

A golden snake is coiled on dark, large leaves. The background is dark with intricate, golden, swirling patterns. The title is written in a golden, serif font.

COURT OF
MOONLIGHT
AND
SHADOWS

NIGHTSHADE UNIVERSITY BOOK ONE

POPPY IRELAND

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Cover design by Jay Aheer

Published by Romantasy Publishing

PO Box 55091

Portland, OR 97238

*To the sexy Fae men that whisk bookworms away and dick them down in
enchanted forests.*

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ABOUT COURT OF MOONLIGHT & SHADOWS...

For those enticed by forbidden desires and secrets that demand a price...

Nightshade University was supposed to be a land of opportunity, a haven of knowledge. A prestigious institution catering to the elite Fae of all four courts:

The Dawn Court: Defenders of justice and honor.

The Dusk Court: Agents skilled in secrets and espionage.

The Demon Court: Bringers of chaos, reveling in destruction.

The Moon Court: Mystics wielding celestial magic and divination.

As a freshman, navigating power and politics was not on my syllabus, but now it's a game I'm forced to play.

At the heart of the intrigue stands Lysander Thorne. Our connection is electric, an attraction that's as forbidden as it is undeniable. With him, I'm drawn into a world of shifting alliances and treacherous loyalties.

But as I delve deeper, I discover more than just courtly schemes. A darkness looms, one that ties my fate to the very soul of Nightshade University. I might be the key to unearthing a malevolent spirit, but at what cost? My heart, my future... or perhaps even my life?

In a world where secret societies rule, and passion intertwines with politics, trust is a luxury and every decision, a high-stakes gamble.

ONE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

I'd seen fountains before, but none that gushed blood like a fresh wound.

The air was heavy with an ominous stillness, the kind that came before a storm. My eyes were drawn to the center of the room, where the fountain bubbled and sprayed. The coppery tang infiltrating my nose left no question that the red liquid was, in fact, blood and not water dyed for effect. New students gathered around it, many of their faces twisted in horror and disbelief. I tried to step back, to distance myself from the gruesome scene, but I couldn't tear my eyes away. It was as if the fountain had cast a spell on me, drawing me into the darkness that lurked beneath the surface of this prestigious Fae institution.

My brother, Rook, pressed his hand on my lower back, nudging me forward. "It's okay, Sarielle."

Rook towered over me, his lean, muscular frame accentuated by his fitted black blazer. His hair was a shocking shade of blue, a trait inherited from our grandfather, and his striking features were marked by a glittering scar on his left cheek. Despite his imposing presence, the kindness in his eyes always put me at ease.

It was nice knowing I wasn't alone while walking toward the biggest moment of my life.

"The blood is creepy," I hissed to him.

He chuckled. "Just wait until you see the rest of it." Rook whistled softly, looking up. "Ever seen gargoyles like those?"

I followed his gaze to the ceiling, where stone monsters leered down menacingly. "They're a bit disconcerting," I murmured.

He traced the patterns on the wall with his finger. "These vines... they're incredibly detailed."

Nodding, I was drawn to the walls, which were punctuated by glowing crystals and flickering candles. The subtle light they cast was bewitching.

Rook raised an eyebrow. "It's like they're alive, isn't it? The way the shadows move?"

I quivered slightly, feeling the room's enchantment. "It's mesmerizing."

I knew he was just trying to distract me from the disturbing fountain, but I

was still unsettled.

A sense of dread enveloped me as my attention gravitated back to the fountain. What had once stood as a pristine work of art had morphed into a gothic masterpiece of horror. I took a hesitant step closer, feeling the cold draft of the room. The fountain pulsed and bubbled with a thick, dark liquid that gleamed eerily, reminiscent of oil in the dim ambiance. I swallowed hard, my heart quickening. The blood, a shade so profound that it bordered on black, welled up, nearly spilling over the edges. It descended in thick streams, pooling ominously at the base, making me shudder involuntarily.

I scanned the room, noting the proud parents standing in the shadows. My own parents were present, chatting with other members of the Dawn Court, my beautiful mother worrying her lip as my father spoke in hushed tones.

The Dawn Court was known for their diplomatic prowess and their ability to keep the peace among the Fae realms. They were respected and powerful, with a long history of leading negotiations and making important decisions for the entire community. My parents would often regale me with tales of their experiences, of their encounters with powerful Fae and their successes in negotiating peace treaties. It was a life I had always envisioned for myself, a life of luxury, tradition, and influence. But now, as I stood in this ominous room, I couldn't help but wonder if I was truly cut out for the life of a diplomat. A life of rules and obedience.

"Don't look so scared," Rook said, a teasing glint in his eyes as he noticed my tense shoulders.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves, but it trembled out. "It's not that simple."

He leaned against a pillar, studying me. "Let me guess... you're worried about the test?"

I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek. "It determines everything. Which court I belong to, my place here at Nightshade University..."

Rook crossed his arms. "I'm looking forward to having you join me here. I think we will have lots of fun, Sare-bear."

I cast my eyes downward, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of my sleeve. "But the pressure, Rook... if I fail, if I don't meet Mom and Dad's expectations..."

He stepped closer, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "You're more than just their expectations. Remember that."

As we stood there, I noticed a few members of the Demon Court walking

by. They were tall and imposing, their eyes glinting with an otherworldly light. The Demon Court was known for their dangerous and unpredictable nature, and the mere sight of them sent a current of fear through me. I had heard stories of their brutal tactics and willingness to do whatever it took to get what they wanted. I silently vowed to stay far away from them, to avoid their attention at all costs. What if the fountain somehow determined I belonged with them? What if—

“You’re worrying again,” Rook pointed out.

I scowled at him, shaking my head. “I’ll be fine.”

He smiled. “I was nervous too, but you have nothing to fear, Sarielle. You’ll be in the Dawn Court just like I am. Just like our parents are.”

My brother had a point. A Fae’s inherent traits were passed down from one generation to the next. The risk of anyone being placed in a court outside of the one they were born in was rare. Still, my stomach twisted at Rook’s words. There was a small, nagging voice in the back of my head whispering, “But what if I don’t *want* to belong to the Dawn Court?”

I meant no disrespect. I knew that our parents had important jobs. Each faction had their own duties and responsibilities that helped shape our world. The Dawn Court was judge, jury, and executioner—all essential roles to maintaining a civilized society. They prided themselves on taking the moral high ground, no matter how difficult that could be sometimes.

Conversely, the Demon Court thrived on chaos and destruction. They reveled in mayhem and enjoyed causing pain and suffering in others. This group comprised some of the most powerful and skilled fighters, assassins, and magic users.

The Dusk Court was considered the most mysterious, as they lived a secretive life, lurking mostly in the shadows, using their mastery of espionage and subterfuge to achieve their goals. Like the demons, they, too, were skilled warriors. But they were also exceptional manipulators, which perhaps made them more dangerous than their counterparts.

But the court I feared being assigned to the most was the Moon Court. It was the smallest group, albeit an influential one, that specialized in magic and divination. They were known for their ability to harness the power of the moon to cast complicated spells and see into the future. That all sounded great in theory; however, their powers came at a cost. Citizens of the Moon Court were often consumed by their magic, resulting in mental health issues as they aged. It was not uncommon for members of this faction to become

paranoid or delusional as the toll of their powers became too great to bear. Many turned into recluses or even disappeared altogether, never being heard from again. The thought of being plagued with constant visions until your sanity slowly deteriorated was a terrifying concept to me.

“Will the first group of students please step forward?” a middle-aged man, who introduced himself as Dean Aurelius, called. He wore a long black robe, with an obnoxiously large set of devil’s horns on his head. I had no idea what the latter’s purpose was, but I’d assumed they had some significance in the trial that was about to commence. “Don’t worry; the fountain doesn’t bite.” The subtle lines on his face were more pronounced as he chuckled to himself.

I pursed my lips, holding in a snarky retort.

I couldn’t fathom what that man could possibly find so amusing. The fountain may not have been capable of biting, but all that blood came from somewhere, and I was willing to bet it wasn’t voluntarily donated.

I looked to my brother, who gave me a reassuring smile. “Go on. I’ll be right over there with Mom and Dad. We’ll celebrate when you get back.”

As Rook took his place beside our parents, I sucked in a deep breath. Why was I so worried? I was being ridiculous. Gross sacrificial fountain aside, my brother went through this very same trial on his first day at Nightshade University two years ago and came out just fine. I grew up in the Dawn Court. I was *raised* in the Dawn Court.

I was a Dawn Court Fae.

I took a step forward as the dean beckoned us closer. There were about two dozen students in the first group standing in a circle. We may have been dressed alike in frumpy white linen robes, but we all wore varying expressions on our faces. Some looked terrified, others looked excited, and a few even looked downright bored, as if this were an everyday occurrence.

But it *wasn’t* an everyday occurrence. This was one of the most important moments of any Fae’s life. As we launched into our newly minted adult lives, this moment determined the fate of our futures. It solidified our place in society for the rest of our adulthood.

My gaze shifted as I suddenly felt a heated stare directly across from me, and I gasped when I found the source. He was easily the most attractive guy I’d ever seen in my life. The personification of a tall, dark, and handsome hero from my favorite romance books. His thick hair was freshly cut and nearly black. Skin a deep shade of bronze. Wide shoulders branched out into

full-body muscles that were obvious, even beneath the shapeless robe he wore. But this guy was no hero. The arctic eyes that drilled into me left no doubt about that. They were soulless, yet... not. Haunted, yet composed. He was a juxtaposition of dark and light, a necessary evil to strengthen virtue. If I had to use one word to describe him, it would be *psychopath*.

As his full lips curved upward, it confirmed that I was the subject of his attention.

Awesome.

I had never felt more like prey than I did at that moment.

“Come on, now, don’t be shy,” Dean Aurelius said, snapping me out of it. As we neared the fountain, tension hung thick in the air. Our white robes rustled with each hesitant step, and my heart pounded loudly in my ears. Something just didn’t feel right.

The metallic scent, sharp and off-putting, grew stronger, making my stomach roil. Trying to focus on the path ahead, my eyes betrayed me, darting to the fountain.

The blood inside it didn’t just flow; it seemed to twist and turn, almost like it was alive.

Looking around, I caught the gaze of a girl to my left. Her wide eyes mirrored my own unease. To my right, a guy clutched his robe tight, his lips pinned shut.

Suddenly, the blood in the fountain moved faster, spiraling into a whirl. It seemed as if an unseen energy burst from it, making the hairs on my arms stand on end. Murmurs swept through the crowd. We all stood, entranced by fear, watching with trepidation.

Then, with a deafening roar, the sticky red liquid rushed away, revealing a dark opening beneath the fountain. A set of stone steps led down into the depths of the earth. I knew that this was our destination, the place where we’d be baptized into our new courts.

“Descend the stairs,” the dean spoke with a wry grin. “Your future awaits.”

Before I could process his words, movement caught my eye. A girl, seemingly my age, with sunlight tangled in her blonde hair and a bright, almost infectious smile approached me. There was a playful lightness in her step as she twirled, making her white robe flutter around her.

“Hey there, Sarielle!” she chimed, voice lilting and dreamy. “Don’t look so pale. It’s just a little blood ritual. I’m Lirien.”

I stumbled over my words. “How do you... know my name?”

Her smile widened. “The ravens told me. Said we’d be great friends. Watch your step.”

As she pulled me forward, linking her arm with mine, I got a better look at her. Braided strands of her hair intertwined with wildflowers. A soft blush graced her cheeks, making her look both radiant and innocent. Her robe shimmered with feathers and tiny specks of glitter, creating a magical effect. Envy erupted within me. She seemed so free, so unburdened.

“I know your family is from the Dawn Court, which means you’re supposedly stuffy and a rule-follower, but I’m looking forward to all the adventures we’re going to have. My mother says I shouldn’t tell people about the future, but it’s so much more fun. I think a good friendship should start off with honesty, don’t you?”

I nodded distractedly. “What court do your parents belong to?”

“Moon Court, naturally. Mom is a seer. Dad teaches astrology at our local high school. When they told me I was going to marry your brother and—”

I paused, nearly tripping over a step. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh, sorry, sometimes I get ahead of myself. He won’t fall in love with me until next year. This year, you’re going to help me keep Aurora Emberwood and her grubby too-good hands away from him. I don’t know what he sees in her.”

My brother had never mentioned a girl named Aurora Emberwood.

“Um, I think maybe I’m going to—”

“Oh, don’t be scared. You’ll get used to my quiriness real fast. Promise. We’re going to be family, after all. I already picked out your bridesmaid dress. Navy blue is going to look so pretty with your pink hair.” She reached out and flipped a piece of my hair over my shoulder.

I wasn’t sure if this girl was legitimately insane or could actually see the future, but either way, she was freaking me out.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Lirien winked. The sconces leading down the steps illuminated her playful face. “That I’m totally crazy, right?”

Could she read minds, too?

“I’m just trying to focus on the ritual,” I choked out.

“Right. This is a big day for you,” Lirien replied. “Don’t worry, I’ll be here to comfort you after everything. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Right.”

The more we went underground, the colder and damper the air became.

Every step felt heavier, as if I were dragging myself further into the abyss. Fear and uncertainty gripped me as I heard the sound of dripping water and faint whispers in the distance.

As we made it to the bottom, Lirien bounced beside me, her eyes shining with excitement. “I just love caves. Don’t you? Sometimes, when it’s quiet, I can hear the whispers of the dead.” Her smile widened as she turned to me.

A rush of nameless terror rolled over me. Her light tone and dreamy expression seemed out of place in this dark, foreboding space. Especially with the whole *I can communicate with the dead* thing. I hesitated, wondering if I should pull away from her, but she was already moving ahead.

We stood in a large cave, where the air was pregnant with the scent of earth and decay, and the only light came from flickering torches that cast creepy shadows on the stone walls. I felt the pulsing power of magic coursing through the cavern, and it made my heart race.

The space was massive, with high ceilings that seemed to stretch up to the very heavens. The walls were jagged and rough, made of black rock that was slick with moisture. In the center of the pit was a large pool full of blood, its dark surface reflecting the torchlight in a sinister dance.

“Welcome to Nightshade University. As you are aware, you have been summoned here to determine which court you belong to.” Dean Aurelius’s voice carried throughout the cavern, bouncing off the walls and making it impossible to tell where it was coming from. “But do not be mistaken—this is not a mere test. This is a trial by fire, a challenge to prove your worth to all of Fae kind.”

Lirien’s hand slipped into mine. I hadn’t even realized she ran back to me. Against my better judgment, I squeezed it tightly, drawing comfort from the touch. I knew I wasn’t alone in my fear—the other students around us were tense and nervous, their eyes darting around the cave. I didn’t know what lay ahead of us, but I was determined to face it with courage.

“You must step into the pool for your baptism. When you emerge, the court you belong to will be seared into your skin.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I had heard about the baptism, and I was anxious about how painful it was supposed to be.

Lirien squeezed my hand, sensing my reluctance and fear. “It will be alright.” Her soft feminine voice was a soothing balm on my nerves.

“The power of the baptism will draw out your true identity,” Dean Aurelius continued. “But you must be brave and trust that the process will

bring you closer to your true purpose and destiny, no matter the outcome.”

Sheesh. Could he be more ominous?

My heart pounded in my chest as I took a step toward the baptismal pond. The bloody pool was as dark as midnight, and it seemed to contain a malevolent energy. I glanced around the cave, searching for any sign of danger, but all I could see were the torches flickering in the darkness.

“This pool has been used for court baptisms for centuries. The power of Nightshade University’s alumni runs deep within these grounds, and those who enter its halls are forever changed.” His voice echoed through the cave, emphasizing the gravity of the situation.

Lirien tugged on my hand, and I looked over at her. Her eyes were wide with excitement, and I could see the reflection of the flames in their depths.

“Me first!” she exclaimed before letting go of me and prancing toward the pool. I watched with my mouth hanging open as she sprinted toward it, other students parting in surprise. The sharp pitch of Lirien’s cry ricocheted through the cavernous space, jolting the hushed murmurs of onlookers.

“She’s mad,” someone whispered in awe, as her jubilant voice seemed to linger in the cold, damp air.

With wild abandon, Lirien dove headfirst into the pool. I was spellbound, unable to tear my gaze away as she frolicked in the dark, viscous blood. It cascaded over her like a morbid waterfall, each droplet painting a picture of death. I drew a sharp breath, the pungent scent of copper stinging my nostrils. Around me, others gagged or turned away, their faces twisted in disgust.

The cavern stretched out, the pool of blood appearing even vaster from my vantage point. Menacing stalactites, like the fangs of some primordial beast, hung precariously above. I shuffled forward, my foot catching on a bone half-buried in the rocky ground.

“Watch your step,” someone muttered close by, their voice laced with annoyance.

Lirien began to rise, her form emerging from the blood-soaked pool. It clung to her fiercely, as if reluctant to let go, drenching her robe and transforming it from pristine white to a haunting shade of red. Her once blonde hair was slicked to her head, and as she turned my way, I was struck by the spooky luminescence of her skin, radiant in the dim light.

I felt a pang of envy, wishing I could be so fearless.

Some of the students politely clapped as Lirien curtsied. Others stared at her in wonder. I didn’t think any of us were surprised that she was affiliated

with the Moon Court. It certainly explained her... eccentric personality.

My anxiety rose as I wondered what fate awaited me in this dark, eerie cave.

“Scared?” I startled as the deep voice rumbled beside me.

I had to consciously force my feet to remain rooted in place as I noticed the guy from earlier standing beside me.

“No.” My voice was so shaky I didn’t even believe myself.

“Right,” he scoffed.

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dimples popped on each side of his mouth as his lips formed into a cocky grin. “Let me guess, Dawn Court? You look like Dawn Court. Righteous. Terrified. You wear your emotions on your face. No secrets. No *backbone*.”

I resisted the urge to stomp my foot like a toddler. “And you must be Dusk Court. Cocky. Arrogant. Crude. Compensating for something.”

Our voices were barely above a whisper, but I could feel how much attention this little spat of ours was getting from the others, and I didn’t like it.

Mystery Guy’s dark gaze slowly traveled the length of my body, pausing briefly on my chest as if he had X-ray vision or something. “I can assure you, I have nothing to compensate for.”

“I can assure you, I don’t care.”

I didn’t mean to encourage his rude behavior by continuing this conversation, but something about him riled me up.

He smirked and leaned closer to whisper, “You’re blushing.”

“Am not,” I snapped back.

He chuckled, the sound low and teasing. “Denial. Cute. Tell me, does your face always turn that lovely shade when you’re about to dive into a pool of blood? Or is it just when you talk to handsome Dusk Court Fae?”

I gave him a wry look. “Only when I’m around overconfident men who think they have something to prove.”

“Well, I suppose I should go next then, gorgeous. Be back in a minute.” Mr. Broody gave me a flirty wink before stepping into the pool and dunking his head beneath the surface.

It was official. That guy was a certifiable psycho *and* an asshole.

I watched in horror as the blood rippled and bubbled. Steam rose from where he was submerged, and Lirien giggled. “Oh, I bet he’s trying not to scream. It’s rather unpleasant in there.”

I snapped my attention to Lirien as she patted her skin with a towel. “Unpleasant?” I asked.

She nodded. “Like dancing in fire. Or rolling around in a bed of broken glass.” Great. Just great.

The jerk broke the surface of the pool with a loud gasp, making me turn to look back at him, blood pouring down his face in crimson waves as his jaw tensed. Even though he didn’t scream as Lirien predicted, I could see the agony in his movements. The vibrant way his dark eyes narrowed. His labored breathing.

The robe clung to his abs, outlining every muscle in his body. Slapping a hand against his neck, he swatted the blood away as if it burned his skin. And after he smeared it a little, I saw the edge of the glowing rune on his neck. It was a blade pointed right at his Adam’s apple.

“Dusk Court!” someone shouted.

Just as I’d predicted. No other court made sense. This guy was clearly a warrior. Mischievous. Strong. Anyone could see that with a simple glance.

With a rigid gait, he stepped out of the pool and quickly grabbed a towel, glaring at Lirien. “You’re fucking crazy! You were swimming laps in that hellfire!”

“It’s freezing down here.” She shrugged. “Besides, women are used to bathing in blood. And pain. FYI, I cycle with the moon like clockwork. Me and your future girlfriend are going to sync up soon, so you should thank me for sharing that very helpful information. Also... you can never go wrong with chocolate, unless the girl’s allergic. Which neither of us are.” Lirien winked, then pointed her index finger to him and then to me. “Sarielle, this is Lysander Thorne. Lysander, Sarielle Blackwood, although she doesn’t mind if you call her Sari while you’re in the throes of passion.”

Broody Guy—who was apparently named Lysander—looked as confused as I felt. “What the hell are you talking about? I don’t have a girlfriend.”

It didn’t escape my notice that he didn’t deny the implication that he and I would be in the throes of passion one day.

My cheeks absolutely did not flush at the thought.

My gods, if Lirien and I were going to be friends, as she predicted, we really needed to work on her communication skills. And her filter.

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll learn soon enough.” Lirien winked again.

Lysander shook his head and continued to wipe the blood off of him while slowing his breathing.

One by one, more students went into the pool. As Lysander stated, it was obviously painful. Nearly all of them screamed out in agony. Only the ones designated for the Dusk Court managed to shoulder their pain silently, something that didn't surprise me, considering how secretive they were. It was like they didn't want the world to know their pain tolerance. The more the wails echoed around the cavernous room, the more my heart raced. I was terrified to dive into the pool, but at the same time, I wanted to get it over with so I could get out of here. This place reeked of death, and I was already looking forward to the scalding-hot shower I had every intention of taking later.

Finally, it was my turn, so I walked toward the edge.

Lirien inched closer, as if she were prepared for something, a worried look on her face that had every hair on my neck raised. "You got this," she whispered. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"Will do," I breathed.

And with her encouraging words at the forefront of my mind, I stepped off the edge and fell straight into the bloody depths of my future.

Two

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Knives.

It felt like every inch of my skin was being sliced open by sharp blades. I wanted to scream, but thick blood coated my mouth and filled my lungs with burning embers that seemed to destroy me from the inside out.

It was a pain unlike any I'd ever known. Pain that consumed me. *Destroyed me.*

Lirien had warned me, and I'd watched the other students suffer and scream, but *nothing* prepared me for this. It was like having every inch of my body ripped apart. Every inch of my *soul*.

I clenched my fists and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to endure the excruciating pain. Ghostly whispers echoed in my ears, urging me to be strong, to endure, to embrace the transformation. But it was hard to think of anything other than the agony ripping through me. It overwhelmed my every thought, every inch of my existence. My skin prickled, as if invisible razors were dancing over me, shredding my very being.

A ghostly whisper broke through. "*Endure...*"

Muscles convulsed and tensed, rebelling against the inferno that surged beneath them. "*Persevere,*" a second flickering voice murmured, drifting to my ears like a distant lullaby.

I clung desperately to the pool's edge, fingers pressing into the moss-covered stone, seeking any anchor in this storm of torment.

A third whisper, melancholy and soft, urged, "*Resist the dark embrace.*"

Wave after wave of pain continued its assault, each more intense, each beckoning surrender. Yet, amidst it all, the ghosts' whispers became a beacon, a refrain, urging me not to yield.

And then, something strange began to happen. It felt like an invisible force was pulling me down, dragging me deeper into the pool. I kicked and thrashed, trying to swim to the surface, but it was like fighting a tidal wave. My lungs were struggling to function more and more with each passing second.

My body was weighed down, my limbs growing sluggish as the last bit of oxygen drained from my system. I instinctively tried to gasp for air, but

instead was met with a mouthful of blood. I fought against the invisible force, but it was useless. I was being pulled farther into the depths, being slowly suffocated. How deep was this damn pool of death anyway? I opened my eyes, but there was nothing to see beyond the red tint of the blood surrounding me. My vision began to dim as I slipped into the darkness, my body sinking into the depths of the pool. I couldn't stop thinking of my family up above, waiting patiently for my return, only to be notified of my drowning.

"Why is this happening?" I thought, panic racing through my veins like poison.

With the gory sensation of the blood swallowing me, memories spilled over in my mind. Laughter, love, joy, and the faces of my family. Mom with her always-concerned frown. Dad, his boisterous laugh that could fill any room. And my brother, Rook, whose support never failed to bring a smile to my face.

"This is not your fate, Sarielle."

My limbs were infused with energy as I heard the dreamlike voice inside my head. It was layered with a thousand souls, a sound so alien I shouldn't have been able to decipher it. But I identified every word with shocking clarity.

"You must save me," the strange voice continued. *"You're the only one who can, blood of my blood."* I tried to wade through the thick blood, searching for the surface. *"Focus on my voice, Sarielle."* The disembodied voice continued. *"You must embrace this change wholeheartedly. You must accept that the blood of the ancients runs through your veins like a raging river. Only then will you have the strength to save me."*

I had no idea what that meant, but I chose to run with it because it fueled me with determination. As I made the seemingly never-ending journey, the whispers became so loud they were nearly deafening. Right before I broke through, strong arms banded around my middle, hauling me above the surface. I coughed uncontrollably as I was deposited onto the rough stone, hacking up a sizable puddle of blood.

Every cell in my body was on fire. I groaned in agony as the searing heat took an even firmer hold. The pressure began to increase, squeezing my very essence. Just as I was about to beg someone to put me out of my misery, it stopped. My lungs expelled the last of the blood with an audible gurgle. I took several deep, gulping breaths and opened my eyes to see the tall, darkly

handsome Fae leaning over me. The pain was still present, but it didn't feel like it was ripping me apart anymore. The temperature had cooled considerably.

"You good now?" Lysander's chest heaved with exertion, the wet, bloodstained robe clinging to his muscular frame. He looked extremely pissed off, but I couldn't figure out why.

"Uh-huh," I croaked, groaning as I pushed myself up with wobbly arms.

"She's totally fine," Lirien chirped, breezily waving her hand. "Just a necessary part of the process."

My brows pinched together, trying to decode the crazy girl's statement.

"Miss Blackwood? Do you need a healer?"

I lifted my chin to find the dean looking at me with concern.

I shook my head, managing to fully sit up. "No, I'm okay."

He considered that for a moment before nodding. "Very well." His eyes widened as his gaze dropped. "Oh, my! That's quite unusual, isn't it?"

I looked down, trying to figure out what he was referring to. "What's unusual?"

A full-body shiver ran through me as Lysander knelt beside me, trailing his index finger over the slope of my neck. Red droplets fell from his wet hair onto my arm as he quirked his head to study me.

"What is that?" A deep crease formed between his brows. "I've never seen one like it before."

My skin sang beneath his touch. I didn't know if I was having a crazy chemical reaction to him or if I was imagining the whole thing. I would say the odds were fifty-fifty, because it was quite possible I had actually drowned and I was now in some weird purgatory.

"What is *what*?" I asked, placing my hand over his.

Lysander quickly pulled away as our fingers touched, standing up and taking a step back.

Murmurs scattered through the crowd as my fellow students directed their gazes toward me. Why was everyone staring at me like I was some kind of freak?

"Ignore them." Lirien extended her hand, helping me up. "They'll get used to it."

"Get used to what?" I was sick of repeating myself. I wished someone would just tell me what the hell was going on.

"Your mark," Dean Aurelius began, his voice carrying a weight that

seemed to darken the room. “The crescent shape is clear as day, signifying your relation to the Moon Court, but...”

My heart stuttered. Cold dread settled in my gut, spreading its icy fingers to every inch of my body. “What?” I barely whispered, my fingers trembling as they touched the warm spot on my neck. The very place that betrayed me. “I’m moon-marked?”

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “But it’s filled in entirely. It’s almost as if there’s a... dark energy coming from it.”

Now I was really confused. Not only was I evidently a member of the Moon Court, but the golden crescent-shaped brand that marked a Fae as such was *never* colored in. It was supposed to be an outline, like every other brand I’d ever seen.

What the hell happened to me in that pool?

“No, it can’t be,” my voice quavered. Visions of the Moon Court, its mysterious rites, and the aloof, often isolated members flooded my thoughts. It was the one court I never wished to belong to.

Dean Aurelius looked at me, sympathy evident in his eyes. “It’s unusual, given your lineage.”

“My family... we’re from the Dawn Court,” I stammered, disbelief clouding my voice. Memories of my childhood, bathed in the golden light of the rising sun, rituals and traditions all tied to the Dawn Court, filled my mind. Tears threatened to spill as I wondered what would happen next. Would I be estranged from everything I knew? Would my family disown me?

Dean Aurelius took a deep breath. “Sometimes, the fates have different plans. There must be a reason you’ve been marked this way.”

“Is that why the pool of blood was dragging me down?”

Lysander took another step back, as if I just confessed I had a venereal disease. People whispered around me as I tried to process.

“The pool doesn’t drag students down,” the dean replied with a boisterous laugh, as if what I was suggesting was hilarious.

Lysander grumbled, “I had to take another blood bath because, evidently, the crazed Moon Court chick doesn’t know how to swim.”

I scowled. Just five minutes ago, he was flirting with me, and now, because I was labeled a member of the Moon Court, I was suddenly too weird for him. I didn’t want to date his Dusk Court ass, anyway. Not that I could. Romantic relationships between the courts were strictly prohibited.

Holy shit, I was a member of the Moon Court!

“Are you sure it’s a moon on my neck?” I asked.

“Positive,” Lirien answered. “We’re going to be roommates. I call the bed on the right. I like to sleep in the nude under the moon’s glow, and the beams hit that mattress perfectly.”

Oh, gods. What would my parents think? I was supposed to be Dawn Court. I was *always* supposed to be Dawn Court. I knew all the laws. Had shadowed my mother at work for the last two summers.

“This can’t be right,” I argued. “My parents... my brother...”

“The blood doesn’t lie,” the dean said matter-of-factly.

Every bone in my body buzzed with awareness. I looked around at the students staring at me. “Did anyone else hear voices in the pool?”

“Voices?” the dean repeated, while a few students snickered.

Something was terribly wrong.

“I totally heard voices!” Lirien said excitedly. “But to be fair, I *always* hear voices. They’re so fun. Like little imaginary friends inside my head. *Don’t kill that Fae, Lirien. Knives aren’t for play, Lirien. You can’t slap that guy in his sleep, Lirien.* So bossy, but they give such good advice.”

Oh my gods, I was going crazy.

A whirlwind of emotions tore through me: shock, disbelief, fear. Moon Court? The very thought sent a fresh wave of panic spiraling through me. It was unfathomable. For generations, my lineage had proudly stood with the Dawn Court. Every tale from my childhood, every lesson, every custom I had learned was steeped in its golden traditions. The Dawn Court’s tenets and truths had been etched into my soul from the moment I took my first breath.

But now, the cruel twist of fate and blood loomed before me, undoing everything I had known and believed. As Dean Aurelius had so starkly put it, the blood didn’t lie. And there, glaringly visible against my skin, was the undeniable mark that tethered me to the Moon Court—but with an oddity. My rune wasn’t the pristine, classic crescent of the Moon Court; it was a peculiar shaded-in variation. What did that even signify?

A knot of dread tightened in my stomach. Being marked for the Moon Court wasn’t just about changing allegiances; it was about facing a realm known for its visions and cryptic ways. How was I supposed to navigate a world that felt so alien, so distant from everything I cherished?

“Is this some kind of mistake?” I stammered, touching the mark, hoping it might fade away if I wished hard enough. But deep down, I feared what it truly meant: I was an outsider in my own legacy.

As we ascended the stairs, leaving the cave behind, an unsettling sensation clung to me. The whispered pleas of the enigmatic Fae reverberated in my mind, and the remnants of my enchanted baptism ached within my very core. Yet, an ominous feeling, distinct from the previous experiences, loomed over us like an impending tempest.

As we neared the top step, a pearlescent mist began to envelop us. It was cool, tingling against my skin, like a million minute magical particles. The blood and the grime that had stained our clothes were lifted, consumed by the shimmering haze. When the mist cleared, we stood there, not in the soiled garments of our ordeal but in pristine linen once again, as if we'd been reborn. Although, they were now colored in shades that represented each court. Mine was deep blue with silver piping, so everyone would know from the moment I surfaced which court I belonged to.

Reaching the room's entrance, I noted that it was untouched by the chaos we had just endured. The fountain's gentle bubbling served as a soft backdrop, and beams of moonlight painted celestial patterns on the floor. I spotted my parents standing in the corner with anxious expressions on their faces.

My mother, with her violet hair and delicate features, was exquisite. Her eyes were a striking shade of sapphire that seemed to sparkle in the moonlight, contrasting nicely with her pale complexion. My father was tall and lean, with spiky black hair and a strong jawline. His almond-shaped green eyes seemed to grow wide in horror as he looked at me.

Correction: both of my parents were staring at me in horror. My brother looked between us like this was some sort of joke.

"No, this has to be a mistake," my mother hissed while looking around.

"Why is your rune so dark?" my father asked while reaching toward my neck, pulling back at the last minute, as if my mark would electrocute him.

Rook stepped forward with a big smile, like it was his personal responsibility to smooth this over. "Moon Court, huh?" His tone was carefully blasé, obviously attempting to lighten the mood. "Congrats, Sis. I'm sure you're a tad disappointed at the moment, since your heart was set on Dawn, but try to remember that every court is important to the overall good of society." My brother spoke like a seasoned diplomat, a true representative of his faction.

"Ugh," I muttered so eloquently. Maybe I truly wasn't meant to be a Dawn Court Fae.

In my defense, I just wanted to scrub my skin raw in the shower and sleep for no less than forty-eight hours, in that order. Then, I wanted to pretend today never happened and go back to living blissfully unaware.

The room was abuzz with a kaleidoscope of emotions. Every corner bore witness to raw reactions that revealed how deep the ties of tradition and expectation ran in our society.

To my left, a family adorned in the deep crimson and obsidian associated with the Demon Court stood out starkly. The mother's eyes, which once must have shone with pride, now glistened with frustration. She pointed a finger accusingly at her son, whose jet-black robes signified his unexpected appointment to the Dusk Court.

"This is a disgrace! Our bloodline has always been Demon Court!" she exclaimed.

The father, a tall figure with chiseled features and fiery eyes, placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Enough, Malka," he murmured, though his own disappointment was evident in the tight set of his jaw. Their son looked down, shame and rebellion warring in his gaze.

On the other side of the room, I spotted Lirien, who was engulfed in a joyful embrace by her parents. Both parents were a sight to behold, with cascading blond hair that reached their ankles, dancing around them like golden waterfalls. Their skin bore shimmering tattoos that seemed to move and play in the room's ambient light. As Lirien pulled back, her eyes twinkling, her mother laughed, her voice as musical as chimes. "We always knew you'd shine, my star!"

Her father, his eyes mirroring the same gleeful pride, added, "The Moon Court will be honored to have you."

My heart ached as I turned to face my parents. My mother's eyes, usually so warm, were glassy with tears. "Oh, honey," she whispered, her voice catching, "this isn't how we imagined it, but it's not the end of the world."

I studied her face, trying to discern if she was trying to reassure me or placate her own distress.

Dad attempted a brave front, the usually vibrant spark in his eyes dulled by concern. "Moon Court has its strengths. They're formidable. And that rune of yours? Never seen one quite like it. We'll dive deep into the family archives, look into it." His attempt at levity fell a tad flat, but his intention was clear.

I managed a weak smile. "I hope we find something," I murmured.

Dean Aurelius's authoritative voice cut through our somber bubble. "Freshmen! Time to bid farewell to your families!"

A lump formed in my throat. Amidst the chaos, I'd momentarily forgotten the looming separation. Nightshade University was now my new home, and somewhere in its vast expanse was a room waiting for me.

My parents and I clung to each other, each touch a desperate attempt to convey love, concern, and hope. When my mother hugged Rook, her plea was evident. "Please, watch over her."

Rook, always the pillar of strength, nodded solemnly, pulling me close. His familiar scent and warmth temporarily pushed away the gloom of isolation. "We're in this together, Sare-bear," he whispered, his voice full of determination.

As our parents receded into the distance, their silhouettes blurred by tears, Rook's grip tightened around me. "They'll come around," he said softly.

I blinked away tears. "I hope so."

"Hello, everyone! I'm Evangeline, your campus lead for the Moon Court! Everyone bearing a moon brand, follow me and I'll show you to your rooms."

I turned toward the cheery voice, took one look at my campus lead, and mouthed, "Wow."

"You can say that again," Rook agreed while eyeing the Moon Court representative greeting all the new freshmen.

I was strictly attracted to men, but even *I* could admit how stunning she was. Evangeline's face was perfectly symmetrical, with bright silver eyes, the metallic color a perfect complement to her rich umber skin. Her hair was emerald green, cascading in loose curls halfway down her back. She carried herself with a regal grace, every movement calculated and purposeful.

"Come along! I have lots to tell you. Don't worry about your luggage; everything will be magically transported by the time we get there."

Evangeline's clothing was just as impressive as her physical features. She wore a long, flowing gown of deep blue silk that seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. It hugged her ample curves in all the right places, and a high slit in the skirt showed off her toned legs. The gown was adorned with intricate

silver embroidery that sparkled with every movement she made. It was a bit fancy for a college campus, but oddly, she made it work.

Rook cleared his throat. "I should go with you, to make sure you get settled in properly."

I gave my brother a wry look, but he probably didn't notice since he was too busy staring at the pretty lady. "You know the rules about intermingling between courts, Rook," I sighed.

"Hmm?" he said.

Lirien suddenly appeared at my side. "Aw, such a sweet offer, but we're good." Rook looked confused as she patted his cheek. "Go on, now. I'm sure you have much better things to do *alone* in your dorm, right?"

"Um... I guess?" he answered. "Who are you?"

Lirien's face lit up with a smile. "I'm Lirien. Go to your dorm and we can chat later. See ya, hot stuff!"

I laughed as he followed her suggestion with nothing more than a little finger wave. There were only three other freshmen who were assigned to the Moon Court in the first group, so Lirien and I followed at a distance so we could talk.

"That boy is going to try my patience this year. But he's insanely talented at oral, so it'll be worth it." Lirien waggled her sculpted eyebrows.

I made a gagging gesture. "Lirien, if we're going to be friends, we need to get one thing straight. Please do not *ever* mention Rook and the word *oral* in the same sentence ever again. And while we're on the subject, that applies to anything sexual if it involves my brother. Got it?"

Her lips formed into an exaggerated pout. "Oh, fine." She tilted her head for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. "But for the record, Fred thinks you're being a bit dramatic."

"Who's Fred?"

"Fred Appleton," she replied, giving me a *duh* look.

"Um... am I supposed to know who that is?"

"Oh my stars! You don't know who Fred Appleton is?!"

"Didn't I just say that?" I countered.

"Huh." Lirien paused for a moment. "Weird."

Before she could say anything else, Evangeline spoke. "Welcome to the Lunar Tower, in my opinion, home of the most powerful and esteemed Fae in all of Nightshade University. This tower has been standing for centuries and has seen generations of talented and ambitious Fae come and go. But make

no mistake, only the best of the best earn their place in this hallowed hall.” As she spoke, her voice was like music, honeyed and smooth, yet with a sharpness that hinted at her ambition. It was clear that she was used to getting what she wanted and that she had the power to make it happen.

We made our way up the winding staircase of the dorm’s tower, as Evangeline continued waxing poetic about its history. The stone steps were rough and uneven, the walls made of a dark, ancient stone that seemed to soak up the very light around us. We passed by cobweb-covered torches that flickered with a dim, eerie light, casting long shadows that danced along the walls like sinister phantoms.

“My parents fell in love in this tower,” Lirien said dreamily. “I was conceived in the library.”

Well, okay then.

“As new students, there are a few things you should know about the Moon Court,” Evangeline continued, somehow speaking without huffing and puffing like I was. Man, my calves hurt. “First and foremost, we value excellence above all else. Mediocrity is not tolerated here, and only those who show true skill and ambition will thrive. Secondly, loyalty is paramount. We are a tight-knit community, and we look out for one another. But if you cross us, you will feel the full force of our power. But don’t let that intimidate you too much.” She tossed a flirty wink over her shoulder. “We also know how to have a good time. And with the finest amenities, world-class instructors, and some of the most beautiful and talented Fae in all the land, you’re in for a wild ride. Now, follow me to your new rooms, and let’s get started on making you the best Fae you can be. Your schedules and information about the dining hall, extracurriculars, and more is in a packet on your beds.”

Despite the gothic architecture and the spooky atmosphere, there was something undeniably magical about the tower. It was as if every stone, every cobweb, every flickering torch held a secret, waiting to be uncovered. I could almost hear the whispers of ancient spells and incantations, and the faint scent of incense hung in the air like a promise of something extraordinary.

As we climbed higher, the stairs grew steeper and narrower, and I had to grip the rough stone walls to keep from tumbling down. Lirien, on the other hand, skipped and twirled up the stairs with ease, her laughter ringing through the tower like a melody. She didn’t seem to notice the oppressive atmosphere or the sinister shadows that lurked around every corner.

Finally, we reached the top of the staircase, and I gasped at the sight before me. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The walls were made of a shimmering, iridescent stone that seemed to glow, and the ceiling was so high that it disappeared into darkness, leaving me with the impression that we were standing at the very top of the world.

Evangeline opened a heavy wooden door to our right. "Welcome to the Common Room. There's a small powder room next door. Directly across the hall, you'll find a kitchenette. The door to the right of that is the tower library."

My cheeks heated as she mentioned the room where my new friend was supposedly conceived.

The Common Room had the same spooky vibe as the rest of the tower, but with dark wood paneling. High arched windows looked out onto a star-filled sky, and a massive stone fireplace crackled and popped with blue and green flames, providing refuge from the draft that seemed to follow you throughout the rest of the building. Several conversational seating areas were scattered throughout, but the furniture looked Victorian, which likely meant it was also terribly uncomfortable. I really hoped the university had invested in quality mattresses, because I was a girl who needed a good night's sleep to function the next day. Much to my relief, I spotted the two suitcases and box I had brought from home, sitting along the wall with several other pieces of luggage. If nothing else, at least I had the comfort of my belongings.

Evangeline walked over to a wall-mounted cabinet, producing a key from the lanyard around her neck to unlock it. She grabbed several keychains and distributed one to each of us. A quick glance at the number seven on Lirien's keychain confirmed she was my new roommate. Huh. Maybe there was some merit to her visions.

"Okay, everyone. That's the end of the tour. The rest of your evening is free to do as you please, but if I were you, I'd unpack, maybe head down to the dining hall for a late dinner, and get some rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day. All of the dorm rooms have a private bath and are located on the top two floors, which you can get to using the same staircase that led us here. Rooms one through four are on the next level up, five through eight are on the top floor. If you need me, I'm at the end of the hall up top, in room eight."

"You wanna check out our room?" I asked Lirien.

"I've already seen it plenty..." She tapped her temple. "But you haven't, so I totally understand your curiosity. What are we waiting for?"

“Uh... right.” I looked at my luggage.

This girl was going to take some getting used to. I’d never spent much time with a seer before.

We each grabbed one of our suitcases—deciding one at a time, with multiple trips, was the best approach for the narrow staircase—and carefully climbed up two levels, making our way down the surprisingly wide hallway. As Lirien and I stood in front of room seven, I felt a mixture of excitement and dread. I had never lived away from home before, and the thought of sharing a room with someone as wild as she was, was daunting.

“Here we go,” Lirien said, turning her key in the lock and opening the door.

As she pushed it open, my eyes rounded in surprise. The room was massive, with high vaulted ceilings and grand windows that looked out onto the grounds below. Compared to the rest of the tower, it held a surprising warmth. Two four-poster beds draped in royal blue curtains were situated on each side, along with a wardrobe and a small writing desk. There was a door on the right wall, which I was guessing led to the en-suite Evangeline had mentioned. I didn’t know much about architecture, but if everyone’s room was this large, I didn’t understand how that was possible. Now that I thought about it, this entire building seemed to have some major spatial distortion going on.

Lirien bounded into the room, rolling her suitcase behind her. “Isn’t it amazing? We’re going to have so much fun here.”

I was in awe at the grandeur of it all. This was so much more than I had expected, especially considering how tight the stairwell was. As I took in the luxurious surroundings, I wondered what I’d learn if these walls could talk. How many dirty secrets were buried here, and what kinds of magic did its former residents practice? I made my way over to the window, gazing out at the moonlit campus. The view was breathtaking, but it was also a glaring reminder of how much my life had changed in the last twenty-four hours.

As we continued to explore our new digs, Lirien suddenly turned to me with a serious expression. “Sarielle, I must warn you about something.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She took my hand. “I have foreseen a great danger that will befall us in the near future. We must be prepared.”

My new roommate’s personality was seriously giving me whiplash.

“What kind of danger?” I whispered.

Lirien shrugged. “I’m not sure. My visions are often unclear at first. But we must stay vigilant and keep our wits about us.”

I nodded, not sure what else to say. Lirien’s odd behavior was starting to make me question her sanity again.

“Dibs on the first shower!” Her tone lightened considerably as she skipped toward our shared bathroom. “I solemnly swear not to use all the hot water!”

I watched her go, wondering once again if she could really see the future or if she was a little bit crazy? Or maybe it was a combination of the two. I decided to keep a close eye on her until I figured it out, one way or the other.

THREE

LYSANDER THORNE

The flickering flames from the fireplace cast dancing shadows on the walls, illuminating the room just enough for me to make out my surroundings. Its crackling sound was the only interruption to the thick silence that hung in the air.

“Lysander,” my father’s voice broke the stillness, deep and authoritative.

His features were sharp and angular, his high cheekbones giving his face a chiseled look. His eyes were a piercing shade of blue, and his black hair was slicked back, revealing his pointed ears. My father exuded a sense of power and control that made even *my* skin crawl.

“Hello, Father.”

As a member of the Dusk Court, I had been trained in the art of warfare and espionage from a young age. But even with all my experience, I knew better than to cross my father. He had a way of making you feel small and insignificant with just a single look.

I resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably in my chair, my eyes drawn to the tattoo wrapped around my father’s wrist. The magical serpent seemed to wink at me, as if it were mocking me for my weakness. I hated that tattoo, and I hated my father even more. But I knew better than to show it.

I couldn’t show my true feelings. My father’s influence extended far and wide. He was a man who always got what he wanted, no matter the cost. I had learned this lesson the hard way.

“I looked over your schedule,” he began, pausing to make sure he had my full attention. “I don’t think there are enough sparring sessions. I expect you to get up at four a.m. every morning and train. Just because you’re attending this school doesn’t mean you can slack off.”

He continued with a hint of disdain, “The university has been slipping lately. They’ve done away with the old ways—the corporal punishments, the stricter laws. Now, many of your classmates are weak, but I expect more from you. You will rise above them.”

Internally, I winced. Nightshade University was renowned for its rigorous academics and intense training. It was one of the most prestigious institutions in the land, where passing was a herculean task even without the extra

pressures. How could he not see that? Yet, challenging him openly was out of the question.

“Understood,” I replied, careful not to show my frustration. I’d never slacked off a day in my fucking life. My father didn’t want a son. He wanted a weapon. One he could wield with an iron fist.

“I suppose you didn’t disappoint me with your baptism. The dean said you didn’t scream.”

Of course I didn’t scream. I’d been beaten enough throughout my life to know genuine pain when it hit you. And even though those bloody pools ripped apart every cell in my body, it was nothing compared to the torture my training was comprised of.

“Father,” I said with a slight bow. “I need to get back to my dorm and set up my protection runes as well as start scouting recruits.”

A small smile curved his lips, and that scared me far more than any frown ever would. “Yes. Of course. But first I want to discuss Sarielle Blackwood with you. I have a favor to ask.”

I knew that when my father asked me for a favor, it was never something easy or trivial. But I also knew that I had no choice but to comply. I was bound by duty to the Order, and to my father.

I arched a brow, keeping my face blank. One of the first lessons you learned in Dusk Court was to never reveal what you’re thinking.

He continued, “I know you are aware of the girl. I heard whispers that you pulled her out of the baptism during the ceremony. Tell me what happened.”

I gritted my teeth. “She was drowning.”

“Because of the pain or something else? It’s not like you to be the knight in shining armor.”

I thought back on the ceremony. Sarielle had been under for so long. No one was supposed to interfere during another person’s ceremony, but I did it anyway. I couldn’t stand by and do nothing while she drowned. I might have been a heartless bastard, but I wasn’t that much of a dick. Something about her...

I cleared my throat. “She was drowning. When I pulled her out, she said she could hear voices and something was pulling her down. Her mark looked strange.”

“Voices, you say?” my father asked while stroking his chin.

I shrugged. “She’s Moon Court. Could be ghosts. Could be anything. We

won't know until she learns to control her powers. Either way, it's not my problem."

My father contemplated that. "Not necessarily. I need you to get closer to Sarielle. She's an unexpected member of the Moon Court, and her mark is unlike anything I've ever seen. I need to know more about her. I'm counting on you, Lysander. You have my permission to use whatever methods are necessary to obtain this information."

In other words, I was given permission to fuck her. Or torture her. Perhaps both. You never knew with my father.

"Why? Just because her court rune is unique?" I asked, my tone purposefully bland.

"Because she was born and raised a member of the Dawn Court and is one of the few people to be sorted into a different court. Because her baptism was abnormal and because her mark is peculiar. That's too many oddities at once. I need to know more. I don't care how you get the information. *Just get it.*"

I couldn't explain why, but the thought of hurting Sarielle didn't sit well with me. Although, I certainly didn't mind extracting information in a more pleasurable way, preferably naked. I wasn't keen on the idea of feeding that information to my father, but I kept my face still. I'd learned long ago that I couldn't let others see my emotions, not even my father. Every single interaction I had with every single person was a curated persona I'd cultivated. Every smile had a purpose. Every word. Tone. Inflection. Wink.

"Sarielle is weak," I replied in a bored tone. "She nearly drowned during her baptism. I don't think she has the sort of power you're looking for."

My father leaned forward in his chair, his eyes narrowing. "You know that's not true. There's something different about her, and I need you to find out what that is. *The Order* needs to know."

Okay, I definitely didn't like this. My father was not one to be trifled with, but when he brought the Order into it, it usually meant trouble. I kept my expression neutral and nodded, knowing that I had no choice but to do as he said. It was my duty to our court to gather information and report back to my superiors. And if my father believed that Sarielle was important, then I had to believe it, too. I couldn't waste time or energy trying to figure out this strange feeling that resided in my chest since the moment I first saw her.

My father's gaze connected with mine, holding it like a vise. "Lysander..." His tone was slow. Deliberate. "It's imperative that you

understand the gravity of this mission.”

I clenched my jaw. “I’m not new to such tasks, Father. You know I’ve always fulfilled my duties.”

A smirk played on his lips. “Oh, I recall. You did especially well with that Dawn Court girl last spring. You seduced her, charmed her, and we got all the information we needed in record time.”

I shifted uncomfortably at the memory. The task had been easy, with the diplomat’s daughter willingly spilling her family’s secrets in whispered conversations under silken sheets. There was no emotional entanglement, just pure strategy. But something about this mission with Sarielle felt intrinsically different.

“How close do you want me to get to her?” I asked.

“As close as necessary,” he replied.

I nodded once again, hiding my discomfort at the thought of spying on Sarielle. She seemed harmless enough, but my father’s request made me wary.

“You know...” My father rubbed his chin in thought. “I just thought of a really great way to see what this girl is capable of.”

His fingers tapped a slow rhythm on the armrest. “Make her an initiate. The trials of initiation will force her to show the true depth of her power.” His eyes, cold and calculating, met mine. “Then we will see just what she’s made of. She’ll either thrive or she’ll drown.”

I took a moment, absorbing the implications of what he was suggesting. The initiation was grueling, dangerous, and had even killed some lesser Fae. “Father, I really don’t think—”

His eyes flashed, his voice turning icy. “Are you questioning me?”

Swallowing hard, I tried to hide my apprehension. The last thing I wanted was to be on the wrong side of his wrath. “Of course not,” I responded, trying to maintain composure. “I’ll see it done.” I stood, eager to put some distance between us. “Is there anything else I need to know? Anything specific you’re looking for?”

A slow, menacing smile crept across his face. “I want you to track her every movement, every gift she reveals. I need to know her powers, their limits, and every time she levels up. The intricacies of her skills, her weaknesses... *everything*.”

“Yes, sir.”

My father leaned back in his chair, regarding me for a long, tense

moment. “Report back daily. Just remember, the Order has placed its trust in you. Do not disappoint us.”

Each word was a reminder of the thin line I walked, a line where failure was not an option.

With that, I made my way out of the room, feeling a sense of relief wash over me as soon as I stepped through the portal connecting my father’s office to campus grounds. On my way back to my dorm, I decided to check out the university’s academic wing for the Dusk Court.

The wing itself was a shadowy structure, cloaked in secrecy and hidden passages. The halls were dimly lit, with flickering torches casting light on the stone walls. The faint sound of whispers echoed through the corridors, adding to the mysterious atmosphere of the place. It was almost as if the wing had a life of its own, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of reverence for the place.

The Dusk Wing was steeped in history, with stories of legendary spies and assassins who had trained within its walls. My own family had a long history at the Dusk Court, dating back several centuries. My great-great-grandfather had been one of the most renowned spies of his time, and his exploits were still talked about in hushed tones among our court’s elite.

The wing was filled with some of the most advanced equipment for eavesdropping, infiltration, and deception. The walls were lined with diagrams and charts, and there were numerous gadgets and devices scattered throughout. As I passed one of the classrooms, I caught a glimpse of a group of students huddled around a table, poring over maps and schematics. Classes didn’t begin until tomorrow, but it didn’t surprise me one bit that they were getting a head start. The old saying “By failing to plan, you are planning to fail” resonated well within a court of spies.

Despite the allure of the Dusk Wing, I felt on edge. The court’s obsession with secrecy and covert operations had led to a culture of distrust and suspicion. Every move was scrutinized, every word weighed and measured. It was a game of chess, and one misstep could mean the difference between success and failure.

I couldn’t deny the rush of excitement that came with being a part of it. To be a member of the Dusk Court was to be a part of something greater than oneself, a legacy that had been built over centuries. And I was determined to uphold that legacy, no matter the cost.

It wasn’t like this job would be a hardship, especially if I had to seduce Sarielle. She was absolutely stunning. Her light pink hair and dark brown

eyes immediately caught my attention at the orientation ceremony. And when her white robe was drenched in blood, molded to her delectable curves, the visceral reaction my body had couldn't be denied. I wanted her, plain and simple. I had never wanted someone on such a primal level before. But it wasn't just her physical appearance that drew me in. There was something about the way she carried herself, with a hint of mystery and a touch of vulnerability. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I knew there was more to her than she let other people see.

Then, there was the sensation I had when she didn't immediately resurface from dunking herself in the pool of blood. I had this inexplicable need to save her. Even though I'd only been officially initiated tonight, I'd been training for this my entire life. Like any member's of the Dusk Court, my actions were always calculated. I didn't do or say anything without careful analysis. Yet... when it was evident Sarielle was struggling, I jumped into that pool without thought. I had never acted more impulsively in my life, and I had never been more disgusted with myself. Even more infuriating, as she was coughing and gasping for air after I pulled her out of the pool, I wanted to comfort her.

Fucking comfort her.

Thankfully, I shook myself out of whatever trance she had me in, and was able to resist the urge. I reminded myself that no matter how intriguing Sarielle Blackwood was, I had no future with her anyway. My father didn't care if I bent the rules by fucking outside our court. In fact, he encouraged it, because he believed women had a nasty habit of having loose lips during pillow talk, and it was a great way to gather intel, whether the girl was one of my missions or not. And so far, in my experience, he wasn't exactly wrong. But I knew to never get attached, because my future had already been mapped out. I frowned as I recalled something that strange blonde, Lirien, had said.

Your future girlfriend.

She doesn't mind if you call her Sari in the throes of passion.

As a member of the Moon Court, it wasn't unreasonable to believe that Lirien may have had some sort of vision. Perhaps she saw me dating her friend. I knew if that were true, I wouldn't have been *actually* courting Sarielle. It did give me an idea, though. If my father wanted me to get close to this girl, what better way to do that than become her supposed boyfriend?

I paused mid-stride as I spotted Silas Stone at the end of the corridor. His

mouth curved into a cocky smirk as he noticed me and began walking my way. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt and athletic shorts, his bulky muscles shining with sweat. I wasn't exactly a small guy, but Silas was fucking stacked. There was a reason why he was known as the enforcer within the Order. I swore he spent every minute of his free time in the gym, which was clearly where he just came from.

Silas's damp silver hair flopped over his forehead as he jerked his chin in greeting. "Thorne."

"Stone." My tone was identical to his: a combination of entitled and bored.

Silas was a year older and joined the Order last year. He was the bastard son of one of the most influential founders, so he had to work twice as hard to be respected. And even though he had no official titles or birthrights, we'd been forced together our entire lives by the expectations set in the generations before ours. He was a total douchebag, and I couldn't stand the guy. For as long as I could remember, this meathead had coveted what was mine. When I made it to high school, he'd decided I was his biggest threat when it came to the female student body, and was constantly trying to lure away whatever girl I was fucking, just to stroke his ego.

Much to my annoyance, he'd succeeded several times, and he loved rubbing it in my fucking face. It wasn't like those girls meant more to me beyond satisfying a physical need, but it still rankled. This dickhead had the personality of a fucking robot, but I had to admit he was conventionally attractive on a physical level. Not that I had any issues in that department.

"Any luck on finding new recruits?" he asked.

"A few with potential," I answered.

It was risky speaking about such things out in the open, but since classes weren't in session yet and we were both well-versed in ambiguity, I knew it'd be okay.

"Good." Silas nodded.

He was a man of few words, which I appreciated, considering how much his mere presence annoyed me. Unfortunately for me, when it came to the Order, Silas needed to be informed just as much as I did, so I had no choice but to continue this conversation.

"My father asked me to look into someone. I'm going to work on getting closer to her to gather intel. I don't think she's Order material, but she is... unique."

“She, huh?” Silas folded his beefy arms over his chest. “Is she hot?”
Absolutely, I thought.

“Eh.” I shrugged, suddenly in a hurry to end this topic. “Maybe a five, six tops.”

His icy eyes narrowed. “Really? Why do I get the feeling that she’s actually a smoke show?”

Fuck.

I was an exceptional liar. Not even the most sophisticated detection equipment could catch me most days. But as I thought about what I’d just said to Silas, I realized that I had downplayed Sarielle Blackwood’s beauty for one reason and one reason only: I didn’t want this asshole to go after her, because I wanted her all to myself. There was no doubt my tone and body language had betrayed me because it was a response driven by desire.

I took a deep breath to center myself, but Silas’s next words made my fists clench.

“I’d be happy to take that task off your hands so you can focus more on recruitment.” His gaze fell to the balled-up hands at my sides. “Whoever this girl is, she seems to throw you off your game. I wonder what your father would think about that.”

I glared, not even bothering to conceal my ire. “I’ve got it handled. You worry about your job, and I’ll worry about mine.”

“Sure, Thorne. Whatever you say.” Silas’s eyes twinkled with amusement as he backed away, palms facing out. “I’ll see you at the next meeting.”

As he flipped around and strode away, I had one thought racing through my mind over and over again.

What the hell was this girl doing to me?

FOUR

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

“Don’t be nervous,” my new roommate told me as she stepped into a pair of fashionable booties. “You’ll do fine.”

“Who said I was nervous?” I met her eyes through the reflection in the mirror that was attached to my new wardrobe closet.

“You’re being super obvi right now, Sarielle. But really, you have no need to worry. I haven’t had a vision per se, but I do have a great feeling you’ll easily make the dean’s honor roll.”

I finished painting a second coat of mascara on my lashes before replying. “I don’t know if nervous is the right word. It’s just that I was prepared to be a member of the Dawn Court. I’ve worked so hard, especially over the last few years, studying Fae laws and all the different career paths I could take. But now... I feel like I’m starting from scratch. I have no clue what to expect from my classes. I’m afraid I’ll be so far behind the rest of our group.” I sighed. “We both know I was one of only two in our entire class who was surprised with the outcome of that ceremony.”

“Man, that Demon-raised kid that ended up in Dusk Court. Poor thing looked so confused,” Lirien replied.

I stepped in front of the enchanted full-length mirror, noting the motivational quotes that flashed over my head. Apparently, Evangeline had spelled every single mirror in Lunar Tower to give Moon Court students encouraging words tailored to our specific needs, with a sprinkling of our future added in for fun.

Lirien’s had said, “Embrace the whispers of the stars, for your uniqueness is the magic that illuminates the world, but maybe don’t tell your future husband that he should coordinate outfits with you.”

The words above my head were less motivating. “Live like there’s no tomorrow. Because for you, there might not be. Also, be wary of stairs.”

“Great,” I mumbled. “Half this freaking tower is made of stairs.”

Lirien waved her hand. “You’ll just scrape your knee. Nothing a Band-Aid can’t fix.”

As sunlight filtered into my dorm room, it caught the iridescent shimmer of my yellow skirt. I glanced down, a bittersweet smile tugging at my lips.

Just last week, Mom and I had selected this outfit for my first day, the excitement tangible between us. But now, the memory was tainted by my assignment to a new court.

When I shifted, the tiny dewdrop gems on my cropped spider silk top sparkled even more intensely. They were scattered across the fabric, creating a dazzling effect with every movement. Absentmindedly, I touched the delicate silver vine choker around my neck. The bioluminescent flowers woven into it radiated a gentle glow, providing a soft contrast to the gleaming gems.

“You look cute,” Liriel said. “Lysander is going to drool all over you.”

I shook my head. “I’m not trying to impress him. Even if I was interested—which I’m not saying I am—it’s against the rules. I think I just need to settle in and get used to my new designation.”

She rolled her eyes while grabbing her backpack. “The rules are ridiculous. I’m not letting them stop me from dating your brother. Besides... there are loopholes.”

I arched my brow. “You aren’t dating my brother, though. And *what* loopholes?”

“I’m not dating your brother *yet*,” she replied with a grin. “But today, he’s going to meet me for the first time. It’s our origin story.”

“Um... technically, you met last night. Remember?”

“True,” she agreed. “But today is the day he notices how bangable I am, which we both know is super high on the priority list for most boys. If their peen is interested, their other parts may follow. Rook really likes my boobs, so I put a little extra oomph into it, don’t you think?” Lirien palmed said boobs and pushed them together for emphasis.

I made a face. “I’m pretty sure everything that just came out of your mouth falls under the sexual stuff you’re not supposed to mention involving my brother.”

She waved me off. “You’ll get used to it.”

Why did I get the feeling I’d be hearing that phrase from her a lot?

“As for the loophole stuff, you’ll learn the answer to that in time. I don’t want to spoil the fun.”

I shook my head as we made our way out of Lunar Tower and headed toward our first class of the day: Divining 101.

“So, tell me about your visions. How long have you been having them?” I wanted to know more about Lirien, but I was also asking for myself. Would I

start seeing the future? Talking to the dead? Seeing omens at every turn?

Lirien grabbed my wrist to steady me as we started walking down the steps. “For about as long as I can remember. In the beginning, they were pretty terrifying. Mom and Dad had to teach me how to identify the differences. I used to dismiss them as nightmares because they only came while I was sleeping, which is a fairly common intro to visions, if you don’t know that already. But my parents taught me that most of my bad dreams were actually visions of the future. When I was ten, I predicted my own grandmother’s death, which was a little traumatizing, but she died eating a chocolate cookie, and if you knew my grandmother, she wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

That sounded horrible. I couldn’t imagine being burdened with her gifts, especially at such a young age. “But not all of your visions are sad or scary, right?”

“Not at all. I get flashes of fun stuff all the time. The sexy visions are some of my favorites. Especially the ones involving a certain brother who shall not be named.” Lirien winked.

I tsked at her not-so-veiled attempt to skirt around the rule of not talking about Rook sexually. “I’m fighting a losing battle on that front, aren’t I?”

“Pretty much.”

I smiled, but it turned into a frown when I realized I was even further behind than I had originally thought. “I’ve never... really had any experiences like that.”

“Are you sure?” Lirien caught me as I stumbled over a step. “Have you ever had a dream that felt so real—so intense—that you couldn’t tell what was real and what was in your head? Have you ever heard voices?”

I thought back to the voices I heard in the blood pool, and a shudder traveled down my spine. “Nope,” I choked out.

The slight frown on Lirien’s face told me she knew I was lying. “Well, some Fae don’t get their powers until after their baptism, so I wouldn’t stress about it. I think if you were raised in the Moon Court, you would have had more of an affinity for it. The first step to getting your powers is accepting them. You can’t accept them if you’ve been raised thinking you’re something else.”

I supposed that made sense, but it didn’t alleviate any of my anxiety.

We rounded the corner and filed in with the other students on the walkway. “I don’t know if I’ll ever accept this,” I admitted.

Lirien stopped to stare at me. “You will.” A large grin stretched across her face. “Sooner than you think.”

We continued our trek, my eyes taking in the magnificent campus of Nightshade University. The gothic structures towered over me, their shadows stretching and shifting with each step I took. The grounds were teeming with life as students from the four courts hurried along, their laughter and conversations filling the air.

I paused near the Dawn Wing, watching a group of students deep in discussion beneath the grand pillars. Sunlight filtered through the windows, bathing them in a soft glow. They looked so engrossed, so in their element.

A familiar ache settled in my chest. I had always imagined myself there, discussing and debating with them. It was the path I’d always seen for myself, the one I’d prepared for. But things had changed.

I pushed the lingering feelings of regret and disarray aside. It was a new day, a new direction. Time to move forward.

As I neared the Dusk Wing, the atmosphere changed. I watched a student slip through a hidden door, a knowing smile on her lips. The faint sound of whispers caught my attention, a rumble of intrigue at the secrets concealed within those walls.

Lirien and I neared the Demon Wing, and she nudged me, pointing toward the lawn. “Watch this,” she whispered with a hint of amusement.

Two students were in the midst of a chaotic sparring session. They seemed to dance around each other with wild abandon rather than any discernible pattern. The looming, jagged spires of the building stood tall behind them, adding to the frenetic atmosphere. The raw, unpredictable energy was a force I could almost physically feel.

“They’re so barbaric,” I remarked, a bit taken aback by the unrestrained nature of their training.

Lirien grinned. “What did you expect? They embrace the chaos. It’s in their blood.”

We continued walking a bit further, and finally, we arrived at the Moon Wing. A girl in the courtyard was practicing her enchantments, her fingers weaving through the air as a delicate shower of shimmering lights floated around her. The stone structure emanated a serene aura that enveloped me as I entered through the double doors. Arched windows lined the top of the front wall, their stained glass casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the hallway’s dark wooden flooring. I craned my neck, glimpsing murals painted on the

high ceiling, depicting stars and celestial beings that seemed to move with a life of their own.

“Our class is over here,” Lirien said, pointing at a large wooden door carved with crescent moons and mystical creatures.

“Wow,” I whispered as we stepped into the room. I was instantly in awe of the beautiful space.

Lirien nudged me toward an empty spot at one of the dark oak tables. In the center of the room, a massive obsidian sphere rested on an ornate stand, its surface reflecting the constellation-like patterns of light and shadow that filled the room. Ancient tomes were scattered across the tables, and the scent of incense filled the air, mingling with the faint aroma of old parchment and leather-bound books perched on tall bookshelves. The room was alive with the whispers of past and future, the secrets of the universe waiting to be unlocked by the eager minds that gathered here.

“Ever used one of those?” she asked, nodding toward a nearby crystal ball.

I giggled nervously. “Can’t say that I have.”

“My parents let me use theirs once but took it away when I stole the answers for a midterm,” Lirien joked.

The door creaked open and in walked a figure with an air of wisdom about him. He moved gracefully to the front of the classroom, his dark eyes twinkling with a hint of mystery. He had long silver hair and deep wrinkles.

“Good day, students,” he began, his voice filled with warmth. “I am Professor Valen, and I’ll be guiding you on the wondrous journey of divination. Since today is our first day together, let’s get to know each other a bit better instead of getting straight to the lessons. Please share your names and what you’re most excited to learn about divination.”

A boy with a mischievous grin raised his hand, volunteering to be the first to share. “I’m Rian, and I’ve always been curious about predicting the future and maybe using that knowledge to my advantage in, uh, friendly bets.”

Professor Valen chuckled. “Ah, Rian, the future is indeed a tempting source of knowledge, but remember that divination teaches us to respect the unknown and use our abilities *responsibly*.”

A shy girl with bright purple hair spoke up next. “My name is Elara. I’ve always felt a connection to the Moon Court’s mystical side. I hope to develop my intuition and understanding of the patterns in the universe.”

Our instructor nodded encouragingly. “Welcome, Elara. Divination can

be a powerful way to deepen that connection and refine your intuition.”

The introductions continued, with students sharing their motivations and interests, some expressing sincere curiosity and others admitting to wanting to learn for more lighthearted reasons. The professor listened intently, occasionally interjecting with thoughtful insights and gentle guidance. Finally, it was my turn, but I didn’t know what to say. I was raised in the Dawn Court and never really gave much thought to divination or anything else Moon Court related for that matter.

I nervously cleared my throat before speaking. “I-I’m Sarielle Blackwood. I’ve always been intrigued by the idea of uncovering hidden truths and understanding the forces that shape our lives.” It felt like an honest answer for me. The Dawn Court was motivated by justice and truth.

The professor smiled warmly at me. “Sarielle, your quest for understanding will serve you well in the study of divination. Embrace that curiosity and allow it to guide your journey.”

As the class continued, I was drawn into what our teacher was saying.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“Does my hair look okay?” Lirien asked, nervously patting her golden locks.

I glanced at her as we walked through the dimly lit corridor of Hemlock Hall. The distant hum of conversations echoed softly, intermingling with the clinking of cutlery and dishes.

“It looks perfect, as always,” I assured her as we neared the entrance to the dining room.

“And my boobs?” she asked, her tone blunt.

I glanced at her low-cut shirt. “They’re, uh, nice.” I somehow managed not to sputter. I guess I was getting used to Lirien’s quirks.

Lirien beamed at me. “Thanks, bestie. I’m glad you like them because you’ll be the one taping them down on my wedding day. My dress just doesn’t work with a bra.”

Yep. I definitely needed to warn Rook.

The dining hall was a magnificent room. Located in the heart of the university, it was one of the few common areas between all four courts. The lengthy tables were covered with elegant fabric and decorated with lustrous

cutlery, and the chairs were soft and cozy. Chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, their crystals shimmering in the light, casting a warm and inviting glow. It was a space that exuded luxury and refinement. It seemed a bit much for a university, but at the same time, it fit. From what I'd seen so far, most of the campus had the same vibe.

Based on the information pamphlet, the cuisine served here was nothing short of exquisite, catering to the unique dietary needs of each of the four courts. While we could technically eat whatever we liked, a Fae's body chemistry was altered during their baptism. According to the Fae Health Organization, you had better control over your magic if you adopted the designated diet of your court. I'd seen plenty of contradictory reports over the years disputing that, but Nightshade University followed the government's recommended guidelines. The Moon Court food was light and delicate, with a focus on fresh fruits and vegetables. The Dusk Court went the decadent route, with seasoned meats, starches, cakes, and artisan chocolates. The Demon Court's food was spicy and bold, with an emphasis on exotic meats and fiery sauces. And lastly, the Dawn Court's cuisine was elegant and refined, featuring fresh seafood and fine wines. I'd been looking forward to enjoying lobster and caviar on the regular, but I guess that wasn't in my future.

Lirien gave a melodramatic sigh, twirling a strand of her blonde hair. "I really can't believe I have to wait an entire year to, you know... pursue your brother. The fates are *very* specific about when we fuck for the first time. We try anal shortly after—"

"Lirien!" I gasped. "Please, for the love of glitter, I do not want to discuss this!"

She merely shrugged, her eyes twinkling. "It's not my fault the visions show what they show. They can be graphic. Tempting. *Delicious.*"

"Ew," I groaned. "You really shouldn't be talking about this. There are rules, you know."

"Archaic rules, schmules. It's the modern age! Rook and I have a connection that can't be denied. You'll see."

I sighed. "You know, maybe you should give the Moon Court guys a chance? There's probably someone just as... tempting there."

She scrunched up her nose, feigning deep contemplation. "I've observed them. But there's something about your brother. His aura is like midnight with a sprinkle of stardust. And..." She paused dramatically. "A hint of

morning dew.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “That’s a very specific aura you’re describing. But you know how strict our laws are about intermingling between courts. And my brother? Let’s just say he’s not the rebellious type.”

Lirien waved her hand dismissively. “Rules are meant to be... gently nudged.”

“More like shattered, in your case?”

She grinned, leaning closer. “I once read in an old scroll that the heart wants what the heart wants. No law, no decree, can stand in its way.”

Trying to redirect the conversation, I prodded, “Have you ever considered that maybe your visions are... I don’t know, a bit off sometimes?”

She blinked, feigning shock. “How dare you question the precision of my psychic prowess? Though, there was that one time I thought I’d end up with a prince... turned out it was just a frog in the garden.”

I snorted with laughter. “See? Maybe this is another frog moment?”

Lirien pouted, mock offense clear on her face. “Rook is no frog. Trust me.”

We continued our playful banter for a few more steps when a familiar voice cut through our chatter, “Did someone mention my name?”

Both of us turned to find my brother leaning against a stone pillar, an amused smirk on his face.

“Speak of the devil,” Lirien whispered.

I wasn’t exactly sure how concrete her visions of the future were, but I wanted to keep her expectations low. My brother would never break the rules and date outside of his court.

Rook approached us with a smile on his face. “Hey, Sarielle. How is your first day going?”

Beside me, Lirien was practically bouncing on her feet. “Good. Uh, have you met my roommate? Lirien, this is Rook. Rook, Lirien.”

My brother dragged his eyes up and down Lirien, and to my absolute horror, he stopped at her chest for a fraction of a second longer than everything else. I loved my brother dearly, but I didn’t want to know he was a boob man.

“Hello,” Lirien said while thrusting out her hand. “We’ve met before.”

My brother cocked his brow. “We have? Oh, yes, last night at the baptism.”

“Oh, no. I meant in your dreams, of course. I’m the one that did that thing

with my tongue—”

I grabbed Lirien’s arm just as she pushed her tongue against her cheek, mimicking something that I didn’t want to think about involving my brother.

“Wh-what...” Rook stared blankly at her.

“You should go sit with your friends,” I said, praying he listened. I nodded at the Dawn Court section of the dining hall.

Rook’s expression fell. “I’m sure you could sit with us if I asked, Sarielle.”

I shook my head. “That’s okay. I need to get to know members of my court.” I couldn’t stop the sadness from pouring through my tone.

Lirien straightened her whimsical attire. “I think I’ll accompany you today, Rook,” she declared, nodding to my clearly bewildered brother. The tone of her voice made it sound like she was making a choice about which flavor of tea to sip, rather than gate-crashing a lunch table.

Rook blinked once, twice, then looked at me with an expression that screamed *Is she serious?* “Uhh, Lirien, isn’t Sarielle your designated lunch buddy?” His voice had that slight high-pitched, panic-tinged quality to it.

“Oh, I had a vision,” she replied dreamily. “Sarielle, darling, you’ll be occupied elsewhere. You know, fate and stuff.”

Before Rook could process this, Lirien latched onto his arm, her fingers—decorated with shimmering rings—digging in a bit too tightly. My poor brother looked like a deer in headlights, his eyes darting around the dining hall, searching for any potential escape routes.

“But the Moon Court tables are on the other side...” Rook began, trying to guide her away from his Dawn Court territory.

“No worries! I had a dream about this very day. Trust me, it’s destiny. Or indigestion... but mostly destiny,” Lirien said, her voice ringing.

Rook gulped, his face paling as they neared the imposing Dawn Court members, who looked on with amusement. “I’m sure you won’t like what’s on the menu,” he whispered, his priorities clearly shifting to the immediate lunchtime crisis.

Before they disappeared into the heart of the Dawn Court section, Lirien paused and pointed dramatically toward the opposite end of the hall. “Look, Sarielle! Your lunch destiny awaits. Don’t keep it waiting!” She then proceeded to pull my shell-shocked brother into the thick of the Dawn Courtiers.

I turned to look where she had pointed and froze when I saw Lysander

Thorne staring at me. He stepped into the light, and immediately, my eyes were drawn to his smoldering gaze. The overhead lights made his black silk shirt glow faintly, emphasizing the expanse of his broad shoulders. My gaze followed the lean cut of his waist and drifted down to the fitted pants that showcased strong, muscular legs. Pausing for a moment, I caught the glint of silver buckles on his boots—a minor break from his otherwise dark ensemble.

As he closed the distance between us, an unmistakable warmth spread across my cheeks. Damn it, I chided myself internally. Why was I reacting this way? Especially to someone from the Dusk Court? But despite my reservations, there was no denying the quickened beat of my heart.

“Mind if I join you for lunch?” he asked.

I chewed on my bottom lip for a moment before answering, his eyes locking onto the movement. “Are you sure about that? Last night, you couldn’t get away fast enough when you saw my court rune.”

He chuckled, the sound dark. “We were both covered in blood. I think a little space was fair, given the circumstances.”

“I suppose I’m not covered in blood now.”

The corner of his lip twisted. “And I suppose I could endure a salad and fruit for lunch in exchange for your enticing company.”

I rolled my eyes and started walking over to the Moon Court’s table. “Would you prefer steak and potatoes?”

He sat down and contemplated my question for a moment before responding. “What I’d *really* prefer to eat is not on the menu.” His lascivious grin left no doubt about what he was thinking.

A wave of goose bumps washed over me at the implication of his words, but I refused to let him see how much he affected me. “Well, I’m afraid the kitchen can’t accommodate your every desire, Lysander.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong,” he replied with a sly smile. “I have ways of getting what I want.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And what ways are those?”

He leaned in closer. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

I laughed nervously, trying to ignore the way my heart was pounding in my chest. “I’ll take my chances.”

Lysander’s smile widened, revealing a flash of white teeth. “I like a woman who isn’t easily intimidated.”

“I’m not scared,” I said, my voice sounding breathless to my own ears.

“Good,” he replied, his gaze locking onto mine.

We sat in silence for a moment as his eyes roamed over me, taking in my every feature. It felt like he could see down to the very depths of my soul, and strangely, I didn’t mind. I tried pushing the thought away, knowing that it was stupid to let my guard down around someone like him. But as I looked into his eyes, something stirred deep within me. It was wild and exhilarating, making my heart race and my palms sweat. Maybe it was the danger he exuded. Or the fact that he was the epitome of everything I should stay far away from. Logic warred with curiosity inside my head, and in the end, the latter was crowned the victor. I could deny it all I wanted, but it didn’t change the facts.

I was drawn to him.

“So...” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Why the sudden interest in being my friend?”

“Who said I wanted to be your friend?” He flashed a wicked grin.

The images his suggestive grin conjured in my head flooded my face with heat. “What do you want from me?” I asked, trying to steady my voice.

Lysander tilted his head, his eyes searching mine. “Why do you assume I want anything?”

“Because I wasn’t raised in ignorance,” I shot back. “I was raised by Dawn Court dignitaries. I’ve been schooled about every court faction since I could walk. Dusk Court Fae? You always have your ulterior motives, your whispered secrets, your dark reasons. A Dusk Court Fae is the last person I’d trust.”

Lysander’s lips quirked up in a half-smile. “Fascinating. Most Moon Court Fae I’ve encountered seem to believe in free love, trust, and an open heart. Yet here you are, ready to stab with a silver tongue.”

“I see right through you, Lysander.”

His gaze dropped to my lips briefly before meeting my eyes again. “Oh, I see you too, Sarielle,” he murmured. “*Quite* clearly.”

A nervous laugh escaped my lips as I leaned back. “I’m sure you *think* you do.”

Lysander’s expression turned playful, yet his voice had an edge to it. “Okay, I admit. I do have ulterior motives.”

“Oh?”

“You have a certain... charm that’s hard to resist. I think we should have a little fun together.”

“I don’t typically indulge in ‘fun’ with people I hardly know.”

“Well then,” he suggested with a smirk, “how about we get to know each other better?”

“Dusk Court Fae never let anyone truly know them,” I retorted. “Half the time, I suspect you lot don’t even know yourselves. It’s just layers upon layers of secrets.”

He paused, his playful demeanor faltering slightly. For a fleeting moment, a distant, almost sad look crossed his features. “How about this for a revelation: I find you irresistibly intriguing. How’s that for a start?”

I smirked, but deep down, his vulnerability, however brief, left a lasting impression. “It’s a start,” I conceded.

Lysander tilted his head, studying me as if he were piecing together a complex puzzle. “You know,” he began thoughtfully, “you might have been raised in the Dawn Court, with its structures and its rigidity, but maybe, just maybe, there’s a reason for your Moon Court designation.”

I stiffened, narrowing my eyes. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

His eyes glittered with playfulness. “Have you ever wondered if the reason you emerged from that baptismal pool as something more... fluid than a strict, rule-following Dawn Court Fae was because there’s a part of you that craves... something different? Something a bit... wild?”

I blinked, feeling the heat rise to my face. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating.”

“It’s intriguing to think that, deep down, you might want to test the boundaries, to experience a life less confined. A life where rules aren’t black and white, but varying shades of gray. Where you can dip a toe into an untamed side of life and see just how exhilarating it can be.”

His finger traced a path up my arm, making me shiver. His voice dropped lower, taking on a seductive tone. “What if the Moon Court’s fluidity, its embrace of freedom and passion, represents a side of you that’s been suppressed, yearning to be discovered?”

My heart raced, and I struggled to keep my composure. “That’s a fanciful theory.”

His lips hovered mere inches from mine. “Is it? Or is it that you’ve been too scared to confront that part of you? Too comfortable with your preordained destiny to ever question if there might be more to you?”

His words stirred something within me, challenging my self-perceptions and beliefs. “You talk as if you know me,” I whispered.

“I’d like to,” he responded, his gaze captured mine, filled with a bold promise. My breasts felt suffocated by my bra as his gaze dipped to my chest and he licked his full lips. “How does that sound, Sari? Would you like to get better acquainted?”

I knew that I should get up and walk away. That nothing proper could come from entertaining this conversation any further. But that dark place inside of me—the one that I’d tried suppressing my entire life but was becoming increasingly more difficult to ignore—wanted what he was offering. That part of me was sick and tired of staunchly following the rules. That part of me was wholly responsible for what I said next. “I’ll consider it.”

He smirked. “That’s all I ask.”

Gods, I was so out of my element here, but resistance was futile the moment he shortened my name like Lirien predicted he would. I wanted to take a walk on the wild side so intensely I could practically taste it.

And I had a feeling Lysander Thorne would be the *perfect* guide.

FIVE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

The suffocating darkness enveloped me like a shroud, the stillness of the air pressing down on me. The silence was so profound that I could hear the blood pulsing in my veins, my own heartbeat pounding in my ears. My breath emerged in ragged gasps, each exhale forming a misty cloud that seemed to be absorbed by the encroaching darkness. The air was dense and stagnant, as though it had not been disturbed for centuries, leaving a rancid taste in my mouth.

“Sarielle...” My name was spoken with a sinister promise.

Without warning, the earth convulsed beneath my feet, sending tremors up my legs, making my knees buckle. The ground seemed to groan in agony, and from the void came a roar that seemed to reverberate from the very depths of hell, a sound so terrible that it rattled my bones and clutched at my heart with icy fingers. Desperation seized me as I spun around, my eyes straining to pierce the darkness, searching for the origin of my terror. But there was only an abyss of shadows, a yawning chasm of despair that seemed to swallow me whole.

The trembling grew more violent, and I sensed a frigid presence behind me, an almost imperceptible whisper that grazed my neck, making a jolt of alarm course through me. As I turned, my heart caught in my throat, my vision filled with ghastly specters reaching out to me with gnarled skeletal hands. Their faces contorted in anguish, their eyes empty and soulless, their mouths gaping open in a soundless scream.

“Save us, Sarielle...”

“Save yourself...”

The nightmare shifted in an instant, the spectral horrors still clawing at me as I found myself before a grotesque and malformed tree. Its trunk was twisted and warped, resembling a serpent writhing in torment. The sap that seeped from its bark was viscous and crimson, dripping languidly to the ground like congealing blood. The tree bore fruit that hung ominously from its branches—bright red apples that looked ripe for the picking, yet seemingly infected with malevolence.

The mournful wails of the ghosts assaulted my ears, their despair

threatening to tear me apart. As I stumbled back from the terrifying spectacle before me, I could feel the tree pulsating with an energy that seemed to poison the very air I breathed. Every instinct within me screamed to escape, to flee from the nightmare that threatened to consume me.

All of a sudden, I found myself plunged into a suffocating blackness. The soil surrounded me, pressing down as though I were buried alive. Panic surged through me, and I slashed at the dirt, desperate for escape. Each handful of soil I grasped seemed to disintegrate into a fine dust that coated my throat, my lungs, my very soul.

My fingernails tore and bled as I made my way upward through the earth, the pain of each movement both torturous and strangely exhilarating. The darkness was absolute, a crushing weight that threatened to smother me, to extinguish the very essence of my being. Yet the desperate instinct for survival fueled me, pushing me to crawl through the earthen tomb that sought to claim me.

And as I finally broke through the surface, my gasping breaths met the cool night air. My hands, bloody and raw, grasped at the damp grass, the dew soothing my tortured skin. As I pulled myself free from the choking nightmare, I could feel the darkness receding, the nightmarish landscape fading away as though it had never existed.

My eyes fluttered open, the dim light of the moon illuminating my surroundings, casting long, eerie shadows across the room. My heart still raced, my breaths still came in ragged gasps, but I knew I had escaped the nightmare.

“Oooh, you had a doozy. I could feel the power rolling off of you,” Lirien said.

I jumped at the sound of her voice, still spooked from my dream. She was sitting on her bed, pale legs dangling over the edge as she gave me a concerned look.

“It was just a nightmare,” I groaned before rubbing my forehead.

I was exhausted, but there was no way I’d be going back to sleep after that.

“It was a *vision*, Sarielle. You have a malevolent spirit attached to you.” She wrinkled her nose. “I can smell the sulfur. Someone on the other side is very interested in you.”

Well, that really woke me up.

I thought the lingering rotten egg smell assaulting my nose was my

imagination still clinging to the Dreaming.

“Ugh, I’m drenched.” I pulled my cotton pajama tank away from my sticky abdomen as I headed to my wardrobe to grab fresh clothes. I glanced at the clock sitting on my desk and saw that it was barely five in the morning.

“I have a plan.” Lirien’s tone was way too chipper before sunrise.

Another groan bubbled in my throat as I realized my new roommate was a morning person. I’d never been one to jump out of bed, instantly ready to tackle the day. I was more the type of person who needed copious amounts of coffee before I was even ready to talk to anyone without biting their head off. My brother used to tease me and say, “What kind of member of the Dawn Court doesn’t like mornings?”

I touched the mark that never quite seemed to stop simmering beneath my skin and muttered, “I guess that explains it.”

“Helloooooo!” Lirien singsonged. “Sarielle, did you even hear my fantabulous proposal?”

“Why are you so cheery right now?” I snapped. “The sun isn’t even up. Aren’t Moon Court people supposed to thrive in the night or whatever?”

She waved me off with a girlish giggle. “Usually, yes. But I’ve always marched to the beat of my own drum, in case you haven’t noticed.”

That *almost* made me smile, which was a damn miracle, considering my foul mood. “Oh, I’ve noticed.”

A proud grin lit up Lirien’s pretty face. “Anyways... what do you think of my plan?”

“*What* plan? I wasn’t paying attention.”

I dug through the built-in drawers of the wardrobe, searching for my favorite undies. I enjoyed pretty frilly lingerie as much as the next girl, but sometimes, you just needed a big ol’ pair of cotton boy shorts covering your ass.

Once I found them, I chose my cherished pants tailored from ethereal gossamer—a material prized by fashion-forward Fae for its lightweight and flawless fit. I paired them with a navy crop top spun from lumina fabric, which subtly glinted with the softest of starlights. Gathering my hair, I twisted it up and fastened it with an ornate clasp crafted from dark wood and encrusted with sapphire crystals.

Lirien sprung from her bed and began digging through her clothes. “I said, why don’t you go shower off all the gross sweat and bad vibes from your vision, then we can head to the dining hall and binge on caffeine and

pastries before class? By the time we're done getting ready, they should be open. We can snag all the good stuff before anyone else does. Baked goods always help me shake off the really nasty visions."

I didn't exactly hate her plan. If anything had a chance of improving my temperament this morning, it would be baked goods.

I nodded. "Okay."

"Awesome!" Lirien actually bounced on her toes with excitement and clapped her hands. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get your butt in the shower! The sooner you get ready, the sooner we can start piling our plates with deliciousness."

As I closed the bathroom door, my mouth curved into a smile. Growing up, I had acquaintances, but I never really had anyone I could confide in besides Rook. But I was starting to believe Lirien's declaration that we would become besties. There was something really special about that quirky girl.



After way too many pastries, Lirien and I shuffled into our divining class mere moments before the bell dinged.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Professor Valen began, puffing his chest out with a self-satisfied smirk. "Now, I understand many of my antiquated colleagues cling desperately to their dusty textbooks. However, I pride myself on being a forward-thinking, modern man. So, please, indulge me by opening your FaeMacs and selecting the link for today's lesson. After all, it's the twenty-first century." He winked, a grin spreading across his face.

I pulled my university-issued laptop out of my bag and turned it on. My finger traced over the trackpad until I found the link the professor was referring to. It brought me to the agenda for today's lecture: The History of Nightshade University. I opened my digital notebook beside it and waited for him to begin.

"Before we start learning about the many different forms of divination, I'd like to discuss the history of this fine university. You may have noticed that my last name is the same..." He gave us a cheeky smile before continuing. "And that is no coincidence. You see, my ancestors founded this school many moons ago, so I have a special advantage over most in understanding why this university is so different from any other. And lucky

for you, I'm going to share information with you today that can't be found in any reference materials." Professor Valen looked around the room. "Can anyone tell me why this university was built in such a remote location?"

A redheaded girl timidly raised her hand. "Um... because you can see the stars better without light pollution?"

The professor smiled. "That's a great guess, Marley, but I'm afraid you're wrong. Nightshade University was built in this specific location because right beneath your very feet is a massive convergence of magical ley lines."

Huh?

"I thought those were a myth," Rian said, vocalizing my thoughts.

"That's a common misconception," the professor replied. "But let me assure you, they are quite real indeed. For those of you unfamiliar with ley lines, think of them as a web of metaphysical connections linking various sacred places together. These lines can carry positive or negative energy, or sometimes... both. It is believed that where two or more lines converge, you have a place of *great* power and energy. Well, this campus has *eleven* intersecting lines. And *that* is why my ancestors chose to build here. All magic is amplified within these grounds unlike any other place in this realm. That is why we only admit students from the most elite families. Your education at this institution is quite an honor, so we expect all students to treat it as such and take their studies seriously."

As he continued his lecture, my mind drifted away from the professor's words and toward the possibilities. It may have been my imagination, but I could swear the ley lines beneath my feet were magnetic. It was almost as if a tangible force was tugging on the power running through my veins. Calling me to them like a siren, promising incomprehensible greatness. My sudden thirst for knowledge was insatiable.

When class was over, Lirien and I gathered our things. We had a short break before our Practical Magic lesson, so she'd suggested a stroll through the Moon Garden. I could use some fresh air, so I agreed. The moment we exited the building, I felt a prickly sensation at the back of my neck, which halted me in my tracks.

"What's wrong?" Lirien asked.

"Nothing." I surreptitiously scanned for the source of my unease.

She frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Totally." I nodded. "I just think my brain is overloaded from our last class. But I'm excited to check out the garden."

“Ooh!” Lirien exclaimed. “Me too. I heard it’s the best place on campus to summon moon energy, which, like, makes sense, I guess, considering its name.”

I nodded in agreement and started walking again. Despite my assurances, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched. As we cut through the center of campus, that sensation only grew stronger, but Lirien seemed completely unaffected, humming to herself in a little happy bubble. By the time we reached the entrance to the garden, my jaw felt like it might crack from all the tension it held. Like a static charge building inside a storm cloud, something dangerous was brewing.

And that’s when I saw him, stepping out from behind a large tree.

“You have a few minutes to talk?” Lysander asked.

I looked at Lirien, who was gleaming with sly amusement. “What? You don’t need my permission. I’ll just be in there if you need me.” She literally skipped along the cobblestone path before disappearing behind the iron gates.

“Have you been following me?” My eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Lysander’s mouth tipped into a cocky grin. “What’s the matter, Sarielle? You don’t like being stalked by an admirer?”

Heat crept up my neck, flushing my cheeks as I considered his question. It was strange, being pursued so brazenly. But for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to be bothered by it. There was something about Lysander that intrigued me, like he held some secret knowledge that I was desperate to uncover.

I gave him a wry look. “Was that an admission?”

“Let’s walk.” Lysander gestured for me to follow him, completely ignoring my question.

I hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not to trust him. But the pull I felt toward him was too intense. “Where are we going? My next class starts in half an hour.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t keep you long,” he tossed over his shoulder. “We can save the fun stuff for later when we have time.”

I damn near swallowed my tongue. “What fun stuff would that be?”

“If I’m lucky, you’ll find out soon enough.” Lysander pointed to a weathered bench sitting under a giant weeping willow. The wood groaned under his weight as he sat down, patting the space beside him. “Sit. I promise I don’t bite—unless you’re into that sort of thing.”

I was suddenly blasted with erotic images of sweaty bodies, lots of skin,

and heavy breathing. More specifically, *my* naked body locked in a passionate embrace with the guy before me as he left a trail of biting kisses over my breasts.

What the hell was that?!

I tried to ignore the ache between my thighs, and folded my arms. “I think I’ll stand. Now, answer my first question. Were you following me?”

His baby blue eyes twinkled. “Did it *feel* like someone was following you?”

“Will you stop answering my question with a question?” I threw my arms up, not missing how heated Lysander’s gaze became as my shirt lifted.

His teeth scored his bottom lip. “I’d be a pretty shitty spy if you felt me following you, don’t you think? And I *know* I’m not one of those.”

“That’s not an answer,” I huffed.

“Speaking of answers...” I resisted the urge to back up as Lysander stood from the bench and closed the distance between us. “I think I may have some answers that you’d be interested in.” He reached out, tracing a finger over my court brand, smirking when I couldn’t hide the resulting jolt.

I did step backwards this time, breaking the contact. “Answers about what?”

His gaze briefly dipped to my neck. “About your rune. I’m in this... *club*... where people know things. Information that isn’t readily available to the general public. Word about your mark has spread, Sari. And if you’re looking for answers about why it’s so unique, our club is the best way to get them.”

“And these club people just want to give up the information out of the goodness of their hearts?”

Lysander’s black hair flopped as he slowly sliced his head to the right, then the left. “Not every member of this club is a good person, Sari. Very few are, in fact. They do *nothing* without a motive.”

My heart was beating wildly with trepidation, but I refused to show it. “Are you included in that ‘not a good person’ group?”

“I am.” He nodded, shocking me that he’d admit something like that so freely. “And you’d be wise to remember that.”

I nodded slowly, processing his words while trying to calm my racing heart. “So, who’s in this club?”

“People with answers,” he replied cryptically, his eyes connected with mine.

“Answers or ulterior motives?” I retorted.

“Perhaps a bit of both.”

I took a deep inhale, gathering courage to ask more questions. “Is this some sort of trap?”

He leaned in, so close that I could feel the warmth of his words on my face. “Would you dive in even if it was?”

My eyes widened, taken aback by his bluntness. “What would you want in return for these answers?”

Lysander tilted his head, a playful glint in his eyes. “Who said I wanted anything?”

“You just admitted you’re not a good person.”

He smirked. “Perhaps I enjoy the chase more than the capture.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to regain some semblance of control in this conversation. “How many Fae are in this... club of yours?”

“Enough,” he whispered, moving closer. The proximity was dizzying, the tension palpable.

“What’s the club’s name?” I tried, desperate for something to grasp onto.

He chuckled softly. “That’s a secret.”

Frustration flared up. “Do you ever give a straight answer?”

His voice dropped to a sultry whisper, “Only to those who can handle it.”

Our faces were inches apart, the air between us electric. “Then maybe you haven’t met someone who can... until now.”

Lysander’s smile widened, revealing a flash of white teeth. “Then let’s test that theory, shall we?”

“What?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

Lysander leaned forward. “I think you could handle me *very* well. You’d ride me—”

I scoffed, cutting him off. “You’re delusional.”

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat. “We’ll see about that. So, are you in or what?”

“In for what?” I hated how breathy my words had become, but I couldn’t seem to fix that.

Lysander pulled back slightly, just enough to look me in the eye, but he was still very much invading my personal space. “There’s a meeting coming up. I’m inviting you. If you want answers, you need to come. So, what’ll it be, sweet Sari?”

“Don’t call me that,” I said, finally snapping out of the lust-induced haze.

I placed a palm on his chest, pushing back. We both knew his big body wouldn't budge unless he wanted to, but thankfully, he allowed the space. "I'll be there. Just tell me when and where."

Lysander's full lips curled into a smile. "I'll be in touch."

With that, he turned around and walked away with an annoyingly confident stride. As I watched him go, I hoped I wouldn't regret this. But another part of me had to admit that Lysander was right about one thing. The element of danger *did* get my blood pumping. I just had to make sure I didn't do anything stupid that got me dead.

I supposed time would tell.

SIX

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

The damp air seemed to cling to my skin as I followed Lysander deeper into the tunnels. Each step echoed, bouncing back from the stone walls. I was thankful for Lysander's advice to dress appropriately. My fitted black leggings and lightweight, long-sleeved top allowed me to move easily, and my sneakers gripped the uneven, moist ground beneath.

"Why did you choose the dead of night for our little excursion?" I huffed, adjusting the high ponytail my hair was pulled into.

Lysander smirked, not looking my way. "Some things are best seen in the shadows, Sari. Especially when it involves the underground."

The whisper of magic feathered over my skin, growing more pronounced with every forward stride. "And this secret club of yours? What should I expect?"

"People who've been to the darker corners of our world and, at times, prefer it there. They're an... eclectic group, but they might have the answers you're looking for."

"And how does someone like you get involved in an... eclectic group like this?" I asked.

It was dark in the tunnels, but I swore I saw the flash of sorrow cross his features out of the corner of my eye. "Guess you could say it was something I was born into."

The longer we traveled, the more turned around I got, and if it wasn't for the outline of his towering figure leading me, I would have been completely lost.

The rock was cold and wet, the sounds a subtle drip, drip, drip of liquid landing on stone. "Lysander, I don't like this—"

My foot caught on a root, and I surged forward, nearly landing on my face. Lysander's warm, muscular body wrapped around me, stopping me from falling.

"Easy," he rasped, his tone full of suggestion.

I braced my hand against his chest and looked up at his face, the flickering torch mounted to the wall casting shadows along his sharp face.

I swallowed. "Sorry."

I saw the flash of his white teeth, a smirk curving his lush lips. “Happy to have an excuse to catch you anytime, Sari.”

The tunnels seemed to close in on us, the damp air making it difficult to inhale. As we delved deeper, the distance between Lysander and me grew shorter, our strides syncing with one another.

“Remind me why we’re doing this again.” Gods, these tunnels were creepy.

“You want answers, don’t you?” he asked. “This is where you’ll get them.”

Before I could form a retort, a sudden tickling sensation crawled up my calf. I glanced down, and a large spider scuttled up my leg. A suppressed scream caught in my throat.

In one swift motion, Lysander was at my side, pulling me into him. His hand grazed my thigh as he swiftly brushed the spider away. My heart raced, not from the arachnid, but from the proximity of his body. We were so close I could feel his lips brushing against my forehead and smell the intoxicating scent that clung to him.

“Not a fan of the locals?” he teased, his voice low and sultry.

I took a deep, shaky breath, attempting to regain my composure. “Oh, shut up,” I replied, playfully shoving his chest.

He chuckled, holding his hands up in mock surrender. “Alright, alright. But just so you know, you’re even more adorable when you’re scared.”

I was grateful the darkness hid the blush creeping up my neck as we continued on, the undeniable tension between us growing.

Finally, we came to a large chamber. A soft light emanated from glowing stones embedded in the walls, casting the room in a warm orange glow. I could see there was a pool in the center of the room, the water shimmering and inviting.

Lysander walked toward the pool, his hand beckoning to me. “Come on, Sari,” he said. “Trust me.”

As I hesitated, a figure emerged from the shadows, making me jump in surprise. As they handed me a heavy piece of fabric, Lysander stood stock still, his body language unreadable.

“Put it on,” the robed man commanded, his voice unyielding. “Over your head.”

My heart raced, and I shot Lysander a pleading glance. But his eyes were suddenly cold and distant. Gone was the playful guy who brushed the spider

from my leg and caught me before I fell. It was like he was a completely different person.

It was then that I realized I was on my own.

I couldn't run away.

I didn't know my way out of here, and I was outnumbered. I felt so stupid, like one of those victims in a horror movie who'd run toward the serial killer.

My hands trembled as I slipped the sack over my head, the fabric muffling my vision and my hearing. Lysander's presence was a distant memory as I was dragged deeper into the cave. My feet faltered over the uneven ground and my fear threatened to choke me.

"Why all this secrecy?" I tried to sound braver than I felt, but the quiver in my voice betrayed my anxiety.

"To ensure you don't run before you've seen the whole picture," the voice beside me hissed, tinged with amusement.

Suddenly, the strangling grip on my arm eased. The cover was yanked from my head, and a rush of light momentarily blinded me. As my eyes adjusted, I could see we were in a vast chamber. I discerned hooded silhouettes, backlit by the wavering glow of torches, their faces sunk into deep shadows.

But it was the altar in the room's center that captured my undivided attention. Intricate carvings were etched upon its surface, marked by glowing symbols that made my heart lurch. As I stood before it, my heart hammering in my chest, I couldn't help but wonder what Lysander's role was in all of this. Was this the club he was referring to? Had he brought me here to join their ranks, or was I to be a pawn in a game I didn't understand? As the hooded figures closed in around me, their whispers filled the air like a sinister chant. I braced myself for whatever was to come.

A booming voice echoed through the chamber, causing the ground beneath me to tremble. "You stand here as recruits, chosen to learn the secrets of our ancient society. But first, you must prove your worth."

Recruit? What the hell? I didn't sign up for this. I wanted *answers*, not a membership into some cryptic brotherhood.

The cavern seemed to inhale, the collective breath of its inhabitants creating an unnerving stillness. The magnitude of the space made me feel small, like an insect trapped in an amber expanse. I tried to meet the eyes of other people, hoping for an ally or at least a shared sentiment of trepidation.

But the void in their expressions told me nothing.

From the very heart of the room, a new voice emerged—so commanding that I felt it more than heard it. “Initiates,” he began, drawing the word out like a blade from its sheath, “you stand at the threshold of transformation. Many souls have stood where you are now, shaking with anticipation or dread, but not all have transcended the trial that awaits.”

I couldn’t keep the shock from registering on my face. What had Lysander gotten me into?

The voice, as if feeding off my confusion, continued with a slow, deliberate cadence. “This is not a mere induction. This is an odyssey of the self. You shall traverse not just the pathways of this cave but the labyrinthine corridors of your psyche.”

As the final word was spoken, the figures encircling the room began a sonorous chant that was both haunting and harmonic. Beautiful and terrifying. My thoughts threatened to spiral into panic, but the commanding voice once again captured my full attention.

“To join us, to truly be one of us, demands more than mere desire. It demands confrontation—with your deepest fears, your harshest truths. Tonight, the cave is not just a physical entity but a reflection of the soul.”

Conflicting emotions surged within me. Was this about proving worth or discovering self? The promise of answers seemed tantalizingly close yet wrapped in enigma.

“Your journey begins now,” the voice declared, resonating with finality. “Navigate its depths with every ounce of your being, every fragment of your spirit. Emerge victorious, and you’ll be one step closer to the revelations of our Order.”

The intensity of the task at hand loomed before me. I had wanted answers, yes, but at what cost?

The voice’s intensity didn’t waver, its tones resonant within the cavern’s embrace. “But be warned, initiates.”

I attempted to steel myself for whatever would come next. The sensation of dozens of unseen eyes on me was unnerving.

“If you cannot navigate these caverns, cannot find your way out by dawn’s first light, you will be lost to its depths forever. And the cave is unforgiving. Many have wandered its dark halls, never to emerge into the light of day again.”

A collective murmur rustled through the gathered crowd.

My pulse quickened. “Lost... forever?” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

The commanding figure seemed to nod in agreement. “Indeed. This is not a mere game or trial. It is a testament to your strength, resourcefulness, and determination. The caverns do not care for your title or lineage. Here, you are merely a soul seeking its way, and the path to enlightenment or entrapment is in your hands. I look forward to seeing who will rise... and who will perish.”

This wasn’t just a challenge—it was life or death. The stakes had never been higher. And I had to find my way out, not just for the answers I wanted, but for my survival.

Again, what the fuck had Lysander gotten me involved in?

As the final word rang throughout the chamber, the torches were suddenly extinguished. Darkness enveloped us, snuffing out every glimmer of light. The air grew colder, as if the darkness itself had leached away the warmth.

I could hear the shuffling of feet and the murmur of voices, but I couldn’t see anything or anyone. Fear clawed at my chest, tightening its grip around my heart. I couldn’t tell where Lysander was or if he was even still in the room.

Groping blindly in the dark, I found the wall and pressed my back against it, trying to calm my racing thoughts. I knew I couldn’t afford to panic. Instead, I focused on the challenge ahead: I needed to escape this labyrinth. I didn’t give a flying fuck about this so called secret society Lysander invited me to. I just wanted out of here. Fuck him. Fuck him for bringing me here. It all seemed like a gigantic joke, now.

I ventured forward, my hands skimming the damp stone as I made my way through the cave. The darkness threatened to smother me, but with each step, my resolve grew stronger.

As I navigated the winding tunnels, I could hear the distant sounds of my fellow recruits, their voices mingling with the scuttling of unseen creatures. It was a race against time and one another, and I was determined not to be left behind. With each step, the fear and panic subsided, replaced by a fierce determination to make it out alive. The darkness became my companion, and the walls my guide.

I couldn’t see the others, but I knew they were close. I needed to keep moving, because I highly doubted anything good would come from them catching up with me.

I ducked and weaved through narrow crevices, scrambled over rocks and climbed up steep inclines. My heart pounded in my chest, and my breath came in ragged gasps, but I didn't stop.

"I don't think the only job is to get out of here alive," someone hissed to my left, causing me to freeze.

"Yeah?" another one said. "What do you think we're supposed to do?"

I waited to hear their answer.

"I think we're supposed to eliminate the competition. What do you say we team up?"

My blood ran cold at the words. Eliminate the competition? Did that mean they were willing to kill to prove their worth to this secret society? I couldn't let that happen. I had to find a way out of here before it was too late.

My heart thumping, I pressed forward, my senses on high alert. Every sound, every movement, could mean the difference between life and death. The darkness was my enemy, but I had to use it to my advantage.

I heard the sound of footsteps behind me and realized with a start that they were chasing me. I suppressed a scream and willed myself to run faster. I could feel their presence almost upon me, the darkness shrouding them like a curtain of dread.

"Get them!" one of them roared. "One less to compete against!"

I wasn't giving up without a fight. Fueled by adrenaline, I pushed myself to the limits as I raced through the tunnels, ducking and weaving around blind corners as if my life depended on it, because evidently, it did. I ran until my lungs ached and my muscles burned, hoping against hope that eventually they would give up and leave me in peace.

But they kept coming, their footsteps pounding against the wet stone floor. Panic gripped me as I realized my options were dwindling. I didn't know this place, and I couldn't see where I was going.

Suddenly, strong arms wrapped around me from behind, pulling me to the side. I struggled and tried to scream, but a hand covered my mouth, muffling my cries. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I fought to break free, but the grip only tightened.

"Shh, it's me." Lysander's warm whispered voice thawed the icy fear running through my veins. We both waited until the footsteps passed, and once the only sound I could hear was our combined breathing, relief flooded through me, but it was quickly replaced by anger. How could he have put me in this situation?

“What the hell is going on?” I hissed, pushing him away. “Why did you bring me here?”

I couldn't see his expression, but I sensed he was smirking, which made me want to slap him.

“I'm not supposed to interfere, but I had to keep you safe,” Lysander replied calmly. “I couldn't let them catch you.”

“Who are *they*?” I demanded, feeling the adrenaline slowly fade away but the anger rekindling.

“The other recruits,” he explained, sounding impatient as if he couldn't believe I didn't know this already. “They'll do whatever it takes to win.”

“Why? What is so special about this club?!” I asked.

“Power most would die for,” Lysander replied, his tone bitter.

I stomped my foot, disgust curdling in my stomach. “Do you think this is okay? That *any* of this is okay?!”

Lysander's hand reached out, and I flinched away, not wanting his touch. “Of course not. But there's no other way.”

I shook my head, still feeling a sense of betrayal. “You should have told me before bringing me here.”

“I couldn't,” Lysander insisted. “I can't tell you anything about this. You'll have to learn it on your own.”

“This is insane!” I whispered. “I want nothing to do with this. You and your fucking secret society bullshit can fuck right off.”

I shoved at his chest and he grabbed my wrists to pin them over my head. “You want nothing to do with me?”

I swallowed. “That's right.”

Lysander leaned closer to me. “I don't believe you,” he whispered, his lips grazing my earlobe. “You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to be a part of this. If you didn't get off on danger. If you didn't want to explore the part of yourself that wanted to break the rules.”

I tried to pull away, but his grip on my wrists tightened. Part of me wanted to deny it, to push him away and leave this all behind, but there was another part of me that wanted to lean into his touch, to feel the heat of his body against mine. Gods, what was wrong with me? All sense seemed to flee the scene when Lysander Thorne was near. I really was an idiot.

“You're wrong,” I rasped, closing my eyes as he continued to tease my ear with his lips. “I don't want anything to do with you or your fucking club.”

Lysander chuckled softly, his free hand trailing down my body, leaving a

lick of fire in its wake. “You can lie to yourself all you want,” he murmured. “But you can’t lie to me.”

The intensity of the moment heightened as Lysander’s strong hands threaded through my hair, drawing me closer to him. He hovered over my mouth, taunting me. “You want me, Moon Girl. You want to taste me.” He flicked his tongue out, licking my lips. “You want to *feel* me.” He pressed his body against mine, and I could feel his hard cock straining against his jeans.

“I want to fucking kill you,” I rasped.

“No, you don’t. You want me to fuck you.”

I knew I should’ve been outraged when he slammed his lips to mine, but instead, our mouths danced together in a passionate tango, fueled by the raw desire and hate that coursed through our veins. His tongue traced my lips, begging for entrance, and as I yielded to his silent plea, our tongues met and entwined with a fiery hunger. Our breaths mingled, hot and heavy, as our bodies pressed against each other, the heat between us nearly unbearable.

“Fuck, Sari, your lips were made for mine,” he growled possessively between broken kisses.

Our embrace tightened as the passionate push and pull continued, and his arms encircled my waist, lifting me off the ground. My legs instinctively wrapped around his hips, while his hands roamed my back, tracing the contours of my body. Our hearts raced in unison as the room seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of us, locked in desire.

“Damn, Moon Girl, your lips... they’re addictive.”

As Lysander’s lips left mine, they trailed a heated path down the curve of my neck, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. His teeth grazed my collarbone, causing a sudden quiver in my soul, and as he claimed my skin with gentle nips and kisses, I found myself lost in the intoxicating whirlpool of pleasure. My fingers dug into his shoulders, desperately seeking purchase, as my body trembled beneath his touch, my senses pushed to their limits by the intensity of the connection we shared.

Lysander’s fingers tightened in my hair, pulling me closer, his kiss deepening with urgency. “I can’t get enough of you,” he murmured against my lips, his voice tinged with a raw need.

I gasped as his other hand found the small of my back, pressing me tightly against him. “Lysander,” I whispered, the heat between us threatening to ignite into an inferno.

His kisses softened, his lips brushing against mine in gentle caresses, each

touch a testament to the intense connection between us. “It’s like every time we touch, there’s this... electric charge,” he whispered.

I leaned my forehead against his. “This is dangerous.”

His fingers traced my jawline. “You can’t deny the attraction between us.” His voice was low and husky. “I know you feel it, too. And if you want me, if you want us, a world without rules, and power that exceeds the laws of the court, then you’ll find your way out of these caves. Use your gifts. Maybe the dead can give you directions. I’ll be close to ensure you’re safe, but I can’t guide you out of this.”

Lysander set me down and faded into the shadows. My heart pounded, my legs wobbly. The dark caves and the loss of his lips made me feel infinitely alone. My mind was foggy with desire, and I struggled to find the words to refute him. But deep down, I knew he was right. There was something between us that defied logic and reason.

The audacity of the suggestion echoed in my mind. Talk to the dead? Was that even possible? Lirien had mentioned her ability to do so, a talent inherent to the Moon Court, which I had just joined. Could I...?

As I grappled with the prospect, my concentration was shattered by a shadow darting across the dark tunnel ahead. My heart leapt into my throat, fear rippling through my veins like lightning. It wase as if I’d tripped an unseen wire, setting off an electric surge. My heart rocketed in my chest as something slithered across my foot.

“Oh gods, oh gods, no,” I muttered, unable to suppress the scream that finally escaped my lips. I kicked out instinctively, trying to dislodge whatever creature had invaded my personal space in this hellish darkness. Every shadow morphed into a lurking monster, every sound a sinister whisper.

I couldn’t stay here, not for another second. Fueled by adrenaline and an all-consuming dread, I started to run, stumbling through the winding tunnels with reckless abandon. My footsteps echoed around me, but they weren’t alone. There were other sounds—skittering, scratching noises—that seemed to chase me through the maze.

“What is happening?” I gasped to myself, voice tinged with hysteria. My panicked words dissolved into the dank air, replaced by the pounding of my heart, which was like a drumbeat leading me further into an unknown abyss. “Keep it together, just keep it together,” I chanted, my mantra providing comfort.

The air grew thick with tension, as though reacting to my fright. It felt

like the walls themselves were squeezing in, ready to smother me in this underground nightmare. Air came in shallow, sharp gasps, rasping in my throat as if I were swallowing shards of glass.

It was in this state of frenzied terror that something deep within me began to react, as though my fear had become a key, turning a lock within my soul that I hadn't known existed. I felt it then, a pulsing force surging forth from the depths of my being, uncoiling like a serpent. My mind became a whirlpool of frenetic energy and emotion, my fear mingling with a nascent, indescribable power.

As I tried to make sense of it, to shape this newfound force into something tangible, the air thickened to an almost viscous state. The temperature plummeted further, condensing my breath into misty plumes that floated before my eyes, ghost-like. It was as though the very fabric of reality was warping, rippling in response to my fear and the dark energy it had awakened.

I slowed to a halt, a shaky hand reaching up to cover my mouth as if to hold back a sob—or another scream. I was on the edge, teetering between sanity and a descent into complete and utter madness. And that's when I felt it—a presence, not quite a person, but undeniably sentient, pulling at the frayed edges of my consciousness.

“Who's there?” I whispered.

And as if in answer, the surrounding darkness seemed to part, revealing a ghostly figure.

“Shit,” I exhaled, shivering in the face of the impossible. Had I just summoned a ghost from the netherworld? The very thought was both ludicrous and horrific, yet here I stood, suspended in a moment that defied all reason.

Her ethereal gaze latched onto mine, and her hand—was it a hand?—stretched toward me in invitation. “Come,” she commanded, her voice carrying a timeless gravitas that was equally unnerving and awe-inspiring.

“What the fuck,” was all I could manage, disbelief and amazement battling for dominance within me.

I hesitated for only a moment before placing my own hand in hers. It was strange, because I couldn't *feel* her palm resting against mine, but in that brief instant before my hand passed through the specter's, an overwhelming sense of calm washed over me, a promise that all of my questions would be answered in time. With no further words spoken between us, the woman

began to move forward with purpose, encouraging me to follow behind her. As we proceeded through the treacherous passages of the cave, I could swear I heard whispers, voices that seemed to be calling out for help. The woman continued her march forward, paying no heed to their cries.

We traveled through the tunnels for what seemed like hours but was probably only about ten minutes. Every so often along our journey, strange symbols and intricate carvings adorned the cave's walls, depicting some sort of ancient ritual maybe. The woman's pace was determined and unflinching. I probably should've been worried about the faint glow she was giving off, but her presence lent me a strength I hadn't known I possessed. I somehow knew that I was the only one who could see her, that the light she provided to help me navigate the darkness was a gift bestowed upon me and only me. The dips and curves of the cave became increasingly more challenging as we moved through its depths, but with each step forward, my courage grew until eventually, we reached the mouth of a large chamber. As I stepped beneath the jagged arch, I gasped.

We were standing—or *I* was standing, and my new ghostly friend was hovering slightly above the ground, rather—in the same cave where the baptismal ceremony was held. The pool of blood where I was marked stood before me, but for some reason, it didn't seem nearly as scary this time. The woman kept going, so I followed, carefully skirting the narrow passage surrounding the perimeter of the pool, until I was on the opposite, much wider end.

I started walking toward the roughly hewn staircase, which originally led me to this cave, but the spirit shook her head and said, "This way."

She directed me to the left, past a few large boulders and into an alcove I hadn't noticed the first time I was here. As I stepped into it, I realized it wasn't an alcove at all, but a path. We veered right around a sharp corner and came to a dead end a few yards later.

"What do we do now?" I asked my ghostly friend. "There's nowhere else to go."

She pointed to the wall and, in the next moment, faded into the ether.

"Where'd you go?" I whisper-shouted. "Come back!"

After a few minutes, I hung my head, resigned to the fact that she wouldn't be returning. As I started to walk away, her disembodied voice rang through the air.

"Look again, Sarielle."

Huh?

“Look at *what?*” I threw my arms up. “A blank wall?”

An icy disturbance brushed over my shoulder before she repeated, “Look *again.*”

I turned back to the stupid wall, squinting in the darkness. My eyes widened as an unfamiliar symbol began to glow. I traced it with my fingers, feeling the deep groove carved into the stone. It was almost like the mark of infinity, but... not. The lazy eight shape was there, but there seemed to be other symbols layered on top of it, which interrupted its smooth edges. I looked closer, noticing a tiny crescent moon. Directly across from it was a dagger, and on the bottom half, a sunrise and a chaos star.

“It’s the court runes,” I murmured to no one in particular, noting that each symbol was located on one of the four rounded corners. “What the—”

I nearly lost my footing as the cave wall began to move. Scratch that—the *wall* wasn’t moving. *I was*. Right through the damn thing, as if I had no corporeal form. I blinked rapidly as I emerged into a wooded area, where the moonlight shone through the gaps in the trees. I took a few steps forward, dried leaves crunching beneath my feet. Artificial light shone in the distance, so I headed in that direction. I came to the edge of it where a concrete path lay, directly beneath one of the many lamp posts that ran through the university grounds. A quick glance told me I was behind the academic buildings. I scanned the area for Lysander, but I couldn’t see him. I wondered if he was really that good of a spy or if he was still in the caves. I made a mental note to ask him later how far he followed me.

I took a deep breath, squirming as I replayed all the crazy shit I just went through in my head. I was so freaking mad at Lysander for misleading me, but I was also grateful because, as much as I hated to admit it, I didn’t think I would’ve made it out of that cave if he hadn’t pulled me aside and helped me regain my bearings. The *methods* he implored to ground me, and my enthusiastic reaction to them, was a problem I would deal with later. For now, there was a hot shower calling my name. Rinsing away the grime coating my skin was my top priority.

SEVEN

LYSANDER THORNE

Even the breaking daylight couldn't alleviate my dread as I read the cryptic message I'd received.

"The catacombs. Dawn."

I stumbled through the campus, the weight of the world on my shoulders, feeling the pull of the underground. There, beneath the feet of unaware students, lay our secret sanctuary, known only to a few. The catacombs were not just any secret spot; they were the Order's clandestine meeting grounds.

His silhouette, tall and unyielding, greeted me before I could fully adjust to the dim light. As I approached, I could barely make out the upturn of his lips. A smirk? The man who had rarely shown any emotion was displaying... amusement?

"You came," his deep voice echoed, the satisfaction evident.

"Didn't have much of a choice, did I?" I retorted, a tremor betraying my feigned bravery.

His laughter, hollow and shocking, resounded throughout the cavern. "Ever the defiant one."

"Why did you summon me?" I asked, mustering up all the courage I had.

"She's perfect, Lysander," he said while rubbing his hands together. "She has the power we've been searching for."

I swallowed, instantly knowing who he was referring to. Part of me had been hoping that Sarielle wasn't the answer to all his problems. That pull toward her was like a damn magnet, unavoidable and relentless. It wasn't just attraction; it felt deeper, more primal. It challenged the walls I had meticulously built over the years, urging me to throw caution to the wind. To hell with consequences.

Why does she get under my skin so easily? I thought. Every rational part of me said to keep distance, to not entangle her in my mess. Yet, something raw and untamed within me wanted her close, wanted her marked as mine.

This wasn't just about the mission. This was possession. An urge so strong it was damn near overwhelming. The realization was unnerving, but one thing was clear: Sarielle wasn't just another job. She was becoming an obsession.

I cleared my throat. “Are you sure? She was terrified last night. Hardly the picture of strength,” I replied.

“I don’t need someone brave,” he said with a casual wave of his bony hand. “I just need the power thudding through her veins.”

My stomach clenched. “How do you know she’s powerful?”

My father’s beady eyes narrowed, clearly annoyed that I had the nerve to challenge him. “Because I’ve had the best scholars researching that mark on her neck. They haven’t been able to determine exactly *why* her rune is shaded in, but they *have* confirmed it signals a connection to great power. Possibly even royalty. When she arrived at the Order meeting, Xavier confirmed it.”

Fuck.

Xavier Axewood was my father’s second-in-command, and an accomplished man with an incredibly rare gift. Xavier was able to sense someone’s power level, which undoubtedly led to his high-ranking position within the Order. When a recruit was initiated, Xavier stood by my father’s side, silently assessing each and every one as they arrived for their first trial. Last night was the first of several tests the recruits would have to endure to become official members of the society, but if your power level wasn’t above average, you’d never be invited to the next meeting, regardless of whether or not you made it through those tunnels unscathed.

My father looked down at me, his fingers steepled in contemplation. “I find it curious, though.”

I bristled. “What?”

“Her parents. They’re unremarkable,” he said, a sneer evident in his voice. “Just like the rest of those tedious, rule-abiding Dawn Court Fae. It’s strange, isn’t it? That their daughter could be so powerful when they’re... decidedly not.”

I felt a flicker of irritation. “People aren’t necessarily direct reflections of their parentage.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are they not? Look at us. Our lineage is steeped in power and influence. Our ancestors’ legacies live on through us.”

“I’ve seen Fae from the most influential families fall short of expectations,” I shot back, “and others from unknown backgrounds rise to greatness.”

He smirked, clearly enjoying our verbal sparring. “True. But power like hers? It doesn’t just spring from nowhere. There must be a hidden lineage, something in the shadows. Perhaps a dalliance? A powerful ancestor buried

in the family tree? Who knows?”

I gritted my teeth, forcing calm into my voice. “Regardless of her origins, it’s her power we’re dealing with now. We need to tread carefully.”

“Yes, yes,” my father said, his expression blank as though his mind were elsewhere. “I need you to get closer to her. As soon as possible.”

“I got her to the meeting, and now you have your confirmation. What more do you want?”

He lifted his chin. “I need time to prepare things with the Order. Make sure nothing interferes with our plans. She is what we’ve been waiting for. I’m almost sure of it.”

His words sent an unexpected jolt of panic through me, making me feel like the walls of the cavern were closing in. *Get closer to her?* My heart hammered against my chest at the thought. The connection I had with her already unnerved me to my core. How could I forge an even deeper bond when every instinct was shouting at me to distance myself, to protect both her and my heart from the inevitable fallout?

I wasn’t supposed to care. Not like this. Not at all. But here I was, feeling a pull toward Sarielle that I hadn’t felt for anyone before. Was it just the allure of her power? Or was it something deeper, something more personal? Whatever it was, I needed to put distance between us, not get closer.

“What about Ariya?” She was probably my only way out of this.

My father scoffed. “She knows that the mission takes priority. Your betrothed will prioritize our family’s alliance over any petty jealousy. There is too much at risk otherwise.”

I nodded solemnly, working hard not to let my feelings show. Ariya and I had been betrothed since before I was born. Our families treated marriage like a business deal, and in five years, we’d *combine assets*.

“Do not fuck this up, Lysander. I don’t care if you have to fuck the girl. Keep. Her. Close. Keep her safe. Keep her compliant until the moment is right.”

I leaned forward and stared at him. “And what’s the purpose of keeping her close? Why bother?”

We both knew my father wasn’t opposed to silly things like kidnapping.

My father frowned. “Despite their lack of notable power, her parents are well-connected, dignitaries,” he began, his tone laced with disdain. “Any overt actions against her will raise alarms. The last thing we need is the whole of the Dawn Court interfering with our operations.”

I bit back my irritation. “So, we’re just supposed to be... friends? Make nice?”

His eyes flashed with annoyance. “You need to understand the delicate nature of our position, Lysander. Yes, we can’t act directly—yet. But if she trusts you, if she’s at ease around you, it creates opportunities. Once the new initiates have pledged their allegiance and undergone the secrecy ritual, we can proceed.”

I felt the weight of unspoken terror. “Proceed with what?”

His expression darkened. “I intend to harness her power. Extract it in a way that won’t rouse suspicion. We need every advantage we can get. With her power at our disposal, we’ll be unstoppable.”

I stared at him, struggling to keep my emotions in check. The thought of exploiting her, especially when I was beginning to feel a strange connection, was unsettling. But now wasn’t the time for that. “And the Dawn Court?”

He smirked, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “They won’t even know what hit them.”

Part of me wanted to get closer to Sarielle while I had the opportunity. I wanted to feel her against me, suck on her bottom lip. Caress her tongue with my own. But the other part wanted to push her away before I no longer had the choice. I had a feeling Sarielle would quickly become an addiction if I wasn’t careful. I barely knew her, and she was already consuming my thoughts and fucking up my focus on important matters. She was a straight-up liability to me, but according to my father, she was also a potential asset to the Order, which always took priority over everything else.

I nodded, knowing there was no sense in debating this any longer. “Understood. Will that be all?”

He carefully studied me before answering. “I hope I don’t need to remind you what happens to people who disappoint the Order.”

I looked him in the eye, refusing to show an ounce of fear. “I’m fully aware of the consequences of a failed mission.”

“Good.” He waved me off. “Then get to work.”

I spotted Sarielle in the main library, her pale pink hair making her stand out even from a distance. Her lithe frame, marked with delicate curves, was bent

over a table she shared with her peculiar friend. Her beauty was undeniable, and it gave me pause for a moment longer than I'd care to admit.

I decided there was no time like the present and moved toward her. As I took the empty chair beside her, I couldn't help but smirk when I noticed a faint bruise on her neck, a souvenir from my biting kisses. The satisfaction from that sight only grew as she shot me a piercing glare.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise?" I said, matching her glare with a grin.

She brushed some pink hair away from her face. "What do you want? We're busy."

I held my palms out. "I come in peace, I swear."

The blonde sitting across from us stood and started packing up her bag. "I'm going to give you two some privacy."

Sarielle shook her head. "No, Lirien, that's not necessary."

"Afraid to be alone with me?"

She placed a hand on my shoulder, pushing me back. "No."

"Prove it," I challenged.

"Really, girl, it's fine." Lirien looked over her shoulder and giggled. "I see someone I need to talk to anyway. Just text if you want to meet up for dinner."

The beautiful girl at my side huffed. "Fine."

I waited until the strange girl had wandered off before inching my chair closer. I leaned in, my lips brushing the shell of Sari's ear.

Her body tensed, and she whispered without looking at me, "You're brazen. It's like you don't even care about the rules."

I pulled back slightly, meeting her fierce gaze, a smirk playing on my lips. "I'm not kissing you," I responded smoothly, "just whispering sweet nothings."

As our whispered conversation continued, I was well aware of the eyes on us. Not just from the regular patrons of the library, but from my father's spies. I had caught a glimpse of two of them lurking in the shadows of the book stacks as I approached Sarielle's table. The theatrics were for their benefit as much as they were for Sarielle's. I knew my father wouldn't blindly trust me to handle this situation—he didn't trust anyone—but if his men reported back that I was playing my part, it might buy me a little more time and freedom.

"I'm glad to see you made it out alive."

“No thanks to you,” she muttered.

I pulled back just enough to look into her pretty brown eyes. “Ouch, princess. I thought I was a great help.”

Sarielle scoffed. “Oh, yeah? How do you figure?”

“You went from panicked to focused, just like that.” I snapped my fingers for emphasis. “I’d be happy to remind you how I accomplished that, but I don’t *really* think you forgot.” I gave her a wolfish grin as I grabbed her hand.

She yanked her hand back, eyes flashing with annoyance. “Oh, right. How could I forget that earth-shattering kiss?” she replied sarcastically. “Especially when it was just after that cozy little trip to a terrifying underground cult meeting where I could’ve been killed.”

I smirked, leaning closer. “You’re right; the circumstances were less than ideal. But you can’t tell me you haven’t thought about that kiss since.”

She hesitated for a split second before retorting, “What I’ve been thinking about is how to avoid getting dragged into another one of your deadly nighttime escapades.”

“Come on, Sarielle,” I teased. “Admit it, you enjoyed it. The kiss, I mean.”

She rolled her eyes, but I didn’t miss the faint blush that tinged her cheeks. “In your dreams, Lysander. It was a mistake and *definitely* won’t happen again.”

“Liar.” I chuckled. “But I would like to know *how* you got out. I was tracking you for a while, but you somehow managed to elude me, which doesn’t happen often.”

Truth be told, it drove me fucking crazy when I lost sight of her. I watched her step into a shadowed alcove, seemingly on a mission while muttering to herself. When she didn’t come out after ten minutes, I followed her in, only to find an empty passage that led to nothing. I didn’t know how she snuck off without my knowledge, but she did. When I finally traced her back to her dorm, I damn near broke the door down, demanding answers, but then I ran into Silas and had to deal with him.

I was worried about her because of the mission.

Because of the motherfucking mission. Nothing else. Nothing more.

“I had a little help,” she replied, her eyes distant as she stared at the table.

The spike of jealousy that surged through my veins nearly had me wrapping my hands around her throat and demanding to know who helped

her.

Because of the mission.

I needed her wrapped up in me. No one else. I'd fucking kill one of those recruits. "Who helped you? What's his name?"

She snapped her eyes to me. "Jealous?"

My face felt hot as I stared at her. "No. Just want to know who my competition is." I winked at her, trying to be playful, even though I was already mentally stabbing whatever asshole spent time with her.

She waved me off. "It's none of your concern."

I reached out and grabbed her wrist, yanking her forward. Her glistening brown eyes were locked on mine. Up close, she smelled like vanilla and spice. "What if I want it to be my concern, hmm?"

She swallowed, and I wanted to drag my tongue along the veins in her neck. I wanted to hear her moan, crush her body to mine.

"Then I suggest you don't invite me to secret clubs where I have to fight for my life, *Lie-sander*." The emphasis on the first half of my name almost made me chuckle. My entire life was a lie. An illusion. A mystery. It was the way of the Dusk Court.

I pulled her even closer, my lips hovering over her plump mouth. She was close enough to taste. Close enough to devour. But I didn't kiss her. Not yet. I kept her frozen in place, feeling her heart pounding against my chest. She tried to pull away, but I held her tight. I wanted her to know that she belonged to me, that she was mine to protect. It was a strange sort of possessiveness, and a small part of me wondered if I was playing a role, or something else.

"Tell me who helped you," I growled, my voice low and dangerous. "I need to know."

She clenched her jaw, her eyes narrowing in anger. "And I said it's none of your concern. You have no right to interrogate me."

I chuckled darkly. "I have every right, Moon Girl."

She raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. "Is that so?"

I leaned even closer, brushing my lips against hers. The small gasp that escaped her made my dick hard as a rock. I wanted to ravish her then and there, but I restrained myself. "Yes," I whispered. "One way or another, I will find out who helped you. After all, I can't very well have competition, now can I?"

She gulped, seeming to understand the underlying implications of my words. She was mine, and I didn't share. She was no longer allowed to be close to anyone else but me.

For the mission.

For the fucking mission.

She licked her lips. The fucking tease was going to drive me insane. "I did what I had to. I was alone in that dark chamber. It was... terrifying."

"How can I make it up to you?"

She started breathing heavier, the rise and fall of her chest dragging her tits against me. I bet they were the perfect handful. I bet she'd arch her back when I sunk my teeth—

"Lysander?"

When I heard that sickly sweet voice, I tensed. I pulled away from Sarielle, and the closeness we'd just shared evaporated in an instant. "Ariya," I greeted tersely, forcing a smile.

She stood there, the very picture of angelic elegance, blonde hair cascading like a waterfall.

"Who's this?" she purred, not waiting for an answer before stretching her hand toward Sarielle. "Hello, dear. I'm Ariya." She paused for effect, her eyes radiated with cheeky charm. "Lysander's fiancée."

The engagement ring on Ariya's finger may as well have been a beacon. A magnificent piece of art, it gleamed menacingly, casting a shadow over the moment. Its brilliance was undeniable, just like Ariya's beauty.

Sarielle's gaze was drawn to the ring, a clear symbol of the alliance between our families. Her eyes widened ever so slightly, and a flicker of confusion passed over her face.

"I wasn't aware Lysander was engaged," she finally managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ariya's smirk widened. "Seems you don't know much about him. And who are you again?"

I clenched my fist, struggling to keep my composure. I never imagined introducing Sarielle to Ariya would be like throwing a lamb to a lioness. "That's enough, Ariya."

Ariya leaned close, whispering something in Sarielle's ear, her voice too soft for me to hear. But the color draining from Sarielle's face told me all I needed to know. Whatever Ariya said, it was meant to wound.

Sarielle looked at me, seeking answers. The pain reflected on her face felt

like a punch to the gut.
Fuck.

EIGHT

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

I was standing in a vast, dense forest. The trees were tall and imposing, their trunks twisted in the most surrealistic way. The air was so still I could hear my own heart beating like a drum inside my chest. Besides the trees, there was not a single sign of life around, only an eerie silence that seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

“Sarielle... you must hurry.”

I startled when the feminine voice broke through the silence, my eyes frantically searching for the source.

“Who said that?” I asked. “Where are you?”

“You must help me,” she replied.

How was I supposed to help her when she wouldn’t tell me where she was? Who she was?

The woman kept repeating the same four words over and over, her voice sounding more anguished as time went on. I ran through the forest with an overwhelming sense of dread nipping at my heels, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched. The more I ran, the more disoriented I became. It was as if the forest had come alive, dirt paths shifting before my eyes, every turn bringing me further into its depths. Gnarled branches reached out to me from all angles, trying to ensnare me in their clutches. A strong wind began to blow, carrying pained cries and slapping me in the face with dead leaves.

I screamed as a sharp branch sliced through my skin, rivulets of blood and sweat running down my arm as I fled, desperate to escape the macabre woodland. I stumbled through the underbrush, releasing a cry as my hands and knees landed on the unforgiving ground. My chest heaved and my head spun as I fought for breath, knowing deep in my bones that I needed to move. The hairs on the back of my neck rose as I suddenly felt a deeply malevolent presence behind me. I looked over my shoulder, finding an inky black mist. I knew it sounded crazy, but as it floated above the ground, expanding and contracting in time with my pulse, I could swear it was a sentient being. The moment that thought formed in my head, the wall of shadows raced toward me. I scrambled backwards, trying to regain my footing, but before I could

manage, it swallowed me whole.

My body felt weightless as I was swathed in complete darkness. The screams were deafening, coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. I could feel the presence of something powerful and ancient within the endless void. I had no idea which way was up or down, fear coursing through my veins as I tried to make sense of it all. The one thing I knew for certain was that this wasn't just an ordinary void; it was one filled with endless possibilities.

I blinked as a glow pierced through the darkness, my eyes struggling to adjust from the sudden brightness. A shadowed figure stood at the center of the incandescent light, radiating great power. I knew I should be scared, but for some reason, I wasn't. It was quite the opposite, in fact. It was like my soul recognized the newcomer, but I was still waiting for my brain to catch up.

"Who's there?" My question echoed in the void.

"Blood of my blood," the being replied in an androgynous voice. "There isn't much time. You must listen closely."

"Who are you?"

"I am the Shadow Queen." A dark melodic laugh pierced my ears, and I looked down at the ground as snakes slithered toward me.

The darkness of the night seemed to press down on me, the shadows elongating and distorting like grotesque arms reaching out. I could barely see the snakes as they slithered toward me, their bodies a sinister dance of ebony and emerald against the moonlit ground. They moved with a purpose that was ominous, their eyes glinting with an unnatural intelligence.

"What are you doing?"

"Beware of the Midnight Serpents, child," the voice echoed.

I kicked and flailed my legs, fighting the snakes that crawled up my body. "Stop!"

"You must accept your power, then you will understand." The voice grew softer.

As the snakes began to crawl up my legs, their cold, slippery scales brushed against my skin, each serpentine coil wrapping tighter and tighter, like a vise. Their bodies twisted and contorted as they climbed higher, leaving me feeling trapped and helpless, my breath catching in my throat.

The air was thick with the scent of decay, the damp earth beneath me becoming a distant memory as the snakes enveloped me in their embrace. I

tried to scream, but the sound caught in my throat, swallowed by the darkness.

Suddenly, a snake brushed against my cheek, its flickering tongue tasting the air before it slithered into my mouth. I gagged as it continued its relentless crawl. Panic and revulsion coursed through me as the creature slowly wound its way down my throat, choking me from the inside.

The sinister laughter surrounded me, the voice as cruel as the darkness itself. I could feel my consciousness fading, the darkness threatening to consume me entirely. But as I teetered on the edge of oblivion, the voice grew softer, almost soothing.

“Accept your power, and understand,” it whispered, like a lullaby sung by the wind itself.

The Shadow Queen’s laughter echoed through the void one last time before fading away.



I awoke with a startled gasp, clutching my chest as I tried to make sense of what had just happened.

“Whew!” Lirien said. “Another wild vision, huh?”

I sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. I flushed from head to toe when my gaze lifted and found my roommate prancing around our dorm, *buck ass naked*. Her pert breasts bounced as she waved an earthy wand around, clouding my vision with thick smoke.

“Uh... Lirien. What are you doing?”

“I’m cleansing the energy in the room, silly.” She gave me a *duh* look. “Whatever you just saw coated our little sanctuary in some really maleficent vibes. That’s no way to start the day.”

“Okay...” I tried to steady myself. “But, why are you *naked*?”

She lifted up on her toes, waving the wand over the top of my wardrobe. “Because being in your purest form makes it easier to purge the negativity. Haven’t you ever saged before?”

“Nope,” I muttered.

I was trying really hard to maintain eye contact, but she wouldn’t stop flouncing around, which meant her jiggly parts wouldn’t stop... jiggling. It didn’t help that both of her nipples were pierced, so the shiny barbells were

drawing my eye, and I was pretty sure there was another one winking at me from between her thighs.

I'd never considered myself a prude, but I definitely wasn't as free-spirited as my roommate. I had to remind myself that there was nothing wrong with being nude in the privacy of your own space, but it definitely wasn't something I was used to. As a whole, Dawn Court members were more reserved, so that's how I was raised.

Truthfully, I envied her bold confidence. Lirien was a beautiful girl, inside and out. She had every reason to be as secure as she was. But it also made me realize how severely lacking I was in that regard, which was a new feeling for me. Being appointed to the Moon Court was really throwing me off.

"We need to let that sit for about twenty more minutes, then we can open the window to release all the stuck energy." She placed the burning sage on the abalone shell that sat on her desk, before walking over to her bed and climbing on.

Lirien arranged herself into a lotus position, leaving no doubt about that third piercing, and rested her upturned wrists on her kneecaps. She closed her eyes and appeared to be silently meditating.

I jerked my chin toward the bathroom door. "I think I'm going to take a shower."

Her blue eyes popped open, boring into me. "Wait. Don't you want to talk about your vision?"

"What makes you so sure it was a vision?" I challenged. "Maybe it was just a nightmare."

"C'mon, Sari, do you *really* believe that?"

I thought about it for a moment, remembering what she told me about identifying the differences between a vision and a nightmare. As fantastical as my dream was, it definitely felt larger than life. Significant.

"Not really," I admitted. "Talking about it makes it more terrifying, somehow. But honestly, it doesn't make sense."

She made a *gimme* gesture with her hands. "Tell me about it."

Oh, why the hell not? If anyone could help me interpret this vision, it would probably be her. "Okay, fine. But would you mind putting some clothes on first? I can't have this conversation with a naked lady."

Lirien seemed amused by my request, but she complied without question. After she was sufficiently covered up with a robe, I began to recap my dream.

Lirien listened intently, occasionally asking clarifying questions.

“It certainly sounds like a vision to me,” she concluded. “And a message from the Shadow Queen no less! How exciting is that?”

“That’s not exactly the word I’d use to describe it. What I want to know is why she’d suddenly resurface to communicate with me of all people?”

According to my high school history lessons, the Shadow Queen had ruled Tartarus, more commonly known as Hell, for thousands of years. Well, not the same Fae female throughout, but a succession of queens who took the crown as each of their predecessors died. The most recent queen to hold the title had disappeared without a trace, which sent the underworld into a frenzy. Evidently, they couldn’t replace her seat on the throne without irrefutable proof of her demise, so Tartarus had been missing its monarch for nearly two decades now.

“I dunno, but if she was communicating with you, that means she’s actually dead! But if that were true, why wouldn’t she cross through the veil? What unfinished business is keeping her anchored to this realm?” Lirien’s eyes widened. “Holy shiitake! I wonder if she’s the malevolent spirit that’s been haunting this university! It makes so much sense.” She got off the bed and, much to my relief, started throwing on some clothes. “We need to go to the library. I bet one of those dusty books has some answers.”

“Uh... *what* malevolent spirit? Are you talking about your little ghosty friends?”

The quirky girl gave me another one of her *duh* looks. “Are you kidding?! There is one *seriously* pissed off ghost haunting this campus. I’ve sensed it from the moment I stepped foot on Nightshade University grounds.” She gave me an exasperated look. “How can you not tell? The chills traveling down your spine? Ominous moans in the distance. Its energy is so much darker than our friendly neighborhood ghosties.”

I thought about my own ghosty friend back in the cave. But that one seemed genuinely helpful as she led me to the secret exit. On the flip side, whatever tried to drown me in a pool of blood was definitely rocking a sinister vibe. Was that the Shadow Queen?

“Pardon my ignorance, but I’m new to this whole talking with the dead schtick. What exactly makes a spirit one of the *friendly neighborhood ghosties*?”

Lirien thought about it for a moment. “Well, in my experience, most ghosts just kinda hang around, waiting for their opportunity to tie up

whatever loose end is keeping them here. Some are super outgoing, others are pretty reserved, and then you have the occasional Grumpy Gus who's obviously waiting for their moment of vengeance. But even the latter is totally harmless unless you're the target of their ire. More often than not, ghosts are simply little invisible voyeurs. Most Fae don't even notice when one is nearby, but I've become pretty attuned to the signs over the years. But if they choose not to show themselves to me, I pretend I don't know they're there. Heck, just yesterday, I was diddling my clit in the shower when I felt someone watching me, but they would've never known I was on to them."

I forced myself not to cringe. "What did you do?"

Lirien shrugged. "Well, I wasn't about to let it ruin my orgasm, so I just gave it a good show. I'd like to think whoever it was, was thoroughly entertained. Maybe fondly remembering their corporeal days when they could rub one out, too." She winked at me and I made a mental note not to bother her while she was in the shower. "But anyway, solving the mystery of the Shadow Queen's unfinished business should top our agenda," Lirien continued. "Because I'm almost positive she's the one who's haunting the university."

"Do you think I should be worried?" I asked. "During my baptism, it seemed like someone was trying to drag me under. Do you think it could've been her?"

Lirien's expression became thoughtful, her eyes distant as she pondered. "If the Shadow Queen is trying to communicate with you... that means she must consider you useful somehow."

I swallowed hard, her words sinking in. Just what every girl wanted to hear: the pissed off ruler of Hell had a vested interest in you.

"But what does being useful to someone like that mean? Does it mean I'm in danger? Or could it mean that I'm safe from her wrath?"

She tilted her head, blonde hair cascading over one shoulder. "I wouldn't say 'safe.' But think about it: she wouldn't destroy a messenger before you could receive the intended memo, would she? Especially if you carry something of significant value to her."

I frowned. "That doesn't make sense. She tried to drown me. Why would she do that if I was so valuable to her cause?"

She bit into her lower lip, contemplating my question. "Maybe the Shadow Queen wasn't the force behind that particular event."

"Who else could it be?"

“Not who. *What* else could it be?” Lirien leaned in closer, her voice lowering. “Hear me out. The ley lines running beneath the university aren’t just dormant channels, Sarielle. They’re alive, seeking, always hungry for more power. When there’s an abundance of it in one being, like perhaps in *you*, they’re drawn to it. It’s a magnetic pull, irresistible.”

I considered this for a moment. “So you’re saying the ley lines sensed something in me during the baptism?”

Lirien nodded slowly. “It’s rare, but not unheard of.”

“How do you know so much about ley lines?” I asked. “I thought they were a myth until recently.”

She shrugged. “My dad’s a teacher. He’s been sharing random knowledge with me my whole life. I never doubted their existence.”

“But why is all of this happening to *me*? What makes me so special?”

Lirien’s gaze was unwavering. “That, my dear, is what we need to find out. We need to start researching. Stat!” She grabbed her backpack and headed for the door. “C’mon, let’s go. We have some ghost hunting to do!”

After I quickly changed out of my pajamas, Lirien led the way across campus, her excitement evident in her brisk strides. Entering the library was like stepping into a dream—one constructed by the wildest parts of the imagination. The air was thick with enchantment and knowledge, an intoxicating mix that both grounded and lifted the spirit simultaneously. I kinda loved it there.

Lirien, ever the playful soul, glanced around with a grin. “You know, I had a vision once that I’d... uh, *rendezvous* with your brother right in that aisle over there.” She winked, pointing to a corner where a cascade of luminous books floated gently.

I grimaced. “Honestly, Lirien, there are things I wish to remain blissfully ignorant about. That’s high up on the list.”

She chuckled. “Well, if you think that’s shocking, you should hear about the other vision I had about this place... involving *you*.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Oh no, you’re not pinning any of your naughty visions on me.”

Lirien tried and failed to look innocent. “Who, me? I’d never!” But her gleaming smile betrayed her. “But I promise, this one was... shall we say, more decent.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “I’ll believe it when I hear it.”

She looped her arm with mine, pulling me deeper into the library. “Ah, a

mystery for another time, perhaps.”

As we meandered through, I couldn't help but marvel. Books, with bindings of shimmery linens or worn leather, levitated, giving off an aura of ancient secrets.

Lirien playfully nudged a floating book, which, in return, spun in a small pirouette before returning to its original position. “Show-off,” she teased.

The library's ceiling was a celestial masterpiece, an unending portrayal of galaxies and constellations.

Lirien twirled below it, her fingers tracing imaginary patterns in the air. “Dance floor for the stars.” The floor beneath shifted in vibrant mosaics as if reacting to our very presence. At one point, a pattern of roses bloomed beneath Lirien's feet. “Oh! Seems like the floor has a crush on me. Don't be jealous.”

Laughing, I replied, “Oh, I couldn't possibly compete.”

With every step and playful jest, it was evident: the library was a magical entity of its own, and with Lirien by my side, it was an adventure waiting to happen.

Finally, we made our way to a section of history books. “Ah,” Lirien said. “Here's one on Tartarus, and it's the latest edition. I'd say this is a good place to start.”

She pulled out a large book and grinned. “Oh, you're a naughty boy, aren't you?” She lovingly stroked the book's spine, and in the next moment, it jolted to life and started nuzzling her breasts.

“Uh,” I whispered, watching Lirien bat her eyelashes at the damn thing. “What are you doing?”

Lirien flashed me a cheeky smile. “Flirting, of course.”

“With a *book*?” I blinked incredulously.

She winked. “Sometimes, if you flirt with the books, they're more... forthcoming. Haven't you heard of scholastic seduction?”

“Nope. I can't say I've ever tried seducing a *book*.”

If I was being honest, I'd never really seduced *anyone or anything*. In my limited experience, the boys had always made the first move, and those encounters usually resulted in a lot of awkward fumbling and disappointment.

Until recently, anyway. But this certainly wasn't the time or the place to open that can of worms.

Lirien giggled, leaning in close to the hovering book. In a sultry voice, she cooed, “You're so handsome. Mind spreading these pages like a good

boy and showing me what you've got?"

I almost choked on my laughter as the book vibrated slightly, as if flustered, before splaying its pages open, revealing its contents.

Lirien flashed me an I-told-you-so grin. "See? It's all about the approach. You might want to try sweet-talking your divination textbook during midterm prep. Who knows? Maybe those zodiac signs just need a little love."

I sighed. "If that's the secret to acing exams, then I've been doing it all wrong."

Lirien set the book on a nearby table. It was opened to a passage titled, "The Shadow Queen." At the top, there was a picture of the reigning monarch with her crown and scepter, which had both been crafted from the bones of defeated enemies. Yikes. Talk about dramatic.

My jaw dropped when I took a closer look at her face. "That's the woman who led me out of the cave!"

Lirien's blue eyes rounded. "Are you sure?"

I looked at the picture again and nodded. "I'm *positive*. But... she didn't seem evil or angry, so maybe she's not the malevolent spirit you're thinking of."

"Or... maybe she didn't want to scare you," she mused. "It makes sense if she thinks you'd be useful somehow. This would all be a lot easier to solve if we knew more about her disappearance."

My eyes fell to the page again, reading a brief description of the early years into the latest Shadow Queen's reign. According to this text, her realm had been a bleak place full of turmoil and fear. But, in her short time there, she had restored order and patched crumbling alliances. She was feared in the underworld, but also respected. It went into great detail about dark royalty life as a whole but said nothing about the circumstances leading up to her disappearance.

"I don't think this is going to give us the answers we need, Lirien."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Lirien shook her head. "Time to bring out the big guns." She licked her lips and started unbuttoning her top. I quickly looked around the library, worried someone would see us.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"Turning the book on so it'll tell us its secrets, of course." She pressed the pages to her breasts, and I swear the book motorboated her with the pages. She giggled to herself. "Oh you naughty, naughty book!"

Fuck, what had I gotten myself into?!

I focused, reminding myself that I needed answers, and no matter how... *unconventional* Lirien's methods were, it was worth it if they worked. A few suggestive strokes, several compliments, and one not-so-accidental nip slip later, the book flipped open to another page. My strange friend set the book down again so I could read the new passage.

If I was interpreting the text on this page correctly, it seemed to be some kind of prophecy. I didn't tend to put much stock into vague predictions from ancient seers, but I couldn't deny the wave of alarm that raced through me as I read through this one.

*A society forged in secrets and lies,
Forbidden fruits and innocent lives.
Order amidst chaos, temptation abound,
Intentions impure, snakes all around.
Darkness in bloom, sacrifices made,
Shadows and Serpents, together they reign.
Bargains are struck, a blood debt is paid,
The ultimate betrayal, the Queen of Shadows is slayed.*

A deep sense of foreboding ran through me as I read through it again. Could this prophecy be referring to the secret club Lysander was involved in? The same club he got *me* involved in? Was one of their members responsible for the Shadow Queen's death? It would certainly explain the haunting. What if the club members were her target and not the actual university? What did that mean for me now that Lysander had roped me into their sadistic world? Was I now her target by extension? Was she simply luring me into a false sense of security when she helped me escape the cave?

I had dozens of questions racing through my head with zero answers. The frustrating part was I couldn't ask Lirien because I hadn't told her about the secret society bullshit. I didn't like withholding information from her, but my gut told me that ignorance was bliss as far as that fucked-up club was concerned, and I didn't want to pull her into anything dangerous.

Lysander Thorne was the only person I could think of who might be able to provide some insight, but he was the last person I should trust. I mean,

who did he think he was, kissing me like his life depended on it when he had a freaking fiancée? He'd made me the other woman against my will, which made me sick. If I were smart, I'd go out of my way to avoid him altogether. Hell, there was no *if* about it. I *was* smart. But I was also determined to get answers.

I just had to hope my curiosity wouldn't get me killed, too.

NINE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Dinner sat heavy in my stomach, the long days of class wearing me down. I hadn't gotten anywhere in my search for information about the Shadow Queen or my unique court mark, and I was so exhausted by the cryptic nightmares that it was impossible to find the energy to search more.

It had been a full week since I was introduced to that fucked-up secret society.

Six days since I learned the boy I was inexplicably drawn to was engaged.

I was trying to navigate my new court life, fly under a cult's radar, solve a ghostly mystery, and oh yeah... actively avoid the aforementioned boy.

In short, my life was a clusterfuck.

The soft glow from the moonlight played tricks on my vision, making me see his face for a split second. Lysander. His unexpected presence in my life was turning out to be more befuddling than any ritual. He was Dusk Court through and through. And me? A rule-following hybrid of Dawn-raised and Moon-marked. Our paths were meant to cross at formal gatherings, maybe a nod here, a polite smile there. Nothing more.

Yet, that stolen moment in the caverns had been anything but formal or polite. That desperate, toe-curling kiss had sent my senses into a tailspin. It was a lapse of judgment, spurred by need, a craving I hadn't known was simmering within me. But that was all it was. A moment. A beautiful, confusing, heart-pounding moment.

Engaged or not, he was off-limits. Lysander was Dusk. I was Moon. Every whispered tale about cross-court trysts spoke of heartache, betrayal, or worse. Dancing on the edge of such stories wasn't my style. I was grounded, a rule-respecting Fae. And as I walked faster across campus, I reassured myself. Whatever that kiss had sparked, it would burn out, becoming nothing more than a fleeting memory.

The outdoor path leading to the dorms seemed to stretch on forever. With each step I took, my exhaustion grew heavier, my mind burdened by the unanswered questions about the Shadow Queen and the tangled web of relationships at court.

Lost in thought, I barely registered the sudden whisper of movement before a dark shadow lunged at me. The world blurred as coarse fabric enveloped my face, its rough texture scraping against my skin, stealing my vision.

“Wha—” My shout was cut off by the bag cinched tight around my neck, the world outside reduced to muffled sounds.

Strong hands, iron vises really, clamped around my arms, jerking me off my feet and away from the familiar pathway bathed in light. Every inch of me ignited in revolt. Legs kicking, elbows jabbing, I writhed and twisted, attempting to break free.

“Let me go!” My words, though fierce, came out distorted and muffled by the thick fabric. The dread that I’d kept at bay surged, threatening to drown me.

The only sounds: my rapid heartbeat, my gasping breaths, and the unmistakable grunts of my captor, close, too close. Desperation gave me strength, and my boots scraped against cobblestones as I resisted, trying to plant my feet and anchor myself.

Suddenly, there was a disorienting shift, the creak of rusty hinges. Then, empty air. I was shoved, losing my footing, and sent tumbling down a narrow set of stone stairs. Each step was like a jolt of lightning as I crashed downwards.

I landed hard, pain ricocheting through me. I groaned, my head throbbing, darkness pressing in from all sides.

Gritting my teeth, I pulled myself up just as strong arms wrapped around me again. I clawed at the hulking person holding me and stomped down hard on my captor’s foot, the satisfying sound of bones crunching beneath my heel. The grip on my arms loosened for a brief moment, just long enough for me to twist out of their grasp. I used the momentum to deliver a swift elbow to their gut, hoping it was enough to temporarily disable them.

I scrambled away as quickly as my legs could carry me, tearing the bag off my head. I was in an underground tunnel—of freaking course it had to be underground—darkness closing in on me. There seemed to be only one way to run, so I started sprinting through the dark space, gasping for air as the sound of pounding footsteps followed after me. I didn’t recognize anything from my last below-the-surface sprinting session, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t in the same network of tunnels. I suspected everything beneath Nightshade University was connected, but solving that puzzle would need to

wait for another day. Right now, all I cared about was finding an escape route. I could see dim lighting up ahead, so with my captor hot on my heels, I made a break for it, figuring it had to be better than trying to find my way out in near darkness.

Oh, how wrong I'd been.

"So glad you could join us, Sarielle," a cold voice said. "You're just in time."

My eyes darted around the room, slowly adjusting to the dim, flickering candlelight that cast eerie shadows on the walls. The chilly air of the rounded chamber closed in on me, but it was the sight before me that froze my bones. There, just a few feet away, Lysander knelt on the unforgiving stone ground. Every fiber of his proud being seemed crushed, his wrists cuffed, forcing his head into a bowed position. When he lifted his gaze for a moment, the fierce spark I was used to seeing in his eyes was replaced by shadows and weariness. It felt like a blade was twisting in my chest.

Something primal pulsed within me at seeing him like that. An instinct, raw and powerful, screamed to protect, to shield him from harm. Before I could even process this rush of emotion, my attention was hijacked by the looming presence towering over Lysander. I knew he was part of this stupid society, but I had no idea what his actual role was. The man's build was commanding, his very presence swallowing the space. His piercing gaze was fixed on Lysander as if weighing his worth, or lack thereof. The smirk on his face, twisted and brutal, didn't just hint at danger; it screamed it. I had no idea who this man was, but I could tell he was in a position of authority and immensely powerful. It radiated off of him in waves, daring anyone around him to challenge its abilities. It took great effort to hide my surprise when I felt my own magic stirring in response. Something dark and foreboding whispered in my veins, begging me to set it free.

Whoa. What the heck was that?

My eyes darted around the room, landing on the familiar faces of other students. Their expressions mirrored my own—bewilderment, dread, and horror. What had we walked into?

"Well, Silas. It seems our new recruit gave you a bit of trouble," the man said, his voice as cold as the stone walls that surrounded us. He didn't even bother to glance in my direction, his attention fixed solely on the defeated Lysander at his feet.

"Bitch," a silver-haired, muscle-bound douche spat as he came up from

behind me. This was no doubt my asshole kidnapper.

I refused to show him any fear. “How’s your foot, asshole? I think I felt at least a few bones cracking back there.”

I braced myself when he charged me, but the scarier asshole in the room barked, “Silas! Stand down,” effectively stopping him. “Now... as I was saying before the recruit interrupted me.”

“I-I’m not a recruit,” I argued, feeling terrible as the man fisted Lysander’s hair, making him wince. It was so subtle I wasn’t sure if anyone else noticed, but I knew he was in pain.

Why couldn’t I shut the hell up? It was like my mouth suddenly had a mind of its own.

“You are whatever I say you are, Sarielle Blackwood.” The man’s tone was savage and unyielding.

I started breathing heavily, but I couldn’t decide if it was in anger or fear.

“What is this?” I gestured to Lysander. “What’s going on?”

He sneered. “*This* is a lesson. A glimpse of your future should you choose to disobey.”

Lysander shifted, looking like he was trying to stand, but the man backhanded him so forcefully, he fell to the ground, groaning as blood leaked from his mouth.

I instinctively lunged—to do what, I wasn’t sure—but the asshole who brought me here grabbed my arm, squeezing until I cried out in pain.

“What do you want from me?!” I willed the tears in my eyes to stay right where they were. “Who are you?”

Lysander got back to his knees, his widened gaze drilling into me, as if he were trying to tell me to behave.

Any idiot could sense the arrogance and violence in the air, so I bit my tongue, waiting to see how this played out.

“I’m glad you asked.” The man smiled, walking toward me as he rolled the sleeves of his black button-up shirt to his elbows. “Those who’ve sworn fealty to the Order call me their lord.” His eyes briefly snapped to Lysander. “*He* calls me father.”

Oh, fuck. Now I knew why this psycho looked so familiar. Both men had thick inky hair, regal noses, strong jaws, and muscular builds. Wait... what the hell was the Order and why were people swearing fealty to it?

“But the general population calls me Caius Thorne,” Lysander’s dad continued. “The last time we were together, I’d concealed my identity with a

hood. But since you passed the first trial, you get the privilege of seeing my face. It's a pleasure to officially meet you, Sarielle."

Wish I could say the same, you nutcase.

Caius stepped closer with an outstretched arm. My jaw clamped shut as he took my hand, lifting it to his mouth, placing a soft kiss on the top. I averted my gaze, taking in the large snake tattoo that stretched across his forearm. My eyes had adjusted enough to make out the details, but I almost wished I couldn't. It was incredibly lifelike, and if I wasn't so freaked out right now, I'd probably be impressed by its artistry. Each scale on the serpentine body seemed to move and shimmer in the candlelight, almost as if it were slithering beneath his skin. The top portion wound around Caius's wrist, its beady eyes and forked tongue staring back at me. I could've sworn the snake flicked its tongue for a second, but when I blinked, it was perfectly still.

"What is going on?" I asked while looking around.

Caius chuckled darkly as he released my hand. "What's going on is a lesson in loyalty, my dear. A lesson that you will take to heart if you know what's good for you. All initiates must be loyal above all."

I fumbled at the ruthlessness in his voice, my mind struggling to make sense of the situation. What lesson? What loyalty? And what did any of this have to do with Lysander? He was definitely loyal to this stupid cult. He'd made that very clear.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a sharp slap, and I looked up to see Caius standing over Lysander once again, his hand raised threateningly. "All recruits must learn the meaning of pain. Of consequences. This, my dear, is what happens to those who betray the Order."

My heart sank as Lysander greedily accepted the blow, as if he were stone. A fresh trickle of blood dripped from his nose. As much as I hated to admit it, I had a feeling that this wasn't the first time this had happened to him.

But why?

"Wh-what did he do?" I stammered.

Caius looked at me with a smile. "Nothing. Lysander is a loyal member of our organization. A true testament to what it takes to rise in the ranks and gain power." He paused to look at his bloodied son. "But even the best soldiers must be reminded of what's at stake. If you let too much time pass between beatings, they forget."

My heart was pounding, echoing the rhythm of cruelty and rage playing out before me. Lysander, despite his evident strength, seemed to be slowly buckling under the barrage. His once-pristine face was now marred with welts and streaks of crimson. With every blow Caius delivered, I felt a sharp jolt of agony in my own chest, though his fists never touched me.

The air became stifling, the metallic scent of blood and the hushed murmurs of the recruits surrounding me. The heartless dance between father and son seemed endless, a torturous loop.

Lysander, between hits, managed to lock eyes with me momentarily. There was a haunting plea in them—part pain, part assurance. Every wince, every falter, only stoked the flames of my anger further.

With a sudden, unchecked burst of courage, I found my voice. “Enough! Stop it! You’ve made your point!”

Caius’s hand paused midair, and slowly he turned his gaze toward me. The cave was deathly silent, and I felt dozens of eyes piercing into my back. “Do you sympathize with him?”

From behind, a fellow recruit urgently whispered, “My gods, girl. Do you want to die?”

Another recruit added in a hushed tone, “Hold your tongue or we’ll all pay.”

I took a shaky breath, trying to steel myself, but before I could muster a response, Lysander coughed, drawing Caius’s attention back to him.

“Father,” he rasped. “Maybe you should be teaching these new recruits a lesson instead of wasting your time on me. Unless...” He spat out some blood, smirking slightly. “You’re getting old and weak.”

Caius’s face twisted in rage, and he launched himself at Lysander with renewed fury. He had purposely made himself the center of his father’s attention, shielding the rest of us from Caius’s wrath until both of them were exhausted and bloody.

As the blows subsided, Lysander’s bruised and battered form sagged, but he still managed to hold his father’s gaze with defiance. Caius, panting heavily, took a step back, wiping Lysander’s blood from his hands onto a dark cloth.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, Caius finally spoke in a mocking tone. “Enough of this spectacle. It’s time we proceed with the main event.” He gestured grandly to an ornate altar at the front of the room. “Your next challenge awaits.”

I felt a rush of dread. After what I had just witnessed, the prospect of whatever Caius considered a “challenge” gripped me with a sense of foreboding.

Shaking off my horror, I met his piercing gaze. “I want nothing to do with this.” Taking a step back, my eyes bore into his with unyielding resolve. “I will not be a part of this.”

Caius frowned, and I could feel his gaze on me as if it were a physical force. “Your defiance will be noted, Sarielle, but you have no choice in the matter. Everyone who desires power must learn how to pay the price.” He gestured to Lysander. “You will either pay it willingly or the consequences will be severe.”

My mouth went dry as I stared at Lysander. I had no idea what he had gotten us both into, but I knew that I had to get out of this place.

Caius then addressed the room. “The Order is a prestigious organization. Should you survive recruitment, you will have power and influence beyond your wildest dreams.”

I trembled. “And what if we don’t want power or influence? What if we don’t want to join your organization?”

Caius chuckled while rubbing his closed fist. “I’m confident you’ll change your mind. You see, our recruits are selected with careful scrutiny. It is an *honor* to pledge. Every Fae standing in this chamber is here because they’ve already shown potential to be a worthy member of this society. If you pass the remaining trials, you will swear a blood oath to our cause and be welcomed into the fold for life. And I do mean that quite literally. Once you pledge your allegiance to the Order, the only way out is death.”

Okay, so all I needed to do was fail the next trial and I could forget about this bullshit.

As if he sensed my rebellious thoughts, Caius narrowed his eyes and added, “If you do *not* pass the trials... well, I’m afraid that’ll result in your death as well.”

There went that idea.

“But you’ll be glad to know today’s trial requires little effort on your end,” he continued. “Xavier, will you please explain while I prepare?”

“Yes, my lord.” A hulking man, presumably Xavier, stepped out of the shadows, lifting his chin as he looked over our small crowd. “Silas, the robes.”

The silver-haired goon who’d brought me here began passing out long

black robes like they had worn during the first gathering.

“Put this on,” he grunted as he shoved the garment into my chest.

Lysander gave me a subtle nod, encouraging me to comply. Taking orders from these people was the last thing I’d wanted to do, but I was smart enough to recognize I was severely outnumbered. The others and I pulled the robes over our shoulders while Caius stood in the corner, speaking to someone in hushed tones while he donned his own robe.

Once we were all draped in black fabric, Xavier spoke again. “As our lord mentioned, admittance into the society requires a blood oath. We will collect that blood from you today as it’s required to personalize your final trial. This tradition also serves as a reminder of what happens when you disobey a society elder. We have a saying here at the Order, ‘*Sanguis in, sanguis e.*’

“For the society to thrive, blood must be spilled. It can be given voluntarily, or it can be taken brutally through punishment. But the latter is the Order’s preference because pain and fear activate adrenaline. The power flowing through your veins is more potent during an adrenaline rush, so it provides more sustenance to the society. The more sustenance the Order has, the greater it thrives. And when the society thrives, *you* thrive.” He inclined his head toward Lysander, who was in the process of having his cuffs removed and the shirt torn off his body. *What the hell was he doing that for?* “Lysander has graciously agreed to demonstrate one of our collection methods.”

I jumped at the first crack of the whip that Caius now held in his right hand.

Oh my fucking gods, was he going to whip his son after beating the shit out of him?!

This was way more fucked up than I’d imagined, and I’d already imagined some pretty disturbing shit.

I held back a scream when the first lash hit Lysander’s back. An angry welt formed on his skin, but Caius didn’t stop there. He continued to beat his son’s back, breaking the skin in several places. Red and purple bruises mixed with streaks of blood as the lashings increased in both speed and intensity. I had a feeling that Caius was taking out some repressed anger on his son, but Lysander didn’t make a sound. I could see his profile as he silently endured the punishment, staring straight ahead, lips firmly pressed together and fists clenched at his sides.

The sight of it all made bile rise up in my throat, but I couldn’t look

away. It was like I was frozen in place, watching this horrific scene unfold before me. Finally, Caius dropped his arm and stepped back from his son's broken body. Xavier approached Lysander, murmuring some kind of chant as he soaked up the blood with a weird-looking sponge. Xavier continued mumbling unintelligibly until the sponge began to glow so brightly I had to shield my eyes. The light quickly dissipated, leaving behind a large white crystal.

"Well done, Xavier!" Caius praised, handing a black robe to Lysander. "Son, thank you for your loyalty to the Order. You may dress now. Our healer will treat you once we finish collecting samples from the recruits. I can't return you to your fiancée like that, now can I?" Caius and Xavier laughed boisterously as if he'd just told the funniest joke in existence.

A muscle jumped in Lysander's cheek as he slid the robe over his battered skin and bowed slightly. "Thank you, my lord."

What the actual fuck was happening right now?

"Now, who's next?" Caius's gaze roamed over our meager crowd, stopping when he got to me. "Ah, Miss Blackwood. Please come forward." When I hesitated, he added, "Don't worry, your collection process won't be nearly as dramatic." The psycho winked. "Unless you resist, that is."

"Go," Lysander mouthed to me over his father's shoulder.

I cursed him in my head as I stepped forward, my sympathy for the beating he just endured disappearing entirely. He was the asshole who got me involved with this sick club in the first place, and he didn't deserve my compassion. Okay, fine, I still had *some* sympathy, because I wasn't a robot, but I *was* mighty pissed off.

I held my chin high. "What do I need to do?"

"You just need to hold still, my dear." Caius grinned as grabbed my hand again, pushing up my sleeve. He turned my palm upward, running his index finger down the length of my forearm. "If you flinch, I may nick an artery, and we wouldn't want that."

I held my breath as Xavier produced a scary-looking dagger from who knew where and handed it to his supposed lord. The two men had some sort of silent communication before Caius pressed the tip of the blade into my skin. I hissed as he made a one-inch slice, blood immediately welling in the cut. Xavier then placed a small vial directly over my wound, slowly rotating my wrist so gravity would do the rest. I was part hypnotized, part horrified as I watched my blood drip into the cylindrical container. It only took a few

drops before they'd decided they had enough, and Xavier was capping the vial and wrapping a strip of fabric around my arm, securing it in place.

I stepped back, holding my wounded arm to my chest as Caius took the vial, looking pleased as he inspected the sample. "You have done well, Sarielle. The Order thanks you for your contribution."

Fuck the Order and every one of its members, I wanted to scream, but I held my tongue and returned to where the other recruits were standing. When my gaze collided with Lysander, his indifference was infuriating. It was clear he wasn't going to be any sort of comfort or ally in this situation.

Caius addressed us all once more, speaking about loyalty and obedience as if we had any choice in the matter. One-by-one, each recruit was called forward to offer their own blood sacrifice to the Order. I carefully studied them, noting that not a single one seemed disturbed by tonight's events. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised they'd go with the flow of something so sinister and barbaric, considering they all had the mark of the Demon or Dusk Courts.

I wondered once again why I was chosen to participate in something that so clearly conflicted with the attributes of the courts I was affiliated with. Caius had mentioned we were all here because we showed great promise as assets to the society. The question was, what exactly did he think I had to contribute?

And more importantly, how the fuck was I going to get out of this without forfeiting my life?

TEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

My footsteps echoed through the stone corridors, causing me to flinch with every sound. I had barely slept the previous night, tormented by the horrors that had unfolded before me. The haunting images still lingered at the forefront of my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that eyes were following me, scrutinizing my every move.

The memory of the previous night clung to me. Especially Lysander. Every aching bruise, the raw defiance in his eyes, and the crazy way he'd diverted Caius's rage onto himself—it was impossible not to think about it.

A part of me wanted to check on him. See if he was okay, maybe offer a word of comfort. But then an annoying thought niggled at the back of my mind: he had a fiancée. She was probably there right now, nursing him back to health or offering the kind of comfort I was thinking about. That thought annoyed me more than I cared to admit, and I quickened my pace, trying to shake off the brewing jealousy.

The halls were guarded by gargoyles, their stone eyes seeming to glare down at me as I hurried past them. Shadows from the flickering torches played tricks on my mind, transforming the faces of students and faculty into monsters. I hugged my books tightly to my chest, as if they were a shield.

Through the throng of students, I caught sight of my brother, Rook, chatting excitedly with his friends from the Dawn Court. Their laughter filled the air, an unwelcome reminder of the normalcy I felt slipping away from me. That could have been me.

That *should* have been me.

I mustered the courage to approach them. My pulse quickened as I weaved through the sea of students, feeling their whispers and stares burrow into my skin like a thousand tiny needles. It was like, the moment I became Moon Court, I became an outcast. I wondered what they'd think if they knew I was having nightmares about a malevolent ghost and was meeting in secret with a bloodthirsty organization.

Rook looked up as I drew nearer, his expression shifting from amusement to concern as he noticed my disheveled appearance.

"Rook, I need to talk to you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He frowned, sensing the urgency in my tone. “Of course, Sare-bear.” He turned to his friends, offering them a quick apologetic smile. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

He followed as I pulled him to a secluded corner, away from prying ears. My hands trembled as I looked into my brother’s worried eyes, searching for the words to convey the terror that had taken root in my soul.

“Something... something happened,” I stammered, tears welling in my eyes. “I don’t know what to do, and I’m scared.”

He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his gaze never leaving mine. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I knew I couldn’t tell him anything about Lysander’s messed up secret society. I refused to put my brother at risk like that. But that wasn’t my only problem since coming to Nightshade University, and I desperately needed someone to lean on. I needed my big brother, dammit.

I sighed. “I’ve been having these... nightmares. But I think it’s more than that.”

Rook’s expression turned grave. “What kind of nightmares? What were they about? And what do you mean, you think it was ‘more’?” He was in full Dawn Court mode, gathering evidence.

“I think maybe they’re... visions. Lirien is pretty convinced that’s what I’m dealing with here. But this whole thing is really fucked, Rook. It feels almost like a... warning.”

His grip on my shoulder tightened, and I could see his protective instincts kicking in. “Tell me *exactly* what you’ve been dreaming about.”

I hesitated, uncertain if I should divulge this to him. What if he thought I was just as crazy as the rest of the Moon Court people? What if this put even more distance between us?

“I’ve been seeing a... ghost,” I whispered. “There’s this really dark energy coming from her. I don’t know what she wants, but I’m pretty sure she wants to use me somehow to achieve her goal. I can feel her hold on me strengthening.”

Rook’s eyes widened, a look of concern etched on his features. “Sarielle, are you sure it isn’t just the stress? You started a new school, a new court—”

“It’s real, Rook!” I hissed. “I saw... I saw her while I was awake, too.”

He looked around, as if worried someone would hear his sister having a breakdown. “Sarielle. I know that, as a Moon Court member, you have certain... struggles. But it’s important to cling to your reality. You *know* what

happens to Moon Court Fae who become consumed by their magic. I don't want to see you hurt."

"I'm not crazy, Rook. These dreams are real. The ghost is real. It's like we're connected somehow. She called me *blood of my blood*. What does that even mean?"

I noticed a flicker of recognition in his eyes. It was brief, almost imperceptible, but it was there. What the heck was that about?

"Sarielle, I think you should talk to Mom and Dad."

My jaw dropped. "What? Why?"

Rook's eyes sharpened as Lysander emerged from the shadows, his weary and battered appearance doing nothing to quell my brother's rising protective instincts.

He turned slightly to face me. "We'll talk about this later. Just remember I love you, and no matter what happens, I'll always protect you." His fingers tightened around my arm. "If anyone dares to hurt you, they'll answer to me."

As Rook finished, his gaze slid slowly over to Lysander, the threat in his eyes unmistakable. Lysander held Rook's stare, the tension between them crackling.

A smirk played at the corner of Lysander's mouth. "What an endearing family moment," he drawled. "Do you practice that speech in the mirror, or does it just come naturally?"

Rook's nostrils flared, his patience clearly at its limit. Without responding verbally, he took a step toward Lysander, deliberately shoulder checking him as he passed. Lysander swayed slightly from the impact but remained on his feet, his smirk never wavering.

"Watch your step," Lysander called after him mockingly.

Rook continued to walk away, each step loaded with suppressed anger.

As my brother disappeared down the hallway, I turned my attention to Lysander. His eyes met mine, and for a moment, it felt like we were two lost souls.

He took a half-step forward, his gaze never wavering. I mirrored him instinctively. His eyes, which always seemed to hold a hint of mischief, now appeared clouded, searching. A muscle in his jaw twitched, perhaps a signal of his internal conflict.

I took a deep breath, my fingers involuntarily curling and uncurling. Part of me wanted to close the distance between us, ask him about his wounds,

about everything. Another part of me wanted to scream, to question him about the mess we found ourselves in. But a significant part—an undeniable, maddening part—felt an urge just to be near him, regardless of the barriers that existed.

He tilted his head, a silent question in his eyes. I blinked back, my own eyes probably showing a mix of frustration, concern, and confusion. There was an unspoken challenge between us, a game of emotional tug-of-war. It was like we were both trying to figure out the rules, to understand the push and pull that seemed to define every interaction we had.

Averting my gaze, I broke the silent standoff. But even as I did, the turmoil continued.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my voice soft and concerned. I was still angry with him, but I couldn’t stop seeing him in that chamber. Bloody. His face stoic as he accepted his fate. I wondered how many times he’d been beaten like that. I couldn’t imagine growing up with that man for a father.

He hesitated before speaking, his voice barely audible. “No, not really. But I think we need to talk.”

I gasped as he took my hand. “What are you doing?”

“We need to go somewhere more private.” Lysander tugged. “I need you to trust me.”

I dug in my heels. “The last time I trusted you, I got sucked into this whole mess.”

He frowned, seemingly struggling for words. “I know.”

“That’s it?” I scoffed, pulling my hand out of his grip. “You’re not going to even *attempt* to apologize?”

Lysander looked genuinely confused. “I have nothing to apologize for.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you kidding me? You can’t think of *anything* you’d be sorry for?” I lowered my voice into a whisper. “Like... oh, I don’t know... dragging me into some crazy cult? Or maybe *kissing me when you had a fiancée*, perhaps?”

The asshole actually had the nerve to smirk. “Jealous?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Hardly. More like pissed that you made me the other woman.”

“Look, Sarielle. Fact of the matter is, I have something you want. You have something I want. It’s beneficial to both of us if you cooperate. Now, can we please go somewhere more private?”

“The only thing I *want* from you, is for you to leave me the hell alone.”

His dark brows rose. “Oh? So you don’t want information, then? My mistake. I’ll just be going now.”

Dammit.

I lunged forward without thinking to grab his arm as he started walking away. “Wait!”

Lysander turned toward me. “I’m not saying another word until we have privacy.”

“Fine.” I sighed, resisting the urge to stomp my foot like a toddler. “Do you have any suggestions? You seem to know this campus much better than I do, which now that I think about it, is odd considering you’re also a freshman.”

He held true to his vow of silence, but the look in his icy blue eyes screamed, *I know things beyond your wildest imagination, little girl.*

Of that, I had no doubt.

Lysander jerked his head to the side, gesturing for me to follow his lead. We made our way out of the academic building, down the path leading toward the dormitories. When Lysander climbed the front steps to Twilight Hall—the Dusk Court dorms—I froze.

“Oh, hell no.”

He unlocked the front door and looked over his broad shoulder, arrogance bleeding out of his pores. Lysander had me cornered, and his expression told me he knew it.

“Don’t make me carry you upstairs, sweet Sari.”

“I’d like to see you try. You still look pretty weak from last night,” I challenged, my eyes narrowing at him. “And I told you not to call me that.”

“Don’t test me.” His smirk was maddening. “I *do not* bluff when it comes to tossing a pretty girl over my shoulder. Or perhaps you *want* to be manhandled... Is that it?”

I crossed my arms, determined not to let him see the surge of lust his words triggered. Every step he took closer felt like a drop in pressure, the atmosphere pregnant with anticipation.

His face was mere inches from mine, close enough that I could see where the healing potion had started its work. The cut on his lip was already closing, the angry purple of his bruises softening to a faint yellow. Magic had mended most of his injuries. I found my gaze lingering on that lip, wondering about the pain beneath the healing.

“Am I right?” he whispered. The proximity was disarming. “Just say the

word and I'll make all your dirty desires come to life."

His words snapped me out of my daze. "I think *you're* the one who would enjoy manhandling me," I shot back.

His grin deepened, and there was playfulness in his eyes again. "I'm not going to deny that. But I'd prefer a lot more privacy and a lot less clothing."

I shoved past him with all the strength I could muster, moving toward the stairs. But even as I climbed, the heat of his presence stayed with me, a reminder of the tension that always seemed to spark between us.

I thought the Lunar Tower was creepy, but it had nothing on this place.

The air grew thicker as we ascended the staircase. Then at the top of the staircase, Lysander paused before a heavy door, inlaid with intricate symbols that seemed to shimmer momentarily under his touch.

He inserted a key, and as the door creaked open, a flood of soft light bathed the space beyond. I stepped in, momentarily forgetting our silent battle of wills, captivated by the room. Sunlight streamed through grand, stained glass windows, painting the room in hues of amber and sapphire. It cast a delicate dance of colors across the polished marble floor, gleaming in its pristine beauty. To the side, a lavish bed was draped in silks of midnight blue and deep burgundy, its canopy made of a sheer, shimmery material. Adjacent, a fireplace, its mantel littered with half-melted candles, each telling tales of nights spent in contemplation or passion. Opulent rugs blanketed the floor, providing a gentle cushion for every footstep. Each wall was either covered with thick, rich tapestries or lined with shelves bearing ancient-looking books.

"You brought me to your bedroom?" My voice was barely above a whisper, breathlessness betraying my feigned indifference.

Lysander watched my every reaction, leaning against the ornate mahogany desk, the gold inlays catching fragmented rays of the dying sun. His presence was overbearing, a force that demanded acknowledgment, and as I turned to face him, our eyes locked. The world, for a brief moment, seemed to still.

His eyes darkened, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "You said you wanted to know more about me. Go ahead. Dig around. I've got no secrets here."

I took a hesitant step toward him, hyper-aware of the proximity. "Is this a Dusk Court Fae's way of letting someone in?"

He tilted his head, his gaze unwavering. "Perhaps. Or maybe, it's just an

excuse to get you alone.”

Every instinct screamed at me to retreat, to guard myself against the enigma that was Lysander. But a part of me, the part that had been locked away as a Dawn Court child and the woman blooming under her new Moon Court designation, yearned for the danger he represented. I craved the thrill, the mystery, the raw desire that seemed to bounce between us.

I moved closer to one of the tapestries, letting my fingers trace the woven patterns. He mirrored my actions, trailing his fingers along the edge of the desk.

“It’s a pretty big room for a freshman,” I murmured. “No roommate, either. Lucky you.”

Our fingers brushed as we moved closer to each other, the brief touch sending shockwaves through my system. Lysander’s eyes bore into mine, searching, challenging.

“One of the perks of being born a Thorne,” he whispered.

“Lysander... about what happened last night—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But—”

Caught off guard, I hesitated. That moment of vulnerability was all he needed. With a fluid motion, he closed the distance between us, his hand resting lightly on my waist.

My breath caught, every sensation amplified. The feel of his fingers, the warmth emanating from his body, the rhythmic beating of our hearts.

“I thought you wanted to talk,” I managed to say, my voice wobbly.

His lips hovered inches from mine, his gaze fixed on my eyes. “*We are talking,*” he rasped.

I wanted to push him away, to reestablish the barriers that had been hastily erected. Yet, as the shadows lengthened with the setting sun and the room darkened, with just the two of us bathed in the twilight’s embrace, all I could think of was how easily lines could be crossed and boundaries could be blurred.

I cleared my throat and pushed him away, shaking my head free of the lust hazing my senses. “How would your *fiancée* feel about you inviting other girls into your bedroom?”

Lysander gave me an *it’s your loss* look before walking over to the couch and taking a seat. “Ariya and I aren’t... *together*. Our engagement has been planned since before we were born, but it’s nothing more than a business

deal. I can fuck whomever I want, and she's free to do the same. Go ahead and ask her. She'll tell you the exact same thing I just did."

What the shit? I thought arranged marriages were bygones of the past.

I leaned against the wall directly across from him, eyes narrowed. "Then what's the point? Why say you're engaged if you never really plan on getting married?"

"Who said we wouldn't get married?" he asked. "Ariya *will* be my wife the summer after graduation."

I blinked a few times, allowing his words to sink in. "And *then* you'll be an official couple?"

Lysander assessed me carefully. "Why is this so important to you?"

"Oh, I don't know?" I threw my hands up. "I guess I'm just trying to figure out why you would kiss me like... *like you did*, if you have a wifey-in-waiting?"

He stood, his big body slowly stalking toward me. "How exactly did I kiss you?"

"You know..." I waved my hand but quickly flattened both palms against the wall as he caged me in. "Like you were interested in, I dunno, dating me or something?"

His blue eyes lit up with amusement. "I don't *date*, Sarielle."

I frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means..." he began, ducking his head until his mouth was hovering over my ear. "That for me, dating is a waste of time. I *do* have a wifey-in-waiting, as you called her, so there's no point in leading some girl on thinking she has any kind of future with me."

"If you don't date..." I whispered. "What do you do?"

I didn't know why I asked, because I was almost certain I already knew the answer.

"*I fuck, Moon Girl.*" My hip burned as Lysander gripped it with bruising force. "And before you say a word, you should know that I'm not an asshole about it either. I've been honest about my situation with Ariya with every girl I've ever been with. And I've *never* left one unsatisfied. There's not much in life that I enjoy more than making a woman scream my name as she comes."

Fuck.

I couldn't think straight with him towering over me, planting erotic images in my head with his filthy words. I also couldn't stop wondering how many girls he'd been with, and I hated myself a little for it.

I pressed a hand against Lysander's chest. "I need you to move back now. I don't want this."

Hopefully, that sounded a lot more convincing out loud than it did in my head.

He took a step back, maintaining eye contact the entire time he walked backwards to the couch and sat down once again. I was really starting to regret my herculean level of self-control. "I don't believe you, but I'll let it go for now because we have more important things to discuss." He nodded toward the opposite end of the couch. "Take a seat."

I swallowed as I sunk into the comfortable cushions. "Go on, then."

Lysander winced as he shifted. "Last night, you passed the second trial of initiation."

"Lucky me." I gave him the same *duh* look Lirien was so fond of. "Speaking of... I thought your father said he was going to heal your... uh, injuries. I can tell you're trying to cover it up, but you're still hurt, aren't you? Why is it taking so long?"

He tilted his head to the side, assessing me. "My father likes to make sure the healer gives me the bare minimum. Just enough to allow me to function, but he wants me to feel the pain long after it's done. A couple more days and I'll be back to normal again."

"What the fuck?" I practically shouted.

Lysander shrugged. "It's nothing I can't handle. I knew I shouldn't have questioned a directive from the Order. I challenged him and called him weak in front of freshmen recruits. I had to pay for that."

I looked at the ground nervously. "Did you do that to... protect me?"

He reached out to tilt my chin up, peering deeply into my eyes. "Yes. And I'd do it again."

"Oh. Well... next time don't do that. I don't like you getting beat up."

"Next time, don't interfere," he countered. "I don't like the idea of anyone laying even a finger on you." The growl in his words had my stomach clenching.

I pulled back, trying to keep my heart from fluttering. It was damn near impossible not to swoon in his presence. "So... a directive, huh?" I repeated. "Were you given a *directive* to bring me into your fucked-up Order?"

He nodded. "Yes."

I scoffed. "And you didn't think twice about doing it, did you? You didn't give one flying fuck that you were putting my life at risk by exposing me to

those sadistic people?”

Lysander looked me directly in the eye. “Your life was at risk regardless. You got my father’s attention, and when he finds someone or something of value, he doesn’t let go. At least this way, I can keep an eye on you.”

“Why would Daddy Dearest find me the least bit interesting?” I challenged. “From what I’ve seen, I’m *nothing* like you people.”

“First...” Lysander held up his index finger. “I’ve said this before, but I know there’s more to you than you show the rest of the world. The sooner you come to terms with the fact that not *all* your intentions are good, the better. You’re powerful, Sarielle. But you’ll never be able to harness the full force of that power unless you’re honest with yourself.”

I wasn’t even going to try denying the fact that I occasionally had some darker thoughts. I had no doubt he’d see right through me.

“How do you know how powerful I am?” My eyes narrowed. “I don’t even know how powerful I am. In fact, before this weird-ass mark appeared on my neck”—I pointed to the crescent moon permanently etched into my skin—“I wasn’t aware that I had *any* abilities.”

I had felt like something was wrong with me my entire life because most Fae gained some kind of magical ability before they received their official court assignments. Hell, my own brother was considered advanced in that area, and there was never any doubt which court he belonged to. Rook effortlessly conjured his first pair of magic-binding cuffs when he was barely thirteen. The more he learned to hone his magic over the years, the more I questioned myself because he was so far ahead of me, yet only two years older. But my parents had assured me the best thing I could do while waiting for my magic to surface was study. So that’s what I did. I immersed myself in the world of the Dawn Court, learning as much as I possibly could so, when my magic did come, I’d be ahead of the game for once.

So much for that idea.

Admittedly, I felt better after talking to Lirien, knowing I was probably showing *some* signs that I just didn’t know how to interpret at the time, but still. It didn’t erase eighteen years of feeling terribly inadequate.

Lysander stared at me, seeming to choose his words carefully. “Xavier—my father’s right hand—”

“Oh, you mean the *look-at-me-I-can-turn-blood-into-pretty-crystals* asshole?” I interrupted.

“That’s the one.” He smirked. “He can also sense someone’s power level,

a talent my father exploits any chance he can get. Xavier may be an asshole, but he's *never* been wrong when determining someone's value. Your power may be untapped, but if he says it's there, I've no doubt about it. And *that* makes you an asset."

"An asset?" I slowly repeated. "So, if being powerful makes you an asset, then a Fae who isn't as magically endowed is worthless?"

Lysander shook his head. "In my opinion? Not necessarily. In my father's? Absolutely. Caius Thorne is not a good man. In fact, he's pretty fucking despicable most days."

"Yet you blindly follow his orders," I grumbled.

His jaw clenched. "I don't have a fucking choice, Sari. My father *runs* the Order. I didn't even get the chance to pledge. I was born into it. I've been given these life-or-death challenges since before I could walk. I'm just one of his many soldiers and have been *my entire life*. Being part of this society has given me opportunities most Fae can only dream of. It's not always pretty, but it *is* an honor to be chosen. They deserve my loyalty."

I couldn't tell if Lysander was feeding me some recruitment line to make me more agreeable or if he was truly brainwashed.

"What's so damn special about the Order anyway? Because all I've seen are a bunch of sick fucks who get off on terrorizing people, all in the name of *the society*. It's like a cult. You do realize that, right?"

"I do," he confirmed, his glacial eyes boring into me. "But there's a lot you don't understand."

I sighed. "So *make me* understand, Lysander."

"I can't. I've already said too much."

"Why are you telling me this?" I threw my hands up.

"Dammit, Sarielle!" His voice boomed, a raw edge to it that hinted at barely restrained fury. "It's about keeping you safe!" Veins throbbled in his neck, and his intense eyes bore into mine, pleading and frantic. "You heard what my father said. Once you're in, there's no walking away. No escape except death. I'll be damned if I let anything happen to you. Do you understand? I can't... There's something about you that just makes me want to protect you, okay?"

I pouted. "But I never asked for any of this."

"Neither did I." He raked a hand through his dark hair. "But I can help you make the best of it if you would just fucking trust me."

"And why the hell should I trust *you*? Someone who was literally born to

excel in espionage and manipulation? You've lied to me, tricked me, *sexually assaulted* me, Lysander. So, why would you ever think I'd be able to—"

I froze mid-sentence as Lysander's hand cuffed my throat, and he pressed me back into the couch cushions with his big body. It happened so fast I hadn't even seen him coming.

"Let's get one thing straight," he seethed, nostrils flaring as he applied slight pressure on my larynx. Not enough to cut off my air supply, but the threat was there. "I *never* assaulted you. Even right now, as I'm literally holding your life in my hand, you *want* me here. Your pretty brown eyes are begging me for more."

"No, they're not." I lied, gasping as he squeezed, my nipples pebbling beneath my thin bra.

His mouth kicked up in the corner. "Now who's the liar?"

If I wasn't so turned on, I would be disgusted with myself for allowing this man to choke me. To grind his erection into my core, rubbing against my clit through my leggings each time he slid against me, creating the most exquisite friction.

Stars danced across my vision as I moaned.

"You *love* the way my body feels up against yours, Sari." Lysander's biceps flexed as he squeezed a little more. "Look how your spine is arching toward me. How your nipples are poking through your shirt, begging for my mouth. How your mouth is slightly parted, sexy little pants escaping from it as I rub against you." He leaned down, clamping my lower lip between his teeth, making me whimper.

Every exhale, every emotion was a silent duel of wills, both of us teetering on a precipice between danger and desire.

His fingers, firm against the curve of my throat, sent a tremor of fear—or perhaps anticipation—through my body. "Sarielle," he whispered, the rough timbre of his voice making my heart thud. "You can deny it all you want. Fight it. Push it away. But deep down, you can't escape how much you fucking want me."

I tried to retort, to muster some form of defiance, but words betrayed me. There was truth in what he said, and the fire in his gaze threatened to consume every defense I had left.

His body continued to move against mine, each muscle evident beneath the fabric of his clothing. Our closeness was intoxicating, the heat overwhelming. With every deliberate motion of his hips, Lysander stoked a

fire deep within me, one that I had long been trying to suppress.

“I can feel your heart racing.” His lips were warm against my earlobe. “Every pulse, every beat calls out my name, doesn’t it?”

His words were seductive, woven with promises and threats. It was dizzying. Maddening. The sensation of him, so close, so dominant, was a storm threatening to undo me completely.

“I hate you,” I managed to choke out, my voice filled with both rage and lust.

His free hand slid down my side, his touch electrifying, tracing the curve of my hip. “Hate never felt so fucking good,” he murmured, his lips brushing against my jawline.

Lysander’s hold on my neck softened just a fraction, a tacit acknowledgment of our shared vulnerability. But the other hand, the one that had ventured lower, gripped my thigh with a possessiveness that left no room for doubt. Lysander wasn’t one for half measures, and he made it clear that he wanted everything.

“Lysander,” I whispered as my orgasm approached the point of no return. “I need...”

“What do you need?” he whispered back.

I wanted to curse him out. Scream at him. But instead, I said, “I need you to make me come.”

Lysander’s lips formed into a cruel smirk before he abruptly stood, instantly deflating my impending climax. “Think about that the next time you want to pretend you don’t want me.”

I sat up, infuriated. “So, this is all one big joke to you. Is that it?”

His cool blue eyes bore into me. “No, Sarielle. The last thing *any* of this is, is a joke. This is a *literal* life-or-death situation. But lucky for you, I know how to keep you alive if you follow my lead. The question is... can you set all the other bullshit aside and trust me enough to do that?”

I pondered his question. I knew I *shouldn’t* trust Lysander Thorne. Every bit of logic within me was staging a protest at the mere thought after everything I’d gone through since coming to Nightshade University. But when I noticed the slight grimace as he straightened, remembering the injuries he’d sustained at his father’s hand, I knew that he was being truthful earlier. His father was the biggest baddie in this situation. And Lysander may have had some twisted loyalty to their fucked-up Order, but I didn’t believe that allegiance extended to the cruel man who sired him. If I had any chance

of surviving whatever the hell Caius Thorne had planned for me, I would need his son at my side. That realization was what prompted my next words.

“Yes.” I nodded once. “I trust you.”

I hoped Lysander lived up to his promise, because if he didn’t, I just may have made the biggest mistake of my life.

ELEVEN

LYSANDER THORNE

As I roamed the grounds of Nightshade University, the past echoed around me with each step. Of countless Order meetings held in the catacombs beneath the university. My own blood that had been spilled upon those ancient stones time and again, marking both my allegiance and my sacrifices. However, as my haunting memories threatened to sweep me away, a streak of pink pulled me sharply back to the present. Sarielle, unmistakable and radiant as ever.

She was crouched behind a low wall, eyes wide and clearly conflicted. Next to her, her dormmate was practically vibrating with excitement. The sight was so unexpectedly comical that I leaned against a tree for a better view, arms crossed, a hint of a smirk tugging at my lips.

Calling upon my trusty surveillance skills, I focused on blocking out the background noise so I could hone in on their conversation. Lirien's voice, laced with that familiar mix of quirkiness and audacity, reached me first. "I told you, I had a vision, Sari, but it was murky. I need to know if they're actually on a date."

"Okay..." Sarielle sighed, a tinge of exasperation in her tone. "But spying on my brother is a terrible idea. What if he sees us?"

Lirien flicked her wrist. "He won't! I promise. C'mon, Sari, if Rook's seeing someone, I deserve to know."

Sarielle groaned. "Fine. But let the record show, I'm only here because you said you'd bake those almond pastries for me. If we get caught, I'm pinning the entire operation on you."

Lirien giggled. "Deal! Now, focus. We need to find the right vantage point."

Their dynamic was endearing—Sarielle's reluctant pragmatism paired perfectly with Lirien's whimsical impulsiveness. As they continued their hushed discussion, I found myself more amused than I'd been in ages. This new side to Sarielle, coupled with Lirien's infectious energy, made for an engaging spectacle. The differences between the two women were glaringly evident as they huddled together. While Lirien was engrossed in her vision-driven mission, Sarielle was more hesitant. This presented the perfect

opportunity for me to participate in a bit of harmless fun, something I hadn't done in far too long.

Silently, I invoked the stealth techniques that the Dusk Court was famed for, allowing me to creep up undetected. Each footstep was a whisper against the ground. The faintest trace of a breeze ruffled Sarielle's hair, but she was completely unaware of my approach.

I admired her outfit as I drew closer. The off-shoulder top she wore left a stretch of delicate skin exposed, tempting me irresistibly. Her vibrancy, from her pink locks to her colorful attire, made her stand out like a beacon. She was too luminous, too striking. If she were assigned to the shadows and stealth of the Dusk Court, she'd shine too brightly to ever truly hide. It was both her charm and her curse. It put a target on her back.

Taking advantage of her distraction, I moved close enough that my lips hovered just above her bare shoulder. I could feel the heat emanating from her, the rapid pulse beneath her skin hinting at her anticipation, even if she didn't yet know the cause.

"Who are you spying on?" I murmured, my words a soft exhale against her neck.

She jumped, her entire body tensing before she turned to face me, those wide eyes of hers reflecting her surprise, indignation, and a hint of excitement. I smiled, thoroughly enjoying the playful ambush.

The swift motion of her hand covering my mouth was unexpected, and her forceful pull to a crouching position even more so. The sheer theatricality of the move would have drawn more attention than if she'd merely turned to whisper to me. My laughter, which had started as a soft chuckle, erupted into a full-blown roar.

Lirien, in all her quirky glory, seemed to join in the spirit of things, a light giggle escaping her. "Oh, hello, Lysander." Her tone suggested innocence; however, her eyes sparkled with mischief as they landed on me. "I had a vision about you swooping in and saving the day. I just wasn't sure if you'd manage to pull your head out of your ass and show up."

Sarielle swiftly pulled her hand away from my mouth, her chocolate eyes flickering with annoyance and an unmistakable spark of interest.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, her voice low and full of challenge. She moved a little, subtly putting some distance between us but not too much, I noted.

"I could ask you the same," I teased, but then added with a more serious

note, “but honestly, you’re doing a terrible job at spying.”

She huffed, her cheeks taking on a light pink hue, clearly flustered. “We’re doing just fine, thank you very much.”

I leaned in closer, my lips hovering near her ear. “You stand out, Sarielle. And you’re making way too much noise. Rook will spot you in seconds.”

As I pulled back, our eyes met, and the tension was palpable. But before it could escalate, Lirien let out an exaggerated sigh, breaking the moment. “Well, looks like the fun’s over now that Captain Obvious has shown up.”

Sarielle, not willing to let me have the last word, retorted, “You can leave anytime, you know.” But even as she said it, the playfulness in her eyes betrayed her words, hinting that maybe, just maybe, she didn’t want me to go quite yet.

Sensing an opportunity, and maybe because I genuinely wanted to spend more time with Sarielle, I offered, “Would you like some help with your... operation?”

Lirien’s eyes lit up, clearly thrilled at the prospect of getting some professional assistance. “Oh, please! I knew you’d come in handy one day!” she exclaimed, grabbing both mine and Sarielle’s hands. “You have to help me! It’s a matter of life, love, and... well, fate itself!”

Sarielle raised an eyebrow at Lirien’s dramatic flair. “Lirien, what are you going on about?”

Lirien sighed deeply, her gaze far off, as if looking into another dimension. “You know this, Sarielle. I’m destined to marry Rook. It’s written in the stars. But there’s a slight hiccup in the grand tapestry of our shared fate.” She paused for effect, her eyes narrowing into slits. “Aurora Emberwood. It’s my sworn duty to fate, to the universe, to the very cosmos itself to ensure he doesn’t fall in love with her!”

My lips twitched as Lirien spouted her long-winded explanation. “You’ve got quite the imagination, Lirien.”

Sarielle tried suppressing her smile, but she wasn’t doing a very good job at it. “You can’t be serious.”

Lirien pouted, looking genuinely hurt. “I am! It’s a cosmic responsibility, Sarielle. And with Lysander’s expertise and your... well, presence, we’ll be an unstoppable trio!”

“Well, when you put it like that, how can I refuse such a noble cause?” I asked.

Sarielle shook her head, her eyes meeting mine with a mixture of

amusement and disbelief. But deep down, I could tell she was as intrigued by the idea as I was.

The sun cast long shadows across the grounds of Nightshade University as Lirien recounted her vision. Her arms flailed with every word, her eyes wide and animated. “Lysander, in my vision, Rook had his... er... how do I put this delicately... his ‘wand’ dangerously close to her... um... ‘magic portal’!”

I choked on my laughter. Sarielle, on the other hand, looked like she was fighting off debilitating nausea. “Ew, Lirien! That’s my brother you’re talking about!”

Lirien waved her off dismissively. “It’s a metaphor, Sari! Just making sure you understand the gravity of the situation.”

Sarielle rubbed her temples. “I got it. I really wish I hadn’t, but trust me. *I got it.*”

“Anyway!” Lirien continued, unfazed by Sarielle’s disgust. “It started off at a statue, holding hands. It was all very romantic and very not-what-I-want-to-see. They exchanged some sentimental chatter, then progressed to his dorm room. We must prevent this!”

She pointed dramatically at a statue not far from where we stood.

I raised an eyebrow. “That statue?”

She nodded fervently. “Yes, that one!”

I took a moment to study the statue, then turned back to her, my tone laced with skepticism. “Are you certain it was *this* statue? Because there’s another, identical one on the opposite side of campus.”

Lirien’s eyes widened in genuine horror. “There is?! Why?! Why would this stupid school have two identical statues?”

I laughed at her melodramatics. “Your guess is as good as mine, but it’s true. So, if your ‘wand-to-portal’ crisis is as dire as you say, we might want to double-check our locations.”

She placed a hand on her chest dramatically. “Fates, Lysander. What if they’re at the other statue right now? What if the wand is nearing the portal as we speak?!”

Sarielle’s face had turned a delightful shade of green. “For the love of all that’s holy, Lirien! Please stop!”

Lirien looked between the two of us, desperation clear in her eyes. “Okay, listen. We need to split up. Divide and conquer. Lysander, you and Sarielle head to the other statue. If you spot them, you must ensure that the date goes

awry before they head back to his dorm. I don't care how you do it. Just keep his wand away from her portal! I believe in you."

I barely held back a snort. This girl was bonkers, but for some reason, I found it amusing. "Your faith in our abilities is truly touching."

Sarielle gave her friend a pointed look. "I swear to the gods, Lirien, if I hear one more euphemism about my brother's... ugh, I can't even say it, I might just let fate run its course."

Lirien clasped her hands together, blatantly ignoring Sari's threat. "Thank you, both of you. The future of my love life is in your hands. If Rook falls for Aurora, it'll be a disaster of epic proportions. I've already picked out our wedding china!"

Sarielle threw her hands up in exasperation. "Why do I put up with you?"

"Because clearly, life would be too boring without her," I offered with a wink.

Sarielle's gaze dropped to my mouth. "Why are you being so weird?"

"What do you mean?" My eyes fell to *her* mouth.

"Sneaking up on us, laughing, bantering, offering to help." She stabbed a finger at me when I smiled. "And that! You can't just go around flashing those dimples without warning! The whole thing... it's all very *odd* for someone who's normally such a Broody McGrumpypants. What's your angle?"

"A *Broody McGrumpypants*?" I repeated. "What the hell is that?"

Sarielle shook her head, as if I was the one not making any sense. "Lysander, focus! Why are you being so... so... fun and, dare I say, nice?"

Nice? I didn't think anyone had ever accused me of that before. Fun, sure. I knew how to have a good time when the occasion called for it. But definitely not *nice*.

I supposed there was a first time for everything.

I shrugged. "Do I need a reason?"

She studied me for a moment. "Well... I—"

"You guys!" Lirien interrupted. "Get a move on! The fates wait for no one!"

She gave me a wry look. "We're talking about this later."

"Whatever you say, sweet Sari." I grinned, just to see her get all flustered again when my dimples popped. "Let's get this show on the road."

With our mission clear, the three of us dispersed, ready to guard the fate of Lirien's romantic future—one statue at a time.

The path to the other statue was lined with ancient oaks, their branches interlocking overhead, creating a canopy of green. The sun's rays filtered through the leaves, casting dappled patterns onto the cobblestone path below. Birds chirped and a gentle breeze ruffled the trees, creating a serene atmosphere.

But serenity wasn't exactly the name of the game today.

As Sarielle and I walked side by side, every so often, our fingers would brush against each other. It was as if there were an invisible force pulling us closer, and every accidental touch sent a jolt of electricity straight to my dick. It was frustrating as hell because this wasn't the most convenient time for an erection.

Attempting to lighten the mood—and perhaps distract my other head from the way Sari's breasts gently bounced as she walked—I said, “You know, you kinda suck at covert ops.”

She shot me a quizzical look. “Why's that?”

“Have you looked in a mirror recently?”

Her jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

Stopping for a moment, I reached up, tucking a strand of her light pink hair behind her ear. “With this pretty pink hair, those heartbreak eyes, not to mention all the other attention-grabbing parts...” She inhaled sharply as my gaze slowly traveled down the length of her body and back up again. “Spies are meant to blend in, and the last thing you could *ever* do is blend in, Sarielle Blackwood. You're too extraordinary.”

The flush deepened on her cheeks. “Lysander...”

For an all-too-brief moment, the world around us faded, as if we were the only two people left on campus. I didn't know what it was about this girl, but she made it easy to forget about the politics of being from two different courts. Of my obligations to the Order. The threats looming over our heads. Sadly, it was only a matter of time before the bubble burst, forcing us back to reality.

Pulling back slightly, Sarielle gave a mock huff. “Well, maybe if the so-called ‘professional spy’ had given me a few pointers beforehand, I wouldn't stand out so much.”

“Well, now's as good a time as any. Rule number one: always blend in. It's too late for this mission, but if you plan on doing this again, you might

want to invest in some drab black clothing and a wig.” I laughed when she made a sour face at that. “Rule number two: never let them see you coming. And rule number three.” I paused, leaning in close, our faces mere inches apart. “Always keep them guessing.”

She paused “And what if I don’t want to blend in?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Then you better make damn sure you’re worth the attention.”

With a flirtatious smile, she replied, “Oh, trust me, I am.”

“I have no doubt.”

As we continued our walk, every step, every breath seemed freakishly in sync. My mind raced, attempting to make sense of the emotions stirring inside of me. Why was I so drawn to her? Why did she have this incomprehensible hold on me? For someone trained to always be in control, to always have the upper hand, this was unfamiliar territory. Every instinct I had told me to pull away, to guard myself, but with Sarielle, it was as if those walls were crumbling bit by bit.

As if sensing my internal struggle, Sarielle gently probed, “So, what’s it really like, being a spy? You make it sound so thrilling, but there must be more to it.”

I glanced at her, the sincerity in her eyes catching me off guard. I hesitated for a moment. “It’s not all glamor and intrigue. There’s a weight, a responsibility. Living up to the Dusk Court legacy. One of secrets, of sacrifices. It’s... burdensome at times.”

She looked at me, her gaze unwavering, prompting me to continue.

“There’s an intensity to it that’s hard to describe. My childhood was filled with rigorous training sessions, a never-ending test of endurance and willpower. Every bruise, every wound on my body, told a story. Some days, I felt like a weapon, sharpened and honed to perfection. Other times, I felt like a puppet, my strings pulled by those with bigger agendas.”

A shadow of concern clouded her eyes. “That sounds... awful. Do you ever have regrets?”

I pondered the question for a moment. “Regret? No. But I often wondered what life would’ve been like on the other side. Free from the chains, the expectations. But this is the path I was set on, and in many ways, it’s molded me into who I am.”

She nodded, absorbing my words. For a moment, we walked in silence, each lost in our thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

I placed a reassuring hand on her arm. “It’s okay. It felt good to get it off my chest, especially with someone who genuinely wants to understand.”

The honesty of the moment left us both a little vulnerable, a little exposed, but it felt right. In our world of masks and facades, genuine connection was rare. And with Sarielle, it felt like I’d found something truly special.

As we neared the statue, a question formed in my mind, a natural progression from our earlier conversation. “What about you? How are you adjusting to the Moon Court?”

She sighed. “It’s almost like waking up from a dream and realizing that everything you once believed might not have been the complete truth.”

I watched her, my eyes attentive, urging her to elaborate. Asking questions, gathering intel on someone wasn’t a new process for me. But for the first time I could remember, this wasn’t about the job. I genuinely wanted to know how she was coping with such a massive change.

“Being raised in the Dawn Court was all about following rules, adhering to traditions. Everything was so rigid, so structured. But there was a certain comfort in that predictability, you know?” Her eyes sliced to me for a moment. “But lately, I’ve been questioning if that’s genuinely what I wanted or if it was just what I was *conditioned* to want. Being a part of the Moon Court feels more... authentic in some ways. It’s liberating not being bound by the chains of convention.”

“But?” I prompted, sensing there was more she wanted to say.

She hesitated, her gaze distant. “*But* there’s still this feeling, like something’s missing. I can’t quite put my finger on it. Moon Court feels closer to where I belong, but it’s not... complete.” Her delicate shoulders lifted in a shrug.

I nodded in understanding. “Finding where we truly belong, Sarielle, is a journey. Sometimes, it’s about discovering a place, and other times, it’s about discovering oneself. Maybe what you’re feeling is that journey, the path of self-discovery.”

She met my gaze. “Maybe.”

The distant sound of laughter rippled through the air, yanking my attention from our conversation. I instinctively recognized the profile of her brother, Rook, standing near the statue. Without hesitation, I reached out, grabbing Sarielle by the waist and pulling her behind the expansive trunk of a

nearby tree.

She gasped as her back met the rough bark of the tree and my body pressed tightly against hers. I could feel the rapid flutter of her heart, syncing with mine in a frantic rhythm. Her soft hands found purchase against the firm plane of my chest, fingers clutching the fabric of my shirt as she tried to steady herself.

I leaned in closer, my lips hovering just a fraction away from her ear. “Quiet,” I whispered.

Our gazes locked, those deep brown eyes staring up at me, wide and filled with a mixture of surprise and something more intense, something that mirrored the desire surging through me.

Her lips parted, and she hesitated for a moment, her gaze darting to my mouth and then back to my eyes. She bit her lip, a subtle, nervous gesture that made my mind fog with need.

“Don’t do that,” I murmured, the words unintentionally rough, my eyes fixed on her now reddened lip.

“Do what?” she whispered back, her voice filled with innocence, but her eyes told a different story.

I leaned in even closer, feeling her lip. “That,” I murmured, indicating her still bitten lip with a nod. “It makes me want to do things I shouldn’t.”

She swallowed hard, her grip on my shirt tightening, and for a moment, the only thing that mattered was the magnetic pull drawing us closer and closer together. I could feel every minute shift of her body against mine, the friction of our clothes, the rapid tempo of our pulses.

Her breath came in quick, shallow bursts. Her chest rose and fell against mine in a rhythm that had me aching with want, every nerve in my body alive and focused on the woman pinned beneath me. The hard ridge of my desire pressed against her, an undeniable testament to the effect she had on me.

Her eyes held mine captive, an all-consuming fire smoldering within them. I watched, spellbound, as her tongue darted out, moistening her lips in a tantalizingly slow motion. My control wavered.

“Tell me to stop,” I rasped, even as I leaned in further, chasing the warmth of her scent, the soft promise of her lips. “If you don’t want me to kiss you, you need to tell me to stop right the fuck now, Sari.”

Her fingers curled tighter into my shirt, nails scraping ever so lightly over my chest. “Don’t stop,” she said, her voice breathless and filled with desire.

The space between us threatened to collapse, our lips nearly touching

when a familiar voice shattered the moment.

“Sarielle?”

The two of us froze. We turned to find Rook staring at us, eyes narrowed and full of warning, his date forgotten by his side.

Every muscle in my body tensed, readying for what might come next. Rook’s intense gaze held onto where Sarielle was pinned against me, his expression morphing from disbelief to fury in a blink.

Without a word, he stormed over, yanking me off of Sarielle with a force that nearly sent me sprawling. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with my sister?” he growled, getting up in my face.

I smirked, recovering quickly. “Isn’t it obvious? We were just getting to know each other.”

His face reddened, veins bulging at his temple. His date looked on in shock, clearly not having signed up for this kind of drama.

“Rook, stop it!” Sarielle implored, stepping between us, her hands up as if trying to physically push back the storm of anger radiating from her brother. “It’s not what you think.”

I couldn’t resist adding fuel to the fire. “Oh, come on, Sari. Don’t be shy. We were just—”

A fist collided with my jaw before I could finish, sending a shockwave of pain rippling through my head. The world tilted, but I kept my footing, tasting blood.

“I let you hit me,” I spat out, rubbing my jaw and giving him a defiant grin.

Rook’s nostrils flared. “Fuck you, Lysander. You might think this is a game, but intermingling with other courts, especially with my sister, won’t end well for you.”

I met his furious gaze with one of pure challenge. “Ah, the age-old laws of the courts. Tell me, Rook, when did they ever stop anyone from doing what they wanted?”

Sarielle’s face was a picture of distress. “Both of you, stop it! This isn’t helping anything.”

Rook ignored her, gripping my collar. “Stay away from her. I won’t have some Dusk Court dipshit ruining my sister.”

With that, he turned on his heel, grabbing Sarielle’s wrist, pulling her along with him. She cast a furtive glance back at me, a blend of frustration and concern evident in her eyes.

His date stood there, looking flustered and out of her depth. “Rook?” she called out, but he was already striding away, his protective instincts in overdrive.

I sighed, rubbing my jaw, watching them go. Well, that escalated quickly.

I leaned back against the tree, trying to catch my breath and recalibrate. The lingering scent of her and the heat of our shared moment still clung to me. As the reality of what had almost transpired settled, a wry smile formed on my lips.

Well, I mused as I adjusted my shirt and began to walk away, at least Lirien got what she wanted.

TWELVE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

The library was sparsely populated and silent, the perfect sanctuary for reflection. I was nestled in a corner, a leather-bound history book opened in front of me, but my thoughts were far from the pages. Instead, I found myself reliving that electrifying moment, pressed against the tree with Lysander's breath warm on my neck. The tip of my pen danced on the paper, tapping a staccato beat as my mind replayed every detail. How close he was. How desperately I wanted to close the gap between us.

My thoughts scattered as I heard the scraping of a chair next to me. I glanced over to find my brother, his striking blue hair standing out against his white tee. The golden hue from the table lamp shone on the scar that trailed his cheek.

"Shouldn't you be studying?" he remarked, his gaze skimming over the blank page of my notebook. The hint of admonishment in his voice made my grip tighten on the pen.

"When are you going to stop babysitting me?" I snapped, not even bothering to conceal my irritation. "It's been a week."

Rook's jaw tightened, but he didn't immediately respond. Instead, he took a moment. "When I'm sure you won't go running off with some Dusk Court asshole, doing gods know what."

I rolled my eyes, leaning back in my chair. "Nothing happened, Rook."
At least not that time.

"From what I saw, it looked like something was *about* to happen," he retorted, his blue eyes hard.

Lirien smiled brightly from her seat across the table, clearly enjoying the increased attention from my brother. Rook had been following me—and by extension, *her*—everywhere now. And if it wasn't annoying enough to have him hovering over me like a parent, I had to watch her send him adoring glances every few minutes.

The library's ambiance felt oppressive all of a sudden. Each whisper from the adjacent tables, the rustling of pages, the soft thud of a book being placed back on the shelf—it all accentuated the growing tension between my brother and me.

I attempted to steer the conversation in a neutral direction. “Can we please not do this here? This isn’t the place.”

Rook’s fingers drummed on the table, his frustration evident. “Then when, Sarielle? When do we address the fact that you’re endangering yourself by getting close to someone from the Dusk Court?”

I was cornered, both by the confinements of the library and my brother’s unwavering protective stance. “I’m not a child, Rook. I can handle myself.”

He sighed, running a hand through his vivid hair. “I know you can. But as your brother, it’s my duty to protect you, even if it means from yourself.”

Oh, if he only knew the true dangers I was facing, cross-court dating would be the least of his concerns.

“Fine.” I exhaled sharply. “So I flirted a bit with Lysander, but nothing happened. I’m not a naive little Fae, Rook.” I shifted in my seat. “I might belong to Moon Court now, but never forget, I was raised in the Dawn Court. Those rules? They were drilled into me from the moment I could understand words. Hell”—I paused to let out a dark chuckle—“sometimes I think Dawn parents love rules and justice more than they love their own children.”

Rook’s expression shifted, pain momentarily flashing in his eyes. “That’s not a fair shot, Sarielle. The rules aren’t just some abstract notion to be debated. They’re in place to protect us, to protect *all* Fae. They maintain the balance we’ve fought so hard to preserve.”

“And I know how much they mean to you,” I cut in, my tone softer yet firm. “I also know how much I mean to you. Your overbearing behavior screams it loud and clear. But I need you to understand that I’m fully capable of making my own decisions. I know what I’m doing.”

I really didn’t, but I wasn’t about to admit that. I couldn’t bear the thought of my brother putting himself in the line of fire because he was trying to protect me.

Rook’s expression clouded, a storm brewing in his eyes. “I know how seductive the Dusk Court can be—trust me—but you need to understand, these people play by their own rules. Lysander might seem charming now, but you and I both know he’s capable of deceit. He’s literally been trained for it his entire life.”

I tried to remain calm. “I don’t need you to paint monsters under my bed, Rook. I’m well aware of the complexities of each court. But trying to control every step I take? That’s not going to help. In fact, it’s pushing me away.”

There was a weighted silence between us, a mixture of concern,

frustration, and love.

Finally, Rook sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Look, I don’t want us to be at odds. I just want you safe.” He looked at me, his blue eyes earnest. “I’ll try to give you some breathing room, alright? But promise me one thing.” He paused for a moment, searching my face. “Keep your distance from Thorne. He’s not worth the risk.”

I nodded, appreciating his effort to understand, even if I didn’t entirely agree with him. “The only promise I’m making is that I’ll be careful. I need you to trust me.”

He took a deep breath, seemingly processing everything. “Deal,” he murmured, pulling me into a brief hug, which I returned, relishing the comfort of familial love.

As we pulled away from the embrace, a fleeting shadow caught the periphery of my vision. At first, I thought it was just a trick of the light, but then the silvery apparition shimmered again, more distinct this time. The transient form of a ghost hovered near one of the library’s arched windows. But this was not like any ghost I had seen before. Its contours were sharper, its essence darker.

I blinked twice, squinting, trying to discern if my eyes were playing tricks on me.

Rook followed my gaze but frowned, confusion evident. “What is it?”

“I... I need to go. Please make sure Lirien gets back to the dorm okay.” Without waiting for his response, I quickly rose from my seat and began following the ghost, my instincts overriding any doubts.

“Sarielle? What are you doing?” Rook called after me, but I didn’t look back. I needed to know why this spirit was here and why it was beckoning me. Thankfully, my brother wasn’t following me, so I assumed Lirien had somehow managed to distract him from doing so.

Once outside the library, the ghost seemed to gain more form, its movements more deliberate as it led me away from the academic buildings to the less traveled parts of the campus. The shadows of the trees grew long and twisted under the moonlight, creating a landscape that seemed both familiar and alien.

“Who are you?” I called out to it, trying to bridge the chasm between the living and the departed. “Why have you come to me?”

The spirit didn’t respond verbally but paused, its hollow eyes fixing on me. An insistent, almost urgent feeling emanated from it, compelling me to

follow further.

I quickened my pace, my heart thudding against my ribs. "Speak to me. Please." The path ahead was obscured, but the pull of the spirit was undeniable.

Again, there was no verbal reply, but its continued presence was answer enough. Something about this ghost was different, and I was determined to uncover its secrets.

Just as I was about to cross into the deeper parts of the forest, a firm hand clamped onto my arm, pulling me back. I gasped, spinning around to face none other than Lysander.

"What are you doing out here, alone, in the dark?" His voice was thick with concern, the fiery embers of his eyes illuminating his face in the dim light.

I shrugged off his grip, irritation rising within me. "I'm following that ghost." I gestured to where the spirit had been hovering moments before, but to my dismay, it was gone. "It was right there!"

Lysander scanned the area, his brow furrowing. "Even if there was a ghost, why would you chase it alone? It's dangerous."

I huffed, frustration clear on my face. "I don't need a protector. I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself. Besides, why were you even here? Were you... spying on me?"

He hesitated for a split second before answering. "I just happened to be in the area."

"Convenient," I shot back sarcastically.

Lysander ran a hand through his dark hair, sighing in exasperation. "Look, that's not important. I just want to make sure you're safe."

"Why does everyone think I'm incapable of taking care of myself?" I countered, feeling like a cornered animal. "I appreciate the concern, but I've been taking care of myself for a long time."

For a moment, there was a tense silence between us, punctuated only by the gentle whisper of the wind and the distant hoot of an owl.

"Sarielle, you should head back to your dorm," he said, his voice edged with urgency.

I was taken aback by his sudden shift in demeanor. "Why? What's going on?"

He hesitated, eyes never ceasing their vigilant scan of the woods. "I... I have something going on here tonight."

I stepped closer, narrowing my eyes. “What ‘something’? You’ve piqued my curiosity now.”

Lysander looked down, avoiding my gaze. “It’s... complicated.”

I leaned in and lowered my voice. “Complicated *Order* business?”

He exhaled deeply, clearly frustrated. “It’s *none* of your business. That’s all you need to know.”

Closing the gap even further, I smirked. “Everything involving you seems to become my business lately.”

“I want that to be true more than I should,” he murmured, his gaze filled with longing. “But you need to leave.”

“You’re the one who insisted that I *like* the idea of taking a walk on the wild side.” Feeling bolder, I leaned even closer, our lips tantalizingly close. “This seems like a prime opportunity, don’t you think? C’mon, Lysander. Show me what big, bad things you have in store for me.”

Who was this brazen vixen? There was no chance he missed the suggestion in my tone. Why did all my senses seem to scramble when this guy was around?

“I can’t,” he whispered, eyes swimming with turmoil. “There are things at play tonight you don’t understand. These woods... they’re not safe, especially not for you.”

The dark canopy of trees seemed to loom even closer, their twisted silhouettes stretching out like the gnarled fingers of a forgotten specter. Every rustle, every distant hoot, added to the eerie atmosphere of the woods. The forest whispered its ancient secrets, alluding to tales and mysteries only Lysander seemed attuned to.

I caught the lightest touch of his fingers against my wrist, sending tingles up my arm. “For me specifically? Or anyone near you?”

He searched my face, eyes deep and turbulent. “Both,” he rasped out, sounding as if he was admitting a painful truth.

Suddenly, a branch snapped somewhere in the distance. Lysander’s head whipped in its direction, his body immediately tensing. Instinctively, he pulled me a bit closer, his chest heaving beneath his shirt. “Sarielle... I can’t guarantee your safety if you remain here. You need to go.”

As he spoke, my heart raced, realizing how close we truly were. For a moment, the world around us faded, and all that mattered was the two of us.

Unable to resist, I reached up, my fingers brushing against the rough stubble on his jaw. “What if I don’t want to leave?” I met his gaze with every

ounce of defiance I could muster.

For a beat, everything paused. Then, with a curse, Lysander's resolve shattered. He closed the distance, his lips finding mine in a fervent kiss.

We were a storm, a collision of pent-up emotions and forbidden desires. Lysander's hands buried themselves in my hair, pulling me even closer, deepening the kiss. Our racing pulses echoed the raw need coursing through us.

He groaned against my lips, voice gravelly, "Gods, Sarielle... why do I want you so badly?"

"I could ask you the same," I panted.

The very air seemed to thin, every sensation amplified—the taste of him, the warmth of his body pressed to mine, the desperate clashing of our mouths.

But reality quickly rushed back in. A soft rustling sound, accompanied by the glow of a lantern, grew closer. The taste of guilt was sour in my mouth as I saw who was at the end of that light. My eyes dropped to the ground, the shame evident in every line of my body. I hastily stepped back, putting distance between us, and cleared my throat awkwardly, unable to meet her gaze.

Lysander, however, remained composed, his face betraying no hint of regret. He straightened, his gaze shifting to the approaching figure. The lantern illuminated Ariya's striking features, her eyes sharp and calculating.

"Well," she purred, eyes flickering between the two of us, "isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

I bit my lip, looking anywhere but at her.

Ariya's laughter was melodic, the sort of sound that seemed like it didn't belong in these dense, eerie woods. She tilted her head, studying me with those keen violet eyes. "Oh, don't look so nervous. You're certainly not the first girl I've seen Lysander kissing."

A heavy pause settled between us, only intensified by Lysander's silence.

She continued with a smile tugging at her lips, "Though you *are* the first one he's ever brought on a job."

Lysander's jaw tightened, his fingers forming a hard fist at his side. "Sarielle was just leaving."

Ariya cocked an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirking up. "Why not? She could be helpful." She circled me slowly, eyes roving over me like a cat sizing up a new plaything. "This mission will be quite taxing, you know."

She might provide a good... distraction.”

“That’s enough,” Lysander snapped. “The Dusk Court does not bring outsiders on missions.”

Ariya rolled her eyes dramatically, the strands of her pale blonde hair catching the dim light filtering through the trees. “She’s a pledge, isn’t she? You know this isn’t strictly a Dusk Court mission, dear fiancé of mine. It’s for the Order. Having her along might just work in our favor.”

Lysander’s eyes flashed with anger, but I could see the wheels turning in his mind, weighing the possibilities.

Mustering as much courage as I could, I firmly declared, “I’m going.”

Ariya clapped her hands together in excitement, her face lighting up. “Perfect! This will be fun.”

Before I could react, she slid her arm through mine, her fingers chilled against my skin. The way she guided me through the woods felt oddly intimate, her steps graceful and purposeful, but something about her closeness made my skin crawl.

Suddenly, Lysander was beside us, his hand wrapping around my wrist and pulling me gently from Ariya’s grasp. “Careful,” he muttered, though whether the warning was for me or for Ariya, I wasn’t sure.

“Every month, the Demon Court gathers deep in these woods. They call it Chaos Eve,” Lysander explained, his voice low.

Ariya chimed in. “It’s a wild night. Filled with debauchery, rituals... and more than a few secrets.”

Lysander shot her a warning look, but she simply shrugged, her grin never wavering. “They invited us because they assume Lysander and I will... put on a show.” She winked at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I frowned, feeling a rush of confusion and discomfort. “What *kind* of show?”

Lysander’s expression darkened, and he shot Ariya with a look that could kill. “Enough, Ariya.”

But she just laughed, a carefree, tinkling sound that sent shivers through me. “Oh, come on, Lysander. I’ve never known you to be such a prude.”

It hit me then, a wave of realization, of what she was implying. My cheeks burned, a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

Ariya’s demeanor shifted from playful to serious. “But what I’m really going to do is seduce a demon or two and extract their secrets.” Her voice was matter-of-fact, as if this was something she did on a regular basis.

“Lysander, as always, you’re on my six. And if things take a turn for the worse”—she turned her gaze to me, her violet eyes sharp—“you’ve got Lysander’s back. Understand?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. I wasn’t sure what the worst case scenario could be in a situation like this, but the gravity of it was starting to sink in.

“Relax,” Ariya continued, a hint of pride in her voice. “Lysander and I have been doing this since I was fifteen. We’re pros.”

The lantern’s light flickered, and for a moment, I caught a glimpse of vulnerability in Ariya’s eyes. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, but it was there—a hint of sadness, a shadow of a past burden.

“Wait,” I said, hesitating, “you were *seducing* Fae at fifteen?”

Ariya gave a nonchalant shrug. “Of course. It’s what I do best.”

I couldn’t help but reach out and give her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

I wasn’t quite sure what I was apologizing for, but it just seemed so wrong.

She looked down at our entwined hands for a moment, then gave me a soft smile. “Don’t worry about me, Sari. I know what I’m doing.” She squeezed Lysander’s arm affectionately. “And if shit ever goes downhill, it’s comforting to know I have a competent fiancé.”

Gods, I hated that last word. No matter how open their relationship was, I needed to remember at the end of the day, they were still planning to marry one day.

With a strained cough, I pushed those thoughts aside and trudged forward, focusing on the crunch of leaves underfoot. But that distraction didn’t last long; the woods soon gave way to a breathtaking spectacle.

Moonlight cast silvery beams across a clearing that pulsed with life. Demon Fae, their lithe bodies barely covered, moved with a grace that was mesmerizing. Tattoos slithered across their skin, and their eyes—whether deep crimson or gleaming gold—sparkled with an intoxicating combination of allure and danger. Shouts erupted as two Fae clashed in combat, their need for dominance ending with blood sprayed on the earth. Everywhere I looked, symbols of the Demon Court—curling horns, a star made of arrows, and wings dark as midnight—were prominently displayed.

Caught in the rapture of the scene, I barely noticed Ariya moving next to me. She wore a smile that was both wicked and proud. “Quite the sight, isn’t

it?”

“It’s... overwhelming,” I murmured, still processing.

Ariya tilted her head, her grin widening. “Welcome to Chaos.”

THIRTEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Drums throbbed like a heart in the middle of the clearing, each beat lulling me deeper into the frenzy. I felt intoxicated as I looked around, bearing witness to pure, unabashed debauchery. On the outskirts of the fighting ring, topless women, their bodies painted in gold, danced around low fires, their movements sinuous and free. Laughter, growls, and groans filled the air as partygoers joined in heated embraces, right there in the middle of the fray. My eyes snagged on a woman down on her knees, moaning in ecstasy as a man fisted her dark curls while thrusting roughly in and out of her mouth. When he pulled out entirely, I could see that he was quite well endowed and pierced all the way down his shaft. The woman extended her tongue as he jerked himself before her, enthusiastically begging him to shower her with his seed. I should've probably looked away, but my eyes were rooted in place, desire pooling in my belly. I wondered what all those piercings felt like as she took him into her body. Whether or not his generous length caused a bite of pleasurable pain each time he rutted into her. Then my thoughts wandered to the Fae beside me. Was Lysander genetically blessed in that department as well? It certainly seemed like it from what I felt through our clothing. Was he a dominant lover like this demon? Or would he—

Ariya tugged on my hand to get my attention, a devilish smirk playing on her lips. “You look a bit... out of place. I think a wardrobe change is in order.”

Before I could react, her fingers brushed against my shoulder, a wash of magic rippling over me, making my skin tingle. I looked down to see my clothing shimmer and change. My once-modest dress morphed into a daring ensemble made of dark, glistening fabric that clung to every curve. It had an asymmetrical cut, with one thigh exposed and the other covered, ending in a slit that gave a teasing glimpse of my leg with every step. The neckline plunged, with intertwining silver and gold chains resting between my newly exposed cleavage. Around my waist, a thin belt of moonstones glowed softly, while my arms were covered in intricate cuffs made of vines, shimmering in the firelight. On my feet, lace-up sandals snaked up my calves, their ties glinting with tiny, ornate charms.

The ensemble was sexy and daring, and not something I would've ever envisioned myself wearing. My wardrobe was mostly of the pretty and modestly flirty variety, but I couldn't say I hated the way I felt in this new outfit. It was... empowering, especially when I glanced at Lysander and saw the raw hunger in his gaze.

Ariya stepped back, admiring her handiwork. "There. Now you look the part. My gift of transformational magic does have its perks, don't you think?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "This... is certainly something. Thank you."

"Embrace the mayhem, Sarielle. Who knows? Maybe you'll even enjoy it." Ariya wagged her brows, nodding to Lysander.

His eyes were fixed on the exposed patch of skin in the middle of my torso. My nipples hardened beneath my dress, and since I was no longer wearing a bra, the stiff peaks rubbed against the silky fabric. My cheeks flushed as a moan escaped my lips.

Lysander's nostrils flared as our eyes met. "Fuck. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I'm two seconds away from—"

A surge of jealousy and resentment flared within me, hot and hard to suppress, as Ariya interrupted the moment. She fisted Lysander's shirt, pulling him close to smack a brief kiss on the corner of his mouth.

What the hell was that for?

Pulling away, Ariya turned my way and winked. "Have fun tonight, you two. But don't follow me too closely. I want to enjoy the evening, maybe find someone intriguing." She chuckled. "And, of course, complete the mission."

Lysander's eyes bounced between me and Ariya, seemingly torn, before settling on her. "Don't worry, I'll keep my distance and let you work your magic."

Ariya's laughter echoed behind her as she melded into the throng of partygoers, leaving Lysander and me amidst the whirlwind of Demon Court revelry.

"She's quite..." I began, the words stuck in my throat as I tried to make sense of the complicated emotion I felt.

"Resilient," Lysander finished for me, eyes fixed on the crowd where Ariya had disappeared. "Ariya's been given some rough assignments through the years, but she always perseveres. And as you can probably tell, she somehow manages to find some fun in it as well."

I glanced at him, trying to read the emotions playing across his face. There was a certain melancholy in his eyes that made me wonder about the

depths of their relationship. There was also a hefty dose of respect.

“What’s your definition of a ‘rough assignment’?” I asked.

“There’s varying degrees, but Ariya tends to get one particular kind of assignment over any others. Which can admittedly be fun, but some marks can make the experience... not so fun.”

I bit my lip in confusion. “What kind of assignment?”

Lysander kept his eyes on the crowd. “In our court, beauty like Ariya’s can be a curse. You’re taught from an early age that free will doesn’t matter. You’re an *asset* and you have a duty to serve the court. When the court needs intel, seduction is one of the most effective methods to get that information. And let’s just say Ariya’s met her fair share of Fae who get off on hurting or belittling others.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth, heart aching for Ariya, imagining what she must’ve gone through. I’d known the Dusk Court used seduction as a tool, but I had no idea it wasn’t a voluntary action. Gods, it was so messed up.

“Have you ever... I mean, did you...”

I couldn’t even say it.

Lysander seemed to sense my turmoil, his voice softening. “Have I ever needed to seduce someone in the line of duty?”

I nodded.

“Yes, Sari. Many times.” He looked me directly in the eye. “It’s a facet of my life that I have no control over. But I won’t lie to you and say I haven’t enjoyed myself doing it. I’ve never run into the same... misfortunes that Ariya has.”

My fists curled. Even though he’d claimed to enjoy himself—which made me unreasonably jealous of any Fae he’d seduced—the Dusk Court blatantly coerced him. They completely took away his rights to his own damn body. It was criminal, or at least it should’ve been. I couldn’t imagine what kind of warped views he or Ariya, or anyone else in their predicament, had on intimacy.

“What about Fae who are in committed relationships? If you were married, or whatever, the court would find someone else to do the job, right?”

His dark hair flopped over his forehead as he shook his head. “That’s not how it works for people like me and Ariya. As you can probably imagine, forming any kind of meaningful attachments would be difficult for most Fae if monogamy was entirely off the table. That’s why arranged marriages are so

common in our court. That's why Ariya and I work so well together. We understand each other and neither one of us has any misconceptions about what our duties to our court entail."

"So... what? You just accept it?"

Lysander's jaw clenched as my eyes filled with tears, but I couldn't help it. It felt like I was

grieving the loss of something I never really had to begin with.

He sighed. "Don't feel sorry for me, Sarielle. I'm not complaining, so you definitely shouldn't waste your time getting upset over it. Even though I didn't get to choose my future bride, I'm glad it's Ariya. She's my best friend. Hell, she's my *only* friend. It could be a lot worse."

His words cut deeper than I'd like to admit. Silence settled between us before I finally gathered my composure, trying to rid the lump in my throat.

"We should probably check on her," I whispered, my voice betraying my vulnerability.

The warmth of his gaze lingered on me, but the intensity of the moment was too much. "Yeah," he finally said, clearing his throat. "Let's go."

My mind raced, emotions tangling with logic. I needed to create distance. I needed to somehow sever this connection between us. But with every step I took, my resolve weakened. Lysander Thorne was unapologetically arrogant. His morals were questionable. He was the heir to a fucked-up society of dangerous assholes. But there was no denying the fact that he made me feel alive. Strong. Capable. Wanted.

Seen.

That last one was the real kicker. How could someone I barely knew strip me so thoroughly of all artifice and defenses? Why was Lysander the only Fae I'd met who could sense the darkness stirring inside of me? My own family had no clue what I'd struggled with nearly my entire life. Even now, I was deathly afraid of what they'd do when they learned I'd been keeping secrets from them. One of the only things I knew for sure was that they *would* find out. The tenuous control I had over the shadows that lurked within me was slipping. I felt it more and more every day. And the one thing I couldn't stop thinking about?

I believed Lysander Thorne would *welcome* the darkness.

And I couldn't bear the thought of losing that.

As we weaved through the crowd, the pulsating rhythm of the drums reverberated through my bones, causing every nerve to come alive. The party

was a cacophony of wild laughter, sharp cries, and soft moans, all blending together into a symphony of hedonistic celebration. Nobody seemed to mind we were here, and as I took a better look around, I could see why. This may have been a Demon event, but evidently, this was an equal-opportunity gathering. It was no surprise the only marking I hadn't spotted on the necks of partygoers was from the Dawn, but there were several members from the other three courts in attendance. They danced and drank and fucked as if there was no other place they'd rather be.

Lysander's fingers intertwined with mine, his grip firm yet gentle. It set my heart racing in a very different rhythm from the drums, but the beat was just as intense. Golden bodies twirled and glistened around us, their forms barely discernible in the shimmering light, moving as one with the entrancing music. The air was thick with the scent of wildflowers, musk, and the tangy undertone of spilled wine. It was heady. Intoxicating. Arousing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught fleeting glimpses of Ariya, reminding me we had a job to do. I strained my neck to see better, but I kept losing her in the throng of bodies.

"You're too obvious," Lysander whispered, leaning in so close that his lips brushed against my earlobe.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" I murmured. "She's out there, and this... this is wild."

"I've got it covered," he said, his voice low and raspy. "You just focus on me."

Lysander stopped suddenly, tugging me into his chest. I could feel the hard ripples of his abs, and I wanted to explore every one of them with my tongue. I shamelessly rubbed myself against him, moaning as I felt his erection grow. Gods, how I ached for him. I was dying for him to slip his finger beneath my dress and give me sweet, sweet relief. I couldn't care less that we were standing in the middle of a bunch of onlookers.

"Lysander," I panted. "Why am I so... so..."

I fumbled around as I stepped out of my panties to make it easier for him.

He grinned as he took my panties and tucked them in his pocket. "See the smoke floating around?"

I tilted my head back, clutching onto Lysander's thick forearms as he trailed kisses down the slope of my neck. What was I looking for again? Oh, yeah. Smoke. Sure enough, there was a rolling fog stretching across the forest.

“I see it.”

He licked the shell of my ear before clamping it lightly between his teeth. “That’s Faecstasy. They pipe it through all Demon Court parties. It’s why they’re always so popular. All courts are invited because the demons know that everyone will be too busy fucking to cause any trouble.”

I met his intense gaze, getting lost for a moment. “Why aren’t you affected?”

He gave me a half-smile as he wedged his thigh between my legs. “Oh, I’m affected.”

I reached between us to feel how true that was. “Mmm. Yes, you are.”

Lysander’s hearty laughter shot straight to my core. “C’mon, Sari. Let’s dance.”

I pouted as he moved my hand away from the temptation beneath his jeans. “You’re no fun.”

“I can assure you, that’s not true, but I’m not going to take advantage of you while you’re like this. A little dirty dancing is all you’re going to get.”

I stuck my tongue out, making him laugh again.

We were lost in a whirlwind of movement and color. Everywhere I looked, Fae were grinding to the throbbing pulse of the music, both vertically and horizontally. Lysander and I were melded together as if our bodies were magnetized. His hands were wrapped around my waist, fingertips flirting with the tops of my butt cheeks. We moved together, rhythmically, sinuously. The world fell away, leaving just the two of us in our own little bubble. His grip on me was both possessive and protective, each touch setting my nerves alight.

Lysander promised me a little dirty dancing, and he definitely delivered. At some point, I adjusted the hem of my dress so the rough denim of his pants was rubbing directly against the slickness between my thighs. We moved together in an erotic dance as old as time, until a familiar pressure built deep within my belly. Lysander’s icy blue eyes bore into mine as I used his leg to chase the orgasm that seemed just out of reach. His fingertips bit into my hips as he watched me, nostrils flared.

“Every time I’m near you,” he growled softly, “I have this insatiable urge to claim you as mine.”

I tilted my head slightly, offering him more access, and he took the invitation, trailing soft, hungry kisses down the side of my neck again.

“Lysander... oh, gods.” I gasped as his thigh moved just a little to the left,

landing right where I needed him. “Right there. Please, Lysander. *Don’t stop.*”

Wordlessly, he applied a little more pressure, detonating a delicious explosion. I whimpered as my core clenched, feeling unbearably empty. My head fell to his chest as I rode out the high, a rush of euphoria flowing through my brain, making me a little dizzy.

Once it was over, I lifted my head and gave him a sleepy, satisfied smile. “Well, thank you, kind sir. That was just what the doctor ordered.”

“Fuck, you’re beautiful when you come.” His hand slid up, fingers tangling into my hair, pulling gently to expose my neck further to his assault. “You drive me mad, Sarielle.” His teeth nipped at the sensitive skin, sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through me.

Our bodies pressed impossibly closer, moving to the intoxicating rhythm. Every point of contact was fire, every shared exhale laced with desire. I could swear I was on the verge of another orgasm.

“I can’t help it,” I managed to murmur back, lost in the feel of his body moving against mine.

Lysander halted suddenly, a charged tension wrapping around him. “Ariya’s on the move.”

My heart skipped a beat, caught off guard. “What... what do we do?”

Instead of answering, he took my hand, weaving us swiftly through a labyrinth of tents, each more opulent than the last, as we followed her from a distance. Suddenly, he backed me against one of them, his body caging mine.

“Someone’s coming. Act natural,” he instructed before brushing his lips over my jawline, making me gasp.

The smoky aphrodisiac was missing from this side of the forest, but Lysander’s closeness, the heat of his body against mine, still made it hard to focus. The sensuality of the moment mingled with the undercurrent of danger as a group of people strolled by.

He cupped my jaw, pressing his mouth against my ear. “Ariya just ducked out of the camp, but if those people see us following her, they could alert security.”

“What do you want to do?” I whispered.

The group was lingering no more than twenty feet away, so instead of replying verbally, he pressed his lips against mine. Lysander played his role perfectly, making my heart pound with every kiss and caress. Yet, between each touch, I could tell he was cataloging every detail of our surroundings. It

felt like at least twenty minutes had passed before the wandering partygoers finally left the area. I was worried about Ariya being on her own for so long, but then I remembered she wasn't just your everyday pretty girl. She was a highly-trained spy who could more than likely take care of herself.

Lysander leaned back, studying my face. "You okay?"

"I think so." I nodded. "But I'll feel better once we get eyes on Ariya again."

He grabbed my hand and said, "Let's go."

I didn't see which direction Ariya had gone, so I had no choice but to trust Lysander as he led me to a seemingly deserted part of the forest. I squinted into the darkness as we followed a path, spotting a faint light up ahead.

"Bingo." Lysander pointed to what I could now identify as a small cabin. He looked around for a moment before grabbing my hand again and leading me behind a thick tree trunk. "I need you to stay here. Do you understand, Sarielle? Do not leave this spot. I need to get closer, but I don't want you anywhere near that demon." He gripped my chin. "Do you understand, Sari?"

I nodded. "Yep. Sure."

His eyes narrowed, but when a loud crash sounded from the cabin, he said, "Do. Not. Move." His gaze was fierce and piercing, leaving no room for argument.

Before I could blink, he darted down the path, ducking down to conceal his approach.

The eerie silence stretched, making every second feel interminably long. The idea of just slipping away to the dorms grew stronger with each passing moment. If I wasn't sure I'd get lost on the way, I would've been gone already. An owl hooted in the distance, making me jump. A twig snapped beneath my shoes as I pressed my back against the rough bark, silently begging Lysander to hurry the hell up. No more than thirty seconds later, an icy grip wrapped around my arm, yanking me forward. Startled, my eyes popped open to find two Demon Court Fae.

The one gripping me stood tall, his face marked by pronounced, chiseled features, and raven-black hair that flowed down his back. His eyes, a deep blood-red, sparkled with malevolent delight. Intricate, dark tattoos swirled from his wrist to his fingertips, seeming to writhe and move of their own accord.

The other was slightly shorter but more muscular. The horned headdress

he wore twisted and curved in an ornate pattern, framing a face that would have been handsome if not for the wicked grin stretching across it. Fiery golden eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made my skin crawl.

“Well, well,” the horned Fae mused, “what’s a pretty girl like you doing all the way out here?” He made no attempt to disguise his interest as he scanned my body. “Felt like playing dress up to party with the big, bad demons, did you?”

I tried to wrench my arm away, but the other guy’s grip tightened. Panic ignited within me as the reality of my situation became glaringly obvious.

I cleared my throat, straightening my posture and injecting as much confidence into my voice as I could muster. “I was just having a little fun at the party, but it seems like I’ve gotten myself a little lost trying to find the way out.”

The horned Fae tilted his head, lips twisted in a cruel smirk. “What’s the rush? I think the three of us should have a little fun *together*.” As he leaned closer, the sickly sweet scent of wine wafted from his mouth.

“Is it true?” the one holding me whispered, his hot threats ghosting over my ear. “They say Moon Fae are especially... wild in bed. I’ve never had the pleasure, but I think that’s about to change.”

My eyes flashed with anger and disgust. “Let. Me. Go.”

The taller Fae’s lips quirked up in a twisted grin. “Oh, come now. Tonight is all about chaos. That’s what you came here for, isn’t it?”

Baring my teeth, I shot back, “Fuck off. Both of you.” I squared my shoulders, ready for whatever came next. But deep down, a rising tide of panic threatened to drown my feigned confidence.

As the panic began to push down on me, an unfamiliar sensation simmered in my veins, pulsing outward like ripples in a pond. My body started to quiver uncontrollably, and the air around me crackled with an unseen force.

One of the demons cocked his head, his smirk faltering for a moment. “What’s happening with this one? She’s... different.”

With each beat of my heart, the sensation grew stronger, consuming my senses. I glared at them, my gaze unyielding, and as I did, a low mist began to envelop the ground, swirling around our feet. The demons tried to step back, but it was too late. From the mist, spectral figures began to emerge. Gaunt faces, hollow eyes, and tattered clothes—the ghosts of ages past made their presence known.

A ghostly woman with long, flowing hair and a dress that fluttered as if caught in an eternal breeze materialized, stepping protectively between me and my assailants. “You dare threaten her?” Her voice echoed, a haunting whisper carried by the wind.

Another figure, a burly man with chains wrapping his elusive form, approached, fixing the Fae with a disdainful look. “You think your chaos has power here? You know *nothing* of true power!” The very ground seemed to tremble with his words.

The horned Fae, trying to regain some semblance of boldness, scoffed. “What the hell kind of trick is this?”

Yet another spirit, a child with sorrowful eyes, floated closer. “No tricks,” she murmured, her voice deceptively soft. “Just pain.”

The two Fae were visibly shaken, looking from one ghost to another, clearly uncertain of how to combat this unexpected turn of events.

While the spectral army closed in around them, my voice was laced with newfound power as I whispered to the Fae, “You should’ve just let me go.”

Just then, Lysander and Ariya appeared beside me, bloodstains painting them like morbid badges of honor. The army of ghosts suddenly scattered, fading into a mist beneath the trees.

Ariya’s whistle pierced the silence. “That was one hell of a show. Our little pledge is full of surprises, isn’t she?”

Lysander held his body taut, like a bowstring pulled to its limit. His breathing was ragged, chest heaving with suppressed rage. His eyes, normally a calm sea, now appeared stormy, laser-focused on the Demon Fae.

He took a threatening step forward, his voice low and menacing, vibrating with barely contained fury. “You made a grave mistake touching her.”

Both men took a faltering step back, their posturing from earlier completely shattered. Any fool could see they were now the prey, facing a predator.

Ariya, ever the observer, leaned in closer to me, whispering, “I’ve seen him angry before, but this... this is something else. It’s hot, right?”

As Lysander’s shadow loomed over the demons, his intentions clear, Ariya gave a theatrical sigh. “I always did say he had a flair for the dramatic.” She paused, glancing back at the scene unfolding, adding with a smirk, “And a touch of the overprotective.”

The shorter guy, eyes wide and pupils dilated from the ghostly ordeal, gasped, trying to form words. “Look, I... I didn’t mean—”

Before he could complete his sentence, Lysander was upon him, swift and lethal. The blade glinted under the moonlight, and in a fluid, almost poetic motion, it arced through the air, embedding itself deeply in the Fae's throat. Blood erupted like a ghastly fountain, staining the surrounding grass and leaves as he fell to the ground.

A nightmarish silence followed, broken only by Lysander's labored exhales and the sickening sound of him removing the knife from the dead man's neck. He turned, eyes aflame with fury, to face the remaining guy. "Had enough chaos for one night?"

Panicking, the other Fae stumbled backward, desperately scanning for an escape route. But Lysander, fueled by a fiery protectiveness, closed the gap between them in mere seconds. He bore down on the demon, and with a swift, merciless motion, Lysander pinned him to the ground, his free hand wrapping around the man's throat.

The demon's eyes filled with terror, the realization of his imminent demise setting in. He desperately grabbed at Lysander's hand.

Lysander, his face mere inches from the Fae's, whispered, "You shouldn't have touched her." And with that, he drew the blade across his throat, ending him in a quick, brutal stroke.

Ariya sidled up to me, eyeing the aftermath. "I swear, he gets so emotional sometimes. Though... I guess they had it coming."

Trying to push down the rising nausea, I turned to her, my voice trembling. "He... he killed them."

I tried to find some sort of remorse or, hell, even revulsion, but there was none. Instead, the shadows inside of me began to stir excitedly.

"Oh, darling, you haven't seen anything yet." Ariya chuckled, her gaze widening when she looked at me. "Whoa. How'd you get your eyes to do that thing?"

"What thing?" I asked.

She waved her hand toward me. "The thing where your pupils completely covered the white part. It was super creepy but in an awesome way."

I shook my head, having no idea what she was talking about.

Lysander approached me, his hands sliding up and down my arms as if searching for some unseen injuries. "Sarielle?" He cupped my face, his fingers splayed wide, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones. "Are you hurt? Did they touch you? Did they...?"

His frantic examination continued, fingers flitting to the curve of my

shoulders, the nape of my neck, down the length of my arms again. The world around us seemed to blur, leaving just the two of us in its vivid clarity.

I grasped his wrists gently. “Lysander... I’m okay. Truly.”

His hands stilled, but they didn’t leave me. Instead, they rested, firm yet gentle, on my waist, pulling me a fraction closer. “What was that? Those ghosts... How did you...?”

I met his gaze evenly, feeling the warmth of his touch seep through me, a reassurance amidst the night’s insanity.

“I don’t know,” I admitted softly, “but whatever it was, it saved me—or at least bought me some time before you got here.”

“I shouldn’t have left.”

Ariya laughed. “You really shouldn’t have. I totally had it handled.”

Lysander’s gaze darted from me to Ariya, his temper flaring. “He had you pinned, Ariya!”

She flicked off a speck of blood from her hand. “Oh, please. I had him right where I wanted him.”

Lysander’s eyebrows shot up incredulously. “On top of you?”

A smirk tugged at Ariya’s lips. “My blade was at the ready. Just needed the right moment.”

“You were in trouble. Admit it.”

Ariya arched her eyebrow. “I landed the blow, didn’t I?”

Lysander’s jaw tightened. “*After* I pulled him off you.”

She shot him a teasing grin, pushing back her wild hair. “Always have to be the hero, don’t you?”

Lysander huffed, his chest heaving with residual adrenaline. But their banter seemed to drain the tension from him. They had been bickering, but the bond between them was undeniable.

As the eerie remnants of the encounter faded, Ariya stretched, a languid smile curving her lips. “Got what we needed. Time to head out.” She nudged me playfully with her elbow, her gaze thoughtful. “I’ll be sure to put in a glowing recommendation for you with the Order. And mention your... unique ability.”

Her words settled in the pit of my stomach.

Before I could respond, Lysander’s voice sliced through the tension. “Maybe... don’t mention the ghost part.”

Ariya turned her gaze to him, their eyes locking in a silent conversation. A flurry of emotions, an unspoken language, passed between them—

understanding, caution, mutual respect. After a moment, she offered a slight nod. “Alright. Mum’s the word.”

With a shared sense of camaraderie, Ariya gracefully linked her arm with Lysander’s and then mine. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

I nodded to the two bloodied bodies on the ground. “What do we do about them?”

Ariya’s shoulders lifted. “Leave ’em. We already have a cleanup crew on the way.”

And with that, the three of us began our journey out of the chaotic woods.

As the forest thinned, dropping us back on the main pathway to the dorms, I knew without a doubt I wouldn’t be able to stay away from Lysander Thorne anymore.

I also knew I’d never get my favorite pair of panties back.

FOURTEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Two days had passed since the chaos party, and the strain from that night was getting to me. I was drained, as if the act of summoning those spirits had sucked away a part of my essence. My mind swirled with confusion, grappling with what had happened. But worse than the physical and mental exhaustion were the nightmares. They'd intensified, becoming so visceral and horrifying that the mere thought of sleep made a stab of unease fill me. Yet, despite my best efforts, exhaustion won, pulling me into its dark embrace.

The second my head hit the pillow, I was somewhere else entirely. The setting was always the same—cracked earth and weird smoky air. Heat so intense I was constantly looking for a wall of flames that was going to swallow me whole. In the distance, tall dark towers stood, their silhouettes sharp against a deep red sky. There were no stars up above. No light. Just that unnerving red. Tortured screams echoed through my brain, begging for mercy, begging for the final death. But each time I visited the hellish Dreaming landscape, I was an observer. An invisible voyeur there to witness unspeakable things.

But tonight was different.

Tonight, somebody had decided I would be a participant.

“Where am I?” I muttered.

I tried to move forward, but my feet stuck a bit with every step, like the ground itself was trying to pull me under. A whiff of sulfur hit me, making my nose wrinkle.

“Lost?” a voice echoed, but I couldn't see where it came from.

“Just a bad dream,” I whispered, more to myself than the disembodied voice, hoping that saying it out loud would make it true. The darkness around seemed to tighten, and I had never felt more alone. “It's just a dream. I'll wake up soon. I *have* to wake up.”

Barely audible at first, a growl rumbled from somewhere ahead. It wasn't a sound I recognized—it was deeper, more resonant than any beast I knew. As it got louder, every instinct told me to run, but my feet were glued to the fractured ground.

From the inky blackness, two crimson eyes lit up, fixing on me. They

belonged to a looming shape, hulking and easily twice my height. The sight of it made my stomach drop.

I willed my legs to move, to do anything, but they wouldn't listen. Every breath was a struggle, coming out more like shaky sighs. As the figure neared, its massive arms lifting, a thought flashed: This is it.

I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for... whatever was coming next.

But nothing happened.

I blinked, disoriented, and the hulking monster had vanished. Instead, a familiar woman in dark attire stood before me. An important woman, my instincts shouted, yet I had no idea why. As my pulse quickened, my lips parted, trying to voice the questions tumbling in my head, but the words wouldn't come.

She moved closer, each step deliberate, predatory. A red hue clung to her pale skin, and her raven-black hair flowed as if caught in an unseen breeze.

"Hello there," she said, her tone carrying a sinister allure. "You've grown into such a beautiful young woman, Sarielle."

I swallowed hard, wrestling with my voice. "Who are you?"

Her cold fingers brushed mine, and a sudden shock rippled up my arm. "Who am I? I think the better question is, who are *you*? You're the only one who seems to be confused here."

I tried to pull away but her grip tightened. "What do you mean?"

The world heaved beneath me. The treacherous ground split open, and I fell, her morbid laughter following me.

I found myself racing through a winding cavern, my feet pounding against the hard ground. The stone walls appeared to tighten around me, twisting and turning, guiding me deeper into the dark belly of the maze. The echoing drip of water from stalactites above was drowned out by her haunting, relentless refrain.

"Blood of my blood," the voice whispered, weaving through the shadows, growing louder, more insistent. "Now that you're grown, it is time to avenge me."

"No!" I shouted, a desperate cry against the disturbing mantra. My lungs screamed, my legs felt like lead, but I pushed on, desperately seeking an exit, a reprieve from the tormenting voice.

"You will be my warrior, blood of my blood," it promised, an omnipresent whisper that seemed to come from the walls themselves.

Tears blurred my vision. "Leave me alone!"

I could feel her presence everywhere, in the wind that swept through the cavern, in the shadows that seemed to shift with every turn. But no matter how fast or how far I ran, the voice followed, a constant reminder of a destiny I didn't understand and a fate I couldn't escape.

Out of nowhere, a new figure appeared before me, the darkness of its cloak parting to reveal a horrifying truth: The spirit looked exactly like *me*.

My breath caught in my throat as she reached out for me, her touch ice-cold and sinister.

I tried to scream, to break free, but the nightmare held me captive, my voice silenced by the oppressive air. Desperation clawed at my chest as my evil doppelganger grabbed my face and leaned in, pressing her lips to mine. My feet faltered as the cavern seemed to be collapsing inward, the darkness pressing in, suffocating. But just as my dread became unbearable, a soft glow appeared ahead of me. My heart leaped as he materialized from the gloom.

Lysander.

He stood there, shirtless, skin bathed in an exquisite light. Confusion shadowed his features, but concern dominated his expression. Those eyes, once a beacon of safety, now scanned our surroundings, trying to make sense of the nightmare.

“Sarielle?” he called out, his voice echoing around me.

I stumbled toward him, eager for the refuge he offered. But as our fingers were about to touch, a dark force within me recoiled, its voice snarling louder than before.

“Kill him,” it hissed.

I jerked my hand back, terror evident in my gaze. “Lysander, I...” The sinister urge was strong, but the ineffable bond we shared was stronger. I willed myself to resist, praying he'd understand.

I was dazed, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. Then, a knife materialized in my hand, its cool metal handle pressing into my palm.

Lysander's eyes widened in shock as he noticed the weapon.

Before I could even process what was happening, my body moved on its own, the knife lashing out at him. I screamed, trying to resist as my arms swung wildly, the blade narrowly missing his face. Lysander stumbled back, his expression hurt and wounded. Shame and guilt washed over me as I realized what had just transpired.

The spirit within me cackled triumphantly, relishing the chaos it had caused. I tried to fight back, to take control of my own body, but it was like

trying to swim against a raging current.

“Excellent,” the spirit whispered in my ear. “Now, kill him.” The eerie command wormed its way through my mind, a shadowy allure. “Avenge me, Sarielle!”

I staggered, barely able to speak against the onslaught. “I... I can’t.”

Lysander’s gaze was sharp and focused, his brow creased in confusion and worry. “Sarielle? What’s happening to you?” His voice, familiar and warm, was a balm to my spiraling mind.

The malevolence inside me clenched tighter, a vise around my thoughts, urging my hand forward, the blade glinting ominously. The haunting directive echoed, louder, more insistent. “Do it!”

Lysander’s gaze flitted to the blade, then back to my face, seeking some understanding, some hint of the girl he knew.

“Stay away!” I screamed, every ounce of my being used to hold back the growing impulse.

“Sarielle...” Lysander’s voice was soft, a gentle plea amidst the chaos. He inched closer, each step measured. “Trust me. Let me help.”

Tears stung my eyes. The overwhelming force that sought control was a tide, but Lysander was a beacon. As he reached for me, his hand steady and sure, a spark of warmth radiated from our connection. His touch was a grounding force, a shield against the encroaching darkness.

“This isn’t you,” he whispered, his voice both firm and tender. “You must fight it off.”

With that simple plea, the shadowy presence within me diminished. Lysander’s steadfast faith was the lifeline I clung to, slowly pulling me back from the nightmare.

As our fingers intertwined, I could sense the spirit’s presence withdrawing.

Shaken and disoriented, I reached for Lysander, trembling as my heart pounded wildly in my chest. The last tendrils of the spirit’s influence slithered away, leaving me drained. My knife fell, the metallic sound echoing dully against the stone floor, a jarring contrast to the silence that had dominated my thoughts.

It felt like a boulder had been lifted off my shoulders, and I almost crumpled to the ground. But before I could, Lysander’s strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me close. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck, feeling the heat of his skin against mine and his rapid heartbeat mirroring my

own.

But then, with a suddenness that left me reeling, Lysander's demeanor shifted. The tender moment was overtaken by a powerful surge. Before I could react, he pressed me against the wall, his eyes scanning the room, every muscle in his body tense, ready to strike. The mercenary in him was on full alert.

The sharp edge of his voice pierced the fog clouding my mind. "What the fuck just happened, Sarielle?" His cerulean eyes bore into mine, full of suspicion and raw emotion. "How did you get in my bedroom? Past my wards?"

I struggled to find the words. "I-I don't know."

His jaw clenched, a muscle twitching visibly. "You tried to stab me."

Panic swirled in my chest. "But that wasn't me. I tried to resist... I swear."

He scrutinized me with a penetrating gaze that left me exposed, vulnerable. "Prove it. Prove to me you're Sarielle."

"How?" My voice broke, pleading. I stretched my fingers to touch his cheek, attempting to bridge the widening gulf between us.

The hardness in his eyes faltered for a moment. Yet, his defensive stance remained, as if he were caught in a battle between his heart and his training. It was clear he needed more than just words to trust me again. Without thinking, driven by a mix of fear, longing, and a need to prove myself, I surged forward, capturing his lips with mine. The kiss was desperate and fiery. I bit down on his lower lip, eliciting a low growl from him that vibrated against my mouth.

His surprise gave way to fervor as he responded with equal passion. His hands, which had once held me in suspicion, now roamed my back, pulling me even closer. My fingers tangled in his hair, nails grazing his scalp as I lost myself in the depth of the kiss.

I moaned softly, the sound muffled by his mouth.

Lysander pulled back just slightly, his forehead resting against mine. "Dammit, Sarielle. What are you doing to me? You're going to ruin me."

My eyes, glossy with emotion, met his. "I'm so scared."

His kisses stilled, replaced by the hard stare of a man looking for answers. "Talk to me," he urged. "What's going on?"

I lifted my gaze to meet Lysander's, searching for an anchor in the storm that raged inside me. But instead of calm, a shadow passed over my vision.

That uneasy voice began to whisper again, winding its way through the recesses of my mind.

Kill him, it hissed. Do it now.

Cold dread washed over me. Every part of me screamed to resist, but its pull was undeniably strong. It was a relentless assault, and I could feel my resolve wavering.

Lysander reached for me and I flinched, putting distance between us. “Sarielle?” Concern deepened the furrows in his brow.

“Get away from me!” I cried out suddenly, pushing his chest. “I... I can’t trust myself right now.”

“Sarielle, what’s happening?” Lysander took a step back, his voice cracking with both frustration and fear. “Talk to me.”

The malevolent voice became louder, drowning everything else out. *Kill him. He’s right there. Do it.*

Desperation surged within me, and I clapped my hands over my ears, as if that could somehow block the noises inside my head.

As I gritted my teeth, trying to fight off the insidious pull, Lysander reached out, concern evident in his stormy eyes. The instant his fingers brushed against mine, the scary voice was muted, its clamor suddenly silenced as if submerged underwater.

I hesitated, my pulse racing. Slowly, I let go of his hand to test my theory. Almost immediately, the voice returned, its sinister tone even more forceful than before.

Kill him! Why resist? You must avenge me!

I grabbed Lysander’s hand again and was again met with blissful silence.

“When you touch me,” I whispered, eyes wide and glistening with tears, “it... it goes away. The spirit... it can’t get to me.”

Lysander tightened his grip on my hand, his intense gaze searching mine. “Then I won’t let go.”

Desperate to escape the darkness threatening to consume me, I reached up and pulled him closer. Our eyes locked, a silent understanding passing between us. I felt the icy clasp of the spirit loosening, replaced by a warmth that began at our entwined fingers and spread throughout my entire being. Sensations heightened. Our breaths merged, quickening in pace.

Lysander smirked as he pressed his body against mine, the corner of his lips curling devilishly. “You feel that, Sarielle?” His voice was raspy and laden with desire, making my heart skip a beat. “That’s what you do to me.”

Our mouths met, hungry and desperate. The sensation was heady, like falling and flying at once. Kissing Lysander was intoxicating, filled with dark temptation and forbidden allure. I moaned softly, and he deepened the kiss.

“Gods,” he rasped into my ear, “you have no idea the things I want to do to you right now.”

I palmed his cotton-clad erection. “I have a pretty good idea.”

Lysander groaned. “You’re an allure I’m not sure I can resist any longer.”

I yanked on his hair, forcing him to tilt his head up as I dragged my teeth along his jaw. “Then don’t.”

His hands, strong and assured, roamed over the silk of my nightgown, causing a jolt of electricity to arc down my spine. The sensation ignited a fire within me, and I clung to him, fingers digging into his broad shoulders. I ground against him as he sucked on my neck. The intensity of his touch and the urgency of his words sent pleasure coursing through my veins. I felt like I was drowning in a sea of desire.

He was chasing away the nightmares.

He was chasing my pleasure.

His eyes seemed to swirl with hunger and need, desire rolling off of him in waves. His hard cock pressed against my stomach as he moaned my name and leaned his forehead against mine. Our breathing still ragged, he kissed me again, slow and languid this time.

“Is that what you really want?”

I wanted a lot of things. To explore this connection between us. To forget about the secret society he belonged to. To vanquish the spirit that was haunting me. But since I knew none of those things would magically resolve themselves, at this moment, what I wanted most of all was an escape into oblivion, even if it was fleeting.

Rather than speaking, I decided to answer Lysander’s question with actions. First, I ran my hands along his back and hips before cupping his ass firmly. I grasped the hem of my nightgown and lifted it over my head, tossing the satin to the floor. I was standing before him in only a thin pair of panties now, the cool air tightening my nipples.

I gave him a mischievous smirk. “Now we’re both only wearing our undies.”

Lysander stared at my breasts, his gaze filled with need, before leaning in to gently swirl his tongue around a peaked tip. My head fell back as pleasure engulfed me, and I gasped, arching my back in response to his touch.

“Look how perfect your tits are. They were made for me to fuck, Sari.”

That wasn't something I'd ever really thought about before, but I couldn't deny how much I enjoyed the erotic image he'd painted in my mind.

“Yes,” I hissed as Lysander dropped to his knees.

“If I were a better man, I'd put a stop to this,” he rasped while hooking his fingers beneath my panties and pulling them down. “But lucky for you, I'm not, because I intend on stealing every fucking drop of your pleasure tonight. I want to drown in it, Moon Girl.”

With that, he leaned forward and inhaled me. The warmth of him was palpable on my skin as he traced a path along my center with his lips, exploring every curve and corner. Lysander's tongue expertly teased and caressed me, wringing moans from my throat as I unraveled in his arms.

“You taste like pure sin. Like everything I could ever want but could never have.”

“You have me,” I panted. “Take whatever you want.”

I squealed when his laughter rumbled against my heated flesh. “Be careful what you wish for, sweet Sari. I might just take you up on that.”

I saw no problem with that as Lysander lapped at my pussy, increasing the pressure of his tongue as he explored me. His hands roamed around my hips and thighs, caressing me until I felt like I was melting against the hard wall. He hooked my thigh over his shoulder and surged even deeper, tongue-fucking me as I cried out in pleasure. I was so close to coming, every inch of me shaking with anticipation. Lysander kept teasing and licking, pushing and pulling until finally, I tipped over the edge and convulsed beneath him. An orgasm like no other washed over me, and he drank it all up like a man dying of thirst.

When I finally opened my eyes, he was still there, his lips cherry-red and swollen and his eyes burning with desire. He stood, picked me up and carried me to the bed, where he continued to ravage me with passionate kisses. As his body covered mine, a wave of electricity passed through us, like something powerful was uniting us in that moment.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he whispered while brushing his lips across my collarbone.

He sat up and pulled me with him. Lysander then drank in the sight of me, dragging his gaze over my exposed body before brushing a gentle kiss against my shoulder. I felt beautiful and desired in a way I had never experienced before, and when he finally looked into my eyes, the intensity in

his gaze made me feel like I was the only woman in the world.

He proceeded to lay me back down, and we continued to explore each other's bodies, our movements becoming desperate as the minutes passed. His hands seemed to know exactly where to go, as if they were guided by some sort of divine force, and his lips were constantly caressing and cherishing every inch of my skin.

"Condom," I grunted as he started frantically shrugging off his boxers. His cock was already standing at full attention and pulsating, ready for action. I took the time to fully appreciate him. He was smooth and velvety, standing tall and proud with a slight curve upwards. It looked like it had been sculpted—all perfect angles and contours that felt like perfection with every brush of my fingertips.

My eyes drifted to the serpent tattoo on his leg. It was outlined in black, shaded in dark green and gold. The ink spread downwards from his hip and contorted in a way that suggested the snake was ready to strike out and attack at any moment. It curled around Lysander's thigh with grace and precision, its eyes full of cunning knowledge. My thighs clenched with appreciation as I took in the intricate details—scales coiling and curling around each other like silk, its tongue flickering out in readiness to taste whatever came its way. For some reason, I found it incredibly sexy, which was odd considering how disturbed I was by a similar tat on his father's arm.

He leaned down against me and took possession of my mouth, pulling away after what felt like eternity. "Do you want me?"

I could only nod back in response.

He got off the bed and said, "Give me just a minute. My box of condoms is under the sink in the bathroom."

The moment he was out of sight, I started to doubt myself and wonder if we should be doing this. It felt so wrong, like I was betraying the very essence of who I was by even being here with him. My heart raced, and my mind was flooded with the harsh reality of the situation—the strict laws keeping us apart, his fiancée, his—

Kill him.

The spirit was back, latching onto my doubts and fears like a parasite feeding on my vulnerability.

Kill him.

The chilling command gripped me in a merciless embrace. What kind of monster was stirring inside of me? The air in the room became frigid. The

ghost seemed to be everywhere—swirling in the air around me, whispering its malicious commands directly into my ear.

I tried desperately to push away its words and focus on the connection I had shared with Lysander just moments before, but the spirit's voice was too insistent and overpowering. It hammered against my consciousness, each command more forceful than the last, until all I could think about was the horrifying act it demanded. I clutched at the bedsheets, my knuckles white with tension as my whole body trembled in fear and revulsion. Panic clawed at my chest, threatening to consume me as the spirit's sinister influence grew stronger by the second.

Suddenly, Lysander reappeared. He had returned with a condom in hand, and as our eyes connected, the ice in my veins vanished like it was never there, replaced by a warmth and security that enveloped us both. I greedily grabbed onto him as he climbed back on the bed, and the moment our skin touched, the spirit faded away entirely.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Fuck me, Lysander,” I moaned.

I wanted the ghost to stay away, and for some reason he was the only person capable of keeping the haunted spirit from consuming me. I'd worry about the consequences tomorrow. Right now I wanted to forget. I wanted to feel good.

“As you wish,” Lysander replied.

His eyes were still shooting sparks as he tore open the wrapper, saying nothing but letting his gaze do all the talking. He started to roll the condom on slowly, taking his time to ensure it was securely in place.

“I've been picturing you naked since the moment we met,” he said with a low growl. “Wondering how you'd feel choking my cock. Imagining the moans that would escape your lips.”

He hooked his arms under my knees, pushing them up high and wide.

I gasped as he entered me, his cock slowly but surely pushing and stretching me open. With each drive of his hips, surges of pleasure made me quiver, anticipation humming through me as I reveled in the sensation of him deep within.

“Fuck, you feel so good. Like this pussy was made for me. I want to spend an eternity filling you up with my cum.”

He moved slowly at first, giving our bodies time to adjust to one another, before picking up the pace. His thrusts became more frenzied as ecstasy

began to rock through my body from head to toe. Every inch of skin felt alive with sensation as we moved together in perfect harmony—each stroke creating an even deeper connection between us—heat radiating between us like a wildfire unleashed on my soul.

My pulse raced as I begged him not to stop. Lysander obliged, pushing deeper and harder as I lifted my hips to meet him every step of the way. His hands roamed my body, exploring my curves as I helplessly surrendered to the wave of ecstasy slowly starting to build. Before I knew it, I was screaming his name as a powerful orgasm ripped through me. A few strokes later, he followed me into oblivion.

We were both left trembling and panting for breath, and for a long moment we just stayed like that, our bodies still intertwined.

When he finally pulled away and collapsed beside me, he tenderly kissed my shoulder. I was sleepy and satisfied, and content in a way I'd never known before. When Lysander turned toward me, offering me the most genuine smile I'd ever seen, vengeful spirits were the last thing on my mind.

FIFTEEN

LYSANDER THORNE

I jolted awake, the first hint of dawn peeking through the curtains. The warmth of Sarielle's body pressed against mine was a cruel contrast to the cold reality of my mission. I had a job to do, and yet, here I was, tangled in a mess of sheets and inconvenient feelings.

As a member of the Dusk Court, I'd been trained to remain detached, a merciless predator lurking in the shadows. But Sarielle had thrown me off balance, igniting something inside that I couldn't ignore, and it pissed me off.

I couldn't feel anything for her.

I couldn't allow myself to get close.

But I also couldn't forget last night. I couldn't erase the memory of how perfectly her pussy wrapped around me. How freakishly in sync we were. How it was, without a doubt, the best sex I'd ever had.

I watched as Sarielle slept, the steady rhythm of her chest rising and falling beneath the sheet. I groaned as she shifted, the cotton falling just enough to expose one perfect-handful breast. There was a slight rash around her rosy nipple from my two-day old stubble, which made me grin. I preened like a damn peacock when I noticed the dark purple hickey decorating her neck. I had no doubt she'd be pissed when she saw it, but I couldn't help the male satisfaction that rolled through me, knowing I'd left my mark on her for anyone to see. Trailing a fingertip down Sari's cheek, I marveled at the softness, grappling with how this vulnerable woman before me had been the same frenzied Fae who attacked me mere hours ago.

Her hold on that knife had been hesitant, so different from my sharp instincts and trained reflexes. My world was one of dominance over adversaries, of predicting moves and countering with deadly accuracy. I could have easily disarmed her with a mere flick of my wrist, even turned her own weapon against her if I'd wanted to. But as I looked at Sari's tranquil face, I was disgusted with myself for even thinking about it.

There, in the dim light, a harsh truth settled in. Despite all my training, the scars I bore from countless confrontations, none of it protected me from the burgeoning emotions I had for Sarielle. My true conflict wasn't with her, but within myself.

The rising sun cast light across her face, highlighting the pinch of her brows as she stirred some more. Whatever dream she was having, it wasn't pleasant.

"Easy, Moon Girl," I whispered, my thumb brushing her cheek. She moved slightly into my touch, a reflex, her subconscious seeking solace. The protective instincts I harbored surged forward, fierce and raw.

But feelings were liabilities in my world. The Dusk Court had made sure I knew that. Emotions were weapons others could use against you. But watching Sarielle now, defenses down in slumber, it felt like all those lessons were a lifetime away.

"Dammit," I muttered, as my frustration grew.

This wasn't like me. I was the guy who had every situation under control, the guy with a plan. But every rule, every strategy I'd ever learned seemed to crumble around this girl. Why was she so special? Sure, she was beautiful in a way that made you notice, but I'd known plenty of beautiful girls over the years. Not being able to pinpoint why I responded to her the way I did was maddening.

She began murmuring unintelligibly. Without thinking, my fingers threaded through her hair, offering the silent reassurance she seemed to seek. "Shh... I'm right here." She settled back into the sheets, the storm within her quieting for now.

Drawing back, I ran a hand through my hair, agitated. Gods, this was all kinds of messed up. One moment, I wanted to shield Sarielle from every harm in the world, and the next, the obstacles that stood between us seemed insurmountable. I felt like I was balancing on a knife's edge. The walls seemed to close in on me, reminding me of the stark realities that lay outside. My past, the mission, and the complications a petite pink-haired girl brought.

I snuck out of my bedroom and made my way to Twilight Hall's north tower. Pressing my hand against the hidden panel, I waited for the bookshelf to drop open, revealing a dark passageway. I ducked beneath the low door, crouching as I walked the narrow path until I reached the rectangular chamber at the end. In the corner stood an ancient mirror that served as a communication device before cell phones were invented. The Dusk Court regularly relied on technology to complete a job, but we were a suspicious bunch by nature. My father was especially mistrustful, so he preferred to conduct sensitive conversations using more antiquated methods. If we couldn't meet in person, this mirror was the next best option. The ancient

elders certainly didn't make it easy though.

To summon my father, I had to perform a specific ritual, one that was known only to members of the Dusk Court's inner circle.

"Let's get this over with," I muttered.

I needed to update my father on what happened last night—the possibility one of his spies saw Sarielle sneaking into my room with a knife was too high. If it seemed as if I was hiding information from him, I would forfeit the small opportunities I had to *siphon* information from him. And that was something I definitely couldn't afford to lose.

I lifted a match from the small table that was stationed to the side, dragging the tip against the striker. Its brief flare cut through the darkness, glowing brighter as I lit the black taper candle. The golden flame danced for a few seconds before morphing to a peculiar purple hue.

Taking a moment to steady myself, I prepared to face what lay beyond the mirror. My reflection stared back, eyes filled with a mix of determination and dread. The incantation needed to be flawless, but thankfully, I memorized every syllable from previous summons.

"*Lorin var deshti, kara zintor makta.*" My voice wavered just slightly, but I pressed on, trying to imbue each word with the requisite power and respect.

An invisible pressure pushed down on me as the final remnants of the chant faded. I braced myself as the gilded frame began to shimmer, knowing that facing my father was never a simple matter. The mirror convulsed, a myriad of dizzying images flashing across the surface before the tumultuous motions ceased, revealing my father. His aristocratic features—chiseled cheekbones, an aquiline nose, and eyes that seemed to always look down on the world—screamed of a man who reveled in his superiority.

"Lysander." His voice was cold, loaded with a mockery that I'd come to associate with our every interaction. "You dare to summon me at this early hour? What could possibly warrant such insolence?"

I paused, reining in the familiar anger that his presence always incited. "Father, there's been an incident with Sarielle Blackwood."

He raised an eyebrow, an ever-present smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Ah, the little enchantress. Tell me, what has she done this time to warrant disturbing my peace?"

My cheeks heated with frustration. "She tried to kill me last night."

That seemed to amuse him. "And do you want a pat on the back for surviving? Truly, Lysander. When I gave you this job, I expected you to

manage this with ease. Now you're saying she tried to kill you? I thought you were *seducing* her."

"She was possessed," I continued, attempting to communicate the gravity of the situation.

His reaction was a short, sharp laugh. "Possessed? That's doubtful."

"It's the truth," I snapped, my patience wearing thin. "Her eyes... they turned completely black for a moment, void of any emotion, any recognition."

His features shifted to something bordering on interest. "Well... that does change things slightly. Did you kill her?"

"No. I didn't."

A pleased glint flashed in his eyes. "Good. She is, after all, a valuable asset. For the time being. Tell me what happened. Don't leave out a single detail."

I gritted my teeth and recounted the events, explaining how Sarielle had been trapped in a nightmare and possessed by a spirit who was commanding her to kill me. I had no intention, however, of telling him that my touch somehow snapped Sari out of it, or the events that followed that particular discovery.

The surface of the mirror rippled momentarily before settling to reveal my father's cold, calculating gaze. His eyes narrowed as he processed my words, fingers drumming the armrest of his ornate chair.

When I finished speaking, my father's signature sneer was firmly in place. "This all seems rather trivial, don't you think?"

My fists clenched. "Sarielle is being haunted by a vengeful spirit. How is that trivial?"

His eyes rolled, an exaggerated show of exasperation. "Of course she is. She's Moon Court, and not just any Moon Court Fae, but according to Xavier, one of the most potent he's encountered in decades. Spirits flock to such power like moths to a flame. Surely you didn't deem this revelation so groundbreaking that it requires my immediate attention."

Each word was a knife that prickled beneath my skin. "So you're saying this is normal? That we should just accept that she's being possessed by potentially murderous ghosts?"

His voice was filled with faux sweetness, a tone I knew all too well. "Oh, Lysander. Always so dramatic. It's not about accepting. It's about understanding. Yes, she will attract spirits, especially the malevolent ones.

But it's up to her to learn how to ward them off. That's none of your concern."

"Father, with all due respect, her safety is at risk. I thought keeping our *asset* safe would be a priority to you."

His laughter was cold and mirthless. "Of course I need her safe. Her well-being is paramount for the Order's needs. But ensuring that safety is *your* responsibility. I shouldn't have to be briefed about every little ghost or spirit that takes an interest in her. Just ensure none of them make her leap off a roof or drown in a pond."

The dismissiveness in his voice felt like a slap. "This isn't a game! This could compromise everything."

"*Life* is a game, Lysander," he replied smoothly. "And I always play to win. Sarielle Blackwood is merely a pawn in our larger objective. Remember that."

My jaw tensed. "Is there a way to shield her from these spirits?"

He contemplated my question. "Not in the traditional sense. Protection amulets, circles of salt, these things may help momentarily. But the real solution? It lies within her. She must learn to control her powers and block these spirits from breaching her defenses."

"And how is she supposed to do that?" I asked, frustration evident in my tone. "She's barely accepted the fact that she bears a moon on her neck instead of a sun. She's still grappling with understanding what she's capable of."

The look he gave me was one of clear disdain. "Then I suggest you hasten her understanding or find someone who can."

My nostrils flared. "You can't expect her to just master her powers overnight!"

He raised a hand, silencing me. "Enough. This conversation has already consumed more of my time than warranted. Teach her, guide her, find her a fucking mentor for all I care. Just ensure she's ready when we need her. And Lysander," he added, the ice in his voice unmistakable, "don't disappoint me."

"I understand," I said through gritted teeth, my fists clenching at my sides.

"Good. Keep me updated on the situation with Sarielle. And be ready to strike when the time comes."

The mirror's surface went dark, leaving me alone in the chamber, haunted

by my father's words and the knowledge of the path that lay before me. Sarielle was in danger, and I was torn between my duty to the Order and the inexplicable need to protect her. As I brooded over my father's words, I heard footsteps approaching. Silas Stone appeared in the doorway, his expression as serious and stoic as ever.

"Something on your mind, Lysander?" he asked, his voice low and gravelly.

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Just need to clear my head."

Silas cracked his knuckles, a dark grin spreading across his face. "A friendly sparring session might help with that."

I couldn't help but smile. A good fight could be just what I needed to take my mind off the impossible situation I found myself in.

"You're on."

We made our way to an open area of the tower to square off. Silas was incredibly strong and skilled in hand-to-hand combat, making him a formidable opponent, and I found myself looking forward to the physicality of a fight. We circled each other, eyes locked as we searched for an opening. The first move was mine—a quick jab aimed at his face. Silas effortlessly deflected it and countered with a low sweep of his leg. I barely managed to leap over it, my heart pounding in my chest.

As we traded blows, our bodies moving in a brutal ballet, Silas spoke, his voice strained from the effort. "I saw a pretty pink-haired Fae sneaking into your tower last night."

I grunted, blocking a punch aimed at my ribs. "What about it?"

"Well... I suppose you're going *above and beyond* for your job." The moment the last word left his mouth, a solid hit landed on my shoulder.

The impact sent a jolt of pain through my arm, but it only fueled my determination. I lunged forward, driving my fist toward his face. Silas dodged at the last second, but I managed to catch him with a swift kick to the side.

"I'm doing what is expected of me."

Silas stumbled back, grinning through the pain. "You always get the best assignments. Wanna trade? I'd love to take her tight little body for a ride."

My jaw clenched. The idea of *anyone* but me touching Sarielle filled me with rage.

"You couldn't handle it," I gritted.

"Care to wager on that?" He smirked.

“Just shut the fuck up and fight me, you asshole.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Message received, bro. Your precious assignment is safe from my charms for now.”

We continued to spar, our bodies slick with sweat and muscles burning with exertion. Silas launched a barrage of punches, forcing me to fall back on my defensive instincts. I blocked and dodged, feeling the weight of each missed blow as it whistled past my face. The room echoed with the sound of our grunts and heavy breathing.

“You’re holding back,” Silas growled, his eyes narrowing as he threw another punch, this one aimed at my gut.

I sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the blow. “Fuck!”

“Focus, Lysander!” he barked, following up with a roundhouse kick that I ducked under. “You’re better than this!”

His words stung, but I knew he was right. The Dusk Court was a ruthless place, and I had to be strong to survive. I gritted my teeth and let out a primal yell, launching myself at Silas with renewed vigor.

Our dance intensified, fists and feet flying with bruising force. The sound of flesh meeting flesh punctuated the air, a testament to the raw power being unleashed.

I landed a solid punch to Silas’s jaw, momentarily stunning him. Seizing the opportunity, I followed up with a kick to his chest, sending him stumbling backward.

Silas recovered quickly, his eyes alight with a dangerous fire. “Much better.” He wiped a trickle of blood from his lip. “You had me worried for a minute there. But no bitch has the power to distract the great Lysander Thorne, right?”

My eyes narrowed. “Don’t call her that.”

Silas grinned, clearly enjoying the reaction he’d provoked. “Damn. You really are pussy whipped, aren’t you? I never thought I’d see the day. Can’t say that I blame you, bro. I bet that pussy is nice and tight. She looks like a good girl who’s just waiting to be corrupted. Am I right? How does she feel about double penetration? I’d be more than happy to tap that ass.” He laughed. “See what I did there? I was talking about shoving my dick up her ___”

Rage boiled up inside me, hot and uncontrollable. The thought of Silas laying a hand on Sarielle made my vision blur with fury. With a guttural roar, I charged at him, every ounce of my strength focused on bringing him down.

Our bodies collided, and I drove my fist into his face with a satisfying crack. Silas staggered, but I didn't give him a chance to recover. I grabbed his arm, twisting it behind his back as I slammed him to the ground.

He grunted in pain, his face pressed against the cold stone floor. I leaned in, my voice a low growl. "If you ever talk about her like that again, or even *think* about laying a hand on her, I swear I'll make you regret it."

Silas gasped for breath, nodding as best he could in his compromised position. I released him, stepping back and allowing him to rise to his feet.

He rubbed his injured arm, glaring at me. "Fine. But don't forget who you are. You're Dusk Court, dude. We're not foolish enough to let emotions get the best of us. That's the quickest path to failure, and failure is *never* an option."

"You think I don't know that already?"

He spat on the ground and started walking away but then paused at the doorway, turning back to face me with a sneer. "I *think* you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter because your father is in charge of the Order. I *think* you take your position as heir to the throne for granted. You have no idea how fucking lucky you are, do you?"

My fists clenched at my sides, anger pulsing through my veins. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Oh, don't I?" Silas challenged, stepping back into the room. "I've had to work twice as hard as you to get to where I am. Every accomplishment, every victory, earned through blood, sweat, and determination. And you think you can just waltz through life, letting some crazy Moon Court girl steal your attention, and expect everything to go your way?"

I glared at him, feeling the sting of his words. "My life hasn't been as easy as you think, Silas. I've had my own battles to fight, my own demons to face."

He snorted, eyes flashing with contempt. "Sure, but have you ever had to truly struggle? Have you ever had to claw your way out of the shadows, to prove yourself to people who see you as nothing more than a pawn in their game?"

I gritted my teeth, struggling to keep my temper in check. "This isn't a competition. We're fighting for the same cause."

He shook his head, his expression darkening. "You're missing the point, Lysander. If you let your feelings for Sarielle distract you from our mission, you're not just putting yourself at risk—you're putting *all of us* in danger."

The Dusk Court doesn't have room for weakness, and neither does the Order."

"I don't have *feelings* for Sarielle."

His mouth curved into a toothy grin. "You sure about that? Because from where I'm standing, I think you *do*, whether you're willing to admit it or not. Fucking pathetic."

With that, Silas turned on his heel and left the room, door slamming shut behind him.

My heart pounded in my chest as I contemplated his words. If Silas could pick up on whatever feelings I had toward Sarielle—good or bad—that meant I was slipping. And if that was true, then I was fucked, because I had no idea how to fix it.

SIXTEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Ever since I woke up alone in Lysander's bed and did the walk of shame from Twilight Hall, I'd been on edge. I couldn't stop replaying last night's events—both the sexy *and* scary parts. I probably should have felt upset that I woke up alone, but I was relieved not to have to face him. I was embarrassed.

I was startled as someone knocked on my door. "Who is it?" I asked, thinking a peephole would be really helpful right now.

"Evangeline," a musical voice answered from the other side.

A wave of relief washed over me as I opened the door and found my beautiful resident advisor smiling back at me. "Hi. What are you doing here?"

She practically floated over the threshold, long emerald hair trailing behind her as she invited herself into my room. "I just wanted to check in with you. See how dorm life has been treating you." Evangeline dropped onto Lirien's bed, making herself comfortable.

Well, okay then. Moon Court members were definitely more... outgoing than I was used to. I wouldn't say my RA was being rude by inviting herself into my personal space, but it wasn't exactly polite either. I couldn't imagine either one of my parents so casually disregarding basic social etiquette.

"So?" Evangeline prompted. "Tell me about your experience so far. Are you settling in okay?"

I closed the door to my room and took a seat on my bed. "Um... I guess you could say that."

Her delicate brows knitted together. "Why did you hesitate?"

"What?" I shook my head. "I didn't hesitate."

"Of course you did," she countered. "What's the matter? Are your classes tougher than you thought? I can't help you if you aren't open with me, Sarielle."

I laughed nervously. "No, no. It's nothing like that. I'm just... adjusting to living away from home for the first time. I'm sure all freshmen need time to acclimate themselves, right?"

Evangeline smiled sympathetically. "Ah, I see. Don't worry, I felt the

same when I first arrived at Nightshade. But it doesn't take long to get used to things once you start meeting more people outside of your own little bubble." She winked playfully at me, her eyes twinkling with mischievous delight. "And if there is anything else troubling you, feel free to talk to me about it. You know we Moon Court members are all loyal friends for life!"

"Of course." I nodded.

Evangeline's eyebrows rose. "You still seem off. Is it... guy troubles? Oh! Or is it something a bit more... *intimate*?"

My face flushed. "Intimate? What are you talking about?"

With a dramatic flourish, she pulled out a small pamphlet. "During training, they told us we might have to handle 'delicate situations,' and guess who volunteered to become Nightshade University's go-to expert on... Fae intimacy?"

I squinted at the pamphlet. "Is that... a guide to safe enchantment?"

"Exactly! And before you ask, yes, it includes a section on magical contraceptives." She grinned, tossing a tiny wrapped object onto my bed. It was a condom, shimmering with a faint magical aura. "You know, for those spellbinding moments."

My eyes widened. "Please tell me you're not handing these out at RA meetings."

She laughed. "Oh, no. Just for special occasions. And friends who might need a magical boost in the bedroom safety department."

As I picked up the mystical prophylactic, still slightly in shock, Evangeline cleared her throat. "Speaking of which, are you educated on MSTDs?"

I choked on air. "What now?"

She leaned in, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Magical Sexually Transmitted Diseases. They're no joke, Sarielle."

Feeling both curious and a bit apprehensive, I gestured for her to continue.

She opened the pamphlet, pointing to a section titled "Beware the Bewitchments: A Guide to Mystical Maladies."

"First, we have Pixie Pox," she began. "Symptoms include glowing in the dark, uncontrollable laughter, and, in extreme cases, temporary levitation."

"Wait, you levitate?" I asked incredulously.

She nodded solemnly. "For about an hour. It's all fun and games until you're floating near the ceiling and can't get down."

I snickered, imagining the scenario.

Evangeline continued, “Then there’s Witch Warts. Not your average warts, mind you. They sing. Off-key.”

I gasped in mock horror. “That’s just cruel!”

She smirked. “Indeed. And don’t get me started on Elf-Itch. It’s not exclusive to elves, despite the name. It makes you dance. Nonstop. For days. It’s like a magical rave in your pants.”

My laughter echoed in the room. “Okay, okay, I get it. Safety first.”

Evangeline gave me a pointed look. “And lastly, the most dreaded of all, Nymph Nausea. Think of it like morning sickness but with an insatiable desire to bathe in moonlit ponds and sing ballads.”

I placed a hand on my chest. “Oh, the horror.”

She chuckled. “Things can take an embarrassing turn when you’re serenading a duck at two a.m.”

I burst out laughing, the earlier tension dissipating. “Thanks, Evangeline. I’ll remember to come to you for all my enchanting intimacy issues.”

She winked. “Always here to help. And remember, better safe than serenading waterfowl in the moonlight.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

She giggled. “At least I managed to make you smile. I just hate that your aura is all off.” Evangeline gave me a long look before finally nodding her head in understanding. “Okay then...” She rose from Lirien’s bed and made her way toward the door. “Just remember that you can tell me anything. That’s what I’m here for.” Just as she wrapped her hand around the doorknob, Evangeline froze.

“Evangeline? Are you okay?”

Her head whipped toward me, and I gasped when I saw her silver eyes completely clouded over like a fog had rolled in from the sea.

I jumped off my bed, panic clawing at my gut as I backed into my desk. “Evangeline? What’s happening?”

Her eyes were still unfocused, her lips slightly parted as garbled words fell from them. “*A society forged in secrets and lies...*” Her voice was layered with complexities and fragility and terrible weight. “*Forbidden fruits and innocent lives. Order amidst chaos...*”

“Evangeline!” I shouted. “Snap out of it! What are you talking about?”

I swallowed, my heart pounding in my chest. I had no clue what she was talking about, but something told me it was important.

Evangeline's lithe body slumped against the door. "*Temptation abound, intentions impure, snakes all around...*" Spittle rolled down her chin as she reached out with a trembling hand. "*Darkness in bloom, sacrifices made, shadows and serpents, together they reign. Bargains are struck, a blood debt is paid, the ultimate betrayal, the Queen of Shadows is slayed.*" She pressed her full lips together until they disappeared in a tight line.

I inhaled sharply when my brain finally processed her words. Evangeline was reciting the prophecy in that history book about the Shadow Queen. But why? How? Was she being possessed by the spirit like I was last night?

Oh, shit.

I glanced out the window, debating my survival chances if I jumped from this height. Dammit, the odds weren't good, but if there was an evil spirit blocking my door, what choice did I have?

"Evangeline," I said slowly. "Come back to me. *Please.*"

Her spine bowed. "Do not trust the Serpents. The Blooming Shadow is thirsting for blood."

"*What serpents?*" I shouted. "And what the hell is a blooming shadow?!"

Just as I was about to take my chances with the window, her eyes cleared, leaving silver irises behind. "Sarielle?" she asked weakly. "Whoa. That was freaky."

"You think?!" I threw my hands up, confident she was no longer possessed. "What the hell was that?"

I hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward, reaching out to take her arm and lead her back toward Lirien's bed. She collapsed onto it with a sigh of relief, rubbing her forehead tiredly. "A vision. *An incredibly powerful vision.*"

I thought about my possession last night and couldn't help but notice the similarities. "Evangeline... that didn't seem like a regular vision. It almost seemed as if... you were taken over by someone's spirit."

She turned her head toward me. "How do you know what a possession looks like?"

Crap.

"Uh... I don't. But what just happened here with the ominous warning"—I waved my hand toward the door—"definitely seemed like you weren't in control of your body."

Her gaze sharpened as she carefully sat up. "I'm a descendant from a long line of gifted clairvoyants, Sarielle. I guarantee I can differentiate between a

vision and a possession. I've also learned to read people pretty well, so I know that you're bullshitting me about your experience with possessions. What happened?"

"We'll get to that," I promised her. "But will you please explain what just happened? You were reciting a prophecy that I recently read in a history book about the Shadow Queen."

She hesitated before finally speaking. "This isn't the first time I've had a vision about her. I've been having them since I came to Nightshade U. What do you know of her?"

I sat on the edge of my bed. "Not much other than what I've read in books. Basically, she was the ruler of Tartarus before she mysteriously disappeared. Since Hell has no proof she's actually dead, they won't seat anyone else on her throne."

"My visions only show me flashes throughout time, but from what I've pieced together, the Shadow Queen was once the most feared and respected leader of the Order of the Midnight Serpents, but she was betrayed by those closest to her. There are whispers, rumors around campus, that she is still out there somewhere, waiting for the right moment to exact her revenge against those who wronged her."

My heart raced as I listened to her words. "Order of the Midnight Serpents... what is that?"

Could she be referring to the same Order I was unwillingly pledging to become a member of?

Evangeline studied me carefully. "I think you already know, Sarielle. I've seen you spending time with Lysander Thorne. He is next in line to rule, after all."

A swirling vortex of dread coursed through me as I thought of the snake tattooed across Lysander's muscular thigh. And the other one I saw wrapped around his father's forearm. Both men had referred to their society as *the Order*, but I had a feeling they were intentionally withholding its full name until after pledges passed their tests.

"What do you mean he's next in line?"

Her mouth formed into a pitying smile. "You're one of their pledges this year, aren't you?"

I knew I could be risking everything by discussing this openly with her, but I also knew she had information no one else would be willing to give me.

I paused for a moment. "Yes. But not by choice."

“Then I suppose I don’t need to tell you how dangerous they are.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Trust me, I’m *well* aware. But I’m also pretty freaking clueless on what their endgame is. Lysander seems convinced being a part of this society is an honor. That the rewards far outweigh the risks.”

“Like I said before, my visions aren’t always clear. And rarely in any sort of chronological order. But as far as I can tell... their endgame, as you call it, is power. They want as much of it as possible.” Her shoulders shook as she shuddered. “But there’s a price.”

“What kind of price?”

“They sacrifice Fae, Sarielle. They’re feeding some sort of higher being with the blood of innocent people. I’ve never seen exactly what kind of being that is because whenever a vision gets me close, I’m kicked out of it by a blinding light, but I’m guessing it’s some kind of demon or a god. The Order members are granted power in return for their sacrifices.”

I thought about that Xavier guy and the crystal he conjured after mopping up Lysander’s blood, and described what I’d witnessed.

“It’s possible the crystals are temporarily pacifying the beast,” she said. “But it’s likely only a bandage until they can find a suitable sacrifice.”

“What makes someone suitable to become a sacrifice?” I asked.

Evangeline swallowed. “I think the angry ghost haunting this campus might be able to answer that question.”

My brows rose. “You know about the malevolent spirit?”

“Anyone who’s been here for more than a few months knows about it. But most students have no idea the Order exists, so some of the theories I’ve heard about who it is and why they’re haunting Nightshade are wild.” She laughed humorlessly. “Personally, I suspect it’s one of the Order’s sacrifices who’s mighty pissed off about it. As far as I know, no member of the Moon Court has actually seen their apparition, but we can feel their rage as if it’s a tangible thing.”

Curiosity and dread mingled within me. “What exactly has this spirit done?”

Evangeline seized up, visibly disturbed. “It’s said that sometimes late at night, in the oldest part of the campus, you can hear sorrowful wails that spook you. The spirit relives its last moments, trapped in an endless loop of pain and betrayal. There’ve been incidents where students have ventured there at night, only to be found the next morning in a state of shock, muttering about cold hands and sorrow-filled eyes.”

My stomach knotted. “That’s horrifying. Why hasn’t the university done anything about it?”

She gave a cynical smile. “Because most don’t believe. They write it off as pranks or the wild imaginations of stressed students.”

Feeling a sudden sense of dread, I glanced around the room. “So, you really think this spirit is one of the Order’s past sacrifices?”

Evangeline nodded slowly. “It makes sense. The anger, the sorrow, the never-ending cycle of reliving their last moments. Whoever this spirit was, they were deeply wronged and now they’re out for revenge.”

I gulped, trying to push away the growing fear. “And no one from the Moon Court has seen this apparition?”

She shook her head. “Not directly. But the aura of rage, the sudden temperature drops, the flickering lights when there’s no reason for it—we’ve all felt its presence. It’s as if this spirit is crying out, demanding justice for its untimely end.”

It was clear that whatever lurked in the shadows of Nightshade was no mere tale. The very real danger floated in the air, an ominous cloud that threatened to engulf us.

I nibbled on my lower lip. “What if I told you I know who it is because I’ve seen her?”

Evangeline’s emerald hair fell over her shoulders as she leaned in closer. “Who?”

“The Shadow Queen,” I exhaled. “I recognized her image from an illustration in a text book. She’s come to me more than once. She’s... she’s taken control of my body.”

Her silver eyes widened. “Then I’d say you’re in even more danger than I originally thought.”

“Wh-why?” I stuttered.

Evangeline’s chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. “Because if someone as powerful as the Shadow Queen has chosen you to host her spirit, that means you are one of the most powerful people on this campus. And if anyone from the Order knows what you’re capable of before you figure out how to wield your power, that makes *you* their perfect sacrifice.”

Well, fuck.

It was the middle of the night, and I stood at the center of the room, my hands resting firmly on my hips, the soft fabric of my nightgown rustling gently against my skin.

With a deep inhale, I set my sights on my nemesis—the bed. That plush, deceptive thing that had become ground zero for my nocturnal misadventures. Lirien was out following Rook on some date again, which meant I was all alone.

“Alright, bed,” I declared, pointing a finger dramatically at it. “Tonight’s the night we get some real answers.”

Turning to the vanity mirror, I caught a glimpse of myself. Freckles dotted my nose, and my pink hair hung in loose waves around my shoulders. My brown eyes stared back at me, alight with unwavering resolve.

“You,” I announced to the reflection, pointing assertively, “are not going to let a silly little thing like the Shadow Queen and recurring nightmares run the show. Got it?” I nodded at myself, “Good.”

For a brief moment, I wondered if talking to oneself was a sign of impending madness, but I shook off the thought. Right now, pep talks were the order of the evening.

Trying to keep the mood light, I continued to pace the floorboards, their soft creaks accompanying my impromptu bravery rally. “Okay. I’m the boss of my own dreams. I’m strong. I’m fierce. I’m—”

A loud bang came from the other side of the wall, disrupting my monologue. “Oi! Keep it down in there!” a muffled voice called out, carrying a hint of playful annoyance. “Some of us are trying to catch some beauty sleep!”

I cringed. “Sorry!”

Gathering myself to calm my racing heart, I padded over to the bed. Tugging the duvet back, I slipped under the sheets, cocooning myself in their comforting embrace.

“Alright,” I murmured to myself, feeling a mix of apprehension and resolve, “here we go.”

As I closed my eyes, sleep tugged at my consciousness. But this time, instead of fighting it, I let it pull me under, diving headfirst into the world of dreams and nightmares, determined to face whatever lay ahead.

The hazy mist ahead began to churn, coalescing into a form that seemed to be sculpted from the shadows themselves.

I recognized the Shadow Queen instantly.

Emerging with the elegance of a phantom dancer, she weaved her way through the mysterious fog, leaving behind tendrils of darkness that seemed eager to rejoin her.

“Quite the entrance,” I remarked, attempting to inject some levity despite the tension that weighed the atmosphere down. I refused to be scared this time. I had questions and was going to get some answers.

She halted a few feet from me, her dress, more like a living veil of the night, fluttering as if caught in a gentle breeze. It was as if the very darkness had woven itself into strands of hair that framed her concealed face.

“Blood of my blood,” she murmured as she floated closer, her voice carrying an intoxicating blend of menace and allure.

I tried to mask my unease. “Poetic. But a simple hello would have sufficed.”

“We have... unfinished business,” she intoned, her form oscillating between substance and shadow.

Gathering my resolve, I replied, “Then let’s get on with it.”

I forced myself to stand tall, my chin raised. If there was one thing I had learned from confronting my own nightmares, it was that cowering only made things worse.

“Why do you keep showing up? What the hell was that last night?”

She took a deliberate step forward, her form shimmering as it moved. “Blood of my blood,” she repeated, her voice echoing hauntingly.

I frowned, irritation mingling with my fear. “Yeah, you said that. Want to try another line? Or is that your go-to?”

The folds of her shadowy dress whipped around. “Blood of my blood.”

I huffed. “Great, a broken record. Look, who are you? Why are you here? And why the dramatic entrance?”

Again, she responded, “Blood of my blood.”

I groaned, exasperated. “Okay, I get it. But can we move the conversation forward? I have a lot on my plate without dealing with... whatever this is.”

The familiar eyes settled on me, an eerie depth to them. “Blood of my blood.”

“Ugh!” I threw my hands up. “Okay, I’ll play your game. What’s with the whole blood thing?”

She was now just inches away, the chill from her presence brushing my face. “Blood of my blood.”

Feeling a bit reckless, I squared my shoulders. “Alright, this is going

nowhere. Either spill the beans or let's wrap up this nightmarish meet-and-greet."

As her hand extended, icy fingers inching toward my cheek, her lips curled into that same haunting smirk.

But this time, I was ready. "Blood of my blood, right? Got it."

"Blood of my blood," the ghostly woman repeated once more, this time with a note of finality that silenced my protests.

"Why... why do you keep calling me that?" I managed to choke out, my heart hammering in my chest. "What does it mean?"

The spectral figure merely cocked her head to the side. "Ask the woman who raised you."

"Wait, what?" I blinked rapidly, trying to process the change in her refrain.

The spectral woman remained unsettlingly still, her gaze unyielding and piercing.

"The woman who raised me? You mean my mom? Why bring her into this?" A mixture of anger and fear made my gut churn. "What does she have to do with any of this?"

She maintained her maddening silence, just staring with those deep, haunting eyes.

"Answer me!" My voice trembled, wavering between frustration and fear. "What does my mom have to do with your... creepy blood mantra?"

The spectral woman began to fade in and out, her form becoming less distinct as the shadows seemed to reclaim her. "Seek the truths hiding in plain sight."

"That's it? More riddles? Why don't you try giving me some answers for once?"

The shadows surrounding her grew in size, pulsing angrily. "The woman who raised you is not your mother. *I am.*"

I shook my head, thoroughly confused. "No. That's impossible."

Her dark eyes bore into me as she seemed to consider her response. "Look deeper. You feel my power thudding through your veins. Our connection."

"I..." I began, trying to deny it. But the thing was... I couldn't. "I don't understand..."

The Shadow Queen released a hollow laugh. "You will, Sarielle. You will."

“Why now? Why are you here?” I cried out, the plea in my voice unmistakable.

“You must avenge me. Free me.”

My jaw dropped. “Avenge you *for what*? Were you an Order sacrifice?”

She gave me a single nod. “Partially.”

“Partially?!” I repeated. “How do you *partially* sacrifice someone? You said to free you. Free you *from where*?!”

“There is no time for explanations.” The edges of her form began to blur, but not before she delivered a final, shocking message. “You must kill the serpent heir. Before he kills you.”

The world around me seemed to spin.

“What? Why?! What does that mean?” I shouted. But my questions were met only with silence as her figure dissipated into the shadows. “Wait! Don’t go!”

My heart raced, panic and confusion threatening to overwhelm me. The revelation and the dire warning coalesced into a storm of emotions. How could that woman be my mother? She must be lying. Trying to trick me into avenging her, or whatever. But just as quickly as the thought came, I remembered something she’d said earlier.

Look deeper. You feel my power thudding through your veins. Our connection.

I gasped as I looked down and saw the shadows swarming around me. Caressing me. Becoming one with me.

My eyes flew open as I jolted awake, my heart pounding against my chest like a wild drum. I panted unevenly, the Shadow Queen’s words still echoing in my ears, making my skin crawl. My room, dimly lit by the crescent moon outside, felt suddenly too small, the familiar surroundings too strange. I could still feel a phantom touch on my skin, a reminder of the nightmarish encounter.

“The Shadow Queen is my *mother*,” I whispered into the silence.

But how was that even possible? A bitter laugh escaped my lips. This was crazy. I already had a mother—a kind, loving woman who had raised me, comforted me in times of sorrow, and celebrated with me in moments of joy.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the disturbing thoughts. It was just a nightmare, a figment of my overactive imagination.

Or was it?

I *did* feel unimaginable power thrumming through my veins. And I

couldn't forget about the time I walked through a cave wall. Was this all part of my Moon Court abilities? Or was it something greater? Maybe listing everything out would help me process. I was a big fan of lists. They created order amidst chaos. Walking to my desk, I pulled out a pad and pen, the silence of the room amplifying the scribbles as I began to write.

The Order seemed keen on sacrificing some unfortunate Fae to a mysterious baddie. That someone was possibly me.

Lysander might be more intertwined with the Order than I ever imagined. And if that was true, how could I possibly trust him? Our connection, everything we shared, was it all a lie?

That haunting shadow in my nightmares? There's a growing, gut-wrenching possibility that she's my actual mother. Which means...

My parents, the ones who raised me, loved me, might not be my real parents. Was I adopted? If the angry ghost was truly my birth mother, then who the hell was my birth father?

And in the middle of all this chaos, I was about to start my period. I needed to stop by the student store and grab some tampons.

I stared at the list, the gravity of each point sinking in, before folding the paper carefully and tucking it away with a sigh.

With Parents' Weekend approaching, I'd have a chance to seek answers, to confront my parents. And until then, I needed to be even more vigilant around Lysander. I had to protect my heart and, quite possibly, my very life. No matter how drawn to him I was, I couldn't forget about the fact that he was *heir to the throne*. He admitted he wasn't afraid to use seduction on the job. For all I knew, I was just another mark to him.

Closing my eyes, I whispered to myself, "One step at a time, one truth at a time." It was the only way I'd find my way out of this long list of deception.

SEVENTEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

The courtyard of Nightshade University buzzed with a unique kind of energy. Families, all in a whirl of color, laughter, and tight hugs, filled the air with a vibrant chatter. Students bounced around, introducing their roommates or showing off their dorm rooms to eager, prying parents.

I weaved through the crowd, each step heavier than the last. It was as if an invisible string was tugging me forward, leading me straight to them: Mom and Dad.

But as I grew closer, something felt off. Mom was fidgeting with the end of her braid, and Dad... was he looking around more than usual?

Without thinking, I rushed toward them, the need for their familiar warmth overriding all other instincts. I practically crashed into my mom, wrapping her in a hug.

She laughed, surprised. "Well, someone's missed us!"

Dad's brows rose. "Sarielle, it's only been a few weeks. What's gotten into you?" He chuckled, but there was a hint of awkwardness in his tone.

I steadied myself, trying to push the nagging revelations and suspicions aside. "Just... missed you guys, that's all."

Mom looked around, her eyes skimming over the crowd. "Where's your brother? I thought he'd be with you. I was hoping we'd get the chance to meet this girl he's been talking about. Her father is a supreme justice! Isn't that wonderful? It's so lovely he's met a nice Dawn Court girl from such a respected family."

I resisted the urge to rub the sudden ache in my chest. Their comments, though innocent enough, stung. Here I was, grappling with the possibility that I might be adopted, and all they seemed to care about was their precious son who belonged to the right court. I was bummed when my parents made no attempt to contact me since they left freshman orientation, but I chalked it up to their busy jobs and maybe even the possibility that they were giving me room to settle into university life.

The few times I'd texted them, their responses were brief. They made no attempt to carry on a conversation or ask how I was doing, so I stopped trying. But knowing they'd talked to Rook enough to know about the girl he

was dating and the *respected family* she belonged to, hurt. It *really freaking hurt*, dammit.

I forced a brightness into my voice that I didn't feel. "Well, I'm sure he'll show up soon enough. In the meantime, would you like a tour of the Moon Court classrooms?"

Their expressions faltered, a slight frown marring their faces before they quickly masked it.

"Yes, that would be lovely, Sarielle," my father finally replied with a polite smile. But the brief hesitation hung heavily between us, and I couldn't shake off the sinking feeling that something was profoundly wrong.

We started our journey through the winding corridors, each step taking us further into the heart of the Moon Court wing.

"Are you getting ready for the Avalonian Ball?" my mother asked politely.

Nightshade University held the ball once a year, an opportunity for all the courts to get together and encourage unity and community.

"Yes, I need to figure out what to wear, though."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find something." She chuckled.

"Yeah... I've got a few options in mind."

"Good." My mother smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "That's good."

"Do you have a date?" my father prodded. "Are there any Moon Court boys that strike your fancy?"

I blushed, thinking of Lysander, but quickly squashed that line of thought.

"No," I forced out before walking faster, leading them deeper inside the building where my classes were held.

My divination classroom was one of my favorite places, a room that embraced the mystical aura of our kind, but through the eyes of my Dawn Court parents, I saw it differently. The usually charming ambiance of the room, cluttered with ancient spell books, crystal balls, and arcane paraphernalia, seemed to unnerve them. Thankfully, no other students had ventured this way yet, so they wouldn't be subjected to my parents' obvious prejudice.

"Quite the... unique setup," my father mused, scanning the room with a wary glance.

"How does one even find anything in this... chaos?" my mother added, her gaze drifting over the haphazard piles of parchment and herbs. I could almost see her mentally rearranging the room, her Dawn Court sensibilities

craving order and clean lines.

Looking at the classroom, it dawned on me how distinct our courts were, how much of our surroundings we took for granted. It felt like another symbol of the growing gap between us, a realization that burned even as I tried to brush it away with a casual laugh.

“I guess it’s all part of the Moon Court charm.” I forced a smile, which they both returned, doing little to quell the undercurrent of tension that had settled between us.

My father started to speak again, his tone taking on a formal edge. “Sarielle, I’ve been looking into the sorting procedures of the courts. There seems to be a legal provision, a sort of loophole...”

I raised an eyebrow, interrupting. “A loophole?”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You know how much I despise loopholes. But in this instance, I believe it’s necessary.” Leaning forward, he paused, gathering his thoughts. “Line two hundred fifty-six, under section seven eighty-nine in the *Book of Fae Laws and Regulations*, states that any individual, within their first semester of university, can petition to be reassigned to the same court as their direct kin, given substantial evidence and support.”

My brow furrowed, processing the information. “I don’t understand. Are you trying to tell me that I can be reassigned to the Dawn Court?” I placed a hand over the crescent moon decorating my neck. “Why would I want to do that?”

My mother’s face softened, her fingers reaching out to remove my hand from the shaded rune. “Sarielle, this isn’t you. The Moon Court... it’s changing you, and not for the better. We just want to give you an option, a way out.”

Tears threatened at the corners of my eyes. I knew they were trying to help, but the unspoken implications—that the Dawn Court suited me more than the Moon Court—felt like another gulf widening between us. How did they know how much I’d supposedly changed? They hadn’t *once* asked me how I felt about my new court since coming to Nightshade University. Not once had they expressed interest in my life since this rune was etched into my skin.

“So you want me to run? Pretend like none of this happened and just... go back to the way things were?”

My mother hesitated, pain evident in her eyes. “We just want you to be

where you're meant to be, Sarielle."

"And you think that I belong in the Dawn Court?" Why would they want to change me? Why wasn't I enough?

My parents exchanged a glance, their discomfort obvious. But the damage was done. The revelation was like a crack in our familial bond, and I wasn't sure how to mend it.

My mother finally broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper. "Sarielle, we are just... concerned. The Moon Court could... influence you, bring out parts of you that are best left untouched."

"How would you know how the Moon Court is influencing me?" I challenged. "How do you know *anything* about my life these days since you never bothered to ask?"

"Young lady," my father admonished. "There's no need for an emotional outburst. But this is a solid example of the kind of influence your mother was speaking of. We know about that eccentric new friend of yours." He lowered his voice. "About that *Dusk Court boy* you've been sneaking around with. Your behavior is shameful. You were raised to be a proper young lady. Not some... some... wildling!"

Wow. It wasn't every day I was compared to a society of savage Fae who took pride in razing villages and plundering their women.

"Nice, Dad. Tell me how you really feel," I scoffed. "At least I know who you got your information from."

My brother was going to get an earful—and possibly a swift kick to the nuts—the next time I saw him. How's that for an *emotional outburst*?

"Sarielle!" My mother's red lips pursed. "Your brother was just trying to —"

"I know about the adoption," I interjected, cutting my mother off, my voice hard.

Their faces paled at my words, a visible jolt going through them.

My mother let out a choked gasp, her hand flying to her chest as if physically struck. "H-How... Who told you about *that*?"

The fact that she didn't even bother to deny it only fueled my anger. My whole life felt like a house of cards, each revelation toppling another foundation. But this really took the cake.

"I want the truth, Mother," I demanded, my voice shaking with suppressed emotion. "I deserve to know. Although, I guess you're not really my mother now, are you? What should I call you?"

My father crossed the room, closing and locking the door. “Sarielle, you’re being cruel. Your mother—”

“This is bullshit! I just want a little damn honesty for once in my life. Is that really so much to ask?” My eyes filled with tears, but I refused to let them fall.

My father’s eyes widened. “Sarielle, what is the matter with you? There’s no need to be so crass.”

“Crass?” I repeated, my voice bouncing off the walls. “Pardon me, but filtering my language is the least of my concerns right now. I want answers, and I want them now!” My heart pounded in my chest, matching the rhythm of my mounting anger. My entire life had been a lie, and I was left standing amidst the rubble of it.

My mother started wailing, her petite frame shuddering with the force of her cries. Her distress was a stab to my heart, but I couldn’t back down. Not now.

“Sarielle!” my father shouted, silencing my mother. His eyes, usually kind and warm, were hard and stern as he stared at me. “You’re right. You were adopted. But that doesn’t mean—”

I held a hand up. “I know you love me. You have a funny way of showing it sometimes, but I do know that.” I sighed. “But something is happening to me, and I’m scared. I need to know where I came from, and I think you’re one of the few Fae who can answer that. *Please.*”

Nobody said a word for at least thirty seconds, but I held my chin high, waiting for the answers I sought.

“Honey,” he began, a tremor in his voice, “your birth mother was... unique. Incredibly powerful. She wasn’t even from this realm.”

These were all things I already knew since the Shadow Queen was evidently my mother, but I didn’t say any of that. I wanted to see how much information he would freely divulge.

“And my birth father?” I asked.

“We don’t know.” My father swallowed. “We know he was moon-marked, but that’s the only information we were given.”

“So you knew there was a strong possibility I would be assigned to the Moon Court during my baptism?”

“We did.” My mom nodded. “We hoped raising you in the Dawn Court would influence the outcome, but despite our best efforts, that didn’t happen.”

The confession hung in the air, hitting me like a physical blow. I stood frozen, the raw truth slicing through the haze of my anger, leaving behind a bitter taste. They'd been trying to change me *my entire life*.

I sighed. "So, how did the whole adoption thing happen? Did my birth mother leave me on your doorstep with a note? Or did she sign her name on the dotted line before she left the hospital? Do you even know her name?"

My mom paused, collecting herself. "Sarielle... some things are best left unsaid. Your DNA doesn't define you."

I shook my head. "Nuh-uh. I'm sick of all the secrets. I need to know *everything* you know. And apparently genetics *do* matter, considering I'm moon-marked like my father, *despite your best efforts* to ensure otherwise."

Her brows pinched together. "That's not fair."

"Why not?" I threw my hands up. "Just tell me. How did I end up in your care? What happened to my birth mother?"

"She's... gone," she replied. "No one has seen or heard from her since you were an infant."

I wouldn't say *no one*.

"You were given to a Dawn Court elder," she continued. "We were told you were in grave danger. That one day you would inherit great power, but if anyone found out who your birth parents were, you would be... executed."

"The court was left with the responsibility of deciding your fate," my father added, his voice steadier now. "I... we volunteered to raise you as our own. To conceal your relation to..."

"To the Shadow Queen?" I supplied.

My mother gasped. "How... how do you know that?"

I supposed it was only fair to tell them what I knew. "She's been, uh, haunting me. And she sorta possessed me."

"What?!" they both yelled.

I cringed. "It's all fine now. We worked through it. But she's the one who told me that she was my mother."

"What do you mean you 'worked through it'?" my father demanded.

I shrugged. "I found the strength to fight off her control." I didn't think they had any real interest in knowing about Lysander's involvement in that. "The next time she came to me in the Dreaming, we had an actual conversation. I guess you could say we reached an understanding."

Just because I understood she wanted me to kill Lysander, that didn't mean I agreed to it. It still counted.

My mother lifted her tearstained face, her hand reaching out to cup my cheek. "You are my daughter, in all the ways that matter. You do know that, don't you?"

"But why didn't you tell me?" The air seemed to tighten around us.

"You are a product of an unlawful union, Sarielle," my mother replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "Of both dark and light magic. There was no precedent for this and too many unknowns. But we felt it was unjust to kill an innocent child, so we decided the best course of action was to conceal your identity and help you reject your hybrid nature."

Their confession, their duty, the secret of my birth, it was all too much. My world, as I knew it, had shifted. And I was left in the wreckage of it all, struggling to understand, to accept the enormity of the truth.

"So I was nothing more than a duty to you? Just a Dawn Court obligation?"

"No, Sarielle!" my father answered. "That's not true."

"We love you," my mother assured me, eyes pleading for understanding. "We've *always* loved you. From the moment we took you into our arms, you were our daughter, our family."

My father nodded in agreement. "It was *never* just an obligation. Our love for you was—*is*—very, very real." He took a deep breath. "But your lineage, the power that you stand to inherit from the Shadow Queen and the Moon Court... it's potent... *volatile*. If you let it consume you, there *will* be consequences. The Dawn Court elders will have no choice but to intervene. The balance must be maintained."

The implication was clear. The court that raised and nurtured me would turn against me if my birthright became too much of a threat to their precious balance. It was a sobering revelation, a glaring reminder of the fragile precipice I was teetering on.

Tears pricked at my eyes. "You know me. You know I would *never* hurt —"

"We know you wouldn't," my mother interjected softly, her gaze gentle yet firm. "But, Sarielle, this amount of power... it can be dangerous, even if you don't intend for it to be. We're trying to protect you—and everyone else."

"Maybe there's no need to worry. My only party trick so far is talking to

the dead,” I joked, making both my parents gasp.

Suddenly, it all made sense. Their fears, their protective measures, it all stemmed from the inherent danger of my birthright—a truth that was hard to digest.

“The Shadow Queen... she ruled Hell, Sarielle,” my father said. “Fae royalty—whether light or dark—were never meant to roam this realm. Our entire society would be at a disadvantage. It would create pure pandemonium.” He paused, as if gathering his thoughts. “Monarchs have the ability to manipulate the very fabric of reality, to twist and turn it to their will.

“The Shadow Queen in particular can bring forth unimaginable darkness, control spirits, and even distort time itself.” His eyes met mine, a deep sadness within them. “Her essence lives within you, but you don’t have to succumb to that darkness. Your mother and I believe a controlled environment is the answer. Being surrounded by law and order, instead of this...” He held his arms out, gesturing to the cluttered classroom. “I believe the lightness within you will prevail. Come back to the Dawn Court. Forget about your lineage. Let’s all move forward as a family and forget this ever happened. We can even enroll you in a different university if you think it’ll make things easier.”

I wiped away a fallen tear, knowing it wouldn’t be that simple. I spent the first eighteen years of my life surrounded by law and order. But that didn’t stop the darkness from invading my thoughts. It didn’t stop me from feeling like I didn’t belong. Sure, I never rebelled like I sometimes wanted to, but could I really live the rest of my life pretending to be someone I wasn’t? That wasn’t *living*.

I already knew the answer and it was time for me to admit it.

“I can’t do that.” I shook my head vehemently. “I won’t... I have no desire to embrace the darkness, as you call it, but I can’t live a lie any longer.” My voice broke, raw with emotion. “I have to figure out my own path. I... I’ve gotta go. Please don’t follow me. I need time to think.”

Tears streamed down my face as I turned, fleeing the room in a desperate urge for escape. Tears choked me as I blindly stumbled down the hall, my world unraveling around me.

I careened around a corner with blurry vision and crashed into a solid form. The collision might have sent me sprawling, but a strong arm wrapped securely around my waist, anchoring me.

“Hey! Where are you off to in such...” The playful rebuke died on his lips when he registered my distress.

Our bodies were close enough for me to feel the rise and fall of his chest. My tear-streaked face tilted upwards, meeting his gaze. The concern in his eyes was sincere and unwavering, bringing me a small measure of comfort.

“Sarielle...” Lysander’s free hand rose hesitantly, thumb brushing away a tear that clung stubbornly to my cheek.

“Ly—” My voice broke.

He seemed to understand without words. Pulling me a little closer, he whispered, “Talk to me.”

I sobbed harder, unable to speak. Too hurt. Too raw from everything.

“Sarielle,” he repeated, concern etched into his features. Without another word, he guided me into an empty classroom, shutting the door behind us.

He tenderly wiped away my tears, his touch gentle against my cheeks. Lysander’s presence was a temporary balm against the tumultuous emotions raging within me, a haven amidst the chaos of my shattered world.

“I can’t...” I choked out, struggling to regain my composure as I attempted to pull away from him. “I can’t trust you, Lysander.”

He scowled. “I don’t understand—”

With a tremble in my voice, I managed to choke out, “I know about the Order. I know what you’re involved in. I know what your cult does.” My voice, though quiet, carried a deadly sharpness.

Lysander visibly tensed, every muscle in his body coiling as if preparing for a confrontation. “What are you talking about? What do you *think* you know?”

“This is all my fault, really. You’ve been trained in the art of deception, lies, and manipulation. You’ve never made a secret of that. Yet for some reason, I wanted to be with you anyway. What a fool I’ve been, huh?”

Lysander’s usually confident facade crumbled a bit, replaced by a flicker of genuine fear. “Sarielle, I don’t know where all this is coming from, but—”

“Because you’re a part of a secret society that...” I leaned in closer, voice dropping to an almost inaudible whisper. “Sacrifices innocent Fae in exchange for power.”

His eyes widened in shock, and for a moment, he seemed at a loss for words. “Sarielle, I can explain. But this is not the place.”

I laughed mockingly. “Yeah... let’s talk about that. What are you doing in the Moon Wing anyway? What possible purpose could you have for

slinking around its halls while most of the university is busy with their parents?”

His icy eyes narrowed. “I was looking for you.”

“Well, that’s convenient.” I scoffed. “Okay... how about this? Am I safe with you? Because we have these moments where I feel like we’re the only two people in the world, but then you’ll do or say something that reminds me where your loyalty really lies, and it sure as shit is not with me.”

“I *want* you to be safe with me,” he insisted. “I want to protect you. I want... I want to hurt the people that make you hurt.”

His declaration hung in the air between us, a tangible force that seemed to make the world stand still. I could see the truth in his eyes, feel the intensity of his conviction. But it was what he *didn’t* say that was the problem.

“You *want* me to be safe with you... but, I’m *not*? Did I understand that —”

His mouth was pressed against mine before I had the chance to finish my sentence. At first, our kiss was gentle and tender, like a wave of comforting warmth that swept over me. His soft lips moved with slow deliberation as if he was relieved by the simple gesture of contact. But then it changed as I came to my senses.

“Fuck,” he grumbled as I bit his lip. “That hurt.”

“That’s what you get for interrupting me,” I told him, although for some reason, I was making no move to back away.

Lysander’s lips curved into a cocky smile before he resumed our kiss, exploring my mouth with a feverish passion, his hands now tangled in my hair. I could taste the underlying desperation within his embrace and feel the heat radiating from him as we remained locked in our intimate embrace for what seemed like an eternity.

Eventually, we pulled away, panting for air. His gaze was searching and intense like he was looking for an answer to some unspoken question. All I could do was stare back, unable to speak or think as my heart raced in my chest.

“Tell me why you were crying.”

“No,” I choked out.

“Look at me,” Lysander commanded, his voice a velvet growl that echoed through the hall. “Do you *want* to trust me?”

I swallowed hard. “No.”

“Ah, but your body says otherwise.” He leaned in closer, warmth

radiating against my skin. “You trusted me to give your body pleasure unlike anything you’d ever known. Every whimper, every plea that escaped your pretty lips, was the sweetest symphony of surrender I’ve ever heard.”

Each word was filled with raw desire, and I found myself lost, willingly, in the tempest that was Lysander. His praises, possessive and fervent, ignited a fire within me. But as quickly as it had come, the moment passed. My newly discovered lineage hung over me, the gravity of the truth about my existence came crashing back down.

I pushed Lysander away, stepping out of his embrace. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Sari—”

“Leave me alone. Don’t talk to me, Lysander. Don’t come near me.” With a last, tormented look, I turned and fled the building, leaving a bewildered Lysander behind.

My mind was swimming with confusing feelings and countless questions. But the most pressing of all was what was I supposed to do next?

EIGHTEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

My thoughts were a chaotic mess. Each step that I took across campus felt like a mini rebellion against the reality I didn't want to face. Everyone was at the banquet, enjoying a nice dinner with their families right now, while I was actively avoiding mine.

So I kept walking.

And walking.

And... walking.

The atmosphere tonight was an eerie kind of unsettling, like a dark vignette straight out of an old fairy tale. Fog clouded the campus, blurring the familiarity of the cobbled paths beneath my feet. I hugged myself, half-chastising and half-comforting.

"Nice going, leaving your jacket," I muttered aloud. Something about talking to myself made me feel less alone. My footsteps echoed in a distorted fashion, almost as if they were thrown back at me by the looming stone buildings. Structures that were normally comforting now felt almost threatening. "Walked here plenty of times. No problem here."

Maybe it was reckless to walk around campus alone at night. You know, with a ghost haunting me.

And the Order possibly-maybe-kind-of-sorta wanting to kill me.

And my knack for attracting trouble.

The gargoyles perched high on the buildings looked ready to descend. I paused for a moment to stare up at them, and I swore one blinked at me.

"I'm seeing things. I'm very stressed and haven't had much sleep, so now I'm seeing things."

I quickened my pace, driven not just by the imagined fears but by real, tangible threats. "You're spiraling, stop," I urged myself, but it wasn't that simple.

Spiraling felt like a luxury when I had to evade genuine horrors at every turn, when even corners seemed to encroach with new layers of isolation. "You just found out your parents aren't your real parents. Your mother is the Queen of Hell. You can summon angry ghosts. People want to kill you. You could become too powerful..." I sprinted over to an alcove between two

buildings, away from the watchful trees or judgmental gargoyles. “You’ve got this,” I sighed, lowering my head into my hands. That’s when I heard it—a laugh, light and silly.

I looked up to find Aurora Emberwood, the Dawn Court Fae my brother was dating, standing a few feet away. “Were you talking to yourself?”

I shook my head, flustered. “Uh, no.”

She giggled, turning to her friend. “Moon Court Fae are so odd. I hear most of them lose their minds by twenty-five.”

The friend’s frosty pink lips curled in disgust. “Gods, I’m so glad we’re not one of them. Can you imagine?”

Both girls laughed this time.

I was so not in the mood for their mean girl bullshit. “I’m not sure what my brother sees in you, but I can assure you, his interest won’t last long. He’s not into vapid bimbos.”

Aurora glared. “C’mon, Calliope, we need to get back before they start serving dessert. There’s no sense in wasting time on strange nobodies.”

“I don’t even know how someone like Rook is related to someone like her,” Calliope added.

With cliched hair flips, they both sauntered away, not sparing me another moment of their attention.

As much as I hated to admit it, their words stung, cementing the gaping void I’d been feeling all afternoon. It was another reminder of how dislocated I was—like a puzzle piece from a set that had been recalled for a critical flaw.

Loneliness sank its teeth in deeper, mingling with my real and imagined fears. And just like that, the chasm widened, swallowing me whole.

My heart skipped a beat as the voice crept into my consciousness. “Blood of my blood. You must come. See.”

The muscles in my back tensed, as if preparing for a physical blow. It was her—the Shadow Queen. Her voice was an odd combination of maternal tenderness and sinister allure.

I clenched my fists, nails digging into the palms of my hands. “No,” I hissed through gritted teeth, my voice shaky but resolute. “I cannot deal with you right now.”

But her voice only grew more insistent, as if fed by my resistance. “You need to understand—”

“No!” I snapped, cutting her off. My voice pierced through the air.

The irony wasn’t lost on me; moments ago, I was considered mad for

talking to myself, and here I was, yelling at an invisible presence only I could hear.

I shuddered deeply, forcing myself to regain composure. “Leave me alone. I have no interest in whatever your agenda may be.”

Still, a sliver of doubt gnawed at me, pulling at the loose threads of my unraveling sanity. Could I afford to ignore her? What if she had information that would make my life make sense again?

My eyes darted around nervously, half-expecting her to materialize from the fog or the shadows. But I was alone with the disquieting silence that followed, a silence that somehow felt even louder than before.

Shaking my head as if to clear it, I took a step forward, then another, distancing myself from the spot where her voice had filled the air. “I can’t. Not today.”

The air suddenly crackled with a heavy, electrifying tension.

“You do not have a choice,” the voice boomed.

“The hell I don’t.” My senses were on high alert as I quickened my steps.

And then it happened. The atmosphere in front of me rippled, like a curtain being drawn aside, and there she was—the Shadow Queen. She materialized from the fog, her gown of black lace flowing like liquid night, as though woven from the darkness itself, and her eyes—a deep, infinite abyss—locked onto mine.

The air turned icy, every hair on my arms standing on end.

“You must see...” Before I could so much as blink, she lunged at me, her form blurring into a spectral streak.

Time seemed to slow as my mind raced, grappling with the realization that she had breached the physical space between us. I was cornered, pinned between reality and whatever dark plane she hailed from. And in that sliver of eternal seconds, my soul quivered with a dread so profound it eclipsed everything else.

I knew what was going to happen next, but I had no way of stopping it.

I gasped as the ghostly entity took hold of me. The Shadow Queen’s presence was insidious, gnawing at my thoughts like rats on a decaying corpse. Every nerve in my body tingled with her electric energy, and I could feel her breath upon my skin. It was as if she had become a part of me, a dark shadow stitched to my soul.

My mind swirled with fear, anger, and longing—weaving together until I couldn’t recognize one from the other. Her possession left me feeling

powerless, yet strangely... *alive*.

Really freaking alive.

“Come, Sarielle,” the Shadow Queen commanded in my mind.

I followed her call blindly, my feet moving forward despite every instinct telling me to turn and run away from her grasp as fast as my legs could carry me. This was different from the last time she’d taken over my body in the Dreaming. I was fully aware of my surroundings. I knew with complete certainty that I was nothing more than a vessel. My soul was screaming for release, begging me to figure out a way to overpower her. My panic increased tenfold when I realized *where* she was taking me.

I came to a stop in front of a familiar stone door. Etched on its surface were ancient runes that glowed brightly in the night, as if powered by some unseen force. With a wave of my possessed hand, the stone melted into shadows, revealing the opening to the catacombs.

“Now is the time,” she said with a commanding voice. “You must enter and see what lies beyond.”

I stepped forward into the abyssal darkness, the Shadow Queen’s power emanating from within as I walked down a narrow path. The walls were damp and cold, the air thick with musty odors that clung to me like cobwebs. When we came upon the baptismal pool of blood, she led me off to the right, into a passageway I hadn’t noticed the last two times I was here. With each step I took, the runes etched into the stone began to glow, as if triggered by the motion of my body moving forward.

“Follow the River of Lost Souls,” she commanded. “It will lead you to the Blooming Shadow.”

I had no idea what the hell the River of Lost Souls was, but I didn’t like the sound of it. Yet, at the mention of the Blooming Shadow, the name Evangeline had spoken while under her vision’s thrall, my curiosity was piqued. Could the Shadow Queen be leading me to the answers I’d been searching for?

A sudden stench of iron and decay wafted through the catacombs, so overpoweringly disgusting that it left me reeling. The whispering sounds of unseen water echoed off the cavernous walls. In a way, it was similar to the comforting lull of the ocean, but there was nothing comforting about this place or what I soon saw glistening in the low light the runes provided.

A bloody, raging river approximately four feet wide, snaked its way through the catacombs, veins crisscrossing the stone floor. Its crimson

currents were nothing short of horrifying, but also morbidly fascinating.

“Do not be afraid, daughter.” The Shadow Queen’s voice was oddly soothing this time, as if she knew my terror. “The river is your ally. It is a spirit, born from suffering. It will lead you to the truth you seek.”

There was nothing calming about a blood body of water no matter how she spun it, but I couldn’t deny that the truth part held some appeal.

My footfalls bounced off the darkened walls as I ventured further into the catacombs. The tomb-like environment ate at my nerves, each crunch of stone beneath my feet resonating like thunder in the stillness. The further I walked, the more the river seemed to be drying up, fading into the stone floor.

The desiccating river ended in a rocky bed, barely a pencil’s-width trickle of blood remaining. No more rushing currents, no more whispers from the haunting Shadow Queen. Nothing but my own footfalls met my ears as I took in the surreal sight before me. Amid the macabre surroundings stood an apple tree of gargantuan proportions that seemingly defied logic and nature. It was twisted and gnarled, a testament to its struggle for survival in this inhospitable environment. Hundreds of illuminated white crystals surrounded its massive trunk, shining a spotlight on the withering leaves. The tree looked like it was on the brink of death, but there was a single, vibrant apple hanging low. The pome fruit’s lush red skin glistened, casting an eerie glow, begging to be plucked from its decaying host.

“The Blooming Shadow beckons you, Sarielle.” My birth mother’s voice was a silken whisper, threading through the air like an intoxicating perfume. “Reach out. Claim what is rightfully yours.”

Her words were a siren’s call. The apple before me gleamed, seeming to capture and refract all available light. It promised more than mere sustenance—it promised something sacred, illicit.

Empowering.

The air around it seemed to pulse, like the very universe was beating in time with my accelerating heart.

My hand hovered beneath the brittle branches, trembling as if magnetized by the forbidden fruit. I was salivating as a primal need took root deep within me. I physically ached to sink my teeth into the apple’s flesh and let its juices drip down my chin. This was no mere fruit; it was a conduit for a power so immense it defied comprehension.

“That’s it, Sarielle,” the queen purred, her voice wrapping around my

thoughts like a seductive caress. “Pick the final apple. Absorb its power and set us both free.”

The air was pregnant with promise. Each second elongated into eternity as my fingertips stretched closer to the apple. Every fiber of my being was ablaze with a dangerous desire, a temptation that was now only millimeters away. I felt an electric charge build up around my reaching hand, ready to bridge the gap between the Fae realm and nirvana. To breach the barrier of the very laws of nature—

Suddenly, a vise clamped around my wrist, wrenching my arm back down and severing the connection. “Don’t, Sari.”

“Nooooooo!” the Shadow Queen screamed as her spirit was violently ejected from my body. I was caught in a tailspin, everything and nothing battering all my senses at once. One moment she was controlling my actions, invading my soul, and in the next, she was just... gone. I had never felt more bereft in my life.

My body wanted to crumble to the ground as I gasped for air, scrambling to recover from the queen’s possession, but Lysander’s hold on my wrist prevented me from falling. I turned my head and found myself staring into his piercing blue gaze.

“Lysander? Wh-what are you doing here?” I croaked. Gods, my head was pounding as if someone were driving nails into my temples.

His face was a storm of conflicting emotions—anger, relief, and something indefinable that flickered in the depths of his eyes before vanishing. “I could ask you the same thing, Sarielle. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” The grip on my wrist tightened momentarily, the heat of his touch searing through me, leaving me achingly aware of our proximity. He leaned in closer, his eyes searching mine as if he could find answers to questions he hadn’t yet voiced. “And how did you know where to find the Blooming Shadow?”

“I...” My mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton, words sticking in my throat. A momentary flashback of the apple’s gleam filled my vision, the allure of the forbidden so palpable I could almost taste it again. Shaking my head to dispel the image, I looked up to meet his eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“The fuck it doesn’t.” Lysander’s eyes narrowed. There was a rigidity to his stance, a tension in his body as if he were a tightly coiled spring. “You have no idea what’s at stake, what you’re meddling with. Or do you?”

The air between us thickened, becoming an almost tangible force. I could

feel the electricity sparking, a crackling field of unspoken truths and hidden agendas. It was as if we were both on the verge of crossing some monumental line, the consequences of which were as terrifying as they were inevitable.

His eyes ensnared mine, and for a perilous second, I glimpsed the vulnerability he was so desperate to hide. “Can you even comprehend what you almost unleashed, Sarielle? Or what it would’ve cost you? Cost us?”

The “us” hung in the air, a fragile bubble that neither of us dared to pop.

“Why should I answer any of your questions?”

“Because I’m trying to protect you!” he shouted. “You just need to stop being so godsdamn stubborn and trust me.”

A sharp gasp was all I could manage before his words sank in, cutting through me. “Trust you?! After everything that’s happened, after everything I’ve learned... How can I trust you, Lysander? You’re a liar through and through!”

His eyes tightened at the edges, as if I’d struck a nerve. “So you’ve made your judgments, then?”

“Judgments? Is that what you call it?” A humorless laugh escaped me. “I call it *fact*. You’re a liar by trade. For all I know, you’ve been nothing *but* dishonest with me from day one.”

“You know that’s not true.” His jaw clenched. “*You fucking know it, Sari!* But in my world, sometimes the right thing and the hard thing are the *same* thing. What I want doesn’t matter. *Who* I want doesn’t matter. Not when there’s a greater purpose.”

My eyes watered. “*A greater purpose?* Is that how you justify all the fucked-up things you’ve done for the Order? Is that how you justify *killing innocent people?*”

“No. It’s... complicated.” His voice was strained, as if each word was costing him.

“You either murder innocent Fae or you don’t,” I huffed. “Seems pretty simple to me.”

“*Nothing* about this is simple!” he yelled. “Get off your high horse and grow the fuck up, Sari. I’m not afraid to do what needs to be done, and I’m not going to apologize for that! It’s who I am! I certainly didn’t hear you complaining when I took care of those two demons who attacked you. Where were your fucking morals then?”

“They were vile creatures who were going to rape me!” I screamed.

“Exactly.” Lysander gave me a smug grin. “You automatically assumed

the Order sacrifices innocent people, but innocence is subjective, Sarielle. So think about *that* the next time you want to judge me. Or better yet, why don't you just listen to your fucking gut? Then maybe you won't have any doubts about whether or not you can trust me."

My *gut* couldn't stop thinking about Evangeline's theory that I would be their perfect sacrifice. "Would I make a good sacrifice, Lysander?"

His eyes widened. "What? Why would you ask that?"

I scoffed. "Okay, let me rephrase: *Does the Order plan to sacrifice me?* Was that direct enough for you?"

Before he could respond, the ground rumbled beneath our feet, nearly knocking me into the massive trunk by my side.

"Fuck," Lysander growled, yanking me toward him until I slammed into his unyielding chest. "Stay away from the tree. It's hungry."

"What?!" I asked incredulously, pulling away from him. "Are you implying that *tree* is responsible for shaking the ground just now?"

I couldn't help it; I laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

"I'm not *implying* anything," he spat, halting my laughter in its tracks. "I'm telling you *flat out*, the Blooming Shadow—also known as *that tree*—is famished. It can sense your power, and it's getting agitated. It's never gone this long without a worthy sacrifice. Now, tell me why you're here and how you found this place."

I took a few steps backwards. "I know trees are living things, but you speak of it as if it's a sentient being. Plants cannot have thoughts or emotions, Lysander."

He jerked his chin toward the creepy tree. "The Blooming Shadow is not your everyday tree."

I glanced at the tree—correction, *the Blooming Shadow*—and the crystals staked into the ground. "Those crystals... they look just like the one your father's goon used to mop up all the blood from your back. Are they the same?"

"Yes." Lysander nodded once. "They're *potentia* crystals—they can siphon power through blood. The crystals have prevented the final apple from rotting, but as you can see, the rest of the tree is dying. Its last few... *meals* weren't nearly big enough. It won't be long before the Order's temporary solution no longer works. It's going to take *a lot* of power to bring it back to life."

"And it gets that power through a sacrifice?" I clarified. "*The Order of the*

Midnight Serpents sacrifice someone to feed that tree? Why? Who cares if the final apple rots?”

Lysander’s nostrils flared. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Why does it matter?” I countered.

“Don’t play games with me, Sarielle. The Order is a *secret* society, meaning only fully fledged members have the privilege of knowing it by name. So, I’ll ask again. Where did you hear it?”

“I had a vision,” I lied, holding my chin high as he charged me, caging me in against the stone wall. “Moon Girl, remember?”

Lysander pulled back just enough to look into my eyes. “You’re lying.”

“You have no way of proving that.” I smirked, though it was pure bluster. I had a strong suspicion Lysander wasn’t opposed to using nefarious means to force someone to talk. “Now answer my question. What happens if the final apple is picked? And what makes them so special?”

His icy gaze fell to my lips. “The apples are imbued with great power. Members of the Order have been eating them for generations. If the final apple is plucked, the tree will wither and die almost immediately. And if the Blooming Shadow dies, the Order will be significantly weakened.”

Well, that sure as shit didn’t sound like a bad thing to me.

I looked over Lysander’s shoulder, trying to gauge whether or not I could outrun him and pluck the damn thing. He seemed to pick up on my train of thought, because in the next moment, his hands gripped my wrists and pinned them to the wall behind me.

“Don’t even think about it, Sari. You *do not* want to piss off the Order to that degree. They wouldn’t hesitate to make you—and every single person you love—pay with your lives. And they would enjoy slowly torturing every one of you beforehand until you were begging for death.”

Fuck.

If it were just me, being a martyr didn’t sound like the worst thing in the world. But I refused to put my loved ones at risk. Even if my parents weren’t actually my parents anymore, that didn’t mean I wanted them killed by this stupid Order.

I looked up at Lysander, searching for a way out of our predicament. “So what now?”

His eyes narrowed. “We need to get out of here, and you need to forget you saw any of this.”

I nodded to the Blooming Shadow. “I’m pretty sure I’ll *never* forget

finding an apple tree growing in a dark, dank cave at the end of a bloody river.” My body tensed as the tree’s gnarled trunk seemed to writhe. I squinted, trying to make sense of the blurry movement. “What the—”

Lysander’s grip tightened on my wrists as he briefly peered over his shoulder. “We need to get out of here.”

My jaw dropped. “What the hell is happening?”

A sharp crack suddenly cut through the air, and Lysander stiffened, eyes growing wide. The ground rumbled again, causing us both to sway. “We need to go. *Fucking now.*”

My head spun as I tried to wrap my mind around what was happening. The only thing I was certain of was the fact that I agreed wholeheartedly with Lysander’s last statement.

His large hand enveloped mine. “I know a shortcut. Stay close and keep an eye out.”

“An eye out for *what?*” I asked.

“You don’t want to know.” I could swear he was trying not to cringe.

As we hurried away from the Blooming Shadow, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I tried to keep up with Lysander’s long strides, but it was a struggle. I glanced back at the creepy tree and saw its twisted branches reaching out as if desperate to grab onto something. Or maybe it was trying to grab *someone*. The *potentia* crystals glittered in the dim light, beckoning me to come closer. I shuddered, quickly turning my attention back to the path in front of us.

Lysander led us down a winding tunnel, the damp walls pressing closer as we ventured deeper into the earth. The temperature dropped drastically, making my teeth chatter.

“Where are we going?” I asked, voice barely above a whisper.

He didn’t answer, his grip on my hand tightening as we turned a corner. Suddenly, the tunnel opened up into a large cavern. I gasped, the sight before me stunning me into silence. The walls were lined with glowing runes, casting an eerie blue light over everything. In the center of the chamber was a circular dais with a dark-colored crystal resting in the center.

Lysander dragged me toward the platform, his expression grim. “We need to make a sacrifice.”

“What? No!” I protested, pulling back from him. “I’m not sacrificing anything!”

“It’s the only way to get out of here alive,” he countered, his grip on my

hand unyielding.

I struggled against him, but his strength was too great. “What kind of sacrifice?” I demanded, fear creeping into my voice.

Lysander hesitated for a moment before speaking. “Blood,” he said finally. “Just a little bit. It’ll create a portal that’ll take us back to the surface.”

I recoiled from him, horror etched on my face. “You’re insane if you think I’m going to agree to that.”

He forcibly uncurled my fingers, exposing my palm. Before I could ask him what the hell he was doing, Lysander picked up the crystal, slicing the jagged tip across my hand.

“Ow!” I watched in horror as my flesh split, blood dripping from the crystal. “What the hell, Lysander?”

“I didn’t have a choice. Anyone who wants to take a ride on the portal train must pay in blood. We can’t return the way you came. Xavier spelled the area surrounding the tree. His little magical alarm system alerts him anytime the Blooming Shadow stirs. He and my father are undoubtedly on their way. Trust me when I say neither one of us wants them to find us here. And that’s assuming the Shadow doesn’t get to us first.”

What the actual fuck? So I wasn’t imagining the creepy tree reaching out to me.

Dear gods.

He positioned the sharp edge of the crystal above his own palm. “The moment that portal opens, think of where you want to go and you jump through it, Sarielle. The window will only be open for a few seconds. You cannot hesitate. Do you understand?”

I had so many questions, but the urgency in his voice told me to table them until we got the hell out of here. “I understand.”

He nodded, seemingly satisfied before cutting his hand, giving the crystal the blood it needed. Lysander mumbled a few words quietly to himself right before a disturbance sparked the air. A glowing portal appeared, its edges rippling. I didn’t hesitate for even a second. I ran for it, Lysander’s words running through my mind. I squinted against the bright lights, shielding my eyes as my feet touched the ground.

“Okay, I’m still alive,” I whispered. “That’s a good sign, right?”

“I’d say so,” a cheery voice replied.

My jaw dropped as I frantically scanned the area. I was back in my dorm

room, with Lirien right across from me, giving me a little wave. I sighed in relief until I realized Lysander wasn't with me. Was he still in the cave? Did his father find him and stop him from entering the portal? Would he be whipped again for the good of the stupid Order? Or, gods forbid, did the psychotic tree get to him?

Why do you care, I asked myself. He's the one who got me into this whole mess.

I shook my head, unwilling to admit that I *did* care what happened to him. I didn't know why, but that didn't change how I felt.

"Where'd you come from?" my roommate asked. "You look like something spooked you."

"It's a long story," I told her.

"Ooh! I love long stories! But hold that thought. Let's get snacks first!" She flashed a bright smile, literally skipping to the door.

"Well, in that case, lead the way."

Lirien's sunny disposition made me smile, despite what I just went through. I couldn't deny the girl had a great idea. Snacks were *always* a good thing.

NINETEEN

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

Lirien was pacing the floor of my dorm room like a general preparing for battle. The moment I finished recounting the twisted tale of the Shadow Queen, forbidden apples, sacrifices, and betrayals, she snorted, breaking into a full-on fit of giggles.

“This explains so much.”

I looked at her, baffled. “What do you mean?”

She leaned in, her eyes filled with mischief. “Look, I’ve been having visions, okay? And there were a lot of... intense scenes. You and Lysander, in caves, dark corridors, all very dramatic. Then, bam! One vision where he’s on his knees getting whipped! I couldn’t see who was actually holding the whip, but I made an educated guess.”

My face went beet red. “You thought—wait, who did you think was doing it?”

Her expression turned mock-serious. “I thought you were delving into the world of alternative lifestyles, Sarielle. I was being a responsible friend! I even bought you a book on how to explore your kinks safely!”

I felt my blush deepen, if that was even possible. “You bought *what*?”

Lirien bolted to her desk, rummaging through a pile of stuff—sketchbooks, colored pencils, what looked like a jar of fairy dust—and triumphantly pulled out a book. The title, *Safe & Sensual: A Guide to Exploring Your Desires*, was written in a bold, swirly font.

“I was saving this for your birthday,” she said, handing it over with a flourish. “But considering we’re knee-deep in real drama, why wait?”

I took the book, both mortified and touched. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

Lirien grinned. “Say you’ll read it. Not that it’s much use now, unless your kink is having your soul haunted by dark entities, which in that case, honey, we’ve got bigger issues.”

I burst out laughing, the tension of the past weeks momentarily forgotten. “Only you could make this situation funny.”

Lirien propped her hands on her hips as she looked at me with determination and concern. “You’ve been going through all of this alone,

Sarielle, and that's what worries me the most. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. "I didn't want to drag you—or anyone else—into this mess. It seemed too dangerous."

She waved her hands dismissively, as if I'd just told her I was avoiding her because she talks too much. "Sari, if you're diving headfirst into this mess, then hand me my snorkel because I'm coming with you. We're friends, which means your problems are my problems."

I looked at her, eyes a bit watery. "Are you sure? This is shady stuff, Lirien. Even knowing about the Order can put you at risk."

"Girl, do you know who you're talking to? I can handle it." She gave me a toothy smile. "Besides, who else is going to help you decide which protection runes look cutest with your outfits? We need to go on the defensive."

I blinked at her, unsure if she was being entirely serious. "Defensive? What does that even mean?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised. There are options, my darling, so many options. Protection runes are just the start. Engraving those babies on your skin will make you tougher to crack than a dragon's egg!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Engraved on my skin? Um..."

"Fine, fine. If you're squeamish, we can just stick them on our door or something. Less cool, but it works."

"And what else?" I asked, both curious and slightly terrified.

Her face broke into an even wider grin, and she pulled open a drawer, rummaging through it. "Aha!" She held up a small bag and opened it, making a stench that reeked to high heaven fill the room. "Troll dung! Guaranteed to repel basically anything that's chasing you. A little dab on the wrists, and voila!"

I flinched back. "That smells atrocious! Close it up! Is this what protection smells like? Because I'd rather take my chances."

She chuckled. "Beauty—or in this case, safety—is pain, my dear. Or rather, a horrendous smell that'll probably affect your ability to get laid." She quickly re-tied the bag. "On second thought... let's skip the poo. My favorite crystal ball showed me that Aurora Emberwood was going to develop a raging case of vaginitis one day soon. I need to make sure I look—and smell—my best to console Rook after they break up."

I smirked, sending a silent thanks to karma.

Lirien suddenly turned solemn, or as solemn as she could manage. “Look, Sari. The point is, if you’re in a war, you need armor. And allies.” Her eyes met mine, full of earnest emotion.

My heart swelled. Here was someone who was willing to face the unspeakable horrors of troll dung just to keep me safe. It was touching, in a weird, only-possible-with-Lirien kind of way.

“I just wish I knew how to control my powers,” I finally said, staring at the bag of troll dung like it held the mysteries of the universe. “I can summon ghosts when I’m scared, but I can’t do it at will. It would be a good trick to have up my sleeve, you know? Especially with all this... darkness looming over me.”

Lirien’s eyes sparkled as if I’d just suggested we go on a grand adventure. “Then, my dear Sarielle, we shall practice! And what better time than now? Let me teach you the ancient art of not-so-accidental ghost summoning!”

“Is that even a thing?” I asked, both intrigued and skeptical.

“Is that even a question? Sit down, child, sit down!” Lirien patted the floor in front of her and settled into a cross-legged position. “Now, the trick to controlling your powers is to become one with your inner self. It’s like a light switch inside of you. You just need to learn how to flip it on and off.”

I sat down across from her, curiosity piqued. “Alright, I’m listening.”

“First, we need to set the mood.” Lirien clapped her hands, and the lights in the room dimmed as though obeying her command. Candles lit themselves on my desk, filling the room with a soft, ethereal glow.

“Did you just—”

“Shh, no talking. Only meditating,” she instructed, her eyes already closed. “Now, close your eyes, take deep breaths, and let your mind wander to a time you felt scared. Bring that emotion to the surface, but don’t let it control you. *You control it.*”

I closed my eyes and steadied myself, trying to ignore the faint smell of troll dung still lingering in the air. My mind drifted to a memory of being stuck in a dark cave, the walls tightening, a looming sense of dread. My heart rate accelerated.

“Good, you’re getting there,” Lirien’s voice drifted into my thoughts. “Now, channel that energy, that fear, into a mental image of what you want to summon.”

“Like... a ghost?”

“Exactly! But make it a friendly one. We don’t want to invite any hostile

spirits to our little soirée.”

I focused, imagining a form materializing from my fear, becoming more solid, more real. It was as though I could feel the energy in the room change, a coolness enveloping us.

“You’re doing it, Sari!” Lirien’s voice was tinged with excitement. “Now, release that energy outward as if you’re pushing it away from you. Let it materialize.”

With a final mental push, I felt something give way within me, like a dam breaking. My eyes snapped open in anticipation of meeting my first consciously-summoned spirit friend. What I didn’t expect was to be greeted by a fully translucent but definitely naked male ghost, enthusiastically helicoptering a certain appendage right in front of my face.

My scream probably shattered the astral plane. “Holy mother of Fae, what is that?!”

The ghost paused his, uh, aerial maneuvers and grinned broadly. “You summoned me? You wanted a show, didn’t you?”

I covered my eyes with my hand but couldn’t resist peeking through my fingers. “No! Gods, no! I definitely did not ask for this specific... uh, performance.”

Lirien was doubled over, tears forming in her eyes from laughing so hard. “I’m dead. Officially dead. This is too good.”

“Why are you not more disturbed by this?!” I was still hiding behind my fingers as the ghost finally got the hint and started fading away, a satisfied, mission-accomplished grin on his face.

“Oh my stars, Sarielle, what on earth were you thinking about to summon a ghostly exotic dancer?”

“What?! Ghost strippers are a thing?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. Totally.”

I was probably going to regret this, but I had to ask. “Why would someone purposely summon a naked, dancing ghost?”

“Well... corporeal or not, exotic dancers are technically sex workers. I’m sure you can use your imagination. So, I’ll repeat my question: What were you thinking about before Helicopter Harry showed up?”

“I swear I wasn’t thinking of anything like *that*! I was focused on darkness, fear, and—”

“Male anatomy, apparently!” Lirien howled, wiping a tear from her eye. “I said to summon a friendly spirit, not a frisky one!”

“I did not intend for him to be frisky! I wanted *friendly*, not... not... an X-rated poltergeist!”

Lirien finally composed herself and cleared her throat. “Well, at least we know your powers work. We just need to, uh, fine-tune the focus a bit. Maybe set some ground rules for the summoned entities.”

I was still in shock, eyes wide as saucers. “Ground rules? Like no public indecency?”

Lirien picked up her book on exploring kinks safely. “Maybe start by reading ‘Chapter Five: Setting Boundaries.’”

My eyes met hers, and despite the absolutely horrifying and absurdly funny circumstances, I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

Lirien grinned and cracked open the book, beginning to read aloud. “Ahem, ‘Setting boundaries is crucial in any relationship, be it with a partner or...’” She paused to look up at me. “‘A spectral entity from the great beyond.’”

My jaw dropped. “You’re really comparing this to... that?”

Lirien smirked, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Hey, boundaries are boundaries. Whether you’re summoning a lover or a ghost, it’s all about clear communication and setting expectations. Now, listen up.”

She continued reading. “‘For example, it is essential to set a safeword—or in the case of summoning spirits, perhaps we should establish a safechant.’”

“Safechant?” I echoed, still trying to wrap my head around the sudden genre-blend of ghost summoning and kink advice.

Lirien chuckled. “Yes, a word or chant you can utter to immediately banish a spirit that’s not behaving according to your clearly outlined parameters.”

“Would ‘go away’ screamed at a high decibel qualify?” I asked, half-joking and half-serious.

Lirien laughed. “Well, you want something a bit more... definitive. How about ‘BeGone’ chanted in a resonant tone?”

“I could try that. Or... what about ‘dissipate’?”

“I like it,” Lirien agreed. “It needs to be something unique to you.”

“But really, Lirien, what are the chances of this happening again?” I gestured to the now-empty space where the indecent apparition had appeared.

Lirien’s gaze became playfully speculative. “With your track record? Pretty high, I’d say.”

I sighed. “Fine, what’s next?”

Lirien resumed her reading, her eyes scanning the text for the next pertinent piece of wisdom. “Be sure to establish limits upfront. Lay down the ground rules before diving into any adventures.”

I frowned. “How exactly do I *lay down ground rules* for spectral entities I haven’t even met yet?”

Lirien closed the book and looked at me seriously, though her eyes were still glinting with suppressed humor. “Visualize the boundaries. When you’re summoning, imagine a set of rules surrounding you. Make it part of the process.”

“So, like a metaphysical Do Not Cross tape?”

“Exactly!” Lirien clapped her hands in delight. “Imagine a circle of safety around you. Within that circle, only entities that abide by your rules may enter. And of course, they must be wearing pants.”

I chuckled. “That last part should be a universal rule.”

“Alright, deep breath, Sarielle,” Lirien instructed. “We’re going for a guardian this time. Think security, think strength, think—”

“Armor and chivalry?” I asked, winking.

“That works, too,” she chuckled. “Now, remember your boundaries, your safe circle, and the type of entity you want to invite.”

Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply a few times, the smell of troll dung finally receding to a distant background note. I visualized a circle around me, its boundary impenetrable except by entities willing to abide by my rules. And then I thought of protection, of strength, of a guardian to stand beside me. This time, the air seemed to shimmer with a different energy.

When I opened my eyes, standing before me was a spectral figure of a different sort. He was tall, broad-shouldered, clad in mystical armor that glimmered in the candlelight. His face was stern yet kind, and he carried himself with great dignity. Even as a ghost, the muscles on his arms looked like they could bench-press a boulder.

Both Lirien and I stared, temporarily struck mute.

The armored figure bowed elegantly, hand over his heart. “You have summoned me, fair maiden. I shall dedicate my existence to you and defend you to my last breath.”

I blinked. “Wow. You’re... not what I expected, but definitely a welcome improvement.”

Lirien was biting her lower lip, trying not to laugh or make any further comments that might lead us down the path of another “aerial” disaster.

“My name is Sir Alaric,” the ghost said. “I am at your service.”

“Can you actually *do* anything?” I blurted out before I could stop myself. “I’m not sure how the whole ghost thing works.”

“Sarielle!” Lirien hissed, shooting me a look of disbelief. “That is *such* a rude question.”

Sir Alaric, however, took no offense. With another formal bow, he intoned, “I am a spectral guardian, capable of a variety of protective measures.”

Before I could react, he suddenly launched into a rather unsettling soliloquy.

“My lady, not only will I defend you against all manner of threats, ethereal and corporeal, but I shall win your heart as well. It is a knight’s duty to protect, and an even greater duty to love. I shall woo you as no other has, and, in time, I shall request your hand in marriage. Together, we will—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I interrupted, exchanging an uneasy glance with Lirien. “Let’s pump the brakes here. You’re going from zero to ‘Till Death Do Us Part’ really quickly.”

“My ardor knows no bounds, my lady. My love is as boundless as the celestial skies, as eternal as the—”

“Okay, okay, this is getting into ‘stalkerish’ territory,” Lirien interjected, her amusement shifting to discomfort.

I sighed. “Look, Sir Alaric, I appreciate the offer of protection, but we need to talk about boundaries—again.”

“I am ready to set aside my existence, relinquish my own soul, to—”

“This is getting way too intense,” I said, looking at Lirien for backup.

She nodded emphatically, her eyes wide with concern. “Sarielle, maybe you should practice your banishment word. It’s a key part of controlling your abilities.”

I hesitated, feeling a bit bad for Sir Alaric, but knowing Lirien was right. “Sorry, Sir Alaric, but... ‘Dissipate.’”

As I uttered my chosen banishment word, Sir Alaric’s form began to waver, his eyes widening with surprise and what looked like... heartbreak?

“My lady, I—”

And then he was gone, the air filling with a brief arctic breeze before returning to normal.

Lirien sighed in relief. “Well, that escalated quickly. But hey, you’ve got the summoning and banishing down. Just need to work on the in-between.”

I groaned, collapsing back onto the floor. “At this rate, my in-between is going to be a montage of awkward situations and uncomfortable spirit encounters.”

Lirien laughed. “Well, you’re not alone. At least you have me to share in your awkward summoning escapades.”

“And Chapter Five,” I added wryly.

Lirien’s laughter filled the room, dispelling the lingering tension like a charm. “To boundaries and beyond, Sarielle. To boundaries and beyond.”

TWENTY

LYSANDER THORNE

Every year, Nightshade University hosted the Avalonian Ball for students and select alumni from all four courts. It was the perfect stage to don our finest attire and pretend we didn't all have superiority complexes. It was a bunch of bullshit politics if you asked me—a Fae was nothing without their pride, after all—but I couldn't argue that finding allies within other courts was necessary sometimes, and this ball was where many Fae made those connections. Truth be told, I suspected a majority of tonight's attendees were more concerned about making *carnal* connections, and I couldn't say I blamed them. Forbidden sex was off-the-charts hot. From what I'd heard, most Fae engaged in a taboo tryst at least once in their lives, usually during their university years. As long as you were discreet and didn't do anything stupid like procreate, the elders looked the other way, blaming it on youthful hormones.

If you were a member of the Dusk Court like I was, you had countless free passes. Some of the strongest, most powerful Fae throughout history had been known to divulge sensitive information in the name of desire. I used to think that having that freedom was one of the greatest perks of our court, but now I wasn't so sure. Because as I'd recently told Sarielle, that *freedom* came at a cost.

From the moment I met Sarielle Blackwood, I'd been conflicted, but after we'd slept together, it was on a whole other level. It pissed me off, but at the same time, it made me feel stronger. For the first time in my life, I wasn't just a mindless soldier. She made it easy to forget about things like court obligations and fiancées and being a good little Serpent heir. Sarielle gave me hope that one day, I could be the master of my own destiny.

I couldn't possibly be the first Fae to blur the lines between duty and desire, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow. Because the fact of the matter was, my interest in Sarielle went far beyond my assignment from the Order. I was possessive over her to the point of obsession. I questioned everything I'd ever known because I had an intrinsic need to protect her. I barely knew her, but that didn't matter. I was drawn to Sari in a way that defied reason. I just fucking wished I knew *why* she had this effect on me.

My eyes automatically scanned the room for the woman in question, halting when they landed on her. She was smiling softly at that strange roommate of hers, wearing a dramatic ball gown that hugged her feminine curves in all the right places. Her light pink hair was pinned back and curled in loose waves, and her makeup was minimal with merely a swipe of gloss across her pouty lips.

My gods, she was fucking stunning.

The delicate beads on her obsidian dress shimmered under the chandeliers, reflecting their lighting like white snowflakes glimmering against a midnight sky. Sarielle was a study in juxtaposition from head to toe, but when I thought about it, that was par for the course with her. She was raised to be a proper member of the Dawn Court, but there was a spark of defiance and mischief always glittering in her brown eyes. She seemed so pure—damn near virginal at times—but every time we'd touched, her body became an enthusiastic vessel for sin. The most confounding contradiction was her aura. Sometimes, it was so light and airy I was surprised she wasn't floating up to the heavens. But on a few occasions now, I'd sensed a growing darkness within her, but each time it surfaced, it fled as quickly as it came. I didn't think she was even aware of it, but I was certain it was there. Maybe that alone should've scared me off, but I'd had the opposite reaction the first time I'd noticed it. I was instantly hard, damn near feral with need to claim her as mine. Gods help me, but every time I was near Sarielle, something inside me sparked to life, so wild and untamed it was impossible to deny.

I made my way across the crowded room with a single goal in mind. Her damn roommate never seemed to leave her side, so I hadn't spoken to her since she slipped through that portal. I was desperate to know who her source was. Somebody was obviously feeding her information about the Order, and I needed to rectify that problem before my father found out.

"Would you care to dance?" I asked as I reached her side.

She cast her eyes downward briefly before looking back up to meet my gaze. "No. I wouldn't."

I grinned. "Liar."

"That's rich coming from you." She leaned into my ear and whispered, "How's your hunt for the perfect sacrifice going?" There was a stubborn tilt to her chin as she pulled back.

There was no way I was going to let her control that particular conversation, so my response wouldn't make sense to her, but any

eavesdroppers would be none the wiser.

“It’s okay, sweet Sari. The whole reason the university hosts this ball every year is so the different courts can get to know one another.” She stiffened as I pulled her into my arms. “Now, dance with me.” I winked at the blonde by her side. “You don’t mind, do you, Lirien?”

Lirien pointed two fingers at her eyes, then toward mine. “I’m watching you, Spy Boy. If you mess with my girl, you’ll regret it. Mark my words.”

“Lirien,” Sarielle whispered. “It’s fine. It’s just a stupid dance and we’re surrounded by tons of *witnesses*.”

I laughed when she verbally underlined that last word, earning a mighty glare from the firecracker before me.

“You look fucking stunning tonight.” My eyes bounced to her cleavage as I took her hand into mine and began to lead. “I wasn’t sure if you’d show.”

“Why wouldn’t I come?” She arched her brow in challenge. “It’s a chance to wear a pretty dress and maybe dance with a nice Moon Court boy.”

“You’d be bored out of your mind with a Moon Court *boy*,” I growled. “You need a *man* who wouldn’t treat you like glass to keep you satisfied.”

“Oh, you’re the expert on how to keep me satisfied now?” Sarielle laughed mockingly.

I pulled her closer until our bodies were flush against one another’s. My lips hovered over her ear as I said, “You bet that sweet ass of yours that I am.” I tightened my grip when she tried pulling away. “I know you’re pissed at me, Sari. I know you have questions, and frankly, so do I. But this is *not* the time or the place.”

She gasped when I bit down on her earlobe. “When would be a good time for you, Lysander? Are you actually planning on answering my questions?”

“Tit for tat, baby.” I licked the sting of my bite away.

Sari sighed but didn’t push me away. The music seemed to swell around us as I spun us in circles, keeping perfect time with the rhythm of the beat. As we glided across the dance floor, I noticed her brother glaring daggers at me while he danced with Lirien. I subtly shifted, positioning Sarielle so her back was to him, shielding her from his ire. Normally, I’d put the guy in his place for openly challenging me like that, but I knew doing so would only hurt my chances of getting his sister to open up to me, so I squashed the urge.

Neither Sari nor I could ignore the tension between us. We moved together effortlessly, our bodies instinctively knowing what the other needed without words. I wanted nothing more than to take her away from all these

prying eyes, but I knew that wasn't an option right now, so I did the only thing I could. I kept dancing.

I saw my father watching us from across the room. He wore a proud smirk, like we were both in on some twisted secret. As if dancing with Sarielle was part of some elaborate ruse, a calculated maneuver rather than something I genuinely wanted to do. I supposed to him, it looked like I was being a good soldier. It was all part of the seduction to keep her close until it was time to harness her powers. It blurred the already thin line between my obligations and my own personal feelings. I didn't know where one ended and the other began anymore. I was at a crossroads, and after seeing the Blooming Shadow in such a decrepit state, I knew I was running out of time to figure out which route I should take.

When the song finally ended, Sarielle stepped back from me with a look of resignation. "Okay, fine. I'll play your game for now. But don't think for a second that I'll wait long. I want answers."

I grinned, feeling a sense of victory. "Of course not, sweet Sari. I'm a man of my word."

"Right." She rolled her eyes. "I'll believe that when I—"

Ariya appeared, seemingly materializing out of nowhere, cutting into our moment like a knife through butter. Her expression was serious, and it immediately put me on edge.

"May I cut in?" she asked, though it didn't sound like a question. "It's important."

Sarielle looked puzzled but stepped away, granting us the space Ariya seemed to think we needed. "Uh... sure."

I led Ariya to a little alcove in the corner of the ballroom. "What's so important that it couldn't wait?"

"We need to chat." Her red-painted nails dug into my forearm so hard I was sure they were leaving marks beneath my sleeves.

I eyed her talons pointedly. "Care to loosen your grip?"

She reluctantly did as I asked. "I'm sorry, but I was trying to stop you from doing something stupid."

"Like what?" My eyebrows rose.

"Oh... I don't know. Flipping Sarielle Blackwood's pretty dress up, bending her over a table, and humping her like a hellhound in heat?"

Fucking hell. My dick really liked the visual she'd just planted in my head. Nothing—and I mean *nothing*—felt better than being inside my Moon

Girl.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Lysander.” She sighed. “I know that you... *like* her, okay? But you need to play it cool.”

“Look, Ariya, I’m doing what the Order told me to do. Getting close, keeping an eye on her. That’s it. I appreciate your concern, but it’s unwarranted. I don’t feel anything for Sarielle that I shouldn’t. She’s nothing more than a job to me.”

Ariya held my gaze for a long moment before shaking her head slowly. “You forget, I’ve been taught to read people, to understand their hidden motives and feelings. I practiced those skills on *you*, Lysander. Look, I know you have trouble trusting people—and rightfully so—but you should know by now that you can trust *me*.”

Silence settled between us. Her fingers gently traced my lips, her touch almost featherlight. “You know, sometimes I wish I could force myself to love you. That you’d love me back. We’d be unstoppable together.”

Where the hell did that come from?

“Ariya...”

“They know you’ve grown attached to her, Lysander. You’re not hiding it as well as you think you are.”

Dammit. I wondered if our fathers somehow knew Sarielle and I were at the Blooming Shadow. When my father questioned me about it, I lied straight to his face, telling him I had no idea what could’ve tripped the alarm. I claimed to have been in my dorm studying for an upcoming test.

I grimaced. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I was... talking to Silas earlier and he accidentally let it slip that he’s been watching Sari and reporting back to your father.”

That motherfucker.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Why were you and Silas together? And since when is he stupid enough to *accidentally* leak information about a job?”

If I wasn’t mistaken, Ariya was blushing. “Um... I don’t think there was a whole lot of blood left in his brain at the time.”

I gave her a pointed look. “Why would that be, Ariya?”

She shrugged. “I may have been in the middle of giving him a blow job.”

“Whoa.” It wasn’t the most eloquent reply, but it was all that I had. She’d actually managed to shock me with that little revelation. As far as I knew, Ariya and Silas couldn’t stand each other.

“If it helps, Silas swears he hasn’t given your dad any incriminating information, but who knows if that’s true? But Caius wouldn’t have hired him in the first place if he didn’t suspect your loyalty might be compromised.”

Fuck. She made a good point.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because... as much as my loyalty lies with the Order, with our court, it also lies with *you*, Lysander. We’ve been in this together from the start, and you’ve *always* had my back.” She paused, her gaze intense. “During some of the toughest times in my life, you’ve been there for me. You were the *only* one who ever gave any shits about me. So... this is me showing you how much I care. I know you’re conflicted about Sari. And whichever way you decide to go, I swear I will support you. But I don’t want to see you live with a lifetime of regret, so I’m going to help buy you some time to decide. But you need to act now, before you lose the chance. The tree is decaying faster than ever. My dad is freaking out because the potentia crystals aren’t working anymore. He’s been frantically trying to gather supplies for the sacrifice, which tells me they’re moving up the timeline big time.”

The sincerity in her eyes unnerved me. For years we had trained together, planned together, prepared for our respective roles in the Order and in our families. Even though we had an arranged future, there had been a certain comfort in the predictability of it all, a sense of control. But now, that control seemed to be slipping through my fingers, replaced by doubt and a feeling of impending chaos. I knew our fathers were getting desperate, which was never a good thing.

“Thank you,” I managed to say.

She nodded once, her expression solemn. “Just remember, Lysander, plans may change, loyalties may be tested, but at the end of the day, we’re the ones who have to live with the choices we make. Now... please pass my sincerest apologies on to Sarielle, but I needed something that would send her running from this room quickly without raising suspicion.”

“What are you—” I started to say, but before I could get the words out, Ariya pulled me close and pressed her lips against mine. As wrong as this felt, I knew she was doing it for a reason, so I had to see it through.

It was a good kiss, practiced and technically proficient. But it felt empty, like a beautifully bound book with blank pages. It was nothing like kissing Sarielle, which was like striking a match in a room full of gas—immediate

and explosive.

Ariya pulled away, her eyes scanning mine for a reaction. That's when I saw Sarielle. Her pained eyes met mine over Ariya's shoulder before she turned away, quickly receding into the crowd.

"Now, find a way to get out of here without being noticed, and make sure she stays safe through the night," Ariya whispered. "I'll take care of her roommate and brother. We'll meet in the morning and figure out our next steps, okay?"

I pushed my way through the crowd, with a renewed sense of determination. When it came to Sarielle Blackwood, I had two paths I could take, and neither one of them would be easy. But I was going to make damn sure I didn't spend the rest of my life haunted by my decision.

TWENTY-ONE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

I fled the Avalonian Ball, my heels tapping a frenzied rhythm against the wooden floors as I navigated the corridors. I had to get away from all the lies and games, from the pain that was sharper than any dagger. It felt like I was suffocating, choked by court politics, the stifling atmosphere, and the reality that had just unfolded before my eyes.

Lysander and Ariya. Kissing. A simple act that shattered whatever illusion I'd let myself believe. I had no claim on him; I knew that. He was promised to another, bound by duties and alliances that were as old as the very walls that confined me now. And yet, I couldn't shake the sense of betrayal, the stab of blinding jealousy.

I halted, gasping for air, my hands trembling as I came to a startling realization. I was falling for Lysander Thorne. How could I be so stupid? I knew from the start he was trouble. A labyrinth with no exit, yet I willingly walked into the maze, knowing full well I might never find a way out. But I'd been lying to myself, thinking I had any chance of resisting. Even now, with an ache in my chest and tears pouring down my face, I still wanted him. I couldn't bear the thought of losing the magnetic pull that bounced between us. The way he looked into my eyes as if he could see straight into my soul. How I'd never felt more authentic and accepted than I did every single time I was with him.

Gods, I was so screwed.

Footsteps echoed behind me, and before I could react, a strong hand gripped my arm, spinning me around. My hands landed on a chest as familiar as it was foreign. His pine scent filled my senses, but instead of comforting me, it twisted the knife deeper into my already wounded heart.

Slowly, I lifted my gaze to meet his. Lysander's eyes, always so full of unspoken secrets, now searched my face, clouded by something I couldn't quite name. Without a word, he reached up, his fingers gently wiping away my tears.

"Why are you crying, Moon Girl?" His voice was soft, a haunting melody that gripped my already fragile composure.

Could he see the confusion and pain that clashed violently within me, I

wondered. Did he know that the very thing that was breaking me was him?

“Why?” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “Why do you think I’m crying?”

The sound of giggling voices and footsteps came from the adjacent hallway, drawing nearer. I watched Lysander’s shoulders tense, his eyes narrowing. Realization dawned on me: he didn’t want to be seen with me.

“I’ll leave,” I mumbled, intending to remove myself from this emotionally charged space.

But before I could put any more distance between us, Lysander’s hand came up to grip my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. And in that infinite second, suspended between what was said and what was so palpably felt, everything changed.

“If I had my way...” His voice was husky, charged with the voltage that seemed to live between us. “I’d do everything to get rid of every drop of doubt in your mind right now.”

My breath hitched, caught in the cage of my throat, as he leaned in closer. The walls of the corridor seemed to narrow around us, and my back met the cool surface. He pinned my hands above my head, his grip firm but not painful, his body an imprisoning line against mine.

“I’d make it so you could never doubt how much I want you. How much I crave you. How every time you’re not in my sight, it feels like a godsdamn crime.”

The world spun around me, disorienting and maddeningly vivid. His voice, low and riddled with an urgency I’d never heard before, vibrated through me, electrifying every nerve ending, awakening parts of me I didn’t even know existed.

“And if this were any other night, I’d stop using words and *show you* how deeply ingrained you are in my soul, in every filthy, claiming, possessive way imaginable.”

My heart pounded against my ribcage, a wild drumbeat echoing his every word. My skin felt like it was on fire, every touch, every look from him stoking the flames higher and higher until I felt like I would combust. I was left gasping. Uncertain. Conflicted about a man who was every shade of complicated, bound by duties and shackled by a past that neither of us could escape. But the thing was... despite all the reasons why we shouldn’t be together, despite all the obstacles in our way, I couldn’t ignore the fact that deep in my bones, Lysander Thorne felt like my future.

“I—”

“But you’re in danger,” he interrupted, his eyes darkening as he released me and took a step back. “And making sure you’re safe is the most important thing right now. So I need you to come with me, because the idea of anything happening to you makes me feel fucking unhinged.”

His hand was outstretched between us, palm open, fingers slightly curled. It was scarred, marked by years of brutal training and gods knew what else. Every line and callous on that hand seemed to whisper stories of battles fought, secrets kept, and a life that was as entangled as it was constrained. And yet, it was extended to me in an offer. A promise. *A risk.*

“I don’t have time to explain right now, Sarielle. So... you can trust me or I can throw you over my shoulder and drag you out of here kicking and screaming. Your choice.”

Could I trust him? Wasn’t that the ultimate crux? After everything I’d seen, the social stratifications, the masked intentions, the forbidden attachments?

My eyes flicked from his face to his outstretched hand, that simple extension of flesh and bone suddenly seeming like a turning point. Trusting Lysander meant stepping into a whirlwind of complexities I couldn’t begin to understand. It meant putting my heart on the line for a man whose own was a guarded fortress. But not trusting him meant letting go, perhaps forever, of a connection that had woken me up, that had made me feel more alive than I’d ever felt.

My throat constricted with the enormity of the decision before me. My hand hovered in the air, trembling like a leaf caught in a tentative breeze, gravitating toward his. In a moment that felt as infinite as it was fleeting, I made my decision. Time seemed to dilate, stretching that second into a small eternity where all that existed was his hand and mine, suspended in the space between trust and doubt, fear and desire, uncertainty and the kind of reckless courage that could either save you or doom you.

And then, my palm slapped into his, a clap that resounded like a gunshot, sealing fates and shattering reservations. The look in his eyes shifted, the tension in his frame easing. A new chapter had been written in the complicated story that was us, but for that moment, bound by the joining of our hands, it felt like an affirmation, an agreement to face whatever was coming, together.

Lysander led me through the labyrinthine halls, each click of my heels

sounding like a countdown.

“Who exactly are we running from?” I gasped, my lungs struggling to keep up with the pace he’d set. “Can you at least tell me that right now?”

“My father,” he shot back, glancing over his shoulder.

The moment we were outside, he pulled me toward the woods. The moonlight filtered through the canopy of trees, casting an ethereal glow that barely penetrated the darkness.

“Where are we going?” I lifted the hem of my dress as I stumbled. Dammit, fancy shoes were not the best choice of footwear for a jaunt through the forest. My heels kept sinking into the soft dirt.

“Somewhere we won’t be found,” he said, his tone clipped, almost military. “Ariya got a hold of some intel that told us you were in danger. But my father was at the ball, which is why we had to act fast with the kiss. She figured it was the best way to make you storm off without making it look like she warned you.”

As we navigated through the woods, a low-hanging branch suddenly appeared in our path. Without breaking his stride, Lysander’s free hand shot out, holding the branch back long enough for us to pass safely. His eyes never left the path, and we continued moving, his grip on my hand never slackening.

“So the kiss was all for show? To get me out of there?” I swallowed hard.

“It worked, didn’t it?” he replied. “We needed to get you away from my father’s watchful eye, but we couldn’t risk exposing our involvement. I need time to figure out what to do.”

“Why is your father after me, Lysander?” I couldn’t quite meet his gaze, my eyes focused on the path ahead. “What are you trying to figure out?” I was pretty sure I already knew, but I needed to hear him say it.

“The Blooming Shadow needs to be fed, Sari.”

“And he thinks I’m the perfect sacrifice,” I surmised.

Lysander nodded in confirmation, as we pushed through the final thicket. A lump formed in my throat when I saw the small cabin before us. The memory of the demons Lysander killed on Chaos Eve flooded through my brain, reminding me just how lethal he was in his own right.

He must’ve sensed my apprehension because he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “This is the last place anyone would look for us.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, my voice tinged with doubt.

“Absolutely. At least temporarily. It’ll be a good place to lay low for the

night until we figure out a better plan.”

As we approached the cabin, another thought occurred to me. “What about Rook and Lirien? Shouldn’t they be warned? Are they in danger?”

He paused, a serious look crossing his face. “Ariya will keep an eye on them tonight.”

With every step we took toward the cabin, the gravity of the situation sank in. The realization that I was the Order’s target—and what that might mean—was terrifying. Yet, as we crossed the threshold, I couldn’t help but feel a strange sense of safety. It was as if, in the midst of chaos, Lysander had become an anchor. The question that haunted me now was whether that anchor would hold.

The cabin was humble, the open space bearing rustic wooden furniture, a stone fireplace, and a few shelves stocked with random essentials. The air smelled of wood and old leather, giving the place an earthy, lived-in vibe. A small chandelier hung from the ceiling, its unlit, half-spent candles a silent witness to past gatherings.

“I’ll cast some wards and set some traps. You should sleep, Sari. I’ll keep watch.”

Lysander moved briskly around, checking windows and peeking under furniture. His fingers skimmed surfaces, lips mumbling incantations I could only guess were meant to fortify the place.

As I watched him fluster and fret, it struck me how overwhelmed he seemed. The unshakeable, confident Fae I’d come to know was slowly unraveling.

I moved toward him, grabbing his arm to halt his restless pacing. I guided him to the couch, forcing him to sit with me.

“I appreciate you wanting to protect me, but you’re no good to either of us if you’re running on fumes. Sit. Breathe. We’ll figure this out together.”

“Is that your way of saying you’ve decided you can trust me?” His blue eyes pleaded with mine.

“Honestly... I don’t know.” I sighed. “But I lied to you back in the catacombs. I do *want* to trust you. And I figure if you were going to hurt me, you’ve had plenty of chances to do so. Soooo... I guess you could say I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt for now.”

He contemplated that for a moment. “You know... I figured you’d be a lot more freaked out about this whole thing. But you’re not, are you? Why is that? Learning that a secret society is planning to sacrifice you to feed a tree

isn't exactly an everyday occurrence."

"Oh, I'm freaked out about nearly everything I've experienced since coming to Nightshade." I chuckled nervously. "*Epecially* anything related to the creepy cult or the even creepier bloodthirsty tree. I just don't think it's prudent to act on it all the time. Right now, I'd rather get answers and devise a plan to fix the problem."

Lysander's lips curled upward. "You can take the girl out of the Dawn Court, but you can't take the Dawn Court out of the girl."

I shrugged, feeling sad as I recalled the last conversation I had with my parents. "Guess so."

I chewed on my lip, my mind swirling with thoughts.

His eyes dropped to my mouth, and the tension rose between us.

Lysander's thumb gently coaxed my teeth away from my lip. "It drives me crazy when you do that."

My face flushed. "I can't help it when I'm nervous."

"What do you have to be nervous about? You have a strapping member of the Dusk Court serving as your personal bodyguard." He playfully wagged his brows.

I chuckled softly. "But what are you risking to do that? Maybe you should leave—"

Before I could complete the sentence, Lysander wrapped me in his arms. His voice brushed my ear, warm as he whispered, "I'm not going anywhere. So you might as well shut up and get comfortable. We have the whole night ahead of us."



I padded back into the main room, the oversized shirt I'd found in the bedroom trailing down to my knees. Lysander was missing his shirt, sculpted muscles catching the golden glow of the fire he was tending. He seemed absorbed in the flickering flames, a look of deep contemplation etched on his face.

As I approached, he turned and met my gaze, his eyes softening. With a simple pat to the empty space beside him, he beckoned me closer.

He wrapped a warm blanket around me as I settled on the floor next to him. "Tell me what's on your mind."

The sensation of the blanket, combined with the heat of the fire and his body close to mine, seemed to push the outside world away. For a brief moment, it was just us and the crackling flames. Sadly, it didn't last.

I sighed, my eyes staring into the flickering flames before us. "It's like there are two sides of me warring for dominance. One half is... fearless, wild, trusting. Very Moon Court-y. That's the part that wants to believe your intentions with me are pure."

"And the other side?" he probed gently.

"The other side is all Dawn Court—cautious, guarded, logical. That part worries you're playing me for a fool. That I'm an idiot for being here right now, putting my faith in you, when your father plans to kill me. When you've admitted that you feel honored to be a part of the sadistic society that trades people's lives for power."

He clenched his jaw. "So, which side is winning?"

I chewed on my lip. "That's just it. I have no freaking idea. It changes from one minute to the next. The Moon Court side of me likes to think that the stars aligned and fate put us into each other's orbit. The Dawn Court side of me thinks it's some meticulous plan your father orchestrated."

Lysander placed his hand on my partially exposed thigh, sending a jolt of need straight to my core. "And what about when we touch? Are you still divided then?"

"Part of me wonders if this chemistry is real or if it's some kind of illusion." I suppressed a moan as his fingers inched higher. "But another part thinks even the most well-trained master of seduction couldn't fabricate this feeling."

What I didn't add was that the mysterious darkness inside of me reveled in that feeling. It writhed and purred whenever we touched. Ventured out of deep crevasses of my soul to lie with its counterpart. It knew there was no other man who would *ever* have the same effect on me that Lysander did. Its conviction was unshakable. I didn't know if that made me want to scream, cry, or give in to the promise of pleasure.

He leaned into me, our mouths merely inches apart. "Forget about what you think. What about what you want? *What do you want, sweet Sari?*"

You, I thought.

I gasped as he wedged his hand between the apex of my thighs. "I want it to be real. I want to say fuck the rules. I want to know that you're falling for me, too."

Lysander's hand stilled, making me whimper. "Did you just say you're *falling for me?*"

My cheeks burned as the sensual spell was broken. Coughing awkwardly, I pushed his hand away. "Never mind that. It's my turn to ask questions. When did you decide not to kill me? Or, at the very least, help me?"

His lascivious grin faded. But even so, I knew that my admission hung between us, another layer in our complex web of emotions, spinning a narrative neither of us could predict.

Lysander cleared his throat. "You might not believe it, but I decided I didn't want you to die the first night we met."

I rolled my eyes. "You're just trying to get in my pants."

He made a point to scan my bare legs. "You're not wearing any pants."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"Fine," he conceded. "If you recall, I saved you from drowning during your court baptism. I jumped into that pool knowing it would feel like my skin was boiling in a vat of acid. Even before I knew who you were or how important you would eventually become, I knew I couldn't stand seeing you get hurt."

"Lysander..."

He shook his head. "No more talking. There's plenty of time for that tomorrow."

As Lysander guided me onto the nearby pallet, I felt myself surrendering to a stillness I rarely knew. He pulled me into his arms, fingers sifting through my hair, massaging my scalp in slow, rhythmic circles. Every circular motion seemed to untie a knot inside me, leaving me increasingly boneless against him.

I moaned. "Gods, that feels good."

"If you weren't already half-asleep, I'd make you feel even better," Lysander teased.

"Mmm. You do know your way around a lady's love garden."

His chest rumbled with laughter. "Go to sleep, Sari."

I felt myself drifting off, barely able to keep my eyes open. But before I surrendered to the Dreaming, I whispered, "I just want to know what it feels like to be loved by you, Lysander Thorne. I bet it's spectacular."

As I drifted into unconsciousness, his lips brushed the top of my head. "If anyone has a shot at that, it's you."

And so, in a cabin deep in the forest, as embers popped and crackled in

the fireplace, Lysander and I both succumbed to feelings we were only just beginning to understand.

For me, it was a dreamless sleep, for him, a sleepless night. Yet for both of us, it was a turning point, a pivot in a destiny neither of us could predict.

TWENTY-TWO

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

I blinked my eyes open, struggling to shed the haze of sleep. As my vision cleared, I saw Lysander staring at me with bloodshot eyes. His fingers brushed against my cheek, sweeping a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“Did you get any sleep?” I croaked.

He shook his head, the lines on his forehead slightly more pronounced. “I had to make sure you were safe.”

A sense of gratitude washed over me, followed by a pang of guilt. He looked exhausted, yet oddly resolute.

Sitting up, I noticed he’d already laid out some clothes. A simple but warm sweater awaited me, along with a bowl of oatmeal. I was touched that he had taken care of even the smallest details.

He handed me the bowl. “Here, eat.”

My hands wrapped around the warm ceramic. The first spoonful was heavenly—a blend of sweetness and warmth that filled me from the inside out. My eyes met his as I chewed, some kind of unspoken understanding passing between us.

“Do you want some?” I offered, lifting a spoonful toward him.

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth lifting in a gentle smile. “I want *you* to eat.”

“Where did you find the clothes?” I asked, pulling the sweater over my head.

Lysander chuckled. “I found a bit of a lost and found pile. I think the demon who lived here had quite a few overnight guests. Don’t worry, I washed them.”

I looked around, noting the line hanging next to the fireplace. “And had time to hang them out to dry? How long have I been asleep?”

“About six hours, give or take.” He gave me a crooked smile. “Anyone ever tell you that you talk in your sleep? You said some... *interesting* things last night.”

My jaw dropped. “I do not.”

“You sure about that?” he challenged.

“Uh...”

Crap, I hope I didn't say anything incriminating. Or embarrassing. Ugh. Lysander laughed. "I'm just fucking with you, Sari."

Thank gods.

I grinned, taking another spoonful of oatmeal. "What about the food?"

Lysander shrugged. "He's not alive to eat it. No reason for you to starve."

His words lingered in the air for a moment before he stood up, stepping behind me. His hands sifted through my hair, separating it into sections as he began to braid. A sense of peace washed over me as I felt the rhythmic motion of his fingers weaving through my pink locks.

"Who taught you how to braid?" I asked incredulously.

"Ariya." Just as the final strands were pulled into place, there was a knock on the door. Lysander paused, his hands still in my hair. "Speak of the devil."

Setting aside the bowl, I watched as he strode toward the door, his posture stiffening ever so slightly. Despite the lighthearted conversation and the momentary peace we had found, the reality of our situation was about to walk right back in. And yet, the simple gestures of normalcy—the braid, the oatmeal, the borrowed clothes—had granted me a sense of comfort, of home, even in a place as foreign and uncertain as this.

As he opened the door, a weight settled on my chest. I didn't know what to expect.

Ariya swept into the room like a tornado. "I'm busting my ass making all these arrangements while you're playing house with Sarielle!" She looked at Lysander as if sizing up a competition she'd already won.

She circled the cabin, her eyes taking note of the cozy blankets spread on the floor, the dish of oatmeal half-eaten on the table, and the freshly washed clothes hanging by the fireplace. "So this is how you've been spending your time?" She chuckled, eyeing the domestic setup.

Lysander shot her a look. "You act like I've been on vacation."

Ariya shrugged, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Well, it sure looks comfy here. I got zero sleep last night, you know."

"Neither did I," Lysander countered.

"Too busy banging?" she retorted, eyeing the oatmeal longingly. "Did you make any of this for me?"

"No," Lysander replied, his voice flat. "For both questions. Not that the first one is any of your business."

Meanwhile, I was choking on my own saliva. Geez, these two had a

weird relationship.

“You could lose the attitude, you know,” she huffed. “I’m the one out there risking my neck, while you were nice and cozy at a cabin in the woods.”

“Yeah, well, the plan was to stay under the radar, remember?” Lysander raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed.

“Speaking of plans...” Ariya’s tone turned more serious. “Both of our fathers disappeared during the ball last night.”

“That’s odd.” Lysander frowned. “Do you know where they went?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say they’re preparing for the ritual. I checked my dad’s apothecary cabinet, and the bottle of nerium oil was gone.”

“What does that do?” I asked.

Ariya turned toward me and gave me a sad smile. “The Blooming Shadow’s trunk is anointed in nerium oil before the ceremony begins.” Her eyes flicked to Lysander next. “You haven’t received a call yet?”

Lysander looked at me for a brief moment before averting his eyes. “I turned off my phone so it couldn’t be traced. I should check.” He stepped away from us, his movements uncharacteristically stiff. He retrieved his phone from the pocket of his discarded suit jacket and powered it on.

His jaw tightened as he scanned the screen, fingers gripping the phone just a bit too firmly.

“Well? Any messages?” I pressed.

He shoved the phone into his pants pocket with more force than necessary, meeting my gaze for only a fraction of a second before looking away. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” I couldn’t shake off the gnawing feeling that he wasn’t being truthful. “You seemed—”

“I said there’s *nothing*, Sarielle,” he cut in, his voice harsh. It was as if the words themselves were a barrier, a wall he was hastily constructing between us.

A heavy silence fell over the room, each of us retreating into our own thoughts. Ariya shifted her weight from one foot to the other, clearly sensing the change in atmosphere.

“I kept an eye on Rook and Lirien, made sure they were safe,” she offered, changing the subject. “They’re safe. For now.”

My eyes bounced nervously between the two of them. They were clearly trying to communicate something, but before I could figure it out, Ariya

sauntered over to me and plucked the bowl of oatmeal from my hands. She took a big spoonful and grinned as she chewed. The casual way she seized what I was enjoying felt uncomfortably symbolic, as if she was claiming a small victory.

“That was mine,” I said.

Ariya’s laughter filled the air, soft and tinkling, like the sound of chimes on a breezy day. “Oh, relax. There’s plenty of oatmeal, no need to be so possessive.”

My eyes narrowed, the tension of the day, the questions and insecurities, all bubbling to the surface. “It’s not just about the oatmeal, Ariya. Sometimes, I don’t want to share. Maybe there are some things I want to keep to myself. Ever think of that?”

Her eyes glinted with a spark of something I couldn’t quite place—amusement or perhaps, understanding. “Ooh, somebody has claws this morning. Message received, girlfriend. You’re super cute when you’re pissy, by the way.”

I shook my head. “This isn’t a joke. And there’s nothing cute about this situation we’re in.”

A slow smile spread across Ariya’s face. “Are you still upset about the kiss from last night?”

Ariya’s eyes locked onto mine, and in that second, I felt as if she’d glimpsed every thought racing through my mind. “I know how to fix this.”

Then, without waiting for a signal or approval, she leaned in. Her lips met mine in a kiss that was so slow, so sensual, every moment lingered like the aftertaste of a fine wine. I should’ve pulled away, but the moment was so tender, it caught me off guard. It was as if she was trying to tell me something without words—a secret, a dare, or maybe even an apology.

As Ariya finally pulled back, I was aware of my own rapid heartbeat thudding in my chest.

I bit my lower lip instinctively, caught in the crossfire of Ariya’s audacity and Lysander’s silent intensity. Words seemed suddenly inadequate, my thoughts a swirl of questions and half-formed feelings. I knew we had just crossed some sort of boundary, blurred a line between friendship, rivalry, and something else entirely.

Ariya flashed me a toothy grin. “See? Just a kiss. Doesn’t have to mean anything.”

Lysander’s jaw tightened as our eyes met, and his fists clenched at his

sides. I couldn't tell if he was pissed off or turned on, but I suspected it may have been both.

"So predictable," I muttered.

"Ariya," he finally spoke, his voice low and tinged with a possessive edge. "You're my best friend, but if you ever kiss Sarielle again—or make any kind of move on her for that matter—I swear I will stab you in your sleep."

"So violent." Ariya chuckled, unperturbed, lifting another spoonful of oatmeal to her lips. "But since we're on the subject, if you ever screw things up with Sarielle, I'd be *more than happy* to console her." Her voice was playful but there was an edge to it.

"Could you guys please stop talking about me like I'm not in the room?" I asked.

With his eyes still locked onto Ariya's, Lysander moved toward me. In one fluid motion, he sat down and pulled me into his lap, as if staking his claim in this complicated triangle of affections. His arms encircled me, strong and reassuring, and for a moment, I forgot about how rude he was earlier.

Ariya watched us, a sly smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she continued to eat. Her eyes danced with both mischief and a certain approval, and it was then that I realized—whatever the future held for us, whatever complications lay ahead—we were all irrevocably tangled in each other's lives.

"Alright, so what's the plan now?" I broke the silence, fidgeting in Lysander's lap.

"We need to get you off campus," Ariya declared, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand after finishing the last of the oatmeal.

Lysander shifted beneath me and cleared his throat. "We can use my private portal."

I twisted to look at him and raised an eyebrow. "Really? Most college kids have a car, but you, you have a *private portal*? That's some rich Dusk Court extravagance right there."

"It's not about extravagance," he argued. "It's untraceable, and my father has no idea it exists, which is crucial given the situation."

"And where would we go?"

"To your home," he said, his words making my heart sink a little. "You're untouchable there. Your parents are dignitaries, and my father wouldn't dare cause a diplomatic crisis. He wouldn't have time to organize

an extraction. He'd need to find another sacrifice."

"But that means—" My voice trailed off.

Somebody else would be murdered instead.

He squeezed me tighter and whispered, "It's the only way, Sari."

"No." I shook my head and stood. "There has to be another way. You said the tree was dying, right? Can't you just stall him somehow until it dies? Or better yet, pluck the last damn apple?"

Ariya and Lysander exchanged a glum look.

"What's that look about?" I asked.

"It's not that simple," Lysander insisted.

I threw my hands up. "Oh, that's right. Nothing in the Order of the Midnight Serpents is simple. It's all colored in shades of gray, right?"

"Look, I think we're all letting our emotions get the best of us right now." Ariya took my hand and looked me straight in the eye. "Sarielle, I promise we will try to find another way. But right now, we need to get you to that portal. That is our *number one priority*. You won't be safe until you're at home with your parents. So, can you do that for us? Can we take a walk to the portal and get you the hell away from Nightshade?"

I sighed. "Where exactly is this portal?"

"On the far side of campus," Lysander answered. "By the student parking lot."

There was a lot of open space between the forest and the parking lot.

"Can we get there without being seen?" I asked.

"I think it's our best shot." Ariya shrugged. "Our fathers wouldn't be dumb enough to make a move in broad daylight."

"What about Rook and Lirien? Should we bring them with us?"

Lysander shook his head. "Not right now. It's too risky traveling in such a large grouping."

"They're safe for now thanks to an assist from my transformational magic." Ariya winked. "But once we get you off campus, they won't be far behind. I promise."

"This is really the best solution?"

"It is, and I'll be right there with you every step of the way until you cross through." Lysander's voice was so full of conviction it eased some of my worries. Until the end of his sentence had registered in my brain.

"Wait. You're not coming to my parents' with me?"

"If we disappeared, too, it would instantly raise suspicion," Ariya

answered.

I glanced at Lysander again. “When... how long do I have to hide? When will I see you again?”

“As soon as I know it’s safe,” he replied.

I sighed. “Okay, if you both think it’s the best plan, then I trust you.”

Lysander stood, giving me a soft, lingering kiss on the forehead. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say that, especially right now.”

“Then let’s not waste any more time,” Ariya piped in. “Every second counts.”

“Ready?” Lysander asked, offering his hand.

“I guess I’ll have to be,” I said, gripping his hand tightly.

Lysander pulled me into a quick hug, whispering, “This isn’t goodbye, Sarielle. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I whispered back as we stepped toward an uncertain future, hands clenched in a promise neither of us wanted to break.

TWENTY-THREE

SARIELLE BLACKWOOD

On our way out of the cabin, Lysander reached for something on a small wooden table near the door. It was a blade with a gem-encrusted hilt that glinted in the dim light. He concealed it in his belt in one smooth motion, a move so practiced it gave me goose bumps. What was he preparing for? The question echoed ominously in my mind, but my nerves were already rattled, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

The world around us seemed suspended in a pre-dawn haze as we stepped outside. Ariya led the way, her steps measured and precise. Lysander and I followed, our hands interlinked as if we could physically hold our world together amidst the chaos. But something felt off, like a discordant note in a melody. Lysander's shoulders were stiff, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

Every so often, he'd exchange a quick glance with Ariya. Whatever silent conversation they were having, I wasn't a part of it. It unsettled me.

"We're almost there," Ariya finally said, breaking the silence as we neared the edge of the woods.

"That's good," I whispered, a knot of apprehension forming in my gut.

Lysander seemed to sense my unease. He brought our linked hands up to his lips and kissed my knuckles, but even that gesture felt fraught.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Are we okay?"

"We will be once we get you to that portal." His reply should've appeased me, but the stiffness of his shoulders and the clenching of his jaw told another story, one filled with chapters he wasn't ready to read aloud.

Not yet, at least.

Right as the campus buildings came into sight off in the distance, a sudden, sharp pain splintered through my head, making the world lurch sideways. I crumpled to the ground, clutching my skull as if I could hold the piercing ache at bay. My vision blurred, and for a terrifying moment, it seemed like something—*someone*—was slithering inside my brain.

"Lysander!" My voice was more a rasp than a scream, lost in the cacophony of my own agony.

"What's happening?" Lysander's voice was edged with panic as he

dropped to his knees beside me, hands trembling as they hovered over my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Gods, it hurts,” I choked out, my hands still fisted in my hair, trying to physically yank the pain away.

His eyes darted over my face, and I could see his mind racing through a mental checklist of spells, wards, or whatever else could counter whatever was happening to me. “Can you describe it? Do you feel dizzy? Nauseous?”

“It’s like... like something’s inside my head, crawling around!” My voice was strained, punctuated by short, quick inhales. “Something... evil.”

Ariya had crouched down too, but she was scanning the surrounding woods, her senses fanned out for any approaching danger. “There’s nothing nearby, no spells or entities that I can sense. Do you have any idea what could be causing this? Has this ever happened before?”

“I don’t know, it just hurts!” I clenched my eyes shut, gritting my teeth as the searing pain escalated, each throb like a hammer against my skull.

Was this the Shadow Queen at work? Was she trying to possess me again? I was about to confess everything I knew, desperate to relieve the agony.

“Hold on, Sarielle, just hold on,” Lysander murmured, his hands gently cradling my face. I felt a soft pulse of energy—a spell perhaps or a prayer to some ancient deity.

And then, as abruptly as it had arrived, the pain evaporated. It was like emerging from dark water into air, misery replaced by a sudden, disorienting clarity.

I opened my eyes, expecting to see Lysander visibly relieved. But what met me was an arrogant smirk that made me want to puke. I blinked, as if doing so could erase what I saw and replace it with something that made sense.

“Suddenly feeling better, are we?” His words were velvety but charged, his eyes holding mine in a gaze that was as confusing as it was intense.

“Why—” My voice trembled as relief melded into a chilling sense of unease. “What just happened?”

Lysander’s arms crossed over his chest as he stood over me, his smirk deepening into something unreadable. In that surreal moment, my trust wavered, replaced by a suspicion I couldn’t yet articulate. And whatever that suspicion was, it seemed to echo in the tight line of Ariya’s mouth as well.

I looked from one to the other, grappling with the churning emotions

inside me. The atmosphere had shifted dramatically, and I was standing on a precipice without knowing how I'd gotten there—or what awaited me on the other side.

Before I could voice the questions swirling in my mind, a ripple of dark magic surged through the air. My skin prickled with dread as I recognized the two men who'd materialized from the shadows—Xavier and Caius.

Caius began to clap, his proud gaze fixed on his son. “Well done, Lysander. A true Dusk Court deceiver.”

The blood drained from my face. “What’s going on?”

Before I could fully grasp the situation, both Ariya and Lysander moved with practiced efficiency. Chains snaked around my wrists with a finality that slammed me to my knees.

Confusion and betrayal swelled within me, filling my eyes with tears that blurred my vision. I looked up at Lysander, desperate for some sign that this was all a horrible mistake, a terrible joke. But his face was a mask, carefully neutral except for the smug smile that refused to fade.

Ariya avoided my eyes as she secured the chains, her features equally inscrutable.

My mind was racing to understand how I'd ended up here.

“Lysander, why?” My voice was shaky, fragile, cracking from his betrayal.

He looked down at me, his eyes meeting mine for a moment too brief to read. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he turned away. “You’ll understand soon enough, Sarielle.”

As he spoke, I heard a distant wail, almost like an echo, that sounded strangely like the man in front of me. Before I could ponder the oddity of it, a searing pain clawed through my head again, making me cry out.

Caius stepped forward, reveling in the moment. “See, the plan was simple. Get you away from everyone during the ball. Make it appear as if you had run off, never to return. Ariya forged a note. Lysander, well, he kept you... occupied.”

He patted Lysander on the back. “You’ve done well, my boy.”

Lysander met his father’s eyes. “It was the easiest job I’ve ever had.”

Ariya laughed, a sound that struck me as jarringly out of place amidst the gut-wrenching betrayal. “Poor, pathetic Sarielle.”

The words were like physical blows, each syllable knocking the wind out of me. To hear Lysander speak so crudely was more than a betrayal; it was a

humiliation, designed to strip away my dignity along with my freedom.

I had to find a way out of this nightmare, whatever the cost.

Xavier's voice broke through the oppressive atmosphere, the veins on his forehead throbbing visibly against his taut skin. "The Blooming Shadow awaits."

A profound terror gripped me as I realized how dire this situation was. It was as if my very soul reached out for something, anything, to keep me anchored to the world. In that instant, I tapped into a latent wellspring of magic I never knew I had—magic that sang to the spirits of the dead.

The ground beneath us quaked, and an ethereal howl echoed through the trees. It was a cry from the void, a symphony of voices rising like a crescendo from the netherworld. Shadows flickered at the edge of the clearing, materializing into semi-tangible forms—spirits of the departed responding to my desperate call.

"What in the Nine Realms is happening?!" Caius roared, visibly rattled, his eyes darting wildly.

Lysander looked... as stunned as his father.

His eyes met mine, and I noticed an unsettling stillness there.

Xavier looked near the point of collapse, gripping his chest. "Caius, control her! I can't hold it much longer!"

Caius lunged, fury incarnate in his eyes. Just as he reached me, one of the summoned spirits intercepted, colliding with him in a burst of flames. Caius screamed, recoiling in pain.

The atmosphere was electric, rife with dread and chaos. My head pounded to the beat of my racing heart, and blood trickled down my nose as I struggled to maintain control over the army I'd unleashed.

"What are you doing, girl?" Caius sneered, unable to hide the tremor in his voice as he took a step back, as if sensing the tectonic shift occurring before him.

My hair billowed around my face, lifted by a wind that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. My eyes locked onto his, and in that singular moment, there was an indomitable power surge within me.

"Who are you?!" Caius demanded.

With every ounce of grit I could muster, I uttered the words, "A survivor."

Just then, an angry bellow nearly drowned out the chattering spirits. The voice sounded eerily like Lysander, but when I glanced at him, he remained

stoic and silent.

The shadows and spirits circling around us stretched and shifted, their rage so potent I could taste it on my tongue. Their bodies flickered and waned, becoming solid one moment and incorporeal the next. They had many faces—an ancient warrior dressed for battle, a mother grieving the loss of her child, an elderly man who looked incredibly feeble, a small child. It didn't seem to matter what shape they wore—they were all unified by their shared goal.

Vengeance.

The trees around us groaned, branches cracking and leaves rustling in the wind.

The ghosts surged forward, and as they moved, the wind shifted, turning into a howl that filled the air with an eerie, mournful lament. It was as if the very world mourned their passing—and sought retribution.

Caius looked horrified as he stumbled backwards. “It can't be...”

“You shouldn't have underestimated me,” I growled.

It was at that precise moment that the atmosphere crackled with a dark energy. I felt it before I saw—Xavier, unleashing an invisible force that washed over me like a tidal wave, breaking my focus. The spectral army dispersed in a violent gust of wind and evaporating mist. My body jolted forward, my vision wavering.

Through my blurred sight, I caught Caius's gaze one last time.

“You're the missing child,” he hissed, a cocktail of dread and triumph lighting up his eyes. “The Shadow Queen's heir.”

As my weary eyes scanned for Lysander and Ariya, I realized they were nowhere to be found. Where had they gone? My heart sank as the edges of my vision grew dark.

I fell forward, the chains rattling as my body met the ground with a jarring thud. Before I succumbed to complete blackness, Caius's maniacal laughter echoed through my head right before he said the most disturbing thing yet.

“And now you're *mine*.”

I blinked as I clawed my way back to consciousness, attempting to adjust my

vision to the meager light leaking through a barred window far above me. My mind spluttered as I tried recalling what had happened. Flashbacks assaulted me—Lysander setting me up, Ariya’s complicity, and the army I’d summoned—clashing against each other in a whirlpool of doubt.

Reaching for my face, I touched my lip and winced. It was raw and split open. Dried blood flaked off under my fingers. The uncomfortable sting in my nose alerted me to the fact that it, too, had bled earlier. My hair was glued to my sweat-drenched skin, and my ill-fitting clothing was torn and stained.

My stomach churned as I realized I was in a dungeon. Stone walls closed in around me. Chains dangled from them, the unforgiving steel biting into my restrained wrists. The overwhelming smell of piss made my eyes water. How in the world did I get there?

A harsh throbbing in my skull wrenched me from the haze a little more with each pulse. Memories flooded back in fragments, a vicious torrent of betrayal and heartache. Lysander’s face, his empty eyes, and Ariya’s chilling indifference. My hands clenched involuntarily, my nails biting into my palm as my anger boiled over. I gathered up all the humiliation, the hurt, the anguish that bubbled up from within me and hurled it into the darkness.

“Fuck you, Lysander Thorne!” The words ripped through the air, a snarl of undiluted rage and heartbreak. My voice bounced off the stone walls, filling the dungeon with the sound of my contempt.

A tapestry of our shared moments replayed in my mind—the stolen glances, the intimate whispers, the warmth of his arms around me. Gods, was I nothing but a joke to him?

Before my mounting dread could evolve into a full-fledged panic, a magical force clamped around my mouth, sealing my lips shut as if pressed by an invisible hand. But I had said it. I had let the scream out, and though it changed nothing of my physical circumstance, it shifted something within me. I had given voice to my betrayal, giving form to the ache that had swallowed me whole.

I froze as a shadow crept across the room, its footsteps unhurried, deliberate, each one pounding into my eardrums like a mallet against a gong. My breathing hitched, my eyes widening with an unspeakable terror that was impossible to articulate.

My lips parted to release a scream, a shout, some semblance of defiance, but no sound escaped. My lungs heaved, desperate for the catharsis of a scream, but all I could muster was a choked gasp.

Then, the figure emerged from the shadows, moving with inconceivable grace. The way he held himself—the tilt of his head—was familiar. My eyes squinted to dissect the shadow that veiled his face, but the room was too dark. Every fiber of my being screamed that it had to be him—that these movements, this calculated sneakiness, could belong to no one else. My heart lurched, and for a second, hope—foolish, naive hope—sprang up. I was entertaining the treacherous idea that maybe, just maybe, I had been wrong about him. That maybe this was his convoluted way of rescuing me, that he was on my side after all, that the love I had wasn't unrequited but merely hidden, obscured by the machinations of some greater scheme we were both pawns in.

He stopped just a few steps away, close enough for me to see the blade he held in his hand. It glittered ominously in the dim light, the gem-studded hilt a cold reminder of its deadly purpose.

Then he spoke, his deep voice muffled as if he were speaking through a hood or some kind of cloth. "This won't be pleasant, Sarielle, but it's the only way."

The words were hazy, distorted, yet unmistakably filled with a finality that left no room for doubt. This was a farewell, a grim pronouncement uttered at the threshold of life and death. My body went rigid, every muscle tensed in a futile preparation for a blow I knew I couldn't dodge.

All the signs had been there—the undercurrent of danger every time he looked my way, the secrecy that veiled his every move, even the enigmatic smile that never quite reached his eyes. How could I have been so blind? So desperate to believe in a lie that I had disregarded the glaring truth? The realization was a jagged pill, lodging itself in my throat. I had been a fool. And this—this dungeon, this blade, this moment—was my reckoning.

Instinctively, I jerked against my restraints, every muscle in my body straining in futile resistance. I prodded the dark recesses of my soul, desperate to summon the ghostly forces I'd wielded before. But there was nothing—just an empty void. The spirits, it seemed, had abandoned me. I was no longer worthy of their aid.

The thunderous drums inside my head built to a deafening crescendo. Was this it? Would they slay me here, parade my lifeless body to that wretched tree? Would they soak its roots with every last drop of my blood?

With a precise, deliberate motion, he raised the blade to my neck. The cold, sharp tip dug into my flesh, splitting it open effortlessly. Blood welled

up, then spilled over, a warm and sticky contrast to the chill of the steel. I folded forward, nearly choking on my own despair as my life force seeped away. Each drop that fell seemed to drag a bit of my soul with it, pulling me closer and closer to a darkness more absolute than any dungeon.

My senses waned, tunneling into a pinpoint focus on the fading footsteps. Evidently, Lysander had better things to do than stick around and watch me bleed to death.

Using the last ounce of energy I possessed, I lifted my gaze and glared at his retreating back with a lethal promise:

I'd fucking claw my way out of the fiery pits of Hell to haunt him for eternity.

To be concluded in Order of the Midnight Serpents. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Poppy Ireland is the pseudonym for *USA Today* Bestselling Author duo, CoraLee June and Laura Lee. Poppy was born from a passion project, a spark of creative fun that turned into something magical for these two longtime friends. If they're not wrangling kids or working on their solo projects, they're likely using their freaky mind melding powers to bring you more spicy romantasy stories that'll keep you on the edge of your seat!

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