles and dragging her further down the bed to eat her out, enjoying the pained moan she gives me. The taste of her cum is addicting, and I don't stop until I've given her the same amount of orgasms that North had, until her legs are shaking, her hands are fisted in my sheets, and she's mumbling prayers for mercy.

She's a boneless mess but still, the moment I climb back onto the bed, she's rolling over to me, a little shy as she wriggles down to fist my cock. When I settle back, more than happy for her to be touching me, she licks a stripe from the base to the tip. She's made brave by my head lolling back on my shoulders, humming happily under her breath when I groan as she swallows me whole.

Whoever taught her that did a great fucking job.

I want to lie back and let her go, to see what it is that she wants to do to me, but I can't help myself. I get a fistful of her hair, enjoying the sight of the silvery strands running through my fingers, and I tug her down my length a little quicker, pushing and pushing until I can feel my own release racing towards me.

I'm being rough, I already know. I can't help it. But by the way she's moaning and wriggling against my legs, Oleander likes it. She's getting off on it as much as I am. When I lift my hips to hit the back of her throat as I come, she swallows reflexively, taking every last drop as I grit my teeth around my shout of pleasure.

She was fucking made for me, a gift I do not deserve.

When we arrive at the meeting room in North's office, the space I've been using to lay out all of my research texts and compile as much as I can about the gods, North looks the calmest and most relaxed I've seen him. He's calmer than I thought would ever be possible, considering the threats we're all still facing.

Gryphon notices it straight away as well, raising his eyebrows at him as he pours himself a cup of coffee from the small pot he insists on having. His taste in coffee is *horrendous*. Both North and I refuse to drink anything that isn't an espresso or a cappuccino brewed in a very particular way. Gryphon prefers the drip kind that is basically sewer water. It's something he likes to pretend comes from our upbringing and isn't just that we have functioning tastebuds where he appears to have *nothing*.

"Who would have thought all you needed was a sleepover in your brother's room to cheer you up? We should mark a few more of these in the

calendar for you,” Gryphon says with a smirk, and North doesn't even bother to pretend to be upset about it.

“I’ve spent months knowing that she was hiding something from us all, that she couldn't fully be invested in our Bonded Group because of it. I'm not going to try to deny that I'm pleased that it's all finally over with and we're not going to be walking into any more fights with the Resistance without everyone firmly on the same page.”

That's North, always pretending that he's only ever thinking of the bigger picture. Gryphon and I are very aware that truly he could give zero fucks about the Resistance when it comes to his Bonded. It would have been driving him insane to not know something about her, *anything*. He would happily take up camp in her mind the way that Gryphon did just to know every little inch of her, because he is a possessive, obsessive asshole like that when something gets under his skin and, boy, did Oleander get under his skin.

I can no longer throw stones.

She's under mine as well.

“I’m surprised she didn't insist on coming down here, as well as the other two,” Gryphon says as he stretches out on one of the seats, his back popping from where he had spent the night propped up against a wall in the hallway fussing over her. I could make a joke about it, but I find myself uninterested in needling either of them about her anymore. I'd much rather save that energy for finding a way out of all of this for us.

“Gabe and Atlas had insisted on her staying behind with them. She wanted to discuss her parents’ accident with them herself,” North says, happily keeping everybody on the same page, but I don't want to sit around talking about this without her here.

It feels as though we're all casually gossiping about her trauma. I'd already promised to take this to the grave, so not a single word will ever pass my lips about it.

Not even to my brother or Gryphon.

“What happened with the senator? Other than her digging into things she shouldn't be and trying to use them against you. Did you get anything worth using out of the woman?”

North’s eyes narrow at me a little and then he shrugs. “She's non-Gifted. There's not a huge amount we can get out of her... other than the families that the Resistance have been after. There’s potentially Gifted amongst their

ranks who had been taken as children, but the brainwashing has already happened and there's not much that we can do for them.”

I nod and then scratch the back of my head, tugging a little on my hair there as I try to focus my brain on picking up any tiny scrap of information that might help.

North stops to look around properly at the books and papers spread out everywhere. The whiteboard that I've been taking notes on is in a dead language that only myself, and now Oleander, can understand. It's mostly so that if anyone stumbles in here, they're not going to be able to spy on what it is that I'm doing.

There's too much at stake.

North says, “Have you managed to find anything? Any little thing that might tell us what the fuck we're supposed to do with Gabe if he shifts again?”

I shrug and tap one of the piles of paper that's a printout of an ancient text that has been scanned through and sent to me. The text is the oldest one I've ever seen, possibly as old as the written word itself, and it had been arduous to translate the language. It's deader than the one I'm using to take notes.

“I found a reference to a ‘Dragon God’. I'd assumed that it was a Shifter that had turned into some sort of lizard. Maybe it was a Gifted who was a traveler and could have easily been shifting into something that just wasn't native to where the text was written, but the text refers to his ‘cold, dead, *black* eyes’. I think it's the one and only time that the dragon has walked the earth before.”

North blows out a breath and nods. Gryphon thrums his fingers on the table. He has a lot of his own feelings about Gabe changing that he's keeping to himself, but I'm sure he'll voice them when he's ready.

I know exactly how to get him ready.

“For now, I'm keeping a tally of when and where the black eyes are showing up... and what abilities may have been exhibited, because the shadow creatures are not the only Gift I'm seeing.”

It works like a charm.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Gryphon says as his eyes snap to mine, and I shrug back.

“There's references of a ‘black-eyed being’ who could force his enemies to play along with his deepest fantasies, a being who could force

men to take up his own stances on things. There's also a being who could cut men in half with his mind alone. I'm still trying to figure out what Gift that could possibly be but, regardless, that Gifted was burned at the stake for his crimes. He cried out that it was the demon living inside him that did these things, that he had no control of his Gift when the instances occurred."

Both of them look equally shocked and calculating at this news.

"How much of this do you think the Resistance knows?" North says as he pushes up out of his seat and walks over to the large window, looking down at the city he is slowly building, the last relic of the goodness within the Draven line that no one ever seems to acknowledge. They just cower in fear of the shadow creatures we control.

"There's only so much that we could guess, given what we know," Gryphon says as he raises his cup of terrible coffee to his lips. "We have two Resistance members locked in the cells under the Tech Center. Now might be a good time to be a little more creative in our questioning."

North sighs and shakes his head. "Any more creativity and we cross the line with what we had promised Atlas. I'm not going to bring dishonesty into our Bonded Group. We've fought too hard for it to lose it now."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oli

I'm expecting Gabe and Atlas to have questions or some sort of reaction to my admission about my parents' death, but both of them are more concerned with my reaction to North's revelation than the news itself.

It's both comforting to know that they really will love me no matter what and a little disconcerting, because they should be at least a little concerned for their own safety being around me, shouldn't they?

"Didn't North's bond specifically tell you that none of us can hurt each other? Listen, I'm upset for you. That your parents died that way... it sounds *horrific* for you and them, and it's such a heavy thing for you to have been carrying for so long. But if you think that I'm thinking of myself in this moment and not you, then clearly I have done something wrong so far in our relationship, Sweetness," Atlas says to me as though I'm being incredibly dense.

Gabe is more quiet about it, but he still wraps me up in his arms tightly. When I move to pull away from him, he murmurs, "Don't run away from me again. You promised."

I have to swallow harshly against the lump in my throat, but I nod to him, turning away to swipe a hand over my eyes to banish any errant tears that might think about working their way out.

I still feel as though there should be more to this than just 'you're our Bonded and we love you', but they both get up and get dressed to start our

day, even if it is hours after we normally do.

“Am I getting dressed to work on houses or go back to the training center?” I mumble around my toothbrush as Gabe showers and Atlas brushes his teeth alongside me.

Gabe ducks his head under the water to rinse out the shampoo as he calls out, “Neither. We have a new wave of families joining the Sanctuary today. I was planning on going down to meet with them to help figure out where we're putting them all. My uncle is coming along with them and his Bonded Group. A few of my cousins too. All of them are builders, so we might finally make some extra headway on the next batch of houses.”

My eyebrows slowly creep up my forehead as I finish up with my toothbrush. “You have family here and you weren't planning on telling me? What is it with you guys and springing relatives on me?”

Gabe cuts the water as he chuckles, grabbing a towel and turning his back on us to wrap it around himself. I get a small peek at his gloriously tanned abs as he moves. Atlas scoffs at me, nudging me gently with his shoulder as though he's teasing me for my reactions. At this point, I think they're pretty standard.

They all know I find them hot.

“North and Gryphon have been behind in vetting people, so they've only just gotten the approval to come through. I didn't realize my uncle's family would be in this batch until North told me last night. You were at the dinner table when he told me, but I guess you were preoccupied.”

Preoccupied.

Freaking the hell out about what had North so on edge is what I was, but I guess that's a pretty good way of saying it.

“Do you like this uncle, or do we have another General situation on our hands? Because I have to admit, there is only so much sassy Oli I can throw around before my bond comes out and deals with people itself.”

Gabe chuckles and walks over to me, dropping a kiss on the top of my head as he grabs his own toothbrush. “My uncle is great. He has a lot of opinions about my mom though, so you should probably prepare yourself to pick a side in that argument.”

I start brushing out my hair, watching Atlas pull on his boots as we finish up getting ready. His ass is also very biteable, and I enjoy all of the bending over that's happening around here right now. It's getting hard to focus on the conversation I'm supposed to be having.

“What's the argument?”

Atlas glances up to me, smirking like a smug asshole at my wandering eyes as I take in the strong lines of his flexing arms. I wiggle my eyebrows back at him, not at all upset to be caught ogling him as well.

Maybe we could sneak in a super quick threesome before we leave. Is there any such thing as a ‘quick threesome’? We should try it out.

For science.

“He’s an uncle on my dad's side of the family, so he believes that my mother is nothing but a useless wife who should be exiled from the community for practically abandoning me after my father died.”

My heart squeezes in my chest, all the fun flirting melting away from me as I focus back on Gabe. He says it all very matter of factly, as though it doesn't really bother him to speak of his mother like that, but the tense lines of his shoulders say exactly how he truly feels. We've spoken little about his mother, only that she's still alive, but Gabe has no interest in the two of us meeting.

I pushed it with him once, more out of my own insecurity because I thought he was trying to hide me. It was then that he admitted that his mother struggled to grasp what day of the week it was. The two of us meeting would only be distressing for him, rather than bring any sort of joy.

I'm not in the habit of traumatizing my Bonds any more than they already have been.

Not when I can help it at least.

I'm careful with how I word my question, my words coming out slow. “Where exactly in the argument do you stand? Because I'm pretty sure I'll be at your side, no matter what.”

He shoots a grateful smile over his shoulder, though it's a tired one, as though simply starting this conversation about his mother drains the life right out of him. “I’m at the place where I agree with my uncle that my mother made a lot of bad decisions about how she would cope with my father's death... but I'm also her son and responsible for her, so I'm not just going to abandon my responsibilities to her because of something as small as my own feelings on the matter.”

I don't feel like his feelings are a small thing at all. But he continues as he pulls a shirt on over his head. “I wasn't alone, either. I had the rest of my Bonded Group. Gryphon and the Draven brothers didn't just welcome me with open arms... they filled in any gaps in my life that my mother might

have left behind for me. When I graduated high school, all three of them came. North signed all the paperwork for my college acceptance with me. Gryphon took me car shopping and did his best to talk me out of the motorcycle because he thought he was supposed to be steering me towards a safer option, even though he test drove it with me and bought one for himself as well. When I started struggling with my classes after Gryphon found you and brought you back, Nox stayed up with me and got me back to where I needed to be to stay on the football team. I just... I stopped going home for dinner and just went to the Draven mansion for years, because they were my family now. It could have been *a lot* worse, and I need to extend that goodwill to my mother. She had just lost her chances of ever having a family in the same way that mine was being built in those moments. I can hate my experience as much as I want, but I'm not going to let that dictate how I respond."

I duck forward to wrap my arms around Gabe's waist, pressing my face into his back between his shoulder blades and inhaling the clean smell of him. My lungs fill up with the scent of my own shampoo mixed with his, the mishmash that they all now share thanks to the one bathroom situation we're all still holding on to despite other options.

"You're a good man, Gabe. Better than I deserve."

"Definitely better than the rest of us," Atlas gripes, and Gabe scoffs at him, shoving him with his free arm as the other comes to lay against my own as he holds me there against his back.

"That's not hard, Bassinger."

The small town center is bustling with bodies when we get down there, not all of them are newcomers. There are a lot of people volunteering to help move groups and families into houses, everyone coming together to welcome more Gifted into the Sanctuary and into the relative safety we have found here. My heart clenches in my chest as I watch families being reunited, people calling out to siblings or aunties and uncles, even some Bonded Groups coming back together now that the vetting process has been completed and we're able to move more people in.

Gabe walks with my hand in his, smiling and chatting to people happily, like the little social butterfly he's always been. Atlas scoffs at him from my other side. His arm is tight around my shoulder as we work our way through to the center where the rest of our Bonded Group is waiting for us, minus Nox, who is still on his research binge.

I make a mental note to grab him some lunch and take it up to him later.

Gabe only releases my hand when we reach the others, and he moves forward to hug a man that I assume is his uncle.

The man has a kind-sounding voice and seems to be genuinely happy to have his arms full of his nephew. "Have you gotten taller, Gabriel? I didn't think that was possible! You were already a beast of a boy when I last saw you."

When Gabe pulls back, he slaps at his uncle's shoulder with a grin. "No, Jeremy, just wider, thanks to a city needing to be built. I'm definitely glad to have some more experienced hands on deck."

Jeremy nods and jerks his head at the two teenage boys behind him. "We're here, and we're ready. We're glad to be out of harm's way. Things were getting pretty bad out there."

Gabe frowns a little and nods, slapping his shoulder again. "Sorry it took so long. I'm glad you're all here safe now. I can see that you've already met North and Gryphon. Let me introduce you to Oli, my Bonded, and Atlas, the last of our Bonded Group. Nox is busy with his books."

I step forward and reach out my hand to shake Jeremy's, his grasp firm but friendly, dropping away the moment that I release his hand, and he smiles warmly at me.

This is probably the closest I'll come to meeting Gabe's parents, so I do my best to sound friendly and not at all like a monstrous Soul Render here to destroy the Gifted Community for shits and giggles. "It's good to finally meet you. I'm glad to hear that Gabriel finally has someone keeping him in line."

Gryphon scoffs a little, smiling warmly enough at Jeremy that it tells me a lot about the man's character. Gryphon is the harshest judge, especially when it involves someone in the Bonded Group. "I'm not sure Oli keeps him out of trouble, it's more that she finds herself in it enough to keep the rest of us distracted and busy."

My jaw drops playfully, and I shoot Jeremy a mock scandalized look. "I would never throw myself into trouble. It's not my fault it's attracted to me."

Atlas smirks and presses a kiss into my temple. "Who wouldn't be?"

I bump him gently with my hip, happy to be standing around flirting with them all as though we're just a normal Bonded Group. Jeremy looks warmly at us all, not concerned with the rumors of who, and what, we are.

He gestures at the teenage boys standing slightly awkwardly behind him. "These are my sons, Arlo and Ezra. Their moms are already at the house we've been assigned. They wanted to get my little girl settled before the crowd got too overwhelming for her; she gets overstimulated pretty easily."

Gabe nods and helps direct Jeremy through the crowd, the rest of us trailing behind him. I let my hand slip into North's as the councilman smile stays fixed on his mouth.

He greets everybody politely as we walk through the Gifted, those who had been here for months all greet him back just as warmly, but the newcomers seem a little nervous around him. It creeps down my spine like an irritating itch, but I have to remind myself that the rumors about the Dravens are extensive, and most of these people will have nothing but those stories to go on. It's natural for them to be a little hesitant about a man who has been portrayed by everybody in his community to be nothing more than a mindless monster with shadow nightmares that are poised and ready to rip them apart at a moment's notice.

None of them know the North Draven who has spent his entire life breaking his own back to support his community, who has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into this city, if not billions, for no reason other than his own integrity and morals. None of them know all of the things he sacrificed for them, because he's not just a good person, he's the best of the best.

"If you keep giving me those eyes in public, we're going to disgrace ourselves, Bonded."

North's words don't stop me from staring at him in adoration. If anything, they make it worse. He's still smiling and greeting everyone around us, but there's a warmth in him, a relaxed sort of ease that says how happy he is within himself.

It bleeds out and soaks into me as well until I feel almost giddy around him.

We break away from the town center and the concentration of bodies as we walk towards the unfinished section of the town, the next development

that North and Gabe have been working on. Gabe starts pointing out to Jeremy and his cousins all of the work that he has been doing, the areas that need more supplies, and the various stages of incompleteness. There's at least twenty houses that are at the lock-up stage at a standstill while they wait for the right skilled workers to be able to go in there and complete things such as plumbing and electricity. There's forty more houses that are waiting for the glaziers to finish putting in the windows and fourteen more that are still having walls and roofs put up.

"Is this enough to house the Bonded Groups that are here?" Jeremy asks as he looks around, and North nods.

"If we are able to put two Bonded Groups in each house, then yes. Long term, we would like everybody to have their own residence if they want to."

Jeremy nods and looks further out. "How much land do you have here?"

North follows his gaze and his fingers flex in mine a little. "The entire valley and a significant portion around it. We're hoping to be able to move another wave of Gifted in in the next month or so as well, so as much as you can get done as quickly and as safely as possible is what we're aiming for here, because Gabe is going to be pulled away for other work soon."

Jeremy glances at his nephew and then back to North. "Other work that's more important than this?"

He's not questioning him exactly, more like he's trying to get a read of the situation, and Gabe leaves it to North to decide how much we are willing to say.

But my Bonded always has an answer for everything.

"I'm sure you've already heard about the differences our Bonded Group has to others. It's safer if we're all together, and we can't just run and hide from the Resistance forever. The best way to keep people safe is to stop them from being hunted in the first place, so we would appreciate all of your help in getting these houses finished for the people taking refuge here, but we are also going to be on the offensive."

Jeremy nods, squaring himself up and rolling his shoulders back as though he's preparing himself for a fight, but he's busy looking at the buildings. The war he is preparing to wage is the one that he is most skilled in.

"There's nothing to worry about, Councilman Draven. We'll have these houses finished in no time. A lot of my workers also came through in this portion of the move in, and we're all happy to pull our own weight in this

community. There isn't a single person who made the move who isn't aware of what you're doing for everyone. I, for one, appreciate my kids being safe because of you. The more people we can get out of the Resistance's path, the better."

Aside from Kyrie, this man has cemented himself as my favorite family member of the Bonded Group, and I shoot Gabe a grin, happy to see how proud and relieved he looks at his uncle's words.

Jeremy looks around again before nodding. "Building houses on the fly isn't easy, and you've all done an incredible job for the community."

North holds out a hand to shake Jeremy's as though they're sealing a deal. The moment he lets go, Jeremy starts walking towards the houses with his sons, speaking to them about what they're going to tackle and how best to go about getting everything done.

Gabe lets out a breath and rubs his hands over his eyes. "Thank fuck, it's not all on me anymore."

North nods and slaps his shoulder. "You should be proud of getting it this far, Gabe. You really did an excellent job, and Bassinger too."

Atlas shrugs and kicks his feet against the dusty path like he's feeling uncomfortable taking the praise. "I mostly lifted things. Oli's the one who learned how to tile like a pro."

He's trying to shift the focus, so I help him out, laughing and pretending to flex my muscles. "I carried things too! There was also that one time that you saved Gabe from being squashed by a bathtub, that was pretty impressive."

Gabe groans. "Don't remind me. He's still giving me shit about not securing it properly in the first place, but he would have never figured out about his power growing if I hadn't, so silver linings and all that."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Oli

As the days slowly go on, the tension in our Bonded Group grows.

We know that the peace we're feeling can only last a short amount of time before we are thrust back into a fight with the Resistance. All of the training and hard work we've been putting into place will have to hold up against our enemy, something that can only really be tested when we're in the line of fire.

I spend my mornings down at the Tac Training Center working through drills and sparring with Sage and Aro. My afternoons are spent either building with Gabe and Atlas or reading through translations of texts with Nox in North's offices.

Reading about the other times that the gods had been here is both jarring and familiar. The edges of my memories catch on snippets, as though if I could just clear my mind a little more, I could remember those moments myself. It brings into question the things that Jericho had said, because though the gods had been here before, I'm supposed to be nothing more than a vessel. By his count, I'm brand new, so I shouldn't be able to remember anything. Yet my mind keeps getting stuck on the little details, the little horrifying snippets that I can't stop obsessing over. The dragon. The god who wields madness. The one who had been burned at the stake for tearing men apart in a void-eyed fury, who had said with his dying words that it was the demon inside of him.

Something about them all is so familiar to me, and yet, how could it possibly be? None of the details that grab at me make any sense, and when I tentatively question Nox about it, he stares at me for a moment before he pulls out a small list of his own.

“I started keeping track of it as well. I've been meaning to give it to North to see if he can remember too, but I haven't made the time yet.”

I stare down at the list and find that it isn't too different from my own.

Bleeding out on a field of roses, a sword thrust through the heart.

A death of exposure.

A corpse hanging from a tree.

Each of these things are nothing more than words on a page, but something about them... something is familiar. I question my bond, but it has nothing to say to me, creeping back into the dark corners of my mind as it goes back to its hibernation stage. I hope that it's reserving its energy for our next big fight, but something about this feels so *vital*, as though the words aren't just tugging at my memory but irritating some ancient wound within my soul.

I wake up on the morning of the next council meeting, tangled up in a pile of limbs with a sense of dread hanging over me. Gryphon is already up and in the shower, the bathroom door open just a little, a sliver of light breaking through the bedroom.

North is still sleeping happily where he is wrapped around me, and Gabe is on his back next to me, snoring just a little, one of his hands tucked in my own. Atlas is on the far side of the bed since it's his turn to be on the edge, and he doesn't look any happier than I am, even in his sleep.

I wriggle out from between my Bonded and make my way quietly over to the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes and slipping into the shower with Gryphon where he's scrubbing the shampoo out of his hair. He doesn't turn as he hears the door open, but he speaks directly into my mind so as to not wake anyone up. *You should be getting some extra sleep, Bonded. The council meeting is not going to be easy for any of us.*

I slip my arms around his waist as soon as he's gotten all the shampoo out of his hair and tip my face up to meet his lips as I answer him. *I'll sleep in when you do.*

He sighs and then his hands come down to grip my thighs, lifting me up until I'm wrapped around him. The water works its way down us both as I try not to squeal at the move.

I can't play around when I know what's coming for us. I feel like every second that I'm not training or planning is a second wasted, one that might be the difference between us getting out of there alive or not.

This isn't the sort of foreplay talk I am hoping for, and I cup both of his cheeks in my hands as I kiss him back, hoping to wash away the worries in him.

He's tense under my fingers, the muscles in his shoulders rock hard even though I know it isn't a strain on him to hold me up, and I can't lose myself in the kiss while I'm too busy freaking out about what I could possibly do to fix this for him. Well, maybe not fix it, because short of leaving the Sanctuary right now to hunt Davies and the Resistance myself, there's not a lot I can do about that situation, but if I could just find a way to soothe this tension in him a little...

Isn't that what Bonded are supposed to be able to do for each other?

I'm not going to let them get you again. I'm not going to lose you to Silas Davies again, Bonded.

I shiver at the dark promise in his words, but when I glance up at his face, his eyes flash at me. I blink rapidly, my mind attempting to rationalize what I thought I saw, but there's no way. No chance that I could have seen it.

He couldn't have had void eyes.

It's hard to sit still in a room full of council members and the leaders in our community, including Vivian and Unser, when I had spent the morning getting the life fucked out of me by Gryphon against a cold, tiled wall.

I'd spent the entire time watching his eyes, but there were no signs of change in them, and I started to tell myself that I'm clearly going freaking crazy. The history books I've been reading with Nox have obviously wormed their way into my brain, and I'm seeing things that aren't really there.

Three gods and a pissy dragon is more than we can handle.

I feel hyperaware of my Bonds sitting around me at the table. I don't want to be forced to sit here and listen to people trying to question them and

belittle them even while they're killing themselves to keep everybody safe and alive.

You need to stop fidgeting before I drag you out of here and give you something to fidget about, North sends through to me directly, but because he is evil, he does it where everyone else can hear it.

Gryphon is quick to supply, *The problem is that somebody already has given her that, and instead of scratching the itch, it's only made it worse.*

Someone, huh? Atlas sends through, and I try to keep my face completely blank as Vivian takes his seat across from us.

He's as close as I'm ever gonna get to a father figure who is still alive, and I feel mortified at the conversation happening in my head right now. The fact that it's happening so close to him is just freaking bad.

You can't have done a good enough job if she's still squirming that much, Atlas snarks with a smirk on his perfect face for the whole damn room to see.

I hate them all.

Instead of playing along with any of them, I put the walls back up in my mind and send Nox a pleading look from where he is glowering at the entire meeting room from over by the coffee machine. He's just as good a mind reader as his brother is and brings me a mug the size of my head, threatening Gabe with nothing more than a look to get him to move down so that I'm flanked by the Draven brothers.

Half of the council stares at my entire Bonded Group like we're their worst nightmares come to life, and that is enough to get the smile back on my face.

It lasts about a minute before the General walks back in and takes up his own seat at the far end of the table. I swear that man was supposed to have left the town by now, gone back out on mission somewhere, but he just seemed to be lingering like a bad smell. A teensy, tiny part of me feels guilty about thinking that about my own Bonded's father. That lasts only about as long as it takes for me to get a good look at how the General is glaring at our entire Bonded Group.

His son included.

It makes me murderous, but I really should settle down with those sorts of thoughts, because my bond doesn't need any assistance in planning out the deaths of anyone around me today.

It's already chomping at the bit.

“Thank you everyone for joining us today. There have been significant changes in our stance with the Resistance, and we are hoping to be able to keep you all in the loop on how things are about to proceed.”

There's a quiet murmuring around the table at North's words, and though most of it is positive, there are some disgruntled noises that I try to ignore.

“As you all know, we have just opened the doors of the Sanctuary to sixty-five more families and, though we have some people sleeping in the Community Center in town, we're close to having enough houses for everyone. I have spoken with Jeremy Ardern, who is joining us today, and we are confident that we will be able to fit the growing needs of the community in the coming weeks, as well as continue to expand for the next wave of Gifted who have been vetted.”

The General makes a grunting noise, and North's eyes snap over to him.

“This vetting process seems to be taking too long, considering the amount of people who have reached out to come here. What are you doing about that?”

I *feel* Gryphon flinch from where he's sitting, two seats down. I don't need to see it to know that it's there. He's already feeling the weight of the entire community on top of him being the only person with a built-in lie detector and the only person that North trusts with such a decision. He's already being pulled in five different directions, and the reason that the vetting has slowed down is because we decided as a group that we would all be going out together from now on and no longer splitting up.

I want to kill the General for making such a comment.

North is quick to redirect him away from his own son. “This community is not funded by the council or any other pooled resource point, ergo, no one outside of the Draven Family Trust has a say on how we vet people or the time in which it takes for that process to happen. You are all here at my discretion, every last one of you is here because my Bonded Group allows it. While we are happy to listen to any concerns that you may have, it's up to us whether or not we choose to act on such things. The alternative is, of course, returning to your homes.”

There's a tension in the silence that wasn't there before, every man and woman at the table stewing in the notice North just put them on.

Jeremy casts a look down the table at the General before he addresses the group. “The Resistance are taking hundreds of Gifted a day. I don't

know whether they chose to amp things up because they're ready to or whether they're becoming desperate, but that's the reality of what life outside of this place is like. I suggest you all think about that before you start throwing around accusations baselessly."

Hundreds a day.

I feel sick to my stomach, and there's a small trickle of guilt in me that we're not doing more for everyone. I have to remind myself that we're planning to go back to the Wastelands again to wipe out more of our enemy in the coming days.

"The best way to keep people safe is to get rid of the enemy entirely, and we've moved from the defensive position that we have been in for years, decades, at this point, to now taking the fight to the Resistance. We will be heading back to the Alaskan Wasteland in the coming days."

Alaskan Wasteland. I can't wait to be tits-deep in snow while fighting for my life; the Resistance sure knows how to pick a great place for a fight. I wonder whether they have snow leopard shifters or something running that division, because I can't think of many Gifted who would be able to use the snow as an advantage. I also wonder if Sage can set people on fire if they're surrounded by snow. An important question for my bestie, but it would be incredibly rude to pull my phone out right now while North is talking, so it'll have to wait.

"Is the Alaskan Wasteland the best use of our resources? Could we not go after the smaller Wastelands and shut them down before moving to the larger one?" one of the council members asks.

I have no idea who she is, but she doesn't seem to be asking in an antagonistic way. Her face is open and clear, and the men who sit on either side of her watch North carefully, clearly interested in his answer.

Surprisingly, Gryphon is the one who speaks up. "The Alaskan Wasteland is going to be very difficult to win and shut down because of where it is and the size of it. The strongest of their Shields, the one not being utilized at the camps, is currently manning it. If we leave it till last, there's the potential that we will never get it shut down. Newer and less experienced recruits *could* potentially deal with the smaller camps, and we're hoping to be able to utilize those resources there."

'We're throwing everything we have at the Alaskan shithole' would be the translation of his words, but I try to look confident from where I'm

sitting. This entire meeting is becoming a test of my patience and how far I can be pushed before I lose my shit.

I'm proud of how far I'm making it.

"Couldn't your Bonded walk in and empty them for us?" one of the men says, though his voice is very careful.

He's obviously trying to convey a respectful sort of questioning, but Nox leans forward in his chair anyway.

"Maybe we should just send *your* Bonded in. It'd be the most that she's done since getting the seat from her useless mother," he mutters under his breath, though loud enough that the entire table hears it, and I have to bite my lip at the scandalized looks on their faces.

I'm not sure what they were expecting from Nox, but clearly they haven't interacted with him enough to know that you don't poke him without catching the brunt of his acidic tongue.

"What about the camps? Why are we focusing on the Wastelands when there are still camps full of prisoners that we could be focusing our efforts on?" Councilman Hannity says, his fingers fidgeting nervously in front of him as he deflects away from Nox's quiet outburst.

I'm not sure if he is moving the attention away from Nox as a favor to North or whether he is just naturally opposed to conflict, but he looks nervous as he practically squirms in his seat. His eyes keep darting across to North—it's as though he is an excitable puppy looking for approval.

I have to bite my lip from smiling at that image in my head as well, just as clear as the last.

"The largest camp was dismantled by Shore and his TacTeam on their way in," North says, and it takes me a second to realize that he means the General and not Gryphon.

Hannity looks shocked. "I had no idea that that had taken place, but I'm glad to hear it. How many survivors were brought in?"

A muscle on North's cheek flicks as he grinds his teeth. "Eleven."

"Eleven people?" The words shoot out of my mouth before I have the chance to bite them back, and the General shoots me a filthy look.

The one that North gives me is a lot softer, something that almost feels too private to be happening in this room, but he can feel the way my stomach has given way. "Yes, Bonded. Eleven people."

My mind is empty for another second of shock, but then the information really soaks in. The rage I am flooded with is so consuming that my bond

wakes up inside of me and a ripple flows through my Bonded Group and the entire room as it does. The General has not been around my bond, so he has no idea of the danger that he's in as I peg him with a look of my own.

How dare he come in here with accusations about Gryphon, his own goddamned son.

“You walked into the biggest camp of the Resistance, shut it down, and only brought out *eleven* prisoners?”

The General doesn't even bother to look sheepish about it. “Everybody knows that you don't bring back survivors from the camps. Most of the people in there are already broken shells. The people we got out were hard fought for.” He says it all as though I'm supposed to be congratulating him. Here I was, thinking that I couldn't find much else to hate the man for. Boy, was I wrong.

“You might not bring home survivors. That's your story, not mine.”

He glances at North as though he's expecting my councilman Bonded to step in and disagree with me, and then his eyes flick over to Gryphon as an afterthought.

My bond doesn't like that either.

“Well, how many do you bring home then, if you're so amazing, because the average is—”

I cut him off before he can get his stupidity out. “I'm aware of what the average is amongst the groups that don't have me and my Bonded in it. I'm also aware of what our average is, and it sounds to me like you walked in there, guns blazing, not giving a fuck about the Gifted who were trapped there. How many children were in that camp?”

His eyes narrow at me dangerously, but I'm not afraid of this man. “Not that many.”

“You don't even know exactly how many children were in the camp that you took out?”

His lip curls, and as I stand, the palms of my hands make a smacking sound as they hit the table. I lean forward aggressively, and the moment the General moves to stand as well, as though he's trying to stay in a position of power, Gryphon's eyes flash to white as he keeps his father in his seat. It's the ultimate act of rebellion, and I fucking love my Bonded for it.

“I know how many children are in every camp we walk into. I know how many Resistance are in every camp we walk into, and you know what? Your son does too. North knows the casualties of every camp that every one

of his TacTeams walks into. Nox knows. Gabe knows. Atlas knows. A Bassinger, that you are so intent on loathing, knows the cost of this war more than you do.”

His teeth grind in his mouth, but Gryphon won’t let him stand.

I’m too pent up to stop, too angry at the council and these useless Gifted at the weight they put on my Bonded’s shoulders. How dare they all question and judge every little thing that we’re doing while there are men like this being given all the leeway in the world?

Disgusting.

My arms tremble with rage, but I zero in on him. “And what did you win from this camp that you took out? Sure, you wiped the Resistance there from the map, and sure, that’s what we need, but what else? What intel? What trophy? Which of the higher members of the Resistance did you bring in as a prisoner or take out? What was the win that you got from all of that death and destruction?”

Gryphon doesn’t need to stop him from speaking—the General has no words to give me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gryphon

My parents' Bonded Group leaves the Sanctuary shortly after the meeting with the council.

Despite my complicated relationship with my parents, I feel nothing but pride at my Bonded and our entire Bonded Group with how they had handled themselves in the face of the General's ire.

To have Oli stand up for us all without hesitation, the vehemence and pride in her voice as she had talked about the responsibilities that we all carry when dealing with the Resistance, had lifted some of that pressure off of myself. A little of the guilt has eased away now, knowing that we are doing our best and we have limited resources. We're pushing ahead for our community and those around us.

I leave the meeting and head straight to Sawyer at his request. He's still in the Security Office, which we have now dubbed 'Sawyer's Den' from how much time he spends in there at the computers, working through security footage and monitoring all of our systems to keep the Sanctuary running smoothly.

He's been a godsend for North and I. We'd never had a Technokinetic before, not one that we had trusted and certainly not one as powerful as Sawyer, and the fact that we can argue with him and tell him exactly how it is just makes the situation even easier on us all.

His message to me had been simple. *I found something. See me ASAP.*

I should probably feel apprehensive or hesitant at his text, a signal for our next move against the Resistance, but I don't. I always feel in control and calmest when we are in action, and this time of preparing here at the Sanctuary has just made me even more ready to get on the road.

I catch Nox as I start towards the elevator, jerking my head for him to follow, and without a word, he does. The greatest gift in disguise was the soul-bonding and Nox figuring out a way around his trauma. Even if it had aged North and I a good twenty years, years we will never get back, I'm sure.

When the doors slam shut behind us, I get my phone out and show him the text from Sawyer. He gives me a curt nod and reaches up to rub at his eyes. He's still not sleeping.

He shrugs without me saying a word. "I can't. As soon as I shut my eyes, I start thinking about the bonds in history. I keep having nightmares that don't feel like my own. It feels like... forget it."

My eyes narrow. "If the last six months of learning about your bond, not to mention North's, has taught me anything, it's that any little gut feeling you have, we need to listen to, Nox."

"It feels like they're my bond's memories, but I was there too. They're not my own... but I was there. I don't know how to explain this without sounding like I'm going insane."

I blow out a breath and run my hands through my hair, pulling it up to tie into a low ponytail to get it away from my face. I should just cut it off, but some part of me likes the normality of my hair, the one active protest I ever had against my father and his militant ways. The only one I kept into adulthood after I had a house of my own, a job of my own, and a Bonded Group of my own.

Everything I could ever want, all of my own.

"Have you spoken to North about it?"

His brows furrow and he shrugs. "I mentioned it, but he's had so much bullshit going on with the council that he's barely given it a look. I spoke to Oleander, though. She's not having the nightmares, but she recognizes the deaths like I do."

When the elevator stops and the doors begin to open, Nox presses the stop button before they get very far.

This isn't good.

"You should read them."

I scowl at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Gabe's dragon was in history. It's shown up once, but I've also found a bond that can get into people's minds. They call that a fortune teller, because it always knew the answers to things before people had spoken. The same black eyes, but with your abilities. You should read the list as well."

"My bond doesn't have a voice. It doesn't have anything other than feelings. The same as every other bond but yours."

Nox nods and then he turns to me, fixing me with a look. His eyes are dark on my own, that same dark blue hue they have when he is fixated on something.

"I don't think Oleander's bond made Gabe's bond into a god. I don't think that's possible. I think it woke it up."

Sawyer needs to leave his den a little more often.

You'd think now that he's found his own Central Bonded, he would have some motivation to go home and spend some time with her. Judging from the state of his den, he has not been getting out much.

The air is stale in the room, and there's a mountain of energy drinks scattered across his desk, half drunk and discarded for a fresh one, purely because he can't focus for long enough to drink one while it's still cold.

"What have you found?" I say, trying not to sound disgusted at the state of the place, but it's hard. I'm not a neat freak like North is, but I definitely don't live like a fucking pig. This place is just plain disgusting.

"I didn't find it so much as I was sent it, and by that, I mean Atlas."

I roll my eyes because anything to do with Atlas is a very quick trigger for Nox.

Soul-bonding with Oli had done exactly *nothing* to improve their relationship, and I almost regret bringing him with me.

Sawyer sees my pain and shoots Nox a look. "That phone we confiscated off of him? Yeah, his mom still texts it now and then. I think she knows that he doesn't have it anymore, so it's probably more of a reflex or maybe she's hoping that someday he'll get it back. Whatever it is, her latest texts were enough to catch my attention."

Nox isn't so subtle about sneering at the mess of the place, but he walks over to the desk to read the text that Sawyer has pulled up on his system. "What the fuck does that mean?"

I step forward and read it for myself.

Time is almost up, Atlas. I want you to know that everything that I did was for you. This will make me a traitor to the cause, but I am your mother first and a Bassinger second. I always will be. Try to get your sister out if you can. This life was never meant for her. Her mother was too weak to protect her like I protected you. I hope you're happy with your Bonded. I love you.

I read the message twice before I shoot Nox a look, but he's glaring at the screen just as hard as I am, as though he's trying to find some secret message hidden between the words.

"That's not all," Sawyer says. "She also sent through a file. It was encrypted but easy enough to get into."

I already know it's big, because Sawyer isn't just saying it. There's lots of pomp and drama, the way there always is when it's something big. He clicks on the screen a few times and brings up the file before leaning back in his chair and leaving us to read it.

"Holy fuck."

"That's all the locations," Nox says.

I reply, "All of the planned locations—"

Sawyer cuts in before we can continue. "It's all the locations, the planned locations, where people are allocated, what security they have; it's everything. It's every goddamn thing. It's the key to taking out the Resistance, and Atlas' mom has just handed it over to us, purely to keep her son alive."

I scowl at the screen because there's absolutely no way it's not a trap.

When I say as much, Nox cocks his head at me. "You'd think that, but this is also the woman who protected Oleander and kept her hidden from everyone just to be sure that her son couldn't be used as a pawn in her Bond's games."

I look back at the screen, memorizing places and names as quickly as I can, as though merely by reading it, the screen is going to self-destruct and we're going to lose it all.

We can't just take this 'gift' at face value.

I point at one of the glowing dots on the screen. “This camp is close enough to a town that I could verify it pretty easily.”

Nox says, his patience slipping, “We could easily check all of these locations by sending Kieran to the ones that don't have Locators protecting them. Which we now know, thanks to these lists.”

“We can't send Kieran,” I say, and Nox rolls his eyes at me.

“Just because he's our friend—”

I interrupt him. “I'm not saying it because he's our friend. I'm saying it because he's the strongest Transporter. We have the only one who can transport our entire Bonded Group and TacTeam at the same time. We can't risk him over a recon. We have others we can send in his stead just to scout it and see whether it's true or not.”

“And if it is true?” Sawyer asks, his eyebrows reaching his hairline.

I shouldn't say anything to him, not by official Tac procedures anyway, but he's the closest thing we have to family, the one we've chosen instead of the one that we were born into, some of whom had happily stood in front of a room full of unfriendly faces to attempt to tear us down.

“Then we make a plan, and we wipe the Resistance off of the face of the earth before they come after our families again. We get rid of them all.”

My mind keeps slipping back to Nox's words, but I can't find a way to rationalize any of it.

I usually leave the research and history parts of this job to Nox and North. Not only are they both more well-read than I am on the subjects, but they enjoy it. Talking through the tiny minutia of our society and how we've come to be is like crack to them both. While I am perfectly capable of joining in if I choose to, it's not really my forte.

I don't need to know the history of my Gift to be good at working my way through people's heads. Discovering whatever I need to know about what makes them tick to keep our Bonded Group in the clear is as easy as breathing to me, but now... I can't deny that I'm intrigued. Enough that I want to read up on what it is that Nox is talking about.

I don't feel like I've been here before.

I'm not sure what exactly that's supposed to feel like, but I've never questioned the limitations or boundaries of my Gift. Even after Oli and I had Bonded and I suddenly found myself without limits, there had never been a doubt in me that it was my connection with her that had given me that boost. Never once did I think that it might come from something more, something inside of me.

I check in with my bond again, but it doesn't feel any different. Nothing about Nox's words had opened up anything inside of me, but I doubt he'd be the one to trigger anything anyway.

It would have to be my Bonded.

I check in with her and find her and Sage sparring in the training center together. Now that she can block me out, a frustration I am too stubborn to bitch Nox out about, I find it harder to get a gauge on where she is or how she's feeling. The walls inside of her are now permanently up, unless she decides to let me in.

I understand her need for privacy. Being exposed all the time wasn't fair to her, but it doesn't help dampen my anxiety. She feels me brush up against the wall inside of her mind and lets it down a little, just enough to communicate with me.

Are you okay? Has something happened?

I chew on the inside of my cheek so that no one around me notices the tension slipping away from me at the sound of her voice.

Everything's fine. I just needed my Bonded for a minute, sorry to distract you.

I feel her flush of happiness through the connection. *Don't apologize for needing me. I always need you too. Are you busy? Can you come help fix my form? Kieran is a tyrant.*

Kieran is helping her with her form at my request because I've found myself too wrapped up in planning to properly focus on what my Bonded needs.

The looming deadline of our next mission hangs over our heads.

Just because the rest of the Bonded Group and I are going to do everything in our power to make sure that she never has to go hand to hand with someone doesn't mean we'll be successful in that, and I never want to have a regret about how much she was taught here.

I already have too many regrets when it comes to her.

I can't. I'm working on something with Nox. I'll see you tonight though. We'll come down for dinner at the house.

She sends me her feeling of contentment at my words, the emotion pouring into my chest the same way as if I was feeling it myself.

Will you sleep next to me tonight? Do you think you could convince Nox to let us both sleep in his room? Atlas is still jumpy about the shadow creatures being out, and I miss them too.

Nox would rather chew his own arm off than let any of us sleep in his room. The fact that he had allowed North in there when Oli freaked out says more about their relationship change than anything else that has happened since.

You can stay with him tonight and have me tomorrow if you need, Bonded. I can share when I need to.

North reads over the paper in his hand three times as the elevator takes us down to the cells below. It doesn't matter that he's read the information already a dozen times in the safety of his office; he's still working through it the same way I did, as though trying to commit it to memory.

"How sure of this can we be?" he mutters, and even though I know he's talking to himself, I answer.

"As sure as we can be of anything. We'll still have to proceed as though this is a booby trap, but Evans has already checked out three of the camps. All of them are there, and from what he can tell, the information is accurate."

He nods again, the same way he has every other time I've given him this information, but I don't blame his disbelief.

I'm struggling with it myself.

It would have been much easier if Atlas' mother had turned herself in. If she were standing here in front of me, I could have easily gone through her brain until I found some whiff of a lie, but with nothing but the cold, hard information on the page, we have to find different avenues to try first.

We haven't told Atlas yet.

We're not keeping a secret from him, or from Oli, but we're planning on having as much information as we can have before we head back to the house tonight to face them and tell them what's going on.

I'm hoping that doesn't backfire on us all.

We want to have our own opinion of the situation before we get Atlas', because as much as we all try to stay neutral about these things... it's his

mother. The woman did attempt to protect Atlas, and in doing so, protected our Bonded. There's no doubt in my mind that he will have some biases because of that alone.

Honestly, I would too.

We walk through the hallway together, down past the cells. I take a quick look at the sorry state that Aurelia is in. With Jericho here, she has started to eat again, thanks to his coaxing through the cell doors, but she's still thinner than when we had brought her in. Her cheekbones press up through her sunken skin, and her shoulder bones stick out as though they're trying to break the skin.

She watches us walk past with lifeless, apathetic eyes.

North waits until I have gotten Jericho out of his cell, rendering him effectively unconscious with my Gift and getting him into the interrogation seat before he takes his own seat across the table from him.

I wait until his wrists are secured in the handcuffs before I let his mind out of my grasp.

Finally North says, "Speak to me about the camps."

Jericho blinks as though he's clearing his eyes, but he hears North well enough and answers straight away. "I've told you everything I know about them already."

North shakes his head. "I want specific answers. How many are there?"

Jericho's eyes narrow—he can sense that something has changed. "Three big ones, five smaller ones. In North America, anyway."

He's telling the truth.

It also checks out with the information we have, but North is careful not to look at me. "Which camp do they process prisoners in?"

On and on and on the questioning goes until, finally, I secure Jericho back in his cell, but it's clear that every piece of information that Atlas' mother has sent through has been backed up. Unless they're both in on it, which is entirely possible and is something that we've taken into account, the information is true.

North scowls the entire way back up the elevator, but I leave him to it. I've formed my own opinions about what's going on, and all that's left now is to tell Atlas.

He controls his reaction to the text message and the information his mother had sent through better than Oli does.

She doesn't say a word, but she chews on her lip like she's trying to bite it right off of her face, her eyes darting between all of us. She worries about how this is going to change things. It doesn't help that we made the decision to wait until dinnertime when everybody was present, and Nox is staring a hole through Atlas' head as though he'll be able to find some sort of deception in him even though he's been vetted a hundred times at this point.

He's the only one in the Bonded Group whose head I'd sifted through rigorously, the only person who hasn't been given the privacy of their own thoughts, just to be sure that he isn't some Resistance sleeper cell, some jackpot the Resistance hit by having a child end up in our Bonded Group.

I trust him with Oli, and that's the highest form of praise I can think of.

"She's telling the truth," Atlas finally says, his food abandoned on the plate in front of him, barely touched.

Gabe is the only one still eating, but after a day of fitting out Sheetrock and laying miles of tiles in dozens of bathrooms, I have no doubt that he's worked up an appetite.

North shrugs and swirls the amber liquid in his glass. He's slowed down his drinking, but I think we all wanted to dull the edge a little for this conversation.

"From what we can tell, it's all true. Unless you can find some sort of code word in there or something, then we're going to tentatively move forward with this."

Atlas frowns and turns back to the information, reading over it much slower this time, as if it hadn't occurred to him that his mother might have hidden some message in there for him.

"What are we going to do with it though? How are we moving forward?" Oli says, pushing her fork through her shellfish risotto joylessly.

It makes me regret bringing it up, because it's the first time she's had seafood since we arrived at the Sanctuary and we've gone and ruined it for her.

Watching her eat is a particular pleasure for North and I.

I answer her. "We're going to set up camp outside the Alaskan Wasteland as we've planned, but we are going to put into place other teams to take out some of the smaller camps at the same time. We'll hit as many of them at once as we can handle. If they're unable to call in for backup, we have a better chance of wiping them out."

Oli nods and glances back at Atlas, but he is filtering through the pages with a scowl on his face. “There's nothing here. Nothing but the information we can all read.”

North nods. “I was expecting that. I think that our greatest threat in this will be the traps once we arrive. They will attempt to split us up, and we need to be prepared for that. They’ll expect us to hit the biggest camp, to hit where Davies is going to be.”

Atlas rubs at his chin, his eyes darting down to Oli at his side.

North takes another sip of his drink and says, “That's why we're going after the Alaskan one. It's not the most likely or the least likely, so it's the safest bet. They have enough resources to set up traps at every camp, so we need to be prepared for hell... and to give it right back to them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Oli

The packing to set up camp in Alaska is about as difficult as it sounds. I'm only allowed to take the same bag that I'd taken on the overnight mission with Gryphon and Nox, but the extra layers I need for warmth make it near impossible to feel as though I have enough supplies. We don't know how long we're going to be camped out before we take over the Resistance's area, thanks to our need for recon and our inability to entrust that work to anyone else.

Besides my entire Bonded Group, we're also taking Sage, Kieran, Felix, Sawyer, Gray, and Aro with us.

Sawyer is going to be pivotal in shutting down their camp's security. He's the only person I know who can hack into it before we even get in there. Gray has been training to be able to fight alongside us, and he's been showing a lot of promise as a TacTeam personnel. Honestly, we need as many bodies as we can get, and his Gift is strong enough that he is going to be an asset.

Both of them had refused to come unless Aro did as well.

She's keen to pull her own weight but also to see the destruction of the people who had kidnapped and hurt her. She's reluctantly leaving her little brother behind with Vivian and his Bonded, the only people we trust enough to keep the little boy safe in our stead.

I can't wait until we can all just go back to hanging out and acting like the college students we're supposed to be. I'm not sure we'll ever get that back but, fuck it, I can hold on to that image right now to get me through this.

When I finally emerge from my closet with my bag, still fretting that I don't have enough stuff, Atlas immediately takes it from my shoulders and slings it over his own. I want to argue with him about it, but I'm also keenly aware that he doesn't even feel the weight of it, thanks to his own Gift.

I'm also struggling to move with the giant, tactical puffer jacket I'm sweating in in preparation for the snow.

"It's probably barely going to be cold there. You do realize it's the middle of summer, right, Sweetness?" Atlas says with a bemused grin, and I shake my head at him.

"It's Alaska. It's going to be cold. I'm sure of it."

"Have you ever been to Alaska?" he asks, grinning and totally ready to give me shit about this.

I nod my head because I'm not a dumbass who's going to get caught again. "My parents took me there while we were on our glorious traveling trip that I've now found out was us running for our lives. I nearly lost a toe to frostbite."

He shakes his head at me, biting off his grin, but I can tell he's just *tickled* by my misery. "I highly doubt that your parents would've let it get that close, Bonded."

When we make our way out to the kitchen, we find the rest of the Bonded Group already waiting there, each of them carrying their own heavy packs and dressed for cooler weather, though none of them have taken it to the extreme that I have.

Gabe bursts out laughing at the sight of me, and Gryphon rolls his eyes as though I'm being overly dramatic. I glance down at myself. "You guys all understand that it's Alaska, right?!"

I try to wrestle my pack back off of Atlas so that they don't have anything else to tease me about, but he just nudges me out of the way, stalking forward to get us all moving. I follow behind him and try not to stomp my feet too much at everyone happily giving me shit.

North raises his eyebrow at me, waiting me out, and I break so damn quick under his silent stare. "I don't do well in cold climates. I can deal with

the rain. I can even deal with blistering heat, but add a few inches of snow and I'm ready to run for the hills."

The idea that we could be camping out in it makes me sick to my stomach, far more than facing the Resistance ever has. That probably has more to do with my inhumane ability to compartmentalize than anything else, but that's besides the point.

I don't want to camp in the Arctic freaking Circle.

I'm expecting to take one of the ATVs down to North's office, but when I get outside the house, I find Kieran, Sage, and the rest of our family waiting for us. They're all suitably packed, and I'm pleased to see Sage has an extra sweater on.

She tries, and fails, to hold back a laugh at the sight of me.

Sawyer doesn't even attempt it.

"It's summer, Oli."

I consider throwing something at him. "I know what season it is, thank you! Clearly none of you have ever been trapped in a snowstorm before!"

There is one person amongst the group who could very easily call me out on my shit, having had a front row seat to the entire history of my life, but Nox doesn't look up from where he's busy poring over his tablet. All of his research and information has been loaded onto it to get him through the next few days of being stuck in the camp, and he's already blocking us all out while he works.

North had offered to have him stay behind to continue his research. With Kieran at our disposal, it would be easy enough to bring him in when we were ready to move. Even before my stomach had the chance to sink at the idea of being split up, Nox had dismissed that idea.

He'd been so straightforward in his reply. "We agreed to stick together. I can work from anywhere."

He's close to something. I already know it. The way that North and Gryphon have been acting recently says they know it too. I trust him to speak to me when he's ready, whenever that may be.

Instead of tying myself into knots over it, I focus on making sure that I'm not a weak link in our Bonded Group. I'm so hellbent on making sure that it isn't just my bond who is a weapon for us all.

I'm going to be one too.

I sidle up to Sage and Aro as we get ready to make the jump, grateful when Gryphon tucks into my side as well with those magic healing hands of

his.

There are a lot of things that could go wrong when we land, even having already sent out scout groups to set up and secure the area for us. So even though I'm tempted to make some smartass comments with my friends and laugh all of this off, I take a deep breath and roll my shoulders back, preparing myself to unleash my Gift the second our feet touch the ground, should I need to.

I meet North's eyes across the group and try not to blush at the pride that's there as he looks me over. For a long time, I didn't think that I would ever truly feel as though I was worthy of his admiration and loyalty, but I'm starting to now.

Kieran does one last headcount and then gets into position. "Look alive, people! Everyone grab my arm. Sawyer, I will snap your fingers off if you even attempt to be funny right now, and I'll persuade Felix to let you sit in discomfort for the rest of the day. Right, we're leaving. Three, two, one..."

Gabe makes a big show of finding out the temperature when we arrive, but it's at least sixty degrees without a single cloud in the sky. I refuse to back down on my stance that it could snow at any second, though I do take off my winter jacket and stash it away in our tent pretty quickly.

The camp is in a small clearing in an otherwise dense forest, and I'm worried about the potential of being eaten by wildlife until Gryphon points out that we have shields in place that will protect us from anything that might want to have us for dinner. It only makes me fractionally less concerned.

As soon as we've dropped off our packs, North and Gryphon disappear to speak to the operatives who have already been here a few days, and I prepare myself for the inevitability that I'm going to see very little of them until we return to the Sanctuary.

We *will* all return to the Sanctuary.

There's no question in my mind this time that we're all making it home, and I distract myself by finding someone to give me some jobs to do. I let Azrael down from behind my ear to walk alongside us now that we're here

in a working capacity. No one can argue with an extra set of eyes here to help out, even if it's in the form of a shadow creature.

North and Nox have already both let some other shadow creatures down to act as scouts. Even though I know that Azrael isn't a real puppy, it feels wrong to leave him tucked behind my ear when we're out in the wild like this.

He plays his part beautifully, bouncing around in the foliage and snapping at the leaves as we go past even though his jaws drift straight through them. I catch Atlas smiling at him as he bounces from fallen log to fallen log. I won't call him out on it, but it does warm me.

There's still more operatives to come, and we go about putting up more tents for them and setting up generators to help out. Gabe makes a joke about helping to dig out latrines, but Atlas shoves him into a pile of dead leaves before offering to hold anything that I might need help with, as though they're not being giant children right now.

Sage disappears with Felix to help him get the medical tent put together nicely, and Sawyer buries himself in his computers, growling and grumping at the setup he's been given to work with, though I know he's glad to not be left behind while everyone else is out here.

I know how it feels to be the only one left behind.

Things have also changed for him now that he has found his Central Bond. He's never been quite so motivated to deal with the Resistance as he is now that he knows what they did to her. The fight for him is no longer about morals or his community but about the girl he's growing to love, the person who he and Gray are destined to be with, and the missing connection in their Bond.

With his devious mind, I *almost* feel sorry for the Resistance.

They have no idea who they're dealing with and who they've pissed off.

Aro herself comes over to help put up tents with us, Gray following along and watching her carefully. She smiles at him shyly, a little more reserved now that she's not having to put a brave face on around her brother. Gray doesn't seem to mind, talking to her quietly as they work out how to construct the makeshift lodgings.

He's softer with her than he's ever been with Sawyer, taking a different approach to his Central Bond, and the cocky, ice hockey hottie I'd first met is melting into a considerate and respectful gentleman.

I sort of want to scoff at the idea of him being the same guy as the one Kieran had to drag out of a party with his shirt undone from hooking up with Sawyer in a broom closet.

We've all come so far from there.

We get all of the extra tents put up and then head back to the main area of the camp to eat lunch together and find out if there is any more work that needs to be done.

Aro and Gray are happy to spend the whole day with us, and Gabe enjoys the break from all of the building he's been doing. It's as though this mission, which is probably going to be our biggest and most blood-soaked yet, is a little holiday for him. He enjoys messing around and being a bit of an idiot, only stopping when Sage and Felix join us for something to eat.

I'm shocked to see Felix at first, but he just shrugs his shoulders at me. "No one's injured yet, so until the fighting begins, I'm mostly just running inventory and catching up on my notes."

We had brought sandwiches with us, knowing that the fresh food wouldn't last very long and it would be our last chance to eat a stacked BLT with extras for a long while. There isn't a dining hall or any sort of area specifically cordoned off for us to eat in. Instead, we spread out near the tree line, where we'll be able to keep an eye on the entire camp but not be in anyone's way at the same time.

Aro grabs something for Sawyer and takes that into his tent filled with computers before she joins us. I call out to North, Gryphon, and Nox, just to be sure that they don't need anything from us, but they're all too busy to stop to eat.

When we spread out on the ground, Gabe, ever the social butterfly, calls out to a few of the TacTeam personnel to speak to them.

I only recognize Rockelle, who nods his head at us in what I'm sure he is hoping is a respectful manner, and Atlas huffs out a breath in a pissed off sort of way. There might not be bad blood between the two of them, per se, but my Bonded still doesn't like him.

All four of the guys that Gabe calls out to are carrying food of their own, and he invites them to sit with us, ignoring the savage glare that Atlas throws at him.

We're going to be here for weeks, probably. There's no point in holing ourselves away from the rest of the teams, Gabe sends through our mind link where Atlas can hear it too.

I don't want to admit that I'm siding with Atlas here, antisocial thanks to all of the judgment I get constantly, and instead I send a tight-lipped smile to one of the guys that I recognize from our last mission.

"Oleander, but my friends call me Oli," I say as I stretch out my hand to him.

I'm sure he already knows this. I'm sure everybody in this camp already knows this, thanks to the Bonded Group I belong to, but he takes my hand regardless.

"Tyrone Evans, I'm one of the Transporters."

He introduces me to the other men and then tucks into his own sandwich, laughing along with the story that Gabe is telling about the buildings back home.

Rockelle takes a huge bite of his sandwich and chews once before swallowing, grossly efficient at getting food down his throat, before he asks Gabe, "How far away are the houses from being finished? I know that I'm speaking out of turn about it, but sharing with eight other personnel isn't my idea of home."

Gabe smiles back ruefully. "Unfortunately, unless you find your Bonded Group, that's where you're going to have to stay. There's too many people on the entry list to start prioritizing single dwellings."

Rockelle nods and takes a sip of the can of Coke before he sets it down at his feet.

Evans nudges at him with his shoulder. "You could always move into my house, but I've gotta tell you, living with three-year-old twins isn't going to be an easier ride than the frat house you're currently living in. Five a.m. starts ain't shit when you're not parenting."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "And are those twins yours? That seems kind of intense."

He grins at me, beaming with pride. "Yep, two little boys. I have a six-week-old son as well."

I have to stop my mouth from gaping at him as I look him over again. He certainly does not look old enough to be a happy father of three. I'm clearly not doing a very good job at subtlety because he laughs at me.

"I found my Bonded Group young, and both of my Bonded weren't exactly keen on waiting around for the Resistance to be done messing up our lives before we had a family of our own. I've got to admit, having a

family to fight for and come back to keeps me going when we're out here facing all this shit."

It's hard to argue with that.

Atlas nods and glances around at the other men, but they're all back on the conversation about the work Gabe is doing with the housing, and I'm too proud of my Bonded to interrupt his happy stories of errant nail guns.

Evans glances around the group and then clears his throat quietly, glancing back to me. "I don't want to speak out of turn here, but I just wanted to say thank you for coming and for helping out. I know that most people are terrified of your Gift and what it is that you can do, but I've served under Shore for a long time, and I trust his judgment."

He looks out into the density of the trees before he continues, his face like a blank slate that speaks volumes on its own. "I've also seen the things that the Resistance do to the people that they catch, and I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds. Having your entire Bonded Group here has been the first time that I've actually thought we have a chance at winning this. Hell, it's the first time that we've walked into a fight without knowing that we're completely outgunned. I might actually get the chance to see those little kids of mine grow up. They might have the chance to have Bonded Groups of their own too."

He says it with the type of wonder in his voice that tugs at my heart, like he's been out here fighting in the TacTeams without any sort of hope that they'll win, but doing it anyway because it's the right thing to do.

I wonder how many of Gryphon's men have felt this way.

I swallow the last bite of my sandwich and look back over my shoulder at Gabe's grinning face, the sun shining on his golden hair, making him look even more like the golden child of the group. He catches my eye and grins at me before I glance back at Evans.

"Whatever it takes, we're going to get rid of them all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Oli

I wake up in the darkness of the tent, feeling disoriented but content, aware that all of my Bonded are here in the space with me. It's a rare phenomenon, thanks to Nox's aversion to sharing my bed back at our house with everyone else, so I let myself enjoy it as I lie there with my eyes shut for a moment.

He's sleeping closest to the tent's opening, Procel and Mephis sleeping on top of him with their faces turned towards it as though they're on high alert for danger. Azrael had also insisted on sleeping at the bottom of my sleeping bag, covering my feet with his wispy body as he guards me obsessively.

My chest still aches at the thought of what I might've lost if I hadn't completed the soul-bonding.

I'm wedged between North and Gryphon, with Atlas and Gabe flanking the two of them. From where my face is pressed into North's chest, I can see Gabe. He's snoring just a little, one arm flung over his face and the other splayed out as though he's searching for me in his sleep. Every inch of my being is content right now, none of the worries of what's to come filtering into my mind while I'm surrounded by my Bonded.

The hot press of lips against my shoulder startles me out of my relaxed state.

I gasp and jolt a little in North's arms, and his eyebrows furrow in his sleep, a rough groan rumbling in his chest underneath my ear. I see the white glow of Gryphon's eyes changing light up the fabric walls of the tent as he calls on his Gift to keep North from waking fully.

A very sneaky use for it.

I carefully unwind myself from North and shift around to face Gryphon, biting back a smile when I see the lascivious grin spread over his lips. I quirk an eyebrow at him, but he just leans forward to kiss me, hot and demanding as he pushes me onto my back and covers my body with his own.

I want to push back against him, to stop him from fucking me in the middle of our Bonded Group while they're all sleeping, but I've missed him and it's caused an ache in my chest. He's quick to reassure me.

I can keep them asleep. Come here, Bonded. Get that wet pussy on my face. I want your cum running down my chin.

It feels wrong, so wrong to wriggle out of the sleeping bag and straddle his face, my legs tucked up only inches away from North's sleeping face, but Gryphon's tongue is talented enough to distract me from that pretty quickly. His hands are firm on my thighs, holding me down against the assault on my most sensitive flesh as he drives me over the edge and covers himself in my juices.

He's drenched by the time he's satisfied, my legs shaking so badly he has to lift me off of his face and maneuver me back underneath him. When he kisses me, I groan softly at the taste of my pussy on his tongue, the way he shares it with me is such an intimate thing.

Almost as intimate as the hot slide of his dick as he impales me with one thrust, driving straight into my pussy as it pulses around him. I'm overstimulated and sensitive, my clit throbbing at all of the attention he's given it. When he tilts my hips just right, I almost scream at his hard thrusts against my G spot.

I almost forget we're not alone.

We could wake them up.

My pussy clenches around the thick length of him inside me, his hips still moving at a lazy grind. I'm not sure which one of us he's trying to punish with it.

We could wake them all up and make them watch me fuck you. Would you like that, Bonded? Do you want them to watch this gushing pussy get

filled up? Or do you want more, Bonded? Do you want all of your Bonded filling your greedy holes up?

Fuck.

That's exactly what I want.

I want them all at once. I want to tumble into my bed and feel five sets of eyes on my body, five sets of hands touching me and leaving their mark on me, five cocks driving into my body and coming in me, on me, all over me until I pass out a sticky fucking mess. I want so many things that I can't figure out how to ask for, how to beg them to own me until I'm fucking ruined.

I want it all.

A strangled moan bursts out from between my lips, and he leans forward to cover them with his own, smothering the sound between us. He might have our Bonded sleeping peacefully unaware, but there's still a whole camp of Gifted outside of these tent walls that could hear exactly what he's doing to me.

I really don't want to think about that.

So instead, I think about his hips driving into me, the way his cock is stretching me to my limits, and the dark, filthy promise of his words in my mind until I come again, turning my head to bite his wrist to stop myself from screaming out my pleasure.

His hips stutter at the sharp pain of my teeth in his skin, and he drops down onto his elbow on the other side, tucking his own face into the crook of my neck as he comes as well. I brace myself for him to bite me back, but he just leaves a trail of open-mouthed kisses there, his tongue laving at my skin until I'm squirming on his cock again, ready for round two, just like that.

He lifts up again, glancing down at me with a dazed grin.

My heart stops in my chest.

I blink and it's gone, but this time, I'm sure I've seen it.

His eyes flashed black.

He leans down to kiss me again, but I pull my lips away, only remembering at the last second to speak to him in my mind and not out loud.

Your eyes changed. Gryphon, your eyes turned black!

He scowls at me for a second, but when he lifts his hand up to his face, the glow of the white light is there, as though proving I'm wrong.

I know I'm not.

Gryphon, I swear on our Bond, your eyes turned black.

He's quiet for a minute and then he says, his voice hesitant, *I don't feel different. I didn't feel anything, Bonded. I'll... speak to Nox and North about it later. One more round before I have to leave? Or do you want a nap instead?*

It's a stupid question.

Sleep is for the weak.

I don't want to admit that I have trauma issues about showering at the camp.

It was easy to go in after Kyrie when we'd been captured, the threat of what would happen to her without my help was enough to get my ass moving without thinking about it. But now, here, even surrounded by my Bonded and friends... I don't want to go in there.

I'm also feeling gross about going about my day after my wakeup sex with Gryphon.

If I'd been thinking clearly, I would've asked him to come with me. The shower blocks aren't split up by gender. They're private enough, but instead of thinking about the consequences of enjoying my Bonded, I'd gone back to sleep for a few hours.

Now I'm too freaked out to just go shower.

What the hell is wrong with me that I can just throw myself into any situation if my Bonded or our friends are in danger, but this seems like too much for me? I have a literal death god living under my skin, there's nothing that I should be afraid of.

I also was never assaulted in the Resistance camps.

Not like that.

But I'd heard it every night. I'd been threatened with it countless times by the guards, all of them ready to do whatever disgusting, violent things to me the moment Davies decided I was no longer a VIP prisoner. This is all stuff I haven't let myself think about for years, not since I forced my bond into hiding when I went on the run. I compartmentalized all of this so that I

could get through my days without panicking over every little sound and get through my nights without screaming nightmares.

So, like a coward, I'm slow to get up.

I hate to act as though I'm too tired or lazy to get on with my day, but none of my Bonded say a word about my reluctance. North is gone before I wake up for the second time, and Gabe presses a kiss to my cheek as he heads out, murmuring something about a scouting job for Gryphon. Atlas leaves to help Gray with stocking the supplies that Kieran is transporting in for Felix.

At the moment, Nox is still elbow deep in his research, dressed and taking his notes in the worn leather notebook he has tucked into the crook of his arm at all times.

He ignores me for a full ten minutes as I lie there and try to convince myself to call Sage and go shower with her and Aro there as well. If we're all talking and joking around, I'll be distracted enough to get through it without a panic attack.

I can't get a bucket and wash up here. There's no way of explaining that without sounding like an absolute child, so I'll just have to text Sage and bite the bullet here.

When I finally pull myself up to sit in my sleeping bag, I have to search around to find my underwear and pull them back on, my face heating when I realize Nox is just sitting on the other side of the tent, seeing this twisted version of a walk of shame.

My head is a mess right now.

I freeze when he pulls himself up, opening up his own pack and grabbing out a bundle of clothes. "Get some pants on, there's people everywhere here."

I frown a little, but I do as he says without a word, my mind still running with all of the anxiety I'd woken up with. I triple check the wall in my mind, but it's secure, none of my emotions spilling out onto my Bonded and letting them in on my internal battle.

I pull on the same pants I was wearing yesterday. Mud streaks the legs of them already, so they're a lost cause. Nox rummages through my pack, and then he stalks back over to the opening of the tent, glancing back over his shoulder when he notices that I'm still just standing around like an idiot.

"Stay close. No one is going to try to talk to you if you're with me."

That sounds like exactly what I need.

I have to dodge a couple of shadow creatures, but when I stumble a little over the uneven ground, Nox steps in closer to me, his fingers threading through mine as he leads me through the camp. I'm half expecting to end up in front of the command tent, sure that Nox is ferrying me off to North so that I stop bothering him with my presence while he works, but then he leads me into the showering block.

I want to throw up.

I freeze, but he just pulls me inside one of the stalls, his shadow creatures filling up the space with us as they take up watch, their jaws lolling open, rows of razor sharp teeth visible as they pant like proper Dobermans.

I think sometimes they even forget that they're not really perfect puppies.

Nox keeps hold of my hand as he puts down his supplies on the small chair in the stall. It's a tight squeeze for us both, but he gets us both naked and the water running without much fussing or errant elbows. I'm expecting the water to be cold, but by some miracle, it's hot. There's soap that smells like home, and every inch of the space is filled with the vicious monsters of the Dravens who I already know won't hesitate to devour a Gifted whole for me.

Slowly, I relax enough to actually wash myself.

Nox washes himself first and then, hesitantly at first, as though he's gauging where my boundaries are right now, he takes the soap from me and cleans me as well.

I don't have time to freak out about where we are or think about the reasons that this is terrifying. All I can focus on is the soft, loving touches of the man who'd swore he'd rather die than touch me. The same man who'd done everything he could to hurt me so that he could stay in control of the situation we were stuck in.

The man who'd died and took a part of me with him.

I'm sorry.

He doesn't react to my words, his hands firm as he uses his own towel to get me dry. He waits until he's sure I'm steady on my feet and able to dress in the clean clothes he'd grabbed out for me before he dries himself off as well.

Don't. I don't want or need your apologies. This is what it is, and we'll get past it.

I swallow roughly and nod my head, ducking it so I don't have to see whatever sympathy, or apathy, is on his face right now.

How can I never get a good read on him?

Why do I always guess his actions and motives wrong?

We're going back to the tent, and we're working together for the morning. You can look over the notes North has been taking about what things his bond reacts to and see if your bond recognizes anything. If you're feeling better later, you can go watch Gabe skip around the perimeter or help Bassinger prove himself to the personnel.

I shoot him a look for the Atlas dig, but I'm also deeply grateful that he's planned my day out to keep me both productive and away from prying eyes. We're supposed to be here to fix everything, to sway the fight in our favor, and here I am on day one losing my freaking shit.

I need to get it together, and I need to do it fast.

When he grabs our dirty laundry pile and shoves it into a bag, I finally get my head together enough to reach out for him. He slips the bag over his shoulder and steps into my arms, letting me lean against the firm wall of his chest and just... center myself.

My bond coils in my chest happily like a snake sunning itself on a rock.

I want to apologize to him again, to sweep all of this under the rug as though it's nothing but a stupid overreaction, but he's been inside my head in a way that not even Gryphon could manage. He's lived every experience of my life the way I have his. There's no way that I can deny the toll that those years in the Resistance camp took on me, the invisible fracture lines that will never truly heal that I do my best to cover up.

I never put my damage on display, certainly not where my Bonded can see it, and it should feel like a violation all on its own that he knew what was wrong with me this morning without asking. Instead, I feel relief.

Relief that I'm not carrying this by myself anymore.

We walk back to our tent together, hand in hand, and I enjoy the feel of the sun on my face even with the chill of the early morning. I take a minute to get everything in the tent tidied up a bit, only really picking up after myself and Gabe. He's the only one of my Bonded who is messy. Then I settle myself into Nox's workspace and go through the notes with him.

My bond refuses to cooperate, so I'm stuck trying to decipher my own feelings about ancient deaths. I'm attempting to figure out if I feel sad

because I remember something or just because a void-eyed Gifted being beheaded merely for existing during the witch hunts is fucking terrible.

It's not exactly easy work.

I'm starving by the time it hits midday, and I decide to take a break to grab food. Nox barely registers me leaving, simply snapping his fingers at the shadow creatures to be sure that one of them follows after me for protection. Mephis takes the job, eager for an ear scratch and loves, and we make our way out towards the small supplies tent that has everyone's daily rations in it.

As we walk together, I start working out which packs to grab for each of my Bonded. I'll ferry them around to each of them to be sure they all eat too. There's a lot of choices, and each of them has very different preferences.

North and Gryphon both went without food all day yesterday, the two of them inhaling their sandwiches as they climbed into their sleeping bags last night. I'm determined that I won't let that happen again. Gabe will be hard to find without interrupting his work, but with Mephis and Azrael with me, I'm not afraid of a little running around.

I don't make it to the supplies tent.

I'm still on the other side of the camp when the shouting starts around me, personnel calling out to sound the alarm, and I immediately reach out to my Bonded.

Gryphon is the first to answer me. I'm barely letting my walls come down before he's pushing orders to me.

Get back to our tent. Find Nox and Atlas. Stay with the two of them until we know what's happening.

I don't question him or his orders, turning on my heel and sprinting back to our tent with the pups at my heels as dozens of Tac operatives start moving around me.

Nox is waiting at the opening of the tent for me, his eyes black as the shadow creatures all start to fan out around us. Procel is sitting at his feet, and he greets me with little more than a sniff as I duck past him into the tent.

Atlas is waiting there for me as well. He beat me back here, and he's bouncing on his heels as though he's trying to convince himself not to head back out there to find out what's happened. But he relaxes somewhat when he sees me.

“Could you see anything? Do you know what the alarm was for?”

I shake my head and step in closer to him, giving him a quick squeeze before I drop down next to my pack. I begin to strap the last of my weapons on myself, intent on being ready when the call comes through, and Nox is doing the same.

I always have the guns at my hips strapped on me from the moment I wake up in the morning until I'm going to sleep at night. However, today I held off being fully armed when we made it back from the showers. I thought we wouldn't need it until we were planning on going out for the mission.

I guess I'll have to change that habit.

I murmur to Atlas, conscious of keeping myself on alert for whatever could be happening outside of the tent right now. “I couldn't see anything. I just heard the shouting, and Gryphon told me straight away to come back here. Did you hear anything?”

He shakes his head. “I'd just finished helping stock the medical tent, and I was on my way back here to arm myself before heading out to Gabe. Gryphon sent him to check the perimeter because they knew something was up. Nox was in here working when I got back.”

I glance back to Nox, but his eyes are still black as he uses his shadow creatures' eyes to see what's going on around us. I straighten, throwing my jacket on over top of the knives and extra ammunition I now have strapped to myself. I wiggle my feet in my boots, just to be sure they're on tight enough. There's nothing quite as terrible as trying to run with your shoes slipping off, and I'd haphazardly thrown them on to grab food without really thinking it through.

Nox's head ducks back into the tent, his eyes still voids, but he speaks with his own voice and not the monotone, dark sound of his bond. “We're going to move to the perimeter line. Gabe's found something we need to see.”

I nod and grab Atlas' hand as we follow him out, motioning for Azrael to follow us as we make headway through the camp. There's TacTeam personnel everywhere, a lot of them moving back towards their own tents, but the shouting has stopped.

All of them eye us with unease as we move.

None of them have been concerned with us before. I hadn't felt like I was an outsider here, so it's jarring. I can tell Atlas notices it as well by the

set of his jaw and the way his hand tenses in mine.

I try to rationalize that it's because of Nox walking around with black eyes and shadow creatures streaming around us, but no one seems to be paying them much attention.

Instead, they're watching Atlas and I.

Whatever's happened has them rattled about me again. God only knows what the Resistance could have done to elicit that response.

Ignoring them all and the unease that settles in my gut, we make our way into the forest. The shield boundary line was far enough out that it takes us a good five minutes before we get close to the voices. As we approach, Nox's bond speaks directly into my head where everyone can hear it.

Deep breath. They want dissent, and we will not give it to them.

Atlas' hand jerks in mine at the sound of it, but his face doesn't change. These two might not like each other, but they both agree about keeping our Bonded Group a united front around anyone outside of it.

As we get closer, we find Gabe standing shirtless in only a pair of TacTeam standard issue trousers from him Shifting. I sometimes forget he has to be naked when he does or else he'll shred his clothing. I have to stop thinking about it before my bond gets jealous at any potential eyes that might have seen him.

He meets my eyes before darting a look at Atlas. He tries to act casual as he tugs his shirt back on, swinging the gun holster back over his shoulder casually, and warning bells go off in my head about how he's acting.

It's not me he's worried about.

Three more steps and then we see it.

In the air, a few feet in front of us, is the shimmering line of the shield. It's invisible to the naked eye, but also clearly there before us. A few feet outside of that line, three bodies are hanging from the branch of one of the trees.

The bodies of Atlas' parents.

His father, the Central Bond of his parent's Bonded Group, is a bloodied mess. His face is a mottled purple color and vomit is covering the dress shirt and slacks he's wearing. Poison is one of the only weaknesses that his Gift has. Someone close enough to him to know that has used that knowledge to kill the unkillable.

His mom was also clearly killed before they strung her up.

There's a piece of cardboard stapled to her stomach, blood running from the puncture wounds, but the word scrawled across it is still clearly visible.

Traitor.

Among a dozen other wounds, her hands are a bloodied mess, as though she fought off her killers unsuccessfully. That somehow makes me feel sick, the thought that she was probably tortured before they killed her.

Aurelia's mother has been beaten to the point that her features are unrecognizable. If she wasn't hanging with the other two Gifted, I wouldn't know who she was.

Atlas' hand shakes in mine and he swallows roughly, but there's no other reaction out of him, no words or tears as he stares at the tortured and lifeless corpses of his family.

Instead, he looks over at North and waits for him to say something first.

I look over to find Gryphon and North both staring at Atlas. When they see he's locked up, completely paralyzed by this, they both take over.

"We have to secure the area before we can cut them down," North says, looking over at Nox. But his brother is still staring at the bodies critically.

Atlas shrugs, his voice a little hoarse as he says, "They're the enemy. You're not going to risk our team to give an honorable burial to people who would never offer us the same thing."

The handful of Tac personnel around us glance at each other as though they're shocked by this, but I'm not. Regardless of how Atlas feels about his parents, he made the choice to be with me and be a part of this Bonded Group.

Nothing will change that. He's chosen me above all else.

North shrugs. "Good thing it's not about them and their motives. We're not the Resistance, and there's no great risk to us to do this for you."

His words are firm and leave no room for doubt. This isn't about the people who died, the enemy to us all, even their son. This is about Atlas not being haunted by the thought of their bodies being left up there, any more than he already will be, anyway.

This is about the respect within our Bonded Group that was so hard fought for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Atlas

It takes five hours to secure the area enough to cut my parents' bodies down from the trees the Resistance had strung them up in as a warning, some sickening show of their own psychotic allegiance.

There's no sign of the enemy around us, and I would guess that they'd simply hung them up there and walked away, not needing to see our reactions or attempt any sort of conflict right now.

Their message here was enough.

It feels weird to grieve them all over again. I'd made my peace with being on the opposite side of this war from my family more than a year ago. From the moment I'd seen that footage of Oli being tortured by Silas fucking Davies, I'd begun to distance myself from them and, even now that they've been murdered by their own faction, I still don't regret that choice. The mourning that I feel is more like I'm mourning the parents I wish I had.

The lie I'd been fed, the fantasy that had played out for the majority of my childhood, one that I know now deep in my bones was never real, was only a part that they played so well in their attempts to indoctrinate my sister and I into the Resistance and their cause.

My father never truly loved my mother. He was never truly Bonded to her or to my sister's mother, the meek woman who'd barely been able to meet his eye when he'd been angry.

Her name was Rachel, and she didn't deserve to live and die this way.

I wonder whether they'd poisoned my father *first*.

It's the only way that they could've killed him, the man who was indestructible from the outside. Maybe they'd killed both of the women and simply fed him a meal afterwards.

For all I know, my father was the one to find out about the text my mother had sent.

There's no question that he would've told the rest of the founding families about her treachery, but did it backfire on him? Fuck, I hope it did. He would have told Davies himself, the same way that he would have let him use me and my Bonded as a weapon, even at our destruction, if he thought it would win the Resistance the war.

His blind faith that they are all doing the right thing is nothing short of neurotic.

North offers to take their bodies back to the Sanctuary for a burial there, but I refuse. I don't want them polluting that place for me. And though I want my mother to be laid to rest somewhere, I don't necessarily want it there, especially not now that Oli has made murmurings about scattering her parents' ashes there.

They don't deserve to be laid to rest somewhere like the Sanctuary. Better for them to be buried near a battlefield, and the one that will be the place of our victory as a penance for what they've done. I insist on doing it myself, not putting this work on anyone else while we're so close to our attack.

Gabe helps me dig the holes.

North and Gryphon are both busy dealing with intel and the new arrival of extra personnel. Now things are moving quickly, but Oli comes to sit with us as we dig and even offers to help out, which I swiftly refuse. When we're about halfway done, Gray and Aro come join us as well, Gray grabbing a shovel and getting to work without a word.

Aro brings a small handful of supplies, but I am too busy with the shovel to notice what she's doing until she and Oli get up and start looking around the forest floor for fallen leaves and twigs. They're talking quietly with each other, focused entirely on what they're doing, and it takes a little bit of pressure off of me that I don't realize I was carrying. It felt as though I needed to act a certain way in front of my Bonded so she didn't doubt me.

It's stupid. She's never once doubted me.

When the holes are finally deep enough, I move the bodies into them without any sort of ceremony.

I move my mother first, careful as I get her laid out on the churned-up dirt. Gabe moves Rachel as gently and respectfully as he can while Gray drags my father into the third hole. He's a lot less gentle about it than we are. I don't fault him for that.

I'm glad I don't have to touch the man at all.

The first shovelful of dirt is hard to drop onto the blanket my mother is wrapped in, but after that, it's easy enough to finish the burial on autopilot. Once we have all three of them covered, I still can't find any words to say, but Oli and Aro both place markers over my mother and Rachel's resting places, simple pieces of wood they have tied together to look like makeshift crosses.

They don't have one for my father and neither of them attempt to talk about why that is, thankfully.

I take a seat on the log that Oli and Aro had just vacated, landing a little too hard and with a thump noise as my body deflates like a balloon. I stare at that cross that marks my mother's grave, unblinking, and try to form some words or excuses for how I'm acting right now. I don't want anyone to question my loyalty to my Bonded Group.

I shouldn't worry about it in the first place.

Oli tucks herself into one side of me and Gabe sits on the other, his elbows resting on his knees as he stares at the freshly churned-up dirt in front of us without a word. Gray and Aro disappear for a little while before Aro comes back with a few small flowers, little bunches of white-petaled wildflowers that she places at the bases of each of the crosses.

I feel like I should explain to her why these people do not deserve flowers or any sort of kindness, but still, I can't find any words.

She walks over my father's grave like he is nothing, and I still feel nothing but cold towards him.

They keep skirting around my mother though, and Rachel.

I sit there for long enough that I lose all feeling in my legs, long enough that it starts to get dark around us and shadowy creatures come looking for whatever it is that has delayed us from returning to the camp.

Oli presses her face into August's neck and murmurs to him quietly, small, affectionate words that I'm sure North can hear and is reassured by. She still doesn't make a move to get back to camp.

I know we can't just sit here forever. Finally, I heave myself back onto my feet, pulling Oli with me and stretching out a hand to help Gabe up. I move to clap his shoulder, but he ignores it easily, moving forward to give me a hug. It's the type that a footballer would give a teammate in a very casually masculine way, but it means a lot anyway.

Oli watches us both carefully, and when Gabe steps away, she tucks herself back into my side, threading her fingers through his. Once again, she becomes the solid link between us, the same way she's the solid link between the entire Bonded Group. She's the single thing we can always and *will* always agree on, the person strong enough to survive anything.

Proof that I can survive this fucked-up mourning, the complex, traitorous enemies' deaths that still have me feeling like a lost child in the woods.

"We don't have to go to dinner with everyone. We can just go to bed; it's not such a big deal," Oli murmurs quietly, pressing her face into my chest and taking a deep inhale of my scent as though she's trying to imprint it onto her very being. It's cute and good for a distraction. She's always been particular about it.

"We can just go and grab a couple of those packs. The protein bars aren't too bad, and most of them have peanuts in them as well."

"I hate peanuts," I say and realize that their aim for normalcy is actually working, but I should never have doubted Oli's ability to fake it until we make it.

"How can you hate peanuts? That's just weird," Oli says, her nose scrunching up, and I lean down to kiss it.

"You can have mine," I say, the easy smile of mine that belongs to her sliding back onto my face as though nothing happened today.

Gabe scoffs and tugs at Oli's hand. "She's a third of the size of me; if anyone should get extra peanuts, it's me. I'll trade you the extra peanuts for the can of peaches."

Oli giggles and tuts at him. "You need to eat your fruit, Gabe, or you'll get scurvy. What happened to your salads of sadness? Not so worried about your figure now you're not playing football anymore?"

He groans at her and runs a hand through the mess of his hair where it's plastered to the back of his head. Digging the hole had done nothing to my appearance, thanks to my Gift pulling its own weight, but Gabe definitely

looks like he's just dug a few graves in the middle of an Alaskan summer day.

When we get back to the campsite, we find Sawyer already waiting for us by his Bonded Group's tent, only a few feet away from our own.

He's very clearly waiting for us because when he gets a look at the small huddle we make, he lets out a breath.

"You three sure take your time!"

Oli tenses under my arm, her eyebrows drawing down as she gets ready to snap back at him, but I don't need her to be defensive on my behalf. The only real guilt in me right now is at the fact that I'm dealing with this all so well.

"What's up, Benson?" I say as I squeeze Oli's shoulder a little in reassurance.

"I can't get a hold of North or Gryphon at the moment, and I need to tell someone that I found something. Oli, can you get one of them to come here please?" he says, biting out the words.

Oli frowns like she's worried, but the moment she reaches out to the others, they answer right away.

North is quick with his answer, firm and sure. *Get him to show you, Bonded, and send it through to us. There's been activity on the far side that Gryphon and I can't leave at the moment, thanks to some dissent.*

None of us want to think about what that dissent looks like, but Sawyer shrugs, happy enough with these commands, and leads us over to his tent.

It's hot as hellfire in there with all of the technology running. A couple of big fans are trying to cool the systems down but still, the temperature in there is excruciating. I don't know how Sawyer can stand it.

"I got a message from an unknown number, and it took me a while to chase down where it came from. As soon as I did, it became pretty clear that it was your mother's final attempt at sending you a message. It was from one of your parents' housekeeper's phones, and it came through to the Councilman North Draven official line."

I scowl at the screen, but my stomach clenches at this single line of text, five simple words that my mother had sent to me.

For all I know, the last words she had ever said. The words that send a chill through my blood.

The gods live among us.

"What does that even mean?" Sawyer says, and I'm reminded that while we've been open and honest about a lot of things, the gods are not one of them.

I glanced at Oli, but she's chewing on her lip, a nervous habit she's trying to squash.

Gabe answers for us. "It's something that Nox has been working on. We don't have any concrete answers yet."

Sawyer nods and scratches his chin. "So it's not exactly news to you guys? I was kind of hoping this would help with the situation."

I swallow roughly. It does and it doesn't. We already knew about the gods, this only confirms that the Resistance knows about them as well, so they've kind of had a head start on finding them.

Too bad we have the Draven brothers and Oli on our side where they belong.

We leave Sawyer's tent together and head towards North and Gryphon. Neither of them had anything to say about the message, but North had asked the three of us to join them on the far end of the camp, the one that faces the Resistance camp we're here to take out.

I'm not sure if we were hoping for the element of surprise in our attack plans, but it's definitely gone now.

Oli's quiet again, holding on to me like she's still worried about how I am coping, but her teeth keep tugging at the edge of her lip. The fact that she's not able to suppress the nervous habit tells me a lot about what's going on in her head.

Gabe keeps shooting her looks, then his eyes dart back up at me before he realizes that he's supposed to be giving me some grace because of what's happened today, and then he looks away. It's almost comical.

I want to scoff at him and make a joke out of it, but Oli's silence is deafening between us, a suffocating thing that makes my skin crawl.

Gryphon's eyes shifted to black this morning.

She sends it through the mind connection to just the two of us so that no one can accidentally overhear it. She just sends those words and nothing else.

Now I think we're all freaking out. My heart does a weird pounding in my chest, as though it skips a beat but makes up for it by working twice as hard. She sighs and adds, *We were... intimate, and everything was completely normal. His eyes were already white because he was using his Gift, and after we, uhm, finished, his eyes turned black for a fraction of a second. I told him, but he said he didn't feel different. We should've said something, especially after Gabe's dragon.*

Gabe's dragon. Gryphon's shifting eyes.

I feel the itch of irritation at myself, because my own powers have barely grown compared to anyone else's. Sure, I can shield other people now, but Gabe shifted into a *mythical creature* that has a mind of its own, and Gryphon hasn't found a limit yet on what he can do with the human mind or how many people he can manipulate at the same time.

It feels as though I am lagging behind everyone else.

I'd always loved my Gift growing up, being indestructible and strong enough to move a mountain if I needed to... it felt as though I was Superman himself. I spent a lot of time showing off with my friends. Joining the Draven Bonded Group and having Oleander Fallows as my Bonded has me doubting everything.

I'm pretty certain I'm the weakest link now, and that isn't a comfortable place to be.

Did you tell Nox? Isn't this literally what he's working on right now? Gabe sends back hesitantly.

Jesus.

She'd spent the whole morning with him too. No doubt he'll pitch a fit about it, and then we'll be trying to fight the Resistance with a huge rift in the Bonded Group all over again.

Oli cringes a little and shakes her head. *Gryphon said nothing happened, and it felt... wrong to talk about it without him there. It's hard to navigate Bonded shit when there's six different people to take into account!*

She chews on her lip a little more and then sighs. *His face changed.*

Changed? What does 'changed' mean? Gabe's words come out as frantic as I feel.

For a second there, it went blank. It's hard to describe. It's the same thing that North and Nox's faces do when their bonds take over. It's like all of the humanness drains out of them, and they're a little bit more robotic, I guess. I'm not explaining this right, she says, but I nod.

I know what you mean. At the Wasteland, Nox looked like a completely different person. Your bond does that to you as well. I can tell just by looking at you, even without the eye change, because you move differently when it takes over.

Gabe nods his agreement with me.

We're getting closer to the boundary, the voices of the Tac personnel getting louder around us, so we need to wrap this up. I find myself fascinated by the very idea that Oli could change people, change her Bonded men into something else.

Something more.

No wonder Davies was so desperate to get his hands on her.

When we finally reach the edge of the boundary, there are groups of TacTeam personnel armed to the teeth and aiming outwards with their weapons. Some have their palms raised and ready to unleash their Gifts, while others stick to their standard issue weapons.

I move Oli a little closer into my side, and Gabe shifts subtly in front of her. We find North and Gryphon easily enough, though surprisingly, Nox is with them as well. They're all staring out at the area in front of us where a group of Resistance cavalry is standing there talking, but the shield is strong enough that we can't hear them. That's both a blessing and a curse, but I find myself angry at the sight of them.

These people had killed my parents.

These people had strung them up from trees. These people would do the same thing to me and my Bonded and the rest of the Bonded Group. And given half the chance, these people would do worse.

It's like a pressure building up inside of me, bubbling under the surface until my skin and bones can no longer contain it, like my power is building and building and building as it focuses on what those people would do to us all.

What they *will* do to us all.

Those words echo in my head as I feel my Gift slip out of my control.

Murderers. These people would take everything from us. They would take what is ours.

Mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Oli

I feel the moment that Atlas' bond changes.

It takes over his body in a wave of power that ripples out to slam through everyone around us, intoxicating and terrifying. There's no mistaking what it is, because my bond wakes up with it, pushing at my skin as it strains towards him. I glance over to see the black rings around North's irises, the dark stain on Nox's fingers, and the clench of Gabe's jaw as he holds the shift back, his dragon fighting to come out. The only reaction I can see in Gryphon is the tight curling of his fists at his side as he stares at the destruction of Atlas' god-bond.

There's no time to attempt to hide what's happened to him from the TacTeam personnel here.

There's no way for Gryphon to use his abilities to shut everyone down, not without causing serious damage to them, and I find myself standing there as still as I can, praying that I'm wrong even as I can feel what has occurred here deep in my bones.

My own bond forces my head up to look at Atlas, straight into the voids that have taken over his irises instead of the bright white light I'm used to seeing there.

He looks down at me, and his face is that same blank slate that all of the bonds' are when they take over. When he sees me and recognizes me as his

Bonded, his arms tighten around my waist. From the corner of my eye, I can see Gabe freaking out, but I lean in further to Atlas' side.

If there's anything I'm sure of, it's my safety around these men and the gods that live inside of them. Even the new ones. I know that I can trust them as much as I know that my own heart beats in my chest.

It simply is.

His eyes look into mine, searching. I stare back at him, unsure of what it is that he's looking for and hoping he's finding it. He slowly lowers his head to bring our faces closer together, not quite kissing but still breathing the same air, a whisper away from our skin on each other. My bond yearns for him, strains in my chest with a desperate ache, and I know then that it's been waiting for this bond.

It's been waiting for them *all*.

There's movement around us, but Azrael shifts to grow at my feet, reaching my waist before he snarls at whoever was dumb enough to approach us right now. Once he's sure they're no longer moving in, he sits at my feet as though he's protecting us, both of his lips curling back on his sharp teeth as he growls soundlessly.

"Mine," Atlas' bond whispers against my lips. I nod my head just a little, my lips brushing against his. The next wave of power that bursts out of him flows through me as seamlessly as the shadow creatures would.

I'm afraid, for a second, that he is hurting the TacTeam personnel around us by accident, seeing them as a threat that they're not. Then I hear Gabe curse viciously under his breath, a shocked sound, not horror, and I jerk my head away from Atlas' bond to get a look at what's happened.

The Resistance outside of the shield have been torn in half.

Every last one of them is dead, and it's not the clean and painless death of their souls being torn out or the horrifyingly violent death of me triggering their souls either.

No, this is visceral and bloody and horrifying. The mangled bodies before us look as though they've been hacked apart with a chainsaw or simply ripped into two by a giant.

North and Gryphon are twin images of shock, but Nox's eyebrows are drawn low as he mumbles something under his breath, turning back to look at Atlas, but his bond only stares down at me.

It's fixated on its Bonded.

I can tell everyone around me is already freaking out, so I press my palms to his cheeks, drawing him down to me so I can speak slowly and soothingly to him. "It's okay. Everything is okay. We're safe. The shield is in place, and no one can get to me here. You can give me Atlas back now. Okay? Give him back to me."

I'm not lying. There's no sign of Resistance survival amongst the corpses of his bond's wrath, and none of the TacTeam around us would dare to attempt to harm me. The only danger here is what will happen within my Bonded Group if the bond doesn't give Atlas back. North and Gryphon can get a little jumpy, a little protective, and I don't want a fight breaking out right now.

The problem is that now that the Resistance is all gone, it doesn't want to let go. It wants *me*.

I nod, humming under my breath in a soothing sound. "I know we can be together soon. Once it's safe here for us to be together, I'll let you have my bond as well. Okay? Right now it's not safe for us to be together."

Whether it understands my words or only what I want from it, the bond does slowly slip away until Atlas is blinking down at me. His green eyes are cloudy for a moment before they clear, and his lips part in shock as he feels the being living within his skin. It takes up more room and has more opinions than his bond had ever had before.

I already know how unpleasant that feeling is at the beginning.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispers, and I can only think of one thing to say back to him.

"The gods live among us."

He blinks at me for a second and then curses under his breath, jerking his head around to look again at the destruction his bond had wrought on the bodies just past the shield. There's absolutely no horror in him at the sight of the gore, only satisfaction that he did that. He took out our enemy with no hesitation when they came calling for us.

I'm proud of him too.

"We need to move now. We need to run damage control," Gryphon says as he steps over to us both. Azrael ignores him, pressing his big head against my belly for a scratch. I give it to him almost mindlessly.

North starts calling out commands and directing people around us, walking ahead of us, his shadow creatures moving along with him

obediently. I've never seen him in such harmony with them before, the tension he usually carries with them is gone completely.

A lot has changed in our Bonded Group.

When we make it back, the entire camp is buzzing with the rumors of Atlas' change. The news of it moved faster than even we did, dozens of eyes following us as we head straight to our tent. Atlas' hand shakes a little in mine, the toll of his bond's power shift is already setting in with him.

He'll need to sleep it off, and fast.

All of the TacTeam who were present are staring at Atlas as though they're questioning themselves about what they saw, but there's no question that his Gift had changed. The mangled bodies of the Resistance just outside of the shield is testament enough to that.

He passes out the second his body hits his sleeping bag.

North is careful about getting us away from the public eye until he can decide how to proceed. By nightfall, the situation has gotten out of hand. Gryphon decides to push his Gift further than he ever has before, stripping out of his thick jacket and sitting on an overturned crate by the fire as his eyes shift to white.

We all held our breaths for a second until they did.

Kieran drops off the provision boxes of dinner that we're allocated, and I sit with Gabe to eat while I watch Gryphon work. His eyes stay white the entire time, no matter how hard I stare at him.

He hacks into the brain of every man and woman in the camp. It would be a very tall ask to wipe their memories entirely, especially when we're preparing for our offensive move in the next few days, so instead, Gryphon plants good feelings.

He argues with Nox over it, mostly because my most damaged Bond doesn't like the idea of forcing people to comply. At first, I think that this is an ethical thing, or perhaps trauma, but then Nox snaps, "If they're going to turn against us, we should get them out, not give them good feelings and potentially leave a snake in our nest!"

I can't disagree with that.

North is quick to point out the problem with that approach. "We don't have enough resources to be picky right now. We have to work with what we've got, and what we've got is an entire camp of people who are questioning their leaders, for better or worse."

Gabe groans again and rubs a hand over his face. “I don't understand what happened! We were talking and everything was fine and then he just—what even was that?”

Surprisingly, it's Nox who answers him in our mind link.

The god that lives inside him woke up. Seeing what the Resistance did to his parents, no matter how he felt about them, triggered it. Then finding them all standing there so close to his Bonded after what they had just done, it woke it up.

Gabe shakes his head. *How are you saying that so calmly? What part of your research told you that this was going to happen?*

I'm glad the conversation has moved into our heads when Nox replies, *Oleander and I found dozens of references to gods over the last millennia. There was a reference to the ability to Soul Rend, the shadow creatures, the Neuro ability, and the dragon. There was also the ability of a man who could tear his enemies in half while none of them could touch him. The more I look at it, the more of us that I can see. North and I aren't the only ones carrying gods. We're just the only ones whose gods have been awake so far. Bonding with Oli started the process, and each of you have had a trigger so far. Everyone except Gryphon.*

I cringe and rub my hand over my eyes. *Gryphon's eyes shifted the other morning when we had sex. I told him, but he said he didn't feel anything... that nothing had changed in him. I think... I think maybe his bond took over for a second and then went back to sleep, maybe? It all happened so fast, and because he didn't feel anything and dismissed it, I didn't say anything. I'm sorry—*

North cuts in before I can start rambling. *It's not your fault, Oleander. None of this is your fault. As Nox said, he doesn't think that you're changing anyone, only that they're waking up.*

I let out a breath, some guilt that I had been feeling melting away a little. It's a relief to know that I'm not doing something to my Bonded without their permission. Taking away options from them is unthinkable to me, and the idea of it sickens me.

When we finish eating, I help clear everything away and then strip off my weapons to attempt to get some sleep. Gryphon is still busy, his eyes staying that same brilliant white, and I don't really want to sleep while he's up working.

North is immovable about forcing me to rest. “We have to be up in six hours for a debrief and final plans to move out. Get sleep while you can. Gryphon will be fine. He's trained for this.”

I find my sleeping bag has moved to be wedged between Atlas and Gabe's. When I fuss about getting into something more comfortable to sleep in, North is quick to shut me down.

“I will get Gryphon to knock you out if I have to,” he says as he catches my arms and pulls me into his body for a tight hug. I lean forward to press my face against his chest, overwhelming my senses with him to try to block some of my anxiety out, anxiety over everything except the work we have to do tomorrow.

The work to deal with this camp and finally bring Silas Davies to his knees. It's been a long time coming, and that's the one part of all of this I'm still eager for.

I lie down with Gabe and fail to sleep, lying there quietly so that no one calls me out on it. It takes until midnight for Gryphon to finish wiping the bad feelings out of the entire TacTeam personnel that we've brought with us.

Nox and North both decide against going to sleep themselves, instead they pore over one of the strategy maps that North brought from the command tent back to ours, and they murmur quietly between themselves.

No matter how much Gabe coaxes me, I can't go to sleep. Eventually, he tucks me into his arms as he tries to lull me into slumber. It takes a long time, thanks to the anticipation crawling under my skin, but with his arms around me, I fall asleep.

Atlas wakes up feeling better but still uneasy about the new abilities of his bond.

Gabe, Nox, and I stay in the tent with him to try to get a handle on it before he heads out with us for the afternoon debrief. North and Gryphon have made the call that we are moving out on our mission tomorrow morning, so we're running on limited time.

“We can't wait around here for much longer now that they've already made two moves against us. One of their Transporters came and saw the

bodies. She transported a couple of pieces back to the camp, so it's only a matter of time before they start bringing in reinforcements.”

My stomach is a pile of knots at the thought of what reinforcements North might be talking about, but we always knew that this was going to happen. Right now, the only thing I can do is to help Atlas get control of the bond.

It's a bit of a steep ask, considering mine still does whatever the hell it wants.

“Well, what does yours feel like, Ardern? We already know that Oli's is stronger than any of the rest of ours. She's the Central Bond, and her god has been awake for years. How do you keep yours in line?” Atlas asks in frustration when he tries and fails for the third time to get his bond to even speak to him.

Gabe shrugs and scratches at the back of his head, looking awkward. “Mine doesn't really speak. It's more of a... *feeling*. The way you'd imagine an animal would be like inside their minds. The only time it ever really talks is to Oli, and that's just when it's declaring its devotion to her.”

My cheeks heat a little and I grin at him, trying to find some lightheartedness in this moment.

I do have another perspective on the god bonds, but I don't want to discuss Nox's history with them, so I keep my mouth shut. Luckily, Nox is determined enough about wiping out the Resistance and figuring out what's going on within our Bonded Group that he's quick to offer his own perspectives. “Don't fight it. Fighting with your bond is only going to cause you years of misery like North's did. There's no way to get rid of it or force it into submission, so you need to learn how to work with it. It will always protect you, first and foremost.” He stops and tilts his head a little. “It'll protect Oleander first. Then you.”

Atlas stares at him for a second before he nods. “Well, I guess that's not a bad thing. I can definitely live with that. What do I do if we get there tomorrow and it doesn't come out to play and I'm just useless? I don't really have time to make friends with it.”

Nox shrugs. “We never accounted for this ability in our plan, so it doesn't change anything. No one's expecting you to know how to control it or use this stronger Gift tomorrow. We haven't even factored Gabe's dragon into the mix because it doesn't always play along.”

Gabe looks irritated at this, and I reach over to press my palm against his cheek. “My bond doesn't listen to me either, don't worry about it. The best I can ever hope for is that it will stick to killing the right people from now on.”

My throat closes up a little to even admit that much, and Gabe nuzzles into my palm a little before he turns back to Atlas. “I’m not worried about my dragon tomorrow. There's going to be so many of the Resistance running around everywhere that it's inevitable, I think. Your bond didn't even like the Resistance being that close to Oli when there was a shield in-between them. You really think it's going to allow her to walk into the camp without showing up to the fight? No chance.”

Atlas blinks at him for a second before he smiles, punching Gabe affectionately in the shoulder. “You're a lot smarter than any of us give you credit for, Ardern.”

Gabe smiles back at him. “It's not my fault that none of you can see past my pretty face.”

By the time we step out of our tent and head towards the command tent for the official debrief and communication on what tomorrow holds for us, Atlas is calmer and secure in his skin once more. It's a good thing, because everybody stares at us as we make our way over there.

Nox takes the lead and spends a lot of the walk staring people into submission. They scurry off like terrified little beings at the very sight of a grumpy Draven. It’s almost comical to watch fully grown men, armed to the teeth and trained to kill, turn on their heels and practically run away from him as though the hounds of hell are on their asses. The women are a little more staunch, most of them just gulp and avert their eyes.

He’s the perfect buffer between Atlas and the world.

If you had told me only a few weeks ago that this would be our reality, I would have laughed in your face, because Nox Draven has *never* liked Atlas. Even after Atlas had proven himself to the rest of the Bonded Group, Nox had refused to believe he would be anything other than loyal to his family.

The name ‘Bassinger’ was all that Nox needed to know about him to make that call.

I'm incredibly proud of them both, and I find myself walking with my head held high, mimicking Nox’s haughty attitude as I stare people down. It’s not hard to do, but the results can’t be argued with.

I'm happy to see that most of the TacTeam personnel don't look aggressive or as though they are judging Atlas. Mostly they're just curious, which I guess I can't blame them for. It's unheard of, at least in our generation, to think that somebody could change their bond. The concept is clearly scary enough that while there might be passages written about the gods in history books, it isn't a general folklore.

It's as though the generations past have tried to forget that the gods ever walked the earth, even with history repeating over and over again.

Sage and Kieran meet us halfway over there, both of them looking relieved to see us. Kieran meets Nox's eye and gives him a curt nod before his eyes flick over the rest of us. They linger a little on Atlas, but it's more like he's checking in on my Bonded, a protective sort of thing rather than a judgment. If Kieran wasn't already one of my closest friends, it would win him major brownie points.

Sage ducks in close to give me a hug as she murmurs into my ear, "Seriously, can anything else go wrong in this place?"

I chuckle quietly under my breath and mumble back, "I don't know, being able to cut people in half is definitely going to come in handy at some point. We might've just been given our best trump card yet."

She chuckles again and then we head off together towards the command tent.

When we arrive, I stare at it for a second as though it is an opponent all on its own, but Atlas just tugs me forward. "If we're gonna do this, Bonded, then we're doing this. We need to get rid of Silas Davies, once and for all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Oli

I wake two hours before dawn to the sound of rustling around me as my Bonded get up and get ready for the day ahead of us.

Everyone, including Gabe and Atlas, is already awake. When North sees me sit up, he comes to kneel at my side, already dressed in his Tac gear.

“There’s been a change of plans. We’ve made the call to go in first, as a small group. Kieran is going to transport us, and we have a very specific target. We tried to let you sleep in as long as we could, but we need to leave in the next five minutes.”

I nod, a little confused as I struggle to my feet, but I’m quick to start pulling on my own uniform and weapons as quietly as I can. The plan had sounded solid yesterday. We were going to go in in the early hours of the morning in sets, each team having a different area of the camp to clear out. It was the best chance at getting prisoners out alive and for the big hitters to be taken out.

Something must have happened for this to change.

I feel both exhausted and like I’m buzzing with energy, ready to make the big moves that my Bonded have strategized for today without question. We’re all ready for this to be over with.

Gryphon catches my hand and gives it a squeeze as I move past him, his eyes darting across my weapons as though he's double checking that I have

everything. He's not doing it as an insult or because he thinks I truly might have forgotten something, more that it's a habit of his to take care of me no matter what else is going on around us.

He gives me a nod of approval as though he's satisfied with the job I've done, and then as a group, we all step out of the tent together, our feet as silent as we can make them. Kieran is already waiting out there, dressed and ready for the mission. I check the sky, but there's no sign of the sun's arrival yet, and the air around us still feels very nocturnal.

Gryphon does a bunch of hand gestures to Kieran, which the Transporter nods at, their own form of silent communication. Luckily, I don't need to know it to be able to speak to my Bonded, because they might as well be waving at each other for all I can understand.

Our aim here is to weaken their defenses in our first wave. We've already taken out their strongest Transporter, so if we can take out a few key players now and have the rest of our offensive groups move in shortly after, they won't have time to bring in any Top Tier Gifted to save themselves, North says, and I nod along. So do Gabe and Atlas, so I guess they're learning all of this now too.

Is there anyone in particular that I'm aiming for or that I need to know about, or am I just going after power?

North takes a deep breath and glances at Nox, who is calling all of his shadow creatures back into himself so that they can travel with us without interruption. I double check that Azrael is still hanging out behind my ear, and he's tucked there securely.

Nox sent one of his creatures out this morning for recon. Davies has already left the camp, but he left behind his Bonded, Lydia, in his stead. Killing her takes out one of the big powers of the camp, and it will also weaken Davies. That's your target, Bonded.

I swallow roughly and nod again. I'm not sure that I have enough power to take that woman out, but the last time I'd faced her myself, I was Unbonded and fighting with the god that lives inside of me. Now, I have all five of my men and peace within myself, complete acceptance at what I'm capable of.

Hopefully it's enough.

While Gryphon and Kieran finish their hand gestures, Nox glances over at me and then speaks directly to me, blocking everyone else out.

I want to try something. Are you open to that?

I try to stop myself from reacting so that no one else knows that we're talking in case this is something personal. It's the only reason I can think of that he'd block everyone out of hearing it.

Of course. What do you need from me?

He glances around at each of the men we're standing with, slow and critical as he judges them all, but it's not going to give away the conversation we're having inside of my head.

He always looks at them like that.

Open up your mind to me. Let me in.

Easier said than done.

I have to let down the wall of my mind just for Nox, and I'm still a novice at keeping the walls up in the first place. I feel him reach out to me and press against the wall himself, sitting there at the edge of my mind and coaxing it down himself so gently that I almost struggle to believe that it is him doing it and not Gryphon or North.

I know that the rest of my Bonded Group has realized that there's something going on between Nox and I with how still we have both gone, but North covers for us with Kieran to buy us some more time.

It takes me another minute or so, but eventually I'm able to let him in my head. It feels crowded with both myself, my bond, and Nox in the space, but it only takes him a heartbeat to do what it was he came to do. Clearly, he's had time to practice or at least figure out the mechanics of it.

He opens his mind to mine, and I instantly have the entire plan laid out for me as sure as if I were the one sitting in on the meetings with North and Gryphon instead of Nox himself. I'm not sure if this is an after effect of the soul-bonding or if this is possible for me to do with any member of our Bonded Group, but as he slips back out of my mind, I feel immensely grateful and a lot more grounded in my knowledge of the situation now.

He's not going to leave my side.

None of them are.

I open my eyes back up and look at North, nodding my head slowly, and that's all he needs to see before he's clapping Kieran on the shoulder quietly. And just like that, we're moving.

We have two hours until the next teams are going to arrive, two short hours to get in there stealthily and locate Lydia, taking her out and opening the floodgates of the Resistance's wrath.

I swallow roughly and check in with my bond one last time before I take Kieran's arm.

Is there anything I need to know before we head out?

It's quiet for a moment and then it answers me. *The plan is to lure Davies here and we're not coming back without his head. If he leaves the camp, we follow him. Keep the Transporter with us.*

I swallow and send that message through to North, but he just nods at me and then gestures to Kieran that we're finally ready to move out.

I take a deep breath and then we *pop* out of existence as one.

We transport directly into the shielded area of the Resistance camp.

The moment our feet touch the ground, Gryphon's eyes flash to white as he manipulates the minds of the guards around us. I feel a mixture of relief and disappointment that his eyes stay the same white color they've always been even as he stretches his abilities the farthest they've ever gone.

My question as to why he's going to take hold of their minds instead of one of us just killing them all doesn't have the chance to fully form in my mind before the answer is there, thanks to Nox's impromptu information dump.

We don't want anyone finding corpses and raising the alarm.

We have a two hour head start to work our way through the camp and find Lydia. We need to use that to our advantage, because she's not the type of Gifted we're used to facing.

Only Davies is stronger than she is.

I had always thought that the camp that I was in was the biggest, but as we look around at the lines of tents, this feels as though it's a city of its own. The tents are all worn-looking, aged and settled into place with the length of time that the camp has been here. I can tell just by looking who sleeps in each of them without even reaching for my Gift.

The further towards the center of the camp you look, the better maintained the tents are. The Resistance don't care about equality or keeping *everyone* safe and secure, there's a very clear division between the grunt workers and those who hold power. While North might've made sure

we had a house to ourselves in the Sanctuary, there's no difference in the standard of living between us or any other family there.

No matter what anyone tries to say about the Dravens, I know who the real monsters of the world are.

Kieran has dropped us off at the safest point to enter without being detected, but it means that we have to cross the entire length of the camp to get to Silas Davies' tent, where his Bonded is waiting for his return. I trust North and Gryphon to make the right call here. If they've decided that walking through is what we should do, then I'm going to be stretching my legs here without question.

Gryphon holds the minds of the guards around us, carefully wiping out their memories and replacing them so that they don't notice a gap in their day, until we can dispose of them properly. As soon as we're able to take out Lydia, we'll be back here to mop up the rest of the enemy.

We all start to move together as one, Gryphon palming one of his guns as Atlas moves a little closer to me, rolling his shoulders back as he stares around at the camp to see if there's any danger we might have missed. Gabe flanks my other side, his arms flexing a little as he tries to hold back his dragon. Now that it's come out to protect me on missions, it's almost impossible to contain. Nox lets a few of his shadow creatures out to walk with us, but North only lets out August, careful to make sure that our group doesn't become more visible than it needs to be.

Thankfully, Gryphon can cast his Gift out and sense the minds of people as they approach, shutting them all down before they can become a problem for us.

We make good time as we pick our way through the tents. It's early enough in the morning, or late enough at night, depending on how you look at it, that there aren't many people wandering around outside. There isn't so much for Gryphon to do other than to monitor people.

I don't make him do that on his own though.

My eyes shift to black as I call on my power, casting out my Gift to get a read on the Resistance fighters and the amount of power we're going to be fighting against.

There's a *lot* of bodies around us.

A lot of power as well, enough that the first trickle of fear works its way down my spine, chilling my blood as it goes. My bond might've healed up

from the soul-bonding, but we didn't really get a warmup or the chance to figure out if it was back to full Soul-Rending power.

What if it can't?

What if it just... refuses again?

I want to vomit at the thought, so instead, I focus on gathering information for my Bonded. I do what I can to forget about what I can't control for now. I find the prisoners tent and try not to focus too long on the terrible condition the people there are in. I can't help them if I lose my shit about it now. I can be angry about it later.

Most of them are longtime prisoners, already shells of themselves. The fact that there are children among them has my stomach clenching all over again. There's no amount of therapy that will erase their traumas. Nox is living proof of that.

The kitchen tent is lively as the workers prepare breakfast for hundreds of people. I filter that information through to North and the others so we know about the potential problem there. A couple of the workers are pretty strong as well, strong enough that my bond is interested in their souls.

They could be good fuel if I need it to deal with Lydia.

The smell of the camp is familiar to me, something that always elicits a response in my body, usually in the form of a cold sweat across my forehead and clammy hands. I feel a little sick at the prospect of running into any familiar faces, but Atlas reaches over to squeeze my hand, his eyes narrowed as he looks around at the space.

I'm glad that he's not going to have to run into any members of his family here today. He doesn't deserve any more trauma. His sister being locked up in the cells back at the Sanctuary works in our favor right now, in more ways than one. I'm not sure how his bond would react to the sight of her here, but I'm sure if we ran into her third and final so-called "Bonded", Atlas would not hesitate in taking the man out.

I find Lydia in the net that I cast out, sleeping in her tent.

She's sleeping so peacefully, like a goddamned baby, and the fear and horror of the prisoners pops right back into my mind as my Gift takes in exactly how at ease the woman is right now. She's in perfect health, not a scratch on her or a worry in that evil mind of hers.

I loathe her even more than before.

It's a risk, but I call out to my bond to see if I can tear her soul out from this distance. It falls in line with North's plan just enough that it's worth

giving it a go.

It doesn't work, but it does wake her up.

I meet North's eyes across the group, but he doesn't look pissed off or disappointed in me, he just squares his shoulders and lets out more of his shadow creatures. They form into dozens of different animals. The snake makes an appearance again, coming over to curl around my legs before it disappears between the rows of tents now that the element of surprise is gone.

And it is gone.

It's almost comical to monitor Lydia as she wakes up and tries to sound the alarm. Every person she attempts to speak to, Gryphon shuts down. We're only a few hundred feet away from her tent when she finally bursts out of it wearing a gun holster thrown over a pair of silk pajamas. It looks utterly ridiculous in the middle of a war camp.

She's an older woman, older than Davies even, and she has the sharp features that you would expect of such a cold-blooded person. She looks as though her vicious personality has carved out the angles of her face and shoulders.

Her hair is blonde, but you can see where parts of it have started to turn white. It's not a power thing like mine, it's just that she's letting it age naturally instead of coloring it. Whether that's a choice or just the result of living in a camp is anyone's guess.

Her face is pulled into a sneer as she looks around at all of her incapacitated guards. We move forward and Gryphon's arm rises with the gun in his hand. I think it is more of a comfort to him than an actual attempt to use a weapon against her.

As we approach her, the ground beneath our feet begins to tremble.

"Did you really think you were going to be able to come in here and kill me, little Soul Render?" she says. I refuse to react to her words or the cold tone of her voice.

I had only met this woman a few times during my stay in the camps, but that was enough for me to know that she is a sociopath, completely unable to empathize with anyone around her. All that this woman cares about is power and how to get her hands on more of it.

She would've killed me at fourteen and consumed my Gift whole, if she'd be able to, without question or remorse for the *child* she was

murdering. I take a breath as I peruse her critically, taking in the tired lines of her body.

She looks unwell.

She looks as though something terrible has been happening within her Bonded Group, and I pray that Davies is looking the same way.

I stare at her for a second longer, waiting with a calculated pause as I let my Gift cast out once more. I can get a decent feel of her, thanks to years of having to read these people on the fly for my own survival. I can tell that she thinks that I'm hesitating because I don't know what to do here.

I use that to my advantage.

She raises her hand, and North sends through our mind link, *Don't worry about it, Bonded. Focus on what you're doing, and let us take care of her.*

The ground around us begins to tremble again as she calls on her Gift, and I panic just a little. I can't just let her take the first swing at us. My trust in my Bonded might be a hundred percent, but I also know what it feels like to lose one of them now, and I'm never going to feel that again.

Never.

I cast my Gift out as far as I can go, aware that my bond still has limitations, thanks to the soul-bonding. I'm careful to direct it towards the strongest Gifted that I can. I was helping Gryphon monitor the area, but I was absolutely taking note of who was clustered where in this place, mapping out a plan of where I could draw power from if, and when, I needed it.

Like right the hell now.

Lydia raises her hand again, and I watch as the ground in front of us begins to break open, fissures in the earth opening up and falling away.

I stumble a little, Atlas catching me and setting me back onto my feet. The air around Nox begins to thicken as he calls on the rest of his shadow creatures, ready to strike out to protect me and the rest of our Bonded Group, but I'm already two steps ahead.

Lydia raises her hand up one more time as though she's calling the earth up to follow her, her mouth opening as she prepares to bury us all, to crush us under the weight of the earth and suffocate us, and I *pull*.

I pull my power and I pull the souls out of a hundred Gifted around the camps, all of the strongest powers that I could find. I've picked out the

people who were most likely to be a danger to us or the TacTeams, and I pull their souls right out of their bodies and into my own being.

My skin burns as my bond consumes the feast I give it, my eyes shifting to black even as I hold on to control. My bond comes to the surface to be with me as I prepare myself for what I need to do.

Lydia's eyebrows twitch for a second, the smallest moment of hesitation, and I strike, taking a hold of her soul once more. This time, when I pull, it comes loose. Her bond fights against mine, clawing at the edges as it's forced out of her body, but I'm stronger than she is, even as weakened as I have been. With one final tug, it comes through, hurtling towards me as it crashes into my chest and down into the depths of my stomach.

There's a part of me that doesn't want to consume a soul like Lydia's, but there's no way that my bond would let such a feast go, and with a sickening crunch, her body hits the ground, dead before it lands.

All hell breaks loose in the camp around us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Gabriel's bond

They want what is mine.

The moment the Transporters start to appear, bringing with them dozens of men who would take my Bonded from me, I take control from my vessel, a roar bursting from his human lips as the shift takes hold. I come out to protect what is ours; mine and my vessel's and the others who were made to worship and covet the god that walks with us.

The other Bonded begin to move into place to protect the girl and my bond who lives inside of her. There's the chaos of war breaking out around us, too fast for my shifting eyes to take in, but I cannot be distracted from what needs to be done.

Kill them all.

Burn them *all*.

Dozens of Transporters are appearing around us, each carrying a Gifted with enough power that the Neuro begins to look around for an exit strategy.

There will be no exit for us now.

They have come for our Bonded, and we cannot let them take her from us. The god within him needs to awaken and take control before the vessel loses the fight for us.

My Bonded is covered by the Cleaver, his body an indestructible mass between her and our enemies. It has been a long time since I've been here,

but the last time I was, the Cleaver was here too. We work well together, sure in our job to keep our Bonded safe.

He's worthy to be left protecting her.

I move to take flight, entering the skies above them to gain an advantage.

The sound of gunfire rips through the air, unfamiliar to me, but the vessel knows it and directs me to move evasively, curving my body this way and that. The moment it stops, I turn my head back to spit fire on the row of tents at the center of the camp, taking out dozens of enemies inside as their screams fill the air.

Pride swells in my chest at the sounds.

The sound of my enemies dying torturous deaths for daring to go after my beloved Bonded. Mine. My Bonded. The Bonded I've waited millennia for, the one who completes me and is the reason I keep returning to this wretched place.

The heart that beats outside of my own chest.

Mine.

The rapid, pattering sound of the bullets starts again, but I'm already on a steady course, unable to veer away without risking hitting my Bonded and the others with the flames, so I stay on course and accept that they might hit me. I might be shot out of the sky. As long as my Bonded lives, it will be a good and worthy death.

The tiny pieces of lead hit my tail and one of my wings, stinging but not endangering my life. The three bullets that hit the soft underside of my belly are the real danger, and I let out a roar of pain as hot streams of blood rain out from me onto the battlefield below. It's not a mortal wound, not right away, and so I circle back to take out another long line of tents. I have to be sure not to hit any of our own men and women as I spit out liquid fire.

There are hundreds of Resistance being transported in faster than my Bonded can pull the souls out of. The god within the vessel is consuming what it can and channeling power through to the rest of the Bonded as fast as it can, but the sheer volume of bodies is overwhelming.

I can't stay up here forever, especially not with the wounds I have now.

I start my descent, curving my body so that my circle tightens up, and there's another round of bullets fired into the air around me. The panic of the enemy at my approach is a palpable presence in the air.

This time, one hits me on my long neck, a larger target on me than my vessel, and the taste of blood floods my mouth and my lungs as the bleeding gets worse. Another roar tears out of my jaws, bitten out from between my fangs as I spiral faster to get back down onto the ground. I'd rather be there, tearing these puny humans apart with my claws and jaws than burning them.

I'd rather be close to my Bonded if the bullet wounds kill me and once again take me from her before our time.

My feet hit the ground, and I swipe my tail out at the men who run towards me, guns and hands raised, spearing two of them on my tail spike. The others all scream, but when they turn to run, I burn them alive with nothing more than a single breath of fire.

Pathetic, all of them.

Unfortunately, what they lack in skills and spine, they make up for in numbers.

More Resistance appear, Transporters popping in and out dozens of times as they bring with them the best of what the Resistance has to offer, all of them ready to kill us. Whether it's for power or morals or simply for the pleasure of killing is irrelevant.

They want us all dead.

I take a deep breath, ready to burn them all, when suddenly, they all drop dead around me, their bodies crashing to the ground as one, soulless and gone.

My Bonded destroys them all.

Before I can exhale or catch my breath, the next wave of Transporters arrive with more Gifted, this wave even stronger than the last. This time, I'm hit with a long stream of ice as one of the Elementals strikes out at me, thinking faster than any of the others as they just stand there, looking at me in varying degrees of horror.

I breathe a long stream of fire at them, killing most of them in a single breath. As the flames die down, I find that two Gifted have survived it. One of them is untouched, even her clothing is unharmed, while the man standing only a few feet away is holding a battered shield to protect himself. They either knew about me already, somehow surviving the Wasteland, or they were counting on coming up against a Flame. Instead, they found a Shifter of mythic proportions.

I swing my tail around to spear them, but they're both fast, quick to jump out of its path. They're battle-trained, not just grunts to be used as fodder in the fight. Whatever they can do, it's powerful enough that the Resistance poured their resources into them.

They might even come from a family worth noting, but I don't give a shit about any of that. I only care that they're on the wrong side of this fight, the side that wants my Bonded dead.

Or enslaved.

A burst of power hits me, my skin burning as it begins to stitch itself back together. My blood heats up, and my heart, now an eight-chamber monstrosity in my shifted chest, thumps so hard that I'm sure the Gifted fighting below must think that war drums have begun to beat.

My Bonded is healing me.

Both of the Resistance standing in front of me watch with horror as my skin knits back together as though I was never touched by their weapons, and they see the power of my Bonded right there in front of them. There's no question that we are the most powerful Bonded Group. I'm sure they were debriefed before they got here and knew about it, but actually seeing the ability that my Bonded has to heal me, even from across the battlefield with death and destruction all around us, must be something else.

For the first time so far, I see the enemy hesitate.

I doubt that Davies had prepared them for this.

I swing my tail out again. This time, the very end of it clips the man with the shield, but he's quick to twist his body, protecting himself from the spear as he falls to the ground with a grunt.

The untouched woman runs to one of the tents that is still on fire, yanking out one of the construction poles and hefting it onto her shoulder and hand as if it's a spear of her own. She's faster than I'm expecting, and when she launches the pole into the air towards me, I am barely able to move out of its path before it skewers me.

I'm a much bigger target down here, and though I want to stay on the ground and continue to fight in close quarters, I am most useful to them in the air, that way my Bonded won't have to continue healing the damage done to me.

I need to take flight again, burn hundreds of them at a time.

I don't want to run away from these two though, I'm not one to leave a job half done.

They're not expecting me to be as agile as I am, and with a swipe of one of my clawed talons, I'm able to pin the man down, the satisfying crunch of his spine as it breaks beneath me sending a shiver across my wingspan. I press down even further, just to be sure he's gone, and the way that his body bursts is both fatal and satisfying.

The woman turns to run to another tent to grab another pole, desperation making her movements jerky, but I use my wings to glide as I jump up, my neck stretching out as I catch her in my jaws and bite down. Her screams are ear-splitting as my mouth fills with her blood.

I don't enjoy the taste of human flesh, but I don't stop chewing until I'm sure she's dead. Then I spit her back out onto the ground, nothing more than a bloodied mass of flesh and broken bones, and I stretch my wings out to take back to the air without a second thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Oli

The moment the fighting starts around us, Kieran disappears to sound the alarm to the TacTeams in place for backup. They were close to moving out anyway, but as the waves of Resistance begin to arrive, we need all of the help we can get.

North and Nox move to flank our small group, their shadow creatures thick in the air, and Gryphon's eyes shift to white as he throws his Gift into the mix, hacking into the brains of the Gifted around us to shut down their Gifts as he renders them nothing more than mindless, quick meals for the Dravens' creatures.

Gabe's dragon is quick to move off, and Atlas stays at my side, watching my every move obsessively as I lose myself in the Soul Rending. I become nothing more than a machine, filtering the souls of our enemies into power for my Bonded. I take from them and give it to my most beloved until they're all terrifyingly powerful, indestructible gods.

The Resistance were prepared for that though.

Their strategy is easy to read. Each wave of Gifted they throw at us is stronger than the last as they attempt to chip away at us little by little, weakening us so that when Davies finally arrives, there's no way we could possibly beat him.

The human part of me is worried that it's working.

The god is too busy devouring the glut of life force and power that we're destroying around us to be worried about something so trivial as strategy and warfare. No, it's writhing with joy in there, unrestrained and consuming *everything* around us to its heart's content, because there's nothing I wouldn't do to protect my Bonded.

Nothing.

Instead of taking over completely, my bond just shifts into my mind so that we're working together, my eyes shifting to black and helping me to see through the carnage.

The Resistance just keep on coming.

I let North and Nox work their way through the ones who arrive in the waves, and I focus on emptying out the rest of the camp. Tent by tent, I work through them all, but I'm also thankful when Gabe is able to wipe out rows and rows of the tents himself from the air.

I'm relieved to see that the TacTeams had already emptied out the prisoners' tents, the Transporters heading straight there to get our people out before they became casualties of the fighting. Now I only have to differentiate between the TacTeams and the Resistance when I sweep the area with my Gift.

Gabe is good at picking out the rows of tents that have Resistance hiding in them, those too terrified by the Draven Bonded Group to come out and fight for themselves. Whether they know that Lydia is dead or not is irrelevant. A lot of them have no experience fighting, and their loyalty to the cause doesn't stretch as far as coming out to face the shadow creatures or a fire-breathing dragon.

Little do they know, I don't need to be able to see them to kill them.

Any worries that I had about my bond still needing rest melt away as the souls slowly filter through my body and into my Bonded as pure power. Gryphon's eyes shine brighter and brighter, still the same white color of his Gift, but he doesn't hesitate to use what he has access to, shutting down the minds of those around us even as he is directing his TacTeams.

Bodies are littered around us everywhere, but it's mostly the enemy as they are shredded to pieces by the shadow creatures. The ground around us is churned up, a sea of blood and flesh and charred remains, thanks to Kieran transporting Sage and Gray in to fight on our perimeter as well.

It still might not be enough.

Nox and North both have their void eyes on as they live up to their titles as Death Dealers. Their bonds have not had to take over, content to sit back and watch as their vessels do what they have been trained to do. For a moment, I think that Atlas is set on just guarding me and watching what is going on around us.

That's until I hear him curse viciously under his breath, hooking an arm around my waist as he turns me. I feel the wave of his power burst out from him again, the same way it had when his bond had taken over.

I let my eyes flutter open to look behind me, only to find mangled bodies in his wake.

"They're getting too close, Sweetness. There's too many of them," he murmurs, and I nod my head.

"The camp is empty. It's only the new waves coming through for us to deal with. I'll shift back to helping here."

He nods and moves me to stand in front of his body, his arms bracketing my sides and one palm sitting over my chest. It's as though I'm wearing a living bulletproof vest, one that can fight back if I need it to.

They're coming in too fast. They're getting too close to Oleander. North, pull in. We need to close the gap, Nox calls out through our mind connection. I watch as they all move seamlessly around Atlas and I to cover us with the shadow creatures more fully. Azrael is still sitting obediently at my feet as though he's just waiting for the chance to tear some Resistance scum apart, but he loves me too much to risk leaving me.

There's more fire around us, this time from Sage as she takes out another section of the newcomers, but they're strong, too strong for any one of us to take by ourselves, and Gryphon has to wade into the fight to help her. Without access to their Gifts, she's able to roast them alive.

It's good to do it without having to listen to their dying screams.

Gabe's dragon roars above us as it dives towards the far end of the camp, swooping down to grab at a group of Resistance, and then it hurtles back into the air, dropping its victims to the ground as though they're nothing more than rocks.

For hours, we fight.

We fight for ourselves, for each other, for our community. We fight to fix the evils these people have wrought, for the family we still have and the family we've lost. We fight to finish this once and for all, because we can't live like this forever.

We deserve better than this.

The air around us is on fire.

Every inch of my body aches, and even Atlas is panting behind me as the next wave of Resistance arrives. TacTeam personnel are thick on the ground, the bodies of the Resistance already dead everywhere. I feel as though this hellish day might never freaking end, then I feel him arrive.

My bond pushes back to the surface as I reach out to my Bonded, *Davies is here. He's here now.*

Gryphon replies right away, *He brought others with him. Get the shadow creatures to take him out before he can touch Oli, and we'll deal with the others.*

North and Nox don't bother trying to answer him; they simply get to work, moving their creatures to do exactly that, streaming back towards us as they prepare for the final death we need today. The one that counts.

Davies turns and his bloodshot eyes collide with mine across the charred, blood-soaked grass. My bond reaches for him, but he lashes out at the same time. Atlas roars in pain behind me as it hits him. He stays standing though, wrapped protectively around me. Gryphon feels it too, stumbling over his feet a little as he fights the nerve pains shooting through his head. It's a very specific type of pain, one that I know well.

I don't feel it.

I'm strong enough now not to feel it. My bond has been awake and around for long enough to keep me safe from this pain. North and Nox are both unaffected as well, but Gabe's dragon lands in the small clearing that's now covered in bodies as it lets out its own screech of pain.

They're all newly awakened, without the time to settle into the space and become all-powerful, so Davies' Neuro ability is tearing into their brains and wreaking havoc there. I need it to stop. I need to stop him from hurting them, and me, because I swore I'd never let them feel the pain that man can bring.

I step away from Atlas, casting my Gift out towards Davies again. I'm going to take his soul if it's the last goddamned thing I do.

A shield slams up around me, cutting me off from all of my Bonded.

It won't last forever, the Dravens will see to that, but Davies doesn't need forever to kill me.

"NO!" North screams, shadows slamming out of his body as black as the night as they consume everything, but even as the world plunges into the depths of darkness I can still see perfectly as Davies rushes me.

My Gift isn't strong enough yet to pull his soul out, but it stays wrapped around it in his chest, gripping it and squeezing at it. I filtered everything I've collected through to my Bonded, so I don't have enough to kill Davies myself. I'd need to pull more power, but there's no one left. No one but our own men, and I'm not going to take them.

I'm not a fucking monster.

He puts a hand around my throat, his eyes manic as he gets his hands on me once again. He can't use his Gifts on me anymore, but that's not the only way to kill a person. Hand to hand, he's twice the size of me. Gryphon prepared me for this moment with months and months of training against him. So when Davies gets his other hand around my throat as well, it's hard but not impossible to dislodge him. I take him to the ground, my knee coming up to catch him in the side, and I feel his rib crunch. My legs always have been my strongest asset, and I'm proud of that fact when I smash my knee into his side again, his roar of pain a fucking beautiful sound.

He made me scream like that so many times.

He gets a hand back around my throat and lands a punch on my cheekbone, my head snapping back and stars bursting over my vision. I'm in danger here. If I don't get my brain unscrambled and away from him, he's just going to beat me to death right now.

He doesn't get the chance, and neither do I.

His body is ripped away from mine by a huge pair of jaws, the shadows of Azrael twisting and shifting until he has Davies pinned to the ground. Davies thrashes against him, but there's no fighting the Dravens' shadows, hundreds have tried and failed already.

Then Nox appears through the darkness, clear as day to my shifted eyes. He looks like Death himself standing there. His eyes touch over the bruise forming on my cheek, and it's game over for Davies.

I want to weep with relief.

"If you think killing me is going to end this, you're fucking stupid, Draven!"

“I don’t want you to die. I want you *screaming*,” Nox says, his voice wavering as his bond fights to the surface. “She gave the power away, but that’s okay. I have it. I’ll take care of this with fucking pleasure. Who would’ve thought these demons of mine would come in handy?”

Davies’ mouth opens wide, flapping like a fish out of water, but Nox’s eyes are soulless voids as he unleashes the Madness onto him. The last gift his mother ever gave him is the one he wields now to protect his Bonded, the real one, that was made for him.

The one who followed him to the edge of the afterlife and called him back onto this plane of existence, who loves him as sure as the sun itself.

He breaks Davies open again and again, and none of my other Bonded moves to stop him. No, even North stands there and watches my torturer die a slow, painful, and terrifying death, locked in his own mind as his body shuts down out of pure terror.

At the last moment, Nox’s bond offers Davies’ soul to mine.

A gift of power, if I choose to consume it.

I seriously consider it and the poetic justice of taking his power away and into myself. In the end, I don’t want the stain of that man touching me ever again, not even his soul being filtered through to me. I let it go instead, watching with my void eyes as it disappears into nothingness. The man who haunted my every waking minute, the monster in all of my worst nightmares, is dead.

Nox Draven killed him for me.

I deflate like a goddamned balloon, all but collapsing onto the ground. I don’t cry, not even tears of joy, but there’s an ache in my chest that might be relief, or maybe it’s just a physical pain, because we fought for our lives today.

It’s anyone’s guess, really.

Nox steps over Davies’ body. I’m expecting him to stand by me, maybe offer me a hand up. Instead, he drops down to wrap his arms around my shoulders and draws me into his chest. The breath he lets out is shaky, but the beat of his heart is steady and sure.

There was never a question in my mind about him, not about what he’d be willing to do for me today and definitely not what he’d do for his family. To finish the fight and have him here, alive and unharmed, is all I could ever hope for.

We’re all alive.

North comes over to stand by us both, and Nox eventually stands, pulling me with him, and then he pushes me into his brother's arms. North cups my face in his big palms and presses our foreheads together as he checks in with me.

I pull away to survey the area around us. The smoke is still thick in the air around us, choking me until I'm a coughing mess. It wasn't so bad while we were fighting, but now that my mind isn't focused on our survival, I feel as though I'm being suffocated by it.

As I look out towards the burning tents, I squint a little, blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear my eyes, but nothing I do changes what I'm seeing.

Senator Oldham.

The non-Gifted, pain-in-North's-ass senator is just... standing in the middle of the war-torn camp as though it's a regular Tuesday morning for her.

Gryphon frowns at the look on my face, turning to see what has me so messed up. When he gets an eyeful of the woman there, he shifts on his feet, his hand coming down to rest over his gun. North glances over his shoulder as well, shock sliding across his features unchecked, and Nox steps up to my side with a scowl. Atlas and Gabe both glance around, unsure of what's so concerning about this small, unassuming woman, but they trust us all enough to switch on to high alert.

She shakes her head at us gently, her voice quiet but firm and easily heard. "Well, well. I wasn't expecting you all to survive Davies' psychosis. I was sure he'd get the god-bond out of the little girl. Such a shame that I'll have to finish what he failed to do."

Then her eyes shift to the black god-voids.

I know nothing but pain as the darkness takes me.

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J Bree is a dreamer, writer, mother, and cat-wrangler. The order of priorities changes daily.

She lives on the coast of Western Australia in a city where it rains too much. She spends her days dreaming about all of her book boyfriends, listening to her partner moan about how the lawns are looking, and being a snack bitch to her three kids.

For updates about upcoming releases, please visit her website at <http://www.jbreeauthor.com>, and sign up for the newsletter or join her group on Facebook at [#mountygirlforlife: A J Bree Reading Group](#)



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J. BREE

PROLOGUE

The forest at the edge of the Mounts Bay, California, city limits are well known for being haunted.

The kids at the local high school have spent generations whispering about the bodies buried in shallow graves, waiting for the wolves to scent them and dig them up for food. There's even more legends about the souls that walk amongst the towering redwoods. It's quiet, not silent, but compared to the ever-present sounds of traffic and human experience, it's eerie and adds to the haunted feel.

While I don't believe in ghosts, I can feel the souls that linger here.

It's probably just my guilty conscious giving me the heebie-jeebies as I look over the corpse of my opponent. His blood is still fresh on my hands, cold and congealed, and I wipe them uselessly down my jeans. My clothes are just as stained as my hands, even my face is spattered with the red stains of his life ending. I look like something out of a horror movie, which is about right considering I've just bashed a man's skull in with a rock while a whole crowd of people looked on in sick fascination. There isn't a person watching that dares to make a noise. The vise-like grip of the Club holds their tongues.

I'm not afraid of being caught.

I'm small for my age. Years of food insecurity have taken their toll, and I was the youngest contender in the Game this season. None of that matters, though; I've won. I've beaten thirty men and teenage boys to take the victory and the spoils of this war.

I stumble toward the men at the perimeter of the fighting ring. They're all cloaked in black, hard looks on their faces and black ink etched over

their cheeks. My hands tremble at the thought of wearing those same marks. The marks of the Twelve. But I've earned them. I've earned the right to stand with them and be one of them.

To be free.

"Congratulations, you've won the Game," the Jackal speaks, and I shiver at the cold tones of his voice, so unlike the warmth he usually extends to me.

I nod my head. I want this over with. I want a hot meal and an even hotter shower.

"Welcome to the Twelve. You're replacing the Hawk. Who do you choose to be?"

Free. I guess a hawk is a good embodiment of freedom, but it feels strange to take a dead man's name, like climbing into his bed with the sheets still warm. I look around at the other men that make up the Twelve. Their names are what they're known as on the streets, what their gangs cover themselves with as protection and a warning. I could have that too. I could make myself a queen of my own empire. I could rule the streets and never go hungry again.

I could escape the cycle of poverty my mother has left me in.

My eyes land back on the Jackal, and I lift my chin until I no longer feel like I'm looking up at him.

"I am the Wolf."