

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
B.M. CLEMTON



A
SPARK
OF
REVENGE

UMBRA HUNTERS

A SPARK OF REVENGE

Umbra Hunters

Book 2

B M CLEMTON

Contents

[A Spark of Revenge Playlist](#)
[Content Warning and Trigger Warning](#)
[Main Character Index](#)

1. [Meyer](#)
2. [Valen](#)
3. [Meyer](#)
4. [Meyer](#)
5. [Creed](#)
6. [Meyer](#)
7. [Meyer](#)
8. [Lennox](#)
9. [Meyer](#)
10. [Valen](#)
11. [Meyer](#)
12. [Razar](#)
13. [Meyer](#)
14. [Lennox](#)
15. [Meyer](#)
16. [Meyer](#)
17. [Meyer](#)
18. [Valen](#)
19. [Lennox](#)
20. [Meyer](#)
21. [Meyer](#)
22. [Meyer](#)
23. [Creed](#)
24. [Meyer](#)
25. [Lennox](#)
26. [Meyer](#)
27. [Meyer](#)
28. [Meyer](#)
29. [Meyer](#)
30. [Meyer](#)
31. [Meyer](#)
32. [Meyer](#)
33. [Meyer](#)
34. [Lennox](#)
35. [Meyer](#)
36. [Meyer](#)
37. [Creed](#)

38. [Meyer](#)

[Also by B M Clemton](#)

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Genna Bump

Tiffany Greenwood

A Spark of Revenge Playlist

I Know Your Secrets- ***Tommee Profitt***

Nightmare- ***Halsey***

Redemption- ***Besomorph***

Beautiful Creature- ***Miia***

Castle- ***Halsey***

Whatever It Takes- ***Stephen Stanley***

Uncover- ***Zara Larson***

Bird Set Free- ***Sia***

Voices- ***Hidden Citizens***

My Songs Know What You Did In The Dark- ***Fall Out Boy***

Dirtier Thoughts- ***Nation Haven***

Half Life- ***Livingston***

Figure You Out- ***VOILA***

The Death Of Peace Of Mind- ***Bad Omens***

Bring Me To Life- ***Evanescence***

Dynasty- ***Miia (Umbra Hunters)***

Content Warning and Trigger Warning

This story is a Reverse Harem novel that has darker elements that readers should be aware of such as strong language, and sexual content.

A Spark Of Revenge is the second book in Meyer's Story and ends with a cliffhanger.

Main Character Index

Meyer Smith- *FMC*
Lennox Regalis- *Demon*
Razar Regalis- *Demon*
Credence Regalis- *Demon*
Valen- *Dream Walker*
Theodore Drakos- *Umbra Hunter*
Jordan Jennings- *Umbra Hunter*
Elaine Drakos- *Umbra Hunter*
Monroe- *Umbra Hunter*

ONE



Meyer

“**T**en!” Lennox snarls.

I can hear the howl of a Demon as I race through the gates of the Castle, my feet pounding on the frozen path as I run for the cover of the snowy woods. Bitter cold air bites at my face as I run, and I hope I can get to the old church before Lennox or that other fucking Demon, Razar, can get to me.

My heart is pounding so loudly in my chest that I can hear it in my ears as I sprint through the dark, running off the trail that leads away from the Castle and onto the small path I followed earlier that day.

“*Meyer!*”

Creed’s voice echoes in the surrounding air, making my heart crack, his betrayal hurts more than everything else at the moment. I’m so freaking confused, and I know I need to take a moment to think shit through, but that won’t be happening while I’m being chased through the forest with a soulless-eyed Demon hot on my heels.

“Meyer! Please wait!” Creed shouts after me, his voice slowly growing softer as I put distance between us. I gasp as I almost trip and fall into the deep snow I’m attempting to run through. In my panic, I moved off the path too soon, and the snow is hard to run through.

“Fuck!” I grind out as I hear something running behind me. Just keep going! I have to get to the church and find Valen. He can help me, I mentally tell myself, even though I’m not sure if that’s true. Valen told me to run, and not to trust anyone. I thought he was being paranoid, but shit, he was right.

Only, I didn't have the time to run. I woke up to find those papers in the box on Lennox's desk, and then Elaine came in... then Razar outside and... My mind spins as I try to refocus, my feet finally finding the worn-down trail to the old church I took earlier today. My pace quickens, and I almost scream in fear when the Demon chasing me howls loudly behind me.

He's too close. There is no way I can outrun him!

A lump of fear forms in my throat as tears prick the corners of my eyes. Shaking my head, I run as fast as I can, weaving around the dark trees of the forest. I almost sob in relief when I see the trees ahead thin out, opening up to the clearing the church resides in.

Another howl and the snapping of twigs makes me flinch and stupidly look over my shoulder, only to see the inky darkness of night. I squint as I keep moving, trying to see the monster chasing me, then gasp when my foot catches on a large rock, making me pitch forward into the small clearing. I hiss in pain as I catch myself with my hands, the sharp end of a rock slicing the palm of my hand.

Ignoring the burning sting and warm blood that now oozes from the gash, I jump to my feet and run toward the dark silhouette of the church only about fifty yards in front of me. I practically jump up the stairs and reach for the handle before freezing, my hand outstretched, as a cold sense of dread runs up my spine. I close my eyes for a moment and wrap my fingers around the frosted metal handle of the old door, praying it will open. When it doesn't, I know I've run out of time.

Slowly, the night turns deadly silent. The forest goes still, not even the soft sounds of the wind rustling the branches of the old trees above filter down to me. The snapping of a branch only feet away sounds much louder than it should, making me flinch, my eyes squeeze shut as I take a deep breath to steady myself. Building up what courage I have left, I peer over my shoulder and hold my breath as the black, soulless-eyed Demon stalks into the clearing with me.

A cold burst of excitement runs down my spine, making my teeth grind together in response as I watch with bated breath as the monster slowly approaches. The Demon tilts its massive head to the side, watching me closely as I turn to give it my full attention. It takes another step toward me, and I unconsciously step back, pressing myself into the wooden door behind me, never letting my gaze stray from its black eyes.

"Fuck," I whisper when his mouth slowly opens, and I see its sharp teeth

glistening with a black liquid. Venom. Lennox said their bites hold venom that can kill. A shiver of dread courses through my body as the Demon stalks closer, and the sound of my racing heart thunders in my ears.

“R-Razar?” I rasp, pressing my hands to the door behind me and praying for it to open. I ignore the sting of pain from the wound on my palm, choosing to watch as the Demon slows to a stop and stares at me. “Razar... please,” I start, unsure if he can understand me when he’s like this.

“Little Demon,” a dark, rough voice sounds from the opposite side of the clearing, drawing a startled scream from my lips as I twist and see an enormous man stepping into the clearing.

No, not a man.

A large, demented version of Lennox strides into the clearing. His fiery gaze is focused on me as the massive, dragon-like wings at his back spread wide before closing in tight, allowing him to move through the trees and walk closer.

“Did you really think you could outrun us?” he asks in amusement as he raises a taloned hand to run over one of the twisted horns resting on his temples. Holding my uninjured hand in front of me, I shake my head.

“Stop!” I snap, not wanting him or Razar, who has already halted his approach, to come any closer. My hand shakes in the air in front of me, and I desperately try to hide my gasping breaths as I eye his clawed fingertips. The scars on my back ache, and memories try to overwhelm me as I remember how it felt to be sliced open by claws so similar to the ones Lennox now sports.

Lennox scoffs but surprises me when he actually does as he’s told and stands in place. He eyes me a moment and scowls. “Why the hell are you trembling? You’re stronger than this; toughen up,” he snaps, his smile fading into disappointment. Anger quickly replaces my fear, temporarily chasing away the dark memories of my past as I watch his cocky smile grow, and I glare daggers at him.

“You are a fucking, no-good piece of shit, Lennox Regalis! You lied to me!” I shout, quickly flipping him off with my outstretched hand and making the man in question grin wider in response.

“Ah, that’s better,” he says with a dark chuckle as he resumes walking toward me. “I had begun to worry you were broken there for a bit.”

“Stop!” I shout again, but this time he ignores it, nodding to Razar, who growls under his breath and stalks toward me as well.

“No,” Lennox says simply. “Unfortunately, I still need your assistance, and you will be staying with me. And I never lied,” he mutters, making my anger boil over.

“You just lied again!” I point out. When he doesn't respond, I glare at him. “And what if I don't want to go with you?”

“I'm not asking,” he growls, eyes shining with more anger than amusement this time.

My vision dims, and I shake my head a little, opening my mouth to say more, but then I gasp and yank my hand away from the door behind me as pain shoots from the cut in my hand up my arm and into my body. My legs shake and threaten to give out as something odd filters into the air around me, then a click of a lock sounds, and the old door to the church creaks open behind me.

“Meyer?” Lennox asks as he moves faster toward me, sounding almost worried. Ignoring him, I turn, my vision still swimming as I desperately slap my hands against the door, shove it open, and step into the dark church.

“Meyer, don't you fucking dare!” Lennox roars as I look over my shoulder at him and flip him off.

“Fuck you!” I shout back at him, grinning as I slam the door shut in his face as he runs up the steps, Razar hot on his heels. It feels freaking amazing to finally tell him off like I've been dying to.

The sound of the lock re-engaging filters through the damp, musty air of the church just before the door shakes and pounding from outside begins. I take a step back, squinting a little. There is still a soft green glow around the door, but it slowly dims, and the tiny window next to the door is not big enough to let any of the moonlight in.

“Meyer! You little brat!” Lennox snarls as he pounds on the door so hard I hold my breath, my heart lodging in my throat.

Shit! What if he can break the door down?

But just as the thought crosses my mind, the fading green symbols glow brighter, and the air around me bursts to life. I shiver in response, the feeling of something foreign coursing over me right before I hear Lennox curse and then nothing.

The pounding suddenly stops, the angry Demon no longer shouting at the door or trying to get inside. Curious, I step over to the small window, and my eyes widen when I see Lennox rolling over on the snow covered ground. Whatever magic was on the door must have knocked him away from the

church. Razar growls and paces in front of the steps, not sparing Lennox a single glance.

Hmm... I wonder if Demon Razar and Demon Lennox are friends? They aren't attacking each other, but Razar doesn't look very concerned for Lennox. And why is Razar one of those beasts while Lennox is different?

When the big, horned Demon prince finally comes to a stop, he curses and pushes himself up, his long hair tangled in his horns and falling over his face. A ragged laugh bursts from my chest. I'm not sure if it's from relief or the result of the stressful night, but I can't suppress the manic giggle fit I fall into. That is, until the black soulless eyes of Razar's Demon lock onto mine through the small window.

I drop to my knees immediately, not wanting to test my luck with his Demon's strength.

"Lennox, stop! What the hell?" Creed's voice filters into the old drafty church, making my heart crack a little more. "What happened? Where is Meyer?"

"I told you to stay at the Castle," I hear Lennox snarl, and I press my back harder against that wall behind me. "Elaine will need help containing the other Rangers and putting them in cells until they can be interrogated."

"I fucking told you not to shift. You don't think rationally when you're in this form, idiot. What the hell were you thinking? Why chase her? You knew, Nox! You knew she would run, especially with Razar in his beast form!"

"I was thinking that the Seniors have gotten out of control and are now starting to kill themselves. Elaine's husband is dead, Credence. Father was right. We should've had this finished and gone home long before now. And, of course, I knew she would run. Why do you think I stayed in this form? She needed the truth, and I was sick of handling her with kid gloves," Lennox snarls, his voice echoing through the windows and door of the old church in which I'm currently taking shelter.

"You know why we haven't done that, you fucking—"

"Stop!" Nox roars, and I gasp when the air around me shifts uncomfortably. Green light softly glows around the windows and doors of the church, and I shiver as whatever is in the air seems to thicken.

What the hell is happening now?

As I cast my worried gaze around the church, the cold from the frozen wooden floors under me makes goosebumps rise on my arms and my teeth chatter a little. I frown when I find what looks like three sarcophagi sitting in

the middle of the long, weathered chapel. Massive wooden beams curve upwards on the ceiling, running the length of the room with an odd sort of forgotten elegance. A wall at the far end of the chapel is lifted and leaning, the roots of a thick pine tree pushing its way into the room; nature's way of taking back what has been forgotten.

There are broken, old pews pushed to the sides to make room for the large white stone sculptures, and I tilt my head to the side, my eyes narrowing in confusion. "What the hell?" I whisper to myself, leaning forward to try to see the sarcophagi better. The one on the far right appears to be open, its enormous lid shoved precariously to the side, while the center one and one to the left look sealed shut. I lift a hand to move some of my tangled hair away from my eyes, then wince when my fingers skim over the small gash on my forehead that I got when falling off the couch in Lennox's office. Thankfully, it doesn't seem to be bleeding anymore.

A bone-aching dread slowly pools inside my chest as I realize my attempts to get to Valen were for nothing. I was hoping to find a room where the Seniors might be holding him, but I don't see any other door besides the one I just came through. There is what looks like a thrown together cell in the corner behind one of the pews, but it's empty... No one is here!

The deep, bone-chilling howl of a Demon makes me jump and twist to look at the door in fear. Is Razar going to try to break through the door? Has he found a way to get inside? What if the weird green magic doesn't keep him out the way it seems to keep Nox away?

The silence that follows the howl sets me on edge as I carefully peer through the tiny window. My eyes widen as I see Nox rush to where Creed is now lying on the snow covered ground a few feet from the rickety steps of the building. Nox falls to his knees next to him, his enormous hands moving to help his brother up, his Demon bulk makes Creed appear small in comparison. Creed looks pale and dazed, and I hate the thread of worry that rushes through me as I bite my lip, my hands shaking at my sides.

Did Razor attack Creed? Or did Nox? I pull my eyes from where Creed and Nox are sitting, whispering to each other in low tones, making their words unintelligible as I search for Razar. Almost like a magnet, my eyes are pulled to the right, where they find the soulless black eyes from my nightmares.

My breath catches painfully in my chest as I stare into those voids, my heart rate picking up as Razar stands beside the window, much closer than

Creed or Nox. His big, black, deformed head tilts to the side, and his claws dig into the wood under his feet. A wave of fear washes over me as I suddenly realize I'm stuck here. I may have been able to hide from the Demons outside, but there is no way out of the church other than the way I entered. I came in hopes of finding Valen, but there is nothing in this dirty old church but me and a few stone boxes.

"Shit, shit, shit," I whisper, twisting away from the Demon I'd been staring at and walk further into the church, desperately hoping for a secret way out. "Maybe a secret door? Like behind a bookcase?" I muse, then frown. Yeah, I doubt anyone would bother putting a secret door behind a bookcase in a shithole like this.

I move as silently as I can through the church, trailing my fingertips through the cold, thick layer of dust on the sarcophagus closest to me. Its lid sits askew, and I can't help but notice the beautiful yet terrifying carvings etched into the detailed design of the lid. There are roses of all different sizes twisting over the sides of the lid on thick, thorn-covered vines that fall down and continue on the side of the sarcophagus itself. But it's the monsters in the center, with taloned wings and horns, that make me freeze, and I lean forward.

The monster almost looks like Lennox... or rather, the monster Lennox has become. But it's smaller, less defined, and doesn't have as much bulk. It's also missing the rather enormous claws Lennox is currently sporting.

Frowning, I lean in further to study the dark, empty stone box under the lid and gasp when my eyes zero in on what looks like claw marks carved into the hard, stone sides. There are hundreds of marks moving up the sides of the box. I shake my head in confusion, then lean to the side, looking at the underside of the lid. More claw marks and what looks like rust-brown smears of dried blood reside there, and my stomach drops.

"They locked something in here," I whisper as I reach out to drag my fingers over the rough marks. Each of my fingertips lines up with the five long marks on one side, and I can't stop the shiver of disgust that runs down my spine at the thought of locking someone in this alive. Suddenly, a thought crosses my mind, and my eyes widen in horror.

"No... no, no, no. They wouldn't," I whisper, rushing around the first sarcophagus to the one sitting in the center of the church. This one's lid is closed, and the carvings on it are different. There are the familiar markings I have seen on Jordan and Theo's kalises, but instead of a Demon that

resembles Lennox, it's an entirely different kind of monster. Four large eyes are carved into an oblong looking face with no nose or mouth. Its bony-looking hands are reaching up like it's trying to grab me as I hover above it. I shiver as something heavy and dark inches over my skin the closer I get.

I move to touch the stone, but pause when my fingers are only inches away from the carvings. Suddenly, red sparks dance around the seal of the box, and one of the small sparks bridges the gap to my outstretched fingers. I whip my right hand back and furiously rub at it. It didn't seem to do anything, so I let out a pent-up breath. My heart rate has picked up, and I can taste something sour in my mouth. My body shivers, and I step back, not wanting to get any closer to the sparks and whatever is in that box. I'm not sure what it is, but I somehow know something terrible will happen if I get too close.

Hesitantly, I step around the creepy box that's in the very center of the church and move to the last one, which is also sealed. But instead of a Demon that resembles Lennox or the freaky four-eyed monster, there is a moon and stars carved into the box, and under the moon is a silhouette of a man with what looks like wolves on either side of him.

"Dream Walker blood is the key." Valen's words echo through my mind, and I nod, slapping my wounded hand on the cold stone, then gasp as bright blue-green light sparks under my hand. Something warm burns in my chest, and I squeak in surprise when the feeling grows, moving down my arm to the sarcophagus.

Only it's not coming from the box... it's coming from me!

"What the hell?!" I shout. Jumping back from the coffin-like box, I stare at my hand in horror as green light sparks at my fingertips for a moment before dimming out, leaving me in the cold, dark silence of the dusty church once more. "No, no, no. NO! I don't want any other weird shit," I yell at my hand, then glare at the box just before something loud slams into the door of the church, tearing another shout of fear from my throat as I stumble in surprise, catching myself on the white stone box in front of me. My wounded hand screams in pain when the rough stone digs into my sensitive flesh, and I bite my lip in response.

"Meyer!" I hear Lennox bellow. "Meyer, what's happened?" he snarls before something big hits the doors. The green light starts glowing protectively around the door again, and I look down at my hands, ensuring it's only the door that is glowing and not me. "Open this damned door!" Lennox

growls before he pounds on the door another three times.

“You idiot. She’s not going to answer if you’re yelling at her!” I hear Creed snap at his brother, but that doesn’t seem to faze Nox. The pounding continues, brightening the green glow, and fear filters back in. Nox is going to break the door!

“Meyer! I swear to all the Gods in the universe if you don’t answer me right now!” he shouts so loud, I swear the church windows rattle and threaten to shatter.

“Fuck’s sake! Lemon Drop, can you answer us, please?” Creed shouts. A thread of panic is evident in his calm voice, and I glare at the door in response before bright green light shines. Uhh, no! No, I can not. Fuck right the hell off, Creed!

Creed’s shout is cut off suddenly, and I hear the man and Demon get thrown again by the wards guarding the old church. What do they say about insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results?

I laugh despite myself, serves them right!

Looking back at the sarcophagus, I watch with both fear and wonder as glimmering green magic creeps around the seal of the box before moving into the carvings. It lights first the stars and then the moon with an eerie green glow, shadowing the carved figure of the man and wolves.

“Meyer!” Lennox roars, hitting the church so hard that the walls tremble under his anger, but I don’t bother answering as a hissing sound comes from the lid of the white stone box, and then... nothing. The green light fades, and the weird warm sensation in my chest goes cold.

Well, that was anticlimactic. I can’t tell if I’m glad nothing happened or disappointed. Another roar of anger and hushed cursing comes from outside, and I’m about to turn to tell them to shut the hell up when the soft scent of citrus and winter air drifts over me, making my heart skip a beat.

“I knew it!” I whisper, rushing to the sarcophagus and shoving at the enormous white stone lid, putting all my weight behind it, then cursing when I only move it an inch. Looking around the dark room, I search for something I can use to help pry off this damn lid, and my eyes fall on a piece of wood lying nearby. I frown and look for something better, then sigh in annoyance when I don’t see something more helpful. Rushing over, I grab the long board and jam it in the small crack that I created before jumping and adding my weight to it in a desperate attempt to move the damn lid. It moves, but just

barely, and I let out a frustrated scream.

“Come the fuck on!” I grumble to myself as I shift back on my feet and glare at the unhelpful board.

“Lemon Drop?” Creed's worried voice comes from the door again as the howl of a Demon echoes through the air. I shiver in response and flip off the door. I'm acting like a damn child at this point, but I'm so incredibly frustrated and desperate that I don't give a rat's ass. “How the hell did she get in there?” Creed asks, and I hear Lennox scoff.

“Don't be stupid, you know how. You're the one who figured it out after bedding the little brat.” My already aching heart splinters at Lennox's words.

Creed had told his brother about our night together?

Fuck, of course he had. *He was only using you, remember?*

I shake my head and blink back the tears burning my eyes. I'm not sad... I'm fucking livid! Damn Creed and all his brothers to hell! Why did I trust his stupid, handsome face and charming smile? I grab the board and heave on it, moving the lid another inch before the ominous sound of wood cracking comes just before the board breaks. Snarling in frustration, I kick the box in front of me before pressing my hands to the lid. Green light illuminates the lid once again, and the warmth from earlier comes rushing back.

I grit my teeth at the feeling, trying to ignore it while praying that Valen is in here and somehow unharmed. He did everything he could to save me. Now it's my turn to repay the favor! I shove with everything I have, closing my eyes when the green light glows too bright, and gasp when the lid moves forward with ease, and tumbles to the ground with a loud *thump*.

“Little Demon!”

“Shit, she's not answering. I can smell blood! How the fuck do we get in there?”

“What the fuck do you think I'm trying to do?!” Lennox roars, desperation lacing his rough voice.

Panting, I lean forward and peer into the sarcophagus, my eyes widening at the cold, lifeless face of my dream man. My breath hitches, and a sob threatens to break free as the tears I held back earlier spill over.

I'm too late.

“Valen?” I rasp, my fingers brushing his white-blond locks off his forehead and moving my hand to cup his cold, smooth cheek before darting to his neck. Pressing two fingers to the side of his throat, I close my burning eyes, desperate to feel a pulse there. Anything to show me that he can be

saved. That I hadn't been too late.

Nothing.

“Valen, please—” my voice cracks, and I shiver at the feel of lifeless skin and bite my lip hard until the bitter, metallic taste of blood floods my mouth. My chest aches as I stare down at him in horror and agony. I hadn't known him for long, but there was something about him; something that made me feel protected as I attempted to navigate the brutal reality of my new life. It was a feeling I hadn't felt since Grandpa died, and I hadn't realized how much I missed feeling... secure.

Valen had become my safe place, the person I unknowingly relied on, even though I'd never truly met him. He did everything he could, warned me about the Seniors, and even gave me a place to hide when I needed to run. Warm, wet tears slowly trail down my cheeks as a small sob rattles through me, causing pain to bloom in my chest. I wrench my hand away from Valen's lifeless body, unable to feel his cold skin for another moment, and press the palm of my hand to my chest as the pain there continues to grow.

“I'm sorry,” I get out, my vision blurring as I stare down at the man I tried to help, but had failed. My head and heart are a confusing mix of pain, anger, and sorrow, and I'm not sure if I want to scream, cry, or run until I leave this new world behind me. “I'm so sorry. All I wanted... I wish...” I trail off, not knowing what to say and realizing it doesn't matter. I take in Valen's pale skin and fair features, so similar to my own, yet so different at the same time. His almost elven beauty untouched even in death.

Shivering, I let my hand fall from my chest, my shoulders shaking with the restraint of holding back the agony that has enveloped my body. My eyes move from Valen's perfect white-blond hair to his thick black lashes that lay peacefully over his too gaunt cheekbones, and I close my eyes, my hands balling into fists of anger.

How can a person do this to someone? Why would the Seniors put a fellow Umbra Hunter into a tomb like this? I'm vaguely aware of distant shouts and pleas from outside, but I ignore them, my world narrowing to the dead man lying in front of me.

Pain and fear slowly melt into a fiery ball of rage, and I welcome it like a balm to my torn soul. The pain in my chest turns to warmth, and that foreign feeling that had been there when I pushed the lid off of Valen's tomb rushes back with a vengeance. Harnessing it, I let the odd feeling of power flow, relinquishing the hurt deep inside, replacing it with the smoldering burn of

revenge.

This is all too much—everything with Lennox and Razar. With Creed and Theo... the betrayals I hadn't seen coming, along with the confusion and fear of not understanding the world I had been forced into. Only days ago, I questioned the truth about the reflective-eyed Demons, but never the beast that Razar had become. The scars on my back ache at the reminder of the near-fatal attack I suffered years ago at the hands of those monsters. The deep howl of the Demon outside rings out around me, breaking my resolve, and I let the anger flow through me like a tidal wave. And this time, I'm not strong enough to hold it back.

So I do the only thing I can. I let it loose with a scream, releasing every pent-up emotion inside me. Every broken piece inside me, every doubt and fear. The scream rushes from me so fast that I stumble, my ears ringing. I clench my eyes shut as green light bursts around me, my body heating, and the energy I just felt fades in a matter of seconds.

Suddenly, my body feels heavy, and my scream cuts off with a gasp. Shit, what the hell am I doing? But before I can pull the powerful feeling back inside, my knees give way, and I crumple into darkness.



Valen

Green light is the first thing that filters into my mind as I swim through a never-ending blackness, which is rather odd since I thought this was all that was left for me.

Darkness... Nothing.

I had chosen my fate to save her. I knew I didn't have much magic left, and I happily used what I had to send Meyer back to reality hoping she could escape the no doubt horrid existence that would befall her if she stayed under the supervision of the Umbra Hunters. The air around me stills, and I want to frown and open my eyes.

Am I in another dream? Has Meyer somehow pulled me back to her?

No.., that can't be right. Please, no! That would mean she was still near my physical body and linking our dreams. When I felt her magic snare my subconscious, I thought it was a miracle that another Dream Walker had survived the massacre of our people. I could tell immediately that Meyer wasn't a strong magic user. Meyer's magic was dim, like a flickering candle on a cold rainy day. But after my lonely existence in the black ocean I was trapped in, that small flame gave off the brilliance of a hundred suns. It gave me the first flicker of hope and, with it, a longing to live again. I knew who she was and what she meant to me the moment our magic came into contact with each other, which is probably why she pulled me into her dreams when she was scared. I like that she needed me and called to me even when she didn't know of my existence.

"*Valen, Please,*" my siren pleads, and I long to listen, to go to her. But

before I can try, pain the likes of nothing I have felt before hits me. So much pain that all I want to do is scream.

It starts at my fingers and toes, then slowly creeps up my limbs, the feeling is like a million red-hot needles stabbing into my flesh, making my mind blank. I try to gasp, to call out for help, but my body doesn't respond. I'm trapped in the physical and mental prison that Arthur Axford designed.

"I'm sorry," Mi Sol whispers into my soul. "I'm so sorry." Her voice cracks, pain evident, bringing a roaring wave of protectiveness to the surface, shadowing my pain enough for me to cling to her presence. "All I wanted... I wish..." she continues, and I hang onto her every word as the air thickens around us. I want to smile as her magic grows, doubling, then tripling with strength as her breaths come in rapid succession.

She's close, my little queen, *Mia Regina*, and I'm not sure if I'm ecstatic that I finally have her near or livid that she disobeyed me. I told her to run and demanded that she leave the Umbra Hunter's castle immediately. I gave my fucking life... or rather, I thought I had, in order to keep her safe, and she flat out ignored me. Meyer should be in a completely different country, safe from Axford and the corrupt Seniozem ruling North America. Yet here she is, her magic circling me, filling my pain-riddled body with life once more.

I'm not used to people disobeying my orders, though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. From what I have seen and learned from the few times she called me to her dreams, *Mia Regina* is stubborn and as hot-headed as they come. She was always complaining about that asshole Umbra Hunter who bossed her around. So I shouldn't be surprised that she is here, no matter how terrifying that thought is.

I let my mind latch onto the fear that thought gives me, distracting myself from the pain in my body as my chest bursts with agony, then something gives a loud *thump*. Another one follows only seconds later, and I want to curse and scream as blood slowly circulates in my veins. Still trapped in the prison of my nightmares, I hold on to Meyer's magic, her soft scent of citrus bright in my senses as my body responds to her proximity. All I want to do is hold her, pull her into my arms, and feel her body against mine. To know that she is real and not a beautiful dream the Seniozem created to torture me further.

The sudden and dangerous sound of a *Beastia's* howl breaks through the painful little bubble Meyer has wrapped me in, and for the first time in far too long, I startle. No, no, no! I'm not strong enough to help her yet! No! Panic

courses through me, and my heart stalls when I hear Meyer release a soul-crushing scream. The sound rolls through me like the world's worst nightmare, and my body seizes, my already tense muscles contracting at the sound.

Grabbing her magic like a lifeline, I pull on it, taking it far too fast, but knowing I'll be able to replenish it the moment I know she is safe. If I knew Meyer could fend off a Beastia on her own, I wouldn't worry, but I know from experience she's as vulnerable as a newborn fawn. Well, that's not fair; she must have some grit, and it didn't help that she appeared in the traditional dressing of our court. I thought Mi Sol would freeze to death before she awoke. I wonder if she has discovered her claws yet? Meyer seems to be under the impression she is a full-blooded Hunter, which just isn't the case. Either way, she is not strong enough to fight off a Beastia.

Time and awareness rush back like a tidal wave, slamming into my subconscious, and I gasp, my lungs screaming as they inflate. It feels like a massive weight is sitting on my chest as I try to remember how to breathe again. Gritting my teeth, I send every ounce of magic and energy I can muster through my body, open my eyes, and immediately squint from the bright light of Meyer's magic filling the air.

What the hell? How is she producing this much magic?

As the howl of the Beastia dies out, so does Meyer's scream. I lurch forward, sitting upright, coughing and gasping for breath, my eyes widening as I watch Meyer—who's standing only a few feet from me—crumple and fall to the ground where she stays unmoving.

"Shit!" I yell, adrenaline pumping as I use my arms and heave myself from some weird box. I throw my legs over the side and climb out, landing heavily on my feet just for my legs to wobble, then collapse uselessly underneath my weight. Cursing, I fall next to Meyer and glare at my legs before crawling to where she's far too still on the frigid wooden floor.

"First, save the girl, then try to remember how to freaking walk," I snarl, glaring down at my useless legs before I finally pull myself next to Meyer and sit up, attempting to get my numb legs to respond. I reach for her, my fingers shaking as I gently pick her delicate form up and cradle her to my chest. Citrus and warmth flood me as I pull her close, and I swallow the lump in my throat as I somehow manage to keep us both upright.

"Mi Sol?" I whisper, brushing her blonde locks away from her beautiful face, my heart stalling when I finally see her. I let my arms move protectively

around her small body, curvier than I remembered from her dreams, and simply stare at the goddess I somehow have the privilege of holding. Mi Sol is small for a Dream Walker and a Hunter, but she is average height and build for a human—no wonder she could blend into that world for as long as she had.

My eyes dart from her face to her chest when she doesn't respond, catching the movement there and trying to calm my racing heart with reassurance that she is still breathing. Even still, my fingers move to her neck, finding her fluttering pulse instantly, calming my fears further. Next, I look around us, trying to spot the Beastia whose howl I had heard, but I frown when I see that we are in a dark, dusty room; no Beastia or threat in sight.

My head spins, and I groan, having moved far too quickly for my half-dead state. I feel like I have been trampled in a pit of feral Therion, then pulled out and thrown into the Leviathan abyss. Slowly, I release my hold on Meyer's calming magic, letting it filter back into her, not liking how the power exchange caused a loss of consciousness. I need more; my head is spinning like a top, and my body feels like it is hovering somewhere between the realms of life and death. But I refuse to take anything more from the girl in my arms if it causes her any harm. I'll have to come up with another way to collect a life source.

As Meyer's magic settles around her, I take in our surroundings. Where are we? Is this a room in the Umbra Hunter's Castle? It seems rather stupid of the Senioreem to put a threat so close to their personal space, but I wouldn't put anything past Arthur Axford. The old crow is so full of himself that he would probably lock the King of Hell in the same room with him and believe his spells would be enough to protect him.

I vaguely recall Meyer mentioning that she had felt my presence somewhere outside the castle before she had come to her dreamscape. I sigh, my arms tightening around her still form as I look around.

There is an odd ringing in my ears now that I have released my hold on Meyer's magic, and I'm not sure if it's my vision swimming, making my stomach roll, or if it's my entire body. "Both," I grunt out, moving one hand from Meyer's waist to help brace myself so I don't end up face-first on the cold wooden planks under us. "Mi Sol," I whisper as I slowly set her back on the ground, not wanting to risk dropping her if I lose consciousness. "I need you to open those beautiful eyes for me," I rasp, needing to know she is okay

before my body tries to shut down.

Sounds from outside the room where we reside have my head jerking to the side, my lip curls into a snarl as darkness whispers around my fingers, moving from my hands to Meyer's delicate skin. I watch with sick fascination as her soft, creamy skin darkens under my touch, and my eyes shift; the side of me I keep on such a short leash is awakening at her Shade's presence.

Hmm, there is more Dream Walker in her than I initially thought. The revelation is like a shot of lust and adrenaline as I pull back my magic and whisper a spell, a green light spilling over us, ensuring she and I will be safe until I have enough power to allow us to escape this place.

My magic slowly rolls over our bodies, then expands, ballooning around us like a tiny shield, keeping our magic signatures and presence confined within. No Umbra Hunter should be able to feel or hear us until I release the spell. The room continues spinning and getting darker as I ensure Meyer is safe on the ground next to me. She whimpers and flinches the smallest amount when her cheek touches the cold floor, and I smile.

"Wake up for me, Regina," I whisper, using both hands to lower myself next to her, ignoring the pain in every muscle of my body as I stare at the only thing that matters at this moment. Meyer stirs, muttering something under her breath, and I chuckle when I finally make sense of her slurred words.

"You curse worse than any lady I have met before. It's rather refreshing," I muse as I watch her every breath. I'm entranced by the woman in front of me, and I can feel an obsession starting to take hold. I can only hope that she will forgive me once I tell her the truth about her world, because it's far too late to put distance between us. Meyer is mine, and I will do whatever it takes to convince her of that fact.

THREE



Meyer

“*Mi Sol?*” Valen's calm voice washes over me, relaxing my frazzled mind and soothing my aching heart. But the feeling only lasts a moment before reality comes rushing back, yanking me from the peaceful slumber I had fallen into and thrusting me back into the cold, harsh life I'd been forced into. The momentary bliss of hearing Valen once more is broken by the reminder that I failed him. That he was gone and that I would never see his small smile or watch as his brilliant pale green eyes lit up in amusement as he watched me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, grounding myself to the feeling of cold wood against my face as hot tears fall down my cheeks. “Are you injured?” a deep, melodic voice asks tiredly. Valen! My breath hitches when I feel a strand of my hair moving away from my cheek before cold fingertips brush at the tears there. When a hand resting on my hip—something I hadn't noticed until this moment—moves up to cradle my face, I gasp, my eyes springing open. I jerk back, my hand moving for one of my blades before remembering I threw my last one at Lennox's face before I ran.

As my eyes focus on white-blond hair and pale green eyes, my mouth drops open in shock. My mind reels, trying to catch up with what I'm seeing in front of me.

“Valen?” Shock and confusion rushes through me as I stare at the man lying on the ground next to me. “Wait... am I? Shit, am I dreaming? Did I pull you into my dreams?” I ask in a panic, pushing myself up on my elbows, watching Valen like a hawk, scared that if I let him out of my sight, he'll

disappear. Valen chuckles and rolls onto his back so he can keep his eyes on me as I lean over him.

“No, not dreaming. It's far too cold to be a dream.”

“It was freaking freezing in my dreams, what are you talking about?” I ask in confusion, still not believing him. I chance a glance around me, finding us lying on the floor of the old church, which helps settle a little of my shock and nerves, but not much. Looking back toward him, I sigh in relief as I wipe at the stray tears that still cling to my cheeks. Valen is here! He's here and alive, looking as perfect as ever!

“Yes, but this time, I'm cold. I...I *wa-was* never cold in your *d-dreams*. Only the dreamer can truly be harmed in their dreams, *nev-er* the Dream Walker,” Valen murmurs, his voice soft and ... weak. Not to mention slurred, as if he was drunk. “Well, unless the *drreamer* somehow makes the *Beastia* physical,” he adds, arching a brow at me and making me cringe. “Then they are both in t-trouble.”

Yeah... my bad. I move to add a smartass remark, but stop as I study him.

Shit, the more I look at him, the more I realize he's not his normal perfect self as I first thought when seeing him. There are dark rings under his eyes, and even though he is smiling at me, it's not as bright as it typically is. His body is trembling slightly, and it looks like his breathing is labored. But even with all that, Valen only stares up at me, a small smile in place.

“You're real,” is the only thing I can say, and holy shit, I could facepalm myself right now. Really? That's what you're going to say to him when he's in such bad shape? I cringe at myself and shake my head. There are a hundred things I could have said like, are you okay? How can I help? Or even thank you for being there for me. Yet the only thing I managed to say is *you're real*.

But I have been through so much over the last few weeks that I was starting to question whether I had made Valen up or not. Crazy things have happened to me, so I honestly wouldn't put it past myself to dream up a man who was kind and wanted to protect me.

Valen chuckles, his eyelids fluttering shut for a moment, which makes my heart stall in my chest, worried he passed out or something. “Yes. I'm real, Regina,” he whispers, the smallest hint of a smile still present on his full lips. “Just... tired. I need a moment,” he admits, and I nod, looking around the church.

My eyes flick back to him as he suddenly shifts, rummaging in the many

pockets on his outfit that I actually examine now that I'm certain he isn't going to disappear or die. No longer clad in the noble's garb from my dream, he appears to be in a black tactical suit, the type you'd expect to see special ops in. He grunts as he manages to pull what looks to be a large silver coin from a pocket on his broad chest. He runs his graceful fingers over the face of the disc and groans.

"What's wrong? What is that?" I lean anxiously over him.

"Hmm?" his eyes meet mine, and I'm surprised by the potent mix of anger and sadness that I find there. His gaze softens, and a rueful smile crosses his face as he hands the disc to me. "This is just a timekeeper of sorts. I'm surprised that it is still working," he admits softly. I gently cradle the timepiece in my hands and smooth over the surface like Valen just had. With my touch, a series of foreign symbols briefly fill the face, and I narrow my eyes, studying the beautiful marks. They resemble the same symbols used by the Umbra Hunters but are slightly more complex. Like tiny works of art etched into the silver facade.

"And the clock upset you because?" I gently press.

"Regina....I knew I was in that damn box for a while, but I didn't think that it had been four whole years." I rock back from him as if slapped, horror flooding me as I watch Valen's sad face.

"Oh, Valen," tears instantly brimming up.

"No pity, Mi Sol. It is behind us, you have already saved me." He flashes a bright smile at me while reaching yet again to wipe my tears. "I'm just sorry that I made you cry again." I reach up and grab his hand, surprising even myself by kissing his fingers. I pull back immediately, collect myself, and move to the present again. It's oddly quiet, and that worries me. What happened to the Regalis brothers? Had they given up and left us here?

I almost snort at the idea. If it had only been Creed out there, then maybe. But Lennox is too damn stubborn to give up or allow me any kind of freedom. Not to mention Razar. I kinda panicked and stabbed him in the chest before he shifted into that monster, an action I almost regret now that I think about it. But hell, I fucking panicked! But now that I know who they are... what Razar is, I really shouldn't feel any guilt.

Only I do.

"Regina? Why the name change?" I ask, trying to distract myself from my confusing thoughts. But now that I think of it, Valen's called me that more than once, and I want to know why. I liked his other nickname for me

more. It was more unique, and I must admit, I liked being the light in his life. Regina is cute... but it kind of scares me a little. I'm no queen, and this man is the very definition of some fantasy king—the unworldly, handsome Elf or Fae who runs a kingdom with charm and beauty. “I liked Mi Sol,” I admit, blushing a little when I realize I just said that out loud.

“Why can't I use both?” he asks, voice so quiet I have to lean in to understand him. “I like nicknames,” he adds, and I chuckle, then frown when the floor under me shakes, but no sound accompanies it.

“What was that?” I ask, my hands moving to the floor under us as it shakes again. I strain my ears, trying to hear what may be causing the shaking, but it's silent. Eerily so. The hair stands up on the back of my neck as small tremor after small tremor racks the building. “Shit, is there an earthquake?” I ask, looking over at Valen to see if he knows what's going on, but he only smiles back, his eyes unfocused as he stays lying on the floor.

Pushing to my feet, I move to the tiny window to see if the guys are still outside, but when I get about three feet away from Valen, something stops me dead in my tracks, almost like I've run into a wall. “What the hell?” I gasp, rubbing at my now smarting nose that I crushed against the invisible wall in front of me before reaching out with my hand. My fingers press against something solid, and I can feel my mouth drop open in shock.

“Bubble,” Valen mutters, and I twist on my heel, staring at him in surprise when I see him sitting up on an elbow, his slightly unfocused eyes trying to follow my movements.

“What?”

“I... put up... a bubblllle,” he slurs, then grimaces, pressing a hand to his head. “I heard voices and didn't want us to be discovered,” he rasps, then smiles, tilting his head to the side as he studies me. “You are very beautiful,” he remarks offhandedly. I blink in surprise at the sudden change of topic and furrow my brows.

“Are you drunk?” I ask worriedly. Valen laughs and nods, then hisses in pain, and lays back down. I rush over and kneel next to him. “Valen?”

“Really l-low on magic,” he explains, and I nod.

“Right, how can I help with that because as much as I like your little...” I trail off, looking around us, and shake my head before looking back at him. “Bubble. We unfortunately have already been discovered, and those men out there won't be leaving me alone anytime soon,” I explain. Valen cracks a pale green eye open, a frown marring his beautiful face.

“Men? How m-many men?” he asks, trying to sit up with an angry gleam in his eyes, but he doesn't make it far, his arm gives out after only a second of effort.

Shit, he's really not in a good way here.

“Uh, three, I think? I would need to check and see if any of them have left yet. How can I help you with the magic situation? Because you are way too heavy for me to be tossing over my shoulder and carrying you out the door, especially with Stooges One, Two, and Three out there.”

“Stoooooges?” Valen asks in amusement, and I smile back. “What is a stooge?”

“They are.” The ground shakes, and I wince. “You know what? That's not important right now. We need to get out before Lennox, or worse, Razar breaks in here.”

Valen curses and nods, closing his eyes, and I can feel whatever magic he constructed around us flicker, then crack with an audible pop. It makes Valen groan and jerk before he tries to sit up, his eyes glazed with worry when they land on me.

Like a rush, sounds from the outside world come back to me, making my eyes widen when I hear a roar of anger before the church shakes again. Creed's worried voice is there, but muffled beneath Lennox's raging, and I wince.

Shit, they sound mad.

Valen's eyes widen almost comically so, darting toward the church door as he stares at it in confusion. He is probably wondering who is freaking out. “Meyer,” Valen whispers, his tone cold as I creep close to the window.

I look over my shoulder, finding his glare trained on me as he snaps his fingers and points to his side. I arch an unimpressed brow at his demand and roll my eyes as I go back to what I was doing. I need to figure out how to get Valen and me safely out of this damned church without the Regalis brothers seeing us, then figure out how to replenish Valen's strength. Once we're safe, I can tackle the other things that I need to do, like figuring out where Jordan is and getting him out of the Castle.

Curling my fingers over the cold, dusty edge of the window, I peer through, only lifting myself enough to get an unobstructed view of the men outside. When I realize they aren't paying any attention to the window, I stand a little taller, then squeak in surprise when a large hand curls around my calf, and I'm being yanked back to the floor.

I immediately slap a hand over my mouth when Lennox's roars suddenly stop, then narrow my eyes at Valen. He's glaring back at me, his green eyes narrowed in anger as his hand moves from my calf up my waist, trailing his fingertips softly over my side until his elegant fingers wrap around the back of my neck.

"Meyer?!" Lennox bellows, and I sigh in exasperation, pointing to the door with an accusatory look on my face. Valen only shrugs, his angry look still in place. He opens his mouth to say something, and I press a finger back to my lips, making him roll his eyes in response. "Meyer, I swear to"—SMACK—"Ow! Fucking Hell! Creed, smack me again, and I will gut you!" Lennox roars, and I can't help the small smile that twitches at the corner of my mouth. Jeez, I forget how big of a princess Nox is when he doesn't get his way. Creed shouts something back at Nox, and I use their raised voices to lean forward and talk to Valen.

"I have to figure out how to get us out of here. Stop being difficult," I hiss in frustration, trying to pull back. But Valen's fingers only tighten around my neck, keeping my face close to his.

"I have to keep you saafe. Y-you need to stay close to me," he mutters, and I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, no offense, but I'm pretty sure you need to stay close to me so that I can keep *you* safe. You can be the knight in shining armor next time," I respond, making Valen's slightly unfocused eyes twitch a little. I move my hand and rest it on top of Valen's before tapping it a few times, trying to get him to let me go.

"Lemon Drop? You okay?" Creed suddenly asks, and I startle at the loud sound of his voice so close by.

Who is that? Valen mouths, and I sigh in frustration.

"I heard her! Meyer? Hey babe. You really need to come out and talk with me. It's not as bad as it looks, and Nox is sorry he had Raz chase you," Creed practically shouts through the door, his words so fast I have a hard time keeping up with them.

"No, I'm not. I told her to stay in my office. If she had listened for once in her life, she would be safe up there until I sent for her. But now, here we are. She has served her purpose," Nox growls. "But she needs to open the DAMN DOOR! I swear if she destroys any of the evidence in there, I'll tan her ass!"

"You are not helping!" Creed shouts back, and I hear another loud *smack*.

“You little—” There are grunts and curses, and I roll my eyes, knowing Nox more than likely tackled Creed for smacking him again.

Valen lets out an affronted noise, and I widen my eyes at him, warning him to keep quiet. Shock, then extreme anger, crosses his face, and his fingers tighten on the nape of my neck.

Who. Is. That? he mouths at me, his pale green eyes darkening as they slowly move from my face to the door between us and the Regalis brothers. My breath hitches as Valen’s magic flares, but it only lasts a moment before his shoulders sag once again.

Stop! I mouth at him as I pry his hands from my neck and move back to my knees to peer out at Lennox and Creed. Nox has Creed in a headlock, the Demon's size enormous compared to Creed's smaller body, and I can't help the twinge of panic I feel at seeing Creed in possible danger.

Valen moves at my side, and I try to ignore the heavy knocking on the door as his head pops up next to mine. “They are the stooges,” I whisper into his ear, trying to keep him down when his eyes are wide with confusion. He points at the window, and I nod as he slowly looks out once more, his eyes narrowing in on Lennox, then Creed.

“Those two?” he asks, not tearing his eyes from them as he studies them closely, head cocking to the side as he takes the Regalis brothers in.

“Yeah, but the big one especially,” I mutter, anger turning in my stomach. Valen purses his lips and nods in agreement.

“Yeah, he looks like a s-stooge,” he agrees before his eyes move toward the trees, and he freezes. “Oh, shhhit!” he rasps when his eyes collide with Razar, who is still in his creepy as fuck Demon form.

“Shhh!” I hiss at him, pressing my finger to his mouth and making his eyes widen as he bobs his head in agreement.

“Shhh!” he mimics, eyes wide, as he slaps his long finger to his lips, acting even more drunk than before. Jesus, this is not helping.

“Who the fuck was that?” I hear Lennox ask, his voice eerily calm and somehow even scarier than when he’s loud and shouting.

“Great, now you’ve done it,” I whisper, tossing my hands up in the air. “Now, what are we going to do?”

“Meyer? Who the hell is in there with you?” Lennox asks, not yelling or banging on the door.

“What?” Creed asks.

“There is someone in there with her. Didn’t you hear that?” A low

Demon howl echoes through the air once more, and I wince.

“We are so screwed,” I rasp, then curse and dive forward, grabbing Valen's shoulders when he almost topples to the side.

“I'll get us out of here,” Valen murmurs in my ear, and I nod.

“Great idea. Tell me how, and I'll help,” I whisper back. I have zero ideas, so I'm willing to try anything.

“I want to make a deal with you,” Valen hedges, his voice suddenly clearer, like he's slightly more awake. Long fingers encase my wrist, tugging me closer to him, and I go willingly.

“Okay,” I agree in confusion as Valen places the hand not holding onto me firmly against the ground next to us. Suddenly, green magic crawls over the floorboards, winding and weaving through the grain of the wood like wild vines, inching their way toward the tree and roots that protrude from the back of the building. “What—”

“Meyer Smith,” he starts, his voice stronger than before as the green light in the room begins to grow. I gape in surprise as light glimmers in the air, looking almost as if I have stepped into some fairytale rather than the horror story I'm actually in. Valen's fingers tighten around my wrist as the sudden groan and snap of a branch comes from the other side of the church. I swing my gaze over to the large pine tree and watch in shock as the brown bark darkens, almost as if the color and life are being sucked from it. The needles on the tree morph from a dark emerald to a dusky yellow, and I have to blink my eyes a few times to make sure I'm actually seeing this and not hallucinating or something.

The light in the church brightens, casting Valen and me in a wondrous glow, and I hold my breath as it rushes around us. The church starts shaking, and I glance nervously toward the door, worried Lennox or Razar have finally broken in.

“Valen?” I whisper, leaning closer to him as warmth swirls around us. But instead of answering me, Valen stands, pulling me to my feet with a strength he didn't have moments ago. I look at the green magic cords between his hand and the now dead tree, my eyes widening in realization as I look back at his smirking face. He... he took the life from the tree and used it to support his magic! Holy shit, that's kind of... well, awesome, to be completely honest.

“In exchange for moving your physical form, I bargain the right of a... personal favor of my choosing that I can cash in at a time designated by me,”

Valen whispers after a moment, his once cloudy eyes suddenly focused on my face as warmth zings up my arm where he touches me. Warmth slowly crawls into my mind as Valen leans close. So close that our foreheads brush, and our lips are only a breath away from each other. Butterflies erupt in my belly, and I swallow hard, trying not to lose myself in my fog-induced lust.

“That's a pretty open bargain,” I rasp out, my voice is almost husky, making Valen smirk.

“Is it?” he asks, arching a brow, his head slowly angling to the side. “I’m offering you help in exchange for a favor. I feel like that's pretty fair.” Heat courses through me, and this time it’s not from the odd magic that I’m gradually getting used to. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to ignore the flush as it crawls up my neck. Valen's fingers loosen just the smallest amount as his thumb moves, stroking the sensitive skin on the inside of my wrist, sending goosebumps over every inch of my body. My thighs clench, an ache forming between them, and I clear my throat, using the action to buy me the time I desperately need as I attempt to gather my thoughts.

“But that favor could be anything, and you're not only helping me, but yourself as well,” I point out, making Valen chuckle and draw back, a spark of something I can’t quite place gleaming in his eyes.

“Very smart, Mi Sol. Alright,” he murmurs with a sigh. “A kiss then.” My mouth drops open in shock, not because I don't want the kiss, but because this man could have kissed me whenever he wanted over the last minute or two, and I would have welcomed it. But now he wants to drop his favor and trade it for a simple kiss.

My eyes flick to the full lips that complement his flawlessly carved features that could have been to have been commissioned by some ancient god. I press my lips tight, mentally berating my first thought. No kiss from this man could ever be considered *simple*.

“A kiss?” I ask in confusion. Valen nods, looking as confident as ever, though I’m pretty sure I see the slight blush of pink staining his cheeks through the bright green glow around us. I blink at him, then blink again and nod, leaning forward to close the small distance between us.

“Not yet,” he rasps, his voice deeper than normal as he suddenly steps back, his free hand fisting at his side. I eye him warily, embarrassment crashing through me at his quick retreat. “I’ll choose when,” he says, softening his tone once more. I look at my feet, my cheeks hot, before nodding in agreement. “Words, Meyer. I need your answer vocally.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” he stresses as the church starts to shake again.

“Yes, I accept your bargain,” I answer in a rush, my eyes flying to the door of the church just as Valen's hand tightens around my wrist again, and he yanks me hard against his chest. Almost like an explosion, the green magic around us bursts into flames, tearing a scream of fear from my throat as the room twists, and suddenly we are falling through the air.

FOUR



Meyer

The dark, musty smell of the church vanishes, replaced by the frigid winter air as stars suddenly gleam and twinkle around Valen and me as we plummet through the night sky. Wonder and awe fill me as I brave a glance around us. Valen's solid, warm body is flush against mine, and every curve of my body is pressed to the hard-muscled lines of his own. The air whooshes around us, tossing my matted and dirty hair into my face and eyes; if I weren't clinging to the man like a damn lifeline, I would try to contain it.

I feel Valen tense under my hands and curse, and I squeeze my eyes shut, gripping him even tighter as my stomach lurches. "Hold on," Valen yells over the roar of wind and snow around us, and his arms move so that one is looped around my waist and the other grips the back of my neck, keeping my face pressed firmly to his chest.

"Valen!" I can't help but scream as I peek an eye open and watch as the snow-covered ground comes toward us.

"It's okay," he yells back, his fingers digging into my waist and neck so hard I'm pretty sure they will leave crescent-shaped bruises from his nails. I shake my head and bury my face back into his chest, counting the seconds until I feel a burst of magic, and our downward descent stalls so fast that I'm pretty sure my stomach is now in my esophagus.

"Ugh..." I moan, the sound muffled by Valen's shirt, then scream when we fall again! This time, it's over in a matter of seconds, and Valen curses as we land into soft, fluffy, freaking-freezing snow! The momentum of the small fall is enough to jar me from Valen's hold, and I squeak in surprise as I sink

waist-deep into the snow several feet from where he lands gracefully, his knees bent as he levels his weight enough not to sink even an inch into the snow.

What the hell? Is he a damn cat?

I scowl at him, then look at myself, and curse when I realize I can't move my legs. Leave it to me to crash into the snow and get stuck when my literal dream man is here with me. Valen stands, his gaze steady, though his eyes still have dark rings under them. He moves slowly, graceful as ever, but I swear I see his hands tremble as he comes over to where I'm stuck.

"Are you alright?" he asks in a rush, his hand resting on the side of my neck once again. His soft fingers stroke the skin there, resting on my pulse point as he takes deep breaths. His wild eyes move from my neck as his hands drop to my shoulders, then my arms before moving to my stomach and up my sides, checking for injuries.

"Yeah, but I, uh... think I'm a little stuck," I begrudgingly admit, my hands landing on top of his when they move back to my neck. "Where are we?" I ask, looking around us, disappointed to see snow. Honestly, I was hoping we could avoid the cold white stuff, but that doesn't seem to be my luck. The drift that I'm stuck in is deep, formed against the side of a mountain, and I squint my eyes, trying to make out the different shapes in the dark night.

Valen's fingers stay there a moment, his face frozen in one of worry and something I can't quite pinpoint before he nods. Crouching in front of me a little more, he's able to lift me from under my arms up out of the snow. I'm immediately set back on the ground, and before I can say anything, Valen's hands are moving over my ankles, then calves. His strong fingers press gently on my joints as they slowly move up my body.

"Valen," I whisper, watching him closely. He pays me no mind, his fingers grazing over my hips, making me suck in a breath when they trail over the sliver of skin showing just above my black pants. Swallowing hard, I dip my head to the side, deciding not to push his hands away from me the way I might have if it were Lennox. I have a feeling Valen needs to make sure that I'm okay himself. I watch him closely, trying to ignore how his soft presses and intimate touches make my breath hitch and my nipples pebble in my bra. His eyes are wide and panicked, like he's trapped in a nightmare and can't get out. Shit, he looks like he's only moments away from some kind of freakout.

“Hey,” I whisper, dipping my head to the side, trying to catch his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I lost control of my magic and put you in harm's way. We should have never fallen like that,” Valen suddenly grinds out, his voice harsher than I have ever heard. I feel my brows draw together as I try to meet his eyes, but Valen avoids my gaze like a fucking pro, his attention fixed firmly on my body.

“It’s fine, Valen. We landed safely, and I’m not hurt,” I assure him, moving my hand to rest over his prodding fingers. They’ve moved up to my stomach, and he’s putting more pressure there than normal.

“It’s not fine, Mi Sol. You would have every right to invoke the clauses of our deal and demand access to my soul. Now...lie back. I need to ensure you don't have any internal injuries,” Valen clips out, ignoring what I just said.

“That sounds a little dramatic,” I muse, then cock my head to the side. “Wait, your soul? Why the hell would I want your soul? That sounds dark and creepy,” I mutter and shiver.

“It’s not dramatic when I almost killed you,” Valen snaps, his hand shoving me back with more force until I crash into the snow behind me.

“Hey!” I shout, feeling the cold immediately penetrate the small amount of clothing I have on. But all other words leave me as Valen moves over my body, hovering so close that if I sat up just the smallest amount, I could wrap my arms around him and pull him more snugly against me. “Valen,” I try again, and this time, his eyes dart up, clashing with mine and making me gasp at what I see. His pale green eyes shift, almost like they have a raging storm of gray lingering there. The need to move forward, to run my fingers through his soft looking hair, is almost painful as the need to be closer to him, to dive into those depths and reassure him I’m unharmed, comes full force.

“Meyer, please!” he practically begs, eyes fluttering shut as his jaw tenses like he’s in pain. “I just need to make sure you're unscathed. Just let me take care of you for a moment. Please,” he whispers again, hands trembling on my belly as he shakes his head the smallest amount. Magic swirls around us, and I feel a blessed warmth curl in my chest that I hope stays around since I’m currently freezing my tits off here.

“Fine. But can we find somewhere warmer? I’m freezing, and I’m worried about how much you're shaking,” I point out, wanting him to physically evaluate himself since all he seems to be doing is making sure I’m okay. I mean, sure, I have a raging headache, and my hand is sore from

falling and cutting it open during my frantic escape to the church, but besides that, I'm A-okay. Valen, on the other hand, is the one who was dead less than an hour ago. He's the one who is flinging around magic even though he's low on energy. Shit, what if he hurts himself? There is no way for me to help him here.

Something jerks inside me; a weird need to take care of him the way he is of me, and suddenly, I can't ignore it any longer. "Come on," I soothe, voice gentle as I smile at him, and in this moment, everything suddenly feels right. Something shifts deep down, like a piece of myself snapping into place, and Valen sighs like he can feel it too, his eyes flutter shut as I encourage whatever I feel to grow. My rapid pulse slows, and for the first time since running into Razar tonight, I feel an odd sense of calm.

I need this as much as he does.

Placing my hand on Valen's cheek, I slowly sit up as his hand moves from where it was resting on my belly to cover my much smaller hand on his face. I keep my palm pressed to his warm skin, our eyes locked as I crawl to my feet. Valen leans back, allowing me the space to stand as my free hand moves to help him stand with me. Our fingers interlock, and I nod when Valen takes a deep shuddering breath, his eyes softening, the color slowly fading back to the pale green I'm so fond of.

"Let's find shelter. Then you can make sure I'm alright," I whisper, the wind moving strands of my hair into my face as the snow drifts around us on the dark mountainside. What I don't tell him is that I plan on checking him over and hopefully convincing him to rest a little. Maybe suck the life out of a few more trees, since that seemed to help last time. My dream guy's complexion is far too pale for my liking. More so than normal, and I can't stand the sight of it.

Valen nods, his fingers squeezing mine so tight that I almost wince in pain as I look around us, desperate to find shelter. It's cold, and I wish more than anything to be back in our little cave from my dreams where Valen and I could build a fire and talk about everything going on in our lives. But unfortunately, I'm not dreaming. This is real life, and if I don't do something quickly, we could freeze, or worse, be discovered by Demons.

"Are we still in Canada?" I ask, then sigh in relief when I make out a familiar peak of a mountain ahead. As much as I hate it here, I have people I need to help and some Demon ass I need to kick.

"Yes. I didn't have enough magic to bring us far. My ultimate goal was to

evade the enemy until I could regroup and bring you somewhere safe,” Valen whispers, his eyes still on me, not blinking once. Huh, that's weird.

I pull on Valen's hand, leading him through the thick snow, cursing as my feet sink several inches with each step. My thighs are starting to burn from the effort it takes to stomp through the snow, and I want to kick my feet and cross my arms like a damn toddler. I hate the snow! I never want to see another flake of this shit!

Growling in frustration, I look at Valen, who is watching me closely, before glancing to where his feet rest on top of the snow, not sinking in at all. “How!?” I almost shout, waving at his magic feet and scowling at mine, which are entirely covered. “Teach me how you do that. Is there some spell? One of the weird Umbra Hunters symbols the old dudes like to carve into everything?” I humph in annoyance when Valen smirks, finally moving his eyes from my face to my feet.

“No, you have to balance your weight and lightly walk. Not barrel through the snow like a feral Therion.” He chuckles, amusement heavy in his voice, then frowns down at the dust and snow on his outfit and tries to brush them away.

“A what?” I wrinkle my nose at the name Valen just used, then make a mental note to sit him down and ask him all the questions I have about being an Umbra Hunter. I know he'll answer them and possibly give me the information I need. Valen laughs, and I scowl at him.

“You are using *‘the Force’*, aren't you? You know, that would make sense. Razar is always running around the Castle with his hood up like some kind of evil Sith Lord. Umbra Hunters are secretly Jedis in disguise. Only our weapons aren't as cool, and we don't get spaceships,” I mutter more to myself, ignoring the confused look Valen sends me at my weird nerd idea.

“What's a Jedi?”

“You haven't watched *Star Wars*?” Valen shakes his head at my question, and I gape at him before turning and walking in a random direction. I angle myself so we go down the mountain rather than up. From what I can tell, we are close to the Castle, maybe an hour or two hike away from it. I don't necessarily want to get close to it, but I know I can't leave the mountain without Jordan.

“That's rather tragic. Tell you what, if we make it off this mountain alive, we can do a *Star Wars* movie-thon. It'll probably take a few days to watch them all, though,” I warn as I start walking again, ignoring the snow making

its way into my boots and how my toes are going numb.

“Oh, we will,” Valen mutters, his step wavering for a moment, tugging on my arm as he sways to the side and sinking an inch or two in the snow before he rights himself, and we keep walking.

I can't help but smirk as he regains his lithe footing along the top of the snow. Squinting, I strain my eyes for a place we can shelter in, and smile when I see a marker near a tree in front of me. It's similar to the markers used during the relay race the Seniors made us do a while back. I step toward it, knowing from the survival courses Creed taught that Umbra Hunters have several bad weather shacks near the mountain just in case one of them needed to take shelter during patrol. I haven't seen one of them, so I keep my eyes peeled for something resembling some kind of shelter.

“We will what?” I ask as I tug Valen along with me. Warmth is still present in my chest and belly, but my limbs are quickly becoming numb, and I look up into the cloudless sky, cursing the stars I see. They may be pretty, but a clear night sky means the temperatures will plummet even more than usual, and our risk of frostbite and exposure will double.

“Get off this mountain alive. I'll make sure of it,” Valen says so matter-of-factly that I smile at him over my shoulder.

“I wish I had your confidence. Now, look for some kind of shelter. That was a marker back there, and there should be something that we can weather tonight out in,” I instruct, moving to turn back around, pausing when Valen points to his right.

“You mean that?” he asks, and I twist, trying to see the outline of something through the dark, but I can't see anything.

“You see something?”

“You can't?” he asks, frowning when I shake my head. “That doesn't make me feel better. How are you supposed to navigate at night? Your night vision should be excellent as a Dream Walker,” Valen grumbles, grabbing my chin and tilting my face up, staring into my eyes like he will be able to figure out what's wrong with them.

Shrugging out of his hold, I sigh in annoyance. “I should be able to do a lot of things, remember? I'm *Fracti*,” I sneer, hating how utterly useless I am. “Come on. You'll have to lead since I can't see anything,” I mutter bitterly, stepping to the side so that Valen can pass by me.

A low, almost animal-like growl erupts from Valen's chest, making my eyes widen in surprise as he steps directly in front of me. His chest pressing

against mine, forces me to crane my neck back to look at him. “You are not broken. I refuse to let you believe the lies the Seniorems spew. They are the ones who are broken. They are the ones who have warped the Umbra Hunters’ organization so much that it’s in a state of upheaval. You are not the broken one here,” Valen says firmly, pale eyes brightening with a hint of magic as he lowers his face slightly toward mine.

I nod, my eyes slowly moving to his lips, and I have to physically hold myself back from climbing him like a damn tree and kissing the shit out of him. Valen's expression darkens a little when I don't verbally respond to him, and I open my mouth to agree, but he beats me to it.

“Are you Fracti?” he asks and I shake my head. “Who are the broken ones?”

“The Seniorems,” I parrot back, earning a panty-melting smile in response, and for the first time, I notice the smallest dimple on his left cheek, making his reaction even hotter for some strange reason.

Curse this man and his sexy cute dimples, now I'm going to be hiking with damp underwear. Valen nods in approval and grabs my hand, turning to lead, then promptly falling forward in the snow.

“Valen?” I ask in shock, dipping to help him get back to his feet.

“I think I need to rest,” he admits, starting forward again, this time staying on his feet. I nod in agreement and huddle close to his side, wanting to make sure he doesn't fall again, but also craving the warmth his body lends. After only a few more minutes, we stumble upon what looks like a tiny shack. It looks old and ominous, built against the side of the mountain with a large pine tree standing tall on either side of the makeshift building, but my sore body and aching head practically weep in relief at the sight.

Valen's shoulders slump in relief when we open the door and step into the shack. His arm moves from my hand to wrap around my waist, keeping me a little behind him as his eyes sweep the small space for any danger. At his nod, I rush over to the tiny counter, where I spot a kerosene lantern and matches; I need some more light so that I can check over Valen a little better. I grab the tiny box of matches and pray they aren't damp as Valen shuffles to the other side of the shack. I exhale sharply when the smallest flame ignites and lights the lantern, bringing our shelter into full view for the first time.

I grimace at the lack of a fireplace and bathroom, but nod when I spot a small bed in the far corner of the shack. It's small, but has piles of blankets and pillows that are folded and stacked neatly on top. My stomach growls,

and I belatedly realize I haven't eaten anything since before I went looking for Creed, but the exhaustion I feel far outweighs my hunger.

Valen slowly moves around the small room to make sure the wooden shutters on the windows are secure. Then he stumbles over to the door, latching it and nodding in approval before moving back to the side of the bed and sitting with a heavy sigh. Exhaustion radiates off him as he rests his head in his hands and releases a deep breath.

Turning up the wick for a larger flame, I move toward him, my eyes taking in every detail of the beautiful man before me, soaking in his presence, and, for the first time, actually grasping the concept that I'm in a room with Valen! Not a dream... but a room... in real life. We are both awake and together. I can't tell if I'm excited, nervous, or going to be sick. Valen's head lifts when he hears me approach, his tired eyes catch mine as I move toward the bed and sink to my knees in front of him. Worry quickly replaces everything I had been feeling.

"What do you need?" I reach out and press my hand to his much warmer one, making him frown and clasp my trembling hands in his, shaking his head in frustration.

"I need you to be less fragile. How are you this cold? Your fingers are frozen, Mi Sol." I laugh because what else am I supposed to do?

"I'll work on that." I chuckle, pulling my hands from his. "But I need you to tell me what you need so that I can get it. You said you need rest, right? To replenish your energy? What about the tree thing you did back at the church? Should we go hunt down a tree?" Valen's soft-looking lips twist into the smallest of smiles, and he sighs before leaning forward, scooping me up off the floor and twisting in the bed, lying us both down with my back tucked snugly against his chest. "Ummm," is all I get out as my brain short circuits at the feeling of his strong arms enveloping me.

My body ignites at his gentle touch. I want to sink into him and let him keep me warm and safe, but that thought scares me almost as much as the idea of actually moving away from him. The last time I trusted a man, it didn't turn out so well. The betrayal that I feel from Creed still stings... No, it more than stings. It's like a throbbing wound, pulsing with every beat of my heart. And that doesn't even come close to the confusion and agony that threatens to take over at the thought of Theo. My first friend here. The man who has been with me from the beginning and had quickly become more of a brother than a friend. The look of fear and pain that crossed his face as he

stood in front of Jordan and me, eyes glassy, but not lifting a hand to stop Lennox as he took over the castle.

But Valen being here, holding me so close, helps take that edge off. I can't help but close my eyes and relax into him, letting him take my pain for just a little while. The crisp, fresh scent of winter air and citrus wafts around me, and my eyes suddenly feel extremely heavy.

"I need rest, but I'm not in dire need of energy. Removing the energy from a living thing would be cruel and pointless when a few hours of sleep would cure my problems. You're cold and tired... and I'm pretty sure you're injured more than you realize, so I think a nap is in order for the both of us," Valen whispers, his feet moving as I hear the thump of boots being kicked off the end of the bed.

I follow suit, toeing off my shoes as gracefully as possible while being held against Valen. If I move too far back, I'll grind my ass into his crotch, and I don't want him thinking I'm desperate. But if I lean too far forward, I might tumble off the narrow bed and onto the floor.

"Yeah. I think that's probably a good idea," I croak out, my heart pounding as Valen adjusts, getting more comfortable on the bed before snagging a large pillow and placing it under his head. Next, a heavy quilt is tugged over us, and I twist, moving to snag a pillow of my own, but Valen's arms tighten, and he tsks under his breath.

"I need you right where you are," he whispers, lips pressed against the shell of my ear when he dips his head down, warm breath feathering over my neck, making me shiver in response. "Don't leave. Please."

"I'm not. I was only grabbing a pillow for myself," I explain, turning a little so that I can look at him. Valen frowns and shakes his head, then slowly turns me, his hand firm on my waist like he's afraid I'll bolt if he lets me go. I twist, allowing him to move my body until I lay facing him while he shifts to his back, reaching into a large pocket along his ribs to pull out several wicked looking daggers and tuck them beneath his pillow. Ok, I really want some of those.

My focus is drawn back to Valen and I roll my lips together, my eyes roaming over his chest, then up his long neck to a well-defined jaw where the lightest of blond stubble grows. The impulse to run my hands up and down every part of Valen's body is strong, and I ball my fists to stifle it. What the hell is wrong with me? I have always been attracted to Valen, but being with him in real life has somehow magnified my feelings, and it's intense and

terrifying.

Suddenly, he sits forward, bringing our faces so close I gasp, hoping he will kiss me. But instead of his lips pressing against mine, his hand runs down my thigh, grasping under my knee and maneuvering my body until my leg hooks up and over his hip and my head rests comfortably on his chest. I blink at the sudden change in position and hold my breath when I realize our crotches are lined up, with only a few layers of clothing separating us.

“I’ll be your pillow,” Valen rasps, his hand stroking down some of my wild hair as he tucks the blankets around us.

“Okay.” My voice is strained and breathy, and I know he notices from the deep chuckle that echoes through his chest, the deep vibrations rolling from his body to mine and shooting straight to my clit, making me bite my lip to stifle the moan that tries to break free. Big arms cord around my middle as Valen hugs me to him.

“This is okay?” He words it as a question, letting me know that if I have a problem, we can move, and I can only nod. Because hell yes, this is more than acceptable! Valen huffs a little, and I can feel him nod, resting his head on top of mine for a moment before drawing back. “Sleep, Meyer. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

I nod again because it seems like Valen has stolen my ability to talk and wonder how the hell I’m going to be able to sleep being this close to him. But after only a moment, my eyelids drop, Valen's steady heartbeat like a lullaby to my senses, his even breathing soothes my frazzled nerves. Before I know it, I drift off into a deep sleep, wrapped in the arms of my dream man.



Creed

I worry my lip as I trail after a raging Nox, Razar trotting at his side like a damn demonic puppy as we pass through the castle gates. I grimace as I see some of Razar's thick, dark venom drip onto the cobbles of the path, hissing as it corrodes the stone. He really needs to learn to control that. The night is still dark, though dawn is quickly approaching, making my anxiety hitch at the thought of Meyer stumbling around somewhere out there in the dark. I run my hands through my worry-mussed curls and let out a small growl of frustration.

I knew the moment Nox opened his stupid mouth and told her to run it would break all the trust we had built with her over the last few weeks. Even though I know why Nox had done what he had, why he let her run and gave chase, it doesn't mean that I approve or even forgive him for fucking everything up.

I watch my younger brother as he paces, his claws clicking together in agitation when he makes it to the steps of the castle, only to turn and stride back toward me. Lennox's red eyes are wild, pupils so thin that I almost can't make them out. His beast has taken over, and at this point, I'm unsure if Lennox or Razar is more dangerous to the Hunters that linger in the courtyard, dragging the bodies of the dead away while eyeing us with a hint of wariness.

Nox's shifted form has grown since the last time I saw it and will continue to get stronger and deadlier with time. As Crown Prince to the Versipellis throne, Nox will be its greatest weapon. All Kings and their heirs

hold the ability to shift into some kind of beast. My father's shift is more Serpentine in nature, with green scales and venom deadlier than any earthly snake I have come across. Nox's beast seems to take after a Dragon more. His horns and wings are almost identical to the beasts that live in the far corners of our world, and his strength is unsurpassed. Nox stills for a moment in front of me, smoke billowing from his nostrils. I look up at his towering form and raise an unimpressed eyebrow.

"Say something," he practically bellows, saliva flying from his intimidating maw. I roll my eyes pointedly, wiping my cheek and flicking the spittle off to the side.

"This is your fault," I reply, trying to keep my voice as calm as possible. I know these are not the words he wants to hear, but they are the ones I know he needs. Nox has been making bad decision after bad decision ever since Meyer showed up at the castle. And this time, he fucked up, no matter what he thinks or how his instincts were pressing him. Yes, I knew we would need to use Meyer to break into the church and hopefully find the key that we are all so desperately looking for, but things could have been handled in a better way.

If Nox had only tried to communicate with Meyer... if he had taken his self-righteous head out of his ass for only a moment, he would have seen how Meyer was already questioning the Seniore. Hell, she had already asked if Demons were all bad. I know we could have reasoned with her and convinced her to help us!

Nox snarls in response, his clawed hands flexing at his side as he tries to control his anger. "How is this my—" but I cut him off before he can finish that ridiculous sentence.

"Do you really think I don't know what you were doing? Well, guess what, brother," I sneer, stepping closer to him and going up on my toes so that I didn't look so tiny next to his hulking body. "She got away from you. She not only outsmarted you, but she is now completely gone. There's no way to track her. No way to ensure she is safe. You. Are. Unworthy," I seethe, my anger boiling over as Nox clenches his jaw and shakes his head, refusing to accept what I have said.

"There was someone in that building with her! I heard him! She didn't get away on her own, meaning the ritual is not over," Nox snarls, and I release a cold laugh.

"There was only Dream Walker magic! You were hearing things," I yell

back, shaking my head in frustration. “And even if you had caught her, do you really think she would accept you? You overgrown, two-faced bastard! I was dating her, and you started a fucking mating ritual in the middle of a fucking war!” I roar, then stupidly swing my fist at his ugly face.

The courtyard of the castle, which is bustling with life despite the late hour—or early hour now, I suppose—suddenly stills at my outburst and attack. And I have the smug satisfaction of taking my brother off-guard enough that he doesn't have the time to block my hit. I lean all of my weight and demonic strength into my punch, hitting Nox squarely across the jaw and making him stumble back in surprise.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I yell, moving to launch myself at him, but before I can move, a heavy weight slams into my back, taking me off my feet and sending me flying through the air. I crash into a particularly hard bank of ice and gasp as the air rushes from my body. Big paws slowly prowl toward me, and I smile, my lip throbbing as warm blood drips down my chin. “You finally going to kill me?” I taunt Razar. Honestly, this is probably one of the stupidest things I have ever done. Demon Razar would love to spill my blood, and most days, I'm pretty sure he would be fine if I died. But Beastia Razar? Yeah, he would tear my throat out without hesitation.

“Razar, back down,” Nox roars, making the beast still only feet from me, his head bent low, hackles up as he stalks me like I was going to be his next meal.

“Sure, now you're acting reasonable,” I say with a gasp, trying to get my lungs working again. “Why not let him kill me? You know she will never choose you with me around,” I snarl. His wince tells me the words slice deep, and I wonder if this will be the final straw to break my family. My brothers and I have been through so much over the years, we've had each other's backs at every twist and turn. But that all changed when one of us was taken; then Archer was killed, what little bond we had left shattered. The three of us who remained have been playing make believe, acting as if we are okay when, in all reality, nothing has been the same since we left home.

Father said that this mission would bond us and bring us closer than ever. I scoff and slowly push myself back to my feet. If father could only see us now, I know the disappointment he would feel would be heavy.

“I didn't start the ritual, Credence,” Lennox snarls, but his voice isn't as deep as it had been before as he walks toward me, his hand outstretched as he

beckons Razar to his side. “Meyer did, the night that we saved that male at the rift before the Legion of Bestia attacked. There was a moment outside the castle where...” Lennox trails off and shakes his head. “I kissed her, and her magic flared. I didn't realize what had happened, but with my ability to heal her and with our compatible scents.” Nox shrugs, his shoulders slowly shrinking, losing the bulky muscles as he releases his demonic form. “I didn't even realize what she had done until I saw you kissing her that day before the Ranger games. My beast almost came out and wanted to tear your head off your body. So when he saw her tonight, I couldn't stop.” His clothes hang off his scarred body in tatters, his shift back to a man completed.

I shake my head, refusing to believe what Nox is saying. Meyer wouldn't have started the ritual. She hates Nox!

“She’s mine,” I snap, feeling the rightness of the words deep within. Lennox purses his lips and shakes his head. “You knew how I felt about her!” I roar when Nox says nothing else. “You said you would stay out of my way!”

“That was before I realized who she was to me! What she was! She picked me, and you need to back off,” Nox says way too calmly. He’s acting out of character, and I’m unsure how to handle him. Nox throws tantrums, he snarls and yells, and he’s always mad! But this weird, calm version of him has me confused as hell.

“Meyer has no idea what she did. She still doesn’t know what she is. It was a mistake that she will fix the moment she realizes what happened,” I point out, and finally, Nox reacts, his jaw clenching and eyes blazing with anger.

“I won’t allow that to happen,” he snarls, the calm fading as fury crosses his face. Razar growls at his side, and I shoot him a dirty look.

“You won't have a say!” I snap and turn on my heel, moving toward the castle once more. None of this matters until we have Meyer back, and right now, she is somewhere out there alone and in danger. I need to find her, but I have to figure out where she might be hiding out.

“Where are you going?” Nox snarls, his heavy footsteps following me as I rush up the steps and burst through the large double doors of the castle. Every candle is lit, illuminating the perfectly carved stone of the castle with golden hues. The rugs are rolled out, and people are moving around, dusting the shelves and tables, polishing everything until it reflects the light of the candles, bringing the once magnificent castle back to life. The Umbra

Hunters are about to have their history corrected, their knowledge advanced, and their way of life restored to its former glory.

It's been centuries since the Royal heirs of Versipellis walked the halls of the North American stronghold. Centuries since our ancestors cut all ties with the Hunters we created in an attempt to let them live and govern themselves. But as it turns out, humans like power too much. It calls to a weaker side of them they can't ignore, and they need to be reminded that stealing magic from those who created them has dire consequences. The once great race of Hunters has been driven by corruption for too long. They sacrifice the very beings they were created to protect, wasting human lives to gain stolen magic.

That all stops now.

"To figure out where the hell Meyer would go," I growl back at Nox, frustration clear in my tone. I'd felt the weak spell weaving through the air just moments before Meyer disappeared, and I know she didn't go far. Meyer is still on this mountain, and I'm determined to find her and beg her forgiveness before it's too late.

"How?" Nox shouts after me, more curious than angry this time.

"We may not know her well enough to guess where she would go to seek shelter, but there are two other people who might," I respond, making Nox's footsteps falter for a moment before he rushes forward, moving to walk at my side as we stride through the massive entryway of the castle. The eyes of the Hunters loyal to Nox watch us with a flicker of curiosity and wonder, which quickly morphs into fear the moment Razar snarls and trots up at our heels.

We round the corner, bringing us to the grand staircase, and I grin at the sight of Elaine moving about, instructing the Hunters on what to do and where to go. The elegant, older woman has her hands clasped behind her back, her fine gown of royal blue velvet cascading around her as she turns, dipping her head in acknowledgment to Nox and me as we approach. I smile back, despite my foul mood, unable to help myself. She reminds me so much of my mother, and I can't help but love the woman all the more for it.

"Lennox. It's good to see you back to yourself. Do you truly think that show was necessary?" Elaine scolds, and I chuckle when Lennox frowns, looking like a toddler caught with his hand in a cookie jar. They make quite the pair at the moment. Elaine, immaculately poised, from her demeanor to her appearance...and Lennox, with his tattered clothes and emotions barely under control. Looking at them, it should be easy to guess who was royal, but

you wouldn't guess it to be Lennox in his current state.

"Yes, I do. But I don't think now is the time to discuss that. It looks like you have all the preparations well in hand. I'm afraid a few rogue Hunters escaped my men and fled south. Meaning our timeline for preparation needs to be brought up," Lennox admits, making Elaine grimace.

"By how much?"

"I would be surprised if our enemy isn't on our doorstep in ten days' time. Fourteen if we are lucky," Nox states with a growl, his body shaking as if his Demon is begging for release.

"That soon?! Lennox, I'm not sure we can convince the others that this is the right path for us that quickly. I need more time! And I want every one of my Hunters out of the holding cells; they are not prisoners," Elaine whispers, keeping her voice low so the Hunters, who are cleaning and lighting candles nearby, don't hear.

"They will stay put until I can vet them myself. I refuse to put our lives... or your life in danger by overlooking a misled Hunter with a vendetta. The moment I know they won't attack us, they will be released no matter their loyalty and I'll do my best to give you the time I can. But I'm afraid the European and African Seniorems have had outside help and will be here much sooner than we would like. They share the same views that Axford did and heavily supported his barbaric actions. They won't let his death or the attack on this castle slide, I'm afraid."

"What of the Asians and Russians?" Elaine asks, worrying her hands as she looks at Lennox.

"The Russians will help if my father calls upon them, but the Asians have been a separate faction of the Umbra Hunters and have broken no laws. I'm unsure if they would help, and I know Orcus will not call upon them to take up arms. He wanted you all to govern yourselves for a reason." Nox looks around himself as if hoping a clear solution will just appear. "He won't disturb the only faction that has successfully lived by the rules and power gifted to them without reason," he says with a weary sigh.

"Will your father send his help? Surely he can spare some of your forces from Versipellis," she asks hopefully, and Nox winces.

"Father has no idea that we just overthrew the North American Seniorems. I'm afraid we will all be in hot water because of it," I say, stepping into the conversation and making Elaine's eyes widen in horror.

"What!?" she hisses between clenched teeth.

“It’s fine. This was necessary to help the progress of the mission we were sent to do. Father will understand,” Nox grumbles, glaring at me before looking back to Elaine. “Oh, and I need the Jennings boy brought to the council room for questioning,” Nox demands, his green eyes flicking to the man who just tensed at his words. I eye Theodore Drakos and sigh in frustration. He would probably know where Meyer might be as well, but I’m guessing Elaine won’t like the idea of her son being questioned.

“Oh? And why is that? Jordan has had a bad night, and I think it best we let him calm down before we try to talk with him,” Elaine says calmly, though her eyes narrow slightly at Nox, the smallest bit of anger bleeding into her words.

“Elaine. I need to talk to the boy. That’s all,” Nox reassures her.

“No.” A firm voice clips out, making Elaine wince, and Nox growls, looking at Theo, who is now standing directly behind his mother, his brown eyes glassy and hands shaking at his sides. I take a moment and study the boy, a small hint of pity coming to the surface when I see how haggard he looks. His brown hair looks like it hasn’t been brushed in weeks and his nose is swollen and bruised from where his friend had punched him earlier.

“Excuse me?” Nox snarls, losing some of his cool.

“Theo,” Elaine scolds, turning on her son before Nox can say anything else.

“No, Mom. I did what I had to, but I refuse to let them question Jordan. Where the hell is Meyer? Huh? Why isn’t she back here?” Theo asks, moving to step past his mother, his breathing coming in short, heavy pants.

“Theodore!” Elaine grinds out, but Ranger Drakos is now on a roll with his anger, and there is no stopping him.

“No! I won’t let them hurt another person important to me. I did this for you, but that doesn’t mean I trust them,” Theo snarls, making Nox laugh in amusement as he steps forward, looking down at the young boy with anger and excitement brewing in his eyes.

“Ranger, I think it’s past your bedtime,” Lennox drawls while moving past the irate young man. “Report to the barracks before I write you up for misconduct and failure to listen to your supervisor.”

“You are not my supervisor. You’re not even a Hunter!” Theo retorts, face red as he tries to side-step his mother. Thankfully, Elaine is there, rolling her eyes before she grabs Theo by the ear and tugs him down so she can look into her son’s eyes.

“You're right. Lennox is no Hunter. He is a Demon Prince, the heir to the power that created us all. Now you will go to the barracks and do as you're told,” Elaine murmurs, her voice calm and collected. Theo's mouth opens to argue, and Elaine shakes the boy by the ear a little more. “And you'll trust me to keep Jordan safe. You know I will,” she adds softly, making Theo's mouth snap closed, his face twisted into anger and pain as he nods. Theo shoots Lennox a deadly look before he pivots on his heel and stalks stiffly up the stairs. The moment he's out of view, Elaine whirls on Nox, finger outstretched as she descends on him.

“That was uncalled for, and you will hold your tongue,” she scolds, somehow sounding respectful while making Lennox step back in shock. I have to hide my smile at Nox's bewildered look as he nods in agreement. I mentally take note to let Mother know she will have a great friend in Elaine. If I didn't know better, I would say Elaine and Mom were sisters.

“He was being disrespectful,” Nox argues, though his voice is soft, no longer combative.

“Yes, he was. But he just had his best friend scream at him for his betrayal, and Meyer hasn't shown up. He's young and scared, Lennox. Things might have gone smoother if you hadn't locked Jordan up and chased Meyer away,” she adds with a quirked brow. “Care to fill me in on that tiny subject? I swear if you hurt that girl...”

“We didn't hurt her,” I cut in, reassuring Elaine while Nox nods at my side. She nods in approval at me, a small smile in place. I laugh a little when she smiles at Raz, who lets out a weird huffing sound instead of the growl he normally would have given. Yeah, I'm going to have to run a DNA test on this woman. She's too much like Mom to let it lie. I swear she'll have the three of us running around the castle like idiots doing her bidding in no time.

“We did lose her, though,” Nox adds, making Elaine whirl back in his direction, stunned expression in place.

“Pardon? How does one *lose* a woman?” she asks with a sharp edge in her voice.

“She's surprisingly clever,” Nox mutters darkly. “That's why we need the Jennings boy. We need to know if he can lead us to where Meyer might be hiding. She's still on the mountain, but there isn't a trail that we can follow. I promise not to traumatize him too much,” Nox barter and Elaine sets her hands on her slim waist, glaring at Nox.

“You will not traumatize him at all, Lennox. I'll bring Jordan to you, but

only because we need to find Meyer before she's harmed. And..." she stresses, glaring at Nox, who sighs in frustration at her show of disapproval, "I will be present the entire time you question him." Nox frowns but eventually nods, muttering about *annoying women and the stress they cause* under his breath as he strides away, not giving me or Raz any form of acknowledgement.

Elaine and I watch him go, Razar moving swiftly to catch up to him as Nox thunders down the hall, making the people dash out of his way. "Creed, what actually happened?" she asks, worry set on her pale face as her calm demeanor cracks. She brings a well-manicured hand to her mouth, biting her thumbnail before looking at me.

"Nothing good, Elaine. That's why we need to find her," I whisper back before begrudgingly following my brothers to the council room.



Meyer

I wake up toasty warm and snuggled into my blankets on my bed, the sense of peace and tranquility keeping me locked in a blissful state. Sighing in contentment, I roll to my back and stretch. My back is sore for some reason, making me wince as I crack an eye open, gasp, and immediately slam it shut when pain erupts behind my eyes.

Frowning, I pull myself from the fog of sleep and whimper a little when I realize that the warmth and comfort I was feeling were false, since I feel like I have been hit by a damn truck.

“Mi Sol?” a familiar voice whispers before warm hands cup my cheek, lightly turning me to face them. I groan when the movement sparks more pain in my head, and the warm hand strokes my cheek, soothing me as I try to remember what the hell is going on.

The memories are slow to return; the bliss of my dreams, which I can't even remember now, are heavy on my mind, making me more confused than ever. But eventually, I feel almost awake and try to open my eyelids again. The light that streams into the tiny shack that Valen and I found last night is enough to make me wince. But I keep my eyes open as they focus on pale, flawless skin, perfect white-blond hair, and a soft smile that is almost distracting enough for me to forget the aches in my body. *Almost.*

“I want to say good morning,” Valen says softly, reaching out to brush some of my tangled hair away from my forehead. “But I don't think that is the case for you. Where are you hurting?” he asks, eyes roaming over my body, one hand pressed to my cheek while the other attempts to smooth back my

hair.

I try not to notice how freaking gorgeous Valen looks, crouching down next to the bed I'm lying in. His clothes are wrinkle-free even though he slept in them all night, and it looks like his hair is brushed and styled. The dark rings that were present last night have vanished, and he looks even better than when he appeared in my dreams. There's an odd sort of energy radiating from him like some mythical God.

I know without a doubt that I look rough when I wake up. My eyes are swollen for the first few minutes, and I always end up with imprints from the pillow on my cheeks, no matter how many types of pillowcases I try. When Valen's smile grows as he watches me, I realize he's asked me a question and I'm staring at him like some kind of brainless idiot.

Bringing my hand to my mouth, I try to wipe at my lips discreetly, ensuring I don't have any dried drool there. Then I rub at my tired eyes and try to sit up, ignoring the burning pain in my lower back that radiates down to my ass and the throbbing in my head as I do. My side aches and I'm worried I did something to my ribs when Valen and I fell from the freaking sky last night. Valen pulls back, letting his hand fall from my face, his pale green eyes watchful as I sit upright on the bed. It's freezing in the room, and I shiver as I leave the warmth of the blankets I had been cocooned in.

"I'm fine," I mutter on instinct and watch as Valen crooks a disbelieving brow at me. "My head hurts a little," I amend, making Valen's smile dim as his finger grazes over my temple, his touch feather light, yet still enough to form a physical response as goosebumps cover my arms.

"And?" he prods, making me sigh, the hot air fogging between us as it leaves my lips.

"And my back is a little sore," I mutter, lifting my other hand to pat at my hair and flinch when a burst of pain radiates from my palm. "Oh," I mutter, bringing my hand to eye level and puffing out a long sigh. "Forgot about that one," I admit with a small smile as Valen frowns, grabbing my injured hand and glaring at it like the very sight of the wound offends him. The weird twinge of pain from where the magic sparked on my wrist flares for the briefest of moments, but not long enough to cause concern or mention to Valen.

"This needs to be washed," Valen murmurs, his long fingers brushing over my palm, tracing the edge of the red and angry looking gash that I got while running from Razar and Lennox last night.

“Probably. I bet there is a med kit in one of those cabinets.” I nod across the room where the lantern I lit last night rests, the flame now extinguished. Slowly, I swing my feet off the bed, moving to stand as Valen's hand lowers to my knee, squeezing it a little as he stands.

“I’ll grab it. You stay there.” He’s back in seconds with a small metal box and sits on the bed next to me as he quickly searches through the limited supplies. Leaning close to him, I spot two small white packages of Tylenol and snatch them up, winking at him as I open one pack, dropping the two white pills into my palm and swallowing them before offering him the other. Valen eyes it and shakes his head.

“I’m not in need of pain relief,” he whispers, and I scowl.

“Really? You were practically dead last night, Valen. You should take them so you're not hurting,” I offer again, and Valen grins.

“I’m not in pain, Mi Sol. I may not have the ability to heal people, and I don't heal the way Umbra Hunters do, but my magic can block the pain for me, and honestly, I’m not injured. It was exhaustion that was the problem. You, however, are hurt and in need of medical attention.” he grumbles, his smile fading as he grabs some swabs and ointment.

“So... you have built-in pain relief?” I ask in awe, making Valen’s lips quirk up as he reaches over and grabs my wounded hand, cleaning it first before dabbing on some ointment and wrapping it with gentle hands.

“I suppose that's one way to describe it. Dream Walkers have always been excellent magic users. We excel in all kinds of magic, especially the ones that deal with the body and mind.”

“So, does that mean I will be able to do that? I’m a Dream Walker, right?” I ask. Valen purses his lips, his eyes staying on my hand as his thumb runs over the white bandage.

“You are,” he finally says. “But I’m unsure how strong of a Dream Walker you will be. It’s impossible to tell without a blood and magic test.”

“I’ve already had my blood tested. I’m in the Regalis bloodline,” I remind him, making him chuckle as he lets my hand go and stands, taking the small first aid box back to the cabinets.

“Yes, I recall you saying that, but have you ever wondered why you are different from the other Regalis bloodline members?” Valen asks, tossing me an amused look over his shoulder and making me frown in response.

“Because I’m fr—”

“No!” Valen snaps, his raised voice startling me enough that I jump as he

pivots on his heel. He glares at me as he leans a hip against the counter, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “We already had this discussion, Mi Sol. You are not broken. Those men just didn't realize you were more than what they saw on the surface. They judged you for being lesser than them when, in all reality, you are so much more.” I snort at his obvious joke but stop when his expression darkens.

“You can't be serious,” I mutter after a long, awkward pause. Valen watches me, his lips thin as his eyes stay locked with mine before he moves, walking over to me with a grace I know I will never be able to replicate, and crouches back down in front of me.

“Deadly. You were never meant to work alongside the Hunters, Regina. You were created for far greater things.” I laugh nervously, shifting on the bed and tearing my eyes away from Valen's captivating ones.

“You sound slightly delirious. Are you sure you don't have a concussion or something?” I tease, then gasp when Valen's hand darts out, grabbing my chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to look back into his eyes. “What are you doing?” I whisper when he doesn't say anything.

“I went weeks with only glimpses of your face. I spent countless hours waiting and wondering when you would call me to you again,” he rasps, thumb moving from my chin to drag over my bottom lip as he leans closer. My breath hitches, and I hold it as Valen draws so close, our noses brush. The sweet scent of citrus swirls around us, and warmth blossoms where Valen's fingertips touch my lip, sending a burst of heat straight to my center. “I don't like it when you look away from me,” he murmurs, tilting his head to the side, our breath mingling. My eyes flutter shut, and my body sings with pleasure as I brace myself for his kiss. Only, in the next moment, Valen pulls back, letting his hand fall from my chin as he stands. My eyes fly open, my mouth dropping in shock when he turns and moves to the small window with the shutters already opened.

Okay, did I totally misread that situation? Shit, maybe I have morning breath and it turned him off? My heart sinks while my brain yells at me for almost kissing Valen. I probably shouldn't go around kissing every man I find incredibly attractive on this damn mountain. I think I've more than proven I make terrible choices in who I trust, and I need to keep my wits about me. I rub the bridge of my nose and sigh, a slight blush creeping up my cheeks. Serves me right for judging men for only thinking with something other than their brain.

“I’m sure you have more questions, and I will answer them. But we need to find food. There is nothing here besides a lantern, a few candles, and the medical supplies,” Valen says, looking out at the snowy landscape while I try to regain my composure. “We need to get off this mountain,” he adds, frowning at the snow piled up outside. Dread pools in my stomach at that thought, and I stand, shaking my head.

“I can’t yet,” I announce, making Valen look at me in surprise. “There is someone still at the Umbra Castle that I need to get out. He’s in trouble,” I explain, and Valen instantly shakes his head.

“It’s too dangerous. You can’t—” I cut him off, holding up a hand and glaring at him when a stubborn look crosses his face.

“I’m going to stop you right there. I won’t leave without Jordan, and nothing you say is going to change my mind. So you can either come with me or head down the mountain and go on your merry way,” I say with a shrug, finding my boots that I had kicked off last night and putting them back on. It’s silent as I lace them up while trying to ignore how the thought of Valen leaving so soon after I got him back leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I push the thought away and stand, turning to look back at the man who is practically fuming on the other side of the room.

Valen’s face darkens when our eyes meet, and when I say darkens, it’s not just with anger. Like his whole damn face shifts, his skin and eye color darkening as he regards me coolly, and the first bite of nerves prickles at my mind.

Should I really trust this man? I hardly know him, and besides the insane attraction I feel for him, I don’t truly know who Valen is. I shouldn’t trust him like this. My mind reels and I mentally kick myself at that last thought. Because that statement is not true, Valen is the one who gave me the answers no one else would at the Castle. He’s the one who told me about Dream Walking and saved me from the Demons more than once. He kept me safe, then risked everything so that I could run and be safe from the Seniorems.

I purse my lips as I watch the tall man in front of me. His shoulders are deadly still, and he has a dangerous aura coming off him that makes me want to run from him. But the sick little voice in my head wonders what it would be like if he caught us. If I threw myself into that darkness instead of running like my senses tell me to.

“Hmm,” is all Valen says, his nostrils flaring as he studies me with cold precision. His eyes move from my eyes to my neck, where they linger for

longer than I would think normal, then trail down my body and land on my fists, which are balled at my sides. I swallow the lump that suddenly appears in my throat when Valen doesn't immediately answer.

I really hope he doesn't take the second option and leave me high and dry up here. Even though I like to talk a big game, I'm honestly drowning in a world I know nothing about. I'm scared, and without Valen, I'm worried I won't make it out of this alive. Pain suddenly pricks at my heart and the thought of him leaving me behind is too much, making my breath hitch as I stare at him.

"I-I'm sorry. But I can't leave without him," I whisper, my voice shakier than I would like. "The Castle was attacked last night. It's now under the control of Demons, and Jordan is being held there." Valen's shock at my words is evident, and he frowns but only shakes his head as some of his anger bleeds from him as well as the darkness.

"Why are you apologizing to me?" Valen asks, his voice cold, but his body is relaxing a little, not as stiff as it had been only moments before.

"Uh, you were mad," I point out.

"I was and I still am, though probably not about what you think. However, that doesn't mean you should apologize. Did you do anything wrong?" he questions, and I frown, confused as hell.

"I suppose not. But I didn't mean to make you upset," I add, and Valen sighs, shaking his head as he closes his eyes, muttering something I can't make out under his breath.

Well, shit. This is the first time I've made someone mad by apologizing for making them... well, mad. And they say women are complicated.

Valen finally looks up, and with a weary look, he nods. "I'm sorry, Mi Sol. I overreacted. Our people..." he trails off like he's trying to find the right words. "The fact that another Dream Walker is alive, that you are here with me, is a miracle. There aren't many of us left, and the instinct to bundle you up and run away is strong. I'll try to tamp down the instinct, though I make no promises."

"Dream Walkers are rare?" I ask, frowning. I mean, that makes sense since I haven't met another one besides Valen.

"Extremely," Valen mutters, shoulders relaxing a little more as he takes a deep breath. I want to ask him more questions, but he keeps talking before I can. "Fine, we will go to the castle and save this Jordan," Valen agrees, and I smile in excitement. "But only if you agree to come back home with me," he

adds, holding out a finger to stall my joy at his declaration.

“Go home with you? Like to the safe house you were talking about?” I ask in confusion, and Valen shakes his head.

“No. I’ve been gone a long time, and I’m sure my family is worried by now. I need to go to them, but I don't want to leave you behind. I will go with you and retrieve your friend, but I need you to agree to come with me when we are done,” Valen bargains, and I arch a brow.

“You like making deals, don’t you?” I tease. The smile that lights up Valen's face knocks the breath from my lungs as he chuckles and slowly walks over to my side.

“I do,” he admits. “Now, do we have a deal, Mi Sol?” he asks, and I wrinkle my nose.

“Can we stop in Idaho and grab my cat first? I’m worried about him, and I can't leave him alone,” I admit, worried it might be asking him too much, but Valen nods immediately. “Then, yes.” I offer Valen my hand to shake while grinning up at him. “You have yourself a deal.”

Valen’s eyes twinkle with delight as he takes my hand. Instead of shaking it as I thought he would, he tugs me to his side, a predatory smile lighting his face as he leans close to me.

“Meyer,” he rasps, taking me off guard when he uses my real name instead of one of the nicknames he gave me. “Would you really have left me to go to the castle on your own?” he asks, his voice so deep it's almost a growl.

“I have to find Jordan,” is all I can say because, yes. I would have left, even if I didn’t want to. Valen growls under his breath, and I blink up at him in surprise.

“That's why you were mad? Because I said I would leave without you?” I ask in shock.

“Yes,” Valen clips out, eyes still dark as his arms cord around me. “I don't like that you would so easily leave. Don't say that again,” he grumbles, acting totally unreasonable, but I only smile at his odd show of possessiveness. I don't want to think about or unpack what that says about me, when Valen’s words should be a massive red flag, but hell. He’s my best shot right now, so I'm taking it and holding on as tight as I can.

“Close your eyes,” he whispers, his voice melodic, making me immediately shut my eyes, craving to obey his every word. Something shifts, and his body presses more firmly to mine as frosty air around us swirls. But

before I can gasp in surprise, something soft brushes over my forehead, and Valen's warm breath whispers across my skin. "It's safe to look, Mi Sol."

I open my eyes and gape in wonder as I stare down at the massive castle below. Valen has somehow transported us to a ledge that overlooks the Umbra Hunter Castle. The scene is a picturesque view as large, fluffy snowflakes drift lazily through the morning air. The Castle is built into the side of the mountain, its main gates facing out toward the small clearing that slopes down the mountain. I can see the Hunters moving about the courtyard, several going into the castle while others head to the horse barn, and I can't help but notice this is the most lively the Castle has ever been since I've been here.

My thoughts move to the Regalis brothers; my heart and head are at war with each other as I try to figure out how I feel. Now that I'm not being chased and having my world upended for the second time in only a matter of weeks, I can see how I should have gathered more information. However, there is no explaining away the fact that Lennox and Razar are most definitely Demons. Creed probably is as well, and they killed the Seniors and took over the Castle. That part honestly doesn't faze me. Even if Lennox is as bad as he looks at this moment, he can't be much worse than Senior Axford. Besides, Lennox was saving humans, not killing them.

But he did chase me, said he was using me, and that I had only one purpose for him. Then, there was all that paperwork I found in his office detailing the deaths of the Regalis brothers. I frown as I realize that the attack that had killed Creed's brother would have been the one where Lennox, Razar, and Creed must have killed the Hunters and stolen their identities. That is, unless that story had also been a lie for Creed to gain sympathy in order to get close to me.

I bite the side of my cheek at that painful thought and shake my head. Now, in the light of a new day, I still have my doubts. I know the Seniorems were corrupt and that what Lennox did was probably for the best. But I don't understand how Razar is one of *'them,'* the monsters with soulless eyes. The killing machines only seek death and bloodshed. I may have questioned the intent of the reflective-eyed Demons who never hurt me, but those things?! The beast that Razar is? Can they all shift into men, as Razar can? I shiver in disgust, my hatred burning bright as I look down at the castle below.

Valen's hands move from around me, turning me in his arms before coming to rest on my hips, his body pressing comfortably against my back as

we stare down at the Hunters.

“They can't see us. I have a shield up,” Valen murmurs, and I nod, pleased that he thought about that. Odds are no one would notice us up here, but on the off-chance that they do, it's probably safer to have a shield.

While gazing down, I dive deeper into my musings, my anger kindling anew. Lennox may have used me, Creed may have lied and broken my heart, and Razar may terrify the absolute fuck out of me. But I will show them why that wasn't a good idea. I will remind them that just because they can take over and ruin a person's life doesn't mean it's okay. The Regalis brothers, or whoever the hell they really are, have used me; now it's my turn to use them.

“The Regalis Brothers are going to wish they had never met me,” I mutter under my breath.

“Pardon?” Valen queries with a hint of worry in his rich voice.

“Just thinking about what I want to do to the assholes.” I turn in his arms and smile up at him. “Can you teach me how to use magic?” I ask, wanting to know.

“Probably. But it's not something you can learn overnight, and I doubt you have much. I almost drained you last night while waking up,” Valen admits. I frown but nod, accepting that. “Tell me about the Demons who attacked. I need to know what we are up against before we go in there to find your friend—specifically, the ones who were at the church. I'm afraid my memories are a little foggy from the low magic. Was there truly a Bestia outside? I'm worried my mind was conjuring things it wanted to see.” I grimace and nod, keeping my eyes on the Hunters that move like well-oiled parts of a machine. How the hell has so much changed overnight?

“Yeah. That's Razar. He's the one that wants me dead more often than not,” I mutter, then laugh a little as I remember our last interaction. “Well, probably all the time now since I stabbed him.”

Valen tenses a little, his hands squeezing my sides as he listens.

“You stabbed him? And he didn't kill you? How?” he asks like it's an impossibility.

“Well, he was human when I stabbed him. He didn't shift into a Demon until after,” I explain.

“Bestia,” he corrects, and I frown.

“Isn't that just another word for a Demon?” I ask in confusion.

“No. They are different, as are the Therion,” he states, pulling me a little closer as he looks down at the Castle. “There is so much I need to tell you, so

much you need to learn about our world. I'm at a loss as to where to start," he admits.

"The beginning is usually the best place," I tease, a burst of excitement coursing through me at his words. It's so refreshing to be with someone who wants to actually tell me what's going on. Who wants to educate, rather than demean. Valen chuckles as he releases me, nodding at the small path carved into the mountain's icy edge.

"Fabulous idea. But I have questions of my own. So, as we make our way to the castle, let's trade information," he decides, nodding for me to go ahead of him. I grin, spinning away from the stunning view below with a firm nod.

"Sounds good. But I get to go first."

SEVEN



Meyer

“Okay, so Dream Walkers,” I start as we carefully make our way down the slippery slope of the mountain, ignoring the pains and aches in my muscles as I walk. Thankfully, it's a nice morning, and the sun is actually out for the first time in almost a week. “What can we do? Because I don't seem to have any extra magic besides the ability to call you into my dreams.”

“Full blooded Dream Walkers are some of the strongest magic users in our world. Like Hunters, different families and bloodlines hold different strengths and abilities. For example, my strength is in mental grifting and collection of lifeforce. Which is how I took energy from the tree at the church,” he answers, his footsteps so light behind mine, I almost don't hear them.

I frown as I roll his answer over in my mind, a few things stand out that don't make sense. But when I turn to ask him, Valen shakes his head and smiles.

“My turn,” he reminds me, and I pout, turning back towards the trail while carefully sidestepping a particularly sharp-looking boulder.

“Lay it on me,” I demand as we keep walking.

“I'm confused about how Demons came into possession of the North American castle,” Valen starts, and I smirk.

“That's not a question,” I point out, and Valen laughs.

“Explain to me how the Senioreem was dethroned, Mi Sol.” Valen practically purrs, almost making me trip over my own feet when I get

distracted by his voice.

“Dethroned?” I laugh, shaking my head while throwing my arms out to steady myself. “Yeah, that’s probably a good word for it. Those bastards liked to act like kings lording over us all,” I mutter under my breath but nod, and prepare to answer his question.

“Turns out my Bloodline’s Senior was a Demon. He and his brothers snuck into the castle under the guise of a few other high-ranking Hunters and established themselves deep in the Umbra Hunter’s ranks. Everything came to a head last night when Senior Axford took a big group of humans out to try to capture a Royal Demon. Axford killed Senior Drakos when he tried to stop him, and well... Lennox killed everyone else,” I say with a shrug, still unsure how to feel about Theo’s dad’s death. I’m glad he’s gone, but I know his death may cause pain for my friend. I wince at the thought of Theo, then purposely shove him to the back of my mind, his betrayal still too sore of a topic to think about.

“You don't seem too upset about the deaths,” Valen points out as we duck under a particularly low-hanging pine branch.

“I’m not. Axford was a dick who enjoyed killing humans. I’m glad he’s gone,” I say truthfully. I don't care if that makes me a bad person.

“So why are you mad at the Demons who took over?” Valen asks, and I tsk, waving a finger in the air as I continue to tread carefully on the snowy path.

“Uh-uh. My turn,” I inform him. “You said Dream Walkers are similar to Umbra Hunters. But... aren’t they Umbra Hunters? I’m confused,” I admit. There is a long pause from Valen as we climb down a super steep portion of the path, where my foot slips more than once, and my heart rate elevates. My hands are freezing, and I wish I had thought to grab gloves before I ran out of the castle last night.

“No,” Valen finally rasps when he steps next to me.

“No, what?”

“No, Mi Sol. Dream Walkers are not Umbra Hunters,” Valen whispers, making me freeze mid-step.

“Excuse me, what? How is that possible? They said... but we can see the Demons,” I practically shout, making Valen wince and dart a panicked look around our surrounding area.

“Yes, we can,” Valen confirms, his expression brittle. “But that doesn’t mean we are Hunters.”

“I had my blood tested. It came back as Regalis,” I stammer, turning to face him, no longer interested in walking until Valen coughs up some more answers. “I’m a Hunter,” I state, my mind short-circuiting, unable to process the information.

“Yeah, I’m somewhat confused about that. Maybe your Dream Walker parent married a Hunter?” Valen asks, and I snort, trying to picture my middle-aged deadbeat of a father as a Hunter.

“Yeah, no. My father was a human, and a shitty one at that. And Mom...” I trail off, looking at Valen, then move my hand to a strand of my dirty hair, picking up the long pale lock and frowning.

“Was a Dream Walker,” Valen guesses, and I nod.

“Yeah. I mean, maybe? She could have been a DeLuca, right? Her fair coloring could have been a Hunter trait,” I point out, making Valen shake his head.

“But you are Regalis, Mi Sol. Not DeLuca. Or at least that's what the Senioreem says. I won't know for sure until I bring you home and run tests of my own.”

“Tests? I don't think I like the sound of that,” I murmur, my head throbbing as I try to wrap my mind around all this. Hands suddenly cup my face, startling the crap out of me since I hadn't seen him move. I stare up at Valen in surprise as he frowns down at me, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles on my neck.

“Take a breath,” he instructs, warmth radiating into me suddenly, making me shiver.

“Is that a Dream Walker thing?” I ask, after inhaling sharply, unable to ignore Valen's command. It's like Valen's words become a part of me, and I can't help but do everything he says.

“No, it's a—complicated thing,” he says hesitantly, making me narrow my eyes on him in response. “It's not bad. I just don't want you to get overwhelmed. I'll tell you after you calm down a little.” I take a few more breaths, then nod at him to continue with his explanation.

“When you called me into your dream, I knew I had discovered another Dream Walker. The first time, I thought maybe I was hallucinating, I didn't believe what I was seeing. You had called to me, but it was almost like you were underwater. I could see you, but not clearly. I was observing, but couldn't do anything more. It wasn't until the third time that I was actually tugged into your mind and ultimately added as a physical presence to your

dreams,” Valen explains, looking down at me with earnest eyes. “You were scared and didn't know how to use your magic. You also made the Beastia as physical as I was, meaning they were hunting you and could have killed you, Mi Sol. Try never to make a creature physical in your dreams again.”

“I don't know how I did that,” I admit, trying to remember anything about those dreams besides the feelings of terror and, eventually, safety when Valen had come.

“I know. I'll work on it with you once we collect your friend and cat. I need to ensure you are safe and can't be pulled into dreams while we are here with so many enemies around us.”

“Have I tried to pull you back into a dream?” I ask, curious.

“Yes. Last night, you called me while we slept. I answered long enough to ensure you hadn't called anything else to you, then sent you into a deep, dreamless sleep.”

“I don't remember any of that,” I admit, and Valen nods like he already knew that.

“I know. You hadn't reached REM cycle yet, and I stopped the call before you had,” Valen murmurs, watching me closely like he's waiting for my reaction. The problem is, I'm too overwhelmed to give him one.

“That's why I had a hard time waking up this morning? Why I felt so warm and comfortable?” I say more to myself than Valen.

“Yes. You were shivering in my arms, even though I had you covered in as many blankets as I could find. I decided to give you the mental comfort you needed, even if you couldn't physically replicate it.” I gape up at him, not sure what to say to that. The gesture was super nice, and the thought that he had taken the time and effort to ensure I was as warm as possible helped calm a little of my anxiety.

“Um, thanks,” I finally rasp, sounding like an idiot. But from the way Valen beams down at me, I try not to let it embarrass me too much. “So, how can you make me do things?” I ask point blank, sick of waiting for the answers I crave.

“I used your magic to alter your Dreamscape. I formed a mental link between our magic,” he explains, and I frown.

“And now you can control me?” I ask in confusion, and Valen laughs.

“No. Not unless you allow me to, that is. But after using your magic as many times as I did, I started to feel a bond form. It wasn't until I took your magic and twined it with mine to send you from your Dreamscape that I

suspect it fully kicked in. It's also the reason I believe I'm still alive, since the amount of magic I expelled should have stopped my heart and sent my soul back to Animus," he adds, blowing my mind a little.

"Uhh," I try to say something, but I'm actually a little speechless. When I don't say anything else, Valen continues.

"It's common for our race to form mental and magical links; it happens often with people who have close contact. Most often between parents and their children and spouses. Though it sometimes happens between siblings and longtime friends," he adds with a small smile. "And I'm not forcing you to do anything, Meyer, though I can see why you feel that way. Our bond lets me help you when you need it. Allows me access to your magic and your inner self. You can simply ignore my prompts if you don't want to do them." Valen frowns, staring down at me as I nod. "I'm sorry that you felt that way. I'll be sure not to use the bond. It's a natural thing that I would do for anyone else bonded to me, but until you're used to it, I'll refrain."

"So... this bond. Is it like... forever?" I hedge, unsure how to feel about it. I mean, I like Valen and want to get to know him, but at this point, he's still a stranger to me, and the realization that he can influence my thoughts is rather scary.

"No. You can break it if you wish," Valen whispers slowly, wincing like the thought itself has caused him pain. I nod, relieved a little at that thought.

"Right. Um, I need to process. How about you ask another question, then I'll go again?"

"Lovely," Valen says with a clap of his hands, then nods for me to continue our hike down the mountain. "Now, about your Senior who ended up being a Demon. What was his name again?"

"Lennox," I offer as I turn and walk. "But his brothers call him Nox."

"And how many brothers are there?" he asks, ducking under a low pine branch, his stride long as he follows after me.

"Two others. Razar and Creed," I mutter, lowering my voice when I hear the snap of a twig not too far off. My breath hitches, and weariness replaces my confusion at the thought of Demons being nearby.

"It's a simple black bear. Nothing to worry about," Valen reassures me, stepping closer as I frown. "And these brothers are all Demons or just Lennox?" he asks, continuing his questions. "And are you positive there are only two other brothers? That's small for a Demon Legion," he adds with a confused frown.

“Uh, I’m not sure if a bear is much better than a Demon,” I point out, but I keep hiking down the trail, taking Valen's ease as a sign that there is no danger. “And yes. Only two brothers. Razar, the nasty looking Demon who was outside the church. But I’m not sure about Creed. He hasn’t shifted into a monster, but I wouldn't put it past the lying jerk to be one of them,” I hiss under my breath, more than a little upset that he told Lennox about us having sex.

“I’m sensing some anger in that sentence,” Valen says with a dark chuckle. “Want to talk about it?” he asks lightly.

“Not really,” I admit.

“Fair enough. But you will when you're ready?” he asks, so hopeful that I almost smile.

“Yeah. When I’m ready,” I agree, winding my way through a thick patch of trees before pulling up short when I see the Castle ahead of me. We approached it on the east side, which faces the mountain. It's also opposite from the main gates of the wall. “I forget how big this thing is until I’m outside looking at it,” I admit softly as Valen steps to my side, glaring at the gray stone structure like it's the entrance to Hell.

“There are probably a few things we still need to discuss,” Valen whispers at my side as warm fingers slowly link with my own. I hold on to his hand tighter, still reeling from the information that he already told me.

“Such as?” I ask, dread pooling in my belly as I stare at the high wall surrounding the castle. Valen shifts from foot to foot, and I look up at him, finding him staring at me with an unreadable look.

“Basically everything, Mi Sol. The Hunter world... the Demon world...” Valen pauses and sighs. “You’ve been fed many lies, and I’m afraid you don't have the full picture.” My stomach drops at his words, and I shake my head.

“And why should I trust your words?” I can't help but ask, looking away from the beautiful man standing next to me.

“You shouldn’t, Mi Sol. I don't want you to trust me on my word alone,” Valen hedges, surprising me enough to look back up into those pale green eyes. “But I would like to be the one to help you find the truth. To help you find the evidence you need to feel confident in yourself and hopefully me, eventually,” he whispers, leaning down, bringing our faces closer. “I would be more than willing to make a deal with your safety in mind,” he adds with a mischievous smile.

I narrow my eyes, waiting to feel the surge of warmth that I had started to

get used to, but there was none. Valen isn't using the bond to sway me one way or the other. He's keeping his word, which makes me feel slightly better.

"Fine," I agree slowly, then laugh when Valen suddenly reaches his hand for my own, a spark of green lighting at his fingertips. "But no deal. I'll trust you for now. You haven't done anything that you shouldn't," I mutter, to which Valen laughs and shakes his head, dropping his still-glowing hand to his side.

"In the interest of full disclosure, I'm going to point out that I did form a bond with you that I didn't tell you about, which is rather shady. But I'm also going to defend myself by saying I honestly did it to keep you safe," he says quickly enough that I have difficulty following his words.

I laugh and wring my hands together in front of me nervously. "Anything else you should tell me?" I ask, making Valen's grin falter as he slowly nods.

"Yes," he admits, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. But before he can continue, a roar so loud it hurts my ears rings through the air, making me gasp and jump a little closer to Valen.

"What was that?" I ask breathlessly, my hands falling to where my knife holster is strapped to my leg, then curse when I remember I have no blades.

"Beastia," Valen grits out between clenched teeth just as not one... not two, but over a dozen monsters rush toward the castle wall.



Lennox

“H old still,” I snarl at my brother. Frustration and anger are ever-present friends as Razar growls under his breath, his dark green eyes uncovered for a change as I grab the knife lodged in his back and yank it out. Razar tenses, a pained breath hissing between his sharp teeth, but he says nothing when I deposit the blade on my desk and grab some gauze to wipe at the dark blood streaming down his scarred spine.

I let my magic course over him, checking his vitals, and frown when I realize how low his iron and blood sugar are. His beast should have naturally taken care of all physical ailments, the fact that it hasn’t shows me how injured he was.

“You’re lucky it wasn’t an onyx blade, or this could have gone a lot differently. How many were there?” I ask as I try to rein in my anger. It’s been over twelve hours since I last saw my Little Demon, and I’m getting restless. Ranger Jennings had been useless with information concerning Meyer, and I had to step out of the council room so I wouldn’t throttle the boy when I picked up on his emotions while talking about her.

I know there is a friendship between him and Meyer. They have grown close over the last few weeks, and I only helped kindle that relationship by tossing her physical training on his shoulders—something I deeply regret at the moment.

My Little Demon has formed a little family of her own between the Jennings boy and Elaine’s son, but the worry and love I felt coursing from Jennings when Creed mentioned we had lost Meyer and needed his help to

find her set my teeth on edge, and made my jealousy spike to mountainous heights. That boy loves her, and I knew there would be no way to pry information from him without causing severe harm, something I refused to do not only because I promised Elaine I wouldn't, but because I know Meyer would never forgive such an action. So I left, cursing myself for fucking everything up as much as I had.

“Eight,” Razar clips out, his tone emotionless as I clean his wound, checking to make sure there isn't anything lodged in his skin. Then I press my palm to his back, letting my magic do the rest of the work. “Three Beastia, three Hunters from the Siberian line, and two black-cloaked Demons. Both of them Versipellis,” Razar growls out, his voice strained from lack of use, and I make a mental note to make him speak more. Mother will murder me if I let him relapse into silence once more.

“Fuck,” I snarl, gritting my teeth, and my hand trembles on Razar's back. I can feel his muscles straining under the soft flesh, knitting themselves back together as I release even more magic into him. He doesn't need this much help; his escalated healing will take care of the injury in an hour's time or less now that I have fixed the worst of the damage. But with our future looking dark and Demon Wraiths crossing into the Human realm, I don't want to risk leaving my brother injured for longer than necessary. “I'll send word to Father,” I grit out, trying to think how to word that while I still need to inform him I have personally taken over the North American Stronghold and declared war on the Senioreem.

Razar grunts but doesn't respond otherwise. I take a deep breath, slowly tapering my magic as his flesh heals, the blood flow slowing until all that is left is a drying trail of red dripping down new skin. “You should have called for help when you realized there were more than you could handle,” I murmur, looking at my door and then at the clock on the wall, wondering if Creed was actually going to show up for our meeting or choose to ignore me.

Since our argument in the courtyard, Creed hasn't spoken a word to me. He'll do as I command, ever the loyal little fucker, but damn, he knows how to toe the line and annoy the shit out of me.

“They're dead,” Raz growls. Standing up stiffly, he grabs his bloody shirt off my desk before yanking it over his head, his wild hair loose and waving around his face like a dark shield. “I didn't need help,” he rasps, grabbing his black, tattered cloak next, wrapping it around his shoulders like a damn wraith, and flipping the hood up, covering his unique facial features and

deadly scowl.

“We are a Legion,” I remind him with a sigh, frustration leaking into my voice when my brother reaches across my desk and grabs his sword, knife sheath, and... “What the fuck? Why do you have Meyer’s Kalis?” I snarl, my eyes widening on the familiar blade, my pulse picking up a notch as I step toward my brother, curiosity and frustration warring for dominance within me.

Razar only glares at me, tucking the blade into his sheath before stroking a long finger down the hilt with a crazed look of anger in his dark eyes. The urge to demand an answer courses through me, needing his submission as much as wanting to know the reason he has my Little Demon's blade.

My beast form snarls and snaps inside me, wanting to be set free. I’m quick to muzzle him, refusing him even an inch of leeway after my massive fuck up last night. Shifting hadn't been the problem. In fact, I should have done that way before last night. We had been playing Axford’s games for far too long and should have attacked well before now. But I needed to get into that damn church without breaking its wards—something only a Dream Walker could do. At first, we were hesitant; unsure if Meyer's blood held enough Dream Walker blood to disarm the spells, then Creed had grown to care for the little brat, and we had argued over using her.

Creed pointed out that if she didn't hold enough Dream Walker DNA, the spells on the church would drain her of life, killing her in an instant. Razar had only grunted at the declaration, but the thought of Meyer dying... of my Little Demon’s fire being snuffed out made my blood boil and a fit of rage took its place. So we waited, hoping we could have a sample sent to Versipellis for testing, and decided we wouldn't use her for the blood ritual until we knew for sure. But then the Senioremm attacked the Rift, causing more damage than I could heal and killing more than eight humans while doing so.

The wave of Bestia and Therion that coursed through the veil was so large that I had thought Razar had been overrun. I shifted in a desperate attempt to save my brothers, tearing through the wave of beasts with ease. My Demon rode the bloodlust after being starved for nearly a year. When the beasts had been handled, I turned my anger on the Seniors and Hunters whom Creed had gathered up, sparing them no mercy and taking Senior DeLuca's head as a trophy for Arthur Axford.

That man had wanted a Royal and sought to trap and torture the King of Hell. The thought alone is enough to amuse me. Little did the daft Senior

know that Orcus Darakhs' sons were living in the castle with him, turning his Hunters against him while lying in wait to take back what he had stolen from us. We were sent on a mission to retrieve what was taken and then return to my father and our kingdom.

Only things hadn't gone as planned. I had underestimated the Hunters' ability to shield against Demons and had almost revealed our true identity when I found the church and warded room in the south tower. Luckily, I could weave enough spells and take the memories of the Hunter who found us.

Then we discovered how the Umbra Hunters were not only ignoring the Therion and Beastia invasion but making it worse; they were intentionally damaging the veil between our worlds and creating the Rifts. Allowing free access to the beasts that were never supposed to lay foot in this realm and serving up the very souls the Hunters were created to protect as bait in order to steal more magic for themselves.

"Razar," I growl under my breath as I snap back to the present. I watch as he rolls his shoulders back, his face falling into shadows once more as I glare at him. His body is trembling slightly, but I think he's too weak to shift right now. No matter what he says, he took on too much by killing the legion that came through the Rift on his own. He should have called for Creed or me to assist or, at the very least, taken some Rangers with him. Only, Razar despises Umbra Hunters, and every single one of them who is loyal to me is terrified of him.

"Why do you have Meyer's blade?" I ask once more, adding a thread of dominance into my words, reminding him who he is talking to. I don't like to hold my birthright over my brothers, and I hardly ever do, since they typically listen or calmly disagree if they think my choices are wrong. But things have changed since Meyer Smith crashed into our lives.

Creed hasn't listened to a damn word I have told him, and Razar thinks I'm so lovestruck by Meyer that I'm not thinking straight. I thought he was mindlessly lashing out simply because he hates Hunters, and she is one of them. But then he revealed he'd known exactly who Meyer was from the moment he saw her trying to save Creed that night at her house. I glare at my older brother, not sure what to think anymore. Out of my five brothers, Razar has consistently been the hardest to read, but I always prided myself on being the person who could see past his anger and pain.

That all changed when Archer died. The guilt and pain of his death rushes

through me like it always does when I think of him, gnawing on the jagged parts of my heart. “She stabbed me,” Razar rasps, his voice raspy and difficult to make out even for me.

“Who? Meyer?” I ask, my dark mood lightening at the thought. Razar scowls at my amused expression as he protectively covers the knife with his cloak. I chuckle a little when Razar only nods, his lips twitching slightly on one side, making my eyes widen in shock.

For most people, it would seem that Razar is mad and planning revenge on a woman he despises. And the first part is true. Razar won't let Meyer get away with stabbing him. He no doubt has already planned out a minimum of three different punishments, along with a contingency plan for each, just in case. But it's the way his lips twitch, which may as well be a fucking smile, that has me so damn amused.

Razar says he is upset because Creed and I are too obsessed with one girl. Yet, Meyer managed to stab Razar... and is currently alive and well. That is more than I can say about anyone who has ever come close to stabbing Razar. Hell, there are several I know of who have died for simply looking at my brother wrong. Plus, the small fact that my brother is currently guarding Meyer's knife like it's now his most prized possession.

Deciding to test my theory, I hold my hand out, moving to snatch the Kalis from under his cloak. Razar's reaction is instantaneous, making me bark out a triumphant laugh when he suddenly holds a blade at my throat, his teeth bared like a damn animal guarding its fresh kill. Growling under his breath, Razar leans into his strike, dark green eyes flashing black, turning into matching pools of death.

“For fuck's sake,” I snarl, my smile turning a little manic as I chuckle darkly, pressing my neck against the steely cold edge of his razor-sharp blade. The slight bite of pain lights up my senses, and I shiver in excitement, my Demon more than ready to put Razar back in his place for daring to even think about my girl. “You like her!” I accuse, and Razar scoffs in disgust. He drops his knife from my throat and tilts his head enough to watch the small bead of blood run down to the collar of my shirt, a glint of hunger in his eyes.

“I have no attachment or feelings for the half-blood girl besides an interest in how she continues to stay alive despite everyone's best efforts. That would be an ill-conceived notion and a waste of my valuable time,” Razar whispers, stunning the shit out of me when he uses complete fucking sentences. It's been months... no, probably a year since I've heard Razar

string more than a handful of words together this soon after shifting back from his Bestia form. It typically takes him hours to say a few words and days before he will give me a whole conversation. His beast is getting stronger, and Razar has difficulty putting him back into his cage.

I purse my lips as I study him, hating that Meyer is the reason for my brother's rare use of words, but also beyond grateful. Jealousy and anger war within me, and I'm not sure if I want to talk to Razar more; drawing him into conversation like we used to have all those years ago... or punch him in the fucking face for liking what is mine. The urge to let my magic flow, to reach within him and sort through his every emotion, is almost overwhelming. I sigh and shake my head, push my magic down and decide physical and emotional violence is probably a bad idea. Bringing my hand up to my bleeding throat, I wipe at the warm, sticky liquid there and chuckle.

"It's been a while since you've drawn my blood," I admit, turning from him while looking at the blood that now covers my hand. There is more there than I thought, and my shirt collar is now wet, so I strip off the fabric and use it to mop up the rest of the blood, letting my body heal itself in the process. Razar only grunts in response, his blade already put away as he slowly backs into the shadowed corner of my office, where he likes to dwell like a creepy stalker. I sigh and nod, disappointed with his lack of words, but knowing I can't push him further than he's willing to give.

"Has any of the damage at the rift been repaired?" I ask him, sitting in my chair and moving the papers strewn across my desk to the side as I watch Razar shake his head in response. My hands ball into fists as I scent Meyer's blood nearby, and I glare at the small droplet of dark red blood near the locked box I keep on my desk—the box these damned papers were supposed to be in. Elaine had said she found Meyer in here and that she was freaking out after putting together some information she shouldn't have had access to. I suppose I now know how she accomplished that. I close my eyes and lower my head into my hands, frustration crawling back to the surface when I see the names of the Regalis brothers on the paper at the top of the pile, Meyer's name is scribbled on the paper next to it in Creed's handwriting, the mention of Dream Walker blood also listed.

Fuck! No wonder she was freaking out in the courtyard. That she had run.... I figured it was seeing Razar's Bestia form and that my Demon had accepted her bond, which caused her to run. But now that I know what she saw, what had sparked her fear in the first place, I know Meyer ran because

she thought her life was in actual danger, and I can't fucking fault her for it.

Dammit it all to Hell! I shouldn't have chased her, but the look of distrust and fear in her eyes after I shifted cut me deeper than I would like to admit. I hadn't planned on doing anything more than taunting her, our banter is one of my new favorite pastimes. When she stooped to grab her blade, death burning in her fiery gaze, I knew things had changed. Fury, the likes I had never felt before, coursed through me. The thought that my Little Demon would flip her view of me so quickly brought my anger to the surface at a time when I already had poor control over my Demon. I know I had appeared before her as her nightmare, but hadn't me saving her life all those times meant anything to her? To be fair, I had only saved her in order to use her later, so I suppose her fear and distrust were warranted.

So, I gave her the chance she wanted, knowing I was only setting her up for failure. I decided to play her game, my Demon was all too excited to take her up on her challenge and prove to her that she was far inferior to me. Only... that plan backfired since the little brat somehow slipped through my fingers. I distractedly run my hands through my hair, the beads woven amongst them clicking loudly in the silence. Then I slam my fists on the papers, I am a fucking idiot.

“And you are certain the Beastia were in formation? They weren't there by happenstance?” I ask, dread pooling in my stomach as I ponder what that would mean. Beastia are the literal monsters from Hell that give even the strongest Demons nightmares. A creation that cost the lives of an entire Demon race, making them nearly extinct and leaving the rest of our world in shambles. As far as we know, they are wild, with no way of controlling them. But if what Razar says about them is true, then whoever is helping the Umbra Hunters destroy the veil and kidnap high-powered Demons has also figured out a way to control the Beastia.

Razar nods when I finally look up at him, and I swallow, then push up from my chair, refusing to let fear have the upper hand here. “Then we need to make preparations. We need to inform Father that the war has moved beyond our borders and crossed the veil into the human realm. These are no longer random attacks led by misguided Umbra Hunters. Someone in our realm has turned on us and is helping them,” I snap just as Creed bursts through my door, his breaths heavy as he leans on the doorframe, acting like he owns the damn room. The cocky little bastard needs to be put in his place.

“Where the hell have you been?” I roar, my attempts to control my anger

suddenly flying out the door the moment I see my infuriating brother.

“There is a legion of Bestia heading this way,” he says calmly, hand resting on the kalis he has strapped to his hip, like he’s already bracing himself for a fight.

“Where?” I ask, my mind immediately shifting and going on the defensive, every weak spot of the castle's walls and protection spells coming to mind as Razar perks up at Creed's words. Spinning on my heel, I walk to my weapons cabinet, letting one of my nails lengthen into a deadly claw and nick the tip of my finger, allowing a small drop of blood to bond to the protective spell I have weaved into the grain of the wood. The cabinet clicks open, and I grab my ax, letting its heavy weight ground me as the blare of a war horn sounds ominously through the air.

“At the gates,” Creed murmurs, red-faced and grinning, his teeth sharpening. I smile ferally at him in return, happy that he has let some of his restraints go now that our secret is out. His excitement is tangible as he turns and leaves the room without a second glance. As angry as I am at my brother, I know he feels twice as much anger and resentment toward me. He needs to blow off steam, and killing a few Bestia without holding back will help.

“Irrational boy is hot-headed,” Razar growls, surprising me once again with his free use of words. I nod but grin, rushing to follow my brother. I may not like him right now, but I enjoy watching him fight. His lethal skill with his blades is unmatched, and it does something to my dark soul to watch the fear and death Creed can inflict with a flick of his wrist.

I may be the monster mothers tell their children of at night, but Creed is the shadow you don't see until it's too late. The bloodlust is riding my brother hard, and I pick up my pace, casually tossing my ax over my shoulder as we move from my office, and Razar falls into step at my side. I ignore the weary glances of the Rangers, then nod in greeting as Monroe steps from his room, his eyes narrowing on me, lips thin before he sighs and steps up to my other side.

He’s still pissed about everything that went down and the fact that we didn't tell him who we were. If it weren't for Elaine talking to him and convincing him that we are honestly here to help, I think he might have tried to kill me already. I’m still unsure about his intentions toward me, but I know he only wants what's best for the Umbra Hunters, and he hates the Senioreem. There were no lies in his words when I questioned him a few hours ago, which is the only reason he’s here and not locked up with the other Hunters

unwilling to work with us.

“What are we dealing with?” he asks stiffly.

“Beastia... Alpha Demons,” I correct, using the term he knows since we haven't been able to correct the Umbra Hunters yet.

“Great,” he grumbles, running a hand through his crazy red hair before side-eying me. “And... you're still planning on killing them, right?” he asks, and I grin, looking down at the one and only friend I have made on this insane mission. If I'm being honest, I hope he will trust me again one day. Gaining his friendship here surprised me, and I will sorely miss it if he chooses not to stay.

“Absolutely. Every single one of them,” I agree. Monroe's frown lessens the smallest amount, and he nods, looking around me at Razar, who ignores him completely. “Probably best to stay away from him,” I add, making Monroe pale but nod.

“Always knew there was something off with you fuckers,” he grumbles, then shoots me the smallest smirk. I chuckle as we rush down the castle's stairs, through the brightly lit and newly cleaned and restored entryway toward the sounds of fighting.



Meyer

I follow Valen as he keeps close to the wall of the castle. The sounds of men shouting and fighting become louder as we skirt the perimeter, carefully avoiding where the pack of monsters are attacking.

“What's happening? Shouldn't the Demons all be on one side? Why are they attacking the castle when Lennox is in charge?” I ask in confusion, then frown. What if Lennox isn't in charge anymore? Maybe the Umbra Hunters have taken back the castle, and that's why these beasts are here? The thought unnerves me, and I'm not sure if I'm excited by the prospect or worried.

“Beastia and Demons are not on the same side, Mi Sol,” Valen murmurs, slowing his pace as we come to one corner of the castle wall. He peers around it and smiles with a nod before he continues, moving closer to the main gates.

“They aren't?”

“No,” Valen whispers, grinning as he looks over his shoulders. “Calling the Beastia a Demon would be the equivalent of calling your wolves human. They are from the same world, but different from each other. The Beastia are the monsters in the Demon Realm, a corrupted version of the Therion that have mutated and lost all sense of self. They are bloodthirsty beasts that can't think past their hunger for death.” I shiver in response to his words and frown when we come to the front of the castle.

“So, Dream Walkers aren't Hunters, and now those things aren't Demons?” I grumble, trying to keep things straight in my head. Valen nods and then gestures ahead of us. “What is Razar then?” He continues to peer

intensely ahead, face tight with concentration, either missing my follow-up question or unsure of the answer. Rolling my eyes, I move to follow him. “We won't be able to get in through the front gate. Even with the distraction of the Demons.”

“Beastia,” Valen corrects, and I roll my eyes. Yeah, that's going to take some getting used to.

“Beastia,” I grind out, flinching when I hear another roar of the monster we are talking about. “Going through the main gate will be impossible. As much as I hate Lennox, he's not stupid. He'll notice me the moment I set foot in the courtyard.”

“You think he will be out fighting with the Hunters?” Valen asks, looking far more interested than he should, and I nod.

“Most definitely. Nox hates how the Seniorems hid inside the castle and let the Rangers defend it on their own,” I whisper, drawing closer to Valen so I can peek around the corner of the wall myself. There is a thick grove of trees on this side of the wall, giving us plenty of shelter from any Hunter who may be fighting up on the wall. “It's probably one of his only good qualities,” I grumble, hating to admit it but knowing it to be the truth. Lennox is a lying asshole, and I'm one hundred percent sure he was using me for his own benefit, but he is a good leader and is always out with the Regalis Bloodline during training and missions.

Valen hums under his breath and drags a finger over the gray stone of the wall as he makes his way closer to the main gates, and green magic sparks off the stone like fire. I follow, watching in awe as the green light carves itself into the wall, forming a small rectangle that is maybe only five feet tall and two feet wide. Valen stops in front of it, slowly drawing back his fingers, grinning devilishly at me before he suddenly fists his hand in the air, making the illuminated rock crumble like dust.

I gasp in surprise as twinkling gray dust drifts to the snow under our feet, then smile in awe as Valen ducks his head—as he's far too tall for the small opening—and steps sideways through the tiny entrance he just carved out of the stone, nodding his approval at the narrow passage. I take a step forward, eyeing the opening in the wall, and jump a little when Valen holds his hand out to me, wiggling his fingers, silently signaling for me to hold his hand and come through before we are discovered.

Just as I place my hand in his, another loud roar echoes through the air, and Valen tugs me hard to his side, making me squeak as I narrowly turn and

duck my head before it collides with the stone wall. We shuffle a few feet through the narrow opening and step into the courtyard right behind one of the small storage buildings.

“That's convenient,” I whisper, looking at the tiny wooden structure. Valen doesn't hear, leaning to look around the building and whistling low under his breath when he sees the battle happening in the courtyard.

“How'd they get through the gate?” I ask in confusion.

“The Beastia can jump to incredible heights. This Stronghold was built before the Therion were corrupted, becoming Beastia. These walls were not created to keep the Beastia out. What's shocking is that they are attacking during daylight,” Valen muses, talking more to himself than to me as he watches several Beastia attack groups of Hunters. “Their sight will be limited, and they will rely on pack dynamics for success.”

I step next to Valen and scowl when he shifts, ensuring I stay hidden safely behind him. Going up on my toes, I watch with open-mouthed horror as Hunters I know put their lives in danger battling the Beastia. All Bloodlines are represented in the courtyard, though the number is much smaller than the previous attack weeks ago. A pair of Beastia corner two large DeLuca Rangers who fight back to back, their weapons flashing as the monsters close in on them from either side. My breath hitches, and the urge to run out there and help springs to life just as a large ax spirals through the air and lodges itself into the neck of one of the Beastia, severing its head from its shoulders.

In a flurry of tattoos and long black hair, Lennox jumps into the fray, grabs hold of his enormous ax once more and attacks the second monster, killing it almost as fast as the first. His body moves with so much power, I can see the muscles of his back flex with every dip and turn he takes. The thin white lines of his scars shine in the morning light, showing so many more than I had initially thought; making me swallow hard at how freaking painful the wounds would have been in order to leave those scars. Lennox has the power to heal himself extraordinarily fast. He even healed the wounds I collected over the last few weeks—injuries that should have left me scarred but never did. So the idea of him having scars and as many as he does baffles me.

I briefly glare at Nox's stupidly toned back, wondering why the hell he doesn't have a freaking shirt in sub-zero temps. “Stupid Viking needs to put on some clothes,” I grumble to myself as Nox snarls, his face twisting into a

monstrous expression as he moves out of another Beastia's reach. When his predatory gaze lands on new prey across the courtyard, his lips twist into a beautiful yet terrifying smile. The silver beads braided in his long hair gleam as he swings the impossibly large ax at his side, his movement one of confidence as he watches the Hunters fight as a unit, a hint of pride glimmering in his green eyes.

Valen chuckles, his eyes wide as he shakes his head. "That's one way to kill them," he muses, a flicker of excitement on his face like he too, itches to join the fight. The glimmer of twin swords twirling through the air catches my attention, and this time, my mouth drops open in shock as Creed comes into view.

My hands ball into tight fists when I see him fighting three of the Beastia on his own, twisting and turning as they lunge for him, their claws narrowly missing his neck and stomach. My heart stalls as I watch him fight, his weapons moving so fast I can't keep up.

Unlike Lennox, who uses his brute strength and anger to fight, Creed's skill is undeniable. His movements are constantly one step ahead of the Beastia, almost like he can predict their attacks and use it against them. Nearby, a group of five Hunters work together to take down another Beastia, and I glance around, looking at all the monsters in the courtyard and shake my head nervously when I don't see who I'm looking for.

"Where is he?" I whisper, narrowing my eyes and searching the shadows of the courtyard.

"Who?" Valen asks, only half-looking at me as he watches the Hunters and two Regalis brothers fight. Like a brush of cold fingers running down my neck, an awareness filters over me as I turn my head, looking into the dark shadows of the open castle door. Big black paws drag across the frosty gray stone steps, the sense of dread and death tripling as powerful fur-covered legs and a monstrous face slowly emerge from the darkness.

"Him," I whisper breathlessly, my eyes locked on the Beastia, who is easily two times larger than the attacking monsters. Almost like the beast is bored, it descends the castle's steps, his maw partially open, black saliva dripping from razor-sharp gray teeth. His coarse obsidian fur appears like tiny needles, sharpened into thousands of deadly points, glistening with a black oily substance. As the Beastia slowly raises his head, my eyes fall on the soulless black pits that haunt my dreams, and I swallow as the shiver of excitement I hate so much races down my spine.

A low growl rumbles from him as his vacant eyes fall on a smaller Bestia that is creeping up behind Lennox. Razar attacks so fast I don't quite realize what happened until a burst of dark blood spatters on the snow-covered ground. The throat of the Bestia is torn out in seconds as Razar snarls and rips the monster to shreds under his powerful black claws.

“That's our cue to leave,” Valen says with a hitch in his soothing voice. His eyes no longer hold the eagerness they once had as he eyes Razar warily. I nod in agreement, wanting... no, needing to get away from the massive shape-shifting Bestia who stirs such conflicting feelings inside me.

Valen's fingers wrap around my wrist as he pulls me away from the battle that is quickly ending now that all three Regalis brothers have shown up. Dark blood is splattered everywhere, and the sharp metallic scent of blood lay heavy in the air. I let Valen pull me further into the shadows, trusting him to keep us safe as I look between the faces of the Hunters who lay motionless on the ground. There are only four, and when I'm convinced none of them are Regalis Bloodline or Theo, I release a heavy breath in relief. Don't get me wrong. I'm still furious with my friend and plan to kick Theo's ass the moment I see him; but the thought of him hurt or worse sends me into full-blown panic mode.

“Which door will be the easiest to go through?” Valen asks, looking up at the castle that looms over us.

“The only unguarded door that I know of is the one that the Ranger comes through when leaving the barracks,” I grumble, then glare up the side of the mountain, which the castle is literally carved into.

“Which is?” Valen asks, moving to press his back against the castle walls, tugging me behind him as the sounds of the fight slowly die out. After a moment, black smoke fills the air, and I know the Hunters have already started to burn the dead Bestia who stupidly attacked.

I grimace and point up, glad we approached the castle on this side rather than the other. Valen's eyes follow where I point before they widen, and he nods, a look of determination crossing his face.

“Let's go,” he whispers, fingers still wrapped around one of my wrists as he walks over to the almost vertical side of the castle where the mountainside is carved out to make more room. I watch in shock and horror as Valen lets go of my wrist and hooks his fingertips and toes into the smallest of cracks and crevices before pulling his body up the side of the mountain with ease.

“Follow after me. I'll ensure the hand and footholds are sturdy, but we'll

have to move fast to avoid detection. The Hunters will only be distracted for a while longer,” Valen whispers down toward me, scanning the mountain as he starts moving up a few more feet like a damn spider. I watch him and shake my head, already knowing if I follow, I’ll either kill myself or Valen when he no doubt tries to save my klutzy ass. Valen moves up a little more, his fingertips holding onto the mountain like freaking Spiderman!

Does this guy not know what gravity is?

“Uh, I hate to be a buzzkill on your awesomeness...” I whisper up toward him when he keeps moving, probably assuming I’m following. “But there is no way in hell I’m going to be able to climb up there,” I admit, raising my voice enough for him to hear me while casting a nervous look around to make sure there isn't a stray Ranger around. As much as I would love to follow him, I know I lack the strength and coordination needed for this climb, plus my body feels like I have been sent through a damn woodchipper.

Valen finally stops, looking down at me with a slight frown, his eyes widening when he sees I haven't followed him. I gasp and step forward as Valen suddenly relaxes his body and lets go of the mountain, plummeting at least thirty feet to the ground, making my heart lodge in my chest.

“Valen!” I hiss when my voice decides to work, snarling at the man as he lands gracefully at my side with a questioning look. “Stop giving me heart attacks!” I grind out, whacking his arm with the back of my hand as I attempt to regain control of my panic. I’m suddenly sweaty, and it feels like I ran a damn mile after watching him drop like that. In all fairness, we fell a lot further than thirty feet last night, but I don't think I will ever get used to seeing someone drop from a height that would typically kill a human.

“You can't climb?” he asks softly. I frown and shake my head, still pissed at him.

“Does it look like I climb mountains?” I ask in frustration, gesturing down to my body, which is much thicker than every other girl on this god-forsaken mountain. Valen's eyes move from my face and slowly drag down my body, making my cheeks heat as I suddenly wish I had never brought up my body.

I always liked how I looked. I know I’m not the perfect size and should lose some weight. I actually have. The pants I first came in are too big now, and I had to ask Jordan to help me get some new sweats for bed. But I like my curves and feel confident about them most days. It wasn't until I came here and saw all the freaking Amazonian women that I started to question my

appearance.

“Stop it,” I mutter under my breath, whacking Valen on the arm again and making him laugh.

“You have anger issues,” he points out, pouting while rubbing at his arm. I instantly feel bad, and my anger and embarrassment lessen.

“Sorry. It's been a long twenty-four hours,” I admit, making Valen chuckle and nod in agreement.

“Yes, it has. Okay, then. What is the second best choice?” he asks, and I nod to the opposite side of the castle.

“Honestly... There are only three other doors, two on the front of the Castle, and the other on the far side. So unless you want to wait until dark and sneak over there, I would suggest going through a window,” I mutter, looking up at the thick glass-paneled windows that sit about ten feet off the ground. However, the castle has much larger grooves in the stone work that I should be able to climb, and ten feet is an easy and less deadly height to reach.

“Shattering the glass could raise unwanted attention,” Valen muses, looking at the windows.

“Yeah, it could, but that one there”—I point to the fourth window tucked almost completely against the mountain—“is in an alcove of the entryway, and as long as someone doesn't hear us breaking it, I highly doubt they'll discover it broken until after we find Jordan and leave. No one ever uses the entryway, anyway. It's always dark and dusty,” I add, nodding, liking this new plan. Valen looks to the window, pondering my words before nodding as a thought strikes me.

“Wait... why not just magic your way into the castle like you did with the wall?” I mutter, tilting my head in confusion. Valen smirks and walks over to the castle, motioning for me to follow him as he pulls himself up toward the first window. When he gets there, he turns and looks down, waiting for me to climb up after him and extending his hand when I finally find a safe way up. There's a lip that winds around the castle foundation that is about three inches wide; not wide enough to walk on, but just enough to perch our toes on while holding onto the window ledge for balance.

“Look,” he whispers, his hand wrapping around mine as he pulls me up next to him, then places our fingers on the window ledge where tiny runes are carved into the stone walls. Green sparks glimmer to life under our hands, making me shiver as his magic courses over my skin. A slight sting follows,

making me gasp in shock and tear my hand away from the stone. It hadn't hurt, not really. It surprised me more than anything.

Valen chuckles again, his hand dropping from the ledge before winding his arm around my waist as I lean back a little, staring at the castle with wide eyes, finding hundreds of tiny runes carved into the stone. "It's warded, Mi Sol. Only physical strength can breach the walls, doors, and windows," Valen murmurs, and I nod, reaching out to trace a symbol I had seen on Jordan's kalis. "And even then, you need to be able to read where it is most vulnerable, since several exits are magically enhanced with protective spells."

"How did I not see these before?"

"They are carved on the exterior of all the Umbra Hunter Strongholds and are designed to blend into the stone to avoid detection. Unless you were studying the stone of the castle up close, you would never know of their existence," Valen explains, his hand tightening on my waist for a moment, making sure I've got a good grip on the wall before he starts to sidestep, peering into the windows that we pass, ensuring no one is there who might see us before waving me to follow.

"This one," I confirm, whispering even more as the courtyard becomes far too quiet. "We should have grabbed a rock to—" I cut off my rambling as Valen presses his fingertips to the window and applies enough pressure that a small crack forms under his hand. "Right. I forget that you all are crazy strong," I grumble, rolling my eyes when Valen shoots me a smug smirk, then presses a little harder, breaking the window slowly to not draw too much attention. Ten seconds later, the rest of the window lets out an ominous crack before the glass shatters inward, making me cringe and peer inside to ensure no one hears.

Valen grabs the small glass shards still clinging to the window frame, snapping them off like twigs and tossing them to the ground before he puts a finger to his lips and holds a hand up, telling me to wait here as he jumps through the window. I bite my bottom lip as I wait, casting a look over my shoulder, the sound of voices drawing closer, making my eyes widen in fear.

"Shit," I whisper, sliding closer to the window to peer in and warn Valen just as his white-blond hair pops back out the window, his smile wide as he grabs my wrist and pulls me in, making me squeak in surprise. "Jesus! Valen, a little warning next time," I grumble as I try to regain my footing, letting Valen support me as I glare up at him. His large hands move to my hips as he keeps me steady, my back pressed against the cool stone of the castle wall.

“Three Rangers were coming around the corner,” he explains, voice low and rough as I peer up into his eyes. I hold my breath when I see how close he is to me, our bodies practically glued together, his warm hands holding me even though I have regained my footing.

“Right,” I whisper, then clear my throat when I hear how breathy I sound. I push at his hands, needing a little space to cool my freaking libido and remind myself there is a time and a place for getting turned on, and it's not while breaking into a castle full of Demons. “Let's find Jordan,” I mutter, peering around Valen into the entryway before doing a shocked double take at what I see. “What the hell?” I whisper as I take in the large, pristine entrance.

The enormous wooden chandeliers were dusted and have several white candles lit, flickering in the soft morning light and giving the room a gold hue. The floors, which were dusty and bare before, are now shining with navy blue and burgundy rugs adorning their surface. Large mahogany tables line the entry, each with hurricane lamps and candelabras glittering with golden light, softening the castle and giving it an almost magical glow.

“What? When?” I stutter, shaking my head just as the heavy wooden doors swing open, their hinges no longer creaking at the lack of use. Valen hooks an arm around me, pulling me back into the alcove while murmuring a few words under his breath. A burst of Valen's magic erupts around us as Lennox strides into the castle, bloody ax resting on his shoulder, with Umbra Monroe at his side.

“Shhh. They can't see or hear us, but let's not press our luck,” Valen murmurs into my ear, and I nod, watching Lennox frown at whatever Monroe says to him. I shouldn't be surprised that Lennox strides freaking half-naked through the halls like he owns the damn place. Damn man has way too much confidence for his own good. Creed follows after a moment, talking to a few Regalis Rangers, and I see one of them is hurt and leaning on Creed's shoulder for support. My heart thumps painfully in my chest as I watch him whisper to the other Ranger to help his friend up to the med-wing of the castle.

Finally, Razar prowls through the doors, his blood-slick paws leaving prints on the freshly cleaned floors. I feel Valen tense as everyone moves past the tiny alcove we are hiding in, his arm banding tight around me like he's bracing for an attack, but Lennox, Creed, and the others pass without a single glance in our direction. Just when I think everything will be okay, Razar

pauses, his jagged black fur looking almost like thin porcupine needles this close and I slam my eyes shut when I hear the sharp intake of breath from his beast.

Valen's fingers tighten almost painfully on my waist, and I hold my breath as Razar's heavy steps slowly draw near. Shit, shit, shit! This isn't good. Cold sweat clings to my brow, and I shiver in Valen's hold, praying to whatever God who will listen that Razar will leave and not discover us.

"Razar!" Lennox clips out from where he stands on the main staircase. A growl vibrates from Razar, who stands only feet from us, his black soulless eyes narrowing a little as he inhales once more, then draws back, his monstrous face twisting into something I can't pinpoint. Oh, we are about to die! I cling to Valen, heart racing as stars burst in my vision from lack of oxygen, and then Razar sneezes! It's loud and makes me startle in Valen's hold as the Beastia steps back and shakes his head like the sneeze hurt.

Valen chuckles in my ear, and I shoot him a disbelieving look as Nox shouts for Razar again, gaining the monster's attention enough that he turns and stalks toward his brothers.

"That man is terrifying," Valen grumbles, glaring after Razar while I simply stare up at him in shock. After a moment, I shake my head and look back to the stairs, finding them empty. "Okay," Valen whispers, not letting me go as he leans around the small wall of the alcove to make sure the coast is clear. "Where is your friend?"



Valen

“U mm... I-I don’t know,” Meyer admits, making me chuckle when her sweet face pinches into an expression of annoyance. “I haven’t been a Ranger for long, and I’m not sure where they would have brought Jordan.” Nodding, I shove away the tiny amount of jealousy that runs through me whenever Meyer mentions her friend’s name, trying not to focus on it.

“Is there someone who he may be with? Also, I will need a description so that I can identify him,” I add, reluctantly removing my arm from around her waist so that we can go find her friend. I thought for sure we’d been caught when Razar stopped in front of us, but thankfully, he had been called back to Lennox, granting us more time.

I have to admit I’m shocked at who Meyer has made acquaintances with in her time here. The men who now hold control of this castle are not ones she should mess with, and are far too dangerous to be around her. I thought their magic had felt familiar last night when I saw them, it was too harsh and powerful to be from Umbra Hunters, but the lack of energy and magic had my vision hazy and my mind in shambles. What I hadn’t expected was for the very Demon Meyer has a beef with to be the Crown Prince of the Versipellis throne. A man she calls Nox, but who I know by an entirely different name.

Having him in the picture definitely complicates things, since I’m fairly positive his magic is currently coursing through Meyer’s blood alongside mine, something I don’t believe Mi Sol is aware of. It’s a situation that I intend to confront her about and correct when the time is right. Meyer is mine, and I don’t intend to share her with anyone, no matter who they are.

“Normally, he would be in the Ranger barracks, and if he’s not there, he would be with Theo. But since everything went down with the Demons and the Seniorems, I’m not sure if they are on speaking terms. And I doubt Jordan is just chillin’ in the barracks after he made his opinions known last night. Nox mentioned something about splitting up the Hunters and Rangers not under his control. He said he wanted them brought to the holding cells.” I nod, knowing every Umbra Hunter Stronghold was designed with a warded protection room and holding cells.

“Probably in the crypts,” I whisper, and Meyer grimaces in response, a shiver running down her spine that I soothe the moment I sense it. “And his appearance?” I ask, stepping to her side and lacing our fingers, trying to ignore the thrill her soft hand in mine brings, well soft except for the distinct calluses of one who is very familiar with throwing knives. Interesting. It’s odd how the smallest of touches affects me, but after going through the torture of being nothing... feeling nothing... It’s like heaven just to have Mi Sol’s hand clasped in mine.

I let my other hand move up to her neck, playing with the ends of her ponytail before dusting them over her soft skin. Her strong pulse flutters under my fingertips, and I allow myself a moment, closing my eyes and focusing on the woman I hold close. Her bright and energetic life is a balm to my torn soul, lifting my withered spirits and giving me hope for the first time in years as the slightest flicker of magic swirls around our clasped hands.

“Jordan’s tall, with dark brown hair and green eyes,” she whispers, leaning into my touch instinctually, her warm, curvy body molding to mine like she was made to be there all along. Something primal and dark sparks to life inside me as I keep my hand collared at the back of her neck, relishing her scent and warmth.

“You just described ninety percent of all Regalis bloodline members,” I muse, making Meyer’s face split into a grin as she nods.

“Yeah, but that’s what he looks like,” she shrugs, and I immediately relax. I had been worried about Mi Sol’s obsession to save this Hunter, worried I would have to share in her affections. Considering her lack of attention to his appearance, I’m guessing I have nothing to worry about. She seems worried, like she cares for the person we are trying to save, but not in a way that suggests she might choose him for a life partner.

Voices coming from down one of the corridors make Meyer tense, and I narrow my eyes in frustration, hating how her body freezes in fear. I will

have a word with Nox and the other two to see why Mi Sol is so scared of everything and everyone. I would typically be reluctant to go against someone I know in this manner, but Meyer's fear of the three Demons stalking the halls of the castle has proven to me that she deserves a little revenge for whatever harm they have caused. Besides, I have always been a fan of a bit of trickery, so I see no harm in helping her with this adventure.

“Let’s go find your friend and leave before we are discovered,” I whisper, leaning close to her so she can hear me. I’ve never had to worry about human restrictions before, and even though Meyer has Dream Walker blood, she seems to have more human traits than anything else. I do my best to make her life easier, but sometimes, I forget she cannot do the same things I can. Meyer nods in agreement; I let my hand fall from her neck but keep her fingers locked within my grip as I silently move toward the door that I suspect leads to the castle's lower levels. I have never been in the North American Stronghold before, but it resembles the European Stronghold, so I can only hope I’m leading Meyer in the right direction.

Waving a hand through the air, I let my magic rush the old door, silencing the hinges as it slowly opens, allowing a draft of frigid air to course over us as we pass through and head down the dimly lit spiral staircase. The dark stone steps are sloped slightly, making our descent slow as we wind our way down into the dark depths of the castle. The temperature plunges dramatically as we walk, the small flames on the torches that line the steep steps doing nothing to heat the area.

As we draw near the bottom of the stairs, I let my magic out, seeking the bright life force that calls to me whenever I need it. The small flicker of human life is my answer, and I wince, not used to such dull life force being in my presence. The sounds of labored breathing, cursing, and footsteps meet my ears, and I slow Meyer as we take the last steps down the narrow stairs opening to an equally narrow hallway. My eyes flash to the tiny wards etched into the stone and narrow my eyes, trying to decipher small symbols, then smile in relief. The original wards have been altered, crossed over, and destroyed, and in their place, familiar new ones have been drawn. It looks like magic will still be helping us down here after all.

“Why is it so dark?” Meyer whispers, leaning forward to peer into the shadowed hall as I look to step forward, making sure to keep her tucked close behind me. The small tunnel-like hallway is too narrow to walk side by side, and it splits off in several directions the further we move through it.

“Stay close to me, and don't let go,” I instruct, narrowing my eyes on the tiny passages that branch off the main entrance. “I don't want us to get separated, and it's like a damn labyrinth down here.”

“Roger that,” Meyer whispers, confusing the hell out of me with her words.

“Who is Roger?” I ask, stalling my forward pursuit when I see a holding cell to my right. An older blond Umbra Hunter is lying on a cot, a blanket covering his body as he sleeps, and I sigh in relief when I see the Hunters are at least being treated with human decency. I keep moving, taking a mental note of every turn I take so we don't get lost.

“What? No, Roger is only a saying, not a person,” Meyer explains, and I frown but nod.

“So, there is no person called Roger?” I ask, and Meyer giggles.

“Well, I suppose there is, but—”

Something creaks, and a presence I hadn't felt before slowly grows, making me turn and slap my hand over Meyer's mouth, silencing whatever she was about to say. Leaning down, I press a finger to my mouth, waiting for her bright green eyes to focus on my face in the dark. She nods, and I step back, letting my hand fall from her lips as hushed voices carry through the tunnels, echoing softly off the stone walls. Meyer stiffens when she finally hears them, and I curse when I sense their magic.

“We need to hide,” I whisper, tugging on her hand and picking up my pace, eyes scanning the dark passages for a place we can duck into.

“Why are they here?” she whispers. “Do they know we are here?” Grabbing Meyer, I shove her into an open holding cell, panic lacing my thoughts as low voices come closer. Shit, if they have Razar with them, they may be able to scent magic. I need to lead them away from her.

“Stay here. I'll lead them further into the crypts and double back for you,” I whisper, pushing her onto the bed and pulling the blanket that is folded up at the end of the bed over her body.

“Bad idea. Splitting up is never the best option,” Meyer whispers, her voice cracking a little with fear. I instantly hate the sound and have to bite my lip to keep in the snarl that wants to escape. Darkness floods me as I feel her terror build, and I nod, agreeing with her. Unfortunately, out of the four other options I currently have in our situation, this one is the best one and has the highest success rate. “Besides, I don't like sitting here like a silly princess in need of saving,” she adds softly, and I almost laugh at that. What she doesn't

realize is she is mine to protect; only she will not be my princess but my queen.

“I can get rid of these men quickly, trust me, I excel at this,” I murmur, almost excitedly. “I promise I’ll be back here in eighty-five seconds. Count in your head as a distraction, and keep this blanket over your head. I can’t lock the door, or I won’t be able to get back in, so I need you to stay as still as possible,” I instruct in a calm voice, wanting nothing more than to magically soothe her worries, but my promise to her earlier stops me. I need to earn her trust, and to do that, I need to keep my promises and tell her the truth about everything. Then, I will work on ensuring I become as vital to her life as she now is to mine.

Meyer opens her mouth, then shuts it, and nods, weariness in her eyes as I smile down at her.

“Count for me, Mi Sol. I’ll be right back,” I promise, making sure my magic cloaks her presence before turning on my heel and striding out of the small holding cell. Thankfully, the two men coming this way are not advanced magic users or this idea would never work. I look behind me to see a small golden glow coming from one tunnel as the two men step into the tunnel I’m in.

“He’s gone mad. There is no fucking way. We would have noticed Dream Walker magic,” a calm voice says as they make their way closer to me. “This is all your fault!”

“As you have said a million times before, Credence. Now stop your bitching, and let’s see if we can figure out where the hell Razar went,” a deep voice responds in irritation, making the other man huff in annoyance.

Cloaking myself even more, I pull on my magic, using an excessive amount as I turn and run further down the corridors. The distance I put between myself and Meyer is almost painful, but when I hear a curse and a sharp inhale of breath behind me, I grin.

“You feel that?” the deep voice asks.

“What the hell?” the softer one questions, just as footsteps thunder after me, their voices raising as I turn right, then left.

“Stop!” the deeper voice roars, and I chuckle, feeling the command run over my skin like oil on water. My step falters, and instead of fighting the impulse, I do as I’m told, molding myself into the corner of a darkened hallway and wait, nervous anticipation building as two sets of footsteps rush toward me.

I let the bigger of the two men rush past me then dart out, striking the smaller one in the side the moment he comes into view. He curses as I stick my foot out, catching his ankle and sending him careening forward into the other man's back with a shocked shout. I twist out of view as the other man turns, catching the one falling with a growl of annoyance, his dark eyes flaring as black magic sparks at his now taloned fingertips.

I smirk, shaking my head in disapproval. He has control issues and needs to sort that out, or he'll never win in a fight against someone with more magic than him. Tossing a burst of magic down a connecting hall, I almost laugh as the Prince snarls and twists after it, but it surprises me when the smaller man doesn't follow. Instead, he turns, eyes narrowing as his hand falls on the hilt of a rather impressive kalis blade strapped to his side. I really want to stay and play our game a little longer, but I only have twenty seconds left to get back to Meyer. I refuse to be late. So I lash out, hitting the man in the chest with a burst of magic, making him grunt in surprise, but it's me who is taken aback when his fingers light with blue sparks, sending his own burst of magic at my shoulder. It strikes me and sends pain radiating down my right side.

My magic shifts with his spell, something I hadn't realized he was strong enough to cast, pulling my shield down.

"Fuck," I snarl, jumping forward and kicking the man's ankles out from underneath him as his green eyes widen in shock and surprise.

"You!" he shouts, mouth agape as I smirk down at him. I want to stay, but I have ten seconds to get back, and it will take me eight if I sprint there—no time for pleasantries. Winking, I toss him a wave, then turn and run, casting a shield of magic that should hold him back long enough for me to retrieve Meyer and her friend and make it to the main levels of the castle.

"Valen!" the man shouts before a long string of Demonic curses leaves his lips. The frustration and shock are evident in his tone, making me wince a little as I turn and skid to a stop outside the holding cell Meyer is hiding in.

"Mi Sol?" I whisper, rushing in, then pulling up to a stop, my heart stopping cold in my chest as I take in the mess of blankets on the empty bed in front of me. "*No, no, no, no!*" I whisper, lurching forward as a cold sweat breaks over my body. Fisting the blankets, I yank them back like Mi Sol will somehow be under them, even though I know she's not. Panic and anger war within me, and I grit my teeth together as my hands shake.

The soft crinkle of paper has my eyes snapping to the side, eyes widening

as I see a small note fall from the blankets I clutch desperately in my hands. Releasing the fabric, I snatch up the small note, then curse and shoot to my feet, my worry and anger replaced with frustration and annoyance at one man in particular. There's no way he had the time, let alone a paper and pen to write that note while here, he had come with a pre-scripted message. That scary bastard knew that Meyer would be here.

“Very well. I'll play your stupid little game. But you had better be prepared to accept the consequences,” I mutter out loud, even though I know the man I'm speaking to is long gone from here.



Meyer

I hold my breath, heart pounding so hard it rings in my ears as feet thunder past the holding cell I'm in, Lennox bellowing for Valen to stop as they go. The urge to jump out of this cold, hard bed is strong, and I have to fist my hands at my sides to keep from doing just that.

"Count to eighty-five," I mutter to myself, knowing that it might help me from having a full-blown panic attack. I shiver as I start counting, straining my ears when I hear a few shouts from further down the hallway. When I get to twenty, my heart begins to calm, and I try to relax my fingers. As I reach forty-five, my breath hitches when I hear something scuffing the floor nearby. Holding my breath, I get to fifty, then release it when feather-light footsteps come into my cell, the brush of magic in the air calming my nerves instantly. Sighing in relief, I toss the blanket back and sit up, glad to be rid of the scratchy, thin fabric.

"That was only fifty seconds," I point out to Valen, then frown when I realize Valen isn't in the cell with me. I look at the cracked cell door, far too narrow for someone to have come through, and stand up in confusion, staring around the empty cell. "What the hell?" I whisper, fear slowly creeping back in as the hairs on my neck stand up, as the feeling of eyes on me becomes impossible to ignore. Excitement blooms in my chest, and I clench my eyes shut as I slowly look into the cell's darkest corner. I brace myself, but nothing prepares me for the dark green eyes that lock with mine from beneath a thick black hood.

I gasp and take a step back as the tall, cloaked man moves forward, his

steps graceful like he's floating over the floor. "Razar," I breathe, voice raspy as I stare at him. The burst of excitement melts as fear and a sense of something warm lights me up like a damn Christmas tree, setting my teeth on edge. I freaking hate how I respond to these men; just because I like them close doesn't give them the right to treat me the way they have.

I take another step back, bracing myself to run for Valen; hell, even Creed or Lennox would be better at this point. Razar must sense what I'm preparing to do because a dark smile graces his face as he slowly lifts his hands and pushes back the black hood, bringing his startlingly beautiful face into view. Our eyes clash, and heat builds, the surrounding air becomes almost stifling as Razar tsks under his breath. His dark eyes drink me in as he stalks forward, one hand clasp around my wrist before I realize he's even moved.

"*Ligare*," Razar whispers in a husky voice, magic sparking in the air before my wrists suddenly pull together, with what feels like an invisible rope binding them together.

"No!" I shout just as he suddenly bends, planting his shoulder into my stomach and heaving me up in the air, stealing my breath as he spins on his heel. Razar's hand fastens on my thigh closest to his face as he strides out of the cell, keeping me pinned to his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and begins to sprint in the opposite way his brothers had just run. "You fucking bastard!" I scream, kicking my legs and pounding on Razar's hard, muscled back as he runs. I scream in frustration when my efforts to break free do nothing. "Valen!" I shout, or rather, I try to. Razar's shoulders dig into my stomach as he runs, making it hard to breathe or talk. A dark chuckle comes from the man holding onto me as he sprints up the winding stairs, taking them two at a time before bursting out of the crypts into the castle's entry and taking two Drakos Hunters by surprise.

"He can't hear you," Razar growls, shaking his head as he tightens his hold on me.

"*Umbra Regalis?*" one of the Hunters murmurs, his dark brow furrowing when he sees Razar. He dips his head respectfully, and then his eyes move to me in question as Razar ignores them, striding past without a single glance in their direction. The other Hunter quickly steps back, eyeing Razar wearily while keeping his mouth firmly shut.

"Help!" I rasp, pushing my bound hands to Razar's back as I look at the Hunters standing there, gawking at us. The one that had greeted Razar looks conflicted, and the other one shakes his head, refusing even to consider

helping me.

“They help you; I kill them,” Razar snaps, raising his voice so that the Hunters can hear, making their faces pale as they turn and dash out of the castle. I snarl in frustration, trying to flip the hair that has fallen in my face out of my eyes as Razar moves to the second flight of stairs and runs up them as fast as the first. His shoulder digging into my stomach makes me grunt, and I wince when it makes my already sore muscles cry out in pain.

“You’re hurting me,” I snap, shifting to my left to relieve the pain on my right side as Razar moves through the castle halls, prowling past open-mouthed Rangers and Hunters without a care in the world. I keep my mouth shut, unwilling for their deaths to be on my hands. If I know one thing, it’s that Razar doesn’t make idle threats. I’m pretty sure Razar would kill any of these Hunters just so I would feel awful about it.

In a matter of minutes, Razar is bursting through the door that leads outside to the Ranger barracks, the bright sun making me squint and curse under my breath. “Why are you fucking running?” I growl, confused about why he took me in the first place. Honestly, I figured the next time I came face to face with Razar, he would simply try to kill me for stabbing him. Not toss me over his shoulder and sprint through the castle like a madman. Razar ignores me, shouldering his way into the barracks, using the shoulder he conveniently threw me over and knocking my head on the door frame as he goes.

“Ow!” I grit out, my head throbbing in response as I glare at his back, trying hard to ignore the whispers of the few Rangers sitting in the cabin’s common area. A quick glance around shows that only a handful of DeLuca and Drakos Rangers are there, and I huff in disappointment when I don’t spot Billy or someone else who may be willing to help me. Razar continues his race up the stairs, bouncing me with more force than necessary, and I grind my teeth together, refusing to say anything else about how hurt my body is right now.

Biting my tongue, I wait as Razar opens the door to a room I haven’t been in before, then surprises the shit out of me when his hands move up my thighs, making me gasp before he grabs my hips and then tosses me through the air. A shocked squeak escapes my parted lips as the feeling of falling sends my stomach into my throat. Before I can scream, my butt lands on soft pillows, and I bounce, then roll across a large bed.

“What the actual fuck, Razar?!” I shout when I finally regain the ability to

speak again. “What are you doing?” The bindings around my wrists suddenly release and I shake my hands out at my sides.

“Setting a trap,” he grumbles, slamming the door of the room he just launched me into before leaning on the wall next to it, crossing his arms over his chest, glaring at me as I sit up on the comfortable bed. I eye the door, then look back at him, wondering how I will get through it and run away. Almost like he can read my mind, Razar shakes his head, green eyes flashing with excitement. “Don’t,” he warns, his long black hair falling wildly down his shoulders as he slides closer to me. “You run, and this gets a whole lot harder for you,” he whispers, surprising me when his words come out as more of a warning than a threat.

I swallow and slowly push myself further back on the bed, not liking how heavy his gaze feels as he stares at me. “A trap?” I ask, eyeing him carefully as I rub at my right side, wishing I could heal myself like everyone else in this damn castle. “Who for?” Razar doesn't respond as he glares at me, making the air tense. I freeze when something moves in the corner of the room. Then a small meow makes me freeze, mouth dropping open in shock as I push myself to my hands and knees. Crawling to the edge of the bed, I watch as a ball of orange fluff stretches on a small armchair, its tail flicking in annoyance as it slowly presses to its tiny paws and stands.

“Milo?” I whisper, shock, surprise, and elation rushing through me as I spring from the bed, rushing to get to my cat. Just as I’m about to reach him, Razar somehow beats me to it, snatching Milo into his arms and glaring at me while holding the feline close to his chest. Milo reacts instantly, yowling and hissing at the man holding him before sinking his tiny teeth into Razar's thumb, making me gasp in surprise.

“What the hell are you doing to my cat?” I shriek, jumping off the bed, no longer caring about my own safety, as I take a flying leap at the man in front of me. I wrap my arms and legs around him, yanking on him hard the way I did Lennox the time I took him off his feet. Razar must be expecting it though, because he simply steps back with one foot, countering my attack easily before facepalming me and sending me flying back down to the ground.

“MY little monster,” Razar corrects with a snarl, holding Milo even closer as my cat literally hisses and tries to claw out his eyes.

“No! Not yours! How the hell did you find him?” I ask, partly in anger and the other in relief. I have been so freaking worried about him, scared to

death that Dan wouldn't come looking for me when I had disappeared and that Milo would starve. I've literally lost sleep over my little cat, and now I find out he's been in this castle the whole fucking time?

I shove up to my feet, fury radiating off me as I watch Razar's face soften a little when he stares down at the ball of fur that is currently turning his hands into hamburger. "Umm, you're bleeding. I don't think he likes you," I point out, making Razar's face harden in the next second before he bends forward, snatches a pillow off the bed to our right, then launches it at my face, his green eyes cold as he legitimately growls, the sound vibrating from his chest.

The surprise pillow attack from Razar takes me off guard. I'm not prepared when it hits my face with such force that my neck snaps back, making me shout and fall back onto the bed, cursing as tears spring to my eyes. The pain in my neck and head radiates to a new level, making stars burst in my vision, all my previous injuries making themselves known, and suddenly, I'm too tired to fight Razar anymore. So, instead of jumping back up to square off with him like I should, I grab the pillow Razar tossed at me and curl up around it, keeping my eyes shut in an attempt to make the pain stop. I'm tired, and the events over the last twenty-four hours have drained me.

"What are you doing?" Razar grumbles after a long moment, and I crack a lid, looking at him long enough to find him bent forward, eyes narrowed like he's honestly confused about what I'm doing. The bright light from his window makes my head throb, so I shut my eyes after glaring at him for as long as I can.

"I want my cat back," I growl, trying to match his angry tone, but failing miserably. I honestly just want a nice hot bath and to sleep for a day or two, but I seriously doubt that will happen anytime soon.

"Are you..." Razar growls under his breath, his voice growing closer, making my nerves return tenfold. But before I can do anything, I feel the press of warm, almost hot fingers on my cheek, and my eyes snap back open. Razar keeps glaring at me while he brings his wet fingers up to his face, and I realize he wiped at the tears that fell despite my best efforts to quell them. "You're leaking," Razar states, his voice no longer holding the heat of anger, but cold detachment and perhaps confusion.

Milo has stopped attacking Razar and simply glares up at him, letting loose an occasional hiss, and I can't help myself. A giggle breaks free from

my lips as I watch Razar's face twist into something I can't quite describe. Disgust? Confusion? Worry? Maybe a combination of all three. Razar's face only propels my laughter into full-blown hysterics, making my head and body cry in pain, but I can't stop laughing as I contemplate everything I have been through. Razar steps away from me, acting like my emotions might be contagious, and he may get infected if he gets too close.

"Are you... broken?" Razar asks, his voice softer than I have ever heard before. I shake my head and wipe at the tears streaming down my face as I gather my thoughts. I'm currently being held prisoner by a man I stabbed in the chest... who also shifts into a monster from my nightmares. Who is the brother of the guy I was fucking, and also related to the man I hate... but kinda like at the same time, which makes no fucking sense. Then, there is the man who has only helped and kept me safe this entire time, who I'm pretty sure I'm also catching feelings for, and is probably losing his shit somewhere in this castle because I'm not where he left me. Meanwhile, I've been hurt, betrayed by the men I was growing to care for and my friends, and chased through the forest by a damn monster.

My eyes flick back to said monster man, and I sigh, realizing I have no weapon... no blade to protect myself with. Razar frowns when he sees my gaze on him.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks, tilting his head to the side and staring at me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to figure out.

"I'm suddenly realizing I really suck at being a Hunter," I admit with a heavy sigh. Razar frowns, looking at me like I'm the craziest person he has ever met.

"It's taken you this long to figure that out? I knew that the moment I met you," he says matter-of-factly as I slowly attempt to push myself up on the bed, ignoring my screaming head and aching neck.

"You know you're a real prick sometimes?" I mutter under my breath as I stare at him, my eyes moving to Milo and then to the door that Razar has left unguarded. "Are you going to kill me?" I ask, refusing to look at him as I wait for his answer.

"I haven't decided yet. But I doubt my brother will allow me," Razar growls out, then inhales sharply, making me dart a look in his direction as he suddenly lets Milo go. Razar's posture suddenly tenses; making me realize he had let his guard down while talking to me. He steps in front of the bed, blocking me from view as his door bursts inward, a wave of magic coursing

through the room. Razar growls in response as Valen strides into the room, green magic flickering around him like tiny bolts of lightning.

There is a moment of silence as Valen's eyes fall on Razar, then slide to me, and Razar curses and shakes his head as Valen's eyes darken, square jaw locking as he stares at me on the bed.

"I didn't—" Razar starts, then Valen launches himself at him, their bodies colliding with a harsh impact, making me wince in sympathy.

"You never fucking learn! How many times do we have to do this?" Valen snarls, his fists colliding with Razar's face multiple times before the dark-haired Demon twists, flipping him and Valen, making them roll across the floor in a flurry of fists and green and black magic.

"Fucking men!" I mutter, crawling to the edge of the bed, watching them curse each other out while beating the shit out of one another. I frown, concern and confusion both at the forefront of my mind. Why the hell are these two acting like they know each other? Dread slowly starts to pool in my stomach as I watch, and when they roll dangerously close to Milo, I click my tongue and wiggle my finger at him, grinning as my bundle of orange fur leaps over the two fighting men and onto the bed next to me. His bright blue eyes casually take in the chaos as he loafs on the bed next to me, purring loudly in contentment.

"Good boy," I coo, petting him a few times before sighing loudly and standing up, figuring I'm going to need to stop the fight before Razar kills Valen. Maybe he will forget about the other Dream Walker if I distract him or something. "Hey!" I clap my hands together, trying to get their attention. "Knock it off! Both of you," I yell, jumping to the side when Razar kicks Valen in the ribs, sending him flying through the air and crashing into the armchair. "Razar!" I scream, my annoyance turning to fear as I rush toward Valen, only for Razar to jump to his feet and catch me around my waist, scooping me off my feet as he glares at Valen.

"Let go of me!" I snarl, clawing at his hands as I keep my eyes on Valen.

"You thought I wouldn't notice your magic?" Razar rasps, glaring at the man who just broke his chair as he pushes himself up to his feet, dusting off his black clothes. "Have you been gone so long that you think you could fucking hide from me?"

"Are you okay?" I ask, body tense from being pressed this close to Razar's body. He's incredibly hot and not the drool-worthy way, but the 'I feel like I'm on fire' way. It's wreaking havoc on my mind as I push at his

arm and claw at what skin is exposed.

“Let her go!” Valen snarls, ignoring Razar’s words, his eyes locked firmly on Razar’s arm corded around my waist. Both men ignore me and my anger, which only pisses me off more as I twist my knee to the side and bring it up, catching Razar between the legs. We go down with a crash, Razar growling as his arm tightens around me, hand darting back to support my neck before it can whip back and cause even more damage.

“I forgot how fucking annoying you are!” he wheezes, body curling in on us as he tries to regain the breath I just knocked out of him.

“And I forgot how fucking rude the Regalis brothers are. You all need to be kicked in the nuts more often!” I snarl in response, beating at his chest while trying to knee him in the balls again. Valen laughs, dipping down and punching Razar hard in the shoulder, breaking the Demon's grip on me enough to yank me out of his hold. The sudden movement makes me dizzy, and I sway on my feet, Valen's arm darting out and wrapping around me as his mirthful expression darkens into worry.

“Are you injured?” Shouts and footsteps rushing down the hall toward Razar's broken door stop any reply on my lips as Valen tenses. “Meyer, you know how I was saying there was some more information you needed to know before the Bestia attacked the castle?” he asks in a rough, hurried whisper. I frown and nod as Razar chokes on a laugh, pressing himself up to his knees as two furious men descend on the tiny room. Valen curses and shoves me behind him, turning to face the Demons who converge on us.

They are both wearing Umbra fighting leathers, the black clothes pristine, telling me they had changed after the fight outside. Thankfully, Nox has a shirt on, but it's so damn tight it does nothing to hide the rippling muscle underneath. Creed's dark curly hair appears damp, like he just bathed, making me instantly jealous. I know I smell awful, but I’ve been ignoring that fact since there is nothing I can do about it right now. But what I wouldn't give for a shower right now. I would even take an ice-cold one in the Regalis bathing chamber—anything to wash off the smell of stress, sweat, and filth.

“Valen!” Creed whispers, bright green eyes glassy as he leaps at him, arms wrapping around his neck so tight I think he might strangle him. I gape in surprise when Valen chuckles and wraps Creed into a big hug instead of shoving him away.

“What the hell?” I whisper, stepping back in shock as Lennox glares at Valen and then Creed before his dark eyes fall on me. I shake my head as

Nox glares, striding toward me with murder in his eyes. “No! Nox, I swear I will fucking kick you in the balls again if you touch me!” I snap, stumbling back a few more steps, desperate to keep some distance between us, but it's no use.

A big hand encircles my wrists, yanking them up above my head and pinning them to the wall above me as Lennox presses his chest and legs firmly against me to prevent what I just threatened. I squirm in his hold, wishing I had something to stab him with as his chest rises and falls with ragged breaths and eyes burning with rage.

“Little Demon,” he snarls, pressing me hard into the wall, making my aching body scream in pain. “You. Threw. A. Knife. At. My. Face!” he bellows, frustration clear in his voice as his free hand slides up my side, his fingers digging into my ribs.

Flinching at how fucking loudly he just yelled, I snarl back, “You deserved it!” Which makes him frown and pull back the slightest amount. Frustrated, I look away from him, my arms trembling and making me grit my teeth in annoyance. The muscles are sore and tired, but I'm sure Lennox will only see it as a weakness, and I'm so fucking sick of looking weak in front of him.

“Meyer?” he asks softly, familiar magic drifting over my skin, making me physically sag into Lennox's strong hold.

“*Garthelaun!*” Valen yells, shoving at Creed, trying to break free of his hug but not succeeding. Lennox's body tenses as Valen suddenly starts speaking in some sort of language I can't understand. It's nothing I have ever heard before, full of harsh sounds and growls. Lennox grumbles something back in the same language before shaking his head, his eyes never leaving my face.

“My name is Lennox on this side of the veil, Valen. And you will speak in English so Meyer can understand,” Nox snaps, making my Dream Walker's mouth gape open in surprise, and I dart a confused look at Valen and then Nox, who presses his knee between my legs, probably trying to piss me off more, but screw that! I won't give him the reaction he's looking for. At this point, he can do whatever the hell he wants.

Nox's magic is slowly wrapping around me, making my sore muscles relax for the first time in days. I shudder in his grasp, my fingers going numb above my head as I glare at the man pinning me to the wall. “Why are you not fighting me?” Nox asks, his head tilting to the side, voice so soft I'm

pretty sure I'm the only one who can hear him, but before he can answer, his green eyes blow wide, and a rumble leaves his chest. "You're injured," he snarls, dropping my wrists and letting my hands fall to my sides as he scoops me off my feet and glares at Valen as he moves me over to the big bed at the center of the room.

"Why the fuck is she injured, brother?" Nox snaps. I look over to Creed, but it's not Creed Nox is looking at... it's Valen.



Razar

Guilt fills Valen's eyes, and I shake my head as I curse under my breath, brushing off my clothes as I get to my feet. It's been years since someone has managed to bring me to the ground during a fight, and now it's happened twice in a matter of a few days; first by that annoying girl and now by my brother.

Admittedly, I don't mind the scuffle with Valen. In fact, I've longed for someone to give me a good fight ever since Archer's death. Nox won't, simply because he knows he doesn't need to fight me to get his way, and Creed still feels too guilty to fight back. I try to shift discreetly on my feet, unwilling to let my brothers notice how fucking sore my balls are right now, while I glare at the girl Nox is now flipping the fuck out over. His anger melted the instant he realized little Pup was injured, and now he's practically growling at Valen, demanding answers for the cause of her pain. Honestly, he doesn't have to look much further than the people in this room. Credence always says I am the socially and emotionally stunted of the bunch, yet I'm fairly positive we are the cause of Meyer's pain, physical and emotional. And I doubt any of my hard-headed brothers have realized that yet.

I hum in thought at that. The girl may drive me mad, but with the way my brothers are panting after her, I seriously doubt she's going anywhere anytime soon. Perhaps I can teach her how to control all those pesky emotions, so I don't have to deal with them. I shiver at the reminder of the pain she projected when I tossed the silly pillow in her face and roll my eyes in exasperation.

A damned pillow... full of feathers... injured her enough that I could feel her pain! It's pathetic, really. Not even the mortal Hunters in this realm are that fragile. Maybe I should just put her out of her misery now and save my brothers the inevitable heartache when she dies. The fact she's still alive confounds me. I honestly thought I may have broken her when she didn't get back up. I wasn't sure if I was ecstatic at the prospect, or worried about whether Lennox was going to send me to an early grave.

What I hadn't expected was the rush of pain that wasn't from Pup on my bed... but from me. Something I hadn't felt since Archer was killed—something I swore I would never allow myself to feel again. This, of course, confirmed to me that the girl's damn emotions are contagious, and I need to keep as much distance from her as physically possible.

The air is tense in my room, and I smile, relaxing a little at the apparent discomfort Valen has caused by showing up out of the blue. Something that actually makes our lives easier since we were unsure where Valen's physical body was being held, or how to reconnect his mental and physical forms that Axford had split in order to control him.

We knew the Umbra Hunters were holding our brother, and we had hoped to find enough blood sources in the church that the Umbra Hunters were using to hold the humans. But since he's somehow here without us saving his ass, I'm going to assume he was in that church, and our little Pup over there found him while she was hiding from us last night. She also managed to do the impossible by reconnecting Valen's mental and physical forms, something Lennox was planning on calling Orcus' for his help, since the three of us don't hold enough magic to do it ourselves.

It also explains how the devil Meyer disappeared without a damn trace. I bet if I go back there and actively search out my brother's magic, I will be able to find it. The fact I hadn't scented it immediately means he was only using a small amount and was probably trying to cover his tracks. A small gasp leaves Meyer's lips; the breathy sound makes my chest constrict, and I instantly hate her even more.

Why in the seven rings of Hell is this girl so fucking distracting? I glare at her, taking in her small nose and too big eyes. Her pale blonde hair washes out her already light-colored skin, and she has a tiny freckle on her right cheek, ruining the appearance of a flawless complexion. Currently, her hair looks like it hasn't been brushed or washed in a long time, and her cheeks are flushed, the bright red color making it look like she's about to cry or scream.

If I had to place a bet, it would be on the latter. Pup has some serious anger issues.

“Meyer,” Valen rasps as Nox gently places the girl down on my bed. Creed lets go of Valen, surprising me when he rushes to Meyer's side, worry clear on his young face. Shit, this is worse than I thought if Creed is willingly letting go of Valen to go to Meyer. The amount of love and concern pouring from Credence is sickening, and from the way Valen now looks at him—frustration and jealousy clear as day on his face—I'm guessing our little family unit is about to implode.

“Brother? You're a Demon?” she whispers, mouth agape as her gaze flicks from Nox to Valen, then to Creed. Meyer's face is one of shock and hurt, and Valen looks like he's about to be sick, and I scoff. See, this is why you don't lie or let anyone close to you. Emotions are only something a person can use against you. Letting someone into your life in any capacity is like giving them a small part of your soul and entrusting them not to hurt it. Why would anyone ever risk such a thing?

Creed ignores everyone as he sits next to Meyer, his fingers moving to brush over a bruised cheek. She immediately jerks away from him, mouth pulled into a feral snarl, and I have to hold back the delighted smile that wants to break free. If I didn't know better, I would say Pup is about to bite Creed's fingers off. I almost hope she does, that would be great entertainment. Creed lets his hand fall, hurt filling his features as she continues to glare at him. The anger and resentment I feel coming from her is much easier to bear than the hurt and inner turmoil from only moments ago.

“Adopted brother,” Valen corrects, earning a glare from Nox and Creed, which he ignores. “Technically, Nox is the only blood heir of Orcus Darakh; the rest of us are adopted, but have taken on the Darakh royal name and are considered his true sons,” he explains slowly, trying to ensure the girl understands. When his eyes flick to Creed and Nox, meeting their angry stares, he scoffs. “What? I'm only trying to give her all the information she needs in order to trust me. I told her I would earn it, and that's precisely what I will do. It's not my fault I'm related to the men who pissed her off. You can figure your problems out on your own.”

“You lied!” Meyer snaps, anger moving away from Creed and landing solely on Valen.

“I never lied, Mi Sol. You assumed I was a Hunter, I never corrected you. I told you Dream Walkers were different, that you were not a Hunter, I just

left out that you were part Demon,” Valen whispers, his words soft and pleading.

“*Demon?*” she mouths the word but no sounds comes from between her parted lips. Valen’s eyes widen in shock when he realizes what he just said. I can basically see the Pup’s mind exploding with the information, but she surprises me when she shakes her head, and glares at him. “Omitting the truth is still a lie, Valen! You let me believe for weeks that I was a Hunter!” she snaps, and my brows furrow. Weeks? What the hell, how long has Valen been awake?

“Weeks?” Nox snaps, anger darkening his expression as his head slowly turns from Meyer toward Valen.

“She called me to her dreams weeks ago,” Valen murmurs, worried eyes still on Meyer's face.

“And?” Lennox prods, making Valen finally meet our brother's demanding gaze.

“And nothing. That's between me and her, and I will not share our time with you,” Valen replies, his words clipped and final. My brows arch, and Creed winces, probably uncomfortable with the sudden dominance fight between our brothers. Out of the six Princes of Hell, Valen is the only one who is strong enough to outright refuse a command given by our baby brother. Creed, being the weakest of us, oftentimes folds simply to keep the peace. The air around him has his teeth set on edge, his eyes darting nervously between the men he’s sitting between.

“Fucking traitor. We are your brothers, your loyalty should lie with us,” Nox grumbles, his hand moving to cup Meyer's cheek. Creed relaxes a little when he realizes Nox’s anger is only surface level. It probably helps that we haven't seen Valen in years, and Nox is feeling rather sentimental right now.

Meyer flinches away, earning a growl in response from my youngest brother, to which Valen cuffs him upside the head like a naughty toddler. “It does, and you know it. But that doesn't mean I can’t be loyal to Meyer as well. Don’t scare her, and keep your hands off. What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Valen asks, his voice full of disapproval as he tries to insert himself between Meyer and Nox. Creed reaches out and snags Valen by the back of his shirt, yanking him away from Nox as Meyer's eyes suddenly flutter shut, and she sighs, shocking the hell out of me when she actually leans into Nox’s big hand. Nox smirks triumphantly, and Valen's eyes widen as Creed shakes his head.

“He’s healing her,” Creed mutters darkly, his eyes flashing with jealousy as Meyer's breathing gradually regulates. Understanding finally dawns on Valen's face, which is quickly replaced by anger as his fingers spark with magic. The darkness that resides at the very center of my brother slowly crawls forward, inching over that perfect exterior he likes to hide behind, covering it with a veil of black as his pupils expand and teeth sharpen. Creed immediately lets go of Valen and leans away from him, eyeing him cautiously as Nox’s smile broadens.

“You’re healing her?” Valen hisses, voice deepening, his magic darkening into inky black swirls that call to my beast. I groan, a wave of excitement coursing through me as the darkness leaves a heavenly thrill in its place, and I have to bite my damn lip, drawing blood in the process to shove the beast down. Now is neither the time nor place to let him loose. The last time Meyer sensed him, I got a dagger to the fucking chest. Something I still plan to seek revenge for once I get her alone.

Meyer's eyes slowly open, the color returning to her too-pale face as Nox continues to heal her. When her eyes finally focus, landing on Valen, she inhales sharply and yanks herself away from Nox and his healing touch, eyes wide in surprise as she takes in the angry Dream Walker only feet from the bed. Nox curses, his outstretched hand that had been cupped on her cheek curling in a ball as he slowly lets it fall to the bed next to him, shooting Valen an accusatory look.

Fear thickens in the air, and it's enough for Valen to curse, gaining control of himself faster than I have ever seen before. His hair lightens from a slate gray to white blond, his skin turning back to that creamy color as his eyes lock on Meyer, a silent plea within them making me scoff in disgust. Valen hadn't even shifted all the way, and the girl had been scared of him. There is no way in Hell she’s going to last more than a month with the dangers of our world now out in the open.

“Yes. I can heal her. Are you done with your tantrum?” Nox grinds out between clenched teeth.

“No,” Valen snaps, shaking his head as he glares at Nox. “You won’t do that again!” Nox laughs as Creed slowly pushes himself back on the bed, his eyes on Meyer as she stares at us all in horror.

“You want her in pain, Valen? She has a cracked rib, several strained muscles, a laceration on her right hand and forehead, *and...*” Nox stresses, leaning forward. “A stage three concussion and sleep deprivation. She’s also

dehydrated and hungry,” he points out, his words harsh enough that Valen frowns, eyes widening in horror when he realizes how bad of shape the girl is in. She must have kept some of her injuries to herself, otherwise Valen would have sought out a healer before he decided to join any adventure she pulled him into.

Speaking of... How the hell did this slip of a girl convince my stoic brother to help her? What is her plan, and why is she here? Suspicion slowly creeps into my mind as I eye her, unsure of her motives, as she glares at Valen.

“Shut the hell up, Lennox,” Meyer snarls, her foot kicking out, catching Lennox in the side, making him curse as he jumps from the bed, gaping like a damn fish at the girl’s fucking audacity. Creed rolls his lips together to hide the smile her actions caused, and Valen looks at Meyer like he’s never seen her before. She probably acted like a perfect angel in order to enthrall my brother the way she has. Poor bastard is in for a big surprise if he thinks he has a sweet, obedient girl on his hands. “Are you going to kill me or use me for a blood sacrifice anytime soon?” she asks, shoving to the other side of the bed before standing on shaky legs. Creed jumps to his feet as Nox and Valen take a step forward, all of them moving to help her. Meyer throws a hand up and shakes her head. “No! Answer the damn question!”

“Not in the near future, no,” Nox grinds out, making Valen growl under his breath.

“Not fucking ever,” he snaps, the two only seconds from another dick-measuring contest. Creed sighs and rests his hands on his hips, his head falling forward as he shakes his head.

“No, Meyer. We needed your help to find Valen,” he murmurs dejectedly.

“You mean you needed my blood?” she asks coldly, and Creed nods. Meyer eyes them warily before her eyes move to Lennox. “Would it have killed me?” she asks, head tilting to the side as she stares at the four of us, trying to piece together whether she’s safe here or not.

“Probably,” I offer, speaking for the first time since my brothers rushed into my room. I grin when she tenses and takes a step back, her fingers moving to her empty knife sheath. Little Pup went for her knife instead of running.

“Razar!” Nox bellows as Valen spins on me, a black blade appearing in his hand instantly.

“No! No, Meyer. Raz is just being a shithead!” Creed yells, holding his

hand out in front of him like he's trying to calm a wild animal.

"So you're saying she wouldn't have died? Are you positive?" I ask cockily, knowing damn well that they haven't received her in-depth blood results yet. "Or had it been your plan this whole time to lure her into a false sense of security, to get close to her, then use her for our own benefit, whether that cost her life or not? The girl is a debt you owed to Elaine, which is the only reason you didn't use her at the first opportunity."

Meyer pales at my words, and I can practically feel the heated glare Nox is throwing at me. Creed's shoulders fall forward, and he curses, not looking at Meyer, which only serves to prove my point.

"Tell me I'm wrong," I growl to the room, refusing to let this ridiculous facade of false security go on any further. The girl is a nuisance, and I refuse to let her pull apart what's left of my Legion. I need her to hate them as much as she hates me, and I need her to stay the fuck away from all of us. Valen is here; she no longer serves a purpose and needs to go.

"That may be how it started," Creed agrees, his voice raspy. "But that's not how it is now. Meyer, I swear. I sent in your blood for testing to make sure that when we did use you, it wouldn't kill you," he pleads, and Meyer frowns.

"My blood? When did you get my blood?"

"Uh," Creed stammers, flushing a little as he brings a hand up to rub at the back of his neck. "When you were in my room," he admits.

"While we were fucking!?" the girl shrieks, making me grunt and bring my hands up to cover my ears as they ring from the shrill sound. Valen's eyes start to darken again, probably with jealousy from finding out Creed bedded the whelp before he could.

I lower my hands and let out a long sigh, I'm surrounded by idiots.

"No! I mean... Well, yes. But you were sleeping, we weren't fucking, and I was positive I felt your Dream Walker magic and needed to make sure," Creed says with a smile like what he just said was going to help his situation. I shake my head in secondhand embarrassment as Meyer blinks at Creed.

"You needed to make sure..." Meyer says slowly, her tiny hands fisting into even smaller balls as she places them on the curves of her hips. "You're an asshole, Creed! Who the hell takes blood from a girl they just slept with to see if she can be your blood sacrifice? I thought..." she trails off and shakes her head. "Doesn't matter what I thought. It was all a fucking lie!"

"No!" Creed shouts, jumping forward, his hands outstretched like he's

about to pull her into his arms.

“Okay, we all need to calm down for a moment and try to get on the same page here,” Valen interrupts, closing his eyes while running a hand down his face. For the first time, I see his perfect mask slip, showing the exhaustion he’s been hiding under it. My chest constricts, and I growl when my beast tries to claw to the surface.

As much as I hate to admit it, I missed my brother. It's been four long years since I last saw him. The stress of trying to locate him across the veil, then come up with a plan to save him—without knowing if it was all in vain—had taken a toll on my brothers and me; but from the looks of it, Valen has suffered tenfold. There are dark rings under his eyes, his hair looks duller than I remember, and his hand trembles with exertion from just standing there. My eyes move from my brother to the girl, who looks better than before, but still looks like she’s been through hell over the past couple of days.

“You need rest,” Nox commands, his sharp eyes running over Valen, his shoulders tensing like he too, can see under the mask that our brother has constructed. Valen hesitates, then nods, his attention on the girl who is watching us quietly.

“We need to go home, but Meyer wants her friend back,” Valen says softly, his attention never leaving her.

“We can't leave yet. I have taken over the North American Stronghold, Valen. The Umbra Hunters have become more corrupt than we first thought, and it's only gotten worse over the time you have disappeared. They are creating rifts in the Veil, allowing the Beastia and Therion to travel into the human realm, then offering the humans up as bait in order to trap Demons and steal their magic,” Nox growls. Valen’s eyes triple in size as he finally looks away from Meyer.

“How?” Valen asks in alarm.

“They are receiving demonic help. The legion of Beastia that came through had two demonic Wraiths with them,” Nox admits in a grave tone. “Both of them escorted by Versipellis shifters.” Valen staggers back like the words are a physical blow, and Creed looks a little green. If things ended up being as they appeared, the Wraiths helping the Hunters would be the highest of betrayals in our world. Something that would hint at a betrayal close to our family since only someone from the Darakh family can command the Wraiths.

“Father?” Valen asks in obvious confusion.

“Has been made aware,” Nox says with a sigh.

“And where the hell is he? The Bestia will destroy this world! They will obliterate it without a second thought if left unchecked. Mother will be devastated!” Nox shakes his head, swallowing as he looks at Creed and then at me.

“A lot has happened since you were lost, brother,” Nox whispers, making Valen frown. The reminder of Archer's death is like an arrow in my heart, the hot pain tears through me and makes Nox grunt and pale, no doubt sensing my pain. “I’ll explain it all to you, but for now, we need to prepare the castle for war. The Seniozem and their army will be here in a matter of days and will obliterate any Ranger or Hunter that doesn't side with their corrupt beliefs.”

“What?” Meyer gasps, making four sets of eyes dart to her in surprise. Shit, I forgot she was here. “The Seniozem is going to attack the castle?”



Meyer

Is it possible for a brain to implode from so much information combined with so many unanswered questions at the same time? Because I'm pretty sure that's where I'm at. The word *Demon* keeps rolling through my mind, and I start to feel sick. Could I really be a Demon? No, nope, I can't think about that right now, I'm going to throw up if I do. Thankfully, my head doesn't feel like it has a pulse anymore, which is allowing me to keep up with the brothers as they talk. Brothers... fucking brothers! I knew Valen was acting weird, but I never would've guessed he was a Regalis brother.

Wait, no, that's not right. What did he say the king of Hell's last name was? Darick... Darren? Shit, I need some sleep so I can try to figure everything out. I'm stuck between wanting to run out of this castle as fast as possible and being too tired to go anywhere. When Razar first threw me over his shoulder, I was consumed with fear. Yet as I stand here watching the brothers argue, my fear dissipates, and I'm left with an empty feeling of loneliness.

Who the hell do I trust? Can I keep trusting Valen, knowing that he purposely kept information from me? I glance at Creed, who is staring at me with what I can only describe as puppy dog eyes—his wordless plea for me to allow him to explain himself heavy in the air. But I'm not sure how much that will help.

Let's say I believe everything the guys are saying... which honestly is pretty easy, considering I have seen firsthand what the Seniorems have done with humans. Let's say that they are the good guys here and are trying to

help... But the problem is that they were still planning on using me. They let me believe everything the Seniorems were saying was true and planned on using my blood to break into the church. They weren't even going to fucking ask for it! I bet Lennox had already planned on tying me up and forcing me to do what he needed. And if what Razar said was true, he didn't care that I might have died in the process.

That thought alone makes me wince, my throat constricting from the sharp pain in my heart. I shouldn't feel this way... I hate Nox! I hate him so fucking much. So why does it hurt so damn badly that he was willing to sacrifice me to get what he wants? Looking at Valen, I suppose I can see why he wanted to. If I had a brother, how far would I go to keep him safe?

Why hadn't they just talked to me? Hell! I asked Lennox last week if Demons were all bad, and he said *YES!* That would have been the prime opportunity to tell me what the hell was going on, yet he continued to lie, to let me believe he only had my safety in mind. That I had honestly believed. I knew Nox didn't like me, but I actually thought he wanted me safe. Now that I know he only saved me for a greater purpose... it stings like hell.

I glare at Creed, still pissed that he fucked me, stole my blood, then told Lennox about 'bedding' me. That's such a dick move! There is so much more going on here than whether I believe they are trying to help the Hunters. Good people can still do bad things. Without a doubt, the Regalis brothers have broken what little trust I had in them, no matter their good intentions. Ironically, the only brother who hasn't lied to me is the one who is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room, probably planning my death as his brothers argue around us. He's the one who told me I was being used and that I needed to leave.

I let my attention fall on Razar Regalis, meeting his eyes and refusing to look away when his narrow on me. His wild black hair is a mess around his shoulders, looking tousled, yet somehow still styled... like some kind of model in a magazine. His sharp features are almost too harsh, his cheekbones and jawline so defined that it looks like Michelangelo carved the Demon from stone, his beautiful appearance starkly contradicting his dark soul. The very air around him crackles with barely controlled rage, and I have the overwhelming urge to reach out and try to calm him. Thank god for impulse control, or Razar would probably cut off my hand with one of those blades he has strapped to his chest.

"I'll explain it all to you, but for now, we need to prepare the castle for

war. The Seniorems and their army will be here in a matter of days and will obliterate any Ranger or Hunter that doesn't side with their corrupt beliefs." Lennox's voice growls, cutting through my thoughts like a blade.

"What?" I gasp, then press myself against the wall as four sets of eyes dart to me, the different shades of green almost eerie as I look at them. "The Seniorems are going to attack the castle?" I ask, my mind finally latching onto something that doesn't make me want to throw up or bitch slap one of the men next to me. Lennox is the first to recover from my outburst, and he nods, his cautious eyes on me, flicking up and down my body like he's trying to assess if I'm a flight risk or not. I totally am, but I'm not going anywhere until one of the four jackasses starts coughing up some more answers. So he has nothing to worry about just yet.

"Yes. We just took out two of the six main Seniorems leaders who have been working to push the Umbra units away from hunting Bestia and Therion and move in the direction of Demon capture and magic removal," Nox says, shocking the hell out of me with the information. I'm not going to lie; I was prepared to fight him for my answers, but crazily enough, Nox is providing them on his own. Almost like a warning bell, my suspicions rise, and I don't know if I should trust his words. It would be stupid to trust him after everything, right?

"So they are going to attack? But it's their own castle," I point out hesitantly.

"It's no longer their castle. It's mine. And they can try to attack, but they won't get it back," Nox says, cocky as ever and making me roll my eyes. Yeah, there's the Nox I know and hate.

"Nox, they have a fucking army, plus Wraiths helping them!" Creed clips out, apparently not agreeing with Nox's words. "We have days to get untrained Rangers to Hunter level and pray Father can send help before it is too late. And even if we manage to win over the allegiance of every single Ranger and Hunter, we will be outmatched four to one. Don't be so delusional as to believe we can hold them off ourselves."

"The Umbra Hunters are divided?" Valen asks in shock, shaking his head as he steps around Creed and moves closer to me. I take a step to the side and shake my head at him, making Valen pause a few feet from me, his lips thinning in disapproval. But fuck that, he's the one that just blew my fucking mind here. I deserve a little time to process everything.

"Yeah, you were right when you went to Father about the Rifts. They

were man-made and were being used to lure Bestia and Therion through them. But the Hunters were looking for a bigger target,” Nox says with a sneer. Valen swallows and nods.

“They wanted a Demon,” Valen mutters, nose wrinkling as his eyes slowly go unfocused. “But they got one. They had me, so why didn't they stop? You’re saying it got worse after I was taken?” Valen asks, and Creed nods.

“We believe they are looking for someone or something with more magic. I’m assuming it has to do with the desire for more magic, but Nox over here decided to cut Axford's head off before Raz could question him,” Creed says with a glower in Lennox’s direction.

“More magic than me?” Valen says with a surprised laugh. “Who? Father is the only one with more magic, and he wouldn't be stupid enough to get caught,” Valen admits, cheeks pinking as he looks at his feet. “Well. Maybe Jesthren, but he wouldn't leave hell even if it meant he would get the crown.”

“Who is Jesthren?” I ask, wanting to know who has as much magic as Valen and the King of Hell.

“Our brother,” Valen says, his eyes still unfocused as he stares at the floor. He has his body positioned between me and Creed, and I can't stop the small burst of warmth that rushes through me. Even with me mad and refusing to allow him to come near, he’s trying to keep me safe. He’s still keeping himself between me and the others in this room even as he tries to piece together everything that has happened since he was kidnapped.

“There’s another one of you?” I ask in exasperation. Jesus, help me now. The world cannot handle another Demon brother. Valen nods, and Nox cracks a smile when he sees my disgust.

“Don’t worry, Little Demon. Jesthren would probably help you kick me in the balls if you asked. My oldest brother is not my biggest fan,” he sneers, eyes darkening and hands balling into fists at his side.

“Huh, maybe there is one of you I might actually like then,” I mutter, earning four angry growls.

“Meyer and I need some sleep,” Valen cuts in, sighing as he takes another step toward me. “Return her friend to her, and we can reconvene tomorrow after we have calmed down.”

“I’m not staying in this castle,” I protest, making Creed pout a little and Nox roll his eyes.

“Of course you're going to make this difficult,” he snarls, and I glare at

him.

“Fuck you!”

Nox narrows his eyes on me and takes a step closer. Thankfully, the bed is between us, giving me a false sense of security. “Stop begging for it. It makes you sound desperate,” he sneers, lips pulled back as he gives me a disgusted look.

“Lennox!” Creed and Valen both shout as my fingers twitch for my empty knife holder. Damn! I need to find a few blades so I can stab the bitch!

“Lemon Drop, why don't you take my room and—”

“No!” Valen and I shout at the same time.

“By yourself... I meant by yourself,” Creed says with a sad sigh. “I’m the only one of us with a bathtub in their room,” he whispers. When I perk up at the mention of a bath, I swear I see Creed's lips twitch with the smallest of smiles.

“All by myself? No creepers lingering in the shadows?” I ask, glaring at Nox and then Razar.

“Of course,” Creed reassures me.

“No,” Valen grinds out again, but Creed only shoulders him out of the way and holds a hand out to me.

“Like freaking hell, Credence. How will we know if she runs off if no one is watching her?” Nox snaps. Creed and I ignore him, which only enrages Nox more and he starts blustering about me needing a chaperone.

“I promise I’ll keep them away,” Creed whispers as Razar moves closer to Nox, his angry gaze on me. Valen snarls something I can’t understand to Creed before standing next to him and looking at me with his hand outstretched, too. I stand there, blinking at the four of them, probably looking like an idiot as I try to figure out what to do next.

I really want a bath, and I’m super tired, so the urge to take Creed up on his offer is strong. But I also don't trust him further than I can throw him, and would rather have Valen around if I had to pick between the four brothers. My eyes move from Creed and Valen, then to the pissed-off and angry duo behind them who are both glaring at me with their arms crossed over their broad chest.

Hmm, I kinda want to stab them still. The frustration and anger they stir in me bring up feelings I really shouldn't have, all things considered. But, if I had to choose between taking a bath and stabbing someone, the bath would win. A small meow catches my attention, and I look down as Milo rubs up

against my legs, his loud purring soothing my frazzled nerves.

I smile down at him and do the only smart thing I have done in the last couple of days. Bending down, I grab my cat and then stride past Valen and Creed, leaving the room before any of the guys can say anything else. It takes me a moment to get my bearings since I have never been to Razar's room before, but quickly figure out where I am in the Ranger barracks and move down the hall to where Creed's room is.

“Mi Sol!” Valen shouts, the first one out the door. I look over my shoulder and inwardly cringe at the determination in his eyes. He looks like he's ready to go to battle with that fierce expression on his face. Lennox is only a step behind, with Creed leaving Razar to trail after everyone, his hood back in place, hiding his beautiful features.

“No. I’m not doing this right now. I'm taking a bath and sleeping. I'm so past caring about anything that I don't even care if Nox stabs me in the back or Razar suffocates me with a pillow,” I mutter dramatically.

“Duly noted,” Razar rasps before his hand snaps out, catching the fist Creed tries to launch at his face. Razar *tsks* under his breath, and Creed curses, yanking his hand away from Razar to follow us once again.

I pick up my steps, get to Creed's door, and shove it open before whirling on the four men who have caught up to me faster than I thought they would. “Anyone who steps a single toe in this room tonight is getting their balls cut off,” I hiss, meeting each of their eyes with mine, making sure they know I need a moment to myself.

Nox is already shaking his head, and Valen looks like I have kicked a damn puppy. Creed won't meet my eye, and Razar is staring at Milo, who I have cradled in my arms. I tighten my grip on my little orange friend, turning away from him while shaking my head. “Milo is mine!” I snarl at Razar. Stepping back into Creed's room, I slam the door in their faces, and for the first time since entering this castle, I relax a little, hugging Milo to me as my arms tremble. The adrenaline from everything I just overheard is slowly bleeding from me until I feel like a hollow shell.

Closing my eyes, I keep my back pressed against the wooden door and slowly sink until I’m sitting on the floor. Milo purrs, his bright blue eyes watching me as I press my cheek to his tiny head.

“I missed you, buddy,” I whisper as I tune out the angry voices outside the door. They can wait... Then maybe with a bit of sleep and time, I can attempt to sort out what the hell just happened.



Lennox

“**P**ertinax mulier!” I growl, running my hands through my long hair and yanking at the strands, the small bite of pain helping clear the lust and anger that threatens to overwhelm me. That girl is the most stubborn, hard-headed woman I have ever met. I simultaneously want to wring her neck and kiss her until she finally gives in to me. The need for her submission is like a physical itch. The thought of her letting go, of her curvy, soft body melting into me, makes my cock throb and swell in my pants.

I almost groan when I remember the fiery anger that lit her beautiful eyes when I grabbed her, pressed her to the wall and pinned her there. Molding her body to mine like I’ve been longing to since that kiss outside the wall.

She thinks her anger and hatred will keep me from her, but little does she know it will only encourage me more. It’s like a damn shot to the groin when I see my Little Demon fight back. The way she stays strong, even though she is heavily outmatched? At first, it annoyed me, but quickly became endearing, and now I’m obsessed with the little spitfire on the other side of the door.

I want her to fight me. I need her to have the strength to go head-to-head with me. It gives me something to look forward to, something to rely on. I don’t want her love; I know it’s something I’ll never deserve... but I crave her hate. The sudden urge to break down the door and demand that the frustrating woman inside listen to me is strong, and my hands shake with the effort it takes to hold myself back.

“That is an understatement,” Valen says darkly, glaring at the closed door

like it personally offended him. “Is she always like this?” he asks. The first flicker of worry and maybe excitement fills his pale eyes, and it’s enough to calm the raging beast inside me. My lips slowly curl up as I sigh and nod.

“Worse, actually. I’m surprised we all left with our balls intact. She’s remarkably good at crushing them, even with her lack of strength,” I say with a low chuckle.

Razar grumbles something under his breath that I don’t catch, and I choose to ignore him, not liking how he somehow got to Meyer before I had. Had he hurt her when they were on their own? Had he said something that would have scared her off even more before I arrived? It looked like he and Valen might have been fighting before Creed and I showed up.

Shit! I’m going to have to pull him back into my office and interrogate him, then lay down some ground rules where Meyer is concerned.

I have no doubt he’s going to try to run her off or kill her in order to avoid a messy situation with the four of us and her. It’s not like I’m blind, I have seen Creed and Meyer. They are close, or rather, they were before everything happened. And the way Valen looks at her like she holds the damn world in her palm has me clenching my teeth so hard I’m worried I’m going to crack a molar.

Valen frowns at the door, then looks at me with the smallest of smiles quirking his lips, reminding me of all our talks and time together when we were kids. It’s been years since I last saw him, and suddenly, everything comes rushing back.

“I’m glad you’re back. I... We were worried,” I offer, stuttering over my words like an idiot as Valen’s smile grows.

“Yeah? I’m fairly sure I had it under control,” Valen says coolly, making the light feeling inside me drop, and I scowl at him.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Valen only laughs and nods before moving over and wrapping his arms around me, squeezing me tight in a weird hug that is somehow okay. I hug him back seconds before a heavy weight slams into our sides, and Creed’s arms wrap around us like a damn monkey.

“Fucking hell, Credence! Let go!” I snarl. His enormous arm yanks on my hair, and I swear he’s putting his entire weight on the two of us. Valen laughs in amusement as Creed shakes his head.

“Don’t ruin this for me, Noxy boy. I need a hug, and the person I want to hold won’t even look at me,” he grumbles. Valen looks over his shoulder at

Razar, who immediately shakes his head and pivots on his heel, practically running away from the weird bro hug we have going on right now. Sighing, I let the grown-ass man hug us for a moment longer before I reach up and facepalm him, shoving him off us. “Rude!” Creed complains when he falls to the ground with a loud thump, but he quickly jumps back to his feet to give Valen another hug.

I smile a little, glad to see some of the light come back to Creed's eyes. Creed and Valen have always been super close, and it destroyed Creed when he found out Valen had been taken. Razar and Archer had to physically restrain him from crossing the veil to find Valen until we could find a general location on his last magic signature. That had taken almost three years.

Whoever helped Axford take Valen had covered their tracks well. If it hadn't been for Razar coming to North America looking for a legion of Beastia that crossed and were rumored to have killed an entire town, we would have never picked up on the traces of Valen's magic that the Hunters were using.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Valen mutters to Creed, answering whatever question I missed. Creed sighs and lets Valen go, running a hand through his curly hair, making the already frizzy curls stand even more on end.

“So, what did you do to piss her off? From the way she's been bad-mouthing you...” Valen trails off with a dark look, and I glare at him. Out of all my brothers, Valen and Jesthren are the only ones who ever push back against me. Valen only when he thinks I'm being stupid and Jesthren because he hates that I was born.

“What did she say about me?” I growl, leaning against the wall across from her door, trying to catch any noises coming from her side of the door. Valen laughs and moves to stand next to me, leaning a hip on the wall and crossing his arms over his chest as he too, stares at the closed door.

“I'm not telling you anything she said,” Valen says, not bragging or boasting over the fact that he knows more than I do, simply stating that he won't betray Meyer's confidence, which royally pisses me off. I open my mouth to protest, and Valen shakes his head, not looking at me once. “Nope, don't pull that crap with me, Garthelaun,” he scolds, making me wince at the sound of my birth name. I always hated it, and my mother is the only one who actually uses it. I much prefer one of my other Demonic names, though Nox is quickly becoming my new favorite name. I think I may keep it.

“I willingly gave up my crown. I have no kingdom left to rule over. You

are the heir of Versipellis, and I'm the son of Orcus. You have my loyalty, but you do not own my free agency. As long as Meyer's words and actions do not threaten Versipellis or its people, I'm not required to tell you a word," Valen murmurs, his voice holding that calming tone that soothes me, even when his words anger me. But dammit, he's right. I have no power or even a good reason to demand for him to tell me what Meyer said. Only a burning rage and jealousy I feel when I see him stare softly at her. Or how she didn't flinch that last time he drew near her.

Creed laughs softly as he walks to my other side, leaning against the wall with us, and I note how fucking pathetic we all are. Three Princes of Hell. All of which hold more magic and skill than most Demons ever could dream of... are pining after a damn girl who currently hates us all while glaring at a door she put between us. Damn, we are pathetic, but I can't bring myself to care. After thirty-six years, I finally found a woman who holds my attention for longer than a day, and I refuse to care how stupid I look sitting outside her door, waiting for her to give me a sliver of her attention.

"Nox has been his usual charming self bossing Lemon Drop around, calling her names, throwing her into a world she knows nothing about while refusing to help her," Creed starts to list off, and I turn my head to the side, glaring at him as Valen tenses at my other side.

"Shut up," I grind out. "If he doesn't want to share with us, then we don't have to share with him. And my name is Lennox, Valen. Or Nox if you'd rather. Only Mother can call me by my birth name, and it's only ever when I'm in trouble."

"Lemon Drop?" Valen questions, shooting me a bemused look before tilting his head as if contemplating Creed's words. "I suppose she does have a soft citrus scent about her," he muses.

"Yeah, plus her name is Meyer... like a Meyer Lemon. Plus, Meyer's sweet, but she can be sour as fuck if you piss her off," Creed grumbles, sulking a little as Valen nods.

"Yes, I'm becoming aware of that." Soft footsteps coming down the hall catch my attention, and I look around Creed to see Elaine and her son, Ranger Drakos, walking our way, the latter glaring at us like he would like to stab us all with the kalis he has strapped at his hip.

"Boys," Elaine greets, then frowns when she sees Valen. "Oh, a new face?" she says hesitantly.

"Hello," Valen says, voice deep and unwavering as he dips his head in a

small bow, only flicking his pale eyes to meet Elaine's for a moment before resuming his stare down with the door in front of us. Sighing, I stand up and nod at Valen.

"Elaine, this is my brother, Valen," I wave at him, then look to Valen and nod to Elaine. "This is Elaine. The woman who helped us take over the castle and who I'm hoping to leave in charge once we have things back in order." Elaine laughs, the soft sound like a delicate bell drifting through the air.

"I'm afraid that will never happen," she says with a grin, nodding to Valen, who still hasn't spared her another look. "But... your brother? The one you thought was being held somewhere in the castle?"

"Yes, though it turns out he was in the old church," I growl, my anger turning at the mention of the old bastard who started all this bullshit.

"The church? No, that can't be right. I have been in there. There were only ever the humans they were using," Elaine whispers in confusion.

"I was in a sarcophagus," Valen rasps, making my head snap to look at him so fucking fast that my neck hurts. A sarcophagus? What the actual fuck?! They had him locked in a stone prison this entire time? Four fucking years locked in a damn stone box!

Elaine's face pales as she stares at Valen, pity and sadness rolling off her in waves, causing me to pull back my magic so I don't feel her pain. I could manipulate it, lessen it so she didn't feel so much guilt. But once I mess with her emotions, I would have to ride out the emotion myself, taxing me even more, and at the moment, I'm attempting to control Meyer's pain level since she didn't allow me to heal her completely before pulling away from me.

"I-I'm so sorry," she whispers, her small hands clasped tight in front of her elegant ivory velvet dress.

"Whatever for?" Valen asks, his voice steady and calm, making me wish I had half the composure my brother does. How the hell is he okay right now? "Were you the one to lock me in there?" he asks simply, finally turning to Elaine, giving her a once over as she shakes her head. Valen nods and turns his attention to Ranger Drakos, who has remained silent at her side, glaring at us all.

"No, of course not," Elaine whispers when Valen doesn't respond. "But I am sorry all the same. As a Hunter, what happened to you was unforgivable. I hope you will eventually forgive us."

"There is nothing to forgive. The man who did this is dead, and the men who helped will soon meet the same fate," Valen murmurs, eyes narrowing

on Ranger Drakos as he shakes his head. “Wrong eye color,” he grumbles to himself, making the four other people in the hall give him quizzical looks. Valen glances up a moment before the sound of shouting and cursing meets my ears, an angry male voice rings down the cold hallways of the barracks as more footsteps draw closer. My eyes widen in surprise, then apprehension, when I see Razar stalking toward us, a young man's neck clasped in his hand as he glowers down at him.

“Shit!” Creed shouts, darting around Elaine to grab Ranger Drakos just as recognition flickers in his dark eyes. The boy's hand immediately goes to the kalis strapped to his side, and the swell of protectiveness and bone-deep fear sweeps over me as I watch the boy take in Razar and Ranger Jennings, and suddenly things start to make a little more sense.

Oh shit... how did I not see that before? No wonder Elaine's son is so pissed at us. We locked up the man he loves and chased after Meyer, whom I know he holds as a dear friend.

“Don't,” Creed warns, arms encircling the smaller Hunter as Razar drags Ranger Jennings toward us. Elaine's son struggles against Creed's arms, but he's no match for my brother's strength, which is good since it looks like he's about to murder us all in order to get to the man Razar is holding by the neck.

“Razar Regalis! You let that boy go immediately!” Elaine scolds side-eyeing Creed, silently warning him not to hurt her son before bunching up the fabric of her long dress in her fists as she spins on her heel to face the two men. Razar has Ranger Jennings by the scruff of the neck, and Ranger Jennings is doing everything he can to twist and turn out of Razar's grip, to no avail.

“Let him go!” Elaine's son yells just as Creed slaps a hand over his mouth and then leans down, whispering something to the boy that makes him stop struggling a little. Ranger Jennings looks up when he hears his friend, his eyes widening when he sees Ranger Drakos being restrained by Creed, and he starts yelling, making me groan, rubbing at my head and the headache I'm trying to suppress. How did this become my life?

I watch through slitted eyes as Valen studies Ranger Jennings and then nods. “Razar, I need that boy, please,” he says softly. Despite the loud commotion, everyone stops yelling and turns toward Valen as he steps around me and moves closer to Razar.

“Like hell, fairy boy! Don't you dare touch him. And you,” Ranger Drakos snarls, pointing at Razar. “Let him go right now. I swear to God if

you hurt him, I'll—"

"Theodore Drakos, that is enough! Razar, please release Jordan, and let's all talk about this," Elaine demands, her voice cracking out like a whip and impressing the hell out of me. I smile a little, glad that I'm not the one having to stop everyone this time. Elaine has an authority about her that cannot be denied, all while having a soft, nurturing side that I know is important to counteract the rough world the Hunters live in. She is my one and only choice at the moment to leave in charge once our presence is no longer necessary.

"No," Razar growls out, dragging Jordan closer to Creed's door before shoving him against the wood. "You go in there and tell her she has ten minutes to release the small orange feline," Razar says in a deep, gravelly voice, his fingers tightening on Jordan's neck as he speaks. Jordan's eyes fly wide in surprise, and he nods as he holds up his hands.

"Uh... yeah, sure! But only if Umbra Regalis lets Theo go," Jordan demands. Creed immediately releases Theo, who tries to go to Jordan, but stops when Jordan shakes his head and glares at him. I watch in puzzled fascination. Why in the seven rings of hell would the boy want to save Elaine's son but not forgive him? Humans are so weird.

Creed sighs and walks over to me, rolling his eyes and looking more than a little upset. "Why didn't I think of that? It would have gotten me massive bonus points if I had brought Ranger Jennings up here myself," Creed grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest while sulking next to me.

"You think she will open the door to him?" I ask in confusion.

"Without a doubt," Creed whispers back, eyes locked on the Ranger, who nods at Razar, standing tall and earning a little respect from me as he stares down my feral brother. Few men can look Razar in the eye without wilting, and this boy is holding his own rather well.

"Who am I talking to exactly?" Jordan asks as Valen steps closer, eyeing the boy with interest.

"I expected him to be older. I'm not sure I'm okay with this friendship. Though I doubt Mi Sol will care about what I think," he murmurs to himself, and I look at Creed, concern washing through me. Valen seems lost in his own world, talking to himself rather than the people in the room. Creed nods like he, too, has picked up on Valen's odd behavior, and I make a mental note to tell Father and Mother about it. I'm unsure what Valen was subjected to over the last four years in captivity, but I can already tell it has left its mark on him.

He seems so lost...

“What?” Jordan asks in confusion.

“This is the Jordan that Meyer was talking about, yes?” Valen asks, making Jordan and Elaine’s son tense in an instant.

“Meyer?” Ranger Drakos whispers, looking at Valen, and then the door Jordan is pressed against.

“Meyer’s in there? What the fuck?! Lead with that next time!” Jordan snarls, elbowing Razar hard enough so he finally releases the boy's neck as he starts pounding on the door.

“Go away! I already told you I would castrate the next man who tries to come into this room!” I hear my Little Demon growl from inside the room. Her words are muffled like she's in bed or maybe in the bath, and I have to stifle the smile her anger brings to my lips.

Elaine’s son’s shoulders sag in relief when he hears Meyer as he rushes the door, banging on it with Jordan. “Angry Girl?” Ranger Drakos yells, slamming his fists against the wood door with a force I didn't know he possessed.

“Meyer! Meyer, open the door!” Jordan shouts alongside him. There is a brief moment between the shouting, and I hear the small patter of tiny feet before the door is wrenched open, exposing my Little Demon. Her blonde hair doesn't appear as ruffled, and it looks like she's changed out of her dirty clothes and is wearing a baggy shirt that reaches down to her knees. Creed’s eyes practically bug out of his head when he sees his shirt on my girl, and I shoulder-check him out of the way as the two Rangers launch themselves at Meyer.

“Jordan! Theo!” Meyer screams, and I rush forward as the force of the two idiots' weight takes them all off their feet, and they crash into Creed's room. A growl rumbles from my chest as I sidestep Elaine, who sighs with a happy smile, but Valen beats me to them, snagging Theo and Jordan by the backs of their shirts and tossing them off her like they are small toys.

“Hey!” both boys shout simultaneously as Meyer laughs and sits up, grinning at the two Rangers.

“It's okay, Valen,” she whispers, glancing up at my brother with a softness that I’ve never seen, making me grit my teeth in annoyance.

“Get the fuck out of this room. NOW!” I grind out, glaring at the two young boys, watching as their happy faces fall into annoyance.

“Nox, get out! All of you but these two, out!” Meyer shouts, crawling to

her feet while shoving at Valen's chest. Valen wraps an arm around her, his hand moving to the side of her neck where his fingers linger for a moment, and then he nods.

“Of course, Mi Sol,” he whispers, kissing the crown of her head, his lips barely pressing there, so I doubt Meyer even notices what he’s doing.

What the ever-loving fuck is going on right now?

“Theo can leave too,” Jordan snaps, standing with a huff and brushing off his clothes as he strides over to where Meyer stands in Valen's arms.

“No!” Theo shouts back, his shoulders drooping as he stands and rushes over to Meyer and Jordan. “Please, just let me explain!” Theo reaches out to take Meyer from Valen's grip, but his hand freezes mid-air when Valen's eyes flick up fast, locking on the Ranger's fingers and darkening in an instant. Luckily, the boy isn't stupid, and he lets his hand drop, eyeing my brother cautiously before looking back at Meyer, who surprisingly doesn't look that mad.

Huh, it looks like Creed was right. My Little Demon needed her friends, and suddenly, she's a much calmer individual.

“No!” Jordan shouts, shoving Theo in the chest and making him stumble back a few steps. “Get your lying ass out of here.”

“Jordan!” Theo splutters, face reddening in anger as Jordan keeps advancing on him, shoving him a second, then a third time.

“Out!”

“Jordan?” Meyer starts pushing herself from Valen's arms, making him glower in response as he reluctantly lets her go.

“No! He lied! He was helping those Demons—” he stops shoving Theo long enough to point at us, and Creed chuckles in amusement when Meyer rolls her eyes— “the whole damn time and kept it from us! How the hell are we supposed to forgive that? To ever trust his lying ass again?”

“I didn't know until the night before!” Theo shouts, stepping forward, planting his hands on Jordan's chest, and shoving him back. Jordan's head whips away from Meyer in Theo's direction, and then he's flying through the air, tackling Theo and sending them to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

“Wait! Stop!” Meyer screams at them, running over to grab Jordan and yank him from Theo, but only managing to trip over their kicking legs and fall on top of them. “That's it! Now I'm kicking both your asses!” she yells, grabbing Jordan around the neck with her small arms and winding her legs around Theo's.

“How the hell did we end up here?” Creed muses as he pokes his head around the door frame, glowering into the room, his eyes darting around the small area, looking for something. When Theo's arms wrap around Meyer's middle, I step forward, not liking his hands on her, but Elaine steps in my path and gently pushes me and Valen from the room.

“Elaine,” I growl as Valen glares down at her. Elaine only shakes her head, grinning widely as she reaches behind her and shuts Creed's door, closing us out from the fight now happening on the other side of the door.

“No, Lennox. Let the children figure this out on their own,” she whispers and I grimace. Children? I suppose the boys are still young, but Meyer is twenty-six years old. Granted, I'm much older than her, but I would hardly classify Meyer as a child.

“If she's hurt,” Valen starts, but stops when the shouting escalates. Creed rushes for the handle of the door as Jordan coughs, then grunts in pain.

“Meyer, why do you always go for the balls!?”

“OW! Titty-twisters are fucking cheating, Angry Girl!”

Elaine covers the door handle with her hand before Creed can open it and laughs. “I think that girl can handle those two just fine,” she reassures us. Razar only narrows his eyes on her before spinning and leaving. A few seconds later, his door slamming shut echoes through the corridors. “Now that that's settled,” Elaine says, her calm voice holding a note of worry. “We have a war to prepare for, and I need more answers and resources.”



Meyer

“No,” I hiss, pointing my finger at Jordan when he moves to stand up, his furious eyes burning with rage as he stares at Theo, who is sitting on the bed across the room from him. Jordan scowls and sits back down as Theo huffs, his shoulders rolled in as he holds a cold washcloth to his swollen eye.

“This is ridiculous,” Theo complains, finally tearing his sad brown eyes from Jordan to look at me. “Can’t we talk without him here?”

“Get fucked, Theo! I’m not leaving Meyer with your lying ass! You’ll only stab her in the back once she’s not paying attention!” Jordan yells, making my head pound in response.

“I didn’t know until the night before!” Theo shouts back, leaning forward on the bed, not standing since I already threw a pillow at him the last time he did, but pushing his limits.

“And you should have told us the moment you knew! How could you pick their side?” Jordan yells, tossing his hands in the air as he glares at his friend.

“Because what they said made sense, and they have the evidence to back it up! Plus my mother is helping them! Do you really think I could go against my mom like that? Do you think Mom would really lead me to do something wrong?” Theo shouts back before throwing his wet washcloth across the room, the soggy cloth smacks Jordan’s cheek with a wet *splat*. Jordan flinches when the cold fabric hits his face, then slowly reaches up, pulling it off as he glares death at Theo.

“Theo!” I sigh in exasperation before reaching down and grabbing Milo, who is rubbing up against my legs, purring as he winds himself around my feet. “Here,” I mutter, depositing Milo in Theo’s hands, hoping the purring might calm him down a little. I would have given him to Jordan, since I think he’s more upset than Theo, but I don’t want to risk my cat becoming a weapon in this fight and being tossed in the air.

“Who’s this?” Theo asks in surprise, his furrowed brow softening a touch as Milo stretches on his lap before making biscuits on Theo’s thigh, finding a comfy spot to lie down.

“Milo,” I say with a happy smile. I may still be confused as all get-out, and I’m not too happy about Theo not warning us beforehand about Lennox and his mom, but if what Theo is saying is true, I’m not as mad at him as I was before. If it were my mom, I would have a hard time not taking her side, so it makes sense, even if it does suck.

“The cat you were worried about back in Idaho?” Theo questions, and I nod, petting Milo as he curls up on Theo’s lap. “How did you get him up here?”

“I didn’t. Valen and I came back to save Jordan,” I mutter, thumbing over my shoulder at the man in question, who is now glaring at me for being cordial with Theo. “And Razar kidnapped and brought me to his room, where I found Milo,” I explain, scratching behind Milo’s little orange ear before I turn on Jordan and place my hands on my hips, meeting his glare head-on. “What?”

“What? What! Meyer, he fucking betrayed us!” Jordan yells, pointing at Theo as he stands up from the bed, making me narrow my eyes on him. I swear if those two start tackling and punching each other again, I’m going to lose my shit.

“Yeah. He did. He had to choose, and he chose his mother,” I say with a shrug. “I don’t like it. I’m going to have a hard time trusting him in the future, but I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing if I were in his shoes.”

“Yeah... that’s the problem. I thought Elaine trusted me, too. I thought...” Jordan’s face has turned red, and he shakes his head. “Guess I was stupid for thinking that, huh?” he sneers, turning his back on me as my eyes widen.

Oh... oh! This has more to do with the fact that Theo and Elaine chose to keep him in the dark rather than the whole Demons taking over the castle. Well, shit. I look at Theo, whose eyes have gone wide as he stands in a rush,

scooping Milo in his hands and dropping him in my outstretched arms as he rushes over to Jordan.

“No! Dude, no! It's not like that. You know Mom thinks of you as a second son!” Theo rasps, reaching out to grab Jordan's shoulders. Jordan jerks away from him, moving closer to me, not looking at Theo even once. “Jordan?” Theo whispers, and the sadness in his voice breaks my heart a little.

“What about the Regalis brothers?” Jordan asks me, ignoring Theo as he reaches out to pet Milo.

“What about them?” I ask in a tight voice.

“I need to be brought up to speed on everything. What's the story here? Why should we believe them over what we have been taught our entire lives? They are literally our enemies,” Jordan points out, and I sigh, my brain hurting as I try to come up with some answers. I may know more than Jordan, but I still don't know the full story, and I'm definitely not sold on trusting them. Thankfully, Theo steps in for me, answering some of the questions.

“Lennox and his brother overtook the Regalis brothers in that fight at the base of the mountain. Axford had summoned them to come to the castle in hopes of swaying them to his side of things. You know, the whole human sacrifice bullshit and trying to trap Demons,” Theo starts, and suddenly, Jordan's and my interests are piqued.

“They were really doing that?” Jordan asks in a rough voice, disgust clear on his face. “I mean, using humans?” Theo and I both nod.

“Yeah. I saw a few of them,” I tell him, letting him know this isn't something Theo is lying about.

“That's not good,” Jordan mutters, and Theo nods his head like a bobblehead doll.

“Yeah, anyways, Mom has been trying to figure out how to fix everything. I knew she and Dad had been having some epic fights. But I didn't know until the other night that Dad was helping Senior Axford and was willingly using the humans to trap Demons,” Theo whispers, and my eyes widen when Theo mentions Senior Drakos.

Oh, shit! Theo's dad is dead! I mean, he was a complete asshat, but I haven't even thought about what Theo might be going through. Jordan's sharp inhale and tense shoulders tell me he's just remembered the same, and I watch as some of the anger in his eyes melts into concern as he stares at our friend.

“But I didn't realize how bad it actually was. The Seniorems started using humans the same year the breeding rings were set up,” Theo admits, and Jordan curses under his breath. “Mom says she's been trying to figure out a way to stop the sacrifices, to restore the original crest and purpose of the Umbra Hunters. Her dad was the head of the North American Seniorems before his death and still had several of the old history books. She knew the Hunters were being led astray from our original purpose.”

“Does she still have the books?” I ask in wonderment, not really wanting to stop Theo since this is the most information I have gotten in a single conversation about the Hunters and our history, but I need to know if these books are still around. Theo frowns and shrugs.

“Uh, I'm not sure. But I can ask,” he offers, and I nod.

“So, how did the whole Demons taking over the castle come about?” Jordan asks hesitantly, his need to know the truth overtaking his anger toward Theo at the moment.

“Right!” Theo says, snapping his fingers and pointing at Jordan as he nods. “So Mom was sent down to assist the Hunters during the attack at the base of the mountain, and when she got there, she saw Lennox and Razar in their Demon forms. The three Hunters she was with immediately attacked and were killed by Razar. Then Razar went to attack her, but Creed stopped him, saving her life.”

“Why'd he do that?” Jordan asks suspiciously.

“She never attacked. Mom knew the Demons created Umbra Hunters to protect our world from the creatures that live on the Demonic side of the Veil. That's what is attacking us, not the Demons themselves, but their monsters. She's called them Bestia and Therion. So she chose not to attack the Demons when she saw them, which prompted Creed to save her.”

“We're fucking what?!” Jordan shouts, while I blink at Theo in surprise. Demons created Hunters?

“I think I'm going to need a drink for the rest of this conversation,” I admit, setting Milo on Creed's bed, then move to the corner of his room where a dresser and armoire stand. I open and shut a few drawers before opening the wooden doors on the armoire and look inside.

“There's water on the shelf over here,” Theo offers, and I wrinkle my nose.

“Water's not going to cut it,” I grumble, just as my stomach lets out an embarrassingly loud rumble, cramping up from the lack of food.

“Here,” Jordan offers, walking over with a familiar protein bar in hand. I eye him suspiciously, taking the bar from him while looking him up and down. He’s wearing a pair of black pants and a simple blue Regalis shirt, which makes me wonder where the hell he is storing these things.

“Where do you hide these? I swear you're always eating one or offering them to me.” Jordan grins and shrugs, patting his pants pockets.

“I’m a growing boy, I’m always hungry. Plus you never take care of yourself properly, so I keep a few extras with me for emergencies. It's paid off to have a few extras, so I had some snacks while down in the holding cells.” I grin my thanks at him as I pull the wrapper off the bar and shove half of the chocolatey goodness into my mouth, moaning in delight.

“Thanks,” I grumble with a full mouth, making Jordan wrinkle his nose in disgust.

“Okay, back to the story,” he says, looking back at Theo, who nods and then shakes his head.

“I mean, sure. I'll tell you everything I know. We’ll even let you talk to the human Mom saved so you feel more confident in the decision, but I don't have all the information. Mom said it's on a need-to-know basis. I do know that the castle is being prepared for an attack, though.”

“Attack from what?” Jordan asks, and this time, I answer for Theo.

“The Senioreem. They are coming to take back the Castle. I heard Nox telling Valen about it. Oh, and the attack from the Beastia this morning was weird. They are nocturnal creatures and shouldn't have attacked during the day,” I add, polishing off my protein bar and licking my fingers clean, not willing to miss a single crumb. Jordan frowns, and Theo’s brows raise in surprise as he nods.

“Yeah, that makes sense. We never see the Beastia during the day. It’s super rare,” he mutters and looks between us, confused as hell.

“Right. I think we all need to exchange all the information we know, then go from there,” I offer, and Jordan nods, looking over at Theo, who looks like he’s about to jump up and down in excitement from his agreement. “Cool. I need food, drinks, and a blanket. We have exactly thirty minutes to do this before I pass the hell out,” I admit, making Jordan chuckle but nod in agreement.

“Yeah, me too,” he whispers, and I take a moment to study him, the dark rings under his eyes making him look far older than eighteen.

“I’ll go get some food,” Theo offers, and I give him a small smile and

nod.

“I know where Umbra Monroe keeps the liquor,” Jordan says offhandedly, making Theo grin and nod.

“Just don't get caught, or you'll be running extra laps all fucking week!” he crows with a laugh before racing from the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. I'm worried one of the Demons that like to haunt me is about to come in, but the hallway outside is blessedly quiet.

“Keep that door shut until I get back. I still don't trust these fuckers,” Jordan grumbles as he leaves, slamming the door shut behind him.



Meyer

“**M** *i Sol.*”

Valen's voice echoes through my mind as I slowly wake, the sense of his warm arms wrapped around me is keeping my panic at bay as my heavy lids peel open. My eyes feel dry and gritty, and as the warm comfort of sleep slowly fades, harsh reality seeps back into my consciousness. Valen's presence fades, leaving an empty longing in its place.

An odd sense of something watching me makes me do a fast evaluation of myself, ensuring everything is okay. Something heavy stirs at my feet, making me jump a little, and I slowly lift onto my elbows, groaning as pain splinters through my head. Squinting, I brush my hair back from my face and look down at my feet, taking in Theo and Jordan's still forms, sound asleep at the end of Creed's bed and grin.

Theo lets out a small snore as Jordan tightens the arm banded around Theo's waist, tugging him more firmly against his chest, Theo's the small spoon to Jordan's big one. We have formed a tentative truce for the moment. Well, Theo and I have. I think Jordan has already forgiven Theo for what happened; he's more hurt that Elaine and Theo kept such a big secret from him.

After we secured food and drinks last night, the three of us sat down and exchanged information with each other. Jordan had little to offer as far as new information, but Theo had some about how his mom ended up saving Lennox's life, earning a debt from the Demon Prince, which she apparently used to help me out when I first showed up here. When I asked him why she

chose to help me, Theo shrugged and said he didn't know.

I also learned that the reflective-eyed monsters I have seen my whole life—the ones who would stalk and scare but never hurt me—are called Therion, not Bestia, which are the soulless-eyed ones that Razar can shift into. They are the dark creatures of the Demon world even the Demons despise. When the Veil was damaged, the Demons created the Umbra Hunter line with their own blood, elevating a simple human with traits a Demon would have in order to defend the human world from the Monsters.

That information made my head spin. I mean, it makes sense that Demons are the ones who created Umbra Hunters. The similarities in abilities such as strength, speed, and the capacity to heal match Creed, Lennox, and Razar's. Also, the Demon Princes blend almost seamlessly into the Regalis bloodline with dark hair and green eyes. This makes me wonder if Dream Walkers also helped create the Hunters, given the lighter coloring of the DeLuca bloodline.

Something shifts in my peripheral, and I tense as a dark shadow moves closer to the bed, reaching for me, but before I can react, Jordan, who I thought was sound asleep, twists, blade in hand as he sits upright, bringing the blade of his kalis to... Creed's throat.

"What the hell, Creed?!" I shout, shoving myself to sit up fully on the comfy bed, glaring at the man who has his hand outstretched toward me, his amused eyes flicking from Jordan to me as he winks and smiles.

"Hmm, good reflexes. Maybe you're not too bad to keep around after all," Creed murmurs in approval, ignoring my shouts as Theo snorts himself awake, jumping to his feet and whirling on Creed with a dark look.

One moment, Jordan has his knife pressed to Creed's throat, the next, the hilt of the blade is somehow in Creed's hand and he tosses it in the air, letting it spin a few times before catching it effortlessly between two fingers as he shoves Jordan from the bed, making him topple to the ground at Theo's feet with a surprised shout.

"You, however, let an armed assailant sneak into your room undetected and didn't even budge when lover boy released you to attack me," Creed growls disapprovingly at Theo, pointing Jordan's knife at his face and shaking it while telling him off. "I'm going to have to tell Umbra Drakos about this so he can correct that."

Theo bends down, grabs Jordan by the waist of his pants, and yanks him to his feet while looking around the room, ensuring there are no more threats to deal with. "I haven't slept in two fucking days, Umbra Regalis! And I

thought it was safe in this room, or I would never have slept so deeply,” Theo complains, then grunts when Jordan shoulders him out of the way to get to me.

“Leave,” Jordan hisses at Creed with so much venom in his voice it takes me by surprise as he tries and fails to push Creed away from the bed. Creed arches a brow, Jordan’s knife still in hand as he gives the young Hunter a once over. His body barely moves as Jordan shoves him, and it only pisses off Jordan more.

“It’s my room, Ranger Jennings. I believe I should be asking you to leave,” Creed replies calmly before looking back at Theo, ignoring the angry Hunter in front of him. “And I’m assuming that”—he chuckles, eyeing the empty bottle of tequila sitting on the side table near the bed Jordan stole from Umbra Monroe’s room—“is the reason you didn’t wake up when I entered, but it’s no excuse. You should be aware of your surroundings at all times. Even Meyer woke when I came into the room,” Creed praises, and I scowl.

“What do you mean, even Meyer?” I grumble, moving to the edge of the bed and standing next to Jordan, shoving at Creed’s chest. This time, he takes a step back. Jordan scowls at me, then Creed, probably wondering how the hell I managed to move the Demon when he couldn’t, but I know the only reason Creed moved was that he was doing what I wanted and stepped back.

“No offense, Lemon Drop. But you sleep like the dead. Hell, I thought you were dead when you slept in here last...” he trails off and winces as I glower up at him. Really, he’s going to bring up that night?

What a freaking idiot.

“What do you want?” I hiss up at him, my hands fisting at my side as Jordan and Theo step up next to me. Creed eyes the boys and sighs before nodding at the door.

“Out,” he commands, flipping the kalis in his hand so that he’s holding the sharp blade, hilt extended to Jordan, who takes it slowly, eyeing Creed with distrust burning in his green eyes. “Senior Regalis wants all Rangers to report to the training center in twenty minutes. Hit the cafeteria and get some coffee, or you’ll be dragging all morning.”

“What?” Theo asks in confusion.

“Did I stutter?” Creed asks coolly, then nods at his door again. “Out of my room, now. Or I’ll have Senior Regalis and Senior Drakos write you up for insubordination.”

“There is no Senior Drakos,” Theo rasps, swallowing hard and making

my heart crack as I glare up at Creed, who at least has the decency to look guilty.

“Yes, there is. Report to the Center in twenty minutes. The rest of the Bloodlines have already been informed,” Creed says a little softer, his large hand moving to grip the back of his neck as he looks at Theo, a sheen of remorse lit in his eyes. I’m not sure what for, since it was Axford who killed Theo’s dad, not him or his brothers. If you want to be technical, it was Lennox who took out Theo’s dad’s murderer.

“Come on, Meyer,” Jordan mutters, glaring at Theo as he laces our fingers together and tugs me toward the door.

“No. She’s getting dressed first and will meet you there,” Creed says, grabbing my wrist and yanking my hand from Jordan’s. Theo curses, and I glare up at Creed, yanking my wrist from his grip, moving to slap the fucker. Unfortunately, his reflexes are too fast, and he simply catches my wrist when it’s inches from his face, his green eyes calm and collected as he stares down at me, arching a brow when I growl under my breath in frustration.

“Let me go!”

“No,” he says simply before looking over my head to the boys standing there. “Out, or you will be running extra laps.”

“This is bullshit! Why are we even training?” Theo complains, looking at Creed then me, hesitant to leave the room.

“Would you like to fight the Senioriem untrained? Or would you like to stand a fighting chance?” Creed asks, and I sigh in frustration, pulling on my captured wrist but not getting anywhere when Creed tightens his grip on me.

“Who says we will fight them for you?” I ask, lying since we all know the Senioriem is corrupt as fuck, and if they gain control of this castle, things will only get worse. Besides, there is no way in hell I would let Theo and Jordan fight without me, even if their fighting skills far outweigh my own. “This is your war, not ours,” I add. Creed gives me a patronizing look before he releases my wrist, his fingers letting go one by one.

“How in the world is this not your war, Lemon Drop? This is technically an Umbra Hunter problem, and Nox has decided to help despite being counseled against it. And even if this were a Demon war, you would still be involved. You are of both worlds, Meyer. There is no running from that.”

“Meyer will not be fighting. She’s not trained enough for that,” Jordan snarls, stepping up to Creed’s side and glaring death at him. Neither of the boys reacts to Creed’s remark about how I’m of both worlds. I told them last

night that I was a Dream Walker, and Theo immediately figured it out. Turns out Elaine had been teaching him some of the old history that the Seniorems got rid of this whole time. In fact, Theo's knowledge of Demons surpassed my own, but we had to explain it to Jordan. He instantly apologized for all the mean Demon comments he'd said over the last few hours once he realized I was one.

"She will, and you don't have a say. The only ones who have a choice in that fact are the Regalis Senior and Meyer. In fact, you shouldn't even be here arguing with me. Go report to your Senior, Ranger Jennings. Or I'll ensure you won't lay eyes on Meyer for the rest of the week," Creed threatens in a dark voice, stepping subtly in front of me, his protective actions making me roll my eyes. Theo watches Creed's movement with his own skeptical look before glancing at me, silently asking me what I want them to do.

Creed growls in irritation when he sees both Jordan and Theo ignoring him, watching me for my answer, and I nod, letting them know it's fine to go. I may not like Creed very much right now, but I no longer think my life is in danger where these men are concerned. I'm not sure if these men have my best interests at heart, but I know I'm safe, for now.

Theo nods, his eyes flicking to the closed door, brows creased like he's wondering what the hell we are all about to step into when we get to the Training Center, and Jordan grunts, not liking that I'm telling them to leave.

"Come on. I don't want to make a bad impression on my Senior on the first day," Theo mutters with a tired sigh, his long fingers latching around Jordan's wrist as he tugs him away from Creed. Jordan follows reluctantly, but glares at Creed the entire way out of the room until Theo shuts the door.

"I don't think they like me," Creed muses, bringing his hand up to rub at the dark brown scruff covering his jaw, eyeing the closed door with a narrowed-eyed look.

"No shit, Sherlock," I grumble, walking away from Creed to where I laid my clothes out to dry. I'm only wearing one of Creed's shirts, and it's barely long enough to cover my ass. I need to get dressed before I face these guys and try to make sense of what's going to happen now.

After bathing last night, I used the water in the tub to wash my dirty clothes, then left them to dry while I talked with Jordan and Theo. Reaching out, I grab my pants and shirt before walking behind the screen Creed has set up by his tub, and yank off his shirt, trying hard to ignore his presence in the room. I can hear his feet draw near and hold my breath as I step into my pants

and button them up. Will he come around the screen or give me the privacy I need to get dressed?

“Lemon Drop... can we talk for a minute?” he asks, voice soft and warm, completely different from the one he had used with Jordan and Theo.

“Yes. But only if I get answers,” I reply, yanking my shirt over my head and trying to ignore the fact that it smells like Creed. I didn't have any soap with me when I was bathing and was forced to use Creed's, so now my clothes and hair smell like the man I'm most upset with; which is frustrating since Creed smells so damn good. All I want to do is bring the fabric of my shirt to my nose and huff it, but I simultaneously want to throw it to the ground and forget I ever met the lying bastard.

Creed's feet shuffle on the other side of the screen, and I can picture how he's shifting from foot to foot, with his hands stuffed in his pockets. “Of course,” he agrees faster than I thought he would, and I purse my lips as I run my fingers through my clean but tangled hair. I wasn't able to brush it last night since I couldn't find a hairbrush, so I had only used my fingers. Now I regret all my life choices. I look like a mess. I know I do, but after the last few days, I honestly don't give a crap.

“Alright, so start talking,” I prompt.

“Uhhh,” Creed rasps as he paces in front of the screen, waiting for me to come out. “What do you want to know?” he asks, sounding at a loss as to where to start. I frown and try to think of what I want to know first. It may be childish, but there is one thing that is bothering me more than anything else.

“Did you sleep with me only to earn my trust?” I whisper, starting out heavy but needing to know the answer before we continue this conversation.

“What?! No! No, Meyer, I swear I didn't,” Creed practically shouts, his feet moving to the side of the screen before he curses and waits. “Are you done? Can I see you yet?” I mentally give him bonus points for asking rather than barging back here. Instead of answering him, I step out from behind the screen on the other side to keep my distance between us.

“Did you pursue me to earn my trust? Were you using me... playing with me to get me to trust you?” I ask, not wanting to waste any time. I needed to go down to the Training Center and meet up with Jordan and Theo, and then I needed to track down Valen.

Creed hesitates this time, and I shake my head, letting my eyes fall shut as hurt courses through me. My head throbs, and my stomach rumbles, so I decide that I can ask him more questions after breakfast and after I find

Valen. Turning on my heel, I move to the door, determined not to let the crippling pain inside me grow. I can't let it! I have things that need to be done.

“Meyer, wait! Please let me explain!” Creed shouts, rushing after me and catching me around the waist just before my fingers make contact with the doorknob.

“Let me go!” I hiss between clenched teeth as Creed scoops me up off my feet like I weigh nothing.

“No! You're too goddamn stubborn to let this go until you have all the information. You asked for answers, and I'm going to give you them!” Creed growls, turning us away from the door and striding back toward his bed.

I kick at his shin, making him grunt when my heels make contact. I grind my teeth together and wiggle from his arms, twisting out of his grip. Unfortunately for me, he's too quick, catching me by my shoulders and shoving me back, making me stumble a few feet until my back presses firmly against the wall. I gasp then inhale when Creed invades my space, taking over every inch of breathing room.

“Stop it!” he snaps, his face tight with frustration as he pins me to the wall with his body, his warmth rushing me and making my nipples pebble irritatingly in my bra. My body practically sings when I feel his hard-muscled one press against every inch of mine, and I hate it so fucking much! “I'll give you everything, Meyer! Fucking everything you want, just don't walk out on me! On us... please,” he rasps, leaning down. His forehead pressed to mine makes my heart clench, and causes agony to spread from my chest, crawling to my limbs and enveloping me in bone-deep pain.

How? How do I give him what he asks for when he just admitted to using me like that?

“I can't,” I finally croak out, shaking my head and closing my eyes so I don't have to see the heartbreak in his. Why is he acting like this? He said he was using me. Why does he look like I just stabbed him in the chest with my words? “Don't you understand I can never trust you again. I-I hate you!” I rattle off, shoving desperately at his chest, needing air. Space away from him!

Creed's dark chuckle makes my heart skip as his hands wrap around my wrists, stopping me from hitting him again. I try to control my heavy breathing as Creed leans impossibly closer, his warm breath fanning over my lips as he shakes his head, capturing my gaze with his heated one.

“You're lying, Lemon Drop. I know I fucked up, and I'm willing to do

what you need in order for you to trust me again. But don't stand there and claim you hate me when we both know it's a lie." My eyes widen, and I shake my head in a desperate denial of his words, only they're the truth, aren't they? Even after everything he just said and admitted... I don't hate Creed, despite how much I wish I did.

"Don't, baby," Creed pleads, his hands dropping my wrist, and I let them fall to his chest as he places a long finger under my chin and tilts my face up, our lips only a breath apart. "Don't push me away. Let me fix what I broke," he rasps, voice rough as he closes the distance and presses his lips to mine in the softest of kisses.



Meyer

I gasp, surprised by his action when I shouldn't be. Creed takes advantage, deepening our kiss, letting his hand move from my chin to slide into my hair, pressing his lips harder to mine as our kiss intensifies. My body ignites, responding to Creed's familiar touch, my back arches as he groans. His other hand wraps around my waist and yanks me as close as he can, letting me feel the evidence of his arousal pressing hard into my belly.

My toes curl against the cold stone of the floor as Creed ravages my mouth, kissing me so hard that I know my lips will be bruised after this, but I don't care. My hands slide up his chest and weave into his silky brown locks, fisting them in my grip as I go up on my toes, pressing Creed back with every ounce of myself. I let my fear, anger, and pain bleed into that kiss, allowing him to take that pain from me for a moment.

"Meyer," he groans, bucking his hips and grinding his length against me, causing heat to pool between my legs. Moaning, I pull back, sucking his full lower lip between my teeth, then bite. Creed hisses in pain as a sharp metallic taste fills our kiss. Creed doesn't stop, though. He only kisses me harder, his hand moving from my waist to hook my knee up around his waist and lifting me into his arms, keeping my back pressed against the wall for added support.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you," I growl between heated kisses, yanking his hair even more, needing him to hurt the way I do. Creed only moans, his eyes fluttering shut as I slam my lips back to his, his length now grinding against my center, lighting up my body with so much lust I'm pretty

sure my panties may burst into flames.

“I know,” Creed whispers, his kisses softening, moving from passion and lust to something sweeter. I instantly hate it. I need the anger to forget his words. So I push him by bucking my hips against his cock, dragging my denim clad pussy over his erect length that is straining in his pants as I kiss him harder, trying to get him to return to our heated embrace. “Lemon Drop,” he whispers, and I snarl in frustration.

“No! Just fucking kiss me,” I demand as he slowly pulls back, his sad eyes on my trembling and swollen lips.

“Baby,” he says softly, and I slam my eyes shut, blocking the guilt and concern I see in his eyes as his admission from earlier plays out in my mind.

What the hell am I doing? Why am I setting myself up for more pain?

“Let me down,” I rasp, wiggling in his arms. His hands tighten on me, and I growl in frustration. “Now! Let me down,” I scream at him, hitting his chest when he only holds me closer. “I hate you!” My words finally get a response, his answering growl like a deep vibration that starts in his chest and courses into my body like a wave. I inhale sharply as Creed spins us, then gasp when I feel myself fall to the bed, Creed's weight pinning me to the mattress as I glare up at him defiantly.

His face is a mix of anger and pain, and I have a sudden urge to reach up and brush a curl from his forehead. I hold my breath, trying to regain control of my body. Just because I'm attracted to this man, doesn't mean I should give him control over me like this. He hasn't earned it.

“Fine!” he hisses, his face inches from mine. “Hate me. Hit me... do whatever you want to me! But Meyer, you need to hear me out! It's not what you're thinking! I fucking care about you, you stubborn, headstrong woman! More than you could ever know!”

Tears burn in the backs of my eyes, and I blink several times, willing them to stay put. Refusing to let Creed win like this. “You used me. Pursued me to gain my trust and...” My voice cracks, and I slam my mouth shut as I shake my head.

“No,” he whispers, his body lifting enough to allow me to breathe properly but never leaving my space. “I already wanted to pursue you. I had felt drawn to you the night you saved me,” Creed states, and I glare at him.

“I didn't save you, Creed! That Beastia was Razar!” I scream, my anger finally spilling over at his words as I shove at his chest. I need space right now, or I will lose my mind. Creed's eyes widen, and he jumps off me,

helping me to my feet before stepping back. Finally giving me some breathing room.

“No! I mean, yes,” Creed stutters while shaking his head and putting his hands out in front of him, trying to calm me down. “Yes, that one was Razar. He ran ahead of Nox to get to me, but it wasn’t Razar who almost killed me. A legion of Bestia were in that town. I had tracked them from the Rift up here and finally caught up to them in McCall. You did save me, Meyer. I was bleeding out faster than I could heal. If you hadn’t brought me inside, forced me to stay awake, I would have passed out and probably died before Nox got there to heal me,” he explains, his voice softening as he goes.

I inhale sharply, then nod, accepting his answer and letting him continue with his previous explanation. I cross my arms over my chest and hug myself, bracing for his response that will no doubt cause some form of pain.

“I already wanted to be with you. The day I saw you for the first time here at the Castle was the first time I didn’t hate my life here. I just got back from an assignment at the Rift. Razar had to physically pull me out of the cafeteria because I wanted to talk to you. After that, Nox told me to keep away from you.” I nod, remembering that part. “But I fought back and got his approval,” Creed whispers, and I grimace. What the hell? Why would Creed need Nox’s approval? At first I thought it was an Umbra Hunter thing. Nox outranked Creed as the acting Regalis Senior, but why now? I know Nox is a Demon Prince, but from what I have gathered, so is Creed.

“But why? Why does everything have to go through Nox? Why is he the one who gets to make all the choices around here when he’s so obviously unqualified for it?” Creed laughs a little at that, his eyes lighting up as he slowly lets his hands fall to his sides.

“Lennox is extremely qualified, trust me. He’s just all wound up and making bad calls since a certain girl showed up here and flipped our lives upside down. Do you know Nox hasn’t been questioned or challenged by anyone but the Senioreem since we got here over a year ago? Then you come bulldozing your way through the castle, talk back to him, give him all that sass, and question him at every turn,” Creed admits, and I frown.

“No wonder he’s so spoiled. No one should be left unchecked like that. It makes their ego much too large,” I grumble under my breath, and Creed laughs, looking down at his feet while he toes the carpet nervously.

“Yeah. You’ve been good for him,” he mutters, his smile cracking and then slowly fading away. My chest aches at the sight, and I have to clench my

fists and plant my feet where I stand in order to not move to his side. I'm still mad and hurt, but I don't like seeing Creed hurting, either.

"Keep going. Pretty sure I only have a few minutes until I'm supposed to be at the Training Center," I admit, and Creed nods before hesitantly looking back up at me.

"Nox told me to keep an eye on you after he figured out he could heal you. That's something he can only do for Demons or really strong Umbra Hunters. He knew you weren't a strong Regalis member simply from your coloring, so he told me to watch for any signs that you were a Demon."

"But he healed me before we got together," I point out, and Creed winces and nods.

"Yeah. I was already watching you then, but only because I was commanded to Meyer. I didn't want to. Well, I mean, I did want you... just not the spying thing," Creed stutters and then groans, rubbing the back of his neck when I only blink at his rambling. "Anyway, I noticed the Therion didn't go after you during the attack until it was provoked. That was my first clue. Then, when we slept together..." Creed trails off, and I narrow my eyes on him, anger burning in my belly. When Creed doesn't continue, I wave my hand at him, getting him to keep talking. "You were talking in your sleep, and I felt a small burst of Dream Walker magic."

"So you knew then that I was a Dream Walker," I state, and Creed nods.

"Yes. I knew. We needed a Dream Walker to open the church where the Seniorems were holding the humans. It was well warded. So well protected that not even Nox could get in, which is odd, since Demons never shared those wards with the Umbra Hunters. We thought there was something in there, but we thought it was the key to the warded room in the tower and a holding ground for humans. We never suspected them to be holding Valen in there."

"So you took my blood," I fill in the gaps with what limited knowledge I do have.

"Yes. At first we were going to use you, Meyer. I'm not going to lie, but then I fucking fell for you," he whispers, taking a step closer to me, his eyes burning with so much emotion that my breath hitches as I watch him. "I fell so hard and fast that I didn't even realize it until I held you in my arms that morning after we were together. You were talking in your sleep, and I knew you were who we needed to find our brother. But I knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't risk your life, even if that meant not finding Valen."

Creed's words hang heavily in the air, both of us staring wide-eyed at

each other as Creed curses and runs a hand through his messy curls. Both of us jump when Creed's door flies open, revealing a frustrated-looking Valen as he storms in, his light eyes coming to rest on me the moment he steps in.

“Valen?” I whisper, stepping toward him as Creed sighs, glaring at his brother while tossing his hands in the air.

“I thought you were taking Nox to the church this morning,” Creed grumbles as Valen walks over, his frustrated look melting into weariness as he draws near. I watch the brothers interact, Valen only sparing Creed the briefest of looks, nodding to him once before tentatively reaching a pale hand out toward me.

“I am. But I needed to make sure Meyer was okay and wanted to say good morning,” he says in a melodic voice, answering his brother but never letting his eyes stray from my face, a small smile gracing his face as he studies me. “Besides, Nox is at the Training Center with Elaine. We’ll leave for the church after he gets the Rangers started on their new training.” My eyes widen at Valen's words, and I slap my hand in his, not paying much attention to the beautiful smile that lights his face as I run from Creed's room, pulling Valen behind me.

“Shit! He’s going to roast my ass for being late,” I hiss under my breath, my stomach knotting as I rush down the hall, Valen chuckling in amusement behind me as we go.

“Lemon Drop! Wait up!” Creed yells after us, catching up in a matter of seconds as I barrel down the stairs of the Ranger Barracks and rush out into the snowy day, shivering from the cold winter air.

“Don't worry, Mi Sol. Lennox won’t roast you,” Valen reassures me, making Creed and me laugh.

“You and I must know a different Lennox because nothing and no one will stop him from roasting anyone,” I mutter, throwing open the door to the Castle and racing inside, sighing at the instant burst of warmth.

“Yeah. Pretty sure I’ll be getting it for making you late,” Creed admits, making Valen frown and toss a confused look at Creed, who shrugs and nods.

“Hmm,” Valen mutters, his hands darting out to catch me when I almost trip on one of the stairs leading down to the Training Center. “Things have changed since I was taken,” he muses, and Creed laughs.

“That's an understatement. Lennox has only grown more powerful. He’s still the same brother we know and love, but Father has taken the time and effort to shape him into our future King. He’s no longer the carefree boy you

last knew.”

Creed’s words make me frown and wonder what Lennox used to be like before now. Had he been like Creed and Valen? Intense at moments, but happy and carefree? I wrinkle my nose at the thought and shake my head. No way. That doesn't fit the imposing man I know. I would be surprised if Lennox didn't come out of the womb with a scowl on his absurdly handsome face.

I run down the long hall, panting with exertion, my hand still clasping Valen’s with Creed jogging at my side. I side-eye him and then glare when I notice he’s not even sweating. It looks like he just woke up from a refreshing nap instead of making a mad dash for the Training Center. Creed runs ahead a little, opening one of the heavy wooden doors for me, and Valen and I rush in, then stop dead in our tracks, mentally groaning when a set of furious eyes land on us, followed by every single Hunter standing at attention in the room.

Shit! We’re so screwed.



Valen

“**Y**ou’re late,” Nox hisses between clenched teeth, and I eye him in amusement. When had my baby brother become so... angry? And why was I having such a fun time provoking his ire?

Meyer’s hand squeezes mine as the eyes in the room fall on us. I use my thumb to stroke the inside of her wrist while holding my magic back when it tries to spring out, wanting to calm her racing heart. The pull I feel toward Meyer has grown overnight. At this point, I’m pretty sure I have formed an unhealthy obsession.

My gaze flicks from the wide-eyed stares of the young Rangers gathered in front of my brother and the woman I met last night with the angry son. There is a line of Hunters standing behind them, all dressed in fighting gear in a variety of colors with different weapons strapped to their bodies.

“Oh, good. Meyer, dear. Right over here, please.” The woman beams at my girl and points over at a group of Rangers dressed in blue and black. Meyer nods and, much to my disappointment, lets go of my hand, rushing around a group of Rangers dressed in a god-awful combination of yellow and brown to stand next to one of the shortest guys in blue.

I move to follow her, but Creed’s hand darts out, stopping me. Instead, he tugs me along with him, and I scowl at his hand as we step up to Lennox’s side. Nox gives me a dark look before his attention moves to Meyer, who is whispering with the shorter boy.

“Who’s that?” I ask Creed, nodding over at them as Meyer’s friend, Jordan, moves to stand at her other side. My eyes slide from them to the

shadows in the corners of the room, looking for my brothers. I quickly spot Razar, his cloaked body concealed by a wisp of dark magic, and I grin. He's improved his control of the darkness since the last time I saw him four years ago, and I couldn't be prouder. Archer and I had been training with him relentlessly to make him an active part of our Legion.

Speaking of... I look around for my other brother, frowning when I don't see him in his usual spots. Archer likes to hide, similar to Razar. Their behavior is so similar, yet different. Razar hides as a safety mechanism, while Archer hides for the thrill of the hunt. Out of all of us, Arch and Razar are the only actual brothers. Twins, despite how different they are from each other. One dark as night, the other light and full of life. Their father, the king's brother, was lost during the wars that eradicated my people. The same wars that killed my parents and destroyed the Dream Walker kingdom.

I glance back at Razar, whose eyes are locked on Meyer, and my frown deepens. It's odd for him to leave Versipellis without his twin, but I have yet to see him. Maybe he stayed back with Father and Jeshren? I already know my oldest brother will never leave our world unless commanded to do so by Orcus. He despises Hunters and has been actively against helping them, preferring to put our time and resources into our own world.

"That's Ranger White, but everyone calls him Billy," Creed whispers, pointing to the shorter Ranger, who stands only a few inches taller than Meyer. "Jordan's on her other side, and most of the Regalis bloodline is behind them. Two are still in the holding cells and need to be cleared by Lennox. He's worried about their intentions toward us and Monroe, since he's now standing with us."

My eyes move to the red-haired giant standing behind Lennox, whom Creed had pointed out to me earlier. The scowl on his face could rival Nox's, and the air around him is dangerous as his hand moves to rub at the thick, rope-like scars crawling up his neck. I can tell by simply looking at this man he has a dark side born of pain and fear.

I like him immediately.

The woman next to Nox starts talking, ignoring his obvious anger at the three of us for arriving late, and I nod at her. "What's her name again?" I whisper, frowning when I realize I haven't the vaguest recollection of her name being mentioned.

For the most part, my mind seems to be recovering from the four-year-long coma it had been forced into. But my memories of the first twenty-four

hours after Meyer woke me up are spotty. I thought I remembered seeing my brother at the church. My vision was hazy, and my mind had a dense fog from a lack of magic and energy. What I can remember is Meyer. Her beautiful eyes were red-rimmed from crying. Her stunning, pale face upturned, our lips so close when we talked. I had to use every ounce of self-control I possessed not to ravish her then and there on the dirty floor of my prison.

I wanted her so much, but I knew I had to wait. I refused to take anything personal from her until I was able to tell her the full truth. I was desperate, which is why I made the selfish bargain in the first place. I could then call on it even if Mi Sol never wanted to see me once she knew the truth.

I planned on telling her once I had slept and replenished my strength. When I woke up with her in my arms there was a moment I thought I had died. That somehow my soul and body finally reconnected and were at peace for the first time. But awareness slowly came back to me, and the memory of seeing my brothers flashed through my mind like a bad signal. I convinced myself that seeing my brothers out there was just my imagination playing tricks on me, but then Meyer woke up and started talking about the Demons who took over the castle. I had hoped... prayed that it was them, but didn't dare believe it until I saw them with my own eyes.

I stood in the courtyard outside the castle, filled with excitement and relief at seeing my brother's faces, and then I remembered what Meyer told me. What they had done to her and how they were talking to her outside the church the night before. My anger started to fester, not understanding how they could treat Meyer that way. So, I went along with her plan. We would save her friend, and hopefully, I could tell her everything about being a Dream Walker. How we were both Demons and that I was related to the very men she currently hated.

Only my plans backfired when Razar stole her from me, and she was forced to learn the truth in front of the very men who caused her pain. My heart stalls in my chest at the reminder of distrust and pain I saw on her face when she realized I was not only their brother... but a Demon as well.

I checked on her several times last night; twice in her dreams and once in person. When I came to retrieve her this morning, I wasn't sure what her reaction toward me would be. I opened that door, finding Creed's eyes bloodshot, and Meyer looked like she was about to cry again. When I studied her further, I noticed her swollen lips and the blush on her cheeks. Jealousy

was my first reaction, but when Meyer didn't immediately tell me to leave, my jealousy melted into relief.

“Elaine. She’s really cool and probably the only one you can trust in the castle right now. Well... maybe Monroe, but he’ll probably beat the shit out of you just for fun,” Creed adds with a fond smile toward the angry-looking redhead.

“Not Mi Sol’s friend?” I ask in confusion, looking at the tall man standing to her right, his arms crossed over his chest, as he glares at anyone who looks at her. I’m not fond of how good-looking this Jordan has turned out to be. However, I’m confident enough in myself and the tentative link I have formed with Mi Sol to not place restrictions on my girl. It's not my choice who she’s friends with, even if I don't like it.

“*Mi Sol*,” Creed grumbles with a sigh, then shoots me a contemplative look. He doesn't look mad, but he’s definitely not happy about the nickname I have given my girl. “And no. Jordan Jennings would stab us in the back if he could. However, his loyalties are firmly with Meyer, and he won't do anything without her say-so.”

“He loves her?” I ask, trying and failing to keep the growl from my voice. I thought I had sensed something between the boy and Elaine’s son, but perhaps my mind is still recovering from the coma.

“Oh, without a doubt. But I’m still unsure in what way. At first, I was convinced Jordan and Theo both were head-over-heels for Meyer. But the more I study them, the more I question that conviction. They touch her like they would a sister or friend. Not a lover.” I nod, watching as the young boy glares at Elaine's son, who blatantly stares back, his head cocked to the side in a challenge as they have a silent fight. It's interesting to watch. I never understood humans, but I have to admit, I love how free they are with emotions.

“Bloodlines will start training together. There will be no more division between ranks or teams. Your Bloodline Seniors will still have the final say in your training, but we will no longer be doing the Ranger games or Trials. The Bloodline scoreboard has been taken down, and after the Senioreem is restored, they can choose to remove the Bloodline games and scoreboard permanently or bring it back. Ultimately, we are here to ensure the Umbra Hunters are doing what they were created to do,” Lennox declares, interrupting my conversation with Creed.

My brother's commanding voice rings out through the enormous training

room, impressing the hell out of me as he demands the attention of all the Rangers. His shoulders are relaxed, and he's holding himself with an air of authority I have never seen from him before. His long black hair is hanging loose with a few small braids woven in the front, keeping it out of his face with gleaming silver beads.

"That's new. So much has changed," I murmur to myself, then startle a little when Creed chuckles and nods in response to my words. I'm still getting used to people. I have gone years with only myself as company, and I find the world a much louder place than I remember.

"Father increased his court training. Jesthren was growing annoyed with Nox's less-than-subtle approach to Versipellis politics. So father decided to intervene," Creed explains.

"Jesthren always has a problem with Nox," I grumble with a shake of my head. It looks like some things have stayed the same after all. "Speaking of, is Arch with dad?" I ask, leaning around Creed to keep my eye on Meyer. She's glaring at Nox as he speaks to the Rangers, telling them that the factions of Umbra Hunters led by the corrupt Senioreem will be on their doorstep shortly and that they need to train with everything they have in order to survive the next couple weeks.

"Uhh... He's..." Creed stutters, looking away from me while wringing his hands together. "I think Nox is going to fill you in on everything when you two go to the church," he finally says, clearing his throat before turning his attention back to the Rangers in front of us. I nod, looking over at the big redhead who suddenly steps up next to Creed.

"Umbra Monroe has been appointed as the new Regalis Senior starting immediately," Nox says, making a few of the Rangers gasp in surprise, but with a stern look from my brother, they keep their mouths shut. "Umbra Drakos," Nox continues, gesturing toward Elaine, who I hadn't realized was an active Umbra Hunter, "is now the Axford Senior and acting High Senior on the North American Senioreem," Nox announces, making the room fall into a shocked silence. Most women with the Hunter gift stay home with their children. Their sole purpose is to raise strong Hunters and reproduce. Most factions—besides the Russian Hunters—prefer to keep their women and children protected at home. For Elaine to keep the Umbra title, she must complete a certain amount of field time per year and hold a rather impressive amount of magic.

A few men standing behind us tense, and I can feel their anger and

outrage at Lennox's announcement. "But... she's an Axford," a particularly hideous man stammers, stepping forward, glaring at Elaine, who arches an elegant brow at him, her eyes meeting his in a clear challenge.

"*She...*" Nox grinds out, defending Elaine but not stepping in front of her when the man steps even closer, sneering down at her, "is the most pure-blooded Axford in this Castle and holds about three times the amount of magic you do, Silas. And her name is Senior Axford," Nox drawls, crossing his arms over his chest as he glowers at the angry man whose face has darkened to a purple color. "You will do well to remember that. She is *your* Senior, after all."

Elaine steps forward, matching the man's intense stare with one of her own. Her lips twitch in amusement, yet her face remains the picture of calmness as Nox comes to her defense while not physically intervening. It's a smart move the more I think about it. The North American faction has always been filled with sexist pigs, and there is no way a single man in this castle will respect Elaine if Nox fights all her battles.

I chuckle darkly, loving how not Nox's, but Elaine's magic snaps from her, filling the space around her like a perfect bubble, letting the man feel her strength yet keeping it restrained from the Rangers only a few feet away. I gape at her in surprise. Though I've heard of a few Hunters having magic in the past, their connection to the small amount of Demonic magic gifted to them had to be extraordinarily strong for that to happen. They typically rely on chants and wards to keep them safe.

The man fails to hold Elaine's gaze and, with a curse, drops his eyes, stepping back with his hands fisted at his sides. "Well, that was fun," Creed cuts in, slicing through the tension of the room with ease while smiling at the Rangers. My grin grows, and a feeling of rightness settles in my chest as I watch my brothers. I missed them so much. "The last Senior to announce is Senior Victor Drakos," Creed announces, and I raise my brows in shock as a man who is almost the size of Lennox takes a step forward, moving behind Elaine and glaring at the man who has retreated into the line of men.

The new Drakos Senior is one of the biggest Umbra Hunters I have seen. His dark hair is buzzed short, and he has a scar that starts at his temple and disappears into the collar of his black shirt. He has almost as many weapons strapped to him as Razar does, and I eye him curiously as Elaine glances over her shoulder at him, nodding once before he steps back in line.

"There is no reason to explain why Victor is the new Drakos Senior,"

Creed adds with amusement, while the Rangers next to Elaine's son nod, their eyes bright with excitement as they stare in awe at the man standing behind us. "Perfect! Let's start off the day with fifteen laps around the track while Nox and I discuss the training needed with your Seniors."

Like well-trained soldiers, the Rangers all dip their heads in a slight nod, then turn, rushing for the track to begin their laps. "Huh, I can see why you all like it here," I muse, watching Meyer as she jogs over to the track, her expression one of disgust. Like she tasted something sour. Creed laughs, crossing his arms over his chest as he follows my attention.

"It's actually fun here when the Seniorems aren't killing humans and training little Demon assassins," Creed admits, then nods at Meyer as Jordan and Elaine's son slow their pace, allowing her to catch up. "She's going to kill me for that."

"For what?" I ask in confusion, watching Meyer as she jogs pathetically slow around the first lap. Is she hurt? Why is she sweating so much? Worry starts to filter in as I watch her say something to one of the two boys, and they laugh, then slap her shoulder, almost taking her off her feet, and I see red. Stepping forward, I flick my wrist, using the momentum to make the small blade tucked inside my shirt glide into my palm.

"Whoa there, brother. They're messing around. Honestly, Jordan is brave for doing that because Meyer..." Creed trails off, his hand falling from my chest as we watch Meyer elbow Jordan in the stomach so hard he curses and doubles over. "Is violent. I think it's her Demon side. She can't stop herself or the need for violence when she's provoked," Creed says with a wistful sigh, hearts practically falling from his eyes as he stares at her. Taking a page from Meyer's book, I elbow my brother in the side, not liking how he's drooling over her. "Hey!" he shouts, jumping back from me while rubbing at his ribs. "You two need anger management!" His words confusing me all the more. What in the seven rings of hell is anger management?

"Valen," Nox calls out, standing next to Elaine, Monroe, and the new Drakos Senior. "You're with me," he announces, gesturing for me to follow him. "Creed," he starts, and Creed waves him off, moving to stand closer to the track.

"Yeah, I already know. Lemon Drop won't leave my sight," he snarks, earning himself a dark look from our brother as I cast a lingering look back at Meyer. I had been hoping to talk to her more this morning, but there is no way for us to talk right now. It's best to get what I need to do out of the way

so I can give Mi Sol my undivided attention after training.



Lennox

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I trail after Valen, dreading the conversation we are about to have but knowing it needs to happen. Once I felt how tired he was, I chose to keep Archer's death from Valen overnight. I needed him to be okay, to take care of himself so that he could handle what was about to happen. Valen needed proper rest, and if I had told him about Arch, he wouldn't have gotten it. But even knowing that it was best for him didn't stop the guilt, and I can't keep it from him any longer.

The snow crunches under our feet as we weave our way through the trees, the old steeple of the church rising above the branches guiding our way. "I was this close to the castle?" Valen murmurs in disbelief, his eyes darting from the steeple ahead to the turrets of the castle behind us.

I take a step forward, placing my hand on his shoulder and squeezing it as he takes a shuttered breath. "Yes, I'm sorry, Valen. I tried to break those wards about a hundred times over the year we have been here. If I knew you were in there, I would have tried a hundred more," I admit, and he nods, his hand moving up to squeeze mine on his shoulder before he starts walking again.

"Tell me what I've missed. Are Mom and Dad okay?" he asks, trying to smile through his pain. I nod and purse my lips.

"Dad's stressed," I start, and Valen laughs.

"Like always," he mutters, and I nod.

"And Mom is flitting about the castle, griping that Dad has her confined to the grounds. The last time we were there, she hid the left of every one of

his combat boots. He was livid.” I chuckle, remembering how Dad’s face had turned a strange shade of purple when he was needed in the throne room, and he realized he was going to have to meet with his generals with no shoes on. Valen laughs, the tension in his shoulders receding as we walk through a thick patch of trees and step into the clearing where the old church resides.

“And the war?” he asks, the smile fading from both of our faces when he speaks the words.

“Still going on. The Bestia and Therion have crossed over the borders of Versipellis and now run rampant in the ash lands,” I admit, making Valen’s eyes bulge out of his head.

“What?! How? What of the shields?” he stammers in shock.

“Broken. Someone is helping them. Razar first suggested that the Bestia and Therion were being controlled. Their attacks were no longer made of hunger and desperation, but were well coordinated and deadly. They wouldn’t eat their kills. Instead, they left the bodies to rot and moved on to the next target. They started attacking the villages outside our borders first, and Father let the Wildlanders into the ash lands for their protection. But then the shields were destroyed about three months before we came here,” I explain as Valen inhales and shakes his head, still in shock at my words. And to be fair, it is a hard thing to comprehend. No one should have the power to break Orcus’ shield.

My father is the King of Hell for a reason. He rules and governs the entirety of Versipellis and has ensured the safety of the creatures and people outside our borders since the fall of the Dream Walkers.

“Do we know who is doing this?” Valen asks, his pale eyes flicking over the door of the church in front of us, his jaw tight with controlled rage as he stares down the prison that contained him for four years.

“No. But last night, Razar was at the rift closest to the castle, and not only were there Bestia and Hunters fighting him, but Wraiths as well.” Valen spins on his heel, mouth agape, as he stares at me in stunned silence.

“But that would mean...”

“One of Royal blood is behind the attacks and has betrayed the crown,” I whisper, finishing what Valen can’t stomach to answer.

“They are the ones helping the Hunters,” Valen murmurs, his eyes alight with curiosity as he tilts his head to the side, trying to puzzle out everything, and I can’t help the sigh of relief I feel at having him back at my side. I love all my brothers, but Valen has always been my foundation. He is the only one

of us born and raised to be a king, and as such, his input and suggestions have always been invaluable to me. I mentally check myself. I may be in the process of being trained to be a king, but I'm only 36 years old. Valen was being groomed to ascend to the Dream Walker throne before I was even born.

"I believe so, yes. But we still haven't figured out who. There are too many in Father's court who can control the Wraiths. It could be any of them," I admit, and Valen nods.

"So, why are you here? Why not go back to Versipellis?"

"We needed you. It took us almost three years to find your magic and track you to this damn mountain. The moment Father found out, he sent us. Did you really think he wouldn't?" I scoff, and Valen smiles and shrugs.

"I mean... yeah, I know Dad would have come eventually, but the Kingdom... our entire world is under attack by an inside threat. I wouldn't have held it against him if he chose to wait until things had settled."

"Mother would have thrown him in the Therion pit and left him there if he had done that." I chuckle, and Valen grins, ducking his head as he nods in agreement. "Come on. Open this damn door so we can take a look and make sure there is nothing left inside. I don't want to leave a human trapped in there." The worry over someone trapped and hungry or wounded has been weighing heavily on my thoughts since I killed Axford.

Valen growls under his breath and moves up the steps with lethal grace, flicking his wrist just before a small silver blade slides into his grasp. He presses the pad of his thumb against the razor-sharp edge of the blade until the scent of his blood filters through the air. Green sparks flare at Valen's fingertips just as he reaches up to the wooden door and drags his bleeding thumb down the center, leaving a dark, wet trail on the woodgrain. Like when Meyer pressed her bloody hand to the door, a rush of Dream Walker magic courses through the small clearing; but this time, the strength of it almost brings me to my knees.

Valen steps back, bringing both hands up before him, the magic at his fingertips growing into bright green flames as his hands tremble with the amount of magic he begins to wield. I can feel my eyes widen, and I take a step back at the sound of wood snapping. It's the only warning I have before the old door that has kept me locked out for over a year explodes.

Turning, I shield my eyes as tiny slivers of wood fly through the air, scraping over my exposed skin and embedding themselves in my flesh. Slowly, Valen's magic dissipates, and the wood particles and dust drift to the

ground. Glancing at Valen over my shoulder, I arch a brow in annoyance, finding him perfectly fine, without a damn scratch on his pretty-boy face.

“Really?” I grumble under my breath when he looks at me and shrugs.

“It was a strong spell. I enjoyed breaking it,” he says with a devilish smirk before striding through the door and into the quiet church. I follow close behind, my eyes darting around the cold room, taking in my surroundings. The stench of corrupted Demon magic makes me hiss in a sharp breath and shudder uncomfortably. It's mainly Valen's magic that I sense, but there is something else here as well... something older and more powerful. The hairs on my neck stand on end as I move deeper into the church, looking at the old pews pushed up against the wall and then the dead tree at the back of the church, its branches dried and curled in on itself. Everything in this church screams death and chaos.

I look to Valen, and freeze when I find him staring at three sarcophagi sitting in the center of the church. His hands are shaking at his sides, and I watch as his throat bobs when he swallows. “So Mom and Dad are the same as always. What of Jethren?” he asks in a raspy voice, moving us back to our conversation, using it to shield the torrent of pain and agony he's currently feeling as he stares at the box on the left.

“His normal prickish self. I'm pretty sure he keeps a mirror by his bed so that the first thing he sees each morning is himself,” I murmur, taking a step closer, wanting to help him with his emotions but knowing he will not appreciate it if I do. He nods and takes a deep breath, crouching down, resting his hands on his knees before reaching out and running his fingertips over the enormous lid of a sarcophagus sitting askew from the giant box it should have been resting on.

“And Arch? Where is he? I can't imagine Razar is easy to control without him here. Did Father need him to stay and help out at home?” Valen asks in such a calm and serene voice that it literally breaks my heart. A lump forms in my throat, and I tear my eyes away from Valen as he studies his prison. This isn't the place for me to tell him about Arch. He's already in enough pain. “Lennox?”

I look back up when Valen whispers my name, his hand falling from the lid at his feet as he stands, eyes narrowing on me as I clear my throat. “I-uh. Maybe we should go back to the castle,” I suggest, looking around the single-room church. It's empty. No human or Hunter inside, meaning there is nothing here to save. Valen stares at me for a moment, then closes his eyes,

his head drooping. He knows something is wrong. “Valen,” I whisper, stepping to his side and reaching a hand out to clasp his shoulder.

“Is he gone?” my brother whispers, his lashes fluttering on his pale cheeks but never opening, refusing to face the horror my words are about to cause. I have to take a moment, my throat too tight, the pain too much to bear, before I finally jerk a nod, tightening my hold on my brother.

“Yes,” I rasp out, then curse as Valen's colorless eyes suddenly fly open, locking with my own. The gentle green eyes are gone, replaced by those of his Shade, and I let my hand fall from his shoulder but refuse to move.

“How?” Valen grinds out, the sorrow and pain that had been radiating from him only moments ago replaced by unbridled anger.

“Valen,” I say in a soft voice, trying to talk him out of his Shade form and back to my sensible-thinking older brother. “Take a breath, man,” I instruct, using my own magic to link with Valen's emotions, bending them ever so slightly while soothing the pain he has buried deep inside. Only his eyes have changed, his skin and hair still hold some color, but then the black web-like veins begin to spread around his eyes as his pupils dilate. I should be able to calm him down if he allows it. “Calm down. Now,” I order, letting a bit of magic filter into the command. Demanding his obedience.

Valen flinches back, stumbling away from me like my words are a physical blow, catching himself on the sarcophagus behind him. In the next moment, his eyes begin to lighten, the gray tone brightening to green, the black veins around his eyes creeping back into his still large pupils. Sighing, I look down, allowing my brother a moment to collect himself, knowing how much he hates when he loses control in front of others.

“Sorry,” he rasps, and I look back up and nod.

“Better?” I ask, then grimace when Valen looks at me like I'm a fool. “Yeah. I know, stupid question. I've had a year to come to terms with this, and I'm still not okay. It was an impulse,” I admit, and Valen nods.

“Yeah. But.. how? When?” he rasps, and I swallow hard, not wanting to tell him. Knowing Valen, he will blame himself for Archer's death since we had come to this side of the Veil to save him. But it was the Hunter's fault... their choices that caused Arch's death.

“On our way up to the Castle,” I explain slowly, watching his expression shutter into one of controlled rage. “We planned to overtake a group of Hunters who were coming to help Axford. They were real pricks; they supported the sex rings in Siberia and were actively promoting the capture

and deaths of humans in order to further their own gain. We intercepted their group at the base of the mountain near the gatehouse and were able to take out the majority of the group, but we had only planned on encountering twenty-three men in total.” I pause a moment and clear my throat, trying not to picture the events of that day. “Unfortunately, there were fifty-four Hunters instead, and we were outnumbered. Razar had lost a lot of blood, and I had taken a few arrows. One hit my spine, and I was trying to heal myself when a Hunter sliced my throat.”

Reaching up, I touch the thin scar I hadn't been able to heal fast enough. “Archer and Creed were the only ones fighting, and there were still twenty men left. Creed ran to help Razar when he was cornered and saved his life, but... Arch was left by himself and took an onyx blade to the ribs. I was unconscious by that point from blood loss, but Creed said he sent Archer back to Versipellis with the two surviving Wraiths in a desperate attempt to save his life. But it was too late. He died before Father could get to him.”

“Fuck,” Valen whispers, growls, and turns, hammering his fist into the lid of the sarcophagi behind him. “*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*” he screams, pain lacing each of his words as he brings his fist down in rapid succession. I step forward when I scent his blood, catching his fist before he can do more harm to himself. Releasing my magic, I start to heal his busted knuckles as he continues to curse and rage, and then I do the only thing I can. I pull him into an embrace and hold him tight as he breaks down in my arms.

“I should have been there,” Valen rasps after a moment, and I shake my head.

“This isn't your fault, Valen. You couldn't have been there even if you wanted to be. There is no point in wishing or thinking about what could have been. All we can do is stop the men who did this and take our revenge.” A spark of determination fills Valen's eyes as he nods, wiping at his face as he pulls back to gain some control over his wrecked emotions. “Which one was it?” I ask, looking over the three sarcophagi in front of me. Only the ones on the left and right are empty, the middle one remaining sealed. “This one... right?” I ask, looking at the box he knelt in front of earlier.

Valen nods, and I smile. Stretching my hand out, I pull on my magic, a thick black wave of it erupting from my palm and shooting at the stone box in front of me. I can feel the wards and magic etched into the stone, already weakened from when Meyer released Valen, but still there. It is still usable if the Hunters tried to imprison another Demon. With a roar, I wrap my magic

around the wards, crushing them under my power, and then destroying the sarcophagus, rendering it to dust in seconds. With a pleased nod, I step back just as Valen laughs. His low chuckle grows in strength as he watches me eradicate the very prison of his nightmares.

“Thank you,” he finally says, standing back to his full height and stepping closer to the two remaining sarcophagi. I follow him, moving to the one on the left as I look over the sealed one in the middle of the church. I hadn't felt any life within it... so I don't believe there is a human or demon inside, but I want to be sure. Moving over to the box, I frown as I see the carved beast someone took the time to etch into the stone.

“That can't be right,” I whisper to myself as I reach up and trace my fingers over the familiar wards carved into the perimeter of the... Shit! Black onyx box. Not granite or some other type of stone... but fucking black onyx!

No, no, no. This is bad. Like, tell my father immediately bad!

“Valen!” I shout, my eyes widening as I look down at what could possibly be the worst thing I have seen in my entire life. This can't be right! How the hell do the Hunters have this?

“Nox? I think you need to look at this,” Valen says, ignoring my call to him. I look up, worried the matching box is next to it, but sigh in relief when all I see is an empty gray granite box. Valen is frowning, his hands moving over the lid of the box while shaking his head.

“What? What is it? Because I think I found something I need you to look at,” I grind out, my heart racing as I rush over to him.

“You said Arch was wounded at the base of the mountain? That he was sent back to Versipellis before you came to the castle?” he asks, and I nod, my brows pinching together as I step to his side and lean closer to the open sarcophagus. I watch as Valen trails his finger over the stone in confusion. I don't sense any magic or something out of place, but then I see it. The dark smear of blood in the shape of a hand. Leaning forward, I take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar coppery scent that shouldn't be here.

“Then why is his blood in the box?” Valen asks in a broken voice.



Meyer

“I ’m hungry,” I whine under my breath as I duck and spin, evading Jordan's right hook before hooking his ankle with mine and yanking it toward me... or I try to yank it toward me. Freaking giant man over here weighs a ton, and it's me who trips and pitches forward, face-planting into Jordan's chest while he tries to catch me. My clumsiness takes us both to the floor, and I giggle when Jordan curses, darting a hand out to catch the back of my head before it can connect with the floor. “Oops,” I whisper when he glares at me, unimpressed.

“Oops,” Jordan agrees, his hand reaching around and whacking my stomach, making me huff out a breath when his hand hits a little too hard. “You have muscles here. Use them and keep them tight. Your core muscles are there for a reason, Meyer,” he grumbles before jumping back to his feet like a damn ninja and yanking me up so fast my head spins. “I thought I told you to lose the soft belly,” he adds, and I flip him off.

“That was last week! How does one lose fifteen pounds and tone their stomach in less than seven days? If you can tell me, I'll do it,” I snark at him, making his lip twitch in response. “Fucker. Stop calling me fat. You're going to give me a damn complex,” I grumble under my breath, whacking his stomach in retaliation and scowling when his hard abs hurt my fingers.

“You're not fat. You're soft, and that...”

“Can get you killed up here. Yeah, yeah. I know,” I cut him off as I glance around the Training Center, taking in the paired-off Rangers as they spar. We've been training for the last three hours, and Elaine should be

letting everyone go to lunch soon. “So, what's the plan?” Jordan asks as he glances up, looking at the far end of the room where Theo is sparring with an insanely tall and insanely good-looking girl.

“Plan?”

“Yeah. Are we staying here and buying the ‘Demons aren't bad’ story, or are we leaving?” My eyes widen as I turn to look up at my best friend.

“You want to leave?” I ask, truly curious. Jordan frowns, then shrugs, pulling his conflicted gaze from Theo to look down at me.

“I don't know. I think Theo is telling the truth. At least what he knows to be the truth. But do you believe them? Do we fight in this war, or do we bow out and try to leave?” I stare at Jordan for a moment, unsure how to answer him. If you had asked me yesterday, I would have chosen the getting the hell out of here option. But now... pale green eyes swim in my mind, and I can't help but feel a pinch of pain in my chest at the thought of leaving Valen. Could I do that? Leave him and walk away from whatever we have going on?

“Do you think they are bad?” I whisper, looking at Theo and then Elaine. Jordan doesn't answer for a long moment, then he sighs and shakes his head.

“No, but I'm also not convinced that we should trust everything that comes out of their mouths. If the Seniorems were sacrificing humans, like you say they were, then I can understand why Elaine went to Demons for help. She's been through a lot because of her father, and she deserves some help. Besides, I don't think she would knowingly put the Rangers here in danger, especially Theo. But I can't help but wonder if we've traded one bad guy for another. Who's to say the Demons aren't here to fuck things up even more?”

“I don't know. At this point, all I can do is go off what I've seen myself. Yeah, Lennox and his brothers are dicks, and I don't trust them personally, but I have seen them save more than one human, and they have saved my life more than once. I'm not sure if that was for me or them, but I think we kind of have to trust our gut here. If you think we should go, then... maybe we do that,” I whisper, ignoring how my stomach drops at the thought. Jordan starts pacing at my side, drawing Elaine's attention as she talks with the Senior Hunters at the center of the room.

I take in her appearance, noting how, for the first time since I've met the woman, she's wearing fighting leathers. The stark black outfit is devoid of all color except the small gold buckles on her weapons harness. Her long, light brown hair, which is identical to Theo's, is braided back, and her face is missing her perfect make-up, giving her a more natural look. Just then, I

realize how freaking young Elaine is.

Elaine offers me a small smile when she sees me staring at her, dipping her head the slightest amount before looking back at Jordan, who hasn't noticed her attention. There is worry and guilt in her dark eyes as she stares at him, and I can tell she's upset. The new Drakos Senior watches Elaine closely before following her gaze to us, and I freeze, feeling like a predator has me in its sights when his eyes lock on my face.

Shit, that motherfucker is scary as hell!

He leans down, the height difference between him and Elaine massive despite her tall stature. Elaine nods, never pulling her attention from Jordan, then starts walking this way.

Aw shit.

"Uh, Jordan," I whisper, realizing my friend had been talking to me this entire time, and I hadn't paid attention to a lick of it.

"What?" Jordan snaps, stopping his pacing and turning toward me just as Elaine steps in front of him. "Oh," he whispers, his angry expression dropping as Elaine wrings her hands in front of him.

"Jordan," she whispers, and I take a step back. I'm technically not supposed to leave Jordan until we are done sparring, but this kind of feels like a private conversation, and I want to give them at least the pretense of privacy. Jordan schools his expression faster than I thought he would and stands to attention, dipping his head respectfully and looking directly over Elaine's head.

"Senior Axford," he says coolly, making Elaine flinch just the smallest amount. "How can I be of assistance?" he asks, and even I grimace at his indifferent tone. Shit, remind me never to betray Jordan's trust. This boy can ice a person out better than Jack Frost.

"Sweetie," Elaine whispers, glancing around to ensure no one but me can hear them. "You know you don't have to call me that." When Jordan doesn't respond, Elaine rolls her lips together and nods. "I wanted to make sure you are okay. I know you were upset," she starts, and this time, Jordan's furious glare darts down at her.

"Upset? Upset? No, Senior Axford. Why would I be upset? The boy who I thought was my best friend kept a secret from me..."

"I told him to!" Elaine is quick to interrupt while jumping to her son's defense.

"By the command of the woman I considered more of a mother than the

one who actually birthed me,” Jordan hisses between clenched teeth, tears pooling in his eyes as his body starts to tremble. “What could I possibly be upset about?” Jordan grinds out, the sarcasm in his voice strong as Elaine tilts her chin up, taking Jordan's anger like a damn pro.

“I know. But I didn't do it to betray you, dear. You know I think of you the same way as I do Theo,” she says calmly, and Jordan scoffs, running a hand through his hair and looking away from her.

“Respectfully, Senior Axford. That's bullshit. If you gave a damn about me, you would have told me, and you wouldn't have forced Theo to keep it a secret either.” Jordan steps forward, getting into Elaine's space so that no one overhears, and I glance up, seeing that the giant Senior who Elaine had been talking to is now glaring at Jordan and looks like he's about to come over here and beat the shit out of him. Rolling my shoulders, I step in front of Jordan and Elaine, cracking my neck from side to side and stretching my arms over my head, making a show of keeping my muscles loose while blocking Senior Drakos' view. His dark eyes snap to my face, and he glares at me, taking a step forward.

I chuckle nervously, unsure if I'm directing my laughter toward him or me, while I shake my head at him, praying that he decides to mind his own business. If the scary giant dude comes over, I'm pretty sure he will pancake me in a second flat, and I really don't want that to happen. But I'm also not going to let him pound on Jordan, so... here I am, like an idiot.

Senior Drakos only shakes his head back at me, determination glinting in his eyes as he strides my way, his damn forearms flexing those massive muscles like a warning sign. Oh, fuck, this is not looking so great for me.

“Victor!” Senior Drakos stops mid-step, and I jump as Creed's voice cuts through the tense air. “You're needed outside. Now,” Creed snaps, stalking across the Training Center and planting himself directly in front of me. I roll my eyes, but can't stop the small smile that breaks across my lips as I step to Creed's side, not letting him block me completely. Senior Drakos' eye twitches a little, he purses his lips, and I can practically see him trying to figure out if he can take Creed out or not.

“I totally had that handled,” I grumble under my breath, quiet enough so only Creed can hear. Creed's angry expression almost falters, and I can see him trying to keep a serious expression on his face as Senior Drakos stands there and glares at him.

“Victor. Go see what's going on. I'll be there shortly,” Elaine calls out,

making the man's face smooth out a little as he nods and turns without further question.

“Really, Lemon Drop? You had to pick the biggest one to piss off, didn't you?” Creed whispers, leaning close to me, making me chuckle a little and shrug.

“I told you I had him. You didn't need to intervene.” Creed arches a brow, his eyes sparkling in amusement as he leans closer, his hand reaching out to brush a piece of hair off my forehead. And for just a moment, it feels like it did just a few days ago when Creed was my safe space... my happy guy who was always there for me when I needed him. But then reality comes crashing back in as I hear Elaine call out Jordan's name.

“Jordan, please,” Elaine whispers as Jordan steps around her and grabs my wrist, yanking me away from Creed and dragging me behind him as he practically runs from the Training Center.

“Whoa there, tiger! What's the rush?” I ask, grinning up at him. My smile falls when I see tears running down his face, and my good mood plummets. “Hey... hey, what's going on? Who do I need to punch?” I ask as he drags us down the long, brightly lit hallways.

“Nothing,” Jordan snaps, bringing his free hand up to wipe at his wet cheeks. “And please don't punch anyone. Elaine is nice, but she can kick your ass in ten seconds flat,” Jordan adds, and I scowl.

“That's not nice. I'm getting better,” I defend myself as I practically run to keep up with Jordan's long strides. “Where are we going?”

“I need to ride. To clear my head... I just need out,” Jordan stammers, and I nod.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Um, I'm not the best rider, but sure,” I agree immediately, and Jordan snorts and looks down at me.

“You're a terrible rider. And you're not coming. I just wasn't going to leave you alone there unprotected,” he announces.

“But... where are you going? You can't be alone...” I start to panic, and Jordan laughs.

“Yeah, I know. I'm mad, not stupid. All I want is to ride in the larger horse pen on the south side of the castle.” I nod and snap my fingers at him.

“Yes. That's a good plan. But are you sure you don't need company?” I ask, worried about leaving him alone when he may need someone to talk to. Jordan hesitates, then nods.

“Yeah. Can we talk when I get back, though?” His voice is soft and

unsure, reminding me that my best friend is still so young. Jordan is eighteen, still a teenager, and is currently handling a Demon takeover and his life being upended like a freaking boss.

Damn, I need to take a page out of his book and man up... Woman up? Ugh, whatever it is. I need to handle my shit and be there for him if he needs me, and if what Jordan needs is space for now, then that's what I'll give him.

"Yeah, of course," I agree as we run down the stairs and move through the entryway of the castle, over the new rugs, and out the enormous doors. "Just be careful, okay?" I ask. Jordan nods, wrapping an arm around my shoulder for a quick side hug before bounding down the steps and heading in the direction of the stables, with tense shoulders. I frown after him for a moment, then pivot on my heel and head back inside, shivering from the chilly winter air. I hadn't put a cloak on, and last night's temperatures had plummeted so much that even with the sun up, it's still well below freezing.

Rubbing my arms, I decide to go to the cafeteria since it's lunchtime. I'm assuming Elaine was about to dismiss everyone for lunch, which is why Jordan yanked me from the Training Center like he did. My stomach growls, and I grimace as I walk back up the main staircase. About halfway up, I stop when thundering footsteps catch my attention. Suddenly Theo is at the top of the stairs, his eyes wide with worry as he rushes to me, taking the steps two at a time.

"Meyer! Where is Jordan? Mom said he was upset, and I just went to the barracks to find him, but he's not there," Theo rushes out, cheeks red, hands trembling as I stare at him.

"Why?" I ask, feeling a little defensive about my friend.

"Huh?" Theo asks in confusion.

"Why do you want to know? Why do you care?" I ask, making Theo's confusion melt into despair. I know why Theo cares; but after everything Jordan has been through for Theo, I want to hear him say the words out loud.

"Meyer," Theo rasps, shaking his head. "Please. Where is he? I-I need to find him. Please!" he begs, and I shake my head. Nope, not the answer I need.

"Why?" I grind out, looking Theo in the eyes and watching as tears form. "If you want me to tell you where Jordan is, then I want to know why I should tell you. You hurt him, Theo... like really badly," I whisper. "I may understand why you did it, but that doesn't mean I like it. So I need to know why?" A tear falls from the corner of Theo's eye and slowly trails down his

cheek.

“You know why,” he rasps, and I nod.

“Yeah. I do. But I still want you to say it.”

“I love him,” Theo whispers after a tense moment, and I nod.

“He’s in the south horse pen riding,” I whisper back with a small smile. Theo nods and wipes at his face, rushing around me and down the stairs.

“Theo?” I call after him, waiting as he turns to look up at me. “I would have done the same thing for you if the roles were reversed. You both deserve to be happy.” A bright smile lights up Theo’s face, and he nods.

“Thanks, Angry Girl,” he rasps before turning and running for the door just as it slams open, letting in two Demon princes. Theo ducks around them, not even glancing their way, as he rushes from the castle.



Meyer

My eyes widen as I take the brothers in. Nox looks furious as he stalks through the double doors, his long stride eats up the distance between us as our eyes clash, making my stomach lurch. His long black hair is streaming around his shoulders as he scowls and nods at whatever Valen has just told him while he takes off the black gloves he has on and yanks the thick black cloak from his shoulders.

It almost hurts to tear my gaze from Lennox, but I manage only for them to land on Valen, who looks equally upset. His blond hair is messy as he keeps pace with his brother. His black clothes are almost identical to Nox's, and the air around the two is sparking with magic. They are equally beautiful as they are terrifying to watch. But when my eyes meet Valen's pale green ones, I frown, realizing they are red like he's been... crying.

What the fuck? Why was Valen crying? Anger rushes through me as I storm down the stairs to meet them at the bottom, my eyes taking in every inch of Valen's sad expression.

"What did you do?" I hiss at Nox, my hand moving to the Kalis strapped to my hip that Jordan gave me during training. Nox's dark eyes narrow on me as Valen sighs and shakes his head.

"Mi Sol," he starts as I stomp toward them. But before he can continue, Nox steps between us, dropping his cloak and gloves on the floor and bending at the waist, his hands going around my middle, making me curse.

Oh, hell no! I'm not going over another damn Demon's shoulder!

I twist out of Nox's reach as Valen curses and tries to shove Nox away

from me, but the huge Viking is too fast. A big arm cords around my waist, lifting me off the ground and yanking me to him so hard I grunt, the air leaving my lungs as he pins my back to his front.

“You damn, mother fucking Viking!” I snarl between gasps as I try to regain my breath. Nox doesn't stop walking as he hauls me up the stairs, his arm tightening around me as I repeatedly smack at his hand.

“Lennox! Put Meyer down immediately!” Valen snarls, grabbing Nox's cloak and gloves from the ground before rushing after us. Nox growls low in his throat, his face lowering until I feel his breath on my neck, and I freeze, goosebumps racing across my skin as I fight the urge to shiver. I will not give him the satisfaction of knowing how my body reacts to him when he's this close.

“Stop fighting me, Little Demon. This could be much more enjoyable for the both of us if you would only obey.” He grinds out the last words as he gets to the top of the stairs and starts down the hall, moving us in the direction of the Ranger barracks.

And just like that, my arousal problem is fixed!

Twisting in his hold, I manage to elbow him in the side, making him loosen his hold enough for me to turn in his arms. My hand grabs the hilt of my kalis as I spin, wrapping my legs around Lennox's waist and pressing the edge of my blade to his neck. Lennox's steps falter as Valen races up the stairs behind him, skidding to a stop at Lennox's side when he sees the knife.

“Let me go,” I demand, glaring at Nox as he arches his scarred black brow in challenge.

“Is this supposed to be a threat, Meyer?” he growls under his breath, leaning closer and bringing our faces much too close for comfort. I press my blade harder to his skin in response and try to ignore the shiver that runs down my spine when a bead of dark red blood pools, then spills down Nox's neck. “Because I can tell you now,” he rasps, pressing his neck into my blade, making his blood flow like a tiny river. “It's doing the opposite of what you probably want.” Lennox's hands move down from my hips, cupping my ass and grinding me into his... fucking huge and extremely hard erection.

Oh fuck! I way overplayed the game, and now I have an angry... horny Demon Prince in between my legs. The smell of his blood fills my senses, sparking something dark inside me, and I have to bite back a groan as my hips rock just the slightest amount against Lennox's long length.

“Lennox! Don't make me force you to let her go,” Valen snarls as he

catches up to us, dragging me from the weird lust-induced fog that had crept into my brain. I gasp, tearing my kalis away from Lennox's throat and shoving at his shoulders, needing him to let me go. He does the opposite. Of fucking course he does. Because this is Lennox Regalis, and nothing is ever easy with him.

“Nox,” I try to say in a firm voice, but it comes out breathy, and I instantly hate myself for it. He *tsks* under his breath as he starts to walk again, his pace faster than before, weaving through the halls with me in his arms. “You wanna play, Little Demon?” Nox says, his mouth skimming over the shell of my ear, making my breath hitch in response. “Let's play.” His hand wraps around the hilt of my blade, but instead of taking it from me, he moves my hand so that the blade is held more firmly in my trembling hand.

“What are you...” I trail off when Nox brings the blade back to his throat, his hand wrapping around mine and holding the knife dangerously tight against his flesh.

“Demons are fast and strong. If you want to kill one, you have to act quickly. Never falter and never question yourself, or it will be too late,” he instructs in an oddly calm voice. “And don't hold it at the center of their throats,” he continues, walking swiftly up the final flight of stairs before moving us into the cold air outside. “Demons have a thick muscle that runs down the center of their throats to protect the jugular. You'll have a better chance of a fatal blow if you go from the side of the throat. There is an artery on the right side. Sever it completely, and the Demon will bleed out before he can heal himself.”

“Are you seriously teaching her how to kill you?” Valen asks in shock, taking a break from his threats as he studies Nox and me.

Warm air greets us as Nox storms through the door of the barracks, making the Rangers sitting on the couch jump to their feet in surprise, their eyebrows hitching when they see us. Great, fucking perfect! Now there's going to be gossip during training tomorrow.

“She needs to know these things if there are Demons helping the Hunters,” Nox defends, his dark eyes locked on me as he speaks to his brother. Heat pools in my center at the intensity of his stare, and I swallow hard, holding his gaze, refusing to back down from whatever challenge he's offering. Nox's grin grows as he walks up the stairs, then kicks the door of his office open. Stepping into the familiar room, he strides over to his desk, surprising me when he sets me on the surface with a gentleness I wouldn't

expect from the asshole. “Now,” he growls, hand still wrapped around mine. “Are you going to take your chance and kill me? Because this is the only chance I’ll give you.”

My eyes widen, and my mouth drops open in shock while Valen curses at our side, tossing Nox’s cloak and gloves on an empty chair before weaving his fingers into his already mused hair.

“You want me to kill you?” I murmur in surprise, my fingers tightening around the handle of my blade.

“If you want to,” Nox whispers. “I betrayed you... right?” he asks, and I frown. Is this a trick question? Where is he going with this? “I lied and told you what you wanted to hear. I kept you alive in order to use you. You have every right to revenge, Little Demon. So this is me giving it to you.”

“Nox...” Valen grinds out in warning. I’m not sure if it’s to stop whatever game he’s playing or if he’s actually worried I will slit his brother’s throat.

“Did you?” I whisper, watching Nox’s expression as he frowns in question.

“Did I what?”

“Did you betray me? Or did you lie? They are two different things. Valen lied...” I whisper, and from the corner of my eye, I see my dream man flinch. “But he never betrayed me. In fact, he willingly gave his life to keep me safe.” Nox’s eyes widen, but he never looks away from mine, keeping me locked in this odd power struggle.

“I am what I am, Meyer. It’s not something I will apologize for, I needed you in order to save my brother,” Nox states, his voice firm and cold, and I nod.

“But would you have let me die? Did you only save me to use me? That night of the Bestia attack. The night you killed them and healed me before we...” I trailed off, not wanting to bring up the kiss we shared that has starred in several of my dreams. “Was it only to use me?” I finally finish, watching his face closely for any signs of a lie.

Nox swallows, and for the first time since we started our weird staring match, he drops his gaze, freeing me from his eye’s hypnotic spell. Keeping my knife pressed to the side of his neck, I dart my hand out and grab his cheek, surprising him and making him grunt as I force him to look back at me. “Don’t lie to me,” I warn, adding a little pressure to my knife as a warning.

Nox scowls and reaches up, grabbing my hand and prying my fingers off

his cheek. "I wanted it to be for that reason," he admits, and my heart sinks, and my shoulders drop when I see the truth of his words in his eyes. Coldness rushes over my body, wrapping me in its firm embrace.

Wow... that hurt more than I thought it was going to.

"But it wasn't," Nox finally says, voice husky as he stares into my eyes. I tilt my head to the side in shock, waiting for him to say something that might contradict his admission, but he doesn't. Slowly, I peel my fingers back from my kalis and let it fall from my grasp, dropping between us as Lennox glares at me. His hand darts out, catching the blade before it can fall in my lap, then sets it on his desk as he takes one step back from me, then another.

Valen curses and swoops in, snagging me under the arms and yanking me into his protective hold as I stare at Nox. I'm not sure if I will regret not taking Nox up on his offer to slice his throat, but what I do know is that Nox wasn't lying. There was nothing but truth in his eyes, and for now... that's enough.

"I still hate you," I finally mutter, not liking the warmth I feel when I see his stupid face. My words make the stern expression on Nox's face lighten, and he chuckles, shaking his head as he sighs.

"Good. I would think less of you if you didn't."

"You two are fucking weird," Valen snaps, his hand cupping the back of my head as he glares at his brother. "Do not pull that shit with her again," he warns Nox.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Lennox sarcastically drawls while moving away from the desk. "Besides, she won't be my problem for the next few hours." He turns and stalks to the office door. Wait, what?! I take a deep breath, ready to demand answers, but Valen beats me to the punch.

"Don't you dare do anything to her!" Valen hisses, his hands tightening protectively on me while his eyes darken. Lennox chuckles while reaching for the doorknob.

"Calm down. Weren't you listening to what I just said?" he asks while his gaze locks with mine. "You're his responsibility for the time being." Nox opens the door, and a resigned-looking Creed joins us, his shoulders hunched forward as he gives me a small, worried smile.

"Hell no!" Valen and I shout simultaneously, making Creed wince like our words are a physical blow.

"Neither of you has a choice in the matter," Lennox growls out. "Meyer needs to train more, or she will get herself killed." Valen stiffens, indignant

rage apparent on his face. “Meyer’s talents lean toward blades. She’s already decent at knife throwing, and swords are the logical next step. You and I know there isn’t a better swordsman than Creed...on either side of the Veil.” He looks over at Creed, who is uncomfortably scuffing the toe of one boot on the floor but doesn’t correct Lennox.

“I could teach her,” Valen growls, jaw tight as he gently lowers my feet to the ground. I move to step back, but his hands stay firmly on my waist. “Meyer is a beginner. I can show her the first steps, then as she progresses, she can move on to the advanced steps with Heldakar.”

Hell-what-now?

I frown up at Valen, then look at Creed, who grimaces at Valen’s name choice.

“Creed, not Heldakar. Use the names Meyer knows so we don’t confuse her,” Lennox corrects, and my eyes widen. Oh... is that Creed's real name? Like his Demon name? “And I need you here while we figure out what to do about that damn sarcophagus. We need to contact Father, and Mom is already upset I haven't sent you straight home. She’ll want confirmation you’re okay.”

Valen curses, one of his hands leaving my waist to run through his hair again, making it stand on end. I laugh, reaching up on my toes to smooth it back down.

As much as I dislike the idea of being alone with Creed right now, it's probably the best idea. Besides, I’m determined to take a page from Jordan's book and act civil. And despite what Valen said about helping me himself, Nox isn't wrong. I’ve seen Creed fight; Lennox’s assessment doesn’t seem like an exaggeration.

The thought of being trained by the man who hurt me the most has my heart warring with my head. I haven't forgiven him yet, but the idea of learning how to fight like him already spiked my adrenaline, along with my excitement. I shift in Valen’s hold and look at his serious expression. He seems to be battling with himself, his pale eyes still slightly darker than normal.

“You’re okay with this?” he asks in a low voice, and I nod curtly. “Kick his ass for me, okay?” Valen laughs at the feral grin that breaks over my face as Nox groans, eyeing Creed with sympathy.

A loud sigh of relief draws my attention, and I look to see Creed shrugging at Nox before turning in my direction, holding his hand out for me

like he just won at life. “She’s probably going to stab you,” Nox growls, eyes narrowing on Creed's outstretched hand.

“Nothing I wouldn't deserve,” Creed snaps back as Valen curses, looking from me to Creed, then back again with a conflicted expression on his handsome face. Then he surprises us all by slapping his hand in Creed’s before yanking him toward Nox’s opened door.

“Creed. A word in private, please?”

“Wait, what? But Lemon Drop—” Creed stammers as he’s yanked from the room and the door slams shut.

“Uh?” I whisper, pointing to the closed door before looking at Nox, who rolls his eyes and runs a hand over his face in exasperation. “Should I?” I nod at the door, and Nox shakes his head.

“No. Come here,” he demands, making me glare at him in response when he turns and gestures for me to follow him like a damn dog. What a prick! I stay rooted to my spot and hold in the urge to flip him the bird. Dammit, acting civil may be more challenging than I thought, especially with Nox. “Little Demon, I’m not in the mood,” Nox grinds out when he stops at the weird weapons cabinet he has hanging on the wall.

“That's nice. I’m not in the mood to be talked to like a dog... so I guess we’ll both be left unhappy,” I snap in response, crossing my arms over my chest as Nox glares at me over his shoulder.

“Meyer?” he says in a deep, gravelly voice, eyes narrowing on me as one of his fingernails lengthens, sharpening into a deadly-looking claw. I hold my breath, but for the first time since seeing Nox in his Demon form, I’m not scared. I’m not sure if it's from the conversation we just had or if I’ve become numb to all the crazy shit going on around me.

“Yes, Lennox?”

“Would you please get your ass over here so I can give you a damn sword?” he grinds out, running the claw over the pad of his thumb before sliding it on the wood. Black sparks of magic appear for a moment before the cabinet opens, revealing Lennox’s impressive weapons arsenal. I glare at him, but the urge to look at all the pretty swords and knives is too much to resist, so I walk over, ignoring Nox’s smug look as I peer into the cabinet.

“Wow,” I mutter, reaching out to run my hand over a particularly beautiful kalis. The handle is gold engraved with a long dragon, his head by the blade and tail wrapped around a black stone at the end. And the blade is made of some kind of black material.

“Don’t!” Nox practically shouts, snatching my hand in his as he yanks me away from the blade in question.

“What the hell, Lennox?” I snarl, looking up at the big Viking and glaring my displeasure.

“It’s onyx!” he snarls back like that somehow explains his weird behavior.

“And what of it? Oh, wait... shit. Onyx is for protection against Demons,” I whisper, and Nox nods.

“That cuts you, and it will hurt worse than anything you have felt in your entire life.” I frown at him, seriously doubting his words. Not that getting cut with the blade wouldn’t hurt, but I doubt it would be worse than getting attacked by a Bestia and carrying the scars on my back for the rest of my life.

“Okay. I won’t touch it,” I agree, staying calm rather than yelling at him. He was only trying to be helpful and ensure I didn’t get hurt. See... I can be nice. “But why have a blade that can hurt you?” I ask as Nox releases his hold, stepping back in front of the cabinet.

“Not all Demons are good, Meyer. It’s only smart to keep one on hand,” Nox lectures, reaching into the cupboard and coming out with a small sword. “Here,” he offers, turning and gesturing for me to take the tiny thing. I frown and reach for it, my eyes widening when I realize the sword is bigger and much heavier than I initially thought. It had only appeared small in Nox’s enormous hands.

“Oh, it’s heavy.”

Nox chuckles and nods. “It needs to be in order to inflict some damage. Don’t worry. Creed will ensure you’re strong enough to wield it,” Nox says confidently, surprising me as he smiles just the smallest amount. I watch him for a moment, looking from his dark eyes to the small hoop nose ring, then to his full lips. As much as I hate it, Nox is good-looking, and when he smiles... Well, he’s almost otherworldly.

“Thanks,” I mutter awkwardly, as I nod at the sword and roll my lips together. Nox grunts, nodding back at me and suddenly, everything feels... weird. Shit, what do I say next? Thankfully, the door to Nox’s office opens, letting in Creed and Valen. Both of them look a little red in the face, but Creed smiles at his brother while Valen sighs and nods, then looks at me.

“You ready?” he asks, and I frown.

“Like... right this moment? Because I’m hungry,” I admit, making Creed laugh.

“We can grab food first. I haven't had lunch yet either.”

“Good idea. Razar?” Nox says in a low voice, making me frown and look around Creed and Valen to see if the cloaked man is standing behind them. “You want to accompany them down to the cafeteria and make sure the three Hunters we discussed this morning aren't giving Elaine any trouble?”

Confused, I look around, then watch as Razar steps from the shadows in the corner of Nox's office, his cloak pulled low over his face, hiding his stunning features as he nods and leaves the office.

“What the hell? Has he been here the whole time?” I ask, not sure if I'm impressed or terrified.

“Of course,” Nox scoffs, then looks at Creed.

“Yeah! I know, geez. You two need to take a chill pill,” Creed grumbles, pointing at Valen and then Nox, cutting off whatever Nox was about to tell him. Nox gives Creed a dark look before nodding at him. “We need to talk about everything Valen and I discovered in the church, but it can wait until I talk with Father. Make sure she is well fed,” he adds, gesturing at me as he looks down at some papers on his desk. “If you see Elaine, send her up. I want an update about the Russians.”

“Sure,” Creed agrees, stepping up next to me and taking the heavy sword from my hands with a low, impressed whistle. “Damn. She's a beauty,” he praises under his breath, eyes flashing in excitement as he runs them over the length of the sword.

“Right?!” I whisper back, running my finger over the delicate-looking vines and roses, taking a moment to appreciate the pretty sword. Just then... in a room filled with three hot Demons, my stomach decides to voice its impatience for food and rumbles so loudly I almost jump.

“Uh, sorry,” I whisper in mortification. “I haven't eaten very much over the last couple of days,” I try to explain as my face heats. Valen growls under his breath as Nox nods at Creed, widening his eyes at his brother as Creed grabs my hand. But Valen is faster, yanking me to him and placing the softest of kisses on my forehead, sending shivers down my spine as he sighs then leans down, our foreheads touching in an oddly sweet moment. “Give him hell, Mia Regina,” he rasps and I nod as a growl echoes around the room, making it hard to figure out which Demon it came from. Creed steps forward, lacing our fingers as he pulls me out of Valen's arms and toward the door.

“Come on, Lemon Drop. Let's feed you so you're not so hangry,” Creed chuckles, ignoring my scowl at him as I try, and fail, to pull my hand out of

his.



Meyer

S *MACK!*

“Ow! Dammit Creed!” I hiss, shoving him in the chest as I rub the back of my hand, making him shake his head, irritation clear on his face.

After an awkward as fuck training session yesterday, I had been exhausted, gone back up to Creed's room, and didn't leave until Jordan came knocking on the door this morning. Creed hadn't tried to come into his room, which I wasn't sure if I was happy or disappointed about.

Being in such close contact with him yesterday had my body heated, and I was just about ready to jump his delicious body the last time he stepped behind me, reaching around to correct my fighting stance. Having every inch of his firm, muscled chest pressed to my back made me feel things I've been trying to forget.

The moment Creed announced we were done training for the day, I rushed from the room, declining his offer to walk me to the cafeteria for dinner. For some reason, I felt like my skin was on fire; the need for contact had grown so strong it was like a physical itch. I had to give myself three freaking orgasms in Creed's tub before I finally felt like I wasn't about to combust, and I promptly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When I awoke this morning, I thought I could feel Valen next to me, but the other side of Creed's bed was cold, and I was left feeling... alone. I hated it. I came down for morning training only to be told by Nox that I was working with Creed again, which put me in a sour as fuck mood.

“Meyer.” Creed grinds out my name like a curse, and I know he's upset

with my lack of hand-eye coordination. But this is the fifth time he's whacked me with that damn wooden sword, and I'm about ready to take it from him, and shove it up his ass! "You're supposed to block my hits! I told you my exact moves, what I would be doing and when!" he growls, eyes widening as I glare at him. "And you still can't block the hit!"

"Yeah, well, you're like a damn ninja and move about a million miles per hour! Slow down so that I can learn the steps," I explain, and Creed sighs like I'm being unreasonable before stepping forward, grabbing my hands, and placing them back where he told me to the first time. He's so close that I can feel his breath, smell his clean, sweet scent. I swallow hard, trying to ignore the sudden urge I have to lean forward and capture his soft lips in a heated kiss. My nipples are rock fucking hard in my bra, and it makes it difficult to concentrate when he growls at me like he's currently doing.

I think I might be broken. Why does fighting with these men turn me on so much?

"Hold here, with your dominant hand on top and the other below," he instructs through gritted teeth.

"I am!" I insist, and Creed shakes his head.

"You start that way, but always swap them back after a few exchanges. Stop doing that! You have to move faster, and you're tripping yourself up by thinking of your hand placement too much. Just hold the damn thing and block my strikes. Get out of your head!"

"I'm trying! I just need a little more time. Slow down a little. I'm doing my best!" I grind out.

"We don't have time for me to move slow, Lemon Drop," he pleads, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Our enemy is practically on our doorstep, and all four of us will be required to fight. I need to know that you can defend yourself if it comes down to it. Nox has already instructed Razar to keep an eye on you during the fight, but if he gets cornered, there's not much else we can do."

"He what?!" I shout, pointing my wooden sword at Creed's chest and poking him with it. "Does Nox want me dead? Because that's a surefire way for it to happen." Creed huffs and swats at the sword I'm poking him with.

"Razar will be the best bet for keeping you alive if there are any other Beastia around. He won't attack without orders from Nox." Creed rolls his eyes like I'm being dramatic, and I growl under my breath, squaring my feet off and holding the sword like he taught me, keeping my shoulders straight

and my core muscles tight.

“You're an asshole. And you only believe that because he's your brother. He would never hurt you,” I snarl, not waiting for him to bring his sword up before swinging mine at his pretty face. Creed laughs, blocking my blow without a single thought.

“Going in on your right,” he warns before spinning his sword so fast in his hand I lose track of it. But the loud *WHACK* and the following sting on my opposite hand tells me I already missed the opportunity to block his blow, even after he vocalized it for me. I squeak and drop the sword to the thick mat at my feet, rubbing the back of my hand and glaring at him. “You have no idea what you're talking about. And you still didn't block my blow even after spelling it out for you. And I went slower,” he points out, *tsking* under his breath.

“You're enjoying this too much,” I accuse as Creed smirks.

“Making you mad at me? No, but having your attention...” he shrugs, and his smile grows, making my belly flip in response. “Grab your sword and let's go again. Same circuit, but this time try to block at least one blow,” he pleads, spinning the wooden sword in his hand like it's a damn toothpick.

I glare at my own sword, then look across the small private training room Creed brought me to where my new, shiny sword sits propped next to Creed's own two swords.

“If we're so short on time, why am I training with this and not the real thing?” I ask, genuinely curious. Creed follows my gaze, then snorts, looking back at me with amused eyes.

“You can't even block my fake sword with warning, and you want to use real ones?” he asks incredulously.

“That one is much heavier... Why not train me on that? What's the point in using this when it's not even close to the weapon I will be using in a matter of days?” I ask, looking from my sword to Creed as he furrows his brows, looking like he's actually considering my idea.

I'm not going to lie, the idea of training with an actual sword scares the crap out of me, but I also remember how practicing throwing knives with actual blades made a world of difference. I had cut my hands so many times I lost track, but it only pushed me to get better faster in order to stop getting hurt. Granted, I think a sword may do more damage than a small cut to the hand, but I also know Creed won't do anything too bad. I may not trust him, but I no longer think he wants to hurt me.

“Fair point. But I want it to go on the record that I don’t think you’re ready for that,” Creed finally admits, nodding at me and making my heart skip with excitement and fear as he walks over and grabs my blade, leaving his behind.

Oh, shit. Maybe I’m being stupid by doing this.

Creed walks back over and holds my pretty sword out to me, and I swallow hard as I take it. Yeah... I’m definitely stupid. There is no maybe about it. But I also think the threat of cutting off an appendage will force me to practice harder. I stroke my finger over the blade and smile just as Creed places a hand over the tip of the sword and starts to mutter hushed words under his breath. Blue magic flows from his fingers as he runs his hand down the sides of the blade, and I frown, moving my hand out of his way.

“What are you doing?” I ask in confusion as he pulls back his hand and smirks, leaning down until our noses touch, making me blink rapidly in surprise.

“Do you really think I’m going to risk your safety, Lemon Drop?” he asks in a low voice, his eyes moving from mine down to my lips. I self-consciously flick my tongue out, making sure I don’t have something left from lunch in the corner of my mouth, and Creed groans and stands back upright as he reaches down and adjusts the big bulge in his pants.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I reach my hand back up, moving to run my finger over the sharp blade, then gasp when I feel resistance. That little shit put some kind of magical pillow on my sword! I can’t even touch the blade!

“What? No, this completely destroys the whole purpose of using the sword!” I snap, realizing the danger I was relying on is now gone! “I can’t feel the blade at all! It’s soft! That wooden sword hurt more than this.”

“Yeah. That’s the whole point of the spell, Meyer,” Creed drawls, obviously still irritated with me. “Besides, we are going for training with the correct weight. There is no way in hell I would trust you to use a real sword right now.”

“You broke it!” I yell, grabbing him and whacking him on the forehead with its pillowy softness. Creed’s eyes flash with anger just as his hand snaps out, grabs my wrist, and spins me away from him.

“What are you? Ow! Creed!” I scream when he brings the flat end of his wooden sword down on my ass cheek. The sting of it makes me rock up on my toes, and heat blossoms in my core as I drop my sword to the ground, rubbing at my now sore ass.

“Did you just spank me?!” I hiss out, yanking my wrist from his hold and flipping back around him as he spins his wooden sword in the air. Creed opens his mouth, cocky expression firmly in place, and I can't help myself. I launch myself at him, jumping up into his arms so that he has no option but to catch me or let me fall. Creed curses, dropping the wooden sword like I had hoped as his big hands wrap around my waist, and I snatch it out of the air before reaching around him and paddling him firmly on the ass.

“What the? Fuck, ouch! Meyer, stop it!” Creed shouts, and I spank him with the wooden sword as much as possible, knowing my chance at revenge will be short. “Ow. Give it back!” Creed holds me to him with one hand under my ass as he reaches behind him, trying to grab the sword, and I smack him on the back of the hand, making him curse.

“See! Not so fun, is it? Maybe you should be faster, and you wouldn't get smacked!” I laugh as he glowers at me.

“Really?” he growls, dropping his hold on me so that I will fall, but I tighten my legs around his waist and cling to him as I desperately try to get in a few more smacks. “You little brat! We don't have time for this. Give it back!”

“No!” I growl back, darting to one side and then the other as Creed tries to make a grab for the sword.

“Meyer!” Creed says, stumbling back when I lean too far to one side, losing his balance just before we crash to the ground, him falling on his back with me straddling his stomach. “*Umph!* Dammit, Meyer!” he complains, not missing a beat as his hands wrap around my wrist, holding the sword, and shakes, making my entire body move back and forth as I fight to keep hold of my weapon. “It's mine!” Creed shouts as I bat his hands with my free one, trying to get free.

“I won it fair and square! Besides, you'll just spank me with it if I give it back,” I accuse, yanking my sword-wielding arm free and making a run for it. I dive off Creed's body and try to scramble to my feet, but Creed is too fast. His hand latches around my ankle and pulls me back to him as he gets to his knees, tugging me under him so fast I gasp in surprise.

“You bet your sweet ass I am! I may have more self-control than my brothers, Lemon Drop. But I'm still a Demon. *Do. Not. Test. Me!*” he grinds out, green eyes bright as he grins ferally down at me, his teeth sharper than normal. His big hands circle each of my wrists and then pin them to the ground on either side of my head before he leans down, crashing his lips to

mine.

It's a punishing kiss—raw and full of the pain and anger we both feel for each other. Creed's mouth devours mine, his tongue pressing to my lips, asking for entry. I open, letting him in, then bite down hard, capturing his guttural groan with another harsh kiss. I grin my victory against his lips and pull back, making Creed snarl in response. His hands tighten on my wrists as he chases my lips, refusing me any space.

Suddenly, he pulls us upright, yanking me with him, keeping our lips fused as he reaches over and plucks the sword from my hand, tossing it to the other side of the training room. I tear my lips from his and scowl at him, but Creed only shakes his head, his fingers weaving into my hair and pulling me back in for another hot, breathless kiss.

“Kiss now... fight later,” he demands, lips moving against mine as I melt into his possessive hold. I kiss him with every ounce of emotion I don't feel comfortable saying out loud as I tangle my hands into his soft curls and fist them tight.

“This doesn't mean I forgive you,” I gasp out between kisses, our lips swollen, our chests heaving with barely restrained passion.

“That's okay. I'll earn it back, baby. Just don't shut me out,” Creed gasps, his hips bucking up, cock jumping as I give him everything I have left to offer. His warm, comforting scent surrounds me, the softest hints of amber and citrus playing in my mind, comforting me and reminding me of... Oh! Oh fuck!

Tearing my mouth from his, I gasp and lean back, pressing my palms to his chest when Creed growls, pupils blown wide as he lunges for my lips like an animal.

“Wait,” I gasp and shake my head, trying to slide off his lap and then whimpering when Creed's hands fall from my hair and clasp onto my waist, keeping me on top of him. “Creed, wait!” I shout as he snarls, leaning forward, running his tongue up the column of my throat, and making everything inside me light up. “I can't... I... Valen,” I whisper, feeling like a complete and utter bimbo when Creed freezes, his eyes widening for a moment before he chuckles.

“Guess he wasn't lying,” Creed mutters, releasing my hair and leaning back, supporting himself on his hands as he stares at me, heat and longing heavy in his hooded eyes.

“What? Who wasn't lying?” I ask in confusion, and Creed sighs but nods,

pursing his lips.

“Valen. He heard you mention us fucking that first day, and he’s been up my ass about our relationship ever since. He pulled me out of Nox’s office to tell me that you two had already started to form a Legion bond and that he wasn't going anywhere,” Creed says softly, tilting his head to the side as he reaches out to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over my swollen lips.

“Is that what it's called? A Legion bond?” I ask, my eyes fluttering closed as Creed’s thumb moves from my lips down to my neck.

“Mhmm,” Creed rasps, sitting back up as his hand wraps around the side of my neck, reminding me of Valen. I’m at a loss for what to say next. All I want to do is grab Creed and pick up where we left off, but I can’t deny the attraction and safety I also feel in Valen’s arms. The need to be with Creed is strong, but I'm scared to let him close again, and with Valen... Shit. There is honestly no comparing the two. They both do something for me, the attraction equal, and I feel like a freaking whore for kissing Creed while wanting Valen as well.

Then my brain chooses that moment to remind me of a dark pair of eyes staring down at me while he ravages my mouth, his enormous hands holding me close as he takes control of every inch of my body. No! Nope, not happening. I slam the door on the reminder of Nox’s body on top of mine and shake my head, making Creed raise a confused brow at me as my arousal only grows at the thought of each of them.

“I’m a freaking bimbo,” I groan, bringing my hands up and covering the blush heating my cheeks. Creed chuckles, and I glare through my fingers at him as he sits forward, pulls my hands from my face, and then kisses me!

“Creed,” I protest, but it's half-hearted at best.

“You’re not a bimbo, Lemon Drop. If that is the case, almost every Demon in Versipellis is as well. Hell, my father had two wives besides my mother and three Legion mates. It's just your Demon side coming out to play,” he whispers against my mouth, and I frown.

“What? You had... three moms?” I grumble into his lips when he doesn't stop kissing me.

“Four, actually. But my dad was only mated to three of them. The other one was in his Legion, so she was still considered my mom.” My brain implodes at his words, and I blink a few times, then groan as Creed bites my lips, trying to distract me from my thoughts.

“But Valen,” I whisper, trying to hold on to the last amount of my self-

control.

“Already knows we have been together,” Creed replies, his hands moving up my thighs and slipping under my shirt, his warm fingers trailing up my stomach toward my breasts.

“And he’s okay with that?” I ask, and Creed snorts.

“Hell no. Valen is almost as possessive as Nox is. It's in their genetics. I think it has to do with them being royalty. They're not used to sharing what they think is theirs. But we have an agreement.”

“An agreement?” I ask in a sharp tone, and Creed growls in frustration as his fingers reach up, grabbing the top of my bra, yanking it down then pinching my nipples between his fingers. I shout at the burst of pleasurable pain, my back arching as my clit throbs, liquid warmth pooling in my center as Creed grinds himself against me. “Oh fuck!” I whimper, my hands moving to Creed’s pants, yanking at the clasp until the button pops, then shoving them down his hips.

“Fuck, I need you naked,” Creed rasps, removing his hands from my shirt before tearing the fabric up and over my head. Then he loops a finger under my bra between my breasts and rips it in two, exposing my breasts to him in an instant.

“Creed! That was one of only two bras I own! Dammit!” I snarl, hitting him and making the excited smile return to his face before he bends down and kisses me, stopping my rant as I moan into his mouth.

“Fuck, you're so damn feisty when you're mad. It makes me so fucking hard,” he admits. “I’m going to fuck you,” he rasps, moving his hands to my hips and yanking my pants down my legs, taking my panties with them. He’s not asking... But he's also not demanding. It's more like he’s telling me what's about to happen in order for me to say no if that's what I want.

“Shut up and do it already,” I grind out, grabbing his shirt and yanking it over his head, exposing miles of golden skin. Fuck! Why is he so damn beautiful? Creed's laugh is dark and full of promise as he kicks off his boxers, and I spread my legs in invitation. My body feels like it's on fucking fire, and I’m about to burst if I have to wait a moment longer to feel him inside me.

“So bossy. Are you wet for me?” he asks, dragging two fingers through my lower lips, hissing when they come back drenched in my arousal.

“Creed!” I practically beg, bucking my hips and wrapping my legs around his hips, hitching my ankles at the top of his ass, urging him closer.

“God, you smell fucking delicious! I want to taste you so bad,” he growls

as he takes his dick in hand, rubbing up and down my cunt until he's drenched with me. "Deep breath, baby. This isn't going to be gentle," he warns as he thrusts forward, impaling me in one thrust, forcing his dick in deep, making me slam my eyes shut and scream his name.



Creed

Meyer's mouth falls open with a cry that I swallow with my lips as she clenches and flutters around my length, her wet heat so fucking tight that it almost hurts as I thrust as deep as her body will allow.

She clings to me, moaning as my cock swells so fucking hard in her sweet little pussy, and I have to bite my cheek in order to resist the urge to lean forward and bite her. Thank God she hadn't drawn blood when she bit me earlier, or I would have a hard time resisting the need to claim her. She already has an unfinished mate bond with Nox and probably won't be too thrilled if I start one of my own without her consent.

"Creed! Holy fuck!" she screams, head thrown back, eyes slamming shut as I hold myself deep in her tight cunt, rocking my hips against hers as she wiggles and thrashes beneath me. Her cheeks flush a pretty pink as she hands over all control, her body melting into my touch. The rush it gives me is indescribable. Handing over control like this during such an intimate act is rare and only happens if a female Demon feels safe with her mate. And watching Meyer relax into me, close her eyes, and lower all her defenses is like a shot of lust straight to my dick.

I drag my fingers through her long hair and lick at the seam of her lips. She opens for me, her tongue darting out, seeking mine with a tentative flick as I enter her soft mouth, kissing her. I slowly draw my hips back, then snap them forward again, our hips colliding with enough force that her small body slides a few inches up, granting her some space and frustrating me more.

Grinning, I hold onto her hips, my fingers digging into her soft flesh as I

lean over her, slamming her down as I thrust forward again. The sensation of her throbbing sex strangling my length is almost too much as she tears her lips from mine and cries out in pained pleasure. My hand slams over her mouth, muffling her screams as I lean back, hooking her curvy thighs over my hips and spreading my knees wide. I pull her onto me, making her back arch off the floor until only her shoulders are touching the pad beneath us.

“Shh, baby. You don't want someone coming in and interrupting us, do you? I would hate to have to kill a man for looking at what's mine,” I rasp, pulling my hand from her lips as I look down at where we are connected and groan at the tantalizing sight. Meyer's eyes widen at my words, shock and arousal filling her eyes as her pussy flutters around me. Meyer may play at innocence, but she can't hide that dark primal side that likes to play when we fuck.

The way her hands weave into my hair, pulling me to her possessively... The way her nails drag down my back as I wring every ounce of pleasure from her tight little body... Her constant need to bite when we kiss. All of the small growls that break from her lips as I fuck her deep and hard. Meyer is a Demon, and she can't help herself from acting like it at times.

“You wouldn't,” she hisses as I lift a brow and bring my hand down hard on her glistening clit, tearing a gasping curse from between her lips.

“Try me, baby,” I growl, using my fingers to spread her swollen lower lips and watch with sick fascination as my thick cock stretches her tight cunt. “Fuck... Look at you taking my cock so well,” I mutter in praise, making her eyelids flutter and droop as I slowly circle my thumb around her clit. I watch, mesmerized by the sight of myself so deep in Meyer's tiny body, pulling back until only the head of my cock is inside, then driving my hips forward, drawing those delicious cries of pleasure from her lips. “Such a good, fucking girl,” I growl, punctuating my words with a deeper, harder thrust.

“Shit! Creed!” Meyer gasps, her hands shooting out, pressing against my tensed abs, trying to gentle my thrusts and making me snarl in response. Releasing her hip, I grab her wrists in one hand, yanking her up as I cup the back of her neck, tilting her face downward as I lean forward and nip at the lobe of her ear, making her body tremble delicately in my possessive hold.

“Watch as I fuck your tight little pussy, Meyer. Look how fucking perfect you open for my cock,” I growl into her ear as I thrust my hips up, adding pressure to her neck to keep her in place as I drive myself so deep inside her, my balls brush her round ass. Meyer's mouth drops open in response, pupils

blown wide as I hold myself deep inside her, but all that comes out is a choked exhale. For a moment, I freeze, worried I've hurt her, but then she rocks her hips against mine, then circles them as her cunt clamps down on my length, making me see fucking stars.

"Creed, harder," she moans, her rough voice makes my cock throb in response as I slam against her, pistoning my hips as we watch my cock fuck into her swollen, glistening sex. The telling tingle at the base of my spine warns me that if I don't gain some fucking composure soon, this will all be over way too fast and I'm not ready for her to go back to hating me. I need to hold her... To feel her wrapped around me.

I need to mate her... wait! No! *Fuuuuck!*

I can feel my teeth sharpening in response to my thoughts, nicking my tongue as my magic flares, seeking out the small amount I felt from her the first time we were together in my room. It comes like a welcomed breeze, drifting around me, tantalizingly sweet and tempting. She has no idea she's metaphorically offering herself up to me—mind, body, and soul. So ripe and fresh for the taking.

The need to take it, to wrap her so wholly up in me that she forgets every other man in her life, is strong. But then I remember the talk I had with Valen yesterday, and I curse. Yanking her off my slick-covered dick, I toss her back on the mats, ignoring her gasp of surprise as I dive down and bury my face between her creamy thighs. The taste of her fills my senses, and I growl into her heated flesh, licking then sucking at her arousal, wanting to memorize its sweet, tangy flavor.

"*OH!* Hell, yes. Right there!" Meyer's small fingers wrap themselves in my curls as she grinds her sweet cunt into my mouth, taking some of my control away as she rides my face from below. My cock jerks at her approval, and I have to reach down and squeeze the base of my length in order to keep myself from spilling from her taste alone.

"Creed!" My name comes off her lips like a prayer, and I groan, plunging my fingers into her hot, wet pussy, making her thighs jerk and quiver as I suck her little bud into my mouth. "Oh, fuck," she squeals, hips bucking up into my mouth as I pump my hand hard and fast, curling my fingers up and rubbing at that spot deep inside her until she screams. I snarl as her thighs clamp around my ears, her body flushing red as her release takes her over the edge, lapping at her cum as I fist my leaking cock, gentling my thrusts as I ride her through her orgasm.

The moment her thighs relax, I sit back up, grab one of her legs, and hook it over my shoulder as I line my cock up with her entrance and slam myself back inside. Meyers's bright green eyes lock with my own as I fuck her without restraint, coaxing those breathy moans and curses from her like they are my own personal song, and I lose all coherent thought. Fucking into her, I feel my release spiraling through me, her pussy clamping down on my cock so hard it feels like it might snap in two. Meyer's lips twist into a devilish smile as she arches her hips to meet mine, thrust for thrust, her small hands running up the soft curve of her belly before she cups her pink little nipples and pinches them, making my balls tighten in response. Then she whispers the three words that completely ruin me, taking all the dominance and control I had of her and turning it on me.

"Come for me," she whispers, eyes hooded as she moans out another release, her pussy fluttering around me as she milks me for everything I have.

"Fuck! *Fuuuck*, Meyer!" I shout, slamming myself deep into her throbbing core and coming so damn hard my vision darkens. I can feel my cock jerk inside her, and my body trembles with my release, my hands grip Meyer's hips so hard, I'm worried I may have left marks on her pale skin. After a moment, I take a breath, then gently lower Meyer's leg from my shoulder, and fall to my side, scooping her into my arms and pressing her sweat-slicked body to mine as we pant in unison.

"Holy shit," she whispers, her hand moving to her chest as I press my nose into her neck, breathing her in as I slowly come down from the amazing, mind-blowing sex we just had on the damn floor. Shit. I should have taken her to my bed. Meyer deserves better than an angry fuck on the floor.

"Uh-huh," I agree, unable to form actual words just yet.

"Creed?" she whispers, and I close my eyes, enjoying the sound of my name on her pretty lips.

"Yes, Lemon Drop?" I murmur, brushing my lips against her neck in a gentle kiss.

"Would you have really killed someone for walking in on us?" she asks, and I frown. She doesn't sound mad... more curious than anything.

"Depends," I answer honestly, wrapping my arm tighter around her waist when she shifts a little, getting more comfortable.

"Depends on what?"

"Who it was coming through the door and if they looked at you or not. Demons don't share well unless they are in a Legion, Meyer. That's why we

have a Legion bond. It's in our nature to covet and protect what's ours. If it had been one of my brothers"— I shrug, and Meyer looks over her shoulder at me with wide eyes—"I wouldn't have cared and would have left it up to you whether they stayed or left. But if it had been someone else, then probably." Meyer's eyes widen, and her lips pull into a frown.

"That's not okay. You know that, right? What if it were some innocent person walking in here to workout?" she asks in a clipped tone.

"As long as they left without gawking at your amazing tits and ass, they would have kept their life," I reply. Meyer scowls, and I laugh, nipping at her neck and earning a breathy whimper that shoots straight to my already hardening cock.

"What if a girl came in here, but instead of leaving immediately, she watched me. Her eyes skimming my naked body as I..." An angry growl from the girl in my arms cuts off my taunting, and I laugh in delight. "Yeah, that's what I thought. How's that Demon possessiveness going for you right now, Lemon Drop? Don't get mad at me when you would do the same thing."

"I wouldn't kill her," Meyer jumps to defend herself, then huffs in frustration. "Just maybe stab her in the leg or something," she mutters under her breath, and I can't stop the laughter this time as it shakes my body.

"Uh-huh," I agree, pressing another few kisses to her neck. Meyer tenses, then tries to sit up, and I frown, holding her close and shaking my head. "Please... just one more minute. I just want to hold you like this for a moment longer," I plead, closing my eyes as I curl myself around her back. "Then I'll walk you back up to my room, and you can go back to hating me." The words physically hurt me to voice out loud, and I exhale sharply as I cling to Meyer like she might disappear if I let go.

"I-I don't hate you, Creed. But I don't trust you, and I'm not sure it was smart of us to do this..." She gestures to the floor where we just fucked each other's brains out, and I scowl, hating that she already regrets having sex with me but also understanding why.

"I wasn't lying when I said I'm going to earn your trust back, Lemon Drop. I'm sorry for what happened, for lying to you. But I need you to know I would have never let Nox use you to open that church if it meant costing you your life. I would have died before I let that happen," I whisper into her ear. Meyer nods but stays silent, and I hold her for as long as she lets me while planning how I can make this better. Because, at this point in my life,

even with everything that's going on... Meyer is all I care about, and there is no point in fighting if I can't have her in the end.



Meyer

The bitter cold on my face is the first thing I notice when I open my eyes to look around a frozen landscape I've never seen before. From what I can tell, it's morning, and I wince, squinting my eyes as I look around, trying to remember how I got here. The last thing I remember is Creed kissing me goodnight at his door, telling me his room is mine until I can trust him again, and that Valen was planning on coming by before he went to bed, so I laid down to wait for him, then nothing.

The sound of a bird chirping in a nearby tree catches my attention, and I look at the small grey and white bird perched on a pine tree branch. "What the hell?" I whisper, stepping forward and then frowning when snow starts to enter my shoes. Did I have a hole in my boots?

I glance down at my shoes, then do a double take at the formal blue dress I have on that goes all the way to the ground, covering my feet.

"Did I fall asleep?" I muse to myself as I walk a few steps forward. Is that what this is? I look around me, trying to figure out where I am, and then my eyes widen as I look up... and up... and up! The mountain above is imposing and beautiful, its snow-covered peaks so high that the clouds completely cover them. "I'm not on the mountain," I whisper in awe, then look around again, noticing for the first time that the snow drifts are much smaller, and the air temperature is far too warm to be near the castle.

"I'm dreaming," I realize. Now that I know it's a dream, I can feel something familiar... yet different about it. The danger isn't here, but something still makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Valen?” I call out, wondering if I somehow dream walked into his dreams this time. He said it might be possible, but it hasn't happened yet.

Deep male voices catch my attention, and I hesitantly step forward, straining my ears as I try to hear what they're saying, just as two men step from around a tree, their heads ducked in conversation as they stride in my direction.

“Oh shit,” I grumble, darting a look to one side, then another, realizing I'm standing in the center of a clearing with no place to hide. “Of course,” I grumble, facing the men, giving them an awkward smile, and waving at them.

“Oh, uh. Hi. Do you know—” I say as they walk up to me, but then stop when they don't look up from their conversation. “Ummm,” I whisper, stepping forward to meet them, then gasp as they walk through me like fucking ghosts! “What the hell?!” I shout, patting my stomach and then shoulders, making sure everything's still intact before I twist on my heel and watch the men retreat, walking through a few trees and disappearing.

“Okay... ghosts are new for me, but let's just roll with it,” I mutter to myself as I hitch up the skirt of my dress and chase after them, wanting to figure out where the hell I am and if Valen is nearby. I need to find him so he can explain what's going on. Running to keep up, I dart between the trees the two men walked through and catch up just as they approach what looks like a giant log cabin.

“Nice! I bet it's warm in there. My vote is for going inside,” I tell the men who can't hear me while I look around. There is a wide path that heads down from the cabin and a narrower one that climbs up the foothills beyond before vanishing in the thick wooded area of the mountains. Is this the gatehouse Nox mentioned was at the base of the mountain?

I look back to the two men who finally stop walking, one leaning against the corner of the cabin while the other nods, looking at the lower path a few times like he's waiting for something. They are dressed in familiar black clothes, one with a blue stripe down the sleeves of his fighting leathers, the other with red. At both of their hips, there is a shining kalis blade, the standard knife carried by every Hunter.

“The Regalis brothers are set to show up sometime today. I'm supposed to escort them to the castle to meet with Senior Axford,” the one with the blue stripe says, running his hand through his dark brown hair as he looks back at the lower trail.

“You think they are going to join up? I heard the Russians forced them

out for helping with the breeding rings,” the one with the red stripe mutters with a grim smile. The blue guy shrugs and looks around, eyeing the trees behind me with a frown before looking back to the red guy.

“Axford is a convincing man. I’m sure he’ll earn their support one way or another.” The sounds of voices makes the two guys stand up straight as a man comes into view on the lower trails. He rides a horse at a gentle gait and nods at the men who dip their heads in greeting, just as an entire group of men, some on horses, others walking, slowly appear on the path below. Three more Hunters emerge from the cabin as a man with long, greasy black hair rides to the center of the group and dismounts his gray horse, sneering at the men who have walked up to greet him.

“The Regalis crew, I assume?” the red guy says with a smile as he holds out his hand in greeting. Greasy hair man looks down his nose at the young Hunter, then yanks his gloves off his hands and sidesteps the men, staring up at the mountain above with a sparkle of excitement in his dull green eyes. The large group of men and horses draw to a stop behind him, taking up the majority of the path as they watch their leader with closed-off expressions.

“Lennox Regalis,” he sneers, not looking at the men as he sniffs and wipes his running nose with the back of his hand. I grimace, wrinkling my nose before I realize what this man just said. Lennox Regalis... at the base of the mountain. My eyes widen as I piece together what I'm seeing. The list of the Regalis brothers written on the paper Nox had kept in that locked box on his desk—the word *DECEASED* in big letters next to the names.

The distinct snapping of a branch nearby is my only warning of what's about to happen as I spin toward the forested area behind the cabin. My heart races as an arrow flies through the air, arching in perfect form before it slams into the neck of the greasy Lennox Regalis. I cover my mouth with both hands in shock as I watch a cloaked figure step out from the tree line and pull back his hood, revealing a face that I know... yet is different. It's lighter and a little softer than the one I have grown accustomed to.

“Razar?” In the next moment, my heart drops into my stomach as a large, black *Beastia* prowls next to the man who looks like Razar, and I have a feeling this must be the brother Creed had talked about. The one they lost in this very fight. The similarity between this man and Razar is unmistakable. They look identical in every way but coloring.

Where Razar is dark, this man is light. Where Razar is cold and hard, this man is soft and kind-looking. Even after releasing the arrow that just tore

through a man's throat, Razar's brother looks like one of the kindest men I have ever seen, which only makes him more terrifying.

There is a horrendous gurgling sound behind me, and I peek over my shoulder in time to see the real Lennox Regalis grab his now bleeding throat. His hands wrap around the arrow sticking out at either side as blood spews from his dry, cracked lips. Then he crumples, falling to the snow below, staining its pristine white surface red.

There is a brief moment of stunned silence as two more cloaked fighters step out from the tree line, one significantly larger with an enormous ax clasped in his hand at his side, then... chaos erupts. Arrows are launched through the air, and men run at the Demons as four more cloaked figures step to their sides. But what sends me to my knees in fright is the bone-chilling howl that Razar releases moments before he throws himself at three men on horseback. Men run around me, never seeing me curled up on the ground, watching their inevitable deaths as the Demon Princes bring them to their knees.

Oh God! I need to get out of this dream! "Valen?" I shout, looking around for my dream guy. "Valen!" I spin, then freeze as a large chest stands directly in front of me, then peer up into the dark green eyes of a Demon Prince. "Nox," I whisper, stepping back a little so I don't have to hurt my neck looking up at him. Nox's eyes furrow as he watches me, his ax raised slightly at his side, and then they widen in recognition.

"Meyer?" he rasps and shakes his head, confusion running over his face as he looks around him. "What... how are you here?" he asks, but then his eyes narrow, and he swings his ax, making me shout in surprise and stumble back from him in fright. Just as I move away from him, a particularly large man rushes Nox, a sword almost as big as Nox's ax in his hand, and I gasp as the men begin to fight. They twist and turn, their movements so precise and smooth that it looks like they're engaging in a deadly dance.

"Meyer! Get out of here, now!" Nox demands, swinging his ax at the man's head and splitting it in two, making me gag as blood splatters all over Nox and the surrounding area.

"I-I can't!" I stammer, stumbling back a few feet as more Hunters rush from the cabin, weapons raised as they descend on Nox. My hands move to my sides, desperate for a blade or any kind of weapon that I can help with. But would that even help? The only one that can see me so far has been Nox and this is a dream. There is no changing the outcome.

On the other side of the clearing is the brother I have never met—the one I'll never meet—as he fights, blade in hand, twisting and turning, blocking blow after blow before doling out his own deadly attacks. There is a trail of bloody bodies lying crumpled on the ground behind him, and I shiver, a sense of excitement rushing me as I watch the man kill like it's an art form.

Nox's curses pull me from my shocked state; I turn and then gasp when I see a blade sticking out from his back.

"Shit! Nox!" I run forward just as a cloaked figure jumps to Nox's side, twin swords spinning, lashing out at the Hunters and mowing them down before they get too close. Movement behind the Demons makes me shout a warning, but it's too late. A large body collides with the cloaked man, taking him to his knees, knocking back his hood, and revealing soft-looking brown curls.

"Creed!" I shout, but he doesn't hear. The swords in his hands spin and arch, one slices through the man's shoulder, making a sound erupt from him that doesn't even sound human. Then the other cuts through the pale skin at his throat, stopping the scream and turning it into a garbled hiss before he falls to the snow, unmoving.

Creed bounces back up, shouting Razar's name as he runs forward, and my eyes widen when I see six men backing the Beastia into a corner, one with a deadly sharp black blade in his hand. Nox spins, killing another Hunter before he staggers and falls to his knees, breathing heavily as I rush to him, dropping to kneel at his side as another Beastia howls, then another. Panting, Nox grabs an arrow that is lodged in his side and yanks the bloody tip out as he frowns and looks around us.

"I'm in your dream?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Uh, no. I think I'm in yours," I admit, and Nox nods.

"Yeah, that makes more sense, but how are you physical? Why are you physical?" he asks, reaching up and touching my cheek, frowning. "You're freezing! Wait... how do you have this?" he asks, hand dropping to my neck where a black onyx pendant lies. I frown and shrug. I hadn't noticed it until he pointed it out.

"You're the only one who can see me so far, and yeah I'm freezing. It's fucking winter out here, Nox!" I point out as I lean back and look at the blade stuck in the center of his back. It's a big one, at least five inches long, and lodged completely to the hilt. There is another howl, and I look over at Razar, who is limping, his legs shaking as Creed slices through the Hunters

attacking his brother, desperate to reach his side. I know this is a dream... I know there is nothing I can do... But fuck! I hate seeing it.

“That wasn't Razar,” Nox whispers in confusion, realizing the same thing I just did, and I close my eyes as horror runs through me. No, they can't show up in Nox's dreams too... can they? “That's not right. There wasn't a Beastia attack during this battle,” Nox rasps, face already pale from the knife in his back.

“I need to get this out,” I whisper, fear filling me as I reach for the blade at his back.

“Meyer! You're physically in this dream. I can touch you,” Nox whispers, an odd tone to his voice that I have never heard before.

“Yeah. I need to get this out of your back, and we need to start running,” I announce, grabbing the blade and giving Nox my ‘I'm sorry, but this is going to hurt like a bitch,’ smile before yanking the blade from his back with one hard pull. Nox grits his teeth, his back arching as he grunts in pain, then falls forward, catching himself on his hands as he releases a pained groan. “Heal yourself right the fuck now!” I shout, standing up and looking at the trees as more howls fill the air. What's left of the Hunters turn and face in the same direction, their own expressions turning to ones of fear and terror just as the first, black needle-covered monster stalks out from the trees.

“Shit,” Nox grinds out, looking at me and then the Beastia as it launches itself at the nearest Hunter, tearing its claws into the man's belly and ripping his throat out in seconds. “They're fucking physical too?!” Nox glares up at me, and I nod, my mouth opening and shutting as another Beastia follows the first into the clearing. “Meyer! You need to wake up! Now!”

I nod and step closer to him as a Beastia's soulless, black eyes fall on us. If what Valen said in my dreams was true, then Nox can get hurt right now as much as I can. This is his dream I've somehow walked into, and now there are physical Beastia where there shouldn't be.

“Meyer!” Nox grinds out, shoving himself to his feet before standing protectively in front of me. “Can you wake yourself up?” he asks resignedly, glancing back at me for a moment with a hint of sadness. I bite my lip as tears flood my eyes and shake my head. Instead of the yelling I'm expecting, Nox nods and grips his ax as three more Beastia rush into the clearing, their razor-sharp teeth snapping as they tip back their malformed heads and howl.

“Here,” he mutters, grabbing a blade he has strapped to his thigh and holding it out to me as the Beastia start killing everything in sight. I have to

remind myself not to seek out Creed or Razar, knowing that what I see aren't the real people, but the figments of Lennox's dreams. "Get in there and lock the door! Don't you fucking come out no matter what happens!" Nox commands, nodding at the cabin.

"No! Nox, you have to come with me. Everyone here is not real... we are. This is your dream. You're as much at risk as I am," I rush out, jumping forward to grab him, but he sidesteps me and curses when a *Beastia* launches at us. With a hard shove from Nox's arm, I fly off my feet and through the air, crashing to the snow-covered ground with a thump as Nox squares off with the monster attacking him.

There is another monster stalking up behind him, and I curse, holding the blade Nox had just given me as I jump to my feet and throw it with every ounce of my strength, watching with a pleased smile as it sinks into the monster's eye. It releases a bellow so loud I have to cover my ears. Nox brings his ax down on the neck of the *Beastia* that is currently attacking him before he brings his arm up and throws his weapon at the head of the one about to attack.

In a rush, he grabs it from the now dead *Beastia* and spins toward me, his eyes widening, mouth dropping open in horror when he sees the blade I used to protect him, lodged in a *Beastia*'s eye several yards away from me. "NO! Dammit! Meyer, get out of here. You don't have a damn weapon!" Nox's predatory glare snaps to the left, and he growls before panicked eyes fall back on me. "Run Meyer! Now!" Nox bellows as another *Beastia* turns in my direction.

"Shit!" I whisper, turning on my heel and running as the monster rushes me. I can hear its heavy feet strike the frozen ground, and I curse when I see how far I still am from the cabin. Coldness rushes through me with the sudden realization that I'm not going to make it. Then pain rakes over my shoulder, and a heavy weight crashes into my back, sending me to the ground so hard my neck makes an odd cracking sound, and my head bounces off the hard snow. Stars fill my vision as heat spreads through my limbs, filling my veins with liquid flames as it burns me alive. My mouth drops open in a soundless scream as razor-sharp teeth clamp around my shoulder, and my body is lifted and shaken. The beast snarls as it shakes me from side to side, my flesh tearing before it releases me to fall back to the ground.

For a moment, I just lay there, confused as hell, wondering how I ended up on the ground. Then the pain comes back in a wave, and my back arches

involuntarily, warmth running down my shoulder and arms as shouts and angry cursing sounds at my side. Panic swells in my chest as thoughts of Nox getting hurt invade my mind. The ground shakes, and I open my eyes, not realizing I had shut them, only to see the lifeless, bleeding head of a Bestia roll across the snow.

“Meyer!” Snow crunches and warm hands gently touch my trembling body. “Meyer?” Nox says again, his voice so soft, it reminds me of the one he used while healing me after the last Bestia attack. I peer up at him, frowning when I see a huge gash on his left cheek, running over his nose and down to his jawline, bright red blood spilling from it like a tiny river.

“Shit! Shit, fuck! NO!” he yells, the soft tone gone as my body starts to move. I cry out as fire lances up my side, and my head throbs as Nox settles me in his lap. Oh, that's nice. He's much warmer than the snow.

My heart beats fast, and I can't feel my fingers or toes anymore. “Meyer, please! Fuck! I need you to wake up right now! Please!” Nox screams at me, his hands cradling my body to his as I stare up at him in confusion. Why is he yelling? He got the Bestia... it's dead. Everything is okay now. Warmth fills me, and my vision darkens.

Fuck... I'm so tired.

“Don't! Don't you dare, Little Demon! You are in control here! You have to wake up so I can fucking heal you!” Nox snarls, and I try to chuckle, but something warm comes up my throat, making it hard to breathe.

What? Wake up? My head throbs again, and I moan, wanting him to stop yelling so I can get some rest. Darkness surrounds me, its embrace taking the agony that lights up my whole right side, and I welcome it, smiling as the pain finally recedes.

“No! Meyer, please! Please wake up!” Nox's voice drifts through my mind, his words end on a choked sob before I finally let go.



Lennox

G asping, I wake with a start, the feeling of Meyer's small body going limp in my arms the worst nightmare I have ever experienced. I lift my head from where I must have fallen asleep at my desk and groan, my head throbbing, and my right cheek stinging. Frowning, I reach up, brushing my fingers over my cheek, then blink in surprise when they come back wet. Looking down, I see thick red blood, and my heart stops, the panic I had just felt moments ago returning as I spring to my feet, my chair flying back as I run as fast as I can out of my office.

“Meyer!” I shout, barreling down the small, dimly lit hallways of the barracks toward Creed's room, blood dripping down my face as I go. It hadn't been a nightmare, but a dream Meyer had made physical, subjecting the two of us to danger and... “*Fuck!*” Her body had gone limp, she had lost consciousness!

Just as I round the corner to lead me down the hall where Creed's room is, I pull up short, almost barreling into Valen as he steps out from Razar's room.

“Lennox? What's wrong? Wait... is that blood? Why are you bleeding?” Valen demands, but all I can do is shake my head and dart around him, running to Creed's door like the damn apocalypse is on my heels.

“It's Meyer! She dream walked into my dreams and made everything physical!” I shout behind me, making Valen inhale sharply and sprint after me. I burst into Creed's room, shoulders heaving as I run to his bed where a small form lies unmoving, the scent of Meyer's blood is heavy in the air,

making my stomach turn and bile race up my throat.

Footsteps thunder down the hall, along with Creed's voice calling out, asking what happened. I grab the blankets covering Meyer's still form, yanking them back and snarling at the amount of blood covering my Little Demon. She's so pale and still, lying on her back like she's asleep, yet I can see the blood seeping from her right shoulder, the way her neck sits oddly to one side, her normally creamy skin, white, and her chest... unmoving.

"No!" I shout, pulling every spark of magic I have to my fingertips as I lean down, pressing one hand to the delicate column of her throat and the other under her blood-soaked shirt. Quickly, I shove it up and rest my hand on her still chest above her breasts before I immediately begin healing what is broken. Like a list of horrors, my magic starts to uncover every injury Meyer sustained in my dreams.

Blunt-force trauma to the head. Cervical vertebrae fracture. Rib fracture and punctured left lung. Several lacerations on the right shoulder and back. Severe blood loss.

The list goes on, making my throat tighten as I look down at the face of the woman I've begun to care for. She frustrates me even as she calms me. I want to fight her stubbornness... to bend her to my will as much as I want to nurture her strength. I want to help her become something truly remarkable and teach her how to use her magic. There have been sparks of her abilities, small and dim, but they are under the surface, and every time I get a taste, I crave more.

"Mi Sol!" Valen rasps, rushing into the room before pulling up short at the end of Creed's bed, his mouth dropping in shock, his eyes filling with fear and terror that I relate to on a personal level. "No!" he groans, rushing over and crawling up on the other side of the bed, his hands trembling as he reaches out to cup her face. One hand stays on her cheek as the other one slides down, cupping the side of her neck my hand isn't covering, his fingers pressing there as he shakes his head. "Nox?" he asks, voice shaky as he stares down at Meyer, his eyes gradually darkening to gray pools of death.

"Sh-she's in rough shape, but her heart is still beating," I whisper, answering his silent question as my shoulders slump and my body curls in slightly at the amount of relief that I feel when I realize I'm not too late. I can still save her. My magic floods into her body, wrapping around her so completely that our heartbeats match up, making me grunt in pain as my body forces hers to stay alive.

“Fuck!” Valen grinds out, his hands trembling so hard I’m a little worried he might hurt her neck more than it already is. His breaths are coming in heavy pants, and his fingers slowly lose color, the light pink bleeding to gray as the colorless void of his Shade form inches up his arms. My eyes widen when I see Meyer's skin turn gray under his magic, and I curse.

“Valen, let go. She can't have her first Shade shift while half dead,” I whisper calmly, trying not to trigger his Demon form, but wary of how fast Meyer’s magic reacted to Valen’s.

“What’s...” Creed's voice breaks off when he steps into the room, Razar on his heels, his mirthful eyes falling on me, then Valen before settling on Meyer. “What the fuck?! What happened?!” he shouts, running forward but only making it a step before Razar hooks an arm around his waist, keeping him in place. “Let go of me!” Creed pleads, tears already streaming down his face as he tries to break out of Razar’s hold. “Meyer!”

“Don’t,” Razar growls, keeping a firm grip on Creed as he stares down at Meyer, his cold eyes shuttered and emotionless as always, but it's the slight tensing of his jaw—the way his hands fist as he holds onto Creed that gives him away. Razar might not like Meyer, but he is worried about her safety. Probably because he knows it will break Creed and Valen to lose her. “Let him heal her. You’ll only slow that down by getting in the way.”

“I need more skin contact,” I growl, narrowing all of my attention on the girl lying in front of me. “Valen, help me with her shirt.” I’ve healed her neck and spine enough that I’m not worried about moving her, but she’s still losing a lot of blood, and the swelling on her brain has me extremely worried. Carefully, we sit her up, and I lengthen one of my claws, slicing through the fabric of her shirt before gently peeling it off her still mangled body.

Valen curses when her head gently falls to the side, resting on his shoulder before we gently lay her back on the bed. “Move,” I demand, not caring that I sound like a dick. Now's not the time for pleasantries, not when I’m the only one who can save her. Valen growls, his fingers stroking down Meyer's pale cheek before he relents, moving off the bed as I let go of her long enough to tear my shirt up and over my head, then lie down next to her, moving her body so that her chest is flush with my own, trying to get as much skin contact as possible.

“Is she okay?” Creed whispers, voice rough as he nods at Razar, signaling that he’s calmed down enough to be let go.

“Yes. She’ll be fine by morning. Probably tired and a little sore. No

training for at least twenty-four hours. But she'll recover," I grind out, my mind reeling as I reflect on my dream that Meyer and I narrowly escaped. It's one I have had so many times—one that I hate more than anything, but it's also the only time I ever get to see Archer.

"What happened to your face?" Valen asks, his eyes still on Meyer as I press her tight to my body, my hands spanning her small back as her breathing gradually grows stronger.

"Beastia," I clip out, still confused as to how they showed up in my dreams. "She made them physical." Valen nods like this is no surprise, and I scowl at him. It looks like I will need to pull my brother to the side to get more information about what's been happening with Meyer's magic. I know he wants to keep everything between them to himself, but if it concerns her safety, I need to be kept in the loop. Had I known that Meyer could make dreams a physical danger, I may have been a little more prepared, and this wouldn't have happened.

"She walked into your dreams?" Creed asks. Surprise colors his tone as he stumbles to the edge of the bed, sits on the mattress, and wraps a hand around Meyer's small ankle, his thumb stroking the soft skin there as his eyes run over her bloody body.

"Yeah. And in true Meyer fashion, everything went to shit the moment she showed up. The girl is chaos on legs," I grumble under my breath, frustrated, scared, and annoyed with myself that I hadn't been able to keep her safe. Valen watches her out of the corner of his eye as he paces, and I know he's upset. "What is it?" I ask, dread pooling when I realize there may be something more about my Little Demon that I don't know.

"She's been having nightmares. They have been happening since the night she released me. It's usually right when she hits a REM cycle, and it's always the same dream... a dream she shouldn't know about. I've stopped them fairly quickly and always sent her into a dreamless sleep, but... fuck, she must have fallen asleep earlier than normal. So when I wasn't there to help, she subconsciously reached out for someone else and ended up in your dream." I have to stop the thrill that runs through me that it was me who she reached out for. Odds are, I was the only one asleep at the time, and I wouldn't have been if I hadn't fallen asleep while doing paperwork at my desk.

"Things she shouldn't know? Like what?" Razar's gravelly voice asks from the corner of the room, and I look over, rolling my eyes when I realize

he's picked out the darkest corner to slink into, hiding himself in the darkness as he glares at us all. The flick of an orange fluffy tail catches my attention, and I scowl when I see he's holding the orange cat he and Meyer were fighting over the other day.

The evil animal hisses and releases an odd noise before sinking its pathetically small teeth into Razar's finger. I expect him to drop-kick the ball of fluff across the room but am surprised when my serial killer brother cuddles the damn thing close, making it freak out even more, tearing its claws down his arms as it yowls to be set free.

"The *Dark Wars*. The fall of the Dream Walkers specifically," Valen announces, shocking me enough that I tear my attention from the cat in Razar's arms to look up at Valen, who is leaning over the bed, his still gray eyes running over Meyer's body. "An event she wasn't even alive during," he adds with a puzzled look. His hand moves back to her throat and stays there as he takes a few deep breaths. I can't help but reach for his emotions, trying to figure out what he's doing. Concern and panic for Meyer are the main emotions, but there is something darker lingering under it all, a fear that I've never felt coming from him before. I hate it and grind my teeth, wishing I knew what happened during the four years he's been gone.

Valen's trembling hands finally leave Meyer's neck after a moment and trail up to her cheek, making him smile softly when she sighs and leans into his touch.

My heart jumps at the small sign of life from her, thrilled to see her color returning quickly. Hell, I don't even care that it was Valen who got the response from her in the first place.

"What are the odds of that happening right after she was in the church with... that thing," Razar snarls from the corner, letting go of the hissing feline as he moves forward, closer to the bed to look down at the girl in my arms. "Meyer may be fully grown by human standards, but she's still incredibly young for a Demon. Who's to say she isn't helping the Hunters kidnap other Demons? She's been raised in the human realm and hasn't paid fealty to Orcus, making it possible for her to help them without the pain a normal Demon may go through."

I open my mouth to tell him to shut the fuck up, but Razar keeps talking before I can.

"This girl is much smarter than any of you fools think. You're thinking with the wrong head when it comes to everything about her, and it will get

you killed. She has magic and a shit ton of it, despite what you think you know, Lennox. I can feel it... my Beast can feel it, and it likes her. That should be your first red flag.” Valen stands to his full height, letting his fingers fall from Meyer's cheek as he places his hands on his trim hips, looking at Razar with mild amusement.

“Your Beast likes her?” Valen asks the question we all are thinking, and Razar jerks a nod, a disgusted look on his face as he glares at Meyer. “Hmm, that’s peculiar. I already knew she was Legion compatible with Creed, Lennox, and me, but I was worried about you. This is actually a relief,” he says with a sigh just as Razar snarls and growls, the sound coursing through the air like a whip.

“That girl will not be added to our Legion,” he grinds out, and Creed laughs, then rolls his lips together when Razar glares at him.

“Of course she will,” Valen mutters, waving an unconcerned hand at Razar, and I’m surprised at his audacity.

“Valen, you are not in charge of our Legion. In fact, Father mentioned breaking the bond so that you all can move into my General’s positions once we get home,” I remind him, frowning at the thought of our Legion being broken. We always knew it was going to happen. It was the one thing Father made sure to tell us when we came to him asking to form our Legion.

Since my brothers and I are not of the same blood, our magic had started to clash, driving us to more outbursts and acts of dominance once I came of age. The best way to fix it was to form a Legion bond so we could stay close. As the Heir of Versipellis, I can’t have ties to people who may cause me to act without thinking. Staying in a bonded Legion tempered my magic to help keep our Legion's natural predatory response to a minimum, allowing us to co-exist without the typical power dynamic you would normally see from Demons.

So Father helped the five of us form our Legion with a firm reminder it would only last until I was set to start taking over some of my Royal duties. An heir typically starts presiding over the Demonic court on his thirtieth birthday, but since father had groomed Jeshren to be his heir before I was born, I was able to push off that responsibility to my oldest brother. But I already know Father will want me to step up to my duties when I return home.

Valen purses his lips and looks at me, almost disappointed, before he nods. “I know that is your plan. But Creed and I have already discussed

keeping our Legion bond intact, and I was hoping that Razar might stay as well,” Valen whispers, making me blink at them in shock. I mean... Yeah, that makes sense, but the thought of no longer being in their Legion, of being the odd man out, makes me irrationally angry.

I don't like the idea at all.

I glance down at Creed, who nods, and I curse. “So, you two are what... going to stay in a Legion and play happy family with Meyer?” I ask, tightening my hold on her as I think about them living happily ever after. Fuck that! It's not happening.

“Yes. But with Razar as well. And you're more than welcome to stay if you want. In fact, I think you would be better for it,” Valen whispers, looking at me with so much hope in his eyes that I actually consider the thought for a moment.

“I can't, and you already know that!” I snarl, frustrated that he's even put the damned idea in my head.

“That's never happening,” Razar adds in agreement, and Creed chuckles, looking at Valen with a sad smile.

“Ignore him. His Beast is already in love with Lemon Drop. He's just trying to process his big-boy feelings and isn't emotionally mature enough to do it on his own. I'll hug it out with him later.” Valen chuckles, and Razar looks like he's about three seconds from tearing off Creed's head.

“My Beast is not in love with her. Love is nothing but a false sense of security and a weakness you voluntarily give your enemies to use against you. And it still wants to kill her... just not as much as others.”

“Damn, you need a hug more than I thought, Razy baby. Come here,” Creed mutters, standing from the side of the bed to walk over to Razar. “Maybe a little sugar will sweeten you up,” he teases, and I sigh in frustration, looking to Valen for help since my hands are currently occupied.

“Stop him, or we will be planning his funeral,” I whisper, making Valen's lips quirk as he hurries over to grab Creed before Razar can hurt him too much. By the time he rounds the bed, Razar has Creed in a chokehold, and Valen rushes to intervene, whispering threats in their ears before Creed and Razar frown and look at him with matching angry expressions.

Shit.

Valen shouts in surprise as our brothers pounce on him, taking him to the ground, and they roll around, wrestling like they used to years ago. In a matter of seconds, Valen has a sharp blade pressed to each of their necks,

demanding their surrender, and I laugh despite myself. I startle when the small orange ball of fur jumps up on the bed and then crawls up my side, looking down at me before kneading its tiny paws on my skin, spinning in circles and curling up with an oddly loud purr of contentment.

“Really?” I mutter at the annoying thing, then sigh and lower my head back to the pillow, monitoring Meyer’s heartbeat as my brothers continue to argue on the floor. Meyer sighs, her sweet citrus scent so similar to Valen’s helps me relax some of the tense muscles in my shoulders as she shifts the slightest amount in my arms, nuzzling closer to my warmth. She’s so small and soft, the complete opposite of the women in my world, and it only serves to make my protective instincts flare to life. I’m going to have to look into some protective spells to help keep her safe. I’m still unsure what to do with this attraction I have for her or the half-formed mating bond she started a couple of weeks ago. But I do know the thought of her dying and getting hurt makes me practically feral.

My eyelids droop, and I lower my nose to the crown of Meyer's head, allowing myself to hold her close without the worry of losing my balls. I know the moment she wakes, I will be back to her biggest nemesis, and honestly, I wouldn't change that. Her anger and stubbornness intrigue me, and I crave it all.

The amount of magic I’m using to heal Meyer this quickly is draining my energy levels. So I close my eyes and listen to the steady rhythm of her breathing, letting it lull me into a comfortable sleep.



Meyer

My head throbs as I slowly open my eyes, squinting to peer around the dimly lit room as I snuggle into the warm arms holding me. Wait... Gasping, I look up into Valen's soft, pale green eyes as his arms tighten around me, keeping me pressed tightly to his side as his hand moves up and down my spine with soft, soothing strokes.

"Valen?" I whisper, but it comes out a croak, and I cough a little, trying to clear my sore throat. I grimace at the weird sensation, my brows pulling down as I take note of all the aches and pains in my body.

Holy crap, I feel like shit!

Looking back up, I find Valen still looking at me, his eyes locked on my face, and I blush, brushing my hand over my face, hoping I don't have crazy bed hair or something. "Are you okay?" I ask when Valen stays silent, as a thread of worry worms its way into my foggy mind.

Geez, did I drink or something last night? Why do I feel hungover? Valen shifts then, moving the arm that's not under me up to my neck, pressing his fingers at my pulse point and breathing in a shattered breath before he sighs and closes his eyes, leaning down to press his forehead to mine.

"Meyer," he whispers, voice shaking a little and scaring me when he growls under his breath and crushes me to him. I ignore my screaming muscles as Valen holds me, and I wrap my arms around him in return, confused as hell but hating how upset he is right now. The need to help him, to make sure he's okay, burns through me as I hug him back with everything I can.

“What’s happened?” I whisper, my voice finally coming out somewhat normal as I run my hands up and over Valen's broad shoulders, letting myself touch him the way I’ve wanted to since that night at the Hunter shack. My body is suddenly very, very awake, and I gasp as my nipples pebble in my bra.

Valen pulls back just enough to look at me, our noses brushing, his eyes seeking mine. There’s an odd mixture of fear and something else I can't quite pinpoint lighting his beautiful gaze before he leans forward, tilting his head to the side and brushes his soft lips against mine in the sweetest kiss I have ever had. His hands hold me to him, the soft pressure of his lips making my toes curl as fireworks go off in my mind. I gasp, then moan into his mouth, leaning forward just enough to add a little more to our kiss, our lips moving in a slow, sensual dance that I never want to end.

Valen's strong hands cup my jaw, using his fingertips to tilt my face up enough for him to deepen our kiss as he groans into my mouth, his tongue gently swiping across my lips as he kisses me breathless. My mind briefly flicks to worry over morning breath, but Valen is quick to erase all thoughts as he shifts us, leaning into me and pressing my back into the mattress. He continues to kiss me, his hands holding me to him like his life depends on it, and I melt, loving how cherished I feel in his arms. After a few more breathless kisses, Valen draws back, hovering over me with a faint blush staining his cheeks. I can feel his hard erection digging into my hip and giggle when his eyes widen in realization, and he pulls back enough to not poke me with his morning wood.

“Good morning,” I whisper, grinning when Valen clears his throat and smiles in embarrassment.

“Good afternoon, Mi Sol,” he corrects in a raspy voice, his eyes warm as he brushes some hair away from my temple.

“Afternoon?” I question, my smile fading as I look around Creed's room. The drapes are pulled, but I can see slivers of bright sunlight streaming through the cracks. “Holy shit! I slept all day?” I ask, pressing at Valen's chest, needing to sit up, then tilt my head in confusion when I see Creed slouched in a chair at the end of the bed, sound asleep. His curly hair is sticking out at odd angles, and his neck is kinked off to one side, making me grimace in sympathy. That's not going to feel good when he wakes up. Valen pulls back, moving onto his knees on the bed next to me as I press my palms to the mattress and sit up, frowning even more when the mattress crinkles

under my hand and something pulls on my hair.

“What was... Oh, my god!” I shout, looking down at the dark bloodstain on the mattress.

“Mi Sol,” Valen tries to calm me, but I’m not listening. Instead, I’m already half off the bed as I shriek in fright, making Creed snort and then jump to his feet in a panic, my name on his lips as his hand falls to the kalis strapped to his hip.

“Why is the bed covered in blood?” I gasp, looking at Creed's pillows and bedding, gaping at all the blood there. There’s so much of it!

“Lemon Drop,” Creed says, rushing over and wrapping his arms around my waist as Valen crawls off the bed and walks over to me, his hands cupping my face as I stare at Creed's bed in horror.

“What do you remember about last night?” Valen asks, turning my face to look at him as Creed keeps me safe in his arms.

“Ugh... Creed and I...” I stop when I realize what I am about to say, and Valen purses his lips and nods—making me roll my lips together as nerves flutter in my belly. It doesn’t help that Creed chuckles darkly behind me and leans down, pressing a soft kiss on my neck.

“After that,” Valen mutters, not sounding at all amused as Creed winks at him.

“He walked me back here and said you wanted to stop by before you went to sleep and...” I trail off, my head throbbing as I try to remember what happened next. “Was Nox here last night?” I ask in confusion as weird, pieced together memories slowly start to drift through my mind.

“Yes. Do you remember anything else?” he asks, ducking down so he can look into my eyes.

“I, no... Wait, yes. I saw...” I frown and look around the room, shaking my head as my foggy thoughts begin to clear. The snow in my shoe... the blue dress. A man who looked like Razar but definitely wasn’t... the Beastia and—*Fuck!*

“Oh! Oh, shit! Where’s Nox?” I shove out of Creed's arms, pushing Valen out of the way, and run from the room as memories of the Beastia attacking assault my mind. The way it felt when its teeth clamped down on my shoulder... How I was shaken and tossed to the ground like a rag doll. I trip over my feet, almost falling, but catch myself on the wall as I keep running through the quiet halls of the Ranger barracks. Once I turn the corner, I spot Nox’s opened office door and rush in without a second thought.

I skid to a stop as I take in the scene in front of me, my heart clenching, my stomach dropping as bile rushes up my throat, making a cold shiver race down my spine. Nox is holding Elaine in his arms as she cries, nodding and whispering something in her ear as she looks up at him. She smiles, with her elegant gown rustling around their feet as she nods back and reaches up to wipe at her tears. I gasp, then slap my hand over my mouth when Nox stiffens and turns, his arms still around Elaine just as Theo's mom gasps, her mouth dropping open in shock.

"Meyer?" Nox murmurs as Elaine pushes out of his arms, rushing around his desk toward me.

"Oh! Oh, Meyer, sweetheart! What happened?" she asks, concern etched on her beautiful face as I step back from her and bump into Valen's chest as his arms wind around me.

"Mi Sol. Don't run off like that," he chides gently in my ear, but I have a hard time processing his words as I stare at Nox. His long black hair is pulled back from the front of his face, twisted and braided in an intricate pattern, making him look like the Viking I always compare him to.

He stands there, head tilted to the side as he studies me, his frown deepening as I try to regain some brain function. What the hell did I just see? Why was Nox holding Elaine in his arms? And why am I now hurt and... mad? No, I'm not mad, I'm pissed off. Nox suddenly arches a brow, amusement crossing his dark features for a moment, and I suddenly remember that this asshat could read emotions.

Fury burns in my belly as I glare at Nox, watching as his chest puffs out, and his lips quirk to the side as he pulls his chair out from behind his desk and sits. Then he leans back, relaxed as hell, acting like he wasn't just caught with his big, lying hands on Theo's mom. And to think I was worried about this giant prick!

Ugh!

Elaine's small hands land on my shoulders and I flinch, not prepared for her touch, just as Creed rushes in after Valen and looks from me to Nox, then frowns. "I was only thirty seconds behind her, Lennox. How did you piss her off already?"

"Creed, dear. Please explain to me why Meyer is covered in blood?" Elaine practically shouts, making Creed wince and look at Nox for guidance. "I did not ask Lennox. I asked you!" Elaine snaps, and I swallow and shake my head.

“I’m fine, Elaine. Not a scratch on me,” I assure her before pulling myself from Valen's arms and leaving Lennox’s office, needing space from the bastard. I rush back to Creed's room, ignoring the people who shout after me, and go directly to the small mirror hanging on the wall next to Creed's bathtub, and I gasp when I see my reflection. My hair is a rusty dark brown color, with so much dried blood in it that I can hardly see any blonde. I have dried streaks of blood that run down my face, neck, and chest. I stare at the black sports bra holding my tits in place and realize I just ran out there without a freaking shirt on!

“Jesus, I’m a mess,” I whisper, wiping a hand over my face while I stare at the blood covered version of myself in the mirror. “Valen and I just had our first kiss... and I look like I just walked off the set of *The Walking Dead*.”

“Mi Sol?” Valen whispers, walking into the room, Creed and Elaine hot on his heels. “Let's get you bathed. You’ll feel better after that,” he suggests, and I stare at him for a moment, then laugh, making his blond brows draw together in confusion.

“Out. Both of you,” Elaine snaps, stalling my laughter while shoving Creed in the chest, pushing him out the door before rounding on Valen, who eyes her with a disapproving look. “She needs a moment, and if you care about her at all, you’ll give it to her,” Elaine snaps when Valen doesn't move. His pale green eyes flash to me, a question in his eyes, and I hesitantly nod. I honestly could use a second to get my shit back together here. I still feel hungover, and my body is sore.

Valen's jaw tenses, but he nods. “I’ll be in Nox’s office when you're done,” he whispers, reaching out to run a finger over the back of my hand before he turns and leaves the room.

“Elaine. You have no idea what's going on here,” Creed complains from the doorway. “You can't just insert yourself in the situation and kick me out of my own...” Elaine glares at Creed and slams the door in his face before he can finish talking, then sighs, turning toward me while shaking her head.

“I have no idea how you handle those boys on your own. Just dealing with Nox is a lot,” she admits with a smile that I have a hard time returning. I’m not sure why I’m so upset over finding Nox and Elaine together, but the sight shocked me, and I don't know what to do with the anger and frustration of it all.

“They are a lot,” I agree, looking down at my body and wrinkling my

nose in disgust. “I need a shower,” I mutter, and Elaine nods in agreement, then gestures over to the empty bathtub.

“I saw Theo out in the hall on my way down and instructed some boys to bring up some water so we can get you cleaned up,” she says softly, her brown eyes watching me carefully as I push at a crusty piece of my hair that's stuck to my shoulder.

The skin there is smooth, not even a small scar to be found. I have no idea how Nox healed me so well, but I am grateful for it. With the amount of blood on me and the bed, I must have been in worse shape than I thought.

“May I ask what happened to put you in that state?” she asks cautiously, walking over to the privacy screen nearby and grabbing the towel I hung on it to dry after my bath yesterday.

“Uh, I walked into Nox's dreams, and things turned... well, bloody,” I say absentmindedly, then look up when I hear the towel Elaine is holding fall to the ground. She's staring at me with wide eyes as she looks from my dirty hair to my hands, then over my chest before she nods and smiles, reaching down to grab the towel she dropped before walking back over to me.

“I didn't realize you held enough magic to dream walk. That's a unique gift, even amongst the Demons,” she admits, and I scowl at her.

“How long have you known I was a Demon?” The words come out harsher than I intended them to, and Elaine arches a perfectly plucked brow at me in response. “Sorry,” I mutter, ducking my head, feeling properly chastised even though I know I'm in full right to ask that question. It seems like everyone knew I was a Demon but me. Well, Theo and Jordan, too.

“Lennox told me the night before everything happened, and it was only because I overheard him and Creed talking about sending your blood tests to his father to make sure everything would be okay if they needed to use you,” she murmurs, then looks at the door just before someone knocks. Holding out the towel to me, I take it before she walks over to the door, opening it enough to talk to someone, then look over her shoulder at me. “Meyer, dear,” she whispers, nodding at the screen in a silent gesture for me to get behind it before she lets anyone into the room.

Rushing over, I stand there, listening to Theo's deep voice as he and a few others bring several pails of water into the room. “Just leave them there, boys. I'll dump them in when I need to,” she instructs.

“Where's Meyer?” Theo asks, and I smile when his mom clicks her tongue at him.

“What are you, her keeper? Meyer will find you when she's ready. You go find Jordan and make sure he's alright. He was looking a little sad this morning. What happened?” Theo sighs, and I strain my ears to listen to their quiet conversation as the rest of the boys who brought in water leave the room.

“I don't know what else to do, Mom. He's so... mad,” Theo whispers brokenly. “And I can't even blame him. If it were me in that situation, I know I would be putting him through hell.”

“We did what we had to to protect him, sweetie. Considering Jordan's history with Demons and Beastia, we couldn't risk telling him early just in case he went to his father before Lennox could take control of the castle. It would have endangered not only Jordan's life but everyone at the castle as well.”

“I told you he wouldn't do that, Jordan wouldn't have betrayed us. But now he thinks we betrayed him,” Theo croaks out, and my heart hurts for my friend.

“I'm sorry, baby,” Elaine whispers, and I risk a peek around the screen, watching as Elaine hugs Theo, her shorter frame completely hidden by Theo's larger one. “We'll just have to remind him how much we love him and hope he will forgive us one day. Maybe you can talk to Jordan at dinner tonight? It's mandatory to attend, so you know he will be there,” Elaine adds, her voice shaky. I move back behind the screen, deciding to give them some privacy, and start taking off my blood-crusting bra and pants, grimacing when the fabric sticks to my skin from the amount of dried blood.

“Meyer, you can come out. The coast is clear,” Elaine calls out, and I grab the towel, frowning as I try to figure out what to do. I don't want to get it dirty, but I also don't feel comfortable parading into the room naked with Elaine's presence.

“Ummm, so I decided to take my dirty clothes off,” I start to say as a warning that I may need some privacy.

“Oh, good. Come out and let me help you wash your hair. Dried blood can be so difficult to get out on your own without running water,” she replies, clapping her hands together.

“Right. But uh... I'm naked,” I point out, making Elaine giggle.

“That's typically the result when you take off your clothes,” Elaine points out, and despite my frustration towards her at the moment, I smile. “I'm okay with it as long as you are, dear. But if you would like, I can grab one of

Creed's shirts or maybe find an extra towel so you can use one while I help you wash?"

"Yes, please!" I call out, then smile when Elaine's hand pops into view with a big black shirt clutched in her elegant fingers. "Thanks," I chuckle, grabbing the shirt and throwing it over my head before stepping out from behind the screen and finding Elaine combining some water from two different buckets into a separate one.

"I thought it would be best to wash your hair before we fill up the tub. That way, you won't have to bathe in too much of the filth," she explains.

"Yeah, that'd be great," I admit as she nods at the bath.

"Kneel down and hang your head over the side," she instructs, and I do as I'm told, closing my eyes when she pours warm water over my head and starts to lather my dirty locks. The soap immediately turns a rusty brown color, and I grimace, closing my eyes so I don't have to watch it run out of my hair.

"If Nox had told me about this before now, I could have had all this ready before you woke up," Elaine grumbles, her fingertips massaging my scalp and making my eyes roll back at the amazing feeling.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like something Nox would really care about," I grumble, keeping my eyes shut as Elaine rinses my hair and then has me sit up.

"That boy cares about you. He's just going about it the wrong way. It seems that all men, no matter their species, turn into baboons the moment they start catching feelings," Elaine admits, and I snort a laugh as she rinses the tub out and then pours the remaining water into it. There's not much there, only about a foot deep, but it will be enough to get clean with, plus the warm water will feel nice on my sore muscles.

"The only feelings Nox has for me are those of frustration and anger," I grind out before looking at Elaine and frowning. She is so beautiful and so freaking young. How did I not see that before now? "I—Are you and Nox..." I frown as Elaine stands, stacking the buckets into a tall leaning tower before looking over at me with a smirk on her beautiful face.

"Are we lovers?" she asks, and I immediately bristle, anger rushing through me like a hot wave. Elaine's eyes widen, and she bites her lip as she tries to hide her smile. "Oh, you really are part Demon, aren't you? Did you know your eyes darken when you get upset?" she asks with a tinkling laugh, and I shake my head, eyes wide with surprise.

My eyes darken? Huh, I'm not sure if that's cool or not.

"But to answer your question. No, Meyer. Nox is a friend. A good one, but only a friend. I was married up until last week," she reminds me, and I wince, my anger leaving in an instant.

"Right. I'm sorry. I just saw you with him earlier and assumed..." I trail off, my cheeks on fire as Elaine nods in understanding.

"I was having a moment of weakness, and Nox was a good friend and helped me out. It is nothing more than when I've seen you hug my son, Meyer. Nox is my friend, but I must say I'm glad to finally see some jealousy on your end. I was worried you didn't like him," Elaine chuckles, and I scowl.

"I don't," I snap, making Elaine laugh even harder.

"Did you know I had to make him promise not to kill Jordan and Theo two weeks ago? They kept touching you, and he was out of his mind in a jealous rage." Elaine chuckles as she turns and walks over to Creed's bed, plopping down on the blood-stained fabric like it's no big deal to her. The casual behavior is so odd to see when all I have seen until this moment is the regal way she floats around the castle in her beautiful dresses. "I honestly thought I may have to send my boys out on a recon mission just to make sure he wouldn't flip out."

"Really?" I ask, my lips quirking before I can remind myself that Nox is an asshole, and I don't care what he thinks of me or Theo and Jordan.

"Mm-hmm," Elaine hums, nodding at the tub. "Jump in and get clean. Don't worry, I'll stay over here and give you some privacy." I do as I'm told, yanking Creed's shirt off and jumping into the warm water, sighing in bliss when the water covers the bottom half of my body. "I put a rag and bar of soap right on the edge for you," Elaine says from the bed, and I grab them, washing my body, making sure I get every crack and crevice.

"Thanks," I mutter, scrubbing my skin until it turns red, washing every bit of blood and sweat from me.

"There's also a razor there. I found a few on Creed's dresser and thought you might like one. Heaven knows the men around here don't think of simple hygiene products women like," she grumbles, and I smile, delighted when I look to the other side of the tub and find a razor. I'm not going to lie... my legs are starting to look like I'm growing a damn forest in my pants.

"You're a godsend," I rasp, immediately jumping at the opportunity to shave. "Elaine, can I ask you a question?" I say softly.

"Of course," she agrees instantly.

“How old are you?” There is a moment's pause before she finally answers.

“Thirty-six,” she whispers, voice firm, making me pause as I rinse off my leg. I mentally do the math, remembering how Theo told me he was nineteen. If Elaine is only thirty-six, that means...

“And Theo is nineteen?” I ask, needing to make sure I have the right information. I look at her, finding her soft brown eyes on my face, her expression serene as I piece together what I'm assuming is a horrendous path.

“Have you been taught of the breeding rings the Siberians started?” Elaine asks, and I nod. “My father was Senior Axford,” she starts, then sighs, sitting up on the bed and crossing her legs under her dress, getting more comfortable. “We both know he wasn't a good man. He was one of the Siberian's biggest investors and sent several of our young women to them in order to find the best genetic matches that might produce strong bloodlines. More and more Hunters were birthing children without the sight, and they were trying to fix that. I was sixteen when my father sent me overseas to be tested. Four months later, I came home... a married woman,” Elaine admits. Her words make my stomach drop, my heart clenching for Elaine to be forced into marriage that young.

“Theo and Cali were born a year later. They are my saving grace. My father intended for me to be a broodmare. My only duty was to give Laurant as many strong babies as he wanted, but there were complications with the kids' birth. I had to have a full hysterectomy when I hemorrhaged.” Elaine laughs, but it's a dark, cold one, her eyes sparkling with anger. “I have never been so thankful for something in my entire life. My father hated Theo and Cali for costing him more Hunters. He was mad that I was now damaged goods and a waste of a female. But my kids granted me life. Since I couldn't be used for breeding purposes, I was able to stay a Hunter,” she explains, then smiles as I gape at her.

“I-I'm so sorry,” I finally wheeze out, unsure what to say after all that. I knew Theo had a sister who was *Fracti*, as the Seniorems like to call giftless Hunters, but I didn't realize he was a twin. Elaine shrugs, then swings her feet back down to the ground and walks over, grabbing the towel hanging nearby and opening it so I can stand up and cover myself.

“I'm not,” she admits as she walks back over to Creed's dresser and scowls, rummaging through all his clothes and shaking her head. “All these are too big,” she grumbles, slamming the drawers shut.

“How did you survive here this whole time? I’ve only been here for almost two months, and I feel like I might go crazy,” I admit, walking over to grab the first shirt I see, not really caring if it's too big. The day is shot as it is, and I feel like crap. I’m not planning on leaving this room until I have to tomorrow.

“How do you wake up in the morning and go to Ranger training even after everything that happened to you? We do what we have to so we survive, Meyer. Men may dominate our world, but they don't have to choose how we live our lives. You could have run the moment you came back here and found Jordan. But you're still here. You didn't let the men in your life chase you off,” she points out, and I frown. “You’re strong, Meyer. While you may be at a disadvantage right now because of your lack of knowledge and training, you won't be for long. Find your allies, figure out who you can trust, and then show those boys who's really in charge. Because I can tell you right now, it won't be them.”

She smiles down at me, and this time, it's easy to return it. “Right,” she mutters, clasping her hands together and looking at the shirt I threw over my head. “There is a big dinner tonight for all the Hunters and Rangers. Nox has the cooks working double-time to make a massive feast. He wants to bring the bloodlines together and prove to them that they are stronger as one. And I need a wingwoman,” she murmurs, leaning back to look me up and down. “I may have something that will work. Put those shoes on and come with me,” she says with a devious smile, waiting for me to toe on my boots before she takes my hand and pulls me toward Creed’s door.

“Where are we going?” I ask in confusion as she pulls me into the hall, tugging me after her as we make our way downstairs.

“To make your boys realize who is in charge here,” she responds with a laugh.



Meyer

“I’m not wearing this,” I hiss under my breath as I look at myself in the full-length mirror in Elaine’s bedroom. “My boobs are about to fall out!”

“That’s the point of the gown, Meyer,” Elaine drawls as she comes out of her enormous closet, pulling on a pair of elbow-length gloves. Her rich burgundy gown swirls around her feet as she glides toward me, and I scowl, trying to figure out how she manages to look so elegant while walking in the deadly-looking four-inch heels she has on. I would be flat on my freaking face if I tried to do that.

“And why are we wearing gowns to dinner? We haven’t had to since I got to this stupid castle,” I grumble, kicking at the dark green satin of the dress Elaine forced me into before meticulously curling my hair so that it fell in big, full waves down my back. She even added three tiny braids on one side with silver charms woven in.

“Because it’s Christmas Eve, and we always have a formal ball. Usually only sworn-in Hunters and their spouses come to the formal dinners the Senioreem puts on, but since it’s Christmas, the Rangers are expected to attend as well,” Elaine says, grabbing a tube of lipstick and walking over, standing next to me as she applies it onto her lips.

“Christmas?” I gasp, trying to figure out how the hell I didn’t realize that it was Christmastime already.

“Here, you need some more color,” she says, passing me the lipstick before glancing down at my chest. “Are you wearing a bra? Meyer, the dress has a built-in corset. You’re ruining the lines by keeping that on.” Suddenly,

Elaine's hands move to the silver clasps running down the center of the corset, undoing them before shoving the dress off my shoulders and unclasping my bra with a simple flick of her fingers.

"Jesus, woman. You have no personal boundaries, do you?" I mutter, hands flying to my boobs to hold my bra in place as I peel it off my arms and wiggle back into the dress, clasping it back up while throwing Elaine a dirty look. Honestly, I'm not mad about it, just... shocked. I'm not used to having people around me like this. I wonder if this is what it would be like if my mom were still alive. Elaine winces, blushing a little while shooting me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry. I'm used to just... getting things done. I'll try to refrain," she adds, and I snort, rolling my eyes as I grab the lipstick I dropped when Elaine stripped me, then apply some of the champagne-colored makeup to my lips.

"It's fine," I mutter, turning to hand her the lipstick before glancing back at my reflection. I'm not used to seeing myself like this, and I've never worn a gown like this before. It's beautiful, the full green satin skirt billows around my feet, swirling at my every move. And the black leather corset gives it an almost bad-ass vibe, while pushing my cleavage up so high, I'm worried one wrong move, and I'll get bitch-slapped in the face by my tits.

Elaine suddenly appears in the mirror behind me, her hands falling on my shoulders as she grins, eyes twinkling as she gives me a once over. She's taller than normal, standing at least seven or eight inches taller than me, and I sigh, shaking my head in amusement. Back home, I was on the taller side for a girl. In fact, it was almost impossible to find a guy that made me feel small. But here, it's the complete opposite problem.

"You look absolutely stunning, Meyer. Those Regalis brothers won't know what hit them," she whispers, squeezing my shoulders softly as I look at her own burgundy dress. She has silver armor details on her shoulders and chest, which are intricately designed with feminine swirls, curving under her breasts and making them look amazing.

"Red and green," I muse out loud, looking between our dresses with a smirk. "We look like Christmas threw up on us." Elaine lets out an unlady-like snort, making me grin as someone knocks at her door.

"Ah, right on time, as always," she says, walking over to grab a clutch before grabbing a beautiful golden kalis and lifting the skirt of her gown, tucking it into a black leather thigh holster hidden there.

"And here I thought you survived up here on your wit alone," I tease,

making Elaine shoot me a grin.

“A smart woman learns to use all her assets in order to survive,” she admits with a wink before sitting up and readjusting her breasts, pulling them up even higher as she walks to the door. “And for my own safety,” she whispers, grabbing the knob and looking at me before she opens the door. “I want you to know I’m not doing this for my escort, and in return, I would ask you to kindly keep your hands to yourself tonight,” she murmurs, her smile suddenly gone as she eyes me carefully, then turns and opens the door, revealing the two men standing on the other side of the door waiting on us.

“Ah! Lennox, dear. Thank you for offering to escort me to dinner,” Elaine says with a soft smile, her eyes moving from Lennox to the enormous man standing slightly behind him, an angry scowl set heavy on his dark brow. “Victor,” she greets with a slight blush, and my eyes widen in realization.

Elaine is crushing on the new Drakos Senior! That’s why she wants me to keep my hands to myself!

“Elaine, you look lovely as always,” Nox greets, holding his hand out for her while scowling over his shoulder at the Drakos Senior, who is practically breathing down the Demon Prince’s neck. “Is there a reason you have two escorts tonight?” he asks, looking at Victor, who stands there fuming over his shoulder.

“Oh, no. Senior Drakos isn't my escort,” Elaine laughs, pressing a gloved hand to her chest. “He’s hers.” With that declaration, Elaine steps back, opening the door further, bringing me into view.

Lennox’s relaxed smile falters when he sees me, his eyes widening just the smallest amount as they fall on my face. Then they very slowly move down the full length of me, making my toes curl and nerves come back in full force before his eyes snap back up to my face, his smile now completely gone as he stares at me in shock.

I have to take a moment myself, blinking a few times to make sure I’m seeing things right. Because Lennox Regalis is standing there, neatly dressed, hair pulled back into a loose bun on top of his head, wearing a suit! The dress shirt under his pristine suit jacket is black, and the collar is undone, giving me a tease of all the tattoos covering his skin beneath his clothing. He looks like some kind of sexy mafia king from one of my smutty books, and I don't hate it.

“I knew with everything going on, Meyer wouldn't have had time to find an escort, and since Theo is escorting one of the Drakos girls and Sabrina

asked Jordan to escort her, I thought Victor would be a fabulous match,” Elaine says sweetly, walking over and linking our arms together, pulling me toward the door as I force a smile to my face. I try not to think about how the last time I had seen this giant he was stomping toward me with murder in his eyes.

“What are you doing? I thought we were trying to *NOT* get me killed,” I whisper into her ear as she pats my arm lovingly, smiling at Lennox like the sun shines out of his ass. I try not to let it bother me, given that she warned me she wasn't trying to impress her escort but mine, and I roll my eyes when I hear the smallest growl break from Nox's lips before he coughs and swallows hard.

“I'm doing you a favor. Go with it,” Elaine whispers back as she turns slightly, grabbing a black clutch and holding it out for me to take as she leans close. “There are three throwing blades, lipstick, and mints in that bag. Don't cut yourself when rummaging through it,” she warns before letting my arm go and waltzing over to Nox, taking his elbow and tugging him to leave when he only stands there staring at me with an odd look on his handsome face. “Lennox? Are you ready to head down?” Elaine questions, making Nox jump out of whatever trance he was in and nod.

“Huh? Oh, yes! Wait... no!” he mutters, his face darkening as Victor steps into the room and begrudgingly offers me his elbow. I take it, worried that he might pancake me into the ground if I refuse, then send Elaine a dark glare for making me do this. I was already hesitant about the dress and dinner, not that the dress isn't gorgeous, it is! It's just that every time I've been in a dress the last few weeks, something bad always happens.

Nox's eyes practically bulge from his eye sockets when Victor dips his head and gives me a tight smile. “Ranger Smith. It's a pleasure to escort you tonight,” he mutters half-heartedly, his deep voice pleasant on the ears with a heavy accent I can't quite pinpoint. I smile at him and nod my own greeting, unsure how to respond to his words. Elaine smiles, rolling her lips together as she tightens her hold on Nox's elbow when he steps toward us, murder bright in his eyes.

“Ah, lovely. Shall we head down, then?” Elaine asks us all, smiling at the boys when they look at her like she's gone mad. I take the opportunity to flip her off, making her brown eyes widen as she snickers under her breath before she literally yanks Lennox to follow her down the steps.

Glancing up, I find Victor looking at me through narrowed eyes and sigh.

“Look, I’m not going to be mad if you want to leave. I don’t need an escort,” I mutter, cheeks flaming when Victor lifts a thick brow and shakes his head, keeping my hand locked firmly in his elbow with his free hand like he’s worried I may run if he lets go.

“I do that, and Elaine will ensure my personal misery for at least a month. You will stay with me the entirety of the night, and I will walk you back to your room as she instructed,” he grumbles, his deep voice low and hard to understand when he whispers like this.

“So I’m your prisoner?” I ask, as we trail after Elaine and Nox, who look like they are in a heated debate.

“No, but I’m pretty sure the three of us are hers,” he says with a nod toward Elaine, and I chuckle, then nod in agreement.

“Yeah. She’s kinda scary when she needs to be,” I agree, then almost fall on my ass when Victor actually laughs, the throaty sound of it ringing through the halls as he smiles down at me.

“In that, we can agree, Ranger Smith.”

“Please, call me Meyer. It sounds like we’ll be getting to know each other tonight, and I would rather not hear Ranger Smith every time you want to talk to me,” I admit, looking away from him and startle when I find Nox glaring daggers at me over his shoulder. Elaine elbows him in the side, making him whip his head back toward her with a curse, and I smirk. Victor chuckles, his eyes bouncing from Elaine to me with a quirk on his lips.

“She’s needed a friend up here. I’m glad she’s finally found one,” he says, shocking the hell out of me as we make our way down the stairs. “Now, tell me the truth,” he says in a heavily accented voice. “What is between those two?” he asks, face soft as he watches Elaine, then hardening to stone when he turns his attention to Nox.

“Oh, they are…” But I trail off and smile, looking at Victor, then Elaine, and shake my head. “As Elaine’s official friend, I think it would be against girl code to tell you that,” I admit, making Victor grunt in frustration, but he nods as we follow Elaine and Nox through the massive doors of the cafeteria.

“Very well,” he grumbles and straightens his broad shoulders when hundreds of eyes fall on us as we stride through the big room. I gawk around me, realizing I played down the extravagance of the night in my mind, and hold on to Victor a little tighter. The room is festively decorated, with fresh garlands and pine everywhere as people mill about in beautiful dresses and suits. The giant wooden chandeliers above are lit with hundreds of white

candles, casting the room in a golden glow as we walk down the plush, intricately woven royal blue rugs. But it's the pair of angry green eyes at the back of the room that makes me swallow hard.

Creed and Valen are standing next to each other, dressed impeccably in black suits and looking model-ready as Victor leads us to the table Elaine and Nox stop at. Creed's eyes are locked on my face as Valen talks to him; their heads ducked close so they can hear each other. But when Creed freezes, his eyes narrowing on me, Valen stiffens, then turns. His face brightens in an instant when our eyes meet across the room, then darken when he sees Victor at my side. I swallow hard as Creed's hand falls to his blade strapped at his hip and yank my gaze from them as Victor releases my hand and pulls out a chair for me right next to Lennox.

I can feel Lennox's dark glare on my face as I sit, but choose to ignore it and look at Victor when he pulls out the chair next to me and takes his own seat.

Shit, this is going to be a long night.



Meyer

Steaming plates of food are placed in front of us the moment everyone sits down, as a freaking string quartet plays in the corner of the room. Soft Christmas carols fill the air as Rangers and Hunters alike join in with comfortable chatter now that the food has been served. I suddenly realize everyone has been waiting for Elaine to sit before following suit. My eyes widen when I see I'm sitting at the table with the rest of the bloodline Seniors and their dates.

Elaine and Nox sit in the center of the table. Elaine's chair's the largest, almost looking like a wooden throne, and I watch as she shifts uncomfortably in the large seat. To her right is Nox, then me, Victor, and a man who, from his light coloring, is the new DeLuca Senior Elaine has yet to announce, with his date at his side. On Elaine's left is Monroe, who is now the new Regalis Senior, and his date, a beautiful raven-haired girl I've never seen before. Then, the Rivera and Rossi Seniors with their wives, who I realize are the only Seniors who survived Nox's takeover.

"Is the food not to your liking?" Victor asks in a deep voice, startling me out of my thoughts as I turn to smile up at him.

"What? Oh, no. It looks good. I was just taking it all in," I tell him, gesturing toward the decorated cafeteria.

"This is your first Christmas at the castle?" he asks with a tilt to his lips, and I nod.

"It is. It's beautiful, but I have to say I'm surprised. From what I've heard, we need to be preparing for war, right?" I ask in a low voice, leaning

toward Victor so only he can hear me. Victor nods, setting his fork down as he rakes his dark gaze over the room.

“Indeed. However, keeping the morale up for the Hunters and Rangers is just as important as training. The Regalis brothers have increased the training over the last three days, and our people are tired. Even with the threat of war between our ranks, they deserve a night off,” Victor grumbles, surprising me with the long speech.

“That makes sense,” I whisper back to him, my body still leaning into his as a large, warm hand suddenly finds my thigh under the table, fingers squeezing in warning as I gasp and sit up, darting a surprised look at Nox. Only he’s not even looking at me. He’s engaged in conversation with Elaine, yet his hand is locked tight on my thigh, wrinkling the fabric of my dress as he holds me tight.

“What are you doing?” I hiss at him under my breath, reaching under the table as subtly as possible and push at the strong fingers grasping me.

“Meyer? Is everything all right?” Victor asks politely, and I’m quick to smile back at him, putting on a fake mask of calm as I nod.

“Yes, of course. The food smells great,” I say quickly, bringing my hand back up to grab my fork before diving into the creamy mashed potatoes on my plate. Truthfully, I’m starved, but I’m having difficulty enjoying my meal with Lennox’s hand still on my thigh. “How long have you been at the castle?” I ask as I try to move my thigh away from Lennox’s firm grip, which only makes him hold tighter, and I try not to wince. The big bastard is going to leave bruises if he squeezes any harder. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you before the day Elaine and Lennox announced you as the new Drakos Senior.”

Victor nods, taking a small bite of food before setting his fork down and dabbing at his mouth with the napkin he’s set across his lap, and I grin in amusement. For such a big, burly guy, Victor sure has impeccable manners. “I only came back at Elaine’s bidding. The late Senior Axford and I didn’t see eye to eye on things, and I refrained from visiting the castle unless called upon,” he responds, his eyes narrowing as he continues to look around the room. “Meyer,” he questions, his accented voice becoming easier to understand the longer I talk with him.

“Hmm?” I ask around another bite of food, groaning a little as the tender prime rib practically melts in my mouth.

“Is there a reason two Demons are currently stalking me?” he asks with mild amusement.

My eyes shoot up in surprise, and I stupidly inhale and gasp when a piece of meat lodges itself into my throat. I immediately fall into a coughing fit, which makes Victor's eyes widen in horror as a massive hand wallops me on the back, helping me cough up the offending piece of meat as I make a fool of myself in front of everyone.

Eyes watering, I finally clear my throat as Victor leans closer to say, "I apologize, I didn't mean to startle you that way," he says, eyes falling to the hand on my back, which is now rubbing my shoulder in soft circles, before he looks over my head at Nox. When I risk a peek at the Demon to my left I realize his hand is no longer on my thigh but my back. I find him still in conversation with a concerned-looking Elaine, who gives me a tight smile before returning to her conversation once she's sure I'm okay. Nox doesn't glance my way once as he helps me not choke and die on my prime rib, and I glare at him, shrugging off his hand before looking back at Victor with an embarrassed smile.

"I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting you to ask that question," I whisper, trying to ignore the curious glances pointed my way as my eyes flick around the room, landing first on Creed. He's only fifty or so feet from the table, a small throwing blade in his hand as he leans casually on the wall, tossing the knife in the air every thirty-seconds or so. His dark glare is trained on Victor's hand as he picks up my napkin and offers it to me, which I take gratefully, dabbing at the tears that had run down my face while coughing.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asks, leaning forward so he can look at my face, genuine concern on his heavy brow, and I can't help but giggle and nod, wondering how I thought this massive man was terrifying the first time I saw him. Besides his intimidating size, he is honestly one of the softest-spoken, well-mannered men I have met since stepping foot in this castle.

I can see Nox tense out of the corner of my eye when I laugh at Victor just before his hand clamps around my thigh once more, and I have to fight not to roll my eyes at his possessive gesture. He wants to get mad that I'm laughing with a man, but finds it amusing when I walk into his office to find him holding another woman in his arms. To be fair, I'm no longer upset about it since Elaine and I talked, but he doesn't know that.

"Yes. Sorry about that," I rasp, cheeks still warm as I grab my fork while looking around the room for Valen. It doesn't take much to find him. Almost like a magnet, our eyes connect, and my heart skips a beat at the intensity in his eyes. He's no longer standing next to Creed, but is now on the other side

of the table, his beautiful face frozen in a mask of anger as he tilts his head to the side, eyes flashing like a predator hunting his prey. I shiver and yank my gaze from him. Victor hadn't been lying. Demons are definitely stalking us. They've split up and are closing in on all sides. "Just ignore them. They won't attack... I think," I whisper his way, then squeak when Lennox's hand tightens to a painful level on my thigh. I glare at the infuriating Viking, but he's still ignoring me.

As quickly as I can, I move my fork under the table, holding it like a dagger before stabbing Nox in the back of the hand, making his hand release my thigh as his head slowly turns to glare down at me. My eyes widen when I see Nox's pupils blown, a dark, uncomfortable energy sparking from him as a growl slowly vibrates from his chest. I stubbornly glare back at him, refusing to let him boss me around with his bad attitude as I yank my fork out of his hand, then smirk my triumph as Elaine laughs nervously at his side.

"Lennox. Ask me to dance," Elaine suddenly requests, standing as Victor chuckles darkly at my side. I guess he caught my less-than-subtle stabbing as Elaine yanks a growling Lennox from his chair and forces him over to the cleared portion of the dining hall at the center of the room. Nox allows Elaine to pull him from the table, but his dark eyes stay on me as Victor stands and offers me his hand.

"And now I understand why Elaine likes you so much. Would you care to dance?" he asks, and I grimace.

"I don't know how to dance," I admit, and Victor's lips quirk up in the smallest of smiles.

"It's not hard. Just follow my lead," he prompts, and I eye him warily. "Come on. Elaine said dancing was mandatory before I allow you to sulk off to your room," he replies as I hesitantly take his hand and let him pull me to my feet. I tuck my now bloody fork under my napkin as I leave, hoping no one else caught my little tantrum before allowing Victor to lead me to the dance floor, which is quickly filling now that Elaine and Nox are waltzing gracefully around the space.

I watch them with a strange feeling in my chest as Victor places an enormous hand on my waist and takes my hand in his. "Watching him will only give him the satisfaction he wants, Meyer," Victor whispers, and I look up at him in surprise, finding him staring longingly at Elaine.

"How do you know that?" I ask as he slowly starts to move, our pace much slower than the sprawling dancers around us. Tentatively, I follow him,

stepping on his toes at every turn, and cursing under my breath when Victor chuckles. I glare up at him, bending my neck so far back it almost hurts.

“Because I would be proud as a damn peacock if I had her staring at me the way you are him. From what I have heard, that man is powerful and knows it. It looks like you are giving him a run for his money, but you can't be too obvious,” he adds with a wink.

“But you are staring at her,” I point out as we dance around the room.

“Yes, but the difference is, I want Elaine to know I'm pursuing her. There is no fight on my end. Only hers,” he grumbles, his scowl deepening with his words as he watches Elaine and Nox. When I step on Victor's toes for the fourth time, I curse and glare at my feet. “Come here,” he mutters, his hand moving to my waist, plucking me off the floor before resting my feet on top of his much larger ones. “Now, don't go stabbing me with a fork. I'm just trying to help,” he adds, and I laugh at the completely serious look on Victor's face.

“I won't thank you,” I add as Victor picks up our pace, dancing us around the room, placing me on my feet when he spins me under his arm before putting me right back. By the time the song is done, we are both laughing and smiling before a dark presence comes up behind me, making Victor's smile falter.

“Prince Darakh,” Victor greets with a dip of his head as I turn and look up into my dream man's face.

“Lennox?” I whisper, not expecting to see him behind me. I'm so used to calling him by the name I know or that of Regalis that I forget it's not his actual name. Lennox glares at Victor, the two of them almost seeing eye to eye before he silently holds his right hand, the hand I had just stabbed but no longer has a wound.

“Ranger Smith. Would you do me the honor of a dance?” he grits out between clenched teeth as Elaine rushes over to us, her eyes flitting from me to Lennox, then landing on Victor.

“Senior Drakos?” she whispers, holding out her small hand, which he grabs immediately before stepping to her side, pulling her tightly into his arms, and beginning to dance.

Well, shit. There goes my escort.

“Little Demon,” Nox growls under his breath, wiggling his fingers impatiently at me as I reluctantly take his hand and then gasp as he yanks me hard to him. My chest slams into his as his strong arm bands around my

waist, holding me so close I can feel every plane and divot of his body against mine. Heat immediately pools in my center, and I clench my thighs in response as I glare daggers up at him. Nox starts leading me in a flawless dance, his feet moving mine as he glides over the floor. "I'm convinced you were placed on this earth to try my patience," he growls low, ducking his head so I can hear him over the music.

I snort in response and look up at him, still confused about how he's able to dance without me stepping on his damn toes. "What patience?" I snark back at him as he glares at me, the air around us heating with his dark magic. He suddenly spins me, making the dress billow out around my feet before pulling me back close, his lips brushing over the shell of my ear as he chuckles.

"You and I have that in common, don't we? And why are you out of bed? I told Creed to keep you there after what happened last night," he rasps, and I shiver, partially from his hot breath on my neck but also from the reminder of that awful dream.

"I'm fine," I whisper, some of my annoyance melting when I remember this man did save my life today. Even if he's a prick, I'm not too much of an ungrateful brat not to say thank you. "Thanks for, you know... keeping me alive," I mutter as Nox stands up straight, his brows furrowed as he stares down at me with an odd expression on his handsome face.

"You are not fine. You should be in bed. Your muscles are still weak, and your magic is barely holding on. It's almost as dark as it was before you brought Valen back. Elaine should have never brought you to this," he mutters darkly, ignoring my thanks while shooting his next dirty look at the woman dancing in Victor's arms.

"You healed me, remember?" I point out, which doesn't seem to help at all.

"Yes," Nox hisses, body tensing as he spins me around the room, moving faster than before. "I healed you, Meyer. Meaning, I know every fucking injury you endured! I felt your pain as my own as I tried to keep your damn heart beating. So you will have to forgive me for wanting you to stay in bed for one goddamn day!" he snarls, taking me by surprise at the genuine worry and fear in his eyes. His raw emotions make me stumble for the first time during our dance. Lennox curses, his arms banding tight around me, catching me before I can trip and lifting me off my feet, carrying me from the dance floor and out one of the doors nearby.

The startling difference between the brightly lit and loud dining hall and the dark, silent hall is shocking as I hold on to Nox.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask nervously, still unsure if I trust him or not. Nox scoffs, bearded jaw tightening as he spins us, pressing my back to the stone wall before boxing me in with his arms.

“Not even saving your life will earn your trust. Will it, Meyer? How many times have I kept you breathing up here? Hmm? How many more times must I do so in order for you to understand I don't want you dead!” he roars in my face, shoulders heaving and sparking my anger in return.

“Lennox, I don't think you want me dead! I don't want you dead either or I wouldn't have thrown the only knife I had to defend myself to save you!” I scream back in response. “And I'm grateful that you saved me,” I add, softening my voice a little so people inside the dining hall won't hear our argument. “But that doesn't mean I trust you,” I add, making Nox snarl in frustration and punch the stone wall behind me. I watch his body grow before me, his shoulders widening as his teeth sharpen. In the back of my mind, I know that I should be scared. Hell, I should be goddamn terrified... but I'm not.

“You're too damn stubborn,” he growls in frustration, raising a clawed hand and collaring my neck with it. I swallow as excitement runs through my veins, my body instantly reacting to Nox's as my nipples pebble against the smooth leather of the dress's corset.

“And you have anger issues,” I point out, trying to ignore the burst of arousal deep in my belly as I press my hands to his chest and shove at him, trying to get a little space from his dark, masculine scent that makes my mind melt.

“Stop pushing me away!” he snarls, voice deepening as his eyes glow with an unnatural light.

“Stop being an asshole, and I fucking would! You want me to trust you? Then earn it. So far, all you do is purposely piss me off and treat me like a damn toy you want to play with,” I accuse, and this time Lennox stalls, frowning and leaning back, granting me the space I so desperately need. Nox curses under his breath as he hangs his head, his shoulders slowly shrinking back to normal.

“You're not a toy, Meyer,” he rasps, looking a little defeated and making me feel bad for chewing him out.

“You're not an asshole,” I mutter, feeling like I should say something nice

as well, then frown when I realize I just lied. “For the most part,” I add, making Nox chuckle as he looks back up at me, his eyes lightening as he shakes his head. “Nox?” I ask, pursing my lips at his sudden change in mood, wondering if I can get one of my questions answered.

“Hmm?” he asks, his eyes moving from mine down to my lips when I lick them nervously. He groans under his breath and leans in slightly, his hands moving to my hips as he presses me harder against the wall.

“What is your real name? Not the one you go by here... but your Demon one. Victor called you Prince Darakh,” I whisper, then hold my breath as Nox’s lips thin into a straight line.

“*Victor*,” he hisses under his breath as his fingers grip my hips harder. “If you want Elaine's little toy to live through the night, you will not call him by his given name again,” Nox warns, and my shoulders slouch in disappointment when asshole Nox makes a reappearance. When I nod in agreement, Nox grunts in approval but doesn't move, staying dangerously close to my face, our lips only inches apart. “You wouldn't be able to pronounce my entire Demonic name. But my mother calls me Garthelaun,” he whispers, and I roll his name around in my mind, frowning.

“Garth-e-lawn?” I try to say, making Nox’s entire face transform as a full smile splits across his face, and he nods.

“Close enough. But only my mother calls me that. I go by several names in Versipellis. However, Lennox is quickly becoming one of my favorites, and I’m considering keeping it when we head home.” Lennox shifts forward, still arched over me, keeping me pinned to the wall as his hands slowly start to inch their way up from my waist. My breath catches, and my heart races in my chest as his hands skim over the leather of my corset, his big thumbs caressing the underside of my breasts as he leans into me.

“Why?” I ask breathlessly, then moan as his thick fingers move up to my collarbone, one hand wrapping around my neck as the other weaves itself into my hair, fisting my blonde strands in his strong hand and tipping my head back, making me gasp when his lips skim over my own. The touch so soft, I don't know if I imagined it or not.

“*Lennox*,” I gasp against his lips, my voice deeper than normal, making a rumbling growl burst from Nox’s chest in response, a feral smile spreading over his face.

“That's why,” he rasps before taking my mouth with his as my eyes widen in understanding. He likes the way I moan his name.

Firm, unyielding lips press against mine as Lennox kisses me senseless, an electric chill shooting through me, making my toes curl in the shoes Elaine lent me as Lennox pulls me closer to him, deepening our kiss and forcing his tongue between my lips. Everything about our kiss is deep, dark, and full of a possessiveness that I can't help but crave. A thrill shoots through me as I return everything Nox gives me tenfold. Wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing myself against his lips so hard, I know they'll be bruised in the morning.

He tastes like spiced rum and sugar, our tongues tangling as he groans, the sound shoots straight to my pulsing clit as my legs shake. I cling to him when I feel like my knees are about to buckle, and almost like he can also sense it, Nox lifts me off my feet, encouraging me to wind my legs around his waist as we keep our heated kiss going.

"Meyer," he rasps into my mouth, teeth grazing my bottom lip as he sucks it into his mouth. I feel something stir deep inside me, something dark and almost animalistic. It simultaneously gives me a thrill and scares the ever-living shit out of me, and I gasp, drawing back from Lennox's mouth with wide eyes. "Fuuuuck!" he snarls, as his entire body quakes, the corded muscles in his thick neck flexing as Nox slams his eyes shut and slowly sets me to my feet.

"Nox?" I pant out, my hands moving from around his neck to press against my racing heart as he growls and shakes his head. "What's wrong?"

"Fuck! Go! Meyer, get out of here," he snarls, popping the warm little bubble we had wrapped ourselves in as my mouth drops open in shock. Not again! He seriously wouldn't push me away a second time, would he?

"What?" I ask breathlessly as he groans like he's in pain, his body trembling, and I step back, ready to run and look for Creed or Valen. But before I can panic too much, the shadow behind us shifts, and Razar moves into the light, his hooded figure stalking over to me. I take a step back as Nox growls low in his throat, bright red eyes flashing at Razar, who freezes mid-step.

"Get over here, now," Razar rasps, and it takes me a moment to realize it's me he's talking to.

"W-what?"

"Now!" Razor bellows as horns slowly start to appear on Nox's temples, the curled black points growing over his brow as his shoulders hunch forward.

“Okay!” I nod in agreement, running over to Razar and squeaking in surprise when he grabs me, yanks me close, then covers me in his dark cloak, shutting out the light as his arms lift me off the ground and dark, cold magic surrounds us. “Razar!” I scream in fright as everything moves and shifts, the feeling of him running making my stomach turn as I cling to his strong arms.

“Wait! Nox needed help. Why are we leaving?” I shout as Razar’s pace slows, and he chuckles darkly under his breath before his arms release me without warning. I fall from him, crumpling to the cold floor with a shout, then glare up at the hooded man. “What the hell, Razar?!”

The man growls down at me before he turns on his heel and walks away.

“What?! Wait, what just happened? You can’t just take me like that and...” I trail off, looking around me, trying to figure out where I am. “Where the hell am I?” I shout after him, running to catch up, then grab his elbow to stop him. In an instant, I’m pressed against a wall, blade pressed to my throat as I gasp and gape up at him.

“Do not mistake my help as kindness, Pup. I did what I had to so Nox wouldn’t claim your ass and chain his soul to you for the rest of eternity. If I were you, I would give him twenty-four hours to ensure your safety and freedom,” he snarls before letting the blade slide from my throat, its sharp edge nicking my skin as he sneers down at me. “Or don’t. I honestly couldn’t give two shits about you,” he growls, dark eyes fixed on mine.

“Then let me go,” I grind out, looking down to where his free hand is wrapped around my waist. Razar releases me so fast you would think I burned him, his eyes wide, and the sneer falls from his face as shock takes its place. In the next moment, Razar turns and strides away from me, his steps feather-light as he disappears into the shadows of the dark hallway, his cloak billowing out behind him as he goes.



Meyer

“Where’d you run off to last night, Angry Girl?” Theo asks as he shovels scrambled eggs into his mouth, eating so fast you would think he didn’t have a four-course meal last night. “I wanted a dance, but you disappeared when I went looking for you. Did you get lucky?” he asks with a mouthful of food, looking up at me and wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“No. And I was tired. It was a long day,” I say, keeping my answer vague. In all reality, I had wandered the castle halls for the better part of an hour, trying to figure out where I was since Razar left me in a corridor I had never seen before. When I finally stumbled upon the door that led back to the Ranger barracks, I almost cried in relief. But that relief was short-lived when I found two Demon Princes leaning against my door, waiting for me with matching angry expressions.

Creed was mad that I had disappeared and he couldn’t find me, and Valen was upset that I left without granting him a dance. Neither of them mentioned Victor Drakos being my escort for the night. I’m assuming Elaine explained things, since it looked like they were only moments away from roasting her guy at dinner. Thankfully, they were only there to say good night. Valen had been the first to sweep me into his arms for a soft, sweet kiss, but Creed had been right behind him, his chest pressing to my back as he kissed my neck, taking advantage of me being distracted by Valen.

I clear my throat and look around the cafeteria, which looks completely normal this morning as I try to cool my raging libido. I went to bed hot and

needy after that kiss, and more confused than ever before. Then I had a hard time actually falling asleep because I was scared I may dream walk into someone else's dream... Needless to say, it was a long night and I'm exhausted.

"Is everything okay?" Jordan asks, sitting next to me while glowering at Theo. "You were missed during training yesterday, but Umbra Regalis said you were doing some private training with Creed." I nod, not wanting to worry my friends about a near-death experience when I'm totally fine now.

"Yeah, I was practicing with some swords, and we had an argument," I admit, telling them about my training with Creed before Nox's dream.

"Do I need to talk with him? I'll make sure he leaves you alone if you want," Theo says, totally serious, and I crack up.

"Theo, I appreciate it. But getting your ass kicked for sticking up for me wouldn't be helpful. Besides, I already spanked him," I add with a shrug, making Jordan choke on a bite of his toast as Theo grins and winks at me.

"Kinky! Did you make him your bitch?"

"Theo!" Jordan snaps, gaping at him in shock and making the two of us burst into laughter as I nod.

"Totally did," I giggle, wiping my eyes as I look down the table at the two Rangers staring at us. Billy and Sabrina exchange curious glances, probably wondering what's so funny, and Jordan gives them a small wave, which they return before they go back to their meal.

"Theo?" I ask, staring at Billy with a sneaking suspicion.

"Yeah, Angry Girl?" Theo mutters, reaching across his plate and stealing a piece of bacon off mine. I immediately whack him with the back of my fork, protecting my breakfast and making him pout at me as he rubs his hand. "How many Rangers and Hunters were already on Lennox's side before he officially took over the castle?"

"Almost half of the Hunters and about a third of the Rangers. Though the number is almost double now. Mom's been making it her personal mission to make sure everyone is told the truth about the Senioreem. Once they've been informed about the humans and other shady shit that the Senioreem have been doing, they have been voluntarily changing their allegiances. Why?"

"I haven't seen any real fights or arguments, and after a hostile takeover like that, I guess I just figured there would be more pushback," I admit. Sure, there have been some wary glances and whispers whenever one of the guys is in the room, but I haven't seen any outright defiance.

“Oh, they’ve been happening. It's just that Nox seems to know when someone is about to freak out and intervenes before it gets nasty. It's kinda creepy how he’s just there to handle everything right as it goes to shit,” Theo admits, and I snort.

“He can read emotions. Creed said something about only letting the Hunters out of the holding cells who aren't about to slice our throats. So if he suspects someone may be a threat, he probably has Razar watching them,” I mutter, rolling my eyes as I glance down the table where Nox is sitting next to Elaine, Victor, and Monroe. Theo's brows draw together as he nods.

“I knew he could tell if people were lying. There have been a few Hunters with that ability, but I didn't realize he could sense all emotions. That's kinda badass!”

“Nox isn't a Hunter, he’s a Demon. It makes sense that he has more abilities than one of us,” Jordan remarks, following my gaze as he stares at Nox. “Do you think all Demons are as attractive as the ones here?” Jordan muses. I giggle as Theo's expression suddenly darkens, his eyes flicking from Jordan, who is clearly checking out Nox, to the Demon in question before he huffs and stands from the table.

“I need to go find Mom and help her with some stuff. Catch you guys later,” he grumbles under his breath as he clears his area and leaves the table, glaring at Nox when he passes behind him. Jordan and I watch him as he goes, and once he leaves, I giggle again, looking at Jordan in excitement.

“Theo was SO jealous! Did you see that?!” Jordan smirks a little and ducks his head, rolling his lips together before looking back up at me.

“He was, wasn't he?” he whispers, the pure joy in his expression impossible to miss.

“So... How did it go the other day?” I ask, my curiosity impossible to stifle. I’ve been dying to ask Jordan what happened after Theo chased after him, but he’s been a little withdrawn, and then everything happened with Lennox's dream, and I haven't had a moment alone with him since. Jordan's smile dims a little, and he sighs, letting his head fall into his hands as he shrugs his shoulders.

“It was... good. More than good,” he admits, looking at me from the side of his eyes. “Theo kissed me,” he whispers, and my heart stops in my chest as I squeak in surprise and bounce in my seat.

“No fucking way! Really?! Was it good?” I ramble, screaming a little when Jordan's cheeks blush bright red, and he nods.

“So good!” he groans, then lets his head fall to the table with a *THUMP*. “But then I remember everything that happened and... I get hung up. Meyer, Elaine is practically my mom! I literally trust her more than anyone in this world, and Theo... Well, I thought I trusted him, and he trusted me. I would have bet my life on that knowledge!” Jordan shrugs again and releases a shuddering sigh. “So I guess I’m just upset that I wasn’t good enough for them to trust. That they thought they had to keep that from me and it hurts so much. I don’t know if I can get over it,” he grumbles into the table as I rub his back, resting my head on his shoulders as I let him vent his frustrations.

“Have you talked to Elaine about how you’re feeling yet?” I ask softly, and Jordan shakes his head.

“No. I know I’ll end up forgiving her. I love her too much not to, and I’m not done being angry yet,” he admits, and I nod.

“You need to do it on your own time. Don’t feel guilt over that,” I whisper, then shiver when the feeling of someone watching me makes the small hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I glance around the large room, keeping my head on Jordan’s shoulder, as I look around, then find Lennox glaring at me, his angry eyes moving from Jordan to me, then back as Monroe talks to him.

I roll my eyes and flip him the bird, but sit up, removing myself from Jordan for his own personal safety. I’m still not sure what happened between Nox and me last night, but I know I don’t want Jordan getting in the middle of our fights.

“Yeah, I know I’ll figure it out. I just need a little more time and some distractions,” Jordan says, sitting up when I move and giving me a soft smile as he wraps an arm around my shoulder. I mentally cringe, hoping that Nox isn’t still watching as I give Jordan a side hug.

“No better distraction than a civil war between Umbra Hunters,” I point out, and Jordan scoffs a laugh and then nods.

“Yeah. I’m worried things are about to get ugly. There’s that heavy feeling in the air, you know?” he mutters as I nod. “Anyway...” Jordan waves a hand through the air and stands, grabbing his tray and waiting as I finish shoveling the rest of my food into my mouth. “You were late for breakfast this morning,” he points out as I stand up.

“Yeah. I was looking for Milo. I saw him last night, but he was hiding somewhere in Creed’s room before I left. His food bowl was untouched, and I wanted to make sure he was doing okay,” I mutter, as concern for my little

furry baby grows.

“Oh, I saw Razar leaving Creed's room with him this morning. Maybe check with him,” Jordan suggests, making my blood run cold as I snap my head in his direction.

“Razar?” I ask in a cold voice, making Jordan frown.

“Yes?” he says slowly, his answer pitched like a question.

“Had Milo... my Milo. Orange cat,” I add for emphasis.

“Uh... Yeah. Is that bad?” Jordan asks, taking my trembling tray out of my hands as I glare at the door to the cafeteria.

“I’m going to kill him,” I grind out, letting Jordan take my dishes as I turn and stalk from the cafeteria without a further word. “Stupid cat-napping monster is going to get his balls kicked so damn hard, his ancestors will feel it!” I stomp through the pristine halls of the castle, running upstairs and rushing into the barracks, slamming the enormous door shut, making the three Rangers hanging out on the couches jump in surprise. I nod at them but don't spare them any more attention as I barrel up the stairs, anger brimming and about to explode, as I burst into Razar's room, ready to take my cat back.... Then freeze, all my ambition and anger disappearing to shock and...

“Wh-why are you naked?!” I scream, slapping my hand over my eyes in mortification as Razar stands butt-ass naked in front of me.

Wait... did I actually see that correctly?

Spreading my fingers, I peek through them, my mouth falling open in appreciation as Razar rubs a towel through his long, wet black hair, a scowl in place as he glowers at my sudden appearance. I want to look away, but fuck! The man looks like he was carved from stone by the gods! He’s not as bulky as his brothers, but the muscle he has is well-defined. I’m pretty sure his abs have abs! Being a Beastia must take a lot of work because Razar is ripped!

My eyes falls on the bead of water that travels over Razar's chest, then slides down each divot of his abs, and I suddenly have the impulse to lean forward and lick it off him. The farther down I look, the wider my eyes get, and when I finally glance at what he’s packing between his legs, my thighs immediately clamp together in fear.

Yeah. No. That’s not natural! Why is it so damn big?!

Razar grunts at me, his dark eyes cold and assessing as he lowers his towel from his damp hair and lifts an unimpressed brow at me, seemingly unbothered by his nudity. “Are you done?” he finally growls when I stand

there staring at him between my fingers like a creeper. I startle from my dick induced trance and spin on my heel to look at the wall and try to get my brain to function again.

“Umm... I... Would you please cover up?!” I shout over my shoulder. I hear another grunt, but this time with a rustle of fabric. After a moment, I peek a glance over my shoulder and sigh in relief when I see Razar has wound the small blue towel around his trim hips. It's not covering much, but at least the anaconda he's packing between his legs has been tucked away. “Would it have killed you to put clothes on?” I snarl at him, my anger rising as Razar stands there, arms crossed over his wet chest, glaring at me.

My only answer is the irritating arch of his brow, and I narrow my eyes at him, trying not to look at the perfectly formed ‘V’ that is showing above the towel and the dark line of hair that trails from Razar's belly button down to that freaking... weapon! Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare back at him, opening my mouth to demand the location of my cat is, when a small meow filters through the room, answering my unspoken question. I dart a look over to the impeccably made bed, finding Milo rising to his small paws, yawning as he stretches. I growl and lurch forward, ready to take my cat back just as Razar's big arm snags me around my waist, stopping me from getting to Milo.

“Stop taking my cat!” I yell at him, kicking him in the shins before getting him good in the ribs with my elbow. Razar grunts, his grip loosening, and I kick back, throwing all my weight into his body, sending us to the floor in a crumpled heap of limbs and skin. “Dammit!” I gasp, twisting and shoving off Razar, getting to my hands and knees as he growls and kicks my hand, making me face-plant into the cold floor with a huff.

I thankfully stop my nose from crashing into the stone, but I'm not fast enough to get up before Razar grabs me by the waist and rolls, turning us so fast I scream. Then I find myself staring up at his angry dark eyes as he plants a knee on either side of me. Long strands of black hair hang around him like a curtain as he bares his sharpened teeth at me. “He's mine!” he snarls in my face like a damn animal, and I shake my head, then do the only thing I can since the Demon above me is so much stronger. I reach up and poke him in the eye, making Razar curse and jerk back, his hand flying to the eye I just assaulted. I immediately roll away from him and jump to my feet, gazing at him as I skirt the walls of the bedroom to avoid getting caught and rush over to Razar's bed.

“No! Milo is mine! Get your own damn cat!” I grumble over my shoulder, glaring at him as I scoop Milo up in my arms, calming a little when he starts to purr.

“*Pup*,” Razar growls in warning, jumping to his feet, his bright red eyes watering as he stalks toward me.

“No!” I shout, pointing at him like that will somehow stop his forward pursuit. “Knock it off. Milo is mine, Razar!” I shout and then scream when he lunges for me, arms wrapping around both me and Milo as he lifts me off my feet. Milo hisses in response, his bright blue eyes locked on Razar's hand before he scratches the hell out of it. “See? He doesn't even like you!” I point out, kicking my legs in the air while Razar growls at me like a rabid beast.

“You have no idea what you're talking about. My tiny monster has no fear of me,” he growls into my ear, making me shriek in outrage when Razar bats Milo from my arms. My cat leaps to the bed before hissing at the two of us in response and jumping to the safety of the small ledge of the window.

“Dammit! Razar, let me go!” I reach for my kalis, and Razar chuckles, his big hand covering mine before I can grip the handle; then he spins me so I'm facing him.

“You know, at least there is something good about you... You always go for your weapon when you're mad,” he snarls, then tosses me on his bed, following me down and pinning me to the mattress with his heavy weight. His fingers pluck my kalis from its sheath as he taunts me with it, spinning it between his fingers like a toothpick. “That and you never give up, despite how pathetically outmatched you are,” he muses, his raspy voice becoming stronger the longer he talks.

My hands inch down slowly as I grab the throwing blade tucked in the thigh holster at my side and glare up at Razar. “At least I don't underestimate my enemy,” I hiss between my clenched teeth. Razar's dark expression lightens in amusement, and he leans down just as I dart a hand up, bringing my blade to the side of his throat the way Lennox told me to. “Don't get cocky,” I whisper, arching a brow in challenge at the Demon Prince hovering above me. “It could get you killed one day.”

Razar's breath stills, his eyes locked on mine as a slow smile forms at the side of his lips, scaring the shit out of me as he nods in approval. But before either of us can say anything more, a loud horn sounds through the air in warning, making Razar and me dart a look to the window where Milo is sitting, cleaning his paws.

“It's too soon,” I whisper, my fear ratcheting up as Razar jumps off me. Then he shocks the hell out of me by yanking me to my feet and hauling me close as he steps in front of the window. “Lennox said the Senioreem was still several days out,” I whisper, and Razar nods, his eyes narrowing as he stares out into the snowy landscape.

“They should be,” he agrees, then curses, letting me go and rushing over to his dresser.

“Is it the Russians? I ask, peering back out the window before turning just in time to see Razar drop his towel, giving me a prime view of his round, muscular ass. “Jesus! You need to learn some decorum,” I grumble, shaking my head as Razar steps into his pants and shrugs a loose-fitting black shirt over his head.

“They wouldn't blow the horns for anything but an enemy,” Razar growls, shooting me a dark look as he toes on shoes without socks, then moves over to a small set of drawers, grabbing a few knife belts and harnesses full of small blades. Then he's walking over, dropping to his knee in front of me, and strapping three new knife holsters around my thighs and waist.

“What are you doing?” I ask in shock while admiring the small silver blades. They aren't fancy like the sword Nox gave me, but they are sleek, and when I grab one, holding it in my hand to test out the weight, I smile.

Yeah, these are nice.

Razar only grunts in response to my question and stands, grabbing his cloak, throwing it over his shoulders, and clasping it before turning back to me. “You don't talk much, do you?” I mutter in annoyance.

“I would, but you won't shut up long enough for a person to get a singular word in,” he rasps out in response, then grabs my hand, tugging me to follow him. “Come on. We need to get down to the courtyard.”



Meyer

Razar keeps a firm grip on my wrist as we barrel down the stairs with at least fifty other Hunters behind us, all dressed in fighting leathers and all ready for battle. There is a heaviness in the air that makes me shiver as we run through the entry of the castle and out onto the frozen steps outside. Squinting through the heavy snow falling from the sky, I look around at the Rangers all dressed in fighting gear, looking at their bloodline Seniors with hardened expressions. Their hands all tucked behind their backs as they stand at attention as their Senior shouts instructions at them like drill sergeants.

My gaze zeros in on Senior Monroe, then finds Jordan as he stands near him, his hands also clasped behind his back as his eyes roam over the Drakos Rangers, searching for Theo. I move to head over to my Bloodline, but Razar's hand tightens on my wrist as he leads me to the small stone steps that lead to the top of the wall surrounding the castle.

“Where are we going?” I ask in confusion, but follow willingly. I may have trust issues with these guys, but I’m quickly coming to realize they are the safest place to be when shit hits the fan.

“Up,” Razar growls like it's the most obvious answer ever. I scowl at him and roll my eyes.

“Yeah, I figured that much. I want to know why we are going up.”

“That's not what you asked,” he points out with a huff as we get to the top of the tall, gray stone wall. My breath hitches as I look around us. The massive clearing in front of the castle is hard to see through because of all the

snow, but the large black shapes of Beastia are still easy to see.

“Uh... Pretty sure those weren't there when we looked out the window a few minutes ago,” I point out.

“Shit,” Razar snarls, yanking me close to him as he lets go of my wrist, stepping slightly in front of me.

“They’re not attacking...” I breathe out through panting breaths, watching as the monsters below stand eerily still, their soulless eyes black and unblinking. Venom drips from their open maws, the thick black liquid dripping on the dirty snow under massive taloned paws.

“They’re being controlled,” Razar hisses, eyes flashing black as his anger crawls to the surface, showing the beast that lies within. “Stay next to me,” Razar mutters, and I nod, having no plans to move from this spot until told otherwise. I’m too busy gapping at the amount of Beastia in front of me to notice Valen until his arm hooks around my waist, and he tucks me into his side, his angry pale green eyes on Razar.

“Why is she out here?” he grinds out, looking down at me for a moment, his stern expression softening before glaring back at Razar. I step out of Valen's hold and move closer to the high edge of the wall, leaning on it with my hands and going up on my toes to get a better look at the monsters below.

“Because I’m an Umbra Hunter, and this is technically my job,” I tell Valen with a small smile, making his scowl deepen as he shakes his head.

“No, you're a Dream Walker, and I don't want you near these beasts. They are incredibly dangerous, Mi Sol,” he rasps. He reaches out his hand and twines his fingers with mine as he steps to my side. I look up at him, his white-blond hair ruffling in the winter breeze as he frowns at the terrifying scene below.

“She’s a Hunter as well, Valen. Her blood wouldn't have popped Regalis without having at least something in there,” Nox grumbles, stepping up next to Valen, his green eyes falling on our clasped hands for a moment, lips pursing before he nods at Razar.

“Aren't all Hunters basically Demons if you lot created us?” I ask, trying to distract myself from the dread pooling in my belly. Razar scoffs, and Nox shakes his head.

“No. Just because Hunters were created with our blood and magic doesn't mean they are Demons. They *were* human, but we made them more. Now, they are their own race who were *supposed* to protect this side of the Veil. Mortal, like a human, but with an extended life expectancy and abilities. The

stronger their connection to the magic we infused to their DNA, the stronger the Hunter,” Nox explains, grumpy expression firmly in place as he looks over the courtyard of Hunters and Rangers. There are more here than the previous attack on the castle. Like, a lot more! Where did all these people come from?

The sound of someone running up the stairs behind us finally has me tearing my gaze from the army of mindless Beastia. I find Creed sprinting toward us, taking the steps two at a time until he reaches the top.

“Report,” Nox clips as Creed nods at Razar and Valen, then walks over and presses a kiss to my forehead, shocking me enough that I forget to pull away from him.

“They are surrounding the entire wall. I just sent Senior Rossi and five Units to the look-out to ensure they're not closing in above us as well,” Creed mutters, grabbing a bundle of rolled-up leather he's tucked under his arm as he pushes Razar out of his way. “Arms up, Lemon Drop,” he instructs, gesturing for me to lift my arms above my head.

I do as I'm told, curious about what he's doing, as he slides the leather over my head and pulls it down over my chest. Creed's big fingers slowly lace up the strings of the fighting leathers he's just put on me, but they aren't like any armor I have seen since coming here.

“What is this?” I ask, dusting my fingers over the small scale-like fabric Creed just slipped over my head. It covers the majority of my chest, stopping at the knife belt Razar clipped around my lower waist.

“Dragon scales. They are one of the only things the Beastia needles can't pierce,” Creed mutters as he keeps tying me into the fabric that practically covers my body. It's form-fitting and protects all my major organs, even going up and over my shoulders, riding high on my neck.

“Dragons are real!?” I whisper shout at him, a giddiness rushing through me at the thought. “That's awesome.”

“They are awesome,” Valen murmurs with a chuckle as he watches Creed and me. He has the same black clothes he had on when I woke him in the church, and there is a darkness lingering in his eyes that sends shivers down my spine. “And incredibly dangerous,” he adds, making me roll my eyes in response. It seems that Valen thinks everything is dangerous.

Nox leans in, his fingers moving to the back of my neck and pressing against the fabric right under my hairline. He grunts in approval as he looks down at me, dark eyes emotionless and cold like they used to be before I

found out who he was. An armor of his own, I suppose?

“I like that it covers the back of my neck,” I admit, tearing my eyes from Nox, shivering a little when I remember the last Beastia attack that Nox and I went through together, and Creed nods.

“Nox made sure I added it after his dream,” he admits as he pulls the strings tight, then moves on to the smaller pieces that he straps to my forearms and shins. My eyes fly back to Nox in surprise, but he’s no longer looking at me. “There! Snug as a bug in a rug,” Creed says with a smile, acting like it’s no big deal that he just suited me up for battle with an army of deadly poisonous monsters.

“A bug in a rug?” Valen questions, and I grin up at him as Creed chuckles.

“It’s a human thing,” he tells his brother, who arches an unimpressed brow.

“What are they waiting for?” I mutter as I look back at the still army before us.

“Their command to attack,” Nox mutters, his thick black cloak hanging heavy around his shoulders, covered in freshly fallen snow as he stands tall on the rampart. He glances over at a Hunter about fifty yards away and nods. Seconds later, the massive braziers lining the walls of the castle ignite, the flames shooting toward the snow-darkened skies, adding extra light to the dark, cloud-covered day.

“Whoever is controlling them must be strong. I’ve never seen them so... quiet,” Razar growls, then freezes and nods to the far line of pine trees so far back I can’t see much. “*There*,” he rasps, and Lennox leans forward, one hand resting on the stone wall, the other bringing his enormous ax up to his shoulder where he rests it. I blink at the massive weapon in surprise, not having realized Nox had it this whole time.

“Wraiths,” Nox growls under his breath as Creed curses, leaning so far over the castle wall to look at whatever Razar has pointed out that I’m worried he’s going to fall over. My hand immediately latches onto the black leather of his belt, and I yank him back, letting him go when he turns and gives me a surprised smile in return.

“Six?” Razar mutters, his voice unsure. Nox shakes his head as Valen casts a calm look around the castle, not looking even the slightest bit worried about whatever these Wraiths are.

“Nine in the trees, along with a few Therion; but they are holding back,

probably to be sent in as a distraction,” Creed murmurs, his eyes flicking from one side of the clearing to the other as his shoulders tense. “Valen?” he asks as Valen nods.

“Nine Wraiths. Fifty-seven Beastia and a dozen Therion. But there is a presence I can’t quite figure out. It’s lingering on the south boundary, several miles out,” he mutters, and Nox frowns.

“Elaine has recalled the rest of the North American Units. Could it be a Hunter with cloaking abilities?” he asks his brother as he turns and steps to the other side of the eight-foot-wide wall and nods down at a waiting Monroe. The red-headed giant curses and then starts shouting orders, making the Regalis Rangers scatter in different directions.

“It’s a possibility. Though the magic seems too strong for that of a Hunter,” Valen says, twisting his lips to the side as he tries to figure out what he’s sensing.

“It’s rare to have such a strong Hunter, but it is possible. Look at Elaine. She has access to magic, which I haven’t seen before,” Nox reminds him, and Valen nods but still doesn’t look convinced.

“Hey guys?” Creed whispers, drawing our attention back to the army of Beastia just in time to see every one of them shift, their weight distributing further onto their front haunches as a deep growl rumbles through the air. Almost like Phantoms gliding over the snow, nine extremely tall figures step out from the trees, their skeletal hands hanging by their side with an odd-looking weapon in their hands, I can see broad handles collapsed between bony fingers and thick black chains that hang several links down with a large metal spiked ball attached at the end.

“What the fuck kind of weapon is that!?” I whisper in horror, looking up at Nox, who doesn’t spare me a glance as he glares at what I’m assuming is the Wraiths they have been talking about.

“The Wraith’s Flail,” Creed mutters with a grimace, shaking his head as he takes a deep breath. “They’re not ready for this fight,” he whispers under his breath, casting a concerned eye over the Courtyard where the Hunters and Rangers have all gathered in formation, waiting for their next command.

“No, they’re not. But we’ll help them all the same. Keep her here unless it’s pivotal to move her,” Nox grinds out. Then he spins on his heel, moving to the stairs as the Wraiths slowly bring their arms up above their heads, bringing the clearing to a deadly calm.

“You said she was to fight,” Razar grinds out at my side as Creed follows

Nox.

“I’ve changed my mind!” Nox bellows as he races down the stairs to the courtyard below. I huff in annoyance, but it’s cut off just as the Wraiths bring their hands down simultaneously, making the Beastia's heads snap up and growl before they charge the castle walls. A wave of bright red comes from the Wraiths, and Valen curses, bringing his hands up, his deep voice murmuring words I’ve never heard before and can’t understand. Instead of a soft spark of magic lighting at his fingertips, a bright green circle appears above his hand, with various symbols that spin, casting off a glow almost as bright as the fire nearby.

Razar snarls as he watches the Beastia and magic rush at us. But just as the red wave is about to strike, Valen shouts and brings his hands down with a strained gasp. Brilliant green magic erupts, spiraling out in front of us, forming a wall of bright light that wraps around the wall and castle, cloaking it in a protective shield.

I scream when the magic collides with an explosive force, making the earth quake around us, and my ears ring with the intensity of the sound. Valen curses, grabbing me and spinning us, tucking me protectively in his arms as his shield splinters’ the green surface is covered with spiderweb cracks as bright red infiltrates its bright glow, then shatters it completely.

“That is not Wraith magic!” Valen yells over my head at Razar, who is now on the ground by our feet, the force of the blow taking him down without me realizing it.

“I know! They are being controlled!” he growls back, shoving to his feet and glaring at his brother. “Why does no one listen to me?” he growls, tossing his hands in the air before his big hand grabs my arm and yanks me to him. “Go!” he orders, nodding down to where Nox is commanding the Seniors by Elaine’s side. “Remember that he is your first priority,” Razar growls, making Valen's jaw tense when he looks at me next to Razar. “I’ll keep the damn Pup safe, brother! Go!” he snarls, pointing a clawed finger to the stairs just as the wall shakes beneath our feet.

“Shit!” I gasp, stumbling back as something strikes the walls again. Razar wraps an arm around me and yanks me closer to him as he walks to the edge, looking down at the hoard of terrifying beasts below.

“How good is your aim?” Razar grinds out, and I look up at him in confusion.

“What?”

“Your aim? How far can you throw?” he asks, reaching down to grab several of the blades from the thigh holster he gave me in his room before whispering under his breath. Black magic whispers around the blades as the wall shakes yet again, making me rock back and throw my arms out at my side to keep my balance.

“You’re like a baby deer on new legs,” Razar complains, his hands darting back up to make sure I stay on my feet. “How good is your aim?” he shouts as I glare at him.

“You tell me? I managed to stab you, didn't I,” I shout back, reminding him of the first night at my cabin when I was trying to save Creed. Razar’s black eyes flare in anger, but instead of lashing out like I think he might, he hands me the blades and points down to the mass of Beastia, throwing themselves against the walls. “Kill them,” he snarls as he strides away from me toward the southern part of the wall, peering down and nodding as he goes.

“Freaking hell!” I mutter as I palm the now glowing blade in my hands, Razar’s magic makes my hands tingle as darkness inches up my wrists. One glance down at the Beastia that are throwing their black, needle-covered bodies against the wall is enough for my stomach to flip and bile to rise in my throat. A black, soulless pair of eyes locks on mine, big monstrous paws digging into the snow below as it snarls, its razor-sharp teeth gnashing together as it starts to run at the wall fast. It jumps, using the back of another Beastia to propel itself up. I flip a blade from my left hand to my right, drawing it back over my shoulder as I take a deep breath in, letting the fear ground me as the Beastia flies through the air toward the top of the wall. Once its face is fully visible, I release my blade, watching with bated breath as it spirals through the air and then sinks into the left eye of the Beastia. The monster roars and twists in the air, its entire body seizing as black magic wraps around it like a snake, twisting and turning so fast I have a hard time watching it.

“Ha!” I shout in victory, then gasp when its body hits the top of the wall only feet below where I stand, making me tumble back as the wall shakes, an ominous cracking sounding through the air. “Shit! Not good!” I jump back to my feet, grab another blade, and throw it at the next Beastia I see. It sinks into the top of its head, making it scream in agony as its body shakes and convulses. The sight is sickening, and I eye the dark blades Razar had given me. Better make sure I don't cut myself with these.

I'm able to throw three more blades, but even with the Bestia dying as soon as my blades land, it's not enough to stop the hoard. "Razar!" I scream as the wall shakes again, this time taking some gray stone with it. On the north side of the wall, I see that two Bestia have jumped high enough to get to the top of the wall. Several units of Hunters rush to fight the monsters; I watch in horror as one of the Bestia darts around, striking a Hunter in the chest with its pronged tail and sending him over the wall into the wild group of Bestia below.

Something shifts at my side, and I scream in surprise when Razar is suddenly next to me. "Come on!" he growls, grabbing me and taking off down the length of the wall.

"They are going to break through!" I shout at Razar, who nods in agreement.

"We need to draw them away. If they break through with that many of them at one point, the loss of life will be extraordinary." Razar skids to a stop at the end of the wall where it's carved into the mountainsides and looks down, grunting before turning toward me. "Fight or hide?" he asks, and I blink at him in surprise. "Come with me and fight, or stay here and stay safe until my brothers come to get you?" he asks in irritation, obviously annoyed that he has to babysit me.

"You would let me fight?" I ask, narrowing my eyes on him. Razar grunts again and nods.

"You're stupid, but you can throw a blade. I need you to cover me so I can draw them away from the walls," he growls, and I nod.

"Fight," I answer. Razar nods in approval before grabbing my arm and throwing me over the side of the wall.



Meyer

Before I can even think about screaming in fear, my butt lands in a soft pile of freshly fallen snow. I huff out a breath, shoving my hair out of my face as I stare wide eyed up at the man who is peering over the side at me and nods, then jumps, landing on his feet gracefully next to me. “Di-did you just toss me off the wall!?” I hiss at him as Razar reaches down and yanks me from my soft snow pillow.

“Yell at me later,” he growls, eyes landing on a Bestia whose head has turned in our direction. Razar curses and grabs my hand, turning us away from the castle and dragging me as he runs as fast as my short legs will allow us. We head away from the open area of the castle and toward the steep side of the mountain as a Bestia howls, the sound like razor blades running down my back. Another one answers... and then another that makes the hair on my arms stand on end as we sprint away from the castle wall. Razar turns to look over his shoulder and grins in excitement as heavy paws thunder after us.

“This was a stupid idea!” I gasp, my lungs burning as I try to run through the deep snow.

“Probably,” Razar agrees, not helping me feel any better about our situation. I can hear the Bestia growing closer and start to panic as Razar curses, picks me up, and runs faster. I wind my arms and legs around him, trying to keep myself from being bounced around as I peer over his shoulders at the Bestia in pursuit of us. It looks like we successfully pulled ten or more of them away from the wall. Hopefully, it will be enough for the Hunters and the guys to handle. “How many are following us?” he asks as he runs.

“Uhhh, ten? No eleven!” I shout back as I count the monsters on our heels, then grunt as Razar skids to a stop and drops me to my feet.

“Climb up there and hide, try to take as many of them as you can out with your blades!” he commands, pointing at the small ledge twenty or so feet above our heads where there are a few trees. I nod and turn to dig my fingers into the frozen rock as Razar grabs my waist and tosses me up high, making me squeak as my fingers barely grab the edge of the ledge. “Do not get hurt. Nox’s ire will make the Beastia’s look tame if he finds out about this!” he adds as I desperately claw at the frozen stone, trying to find a better grip.

“Jesus Christ!” I shout as I haul myself up and over the ledge, rolling to my knees and grabbing a few more blades from my sheath as Razar turns to face the Beastia. “Please shift,” I whisper in fear as he stares at them. My heart rate picks up as Razar shrugs out of his cloak, his shoulders trembling before he growls. His body crumples as he falls to his hands and knees, sharp black needles break through dark gold skin, soaking the snow with bright red blood.

I’m not sure what I was expecting to see as Razar shifted into the nightmare monster, but it isn't this; it looks so painful. Seconds later, Razar’s Beastia stands on strong legs, easily a head taller than the monsters barreling toward him. I stand, holding a blade in each hand as I take aim at my first victim and let the blade fly as Razar leaps at the first Beastia, tearing its throat out so fast I don’t notice until its black body crumples to the ground.

I throw my other blade, striking a Beastia in the neck, making its dark blood spill over the snow, but it doesn't go down like the last ones. “Shit!” I grumble, my eyes widening as movement beyond the fighting Beastia gains my attention. Four of the black hooded Wraiths are gliding over the snow, their void eyes on Razar as they close in on all sides. “Shit, shit, shit!” I rasp, grabbing blade after blade, launching them at the Beastia and Wraiths, my heart racing as I slowly start to pick off a few of them. Razar has taken out five of the Beastia by himself, but he's panting heavily, and dark blood oozes from his neck as two of the Wraiths move forward. Their bone fingers wrapped tightly around their deadly looking weapons, hauling them back to strike and no doubt deliver a killing blow.

Reaching down, I move to grab more blades, then curse when I realize both my thigh holsters are out, including my personal one I had strapped to my leg before this all happened. All I have left are the six blades Razar strapped to my waist.

“Dammit. We’re both going to die, then Nox is really going to be pissed,” I mutter, grabbing two of my six remaining blades, aiming, then throwing them at the same time. The first one slams into the right shoulder of a Wraith as he heaves back his weapons, and the bone-chilling scream the Wraith produces is bad enough to haunt my dreams. My second blade isn't as good, sinking into the right arm of the other Wraith as he swings his flail at Razar.

Thankfully, Razar moves just in the nick of time to avoid the deadly spike-covered ball before he jumps on another Bestia circling behind him. I watch as they slowly back Razar further away from the ledge toward the large cliff behind him and shake my head. Frantically, I look around, trying to figure out what to do next. But my eyes fall on the two remaining Wraiths as their dark hooded faces turn to look up at me, and my blood runs cold as they turn and head my way.

“Oh fuck! Of course. Let’s just add to the problem,” I snarl, looking behind me to find a way around fighting those things. There are four large pine trees and some snow-covered shrubs on the small thirty-foot ledge Razar threw me on. I shake my head as I realize there is nowhere to run and no room to fight. If those two Wraiths corner me up here, I’m as good as dead. “Don't look down,” I mutter as the first Wraith gets to the ledge, then jumps, leaping up and hooking its bony fingers onto the edge. I wait for the second to follow before I close my eyes and run for the opposite side of the ledge and jump.

The Bestia below have followed Razar, leaving the area clear as I fall and roll over the snow, the air whooshing from my lungs when I crash to the ground.

“Ow!” I hiss, gasping for breath as I shove to my feet and look for Razar. He's even further away, still fighting the Bestia and the two injured Wraiths. He is covered in blood, but it looks like he’s killed another three beasts. The Wraiths closest to me hiss in annoyance as they drop back to their feet and turn toward me, moving impossibly quick in my direction. Magic sparks at their fingers, and I grab two more blades, throwing them at the Wraiths, then cursing when they move, jumping out of the way just before my knives can land.

I quickly back up, trying desperately to keep some space between us as I fumble for the last two blades at my waist. I shout in surprise when one of the Wraiths leaps, jumping the twenty-foot distance between us while swinging its flail at my head. Instinctually, I drop and roll back, gasping when the spike

ball crashes to the ground, not two feet from my face. Its spikes crater the snow and dirt before it's yanked back, and the Wraith lurches forward to attack again. I roll to my feet and jump out of the way just in time to avoid another blow. Falling to my back, I throw a blade, then sigh in relief when it strikes the Wraith in the thigh, making it scream. I push myself back, my butt sliding across the snow, then gasp when I feel myself slide back further than I'm expecting. Looking behind me, I realize I've pushed myself toward the steep incline of the mountain. It's not the dangerous cliff that Razar is currently up against, but it would be hard to get back up by myself if I were to fall down.

The sound of a bellowing roar makes me grit my teeth in fear, worried Razar may be hurt. But I have no time to look his way as the second Wraith springs at me, shoving the first one out of his way. Instead of swinging his weapon, his long, bony fingers swipe at my face. I turn, then gasp when I feel its sharp fingertips connect with my cheek, whipping my face to the side as I move to my feet and try to get away from the steep hill the Wraiths have cornered me on. Warm, wet liquid slowly drips from my stinging cheek as I hold my last knife in my hand, eyeing the two Wraiths as they start to converge on me from either side.

I glance over their heads, squinting through the heavy snow, wanting to make sure the castle is okay. That if I die here, my friends and the guys will make it out of this battle. But the snow is too thick, and all I can see is the dim glow of the fires on top of the wall.

Holding my breath, I try to find Razar, but he's no longer in view, and my worry for him increases.

"*Stultus paulo, Princeps,*" the Wraith I stabbed in the thigh hisses at me as he grows closer, dropping his flail to the snow at his feet. I hold onto my blade as the monster strides forward, its enormous shoulders twice the size of mine. His hands flex, making the exposed bones crack in the hushed air around us. I wait, knowing that he's about to strike, and hold my breath just as the Wraith launches forward, his sharp fingers clamping around my throat as I bring my blade up to stab it in the chest. It roars in agony, its body twisting away from my blade as I yank it out and then stab it again and again.

If I'm going to die, I'm going to make damn sure this thing is coming with me.

I gasp in surprise when the Wraith's fingers release my throat, grabbing my wrist to stop my assault. Fury burns inside of me as its eyes glow red

from deep inside its hood, and I snarl at it in response, warmth flooding me as my heart races. Bringing my other hand up, I shove at the Wraith's face, my hand connecting with cold bone as I harness the dark, angry warmth inside me, welcoming it as it demolishes the cold stench of fear.

A loud noise wrenches through the air, making my head throb as the Wraith releases me, its bone hands clawing at its face in desperation as it stumbles back, falling to the ground at my feet. I gape at it in surprise, then shriek when the other Wraith's bony fingers whirl toward my exposed throat, its fingers curled into a deadly claw. A mighty roar bellows behind me as something big and black slams into my side, shoving me out of harm's way. The force with which I'm thrown back makes me tumble, then roll down the steep hill below us.

Cursing, I throw my hands out to catch myself as my body slams into the frozen ground at the base of the hill, and I stare up at the gray-colored sky in shock. Pushing up to my elbows, I try to regain my bearings as I rub at my throat with trembling fingers, the feeling of the smooth, cold bone still lingering there. That was too close. My throat would have been ripped out if Razar hadn't.... I jump up, heart lodging into my throat as I search for Razar. I spot him up the hill, ferociously attacking the Wraiths that had cornered me. The shadows of five Bestia move in and now have him surrounded.

"No! Razar!" There are too many of them!

My heart freezes, and something in my chest aches as I watch a Bestia jump on his back, sinking its razor-sharp teeth into the side of Razar's neck. "No!" I scream in horror, the realization that Razar isn't going to make it is like a physical blow to my body! I fumble about for my last blade, but it got knocked out of my hands when Razar shoved me.

"Dammit!" With a growl, I grab a large branch and start to charge up the hill toward Razar when I notice something barreling toward me. A small Bestia snuck around and flanked me. The rush that always takes over me while in battle rises, and I let out a roar of defiance, raising the pathetic little branch in my hands. I bare my teeth as I see my reflection in the soulless eyes that careen my way, but suddenly the Bestia hurdles to the right with a screech. My head whips to follow, finding the monster pinned to the tree next to us as the tree breaks with an ear-splitting crack, making the Bestia go limp, curled around the ornate spear that is holding it there.

"Umm," I rasp in confusion, looking at the long spear, then turn in the direction it came from. I step back when I see the outline of a man striding

through the thick snowstorm in my direction.

Big, heavy black boots strike the ground with purpose as what I can only describe as the Greek god Apollo emerges in front of me, still leaning forward from the strength of his throw. The man's fiery gaze catches mine, and his sculpted face breaks into a radiant grin while he straightens to an impressive height, the very air around him commanding my attention. Broad shoulders give way to powerful arms, while his posture exudes confidence and a sense of self-assuredness. A clean-shaven face reveals a chiseled jawline, accentuating his finely crafted facial features.

“Are you alright, my lady?” the god asks with a voice as smooth and rich as good bourbon, quirking his strong brow. Before I can answer, his gaze surges to where Razar is still fighting the Wraiths and narrows, his hand reaching out toward the battle. As I watch, red light swirls around the Wraiths, who look around, confused. With a look of determination, the man makes a fist, and I wince as the Wraiths collapse in on themselves—the sound of bones snapping, unmistakable.

“Meyer?!” someone shouts from the direction of the castle. “Razar?!” The voice echoes around us as the new man steps toward me, a newfound interest in his eyes.

“Wh-who are you?” I stammer out, the branch still held tight in my hand like it would do something against this behemoth of a man.

“Mi Sol!”

The new man and I glance up the hill as Creed falls to his knees next to a panting Razar, who has crumpled to the ground. My eyes widen when the man gasps, then runs to the blond man running down the hill in my direction.

“Valen!?” he shouts in excitement, making my dream man pull up short in surprise, his pale green eyes widening as a breathtaking smile breaks across his face.

“Jesthren!” Valen dashes down the hill, grin in place, but he runs to me, not Jesthren, and pulls me into his arms, kissing my hair, then my forehead as his hands immediately move over my body. His soft touch starts at my shoulders, then glides over my arms, stomach and finally legs before going back to my neck, his fingers wrapping firmly around the sensitive skin there as he releases a shaky breath.

“I’m fine,” I rasp, my heart still beating fast in my chest as I try to regain control of my rapid breath. “Is Razar okay?” I ask, peering around Valen as he holds me close and then moves us closer to the new guy, his hand

outstretched. Jesthren grins, clasping his hand to Valen's before pulling him into a side hug, me along with him.

"Razar?" the new man asks and Valen gestures up at Creed and Razar, making him smirk and nod. "Nothing can take Razar down, my lady," Jesthren answers for Valen, grinning down at me with dark green eyes before ruffling Valen's hair like he's a child. "I missed you, brother," he murmurs, smacking Valen's back a few times before nodding up the hill. "Let's go make sure Raz doesn't need some help," he adds, and I nod, grabbing Valen's hand and pushing out of the weird hug I got caught in.

"Mi Sol? Why are you holding a stick?" Valen asks, plucking it from my hand as I try to climb back up the steep slope of the hill.

"Mi Sol?" Jesthren asks with a deep chuckle, grabbing the stick from Valen as he studies it, then looks at me in amusement. "Your sun?" he asks Valen, then grins. "That's rather adorable. And the girl looked like she was about to wage war against the Wraiths with this stick alone," Jesthren teases, making me scowl over my shoulder as I try to yank Valen to move faster toward Razar. Does no one care that Razar is injured? Thankfully, Creed's at the top of the hill, his hands pressed to Razar's side as he looks down at me, his eyes full of worry.

"You what?" Valen whispers in horror, and I shrug.

"I ran out of blades! What was I supposed to do? Let Razar die?" I ask, then curse as my foot slips, and I almost face-plant in the snow. Valen catches me, holding me close to him as he finally starts leading the way back up the hill, not having a problem with the steep slope. When we finally make it to the top, I'm a panting, sweaty mess, and Jesthren is looking at me like I might die or something.

"Razar?" I shout, rushing over to him and falling next to his side as Creed looks up at me in relief.

"You alright?" he asks, his brown curls plastered to his head from the amount of snow falling on us. I nod and lean forward, my heart skipping a beat as I tentatively run a finger over the top of Razar's nose; the only part of him that's not covered in poisonous needles. Razar growls in response, and I glare at him, shaking my head.

"That was such a stupid plan! Next time, I get to choose how we lure the Bestia away," I grumble, ignoring how Razar's soulless black eyes stare at me.

"We said that she was to stay on top of the wall, Razar," Valen hisses,

dropping next to me as he runs a gloved hand over Razar's wounded side. "Nox will be needed to heal these," he mutters, concern replacing the anger as he looks at his brother.

Jesthren tsks above us, then crouches next to Creed, patting his shoulder in help as he shakes a big finger at Razar. "You should know better than to start a fight you can't win, Yannos," he murmurs affectionately, then motions for us all to move away. Valen rises immediately, tugging me to my feet as Creed slowly climbs to his and rushes over, his hands moving to my face before he yanks me to him in a hot, demanding kiss.

I gasp against Creed's mouth but don't have time to react as he stops our kiss as fast as it starts. "You were supposed to stay put! Do you have any idea how worried we were?" he asks, closing his eyes as he rests his head on mine. I watch Jesthren from the side of my eye as he pats Razar on the head like a damn demonic puppy before literally scooping him up into his giant arms and starting toward the castle.

I gape after them in shock as Valen snorts an amused laugh, muttering, "Only Jesthren would have the balls to do that," under his breath while he tugs me from Creed and leads us toward the castle.

"How is he doing that?" I whisper to Valen who nods at the big man's long leather coat and gloves.

"Dragon scales," he mutters and I nod.

"Shit," Creed mutters, his fingers wiping at my cheek as we walk through the snow. "Nox is going to lose his shit!" he grumbles, looking down at me with a wince, making Valen do the same just as a familiar figure appears on top of the wall, his intense green eyes roaming the landscape until they fall on us... on me. I can feel his gaze like a living thing inside me, making my blood warm as he narrows his eyes, a frown marring his beautiful face. Then his eyes widen, and pure, unadulterated rage fills his face as he leaps over the side of the wall, landing with a grace I know I'll never have.

"Fuck! He's going to kill Raz for this!" Creed whispers as Nox strides toward us, his black cape billowing behind him and ax in hand. His eyes move from me to Creed, then Valen, and finally stop on Jesthren and Nox as he bares his teeth in outrage.

"Credence!" Nox bellows as he stomps toward us. "Lead him to the med wing. I'll meet you there," he snarls, gesturing toward Jesthren and Razar with his ax, making Jesthren's amused smile reappear on his face.

"Aww, baby brother. It's so good to see you, too. Too bad it's under these

unfortunate circumstances. But don't worry. I'm here to clean up the mess you made." Lennox growls so loud I can hear it from where we stand at least fifty feet away, but he ignores Jesthren, his eyes falling on my face as Creed kisses my cheek, whispering that he'll come find me later, then rushes to Razar and Jesthren's sides ushering them toward the castle.



Meyer

Nox is practically trembling by the time he reaches us, throwing his ax to the ground as he curses. He yanks the black leather gloves off his hands and cups my cheek, making me wince as his fingers brush the scratches the Wraith left behind.

“Why is there always so much blood on you?!” He snarls at me, eyes flashing with anger as he flicks a glance to Valen, who keeps his hands on my waist.

“It’s not all hers. Creed had blood on his hands when he touched her; the only injury I’ve found is her cheek,” he whispers, fingers stroking over my hair as I glare up at Nox.

“Why are you always so mad? You need to chill out,” I grumble under my breath, earning another growl in response.

“I told you to stay up on that wall!” he roars. His hand is still trembling as I feel what I now recognize as Nox’s magic rushing from him to me, warming my injured cheek as he knits my wounds back together.

“No... You told Razar I was to stay put,” I growl back, crossing my arms over my chest in defiance. “You didn’t say a single word to me on the matter.” Nox glowers at me and leans down, bringing our faces so close I can feel his hot breath whisper over my heated skin.

“Why are you always a stubborn little brat?”

“Why are you such a bull-headed bastard?” I snap back, making Valen chuckle, then slap his hand over his mouth, pale eyes dancing in amusement when Nox flashes him an angry look.

“Nox. Razar needs you. Heal him and take this anger out somewhere else. I’m taking Meyer to my room tonight. Tell Creed so he can sleep in his bed if he needs to,” Valen suggests. He pats him on the shoulder, then presses lightly, nodding for him to follow after the rest of their brothers.

“Fine,” Nox grits out between bared teeth, spinning on his heel, making his hair flare out around his shoulders dramatically as he grabs his ax and heads back to the castle.

“What a princess,” I mutter under my breath, making Valen laugh as he pulls me close.

“You need a bath and some rest. You feel exhausted,” he whispers as we slowly make our way back to the castle.

“You can feel me?” I ask in surprise, and Valen nods.

“Some things. I was trying to figure out if you were wounded earlier. I’m not gifted in healing the way Nox is, so I can only tap into our mental link I created to see if I could find anything.”

“Creed said that it was called a Legion Bond,” I mutter, making Valen pause and then nod.

“Yes, that’s right,” he agrees, and I eye him suspiciously.

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” I ask, and Valen winces, keeping me close as he nods at a few of the Hunters we walk past the closer we get to the castle. There are bodies of dead Beastia strewn all over the place, and I try not to look at them as we walk.

“I told you exactly what the link did, Meyer. But I didn’t want to scare you. I was speaking the truth when I said you could break the bond, and I will fully support you if that is the choice you make,” he whispers, leading me toward the castle. My eyes double in size when we walk past a section of the wall that is completely caved in and swallow hard at the line of bodies lying on the snow, covered with black furs.

“How many?” I rasp, and Valen shakes his head.

“We don’t know yet. It would have been more if Creed hadn’t taken out the three Wraiths that breached the wall. Elaine took the DeLuca and Drakos bloodlines out to hunt down the remaining Beastia before they got away, and then we can get a final number.” I follow Valen up the stairs, then gasp and look behind me as my mind finally decides to play catch up.

“Jordan and Theo?” I ask in a panic, moving to run back down the stairs to find my friends and make sure they’re okay. Valen’s arm tightens around me, not letting me break from his hold as he points to the far side of the

courtyard, where I find Jordan helping Billy and Sabrina drag a smaller Beastia out of the way.

“They’re fine. Creed made sure Jordan was safe, and I watched Theo,” Valen reassures me, making me look up at him in surprise.

“You... You guys made sure they were okay?” I whisper, my lip trembling a little when Valen smiles softly down at me and leans forward, dusting his lips over mine.

“Of course. I would like to say it was my idea, but Creed deserves the credit. He knew them getting hurt would devastate you,” Valen says softly, and I nod.

“Yeah, I need them to be okay. They’re... my family,” I whisper back, inhaling a shaky breath as I wrap my arms around Valen for a tight hug.

“We’ll keep them safe. Theo is with his mother, and god help anyone who tries to hurt her son while she’s there. I’ve never feared a Hunter before, but that woman makes me question things,” he admits, and I laugh and nod.

Yeah, Elaine is a badass.

“I need to get my stuff from Creed's room if I’m going to yours tonight,” I murmur nervously. I hadn't expected Valen to say I was sleeping in his room tonight, but I'm not going to lie, I’m a little relieved. Last night, I had a hard time sleeping after everything that happened in Nox’s dream, so maybe having another Dream Walker there will ensure I don't accidentally kill myself or another person.

“I’ll grab everything while you bathe,” Valen says with a soft kiss on my head, and I shiver as his warmth surrounds me. “Come on, Mi Sol. Let's get you clean and tucked into bed.”



BRIGHT LIGHT BLINDS me as I open my eyes, blinking and looking around in confusion as I turn in a circle. The air is warm and fragrant, smelling of fresh water and flowers, instantly relaxing me as I look down at the narrow cobblestone path under my blue silk slippers.

A dream... I’m dreaming again. My breath hitches as I peer around, waiting for something bad to happen. But when I hear the sounds of children laughing and a mother calling after them, I turn, smiling when I see two small children, a boy and a girl, each with silky white blond hair and pale

green, almost white eyes. The woman calling after them laughs as one of the children spins and twirls in a circle, calling for her to join them in the large garden.

I smile as I take in the scene of the mother nodding and chasing after her children, picking up the hem of her elegant pale yellow gown as she runs to them. Her hair is long and twisted away from her face in a mess of spiral curls that hang down her back. She has a small silver crown on her head, its delicate metal curving naturally along her hairline, making it look almost like water.

Spinning, I take in the lovely garden surrounded by light blue, almost crystal-like walls that reach for the sky with their brilliance. I gasp as I turn, realizing the garden is resting at the center of a large castle, its beauty almost indescribable from its large turrets to the grand arches at each side of the garden leading the way back inside. My eye catches on a familiar-looking man as he steps into view, leaning a broad shoulder against the wall as he smiles adoringly at the woman and children playing in front of him. His fine-tailored suit coat is light blue with gold lining the cuffs at his wrists, his white hair is short at the side and styled back, accenting the much larger crown resting on his head.

“Meri! Valen!” the man calls, a smile firmly in place as the mother and children stop their playing and turn to face him.

“Papa!” the small boy yells, leaping over the girl in the matching yellow dress and racing for his father. My mouth drops open in shock as the man crouches down and scoops the boy up into his arms with a laugh.

“Valen?” I whisper, stepping closer to study the small boy. He can't be more than four or five, his cheeks still holding that childish round shape, making him look like the cutest little cherub I've ever seen. But before I can get closer, the dream shifts, almost like a mirage; the beautiful garden blurs then darkens.

Smoke swirls in the air as the dream comes back into focus, and I gasp in horror as the once beautiful garden lies in shambles. Fire burning at every corner, the flowers lie dead and limp on the black ground. Smoke billows from the tall, blue walls of the castle, the sky stained red as screams echo in the air. I step back when I look to the spot I'd seen Valen and his father, bile rising in my throat when I spot the still form of the woman in the pale yellow dress lying on her stomach, her beautiful white curls spread around her like a halo.

“No!” I whisper, stepping back as the dream blurs again, making my stomach lurch as the sky spins. When it comes back into view, I’m no longer in the garden but standing on the edge of a large field. Soldiers in fine silver armor fight off hordes of Beastia as they race from the forest on the other side of the field. Bright bursts of green, blue, and white magic soar through the air, but they stand no chance against the enemy. Each and every one of them falls to the monsters, screaming and shouting in pain before the field is eerily quiet once more.

My stomach heaves as I turn, looking at the burning blue castle in the distance, black smoke billowing from the city around it. The Beastia charge forward, throwing themselves at the blue crystal wall until it shatters under their weight.

Is this what happened to the Dream Walkers? Is this why Valen said we are rare?

When the ground shakes, I close my eyes, the feeling of excitement coursing not only down my back but through every molecule of my body. I feel like I’ve been dosed with adrenaline, and something dark presses against my skin as I turn back to the now-empty field of dead.

The sky darkens, and the tree quakes as the ground shakes beneath my feet as a shadow of a monster crawls over the land. It moves like tar over the bodies of the dead, its presence so large it fills the entirety of the field in seconds. My hands shake at my sides as I look up and up at the darkness, my heart pounding, thrilling at the void in front of us. But just as fast as the void appears, it slowly lessens, swirling through the air like a winter's breeze whipping my hair around my face as the blue silk of my gown flies around my ankles.

The darkness curls in on itself, then an explosion of magic sends everything nearby to the ground. A massive wave of sound snaps from it, taking down the trees and nearby buildings lining the field.

I watch the destruction unfold, coursing around me like a wave while leaving me unharmed. When I look back to the center of the field where the darkness resides, I find a man... No, not a man. A giant! The male stands tall, his thick black hair coursing down his back in intricate braids. His chest is bare save the black leather belts strapped diagonally across his body, holding an arrangement of weapons. In his hand, he clasps a sword so large I’m pretty sure it's bigger than I am.

Darkness swirls at the giant's feet, making it appear like he’s walking in

shadows as he appraises the land before him with a feral smile, exposing the long, sharp canines behind his full lips. I inhale sharply at the sight, and the giant's head snaps in my direction, startling me all the more.

How can he see me?

Bright red eyes find my own, and a feeling of rightness and excitement flows through me, followed quickly by fear and despair, and I know he—whoever this man is—is responsible for all the death surrounding us. The imposing man stalks forward, his feet crushing bones as he smiles, head tilted to the side, blood-red eyes locked on me as the red symbols carved into his leather-like skin glow brightly.

“Mi Sol?”

I gasp as I stumble back over all the blood and bodies, tripping over the dead and falling into the filth at my feet, clinging to the familiar voice in my mind. But he sounds so far away!

“Mi Sol! Wake up!”

My body shakes as the world around me burns, the screams of women and children tear through the air... a sound I know I'll never forget for as long as I live. I push myself back even further, not looking at what is under me as warm liquid oozes between my fingers.

“Come, child.” The giant man whispers like a terrifying lullaby coursing through the air. My reaction is instant and makes me scream as I stand, losing control of my body as he beckons me to him. He moves his black onyx weapon to his other hand, then reaches for me, hand outstretched, a serene smile on his face.

I feel like a child as I step closer; our height difference is something I would never have imagined possible.

“Take my hand, darling girl. Let me help you,” he coos as my arm starts to lift. My mind screams at me to run, but my body is helpless to obey. “There you go,” he whispers, crouching down so he can look me in the eye. Blood drips from his clawed hands as he closes the distance between our fingers.

“No, don't!” I scream at him, making him chuckle and shake his head, then wrap his hand around mine with a sigh. The amount of power that surges from the man in front of me is enough that I feel my back arching, my head snapping back as a silent scream of agony tries to break from my lips. The pain slowly travels through me, almost like it's claiming every inch before it moves to my wrist. This time, when I try to scream, sound comes with it.

The giant's hand wraps tightly around my own, and his eyes fall to my wrist as bright red magic appears, etching itself into my skin in a complex design of swirls about the size of a quarter.

"Meyer!"

This time, Valen's voice is accompanied by a burst of green light, making the man release my hand and stumble back in shock. Firm hands grasp my arms, my entire body shaking so hard I feel like a bobblehead doll, and I'm yanked back and away from the man! He roars in anger, his face twisting into madness before the red and orange sky fades, and I'm jolted upright.



Meyer

“Meyer! Look at me now!” Valen commands as I gasp, sitting upright and looking around at my surroundings. My entire body feels hot and sweaty, and I can't stop my hands from shaking as I reach for the man kneeling on the bed next to me. His hands are firmly holding my shoulders as his pale eyes stay on mine.

“Valen?” I whisper, then squeak when Valen's entire body relaxes, the relief in his face palpable as he yanks me to him.

“Thank the gods,” he rasps, his hand cupping my head to his shoulder as he holds me tight.

“What... What the hell just happened?” I practically scream, my entire body shaking uncontrollably.

“I don't know. We were sleeping. I had you safe, Meyer. You were with me... I was watching after you, and then suddenly, you were gone! I woke up and found you thrashing, still asleep, but I couldn't get into your dreams!” Valen is panicking a little, his words clipped and running together as he holds me. “You're still shaking,” he croaks out, leaning back enough to look at me. “I'm going to get Nox! He can make sure you're uninjured!” Valen rasps, moving to pull away, and I panic.

“No! No, please don't!” I cling to him, afraid to be left alone as my teeth start to chatter, my trembling growing stronger.

“Meyer, shhh,” he soothes, his big hands run over my hair, then rub at my shoulders, pressing me to him as I try desperately to calm my breathing. My heart is pounding so hard that my chest aches, and my vision is darkening.

“Shit! Mi Sol, look at me,” Valen whispers, his voice calming a fraction as he lowers himself to the bed and pulls me on top of his chest. “Take deep breaths and find something to concentrate on. You’re having a panic attack,” he says softly, and I nod.

Yeah, that makes sense, but it’s almost impossible to calm myself down. My fingers have gone numb, and my tongue feels swollen. The only thing I can feel is the weird burning at my wrist from whatever that man did to me, but when I look down at my wrist, nothing is there.

“Breathe with me, Mi Sol,” Valen instructs, grabbing my palms and laying them on his chest before he rubs my back again. “Feel me under you and try to breathe when I do.” I nod since that’s all I’m capable of and try to concentrate on Valen’s breathing, inhaling when he does, then exhaling. Over and over again until I can feel my body slowly calm down. My shaking turns to soft trembles as Valen’s deep, soothing voice brings me back to myself and away from the death and horror of my dreams. “Good, just like that,” he praises, his long fingers trailing up and down my spine over my thin sleep shirt, moving from my shoulder to my side as I peer up at him. “Better?” he asks, a soft smile in place, and I nod.

“Yeah. Thanks,” I rasp, my throat sore from all the screaming I must have done. “You handled that like a pro,” I admit, my cheeks flaming hot as I duck my head to lay on his chest again. “I feel like an idiot.”

“Whatever for?” he asks, and I grimace.

“I just had a panic attack over a nightmare. If Razar finds out about this, he’ll never let me live it down.” Valen chuckles, his hands moving up to my shoulders again before trailing down to my sides, making me shiver in response.

“You had an appropriate reaction over a traumatic event, Mi Sol. There is no shame in that,” he whispers, trying to soothe me.

“Maybe,” I agree and shrug my shoulders. “Thanks for helping me calm down. The breathing thing is what brought me out of it,” I tell him, and Valen nods.

“Yes. That’s my favorite technique as well.” I frown at his words and look up at him.

“You have panic attacks?” I ask, and Valen smiles, a raw sort of pain filtering through his eyes.

“Every day since you woke me up. It helps if I can wake up next to you, though. When I wake alone, it’s bad... Or when your life is in danger,” he

adds, and I stare at him in horror.

Every day? Valen has panic attacks every day?

“I-I didn't know that. You always look so calm and collected,” I mutter in confusion. Valen laughs, his hands moving to my neck, resting there like they always do.

“Listening to my breaths calmed you... feeling your pulse grounds me. I could never feel it in your dreamscape. So if I ever start feeling like I may be lost—which is another cruel trick of my mind—I reach for you,” he whispers, melting my heart and making tears prick in my eyes at his words.

“Valen,” I say, then bring my hand up to cover his on my neck. I'd always wondered why he seemed to gravitate to that area of my body, but now that I know the reason, I'm both elated and nauseous. While I love that I can be his safe place—that he looks for me to ensure he's okay—I remember all the times he's touched my neck. Each of those times he thought he might be stuck in the mental and physical prison Aurther Axford created, and I want to storm out of here, find Axford's body, and spit on his rotting corpse. “I want to kill Axford again for you,” I admit, making Valen's soft smile brighten.

“That's honestly the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me,” he whispers sincerely, and I laugh in surprise.

“Murder isn't sweet,” I point out, and Valen nods.

“You want to protect me even though the man who hurt me is dead,” Valen replies and shrugs. “That's pretty romantic.”

“You're rather easy to please if that's what you call romance,” I tease, and Valen grins. His hand lowers from my neck and wraps around my waist, flipping us until he hovers over me, pale eyes bright with excitement. He braces himself on one hand and reaches up, brushing some of my hair away from my face as he studies me.

“I would like that,” he whispers, fingers trailing over my cheek before falling to my lips. “To romance you. I already know I like you, Meyer, but I want to know you. To be a part of your life and help you navigate our world together,” he whispers, and I blink up at him in surprise.

“You do?” I ask dumbly, making him chuckle again.

“Mm hmm,” he whispers, leaning closer to me, our lips tilted close as he keeps running his fingertip over my lips. He lets his weight press into me as he pushes a knee between my thighs, spreading them apart so I can cradle his hips in mine.

“I... I think I would like that,” I admit, making a brilliant smile break over Valen's face.

“Good,” he whispers. “That definitely makes my life easier,” he admits with a wink, charming as always. Pale green eyes meet mine, and I marvel at their soft glow, almost like they’re small stars twinkling in the night sky. “Mi Sol?” he rasps, lowering his body more firmly to mine, my chest pressed firmly to him, his weight a comforting blanket on my still trembling body, grounding me in reality.

“Yes?” I whisper back, sounding so breathy I would be embarrassed if I weren't so turned on right now. But holy shit, Valen’s hard cock is rubbing at my damp panties, and I’m having a hard time forming words right now.

“May I... May I kiss you again?” he asks, almost like he’s worried I’ll say no. Instead of responding, I sit up and take his lips with mine, thrilled at the deep groan and shudder that races through his body at my contact.

“Valen!” I gasp between his lips, my skin pebbling as he curses and draws back.

“Wait... I-I want to romance you... not ravish you on my bed after you had a horrid dream. Your dream, we should probably talk about that... and the scars on your back. Mi Sol, you don't understand the soul-wrenching need to kill whoever or whatever did that to you,” he growls. It makes my eyes widen in surprise, realizing that his fingers had been trailing over the scars on my back while he was trying to calm me down. “You need comfort, not this.”

His voice is hoarse, and he groans loudly, closing his eyes tight when I roll my hips up, grinding into his hard length. I’m trying to distract him from his rambling because there is no way in hell I want to talk about my dream or my scars. What I want... What I need is the man currently kneeling between my spread thighs.

“This is precisely what I need,” I disagree, looking up at his beautiful face as he curses and slams his eyes shut, a growl building in his chest. “Uh, I... If you want to, that is,” I whisper back, not wanting to make him do something he’s not ready for. Valen's dark laughter fills the air around me as he grins. His teeth sharpen and his eyes slowly open, locking with mine, keeping me trapped in his gaze as he leans close.

“You have no idea how much I want to devour you, Mi Sol,” he growls, his voice so deep I almost jerk back in response. Oh, boy! Okay, I'm both terrified and extremely turned on. I’m not sure if I need to run for safety or sign up for therapy because my pussy is currently ruining my panties and has

a pulse of its own.

“Umm, yeah. I vote for that plan,” I rasp, nodding my head so fast I get slightly dizzy. Valen's eyes darken, his body trembling over mine as he sits up, his hands fall to my thighs and slide just a few inches up to the waistband of my panties. His fingers feel like fire on my skin, the hot touch jarring as he inhales, nostrils flaring as he groans and lets his eyes flutter shut. When his fingers dig almost painfully into my hips, I gasp and moan, rolling my hips up in a desperate attempt for friction.

“Meyer. I... I'm not the good guy in this story. I'm a Demon... I... Fuck, you smell so good,” he growls as he shakes his head, trying to concentrate long enough to speak.

Oh shit. He can smell me?

I move to clamp my thighs shut, embarrassed as hell, but squeak in surprise when Valen growls. The threatening sound echoes through his room as he catches my thighs in his big hands and spreads them, making my knees drop to the bed, his heat-filled eyes zeroing in on my panty-clad center.

“Is this what you want, Mi Sol? Because if not, you need to tell me now. I'm more than happy to hold you all night in my arms,” he growls as his pupils blow wide, making his eyes look almost black. I grin, a sharp thrill racing down my spine as I arch my back and wrap my legs firmly around Valen's waist, tugging him back down to me.

“You're everything I want, Valen,” I whisper, letting the truth flow from me in hopes he understands that at this moment, I want no one... nothing but him. “Now fuck me and make me forget everything but you,” I demand.

His low laugh sends chills down to my toes as Valen leans forward, trailing kisses down my neck and over my chest. He reaches out, grabs the hem of the sleep shirt I threw on before bed, and tears it up and over my head, separating our mouths for a moment before we come back together with a magnetic force. I shiver when my bare breasts are exposed to the cool air of his room, the fire he had made before we had gone to bed is reduced to smoldering embers in the fireplace across the room. It's only giving off enough light to see his dark beauty.

My nipples pebble almost painfully as Valen snarls and yanks his mouth from mine, kissing down the column of my throat before wrapping his warm lips around one tight bud. His hot tongue swirls around one nipple before he sucks the opposite one into his mouth. I bring my fingers up to his hair, threading them into his white-blond strands, and moan his name while trying

to rub my pulsing center against him.

“Valen, please,” I beg, wanting more.

He smiles a little before he bites my nipple, causing me to shriek in surprise. The small amount of pain and pleasure sends heat straight to my core.

Damn, why did that feel so freaking good?

“Mi Sol, you’re so damn beautiful.”

Valen leans back down and presses his lips to mine for a moment before crawling further down my body. He presses small, warm kisses to my chest, then my belly as he moves lower, stopping when he gets to the waistband of my panties.

“Fuck,” he breathes out, staring at my body with lust shining brightly in his eyes. He runs his fingers over my legs, spreading them wider, exposing me to him completely. Leaning down, he presses his lips right over my panty-covered clit in a soft kiss, causing me to arch up off the soft blankets underneath me. His fingers skim the edge of my panties, pushing them to the side before flicking his tongue out and running it down my wet cunt.

Oh, holy fuck!

My body pulses with need as his tongue strokes and licks at my slit. Valen’s hands slide under me, his fingers digging into my ass, shoving me closer to his talented tongue, making me moan his name in delight.

His long fingers slide through my heat, rubbing at my entrance, and I still. My heart pounds as he slides his finger inch by delicious inch into my pussy, before he pulls it out and adds a second one, pressing them both in at the same time.

I throw my head back, moaning at the feeling of Valen’s fingers inside of me. His hot tongue is still lashing at my clit, while he finger fucks me slowly.

“Valen!” I almost sob in pleasure, gripping the blanket at my sides and slamming my eyes shut as wave after wave of intense pleasure crashes through me. My breaths are coming in heavy pants, and my heart is racing. Valen hums low in approval, his tongue flicking out and teasing my clit. Then he slides it low to push into my throbbing cunt, and I come with a cry, shuddering through my release as Valen growls, the vibration of it sending shock waves through my sex.

“You taste so fucking good, Mi Sol.”

“Please, Valen! Please more,” I gasp between panting breaths, my fingers fisting his hair, tugging him up so that I can kiss him. He complies, prowling

up the bed with a feral smile on his face. A spark of something dark in his eyes makes me shiver, then I slam my mouth to his, moaning at the taste of myself on his lips. His hands move fast, fingers hooking into the side of my underwear and tearing them from my body with a quick motion before he lifts himself enough to shove off the sweats he put on before bed.

Thank god he doesn't have a shirt on.

His hard shaft springs free, and I stare up at him from the bed. He is long, hard, and much thicker than I thought he would be. Valen palms his cock, rubbing it from base to tip as a drop of pre-cum travels down his erection.

I bite my lip as he reaches between us and notches himself at my entrance. Valen slowly pushes into me, making me feel every thick inch of his cock until he's seated fully. He leans down and presses his forehead to mine as he looks into my eyes and releases a shuddering breath.

"*Oh, my God,*" I groan as my pussy stretches around Valen's thick intrusion.

"Meyer..." he groans, shifting to cradle my head in one hand. His hands run up my sides, stroking my skin before he places them on either side of me and sinks his length so far inside that my eyes roll back in my head, and I writhe under him in pleasurable pain.

"Holy fuck!" I scream as he holds himself deep, his cock pulsing as he lets me adjust to his size. "Oh! Oh, God. You feel so good."

"You're so fucking tight," he groans, changing the angle of his hips and hitting me in that sweet spot, making my eyes roll to the back of my head and my pussy clamp down. "Fuck!"

He moves rapidly, thrusting in and out of me with such strength I think I might walk funny tomorrow. Valen's hand snakes between us, finding my clit with his thumb, rubbing soft circles over the sensitive spot. It makes me gasp and shudder under his body. His shoulders tense as I rake my nails down his back, earning a snarl of approval.

"Fuck, fuck... Meyer! Shit, I need you to come, Mi Sol. I need to feel you come undone on my cock," he rasps as his length swells and throbs deep in my core, his thumb pressing harder to my clit as his thrusts grow harder and faster. The sounds of our fucking fill the small room as Valen works my body higher and higher until I feel myself tighten around his thick cock.

"*Valen!*" I scream, digging my heels into his ass as my body clamps down hard around him. It makes him curse, then roar his release, both hands moving to my hips as he fucks me so hard the headboard slams into the wall

as warmth fills me.

After a drawn-out moment of heavy panting, Valen groans, moving his head from my neck and staring down at me reverently. I blush, the intimacy of the moment almost too much to handle as he smiles and gently pulls his still-hard length from my battered and swollen sex. I gasp, then whimper at the empty feeling, watching Valen as he looks down between my legs, eyes flashing with heat from what he sees. My thighs close on instinct, and Valen growls low. His hands shoot out once more to keep me spread wide for his appraisal, then he groans and slams his eyes shut, cursing as he falls to my side and pulls me to him with trembling arms.

“Are you well?” he asks softly, and I nod, swallowing hard and looking at my dream man with new eyes. Our fucking had been so much more than I thought it would be. I had been scared and wanted Valen to distract me, but I didn't think he would blow my mind and engage in such intimate love-making the way he had. I feel like jelly, my body still trembling from the aftershocks of my orgasms as I close my eyes and rest my head on Valen's chest.

“That was perfect,” I admit, and Valen's hands tighten on me.

“That was more than perfect,” he rasps, holding me close as he pulls the tangled blankets from around our feet and covers us up. I yawn and snuggle closer, smiling when I feel Valen's lips press to my brow. “Sleep, Mi Sol. I'll keep you safe,” he whispers, fingers trailing over my scars as I slowly drift off in his warm, strong arms.



Lennox

The grand hall is dimly lit, as the Hunters have already retired to their beds in preparation for the next battle to come. The flickering torches cast long shadows on the stone walls as I impatiently survey the large room.

Where is the bastard?

I crack my neck to the side, and it takes every ounce of my self-control to keep from pacing back and forth. The door creaks open, and Jesthren strides in with an air of confidence. He is impeccably dressed, practically dripping with charm. When he notices me, his face breaks out in a wide grin, to which I respond with a dark scowl.

“Ah, there you are, Garthelaun! It was a big day for you, no?” He smiles and flicks an invisible speck off of his well-tailored jacket.

“Cut the shit, Jesthren. What are you playing at?” I growl as Jesthren’s eyes grow wide.

“Come now, baby brother. It seems you’ve gotten yourself into quite a mess.” His words are heavy with concern. “I’m simply here to deliver that absolutely ravishing lady’s test results—terribly interesting, if I do say so—and to provide the support that you requested from Father.” I clench my fists at the mention of my Little Demon.

“Don’t speak about Meyer that way,” I snap.

“Meyer? So the goddess has a name.” He casually strolls past me toward the large chair at the head of the hall, examining the room with a critical eye. He smirks and settles down on the throne-like seat, crossing his legs with an

air of superiority. “What is she to you?” My simmering rage comes to a full boil.

“That is none of your damn business, now stop interfering! Why did you even cross the Veil!? You’ve never crossed it before.” Jesthren chuckles, and I stomp toward him, my anger at an all-time high. I’ve never trusted my oldest brother, and to have him this close to the people I care for is setting my teeth on edge.

My protective instincts are roaring to the surface, begging to be set free. Jesthren invited himself to the war council Elaine called after we gathered our dead and wounded, adding his input and charming every fucking person there besides Elaine herself. I’m pretty sure she’s as wary of Jesthren as I am, but is willing to have him here since he is one of Orcus’ sons. If it hadn’t been for Creed bringing him along, my big brother would have never known of the meeting, and now I’m pissed at both of them.

“Temper, temper... what do you call yourself here? Lenny right? No, something more imposing sounding...” He snaps his fingers. “Lennox! That’s it! You’ve always had such a temper, Lennox. Can’t you see that I’m just trying to help?” I scoff disbelievingly at that.

“Help? You’ve always been about helping yourself. What’s your angle, Jesthren?” He stands eye level with me and leans in, his gaze serious and piercing.

“The angle, my naive brother, is survival. I’ve always known how to navigate these waters. And as evidenced by earlier today in the war council, it’s time for you to step aside and let a true leader take charge.” I flex my hands, claws lengthening as black sparks gather around them. Jesthren looks down with a bemused look.

“Oh, Lennox. Calm yourself, dear boy. It’s not like I want your title. You’re so young; I only want to save you from yourself and your people while I’m at it.”

“I don’t want or need your help, Jesthren. I already have my assigned generals. You’re simply a placeholder until I get home,” I snarl back at him, and for the first time since he arrived, his charming smile finally falls off his face. “You would do well to remember that,” I add with a sliver of dominance, bending him to my will and commanding his submission. Jesthren’s jaw tenses as his eyes blaze with anger, but he nods.

“Of course, Lennox. I truly only wanted to help,” he adds, false sincerity bleeding into his voice as I glare at him.

“You brought Ranger Smith’s blood results?” I ask, refusing to say her name in his presence again. I don’t like that gleam of interest in my brother’s eyes and refuse to feed it.

“I did,” he murmurs, reaching into his pocket, producing the envelope, and holding it out to me. I take it and rip the paper open, needing to know what I might be dealing with, then frown at the results.

“Half Dream Walker and half Hunter?” I mutter in confusion, shaking my head. No, this can’t be right. Yes, we knew Meyer was both of those things, but there is more to her than this. Even her Umbra bloodline test had shown more to her than Regalis when it turned indigo. The color had been so dark I would almost say it was more violet than blue. Could that color change simply be from being part Demon?

“Yes. The little lady is quite a unique toy. Not enough to gather the attention of four Demon Princes,” Jesthren chides, “though I see the appeal. She’s so.... small and enticing. I bet she submits beautifully.”

I almost scoff at my brother’s words. Little does he know out of all the Demons I command, Meyer—my little half-blood Demon—is the hardest for me to dominate. It’s both frustrating and intoxicating when she defies me. And even though I have been able to dominate her so far, something inside me tells me that it won’t last for long. My magic has never felt so threatened as it does when Meyer defies me. I had to use more magic than I’ve ever had to demand her obedience, and even though she bent, she didn’t break.

“You would do well not to look at what’s not yours,” I grind out, then internally curse myself when Jesthren’s eyes light up in excitement, and I know I just gave him what he was looking for.

“You too, then? I suspected so, but the way you were yelling out there like a beast, I wasn’t sure. I’m not surprised that Heldakar and Valen are willing to share. They have always been close, almost as close as Yannos and Archer... but you?” Jesthren smiles. “You don’t share your toys.”

I grit my teeth, fighting the growl that tries to break free. That would only give him what he is looking for—a reaction. And I already gave him enough to put her in danger. He needs to think I have zero interest in her. If Jesthren believes Meyer is just Valen and Creed’s, she will be safe. Hell, he would probably defend her himself as long as he was positive I hated her. Jesthren may be my enemy, but he is my brothers’ protector. He will keep them safe as long as it doesn’t interfere with his vendetta against me.

“The girl is nothing but a pastime, Jesthren. As you said, she is not

enough to tempt me into sharing,” I scoff with a wave of a hand, looking at the papers in front of me, keeping my heart rate steady so that Jesthren won't detect my lie. It should be fairly easy to make Jesthren believe my Little Demon means nothing to me. All I need to do is piss her off and let her stab me again, and he'll be her greatest fan. That idea instantly backfires in my mind, and a growl of jealousy breaks from my lips, making Jesthren frown and look at the papers, trying to figure out what put me in a bad mood.

“What?” he asks, suddenly interested, giving me the perfect opportunity to move his attention away from Meyer.

“Were you briefed on our situation here before you left?” I ask, folding up Meyer's blood results and tucking them into my pocket, looking at him with cold detachment. Jesthren arches an unimpressed brow, nodding.

“Of course. Do you truly believe Father would send me to clean up your mess unprepared? I have been fully briefed on how you inserted us in a war that we have no business being in,” he mutters, looking away as he fixes his perfect suit jacket, again brushing at the invisible dust there. He probably thinks the dirty earth grime is staining his pristine clothing and is having a mental breakdown. “Why is this realm so filthy?” he adds, confirming my suspicions.

“Not the war with the Seniorems,” I snarl, making Jesthren smirk. “What Valen and I found in the church outside these walls.” Jesthren grimaces and shakes his head.

“Why would we care about what the silly humans do in a church? Really, Garthelaun, they are mortal beings. Their life will be over in a blink of an eye. Why bother with them?”

“They are people, Jesthren. They have a soul and have a right to their freedom as much as we do. Just because they have shorter life spans doesn't make them lesser than us,” I growl and shake my head. “But no. I'm referring to the sarcophagus of Inanis, brother,” I snarl in frustration, losing control of my shift as my claws slowly begin to lengthen from my fingertips.

Jesthren's humor fades instantly, his face paling at the name I just uttered. “Inanis?” he rasps, then clears his throat and looks around the room like he's worried the devil himself may be lurking in the shadows. “That's a cruel joke, Garthelaun,” he growls, his eyes flashing with anger as he looks down at me like a child who is telling a story.

“It's no joke, brother,” I hiss between my teeth.

“Inanis... The harbinger of death? Sire of the four horsemen... That

Inanis?” Jesthren drawls, and shakes his head. “How in the world would the Hunters manage to recover the sarcophagus? It's enchanted and locked against all infiltrators. The Dream Walker king himself sealed the sarcophagus with his life to keep it safe,” Jesthren growls, and I nod.

“I know... Yet we found it outside these walls,” I confirm, and Jesthren finally staggers, sensing the truth in my words. “Thankfully, they only have one of them. I just sent word to Father to check on the other in the Demon Realm.”

“That’s impossible,” he breathes, eyes wide, and for the first time in my life, I see a flicker of fear in those pompous green eyes.

“Valen warded the grounds, then I added my own layer of protection. Creed and Razar don’t hold enough magic to add their own, but...” I trail off, nodding at him, unsure if he will help simply because I asked it of him.

“Of course,” he breathes, shocking me enough that I give him an odd look. “What?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest. “We aren't talking about the line of ascension or petty fights between brothers, Garthelaun. This would mean the destruction of our world. It goes beyond you and your silly pride. We should probably relocate the sarcophagus to a defensible spot. The fact that you left it out in the open proves you're not ready to lead this war.”

“And how exactly would I move the sarcophagus alone? Valen has barely recovered a fraction of the magic drained from him over the last four years. I needed help, which is why I wrote to Father,” I explain, making Jesthren cock a skeptical brow at me. I roll my eyes at him as I turn, giving him my back, knowing it will piss him off with the lack of fear I hold for him. “When did murder attempts and physical torture become petty fights between brothers?” I ask, making Jesthren grin.

“You’re so dramatic, Garth-”

“Lennox! My name is Lennox, Jesthren,” I correct him, then walk to the doors before snapping my fingers. “Come on. We don't have all day. I thought the Senioreem was coming to take back the castle, but I think their real target is the sarcophagus. We need to move it into the crypts until Father sends word on what to do.”

“We should destroy it,” Jesthren growls, his hands fisting as he begrudgingly follows me, his will crumpling under my magic.

“That is up to Father to decide. And who would give their life to open the sarcophagus? You?” I ask. Jesthren scoffs, and I nod. My brother may be all talk about protecting our people, but he would never give his life to save

them.

“I will if I have to,” he lies, and I roll my eyes.

“We do nothing until Father commands it,” I mutter again, then snarl when Jesthren's large hand wraps around my arm, tugging me to a halt.

“That could mean the fucking apocalypse, Lennox! He needs to be destroyed. Father was weak when he chose to keep Inanis alive. He didn't have the magic to kill him; but you do! Kill him and be rid of this nightmare forever. Secure your kingdom the way Father should have all those years ago,” he whispers, magic flaring around us, making me pause in confusion.

Is he... trying to compel me?

I release a cold laugh and tear my arm from my oldest brother, then shove him against the wall, hooking my arm under his neck as I sneer up at him.

“I am not the king! It is *NOT* my kingdom to rule over,” I growl in a low voice. “I will not do anything unless instructed to by Father. And if you ever try to compel me again...” I trail off and let my teeth sharpen as Jesthren glares at me, his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. “I will tear your spine from your body and throw you to the Beastia. I am in charge here, not you, Jesthren. As you said, this is not the time or place for your jealous rage. You will tamp it down, or you will return home. I'm not stupid enough to deny I need your help, but I refuse to let you bring chaos to this realm simply for your entertainment. Am I understood?”

Jesthren snarls, baring his teeth at me as his dark magic slams into mine in challenge. I grit my teeth, the feeling uncomfortable as I fight back, bending his magic until Jesthren growls, sweat dotting his brow.

“Am. I. Understood?” I repeat, lording my dominance over him as he slowly nods.

“Yes,” he hisses under his breath.

“Yes, what?” I growl.

“Yes, my prince,” he spits the words at me, and I nod, letting my arm fall from my brother's neck as I stand and move away, refusing to let his defiance get to me. This is how it's always been between us. I will never trust my brother with my life, but I know I can trust him to help as long as it's what Father wants. Jesthren is loyal to my father, his devotion something I will never have. But for now, it's enough. Jesthren is a strong magic user and an even better warrior. To have him at my side will only help. I just have to make sure he doesn't stab me in the back in the meantime.



Meyer

“No, Angry Girl. You have to spread your legs and fold at the hips,” Theo grumbles, kicking my ankles apart before whacking the back of my head to make me bend further over, and I grunt as my fingers stretch to reach my toes. “Jeez, my grandma is more flexible than you are,” he grumbles, so I glare up at him and flip him the bird.

The morning came way too fast after the night I had. After my nightmare and the incredible sex Valen and I had, he held me in his arms, kissing me and spending every moment he could inside me. I lost track of how many times I woke up with his tongue between my legs, bringing me to yet another orgasm, or his cock stroking my sex, his whispered words of praise waking me as he slowly pushed inside my body.

I’m not going to lie... I didn't realize I ever wanted to be woken up like that. Typically, I wake up cranky and need food before I can function properly, but I think I may have found a new addiction to wake up to. Being tired has never been so worth it in my life. There is just something about my dream guy that makes me calm... He silences all the doubt and pain I feel and brings me back to myself—the lighthouse in the raging storm that is my life.

“Leave her alone. Meyer only started training a couple months ago, Theo. We’ve been doing this since we were kids. Remember how long it took for you to touch your toes?” Jordan snaps, making Theo wrinkle his nose in annoyance. Jordan scooches over and presses his enormous feet to the side of my ankles, keeping my legs spread as he leans forward and grabs my hands

with an encouraging nod. “Just hold on to my hands, and I’m going to pull you forward gently,” he instructs, and I nod. “Don’t arch your back. Keep it straight, but tell me when your muscles start to hurt. We want to stretch them, push them a little, but not cause damage.”

“Right,” I agree, smiling at him as his strong hands pull me forward. I strain to keep my back straight, and my calves and thighs burn with the stretch that starts in my muscles. “There,” I gasp when the burning stretch becomes slightly painful.

“Good! See, you did better than I thought you would,” Jordan praises, while Theo sighs and plops down on the ground next to me, patting my back.

“Sorry,” he grumbles, looking a little embarrassed. “I should have done that for you first,” he admits, and I frown in question, making Jordan chuckle.

“Theo did that for me when I couldn’t touch my toes,” he explains, eyeing Theo briefly before looking back at me. “It was the only thing that helped me gain flexibility in my legs.”

“It’s a genius idea. I can actually feel more muscles stretching this way,” I mutter, trying to relax my body so that I can bend further forward.

“I can’t take the credit. Mom’s the one who did this with me and Cali when we were kids. Dad was on our asses about being the best at the academy, and Mom helped so he would chill out,” Theo grumbles, his eyes roaming over Jordan as he gently pulls me just a little further forward.

“Are you doing okay?” I ask, then cringe, hating that I’m asking while training. The thing is, I haven’t seen Theo much outside of our normal day-to-day training lately. I’m either with one of the guys, or he’s out chasing after Jordan, which is exactly where he should be. Our friendship is solid. Sure, I want to nut punch him a little, but I’ve already forgiven him and have decided to let him earn back my trust. It’s not something that will happen overnight, but Theo’s trying; I can see that in his actions and words. Hell, he came and told me all about how his mother had reached out to the Russians and how they are sending the units stationed in North America to assist us until their full battalion can make it here.

“Uh, yeah?” Theo answers in question, then blinks in surprise when he realizes I’m asking if he’s okay about his dad. “Oh,” he whispers, then nods. “Yeah. I really am okay. I know that makes me a terrible person, but I’m just glad he’s no longer yelling at Mom and Cali anymore. Mom’s even bringing her up to the castle now that Dad’s gone, so I get to see her!” Theo beams, leaning against my shoulder as I smile at him.

Jordan looks up in surprise at Theo, his own excitement evident at Theo's words.

"Cali is coming?" he asks, and Theo nods, grinning ear to ear.

"Mom said we have to wait until after things are settled with the attack of the Senioreem. Lennox said his spies have estimated they will be here in the next two to three days. But after that, Mom is sending Senior Drakos and my unit to get her!" Theo is practically bouncing in excitement, his big shoulders bumping into me until he is almost on top of me in his happiness.

"That's great! It's been what? Two... no, three years since Laurant allowed her up here?" Jordan mutters, making my eyes widen in surprise as Theo nods, resting his head on my shoulder, taking a strand of my blonde hair and tugging on it playfully.

"That long?" I whisper, feeling bad for both Theo and Elaine. "What a dickwad," I grumble under my breath, then startle when a big Demon is suddenly crouching down on my other side, being mindful not to step on my or Jordan's toes as he helps me stretch.

"Lemon Drop," Creed greets in a happy tone, but when I look up to see him, his smile is strained, almost forced, and looks unnatural. "Ranger Jennings, Ranger Drakos," he says, dipping his head in a nod as he clasps his hands together on his bent knees, then turns darker than normal eyes on me.

"What's wrong?" I whisper, feeling his angry energy as he keeps his fake smile on his face.

"Listen," he says, whispering so low I have to lean a little toward him to hear. "I know what I'm about to say is incredibly possessive and a little... crazy," he hedges, and I frown. "But if Ranger Jennings doesn't remove himself from between your legs in the next ten seconds, I'm going to lose control of myself," he admits, fake smile still in place as his green eyes flick to where Jordan's feet keep my legs spread wide. "And unfortunately, I'm not the only one with control issues today," he adds, subtly nodding behind him.

Theo, Jordan, and I all lean to the right, peering around Creed to find Valen leaning against the wall several feet away, wearing a pristine set of black fighting leathers while twirling a small sliver blade between his long fingers, glaring at where Theo's head is currently resting on my shoulder. My dream man's jaw is cleanly shaven and tense as fuck, his pale eyes sparking with dark violence that makes me shiver in excitement.

I gape up at Creed and then look at Jordan, whose eyes double in size seconds before he throws himself away from me with a nervous chuckle.

Theo is close behind, rolling away from my side and crashing into Jordan as they look at each other, then me, and burst into laughter.

“I... What the hell?” I mutter to my friends, still in shock at Jordan's immediate response. Jordan simply shakes his head and grins.

“Uhh, Elaine may have warned Theo and me of how Demons are territorial by nature, and well...” Jordan trails off.

“We don't want to get our asses kicked the way Senior Drakos did,” Theo finishes for him while nodding at the territorial Demon at my side. My mouth forms an ‘O’ before I shake my head, then glare up at Creed, who looks much happier if not slightly mortified by his own actions.

“Senior Drakos? What the hell did you guys do to Victor, Creed?” I snap, making the Demon shoot Jordan an annoyed glare for ratting them out before shaking his head and holding his hands out in front of him.

“I did nothing,” he assures me, then shrugs his shoulders. “Lennox, however...” he whispers, trailing off with a guilty smile, and I glare daggers up at him.

“Are you kidding me? Elaine is the one who asked him to escort me to Christmas dinner. Hell, the man is completely in love with her,” I add, making Theo choke and look at me with wide eyes as he clambers to his feet.

“He what!?” Theo shouts, making Jordan wince and give me a ‘*what the hell were you thinking?*’ look. “I’ll kill him if he touches my mom. She's way too good for him,” Theo rages, and I grimace. Aww, shit! Now I’m going to have to threaten to cut my friend's balls off so he doesn't intervene with Elaine and Victor.

“This is all your fault,” I hiss under my breath at Creed, who purses his lips and nods in agreement as he stands to his feet and offers me a hand up.

“Trust me. I’m fully aware that this is not my finest hour. Threatening teenage boys is not what I enjoy doing. However, I can only stifle my instincts so much until they overwhelm me,” he adds with a sweet smile on his handsome face while shrugging his shoulders as I slap my hand in his and let him tug me to my feet.

“Right. Then maybe leave the room while I’m training because I need their help, and I refuse to cater to your silly possessiveness,” I grumble, making Creed pout as I pull my hand from his. I’m not sure how I feel about him acting this way. There is a part of me deep, deep down that thrills at his jealousy, but then there’s the part that realizes we aren't dating and he’s acting like a caveman.

“Laps!” Lennox bellows through the training center, making a choir of groans follow suit. “I want fifteen of them, and I want them done now!” he clips out, clapping hands together as the Rangers all move to the track that runs around the enormous room. “Seniors, make sure you don't have any stragglers. Then straight to the obstacle course.”

“Which bloodline?” one of the Rangers shouts as they run.

“All of them,” Lennox growls, glaring at the Ranger, who scowls, obviously not liking the new rule about the bloodlines training together.

“So... you wanna ditch and go somewhere else?” Creed asks, leaning down and whispering in my ear so no one else will hear it. My eyebrows practically hit my hairline in surprise as I turn to look up at him.

“Really?” I ask, a thread of excitement coursing through me at the prospect of not having to run laps and have my lungs explode. Creed shrugs, and I swear I see the faintest blush tinge his golden skin.

“Yeah. I would like to show you something,” he admits, then hesitantly holds a hand out for me to grab. I eye it for a moment, then shrug. Hell, anything is better than running laps while having Nox glare at me for being too slow. I place my hand in his, and his fingers immediately close around mine, holding on tight.

Creed grins, then looks over at Valen and nods, making my dream man sigh and roll his eyes as he begrudgingly walks over to Nox, slapping him on the shoulder and pointing toward the Rangers on the other side of the room from us. When Nox frowns and turns, Valen's hand moves behind his back so that we can see him gesturing toward the door, signaling for us to move our asses while Nox is distracted.

I giggle and look up at Creed, who smirks victoriously and waves Theo and Jordan off, nodding for them to head to the track before we turn and then sprint for the doors of the training center. “You totally planned this with Valen,” I laugh as we make it out of the room undetected, our fingers linked as Creed pulls me through the halls at a quick pace.

“I did,” Creed confirms, winking at me as his hand squeezes mine gently.

“You knew I would say yes to coming with you?”

“I hoped,” Creed whispers, looking down at me with warmth in his happy green eyes.

“Are you going to get in trouble for this? Nox won't be happy,” I point out as Creed leads me up one flight of stairs, then another... and another. He laughs and nods, but doesn't look concerned.

“Yeah, probably. But if Razar can use you as bait for the Bestia and live, then I figure helping you ditch out during laps won't get me killed. How'd Raz get you off the wall in the first place? Nox was in the courtyard protecting the castle the entire time,” Creed mutters as he tugs me up yet another flight of stairs. I'm panting at this point, and sweat is running down my brow as I stomp after him and frown at the mention of Razar. I haven't seen him yet this morning, and when I asked Valen if he was okay at breakfast, he said Razar was already healed and out of the castle doing something for Nox.

“He tossed me off the wall on the south side,” I mutter between heavy breaths, then squeak in surprise when Creed comes screeching to a stop, and my nose collides with his back. “Ow! What the hell, Creed? Your back is as hard as the damn wall,” I mutter, rubbing my sore nose as Creed spins and looks at me like I've gone crazy.

“He... Wait. Raz threw you off the wall!?” Creed shouts, his voice going up two octaves as his hands thread into his hair, pulling at the strands as he blinks rapidly like a cartoon character.

“Uh, well yeah,” I mutter, my voice nasally as I pinch my nose and wiggle it back and forth, making sure I didn't break it or something. “But there was a pile of snow at the bottom, so I was fine,” I add, when I realize Creed's face is turning a weird shade of purple.

“I'm going to kill him,” Creed breathes, then smiles and shakes his head. “No, I'm going to tell Valen,” he mutters in excitement.

“Telling Valen is worse than dying?” I ask as Creed nods and takes my hand once more, practically running up the stairs and making me wonder why the hell I left the training room. I was trying to avoid exercise, not do a million stairs!

“Without a doubt. Razar will wish for death if Valen finds out what he did,” Creed answers, turning to walk down a long hallway I've never seen before, shouldering open a door and pulling me after him and I groan when I see a small spiral staircase in front of me.

“Why are we climbing so high? And why are we running?” I growl as Creed starts up the stairs, making me move much faster than I want to. My thighs and butt are on fire, though I do have a prime view of Creed's ass as he leads us up the stairs. I've got to hand it to the man. He may be a traitorous jerk at times, but damn... he has a nice ass.

“Because we'll miss them if we're not fast enough,” Creed answers, only

adding to my confusion as we finally make it to the top of the spiral stairs, and he opens a heavy wooden door.



Meyer

Cold winter air rushes inside the moment the door opens. I shiver as Creed yanks me out onto a railed walkway around one of the highest towers of the castle.

“Whoa,” I whisper, moving closer to Creed as he shuts the door behind us and grins. “It’s beautiful up here,” I admit, looking over the winter landscape and smiling at the peaceful scenery below.

“It is, isn’t it?” Creed whispers, stepping closer to me so our arms brush as he looks down and grins, then waves. Looking over, I see two men walking up the stairs of the castle and get a little dizzy at how freaking high up we are.

“How tall is this castle?”

“One hundred and fifty-three feet at the tallest peak. Why?” Before I can answer, the door behind us bursts open, and Valen steps out onto the rooftop with us.

“Did you two run all the way here? I thought I would catch up in the northern halls,” he chuckles, walking over and patting Creed on the shoulder before stepping close to me, dominating my space, and hooking an arm around my waist. I grin when Valen’s pale eyes twinkle with mischief, and he pulls me close, kissing me breathless and making me melt into his chest.

I pull back when Creed clears his throat, my cheeks flaming with embarrassment when I realize I just kissed Valen in front of Creed. But when I glance up at the curly, dark-haired Demon, he’s quirking a brow at Valen and rolling his eyes before looking back down at the men below.

“Have I missed it?” Valen asks, and Creed snorts.

“Do you see fifty big, smelly Russians down there?” I cough to cover my laugh as Valen scowls at Creed, who grins back.

“Russians?” I ask in amusement, then look down and gasp when I see the two men who were previously standing on the steps scaling up the castle walls! “What the hell are they doing? They don't have climbing gear on,” I rasp as I lean further over the metal guard rails. Valen's arms immediately hold on to my hips, but he doesn't pull me back, letting me watch as Razar and their older brother climb up the wall.

They're moving fast, and I'm pretty sure I see Razar duck when his brother purposely kicks out at his knee. I gasp, and Creed chuckles in amusement when Razar leaps up and kicks his brother in the chest. The hit makes him lose hold of the wall and slide down several feet, lodging my heart in my throat.

“What the actual fuck are they doing?” I gasp as Creed laughs harder, holding his hand out before nodding at the men scaling the wall.

“Fifty on Raz,” he mutters, and Valen grins, slapping his hand in Creed's for a moment and shaking it before moving it back to my hips.

“Deal. Jesthren is only playing with Razar. He's about to leave him in the dust.” And almost like Valen can predict the future, Jesthren suddenly starts racing up the wall, passing Razar and making it to us at least thirty seconds before Razar does. He swings his big leg over the railing, making the three of us already up here step back to give him more room, then grins down at Razar and holds out a hand. To my surprise, Razar takes it willingly and without a scowl on his face and lets Jesthren help him over the railing.

“Dammit!” Creed curses, gazing at Valen, who smirks victoriously.

“What am I missing?” Jesthren asks, his charming smile moving from Razar to Creed, then to Valen before settling on me. He nods in greeting but stays where he's at as Razar stalks over to me, shocking the hell out of me when his cold, long fingers grab my chin and tilt my face up to meet his gaze. Dark eyes move over my cheek that the Wraiths injured, the one Nox healed the moment he saw me. Razar frowns, narrowing his eyes, then grunts and nods before letting my chin go and stepping back from me.

“Creed bet Razar would win,” Valen fills in his brother, making Jesthren laugh and shake his head in amusement.

“Not yet. He's getting good, though. I'll have to watch myself as you four get older and stronger,” he teases, and I frown, looking from Jesthren to the

other guys. Sure, he looks a little older, but not by much.

“How old are you?” I ask before I think, then slap my hand over my mouth. Shit. I haven't even been properly introduced to the oldest Demon Prince, and I just asked a rather personal question. Thankfully, Jesthren smiles, not in the least put off by my question.

“On the winter moon, I'll reach ninety-six demonic moon cycles, which is about one hundred and forty-four earth rotations around the sun,” he responds, and my eyes bulge out of my sockets.

“You're one hundred and forty-four years old?” I whisper in awe, and Jesthren laughs.

“Yes, and still considered young for a Demon,” he says with a wink.

“Wait, so how old are you?” I ask, looking at Valen and side-eyeing Creed and Razar. Valen shuffles on his feet and looks at Creed, who shrugs and nods.

“I'm sixty-eight moon cycles,” he responds, and I frown and look at Creed, who mouths, ‘*one hundred and two*’ in my direction. My lips part, but no sounds come out. “Mi Sol?” he whispers, reaching out to hold my hand as I stare at him in surprise.

“You're older than my gramps. Oh, my God! I had sex with an old man!” I rasp out in realization. Creed doubles over and roars with laughter when Valen looks at me in shock and mild disgust.

“I'm not an old man, Meyer,” he chides and sighs, looking at Creed, who is now wiping his eyes from laughing so hard. “A Demon's life expectancy is much longer than a human's. I'm still considered a young man.”

“Hell, Lenny is still considered an adolescent,” Jesthren says with a chuckle, making Razar's lips twitch up on one side. I glare at him suspiciously; something weird is going on with him. He's not acting as murderous as usual.

“He is not,” Valen chides, rolling his eyes at Jesthren as Creed tries to rein in his laughter. “Besides, Nox is the crown prince. His magic develops faster than normal Demons. He's practically on your level already,” Valen adds, making Jesthren huff and nod in annoyance.

“If Nox is an adolescent... what does that make me?” I wonder out loud.

“An infant,” Razar replies coolly, making Creed chuckle when I flip him the bird in response. “That didn't help you appear as less of an infant,” he points out and my cheeks heat.

“I'm Jesthren, by the way, since these imbeciles don't seem to have the

common decency to introduce us,” Jesthren says with a soft smile, holding a massive hand out to me to shake.

“Meyer,” I respond, moving to place my hand in his, then gasp when Valen tugs me closer to his chest and away from Jesthren.

“Uh-huh,” he chides, looking at his brother and scowling. Jesthren frowns and shakes his head in frustration. “You boys need to practice better self-control. That is a woman... Not a toy that you should be marking as your own. I was only trying to be polite,” he chides, making Valen's shoulders stiffen in response.

“You know that's not what this is. You're not Legion, and I want to keep liking you, brother,” he whispers, and Creed nods in agreement as Valen slowly lets me go and steps closer to Jesthren. Creed follows closely, the three brothers dipping their heads in conversation, leaving me standing awkwardly next to the murderous man who is now glaring down at me. I glare back and turn, eyeing him before I nod. He's not hurt. In fact, he looks better than he did before the battle.

“I know you still have Milo, and I want him back,” I mutter, looking at the guys from the side of my eye but keeping Razar my main focus. Razar's shoulders tense, and I hear him scoff before he steps even closer to me.

“Tiny Monster is mine. Find your own feline,” he rasps back at me, making my mouth drop open in anger.

“What?! Milo is mine! You catnapped him from my cabin, and I want him back! You get your own feline,” I whisper back at him, making Razar scowl from beneath the hood.

“What are you two fighting about?” Creed asks, glaring at Razar as his arm wraps around my shoulder protectively.

“None of your business. This is between me and her,” he rasps, glowering at me.

“Lemon Drop, is Raz pissing you off?” Creed asks, his smile brightening like he just came up with an idea.

“Always,” I growl back, not breaking Razar's glare as the air around us charges with tension.

“Hey Valen!” Creed shouts, giddy as hell as he turns and looks over his shoulder at his brother. “I found out how Meyer and Raz got off the— *Umph!*”

I cut off Creed's next words, slapping my hand over his mouth while glaring at Razar. Sure, he's annoying and keeps taking my cat, but he also

shoved me down that hill, keeping me safe as he fought off the Beastia and Wraiths by himself. He got hurt for me, and I would feel really bad if Valen found out and ended up hurting Razar over it.

“*What da hell, Wemon Dwop,*” Creed grumbles behind my hand, his words muffled as I smile sweetly at Valen, then turn back to Razar.

“You will give me my cat back, or I’ll let Creed tell Valen how you got me off the wall. I’m pretty sure he’ll do the same to you in revenge,” I add, and Creed nods and gestures over to the castle railing. Razar scoffs, and I narrow my eyes on him.

“You wouldn’t,” he snarls, leaning down and getting right in my face, trying to intimidate me. I scoff and step into him, letting my hand fall from Creed’s mouth so I can invade Razar’s space in return. Stupid Demon thinks he’s scary as shit, but he needs to learn not to mess with my cat. I growl back at him, getting so close I can feel the heat radiating off his body. Razar’s eyes widen in surprise as he jerks back like I burned him.

“Try me,” I hiss as he snarls. His eyes darken as he starts to pace in front of me before he growls and nods, turning back toward me and leaning down so we are eye to eye.

“Three days,” he bargains, and I shake my head.

“No! He’s my cat!” I shout in exasperation, whacking the Demon’s shoulder with the back of my hand. A weird gasping inhale startles Razar and me, and we turn away from each other to find Valen, Creed, and Jesthren gawking at me like I have three heads.

“You weren’t kidding,” Jesthren mutters in awe as Valen smiles happily at us, like seeing me fight with his brother is the best thing he’s seen all day.

“Nope,” Creed says, popping the ‘p’ as he sighs. Suddenly, the door to the roof bangs open, and Jesthren groans in disappointment as a fuming Nox steps out onto the ledge, his eyes finding me immediately before he turns and glares at Valen.

“Really?” he growls, and Valen shrugs.

“She doesn’t like running,” he says simply, and I nod, snapping my fingers and pointing to Valen when Nox looks back at me.

“He’s not wrong. Though I’m not sure running up the stairs to get here was much better.”

Creed laughs, then tenses, nostrils flaring as he stands up straight. Lennox growls and grabs my arm, yanking me behind him. Valen is suddenly at my side just as massive black wings fly overhead, the loud cry of a bird piercing

the air.

“Holy shit! That thing is huge!” I murmur, craning my head back to watch the big black bird fly around the castle and then circle back. “What is it?”

“A Cinereous Vulture. But the Hunters call them Russian Raptors,” Creed says with a chuckle. “And yes, they are enormous birds and extremely loyal to their masters,” he adds as the six of us watch it fly around the castle. “Where are they?” Creed whispers in confusion, looking down at the ground before Lennox pauses, his shoulders freezing as he looks up at the mountain, then grins.

“Look up,” he instructs, and I gasp when I look up. The big bird circles before tucking its black wings to its sides and diving to the ledge Valen and I stood on the night after I woke him up. Eight brown-cloaked figures stand there staring at us, making me shiver when I realize they have probably been watching us the whole time. Movement from further up the mountain catches my eyes, and I find another five cloaked figures. I look around and smile as I start counting. The mountain is covered in Umbra Hunters, all wearing brown cloaks with heavy furs around their necks. I squint to see how far up they go, and stop counting when I reach forty-eight.

“That's all?” Jesthren drawls, eyeing Lennox in disappointment. Lennox doesn't respond, only glares at his brother.

“They came over the mountain?” Creed asks in confusion, and Valen curses, and Nox nods.

“They must have been forced to come that way,” Nox growls, turning on Razar. “I need you to take three units and scout the area. Make sure the Hunters come from the gatehouse and give me a time estimate on the Senioreem if you can,” he instructs. Razar nods, then heads for the door, tearing it open and disappearing within.

“I'll get Elaine,” Creed mutters, squeezing my hand before rushing after Razar.

“Tell her Senior Ivanov and the Volkov Units are here,” Nox shouts after him before looking at Valen. “Get this castle warded and ready for battle by nightfall,” Nox says calmly, and Valen nods, pressing a kiss to my forehead and then leaving the rooftop.

The Russians start to move and I step back a little, wanting to watch their descent. Strong fingers wrap around my elbow when I lean back on the railing, and I look down to find Jesthren's fingers gently tugging me away

from the side of the castle.

“Don’t get too close. It’s dangerous,” he says with a small smile, letting me go the instant I’m not pressed against the railing.

“Do not touch her!” Nox growls; his hand darts out, wrapping around my wrist and yanking me away from his brother. I go to yell at Lennox, but his eyes aren't on me; they're on his brother, and his hands are shaking.

What the hell?

“Yes, I know,” Jesthren agrees, raising his hands in the air and nodding. “I just didn't want her to fall, Lennox.” Nox growls, and I yank my hand away from Nox, glaring at him when his eyes flick back to me in surprise.

“Go back to your bloodline and get your fighting leathers on, Ranger,” Nox growls, pushing me toward the door the guys left through, and I stumble. Jesthren reaches out to catch me but stops at Nox’s feral growl, and I throw my arms out, steadying myself before I fall. “Now, Meyer!” he roars, and I can feel the magic in the air around us. It's almost tangible, and it takes me by surprise. I’ve never felt this before.

An odd pressure rubs against me, and I shiver, wanting to bend to its will, but something else rises. I look over at Nox and cock my head to the side, making his anger falter as his eyes widen. The spot on my wrist starts to tingle as warmth burns in my belly, and I smirk as Lennox’s magic slowly lessens.

“Don’t push me, Lennox,” I growl, pushing whatever magic he’s using to make me feel uncomfortable back at him. This time, it’s Nox who stumbles back, his dark green eyes widening in surprise before I turn and leave, my heart racing in excitement and my mind spinning in confusion.

What the hell just happened?



Creed

Racing into my room, I slam the door behind me as my mind spins with excitement, nerves, and fear. This is who I am. A warrior... a fighter... a Demon. I excel at war, and I thrive in the chaos it creates. I live for the thrill of endorphins before a battle, the bloodlust that courses through my veins as I sharpen my blades and strap on my armor. But this new fear that resides deep inside me—the feeling of dread pooling in my stomach as the sense of foreboding hangs in the air—is a new sensation for me, and it's all because of one thing. Or rather... one woman.

“Meyer,” I growl her name as heat fills my blood. Intense need for the tiny half-Demon floods me, making my length strain in my pants as I yank my simple black t-shirt off over my head and reach for my thicker blood-absorbent one. I throw it on before grabbing my Dragon scale armor and strapping them to my chest and arms. Then I temper my lust and focus on the more important things in my life.

First and foremost, I will ensure that everyone I love and care for survives the next twenty-four hours, and then I can focus on showing my Lemon Drop that I meant what I said. I need to show her I’m worth a second chance and that I will do everything I can to earn her trust back. The need to have her in my life is like a physical ache in my chest that I can’t relieve. I already knew there was a physical attraction; I knew we were magically compatible the moment I scented her. But this is starting to go beyond that. I feel entranced, like I’m spelled whenever she’s around. Meyer is a drug that I will gladly and wholly lose myself to.

I almost lost it when Valen came into Nox's office, telling us that Meyer had another nightmare last night. Nox did freak out, standing from his chair so fast that it flew back against his office wall. He was just about to charge out of the room to find Meyer when Valen told us she was fine. He'd been able to wake her before anything terrible happened besides a panic attack he talked her down from. Nox had calmed down, and to my surprise, Razar stepped back into the shadows, hiding himself again when he knew Meyer was okay.

My girl has us all on edge, even those of us who claim they don't want her. I'm honestly looking forward to them realizing they are even more protective over her than Valen and I are. I was expecting Nox to fall eventually, but Razar has been a surprise. Sure, I'm almost positive half of his interest in her is her ability to kick him in the balls and stab him without dying at the hands of his monster. But I honestly thought I was going to have to protect her from him for the rest of our lives. Yet, here I am, willingly letting him talk to her and guard her during dangerous situations.

I scowl at that thought, remembering what happened the night before on the wall. I can't believe he tossed her off it like that! What if she had been hurt and then stranded down there with the Beastia? I take a mental note to challenge him to a fight when we have some time. It's been far too long since I've knocked my brother on his ass, and now I have a good reason for it.

My door opens, and Jesthren walks in, his clothes changed from the ones he was wearing earlier on the rooftop of the castle. He's now sporting Hunter fighting leathers that stretch over his massive chest, and I briefly wonder if the fabric will shred the moment he flexes a muscle. Without a word, Jesthren grabs my remaining armor and helps strap it on; reaching the buckles I struggle to clasp on my own and making a sound of approval in the back of his throat as he cinches the one around the top of my shoulders.

"You've grown, Heldakar. The last time I helped you into these, you were two notches smaller than you are now," he grumbles, slapping my shoulder with his big hands and making me laugh as I stumble back. It's true that I have put on a significant amount of muscle since coming to the human realm. After Archer died, I trained relentlessly with Lennox, needing the physical relief from the torment and guilt I had over my brother's death. I'm not even close to being as built as Lennox or Jesthren, but I'm not as small as I once was.

"Nox has been keeping us busy," I admit with a smile, turning to look at

my oldest brother with a grin. I'd missed this big bastard. Sure, he throws a wrench in our little family unit when it comes to Nox, but he's been my big brother for almost my entire life. Mom and Dad adopted me when I was only four years old. I'm the second youngest in the family, and I've never not had Jesthren in my life.

Jesthren's smile falters at the mention of Nox, and he sighs, walking over to sit on my bed as I start strapping weapons to my body. "I need you to talk me through this, brother," he admits, looking conflicted. "What's going on here? I know the basics. The Hunters are rebelling and foolishly trying to steal magic that doesn't belong to them. They somehow have located and moved Inanis' sarcophagus, and they are divided. It's a civil war, and the Hunters are divided, as far as I can tell. Why are we involved in a fight that doesn't concern us? I've tried to get information from Garthelaun, but he's been less than forthcoming on the matter," he grumbles, running a hand over his short-cropped hair as he watches me ready for battle.

"You act surprised that Nox doesn't trust you. His actions are a product of your treatment over the last thirty-six years, Jesthren." I laugh, shaking my head when Jesthren scowls and then nods.

"You're right. I haven't been very... brotherly toward him. But the boy is just as hot-headed and temperamental as he's always been. Garthelaun doesn't think before he acts, and now look at us," he says in exasperation, waving a hand at me and then at himself. "We're fighting a war for mortals. Protecting a castle that isn't our own," he points out, and I shake my head.

"First off. His name is Lennox on this side of the Veil, and he's talking about keeping the name even when he returns to Versipellis. My name is Credence, though I do prefer Creed," I tell him, making his nose wrinkle in disgust.

"Out of all the souls you have killed and names you have earned, why keep a mortal one?" he asks in confusion, and I shrug.

"This name has cost me the most. The man I took it from may have been mortal, but I lost a brother, and I'm currently fighting to form a Legion with a girl I want. This name has seen me through the lowest of lows, but it has also brought me some of the best things that I now cherish over anything else."

"A half-blood female?" Jesthren asks in shock, looking at me like I've gone crazy. "Meyer Smith is beautiful, to be sure. And I can even understand why Valen wants her as his mate. She holds Dream Walker blood, and it will be a driving instinct for him to claim her as his own. But you're a Prince of

Versipellis, Creed. You don't have to share a mate the way other Demons do.”

“No,” I snap, then sigh. “I mean, yes. Meyer is a big reason my life is better than it was. I don't know how to explain it, Jes...” I mutter with a shrug as I grab my favorite blades and inspect them before strapping them on my back, letting the hilts stay level with my shoulders for easy extraction. “But Meyer is mine, and I’m not going to let anyone tell me otherwise. But I’m talking about Nox, Valen... and even Razar. I was afraid that my Legion had crumbled when Arch died. We already lost Valen, and I was a mess. Then Razar went off the deep end, and even Nox was inconsolable for weeks when you sent word that Archer didn't make it.”

Jesthren's face falls at the reminder, and he nods, eyes glassy as I swallow the thick lump in my throat that I get whenever I talk about Arch.

“But Razar started to show signs of coming out of his depression when Meyer showed up. Sure... it's been in the form of death threats and scowls, but you have to understand the man had turned into a shell of himself. When I returned from the rift the first day Meyer was here, Razar pulled me out into the hall and threatened my life. But the only thing I felt was pure relief. Things are slowly getting better, and I can't help the hope that maybe my Legion won't break apart after all,” I whisper. Jesthren stands and nods, walking over and flicking a curl off my forehead.

“I should have been here,” he mutters, and I shake my head.

“No. You were where you needed to be. Mom and Dad were grieving their son, and the heir was in another realm. Dad needed your help to run the kingdom, but now Nox needs your help to stop this war. This is our war as much as it is the Hunters, Jes. You said it yourself. Inanis—the damn apocalypse's tomb—has been recovered. Valen was held against his will for over four years, used and assaulted on a daily basis. The Hunters have demonic help. You killed those damn Wraiths yourself. This war is no longer one of mortal men... but of Demons as well. One that could easily mean the end of both Mortal and Demonic realms if Inanis is ever set free. We need to stabilize this side of the realm in order to fix our kingdom. Nox thinks that the attacks against Versipellis and the ones here on Earth are somehow connected. And the more evidence I see, the more I believe it,” I admit, making Jesthren’s brows furrow.

“I agree about Inanis,” Jesthren says with a firm nod. “But you really think this is connected to the attacks on Father?” he asks, and I nod.

“Yes. We need your help, Jesthren. Something’s not right here, and Nox is trying to puzzle it out. He has more help now that Valen is back, but I know he could use your support,” I mutter, glaring up at my brother as he sighs in irritation.

“He’ll never trust me enough to let me help,” Jes points out, and I nod.

“So prove him otherwise. You need to make amends, Jesthren. I know you are upset that Nox took your place in the line of succession, but he will be your king one day. You two need to figure your shit out. Sooner rather than later,” I add as I walk past him and open my door, motioning for him to go first before following after him.

“I know,” he admits in a softer-than-normal voice. “It’s one of the reasons I came in place of our uncle. I wanted to attempt to talk with Nox and see if we could maybe be... cordial,” he says with a hint of disgust, and I laugh only because Nox acts the same way when talking about Jesthren.

“I was curious about why you were here. Never would I have thought you would willingly cross the Veil into mortal lands,” I mutter with a chuckle, striding down the familiar halls with Jesthren. We watch as the Rangers race in and out of the barracks, their Seniors bellowing demands from the bottom of the stairs as the sun starts to lower, bringing an eery calmness to the darkening sky. We head down the stairs, nodding at Monroe, who is currently screaming at a trembling Drakos Ranger, and chuckle when the red-headed giant glares at me and nods—his version of a friendly hello. Jesthren grunts, the sound so like Razar’s that I smile and shake my head.

“I came because Father was worried. He’s already stressed, and I wanted to help,” he grumbles as we step out onto the frozen walkway that connects the barracks to the castle. I shiver at the quiet air. There’s no sound. Not a breeze or a rustle of any wildlife around us. Just emptiness. It sets my teeth on edge, and I pick up my pace, needing to get down to the courtyard so I can help Nox. “And as much as I want to deny it, Nox is my brother, and I will help him. You guys are in a little over your head here.”

“We are,” I agree, not liking how in the dark we are about everything. Nox and Jesthren were able to get Inanis’ sarcophagus into the crypts last night, and Valen spent the better part of the afternoon warding it before moving on to ward the walls of the castle. Then there is the fact that Nox and Valen found some of Archer’s blood in the sarcophagus next to Inanis. There is no plausible way for it to be there. We killed every Hunter at the base of the mountain before Elaine showed up and saved Nox. “What are your

thoughts on Archer's blood being found in the sarcophagus?" I ask as we move into the castle and down the stairs, heading toward the main entry.

"I'm unsure if it's actually Arch's," Jesthren admits, and I frown.

"Nox and Valen are adamant that it is," I whisper, and Jesthren nods.

"I know. But he is Razar's twin. They have almost identical blood. It would make more sense that the Senioreem somehow got their hands on his blood and were testing it. Nox said the Senior who was in charge had already begun to grow suspicious of you all before Nox killed him. It's possible that they started to figure it out and managed to get some of Razar's blood," Jesthren says with a sigh.

"But..."

"Creed, I was there. I raced for our borders to help Archer the moment I knew he was coming back injured. And I'm the one who brought his body back to Mom. Arch is gone," Jesthren whispers, voice ragged with emotion, making me growl and nod, hating that I had foolishly started to hope otherwise. Jesthren and I stride through the crowded entryway of the Castle, and my eyes search for the long white-blond hair of the girl who now stars in my every thought and dream.

"Creed!" Nox yells as we head outside, moving through the open doors with ease as the Hunters and Rangers step out of our way. I look over to Nox as he waves me to him, and I immediately walk in his direction, a scowling Jesthren on my heels, making Nox's already sour expression darken when he sees him. The courtyard is already lit with torches and large fires adorn the castle walls as Rangers and Hunters run around in organized chaos. I grin and lift up on my toes a little at the charged energy in the air.

"Hey," I greet, clapping Nox's shoulder in greeting, then smile at Elaine, who is commanding the attention of the people nearby as she instructs the Rangers on what to do with firm guidance. The massive shadow of Senior Drakos behind her makes me smirk, and I nod at him when his dark eyes fall on me. His shoulders tense, and he steps closer to Elaine protectively; and even though I'm no threat to her, I have to admire his protective nature. It's something we have in common. "Is Razar back with the Hunters from the gatehouse?" I ask, and Nox shakes his head, his hands fisted at his sides as he looks at the darkening sky beyond the wall.

"You have hours before their armies are on your doorstep, if you're lucky," a heavily accented voice rasps as Senior Ivanov steps up to Nox's side, his dark scowl moving over our group before his eyes fall on Nox once

more. “We have come to do Orcus’ bidding, but we need more fighters. We came over the mountain for a reason, Prince Darakh,” the old Russian man says, his thick coat and furs bundled around his neck as he glares at everyone in sight. “Their army is at least four hundred strong, and from what my people have gathered, this is only the first wave of Hunters that the Asian Senioreem has sent over.”

“There is no way for an army that large to move up the mountain undetected,” Jesthren growls, stepping closer to the Russian Senior, standing close to Nox protectively and backing him up. Nox looks at our brother in confusion, and the old Senior immediately takes a step back, his face paling as the big Demon Prince growls under his breath.

“Jesthren,” Nox chides, placing a hand on our brother's shoulder and pulling him back so that he can talk to the Senior himself.

“Ivanov is not wrong,” a firm, accented, and rather deep feminine voice says as a tall, dark-haired woman comes to stand at the Senior’s side. Her bright green eyes rake over us as she rolls her shoulders back, moving her long black braid that’s streaked with silver to one shoulder before she continues to speak. “The army moves with a speed and strength I’ve not seen before. Five magic-using Hunters are leading them. Dark magic’s sour in the air,” she clips out. “If you are waiting for people outside your walls. Don’t. They are gone.” Over head the massive Russian Raptor screeches, circling the courtyard and making me wince at the sound.

“Senior Regalis,” Nox greets, brows furrowed with worry at her words, and I eye the older woman. She is strong, her face set in a cold, unfeeling mask as she looks Nox up and down with a critical eye. Then she huffs, dismissing my brother without a second glance and turning toward Elaine instead. Nox’s eyebrows hitch, and I sense amusement radiating from him as he watches the two women square off.

“I never liked your father. He was a horrid man who only sought power for himself,” she growls. Her words make my eyes widen in shock at her bluntness as Victor snarls and steps closer to Elaine, who holds a small hand up, making him stop without a single word.

“That is an opinion we have in common,” Elaine says calmly, making the older woman's cold expression falter as she stares at Elaine for a long moment, then nods. She’s not smiling, not even close, but she doesn't look as angry as she did before.

“You are the new Shadow Elder of the North American Senioreem?” she

asks, and Elaine gives a small nod, holding the old woman's stare with little effort. I grin when I realize their magic is starting to battle, a silent fight for dominance between them. One I already know the winner of. After a moment, the Russian Regalis Senior growls and then nods at Elaine, acknowledging her and shocking me when she holds out her hand to Elaine. "Okay," she finally clips, nodding firmly as Elaine shakes her hand. "We came because we were called. But I was curious about the new Elder. You will do fine," she says abruptly, making Nox chuckle as Elaine blinks at her in surprise.

"As we were saying," Senior Ivanov sneers, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"*Zatknis' starshiy, Ivanov,*" Senior Regalis snaps, making the older man flush and stammer before a younger man steps to his side and rests a hand on his shoulder. "*Idi, gotov' nashi podrazdeleniya k boyu,*" she growls, waving a hand through the air as she glares at the younger man who pulls the Senior away. Jeshren chokes on a laugh, and I look up at him in confusion. I haven't had the time to study all the mortal languages, and I'm only fluent in English, Spanish, and Italian.

"She just told him to shut up and get their units ready to fight," Jeshren whispers, and I grin, suddenly liking the woman more.

"Should you be talking to him that way?" Elaine asks, her eyes narrowing on Senior Ivanov as he starts to shout at the men and women dressed in brown furs nearby.

"As Russian Shadow Elder, I do as I please," Senior Regalis announces, and I frown. Shadow elder? I thought Ivanov was the head of the Russian Senioremm. From Elaine and Lennox's expressions, they are also surprised by this new information.

"I apologize, Senior Regalis. We were unaware of your position. Our records stated that Senior Ivanov was the head of the Russian Senioremm," Elaine says in a calm voice as she stands tall next to Lennox. A flash of blonde catches my attention, and I grin when I see Lemon Drop stomp down the stairs with her ever-loyal duo at her sides. Elaine's son is practically skipping in excitement, and Ranger Jennings is standing protectively at Meyer's back. She's dressed in black fighting leathers and I notice she has on a few extras than before, probably from Ranger Jennings. He's been extra protective of her since she came back to the castle and he discovered our true identities.

“Yes. That’s what we wanted your Seniorems to believe. Sexist swine,” Senior Regalis snaps. This makes Elaine’s lips twitch in amusement, but she covers it well and nods as they begin to talk about the army of Umbra Hunters headed our way.

I barely make an attempt to pretend to listen to the conversation being held in front of me, choosing to watch my girl as she glares at Elaine’s son. She leans down, scooping up a handful of the snow at her feet before forming it into a ball and chucking it at his face, making him shout in surprise as Ranger Jennings falls into fits of laughter behind her.

Elaine’s son scowls and tries to bend over to make his own snowball, but Meyer simply kicks him in the butt as he bends over, making him faceplant into the snow. I chuckle as she laughs with Ranger Jennings at their friend’s expense, and then she squeaks and turns, dashing in my direction. Jordan is hot on her heels as Theo stands, two snowballs in hand and determination on his young face.

Monroe happens to look up at that moment, his face turning a bright shade of red when he sees the Rangers goofing off, and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from growling at him as he yells and instructs them to their spots with their designated bloodlines. Meyer smirks but nods, doing as she’s told and heading toward Monroe who I smile at when he looks my way.

“*Really?*” he mouths at me, and I shrug and nod as he heaves a sigh when he sees my expression and tosses his hands up in the air, already knowing I won’t be letting her out of my sight until Razar gets back and takes over as her guard.

Stepping away from the group, I snag Meyer by the waist, nuzzling my nose to the top of her hair, which is pulled up in a high ponytail. I grin when she immediately sinks into my hold, then tenses and glares up at me. Her defiance and stubbornness always make an appearance as she demands the respect she deserves, not letting me off the hook so simply. Her sweet citrus scent fills my senses as I breathe her in. It’s so similar to Valen’s, yet different.

“Hey, Lemon Drop,” I rasp, tugging her away from a scowling Ranger Jennings and toward Nox and our group. She comes willingly, blushing a little at the arched brows of the Russian Seniors, then nods at Jeshren when he offers her a friendly smile.

“Creed,” she whispers in greeting, and I mentally fist bump the air that she hasn’t thrown an elbow to my side or tried to kick me in the balls. “What

are you doing? I need to go stand with my bloodline. I don't know if you've heard or not, but there is an army of Umbra Hunters coming our way," she snarks, and I chuckle.

"Ranger Smith," Nox clips out, making Meyer tense. The amusement in her eyes vanishes as she looks over at Lennox, who is pushing through the circle of Seniors and stepping in front of us.

"Prince... shit. What's his name again?" she whispers up at me as she glares at Nox, who has apparently pissed her off once again. *Surprise, surprise.*

"Darakh," I whisper back to her, smirking at Nox when he shoots me a dirty look. Meyer snaps her fingers and nods.

"Yeah, that," she says, then looks up at a fuming Nox as he glowers down at her.

"Go back inside," he snarls and she actually laughs, making my eyes widen in shock as Nox's magic whips out from him like a weapon. It's enough that it has my knees quivering, and the Seniors behind us gasping and stumbling back from the raging Demon Prince. But Meyer looks totally unaffected as she shakes her head.

"No," she growls back at Nox, making my brother's face turn an unnatural shade of purple.

"Meyer," he growls under his breath in warning, his dominating magic filling the air and making me grunt in pain. Fuck, he's getting strong! Jesthren flinches when Nox's magic courses over his skin but doesn't look nearly as uncomfortable as I am.

"Lennox," she replies, cracking her neck to the side and smirking, a dark challenge in her eyes as he studies her. But before he can do anything about it, the sound of the battle horns rings through the air, and we all freeze in shock.

What the hell? We were supposed to have a few more hours!

"Where's Razar?" I shout at Nox as the courtyard suddenly springs into action. Hunters run for the wall in formation, the Rangers following behind as the Seniors start barking orders. The horn sounds again, and Meyer looks up at where the massive horn resides, squinting through the dark as she tries to see it. Fuck! I forgot she doesn't have the typical night vision that a regular Dream Walker has.

"He hasn't returned," Nox snaps, his confused eyes still on Meyer as Valen comes racing off the wall and toward us. Jesthren steps to my side and

looks to Nox for instruction as Elaine walks over to the large horse near the gates.

“She’s not riding out to fight, is she?” I ask in surprise, then frown when Nox nods.

“Of course she is. Elaine is one of the best fighters we have, and she’s the head of the North American Senioreem. She’ll lose the respect of the Seniors if she doesn’t.”

“Axford never fought,” I point out, then pause and nod, getting Nox’s point. Axford may have had the support of the Senioreem, but only because they were corrupt or blackmailed into it.

“I’ll keep her with me,” Valen says, hand outstretched for Meyer, who glares at us all.

“I’ll be fighting with my bloodline,” Meyer corrects Valen, making him blink at her in surprise when she doesn’t take his outstretched hand.

“Damn, stubborn...” Nox starts to grumble under his breath as he looks over his head at Elaine, who gestures him over to her. “Fuck! Fine. Get yourself killed,” Nox bellows at her, moving around Valen and snagging my arm as he walks toward Elaine. “Keep her in your sights at all times until Razar comes back. Am I understood?” he hisses into my ear as Valen steps closer to Meyer, who is already backing away and heading toward the Regalis bloodline Hunters.

“Absolutely,” I agree, hand falling to the extra sword I have sheathed at my side as I watch Nox stride confidently toward Elaine and mount the big black horse waiting for him. The howls of a Beastia in the distance echo through the night air, and I shiver as the peaceful feeling I had before now dies, leaving an aching pool of dread in its place.



Meyer

I walk away from Valen, trying to act normal as I freak the hell out. Something is wrong. For some reason, I can see more than I could before; there are suddenly shapes in the dark. The pine trees are no longer dark outlines against the night sky, but trees with branches and pine needles I can see clearly.

I rub my sore wrist and glare down at it. The man from the dream had taken my hand and burned something into my skin, but when I look down, there's nothing there. I even ran my thumb over the skin to make sure there wasn't some weird bump under the skin, but it's perfectly fine besides the dull ache in my joint. Jordan looks up as I draw closer to the Regalis bloodline and winks at me, nodding at the empty spot next to him as Monroe continues to yell at them all. I glance to my left, studying the wall that had been decimated the night before but now stands tall and slow my steps.

"How the hell did they rebuild that overnight?" I mutter, then shriek when Jordan stands next to me and nods at the gray stone.

"Your blond scary guy did that while Theo's mom was getting the Rangers together after the Russians got here," he explains. I purse my lips, impressed as hell. I didn't know that was something Valen could do, but he did say he was a strong magic user.

"Valen's not scary," I huff out as I stare at the wall.

"You're delusional and are looking through rose-colored glasses. The only Demon who may be slightly more terrifying than Valen is Lennox," Jordan mutters, grabbing my hand and yanking me with him as Monroe

suddenly shouts for us all to move our asses toward the gates.

“We’re going beyond the gates?” I ask in confusion. Jordan nods, checking his arrows and bow before counting the knives he has strapped to him and touching the handle of his kalis, taking a mental count in preparation for battle.

“Yes. We stay behind the walls if there are too many Beastia simply because they are too deadly to meet on the battlefield. But doing that means we run the risk of getting cornered like last night. If Razar and you hadn't led some of them away, it could have been much worse for us.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” I mutter, following Jordan and stopping in front of the gates as they slowly are opened, the giant hinges creaking in the cold as the courtyard lays still, waiting for our signal to move. I feel completely out of my depth here, because I'm not a soldier like the Hunters around me. I've only been training for a couple months, yet there is some sort of rightness in me as I stand there with the Regalis bloodline, and I realize for the first time since coming up here... I feel like I belong. Even though I had the chance to leave, I stayed.

Elaine and Lennox are the first to move, followed by one of the badass-looking Russian women, who has long black hair streaked with gray. She's on her own horse and riding at Elaine's left while Nox takes her right.

“You ready?” Jordan asks, an excited smile crossing his face as he bounces up and down on his toes, shaking his hands out at his side as he tries to stay loose.

“Nope. Not even a little bit,” I reply, but can't help but smile in return.

“Move out and head to the south,” Monroe calls out as the Rossi Senior does the same, motioning for everyone to move toward the designated areas. “Remember to not cross the boulder line out in the clearing. Archers are stationed on the wall, and you will be caught in the crosshairs,” Monroe continues to instruct as our feet crunch on the frozen snow below us.

My eyes widen as I look around the dark field, seeing things I've never seen without the sun out. Something shifts inside me, and I swallow, desperately trying to ignore the sensation of something bad about to happen.

“There,” Jordan whispers, pointing to the center of the large clearing where the path bends and heads down the mountain. Five tall figures ride on horseback, their forward motion sure and steady as they stride into the clearing, then pull their horses to a stop. Elaine, Lennox, and the Russian Senior are a ways ahead of all the Hunters, and a thread of worry fills me

when I realize if they were to be attacked, there would be no one there to help them.

The sound of a branch snapping in the trees about a hundred feet from where we stand on the north side of the wall makes me snap my head in that direction just as a low howl breaks across the clearing. The trees suddenly shift, branches swaying as rogue Hunters in different colored fighting leathers run from the trees, storming us from all directions with no warning. I hear Lennox yell, and the Hunters respond, blades drawn as the Hunters and Rangers around me begin to run forward and attack.

Jordan's hand grabs mine, and he yanks us forward. "Stay by my side," he demands, and I nod. "I'll watch your back. Use your blades first and try to take them out before they get close," he instructs, pulling out his bow and arrows, notching one on the string and letting it fly so fast I almost don't see it. We all spread out as the enemy rushes at us, the sounds of screams setting my teeth on edge as I palm two blades and swallow hard, suddenly realizing these are people I'm going to kill... not monsters.

A knot lodges in my throat at the thought, but then I see a big, burly rogue Hunter set his eyes on Jordan and lift his bow, taking aim. I growl under my breath, and I let my blade fly, no longer concerned with the people I kill as long as I keep my friend safe.

My aim is true, and the thrill I get when I hear the man scream in pain makes me sick. Blood courses from the man's parted lips, and I can feel a feral smile twist on my face, darkness pooling in me as I watch the man die. In the next moment, I whimper and step back, realizing what I just did. Something is definitely wrong with me. I'm going to have to ask Nox to make sure something didn't happen during that dream because ever since I woke up, my senses have heightened, my excitement for blood and danger is no longer a thrill that races down my spine but a physical need... something I'm starting to crave. I felt it when Nox commanded me to leave the rooftop earlier today. In the moment, I wanted to challenge him, to make him submit to me the way he was trying to force my own submission.

Fuck! This isn't good.

My eyes fall on two large monsters racing toward Jordan, and I scream in warning. He's moved farther away from me, and I curse when he spins and takes aim with his bow, but I already know that's not going to stop the Beastia. I sprint forward just as one of the monsters launches itself at Jordan. Cursing, I throw another blade at the monster just as its big paws bring

Jordan crashing to the ground. Shit! I wish I knew whatever magic Razar had done to the blade he had given me for the last attack, that would be really handy right now.

Jordan yells and brings his sword directly up into the soft part of the Beastia's body, making it release an ear-piercing scream as I release another blade. It strikes the monster in the neck, making an arc of dark blood stain the snow near Jordan's head as the second Beastia crouches to attack. I jump in its way, not wanting it near my friend. But just as I reach for my sword, a massive black Beastia barrels into its side, taking it off its feet and rolling through the snow.

Wasting no time, I grab a throwing blade in each of my hands and rush over to where Jordan is, bringing my blades down with a shout, aiming for the black pools of death that stare back at me. The Beastia's blood-curdling howl cuts off as it falls forward. Jordan rolls over in the snow and stands, bringing his sword up as more Hunters swarm us.

"Billy and I have these. Go help him!" Jordan shouts, and I twist on my heel, eyes widening as the large Beastia slowly shrinks, its needle-like fur receding until a naked Razar is all that's left. He's hunched over in the snow with deep wounds etched into his back. His flesh torn like paper as he hisses a curse through his teeth, while the body of the one he had just saved me from lies motionless at his side.

"Razar!" I yell, rushing forward and grabbing a cloak off one of the dead rogue Hunters on the ground nearby. Just as I reach him, Creed also approaches, his eyes running over Razar as he bends and grabs another cloak, tearing the fabric with his hands and running over, tying it around Razar's waist as he grunts in thanks.

"Where the hell have you been?" Creed asks, moving some of Razar's hair away from his eyes as I place the cloak I grabbed over Razar's shoulders. The Demon stiffens and growls, but Creed whacks him upside the head and glares at him. "Knock it off."

"There were Wraiths waiting for us halfway down the mountain. All the Hunters from the Gatehouse are dead," he rasps, and Creed and I curse at the same time.

"Fuck. Okay. I'll let Nox know. There aren't as many Hunters here as we were led to believe, and the attack so far has been incredibly uncoordinated. So we should be able to handle this wave of them easily," Creed mutters, and I sigh in relief as Creed stands up and hands Razar the sword he has strapped

at his hip and nods at me, raising a brow as he grins. “You got her?” he asks, and Razar nods, growling at me like a rabid animal when I roll my eyes in annoyance. Then I quickly throw one of my remaining three blades at the Hunter dressed in colors I don't recognize. The men are acting like it's me who is wounded and not the Demon.

“I'll take care of him, don't worry,” I mutter as the Hunter behind Razar falls to the ground, my blade lodged in his chest.

Creed smiles, then nods at Jordan.

“You're with me, Ranger Jennings,” he commands, making Jordan's mouth open in shock before he looks back at me. I nod at him to follow, wanting to make sure he stays safe. Hopefully, this battle will be a short one, and over soon. After a moment of hesitation, Jordan follows Creed as they run toward Nox, as he rips through the line of rogue Hunters, taking down multiple men at a time with a swing of his stupidly big ax. “You can't shift back?” I ask Razar as he takes the sword Creed had given him and shakes his head.

“I have to finish healing. My energy levels are too low,” he admits, jaw tight as he twists and swings his sword, slicing through the belly of a Beastia trying to sneak up behind him. I blink in shock because I hadn't even seen the monster until Razar killed it.

Okay, well, Razar is no less deadly when he's on two legs rather than four, and I nod, frowning at the dead Hunter and grabbing my blade protruding from his still chest. I try not to look at the man's unmoving chest and cold, dead eyes. I don't want to deal with the new weird feelings inside me.

“Something is not right here,” Razar snarls as he kills another Hunter, moving further away from me. My eye catches on some movement in the trees to the north, and I watch as shadowed figures race between the trees.

“How so?” I ask, gaping at the men hiding but not attacking.

“There is magic being used, yet no Demon to be found. And they have numbers of Hunters still waiting to attack. They've sent in the lower class Hunters and Beastia, but are holding the others back...” Razar growls, his black void eyes the only thing left of his shift as his head whips to the side, and he growls at three Beastia closing in on him. “This is a distraction,” he calls out, and I frown, looking behind me and seeing the men I had seen earlier moving in on the north side where Valen stands, killing the monsters and Hunters with the Drakos bloodline.

He stands near Theo, keeping him in his sight as they fight, and my heart lodges in my chest as the new wave of Hunters attacks. I run forward, wanting to help them, but stop when I realize I need to stay with Razar. He's fighting alone, and I don't want him to get hurt, especially after he just saved me and Jordan from a Beastia.

I turn back in time to watch Razar kill the first Beastia and turn on the two circling him. Four more Hunters run up the slope, their weapons raised, and my reaction is immediate as I take aim and throw my knives. One after the other, my blades hit their targets with an ease I normally don't have, until there is only one Hunter left. I curse when I realize I'm out of throwing blades and for the first time tonight, draw the sword Lennox gifted me, holding it with steady hands as the remaining Hunter charges me, her teeth bared like a wounded animal. I step back and block the blow of her sword as she brings it down toward my neck.

My arms tremble as I shove her back, then spin, trying to remember some of Creed's training. I move up the slope, seeking higher ground since the female rogue Hunter has me at a height advantage. She roars in anger, the sound animalistic as she attacks with uncoordinated movements. I stumble back and barely manage to bring up my sword in time to block her brutal blow, gasping in surprise when my eyes meet her dark, glassy ones. She snarls like a beast, unblinking, and shoves me back, making me trip and stumble, then fall to the snow as she advances on me.

Her eyes are still glassy, and she doesn't look down at me as she moves. Realization dawns on me, and I curse, rolling out of the way as she lunges at me with her weapons.

"They're being controlled," I whisper to myself, shoving to my feet and keeping my sword pointed down. "Stop!" I gasp, twisting to the side to miss another attack. "Please!" I shout at her, bringing my sword out, our blades clashing as she growls, spit flying through the air and landing on my cheeks as she tries to shove me to the ground again. "Fuck!" I scream in frustration, and my feet slide on the snow. "Please! Don't make me do this," I beg, already knowing she won't respond.

I may not have a problem with death, but I do with murder, and that's what this would be. This girl isn't attacking me because she wants to, she's being forced into it.

"Please," I rasp as she spins, bringing her blade up to deliver another brutal blow. My step falters, and I stumble as she steps forward. I growl, tears

stinging my eyes as I bring my blade around and feel it strike, sinking into her flesh. “I’m sorry!” I whisper, tears running down my face as the girl’s glassy eyes flutter shut, then she slowly falls off my blade, crumpling into a bloody mess on the ground.

“*Dammit!*” I scream, looking at her and shaking my head in horror. I just killed an innocent girl... Looking around, I see the other Hunters I’ve killed laying nearby and feel sick as I realize how many I’ve killed while ignoring the sense of dread in my stomach. Bile rushes up my throat as I look around me. The battlefield is a chaotic symphony of clashing swords, thunderous roars, and the cries of the wounded and dying.

In the midst of the chaos, Razar stands firm, swinging his sword with determined ferocity, though he’s still in his form of man, his energy too depleted to shift into his beast. In the back of my mind, I know I need to get to Nox and tell him my discovery if he hasn’t figured it out for himself yet. But worry over Razar’s well-being stops me. His arms are shaking, and I’m starting to worry about him.

I move toward him as he fights his way through the melee; out of the corner of my eye, I see movement on the wall above us. A stab of fear lances through me when I see long light brown hair and a familiar face, his features softer than I’m used to seeing as he stands tall, his hood falling away from his stunningly beautiful face.

My mouth drops open in surprise as I look at the Demon I saw in Nox’s dream, but something is different... His eyes are dark with anger, and his lips are pulled down in a sneer of hatred as he casts a knowing look over all the death and destruction below him. My fingers twitch for a blade, but they’re long gone, used on the Hunters and Bestia attacking. And unfortunately, the sword in my hand is far too heavy for me to use on a target so far away.

My feet start moving without thought as the Demon creeps up behind the Hunter stationed on the wall and slices his neck from side to side, making a rush of dark blood slip down the Hunter’s chest before the Demon shoves him off the wall.

I watch as he pulls up a bow, notching an arrow and taking aim at a target I’m now sprinting toward. The glow of the fires along the Castle walls reflect off the polished black arrowhead and my breath hitches, Lennox’s words of warning about onyx and Demons rush through my mind.

This can’t be happening!

“*Razar!* Razar, watch out!” I shout, trying desperately to warn him, but

he's too consumed with his destruction of the rebel Hunters to heed my cries. I let out a frantic sob and move with a speed I didn't know that I possessed. Spinning and ducking around a Hunter who sees me and tries to attack, I evade him easier than I thought I could as the Demon above takes a deep breath, a wicked smile lighting his lips. Almost there! Keep running! My mind screams at me to move faster, and I shake my head. I'm not going to make it!

The Demon on the wall takes aim with deadly precision and then releases the tension on his bowstring as I release a scream.

"*Razar!*" This time, the man in front of me pauses his fight and turns, slicing the throat of a rebel Hunter as he bares sharp fangs at him, his eyes wild with rage. My hand is outstretched as I sense my increased momentum more than feel the burning impact of the arrow deep into my back as I careen into Razar's side.

Air whooshes from my lungs as Razer snarls and turns, blood dripping from his face as the world around me freezes. The sounds of death are finally silent as I stare up into dark void eyes.

"What the hell are you trying to..." Razar bellows, then stops as I try to inhale, to regain the breath that was just stolen from me. Instead, heat fills my lungs, and I release a strange-sounding gasp as I try to say his name. I need to warn him!

"Razar," I manage to whisper as warm liquid crawls up my throat and fills my mouth. The bitter metallic taste makes me cough, sending red droplets onto Razar's pale face. Suddenly, my legs shake, my weight too much to bear as they give out. Razar catches me, jarring me enough that pain the likes I've never felt before races down my spine. The world around me spins as we fall to the ground. I try to ask him what's wrong, but no sound comes from my parted lips.

A feral howl of anguish cuts through the air behind us while panic slowly creeps into Razar's void eyes as they lighten to the dark green I'm used to seeing before my head lolls to the side, my vision darkening, closing in fast, and then finally... blissfully, everything goes black.



RAZAR

I catch the invigorating scent of Pup an instant before she crashes into my side, causing me to stagger. I still manage to dispatch and shove aside the rogue Hunter, then whirl and steady her by her small shoulders before she falls.

“What the hell are you trying to...?” I growl at her, then cut off suddenly, scenting blood.

“Razar...” she whispers wetly, a small ruby drop leaking from the corner of her mouth before she breathes out a ragged cough, her body seizing in my hold as it fights for air. Fear—something I feel so rarely, that its sudden appearance strikes deep into my damaged soul—immediately replaces the frustration I felt. I look at her pale face, pain etched deeply into her delicate features, then frantically examine her fully as my whole body tenses.

When her legs buckle under her, it’s enough that my heart stalls, wrenching my own breath from my lungs as Meyer’s eyes hood, her small frame collapsing in my arms.

“No,” I rasp out, my hand moving to support her waist, then claw aside the dragon skin armor that Creed gave her. It exposes the blood rapidly blossoming on her chest as I reach around to her back and feel the fletching of the deadly arrow lodged deep in her soft flesh.

The hair raises on the back of my neck, and I drop, cradling my Pup to my chest as the air shifts over my head. The arrow meant to take my life, instead lodging into a Hunter’s throat only feet away from where I now kneel.

I snarl and look in the direction the arrow came from, and my heart freezes, my eyes widening in shock as I see the tall man standing on the wall fifty feet away from me. Eyes I would trust with my very soul, stare me down, filled with so much hate that my body trembles.

“Archer?” I rasp. My twin grins, his sharp teeth bloodied, and face pale as he laughs and notches another arrow, pulling it back and aiming straight at me.

I do nothing. I feel nothing. This can’t be right.

Archer’s dead. And even if he wasn’t, he would never betray us...
Wouldn’t betray me.

But just before he releases the arrow I know will take my life, he lowers it a fraction, aiming for the girl in my arms. The change takes my cold,

emotionless heart and fills it with cold, unadulterated rage as he releases the arrow at my Pup. Snarling, I yank Meyer to my side, twisting in time to catch the arrow moments before it hits his target. The sharp sting of the onyx rushes through me, and I take hold of the pain, harnessing its brutal wave of familiarity, and snap the arrow in two, snarling at the man whom I trusted. He snarls back in response, swinging his bow in frustration before jumping off the far side of the wall.

The urge to run after him is almost impossible to ignore just as my Pup gasps, the wet sound sending a cold shiver of fear down my spine as I haul her close and look into her green eyes. All thoughts of running after my brother are gone as I stare at the blood covering her chest.

“Don’t,” I snarl, breaths coming in rapid succession as her body grows heavy in my arms. “Meyer!” But she doesn't answer, her head falls to the side as she pulls in a ragged breath... and her chest stops moving.



ARCHER

I grind my teeth in frustration, striding through the endless darkness. The enormity of my situation swirls around me, threatening to suffocate me. I throw back my head and let out an ear-splitting roar.

Not even a god will be able to help my enemies when I get my claws into them, I will make them suffer for the deaths of all those that I love.

To Be Continued...



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