



# CAROUSEL OF SOULS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# ABOUT CAROUSEL OF SOULS

He tried to kill me.  
Like a coward.  
Like a snake.

He thought he would get away with it.  
He thought I was gone for good.  
But I'm back and deader than ever.

I have a choice to make. Stay dead and become a part of the Carnival of Bones, haunting the swamps of the Bayou for an eternity...or choose life and return to the man I thought loved me. I almost wanted to choose life if only to see the look on Austin's face.

It would be an easy choice if it wasn't for the two entities that ruled this place...this limbo. Two men with a darkness inside of them that calls to me. One, a dark god, and the other, a suave trickster.

They beg me to stay. To die. To fade. To remain at their carnival for eternity with them by my side.

*This is the second and final book in the Carnival of Bones Duet.  
This is a why-choose, PNR novel with TW for past abuse, memories of child  
loss, death and PTSD.*

# PLEASE & THANK YOU

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“I’ve been dead this whole time,” I said, staring into the mirror at the other version of myself laid out on my bed. There was no life left in the shell of a body that was covered in blood.

I blinked, expecting to feel tears cascading down my cheeks, but somehow my eyes were bone dry. “I—I would have seen the—” I said, stopping mid-sentence and staring at my new dress. This one was clean and beautiful. No blood anywhere.

The night I’d woken up from that dreamless sleep, there’d been blood. There was a lot of it, and it was everywhere, but I hadn’t thought to investigate enough. I’d been so wrapped up in finding Austin that I’d fled our apartment before I could get answers. It was all making sense now, and I felt sick.

“The blood?” Bael finished for me. I stiffened, remembering that I wasn’t the only one in the room, staring into this damn mirror. Staring at my corpse. “Our minds sometimes have a way of shielding us from things we aren’t

ready to see,” he said. “If you’re remembering, it means you’re ready to face what happened to you. This happens to most of us when we first arrive. It’s just a natural part of dying.”

My gaze lingered on his deep blue eyes as he traced a finger up my neck and ran his thumb over the softness of my lips. His touch sent a pleasant shiver through me. His voice softened. "Are you ready for the truth, *mon amour*?"

My eyes drifted to the mirror, where my whole world used to be. Now it was empty and cold. Bael circled me so that nothing stood between me and the mirror.

My mind was running wild as I asked myself the same question. Did I really want to know the truth? Was I ready to face it? I could feel it looming over me, the answer so obvious that it swept away any doubt. Of course I was ready for it. I already knew the truth. I could see it spelled out in front of me, and it jogged something in my memory.

Austin had taken it too far. I should have known better than to think he was just making empty threats every time I pushed him. All around me, I saw the reminder of my mistake—the walls and furniture in my room were splattered with red blood from the fight I likely put up before Austin had overpowered me.

In agonizing clarity, I remembered that night. There was an argument—something about him coming home earlier than expected, and within moments it had escalated to a level I never thought possible. Fury took over, and then it was all over.

I looked to my left and saw Theodore, his silhouette illuminated by the glowing violet lights of the *veves* that surrounded the mirror. His expression was unreadable, yet I could sense something in him that made me wonder... How many times had he seen this same dilemma play out? It seemed like an eternity had passed since I first arrived here, and yet so much remained shrouded in mystery. In front of me was a path leading to safety, but what would happen if I chose the alternative? What if I chose to be selfish?

A very real part of me wanted to stay here with Bael and Theodore. I made friends with Ellie and Tony, and they were better friends to me than all of those people who left me when my life got too hard for them to handle.

My whole body trembled with anticipation as Bael's hands lingered on my shoulders, his breath coming out in a ragged exhale against the back of my neck, as if he were nervous too. It was as if he was holding back so many



things he wanted to say to me. I took a calculated step away from him, and the sudden absence of his touch sparked something inside me—something wild yet overwhelming. It was longing.

"I need time to think," I said shakily, sinking my fingers into my hair in frustration. "How long do I have?"

Theodore's pause felt like an eternity, my heart sinking with every passing second. His face remained stoic and resolute, his onyx eyes reflecting the strange violet hue of the funhouse mirrors like two hard marbles embedded in obsidian. Under the surface of his dark skin was that beautiful skull, seemingly radiating an eldritch glow that only made him more striking.

"Time is fleeting, Moria, but right now, it moves slowly, waiting for you to make your decision. Days will pass here, while only seconds slip by in the waking world. Every moment you wait, a part of your life fades away. You'll have to make your choice soon, before it's too late for you to trust your own judgment. But no matter what you decide, I want you to remember; I'm a possessive man." His full lips curled into a grin. "If you choose to reject me, I'll be here waiting, watching until you inevitably beg for me to let you back in."

He came closer and closer until he loomed over me, powerful, terrifying and still so beautiful that I couldn't help but appreciate every otherworldly feature.

"What will it be, blue girl?" Bael asked, his eyes dancing with anticipation.

I shook my head, turning away from the mirror, my chest rising and falling faster and faster with each labored breath. When I peered back over my shoulder, the image once again shifted to Austin, covered head to toe in blood as he clutched that knife in his hands. His movements were torturously slow.

"You could be powerful," Bael said, taking my attention off of the man who decided to take my life from me. He and Theodore came closer, trapping me as I backed away. I briefly wondered what would happen if I tripped and fell through. "You know you can't remain in this state forever. Why not embrace this opportunity? Stay, and be everything that bastard told you not to be."

My mind was desperately trying to process the weight of what was being asked of me. The thought of staying in this place for an eternity, trapped among the undead carnival-goers filled me with something not quite like

dread *per se*, but close to it. But at the same time, there was something alluring about the thought of staying here—a sense of freedom from reality that I had never experienced before.

As I mulled over my options, Bael reached out his hand, his fingers brushing against mine. "It's natural to be afraid. In fact, I would encourage it," he whispered, his eyes darkening until his pupils expanded to cover the blue. Under them were purplish shadows that made his face appear striking and severe, but no less beautiful. "There's a spark of life left inside that body, and if you choose to ignite it, you can't undo it. Whatever decision you make will be permanent."

His gentle caress sent a wave of pleasure through me. He was like a drug, even to this body that wasn't completely alive. I was nothing more than a soul, and yet every touch made me feel hot and flushed with anticipation. I slowly closed my eyes, savoring every second of his touch, before opening them to meet both men's gazes.

Theodore watched us thoughtfully, his gaze pausing on the spot where Bael's fingers caressed me. It wasn't anger in his eyes, but rather curiosity and excitement.

My body heated, suddenly remembering exactly what Bael and I had been up to before I appeared in this room. Theodore had been there in my room, watching us the entire time. He'd watched as I rode Bael's cock hard and fast—never once breaking his stare.

"How am I supposed to make this kind of choice?" My mind flickered with snapshots of my life; Grandma Anne's smile, her cooking, her laughter, and warm hugs. The memory of my dad and the old, dusty photos I kept of him in my bedside drawer. But those were distant memories now. In this moment everything felt so surreal.

It occurred to me that nowhere in those memories did I have a single urge to return to the man in that mirror. The man who thought he could dispose of me like unwanted trash. The man who put a precious child inside of me only to blame me when we lost her.

What choice was there? Immortality or suffering? I could make a home here, couldn't I? With Ellie, Lafayette, Bael, Theodore, and all the denizens of this carnival that I had yet to meet. Was it so wrong that a part of me craved it?

"How long do I have to decide?" I asked again. "Stop dancing around it." I was getting tired of riddles and half truths.

A small smile stretched across Bael's lips, and his eyes shone with something like hope. "As long as you need to be sure of your decision. Day's, weeks, months; it doesn't matter. But Theo is right. This place will change you. It's better to decide while your death is fresh. I don't want to pressure you."

I rolled my eyes with a huff of amusement. "Sure you don't." I knew for a fact that he was indeed trying to sway me. Whether it was with his impressive skills in bed that I wouldn't mind sampling again soon, or with his pretty words and promises. Bael had a silver tongue that I needed to watch out for.

His grin only grew as he placed a hand on his chest in mock outrage. "I would never... It goes against my code of honor." Theodore made a noise that sounded suspiciously like disbelief, but wisely kept his mouth shut and allowed me to continue making my decision.

What was even left for me if I chose to go back? Loneliness? Pain? Regret? My throat tightened up with emotion as one thing became clear: I wasn't ready to choose yet.

"I need a fucking nap," I said suddenly, looking away from the mirror. I didn't want to look at that body anymore. I didn't want to see my face with those blue lips and all that blood pooling on my white dress. "Naps always help clear my head. It's like dying, only temporarily." The absurdity of that statement hit me the second the words left my mouth, and I laughed. The sound was slightly hysterical, so I shut my mouth with a snap of my teeth.

"As you wish, blue girl," Bael said musically. My little nickname made me smile in spite of the turmoil writhing deep inside me." He didn't even give me a second to brace myself before his fingers wrapped around my upper arm, and a wave of buzzing energy surrounded us.

We were gone in the blink of an eye.



The walls of my wagon were starting to close in around me, yet I somehow couldn't seem to make myself leave. The more time I spent gazing at them, the more I felt like maybe they would provide some answers if only I could sit there long enough.

Bael and I had appeared in my room within seconds of telling him that I needed a nap. With a burning kiss that I wished lasted a lot longer, he disappeared without a word, leaving me with my own thoughts.

Before taking my mental health nap, I lit several candles perched on little shelves that decorated the wooden paneling of the wagon. Mine wasn't nearly the same size as Ellie's, but it was cozy and private.

Now that I'd slept for a few hours and sat motionless for a few more, the candles were burning out, the room smelled like lavender and smoke, and carnival music drifted in from outside. I felt groggy and listless, and it got worse with every minute that passed. There was no way to tell time, and it was disorienting.

If what Theodore said was true, then time didn't mean anything here. In the real world, only seconds had passed. My body—my *real* body, was laying suspended in time, bleeding out and waiting to die while my soul was trapped in this crazy undead carnival.

Bael said I had a choice to make, but was there even a real choice? It was either let my body die and watch as those mirrors chose my fate for me, or I could agree to live out this half life here...forever. Living wasn't an option. I never wanted to live like that again.

I gazed around the wagon, taking stock of everything in the small room. Could I really make this my home? Could I agree to live here for eternity? It scared me that my immediate answer was yes.

Truth be told, Theodore and Bael scared the shit out of me, and I still wasn't sure either of them had my best intentions at heart. There was something in the way Bael pressed me that made me feel like my decision meant more to him than it should have. I suppose I could chalk it up to the fact that we'd had mindblowing sex...

My fingers curled into the ruffled, silken bedding as images of his tattooed skin and pierced cock filled my mind. My whole body, whether it was real or just magic, began to tingle as if he was still touching me. I wouldn't lie and say I regretted what we'd done. I didn't regret a single thing, because sleeping with him had been the one thing in a very long time that I'd had some semblance of control over, and I could never regret that.

But what was *his* motive? Could I let myself believe he actually wanted me? Or was this all a part of some sick and twisted plan to sway me into staying here? Anger sparked in me like a burning flame, simmering until I realized I was gripping the sheet so tightly it might have ripped if I didn't let go. The thought of Bael taking advantage of me in that way made me see a haze of red.

But then there was Theodore too. Back in the circus tent as romantic music played for us, and the smell of cigar smoke permeated the air while we laughed and drank, there had been a moment where I'd peered into his otherworldly eyes and felt a spark of something genuine. I *was* terrified of him, especially now that I knew who he really was, but I was also curious. Maybe a little bit too fucking curious.

But I was already dead, right? My body was almost bled out, and I knew for a fact that there was no realistic way I could ever return to life in the real world, so what did I really have to lose if I decided to start playing their little

game?

My thoughts were interrupted when something landed on my lap. Something silky and furry, purring loudly as he rubbed against me.

I chuckled as I reached out and caressed Lafayette's little face. "Where the hell did you come from?" He just meowed in response, his twinkling ice-blue eyes taking up his whole face. "I guess that's a secret too, huh?" Among many, apparently. I scratched under his soft chin and he squinted his eyes at me. "You'd tell me if Theodore sent you here just to spy on me, right?"

Lafayette's eyes flew open wide, and he jerked his head back away from my touch. He let out a little grumble and flicked his tail before looking away from me. I just blinked at the little black cat.

"You can understand every word I'm saying, can't you." It wasn't really a question. The way he peered back at me, giving me a cheeky side eye confirmed it. I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest and leveling him with a look. "Well if you happen to see your master tonight, you can tell him that if he wants to spy on me, he can knock on my damn—"

*Knock, knock, knock...*

I froze, staring in horror at the closed door. Lafayette hopped off of the bed and pranced towards it with his tail flicking in the air. For a moment I had no idea what to do. If it was Theodore on the other side of that door, I wasn't sure I was ready to talk to him just yet. I needed more time to collect my thoughts before I allowed those penetrating, hypnotic eyes to suck me in again.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Mori, let me in already!" Ellie's voice called out from the other side of the door.

I exhaled a sigh of relief and quickly got up to let Ellie in. As I opened the door, she slid past me, a mischievous glint in her eye. "What are you doing here?" I asked, closing the door behind her.

"Checking up on you, darling," she replied with a shrug. "You've been holed up in here for hours, and we were getting worried." By *we*, I assumed she meant her and Tony.

"I'm not okay," I croaked, deciding I needed at least one person who knew the truth. "I might actually lose my fucking mind, Ellie."

"Oh, honey," Ellie sighed, pulling me into an embrace. Her soft touch was a balm to my broken spirit as I leaned my forehead on her shoulder, closing my eyes as I tried to breathe evenly. We stayed that way, with Ellie patting my back lightly until I could breathe again. When we pulled away from each

other, she had a serious look in her pink eyes. "Are you sure you want to stay here?"

"Absolutely," I said. Then I shrugged, feeling suddenly confused. "Wait... Ughh, I don't know."

"You don't have to decide right now," she said softly. "Just keep your mind open. This place isn't so bad. I never once regretted my decision to stay."

I nodded. Maybe it was time for me to start exploring this strange new world I found myself in. Maybe it was time to stop living in fear and start taking control of my own damn life. I knew that before I could take another step forward, I needed to tell her everything.

"Ellie," I said hesitantly. "There's something that I really need you to know about me. I trust you more than anyone and if there's a chance to make things different for myself if I stay here, it starts now." My hands were shaky as I fumbled for the right words. I was sick of keeping everything to myself and suffering alone. I was done with that. The old Moria could fuck right off.

Ellie gave me a curious look. "What is it? You know you can tell me anything."

I inhaled deeply, feeling a heavy weight in my chest. "My husband murdered me," I said. "That's why I'm here. He killed me, and now I'm stuck." Ellie's eyes softened as she grabbed both my hands and gently squeezed my fingers. She didn't even look surprised. I huffed a bitter laugh. "But you're probably used to sob stories like this."

"Don't even think like that," she said waving me off. She sat on the edge of my bed while I sat down on the small sofa on the far wall. The wagon wasn't large, but it was just the right size for a basic living arrangement. "What happened? Tell me about the rat-bastard who did this to you."

My hand shot to my neck, and I swallowed thickly. "He cut my throat." When I swallowed, it was like I could still feel the searing pain and the heat of the knife's blade, even though I didn't fully remember it happening.

There was an uncomfortable pause before she spoke again. "Why?"

"He's a monster, Ellie. A *real* monster," I spat out. "I can't believe it took me so long to realize I needed to run." Dragging my fingers through my hair, I pulled my legs up onto the seat and tucked them under me, as if curling into a smaller form might make me feel any safer. "He hated that I practiced Vodou. I come from a long line of practitioners, and I planned on following in my grandma's footsteps. Austin was Christian, and probably thought I was

a Satan worshiper or something."

She frowned. "If he thought that, why'd he even marry you? No offense to you, darling, of course, but it doesn't make sense why he'd marry someone he had so many fundamental differences with."

I shrugged. "That's the same damn question I've asked myself every day since we got married. I think he saw it as a personal challenge to convert me. He used to treat my beliefs like some kind of silly infatuation or fad. He never came to any of our functions or even tried to get to know my family or the community in New Orleans. All he ever talked about was making a new life with new traditions. Obviously, what he really meant was that he wanted *me* to conform to *his* traditions and *his* life."

She walked to me, flinging her arms around my body as she sat next to me on the sofa. "I'm so fucking sorry, Mori," she said, I couldn't bring myself to reply. On one hand I wanted the comfort of her words, but on the other, I was frozen with rage.

I just hugged her back, feeling the weight of my confession lifted off my shoulders. It felt good to finally tell someone the truth. As we embraced, there was another knock at the door and I froze. I had a feeling I knew who it might be.

Sure enough, when I opened the door, there was Bael looking back at me with worry etched on his face. "What's wrong?" he asked, taking step up the small wooden staircase and into my doorway. He paused when he spotted Ellie. "Why do you look so sad?" He laid a palm on my cheek, and I leaned in to the touch.

My eyes flickered to Lafayette, who pranced over to Bael and swirled around his feet. He wasn't Bael's cat, but I had a feeling he was the reason for this little visit.

I gave him a fake smile. "Everything's okay for now. I'm just feeling extra dramatic right now, I guess."

He glanced at Ellie, and she smiled a bit too widely to be innocent. "Good," he said suspiciously before pasting a grin on his face. "Because I want to take you somewhere."

"I have company," I said, gesturing to Ellie.

She stood abruptly and waved me off. "Oh hush. I was only stopping in before my show. You go ahead. You know where to find me later, darling." Before I could respond, Ellie kissed me on the cheek and pranced outside and down the steps, waving as she left.



I shook my head, bewildered. “Where?” I asked Bael nervously, feeling the tension building between us. He was watching every move I made, as if he knew all about the turmoil raging inside me.

“A place where we can relax. There’s more to this place than you know. Not everything about the crossroads is dark and bleak, blue girl. You promised to give this a chance, so I’m holding you to it.”

I sucked in a deep breath and offered him my hand, which he took with a wide grin before leading me out of my wagon. With every step I took, my sense of anxiety grew. All I could think about was why he was so invested in this. Why did he want me to stay here so badly? Something inside of me urged me forward. Part of me wanted to explore this strange new world, but another part of me wanted to run back to the safety of my wagon.

All around us were gray faces, lined up for every booth, every ride, and every sideshow. They stared ahead blankly, making me feel sick to my stomach. They were like zombies, and I wanted to run up to each one of them and shake them awake.

It wasn’t until we arrived at a secluded section of the carnival, away from the bright lights and chaos, that he finally turned to me. “Moria,” he said softly, his eyes intense. “I hope you don’t think I’m cold and unfeeling. I’ve been where you are now, and I remember the fear.” I raised an eyebrow. He took my hands, linking his fingers with mine. “I know what it’s like to be betrayed by someone you thought you loved,” he said, his eyes going briefly distant. “To feel like your entire world has been torn apart in a split second. It’s not easy, and I can’t promise you it will *ever* be easy. But it doesn’t have to be all bad. Even in darkness, there’s beauty.”

I felt a lump form in my throat as memories of my husband came flooding back to me. Memories of before he changed. Before he became twisted and hateful. “How did you know?”

Bael gave me a sad smile. “It’s written all over your face,” he said. “The pain, the anger—they’re familiar to me.” I just stared at him, unsure of what to say. “But the thing is,” Bael continued, taking a step closer to me. “You don’t have to let those feelings consume you. You have a choice.”

“A choice?” I repeated it, feeling stupid for not understanding.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “A choice to hide from your past and let it continue to control you, or you can get revenge.” His words sent chills down my spine. “When I was hung from that tree branch and left to die, it was the loneliest I’ve ever felt in my life. I had friends and lovers in that city, but not one of

them came to my defense."

My chest squeezed, remembering his sad, horrifying story. He'd been hung as a witch by people who used to smile and welcome him into their lives. He'd been so young. Only thirty when his life was snuffed out, and that kind of thing left scars.

I peered at him sadly, seeing him lost in memories. His eyes were distant, and his jaw was clenched tight. "I got my revenge. It's not something I enjoy talking about, but I promise you it was worth it. I thank Theodore every moment of my afterlife for allowing me to seek it. I don't know if I'd have been able to really move on if I hadn't." He met my eyes, a dry smile curling his lips. "I won't deny I enjoyed it. Just a little." He pinched his thumb and forefinger together.

I chuckled. Truthfully, I'd never been a violent or vindictive person. When I was ostracized by my mom and stepdad, along with that entire half of my own family, I never felt like I needed to get some kind of revenge on them for treating me that way. I picked up and moved on with my own life.

But with Austin—this was something I couldn't move past. He killed me. He slit my fucking throat like it was nothing to him. Parts of the argument that led up to that final moment were starting to come back in pieces. I still couldn't remember everything, but I knew enough to know that he'd been in a wild rage that I could no longer tame with words.

And the sick bastard just huddled there on the bathroom floor, crying like a little bitch while I choked on my own blood in our bedroom—the same bedroom he used to make love to me in. The same room we conceived our baby. The same room I stayed awake at night wondering if he was out with some other woman.

No, I wasn't letting this go.

A stabbing pain was growing inside of me, as if a knife was trying to poke its way out. My throat was on the verge of closing up, and even my heart was racing. I was prone to panic attacks, especially in the last year when I had to dodge Austin's moods and fists, but why was it coming back so suddenly? Wasn't I supposed to be dead? Could ghosts have panic attacks?

Bael squeezed my fingers, and the touch jolted me back to the present. Our eyes connected. He wasn't wearing his top hat tonight, letting the loose strands of his dark golden hair blow in the gently warm breeze. His dark blue eyes looked black, reflecting the twinkling stars that barely showed through the canopy of Cypress trees.

God, he was handsome. For an undead ringmaster who ushered lost souls to the afterlife. Actually, I had a feeling *any* woman, with or without a pulse, would find him charming. And yet, it was the mysterious darkness swirling behind those eyes that hooked me.

“I can help you,” Bael said, his eyes glowing with a fierce intensity. “All you have to do is say yes.”

We walked off of the pathway, heading for a grouping of trees, which we passed through easily before coming to a small clearing. There was an old park bench in the very center, and Bael guided me to it. I sat as he remained standing.

The light of the moon shone behind him, darkening his features and the stars that twinkled in his eyes. Reaching behind him, he pulled out a dark object and raised it in front of him. It took me a moment to realize it was a glossy black fiddle. I blinked at him, knowing damn well there was no possible way he could have hidden a fiddle on his person—not in those tight leather pants. But this was Bael here. Physics never seemed to apply to him.

“If you want me to help you, *Chéri*, all you have to do is stay.” There was no sly grin to follow his tempting words. He just stared at me, his eyes eager.

He started to play his fiddle. The sounds was high-pitched, ringing through the swamp like a woman’s scream. Every note was sharp and piercing. The sound tugged at me from within. It was familiar, I realized right away. The melody, anyway.

I thought back to the day I died, waking up in my bedroom with a melody ringing in my ears. He must have seen the recognition in my eyes, because he started to play faster, taking slow steps backward.

Fog rolled over the tall grass around our feet, and the trees dripping in moss swayed as if dancing as the Cicadas harmonized. Movement caught the corner of my eye, and I sucked in an awed breath. The translucent, ethereal entities that haunted these swamps danced through the trees and inched closer, as if called by Bael’s music. They twirled and glided over the foggy floor, floating in and around one another like some kind of ghostly ball.

My fingers curled into the bench, keeping me in place, even though every cell in my body wanted to get up and dance with them. What was the point of all this? Did he think I was so easily entertained that all bit of music and dancing would convince me to abandon my life and become a specter like the rest of them?

I studied these lost souls, feeling a mixture of pity and jealousy. What

would it feel like to let myself forget everything and fade away until I was dancing alongside them, blissful and unafraid? Did they have their memories? Were they conscious? The thought terrified me. I couldn't imagine living that way for an eternity.

But everyone back at the carnival was so real and alive—in a sense. They weren't like these dancing spirits. They were trapped somewhere between life and death, in a perpetual purgatory of their own choosing.

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of person would choose to live like that. Bael's music was slower and more mournful than before. The ghostly dancers were circling him now, going around and around in a dizzying rush.

It was the first time I could see them up close, able to make out the distinct features of their faces. They looked...normal, as far as I could tell. Normal faces of every day people, dressed in clothing from nearly every era. But their expressions were pleasant and dreamy, small smiles gracing their lips. Most of them held their eyes closed, as if letting the music guide them entirely.

A chill ran through me as a gust of wind kicked up the fog around my ankles. Suddenly, Theodore was beside me. "Are you enjoying the show?" His arm was draped over the backrest of the bench and he had one ankle casually crossed over his thigh.

My heart felt like it was about to burst out of my chest and I couldn't move. His face, illuminated by the moonlight, looked like something from a beautiful nightmare—a skeleton glowing under dark skin.

"You guys always give me a small heart attack when you just appear like that," I breathed out with a hand on my chest.

He laughed low and said, "Well then it's a good thing you're already dead then." Despite knowing this fact was true, dread filled me for the umpteenth time. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Mori. Not anymore. Not for you. This may be overwhelming right now, but I promise you'll grow to love your new life here."

"My new life?" I repeated dumbly. Did he think I already made up my mind?

"Of course," he said with a shrug. "You made the choice to come here after all, so that has to be a sign."

"I don't remember making a choice," I snapped. The words burst from my lips before I could stop them. "I thought you said I still had time to choose? We're you lying?" Was I running out of time? Were they going to

make this decision for me? I was so fucked.

“Oh dear. I thought you understood,” Theodore said, clicking his tongue. “This place is only open to those who choose it willingly.” Reaching out, he twirled a lock of my hair around his ring-clad finger. My breath hitched at his nearness despite my irritation.

“Why would anyone choose this? To live as a ghost forever?” I watched them dancing, realizing that at the same time, Bael had his eyes on Theodore and I, as if he could hear every word we spoke. Knowing him he probably could.

“Because we’re free here,” he replied earnestly, drawing my attention back to him. “We can enjoy music like no one else on Earth can or ever will again. We can experience pleasures some can only dream of. There is no fear, no sickness or suffering. What more could you want?”

“But what about everything else? What about—” I thought for a moment, my mind racing, trying to come up with some way to rationalize what I was feeling. “What about growing old? Or traveling the world? What about everyone back in the real world we’re leaving behind?” Panic crawled up my throat like a snake trying its hardest not let go of its prey.

He stared at me with too-knowing eyes. He knew as well as I did that I didn’t exactly have a lot waiting for me in the world. I didn’t have friends anymore, Austin saw to that. My mom didn’t care about me now that she was happy in her new life. All I had was...Grandma Annette.

A soul-crushing weight pressed down on me as her face flitted through my head. Guilt bubbled in my chest at the thought of leaving her behind. She’d already had to deal with the devastation of losing my dad too early. Could I really even consider abandoning her?

It probably made me a monster for even allowing myself to imagine living a half-life here. It was selfish of me not to consider her.

Theodore waved off my comment casually with one hand, his silver and gold rings glinting in the moonlight. “Those things lose their appeal over time.” His eyes followed the dancing spirits, a look of satisfaction playing out over his features. “Human lives are so short—they’re over before you can fully live it. I’ve never been human, but I’ve watched you all enviously. You have no idea how precious the time you have is until it’s taken from you. It never fails. Souls will beg and *beg* to go back. They promise me that they’ll change their lives for the better, but only when they gaze upon the horrors that wait for them beyond the mirror.”

I studied his profile, running my eyes along the dips and hollows of that strange skeleton façade. It wasn't a mask, nor was it face paint. It really seemed like it was a part of his skin, as if some inner light was glowing beneath the surface. If I was being honest with myself, and I rarely was these days, I might even say he was beautiful. In some kind of morbid, macabre way, I couldn't help but find myself...attracted. I shook my head as he turned to face me again, flicking my eyes to the side to avoid his.

Theodore chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. "You're rather fascinating, you know," he said as he reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His touch was ice cold tonight, but it felt nice. I met his eyes. They were all black again, the stars shining in them. "For a mortal," he added.

I pinned him with a look. "Somehow I don't think *fascinating* is the right word." More like hopeless, lost, confused and pissed off.

"You're just proving my point and you don't even know it," he said with a teasing chuckle. "You're fascinating to me because you place so much value on a life that never once served you the way it ought to have. You're fascinating to me because even though I can offer you a taste of immortality, you can't help but to put others needs before your own desires."

I blinked at him, stunned, unable to formulate a response. Did he really think that of me?

"You're thinking of your grandmother," he said, running the back of his finger over my cheek. I tried not to squirm under his touch, wondering why he suddenly felt the need to do so without hesitation. His expression softened into something resembling sympathy.

"I'm not going to even ask how you knew that, because I probably don't want to know." I sighed, my shoulders drooping. Bael's fiddle slowed into a somber song, hauntingly low and shrill at the same time. "I don't know if I can leave her." My voice was more of a whisper, but I knew he could hear me just fine. Bael probably could too.

I got the distinct feeling that the two of them knew exactly what they were doing. They were performing a well choreographed dance, and I was the unsuspecting partner.

"Why don't we pay her a visit then, and you can ask her how she feels about this yourself?" he suggested.

I jolted in shock, blinking up at him, not quite understanding. "What are you talking about, Theodore? That's impossible—" The last time I'd seen

grandma Anne, I'd been dreaming—or I thought I was dreaming. It was hard to tell what was real anymore. But if I really was stuck in the purgatory, how could I see her?

“I am the spirit of the crossroads, Moria. She's an experienced and powerful mambo,” Theodore said, cutting off my wild train of thought. Pinching my chin lightly, he made me look at him. “Take some time to consider my offer. As you know, time passes slowly enough in the mortal world that your body still has yet to cool.”

I stared into Theodore's hypnotic eyes, feeling his breath on my face. I knew that he was a divine being with unimaginable powers and the ability to manipulate me in ways no mortal could, but somehow I knew he wasn't manipulating me at all.

“You scare me,” I said. Our faces were so close as he ran the pads of his fingers down my cheek languidly.

“Good,” he said, his full lips tilting up on one side. I could just barely see the texture of his dark skin under the glowing skull. “You'd be reckless not to fear me.”

“But you won't hurt me, will you.” It wasn't a question. I already knew the answer down into my bones.

Cupping my cheek with his large palm, he held me in place as he brought his face closer to mine, until our lips were softly brushing. I held my breath, my heart hammering, even though I knew it was a figment of my imagination. I had no real pulse here. I had no blood or breath or any of those things that created life. But I could feel all of it a thousand times stronger than I ever had before.

“I won't hurt you. Nor will I allow anyone else to hurt you ever again,” he growled lowly, before pressing his lips to mine with force.

As our lips met, a spark was ignited between us and I was engulfed in internal flames. His hands were firm as they traveled up and down my back before cupping my head in his palms. Our tongues entwined until I felt like I was drowning in the intensity of his kiss. Suddenly, all of my senses were heightened, and I could feel every point of contact between our bodies.

I knew nothing about what being with Theodore or Bael, or both of them, would entail or what it might do to me, but for now, all I could feel was pleasure.

I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, pulling him closer to me, just as Bael's fiddle picked up speed. The melody was sharp, intense and frantic,

and I could feel him watching us like a physical brand on my skin.

Theodore's hands inched lower and I gasped as he grabbed onto my waist with a possessive strength. The spirit of the crossroads kissed me with passion and fury, and it was utterly intoxicating and slightly taboo. This was *Met Kalfou*. An immortal spirit that reigned over the afterlife, feared by so many back home. This was the reaper, the gate keeper, the jailer of souls. And yet he devoured me as if I was the last meal he'd ever have, and he planned on savoring every morsel.

As we broke the kiss, he pressed his forehead against mine, looking deep into my eyes. "You belong to me now," he said softly. As quickly as it started, Theodore pulled away from me leaving us both gasping for air. "Take your time to think Moria." He said quietly before disappearing into thin air leaving no trace behind except for the lingering warmth from his touch on my skin which left an impression deeper than anything else ever had.





I dragged on my clothes as I emerged from my second long nap, my head still groggy. As I finished dressing, a small slip of paper flitted across the room and came to rest under the door that led outside. It had been hours since Bael had left me at my wagon with a gentle kiss goodbye and a knowing wink that sent something tumbling through my insides. But now I wasn't sure if I was glad or disappointed that he hadn't stayed.

Tentatively picking up the paper, I scanned it for any signs of writing. Nothing. It was all blank and lifeless. I had almost tossed it away when a glimmer of gold caught my eye. The script came alive, as if something or someone was writing in real time.

*Come play with us...*

There was no name and no signature, but I had a feeling it was from Ellie. In place of the three little dots were tiny golden hearts, and the scrawl was a

bit old school. A smile tugged at my lips.

I dressed quickly in a gauzy dress the color of roses that showed off a lot of bare skin, leaving my hair down, my long coppery curls falling down my back. I didn't have any shoes, so I left barefoot.

The moment my foot touched the ground, I was enveloped in a cacophony of sounds. The Carnival of Bones had no concept of time, with darkness surrounding us day and night and stars twinkling overhead in the infinite sky. Despite the cool summer breeze that brushed against my skin, it felt like I was standing still, suspended in an everlasting moment.

The gray faces were lined up for each ride, and I was careful to skirt around them. It didn't matter how long I stayed here, I was never going to get used to the purgatory spirits awaiting judgement.

My curiosity was piqued as I watched the crowds. What could they be thinking about? Did they understand where they were standing and that I was among them, observing their every move? How much of this carnival was taking place in their minds? If it was, what kind of wonderment or terror had the performers conjured up for them? Despite my curiosity, I knew the answers to these questions would remain a mystery unless I chose to stay here and delve deeper.

I made it to the central circus tent where I knew Ellie, or whoever sent that note would be waiting. It seemed like the place where everyone congregated the most. I thought back to the other night—or—I suppose it could have been any night, really. In fact, even though had to have been at least two weeks, it felt like one never ending night.

Remembering that night made me smile, and my whole body buzz with energy. I'd danced with Theodore while we sipped drinks that made my head fuzzy. Then I'd escaped with Bael, let him kiss me on the Ferris Wheel, and then ravish my body in the quiet darkness of my room. For a brief few hours, everything had seemed dreamlike and fun. But like all things in my life, they tend to come to a screeching halt without warning.

I passed the cages where I'd last seen the large performing wild cats. They were empty. That sent a shiver through me for a whole different reason.

Making my way through the tent flaps, I was hit with a wave of heat and smoke. The smell of burnt sugar filled my nose as I scanned the room for Ellie or any sign of someone I recognized. My eyes locked onto a figure sitting at the back table, shrouded in darkness.

As I approached her table, she looked up at me with an eerie smile on her

face. “Ah, there you are,” she said coyly as she leaned over to pour something into a glass. I’d never seen his woman before.

She had dark skin and steel grey hair in hundreds of tiny braids decorated with glass beads. Her eyes were bright green, and she wore a colorful silk dress with long bell sleeves. On the table were various drink glasses and tall fancy bottles of what I presumed was some kind of alcohol.

Beyond her table, I could just barely see flashing lights from the main room, and the performance music was so loud that I could barely hear the woman as she spoke to me.

“What’s going on?” I asked cautiously, approaching the table.

“Have a drink, dear.” She offered me a glass of deep purple liquid, sliding it across the table. I eyed the glass with suspicion. I knew better than to take random drinks from strangers. The woman chuckled. “It’s not going to bite you, I promise.”

She picked up the drink with her bony hand and tossed it back herself before licking her lips of the deep purple droplets. Then, she poured another glass for me and scooted it my way. “We call this Euphoria, or *bwè entèdi*.”

I raised a skeptical brow. *Forbidden Drink...*

Cautiously, I picked up the glass and brought it to my nose. The smell was like chocolate, with a hint of something spicy and sweet like berries. My mouth began to water. “What’s in it?” I asked. Was I seriously entertaining this crazy woman and her mystery drink? “And what does it do? Is it some kind of drug?”

The woman simply smiled at me, her eyes shining with a mischievous glimmer. “Let’s just say that it’ll take you to another world,” she said enigmatically.

I hesitated for a moment longer before taking a sip of the purple liquid. What could it really hurt anyway? I was dead already, right? Or—*almost* dead. This wasn’t my real body, so what I did here didn’t exactly count. At least that’s what I told myself. What happens at the crossroads stays at the crossroads.

I shrugged. “Bottoms up, I guess.”

At first, there was no taste, only coldness on my tongue. But then came the flavor explosion—sweet and tart mixed together in perfect harmony, tinged with warmth from spices I couldn’t identify. Suddenly, everything around me shifted and blurred until all that existed was a deep warmth that slowly made its way through each of my limbs. The first thing I did was let

out a long breath, letting my shoulders relax and my muscles loosen.

The woman waved me off, smiling mischievously. Several people entered behind me, talking amongst themselves. I recognized a few faces and brightly colored performance costumes. They were dancers of some sort.

As they tossed Euphoria back and strode into the main room without hesitation, I couldn't help but feel conflicted. My eyes followed their every move, betraying my desire to join them. One of the women in a shimmery leotard caressed my cheek as she passed, her other arm looped around a man with his shirt off and his skin painted with glitter. A shiver ran down my spine at the sudden touch, but it wasn't one of excitement or anticipation. It was fear. Fear that I didn't belong there, that I could never be as carefree as they were. I followed them through the slit in the tent, and my heart raced as I watched them fade into the distance, leaving me alone in a sea of strangers.

The circus tent blazed with bright colors and loud music, but the fog that filled the air was thick. I could feel a chill in the air as I made my way toward the stands instead of the center of the room like I had last time. The crowd of grey faces sat so still, their faces emotionless and their eyes glazing. Despite the warmth from the lights above, I felt so alone in this corner, surrounded by several random rows of empty seats.

The bright lights of the circus tent illuminated the center ring, where I watched in a mix of fascination and trepidation as two lions, a panther, and a tiger prowled around. The glint from their sharp teeth made me gape, open mouthed with awe as I wondered if they would attack each other or the audience. Yet at the same time, I was captivated by their grace and beauty. Then again, we were all dead already, weren't we? They couldn't really hurt us.

Several dancers were performing stunts, wielding flaming hoops and batons with practiced ease. The big cats interacted with the fire, growling and swiping at the flames, but I didn't really sense any true fear coming from them. They were performers as much as anyone else here tonight.

As I scanned the grey faces in the stands, I realized something. Every few rows, sporadically spread out through the circus tent, were others like me, who were wide awake and in living color. I stared at them in shock. I hadn't realized there were others.

But hey, why wouldn't there be others? Why would I be the only soul to be offered this choice?

Movement from my peripheral caught my eye and I peered over to see a

teenage boy gaping at the tigers with wide blue eyes. He had messy auburn hair, and his clothing was all scuffed up, a bit of blood dripping from his temple, but I couldn't see any wounds on him.

He must have felt me staring, because he turned, meeting my eyes and said, "I'm trying to wake up, but it's not working..." his voice was listless and breathy.

I gave him a flat smile that probably wasn't very reassuring. "Have you been to the mirrors yet?" I didn't know why that was the first question out of my mouth, but I was suddenly very curious about these random souls.

He blinked at me for a moment before answering, as if it took a second to gather his thoughts. He must be brand new here. Newer than me.

"Mirrors? What are you talking about? I woke up a few miles away in the middle of a mud puddle. I've been trying to find someone with a fucking phone but everyone's ignoring me." He turned back to face the room, a deep furrow between his brows as he scanned the stands. "There's something wrong with this place. Something doesn't feel right."

Okay, so he was *new new*. I felt a swell of pity for the boy.

I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly, concentrating on the dizzying cacophony of colors and sounds that filled the circus tent. I had been here long enough to understand what was expected of me and how to play the game. Now, it was time to teach him what I was still coming to terms with.

"Come with me," I said as I grabbed his hand. He didn't move at first, startled by my sudden touch, but after a second, he left the bench seat and let me lead him down the aisle towards where I entered.

I kept my head on a swivel, scanning the dark corners of the room for any signs of Theodore or Bael, or even Lafayette. The little black cat had been suspiciously absent for the last few hours. We made it outside into the cool night air without being spotted and headed in the direction of the funhouse. By now, I knew my way around this place fairly well.

"What's your name?" I asked the boy, feeling like a jerk for not asking when we met a few minutes ago. I was getting ahead of myself.

"Liam," he said, breath coming out in pants as we rounded colorful booths that smelled like popcorn, ducking under the slow moving Ferris Wheel and crossing a rickety wooden bridge over the swamp waters.

"I'm Moria, but you can call me Mori if you want. Tell me, Liam, do you believe in ghosts?" The questions just seemed to tumble out.

The funhouse was finally in sight, the blinking signs overhead like a

beacon against the dark sky.

Liam looked up at me, his eyes wide and full of wonder. "Ghosts?" he repeated in a trembling voice.

I nodded, my mouth curving into a sly smile as we drew closer to the funhouse's entrance. A pair of oddly dressed clowns rounded the corner from behind the building, talking animatedly about something. Liam paused and stared at them open mouthed, tugging me to a stop.

I didn't blame him for gaping at the clowns. They were dressed in puffy suspenders with and massive spiked boots that looked more at home in a motorcycle gang than a carnival. One of them had a pipe dangling from his lips, tendrils of smoke drifting into the air, and the other was shirtless, white face paint dripping down his neck onto his chest with sweat. Their makeup was all smeared and messy.

"Where the hell are we?" Liam asked.

The clowns passed by us without acknowledging us, but Liam's head was on a swivel, his eyes tracking them as they skirted lines of gray faces, heading toward the center of the carnival grounds.

I turned to him, trying not to let pity show on my face as he looked at me with more questions than I had answers for. "You're dead, Liam."

My words fell heavily between us, and for a moment, I wanted to snatch them back. But they were out now, and it was for the best. When I first showed up here in my bloody dress, confused and lost, I would have really appreciated someone taking the time to gently walk me through this without all of the games.

To my surprise, Liam didn't really look all that shocked. He shook his head as if to clear away confusion, but I could see my words swirling around in that teenage head of his, letting them roll around and sink in.

"How did I die?" he asked next. The calmness of his question broke my heart for him.

"Okay, so I might have jumped the gun already." I sucked in a deep breath, raking my fingers through my curls. "How am I supposed to stay here if I'm just going to run into new souls and confuse them even more?"

"Uh, what? Who are you talking to?" he asked, his eyes flitting around us.

"Myself," I said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Ignore it. I try to. What I'm saying is, you might not exactly be dead...yet. See, this place is kind of like a purgatory in a way. You're either fully dead or you're almost dead."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"See those gray faces?" I asked, nodding to the line of people waiting at a nearby booth. Liam glanced over and visibly shuddered, but nodded. "Those are the super dead ones. They come to this place to be judged before going...to...well, wherever it is you go when you die."

"So we're like zombies?" he asked.

I snorted and laughed, and it actually felt kind of refreshing for once. "More like souls, I guess. It's hard to explain. I've only been here for a couple weeks, I think. But essentially, we've come here to decide whether or not to live or to die."

His blue eyes widened. "So I can go back home if I want to?" Hope bloomed on his young face.

I paused, my mouth open but unable to form words. I wanted to give the right answer, but the truth was that I had no idea. The laws and rules governing this strange place were so damn mysterious; how was I supposed to understand them, let alone know how it would be possible to return alive from such a horrific death?

I hesitated, unsure if I wanted to burden Liam with the truth. But he looked at me with such optimism that I couldn't bring myself to disappoint him. "It's not that simple," I said finally. "At least I don't think it is, they haven't really told me how it all works yet. There are no guarantees here, though, so I don't want to give you false hope."

Liam's face fell, and I could see the despair creeping in. "But you might have a chance," I added quickly, grasping for any semblance of positivity. "There is a reason why we're drawn to the place we end up," I explained. "We spend some time here coming to terms with what happened, and then we can choose whether or not to move on. It's more complicated than just deciding if we want to stay or go."

The weight of my words settled between us like a thick fog. Liam didn't say anything, but his disappointment was palpable. I had shattered his hope, and I wasn't sure if I could ever earn it back.

"Move on where?" he asked finally, his eyes flitting to the funhouse looming in the distance. Its lights blinked in the darkness, and faint carnival music drifted from the shadowed open doorway.

"That's just it," I said with a shrug. "No one knows for sure where we go when we move on from here—not even those gray faces. I don't even know if Bael or Theo—I mean Met Kalfou, knows."

He quirked a confused brow at me. "Met who?"

I smiled. There was no reason for him to recognize the name. He was a pale kid, dressed in sandals and board shorts, so I didn't think he was from around here, much less a practitioner of Vodou.

"Met Kalfou. He's the Vodou spirit that presides over purgatory."

"Voodoo is real?" he asked, his eyes widening. "My parents were Catholic."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "That's a really good question, actually, but I think it's less about who is right or wrong and more of a circumstantial thing."

Liam's confusion only deepened, and I couldn't help but feel a little amused by his naivety. If he only knew how much weirder things were going to get.

"Let me explain," I said with a sigh. "You're dead now, right? And you're in purgatory." He nodded slowly, still staring at the carnival funhouse as if afraid it might jump out and attack him. "Purgatory exists somewhere between life and death," I continued. "It's where people go after they die but before they move on to whatever comes next. Think of it as a crossroads."

His eyes flicked back to me again, his expression searching for answers that even I didn't have. "But why am I here and not in heaven?" he asked finally. "What even happened to me?"

I hesitated for a moment before deciding there was no harm in telling him what little information I had so far. "I don't know what happened to you," I said carefully. "But something went wrong when you died—a glitch in the system maybe—and instead of moving on like you were supposed to, well, here we are. You're not in heaven because I think you have a choice to make. You're not quite dead yet, but you might be soon."

What I didn't say, because I wasn't even positive myself, was that there was a good chance heaven didn't exist at all. At least not in the way he was imagining. I had a working theory that I was too embarrassed to run by Bael. I wondered if maybe every religion was the right religion, and where you ended up after your death depended on your interpretation of the afterlife.

The crossroads came in many forms, and although I never personally dreamed up a crazy carnival in the middle of the dark, swampy Bayou, it wasn't so far outside the realm of my beliefs as one might think.

Liam's face twisted into an expression of horror mixed with disbelief. "So what happens now?" he asked nervously.

I shrugged again. The truth was that nobody knew for sure, but Liam



deserved some kind of answer after being thrust into this bizarre world without any warning or explanation.

"Well, for starters, we need to visit the fun house." I gestured toward the entrance. He hesitated, looking unsure, and I didn't blame him one bit. I squeezed his shoulder again, reassuringly. "I'll be with you the whole time, but it's better that it's me with you rather than Bael."

"Bael?" he asked.

"Don't ask," I mumbled before gently ushering Liam forward.

"So why would anyone choose to stay behind then?" Liam asked doubtfully as we finally entered the first hallway.

Mirrors lined the walls in every shape and size. Some had ornate frames, while others were crusty, dusty, or cracked. It was dark, lit only by dangling Edison bulbs every ten feet or so. It still smelled like sawdust and popcorn.

"Some people aren't ready to let go of their lives back in the living world..." My voice trailed off as memories flooded my mind—memories of all the things that were keeping me clinging desperately to life. Maybe I was the last person that Liam should be listening to.

Liam nodded understandingly but remained silent for several moments afterward. I kept my eyes trained on the wooden beams crisscrossing overhead, looking for a dangling pair of legs and those fancy leather boots. Even though I was sneaking, I had a feeling that there was nothing that happened in this place that Bael and Theodore didn't know about. They probably knew exactly where I was right now.

As we turned a corner, the mirrors distorted our reflections into twisted caricatures of ourselves. Liam gulped audibly as we passed by one that made him look like he had a giant head and tiny arms. I chuckled at his horrified expression before sobering up again at the thought of Bael's watchful eye. "Come on, we're not far."

"Where are we going?" he asked as I dragged him further into the maze of mirrors.

"You'll see," I said ominously, feeling bad that there was no logical way for me to tell him the truth.

A black shape dropped from the wooden beams overhead, and I yelped, skidding to a sudden stop. Liam slammed into my back with a curse. With my heart in my throat, I glared down at the little black cat that now sat casually at my feet, licking one paw leisurely as if he hadn't scared me to death for a second time.

"Damn it, Lafayette," I muttered, trying to catch my breath. "I'm starting to think this is a game for you." He blinked his bright eyes up at me, and I almost imagined him grinning in triumph. I sighed as I was able to catch my bearings. "You might as well take us to the...uh." I cleared my throat, wondering what to even call the strange room.

He didn't give me time to come up with a name before he took off running in the other direction. With a curse, I grabbed Liam's hand and pulled him after me as I tried to stay on Lafayette's tail. The little bastard was fast and slippery, but I was starting to get a feel for the fun house, and I had a vague sense of direction now.

Finally, after what felt like twenty-minutes of aimless wandering, we came to a familiar room just off a random hallway. It opened up onto a cavernous blackness that felt like it went on forever. But in the very center of the room were three massive free standing mirrors.

I stopped just inside the door and let Liam go around me. Lafayette made his way over to the first mirror and was rubbing his face against the frame.

Liam gazed at the mirrors with wide eyes and a slackened jaw, similar to my first experience in this room. The frames were beautifully ornate, and on them were dozens of *veves* carved into the surface.

I approached the first mirror that Lafayette was rubbing against and gently laid my hand on the frame. I had no idea what I was doing, but something inside me just said to touch it. There was no way in hell I was touching the glass, but I felt compelled to make contact with it.

The moment my hand touched the frame, every carved symbol lit up as if with its own inner neon purple light. I backed up, staring at the gorgeous, familiar symbols with something like pride swelling in my chest.

"What are all those symbols?" Liam asked in a breathy, awed voice.

"They're called *veves*. In my culture, we practice ancestral magic. A *veve* is a symbol specific to any of the *Lwa* you want to contact. They're ancestral spirits, or guides, I guess. Each one is unique and means something different than the next."

His wide eyes turned to me. "You mean voodoo? Like with the voodoo dolls and stuff?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "That's just touristy stuff. No, my dad was Haitian and my mom is French, but I chose to practice Vodou when I was younger than you. My grandmother is what we call a *mambo*. Essentially, she's a priestess in my culture. It's not like the stuff you see on TV; there's a

lot more depth and history involved.

Liam listened intently, his eyes never leaving mine. I could tell he was fascinated by what I was saying, and it made me feel proud to share a part of my culture with him.

As we were talking, Lafayette had moved on to the second mirror, repeating the same process as before—rubbing his face against the frame until I followed, touching it until every *veve* lit up in response.

I turned my attention back to Liam. "Do you want me to show you how it works? The *veves* I mean, not the mirrors."

He nodded eagerly and followed me over to the third mirror, where Lafayette had already started rubbing against it. I lit those ones up too. I was stalling, but I couldn't help myself. I needed to psych myself up for what I knew had to happen.

"Okay," I began as soon as all of the mirrors were glowing. "So first thing's first: pick a *Lwa* that resonates with you."

"A what?" Liam asked curiously.

"A *Lwa* is essentially like an ancestor or spirit guide," I explained patiently. "They each have their own personality traits and areas of influence. For example, Met Kalfou is the spirit that presides over this place. You can call it purgatory if it makes it easier."

"I don't know any..." Liam trailed off uncertainly.

"That's okay!" I assured him quickly. "Just think about something important in your life right now—a problem, maybe, or a goal or something you really want, and choose something based on that. I can fill in the rest for you."

Liam thought for a moment before nodding decisively. "I'm the swim captain at my high school. I've been training for the Olympics my whole life..." His eyes lowered, and his shoulders fell. "But I guess none of that really matters anymore now that I'm dead, does it?"

I put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It matters, Liam. It always will." He looked up at me, grateful for the words of encouragement. "How about we go with *Agwé*?"

"Uh who?"

"*Agwé* rules over the waters. If you feel a connection to water, then he would be a good choice."

"What, like to contact him?"

I shrugged. "I'm actually not sure if that's possible to do from here." I

hadn't really thought this all the way through, but I was just so excited to feel in control of something for once that I almost didn't care. I just needed to feel some kind of connection again. "But it can't hurt to try. Even if he doesn't show himself, you can ask him for his blessing."

Liam sucked in a deep breath, visibly straightening his spine as if gearing up for battle. I had to stifle a chuckle. "Right, let's do this. What's the worst that could happen if I'm already dead?"

I decided not to remind him that technically, he was almost dead. His body was most likely clinging to the edges of life back in the world. But I didn't want to ruin the confidence he had.

I knelt on the floor, and Liam mimicked me hesitantly. I didn't have anything to write or draw with, so I decided to use my mind's eye and hoped it was enough. Closing my eyes, I felt Lafayette swirling around me, rubbing up against my body softly, and knew instinctively that Theodore was watching. I had a feeling that he had a way to see through Lafayette's eyes.

If he hadn't tried to stop me yet, then he wasn't going to, which meant that I wasn't breaking any rules. I took that as a sign to keep going.

In my mind's eye, I conjured *Agwe's veve*. I drew it carefully, piece by piece, so that I didn't miss a thing. I could see it clearly; a boat with sails, painted shells, and oars. It came to life in seconds as I started to speak.

"*Agwe, nou rele w pou tanpri beni nou ak sajès ou...*" With each syllable, the room grew darker as thunder rumbled ominously outside, like applause from some otherworldly audience.

As the thunder grew louder, I felt Liam's grip on my hand tighten. He was scared, but he didn't let go. That showed me that he trusted me despite only having just met.

I continued with my incantation, calling upon *Agwe* to bless us and provide guidance with his wisdom. I asked him to show Liam the way, and to help him through his turmoil and indecision. Suddenly, Lafayette became agitated, as if sensing something that we could not see. The room was now so dark that I could barely make out anything around us except for the glowing *veves* casting a violet glow into the darkness.

And then there it was—a figure standing at the edge of our invisible circle. But it wasn't the one we summoned.

Theodore appeared without warning or sound—he just materialized before us like a ghostly spectre. The skull that glowed across his striking face had my heart leaping into my throat. My body tingled as if his gaze was a

physical touch.

Liam gasped beside me while Theodore just stood there silently observing us with unreadable eyes and an inscrutable expression on his face. It was then that I noticed another figure standing just behind him.

This man was as familiar to me as my own reflection, though I'd never seen him in the flesh—or the spirit, I guess. He had paler skin than me, though still brownish-tan, and green eyes. He had greying dreadlocked hair and clothing that resembled an old sea captain. Shells dangled from his dreads, entangled with bits of seaweed.

*Agwé.*

*Holy shit. Holy shit shit shit...*

I didn't know what the hell I'd expected to happen, but having *Agwé* show up in the literal sense wasn't it. I was no stranger to the *Lwa*, but this was getting insane.

"Impressive," Theodore said slowly, as if weighing each word carefully before continuing further, "but you do know that summoning others into my domain without my permission is strictly forbidden."

Fuck, he was right. How could I be such an idiot? I let myself forget that Theodore was actually Met Kalfou, and that came with a certain set of rules. The first was that he had complete control over who came and went from his domain. Even his brother, Papa Legba was only permitted under specific circumstances.

I stood, pulling a shaking Liam up with me. "Forgive me, Kalfou," I said in a whisper, letting my eyes fall away from his. "I should have known better."

Theodore's silence was deafening. He stood there for a moment longer, regarding us both with an intensity that made the hairs on my arms stand up. I knew he had complete control over our fate in this moment, and my heart pounded with fear and anticipation.

But I couldn't hold it any any longer. A slow smile played across my lips as I peered back up at him through my lashes. There was no way to explain why I felt the need to laugh, but it bubbled up in my chest and took everything inside me to stifle it. Maybe I could blame it on the Euphoria that the old woman convinced me to drink.

I should have been quaking in terror under the intense scrutiny of Met Kalfou. Any sane person would be, and yet the longer I stayed here with him and Bael, the more comfortable his presence felt. My eyes flickered to his

lips, and my body tingled with the memory of his kiss.

Kissing him was a stupid idea, but there wasn't a single molecule in my whole body that regretted it. I wanted to kiss him again. I wanted to do much more than that.

Theodore must have seen something shift in my eyes, because the lips I'd been studying so closely suddenly tilted up into a wicked grin. My stomach flipped, and my chest filled with buzzing vibrations.

"You're lucky that *Agwé* is not unwelcome in these parts," he said slowly. The *Lwa* of the water simply nodded behind him respectfully but didn't speak. My eyes met Theodore's as he stepped into the violet glow. "And you've shown respect by apologizing for your overreach. I accept your apology, Mori."

I loosed a breath, staring into his eyes that were as black as the room around us, only reflecting a violet version of myself within their depths. It was hard to contain the pleasurable shiver that rolled through me at the sound of my nickname on Theodore's lips. I wanted to hear him moaning it instead.

*Fuck...* What the hell was happening to me? Where were these insane cravings coming from?

I tried to push aside my inappropriate thoughts as Theodore moved closer, his ring-clad hand reaching up to trace the curve of my cheek. My breath hitched in my throat at the feel of his rough fingertips against my skin. The Euphoria was making it hard for me to think straight, but I knew what I wanted deep down inside.

Theodore leaned in and captured my lips with a fierce hunger that took me completely by surprise. His tongue danced along mine, sending shivers down every inch of me. In this moment, I didn't care that we were being watched. I didn't care about anything except the dark god in front of me.

I moaned into his mouth as he pulled back too soon for my liking. "If you keep pushing me, I'll gladly take it all," he whispered huskily. His breath was as cold as mist as it caressed my lips. He smelled like sweet wine.

Feeling unusually bold, I took a step closer, pushing myself against him. His skin felt smooth and taut beneath my fingers as I placed my hand on his bare chest. "You say that like it's a warning," I said, trying to keep my voice from trembling, "but all I'm hearing are promises."

Theodore smiled, a mix of surprise and desire in his eyes. He leaned down to press one more kiss against my lips before pulling away. "Maybe you're right. But I do keep my promises." He stepped out of my reach and

pivoted to face *Agwé*. "You are free to answer the summons if you wish. My realm is yours for the night."

*Agwé* bowed slightly with a grin that was all too devious, and it made me wonder if these two were friends. Obviously, Theodore had some kind of trust in the sea spirit, or else he wouldn't have allowed this to continue. I let out a relieved sigh on Liam's behalf as well.

Heavy footsteps echoed through the dark room as *Agwé* approached Liam. The shells and beads that dangled from his locks clinked together, and the smell of brine and sand filled the room as if he brought the sea wherever he went.

"So it was you who summoned me," he said to Liam, coming to an abrupt stop five feet away from the teenager.

Liam's blue eyes were wide as he stared up at the towering deity, and yet he stood tall and held his shoulders back with confidence. He just nodded.

*Agwé's* rough laugh filled the room. "You have guts, little human," he said with a sly grin. "What is it that you seek?"

Liam didn't flinch under *Agwé's* intimidating gaze. He stood his ground and spoke clearly. "I want to receive your wisdom and blessings." His eyes flickered at me for reassurance, and I just nodded.

It was a dangerous game to ask a spirit for something selfish or foolish. You never knew how they would respond, or whether or not they would find you worthy. I'd never come face-to-face with one of the *Lwa*, but I prayed to them every day. Grandma Anne was trained to interact directly as a sort of liaison between us and them. Since allowing Austin to take over my life, I sort of let that part of my training slip away from me, and I regretted that now.

*Agwé* leaned in closer to Liam, his eyes glinting dangerously. "And what makes you so deserving of my wisdom and blessings?" he asked with a hint of amusement.

"I'm a good person," Liam said with confidence. "At least I try to be. It's just me and my mom, you see, and if I'm dead, it means she's alone now. So, I was kind of hoping you could give your wisdom and blessings to her...on my behalf or something."

*Agwé's* face softened ever so slightly at Liam's words, and he leaned back on his heels. "You care for your mother deeply," he mused, glancing toward the ceiling as if deep in thought.

I felt a pang of sympathy for Liam. He was just a kid trying to protect his

mom, even though he was so young and nearly dead himself.

Finally, *Agwé* spoke again. "Very well, then." He stepped closer to Liam until they were almost nose-to-nose. I could smell the sea salt wafting off him even stronger now and felt light-headed with it all. His green eyes glowed like bioluminescent plant life, and in them were all the secrets of the sea.

"I will give you what you ask for," he said solemnly before stepping back once more. A large golden coin appeared in his hand seemingly out of nowhere; it shone with an otherworldly luminescence that hurt my eyes when I looked directly at it for too long. It wasn't a yellow-gold like the toy doubloons you see in gift shops, but rather a pale-gold with rough edges. It looked heavy as he pinched it between his fingers.

"Give this to your mother," *Agwé* said softly as he placed the coin into Liam's open palm. I could just barely make out the symbol of a sailboat on the face of it. This coin would be worth millions. But it was also another test, I could feel it in my bones.

Liam's fingers closed tightly around it like a lifeline. But then he frowned. "How am I supposed to give it to her if I'm dead?" His voice croaked with emotion for a moment, and my heart ached for him.

"This is where you make your choice, Liam," Theodore said, stepping up beside *Agwé*. "Make it carefully, and make it quickly."

Liam still looked confused, his eyes looking between Theodore and *Agwé*. But then, the two mirrors to the right and left began to dim until they were utterly dark, the *veve*'s snuffed out, while the center mirror remained glowing with its unearthly violet light.

"Moria, why don't you usher Liam to his reflection, since you were the one who so kindly escorted him here tonight." Theodore gestured first to me, and then to the mirror. A small, smug smile still played across his lips.

Taking in a deep breath, I mentally composed myself. I'd seen Bael usher souls through these mirrors before, so technically, I knew how they worked. But I wasn't an usher. There was no telling if I could actually do what Liam needed.

I nodded toward the mirror, and Liam followed me. He clutched the coin in his hand with a death grip. I didn't blame him. A gift like that was priceless, and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The mirror reflected darkness, but oddly, there was no reflection of us. I moved to the side of the frame and placed my palm on it, feeling a buzzing energy flow beneath my palm.



As I pressed my palm harder against the mirror, tendrils of purple light began to spread along its silver surface. Suddenly, Liam's reflection started to emerge from the darkness. A translucent version of himself appeared in front of us; his skin was pale and ghostly, but his eyes shone with a newfound intensity.

Liam gasped at what he saw. "Is that me?" he asked incredulously as he studied his own form intently. "What am I.—" He stopped short, his words fading into nothing.

It took a moment for the scene to make sense. We were staring at a tiled room with a large pool in the center of it. At least fifty people were standing or crouching in various places around the pool deck, their faces worried and stricken.

Their movements were so slow that it almost looked like they were frozen in time, reminding me of my own experience peering into another mirror as I watched Austin clutch the knife he stabbed me with.

"That's my high school," he whispered, stepping closer to the mirror. I wanted to reach out and hold him back, but something stopped me. He needed to do this on his own.

The other version of Liam was now lying on the pool deck, as pale as snow, with lips so blue they were almost black. A man dressed as a swim coach with a whistle hanging from his neck was giving Liam chest compressions. There was a small trickle of blood coming from his temple, telling me that he'd most likely hit his head during swim practice.

There was a woman crouched just behind him who had his exact shade of bright blue eyes. They were filled with tears as she cupped her hands over her mouth in horror.

"Mom..." he whispered, his voice choked. He reached out as if he wanted to touch the mirror, but hesitated. His head whipped around, and his eyes met mine. "What do I do?"

Pulling my hand from the mirror, I approached Liam, turning to face the reflection by his side. "Remember when I told you that you were different from the gray faces?" He nodded wordlessly. "Well, this is why. You're not entirely dead yet. There's still a small spark of life inside that body."

I glanced at Theodore, feeling nervous, afraid I was going to say the wrong thing. To my relief, Theodore nodded for me to go on. I sucked in a deep breath and looked down at Liam again. "You can choose to go back, Liam."

His eyes widened as his head snapped in my direction. "You mean like a zombie?"

I snorted, unable to contain it. I caught a small smirk on *Agwé's* face too before I concentrated on the teenager again. "You know, you talk about zombies so much, it makes me wonder if you really want to be one." Liam rolled his eyes, but I could see the hint of a smile on his face. "No, not like a zombie," I reassured him. "You can choose to live again."

"How?" he asked.

"Step back into your body and fight for your life," Theodore said. His voice was low but soft. Softer than I'd ever heard him. Probably because he was talking to a child.

"Fight how?" Liam asked, and I got the feeling he was stalling. "Swim practice clearly wasn't going so well for me earlier," Liam said bitterly, gesturing to his prone body in the mirror.

"It's more than just swim practice now," *Agwé* spoke up, surprising me. "It's about fighting for every breath, every heartbeat—even if it kills you to do so. Anything worth dying for is worth living for, boy."

I thought about my own predicament and tried to apply *Agwé's* sage wisdom. The words tumbled around in my head, but I just couldn't make them meaningful—not in my case. Not when Austin was the only thing back there waiting for me.

I didn't have any real purpose in this world anymore. I'd lost the marriage I thought would last forever and the love and friendship that Austin used to give me. I lost the father who raised me to love my culture and embrace myself for who I was. And I'd lost myself somewhere along the way, even before the knife plunged into my body.

I'd been dead inside for a long, long time.

"It's your choice, Liam. You get to choose whether you keep living, or die right now. Not many get the kind of choice we have, so please make it carefully. Whatever you choose can't be undone." Again, I glanced at Theodore, and he nodded.

Liam stared and stared into the mirror, and I wondered if he was staring at himself or at his mom, who hovered nearby with desperate tears streaming down her stricken face.

He met my eyes with a sudden determination, rolling his shoulders back and standing tall. "I'm going back, Mori. I.—I don't think I'm done yet."

I nodded slowly, both impressed and fearful of the brave path that Liam

was taking. I gave him a small smile, but inside my heart felt heavy with worry.

Agwé stepped forward then, placing a hand on Liam's shoulder. "Remember what I told you," he said, his voice serious and solemn. "Fighting for every breath won't be easy, but don't forget that it will be worth it if you do it right."

I placed my hand on the small of Liam's back and gently guided him toward the mirror. He was breathing heavily, and if he wasn't just a soul, he might have been sweating. In these astral bodies, we could still feel all of those human-like sensations, even if they were only in our heads.

Suddenly, there were arms wrapping around me as Liam pulled me in for a tight hug. I hugged him back, feeling oddly emotional. I'd literally only met this boy a hour ago, give or take, and yet it felt like we'd been friends for an eternity.

He pulled back and smiled at me. "I know you probably don't believe in them, but to me, you'll always be the angel who guided me back." His cheeks reddened as if he were blushing. "Thanks, Mori," he added before twisting away.

Now I really wanted to cry. His words were so sweet, and much wiser than any teenager had any right to be. Liam took a deep breath, and stepped into the mirror.

The glass rippled around him like a pool of liquid silver, absorbing his body instantly. When the ripples subsided, I could see a translucent version of Liam standing over his prone body, staring down at himself with an expression that resembled awe.

Then, with a glance in our direction, even though I knew that this mirror only went one way, Liam knelt down and laid across his body, immediately sinking into it. There was a loud cracking noise, like the sound of thunder, when suddenly time sped up, resuming its normal pace.

Liam's body convulsed as his coach tipped him over. He spat pool water everywhere as he gasped for precious air. All around him, people were cheering, crying, and gasping. Liam's mom sprang forward, pushing people out of the way to get to her son before dropping to her knees. She held him in her shaking arms and sobbed as she stroked his hair, sending up prayers to whatever god she thought was responsible for this miracle.

Then, as soon as it all happened, it all disappeared. In seconds, the veves went dark, casting the room into shadow.



I tried to feel around for one of the mirrors, hoping to light up some of the veves again. I was lost in pitch blackness, and needed to find my way out before I had a meltdown. I may be surrounded by ghosts, but I was still wary of the dark.

Someone snapped their fingers, and in an instant, a glowing orange light filled up the room. I blinked the darkness from my eyes and peered up at Theodore, who was suddenly very, very close to me. *Agwé* was nowhere to be seen, and with him, went the smell of the salty sea. All that was left was a smokey, spicy scent that only belonged to the man in front of me.

"See? That's wasn't so bad, now was it?" he asked. An overhead light crackled and blinked. It was nothing more than one of those dangling Edison bulbs that were scattered all around this place. It flickered with a faint buzzing sound. The warm glow of the light bounced off Theodore's face, which was now devoid of the glowing skull.

His eyes were a pale blue color, similar to Lafayette's. I couldn't decide

which I found more attractive, the blue, or the pitch, depthless black.

Theodore's fingers brushed against my cheek, sending shivers down my spine. I couldn't tell if it was the coldness of his touch or something else entirely that made me react like this. His hand trailed down to rest on top of mine as he pulled me closer towards him.

"Are you scared?" he whispered in my ear, his breath tickling the nape of my neck. I tried pushing myself away from him but found myself unable to move an inch.

"What did you do to *Agwé*? Where is Lafayette?" I said instead, trying desperately not to sound weak and vulnerable under Theodore's gaze.

"Lafayette isn't important right now, and *Agwé* is enjoying the pleasures of my crossroads for the night, thank's to your invitation, " Theodore replied dismissively before prowling towards me as I got free of his grip and backed up.

I felt like prey being stalked by a dangerous predator—one with hungry glowing eyes and teeth that I wouldn't mind feeling all over my skin, sinking into my flesh while I writhed beneath him.

My breath hitched as my back hit a wall that I didn't realize was there. Theodore caged me in against it, so large and powerful, looming over me like a dark god from faerie tales and legends. He didn't look real.

His hand trailed down from where it rested on the wall next to my head, to brush lightly along my collarbone before dipping lower. His fingers danced tantalizingly just above the shallow V-neckline of my sheer dress, making me bite back a moan.

"What do you want from me, Theodore?" I asked breathlessly, knowing full well what his answer would be but feeling compelled to ask anyway.

"I want you," he growled hungrily. Bringing his mouth to mine, he hovered so close that our lips were just barely touching. "Mori, sweet Mori. How you've fucking captivated me."

As much as I wanted to melt in the heat of him, I couldn't ignore the icy fear that had replaced all sense of rationality and logic. *To fight or flee...* That was always my struggle with Theodore and this time was no different.

"You have no reason to fear me," he said as if reading every thought and emotion that wracked me. I blinked up through my lashes meeting his blue eyes. His ring-clad hand trailed up the center of my chest, right between my breasts until his fingers were gently closing around my throat. "You're the only soul in this world who should never fear me."

For a moment, I just stared at him, at a complete loss for words. What did he mean? Why me?

"I don't understand you at all," I said finally, shaking my head.

"You don't need to understand me," he replied without missing a beat. "In fact, why don't you try thinking with *this* a little less?" he said, tapping my temple with his pointer finger, "and follow *this* a little more." His fingers left my throat as he skimmed his palm back down my chest, settling over my heart. I was about to roll my eyes and push him off of me, when suddenly, his knee came up gently between my thighs, pressing against me just right.

I whimpered at the sensation, and it took everything in me not to grind down on his leg. Theodore pulled back a little, his lips curling into an amused smile as he watched me struggle to keep my composure. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks and tried hard not to squirm too much under his touch.

"You're enchanting when you try to resist the things you want." He chuckled before taking hold of my chin firmly between his fingers and pulling me in for a rough, punishing kiss. My arms wrapped around him instinctively as I melted into it. His lips were warm and soft, tasting like wine and something sugary sweet.

He pulled back, leaving me breathless, my head spinning and my phantom heart racing. His eyes flitted between mine. Back and forth, as if he was contemplating something.

"I'm going to make you scream tonight," he whispered huskily as he wrapped his arms around my waist, lifting me up onto his hips, pressing me against the wall. My legs wrapped around his waist on instinct. "And then maybe you'll finally understand why the living can no longer satisfy you."

Something inside me snapped. Whatever composure I'd been desperately trying to cling to, whatever tether that held me back disappeared. I wanted this. I wanted him. Even if I might regret it later.

He must have seen the decision in my eyes, because blackness swallowed that burning blue in his, and the glowing skull was back, illuminating his velvety dark skin. A rush came over me, and a sudden need to be touched consumed my body and mind. I needed his touch like a fucking drug.

"That's a good girl," he whispered against my lips, right before he crushed them with his own.

My body vibrated with pleasure as Theodore's hands roamed over me, gripping onto my hips and pressing me tighter against him. I could feel the hardness of his arousal pressing into my core through our clothing, making

me ache for more. His kisses trailed down from my lips to the sensitive spot on my neck that always drove me wild.

I ran my palms over his broad shoulders, letting my fingers dip beneath the open shirt he wore. His naked chest was on display, his dark skin glowing in the warm light. I was pinned against the wall by his hips, and I couldn't help but grind down on the hardness pressing against me. It felt so fucking good. My eyes were already rolling back in my head, and we hadn't even done anything.

I was lost in his kiss when I felt his hand snake down between us. I gasped as he cupped my bare pussy. I wasn't wearing any underwear, and suddenly I was grateful for that. My moans were the only sound in the quiet room, save for the distant hum of carnival music coming from the halls of the funhouse. Theodore ground the heel of his palm against my clit rhythmically, coaxing gasps from my lips.

I needed more, but I didn't know how to ask for it. This wasn't just any man. This was Met Kalfou. He was an immortal spirit of the crossroads with immense power, wisdom, and darkness inside of him. I could feel that power thrumming under his skin, my fingertips buzzing with vibrations.

"Tell me what you need, and I'll gladly give it to you," he whispered against my lips. His palm never stopped working me. I was in a near frenzy, my hips thrusting against him frantically.

"I need to come," I whined. I could feel euphoria building inside me, wanting to burst free. "Please—"

His throaty laugh made me shiver with pleasure. "I think I like it when you beg, sweet Mori." He pulled his palm from my soaked pussy, and I wanted to scream and beg him not to stop. My eyes popped open and met his. He was grinning wickedly, and it did all kinds of things to my insides. "Beg some more for me."

"Please..." I breathed out without hesitation. "Theo, please..." His dark eyes glittered, and his smile grew as the name slipped out. Was I giving a god nicknames now?

His hand dipped lower again, but this time, his fingers slipped through my lips, coating themselves in my wetness. He wore several thick rings, and the coolness of the metal made me jolt my hips. In seconds, two fingers were inside me. I groaned, letting my eyes fall closed as I rested my forehead on Theo's shoulder. His fingers pumped in and out, the heel of his palm once again hitting my clit.

“You thought you could tease me by fucking Bael,” he said against the shell of my year. I stilled, but his fingers never stopped moving. He maintained his pace, never once letting up. “You looked into my eyes while his cock was deep inside you. Tell me, were you imagining how it would feel to have us both?”

The mental image of that scenario was almost too much to handle. I’d been replaying that night in my head over and over again, and I couldn’t even lie. I *had* pictured what it would be like to have them both. Two sets of hands, two tongues, and two cocks.

“Did you like what you saw?” I found myself asking between heavy, panting breaths.

His answering growl as his fingers sped up brought a wicked smile to my lips. “I’ve never had a woman test me the way you do. It’s infuriating, but somehow I find myself craving more.”

I clawed at his shoulders as I rode his fingers, moaning now, writhing, and fucking. I needed so much more. I craved it like a fucking drug. Oblivion was so close, I could taste it. “I’m a selfish god, but I’m also generous,” he said. “Watching you with my oldest, most trusted friend only made me want you more. I want to hear you scream while we’re deep inside you. I crave the taste of your sweet cunt, dripping with your need for us.”

“Oh fuck—” I shut my eyes tight again as waves of intense pleasure rolled through me. His words were tantalizing, and the picture they painted was like some kind of dark, twisted fantasy come to life.

“In time, sweet Mori. In time, I will fuck you. You’ll writhe on my cock until you can feel me in the depths of your fucking soul.”

I came on his fingers hard, a burst of wetness coating his palm as my thighs shook around his waist. The pressure was so intense that I could barely hold onto him. His fingers kept moving, pumping in and out of me, his palm grinding against my throbbing clit as I rode out my orgasm.

He was whispering words into my ear in Haitian Creole, something I only half understood. They were musical and lilting, coaxing out moans and sighs as he slowed his movements. His fingers pulled out of me, gently rubbing back and forth through my slickened lips, spreading wetness over my sensitive clit until my hips jolted from the overpowering sensations.

It was too much, and yet I wanted more. I collapsed against his chest as the last of my orgasm rolled through me, shuddering in pleasure as he held me close while whispering sweet promises into my ear. The thought that I



could have this feeling for an eternity if I stayed here gave wings to the most wicked desires of my heart.

"You're mine now, sweet Mori."



**B**ael stood on the platform, tall and broad, wearing an open purple tailcoat, showing his bare, tattooed chest adorned with dozens of gleaming necklaces and medallions. His long hair was unbound under a black top hat, and he was...barefoot?

I frowned at his feet, his toenails painted black just like his fingernails. I'd never get used to watching Bael St. Claire. Everything he did was graceful, eccentric playful and kind of frightening. He was in performance-mode right now as he played his fiddle again.

He played the standard carnival performance music with an ominous twist. Somehow it sounded as if he were playing two instruments at once; one higher pitched and the other lower. I laughed to myself, unable to keep it in when I realized that this was totally nightmare music. It was scary movie music. Music that made your heart race and your stomach rise up in your throat.

Theodore stood beside me, watching Bael with a small smile stretching

his wicked lips. Something about that smile did things to my insides, as if he was feeling smug after what we'd just done. He suggested we watch the rest of tonight's show, and that Bael wouldn't want me to miss it. I was all too happy to get out of that fun house.

As Bael continued to play, I felt myself falling under his spell. The music seemed to seep into every inch of my body, enticing me with an otherworldly power that I couldn't resist. Soon, the lions and tigers were released back into the center of the tent. They began to move in time with the music as well, circling Bael as performers lit those flaming hoops again.

All around us, the audience was silent, not even daring to breathe in case they broke whatever trance had taken hold of them. The gray faces remained watchful but silent and vacant.

But as Bael's fingers danced over the strings of his fiddle faster and faster still, I couldn't help but picture how those fingers would feel on me again, maybe this time while Theo was inside of me.

"So why the carnival?" I asked, leaning over so that Theodore could hear me over the music as we took a couple of unoccupied seats at the end of a row, though, I had no doubt he'd have heard me even if I'd whispered.

He looked down, meeting my gaze. His eyes were once again a bright, glowing blue, contrasting beautifully with his deep brown skin. It was odd that nobody seemed to balk at the fact that Met Kalfou stood among them. All eyes were locked onto Bael's performance, and the gray faces were as unmoving as ever.

Theodore reclined in his seat, lifting up one leg to place his bare foot on the backrest of the row below us. His toenails were painted deep purple, and he wore several clinking anklets. He slung an arm around the back of my chair as he leaned in toward me.

"Carnival represents desire, freedom and tradition." He gestured to the dancers that had joined Bael in the center of the ring. They were the same group of dancers I'd seen drinking Euphoria only hours ago. "It was once outlawed. Looked down upon by those who thought they were better than their baser instincts. The debauchery happened behind closed doors while our people were stifled."

My head bobbed up and down, my eyes glued to his mouth as he spoke. I felt a flood of memories wash over me, remembering the feel of his lips on mine. I jolted out of that thought, trying to focus on what he was saying, but still feeling the lingering sensation.

"But here," he continued, "we've all come together in death. Stripped of our inhibitions and embraced in the beauty of desire and pleasure. There are many ways to spend one's afterlife, but what I offer is life after death. To choose the path you wish to take."

"But *they* don't get to choose," I said, looking out at the sea of gray faces in the crowd. I remembered that night in the funhouse, watching as that woman screamed in horror at what she saw in the mirror. I shuddered at the thought of where she might have ended up.

"Their fates were chosen by the choices they made in life. Unlike you, each of these souls has been weighed and measured. Some have been found wanting, while others might be rewarded."

"Why me?" I asked. "Why am I so different? Why was Liam different? And Ellie, and all the others down there?"

Theodore's eyes bored into mine intensely, and I didn't look away. I wanted to believe that he wasn't lying or being deceptive in order to get what he wanted from me, but the shadows of uncertainty were creeping in. Nothing here made sense anymore; reality had become a distorted version of itself. I was filled with a combination of excitement and dread. It was weird, though, because it seemed like excitement was taking over, and the dread was slowly fading.

"The difference between my denizens and the...*gray faces*, as you call them, is that they, upon their near deaths, found themselves trapped between realms. It's not as rare as you would expect, but when it happens, it gives a soul the opportunity to make the choice for themselves. They can choose to remain the way they are for an eternity, or they can live and use their newfound knowledge to live better."

"So you're offering me a chance to live after death?" I said, my voice barely a whisper. "To what, be with you here? To become one of your denizens?"

He nodded. "Yes, that is exactly what I'm offering." His gaze searched mine for any sign of hesitation or fear. "If you take this offer and accept the fact that you will never return to the world you once called home, into the body that grows cold on those blood-soaked sheets, then yes, you will have an eternity with me. Or, an eternity to do as you please within the confines of my realm."

His hand snaked over my bare shoulder, and his touch made my skin tingle gently. "And if you choose to be with me, then your eternity will be

filled with more exquisite pleasure than you've ever known. I will make you writhe on my cock and my tongue at your command, my priestess."

*Priestess...*

My eyes widened as I fought for a coherent thought. I shook my head, at a loss. "I'm not—"

He shushed me, placing the pad of his thumb on my lower lip. "You successfully ushered a soul to its destiny. You summoned a powerful spirit in the flesh, and you've captured not only *my* attention but the heart of my most trusted denizen. If *ever* I've seen a priestess..."

"Careful, Theo, if you flatter me too much, I might have no choice but to stay. Then you'll never be rid of me." I grinned at him, feeling flushed and hot.

He called me a priestess. A fucking priestess. The very thing I'd been training to become someday before Austin took it all away from me.

My face must have shown my train of thought because Theodore's fingers lightly pinched my chin and raised my eyes to meet his. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. I sighed and shook my head, but he wouldn't release my face. Instead, he slipped his palm over to cup my cheek. "Don't lie to me, Moria. What were you thinking of just now?"

"Damn you and your perceptiveness," I muttered under my breath. He smirked, but I could see anger beginning to simmer in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, I decided to just be honest. "I was training to follow in my grandmother's footsteps. I don't have to tell you how powerful and wise she is."

He nodded, his thumb running softly over my cheek. I wasn't exactly sure how well he knew Grandma Anne, but seeing as she was an elder, and a powerful *mambo*, I'd say he knew her spirit well at the very least. It wasn't Met Kalfou that she summoned usually, but rather his brother, Papa Legba.

"But you stopped your training," he said. Not a question, but a simple statement. Still, those words shot straight through me like an arrow.

"Austin called it devil magic. He was a Christian, and he hated Vodou. He indulged me for a while, but he never took it seriously. It's almost like it was amusing to him or something. He used to call me his *little witch*."

Back then, I would roll my eyes and shake my head at Austin's teasing, but I began to see it for what it was when the dark days came.

"I had a miscarriage last year," I admitted, my heart squeezing painfully in my chest. "Austin didn't handle it well. He lost it and started saying I'd

cursed the baby with my devil worship. He blamed me for losing her, and started to hit me. At first, it only happened when he was drunk. He'd apologize the next day and take me shopping or to a fancy dinner. It never lasted."

I was so lost in my memories that I didn't realize right away that we had a listening ear. I looked up and found Bael perched atop the chair one row down, facing me. He was listening to my every word with rage simmering in his dark blue eyes. Behind him, a trapeze act was in full swing, and I recognized Ellie in her striped costume and crazy makeup.

Bael and Theo shared a knowing look, both of them taking in this new information. I didn't mind if they knew the truth about my past. I wasn't ashamed of it. It was just something I had to deal with.

"I should feed that fucker to the cats," Bael spat, and I knew he wasn't talking about Lafayette, but rather the gorgeous predators that still prowled the center ring. "How dare he lay a finger on this precious skin?" His fingers grazed my exposed thigh, and chills broke out over my leg. "A woman like you needs to be worshiped, blue girl." His thick accent only made me swoon harder, and I had to reign it in, knowing that this conversation was too serious for that.

"That will never happen again," Theodore said firmly, his tone daring anyone or anything to challenge him.

Bael echoed Theo's sentiment with an emphatic nod of his head before sliding off the chair. I leaned back as he loomed over me, placing his hands on either side of me and caging me in against my seat. His long blond hair grazed me as he moved his face closer to mine, his eyes flickering to my lips.

Bael St. Claire was dressed for performing tonight. His eyes were rimmed in cat-eye liner that made eyes glitter with mischief. Speaking of glitter, his skin had a smattering of the stuff stuck to it here and there, especially on his bare, tattooed chest. Fuck, he was pretty.

His sensual lips tilted as if he could read my mind. He brought them to the shell of my ear. "What do you say we make Austin's life a little hellish?"

I pulled back, my eyes widening. "What are you talking about? How?" I blinked in confusion, and Bael glanced at Theo. The two of them shared a conspiratorial look. "What aren't y'all telling me?"

Theodore rubbed his chin in thought, but I could see the sparkle of wicked intent in his dark eyes already. He looked at me and grinned. "You might not be able to live among the living if you stay here, but there are ways

to...cheat, for a short time."

My gaze bounced between the two of them, wondering what kind of fuckery they had up their sleeves. Surprisingly, though, I realized I was looking forward to finding out. If there was a way for me to get even a little bit of revenge on Austin, then I was one hundred percent in.



"So the dirty scoundrel decided to blame you for his problems, fucked other women behind your back, drank himself into a coma, and then slit your throat," Ellie said, listing it all off on her polished fingers. "The audacity of these men never fails to astound me."

She sat cross-legged on the end of my bed, holding a cup of steaming tea in her hands. I'd already drunk half of mine, and the warmth of it pooled inside me, calming my nerves. We technically didn't need to eat or drink here, but it was still pleasurable to enjoy it.

"What was a sweet girl like you doing with a piece of work like that, Mori?" came Tony's deep voice from over on the small sofa. He was reclined casually, smoking a cigar with his foot on my little coffee table.

It was still so odd to refer to this place as being *mine* in any way, but the longer I stayed here, the more it started to feel like home to me. I hated to say it, but I felt a lot more comfortable in this little wagon room than I ever did in that fancy apartment with Austin.



Back there, everything seemed cold and lifeless. I tiptoed around my own house, afraid to disturb the peace of the monster living under my roof. But here, I felt warm, cozy, and alive. Even the smells brought back memories of childhood and the comfort of my family's home.

Incense burned on one of my shelves, and paired with the cigar smoke and the spiced tea, it was like being at Grandma Anne's house as a little girl. That had to mean something. It had to be a sign, right?

I smiled sadly at Tony—the tall, lanky man with the impeccably shaped handlebar mustache. "He wasn't always like that, but I think after a while I just gave in to it. It was easier to deal with him in private than it was to try and escape."

"Shame," he said, shaking his head. "In my day, we'd have taken him somewhere nice and quiet and shown him what a real New York beatdown felt like."

I laughed, and Ellie rolled her eyes. "Tony likes to think he had mafia connections, but I think he's full of shit." She pinned him with a look. "You're too sweet for the mafia, Ton."

Placing a palm on his chest, he feigned offense. "Just cause I'm a lover and not a fighter don't mean I ain't got friends in high places, little lady."

Ellie groaned, and I just laughed at their bickering. I was almost 100 percent sure that there was something romantic brewing between the two of them, but I couldn't say for sure. Sometimes Tony would stare at Ellie with this longing in his eyes that quickly disappeared when he knew he was being watched.

They may have been alive in completely different eras, but the afterlife didn't give a shit about any of that. I had a feeling that all kinds of souls, if given the chance to mingle, might just find a match in the most unlikely of places.

"Sometimes I wish *I* had mafia ties," I mused aloud, reclining against the headboard of my bed. Lafayette sat perched in my lap, and with one hand, I stroked his silky black fur as he purred happily. "Maybe then I could have avoided a slashed throat."

It was my turn to be pinned with a look from Ellie. Her pink-hued eyes glittered with doubt and maybe a little bit of pity. I didn't blame her one bit. Reaching out, she laid a hand over mine and gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. "You've done nothing wrong, darling, trust me. You could have had a whole army behind you, and still, a man like your Austin would have found

a way to let his evil slip through their defenses.” She wiggled her fingers creepily. “That’s how evil works. It slithers through cracks and digs and digs.”

I smiled thinly and nodded, even though I still felt regret for every single bruise I allowed that man to place on my body.

"But you're strong," she added, patting my hand, her polished, sharp nails glittering in the candlelight. "Met Kalfou wouldn't have bothered with a weak soul who has no potential. I know that for a fact. And now you have the power to make your ex's life a living hell, at least for now. No mafia ties required."

I laughed, a deep warmth settling in my chest as I felt a wave of understanding and acceptance wash over me. I knew she was right—that the only real way to fight evil was with cunning and a bit of my own wickedness. I wasn't the type to forgive and forget. Karma came in all forms, and I just had to choose the method of delivery carefully.

"You're wiser than I took ya for, girlie," Tony said, gazing at me fondly, like a proud older brother type. "It ain't always easy doin' what's right..." His voice trailed off as he looked away briefly, almost lost in thought for a moment before continuing on with determination. "But sometimes, right ain't actually...right."

A pillow from my bed went flying across the wagon, smacking Tony in the face as Ellie laughed. "You're talking nonsense, you goof," Ellie said, but she fluttered her long, pale lashes at him.

Oh yeah, the girl was smitten hard.

Tony grabbed the pillow and threw it right back, but Ellie ducked out of the way before it hit her or her mug of tea.

"What Tony's trying to say is, you don't always have to do what society else tells you is right or moral, darling. You can trust your gut and make a choice for yourself. What he did to you was horrifying, but it's not unheard of around these parts. Sometimes it's better to be a little wicked if it means setting things right."

"Took the words right outta my brain," Tony said proudly, tapping his temple with the end of his cigar.

HOURS LATER, I found myself in the middle of a game of poker with Tony, Ellie and those two messy, paint-smearing clowns I'd seen while with Liam. Their names were Roy and Rex, and they died during a train derailment back in the sixties. Believe it or not, they were actually circus clowns before their deaths.

By now the main tent was empty, and the carnies had claimed it for themselves.

The crooning woman was singing; her gentle yet powerfully haunting voice carried through the room, serenading all of us while we drank Euphoria and relaxed. The sweet concoction thrummed through my ghostly veins, and even though I was fully aware that the sensations were probably mostly a mental thing and not physical, it didn't stop me from enjoying them.

The tent was alive with after-hours debauchery and sexually charged flirting. The darkened stands were filled with the occasional sigh or moan, and I remembered the last time I came to one of these. I'd seen people straight up fucking in the stands, without a single care about being seen. It was kind of refreshing to know that things like that weren't looked down on here. Everyone seemed to be indulging in any and every pleasure they could grasp.

After a ten-year relationship with a man who made me feel guilty for being who I was, it was more than refreshing. It was satisfying in a way I didn't realize I craved.

I found myself caught up in the excitement of it all, laughing and joking around with my new undead friends as we played our hands. Tony was smoking his cigar and taking sips of Euphoria like it was water while Ellie fluttered her lashes at him every chance she got.

As Roy dealt out the cards for the next hand, I couldn't help but feel a pang of longing in my gut. But this time, it wasn't a longing for the life I used to have but rather a yearning to become a permanent fixture here with these new souls that truly accepted me.

"Why so serious?" Rex asked me with raised brows. I blinked out of my thoughts, realizing everyone was looking at me. Rex was a burly man with a beard, kind brown eyes, and clown paint all over his face.

"Don't be too shy to share with the class, baby ghost," Roy added. He winked his gray eye at me—the one that wasn't hidden under an eye patch. It was almost the only way to tell the two clown brothers apart.

I smiled indulgently. "I was just thinking that this place might not be so bad—you know, if I decide to stay."

"If, she says...," came a teasing voice from behind me. Hands caressed the tops of my shoulders, massaging gently as Bael's scent surrounded me. His lips caressed the shell of my ear. "As if there's anything remotely as exciting as this awaiting you back there." The others laughed, and I found myself grinning as a giddy feeling welled up inside of me.

I turned to face Bael, my pulse racing with anticipation of this little game he liked to play with me. His handsome features were illuminated by the soft glow of the neon lights, and his body was still sprinkled with remnants of stage glitter.

"I'm not making any promises yet," I said coyly, trying to hide the fact that his touch was sending bolts of electricity through every nerve in my body.

I was lying through my teeth. In my soul, I knew I'd already made the decision to stay. Talking with Ellie and Tony only solidified it. I wasn't going to tell Bael or Theo yet. I might as well make them squirm a bit longer.

Bael chuckled, his arms wrapping around my upper body and pulling me closer against him. Well, then, I'll just have to make it worth your while," he whispered as his lips brushed against mine.

He kissed me gently at first, but then more firmly, as if daring me to pull away since we had a small audience. His tongue darted out teasingly as I parted my lips slightly, allowing him access inside. There were so many more erotic and risqué activities happening around us that this kiss seemed chaste in comparison.

The kiss was electrifying; it felt like nothing else mattered except for us in this moment here together under these flashing lights and smooth music. My hands found their way up into his hair, pulling him closer until there was no space between our bodies anymore.

"Why don't you show her what she's missing and then get back to us with the verdict?" Tony teased.

"You're making us blush, baby ghost," Rex added, elbowing his brother who laughed boisterously.

Bael pulled back from our passionate embrace with a smirk on his face before raising a single eyebrow. "So now they get to give you nicknames too? I thought what we had was special, blue girl?"

"Why do you call her that?" Ellie asked after a long swig of Euphoria. Her eyes were glossy, and her limbs were relaxed as she settled her feet in Tony's lap.

Bael played with my curls, stroking the wild strands absently. "Because eyes are a window into the soul, and my blue girl never could hide that beautiful sadness."

Ellie looked confused, but the others nodded. I shook my head, rolling my eyes at Bael's unique way of dancing around things and speaking in riddles. "It's because I have one blue eye and one brown eye. He's just being dramatic about it."

Ellie leaned forward, squinting at me. "Why did I never notice that?" Tony, Rex, and Roy laughed at Ellie, and she turned her narrowed eyes on them. "Keep laughing, and we'll see who drops a flaming hoop on your hollow heads tomorrow."

This only made them laugh louder, and I could see Ellie fighting a grin as she tossed the rest of her drink back.

"Let's give them something to gossip about," Bael whispered into my ear. Holding out a hand, he wrapped his fingers around mine and pulled me from my chair, placing his other hand on the small of my back.

I waved at the others as their wolf whistles and whoops followed us.

We left the tent, the cool night breeze hitting my flushed face as we stepped outside. Bael took off, pulling me along after him. I laughed as we ran through throngs of gray faces intermixed with wandering, half-alive souls here and there. They were easier to identify now that I knew what I was looking for.

Carnies waved to us from their booths and stations, some simply nodding their heads or tipping their hats our way. The carnival was a dizzying rush of colors, noises, and smells.

We made it to the Ferris Wheel again, and memories of our last ride floated through my head. I used to be terrified of heights, but now, knowing that I was technically dead, it settled something inside me. I couldn't actually get hurt up there, so what was there to worry about?

We jumped into a seat, this one surrounded by a cage of sorts with small windows that allowed you some semblance of privacy to overlook the carnival from above. It swung back and forth as we tumbled into place. Bael's strong arms were wrapped around me, holding me close to his body. It was surprisingly pristine inside, the cage gilded in gold with red bench seats.

He pulled me onto his lap, running his hands up my thighs until they rested on my hips. His lips were rough against mine, hungrily devouring every inch of me. I moaned softly as he slid one hand underneath my dress,

tracing lazy circles around my inner thigh. The ride began to move, lifting us slowly into the air.

He broke away from my lips to trail hot kisses down my neck before whispering huskily in my ear. "Feel what you do to me? I'm wild for you, blue girl."

I could feel him hardening beneath his leather pants, his cock perfectly lined up against my pussy. I was wet for him already, overwhelmed with need.

"I need to be inside you," he said, his voice deepening, his English hard to understand as his accent thickened. He pulled back, his navy eyes nearly black. "Let me fuck you in the sky..."

As we continued our ascent, I pulled down my dress until it bunched around my waistline. I was bare underneath, and now my breasts were exposed to the cool outside air. Bael cursed as he lifted me higher, taking one of my nipples into his mouth. The piercing through his tongue rolled around the sensitive bud, causing my hips to jerk and my head to fall back. I closed my eyes and moaned.

He licked and sucked me as he used one hand to unzip his pants, pulling himself free. I felt the brush of his cock against my pussy, and I shuddered with anticipation. The ride reached its peak, and for a moment, we were weightless. Bael positioned himself at my entrance and pushed inside me in one swift motion, filling me completely. I gasped as he began to move with long, slow strokes.

My thighs straddled his waist as we moved together in the sky-high cage. The wind whipped through our hair as Bael's thrusts became deeper and more urgent. I held onto the bars behind his head with one hand while gripping his long hair with the other, running my fingers along his scalp like claws.

I could see the carnival down below us, lit up like a beacon in the sea of darkness that was the ghostly Bayou. Up here, it was only us, locked away in our private world. Up here, I could be indulgent and selfish for once in my life. I could bask in pleasure that I never knew existed. It could be like this forever if I wanted it.

His hips met mine, thrust for thrust, both of us panting and cursing every time he bottomed out. The wet slaps of our skin were the most erotic thing I'd ever heard.

The ride began to move again, and it felt like it was moving faster now. If I wasn't so entirely wrapped up in the man with his cock buried inside of me,

I might have been freaking out a little.

I fucked him hard and fast, swiveling my hips as I raised one foot up onto the bench seat. It put me at a slightly different angle that had the head of his cock rubbing up against an elusive spot that had me seeing stars.

Bael's muscles rippled beneath his skin with each thrust, and his eyes locked on mine as he drove into me again and again. The rush of adrenaline from being so high in the sky was intoxicating.

But Bael wouldn't let me stay quiet for long; he leaned down to capture my lips in a fierce kiss that sent sparks shooting through every nerve ending in my body. His fingers dug into the flesh at my hips, pulling me harder onto him until our pelvises met with an audible clap that echoed off the metal bars around us.

"Oh, god—" I groaned. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" It was a chant now, every time he thrust into me. Every time I bounced in his lap, another wave of pleasure would roll through my body.

I felt myself teetering on edge. It wouldn't take much more before I shattered completely under his touch. His hand snaked between us to stroke furiously at my swollen, throbbing clit until everything went white behind my closed eyelids and pure ecstasy took over completely.

My thighs shook and locked around his waist as I came hard, the walls of my pussy clenching around his length. Fire raced through my veins as I forced myself to relax and just let myself feel it—to be in the moment and allow my body to soak it in.

I was being lifted before I realized what was happening, so delirious with pleasure that it took a moment for me to wrap my arms around Bael's neck.

He laid me out on the floor between the bench seats that faced each other and settled between my spread thighs, his cock still deep inside me. He was only wearing a waistcoat and leather pants, so he slipped out of the waistcoat, revealing his entire upper body utterly covered in tattoos and piercings. His long, dark blond hair fell in waves over his broad shoulders, and his muscled arms flexed in the moonlight.

"Brace yourself, blue girl," he said, his deep voice guttural with animalistic need. "I can hardly control myself around you as it is. I need you to hold very still for me," he warned. That warning was all I needed.

He began to thrust himself into me harder and faster than before. The sensation was overwhelming; my body already sensitive and buzzing from the intense orgasm moments earlier. But I wasn't complaining. It was exactly

what I needed right now. I craved more. I wanted him to use me until there was nothing left.

I sunk my fingers into my own hair as I moaned and tried to hold as still as I could, following his orders. It was hard not to meet his thrusts or grab his body. He continued to pound into me relentlessly, our bodies slapping against each other in a melodic rhythm.

Bael's gaze never left mine as he moved inside of me with incredible force and precision. His piercing eyes were wild with lust, but I could also sense something deeper there—something new. Hooking his arms under my thighs, he hoisted my legs over his shoulders, causing his cock to push deeper into me, never once losing his momentum.

I'd never been fucked like this before—so thoroughly and violently. Well, I *had* been fucked violently, but Austin always made it seem like a chore. I used to sit there in stillness, letting him rut against me until he was spent, which usually lasted about five minutes tops.

This was different. This was a give as much as it was a take. Bael gave hard, fast, and passionately, and I took ravenously, begging and pleading for more.

My head was in a haze as he pinned me down. His rough hands caressed my hips, and the pleasure he sent through my entire body with every thrust was overwhelming. He spoke softly in my ear, his voice a soothing song. "I won't stop until you come," he growled, pushing himself deeper into me. My body trembled beneath him as I submitted to his will.

"Tell me you'll stay, Moria," he said suddenly. My eyes flew open, meeting his, stunned. He never stopped moving, fucking me hard, punctuating each word with a thrust. "Stay. With. Me. Let me hold you like this every night. Let me fuck you until you forget the life you knew before me."

My mouth opened and closed, but no words came out, only moans. My head was swimming with so many thoughts, trying to piece them all together. I refused to make any promises while my mind was not my own, but I knew he would never force me to make that decision. I wanted to tell him right then that I would stay. That I would explore this afterlife with him and make a home for myself here.

"I'll give you everything you've ever craved," he breathed out between thrusts. I could tell he was getting close to coming undone. His cock thickened inside me, and his fingers shook with tension as he gripped my



skin as if afraid to let go. "You've brought me peace in a lifetime of darkness. I fucking need you."

I cried out his name over and over again, like it was some kind of worshipful mantra. Each thrust felt deeper than the last; each one more intense than before, until I could feel myself teetering on the edge once more. As if sensing how close I was, Bael leaned forward for a kiss, our lips tangling together with wild abandon even as he kept up his relentless pace inside me.

When we broke apart momentarily to catch our breaths, Bael growled low in his throat while squeezing my thighs hard enough to bruise them before resuming his relentless pounding with renewed vigor, further eliciting moans from deep within me.

"Even if you decide to leave, I'll haunt you forever, blue girl. You'll feel me in every shadow, see my face in every reflection, and hear my song on every breeze."

It wasn't long now—my entire being wound taunt like a rubber band ready to snap at any moment, as wave after wave surged through me, simultaneously engulfing us both and sending us spiraling into oblivion.

Bael stopped fighting against himself and fell over that cliff with me, his cock pulsing inside my throbbing pussy, hot jets of cum coating my insides as he started to slow. His hips moved erratically, and his eyes shut tightly as he groaned my name.

He fucked me slower, slower, and slower still, kissing me languidly, lazily, and deliciously. Exhausted but satiated, we finally collapsed in each other's arms, Bael placing his entire weight on top of me. I didn't mind. I relished the feel of him covering me from head to toe as the aftershocks of pleasure spread through my limbs.

Covered only by moonlight filtering through the caged-off seat that was gently rocking as the Ferris Wheel spun around and around, we took a few moments to catch our breaths.

Bael pulled up onto his forearms, using one hand to brush wayward curls out of my face. "You're so beautiful." His dark eyes searched my face, tracing every angle carefully, as if studying a piece of art. I did the same thing to him. "Close your eyes," he whispered, placing a small kiss to the corner of my mouth.

I obeyed, letting my lids flutter shut, my body relaxing in his embrace, a small smile lingering on my lips. A buzz of energy rushed up my arms and

legs, tingling pleasantly over my skin. I shivered as my stomach flipped, and I opened my eyes.

I let out a gasp as Bael's weight left me, and I found myself staring up at the ceiling of a familiar room rather than the night sky and the Ferris Wheel, blinking several times, as if maybe I was seeing things in my post sex haze. I quickly realized that I wasn't imagining things.

I was in Bael's personal tent. His bedroom. The one he and Theodore had brought me to that first night. The one I'd fled from, not knowing where I was, or which way was up or down. The lights were dim, the tent lit mainly by several candles scattered around the room on various tables or shelves. He had a lot of books lying open haphazardly, as if he'd given up in the middle of reading them to move onto the next.

The room was lavishly decorated in colorful silks, beaded curtains, and fancy chaise lounges. It was a space designed to put you at ease. I sat up, realizing I was laid out on a soft bed with a mattress that could have been made of clouds for all I knew. The duvet was black silk, and smelled like roses, and draped around it was floor to ceiling netting, creating a private little cocoon that was halfway pulled back by rope.

Crawling up to my knees, I made my way down to the foot of the bed and peered out of the netting to see the rest of the room. It was nearly three times larger than Ellie's wagon, which was bigger than mine by far.

I took in all the finery and his expensive collection of oddities, then looked around for Bael. He was standing near a small table off to the side, one of his hands lightly gripping a glass of something amber colored as he stared down at yet another half-open book with an unreadable expression on his face.

His hair had fallen forward into messy waves that framed his features perfectly. I could practically feel the softness of how those strands had slipped through my fingers only minutes before.

He finally noticed me watching him and turned to look my way with sparkling eyes full of purely male satisfaction. Right now they were a deep navy blue tinged with flecks of silver and amber, reminding me of the deepest parts of the sea.

"How long have I been here?" I asked him, coming to a perch on the end of his bed, letting my feet dangle, though they didn't quite reach the ground.

"Minutes," he said, setting down his glass. It was then that I realized he was still dressed in the same clothing as before, only now, he was missing his

tailcoat entirely, bare chested and showing off every glorious tattoo that fascinated me. I scanned him appreciatively, pausing on the dip of his muscles that narrowed into a V, just above his still unbuttoned leather pants.

He smiled smugly, obviously noticing my appraisal. "Glad I still have your attention, *Chéri*" he said with a wink. His eyes drifted down my body, heating with need that made me want to preen.

"Can you blame me?" I replied without missing a beat before turning away to take in the room for what it was—a sanctuary of sorts and somewhere that seemed peaceful, despite all the strangeness outside of it. "Why did you bring me here?"

I peered down at myself, noticing that I was wearing a strange shirt that I hadn't had on before. It was a men's dress shirt, but in an older style that reminded me of centuries-old fashion. It looked like something a faerie-tale prince might wear. The shirt was cream-colored, and so large on me that it fell to my upper thighs and belled at my wrists.

He approached the bed with a cat-like swagger that only Bael St. Claire could pull off. My heart hammered and my mouth dried up the closer he got. Reaching out, he sunk his fingers into my hair and pulled my face towards his, placing a gentle, delicious kiss on my lips.

When he pulled back, his thumb stroked my cheek. "I like seeing you in my bed."

Releasing me, he disappeared before my eyes, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. He reappeared a second later, lying on the bed next to me with his head propped up in his hand. I shook my head, turning around to face him, stretching my legs out leisurely. He eyed my bare skin and groaned under his breath in approval before idly skimming his fingers up and down my calves.

"Tell me why you stopped training to be a priestess," he said. It wasn't necessarily a question, but I knew that he wouldn't force me to answer. I'd been expecting the question eventually. "Theodore told me what you did for that boy. Apparently you have a natural affinity for soul work."

I raised a single brow. "*Soul work*? Is that what you call it?" He made it sound like it was some kind of 9-5 job.

"I'm not asking to punish you, or even judge you, if that is what worries you. I just want to understand why someone so passionate about their beliefs would abandon them." His words hit me harder than I expected them to, and an uneasy feeling swirled in my gut. He was completely right, and I didn't even blame him for being curious.

I jumped slightly as a small black shape appeared nearly out of thin air yet again. Lafayette leapt onto the mattress and immediately made his way over to Bael, rubbing his little face against his chest. I beckoned him over, and he came over immediately, tail in the air, and pranced toward me and settled in my lap, purring contently. His presence here immediately told me that everything that was said in his room, Theo would know too. I didn't mind, though. I didn't have secrets.

"It wasn't necessarily my choice. Austin hated Vodou, so what was the point? He always told me it was devil work and that I needed to stop pretending to be a witch and be normal like him." I frowned down at my fingers as they idly stroked Lafayette. "He indulged in my practices until I got pregnant. After that, it was like he wanted to punish me for believing in anything other than his Christian god."

Memories of my time with Austin still haunted me. The thought that I allowed someone so mediocre and heartless to take away my power made my stomach turn.

Bael's fingers gave a comforting squeeze on my leg, and when I looked up at him, his face held only understanding. "Her name was Gracie, wasn't it?"

I stared at him in shock, my mouth hanging open before I could stop it. "How did you find out about her?"

He just smiled gently. "I know far more than you think I do, love."

My eyes narrowed suspiciously at him. "That's not very helpful."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "He started to resent you for something that wasn't your fault, yes?"

I stared at him in suspicion for a moment longer before I broke eye contact again and nodded. "I think he always resented me. But when we lost Gracie it flipped some kind of switch in him. He got violent and angry, and it seemed like no matter what I said or did, I could never do the right thing or make him happy. I was always wrong. I was always the *witch who killed our baby* in his eyes."

Bael's hand continued to rub soothing circles on my thigh as I recounted the memories that had long laid dormant in my mind. It wasn't often that I talked about Gracie, but something about Bael made me want to spill everything.

"He even started going to church more," I said bitterly, "as if it would cleanse him of any of his own sins. As if praying every Sunday to a god who

didn't listen could erase the things he'd done to me."

Lafayette shifted slightly on my lap before settling back down with a contented purr. In his presence, it was easy for me to ignore the pain from those past wounds.

"But you're better off without him now anyway," Bael said reassuringly. "Perhaps this was a blessing after all."

I looked at him skeptically. "Am I though? Sometimes it feels like he still has this fucking hold over me."

"Because he does," Bael replied matter-of-factly. "But only because you let him. You have power inside you that's been there since birth—far stronger power than anything Austin could ever take away from you. I can see it growing inside you, and it makes me wild." His eyes darkened once again, dipping to scan my bare skin. He licked his lips sensually, toying with the ring in his lower lip.

A heat rose up inside of me, a fire sparked by hope and possibility. I was finally free of that fucking monster. He couldn't touch me here. Bael was right. I needed to stop giving Austin power over me.

"And besides..." With a sudden movement, he rose up, causing Lafayette to grumble and leap off the bed. Bael crawled up my body as I lay backward, his thick arms braced on either side of my head. "You're going to be more untouchable than he ever was or ever will be. The blood of the Laveau's runs through those delicious veins." Leaning down, he nosed my face to the side and gently nipped at the hollow of my throat. "He'll never lay a finger on something so divine again."

I moaned softly as Bael's lips moved down my neck, his tongue tracing patterns along the sensitive skin. My fingers tangled in his dark hair as I surrendered to the pleasure he was giving me. He had a way of making everything else fade away until it was just us and this moment, suspended in time.

"You belong to no one but yourself now," Bael whispered against my collarbone before biting down lightly and eliciting another gasp from me. "And I'll never let anyone hurt you again. I'll peel the flesh from their bones for speaking ill of your name." His kisses, licks, and bites grew more frantic as I panted. "For the first time in centuries, I think I finally found someone worthy of my worship."

I gasped as he kissed his way down my chest, pausing to rip open the dress shirt, exposing my breasts. He took my swollen bud in his mouth and

swirled his tongue softly. My thighs fell open, and he took the opportunity to crawl between them.

Licking his way down my stomach, leaving me a shivering mass of pleasure, Bael didn't waste a second before flattening his pierced tongue over my wet pussy and licking me leisurely. I threaded my fingers through his locks as he slid two fingers deep inside me and started to thrust rhythmically. I gasped as Bael closed his lips around my clit and rolled it along his tongue until a wave of euphoria washed over me.

Bael chuckled devilishly before, trailing kisses and bites slowly up my inner thigh until our lips connected again. "I can't get enough," he said, his voice breathy and low. Tasting myself on his lips made me wild, and despite having been fucked hard on that Ferris Wheel, I needed more.

His hands roamed my body as if worshiping at an altar. He settled between my legs, freeing himself from his already unbuttoned pants. My thighs parted for him, and in seconds he was sliding inside of me.

I moaned as his fingers twisted in my hair, pulling and grabbing as he fucked me. His hips moved in perfect rhythm to my frantic heart, his thick cock stretching me exquisitely wide.

I came hard, my pussy throbbing around his length, and the pressure and heat had him losing control too. Sitting up, Bael leaned backwards, his hips pistoning into me with relentless speed. Hot cum filled me up as he threw his head back and moaned my name. Over and over, he chanted my name as his hips moved. I reached down between my legs and strummed my clit, coaxing out yet another, smaller orgasm at the sight of him.

He himself looked like a dark god. A trickster god, let loose on the world to ravage women's hearts. Suddenly there was no more doubt left in my mind. I could never leave this place behind. I could never walk away from all of this and expect to forget. It was impossible to even imagine.

I decided I was going to make my decision final the first chance I got. I'd tell Bael and Theodore that I was staying. Forever. That I'd chosen them and this half-life, because even a half-life in this magical realm was more real and vivid than I'd ever experienced in the waking world.



### *Theodore*

She was exquisite when she slept. Her beauty was a unique mixture of innocence and wickedness, and from the moment our eyes connected, I wanted her. I'd taken a few lovers here and there over the centuries, but they were fleeting, nameless, faceless encounters.

One touch of Moria's skin and I was lost. It took nearly all of my strength not to take her that first night. But she'd been afraid of me, and that wouldn't do. I wanted her to come to me willingly, or not at all.

So I took my time with her—gave her the chance to find her way in my realm before taking her for my own. I wanted it to be her choice—no, I *needed* it to be her choice.

It hadn't taken long for Moria's body language and small gestures of affection towards me in particular, as opposed to Bael, to make it more than clear she'd chosen us both. When we touched, I could feel something pass

between our souls that went beyond mere lust and desire into something much deeper—something intimate and primal.

Sitting in one of Bael's many eclectic chairs next to the bed he'd placed Moria on, I stared at her, sipping the drink the others called Euphoria. The concoction didn't do much for me, but it was admittedly delicious.

"You didn't have to put her into a coma, brother. She's already dead." I smirked at my blond-headed friend as he leaned against the headboard of his bed, keeping a close watch over our girl.

Bael's lips twisted into a smirk of his own, "Ah, but I did. She was delicious. You should have seen it for yourself the way she rode my cock." He ran his fingers lovingly through Moria's curly, chestnut-colored hair and sighed in satisfaction as he continued to watch over her slumbering form.

He was as lost to this woman as I was, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would follow her into the waking world if she were to leave. I could see it in his eyes—the possessiveness setting in.

Bael wasn't one to create attachments. In life, he was flighty and traveled with his uncle as an entertainer. He bedded women on the road, leaving them in tears when he inevitably moved on, leaving them with their grimy, boring husbands. After his death, he'd thrown his entire soul into being my usher. As a magic user in life, he had an affinity for the strange and unusual.

"This was selfish of me," Bael said quietly, flipping a coin between his fingers absently.

I shook my head and looked him straight in the eye. "That wasn't selfishness—it was love."

His expression changed abruptly, a look of shock spreading over his face. "Love? That's ridiculous," he scoffed.

My lips thinned. "You may not understand what it's like to be in love, but that doesn't mean you can dismiss it so easily." I sat forward in the chair, placing my elbows on my knees as I held his stare. "In three hundred years, I've never seen you look twice at a woman, but the moment she entered my realm, you were lost to her. There's no use in denying it."

He gave me a long, hard look before finally dropping his gaze. He was in denial about his own emotions, but I knew better—the way he looked at her spoke volumes. Finally, nodding slowly, Bael muttered something under his breath that sounded like agreement.

"And you?" he asked.

I expected his question and welcomed it. I ran my eyes over her sleeping



form slowly, taking in every inch of that light brown skin, chestnut hair, and freckles. She was unlike any woman I'd ever known.

"I've loved her since the moment I saw her." I didn't bother mincing my words. There was no reason to. I was the ruler of this purgatory, and this realm bent to my will. If I wanted to love her, then I would, and the darkness would part wherever she walked. I only had to convince her of that.

He blinked at me in clear shock. I didn't blame him. Then a slow smile stretched his lips, my trickster friend's wickedness returning to his eyes. I grinned back, because we both knew what this meant.

"So we share her then," he said. There wasn't a hint of trepidation in his voice.

I nodded. "We share her, if that's what she wants. She still thinks like a mortal. Her perception of love is skewed and tainted. There's always a chance she might reject this, even if it's what her heart truly craves."

"This is hardly what I expected from you, my friend," Bael said, tossing the coin into the air and waving his hand in front of it, only for it to disappear into thin air.

I chuckled. "I'm tired of denying myself. Perhaps *I* was waiting for *her*." The pull of her soul was like a magnet, drawing me closer every second she remained at the carnival.

What many didn't know about me, was that this place was a part of my own soul. An extension of myself in many ways. I knew everything that happened within this realm. I could feel souls as they entered, and I mourned them when they left.

There were many gods in this world, and some of them shared my fate. Purgatory was endless, and I'd been tasked with the unique pleasure of watching over a piece of it.

When Moria Laveau entered my realm, it'd been as if my phantom heart started beating for the very first time. I felt a kindred spirit in her, and I planned on keeping her for as long as she'd will it. Her grandmother prayed for the *Lwa* to keep her safe, and I answered. I don't think Annette realized what she was asking for. The deal was sealed, and I was going to keep her granddaughter safe by my side and in my bed for eternity.



I woke up to an annoying licking sound. My cheek felt wet and as I blinked my eyes open, I realized why. Lafayette stood over my face, licking away at my cheek, purring heavily. I chuckled, reaching up to stroke his fur, and at my touch, he nuzzled against my face as if saying good morning, even if there was technically no such thing as morning here.

I was still in Bael's lavish bed, and the room was still dim with flickering shadows. The candles around here seemed like time couldn't touch them since they never seemed to burn down.

I sat up, letting Lafayette leap off of me as I pushed my curls out of my face. I was dressed again, this time in yet another flimsy dress, this time the color of a terracotta pot that sort of matched my hair. It had to be Bael's doing.

The flap of the tent opened, and the beaded curtain hanging in front of it was parted, and in walked both Bael and Theodore. Theo was wearing his usual all black, a suit jacket over his bare chest covered in five or so long

necklaces, black slacks, no shoes, and his fancy walking stick that he didn't actually need to help him walk. He wore his hat today too, and a pair of suspenders hung loose around his waist.

*Fuck me...* These men were ridiculously beautiful.

Bael though, wore another tailcoat, this time, a deep emerald green in color. Again, without a shirt on under it, and those lace-up black combat boots he liked to wear with his tight leather pants. He was dripping in necklaces, piercings and splattered in glitter. On anyone but him it would look insane. On him, insane seemed to work perfectly.

Bael was carrying a tray of teacups and a glass teapot, and as he strode through the room, so did a waft of tobacco smoke. Theo had a curved pipe in his mouth, and his hands were slung in his pockets as he leisurely made his way toward me.

I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated by the two of them. The way they commanded attention with their mere presence was overwhelming, yet enticing. I wanted to climb them and ride them into the non-existent sunset. Maybe I had a little problem with being attracted to things that I feared a little. It was a working theory, but I was starting to believe it.

"Good morning, *Chéri*," Bael said as he set the tray on the bedside table next to me. "I hope you slept well."

Theodore didn't say anything, but his intense gaze bore into mine as if trying to read every thought that crossed my mind.

"I did," I replied hesitantly before taking one of the teacups from the tray and sipping at its contents. It was Earl Grey with a hint of lavender and chocolate.

Bael sat down on one side of me while Theodore took up position on the other side. Lafayette jumped onto Bael's lap without hesitation. Bael snapped his fingers, and a cup of tea appeared in his hands, vanishing from the tray beside me.

"How do you even do that?" I asked, frowning at his hands.

Bael laughed at my question and leaned closer, his lips almost touching my ear. "Trade secret," he whispered before pulling away with a wink.

"Drink up," Theodore said. "We have something important to do today, and I don't want to waste any time."

Bael rolled his eyes, but my interest was suddenly piqued. "I thought time didn't exist here? What's the hurry?" As far as I knew, time ran differently in this realm. I was pretty sure it was still the same day back in the real world.

"For you it does," he explained. "That's how it works. When a soul is in transition, time is put on pause back in the waking world. Until you choose to stay or go, time will remain stagnant, keeping your body from making the choice for you."

A chill of dread ran through me as I frantically searched both men's faces. "So if I make a decision—" I started hesitantly.

"Time will continue on its normal course and your body will eventually rot away." Theo's words weren't harsh, but they were straight forward.

I shuddered at the thought of my corpse growing cold and decaying in my bed. It was hard to accept that this was real—that with my choice here, I would be unable to return to the way things had been before. This was a critical moment, and no matter what I chose, there would be no going back to blissful ignorance.

Bael's voice was insistent as he said, "Before you make up your mind, we have to take care of something first." With a snap of his fingers, our tea cups were gone, along with *him*. A second later, he reappeared in front of me, standing tall on the side of the bed. He offered me his hand and said softly, "Come with us, blue girl. We're going on an adventure."

MINUTES LATER, the three of us were in a boat, floating down the wide river surrounded by thick fog. Theodore was rowing us gently, though I imagined if they wanted to, they could probably propel this old wooden skiff using some kind of magic.

It wasn't cold out, despite the fog. The summer night was still warm and smelled like rain. Crickets chirped loudly from the banks of the swamp, and every time the leaves of the Cypress trees rustled, I imagined a massive gator following close behind us.

Bael had his fiddle out, and was playing a soft, lullaby-type song that had all of my limbs relaxing as we drifted slowly away from the carnival. I realized then that this was as far away from the Carnival of Bones that I'd been since waking up in the swamp, and I had a feeling the only reason I was able to get this far was because of Theodore.

Theodore seemed to sense my thoughts as he said, "We're almost there."

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked nervously.

"You'll see soon enough," he replied cryptically, and I grumbled under my breath.

As our boat began its approach towards land on one side of the riverbank, where thick bushes grew wildly around towering trees, creating a dense forest that enveloped everything else within its grasp, recognition started to dawn and hope bloomed inside of me.

He pulled the boat to a stop alongside a familiar old wooden dock. Bael hopped out and anchored it in place by tossing a rope over a standing post. Reaching out a helping hand, he guided me out of the boat. I fought to catch my bearings. Moments later, Theodore appeared next to Bael.

"You guys really need to teach me how to do that," I grumbled.

Bael smiled. "If you decide to stay, it'll be as easy as breathing."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Is that a death pun?"

Theodore looped an arm around my waist. "Do you want to scare her off before she makes her choice?" He side eyed Bael as he ushered me up the mossy pathway.

Bael chuckled behind us before appearing on my other side, also sliding his arm around me. I was trapped between the two towering men, and oddly enough, even though I was dead, I'd never felt more safe.

I sucked in a deep breath as we paused in front of Grandma Anne's house. It was a tiny house on the bank of the Bayou that had been passed down through generations of Laveaus. It was supposed to be mine someday, and then I'd have passed it to Gracie.

A pang of longing pulsed through me, but I forced it down. I didn't want to let my sadness overtake me again, not after the progress I'd made.

"What do we do now?" I asked both of them. We couldn't just knock, right? We weren't even in the same realm as Grandma.

"Hold tight," Theo said, and I did, even holding my breath, placing my face into the crook of Bael's arm.

That familiar tingling sensation traveled through my limbs. I realized now that it was some kind of magic. The same magic that allowed them to travel places in the blink of an eye.

In seconds we were standing in Grandma Anne's living room. Everything looked just as it had that night I'd come here in some kind of spectral form. I'd been dreaming then, and everything had been hazy and confusing, as if I was watching from outside a foggy window.

My breath caught as I spotted Grandma sitting in her usual chair, frozen

in place. She was utterly unmoving, just like looking through one of the mirrors. I was reminded that time in the waking world was still waiting for me to make a choice.

Theo and Bael released their hold on me, and I walked towards Grandma slowly, unsure if she would even acknowledge my presence. As I got closer, her eyes flickered slightly but remained fixed straight ahead.

"Grandma?" I whispered tentatively. "It's me..."

No response.

I reached out to touch her arm but drew back at the last minute. What if I hurt her somehow? I looked over my shoulder, peering up at Theo. He nodded at me, and I took that as a sign that it would be okay. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to her.

With a deep breath, I pushed my will towards her, beckoning her to see me, to hear me. A current shot through my veins so strongly that for a moment everything went black. When I opened my eyes, Grandma was staring into them, her wide eyes roving over my face, in confusion.

"Bluebell?" she asked, her voice croaked and whispery. She reached for me, her hand coming to cup my cheek, but it only passed right through me. A shiver went through my whole body. Her eyes widened even further, this time in horror. "What has he done?" She cupped her palm over her mouth, a sob escaping as a tear dripped down her cheek. I knelt in front of her, trying not to cry too.

"I'm right here, Grandma. I'm so sorry. I should have stayed with you instead of going back to him. I'm so, so sorry."

Grandma shook her head slowly, her eyes still fixed on mine. Her lips trembled as she spoke softly, "It's not your fault, dear. You couldn't have known what he was capable of."

I shook my head, casting my eyes to the floor. "I wish that was true. I think I just didn't want to face it. I thought there was still time to change him back."

"Baby girl, you had so much left to accomplish." More tears spilled over her cheeks. Her eyes, as dark as my one brown eye, glistened in the still frozen firelight from her small hearth. "How is this possible? How are you here, honey?"

I wished so badly that I could reach out and hug her. I knew her heart was breaking all over again. She already lost my dad, and I was all she had left. The last of the Laveau bloodline.

"It's hard to explain, and I'm not sure how much time I have with you, but I'm okay, I promise. I've been offered a place to rest with Met Kalfou, and he's going to keep me safe."

The mere fact that she hadn't glanced their way once told me that they were invisible to her, and I appreciated that. I didn't want to give her a heart attack when she was already distressed enough.

"Kalfou?" she gasped, clutching her chest. "You must be careful, Bluebell. The spirits are unpredictable, and you haven't completed your training."

I reached out as if to take her hand, but paused, remembering that it was impossible, so I settled for a thin smile. "Don't you worry about him. He's not as scary as they say." My eyes flitted to the side where he stood, and I couldn't help but notice Bael elbowing Theodore in the ribs. Theo rolled his eyes.

Grandma followed my gaze, frowning in confusion, that is, until realization dawned. "He's here now, isn't he?"

I nodded. "Always. He's always with me, and he keeps me safe. I promise I'll be alright. You don't ever have to worry about someone hurting me again. Austin can't reach me anymore."

My grandma let out a long, shaky sigh, her shoulders visibly relaxing as she heard my truth. Then, her eyes darkened with a sudden rage and she looked off to the side. "Austin," she spat out his name like it was poison on her tongue. "That boy is going to regret the day he laid eyes on my grandbaby."

Warmth bloomed inside of me. Grandma Anne was a fierce protector of those she loved, and I knew that the second we left this place, she'd make Austin regret breathing, much less laying eyes on me.

I looked at Theodore and nodded. Grandma had thicker skin than anyone realized. She was a *mambo*, and nothing spooked her. Without fanfare, they allowed themselves to appear in front of Grandma. Her eyes momentarily widened at the sight of them before her mouth flattened into a thin line.

She narrowed her eyes at Theodore. "Kalfou," she said sternly, as if speaking to a stubborn grandson and not a timeless deity. "So it was *you* who took my Bluebell from me. When I asked the *Lwa* to keep her safe, this is not what I meant. I did not agree to this, and I think you know that."

I tried to hide a grin, but it was fighting its way across my lips. Still, I eyes Theodore. He never told me my grandma prayed for me. I wondered

why he'd kept that little detail from me. It didn't surprise me though. Shaking my head, I said "It wasn't his fault and you know it."

She crossed her arms over her plump body and huffed. She was one of the most stubborn old women I'd ever known.

Theodore stepped forward and bowed his head respectfully. "Forgive me, Annette," he said with a hint of amusement. "But believe me when I tell you, she's safer with me than she ever was with that *man*." The way we gritted the word between clenched teeth said more than words ever could about how he felt about Austin.

Grandma's eyes softened slightly. Then she glanced at Bael. "And you?" she asked him.

A charming smile stretched across his lips, and he swept into a deep bow. "*Mambo*, Annette, you're even lovelier than Moria described you. I see now where she gets her radiance from."

She raised a brow, but I couldn't help but notice the way her cheek twitched. I immediately know that Grandma found Bael charming, which didn't surprise me in the slightest.

"Bael St. Claire is my usher. I trust him completely," Theodore said. "Unfortunately we could not save your granddaughter from her living demons, but with me, she'll never have to worry again."

"Your Bluebell is safe with us, *madame*." Bael winked at Grandma, and I knew instantly that she would be under his spell too.

She glanced over at me, as if checking for confirmation, and I nodded with a reassuring smile. She reclined back in her rocking chair and sighed, her shoulders dropping. "I always feared this day would come. That man was no good from the start."

My smile abruptly disappeared. "I know. Wish I would have left him sooner. I should have—"

She stopped me with a hand, shushing me instantly. "Don't you ever blame yourself, Moria Laveau. I don't want to hear anything else about what-if this, what-if that. What's done is done. Such is the way of these things, you know that."

"Yes ma'am," I said with a respectful nod. Grandma's face softened. "I don't have much time here with you, but I wanted you to know that I'm alright, and that I have one request before I go."

Her eyes began to water, and it was all I could do not to cry myself. This wasn't goodbye forever, it was just a see you later. She simply nodded. I



knew she'd do anything I asked of her.

I glanced over at Theo and Bael before taking a deep breath and approaching Grandma. I saw the moment my cold aura touched her skin when she broke out in chills. Her breaths came out in white vapor, but she didn't flinch away from me.

I leaned in close to her ear and spoke low enough that only she could hear. "Wait three days, and then find me. Give me those three days, and it will make sense."

Pulling away from Grandma Anne, I winked, and despite her watery, tear filled eyes, her lips curled into the familiar smile that always reminded me so much of my father. I knew she'd do exactly as I asked and wait the three days to find me. Three days was all I needed. Three days, and it would be over.

We were starting to fade now as Theodore and Bael made their way out of the house, Theo disappearing straight through the wall first. Bael swooped into a dramatic bow one more time before following Theodore.

"I'll miss you, Grandma," I said as I backed away, my form already losing substance. "I love you so much. Don't worry about me. If you ever need guidance, call of Met Kalfou."

She didn't bother nodding. Instead, she just stared blankly after me until I realized she could no longer see me. Tears were rolling down my cheeks freely now as my heart broke for Grandma.

I turned, and was just about to fade through the wall when I heard her whisper, "You'll find it Bluebell. You just gotta trust that Laveau blood in those veins."



For the first time ever, I found myself alone in the center of the large tent. I'd gone searching for Ellie and wound up on here, where the lights were off, there were no gray faces in sight, and the show was temporarily over.

The room was cold, and a single spotlight lit up the center ring from up above. I stood in the center looking up toward the peak of the tent in awe. It seemed so much larger when it was empty.

I'd been wandering around while searching for my friend, but really I wanted to snoop around a little more. I'd stopped by several of the rides, but wasn't brave enough to actually try one out, no matter how enticing the operators were.

Eventually I found my way here, and all I could do was stare up at a large wooden platform that extended out over the center ring. There was a ladder off to the side between two adjoining sections of bleachers. I hadn't been to a circus in forever, but I remembered the basics of the performances I'd seen as

a kid.

We'd been deep in conversation during the trapeze act the night before, so I never got to watch Ellie in all her glory. I promised myself I was going to fix that and watch the entirety of her next performance.

I smiled to myself, realizing what that meant. If I was planning on being here for the next performance, then it meant I really had solidified my decision to stay here.

Grandma's words rang out in my head over and over again. "*You'll find it Bluebell. You just gotta trust that Laveau blood in those veins.*" She was right, and I was going to take her advice and embrace this new afterlife.

I came out of my thoughts and walked excitedly over to the ladder that led up to the wooden platform. I took a deep breath before lifting my foot onto the first step, then continued upward until I reached the top.

The wind from the open section at the peak of the tent whipped around my ears, bringing with it a rustling sound like an ocean wave crashing shoreward, blending with the distant music that played through the night.

It felt so freeing to be up here high in the sky above everyone else, as though I had been wrapped inside a moment of pure bliss and freedom where nothing mattered except for the feeling of being one with myself for the first time in what felt like two separate lifetimes.

The empty seats curved away into shadows far below, yet there was still light dancing against the dust-motes that hung in the air under the spotlight like twinkling stars scattered across a dark sky. It seemed so much higher from up here than it looked from down below.

I'd done some gymnastics when I was a teenager, but nothing to this degree. I was fairly confident with my body control and heights, but I was nowhere near the confidence level one needed to perform. Still, I wasn't even slightly afraid. I wasn't even technically alive, so even if I did plummet to the ground, would it even matter?

With newfound confidence bubbling within myself, I stood tall and positioned myself just under one corner trapeze bar closest platform. One of the swings was larger than the others, and had a ring around it that I could hold onto to keep steady.

I let the other swings loose before I grabbed the one I wanted. I wanted to make sure that there were other ropes available if I needed to get back onto the platform. All I'd have to do was swing over to it and climb up.

Again, it crossed my mind that I could possibly fall off of this thing if I

made the wrong movement. But again, it wasn't exactly a life or death situation. I'd already been there, done that.

Chuckling to myself, I grabbed the swing I wanted and planted my feet on it while I held onto the ring tightly. Then with my other hand, I unhooked the rope from the platform. I shrieked as the trapeze swing immediately dropped with me on it. My stomach shot to my throat and wind rushed through my loose hair.

By the time the swing hit maximum velocity, it dipped and then rose again on the other side of the center ring. Carefully, I crouched into a sitting position and let my feet dangle over the edge of the seat. The swing kept going, back and forth through the air until it felt like I was flying.

I felt Theodore and Bael's eyes on me from the shadows below, watching as I swung through the air. I had no idea how long they'd been up in those stands, but I knew it as sure as I knew I was staying. I opened my eyes, a strange pull guiding my eyes to a darkened pair of seats where two tall shadows sat alone.

"Don't be shy, boys!" I teased, laughing as I pushed the swing harder. My loose teal dress fluttered around me like sheer butterfly wings. I'd never felt so loose and free. I could have sworn I felt their amusement even from so high up.

As I swung back, I held my arms out like a bird and arched my back towards the sky. The feeling of weightlessness only grew stronger, and I couldn't help but laugh at the rush. Then, as the trapeze swing carried me forward again, I felt a strong grip around my waist.

"Careful there, *Chéri*," Bael murmured into my ear as he positioned himself behind me on the swing. His body was pressed tight against mine, and his large hands wrapped firmly around my waist. I realized I'd never get tired of his strange magic.

I leaned back against him, feeling the warmth of his body against mine. It was comforting and still new all at once. I let my head fall back onto his shoulder as we swung together through the air.

"I didn't expect company," I said.

Bael nuzzled his face into my neck, sending pleasurable shivers down my spine. I craned my neck, allowing his access to my bare skin, a satisfied smile on my lips. "We couldn't let you have all the fun," he whispered, nipping once at my nape.

As we swung back and forth through the air, I felt a different kind of thrill

run through me. This wasn't just about the rush of flying anymore. It was about my freedom to do whatever the hell I wanted with nobody here to tell me no. I could have both Bael and Theodore, and there was nobody in my ear telling me it was wrong to want two men. *This* was the kind of freedom I'd always craved.

The swing slowed dramatically and began to lower. I sucked in a sharp breath and clung to the ropes. We descended incredibly fast, only slowing when we reached the ground. The swing pulled taut, just high enough for my feet to dangle above the ground. I looked up, my eyes widening at the elongated ropes. It had to be another one of Bael's tricks.

Theodore's gaze was like a physical caress. He continued watching everything we did. I could barely see him though the darkness beyond the spotlight, but I didn't have to see him. There was an awareness that came over me whenever he was in the same room as me.

"You guys are getting good at this whole convincing thing," I said with a broad smile. A real smile. It felt so damn good to fucking smile.

Bael chuckled, placing a kiss on my cheek. "We aim to please."

With the snap of Bael's fingers, my legs were spreading without me making the conscious effort to do it myself. It felt as if invisible hands were caressing my inner thighs. I gasped as two ropes appeared dangling on either side of me, moving like snakes writhing on their own as Bael's fingers twitched. He was doing magic, and it had me watching in complete and utter awe.

I was giddy as he circled around me with that suave swagger that only Bael could pull off. He'd peeled off his tailcoat, leaving himself bare chested, skin gleaming in the spotlight. My mouth dried up at the sight of him as he swept his long hair up into a messy bun.

The ropes he was commanding began to twirl around my thighs, tightening and knotting themselves before rising up higher and tying themselves off on the ropes that held up the trapeze swing. It created what I could only describe as the world's strangest sex swing. The ropes held my legs in place, my thighs spread wide as my dress rose up around my head until it was fluttering off and falling to the ground leaving me completely naked.

Bael smiled approvingly at his handy work before turning to face Theodore, who still sat in the stands, watching us patiently. "Shall we continue?" he asked.

Theodore had no response save for the smallest hints of a smirk that made my heart skip a beat. I could barely see him, but the glowing skull under his skin was getting brighter.

Bael walked around me as if I was an art piece he'd proudly created and adjusted the ropes slightly before taking hold of them with both hands. "A feast for the eyes *and* the tongue!" Bael shouted in his best ringmaster voice.

"Should I be afraid?" I asked, laughing as he caressed my wild curls and ran his fingertips along my bare shoulders.

"Very," he said teasingly against the shell of my ear. "After tonight, you may forget you ever knew any different."

My belly flipped at his whispered promises. I very much wanted him to prove it to me. I was all-in right now, up for whatever these two wanted from me. If this was going to be my new normal, then I was going to embrace the hell out of it and live the life I was never allowed to live.

He paused in front of me, using his thumb and knuckle to lightly pinch my chin, raising my eyes to meet his. "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?*"

I swallowed thickly, my entire body lighting up like an open flame. I nodded, my eyes never leaving his. "*Oui*," I whispered breathlessly.

Bael's eyes darkened to near black as his pupils expanded. His nostrils flared like he smelled something intoxicating. "What have you done to us?"

Before I knew it, Theodore was standing in front of me. I don't even think I blinked. He was also shirtless, and the buttons of his slacks were undone. He stepped even closer. "This is what we want," he said in a low voice that made me want to obey his every command. "To give you pleasure beyond comprehension. To worship at your altar, my priestess."

I panted, my chest rising and falling rapidly, feeling completely under their spell. Bael's arms wrapped around me from behind, his lips peppering my shoulders with scorching kisses. I moaned, my eyes falling closed and my head tipping back.

Then, I felt a hard slap on my bare pussy. With a yelp, my eyes flew open to find Theodore staring down at me, licking his fingers that were coated in my wetness.

"You slapped me," I accused him breathlessly.

"And you liked it," he said before abruptly doing it again. I yelped as he slapped my wet pussy once, twice, and a third time until my skin was red and my clit ached with the need to be touched again.

Bael chuckled, his fingers brushing across my swollen lips before he leaned down and whispered in my ear. "This is what you'll have at your beck and call, blue girl. Our fingers, tongues and our cocks are yours to fuck. Yours and only yours." His hands roamed over me while I trembled, caressing my bare breasts.

I nodded, barely able to form words as Theodore grasped both of my hips firmly in each hand and pulled me towards him so our bodies were pressed together tightly from chest to thigh, my pussy perfectly lined up with his cock, just under the thin fabric of his slacks.

Bael grabbed a fistful of hair on the back of my head, angling me backwards for a deep, sensual kiss. His tongue licked at my lips and he nipped, sucked and tasted. His kiss had me throbbing and aching.

I jumped when I felt a tongue between my legs. Bael never stopped kissing me, and I couldn't pull away even if I wanted to, which I didn't. His kiss mimicked what Theodore was doing to my pussy, his tongue swirling and flicking.

Bael kissed me deeper, completely consuming me body and soul. His hands moved to grip my hips tightly as Theodore's tongue explored every inch of my pussy, each flick and swipe building until I was desperate for release. My body writhed against him as his tongue found my clit, pleasure jolting through me like a wildfire.

My body trembled as I felt myself beginning to crest, my heart thudding in my chest. Suddenly, Bael pulled away from me with a devilish laugh and Theodore followed suit, leaving me teetering on the brink of ecstasy.

"No," Bael said, clicking his tongue. "You'll have to wait for us to tell you to come."

I glared at Theodore as he stood to his feet and backed up a few paces, but that glare was wiped off my face as he finished unzipping his slacks, pulling his cock free and giving himself a few slow strokes. My mouth instantly watered at the sight of him. Not only was he thick and long, but the tip of his cock was pierced through, just like Bael's.

He walked towards me with single minded intent, and I felt my walls contracting in anticipation. For a second I wondered if he would even fit inside of me.

He positioned himself between my trembling thighs and his throbbing cockhead teased me with tantalizing circles around my wet pussy before finally pushing in all at once. I gasped as he filled me completely, every inch

stretching me like a tight glove. My eyes rolled back in rapture as his touch sent a jolt of pleasure through my body.

"Oh my god..." I moaned in desperate need, my voice a mixture of pleasure and pain. "Fuck me, Theo...oh my fucking god..."

He groaned in response and began thrusting into me, pushing further and harder each time he bottomed out. "I'm your god now, priestess. Say my name." His hands gripped my hips as he moved inside of me, punishing pleasure coursing through my body every time his pierced shaft stroked against a hard to reach spot inside of me.

Bael kissed my neck and shoulders while his fingers pinched and stroked my nipples, giving me both pain and relief in tandem.

"Met..." I groaned, barely able to get the name past my lips. His thrusts sped up until I was forced to hold onto the ropes. "Met Kalfou," I panted. He wanted me to say his name? I'd give him his fucking name.

"That's right, blue girl, " Bael said, his voice low and growly. "Let him fuck that pretty pussy until you're aching for more. I want to lick his cum from your cunt while you writhe on my tongue."

I moaned at his words, my hips beginning to thrust onto Theodore's cock, meeting him thrust for thrust. His eyes were like black marbles, and the skeleton glowed beneath his dark skin like a demon clamoring to burst free. He was a beautiful reaper come to steal me away and keep me forever.

Theo's grip tightened on my hips as his thrusts became almost feral, driving me insane with need. I felt the familiar spark in my lower belly and knew that this was it. I was about to come harder than ever before.

I held my breath as my thighs started to shake. For some reason I wasn't ready to come yet. I wanted to drag this moment out for as long as I possibly could. I tried to control my breathing, staving off my orgasm for the moment.

Bael's hands left my breasts, and he walked around to my side. His chest was glistening with sweat in the warm spotlight, slickening his dark tattoos. I licked my lips and reached for him, hooking my fingers in the waistband of his leather pants.

He didn't object as I pulled his tattooed cock free, licking my lips in anticipation. The urge to suck him dry was suddenly overwhelming. He stepped closer, and I took the head of his cock between my lips and sucked gently. Bael groaned, petting my hair. "That's it, baby, suck me until I fill your throat with my cum."

Theodore pounded into me harder, strumming my clit fiercely with his



thumb. I took Bael's cock in deeper, bobbing my head up and down, flattening my tongue along the under side of his shaft. His hips thrust toward me as he fucked my mouth, groaning and cursing in French.

"Come for me, priestess," Theodore commanded.

Unable to hold back any longer, an orgasm tore through me like a hurricane of ecstasy, leaving bliss coursing through every inch of me until all that remained were stars that glittered behind my tightly closed eyelids. My whole body shuddered, my thighs shaking with the need to wrap around Theodore's hips, but I couldn't move them since I was still tied in place by thick rope.

My pussy walls contracted around his cock, squeezing him like a vice. He grunted and growled under his breath as his hips pistoned into me, his cock throbbing as hot cum filled me up. He kept fucking me hard as it dripped out of me.

Bael followed Theodore over the edge, spilling himself down my throat. I swallowed him greedily, loving the hot, salty flavor on my tongue. His head tilted back as he shut his eyes tightly, moaning as his body trembled. His fingers sunk into my curls, gripping me tight as I sucked every last drop from his balls.

Theodore slowly pulled out, leaving me gaping and empty at the same time that Bael removed his cock from my mouth. I licked my lips, feeling a single drop of cum dripping from the corner of my mouth.

Bael leaned down and captured it with his tongue, groaning in delight. "Do you have any idea how delicious you are?" he asked me breathlessly.

Theodore moved to untie my thighs from the swing, and I could have cried at how much relief I felt when they were free. My muscles strained as he gently lowered each leg with care and reverence.

"If she doesn't, then I suppose we'd better spend the next eternity showing her," Theo said. Reaching out, he caressed my cheek with his palm. So soft and delicate, unlike the punishing way he'd been fucking me only moments ago.

BAEL TIPPED a glass of Euphoria into my mouth. It was hard to keep it from spilling due to the fact that I was currently lying upside-down off the side of

his bed while Theodore massaged my bare feet.

Music played from an old phonograph that Bael had set up in the corner of his tent, and we'd alternated between dancing to soothing jazz, fucking hard, and lounging around doing absolutely nothing. I was sore all over the place, but I had a feeling that would go away after I let go of my life in the waking world.

"So I'll be immortal?" I asked as I attempted to do that little coin trick Bael always did. I'd dropped the damn thing on my forehead at least a dozen times, but I was determined.

"You can't be immortal if you're dead," Theodore said with a small laugh. He ran his thumb up the sole of my right foot, and I moaned at how amazing it felt. "So technically, no. But your soul will phase into it's next state of existence. You're still made up of the same energy that gave you life, only now, you won't have to live within the confines of a mortal body."

"So confusing," I said, shaking my head and I rolled to my side. "You can just say I'm going to be a ghost. It's not going to scare me off now."

Both men shook their heads. Bael set the decanter of Euphoria on a side table before returning to the bed and hopping on, causing me to bounce. He was still shirtless, and his long hair was ruffled and messy.

"No," he said, propping his head on his hand as he faced me. "You are not going to be a ghost. You'll still exist in this world even though you may no longer have physical form. Ghosts are just echos of the past. Souls are just energy that's been transferred from one state to another."

Theodore nodded, puffing smoke rings from his mouth as he puffed on his long pipe. The smoke smelled earthy and sweet, and I realized I loved it.

I nodded, finally giving up on the coin trick, using my thumb to flick it back to Bael. He caught it mid air, and immediately began rolling over his knuckles. I narrowed my eyes at him, and he just winked.

I rolled onto my back and stretched, raising my hands over my head. The movement caused the silk robe Bael had given me to wear, to rise up, the tie falling loose, exposing my breasts. Two masculine groans filled the room, and I smiled to myself.

I counted about two seconds before I felt fingers lock around my ankles. Theodore pulled me towards him, and I yelped, sliding to the head of the bed. I laughed as he anchored my legs on either side of him before crawling to his knees and settling between my thighs.

I tilted my head backwards, looking at Bael from upside down. He

l lounged happily at the foot of the bed, his eyes filling with heat. "*T'as de beaux yeux, tu sais?*"

I blushed, batting my lashes in an exaggerated way. "You really think so?" I teased. He always fixated on my eyes. One brown, and one blue, even from the very first day.

He narrowed his gaze on me, fighting a smile. "You're trouble, as well, *mon amour*. It's a good thing I adore trouble."

I gasped as Theodore's hands roamed along my sides, his lips brushing against my belly, his tongue tasting every inch of my skin. I let out a moan and rolled my hips while Bael watched in fascination.

Theodore kissed his way up my body until he was pinning me to the bed sheets beneath us, my hands curling into them tightly. His body heat surrounded me completely and spread throughout like wildfire consuming everything in its path.

He grabbed onto one of my wrists, pulling my arm up and over my head, pinning me down before grinding himself against me. With his other hand he freed his cock, nudging my thighs wide apart with his knees.

His eyes bored into mine intensely, searching my face before coming back to settle on my gaze again. "*Cheri mwen vle w,*" he whispered against my lips.

I wasn't completely fluent in Haitian Creole, but I knew the basics. Enough to know that he wanted me right now, echoing my own needs.

He slipped inside me slowly, and I groaned as I let my eyes fall closed, savoring the slide of his thick cock, and the pressure that built in my lower abdomen. I was so full it nearly hurt, but that pain was so satisfying.

I quivered in Theodore's embrace, my body aching for more of him as his strong arms held me down tightly. I felt each thrust of his piercing deeper and deeper, a sweet agony that made my body tremble with pleasure and desire. Every movement sent waves of sensation coursing through me, the force of them crashing together like a wild sea. I wanted this moment to last forever.

I could feel Bael watching intently as Theodore had done that first time in my wagon. This time the ringmaster—the usher, was my audience, and he was utterly feasting on the sight of us.

Theo captured my lips with his, kissing me passionately, slowly and leisurely. His lips were soft, yet firm too, and his tongue tasted like the Euphoria we'd been drinking tonight.

The tide of pleasure was surging through us both, and we moved together

as one, feeding off each other's passion, anticipation, need and obsession. His thrusts became faster and more frantic as he built to his own crescendo, while I sunk deeper into my own orgasmic bliss.

He moaned my name against my lips as he came undone, filling me with his hot cum, sending me over the edge and into the pure ecstasy. I screamed as my hands broke free from his tight hold, clawing at his back as he pounded into me faster and harder. He knew exactly what I needed and how I needed it.

I came hard until tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes. My thighs shook around his hips as his movements slowed to a stop.

He leaned back, kissing me passionately again, cupping my face in his massive hand. "*Mwen tètman renmen ou,*" he said, quietly, his eyes flickering up to meet mine. I sucked in a sharp breath, eyes widening in shock.

Little butterflies took up residence in my chest as I kissed him back and said, "I've been falling for you too, Met Kalfou. I think I fell before I realized it."

His eyes darkened at my use of his real name, and I felt his cock thickening against me again. But I was spent, and needed to sleep. My eyelids were drooping, and I let out a long yawn as Theodore rolled off of me.

We stayed like that for what seemed like hours after Bael joined us. The three of us drifted off into a lazy sleep, curled against one another while soft jazz filled the smokey room.



I stood in front of the mirror as the *veves* began to glow. The dark room was lit with ominous blueish-purple light that played off of the skull on Theodore's face. He and Bael watched me, ready to step in if I needed it.

Theodore was next to the mirrors with his hand resting along the frame, a glow emanating from his palm. Bael sat perched atop the mirror, letting his legs swing casually, as if this was just any other day, and I wasn't about to decide the fate of my existence.

Last night felt like a fever dream. It left my body feeling languid, content and needy for another session with my men. I was getting greedy, despite the fact that I'd been fucked to within an inch of my life only hours ago.

But now it was time to do this. To make this official. It was time I stopped fucking around and stalling.

The mirror rippled, and then a fuzzy shape appeared as it came into focus. I recognized my bedroom back on Frenchman Street. The scene was frozen in time, the white gauzy curtains paused mid flutter as wind blew through the

open window. The numbers on the clock on my bedside table were nothing more than four short dashes in the darkness.

I could almost smell the coppery tang of blood even though the mirror. There was a lot of blood. It was everywhere—on the walls, splattered all over my duvet, and puddled on the floor.

I thought back to that night that seemed so far away to me now, but was only seconds ago in the waking world. I'd been delirious, terrified, and so worried that Austin would come home and bring his wrath down upon me. Austin's rage was more terrifying than the blood I'd been soaked in.

I dragged my gaze to the figure on the bed. My body was pale, my lips turning a shade of bluish black, and my dress was covered in crimson splatters.

I finally remembered why I was wearing that white dress. It was the reason Austin chose that night to punish me for the last time. The white dress was a tradition in my culture. Women and girls often wore them on carnival days in celebration. It'd been a long time since I'd donned my own dress or participated in any of the carnival festivities that my family used to love.

But that night, I'd decided to allow myself that indulgence. I wanted to feel close to my dad, who used to lift me up on his shoulders to watch the parades. We'd toss candies at the children in honor and respect for Papa Legba, and we'd celebrate until the sun rose the next morning, just to do it all over again the next day.

Helping Grandma the night before had solidified things in my head finally. I decided enough was enough, and I'd planned on leaving Austin the next morning. I looked to the far corner of my dark bedroom where I'd placed a small leather duffle bag on my blood-splattered white chair. My clothes were halfway packed, spilling out onto the floor.

Memories bombarded me, as if a movie was playing through my head, reminding me of the freedom that was so fucking close I could taste it. If only he hadn't come home from the bar early that night. If I'd been able to get out an hour sooner. I'd have gone to Grandma Anne's, and I'd have been safe.

But there was nothing I could do about that now. There was no way to turn back time and undo my mistakes. In the end, Austin had caught me, and he'd flown into a terrifying rage—one that ended with him slashing a kitchen knife across my throat.

I hesitated as I looked at Theodore or...Met Kalfou as he was tonight. His eyes were deep and unfathomable, like two black holes in the night sky. His

skin glowed with a violet light, highlighting the skull hidden underneath. He looked like a creature of darkness that had come to take my soul away.

"You have to make a choice, Moria Laveau," Bael said from the top of the mirror, his usually mischievous expression replaced by something much more serious. "No matter what you decide, we'll be here waiting." My heart pounded as I made my decision, dreading whatever consequences it would bring.

I took a deep breath and walked towards Theodore, unable to resist the pull that emanated from him. "You're safe here with us," he whispered into my ear as he leaned in, rubbing his cheek against mine. I closed my eyes, savoring the touch of his skin. "No one will ever hurt you again."

I finally pulled back and stared into the mirror again, taking a deep, steady breath. It was time to do this.

As soon as I crossed over to the other side of the glass barrier, everything changed—time slowed down, colors became dull and almost grayscale. All except for the bright crimson blood on the floor, the wall, the bed, and splattered all over my beautiful white dress.

I approached my body slowly, peering down at myself as I hovered between life and death. The woman on the bed no longer looked like me. She was sallow, lifeless, and utterly beaten. Looking at her now, it was like I'd lived a whole other life on the other side of death in the span of minutes.

It would be so easy to step into my body again the way I'd watch Liam do. I could slip right in and, in seconds, breathe life into the corpse in front of me. I could run for the phone or shout from the window that I needed help. I could crawl to safety and maybe, just maybe, make it out alive.

But the longer I contemplated that, the more repulsive it felt. All I could think of were the two men on the other side of that mirror, waiting to see what I would choose. Would I choose to abandon this life and be with them forever?

I closed my eyes and focused on Bael's voice. His words echoed in my mind: "*No matter what you decide, we'll be here waiting.*" He had promised me safety and a new life with them. Theodore and Bael had given me many opportunities to choose between this world and theirs. Their world was not perfect—full of death, grief, indulgence, and pleasure. To be honest, it was far better than the reality I faced every day when I was alive.

I wanted that. I needed that.

I took another deep breath before opening my eyes to stare at the lifeless

body on the bed.

With my decision in my head, I let my eyes fall closed. Time, which once stood almost perfectly still, suddenly shifted. A tingle of awareness buzzed through me, and I rocked forward, unsteady on my feet. My eyes flew open, and suddenly, the room burst into colorful life. The sound of the city roared through my ears, the curtains waved in the breeze, blood dripped down the wall, and the distant sound of a hyperventilating man came from the hallway.

I stared down at the body on the bed, no longer feeling a single spark of life inside of her. She was me, but also not. It was as if I'd suddenly and forcefully shed my skin and stepped out of it. She was hollow and lifeless, cold and dead.





The word went dark, and some unearthly force tugged on my body until I felt like I was being pulled through ice-cold water. I screamed, but no sound came out. All I could do was let it take me. My bedroom disappeared from around me, and seconds later, I found myself once again standing in front of the tall mirror with the glowing *veves*.

I stumbled back, my entire body buzzing with energy. Theodore stood in the exact same place he'd stood when I left, but now Bael stood opposite him on the other side of the mirror. They watched me, their eyes scanning me from head to toe.

Bael's lips were wide, and a broad, satisfied grin told me he was relieved and unsurprised at my choice. Theo watched me intensely, his chest rising and falling faster than normal, his grip on his walking stick tight.

"*Bienvenue à la maison, mon amour,*" Bael said, taking a smooth step toward me. "You chose wisely. I'm happy to say that I had complete faith in you."

Still trembling, I managed to smile back, shaking out my arms as if to ground myself and come back to reality, which was ironic given the fact that now I was officially dead and living in purgatory.

"Did I do the right thing?" I asked, eyeing the two men.

"You would not have chosen otherwise," Theo said reassuringly.

I loosed a breath, feeling a bit calmer now. "There's one more thing I want to do, but I'm not sure it's possible," I said, staring at the darkened mirror that now showed only our three reflections. "This is your realm, Theo. I don't want to step on any toes."

Theo stepped toward me, lifting my hand and bringing it to his lips. He kissed my knuckles softly, his black eyes peering into mine deeply. "My realm is yours to explore, my love. You do not need to ask my permission."

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. *My love...* I loved the sound of those words on his lips. My whole ghostly body warmed in pleasure. I just hoped Grandma listed to me. Now that I was dead, time was running again, and I hoped she would wait the three days to call the police to come find me. I had something to finish before they could take me away.

I looked in the mirror again and stepped close to the glass, Bael and Theo parting for me, giving me space. I placed my palm on the frame, and the veves that surrounded the glass began to glow with violet light. I felt the energy of the veves coursing through my limbs. It was different than before, when I'd ushered Liam through. This was more potent and all-consuming.

Soon the glass began to ripple and change, our dark reflections dissipating, and in their place, another shape appeared. I recognized the room immediately.

Austin stared at me from the mirror, his face ashen, his eyes bloodshot, and his hands shaking as they clutched the bathroom counter. His dress shirt was splattered with darkening blood, as were his hands, face and blond hair. It was slicked back, as if he'd repeatedly run his fingers through the strands.

"Look at that pathetic fool," Bael spat. There was more venom in his voice than I knew he was capable of. His blue eyes were as dark as the deep ocean, and in them was pure rage. "I want to fuck you while his corpse watches," he growled out.

"I'll gladly hold him down as you peel his eyes from his skull," Theo added. Flicking my gaze between them, I watched as Theodore flexed his fingers on his fancy cane, as if it was taking a lot of willpower to hold himself still. His black eyes were locked onto Austin like a reaper preparing

to consume a delicious soul.

I realized I was looking at Austin from the vantage point of my bathroom mirror. He couldn't see me, but I could read every emotion in his eyes. I could practically taste the icy cold tendrils of fear swirling around him. Not that I thought he had any sort of regret for what he'd done. He was only afraid of what this meant for him.

"He was never worthy of you, blue girl," Bael gritted through clenched teeth. "He doesn't deserve the next breath he takes."

A surge of rage rose up inside of me, and my blood began to feel like it was boiling hot. Gritting my teeth, I clenched my fingers into tight fists as my breathing sped up.

This was the man I'd trusted with my life. The man I promised to love for the rest of it. I just never anticipated that he might be the one to put an end to it. He wasn't the man I thought he was. He was a killer. A sadistic abuser who I allowed to hurt me for too long.

My fury was boiling over, and all I wanted to do was let it all out. I gritted my teeth and slammed my fist against the surface of the mirror, my hand disappearing right through it. Austin screamed in terror as he stumbled backward, his reddened eyes widening with fear. I hesitated for a moment, but then stepped forward, walking right into the mirror as if it were an open door.

I emerged on the other side, my mind racing as I took in my surroundings. I stood on the marble counter top as Austin huddled against the far wall of our bathroom, his face twisted in terror and confusion. The room itself was a mess; everything seemed to have been thrown around recklessly.

"What did you do, Austin?" I asked sweetly, taking a step toward him. My steps were light as I hopped off of the countertop, landing on the floor as if I were as light as a feather.

Glancing down at myself, my body wasn't quite corporeal. I could see right through my limbs to the blood smeared on the tile floor. For some reason, that brought a wicked smile to my lips.

He recoiled further into the corner, his eyes darting around as if he could somehow find a way to escape from me. He was cornered, and even if he tried to run, I'd catch him.

"What are you?!" he shouted, scrambling along the wall, heading for the shower. "This isn't fucking possible. You're fucking dead! You stupid bitch, you're supposed to stay dead!" His eyes were wild, and sweat poured from his

hairline. "I knew you were a devil whore, Moria. I fucking knew it!"

*Devil whore...* That was a new one.

Once upon a time those words would have cut me to the core. They would have pierced my heart before sending me into a spiral of self-doubt. I used to let his words matter. I hung on his every word like it was gospel.

"I didn't mean—" he started to say before faltering and shaking his head helplessly. "It wasn't supposed to go like this."

With a single step, I lunged forward and grabbed Austin by the throat before lifting him up against the wall. He gasped for air as my fingers dug into his fragile neck. In life, I'd never been physically strong. I was small, slender and passive, but in death, my strength was amplified. Now that my physical body no longer held me hostage, lifting him was easier than breathing.

His mouth hung open in shock as he helplessly stared at me, gaping like a fucking fish. I held him there like a puppet on strings, his feet thrashing as he dangled helplessly.

My smile was wide, and I knew my eyes were wild with bloodlust. I wanted this man to suffer. I wanted him to feel every ounce of pain he inflicted on me, both emotionally, and physically.

I wasted years on this bastard. Scared, alone and screaming inside. But I was done. That Moria was dead and gone now, and in her place was a woman who would never bow at a man's feet again. I'd brought Met Kalfou to his knees. I could do anything.

I used the tip of my finger to carve a bloody, fleshy M into his forehead, sending blood gushing down his pale face as he screamed out in pain. His fingers clawed at my hand that was wrapped around his throat, but I didn't feel a thing. When I was finished, the bright red wound took up his entire forehead like a brand.

M for murderer. M for Moria.

I didn't want to kill him. That would be too easy. He didn't deserve to have such a quick end to it all. He deserved to rot with what he'd done for the rest of his long, long life.

His fear was so palpable it seemed like it filled all four corners of our bathroom; even with my immortal state, I could feel Austin's terror radiating from every pore on his body. That fear tuned his blond hair bright white until he looked like a madman. His skin was ashen, and his eyes were bloodshot, turning milky and sightless in an instant. I had no idea how I was doing this,

but it was like I willed it, and it simply happened.

"Nobody will ever believe you," I whispered harshly into his face, letting my cold, ghostly breath wash over his face as he flinched away from me. I laughed as he soiled himself, piss creating a puddle on the bathroom floor, mixing with my blood.

When he was blind, white haired and whimpering, I dropped him hard on the floor. His head cracked against the wall with a satisfying thump.

I was done. This was it. I'd never allow this monster to haunt me ever again. He was trash. He was nothing anymore.

I stepped away from Austin for the last time and walked straight through the bathroom mirror without looking back. I'd left him in the bathroom, a mess of sobs, blood, sweat and fear; one last reminder to himself that he'd fucked with the wrong woman.

In the blink of an eye I was back in the darkened room with the mirror at my back. Bael and Theodore waited for me, their faces alight with the violet glow of the *veves*. Behind them, to my shock, stood Ellie, Tony, Roy and Rex. They watched in fascination as I came closer, and they were smiling at me. Ellie winked like a proud sister, and the clowns pumped their fists in celebration. My friends. My new family. Happiness beyond comprehension filled my entire soul at the thought of spending the rest of my existence among these souls.

I wrapped my arms tightly around Bael's neck as he placed a kiss on the top of my head. "You did it, *mon amour*," he said, his voice laced with pride. "And now you'll never leave me." He grabbed my cheeks as he pulled back, his blue eyes flitting between mine. "Say you'll never leave."

"*je t'aime, Bael St Claire*," I said against his lips as I kissed him back. "I'll never leave."

He kissed me once, twice, and a third time. "*je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime, my blue girl*." It was a promise, and I believed him.

Bael stepped aside and motioned for Theodore to come closer. He smiled down at me, his pitch black eyes filled with adoration, pride and contentment. The rage that had been simmering inside of him was gone.

He reached up and tenderly swept a strand of hair behind my ear as he took both of my hands in his own and kissed each knuckle softly, one by one. When finished, he said, "Do you trust me, my priestess?" I didn't even hesitate before nodding. I *did* trust him. I trusted him and Bael with my afterlife completely. "Turn around," he said, casting his gaze over my

shoulder, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

My breath caught as I frowned in confusion, but I listened, trusting that he had a good reason. When I faced the mirror that once depicted the life I was leaving behind, I gasped and took a hesitant step forward. I blinked repeatedly as if the image reflected back at me would disappear and everything would go back to normal.

But it didn't disappear. Instead, I made my way closer to the mirror with my hand slightly outstretched, my lips curling into a delighted grin, because just under my caramel brown skin, was a glowing violet skull that looked just like Theodore's, and in my mismatched eyes, was a sea of endless stars and galaxies that I held within me.

For the first time in my existence, I was powerful.

I was eternal, and I was utterly infinite.



FIN

# WHERE TO STALK ME!



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