



NEPHILIM
MALEVOLENCE
UNIVERSITY

DANCING

with

VIPERS

and

SHADOWS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVERY
PHOENIX

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DANCING WITH VIPERS AND SHADOWS

A Dark Academy Fantasy Romance

NEPHILIM MALEVOLENCE UNIVERSITY

BOOK I

AVERY PHOENIX

DWVAS BLURB

“Lesson One is simple. The Art of Survival.”

Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.

Prodigy, gifted, destined to prevail.

A daughter forced to face the shortcomings of her spineless sister.

Attending the prestigious school of the Dark Arts and Royal Fae elites is the only way to unravel the story behind her unexpected disappearance.

Nephilim Malevolence University.

The academic institution of secrets, mysteries, and bloodshed.

Inviting all those who deem themselves worthy of accessing the dual worlds of Vipers and Shadows.

Like a dance, the students follow the symphony of destiny.

A Quartet of Challenges that plays to the melodies of fear, desire, lust, and the sweet thrill of victory.

For the living, survival is all that matters.

For the dead, salvation is all they can yearn for.

Only the worthy, conniving, powerful Vipers can reach the
finish line.

The real challenge is simple:

Can they face their darkest shadows?

DWVAS TROPES AND TRIGGER WARNING

TROPES:

Spicy Gothic Romance

Dark Academia

Chilli-peppers chemistry□□□

Professor/Student

She falls but He falls harder

Forbidden Romance

Secret Societies

High angst

Deep World Building

Strong & Resilient FMC

Trigger Warning in Effect.

This tale is unapologetically dark.

Proceed with caution.

— *Avery P.*



PROLOGUE: IF WE FALL, WE FALL
TOGETHER

-OPHELIA-

“**F**inally putting that mouth to good use in a dire situation, Ophelia.”

His tone of condescending merit follows with lips that brutally suck mine.

“Says the one who hates listening to my voice,” I counter pantingly. I tug his bottom lip to ignite some pain his way. “I should drop your class.”

“You’d never do such a barbaric thing,” he grumbles in annoyance. His eyes are far from upset with me. “No other professor would stand you.”

“And you can, Professor North?” I dare confront him. It’s the perfect distraction from what’s happening around us.

The overwhelming sensation of doom plaguing us as the world we were sucked into is crumbling every second.

“I have no choice,” he grumbles, his hand on my throat the moment I try to escape his clutches. “Don’t run from me, Ophelia.”

“You can’t die.” The crack of my voice reveals that hidden glint of worry I have for him. That pinch of love I’ve worked tirelessly to ignore and hide from his knowledgeable eyes of

mesmerizing dusk. “The university needs you. They can’t fight what just happened without you. Leave.”

“No.” He grunts and kisses me again, and it carries so much passion, I can’t help but respond.

If we’re going to die after everything we’ve gone through, I can at least delve into this passionate connection one last time, yes?

“You have to take care of the others,” I argue the moment our lips break for air. It’s taking everything to fight the nagging pull of our energies that are viciously fighting one another. “Make sure Azrael makes it through. That Hades doesn’t go on a tantrum strike and burn the school down.”

Just thinking about them is making my eyes pool with tears.

“Stop it, Ophelia.”

“If Daemon gets consumed by darkness, I won’t forgive you,” I stress. “You have to tell Ivy and Blair that despite their duo madness, I love the shit out of them. Don’t forget Hades. I don’t tell him enough, but his deep laughter always lightens my heart.”

“You’re not dying, Ophelia,” he snaps at me and tightens his hold around my neck to shut me up.

“Orpheus.”

He stills at the whimper I release as my mystical eyes bore into his ruthless ones, which blaze with rage.

“If the Land of Shadows wishes for our demise, so be it,” he vows and uses his other hand to snake around me. “But I’ll never forsake you a second time. Never again.”

Pulling me against him, I shiver at how our energies react. Bolts of energy sizzle out of our flesh, and I know without looking, my arms and legs are beginning to reveal the hidden ink of my origin.

The destined marks that no other individual has gotten the opportunity to fathom their uniquely divine wrath.

I'm taken away by the markings of ivory that begin to cover his flesh, watching how his eyes begin to match mine.

I look at him in confusion, unable to comprehend what's happening at the brink of death.

“Opposites attract, yes?” he whispers as he releases my throat, only to cup my left cheek. Wiping away the tear that escapes my eye, he never looks away. “This is the time to test out that theory.”

“We'll destroy each other, Professor.”

It's the truth.

The ultimate truth I've yearned to never admit to him.

“Then, let us burn,” he vows as he tightens his grip and allows his other hand to fall.

Grabbing my hand, he squeezes it as tightly as I do in return.

He can feel my distraught.

Smell my fear.

See my anxiety.

Realize how much I yearn for life.

“After all the betrayal, Little Viper, do you dare trust me one last time?”

I can't fight the hold within me any longer. The power that has thrashed and screamed in captivity, unable to be kept at bay in the presence of an equal.

A counterpart.

"I trust you," I say what's in my heart, even as my vision begins to be consumed by darkness.

I smell the scent of blood, feeling the thick liquid begin to replace my tears and run down my cheeks. Prickling frost rushes through my body, which is on fire with sensational energy. I'm but a catalyst, taken over by the hidden secret only this man has managed to claim as his own.

"Then let us dance to this chilling serenade, my Gilded Merger."

He's my Shadow.

I'm his Viper.

Together.

We dance to the serenade of death.

❁ I ❁



ENCHANTED MALEVOLENCE

“**M**iss Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.”

I knew from the moment my eyes met those dusk-colored voids that I'd despise this man. My gut was screaming that our temperament for one another's existence wasn't written in the stars. Not in the slightest.

We were destined to collide.

Only to never mesh and blend.

This man is meant to be nothing but a plague.

Which makes me give the biggest fake smirk I can force my body to commit in the realm of expressions.

I actually have to portray emotion here. Fun.

Stepping forward is all it takes to have the congregation of chosen students' eyes on me.

I'm completely relaxed, standing at 5'6", which is considered "short" in these realms of dark magic and all things wizardly. Either way, my head is tilted upward with determination and pride as I stare at the professor, whose scowl should be similar to how I feel about his presence.

My inner magic is seething at the sight of him.

This is usually why so many gifted beings like us fall for their intrusive thoughts. We react before we think, and voilà.

You're dead in a heartbeat.

A shame that I can't ignite the same wrath in return.

Ignoring my instincts to destroy this man so he'll stop giving me the death glare, I take a deep inhale and let it out. I need my sanity to keep me alive and on this path of solidifying my official invite to N.M.U.

Nephilim Malevolence University for the Tainted Gifted and Elite.

"Of course, a Guinevere is fucking first." I hear someone in the crowd declare with insolence.

See how my existence brings nothing but trouble and tribulations in my life?

"Isn't she the younger sister?" another speaks up.

It's like they're not even trying to whisper.

"That's what I heard. Older sister found out she was going to be chosen to attend and ran for the hills!"

Not quite true, but what would I know?

I was left behind.

A few students snicker.

"What a shameless disgrace."

"To think her poor little sister has to take her place for the sake of their prestigious family name."

"She probably isn't gifted."

"Good luck getting into a society."

“You’re being too kind, bro. She won’t even get into the school.”

Their laughter is silenced by the strike of black lightning that strikes the middle of the massive crowd of students, leaving some students screaming agonizingly.

My curiosity gets the best of me. My gaze moves to follow the trail of gasps and shocked stares as I notice at least ten students, male and female, now have black X’s along their mouths. They fight to claw at their shut mouths, and when they try to open them to any extent, they’re rewarded with creepy crawlers fighting to be freed. Black beetles, cockroaches, maggots, and other bugs you’d deem ‘disgusting’ are fighting to get out of their mouths.

The image has some students screaming while others are fighting their gag reflexes.

All I can do is swallow my disgust and return my eyes to the culprit of the punishment.

Professor North.

Gilded Elite of Nephilim Malevolence University.

The crazy part of it all?

He’s ten years older than us when the minimum requirement to become a professor at N.M.U. is twenty-five.

“The longer you waste my existence, the further upset the Shadows will become,” he announces, with no remorse in his gaze. *Hell, I bet he enjoyed that.* “Leave your gossiping tendencies behind for when you’re confronted with Mystical beings and Tainted Shadows. You’ll want to savor the very oxygen you breathe instead of wasting it speaking rumors and childish assumptions.”

His dusk eyes are back on me.

“Welcome to N.M.U., Miss Guinevere. We’ve been expecting your attendance,” he greets me as though I’ve already secured my invite.

I can feel the burning urge to question his words hovering in the atmosphere of my ‘fellow’ peers, but not a single individual says a word.

No one wants to deal with Professor North’s wrath.

“The Shadows have seemingly already accepted your application. However, at Nephilim Malevolence University, there are unique roles, titles, and societies a student may be exposed to upon acceptance. Therefore, I’ve been instructed to encourage your participation in the trials ahead.”

The silence is deafening as all I can do is slowly nod.

“That’s all,” he says through gritted teeth. It must have been painful for him to even announce any form of acknowledgment or praise my way. “Everyone else, prepare for your trial.”

Lovely.

Out of the chosen five hundred, I’m the sole individual who has already been approved to be an N.M.U. candidate.

Just put a target on my head so I can be killed.

By accident, of course.

Another individual in a black cloth moves to take Professor North’s place. I secretly wonder if we’ll be draped in the fine silk of black with symbols of gold.

Makes it easier to blend with the shadows.

“Line up in an orderly fashion as we make our way to the Pillar of Roses. Forewarning... the roses should not be touched.”

Seeing as I’m standing at the front of the gated platform, everyone begins to line up behind me.

“Why not?” I hear a female student wonder. “Are they poisoned?”

“Bet the thorns poke to kill,” a male student jokes.

“Shh. I don’t want fucking bugs coming out of my mouth. Don’t let us get struck.”

“Oh, please. He just got mad because of Miss Prestigious over at the front, who thinks she’s the shit.”

“I bet you her family paid hefty to make her be accepted without a fucking trial.”

“That has to be against the rules.”

I want to zone them all out because I can’t keep up with who is speaking. In fact, it’s nothing but a distraction at this point.

“Why would it be against the rules to acknowledge a Viper?”

I’m immediately intrigued by the soft, whimsical tone that comes from behind me. It carries enough of a tug of intrigue to my very generous orb of magic that I turn around completely to acknowledge the female that’s fourth in line. She’s not who you’d expect to even be participating in these trials, let alone be a student of N.M.U.

Those who attended had a strict dress code.

Black. Red. Gold. Green.

That's it.

Even silver seemed like a rarity unless it was a genetic trait in your hair—something I have but purposely dyed to black so I wouldn't be picked on further.

Clearly, that didn't do much in the 'don't see me' department.

This female has bright golden locks. So gold, bountiful, and divine looking, I'm tempted to point a wand her way and send her to any holy school that will take her.

Even the catholic church would be a safer place for her than the depths of this shadowed dynasty.

She's wearing pink tights, a white top, and a pink knitted sweater. Her running shoes are white with a hint of pink sparkles, and her lips are lightly glossed. Her skin is like powdered milk in the shade, not pale enough to be considered sickly, but definitely paler than most people's tanned complexions. She looks like a porcelain doll that's been revived into a real-life being and has never been touched by the rays of the harsh sun.

Meaning she's absolutely beautiful, like a goddess.

I can already feel the shift of envy seeping out of the surrounding females, who take a lengthy look her way. I guess we don't have much of a choice after she's drawn attention to herself, but compared to everyone else, I'm secretly in awe.

Someone with fashion sense. Praise the Shadows.

“What did you just say, Barbie Fake?”

“My name is Blair Ivy Lysander,” she declares, as if she's had to repeat herself more than once. “And you heard exactly what I said. She's a Viper.”

“What’s a Viper?” someone whispers.

“If you don’t know what a Viper is, you’re at the wrong school, buttercup,” the male right behind me says.

I’m forced to look up because he’s tall, 6’3”, to be exact. His hair is as black as the night and rather long for a guy. He’s cloaked in black from head to toe, wearing combat gear like he’s ready to kill in an assassin-type way. Unlike many who are hiding their auras so one can’t see how strong you are, this man is letting it have free reign for shits and giggles.

Personally, I don’t like cocky men, especially when they’re showing off in an attempt to make it a ‘subconscious’ act.

“A ‘Viper’ is what every student at N.M.U. would kill to become. They’re not just Elites. They’re next tier. Just a shy way from the God Tiers.”

Many eyes are on me once more, but I ignore them, my eyes on Mr. Know It All.

“You guys love bickering about prestige families, but you all witnessed it yourselves. Professor North doesn’t acknowledge anyone who can potentially be on the same level as him at entry level.” He purposely points back at me with his thumb while the rest of his fingers are tucked nicely into the palm of his hand. “Don’t know about this older sister nonsense, but you’re looking at a potential prodigy.”

He then glances over his shoulder to give me a cocky smirk.

“Meaning, I want to make a peace offering now so you won’t kill me.”

I can’t fight it.

I HAVE to roll my eyes.

“Sure.” I don’t even care.

I turn around as a few people whisper and curse.

“Fuck you, Alaric! You just want fucking protection because you’re a weak ass, just like your brother.”

“If I was weak, I wouldn’t be second in line,” he argues, as if this line represents who the strongest and weakest links are. “And though I’ll confirm my brother is the weaker out of us two, I’m pretty confident he can get through some measly trial.”

“Do you have to try to start fights everywhere we go?” The second male voice sounds very familiar to this Alaric dude, but it’s extremely calm.

Taking a glance over my left shoulder, I confirm his almost identical appearance to Alaric. There’s no denying they’re twins.

Coincidence? Not sure.

Crazy how I’m here, standing in my sister’s place in the company of male twins.

We could have made a bet on which twin would bend to our witty personality first.

The thought is both amusing and agonizing.

“Of course. I’m trying to start my track record before we enter the gates of Nephilim, so I have an even higher chance of getting into the Mischief Society, Azrael. If I can’t get in, my purpose here is but a waste.”

Poor Azrael already has stress lines on his forehead.

“Why am I here again?”

“That’s what happens when you have divorced parents in two different factions.”

Okay then, that kind of makes sense.

A shame my parents are madly in love with one another, or else maybe Odessa and I would have had the opportunity to attend this school together.

In honor of our prestigious legacy. Blah blah blah.

“So, Barbie...”

“Blair,” she corrects him.

“Same thing,” he brushes off. “Please don’t tell me you’re wearing pink the entire time. If so, stick with my brother. I don’t want a target on my back.”

“I’m not changing,” she announces. “It’s just an entry trial. We can wear what we want.”

“You can’t blend in the shadows looking like Mary Poppins,” he argues.

“Mary Poppins doesn’t wear pink, Alaric,” Azrael notes with a sigh. “Can we stop with the small talk? I doubt we’ll see the majority of people here when we make it to the other side.”

His reality check is much appreciated. It seems to dawn upon everyone else that this isn’t a game of hide and seek.

To get into Nephilim Malevolence University, you have to survive the trial that awaits. Then, you’re invited into the Valley of Shadows, where the essence of Nephilim gods await to mark you with your destiny.

Unlike other universities that thrive on lengthy years of commitment and training, N.M.U. strives to awaken the

ultimate form of Elites.

Gilded Mergers, or what mundanes would deem Nephalems.

Beings of Gilded Light and Tainted Shadows.

Despite the extensive research done on such a sought-out level of plagued divination, the rarity of obtaining the status of Nephalem was 0.00001%.

I'm sure if they could add a few more zeros, they would, but I guess they have to make it look achievable to dedicate an entire secret institute to do it.

In the end, it's been twenty-plus years since the last Gilded Merger was discovered, and they only lasted a year because they got pregnant.

Fertility seems to be a big no-no if you want to remain a Nephalem.

That was Ella Rose Minerva Guinevere.

My mother:

“Prepare to embark!” The woman advisor announces, leaving the crowd rendered silent in a heartbeat. “Be wary, for when you reach the gates to the Valley of Shadows, you will be separated from those you’ve clung to as temporary allies.”

I can sense the looming dread spreading across the vast crowd of anticipating students.

“The Valley of Shadows is only the TIP of the true realms of Nephilim and Malevolence. You will be tested, and the gift all of you carry will be revealed to you,” she explains. “Your gift should not be something to brag about. If you wish to do so, the consequences are yours to bear alone. The darkness enjoys solidarity. It craves the intimacy of secrecy. Either you

respect and allow the shadows to awaken the opportunity for you to display your gifted essence, or it will disgrace you for not respecting its sacred present.”

Her words hold a sense of heaviness to them. Like a commandment that must be adhered to, or you’re destined to face the pits of a burning eternity.

“Upon your escape, you will meet another accepted candidate before the gates of the university. They will be your roommate for the duration of your attendance here at the N.M.U. There will be no excuses or changes to this chosen partnership,” she emphasizes. “Unless one of you perishes along the path.”

I can hear the audible gulps that ignite from many behind me.

“If you die before being officially accepted into N.M.U., your families will be notified. However, we will be unable to retrieve your bodies.”

“Wh-What?”

“Why?”

The trembling fear in the single-word questions magnifies how risky this entry trial is.

“Your body will be sacrificed to the shadows. The realms of Nephilim thrive on blood, while Malevolence seeks bodies to possess. It is unnecessary for us professors and other staff of N.M.U. to risk our lives to save the weak. If you’re unable to leave the Valley of Shadows, you are deemed undeserving of attending our university. That falls back on you. It is no one else’s fault you were too weak to reach the finish line.”

Ouch...

“Out of thousands of applicants, five hundred of you remain. How you arrived here is based on multiple factors I won’t waste time delving into. Regardless of reasoning, your family, representative, or even yourself concluded you’re strong enough to be an N.M.U. attendee. This is the sacrifice you make for your decisions and confidence.”

If the atmosphere was thick before, it’s suffocating now.

“Whether one lacks or not will be determined at this moment, so if you feel as though this is too much for you, I invite you to leave the line this instant,” she encourages while her eyes scan the lengthy line. Before anyone can shuffle around, she has to add one more thing.

“Those who voluntarily depart the line will revoke their chance to ever attend Nephilim Malevolence University again.” I hear curses. “And that plague will be imposed on your family lineage, meaning no one from your bloodline, whether it be sibling or future offspring, will be allowed to apply to our prestigious university for all eternity.”

Might as well choose the option to perish at the hands of the Shadows. At least your family and the future generations aren’t wiped away from the chance at your sacrifice.

It’s obvious being noble and perishing is better than being a coward.

“Shit, no!”

“Y-You pushed me! I didn’t want to leave the line!”

“No... wait. I didn’t know the last part!”

“Please. I made a mistake. My family would kill me!”

I can hear more and more individuals pleading for mercy, but my eyes catch onto Professor North as he emerges from a

void of shadows that comes out of nowhere.

My archnemesis is annoyed I haven't quivered out of this madness yet.

Crazy how I just met this man, and I despise him.

Not to forget the obvious factor that he's a professor, and I'm simply a student.

Screams begin to echo through the line, forcing my instincts to react to the intense spike of ominous energy that rushes from their sprouting surfaces and into the night sky.

It becomes evident that nearly one-fourth of the students who were once in the line and stepped out are now pillars of shadows.

All of us force our eyes to gravitate back to Professor North as he snaps his fingers to obliterate those towers of darkness into tiny orbs that shift from black to white.

Almost like snow.

“Anything experienced up to this point will be wiped from their memories,” she finishes and looks to Professor North. “You never let me finish.”

“I don't carry even an ounce of patience,” he acknowledges his flaw like it's a gift to be praised.

Our eyes lock for a second, and his scowl deepens before he rolls his eyes as he spins around.

Rolling his eyes.

At ME!

The moment I get into the Valley of Shadows, I have to pray never to have a class with this man, or else I'm doomed to fail... no matter how hard I try to impress him.

“N.M.U candidates,” he announces without paying us any mind, even with some being petrified by the abrupt departure. “Follow my lead and remember.” He looks over his shoulder, and those dusk spheres dance with enchanting power.

“Do not touch the roses.”

I pray we heed those words.



PILLAR OF ROSES

“Tempting distractions,” I overhear Alaric state, almost in awe. I kind of don’t blame him. The path toward the Pillar of Roses is absolutely spectacular.

Especially at night.

It feels like an enchanting forest with how the stoned tiles beneath our feet shimmer with magic with every step we take. The fireflies dance around us, the tiny illumination from their bodies furthering the mesmerizing illusion as we keep walking forward.

The path isn’t very big. It’s wide enough to fit four people max in a row, which may be why we’re walking in a single file, for walking even in twos may put us too close to the alluring roses, which are so perfectly blossomed in their bushes.

To be honest, I’m drawn to the ivory green leaves that decorate the roses like an accessory more than a living piece of the roses’ creation. The color reminds me of the ends of my hair that replicate the unique green shade.

It also reminds me of how my eyes are an enriched shade of ivory green with flickers of emerald and gold. That unique

shade is from my mother, but I also inherited the rare traits of my father.

Eyes that look no different from a Viper, only instead of vivid lime green, his are as red as freshly flowing blood.

A sight even I've rarely witnessed with my own eyes.

The aroma surrounding us is extra dreamy. Odd way of describing a smell that ignites a sense of mental freedom, but that's the sensation it kindles with every inhale. It makes it difficult to keep walking forward, but I ignore the nagging pull because I can't afford to be distracted.

There's no way I can bring shame to the Guinevere Legacy by falling for such a simple trap... especially when I've already earned my right to be an N.M.U. Attendee.

We've walked for what has to be five minutes. I've been trying to keep track despite the list of distractions. Despite the sight of the end far ahead, it feels as though it's still quite the walk to get there.

We need to be more observant, or we'll end up in a cycle.

Dark magic is one of the roots of N.M.U.

It's the legal institute that allows those with even a pinch of dark magic to have a chance to not only dive into its powerful clutches but to expand it until you're a respectable individual who can be of service to those far from the realms of mundane.

Fae. Demons. Monsters.

The creatures you read in stories and fairytales you thought were but fable. Mysteries and made-up folklore that either left you giggling in happiness at its ending or dreading the moment you close your eyes out of fear of being eaten.

My parents didn't raise us to think they weren't real. We were thrown into it straight away, which may be why my sister came to despise this world where the mundane is all but precious when they carry hidden gifts and treasures that can be expanded on.

Or, in 'common' instances, stolen.

Needless to say, those who wish to ignore the truth hidden in the shadows live a life of blissful ignorance.

Sadly, I can't be one of them.

"Miss Guinevere?" I don't need to turn my head to know who that whimsical voice belongs to.

"Yes, Blair?" I'm not normally social, but I like the calm musical sound of her voice.

"Can you predict how far we are from the door?"

"I'm not sure you'll like my answer."

"We're stuck, aren't we?" Azrael chips in. "Alaric, look forward."

"I'm looking forward."

"You're looking at the roses," Azrael grumbles. "Stare at Miss Guinevere's hair."

"Why would I want to stare at her hair? It's ugly."

"How is her hair ugly when it's the exact shade of those ivory leaves and the shadows that decorate them?" Azrael argues.

"It's just different, alright. Back of the head of Miss Prodigy doesn't make me feel like I'll enjoy an eternity of happiness."

"Good," I note and decide we need to stop.

This endless walking will lead to our doom.

Coming to a stop forces Alaric to bump into me.

“Ow.”

I’m assuming the whole line has to come to a stop with my move, but walking like this is becoming senseless.

“If you weren’t distracted, you wouldn’t have bumped into me,” I mutter and glance over my shoulder to confirm Azrael, Blair, and a few more people in the line have followed my lead.

Some are making similar ‘ow’ and ‘hey’ comments with the abrupt stop, but I don’t have the time to focus on that. I end up centering my attention on Blair, Azrael, and Alaric.

“I think we’re stuck in a loop. If we keep walking, it’ll be a problem,” I voice, though my eyes are specifically looking at Blair’s. The unique shade of blue draws you in, like the open sea. I wonder if she knows how pretty she really is.

“I don’t think we should stay still for too long,” Blair admits, outstretching her hand at the same time as I do. The two of us grab onto our ‘partnered’ twin.

“Huh.” Azrael blinks a few times before he’s looking between Blair and me. “Wait. Why are you guys holding onto us?”

“Look at your brother and tell me why,” I counter while I notice how the once single line is beginning to fall apart. “Shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have stopped.”

Blair follows my gaze, as do at least ten others in the line behind her, to see the chaos happening farther down. Multiple students are moving away from the line formation, their gazes

as dazed as Alaric's expression as they slowly make their way to the rose bushes.

"Plan, Miss Guinevere?" Blair inquires.

"Ophelia," I correct. "As for plans, we have to make the decision. Are we dragging these two?"

"You don't need to drag me," Azrael mumbles, looking at his brother in deep concern. "Alaric! Snap out of it!" He elbows his brother, but he's not snapping out of it. His eyes are so dilated and transfixed with the roses, I know if I let go, he's a goner.

"Your brother is a goner if Ophelia lets him go," Blair points out and pouts her glittering pink lips. "Ophelia? I bet you don't want to be dragged down, but I think we should bring them along."

"Because?" I ask, more out of curiosity than actually caring. If I wanted, I could bring all these students with me to the finish line, but what would be the point of that?

Thanks to the little sister who has to take her older sister's place. We're totally in debt to you.

Please. They'll laugh and say they didn't ask to be saved by some weak bitch with connections.

"Do you believe they want us to stay in a single line for the entirety of the trial?" she inquires.

"No." That was obvious. This path is made to create disparity. "Twos are the max."

"Bingo," she declares and lets go of Azrael's arm so she can grab his hand. Gold vines ignite from Blair's intense focus—the creation of mystical life wrapping around her wrist and proceeding to wrap around Azrael's.

He doesn't look annoyed, but he does look confused.

“Why are you helping us?” I can see the worry in his eyes now. He's looking at his brother, who's in a complete trance. “This can only be the beginning. If I fall into a trance like my brother, we're dead weight.”

“Then try not to,” I conclude as I let go of Alaric and curse under my breath because he's taking off toward the roses.

He crashes right into a black wall—the summoned shadows I ignited with bare thought begin to move him back until he's next to our group.

“Your brother better be nice to me when this is over,” I complain and snatch his hand. The dark wall dissipates until it's a flowing stream of wind, drifting until it spins and coils around Alaric's wrist. Just as quickly, the visible shadow strings of wind wrap around my right wrist, sealing the next spell that has me handcuffed to Mr. Know It All.

“The irony,” I mutter to myself. “This is not how I wanted to be handcuffed, but beggars can't be choosers.”

Blair snickers while Azrael gives a meek smile.

“Sorry,” he apologizes. “Hypnotic spells are Alaric's weakness. He can't fight them off, no matter how hard he tries. He won't realize he's been a victim of it unless someone snaps him out of it.”

“Lovely,” I comment and look at Alaric, who's still staring at the roses like they're a new fascination. “You can just buy us lunch the whole semester, year, or whatever allotted time we spend at N.M.U.” I use my other hand to point to Blair. “And your brother stops calling her Barbie. It's rather insulting when she's prettier than a doll.”

That has Blair grinning from ear to ear.

“You think I’m pretty, Ophelia.”

Her joy makes me frown.

“Never mind.” I turn my attention backward and forward. “From the distance we started from, it should’ve only taken five minutes to reach the gate.”

“Meaning we entered a loop at the beginning?” Blair questions.

“Maybe the middle,” Azrael suggests. “The gate doesn’t look as far as it did when we started.”

“Alright. We need to walk in twos, and instead of walking, we need to run,” I declare while my mind is formulating a plan.

“Alaric is going to be a problem if we run,” Blair brings up. “We have to keep an equal pace, like what we were doing when we were walking, yes?” She’s smarter than one would give her credit for.

“Guess I’m carrying, Alaric,” I mutter and look at Blair. “But can you carry Azrael?”

We stare at him while he glances between the two of us.

“Wait, hold on,” he begins and looks at me like I’ve gone mad. “Have you lost your marbles? You can’t carry Alaric. He’s practically a whole foot taller than you.”

“I’m 5’6”,” I acknowledge.

“Same!” Blair beams.

“We’re 6’3”!”

“And?” I press.

“And probably weigh more than 200 pounds!”

“Guess you don’t see girls weight train where you’re from, huh?” Blair ponders.

Okay, I kind of like her.

“You two are going to carry me and my brother to the gates while managing a level pace run to keep us in sync long enough so we get out of the loop,” he summarizes.

“I think that’s the plan.” Blair looks at me for confirmation.

With a nod, I give Azrael my full attention.

“That’s the only way this is going to work. I carry your brother. Blair carries you. We have to go at a running pace together down its path long enough to get out of the loop. The moment we’re out, there’s a high chance these roses will...” I trail off as my eyes grow wide at the sight of pink mist farther ahead.

“What?” Azrael follows my gaze while Blair gasps.

“Oh, no. We can’t inhale those perfumes.”

“Poison?” I ask for clarification.

“Definitely poison,” she urges.

“I have a better idea,” Azrael pressures as he points to my handcuffed hand while raising his tied wrist with Blair’s. “We need to switch.”

“Elaborate,” I suggest.

“Let me be cuffed to my brother. I may be able to snap him out of it, but until then, let me be connected to him. If I can do it right, I’ll manipulate the bouncy energy around me and Alaric, which will make us light enough for you both to carry.

That way, you guys will be able to run at a tailored pace and summon your dark traits if necessary to protect yourself!”

“So, you’re a critical thinker when pressed for time.” I reward him with a slight smirk. With a twist of my wrist, the handcuffs shatter apart, and I’m passing Alaric to him. “Sounds like a plan, and we have about…” I pause and squint my eyes. “Forty seconds? Give or take five seconds to scream.”

“Let’s go!” Blair urges as she quickly helps tie Alaric and Azrael together.

Once they’re bound, I’m on my knees, and Azrael aids in getting Alaric on my back. Then Blair kneels next to me, and Azrael gets into position.

He takes a few breaths and whispers, “Bolunacia Le More Va Vuke.”

Compared to the immense weight on my back seconds earlier, I can barely feel anything weighing me down. It’s so nonexistent, I’m worried I wouldn’t realize if Alaric fell.

Before I can comment on it, golden vines swiftly wrap around my biceps and waist, strapping Alaric securely against me.

The culprit is Blair, who’s smiling when I give her an intrigued look.

“I have a strong feeling we’d drop their asses and not notice,” she concludes and rises up with me.

“I’d carry no remorse, but I would miss the chance of free lunch every day.”

“Food is more important than mortality,” Azrael complains. “You two are dangero— What the fuck?”

His swearing comment forces us to shift around so we can look behind us.

The sight is frightening.

If the suddenly eerie quietness isn't enough to make us realize we were the only four standing here, the stillness of the students sends us into our plan.

Without comment, Blair and I turn away and begin to execute our plan. Going straight into a sprint, we seem to easily manage, the walls of bushes and roses blending while we focus on the gate that awaits our arrival.

"It's as if they all became statues," Azrael finally announces when two minutes have gone by. "But those behind us weren't hit by the mist yet. Why were they frozen like that?"

"We have been protected by it," I breathe while trying to time my breaths, so I don't get winded too easily.

"You did something, Ophelia?" Blair asks, sounding breathless, but she's still keeping up my pace. I decide to slow down just a smidge, which seems much appreciated by Blair from her expression of relief.

"Before we started, when I took that first step, I summoned a protective barrier. It mimics an aura of sorts, which is why I like it because people normally assume I'm showing off or something," I reveal. "It's something I'm used to doing entering any sort of combat that may invite unfair usage of magic. The aura I release must have been big enough to wrap the four of us in line formation. I didn't think about it until now.

"When I used to train with my sister, I realized quickly how big her spells would be. They covered a lot of ground on

purpose in hopes of getting rid of her target long before the battle had gotten to the good part. That's why I've gotten used to always pushing out a protective chant in my mind. With years of experience, I don't think about it. My body does it without paying mind to its execution."

"Wow..." Azrael struggles to find words. "I can kind of see why you've already gotten accepted to this university."

"Your praise is appreciated," I breathe. "I also want breakfast for at least a week. Alaric's heavy."

"And you were going to carry his full weight," Azrael acknowledges before he gasps. "Look ahead! I think that's the loop!"

We follow his direction, glancing ahead to see a glint of gold floating through the air. It looks more like a ripple in the space, as if one push-through would tear away the illusion we've been plagued with as a trial.

"Ophelia! Hand!"

I'm moving my hand and placing it into Blair's offered one, her entire body beginning to shimmer until her hand is like golden scales. It reminds me of snake skin, and it takes everything not to be distracted as her energy flows around my hand and begins to ignite a layer of black scales upon mine.

I grit my teeth and ignore how my energy is bubbling inside me at this unique sensation of power. My eyes return to the ripple that's approaching us.

"Ready?!" Blair shouts. "Hold your breath!"

I take a deep breath, as does Blair, and I hope Azrael does something to ensure his brother's nose is covered.

There's no time to tell him otherwise because we crash right through the ripple of gold.

Only to be invited into the swarming warmth of thick darkness.



POOLS OF SHADOWS AND INK OF
DESTINY

-OPHELIA-

“O phelia?”

The shrill of panic doesn't come from Blair, Azrael, or even Alaric. The voice is familiar with a lingering sense of anguish.

I'm standing in a room of white with no exit in sight in the boxed space. Inevitably, I have no choice but to turn around and face the woman I didn't think I'd confront so soon.

At least, not in a place like this...

“Odessa.”

I state the name of my twin sister before I meet her eyes of surprise. Unlike my eyes of ivory and twinkles of gold, my sister's eyes blaze like dark rubies amid burning flames. Her pupils become thin as slits while she's stomping toward me, as if she's ready to finish a vendetta placed against me.

The sudden approach doesn't make me flinch. Neither does the way she grabs my shoulders and shakes them viciously.

It only proves this moment is real.

“Wh-What are you doing here?” She frantically moves her gaze from up to down, as though she can't fathom the idea of

me being here. “You can’t be here. You’re not supposed to be here.”

“And where exactly is here?” I have to ask what she’s so frightened about. *The last time I checked, we were in a white box.* “Don’t bother asking how I got here because I have no clue. I was running from rose bush mist carrying Mr. Know It All and balancing an unexpected partnership with a really pretty girl and the tolerable twin of Mr. Know It All.”

“Rosebush mist?” Her eyes lock on mine. “Why were you near roses?”

“Don’t tell me you still have a vendetta against roses,” I question in return.

“Ophelia!” she snaps and is in my face. “Why. Were. You. Near. Roses?!”

I stare into her eyes, trying to search for what my heart yearns for.

“Would have been nice if you said you missed me.”

I see the pain that floods her eyes, enough that those very slits of rage begin to disappear until her pupils are back and dilating.

“Ophelia... that... fuck,” she curses and looks down at me. “You don’t understand.”

“And I probably never will,” I mutter, knowing she won’t share with me what my heart yearns for.

Why did you leave me?

Why was it so easy to abandon me?

Was I not worthy enough as a twin to be at your side?

Or was that my purpose all along?

To be cast aside.

To be but a burden in her way of survival.

Her escape from everything I was forced to shoulder alone.

Does she regret anything?

“I have to go, Odessa.”

Her eyes are wide again as she grips my shoulders.

“Where are you?” she demands. “Are you at home? Maybe... I can figure something out. I can... see what strings to pull. If you just be a bit more patient—”

“Ten years wasn’t enough?” I whisper, realizing how my voice cracks at the end.

She holds my gaze, which shows a glimpse of vulnerability.

“Ten years old. At the stroke of midnight, we discovered we’d have to attend N.M.U. at the age of twenty. Ten years to train. To be prepared for the inevitable. When we reached eighteen, our gifts were awakened, and we promised to have each other’s backs no matter what the Shadows planned for us.”

I dare to smile, the look only making her expression further pained.

“So why did you abandon me?” I whisper the words I’ve been forced to repeat in my mind. “Was it to set me up for failure?”

“No!” She presses as her eyes fill with tears. “I... I had to do it, Ophelia. You need to understand. This... this wasn’t done lightly. This wasn’t how it was supposed to pan out.”

“Meaning you planned to leave,” I conclude. Her eyes widen further at my understanding before she shakes her head.

“Ophelia!”

“That’s all I need to know.”

“Where are you?!”

“At the university.” My tone falls flat, the emotion that dared to portray glimmers of sadness long forgotten.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Don’t lie to me! You can’t qualify for the university. You don’t have the power...” She trails off as she begins to look at my body.

“What?”

I follow her gaze because of the threads of fear that begin to take over the lines of her face. I realize my shoulders bear a cloak of black, and beneath it, I’m completely naked.

Despite the bareness, that’s not what has frightened my sister.

It’s the oozing blood that’s bleeding along my flesh.

At first, it freaks me out. Not enough to leave me running and screaming to the hills, but just enough to have me replicate my sister’s expression of shock... and fear.

Then I’m completely fascinated because the blebs of blood are beginning to unite, creating lines of blood that flow into patterns, swirls, symbols, and unique characters. It starts at my fingers, moving up my hands. Then my wrists are next, followed by my arms. The silence feels catastrophic in nature, especially when we’re pulled into the alluring trance these symbols have sucked us into.

Holding my breath, I wait for it to end as I can feel the beating pain that feels like a drill is being pricked in my flesh a thousand times, but it keeps going.

My chest, neck, breasts, stomach. Runs down my thighs, my legs, and even my feet.

By the time I look up, my sister is speechless as she slowly pulls away.

Her rejection doesn't phase me.

It's the emotion that dances in her eyes that confuses me.

She's not afraid of me.

Nor is she angry.

What I see in her eyes is something I can't grasp coming from her. One of blood. The older twin who got away with freedom.

Envy.

"You're jealous?" I question.

"You... took it."

"Took it?" I'm not following. "Took what?"

"The shadows aren't yours," she emphasizes. "That's why I can't use them. YOU have them."

"Me?" She's not making sense.

"Give it back, Ophelia!" She grabs me again, her hold making me whimper as my pain escalates tenfold. Despite my pain threshold, this feels unbearable. "GIVE IT BACK!"

"LET GO!" I seethe with bitterness that ignites the energy seeking freedom and domination.

It gets only three seconds of control, and that's dangerously enough to cloak the room of white into complete darkness.

My sister is illuminated by some sort of barrier, and thank goodness she is, or I fear I would have killed her by accident.

"The shadows are mine!" she screams. "I lost them that night! Not knowing you have them!"

"I don't get it." I really don't. The pain that's consuming me is making it impossible to keep up with what she's screaming about. "Go away, Odessa."

"You can't attend Nephilim!" she snarls, somehow grabbing me again. Only this time, she yelps as I scream from her touch—the two of us forced to acknowledge the disconnect between us.

"What's happening?"

She stares at me in horror.

"You're taking the trial."

"I have no choice."

"Ophelia! Quit this instant!"

"I can't!" I shout back. "Our family will be banned. I'll be a disgrace. Our next generation will never be allowed to attend."

"You're not strong enough for Nephilim! You don't belong in Nephilim or even Malevolence! None of those realms are destined for your existence."

I don't understand.

Why is she belittling me as if I don't belong anywhere?

"I'm not quitting."

“You don’t belong there!” she screams. “That’s MY place!”

“AND YOU LOST IT WHEN YOU LEFT!” The power overtakes me in a blink, and it takes great self-control to stop myself from hurting her.

She goes from standing on the ground to pressed to the black wall behind her. I’m towering over her, my body no longer normal while shadows dance, and my bleeding flesh now glimmers of gold.

I can only imagine what my eyes are like, their burning sting reminding me I’m still in control. The pain is past the threshold of unbearable, but this heaviness of agony in my heart seems to be stronger.

I feel betrayed.

“If you wish to run from your destiny, so be it.” My voice is unrecognizable as I lean in so close, I can practically smell her fear. ***“I’ll carry the burden for both of us, and if that leads me to death, so be it.”***

I watch as my stick-like finger touches her cheek. The protective barrier sizzles to combat the intense energy my fingernail carries.

It slices through the protective surface, and I enjoy the gasp my sister makes as my fingernail runs down her cheek. The mere press has her skin tainting black as the cut that kindles from the trail of my nail’s tip ignites pain in her frightened expression.

“Until you’re done being a coward, remember me,” I whisper. “You want me? The power you left behind?”

Moving my finger, I point it to my lips, the touch making a cut that encourages the flow of blood that pools in place.

“Come get it.”

“O-Ophelia.”

I move away, the dark essence consuming me. I feel a nagging need to leave, as though my very life depends on it. Spinning around, I have every intention of leaving this place behind.

On giving up on my sister, who I thought had a better reason for leaving me.

“I never betrayed you.”

If only she understood that leaving was an act of betrayal.

“Farewell, Odessa.” I dare to look back, hoping my face—whatever is left of it in this form of shadows—portrays my disappointment in her. “My Shadows awaits.”

“Shadows...” she whispers in confusion before her eyes widen. “Opheli—”

She’s sucked away from the world of darkness I reign.



A GASP ESCAPES ME AS I FALL TO MY HANDS AND KNEES.

My body trembles with pain, making my world spin as I feel the need to puke. Holding it back has me whimpering as I hug myself. The burning sensation rushing through my skin feels like fire pulsing across my flesh.

“Why hasn’t she given up? Her attendance is set in stone. There’s no need to take it this far.”

That voice.

“Are you speaking because you already have a soft spot for the potential Viper?” The deep, toneless response would ignite goosebumps along my skin.

If I wasn't burning to a crisp.

“It's enough!”

“Not until I say so.”

“It's not your final say.”

“Why? Because you feel a certain way, Shadow?”

“D'Angelo!”

“It's Professor D'Angelo.”

The hiss of pain that comes from the familiar male leaves me reacting long before I can control it.

An arm hooks around me, stopping me from pulverizing the tall figure that takes a few steps back at my sudden movement, but I take a sharp inhale.

“Fuck! Break the spell!” The man speaking from behind me shouts, but it's too late. I'm hissing repulsively, the single move igniting shadows that dart in the man's direction.

“Dammit.” The tall figure shouts as the shadows I've summoned work overtime to consume him.

“This is what you get for interfering,” the man behind me mutters in dissatisfaction, but a hand swiftly wraps around the front of my throat, forcing me to look behind to confirm who's holding me back.

To acknowledge the being I'm oddly protecting.

“Little Viper,” Professor North hisses. “Enough.”

The command seals shut the stream of repulsive energy inside me, leaving me to narrow my eyes that continue to sting with lethal energy.

“To think you’d make it this far annoys me,” he admits.

His words make me frown.

Why does that make him smirk?

Before I can try to figure out what’s happening, I’m left in bewilderment at the sudden brush of his lips.

A... kiss?

Confused is an understatement as to why the touch flicks a different switch in me. One that thrums with warmth and steals the agony that screams through every inch of my flesh.

It’s but a single touch.

A few seconds...

A peck that overthrows the reign of darkness rushing through me.

I’m left feeling rejuvenated and not swirling in agony and devastation.

“I’ll meet you at the gates.” His words are just for me with how quietly he speaks.

“Survive, Little Viper, and trust no one.”

There’s a blanket of power in his words, and all I can wonder is if this interaction was a blessing or a curse.

I may never find out. For now, I’m sinking.



THE MOLASSES DEPTHS OF LIFE
AND DEATH

And I'm drowning...

What a way to snap out of whatever hallucination of darkness held me captive earlier.

As much as I'd like to reminisce on confronting my twin sister in one moment and being some 'possessed, overprotective, hissing student defending a professor she just met' the next, my life is really on the line.

Drowning isn't the way I wanted to perish.

Quickly blinking my eyes, which feel strained and heavy, I look up to see a glimpse of light from the water's surface. With every intention of swimming to the surface, I move my limbs a few times, realizing how painful and weak my flailing arms and legs feel.

Either way, I know with a bit of effort, I can make it to the top.

With a nod to myself, I prepare to swim upward, my head lowering for only a second to see the bottom depths that are practically pitch black. It's eerie to stare at, as though there's a whole other undiscovered world down there, but the moment I pull my eyes away, I catch a tiny glint of gold.

Did I imagine it?

Staring at the exact spot yet again, I test my lungs' limits as I remain in place in hopes of seeing that flicker of shimmering gold one more time.

After fifteen seconds, I decide it was just an illusion.

Drowning isn't the way I want to perish.

Intending to swim to the surface, I move my limbs a few times, realizing how painful and weak my flailing arms and legs feel.

Staring at the exact spot yet again, I dare test my lungs' limits as I remain in hopes of seeing that flicker of shimmering gold one more time.

Until I see it.

Something is down there.

Or someone?

The sudden reminder of Blair's golden scales comes to my mind, and I immediately worry it's her way down there.

Wherever those depths lead...

I'm left with deciding to swim to the top or take the risk and dive further in hopes she's both alive and not another six feet under in ocean darkness.

Guess I'll either die feeding my curiosity or be labeled a fool for worrying about a girl I just met.

Pleading with my lungs to hold out a little longer, I dive. Swimming seems more difficult the deeper I go, but I notice the descent invites a spike of my energies that coil and spin in anticipation. That bubbling excitement that makes the shadow magic within me seethe in impatience encourages my

increased pace until my surroundings are nothing but complete darkness.

I'm beginning to regret this decision, especially when I struggle to see the glint of gold, but five seconds later, it not only flickers but radiates a soft glow that proves I'm a few strokes away.

The moment my hand touches the golden light, it spreads and dances, revealing the golden beauty it keeps safe within its protective bubble.

Blair!

Her body is covered in various scratches and bruises, but aside from that, she seems to be in a state of sleep. The golden magic has a thin layer that surrounds her body, which is why she's still breathing, but I wonder how long it would have lasted if I hadn't arrived.

I need to get us up.

Easier said than done, especially when I'm struggling with the ticking need for oxygen.

It doesn't stop me from trying, my hands wrapping around Blair's left hand and tugging her body with a bit of strength. She floats rather effortlessly, which is a relief because I'm losing strength fast.

Wrapping my right hand around her left hand, I begin to use my one arm to swim upward as I kick my legs to the best of my ability. The movement is slow, but I'm making progress.

It's just not enough.

Seeing dark spots in my line of vision, I fight the need to take a gasp in hopes of air. I don't want to admit defeat, but

my stubborn mind is doing everything to ignore the reality that's crumbling with every second that passes.

Even as my vision goes black, and I take those final strides and kicks, I can't accept this is the end.

The pang of frigid pulsations that come from the root of my magic essence triggers a wave of chilled tingles that rush through my body from my head to my toes.

Then there's a twinkle of warmth that begins to spread.

It rushes through my veins, kindling sparks of hope as the warmth combats the chilled atmosphere surrounding me.

When I'm finally able to open my eyes, I confirm I'm not only alive but glowing the same way Blair is.

Holy shit...

My skin is a replica of hers, with golden scales that rush along my flesh like a second layer of skin. It only takes a few seconds of stillness for my body to be fully covered, leaving me gasping in utter awe.

Then I remember I'm underwater.

"Shit!" I curse but realize I'm able to talk—able to breathe. "Of all things pure and darkness... I'm alive."

Taking a few breaths to appease the burning ache my lungs are suffering, I catch onto the way Blair's eyes further squeeze together before she groans.

"Ow," she moans and fights to open her eyes at least halfway. It takes her a few seconds to adjust her line of vision my way, but when she realizes it's me, her eyes grow wide like saucers.

“Ophelia?” she questions before she’s looking around. “Holy shit! Where... where did my older brother go?” She’s still searching around as if we’re not in the depths of dark waters.

As much as I want to interrupt her, a part of me wants to remain quiet.

Was the trial made to force us to confront our siblings or loved ones in general? I wonder if Blair saw Professor North or Professor D’Angelo.

“Ophelia!”

“Hmm?” I snap out of my thoughts, only to realize Blair’s facing me with her hands on my cheeks.

“H-How are you using my gift?”

“Gift?” I question in confusion. “This isn’t your doing?”

“Me? I was knocked out,” she acknowledges the obvious, making me realize this may be my doing without realizing it.

“Oh...” The cat may be out of the bag, but weirdly enough, I don’t mind if Blair knows about my capabilities. It’s really odd to me because I don’t trust easily. This also isn’t the place to put yourself out there unless you want to be hit with your ultimate weakness.

Blair just seems... different. Why?

“Why are you here?” She looks confused. “This... we’re in the water depths, yes?”

“Mhmm.” I look up, barely seeing the glint of light from the surface. “I think we’re at the bottom of it.”

“I must have passed out...” she mutters to herself and frowns. “Did you find me?”

“When I woke, I saw a glint of gold down here. Wasn’t sure and was going to go up, but I saw it again,” I explain.

“Wait...” She’s putting the pieces together. “Did you venture down here because you thought it was me?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I stare upward, wondering what will face us when we do reach the surface.

“Ophelia.”

Lowering my eyes so they meet her softened gaze, I admire the way her eyes twinkle with gratefulness.

“Thank you, Ophelia.”

“I thought there’s a saying that pretty people can’t die,” I mutter, hoping we can move on.

It feels weird being thanked by someone.

When you live in a community that assumes you’ll be of aid because you’re from a powerful family with a reputation, it’s awkward when someone actually acknowledges the goodness you do for them.

She places her finger on her lips, making me question her with a brow raise. She then smiles.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

My secret... she means she won’t tell anyone about this?

I slowly nod.

“Let’s swim back up,” she encourages with haste. “But when we get to the top, let’s cut out our magic entirely.”

Seems like a smart plan.

Nodding in agreement, we find the strength to swim upward. By the time we’re closing in on the surface, I’m

mentally accepting that I would have died trying if I'd tried to get up here by myself.

Whatever Blair's gift consists of can manipulate the pressure outside her golden barrier walls. If I'd come up on my own accord, my body would have become a squished vessel in nanoseconds.

I wouldn't have realized I was dead until it already happened.

Approaching the surface, we take deep breaths as we cancel out the flow of magic that shields our bodies. The golden scales fade to pure black before sliding off our flesh like old skin. It floats downward to the dark abyss of the waters below while we pierce the surface of what I quickly realize is...

"Water fountain?" I breathe and slowly catch my breath.

"Talk about mind fuckery," Blair grumbles. "Let's get out quickly."

Agreeing, we rush to get out of the fountain water that's tainted with hints of purple. I curse when my leg gets caught in a bundle of vines. Reaching down, I quickly manage to get myself untangled, though my attention briefly stares at the petals of a tiny rose.

Another person's gasping is enough to peel my attention away, but I do a quick reach down to ensure my leg is completely rid of the vines. Multitasking leads to me noticing a male student swimming to the fountain's stone edge and pulling himself out.

"Fuck," he curses when he's finally on the ground. "Where the fuck is my partner?" he questions and looks our way.

Blair is rising to her feet while I take a moment to sit on my knees. Quickly tucking my hands in my pockets, I brush my wet palms on the inner fabric of my pockets. It's all a distraction because my body is reacting weirdly.

Something doesn't feel right.

"Ophelia?" Blair looks at me in confusion, but I need to zone her out for a few seconds.

Something is coming.

I can't justify my next movement as I tackle Blair onto the ground.

"Oomph!" Our fall is cushioned by a patch of grass, but I groan in protest because my body is killing me.

"My bad," I groan.

"Should I ask?" Blair ponders.

"Nope. I do that a lot."

"Tackling people to the ground a lot or acting upon your instincts a lot?" she inquires and smiles my way.

Yeah, I could get used to her company.

"Both."

She manages to shrug.

"I can deal with that," she concludes and helps us sit up. "Now why did— Oh hell's gate of all mercy..."

"Hell's gate of all mercy?" That's the first time I've heard that saying. "Isn't it supposed to be Oh heaven's gate of— Fuck."

Following her frightened gaze leaves me no choice but to look back at the fountain we'd just pulled ourselves out of.

Only to see it flowing with thick molasses liquid.

That's not what makes my stomach churn in disgust.

It's watching the male student we just watched come out of that fountain remain completely still with a shocked expression on his face.

"I... failed..." he whispers as tears of blood begin to run down his cheeks.

Neither of us understands what's happening until half his body begins to slide off his bottom half, the top layer falling back into the fountain of black.

The collision of flesh and the thick molasses makes a sizzling noise while steam and bubbles ignite from his body's descent into the thick liquid.

It only gets worse when vines of green that decorated the fountain so intricately weave around the bottom half of his body until it's lifted and going down the same path his other half went.

The smell of burned flesh makes Blair gag, but she covers her mouth and moves her gaze away from the horrifying scene.

I'm both horrified and fascinated by how this garden works, but my instincts are nagging at me again, which is why I'm up and grabbing Blair's arm.

"We need to get farther back," I instruct.

She doesn't question me for a second as we begin to move away from the fountain. We only manage ten steps before something pierces the surface with every intention of escaping the black muck of desolation.

All we can do is watch, the figure looking human in figure while their magic energy is at the peak of its reign.

Their eyes are glowing, their body burning with marks of red, but despite them using every effort to escape the liquid's clutches, the vines are already making their way to seize him.

They move swiftly around his legs, taking over as they wrap around and around. Those same vines multiply, sporting new ones with black thorns that sink into this individual's flesh, causing them to scream in shrill agony.

There's no possible way out as the vines wrap and pierce this person's head, their screams haunting as they echo through this courtyard.

"No! No! I... I made it this far! I was abandoned! My partner abandoned me! I was there! At the bottom! I deserve... to LIVE!" His screams get an octave higher, the pain reflecting in his shrilled pleadings for freedom.

It's no use, though.

This fountain has decided he's their chosen prey.

One second, he screams a final cry, then with a blink, he's gone. The only remnant of his existence is the bubbling spot that gurgles away until the last bubble blobs and leaves the fountain water in complete stillness.

As if that wasn't enough confirmation that we watched two people perish, it's the sudden shift of color as the black liquid becomes a dark red.

Blood.

The metallic scent is the strongest I've ever smelled, but despite the horrible display, I do my due diligence not to look away.

*To acknowledge that death has plagued these very lands
and we're survivors of its merciless wrath.*

This is proof that I made the right decision to go after Blair.

Or that would have been our end.

Blair's hand slips into mine, making me realize it's as trembling as the rest of her body.

I expect her eyes to be overflowing with tears, but I'm surprised to see the glint of perseverance as she stares back at me.

"Thanks..." Her voice is but a whisper. "For not abandoning me."

There's more to those words.

Hidden sorrow and immense agony, I hope to have the opportunity to discover more.

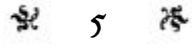
Squeezing her hand back, I give her a smile I haven't given to my own parents in years.

"Shall we head to the gates?"

"Yes."

One last glance at the fountain shows its normalcy once more—the water clear blue, the vines a wondrous green. The eerie sight is no longer present.

It's just a normal fountain.



GATES OF SNAKES AND ROSES

-OPHELIA-

“**W**e’re back on the path.”

The very path we ran away from is now beneath our feet, yet the surroundings are nothing like before. Desolation is but a word of mockery when trying to compare the decaying madness surrounding us. The stench of death is thick in the air. The stone path beneath us is decorated with black mold and debris.

Those alluring roses of striking red and those ivory vines and leaves are all but a mirage, for their remnants are pure black with droplets of toxic waste.

Only the sky seems unchanged, the everlasting layer of dusk displaying tiny twinkles of starlight. It’s what allows me to realize what we’re witnessing isn’t some sort of scene from a dark fairytale.

This is all real.

The buzzing sounds don’t come from the fireflies that once flew around in anticipation but from flies drawn to the decaying scent that haunts us.

It forces us to accept what I’ve been fighting desperately to ignore.

The skeletons.

They decorate this tainted garden that was once filled with life. Each skeleton is in a different pose—some standing at attention while others are mid-stride. It's the skeletons that are perched over the previously bloomed rose bushes that confirm who they are.

The students.

Our peers.

Those who thought they could survive this trial of entering the gates of Nephilim Malevolence University.

Could this be where they claim all the dead that host the school's dark power? Or maybe this is how they keep a deal with the dark fae we may be given the opportunity to learn from?

There are so many questions that have to be asked and wondered, but it's hard to even think straight being surrounded by this sight.

“They warned us,” Blair whispers, sounding rather guilty. “Don't smell the roses.”

“Do you think we'll deal with worse once we enter N.M.U?” I ponder.

Am I afraid?

A little bit.

All the books I've read and the various lessons my parents forced upon me don't portray the university in this gothic element. I knew death could be a possibility for anyone who fails the challenges that are presented to you.

Never did I expect so many to perish simply at the entry into the university.

“I’m not sure,” Blair admits. “It’s frightening. All we know is that we have a gift and abilities that can be manipulated in our favor. Aside from what we’ve been taught to protect ourselves or attack a few enemies, we lack knowledge of this world.”

She reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.

“Weird to admit, I’m not afraid of facing death.”

“Then what are you afraid of?” I ponder as I lightly squeeze her hand in return.

“Being stuck to live in this world of decay that is all but a cycle in time.”

Suddenly, it clicks.

“Wait...” I whisper. “You’re not saying...”

“The students. I don’t think all of them were living,” she whispers hesitantly. “They were just...”

“Decoys... playing the part they’ve played since they... Fuck.”

Since they died.

It begins to make sense in my mind.

Some just followed the lead without asking questions, and other students approached the roses as if we hadn’t been warned not to do so.

“Alaric and Azrael?” I wonder.

“Azrael seemed real,” Blair admits. “Alaric though... I’m not sure?”

I slowly nod while I take one more glance around.

“Let’s end this,” I offer with a look of determination.

“Hope this means you’re my roommate,” she replies and sweetly smiles. “Nice to be around someone who kind of gets me. Most people assume I’m stupid or something. I guess it’s the golden hair or that I look like a Barbie doll.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid.” *Far from it.* “I think people simply don’t want to acknowledge you can potentially be smarter than them. Assumptions only feed egos. It doesn’t help them hide what they lack and fear others will discover with one glance.”

“You’re really knowledgeable.”

“I try to be,” I admit. “Frankly, I know a lot of wise shit from books. Well, that and dark fantasy, but don’t tell my parents that. They would kill me if they knew the dark smut I read.”

Now she’s laughing, and the whimsical sound makes me feel alive in an abandoned place of hopelessness.

“Monster smut is down my alleyway.”

“Shut up!”

We begin walking as we keep on high alert of our surroundings. I’m a bit giddy to meet someone who enjoys the same reading genres I do.

Especially smutty romances that make me wish my sex life was a lot more eventful than a journey through the Sahara Desert.

It makes confronting something frightening a tad easier to swallow down.

“Do you know how hard it is to hide all my monster dildos in my luggage and not be caught during security check?”

“Now, how did you do that?” I’m curious because it was a bit of a mission to hide my lovely collection of vibrators. “I kind of made mine into snakes.”

She’s completely shocked by my words.

“S-Snakes?”

“My precious pets,” I say the words as if I’m speaking another language that has a romanticized tone to it. “My security check associate was female. One look and she said, ‘fuck this shit’ and let me through.”

“My security check was a female, too,” Blair admits with a giggle. “She looked at the magic X-ray machine, then back at me while I gave her the sweetest smile, then let me through.”

“No sins were committed,” I declared with a snicker. “Maybe it doesn’t hurt to look like a Barbie,” I suggest with a wink. “Do you dress like that because it’s your style?”

“Sort of,” she admits. “I used to dress kind of like you do. The problem with that is it draws attention to me from the wrong element.”

“Too seductive?” I inquire.

“Yes,” she confesses, but there’s a dose of mystery in her eyes, even at a side glance. “It brought negative attention from those far too close to home.”

The way my lips set in a frown makes her smirk as she shifts her gaze to see my knowledgeable eyes.

“Sucks when you’re the younger sibling, huh?” she whispers. “You’re sometimes pushed under the rug in this world. Even if you’re desperate to be heard.”

“Blair...”

I secretly make a vow to kill her brother... by accident, of course.

“Is N.M.U. like an escape?” I dare to ask.

“Sort of.” She thinks about it. “At first, I kind of wanted to attend so I could find a boyfriend who’d protect me from all the scary ‘monsters’ in our world.”

She’s looking forward, but I can only imagine what’s playing in the depths of her mind.

The flashbacks, the irony, the panic, and the fear of being alone with a sick predator that shares the same blood as you.

“Then I had a really bad experience with a guy. Sweet and kind. Gave off the impression that he’d be the perfect knight-in-shining-armor persona. I could envision a life with him, honestly. That’s how solid his personality was and the credentials of power he carried.”

I wonder what happened?

“I didn’t realize it was a setup,” she confesses. “Just another way to hurt me. An act of betrayal from the very man who was making my life utterly miserable.”

“All I need is five seconds to murder him,” I emphasize with narrowed eyes.

She laughs. “If we manage to graduate from this university alive, you can be first in line. Hopefully, my father hasn’t killed him already.”

“Wait. Your parents found out about it?” We’re closer to the gates, so I know we’re pressed for time.

“My father did.” Her smile spreads as she turns her attention to me. “That’s kind of why I’m here, and he isn’t.”

“His punishment was to lose out on coming to N.M.U.?” I’m not sure that’s a worthy enough punishment for raping your younger sister.

“That and being in jail. At least, that’s what my mother stated before dropping me off. I think she’s still in denial, but then again, she was right behind my father when he opened the door mid-act.” She shrugs as though it’s not a big deal, though I’m sure it is. “I actually think she wants to defend him, but when the victim is tied to the bed, blindfolded, and unable to even scream, you really can’t blame them. Unless you’re intentionally blind and encouraging the act.”

“So... if your mom goes missing too, you wouldn’t be hurt, right?”

Her smile grows.

“You’re a protective friend, aren’t you?” she assumes.

“I wouldn’t know,” I admit. “I didn’t have any friends. If you consider me one after this, I guess you’ll be my first real friend.”

“Why is that?” Her deep frown doesn’t suit her face at all.

“My parents are obsessed with our legacy. My purpose was to maintain it at all costs. My sister and I were born into such a hyper-fixated reality, which made having friends a burden. A distraction from our grand role in life. I was the youngest. Born less than a minute after my twin sister. You’d think parents would treat us equally regardless that we’re twins, but that wasn’t the case. I was the underdog, while the weight of our continued reign in the realms of power was on

my older sister. That was until she disappeared when we got our gifts at eighteen.”

“She disappeared or ran away?” Blair asks for clarification.

“Honestly, no one knows,” I confess and shrug my shoulders helplessly. “As her twin, everyone assumes I should know what happened, you know? We think alike. We have some sort of connection that makes us know the other is still alive and well. Despite all the logistics around it, I can’t fathom why she left.”

“Doesn’t it feel like she abandoned you?” Blair mutters.

“It does.” No point in lying about it. “She left out of the blue, and the weight was left for me to bear alone. Attempting to meet your parent’s expectations are difficult, but when you have another who’s by your side through the highs and lows, it makes it doable. You have the validation that you’re not alone. When she left, there was no one else to lean on because my suffering was deemed an excuse to get out of what I was destined to do. With one sibling disappearing without a trace, I think my family was frightened I’d follow the lead.”

“Then your legacy would go down the drain,” Blair mutters in disappointment. “You’re angry at your sister, aren’t you?”

“Would it be weird to admit I’m not sure?” I offer in return.

“It’s not weird. Just that I wouldn’t blame you if you were upset with her.”

“Honestly, I can’t say I’m mad when I can mentally grasp why she decided to dip. That’s the logical side of me, though.” I slow my steps until we come to a stop.

Blair follows my lead, but instead of looking at the golden gates a few steps away from us, her eyes are on me.

“What about the side of you deep within?” she questions with sternness. “The hidden persona we all carry deep within our cores that influences the dark energies and essence we harvest into reality through magic and dark art. Does that side think what your sister did was okay?”

I don’t answer.

“Or does she harvest a level of anger that, if given one opportunity to strike, would burn the world around her to prove how your sister’s actions really hurt you?”

My eyes finally meet her blue ones.

“Because if I were in your shoes, my anger would most certainly override all levels of logic,” she admits.

“If you had the chance, would you kill your brother with that uncontrollable rage?” I whisper the sensitive question.

“No,” she admits. “But who said I wanted him to die?” There’s a flicker of danger in her words, and I can see but a glimmer of the burning rage she hides so flawlessly beneath her innocent appearance. “If I suffered for years in silence, he’d have to endure the same if not worse.”

She slowly looks away, her eyes now taking in the golden metal gates before us.

“If the tables were turned, he’d never give me an ounce of sympathy. Instead, he’d slit my throat and cry to the heavens that someone else stole my light.” She bites her bottom lip for a moment, and her expression is hard to read. “And the sad part of it all, everyone would believe him, even if his very hands were cloaked with my blood.”

“But they would have never believed you if the evidence was right in their faces,” I grumble and follow her gaze.

“That’s why I now stand here with you,” she announces, as if this is an accomplishment she didn’t think she could achieve. “And now I know why I want to graduate from here. Not in hopes of finding a knight in shining armor who will save me from my enemies. I’m here to become the very source of power everyone’s frightened of. To become a Viper who is respected and treated like royalty in a world that only bows to power.”

“With power, you can get anything you desire,” I comment, agreeing with everything she just stated.

“And once you’ve forced others to acknowledge that power, no one will dare steal it away from you,” she concludes. “Unless they wish to perish by your hands.”

We let go of each other’s hands, standing taller as we acknowledge how radiant the gates look from this distance.

Roses decorate the stone walls of the gates, and the ivory shade of greenery from the vines and leaves proves that from that gate onward, there is the flow of life.

“I feel like there should be one more test,” Blair confesses.

“Wouldn’t put it past them,” I reply with a taunting smirk. “Are your instincts tingling like mine?”

“They are,” she confesses. “And I don’t like feeling as if I’m about to di—”

Fear paralyzes me, but that’s not until I’m not only in front of Blair protectively but inches from the biggest cobra I’ve ever witnessed.

Not only is this massive creature towering over us, but its giant head is inches from my face. Its venomous eyes bore into mine, the menacing slits in its neon green eyes emphasizing how impatient this creature is to feast on its next meal that's before its hissing mouth.

The sound makes my ears want to bleed, the agonizing sound making me grit my teeth.

Or else I'd be hissing right back at it like I did to Professor D'Angelo.

It opens its mouth, revealing the full set of top and bottom teeth and those specifically poisoned fangs that are ready to pulverize us in a single move.

Tilting my head farther up, I narrow my eyes, which begin to sting while the dark essence in the depth of my core is seething to combat this visible enemy. Having a stare-off with a creature that could inject poison out of the back of its throat and leave you melting in seconds is a lethal gamble to play, but after everything we've been through, we have no choice but to take our chances.

If we're destined to reach the real gates of N.M.U., then we'll survive this final endeavor.

If not... we did the best we could.

Holding my breath at the approaching movement of the snake, I stand completely still, awaiting our end.

Poke.

I blink my eyes, feeling the spike of combative energy burning inside me suddenly deflate like a balloon. The way my shoulders drop and my lips pout makes the snake move its head from side to side hypnotically.

“Um...” Blair’s calm voice proves she saw exactly what I did. “Did the snake just bump your nose?”

“Uh... yes?” It most certainly wasn’t an illusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means she likes you.”

We look to our left from where the voice comes from. A tall man with pure white hair heads toward us. He has to be 6’5” in height, his body slender yet showing visible lines of muscle thanks to the fitted white dress shirt that’s tucked into his black dress pants. The black tie around his collar is loose, and the black spectacles sitting on his nose dip down his nose the moment he comes to a stop. Fixing his glasses becomes a priority as he uses his two fingers to slide them back properly on his face.

I’m drawn to his overall appearance, the tattoos that run along his neck an attention stealer. His whole outlook makes him look like an extremely smart bad boy ready to play the hero instead of the villain.

I wouldn’t admit it to him, but he’s kind of hot, like Professor North—who I obviously despise because he hates my existence.

Sliding his hands out of his pocket, I notice his fingers have similar tattoos that match the detailed artistry of his neck marking. He’s wearing a few rings, the onyx jewelry glinting as he fixes his white locks, which are styled to one side while the sides of his head are buzzed off, giving him a slick side-swept undercut.

“First time our university’s Mascot has shown mercy on a student in about twenty years,” he announces and looks at me with intrigue. “You’re a Guinevere, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I calmly answer.

“Your family always has an intriguing immunity to snakes. Not sure if it’s something in your DNA or a magical trait, but reptiles, in general, adore your family line,” he summarizes.

“Hiss!”

My side glance makes the creature bow its head to my very feet, making me frown at its submissive nature.

“There it is,” the man announces, drawing my attention to him as he suddenly has my chin in his grasp and my head tipped upward so he can look into my eyes. “Slits of death,” he growls low, the sound igniting shivers that run down my spine.

My heart skips a few beats while the energy pulsing between us makes me dizzy.

“No doubt about it. You have to be a Viper,” he speaks with nothing but praise.

I catch onto the black glint from above us a second before I’m pulled into the man’s arms and spun around in time to miss the striking bolt that leaves a black burned spot in the place where the man was standing.

“Now, now,” he repeats the word like he’s saying ‘tsk-tsk’ to the cloaked man coming out from the opening golden gates. “What has the headmaster said about that temper of yours, Orpheus? It’s really detrimental to act before using that brain of yours.”

“If you stop touching what’s mine, I won’t have to snipe you,” Professor North replies as he removes the hood from his head to confirm his presence.

Our eyes briefly met, and I can imagine the flash of relief in his eyes that scan me from head to toe. The moment he

realizes I'm still in his comrade's grasp, he's seething.

"You shouldn't be touching the students, Professor Blackbird."

"Touching the students?" he exaggerates the gasp and hugs me further. "I was all but saving this student from death."

"I wasn't dying," I point out the obvious while this Professor Blackbird grins devilishly.

"You were facing death in the face a minute ago. I think that counts as dying."

"Or you can just admit you enjoy watching your colleague over there scowl at the sight of you touching the woman he likes," Blair points out.

Peering over at her, I realize she has her hands crossed over her chest, looking almost bored with this new development.

"I don't like anyone!" Professor North declares. "Can't possibly like a student. No less a child."

"I'm twenty."

"I'm thirty," he snaps back.

"I'm twenty-five and a half," Professor Blackbird sweetly declares and only hugs me tighter. "Aww. You're but a baby. Would you date an old geezer like Orpheus over there? Probably against the administrative rules, but unlike him, I don't mind being a ruler breaker," he offers and turns my head by the chin, so I have no choice but to acknowledge how our lips are inches apart.

My cheeks flush at the closeness, but it's the warmth that spreads down my body to 'other' areas that makes me want to squirm away from him.

“You know, I could make you feel good and protect you from all the hidden secrets this university has to offer.”

Hidden secrets...

“I can protect myself,” I note.

“I agree,” he smirks. “But it’s a turn-on when you’re protected by a villain, isn’t it?”

“Who said you were the villain of my story?”

“I’m the villain of everyone’s story, Darling Nightmare,” he reveals like some sort of hidden secret. “And I’ll most certainly be yours if that unfazed personality of yours further turns me on.”

“Delightful,” I say without moving my gaze from his. “I’m up for the challenge.”

The tension between us is both insulting and highly addicting.

I’m a sicko to say I like it.

“No wonder why the administration is talking about you,” he mutters with an odd pout. “You’re dang— AH!”

He’s picked up by the golden cobra and thrown back until he crashes into the wall. A silver barrier emerges last minute to cushion the impact, but he falls straight into a bunch of rose bushes.

“Orpheus!” he cries out and hisses as he fights to get out of the vine bushes.

Professor North, on the other hand, is now in my face.

“No flirting with the professors of the school,” he snarls furiously.

“I wasn’t flirting,” I argue.

“Yes, you were!” he counters.

“How was I flirting? Give me an example.” Why do I love poking at this man’s ruffled feathers?

“You...” he begins and can’t put the words together to accuse me. The way I smile has him pointing in my face. “Instead of causing mischief, finish the trial.”

“We did,” I argue.

“You did not! You’re still standing here, and the gate is farther behind me. Neither of you has reached the gate, meaning if I truly wanted, I could simply knock you out, and you’d fail.”

Instead of feeling threatened by his words, I point at his chest, leaving him surprised as I lean right into his face.

“You said you’d meet me at the gate,” I barely whisper and watch the way his cheeks begin to flush. “So I’m meeting you.” Pulling away entirely, I walk around and past him, forcing him and his colleague to see Blair is already at the gate with what looks to be a smaller version of the cobra from earlier.

“Ophelia! This snake is so cute!” she squeals. “It likes my golden scales. Look!” She lets a few scales emerge across the flesh of her left hand.

That immediately grabs the cobra’s attention as it wraps around her hand and admires the twinkling flesh that glimmers despite the lack of light.

“Does she have a name?” I wonder as I reach her and am surprised this little creature was the massive predator ready to destroy us.

“Not sure, but if not, we’ll give her one!” Blair vows. “Are you done flirting with those professors?”

“I wasn’t flirting,” I mumble and watch the way Blair smirks.

“Mhmm,” she replies and leans inward to whisper, “You didn’t even realize he wanted you distracted so you wouldn’t reach the gates because he’s jealous, did you?”

I can’t combat her because I hadn’t considered that.

“As your new friend and partner at N.M.U., I’ll make sure your pussy doesn’t distract you,” she says with a wink.

“Blair.”

“Oh, look! We made it to the gates,” she dramatically announces. “We finished!”

Now that she mentions it, I’m left wondering if we completed the entrance trial.

Looking back at Professor North, who’s approaching us with his scowling face, I catch onto Professor Blackbird, who is walking our way and pulling out thorns that are embedded deep in his flesh.

“Why are we best friends again?” he questions Professor North when they reach us at the same time. “Professor D’Angelo was supposed to be here, not me. You’re supposed to praise and worship me for coming to your aid instead of being matched with that prick of an ancient professor.”

“Thanks,” Professor North declares with a dismissive eye roll. Those eyes of dusk are back on me. “Sadly to admit, you still failed.”

“What?” Blair gasps before laying the golden cobra snake around her neck like it isn’t a living creature that could choke

her to death. “What did we miss?”

“Do not touch the roses,” he repeats as if we’ve forgotten. “Doesn’t mean we expected you to come to the gates empty-handed.”

When Blair and I remain silent, Professor Blackbird decides to enlighten us while he crosses his arms over his chest.

“We all know how black magic works, yes?” he prompts. “Give and you shall receive. Take and you’ll be expected to pay back what you have stolen. Everything in life is an exchange, meaning, upon your arrival at the gates, you’re expected to give something as an exchange.”

“You’re trying to say we were supposed to bring something from the chaos we just endured to exchange for our acceptance,” Blair concludes. “Yes?”

“Yes.” Professor North states as he begins to grin like he’s won some sort of bet.

That taunting gaze grinds my gears, but I tame myself, for patience is the key to overcoming a trap set out for you.

Blair and I exchange a look before she points to the golden snake that’s her new living accessory.

“Then Ophira counts, yes?”

The two professors have no choice but to stare at her, then the snake, and then back at Blair.

“Ophira?” Professor Blackbird eventually inquires.

“Hebrew for gold,” Blair reveals. “Besides, I think she’d be a good pet for Ophelia and me.”

“Are you insinuating that you’re going to steal a key piece in our entry process, Miss Lysander?” Professor North scolds.

“Can’t steal something that’s already been claimed,” Blair replies in a matter-of-fact tone. She pets Ophira with a proud smile. “Ophira... wanna come to school with me? Not sure if it’s gonna be fun like this place of repetitive death and misery, but I’ll take care of you.”

“Hisssss.” The golden cobra seems excited about the new journey.

The way I’m fighting the darndest not to smile from ear to ear makes Professor North’s expression go sour with scorn.

“Miss Guinevere, I’d be more worried about myself than smiling like a fool who thinks she’s won the lottery.” Professor North’s snarky remark makes Professor Blackbird chuckle.

“Your jealousy is making you short-sighted, Orpheus.”

“What?” he looks to his colleague with annoyance. “Just because she’s guaranteed a spot doesn’t mean she’ll be rewarded for not following the key components of acceptance into N.M.U., Daemon.”

Professor Daemon Blackbird and Professor Orpheus North.

I can only assume Professor Blackbird is new because I’ve never heard of him being spoken of outside the university walls.

Unlike Professor North, who is a celebrity for being a young prodigy... but hold on. Didn’t Professor Blackbird say he’s twenty-five and a half? Why isn’t anyone talking about him being younger and carrying the “Professor” title?

“You don’t smell the evidence,” he concludes and even wrinkles his nose.

“Smell?” Professor North looks at him with a scrunched face, only to take a few whiffs of the air. I notice Blair is doing the same, the three of them all looking at me to the point I’m lifting my arms and checking to see if I smell.

“I put deodorant on before the chaos,” I announce. “So, if I’m a little sweaty, you can’t use that against me.”

Blair has a playful smirk on her lips, but the two professors are exchanging a look.

“You have something,” Professor North mutters as his eyes narrow on me.

“Do I?” I ponder innocently, yet I know he catches the slight uplift of the corners of my lips.

“You’re a sneaky little Nightmare, aren’t you?” Professor Blackbird praises with a proud grin. Leaning forward, he can’t hide that excited glint in his expression. “Show the goods, and I’ll make sure you don’t get homework for a week.”

A nice bargain, but...

“What if you’re not my professor?” I offer the obvious possibility.

“I’ll make it happen,” he vows.

“Daemon,” Professor North groans. “We have no control over that.”

“Ignore him,” Professor Blackbird brushes him away. “Anything else, Princess?”

“I like Nightmare better,” I note and gesture to Blair. “She doesn’t get homework, either, and we have a deal.”

“You may last a bit at N.M.U. if you act the way you have this entire trial, Miss Guinevere,” he praises, then leans in to whisper, “Or should I refer to you as *Ophelia*?”

Shivering inducing, panting wetting voice activated.

“I’m gonna murder you,” Professor North snarls as he tugs Professor Blackbird away from me. “Either present your exchange or accept your loss, Miss Guinevere.”

“I don’t like losing,” I admit and slide my hand into my left pocket.

With their attention still on me, I pull my hand out and open it up to reveal a single red rose. A few of its petals fall in the palm of my hand, but the shape of the delicate piece is evident.

The two looked completely shocked while Blair gawks at me in disbelief.

“W-Wait. They said we shouldn’t touch the roses,” she reminds me. “Ophelia? How did you do that?”

“They did say we shouldn’t touch the roses,” I begin while my eyes look past Professor North and Professor Blackbird to see a woman in a golden cloak approach us.

As if sensing the shift in the air, their attention shifts to acknowledge the woman with pale white skin, sapphire curly locks, and burning orange eyes. She’s taller than both professors, standing at 6’8” in height. It leaves me to wonder if she has Nephalem traits or potentially a Nephilim God since the majority of them are extremely tall.

She stands there in wait, and I realize she wants me to finish what I was saying.

“Not to touch the roses of the ivory bushes,” I express, though my eyes are on our new guest. “No one said we couldn’t touch the roses along the fountain’s vines.”

The woman proceeds to raise her hands.

To applaud my declaration.

“It’s surprising that it’s been ten years since another student figured that out,” the woman announces and gives a blissful smile that lightens her entire face. “Isn’t that right, Orpheus? You were the last student to figure that out with Daemon as your partner, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Headmaster Atlas,” he tries to hide his displeasure with the admission and quickly adds, “And it’s Professor North.”

“Yes, yes.” She seems only more pleased with his backhanded comment. Her sunset eyes land back on me. “I did have my hopes up when I looked at the list of attendees to see your name on the list, Miss Guinevere, but your performance was an intriguing watch for myself and the Nephilim and Malevolence Elders. It was enough that they wished for me to personally accept you and Miss Lysander into the university firsthand.”

Wow. Wasn’t expecting that.

“Surely there’s been other students who’ve shown similar potential and performance,” I voice in an attempt to bring down the level of praise we’re getting. I didn’t think it was a brilliant performance of that sort.

We were just trying to survive.

“Interesting enough, there hasn’t yet,” she announces. “You two are the first and fastest time of this year’s students.”

“No one else has made it to the gates yet?” Blair questions in surprise as we share a look.

I hope Azrael makes it.

“Not yet,” she confesses. “Many are still in the Valley of Shadows. I’m positive it’ll take them another hour or two before they reach the fountain.”

I’m baffled.

“I’ll gladly go through your entire performance once we’ve finalized the official student list for this year’s N.M.U. acceptees. That will be in a few hours. Until then, I’ll gladly escort you both to the front desk, where you can complete your finalization documents and inform your families of your official acceptance.”

“Hisssss.”

We all watch Ophira as she moves from Blair’s shoulders over to mine, wrapping around my neck before her head slithers up until she’s on the top of my head.

“Can we keep Ophira, or is that against the rules?” Blair asks Headmaster Atlas.

“Ophira?” Headmaster Atlas inquires. Peering over to Professor North and Professor Blackbird, they decide to enlighten her.

“They named the snake,” Professor North grumbles.

“Miss Lysander used Ophira as her living exchange,” Professor Blackbird notes. “Extremely smart, don’t you think?”

“Very,” Headmaster Atlas admits. “Must thank Miss Guinevere for that.”

“Why would we thank her?” Professor North has a vendetta against me. He has to with his cocky annoyed attitude.

“Ophira, as we’d call her, is the eldest of her nest. That means she’s not only the strongest but is untameable.”

“Untameable?” I question as Blair and I look at Ophira, who is hissing away. It’s hard to see her because she’s on top of my head, but from the way Blair is moving her head, I can assume Ophira is moving from side to side.

“If she’s untameable, why has she been so obedient since Ophelia confronted her?” Blair asks the prime question we’re all yearning for an answer to.

“The rose,” Headmaster Atlas reveals. “The properties of these roses, which are living, have a different effect than the ones from the courtyard gardens that are of the dead. These roses that you see mark the gates as safe, and those who have their lingering scent upon them are off-limits from the strike of harm.”

“Meaning, since Ophelia had the rose in her pocket and confronted Ophira, she marked us both safe, and that was a signal to say we’re harmless,” Blair summarizes.

“Yes,” Headmaster Atlas agrees with a bob of her head. “That and she may like Miss Guinevere’s energy. There are very few gifted snake tamers, but it’s very easy to discover a student or two who are rather immune to the dangerous strike of any fae-tainted snake.”

“Fae-tainted snake?” I can only wonder what that classification is all about.

“You’ll learn all the details regarding the realms of Fae, Dark Magic, and the roots of Nephilim and Malevolence

during your attendance here at N.M.U., so no need to worry about the lack of knowledge now. It's our duty to present you with the tools and research we've collected for centuries. All you have to worry about is keeping yourself fit, fed, hydrated, and in some cases, alive during your attendance here."

She claps her hands together.

"That shouldn't be too difficult. At least, during the day, that is."

Why do I feel as though that means nights are chaotic at the university?

"Once again, congratulations, Miss Ophelia Minerva Guinevere and Miss Blair Ivy Lysander, on your official acceptance to Nephilim Malevolence University," she proudly declares and raises her arms up to kindle the opening of the golden gates. "May the shadows accept your offerings of exchange and ignite the marked blessings bestowed upon you within the embrace of the Valley of Shadows."

A wave of chilled goosebumps runs through me, enough to make me shiver as my wrists sting like a burning wound. Unable to ignore it, I lift my hand and look at my wrist, catching onto Blair's movement as she does the same thing with her left hand.

Together, we witness the finishing touches of a symbolized mark right above our pulse line—the main centerpiece being a golden Viper—which is intricately decorated with roses, green ivory, and clouds of shadows. It's amazing to witness the marking in full color as it twinkles with lingering magic. Once the final specs of energy depart from our flesh, the marking becomes a black ink reflection of the symbol.

“That is the official mark of N.M.U. You will need to present that if a situation occurs where you’re teleported outside the school’s borders. I’d wish to say it wasn’t a coincidence that occurs often, but I’d be blatantly lying. As a competitive space filled with various young adults and older adults, it’s best to try not to get teleported off the school property because it’s a bit tedious to get back in without a professor’s assistance.”

That tells me if you get stuck outside, it’s your duty to find your way back in.

“Also, please know if your hand potentially gets cut off above your pulse line, it will also be impossible to get back into the school property unless you manage to get a hold of me personally,” she declares. “So, avoid that at all costs.”

Gruesome.

She spins around, her golden cloak leaving a trail of sparkling mist in its trailing movement.

“Now, follow me. Since you are the first students of your school year, you’ll be rewarded with a few special privileges, including the Venom Suite. It’s the most luxurious set of suites and is next to the Professor Lounge. You’ll be given special access depending on your grades, so keep that in mind for future reference.”

Special access to even the Professor Lounge? This feels like we acquired the golden ticket for being the first survivors.

Who knows if the Professor Lounge will be beneficial to us, but any resources available to us and not everyone attending N.M.U. is an advantage I’ll enjoy abusing.

And maybe annoying Professor North.

I don't know if the man can read minds or if he's simply staring at me during my entire thought process, but he's pointing in my face.

"Don't you dare think about it!"

"I have not a clue of what you're talking about," I declare innocently and take the lead in following Headmaster Atlas.

I can hear Professor Blackbird's low chuckle before he comments, "You know what, I really like her. She grinds your gears worse than I do."

"Fuck you, Daemon."

"I know you don't mean that," he teases. "At least, not during work hours."

"Oh. Are you two together?" Blair wonders.

"No!" Professor North shuts the idea down.

"Maybe," Professor Blackbird answers instead. "Curious, aren't you, Duo Bunny?"

"Duo Bunny?" Blair ponders on the unique nickname. "Doesn't sound as cool as Darling Nightmare."

"Ah," Professor Blackbird hums the single exaggerated word. "That's because Miss Guinevere is extra special." I can hear him whisper his next words, "You have to claim ownership of what you want early, for the very air surrounding us has ears, and you never know who or what will fight to claim what you're destined to have."

Claim what you're destined to have...

"Walk faster!" Professor North orders. "We have places to be, Daemon."

“And I’m in trouble,” he hums, and I sense him on my left. “Shall I give you a private tour of the Professor Lounge later, Darling Nightmare?”

“She doesn’t need a tou—”

“Sure,” I interrupt Professor North. “Why not.”

“That’s the spirit,” Professor Blackbird cheers and leans over to whisper, “You can always stay in my room if Orpheus is being a dick.”

“Professor Blackbird,” Headmaster Atlas comments. “I can hear you.”

“You mean the gossip from the fae goblins? It’s been a while since they’ve lingered around and manipulated our conversations,” he declares loudly and gives me a wink.

Okay, I like him.

The way I smile catches his attention as he slips his hands into his pockets.

“I hope you smile like that often, Darling Nightmare,” he whispers and corrects his posture, making me realize he was crouching over to speak as close to my level as he could maintain while following his headmaster’s lead.

Staring ahead, I let his words uplift me while I finally allow myself to accept what’s about to happen as we step away from walking through the open golden gates.

Despite the challenges, uncertainty, and doubts I carried in my mind, I not only secured my attendance at Nephilim Malevolence University but proved I’m someone not to be overlooked.

Even as the child of a Gilded Merger.

We take the first steps into the shadowy depths, and my heart blossoms with awe as the shadows unravel the true beauty hidden from the undeserving.

Nephilim Malevolence University... a gothic paradise of hidden secrets.



ILLUSIONS OF SHADOWS

“**I**’m completely smitten for that Darling Vi—”

The compulsive power of possessiveness makes me do something utterly stupid.

Pinning Daemon Blackbird against any type of surface.

The shadow essence within me has a thing with putting people in chokeholds. That’s what is happening now with my hand tightly around Daemon’s neck. The sound of my low growl has made many tremble and whimper in fear, but it’s never been the response I get with Daemon.

He never reacts the way I expect him to.

Today is no exception.

“Now, Orpheus. You have to tame that jealousy of yours.”

Those words are the only warning I get before I’m the one being slammed into a wall of pure shadow energy.

Upside down, to be exact.

“Fuck, Daemon!” If this bipolar fucker leaves me here upside down, I’m fucked. We only have a few minutes until the Chosen Ceremony for this year’s set of Nephilim students. “We’re going to be late, and you know it!”

This is the first year we both are given the privilege of making a claim on the student we wish to specifically train. Some aim to reserve theirs for years, but I know exactly who I want to use this opportunity on.

Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.

“You should have thought of the chances of us being tardy before your demonic, possessive ass assumed you could overpower me.”

Yup, I've lost. I can't face this bastard right now.

Daemon crouches down until he's in my line of vision—his once short white locks are now black, like the shadows that dance around his body like a protective sash.

The Prince of Shadows is awake.

“Should I fuck that mouth of yours to get a respectable apology?” he wonders with a sly grin. The haunting expression on his face, matched with those completely black hollows in his eyes, makes my heart skip a few beats.

“We... don't have time,” I mutter before I force myself to apologize. “Sorry, Prince Blackbird. I made an impulsive error of judgment.”

“The fact you didn't shoot down the idea of me fucking your mouth proves I can choose the spot and time for you to enjoy your punishment, yes?” he dares bring up.

Reaching over until his thumb glides along my bottom lip, I fight the urge to frown, knowing it will get my ass in deeper trouble.

Like getting this man's cock up my ass.

“At least your stubborn foolishness makes you rather cute to look at from the sidelines,” he admits and leans further so

his lips brush mine. “A little Viper has caught your eye, hasn’t she?”

I try to ignore the shivers of fear that rush through me. Prince Daemon could set his intentions on having the new student. If he did, I know right here and now, I’ll lose against him.

He admires my expression, making me wish I could hide my emotions a lot better in tense situations. When you’re so easy to read, anyone can figure out what your ultimate weakness is.

In this case, the new prodigy is my plagued disease.

What’s scarier? I think Prince Daemon already figured it out.

“She’s your Viper.”

Nailed it...

“I... don’t know what.”

“You don’t NEED to know a thing, dear Orpheus,” he begins as his trailing hand moves upward, along my neck, down my chest, past my abs, until he stops right over my groin. “You FEEL the sizzling connection that ignites the moment your eyes lay on her. Your blood boils when those unique eyes of ivory lock on your very path. Her solidified boldness and unique confrontation of challenges leave you completely smitten with her, and deep down, you know the moment she walks into the dining chambers of Nephilim that everyone will want a piece of her, yes?”

He grips my cock at that moment, making it further harden by his aggressive touch.

“You’ve been fighting to hide your boner the entire duration of the entry trials,” he states as fact as a low chuckle escapes him. “You don’t get turned on the same way with me.”

“Th-That’s...” I trail off because I can’t lie to him. *He fucking knows it.* “It’s different, Daemon.”

“Prince Daemon,” he reminds but smirks. “Unless I’m deep in your ass with my hand jerking your thick veiny cock into oblivion.”

My twitching cock makes him chuckle.

“Impatient for pleasure but stubborn when trying to admit his feelings,” he taunts. Closing the distance between us, he pulverizes my lips with a toe-curling, sensation-inducing kiss.

My stomach flips with anxious desperation. The urge to forget the ceremony and just be riddled with immense pleasure and bites of pain is a hard temptation my body struggles to refuse.

“I know when it comes to me, though, your self-control is tested,” he reasons against my lips. “Due to the circumstance, I’ll be lenient on you.” He pulls back, his hand slipping from my groin. “At least until after the ceremony.”

Sounds like a blessing, but I feel as though I further cursed myself.

“Now, be a good professor and secure the diamond that’s yearning to be claimed,” he encourages. “But remember...” He kisses me one last time, the press of his lips making me shiver with how cold his touch is. “You’ll learn to share, or else I’ll have to remind you of how easy it could be to keep that Nightmare all to myself.”

Is his usage of the term Nightmare the same as how our kind refers to Vipers?

“Huh?” Daemon is blinking a few times before he’s scrunching his face. “Why the fuck are you upside down?”

I sigh dramatically.

“Can you let me do—” I don’t finish before I’m falling forward, my body face-planting the ground, thanks to good old gravity. “Ugh. Daemon...”

“Oops. Should have spun you around first,” Daemon admits as he helps me up. “My bad. Didn’t think good me would have come out to play.”

“Good?” I stare at him with narrowed eyes. “He is in no shape or form on the side of ‘goodness.’”

“You sure?” Daemon inquires with a smirk. “I could always be the real Prince of Shadows, and he’s the phony.”

“You’re five years younger than him,” I emphasize.

“That whole age difference between us is rather complicated,” Daemon emphasizes. “How am I going to explain that to my students, anyway?”

“We’ll figure it out,” I grumble and try to smooth out my dress shirt. “We need to go. The ceremony to request for the student we want to mentor has already started.”

“Hmm. Serious question, though.” He stops me from walking around him to get my suit coat. We share a tense look, his eyes now a unique mix of blue and purple. *His eyes shift colors like a moonstone.* “You’re actually intrigued.”

I don’t know how to answer properly.

How do you answer something when you yourself have no clue what you’re feeling for another?

“D’Angelo tried to interfere with her exam,” I change the subject.

“That old douche of a professor?” Daemon already looks pissed off. “He doesn’t even deserve to be in our department of Shadowly Orders. What the fuck would he need from the Nightmare? Besides, doesn’t he realize if he interfered, she could have obtained permanent brain damage?”

“He tried to attack me,” I mutter while the incident flashes in my mind on replay.

“And?”

“She came between us and hissed at him,” I confess. “It created an onslaught of attacks that pushed him back enough for me to snap her out of the trance early. I have a strong feeling Headmaster Atlas saw what occurred but hasn’t brought me in to talk about it.”

“She hissed at him?” That’s all he took from my elaborate statement. “Shit. She’s actually your Viper...”

“I doubt I’d—”

“But why would I react to her?” he interrupts me with his confused statement, leaving me no choice but to stare at him.

And ignore the need to emphasize that she’s mine.

“What do you mean?” He has to elaborate for my sanity.

“When I saw her face, the golden serpent... I was so close to flipping,” he admits. *Meaning Prince of Shadows and Wrath would have come out to play.* “I think whatever layer of magic that controls sudden spikes of magic in non-contenders is what held me back. That’s also why I lost control just now. I’ve been holding him back since we were at the gates.”

“Agonizing,” I complain with a sigh. “We’re gonna have to talk to Headmaster Atlas about this. If we both have a connection with her on that level...”

Fuck. We may not be allowed to teach her.

“Well, if we don’t choose her...” He trails off, looking dazed for five seconds. “Shit.”

“Define shit.”

“Someone brought up the Nightmare’s name at the ceremony.”

“What do you me—”

He grabs my hand and tugs me with him as our surroundings swirl, shift, and dematerialize while we keep up the same speed walking pace. The mindfuckery of watching and experiencing this first-hand leaves me feeling like I’m on a rollercoaster without a seatbelt.

Daemon doesn’t give me a chance to recover before he tugs me along the new path until he’s consumed by the dancing sash of shadows. He emerges with lengthy lavender purple locks and a cloak of shadows resting upon his broad shoulders.

The glint of the crown on his head explains the sudden drop in temperature that makes my next few breaths create puffs of chilled breath. The moment our feet come to a stop, he lets go of my hand and projects himself into whatever conversation has transpired in this secured space of authority.

“We put claim to mentor Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.”

The round of gasps that echo through the space confirms we’re not only amid the Professor Mentee Ceremony, but

we're standing right in front of whoever is about to make a claim.

Professor D'Angelo.

His shocked face is something I haven't seen in a long while, which normally would be amusing to acknowledge. In this heightened state of spinning madness, however, I can only focus on trying not to puke everything I ate for lunch.

"Prince Daemon Thorn Blackbird of Nephilim, what an honor to be in the midst of royalty. I wasn't aware of your attendance, or I would have ensured our chosen destination would have been on a higher level of grace," Headmaster Atlas calmly declares, despite her peers, who are quivering in their place.

In fact, I realize most of the professors, who aren't even close to Daemon's level of power, are on their knees, bowing in complete submission.

I certainly haven't forgotten just how 'big of a deal' Daemon is in the realms of Mundanes and dark arts.

Daemon is the future ruler of one of the Four Courts of Nephilim.

Unlike the Malevolence Realm, where they have kingdoms of power, Nephilim only needs four designated courts that separate their lands by elemental domination. They used to name them after seasons, but fae thought that ideology was stupid when Mundanes started to make it like some sort of trending mockery.

"This is fine," he announces, his voice ten times deeper than Daemon's chirpy masculine tone. He moves his tense gaze over to the individual quivering behind him. "D'Angelo.

Surely you haven't forgotten who has fed your generational line for centuries prior to your unplanned existence, yes?"

The way he drops to his knees and bows his head to the floor is a sight I'll engrave in my memories for as long as I'm privileged.

Just to mock this stubborn ass.

"P-Prince Blackbird. My sincere apologies. I was... completely taken aback by your entrance, especially when we were solidifying the student I was going to mentor."

The atmosphere further spikes with tension, leaving a few professors whimpering while some assistant advisors faint from the energy difference.

"And who would you possibly be trying to mentor?" Prince Daemon's voice is obsolete. "It certainly wouldn't be the student who placed first in the preliminary entry trials that my counterpart had the opportunity to meet, right?"

D'Angelo's nervous swallow is loud, making me realize how frightened he is to even answer.

"Professor D'Angelo was going to claim to mentor Miss Ophelia Minerva Guinevere prior to your arrival, Prince Blackbird. However, it seems as though your declaration came before he could affirm his claim," Headmaster Atlas announces.

She really is the only one not trembling like a leaf.

I, on the other hand, am fighting to still my body, which shivers like a helpless leaf in the middle of a merciless blizzard.

"If he wishes to finalize his claim, he can do so now, but it would lead to a potential tie between the two professors

interested in mentoring one student.”

“Three,” Prince Daemon corrects. “I did emphasize ‘we’ when stating my claim.”

“Out of respect, Prince Daemon, can I confirm who ‘we’ are at this standpoint?” Headmaster Atlas inquires, even though her eyes fall on me.

“Orpheus Maxwell North,” he announces and gestures to me. I have to force myself to stay completely still as the dark fae enjoys taking the steps needed to make a full circle around me. “I’ll refrain from using his real name. Having too much power in such a tiny space isn’t healthy for the environment of the university.”

More like we’d probably clash and burn the entire place down by accident, thanks to our problematic power dynamics.

“So, Professor D’Angelo,” Prince Daemon begins and tilts his head upward to emphasize how he’s talking down to the man. “Or should I say James, seeing as you’re but an ant in comparison to the future Heir of the Court of Shadows and Wrath.”

Professor D’Angelo shivers at the sensation of Prince Daemon now being behind him. Even his complexion has paled significantly, a sign he isn’t foolish enough to think a fae of Daemon’s caliber would carry an ounce of mercy if provoked.

“You wouldn’t be interested in mentoring the new girl, now would you?” he inquires. “Youngbloods these days are rather feisty and stubborn by nature. I doubt you’d have the patience or skill as an herbalist to take on such a student under your wing.”

The mockery in Prince Daemon's voice is obvious. Poor D'Angelo is fighting hard not to reveal just how annoyed he is with being humiliated before his peers by someone he'd consider a child.

At least in mundane years.

"I've heard many things about the Guinevere family. Elite members of our grand society and well respected in various planes of magic and sorcery. From such a strong bloodline of power and political stance, it would make sense that Miss Guinevere is not only appointed someone who can keep up with her ability to rapidly adapt to challenges and instances presented to her but also needs one who can give her the proper tools that will most benefit her in understanding the balance between the world of Nephilim and the world of Malevolence. What better way of securing such a plan than by assigning her two professors, who are youthful, wise in their retrospective elements and worlds, and can help Miss Guinevere walk down the right path to gaining power?"

He leans over to whisper in Professor D'Angelo's ear. If he's attempting to talk 'quietly,' it's far from a hushed tone for every professor, administrator, and secretary advisor to heed his words of warning.

"Professor North and I have done many favors on behalf of you and other administrators of Nephilim Malevolence University. I believe humbly sitting back and allowing us to get the choice of mentoring a student of our choosing is all but a fair exchange. Especially with how unproblematic we've been."

Unproblematic as he barges into the Mentor Choosing Ceremony to blackmail the current professor, who could have fairly beat us if he wasn't a frightened coward.

Then again, I know Prince Daemon. The man has destroyed kingdoms for them, attempting to belittle his immense power in Nephilim. If he wanted to start drama, he wouldn't need to say a word.

“What do you say?” Prince Daemon encourages. “Sounds like a deal?”

I see the hesitation in Professor D'Angelo's eyes, but I know he wouldn't dare go against Daemon. Not in this fae prince personality that wouldn't hesitate to slit his throat in front of everyone.

Meaning it has happened before.

Gruesome.

“It's a deal,” he finally manages to say quietly.

“Hmm?” That's not enough for Prince Daemon. “My hearing must be having trouble with all the tense static in the atmosphere. Shall you repeat that for everyone to hear?”

Fae are all cocky savages.

Respectively, I can't say shit, seeing as I'd do the same.

“It's a deal, Prince Blackbird,” Professor D'Angelo emphasizes. “With all the fair important points you laid out to us, it does seem as though Miss Guinevere would be the perfect candidate to be privately mentored by not one but two powerful professors in our field at N.M.U.”

All bullshit.

“Excellent,” Prince Daemon replies and stands before D'Angelo's knelt position so he can block his image entirely while confronting Headmaster Atlas. “Was that clear enough of a submission to set in stone, Headmaster Atlas?”

Submission.

Prince Daemon enjoys making others feel utterly insignificant in their element and environment.

“Was heard loud and clear,” Headmaster Atlas states. She may not be smiling, but her eyes tell me a different story. I secretly believe she enjoys these random outbursts of Daemon’s.

Makes our professor positions rather eventful.

“There’ll be plenty of students who will survive their trials and be considered mentor-worthy in the coming hours. I’d suggest that those considering using their mentor privileges this year stay near this area, so when I have a larger list of official attendees of N.M.U., I’ll be able to congregate another meeting like this.”

No one says anything because Prince Daemon is still present. Anyone who knows a thing about fae is they don’t have much patience unless they’re very intrigued by the topic at hand.

Or are heavily rewarded in exchange for their utmost attention.

“Then Professor North and I can dismiss ourselves, yes?” Prince Daemon concludes.

He can’t wait to get out of here.

“Yes, Prince Daemon,” Headmaster Atlas confirms. “Please let your counterpart, Professor Daemon, be aware I’ll need to speak to him later with Professor North present.”

“Certainly,” Prince Daemon says with a proud smile. He briefly looks my way. “I’m leaving that to you, Professor North.”

He wasn't going to tell his other side shit.

I don't think Headmaster Atlas realizes it's not a simple task to talk to your alter.

With such a new condition of mental instability, there isn't enough information or research surrounding the unique trait that runs specifically through royal fae and, in a rare instance, Gilded Mergers who have the potential to become Nephalem.

"Excellent." He spins around and takes two steps to leave him towering over Professor D'Angelo. "A word, James." Not waiting for D'Angelo to argue or bring up the obvious point that the ceremony isn't quite over yet, he walks down the hall with everyone's trailing gazes centered on his departure.

He loves the attention.

Following his lead, we end up before the massive doors that open upon our closeness. When they finally close behind us, we turn back to see Professor D'Angelo is with us.

"A little handsome birdy told me you interfered with Miss Guinevere's entry trial," Prince Daemon gets to the point.

The poor guards at the doors are bowing the entire time. Can't blame them when all the tense energy from inside the ceremony chambers migrated out of that room and got cozy in this hall's atmosphere.

Wait. Did he refer to me as handsome?

"Little snitch," D'Angelo mutters my way.

His opinion of me means nothing. I've known he's hated my guts since I obtained this professor position.

Probably because I'm teaching Malevolence Dark Magic and Artistry: Intermediate this year when he's been teaching that subject for twenty-five years.

Not my fault the new curriculum wishes to incorporate more youthful professors who can better motivate the students.

“Didn’t know I owe you my secrecy,” I comment.

Maybe the geezer needed a reminder of our age difference. I just turned thirty and was the second youngest professor at N.M.U. I would have kept my rank if Prince Daemon hadn’t been invited to teach advanced classes revolving around Nephilim Dark Arts and History. Nevertheless, at N.M.U., the younger you were, the more respected you were in the realms of dark magic and arts.

The youth are stronger and more resilient on the battlefield. Not to forget the advantage the youth carry with their abilities of tapping into unlimited flows of magic.

Our weakness is our lack of knowledge, which is why N.M.U. was established in hopes of confronting that dilemma and capitalizing on teaching the youth their capabilities earlier on in their lives.

If D’Angelo’s fifty-five-year-old stubborn self stopped using magic to try to maintain a youthful image, maybe his essence score wouldn’t drop every year. I’d be lying if I pretended that I wasn’t counting the days for this man’s essence levels to reach zero.

Early retirement, so we young scholars and chosen professors can focus on our careers in peace and not with his constant harassment.

The shiver that runs through me makes me realize the goosebumps that run across my arms are thanks to the drop in temperature.

Such an impatient fae prince.

“I was observing the student at a closer glance and decided testing her further would do no harm if she was worthy enough to be given a free pass into the university,” D’Angelo summarizes quickly, sensing the frigid temperature drop.

I don’t think his explanation makes things any better, but Prince Daemon hides it flawlessly.

When a fae hides their emotions, the first thing you do is run and don’t look back.

“You dare try to lay a mere finger on Miss Guinevere, and I’ll do the honor of wiping you off the face of this tainted earth,” he announces before the man can attempt to further defend himself.

“Wh-What?” He looks shocked at Prince Daemon’s declaration.

“Did I stutter?” he inquires with sarcasm that has me trembling, not from the cold but from actual fear he’ll destroy anyone in his current radius.

His boiling temperature could easily make the very walls around us begin to melt into molten if he wished for it.

“Don’t touch what I have every intention of claiming,” Prince Daemon gets to the point with eyes that pulse with foreign energy. “She’s not a lab rat for you to dissect. Quite frankly, you’re lucky I don’t ban you from even looking her way.” He leans forward, his eyes meeting D’Angelo’s.

“Then again. I wouldn’t hesitate to do so if you push enough buttons. Proving people wrong before I slice their heads off their bodies is rather empowering, if you ask me. Not sure whether my prey enjoys it as much as I do, but I’d gladly ask you and see if I get an answer from your detached head.”

D'Angelo swallows again, the motion loud in comparison to the pin-drop silence surrounding us.

“That’s all,” Prince Daemon announces. “Now, go back to your cave of potions. It’s unsafe for you to stay out so long with your weakened immunity, thanks to your age.” He makes it sound as though D'Angelo is in his nineties.

The funny part is, I'm sure the fae side of Daemon can live for centuries if he wishes, yet he's criticizing a fifty-five-year-old man.

My biased, cocky best friend.

“Th-Thank you, Prince Daemon.”

I'm sure it took everything in his chest to say those words of gratitude. I also believe Prince Daemon can grasp whether or not they're genuine expressions of relief.

Tonight, he may not care.

“Imbecile,” Prince Daemon announces as though he's not standing and facing the man he's insulting. “Let us depart, Professor North. We have to pass by the library.”

The library? Why would we go there?

“The library, huh?” I comment without trying to make it sound like a question.

Prince Daemon glances over his shoulder at me, the two of us already walking as we ditch D'Angelo before he can mutter another word.

“The library calms me down with its dark aesthetic,” Prince Daemon reveals, yet I catch the way he smirks.

He's up to something.

“Besides, you owe me, remember?”

Fuck.

“What a good way to blow off some steam,” he encourages, with a hint of a twinkle in his eyes.

Looking away, he doesn't slow down his long strides as he takes the route to the library. I reluctantly follow because I have no other choice.

Time to pay my debt and hope we don't get caught.



THE BEAUTY HIDDEN BY SECRETS

“**H**ere is your sector, ladies. This side on the left is designated for you two. The suites on the right will be assigned to two male elite students. Shared spaces will be the main kitchen, lounge area, and mini theater, and you’ll share the corridors that lead to the Main Library and the Professor Lounge.”

Amy, our guide, has been taking us around N.M.U. since we signed our acceptance papers.

Which surprisingly was two hours ago.

Exploring Nephilim Malevolence University was going to be a trip in itself because this place was massive. I felt like we’d just entered a whole new country.

Since the term ‘Years’ wasn’t used to define the length of time a student remains at N.M.U., Amy explained that Arcs are used instead. Arc One is defined as six months, which is the average allotted time it takes for many students to get enough experience to advance to the Intermediate Level. Once we reached Arc Two and Three, we’d be given the privilege of learning how to fly—literally, fly in the forsaken sky—which would make sightseeing and exploring N.M.U. a lot easier.

That only revolved around the University. It didn't include the gates that lead to the realms of Nephilim and Malevolence.

We'd had a brief moment to review the curriculum at N.M.U., and I was both terrified and fucking excited about what was in store for us—from the basic classes of Dark Arts and Magic History to the tougher classes that would test our skills and gifts. The brief glimpse confirmed that most of my classes matched Blair's, which meant I wouldn't be the "smart-ass teacher's pet" who always sat in the front row because the back was always taken by the "cool" kids.

Can't wait to be the talk of the school.

As usual.

It was the one thing I despised about the school education. Obviously, it wasn't the administrators' duty to eliminate bullying, but what an annoying trip to make to the office whenever I beat the shit out of students for 'attempting' to bully me.

All because I'm a smart-ass, cocky Guinevere with no filter.

"Hisssss."

We turn our attention to Ophira as she slides off of Amy's shoulders to roam around the floor.

"Shouldn't we stop her?" I ponder as we watch her slither away.

"Oh, don't worry. Our Gilded Serpent knows the entirety of N.M.U.," Amy declares happily. "She'll show up whenever she feels like it. You guys named her Ophira, yes?"

"Yes," we reply with an exchange of a look. "We... didn't tell you that," Blair points out.

Amy just laughs.

“I have Seer qualities. All the guides of the University do. Please note that I’m assigned to this sector and can aid you throughout your time here at N.M.U. Once you advance and get the approval to venture into the Nephilim or Malevolence, I’ll be the one to open the gates and allow your entry,” she reveals. “Think of me as your longstanding guide and aid. If you get injured on campus and are unable to heal your wounds, feel free to summon me. I do have limitations, which include being unable to interfere during trials or examinations, but if an unexpected occurrence happens and one or both of you are injured, again, you may summon me simply by saying my full name.”

“Which is…” I inquire.

“Oh, right! I didn’t formally introduce myself,” she giggles. “Amy Hellrose. I’m one of the Senior Guides of N.M.U. and have been doing this for twenty years.”

“TWENTY YEARS?!” We gasp in surprise as we look at her from head to toe.

She looks no older than eighteen.

Her laughter is soft and melodic, like Blair’s.

“I get that a lot. You’ll come to realize that most of N.M.U. staff are much older. The previous requirement to work at Nephilim Malevolence University was thirty-five years of age. As you can imagine, N.M.U. is well known for its immense knowledge and wisdom surrounding the dark arts, specifically in the realms of fae and dark fae. Gathering this knowledge must not solely be due to being born into family heritage or community that feeds one with loads of sacred information,” she explains.

Clapping her hands, a burst of shadows ignites from her palms, creating a whirlwind that shapes into a rectangle, similar to a blackboard. We watch with great interest as designs and letters emerge as she further explains her point.

“When N.M.U. was first created, even the younger students who scored immensely high through their years at N.M.U. were qualified to work and become professors. However, there are a lot of dangers surrounding the youth when it involves black magic. The younger one is, the stronger their magic is. Also, depending on the individual, some can tap into infinite energy levels. It’s a trait that’s either genetic or obtained. Such a rare skill is very dangerous for someone who lacks control, especially when dark magic relies heavily on the Users’ emotions,” she elaborates.

“You’ll learn this in Dark Arts and History, but a young professor got upset with a set of students who enjoyed bullying him for years. The professor had taken eons to graduate from N.M.U., so those students enjoyed using such circumstances against him in mockery. With the university being the entity that decides when one is ready to depart and enter the real world of tainted magic, you can only imagine the level of bullying an individual would receive if they stayed here for ten-plus years.”

“Ten years,” I whisper at the same time as Blair.

I really despised being bullied for anything, but having to endure that scrutiny for ten solid years, finally graduate, and get a position with the university, only to be constantly bullied again is outrageous.

Completely unfair, cruel, and judgmental from those who know nothing of one’s past.

That’s exactly why I despised bullies so much.

No one cares about your ‘whys’ or what you’ve experienced in the past that put you in your current predicament. All they care about is what they hear from the webs of gossip, serving them entertainment and the chance to ignore their own flaws and shitty lives.

“It got to the point where the professor lost control of his dark essence, summoning shadows from the depths of Malevolence Realm. What made the situation dire was he was one of the few who could tap into infinite cycles, the state where the user’s magic regenerates and seems overflowing,” she reveals. “I’m sure you can imagine the consequences of unlocking a state of infinite flow of magic.”

“Like a never-ending vacuum that empowers the user,” I whisper as I try to envision it. “But then they’re still tapping such shadow energy from an external source. It can’t be all internal, meaning, wasn’t he drawing energy from the Malevolence Realm to further empower him?”

“Yes.” Amy looks pleased with my quick thinking. “That was another catastrophe in itself because one can only observe so much Malevolence essence before it becomes lethal by default.”

“Oh, no,” Blair whispers as we watch the scenario play out in the swiftly drawn images on the blackboard. “Did the students and professor perish?”

“Worse,” Amy admits with a deep frown. “The students were pushed into the realms of Malevolence when the professor decided to abandon this world and remain in Malevolence for the rest of his existence. I’m sure you can imagine one can’t recover from losing control in N.M.U., especially as a professor. It proves you’ve lost control and can’t be trusted to maintain it again.”

“So, there’s no room for second chances,” Blair concludes.

“In this profession, in an important role as a professor where bodies of students and other professors can be put in the line of danger, there isn’t any room for error in judgment, especially when that error stems from your lack of resilience.”

Brutal, but she is right. If a pilot is having a bad day, he can’t go crashing the plane with everyone on it.

“So... did they perish?” I ponder while watching the images on the board disappear, then remain blank, waiting for the next scenario.

“Well... they didn’t die,” she admits. “Instead, they’re still serving this professor today.”

“Serving?” I inquire. *I don’t quite get it.* “You make it sound as though he became a god.”

“He did,” Amy smirks and lowers her gaze to the board where a drawn image of a god stands upon a mountain with three chained men who are kneeling on all fours. “Some call him the Hades of Malevolence, and those three students are now the Cerberus of the lands. The confrontation turned into a massive fight that damaged N.M.U. severely. Many perished from the collateral damage, and it was concluded that youngbloods would be too dangerous to have in powerful positions like being a guide who opens the gates into various realms or a professor who teaches other students tainted magic.”

“But why did he ascend into a godly position?” Blair ponders. “Was it out of pity or because he fought back?”

“No one knows,” Amy admits. “Truthfully, I believe the gods of Nephilim and Malevolence enjoy observing the university and the various students that enter the curriculum.

With the professor once being a student who remained on the university grounds for ten years, his perseverance was observed by many, including the gods. It intrigues me how so many mocked him, but in my eyes, his determination to remain and obtain his official diploma from Nephilim Malevolence University was commendable. If a simpleton like me can admire his dedication, one of the gods in Malevolence must have empathized with the professor and decided he deserved revenge in the form of power.”

“That’s a good form of revenge,” Blair praises.

“Does that mean the gods from both realms monitor our progress, even as new entry students?” I inquire.

“The gods observe what intrigues them. They don’t monitor every professor’s or student’s actions but are nosey, just like humans, when it comes to trending gossip. Besides, some gods could be walking among us.”

“Really?” Blair gasps in surprise. “Meaning they could be attending N.M.U. with us? That would be so cool, but then again, why would a god attend? They’re... well... gods.”

She has a point.

“Some do it for entertainment,” Amy admits. “Others are children of gods and are encouraged to attend, so they don’t become too cocky. Unlike our world, where mistakes can be made here and there, in the realms of Nephilim and Malevolence, one single mistake can cost many fae lives. With the fae not only being rare but on a decline in numbers, it’s imperative to protect and secure their numbers in both realms. Even if it means ensuring they protect themselves from one of their own.”

“Aren’t Professor North and Professor Blackbird young?” I decide to bring it up out of curiosity, the thought popping into my mind. “Why are they allowed to be professors? I heard rumors and talk about Professor North, but I’ve never heard about Professor Blackbird.”

“Same here,” Blair admits. “From where I come from, most of my family and friends said Professor North is from a really powerful family lineage, and they have loads of connections. Now that I’ve seen him in person, though, I find it a bit hard to believe he relies on connections to obtain his professor status.”

That I can agree with.

“He’s too cocky with a short level of patience to cut corners,” I grumble. “His father could be the headmaster of the university, and he’d probably fight to get into the curriculum like everyone else.”

It was funny that I was defending the man as if I knew him. We only had what, two interactions? But I’m speaking as though I’ve known him all my life.

“They are the only exceptions,” Amy reveals with a proud grin. “I’m sure they’ll tell you details if you ask, but your observation is correct. Professor North and Professor Blackbird both earned their positions and right to teach at a younger age than anyone in the last ten years.”

“How old are they?” Blair questions. “Professor North looks like he’s in his late twenties. Professor Blackbird looks super young, though.”

“Professor North just turned thirty,” Amy announced. “His birthday is today.”

“Wait... really?” we gasp. “And he’s here?”

Amy giggles. “Professor North takes his position here very seriously. I’m sure you can understand what I’ve explained. Many doubt his abilities to teach all because of his youth.”

“Do they do the same to Professor Blackbird?” I wonder out loud because I feel like they’re treated rather differently. “Maybe I’m overlooking it, but it just feels as though Professor North and Professor Blackbird are on two different spectrums. One end represents the professor, who everyone second guesses their potential, and on the other side, no one dares look at him funny. At least, that’s the vibe I got when I saw how they briefly interacted with their colleagues in the lobby.”

It was only a few minutes as we waited to head to Headmaster Atlas’ office to sign our finalized paperwork, but from the other administrators walking to and from the lobby to the few workers attending to various tasks assigned to them, it was a prominent difference in how they greeted or acknowledged Professor North versus Professor Blackbird.

What really intrigued me was how it seemed like Professor North and Professor Blackbird looked to be really close friends, if not best friends, yet the obvious difference in treatment didn’t seem to bother either of them.

Examples are quick hellos or slight nods of acknowledgment in Professor North’s direction versus humble bows and words of praise in Professor Blackbird’s direction.

“Your ability to observe will take you far, Miss Guinevere,” Amy praises. “I’m rather confident you both will see the reasoning as to why the two younger professors are treated a certain way here at N.M.U. As for Professor Blackbird, I believe he’s twenty-five.”

“Super young,” Blair whispers. “Only two years older than me.”

“Five here,” I admit while taking note that Blair is twenty-three. “Doesn’t that mean their attendance in N.M.U. was rather short in nature?”

“The one thing both professors have in common is their attendance time at N.M.U.,” Amy reveals. “They both graduated in a year.”

“A YEAR?” Blair and I gasp.

“At N.M.U., that would be termed two Arcs,” Amy declares with a bigger smile. “Yes. Those two are rather competitive with one another. They worked very hard to earn early opportunities to explore the university while gaining immense knowledge from the Main Library. Many secrets of knowledge lie within those old brittle books, and those two were not hesitant to expand their wisdom and capabilities for the sake of advancement. N.M.U. decided they were deserving to graduate within a year, and they both were offered professor positions.”

“Meaning they were even younger when they became professors,” I mutter.

“Indeed. They both have been teaching for two years now, though they each have been offered new roles this year since Headmaster Atlas’ wished to change the curriculum to embrace more of the youth.”

“Embrace the youth?” Blair ponders Amy’s wording.

“You’ll notice that many of your classes are run by older professors. Their knowledge is one thing, but obviously, it’s hard to connect with one who isn’t in your same generational gap,” she admits and giggles. “It’s kind of the reason why I’ve

been assigned a guide for this sector. I'm one of the youngest guides, but I do try to keep up with things, so I don't act too cringeworthy old."

"We appreciate that," I praise. "You're really helpful, Amy. Thank you for taking the time to elaborate on so much."

"That's why I'm here," she declares with pride. "Why don't you both go explore and rest? Your official IDs are being molded in the fires, so they should be ready and stabilized for picture engraving in a few hours. The library access will be open all day today, so if you wish to go start reading and researching, be my guest." She claps her hands together and leans in to whisper, "But if you're like me, who enjoys a bit of gossip and hidden secrets, go further into the library near the Manga section."

"Manga section." I'm grinning from ear to ear. *A guilty pleasure of mine is reading comics of various kinds, including Manga.* "Say less. That's where I'll be."

Blair laughs.

"I'd never think you're into such books, Ophelia," she teases.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," I tease back. "But your girl can't help but fall in love with leather-bound books and the smell of ancient magic texts."

"I can agree with that," she admits with a giggle.

We thank Amy for her help before she gets a call that the next set of students is here and ready for a tour. That leaves us the opportunity to admire the unique architecture of the place.

To be honest, my expectations for our living space were rather low because N.M.U.'s aesthetic was wrapped around ancient castles—walls decorated with ivory and black vines,

plentiful rose gardens, trinkets of gold in their statues, floating candles, and some of the most sophisticated artwork I've ever seen decorate the halls and classrooms.

We got a glimpse of the classrooms and how the desks were polished with gold surfaces and matte black legs. The blackboard was framed with gold and brass, and even the wands that some of the professors proudly held wherever they went were either black, gold, silver, or brass. I hadn't seen any other colors, but from my interpretation, silver and brass were plentiful in numbers, but I'd rarely seen gold or black.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited to try our uniform. From the various students we saw when we made our way to Headmaster Atlas' office, the uniform was based on a few things. The primary shade would represent the wand you're designated with. The N.M.U. brooch would display the club you belonged to, and finally, our capes were in the shade that represented our potential at N.M.U.

I wasn't sure what shades corresponded to that, seeing as the only color I've seen cape-wise was black, but we'd find out soon enough.

Our first classes will be tomorrow.

I'd yet to reach out to my parents to tell them of my official acceptance. Even though we were both given the opportunity, Blair and I agreed to do it tonight before curfew.

Yes, there was a curfew at the strike of midnight unless you had special privileges.

That was an intriguing fact, especially when most dark spells have to be done during the witch hours of early morning, especially on a full or new moon.

Entering the main living space, I take in the various amenities.

“I honestly didn’t expect them to have all of this stuff,” Blair admits as she points to the massive 85-inch television that was framed with gold and hoisted directly on the stone wall just over the fireplace. “It really makes it look like a painting versus a television.”

“I wouldn’t have thought it was anything but a work of art if it wasn’t for the PS5,” I admit and point to the gaming console. “All I can think of is Mario Cart.”

Blair giggles. “Ah. The times when we could be children and pretend like we weren’t destined for bigger things,” she hums. “I claim Princess Peach,” she proudly states.

“Yup. We’ll get along just fine,” I confirm.

“Yoshi?”

“A must,” I vow and put my hand over my chest like I’m taking an oath.

Blair is laughing again. “I’ve never laughed this much in my entire existence,” she confesses. “I feel I’m going to enjoy every moment with you, Ophelia. You really are down to earth.”

“It surprises the majority of people,” I confess with a shrug. “I don’t like being my true self to everyone, though. We know not everyone here wants well for us.”

“Like that group of students at the front desk giving us the side-eye for being first?” Blair brings up as she walks over to the fridge. Opening it up, she whistles at the fully stocked fridge. “Damn. Even have the latest energy drinks... Oh, wow. Is that alcohol?”

I'm intrigued now as I walk over to our big double-decker fridge to view the various drink options before the very well-stocked array of fresh fruits and vegetables.

“At least our appetite is important to them,” I admit. “And those students looked envious as fuck. Made no sense to me, though. They're already students here. Why be mad at someone who just got here and did well?”

“From what Amy was saying earlier, maybe your initial rank upon entry is a big deal,” she confesses as she grabs an apple and walks over to the sink to wash it. I end up taking an orange and begin to peel it until the skin is off and tossed into the compost machine.

“It seems predominately important in the beginning,” I admit. “Wands I've seen so far are black, gold, silver, and bronze. The capes I've seen are only black. Haven't seen any emblems with the N.M.U.”

“Me, neither,” Blair confirms and takes a bite of her apple. “I feel like acquiring our wand, cape, and emblem may be another journey in itself.”

“Wouldn't think of anything less from N.M.U.,” I comment and pop an orange piece into my mouth. Moving it to the side, I mutter, “Gonna tell your parents tonight?”

“Have no choice,” she sighs. “I know it's going to be a long conversation, so I'd rather do it tonight or even now. I could use a nap, though. I'm a bit drained.”

“Go take a nap first,” I encourage her. “If your parents make you feel sour, then we can go blow off some steam exploring campus before curfew.”

“Sounds adventurous.” She beams at my suggestion, looking much more relieved than the layer of dread that was

nestled on her expression seconds early. “You’ll do the same?”

“I won’t nap, but probably call my parents at the same time as you. I’m sure it won’t be long. They’re ‘no phone’ people. Even with us using spells to contact them through a mirror, they’d rather have the conversation be nice and crisp.”

Get to the point so they can get on with their lives. I’m sure with Odessa, they would make all the time in the world for her.

“Meaning they want you to get to the point and don’t care about your wellbeing unless you’re dead,” she summarizes.

“Exactly.”

“Which is why I hope my dad picks up and not my mom,” she concludes. “I’m glad we’re roommates, though. I think this school year would give us enough anxiety. Wouldn’t want to deal with not getting along with my roommate as well.”

“That would suck big time,” I agree. “As long as you don’t poison me, we’re on good terms.”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“I have a very lengthy list of who I wish to poison in this world. Trust me, you aren’t one of them,” she assures. “But honestly, I’d never turn on another unless they wish for my demise. I can see you don’t have that drive in you, Ophelia.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some people, you can just see from a glance their true intentions. If they had to choose between moving forward in this tainted world or sacrificing a dear friend, they wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of the friend. You don’t project that energy.”

“Did anyone we saw before the entry trial give off such a vibe?”

“Alaric.” She doesn’t even hide her deadpan tone.

“Not Azrael?” I ask for clarification.

“No. Honestly, I don’t get how they’re twins if you want my honest opinion. Their energies are polar opposites. Were you like that with your sister?”

“Not necessarily,” I admit and think about it. “My sister was more into light magic, oddly enough. I was essentially yin, and she was yang. However, she had to cloak a lot of that because of my parents. They wanted N.M.U. to be the university we attended, not anywhere else.”

“Wasn’t that suffocating?” Blair pouts her lips before taking another bite of her apple.

“Agonizing enough for her to run away from it all,” I say with a sad smile. “Wherever she is, maybe she gets to be the Guinevere she envisioned for herself and not a puppet on strings.”

“I hope you get to break out of your shell as well, Ophelia.”

“Huh? I’m not in a shell,” I defend, but Blair shakes her head.

“You won’t see it now, but maybe as the Arcs go by here in N.M.U., you’ll get to see what your true likes, dislikes, forms of entertainment, and enjoyment are without your parents’ constant scrutiny. At least, that’s what I’m hoping for myself.” She looks at her eaten apple as the seeds glare back at her. “N.M.U. is the soil where we’ve all been planted like seeds. Now, as the days, weeks, and months go by, we’ll begin to grow into our blooming creations. The only difference will be whether we’ll get to enjoy the sunshine and water, survive the storms, and bear the fruit that we deem as success.”

I admire how Blair sometimes speaks with immense wisdom. It only makes me want to learn more about her as a person and a friend.

“Anyway, I hope Azrael and Alaric make it. I know they probably wouldn’t care if we made it or not, but I did like Azrael’s energy. He seems like a real one. Someone who would be a good teammate.”

“Let’s hope we get to see him again,” I whisper with a tiny smile.

She smiles back at me before she yawns.

“Off to nap I go.”

“Guess I’ll head to the library and check out the Manga section,” I playfully tease.

“Make sure it’s Manga and not Hentai,” she counters, making me giggle.

It felt odd to laugh. I stopped doing that since my sister’s disappearance.

“Maybe I can score a boyfriend while I’m there.”

“Oh, boy,” Blair calls out as she’s walking down the hall toward the stairs that lead to the upper floors where our rooms are. “Let him pin you against the bookshelves and fuck you silly.”

“You know that has to be illegal to do in what fae believe are sacred places.”

“Only if you get caught!” Blair shouts and laughs, the whimsical hymn of joy echoing as she heads up the stairs. “See you in a few, Ophelia. Wake me up if it’s reaching dinner time and I’m not awake.”

“Alright!” I call back to her before I’m left alone with one more orange slice.

Staring at it, I can’t help but wonder what life is going to be like now.

This is the beginning of my path toward a new destiny.



EXPECTATIONS OF A GUINEVERE

“**I**t took you long enough to reach out to us.”

You know that feeling of instant regret?

This is exactly that moment of dread.

After taking a long shower to get every particle of dust off my flesh from the entry trial, I decided it would be best to wear a new set of clothes and head to the library.

Checking the mirror prompts me to try to remember the spell needed to cast to reach out to my parents, seeing as cell phones are “earned.” Not a mandatory device of access.

A shame I ended up casting the spell...

This just proves my magic essence is still very reactive after the trials. I’m sure once we’re assigned wands and can channel our magic through one connector, it would be easier not to cast a spell without full intention and magical initiation.

For now, I just have to face my parents.

“We were the first to finish,” I announce in a matter-of-fact tone. I don’t want them to immediately think my tardiness in reaching out to them meant I scored embarrassingly low. “I was supposed to call you in a few more hours when more students have received their official acceptances. I decided to

call a bit earlier because I want to start my studies in the library while it's still rather tame and empty of students attempting to make an impression.”

Lifting my miniature black backpack from the floor, I slip it onto my shoulder so it's very visible. It's interesting how I'm telling the truth about my intention of going to the library, yet my mom is narrowing her eyes at me as if I'm about to jump out the window, summon a broomstick, and get the fuck out of here.

Which reminds me, we'll get to learn how to fly on broomsticks, which is both cheesy and exhilarating to think about.

“You should have contacted us immediately after your acceptance. It would have allowed me to talk to Headmaster Atlas myself,” Mother declares.

Meaning she doesn't believe I was one of the first who got their acceptance.

“Headmaster Atlas has more important things than to entertain my parents with information that will be shown on my summarized report in writing,” I mutter and don't hide my annoyance. “If you don't want to believe me, that's your choice.”

“I won't stand for your attitude, Ophelia,” Mother snaps. “You think because you're away from home, you can act foolishly with no respect and tarnish the Guinevere Legacy?”

Yup. The legacy is more important than me, the individual. That's first, then my sister is second. She'll bring her up in 5,4,3—

“You're only taking Odessa's place due to her ongoing absence!”

There it is. Didn't even finish the countdown.

“Honey.”

I'm surprised by Father's stern voice as he comes into the frame from behind.

“We should be praising Ophelia for doing our family a favor by attending on her older sister's behalf,” he emphasizes as he talks in a timely manner. It's as though he needs to emphasize every word, so my mother gets it. “She didn't need to participate. Also, she could have died. You already heard from seven friends that their children perished from the trial.”

Shit... seven?

I can only imagine those from our rich gated community neighborhood who were all bragging two days ago about how easy it would be to get into N.M.U. They were so confident in their ability to not only get in but to be one of the top students. They enjoyed mocking me all night long, taking bets as to when I'd perish because they were certain I wouldn't make it to the finish line.

I'm not my sister, after all.

“Their children were weak imbeciles,” Mother mutters, as though to justify their ends.

“Doesn't discount the fact our daughter survived and came in first,” Father summarizes and gives me a moment of his attention. “Good evening, Ophelia. How are you feeling?”

“Buzzed,” I admit. “There's a lot of information we have to observe here, but the trial was very interesting. My magic is still sparked from the whole ordeal, which is why I called you guys a bit earlier than originally planned.” It's always been easy to tell Father exactly how I feel. He acknowledges and treats me like a human being.

Not an extension of my older sister.

“Understandable,” he replies with a bob of his head. “Better than me putting the library on fire.”

Oh...

“That...” I stare at him in disbelief because my dad doesn’t have “slip-ups.” He’s a perfectionist, like my mother, which is why they somehow complement one another.

“Hard to believe, huh?” He has a proud smile on his lips that makes his whole expression brighten up. I can tell he’s relieved I made it through.

“Very.” I don’t hide my disbelief.

“I still want confirmation from Headmaster Atlas,” Mother shouts. She makes it seem as though we’re talking over her. “A lot is on the line right now. I can’t be telling my friends and colleagues unless there’s confirmed proof that you came in first.”

“Feel free to reach out to her, then,” I encourage because what else can I say or do to make her believe me? “Nothing else I say will give you the feeling of satisfaction you’re looking for.”

“I won’t stand for your backhanded comment, Ophelia!” Mother shouts, as if she’s right in front of me. “You should be grateful to even attend Nephilim Malevolence University. Without our legacy—”

“I got in fair and square.” I interrupt her because I can’t let her tarnish all the hard work I put in to achieve this. Clenching my hands into fists, I stare into her eyes while fighting not to say what needs to be said for years now.

“Our legacy didn’t help me when I had to complete the six-hour written exam. Did our legacy aid me for the last ten years of working my ass off day and night studying every text in our three thousand book library? I’m sure our legacy is what forced me to take on the responsibility you’ve bestowed upon Odessa for years, and the same legacy not only pushed her away but left me to be the one to pick up the pieces while being mocked and ridiculed for being a damn Guinevere!”

It annoys me down to the core that we’re even having this conversation right now. Instead of giving me praise for surviving one of the hardest trials I experienced while acting as though it was a breeze, I’m being ridiculed and doubted by a parent who cares more about what ‘her friends’ think.

“Ophelia Minerva Guinevere,” Mother snaps.

“If you’re not going to acknowledge that I, Ophelia, went through that trial by myself without this ‘legacy’ protecting me from the trials and tribulations I had to face, then I don’t want to speak to you.”

My words are specifically to my mother, but I’m sure she’ll manipulate them and turn my father against me if it brings her peace in her own household.

“See. The youngest are always the rebellious ones! If Odess—”

“SHE’S NOT HERE!” I shout, which shuts her up. “Fucking Hell! I literally could have died during the path of roses or perished in depths of shadows waters or been wrapped with black vines and drowned. Or better yet, swallowed whole by the golden serpent and never reached the golden gates of Nephilim Malevolence University! I could have died if it wasn’t for ME! Not you, or Odessa, or our fucking legacy! At the end of the day, I, OPHELIA MINEVERA GUINEVERE,

went through that madness all by myself! Despite students making fun of me before the trial could even begin. If you think Odessa could have done a better job, then GO FUCKING FIND HER! Stop forcing me to go through this bullshit and making it feel as if you shouldn't be in debt to me for covering your shame!"

"M-My shame!" she snaps at me. "Th-The only shameful thing I ever did was have YOU!"

"Ella!" Father snarls. "Take that back!"

"You're always defending her and never me!" Mother snaps at him as she spins around and points into his chest. "If it was just Odessa, I would still be a Nephalem. I would be in my role of respect and command and not sitting here doing tea parties with those weak women who think they're in the same class as me!"

"That has nothing to do with Ophelia," Father argues.

"IT HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH HER! She never should have been born!" *Ouch.* "Only Odessa! It was only supposed to be Odessa!"

"It didn't matter if it was Odessa or Ophelia!" Father snaps back at her, which surprises me because I've only heard him raise his voice three times in my lifetime. *This is the first time I heard him scream at her.* "WE agreed, no matter the potential consequences, that we wanted children! That was OUR decision! The promise we made to each other! Don't you dare stand there and act like a victim when we brought Odessa and Ophelia into the world!"

"Y-You never defend me!"

"WHO'S DEFENDING OPHELIA?" he snaps back at her. "This SAME victim-blaming attitude is why Odessa is gone!"

Do you want Ophelia to leave, too? Do you want her to leave N.M.U. and go elsewhere? Do you wish for her to push us out of her life?!”

Mother just stands there, and I can only imagine her expression. Was she mad? Was she crying? What was the expression on her face that made my father’s brows scrunch together in uncertainty?

“This won’t continue,” Father declares with a finger pointed at Mother’s face. “Either you deal with your emotions and mental health that’s prevented you from being the woman I love and the mother of your twin daughters or be prepared to lose everything you say you care about.”

He moves his finger to himself.

“Which includes me, Ella.”

“Ed-Edgar, wait!”

“I’m going out for some air,” he announces and doesn’t even say goodbye as the door of what I assume is the front door opens and slams shut.

I swallow the lump in my throat, realizing I may be the reason my parents finally get a divorce.

Not only does my mother not want me, but she blames my existence for the reason she’s no longer a Nephalem...

Lowering my head, I try to ignore the boiling disappointment that bubbles in the depths of my stomach. My heart clenches in agony, and I wonder if Odessa ever felt this...

Hated.

Despised.

Disappointed in herself.

“Sorry,” I quietly state without looking up at the mirror. “If... you need any updates from now on, feel free to contact Headmaster Atlas.”

There’s no need for me to call her... or Dad anymore...

“O-Ophelia, wai—”

“Goodbye, M—” I can’t even say it. “Bye, Ella.”

I bet she wishes I was never born.

“Ophel—”

When I lift my eyes to the mirror, all I see is the first set of tears that run down my flushed cheeks. Attempting to blink them away, I smile at my sad reflection, noting the way I clench the ends of my buttoned-up white blouse.

Deciding the black tights and white blouse combo will be good enough, I take a few breaths and work to gather my hair into a messy bun.

Slipping on the other strap of my mini backpack, I don’t realize I’m already out of our suite and into the hall until I crash right into someone. Neither of us makes a sound, even as the impact knocks us off our balance. I’m not in the mindset to cast a spell, which is why I brace for impact.

Arms quickly wrap around me, hugging me against a chilled body that cushions the fall.

Without much choice, I open my eyes and press my hands against a firm surface to lift myself enough to see who’s beneath me.

Whose chest I’m firmly pressing my hands against?

Ruby-colored eyes stare back up at me.

They're brilliant to look at, shimmering with a spec of admiration as they bore into mine. For a single moment, they remind me of Odessa.

Reminds me of how whenever I was frustrated with our family dynamic, I could come to her and cry my eyes out in a silent embrace.

The memory is all it takes to make my eyes blur with tears, and those very droplets fall upon the cheeks of the person beneath me. I try to stop them. Fight how they pool in my eyelids or prevent their descent down my flushed cheeks, but how can I stop something that makes my heart hurt so damn much?

My hands slowly curl into clenched fists, and I bite my bottom lip to prevent the whimpering sob that threatens to escape my trembling lips.

“Why...” I finally whisper the question. “Why aren't they proud of me?”

That's always been the hidden question I asked myself.

Why wasn't I enough?

Why couldn't I make them see the accomplishments that everyone else acknowledged without a hint of denial?

Why can't my mother ever be proud of what I've achieved?

Despite it all.

Being abandoned by my sister and having to carry the torch of our legacy all on my shoulders was almost unbearable. Encouraging myself day in and day out that attending this school would finally prove to them that I'm worthy of being praised took every ounce of motivation to finally reach this moment in time.

This is the moment where it finally sinks in.

It doesn't matter how many days, months, or years I spend here.

Their pride and joy is Odessa.

Not me...

That's what pains me the most. What makes the tears continue to cascade down my cheeks and onto this stranger who has no choice but to look up at this mess of a disaster.

Me.

The mistake that shouldn't have been born, to begin with.

I decide it's best to get off this poor man and take the walk of shame back to my suite, where I can cry my heart out and debate whether staying here at N.M.U. is even worth it anymore.

If I disappear like my sister... they wouldn't care, would they? No one would...

"S-Sor..." I try to apologize, but it's cut off by my whimper. "S-S..."

Despite surviving the trials, I feel as though I've failed.

I've lost my point of existence after hearing my own mother say she never wanted me... only Odessa.

I feel myself being pulled back down against this man, his hand pressing the back of my head before he comfortingly strokes it.

As if to say everything is going to be okay.

He doesn't say a single word. All he does is gently stroke his hand along the back of my head, the motion so simple, yet it's the most comfort I've experienced in years.

It might be why it's so easy to cry in his arms.

My sadness consumes me as I shed every tear that begs to escape the hollows of my aching heart. I mourn the idea of doing all of this for some sort of validation from my mom, knowing deep down that nothing I can do will satisfy her own trauma and suffering that she's not ready to confront.

Let alone forgive and heal from.

I cry until I can't anymore, the sobs shifting to quiet whimpers before I finally feel strong enough to make a decision.

I got to N.M.U. by myself. I have to do this for myself.

With a sigh and a sniff, I slowly pull back from the stranger, his draped hand moving away so I can be free to go. Staring back down at him, I'm given this moment to get a glance at him. Red eyes, dark green hair, a corner lip piercing, and clean skin. He has a sharp jaw, clean-shaven, with flawless skin. His attire is all black, but I briefly catch onto the pin that glimmers from its spot in the middle of his knotted tie.

A rose, a bullet, and the slithering symbol of a golden viper.

“Thank you.”

It's the only thing I can say before I rise up and stare at him one last time.

Without waiting for a spoken word, I spin around and walk away, leaving the silent stranger behind and secretly hoping we'll meet again.

Thank you, handsome stranger.



WALK THE PATH OF MY DESTINY

“I don’t even feel like studying at this point,” I mutter to myself before washing my face with cold water. I’m hiding out in the private washroom next to the library entrance. I’m grateful it existed because I couldn’t take the walk of shame back to our suite unless I knew that a handsome stranger wasn’t around.

At least if I go later, I may not see him.

I’ve never been one to hide away in a washroom so I could avoid another individual, but today was going to be a first because I couldn’t confront him at the moment.

Not after crying my eyes out.

Only Odessa had seen me cry like that. Heard those broken sobs or even felt the emptiness I’d endured during the aftermath of my fights with my mother. I couldn’t blame my dad, even though I lumped him and Mother together because they were my parents. Deep down, I knew he disagreed with her treatment of us for years.

Yet he also loves her dearly.

I’m sure he understands Mother better than anyone, but when Odessa disappeared, I couldn’t justify ignoring our suffering any longer.

Or I'd self-destruct.

“Fuck,” I curse and grip the side of the sink far too tightly. Taking a few inhales and exhales, I try to calm myself down from doing something drastic. “It’s alright. I’ll go study like I planned. You’re on your own now, Ophelia. You just... have to suck it up.”

Despite my own words, my mind wants to reject them.

How long do we have to suck it up for?

How long do we have to be alone?

Why does this journey have to be filled with loneliness?

“Because that’s just how it is for someone like me. I’m a Guinevere, so... if I have to take the lonely road to success, so be it.”

“That’s not what we wished for you, Ophelia.”

I lift my head swiftly to the mirror, noticing Dad’s sad expression.

“D-Dad?”

I spin around to see him standing there.

“W-W-What?! Dad! This is the girl’s washroom!” I hiss.

“I know,” he mutters and puts his finger against his lips. “Now, don’t let me get caught. I’ve lasted five years without hearing Headmaster Atlas’ lectures. I don’t want to listen to her talk about me intruding on N.M.U. property without an alumni pass. Especially on the premise of comforting my daughter.”

“Comforting...” I stare at him as he points to the lock, a magic seal of black emerging upon it and sealing whatever spell he just cast.

My spike of intrigue grows as he snaps his fingers and invites walls of shadows to shoot out from the floor to the walls until the entire space is covered in darkness. It's only for a few seconds, but when the darkness retreats into its hidden hollows, the bathroom is now Father's office.

I'm completely speechless, even as I scan the room with my eyes and dare take the few steps needed to press my hand on *one* of the plentiful matte black bookshelves that decorate the room that has become Father's oasis.

"Your energy is still in the bathroom, so no one can say I kidnapped you, but frankly, I can't pull this off for too long. I got in so much trouble in the past, I bet Headmaster Atlas could smell my magic from miles away," Father announces as he walks over to his desk. Lowering into his seat, he gestures to the velvet emerald green wingback accent chair that's on the left side of the fireplace.

The green one was always mine, while the red one on the right was always Odessa's.

"Dad... you shouldn't be here," I whisper as I lift my legs so I can cross them like I always do in this comfortable chair. This was the spot where I could sit for hours, read, and feel at peace. These were some of the few instances I missed as we began to grow up.

Grow further from our childish antics and realize our paths were already paved for us to walk upon.

"I know," he admits and doesn't hesitate to show me his conflicting expression. *His immense worry.* "But that look on your face was something I couldn't ignore."

"My look?" I pout my lips and try to recall what I even looked like. "You make it sound like you've seen such a look

before.”

“I have,” he confesses as he leans further into his office chair while his eyes drift from me to the dancing flames of the fireplace. “The night before your sister’s disappearance. She wore that exact expression.”

“Dad... I had no intention of running away,” I quietly defend, but there’s no reassurance in my voice.

He senses it.

“I know many times we compare you and Odessa because you’re twins and mimic each other in many ways,” he admits as his red eyes drift back to my ivory green-golden ones. “One of those traits includes how you both don’t hesitate to act in the moment. You don’t wait for logic to kick in.” I’m going to argue, but he adds, “Unless the need for logic will determine a positive outcome in your minds.”

I close my mouth, which confirms he hit the nail on the head with that one.

“Your mother’s behavior was inexcusable,” he confesses with a sigh. “I know she’s been extremely stressed since you left. Worried about the trials and if you’d survive through whatever challenges were set for you all this year.”

He reaches over to the pair of glasses that sit on the tower of papers he’s yet to tackle for the day.

Probably because he’s worried about me.

“You know I advocate for her because she has no one else who will stand by her side. Some say it’s a toxic trait of mine that I should acknowledge and confront, but then again, everything is easier said than done,” he admits as he picks up his glasses and stares at them.

“That’s because you love her,” I mutter. “It’s hard to change the habits of someone you love... especially when they themselves don’t want to see the damage they create with their behaviors.”

“She grasps what’s happening, Ophelia,” Dad whispers.

I can’t help but look at him as we stare at one another.

“She’s tipping over the edge of self-destruction?” I whisper.

“Tipping to the point, I’m gonna have to make the decision whether we need a third party in the picture,” he confesses.

“Then why are you with me and not with her?” I don’t want to be the reason why my mother doesn’t promptly get the help she needs.

“Because you were tipping faster,” he admits with a sad smile as he slips his glasses on. “And I can’t let my ignorance bite me in the ass a second time.”

Meaning...

“The same thing happened with Odessa,” I conclude.

“Sadly.” He can’t help but drift his gaze to the red chair. “I have to be reminded every day that I allowed the burdens and frustrations that haunt my lover to impact my child to the point they thought being home and in our lives was no longer a safe place. That never was our intent.”

For once, he lets me see his true emotions as he’s deep in his thoughts.

“When Ella got pregnant, we were ecstatic. We’d been trying for so many years. It was a grand celebration throughout the pregnancy, especially knowing we’d not only be parents but also have a prodigy to continue our name. I know it sounds

stupid, especially when our legacy has seemingly become a burden to you, but it was one of the promises I made to my parents before their passing. From thinking I'd never be able to get Ella pregnant to sensing that little spark of energy inside her tummy, nothing could take the joy away from us."

"Did it go away when I was born?" I mutter and look at the flames, so I don't see the expression of disappointment in his eyes.

"Ophelia." His voice is soft enough to draw me back in, despite my fear of letting him down with my existence. He can't hide his sadness as those red spheres with pupil slits pool with tears. "The day of your and Odessa's births was one of the most serious days of my life."

I can tell he means every word.

"Then... why does Mom despise me?" I've seen all the signs over the years, and I've concluded that I'm the scapegoat between me and my sister. "When she looks at me now, I know she just envisions Odessa. She wishes I was never born and validated that today."

Dad sighs.

"No one informed her," he whispers.

"Informed her of what?"

"That the birth of children will eliminate her Nephalem status," he reveals.

"Wait..." I stare back at him in astonishment. "What do you mean, no one told her that? I mean... wasn't it taught in school? Written in books and scriptures? Mother made sure we knew every single fine detail in regard to Gilded Mergers and their ultimate forms. I knew Nephalems can't get pregnant or else they will lose their blessed gift upon giving birth."

“The curriculum and even scriptures were updated for that reason,” he confesses. “There was so little written about Gilded Mergers we were not aware of. It wasn’t until it became a reality in our lives did we urge the expansion of research to add that prime detail into all the literature.”

“So when we were born, that’s when she found out,” I conclude and try to think about being in her shoes. I knew the premise regarding birth and the risk of complications—especially with postpartum depression—but to find out you’re no longer a Gilded Merger, something you’ve worked hard for years to acquire, is harsh.

A heartbreaking reality... all because you wanted children who would carry on the legacy you built with the man you loved.

“If that’s the case... why does she despise me and not Odes—” In the process of asking the question, it suddenly clicks. “Oh... fuck.”

He arches an eyebrow at my cursing but understands my sudden shock as my eyes widen with realization.

“You’re not... implying...” I’m not sure I can finish the statement.

My gift...

“No one can confirm or deny,” he admits. “We’ve inquired with every knowledgeable being in these realms.”

“Why have you never inquired in Nephilim or Malevolence?” I ask. “Gifts or our magic energies, in general, are said to be blessings from the fae who wished to give a sense of empowerment to children who are born with grand destinies. Obviously, as time has gone on and the mundane population has expanded exponentially, it doesn’t get rid of the

fact that the fae are the ultimate rulers of light and dark arts. Wouldn't they know anything? Or even an antidote?"

"We wouldn't be able to discover that," Dad admits.

"Why not? Couldn't we have done a family trip to Nephilim? I mean, they're the nicer, more reasonable fae between the two worlds, though it doesn't make them any less lethal to interact with."

"A child can't simply enter Nephilim or Malevolence without proper protection. You'll learn that when you receive your emblem," he reveals. "Unless in the company of royalty, the very world itself would rid you of your life force before a fae of low ranks discovers your dead body. It's why so many students and young adults in general are killed easily when entering Nephilim or Malevolence without a professor's protection."

"I didn't know that," I admit. "But... can't I just give it back?"

"Can't give back what isn't stolen," he whispers with a genuine smile.

"I'm confused." I don't hesitate to reveal my earnest uncertainty. "If my gift was involved, then I 'borrowed' it as a baby and just need to give it back now as an adult."

"Again, your gift didn't play a role in this, Ophelia," Dad assures me.

"Then what did?"

"What they don't tell you about Nephalem and fertility is that the chances of you being stripped of your gilded rank are fifty percent," he elaborates with a knowledgeable gaze. "When Odessa was born, it was confirmed your mother still had her abilities."

Then it hits.

“Fucking hell,” I whisper and quickly cover my mouth.
“Um... you didn’t hear that.”

Dad tries not to smirk, but I see the tiny uplift in the corners of his lips.

I’m the fifty percent that came out unexpectedly and sealed the deal of my mom losing her Gilded Merger abilities and rank in the world.

“But... I don’t understand. You knew about us being twins before our birth, yes?”

Dad just stares at me.

“Oh...” Now, it makes perfect sense. “You thought you were only having Odessa...” I try to ignore the sinking feeling that thrums through me.

“They say babies with immense shadow capabilities enjoy hiding their presence in the womb to secure their solidarity as they grow during the pregnancy,” Dad reveals. “Now, when it comes to twins, the baby doesn’t recognize to reveal itself until they sense the absence of their twin counterpart. It triggers the break of the barrier, and the remaining baby becomes prominent and noticeable as it triggers the contractions that lead to the second birth.”

“You learn something new every day,” I conclude and finally get it.

Why my mother hates me.

“I was the hidden, unplanned, power-stealing fifty percent,” I summarize. “You guys should have put me up for adoption.”

“Ophelia.”

“What? I’m serious. Wouldn’t she have been happier? Every day for the last twenty years, she’s been reminded of a hidden dark arts baby in her womb that hid away, borrowed her magic, and stole her chance of remaining a Nephalem just by her existence. No wonder why she hates me. I bet she was hoping Odessa went to N.M.U. and unlocked her gift that counters mine. Or maybe it’ll be the same. Then she’d get her rank back. In fact, she’d get her life back instead of sitting at home, being a housewife, and watching everyone but her delve into the world of magic she probably misses dearly.”

I should feel bad for her now that I knew the truth, but then again, treating me the way she did for all these years without the truth was just as agonizingly painful for me. My livelihood and childhood years are what forced me to become this shell of a person because I couldn’t trust having people in my life long enough before they despise me.

Just like my own mom...

He can’t even answer me back, which proves one thing.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

Mother thought because Odessa and I are twins, that she’d get the same gift unlocked upon attending N.M.U., then she could...

“Is that the ending you wanted for me, Dad?” I ask instead of confirming what my mother always hoped for when it came to Odessa.

It’s why she treated her better.

Kinder.

Showed her nothing but pride and hope.

No wonder I felt like an outcast in my own family, despite how hard my father tried to make me feel loved. He didn't have to risk coming here to N.M.U. on entrance day to comfort me. Or change the environment, so it felt cozier and safer for me to express myself. Dad didn't penalize me for just being a powerful baby.

My mother did... and still does penalize me for something completely out of my control.

I'm surprised to see my dad is no longer at his desk.

He's kneeling in front of me, his hand lightly on mine that rests on my feet that are pressed together.

“What I envisioned for you before Odessa's disappearance was to be given the chance to find your identity before you entered N.M.U.,” he begins. “However, it changed when Odessa disappeared.”

“To what?” I ask, hoping he'll answer.

“That you'd attend N.M.U., not because of the pressure we've burdened you with, but because you wish to explore the worlds you're destined to venture through,” he whispers. “Your potential has always been infinite, Ophelia, but I know your birth was meant to be one of great purpose. That you'd achieve things your mother and I could have never done in our youthful years. I want N.M.U. to open the gates toward freedom and allow you to finally be free from what may have been a prison to you.”

“My childhood... wasn't necessarily a prison,” I mutter in clarification. There were hard times, difficult tasks, brutal moments, and questionable decision-making at times, but I didn't feel like I was suffocating to the point of being desperate to leave.

Dad never made me feel that hostile in my own environment.

“It had plenty of hardships, but there were a lot of good times as well. It’s not like I hate Mother or anything... it’s just...”

“It hurts to know someone you love sees you in a different light,” he whispers. “Especially when it’s undeserving and out of your control.”

“Yeah...” I’m sure this is the time when one would shed tears or cry, but the truth doesn’t make me feel as pitiful as before. I’d shed my tears and accepted that I may never gain Mother’s words of praise. This conversation confirmed what I had to force myself to acknowledge earlier.

Now, I have to take the next steps forward.

“So, N.M.U. is my time to shine,” I say with a tiny smile. “At least I can make you proud, Dad.”

“I’m already proud of you, Ophelia,” he urges me to understand. “You’ve done phenomenally, and I know you’ll continue to make me proud.” He reaches up to gently cup my cheek. “But I want this university to be where you blossom and find your true purpose. For you to make friends and maybe even find someone who will love the individual you are and not solely fantasize about being a part of the Guinevere heritage.”

I know he’s referring to my ex.

“Pick better choices in men. Got it,” I summarize. “Though it seems I have a tendency to be attracted to toxic, possessive men.”

He sighs, but I see a hint of playfulness in his eyes.

“I was ruthless.”

“And yet Mother somehow found it in her heart to love you,” I gasp in horror. “Shocking.”

“That’s what happens when you’re forced to be partners,” he complains, but I know better.

“You enjoyed every second of it.”

“Every damn second.” His eyes couldn’t be more radiant as he smiles genuinely.

We share a look as smiles blossom on our lips.

“Thanks for coming to comfort me, Dad.” I mean it. “I feel better now.”

“Good,” he whispers and rises up.

Uncrossing my legs, I stand and enjoy the embrace Dad gives me.

“There’ll be many challenges ahead at N.M.U., and it’s a place that is merciless to the weak. Don’t let anyone take advantage of your dismissive nature. If they make you feel like you’re a walking weakness, prove to them that you’re the ruler of their lives when on the battlefield,” he empowers. “And always remember... whoever shares the same emblem as you can always be trusted.”

“And how about those who don’t?” I wonder.

“Alliances are safe,” he assures me. “Everyone else? Never turn your back completely when around them.”

“Or else you’ll be stabbed,” I finish, remembering his teaching when we were young. “Got it, Dad.”

“Then off to the library you go,” he assures me, then gives me one more hug. “Please, Ophelia. Don’t perish within those

walls.”

“I’ll do my best,” I vow and quietly add, “I won’t promise, though, because I hate breaking them.”

“Ophelia,” he grumbles, which makes me giggle.

“Alright, alright. Promise. Cross my heart. Whatever that saying is.”

He shakes his head.

“I pray you find someone who can handle your personality.”

“My roommate loves me,” I declare with a wink. “Lysander.”

“A Lysander. Wow.” Dad whistles. “Gilded Benders are lethal.”

“Glided what now?” I ask and watch as he smirks.

“You’ll find out.” He gives me a wink. “Away you go. My senses are telling me Headmaster Atlas is nearby.”

Don’t want to get caught by her, especially in the ladies’ bathroom.

“Away I go,” I declare and skip toward the door. I know the moment I walk through it, the illusion will be gone, and I’ll be back in my spot in the washroom.

Holding the doorknob, I look back to have one more admiring moment of Dad as he stands in wait for my departure. I know this may be the last time I see him for a long time.

Unless I perish. Then this would be the very last time.

“I love you, Dad.” The words of affection haven’t been said for a very long time. His eyes widen in shock before they

begin to water.

Time to go.

Turning away, I take a breath and close my eyes.

“Tell Mom I’m sorry for making her life miserable... and maybe one day, I can make things right.”

Opening the door, I step into the dark oasis before Dad can say another word. The moment the door closes behind me, I open my eyes.

I’m back in N.M.U. and ready to survive this university by any means necessary.



A HUNT TO UNRAVEL EVERY INCH
OF YOU

“Of course, the Guinevere made out it first.”

“No surprise there.”

“Fuck. If she’s entering the curriculum, we’re gonna be stuck at this university for a few more years.”

“Don’t jinx us like that, man. She can’t be that strong.”

“Her parents were top in the league. Heck, she looks just like her mom. Didn’t you see the painting in the Hall of Shadows and Justice?”

“Haven’t been allowed there yet, man.”

“Well, she’s probably gonna suck up to all the professors to get bonus points.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised. Can’t deny she has a nice body.”

“Oh, no. Can’t lust over the nerdy teacher’s pet, brother.”

“You’re too good for her.”

The laughter that ignites makes me place the book I’ve been scanning back on the shelf.

Despite coming here during downtime when there aren’t many students to begin with I’m left stuck listening to these assholes talk about me for a solid fifteen minutes straight.

I'm sure not THAT intriguing to talk about.

My attire doesn't make me feel like I'm sexually attracted to anyone, either. Odessa used to comment all the time about how my fashion sense was boring. I wouldn't get a boyfriend wearing black everything without a hint of skin in sight.

Today I wore tights and a short-sleeved blouse look.

Being talked about like an object more than a woman who wants to be with a man long enough to get her name correct.

Having a sexual appetite like mine doesn't help when you've been deprived for far too long. Since my sister's disappearance, I haven't had much action, seeing as all anyone can talk about is Odessa's disappearance or how my mom is "useless" now in the world of magic.

The audacity of people to have the boldness to say whatever they want when you're but a small radius away from them.

With a sigh, I begin to walk away, and the echoes of laughter from the table of jocks make me roll my eyes. Kind of reminds me of my ex—Asher Heathcliff.

Biggest jock with a grandiose ego.

His cock, in particular, makes you do foolish things.

Like dating him secretly for a year just so you can enjoy riding a pony every Friday night after sneaking out of your house with your strict parents to "study."

Asher was from a well-off family not too far from our massive house, and since he came from a family of powerful guides, my parents didn't ask questions when I went over to "study." The hardest part of the relationship was hiding all the

damn hickeys. Possessive men always enjoy love marking up their territory.

We had to break things off because he was chosen to attend N.M.U. after not being chosen for three years. To think he was finally accepted at twenty-four was a blessing and a bit of a curse.

The older you get, the harder this school becomes, with your magic being forced to reach its peak far too soon.

That was why many wished to get into N.M.U. by twenty, which gave you two years to play around and figure out your abilities before entering this university, which helps us tap into the unthinkable.

I never heard from him again, and it didn't make sense to visit Ash's house when he was no longer there. Sometimes, I hoped he survived and was doing well, but then again, we were just living sex toys for one another.

Our connection was like day and night.

Maybe that was my problem.

My personality was deemed "weird" by many. I was blunt, confrontational if necessary, didn't care much about what many thought of me, and was powerful. Most of those traits were ones many didn't give a shit about, but when you add those and 'power' into the mix, you're stuck with being one of the most envied individuals in the room.

Joyous popularity at the price of being born powerful.

Wonderful.

My Dad wants me to find myself while I attend this university, but what if you already know what you are? What if the root of the problem isn't who you are but the people

around you? Maybe what I'm truly looking for isn't about changing myself but finding an environment filled with people that just got me.

A group of friends, maybe?

A boyfriend who cares?

A society filled with people who accept me.

Coming to a stop, I look up to try to find the Manga section Amy was talking about.

“Top floor, left, down to Row 1069. Interesting.”

The number 69 always made me smirk because that was Ash's favorite position.

He loved eating me out like I was the best dessert he'd ever tasted.

This university gives me a sense of nostalgia when it comes to my past. Weird when I'd only been here when I was a small child. The infrastructure of ancient buildings has changed significantly since, but the library seemed to be the one place they tried to keep the same.

Aside from the mass expansion of more books.

Whether it was the Mundanes who wished to expand their knowledge or the Fae of various Courts and Kingdoms who couldn't get enough knowledge from books and scriptures, the library in any realm was one of the most vital spaces.

Especially when it comes to the worlds of dark magic and arts.

Reaching the Manga section has me scanning the rows of books. Some I recall reading when I was a young teen, but none of them seem to interest me now.

“Don’t they have a smut section?” I mutter with a disappointed pout. Spinning around, I feel a need to discover whether they have a Hentai section of some sort.

I mean, if those technological apps emphasize the importance of steamy romance with their discreet covers and extra sizzling, panty-wetting scenes, then I should be able to find a section revolving around the intense intimacy between two people.

Or three.

Four?

Goodness, how can one handle more than one man?

It’s a thought that makes me snicker before I turn from the Manga section and head down to the final three rows of colossal bookshelves. Turning into the first lane has me walking three steps before I turn my head to see a book I’d been dying to read.

“No fucking way!” I hiss quietly and grab the book I’ve been dying to read for months but couldn’t find it anywhere.

Literally anywhere.

I was completely against getting books on the dark web because they were filled with magic viruses that physically manifested into your lives.

Authors got tired of people stealing their shit and livelihood, so why not collaborate and make every book carry a plagiarism and illegal distribution spell that curses anyone who doesn’t purchase the book from the store or through official online means?

I’m the type to find humor in the most horrendous things, but can you imagine being cursed for five years with nothing

but misery over a ten- to twenty-dollar book?

Suddenly, authors are making bank, and more young people are in the library reading smut.

This book, in particular, was something I could relate to.

Aside from the rockstar princess part.

The FMC is living her rockstar dreams, doing sold-out shows and touring the world when she suddenly gets kidnapped and brought into Nephilim, where she's kept hostage. She has no clue she has magic on a grand scale, and low and behold, her band members show up and cause a ruckus.

Now, where's the smut, you may ask?

Right from the damn beginning to crazy orgies that can appease a teenager's horny mind for days, if not weeks.

The book was sold out in the stores for so long, I gave up trying to acquire a copy.

"I wonder if I say the book was burned to a crisp by accident, I'd only pay a fee," I ponder as I stare at the book's discreet cover. My sinister grin of anticipation can't grow bigger as I kiss the cover.

"Lyrica. You're coming home with me."

"Now, Princess. You can't possibly be kissing a book and being completely unaware of your surroundings."

All I can do is turn my head to my right, only for my jaw to drop while my cheeks burn so hot, I'm surely as red as a tomato.

My pussy, however, is doing the quivering dance of her people because... holy heavenly shadows.

Professor Blackbird is balls deep in Professor North's ass.

What makes it even hotter is Professor North is blindfolded, with earbuds in his ears.

He doesn't even know I'm here, watching two professors fuck in the middle of the Smut Hentai section of N.M.U. library.

Now that I've acknowledged them, I can hear Professor North's grunts. He grips whatever bit of ledge of the bookshelf he can without knocking the books off their shelves.

Professor Blackbird is surprisingly keeping his pace, grinding into Professor North's ass while his right hand further grips his hips so he can't easily escape.

I realized Professor Blackbird's eyes shift colors, the shade reminding me of moonstones that change colors depending on one's emotion. In this case, Professor Blackbird's eyes are pink with hints of gold and red, the romantic shade proving he's at the peak of lust as he fucks Professor North like he's been deprived of him for years.

It's hot as fuck...

No way is this normal for me to walk into.

I would have heard their grunts and moans the moment I walked down this corridor toward this very section. It wasn't until I picked up the book in this row and Professor Blackbird spoke was when the spell came undone.

Meaning he wanted me to hear them.

“What shall my little Nightmare do, hmm?” Professor Blackbird questions with a panting breath. “Stay? Make a fuss? Leave and never come back?”

My cheeks grow warmer as I try to grasp his question.

He's watching me intently, even as his thrusts grow faster, meaning he's closing in on his own sense of pleasure.

"Dammit, Daemon. Not so rough," Professor North seethes and further arches his back. "Fuck... you can't... keep going."

Professor Blackbird chuckles, knowing damn well Professor North has no idea I'm here.

He leans against him, his hand moving to hold his neck from the front side.

"If you dare cum, Orpheus, I'll make sure the next punishment involves a certain little Viper you're lusting over."

I don't know what magic dialect was used for Professor North to hear despite the earbuds, but it makes his body grow more rigid while I follow the trailing movement of Professor Blackbird's hand as it leaves his neck and goes all the way until it's wrapped around Professor North's cock.

Fuck... he's huge.

I have a strong feeling Professor Blackbird's cock is even longer, seeing he can't fully reach the back of Professor North's ass cheeks.

Which are round and rather perfect, if you ask me.

I must have read too many professor-student smutty romances to be standing here, watching two of my professors going at it and not be completely flabbergasted at the sight.

Heck, I should be running away.

"That look in your eyes is dangerously tempting, Darling Nightmare," Professor Blackbird notes, and his eyes are shifting to a brighter shade of red. "Stay or go?"

He needs an answer.

“S-Stay,” I whisper, and it makes him smile.

“Come here, *Ophelia*.” Just the way he says my name with that sudden deep voice has my nipples far too hard against the silk fabric of my blouse and my cunt dripping wet with arousal.

Following his command, I take the five steps needed to be right next to him, my heart beating wildly against my chest. I feel like a prey who’s been caught by the predator who’s desperate to devour her, but maybe this is far worse.

So dangerous yet so deliciously tempting, I can’t pull away, despite the risk factors.

From the way his eyes are beginning to glaze over, it’s taking everything for him not to shoot his load right this second.

Professor North is gripping the ledges for dear life, his entire body shaking.

He’s just as close.

The idea of delaying either of them any longer makes me feel a sense of agony around their suffering.

“You let me see this on purpose.” I get right to the point, something I realize Professor Blackbird enjoys.

“I did.”

“You’re not afraid I’ll tell everyone and anyone who will listen to me?”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you are completely turned on by our display of punished affection,” he acknowledges with a smirk that makes his eyes twinkle with hunger. *As if he’s not in the middle of fucking another.* “Your nipples are like laser beams against that silky white blouse, and I’m sure a slip of two fingers into that clenched pussy of yours would confirm how wet you are.”

I bite my bottom lip, so I don’t speak out right away, and the action is watched like a hawk, thanks to those alluring eyes of his.

“What do you want?” I whisper.

“That’s not the question I want to ask,” he counters and whispers even quieter than me. “What does my Darling Nightmare want?”

To see this again.

To join in?

To be sandwiched in the middle of these handsome professors?

Imagine if we fucked right here... in the library.

“This.” My brain doesn’t even think fast enough before I’m sputtering the word. “Not... now. Later. When I know both of you more.”

“In exchange for?” He’s curious.

“You allow me to still be able to explore my options,” I speak far too fast for my own good. As if time is really ticking, and my statement needs to be crystal clear. “I still get to see other people...” I trail off and can’t help but be captivated by his ability to multitask. “Until I get in on this.”

We share a look as he slows down just a bit.

“On whatever this is,” I summarize.

“Meaning you like what you see?” He’s dying to hear my response.

“Yes?” I’m breathless. “But...”

But surely this is against the school rules?

Professors can’t be with students, right?

I mean... we shouldn’t even be here!

There’s a shift in the air, one that’s enough to make me and Professor Blackbird look down the aisle.

Someone’s coming.

“One last thing,” I whisper and return my gaze to him. “You finish what you started and tell Professor North I saw it all.”

I’ve never seen a man smile so sinisterly.

“Why Darling Nightmare?”

When he talks with that vibration of magic, I could bow to my knees and submit completely to him. It really makes my body hum in a different way than when Professor North glares at me.

“I just want to grind his gears,” I state the truth and point at the book I’m holding. “I want this.”

He stares at my serious face, then the book in my hand, and back at my face again.

“Deal.”

“Sweet,” I praise and quickly put it back on the shelf. “Finish what you started.”

“You’ll miss out,” he grunts, but now he’s really pounding into Professor North, making him moan as he’s surely seconds from being consumed by his own climax.

“I won’t,” I vow, trying not to get so captivated by the scene happening before my eyes that I fuck up the spell I’m already casting at my fingertips. This may go horribly wrong with how physically—and sexually—buzzed I am, but it’s worth the risk.

Seeing these two handsome professors come undone at the same time? I’ll get kicked out of this university for the sight.

Absolutely madness when you think about it logically, but who cares about sensibility when you’re horny?

I snap my fingers that very second, the invisible movement of spike energy doing exactly what I need to slow whoever was heading our way.

A gasp follows with a curse, proving whoever is coming our way is a male—which means it’s not the librarian—but I care not about who I just knocked down with at least fifty books.

Ensuring they are equally protected, of course.

My body is spinning back around in time.

Just to watch those two hot beings cry out in bliss as they wither through the waves of ecstasy their climax delivers.

I can never watch porn again now that I’ve seen the real thing with my very eyes. It wouldn’t be enough to have my lace undies drenched with my juices.

How am I going to watch these two teach when this memory will replay again and again?

I'd have to find a way to toss it on the side of my mind during class, or else things would get complicated.

My eyes slowly descend to Professor North's cock, noticing the cum that drips down Professor Blackbird's hand that's firmly wrapped around the veiny length. He uses his free hand to tug at the blindfold, allowing him to turn his head to look back at him.

Only to stop the moment his eyes spot me.

The magnitude of emotions that wash over his face is a sight to witness, but there's no time for that as I go right into action, not without making a statement of my own.

Lifting my free hand, I place a single finger on my lips and grin the sauciest grin.

Your secret is safe with me.

Then I spin around with my prop in hand, turning into the hall in time to crash into our next challenge.

Professor D'Angelo.



LUSTFUL REVENGE AND FACING
REALITY

“**I**t’s too risky to do this now.”

I’m fighting off a smile while my hand tightens around Orpheus’.

Or else he’d run for the nearest exit.

“We’ve done worse shit in more crowded places,” I justify as we head up the stairs.

The calming ambiance of the Grand Library of Shadows and Secrets has always been one of my favorite places. From the first day I walked into this oasis of books, I knew I’d benefit from its low lighting and cozy, ancient gothic vibes.

During the day hours, the lights were dimmed enough to see where you were going or be able to read the small print of the average magic scripture, but at night was when the library was the prettiest. Lit candles decorated the high ceilings of the stained glass and windows, while every corner aisle had a hanging torch that lit the entire row based on approaching movement.

The smell of blown-out candles was always the best.

An addiction I miss serving now that I’m a professor and not a tutor or scholar in the depths of this very library.

This was my comfort space, where I knew where every hidden nook and gateway was located in this seven-floor institute. I knew the floors no one ever ventured to, which included the Manga section that carried loads of popular yet extremely steamy content.

Why did N.M.U. have this section when very few ever walked down these halls?

It was an intriguing test to determine which students feared other's opinions regarding their likes and interests and who didn't give a flying fuck.

So, what better way but to fill three rows of Hentai, smut, and anything rated 18+ that should be thrown in the "dungeon" of naughty books? The brave were the ones who benefited from this section and kept up with all the series that were either banned or sold out for months.

Reaching the very section I speak of, I can't help but smile as my heart skips a few beats.

I'm starting to realize the new student wasn't going to be a problem for just Orpheus.

She has an effect on me as well.

For the longest time, the one who made me struggle to stay focused was Orpheus. The tension between us grew for years until neither of us could take it anymore.

We collided, sparked, and destroyed each other to a point of no return.

Now, we can't help but appease one another when the other is tired of masturbating to the streams of the shower.

Today was different, though.

The entry trial invited a woman with striking eyes of green with twinkles of gold. They remind me of tiny stars and constellations. As though connecting each glimmering dot would create a sign that would decipher why exactly I'm reacting to her alluring energy.

The crazy part neither Orpheus nor I can figure out is why we're reacting to her when she's not even trying to show off. Unlike all those students flaunting their auras and barely making it through the first part of the entrance trial.

Their lack of seriousness led to their ends. Now, they can enjoy all eternity regretting their flaunting decisions.

To think this student survived the entry trial, coming in first place with her partner, and even getting the fiercest golden serpent to befriend them was a sight to see with your own eyes to believe it.

Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.

Turning into the Manga section leaves me tingling with need. I've been sexually frustrated for hours, and now that we're alone, I can't wait to chase the high of ecstasy with my stubborn best friend.

Best friend.

Not even lover.

Because neither of us is ready to take that step.

Despite us fucking one another and giving a shit about each other's wellbeing.

The only reason neither of us has pulled the trigger and made this official is because of one simple understanding.

Something is missing.

After today, the answer may be *someone*.

The moment we reach the center of the aisle, I'm tugging Orpheus' hand, so he'll have no choice but to stop next to me. All he has to do is turn his attention my way for him to be lightly slammed against the shelf and have my body plastered against his.

Our tongues are tied as we desperately kiss away the palpable tension coursing between us.

"Fuck, Daemon," Orpheus breathes between kisses. "We shouldn't..."

"You want this more than me," I interrupt while I tug at my tie until it becomes loose along my collar. I'm grateful I wore one today because it's going to be put to good use.

"I warned you," I emphasize and break the heated kiss that's making my world spin. With his energy rising like mine, it's best I bring it down a few notches before we knock ourselves out, trying to consume each other with our palpable magic essences.

That's what happens when you let your magic reign and peak against your intimate lover.

Both elements, especially if opposite, spike until they entwine as one and make an outlet of release or consume the users and knock them both out.

Rather not be found knocked out in this section of the library.

Distracting myself, I tug at Orpheus' tie, loosening it enough so I can get further access to his neck, which is still sporting the hickey I gave him yesterday.

Or the godly me who likes to do whatever the fuck he wants.

“We could get caught,” he grumbles, then moans when I suck the side of his neck.

The spot that was bitten yesterday is still as sensitive as ever. I enjoy how it makes Orpheus try to squirm away, but between the two of us, I’m actually stronger than him.

Despite my rather ‘soft’ appearance.

“You don’t care about that.” I acknowledge the truth he’ll never admit out loud. Orpheus doesn’t give a hoot about being caught.

What matters to him is who the person is that catches us in the act.

“Daemon,” he groans before I kiss him with far too much dominance that his lips have no choice but to submit to me like his body that further melts against mine.

I kiss and suck, grind and groan into his mouth. He takes my aggression, every bit of it, knowing just how much his submission turns me on. He has no problem being my bottom.

I’m perfectly fine being on top cause that’s how I get exactly what I want.

Breaking the kiss leaves us panting as I press my forehead against his.

“You’re so warm,” he complains, as if my warmth doesn’t drive him wild.

“And you’re cold as fuck,” I grumble, but our lips brush at that moment, the two of us keeping still while our breaths so easily sync.

It's these moments of serenity hidden in the shadows that make me yearn for this to be more than "something." To be a real relationship and a connection we can flaunt to the world without fearing the consequences. Neither of us wants to lose the careers we worked hard to obtain, but how long before we're completely lost in this thrilling connection that fills the voids within us?

"You're not the type to stall," Orpheus quietly states, pulling me out of my worrying thoughts.

Opening my eyes halfway, I'm met with his eyes of dusk that bore into mine. I can only wonder what shade my eyes are reflecting.

Can he see the flickers of anxiety that swim around hints of uncertainty? Or does he see deep within the depths that show a glimmer of sadness that reminds me that we're at a standstill with this 'relationship' of ours?

I can't find an escape route that leads us to a happy ending, and that's the most stressful part of it all.

Because I want this.

Want us.

But at what cost?

At the expense of whose life?

The press of lips to mine pulls me out of my spiraling misery, leaving me no choice but to stare into Orpheus' eyes.

"Stop worrying," he whispers with that annoyed tone of his. *I know he's not upset with me at all. He's worried.* "We always figure it out. This... won't be any different."

He's right, even though it's frightening to think otherwise.

Fuck reality.

For now, we'll have to keep hiding in the shadows until we're ready to walk together into the rays of light.

"Turn around," I command, and he sees that I'm back to my commanding self. I'd rather get lost in endless pleasure than think anymore.

That's exactly what I plan to do.

Moving a step back allows Orpheus to turn around so his back is facing me.

My cock is already twitching as I imagine the few moments I've seen Orpheus completely naked. We've only actually done that once.

A night where all that mattered was lust and pleasure.

Completely loosening my tie rewards me with silky material that is just enough to cover Orpheus' eyes as I blindfold him. He tenses up at first, but I lean against him enough to press my warm lips against his chilled flesh.

"You know I'll never harm you that way," I reassure him. "I'll only invite pleasure."

He relaxes just as I finish tying the knot behind his head. Slipping my hand into my right pocket, I retrieve a pair of earplugs, something I carry around like a hidden habit. I lean over until I can whisper in Orpheus' ear.

"I'm gonna plug your ears," I warn him. "No one will hear us." Only those I allow would hear our panting moans and cries of relief.

Which at this point in our lives and careers is no one unless we're risking it all to get fired.

“Okay,” he gives me permission with a slight tremble in his voice.

That won't do.

“Orpheus,” I speak his name as tenderly as I can. “I’ll never hurt or set you up for failure,” I vow. Never intentionally. I love him far too much to do something so cruel.

I understand his reactions, though.

When your parents are sick fuckers desperate for rank and power, you can expect them to do anything to ensure their child is but a puppet part of their sick madness.

“I know,” he admits and takes a few breaths to calm his nerves down.

I support him by lightly kissing his neck, then move down to the crook between his neck and shoulder, making Orpheus groan. I’m sure he’s closing his eyes to enjoy the heightened sensation of calm that flutters through him.

He may not admit it, but touch is his love language.

Kiss him anywhere on his neck or shoulders and he's calm and ready for any storm heading his way.

“You’ll hear me when you need to hear me,” I whisper against his flesh. “You’re fine with your punishment?” I only remind him because this is payback for earlier.

It's a pleasurable punishment and not one that will have him quivering in scrutiny.

“Fucking fine,” he grunts. “Hurry up and stick your hard cock in my ass.”

My smirk couldn’t get wider.

“You won’t be saying that after you struggle to walk straight,” I mutter while intentionally unbuckling my belt loudly, so he’ll hear that and the sound of my zipper opening slowly. It’s not until I free my cock and work on unbuttoning his pants that drop to his ankles do I prepare to put the earbuds in.

“Be as loud as you want,” I assure him. “I want to be the only one who hears you scream my name as your ass clenches my cock.”

He groans when I press against him as my left-hand snakes around his erect cock.

This is what I’m talking about.

Him getting nice and hard for me—and me alone.

The idea of him getting hard for that new student tugged a nerve inside of me. Maybe it was jealousy, but then again, I was rather possessive of what I deemed was mine.

Just can’t do it publicly yet... but what if Miss Nightmare was added to the equation?

What explosive combustion would our connection ignite?

“Daemon,” Orpheus groans in impatience, leaving me to chuckle as I slide my hand up to his leaking tip, which is overflowing with precum.

“Impatient for someone who tells his students not to rush into things,” I tease and squeeze the head of his cock tightly.

He groans and shivers against me before I kiss his neck and whisper, “You better hold those ledges tightly because I’m gonna fuck this ass mercilessly.”

He can’t hide the effect I have on him up close, the twitch of his cock in my grasp proving so.

“Don’t knock the shelves over, or else we’ll be caught,” I warn him, knowing he’ll obey me. Then I work on getting those earbuds in, one at a time, with my free hand. Once they’re in, I don’t delay in our pleasure shenanigans.

My hand strokes his cock, pumping him up and down his length to gather more of his precum that generously rolls down the tip. It’s the best lube I can offer at this moment, which is why I make sure to gather enough that can layer my manhood perfectly.

I’m very aware that I’m thicker and longer than Orpheus, which means his ass can’t take every inch of me, but as long as he squeezes me tightly, matched with his loud grunts and moans, that’s all I need to be turned on.

“Ready, King of Darkness?” I use a hint of magic for my voice to echo in the depths of his mind. In reality, my dialect speaks words that mix Latin and ancient Greek, which are some of the hardest words to translate by another listener.

“Fuck me already, Daemon,” he grunts while his body presses against my shaft that’s right between his ass cheeks, taunting that little hole of his.

I’d be lying if I tried to act as though my cock wasn’t desperate to be inside him.

No more delays.

Inching into his ass, I feel the resistance.

“Relax, Orpheus,” I need to calm him down, and I do so by further leaning against him so he can feel my warmth. **“It’s only you and me. Breathe.”**

That seems to do the trick. His tamed inhales and exhales allow the tension to leave his muscles. I take that moment to inch into him. It’s not too agonizingly slow but at a good

enough pace that we're both shuddering at the tight sensation his ass delivers.

"Fuck." I let my eyes close for a moment and reach deep enough to feel perfectly satisfied. I could stay completely still like this and be heightened enough sexually to cum with my added imagination.

It's so much easier to please us Nephilims versus Malevolence Fae, but I want to drag this out for Orpheus' sake—and pleasure.

"I've missed this cock of yours," Orpheus groans. "Fuck..."

"Just how I've missed your delicate ass," I whisper in the hollows of his mind before I inch out a bit. "I'm gonna get moving."

"Please," he begs. "I need this, Daemon. So... fucking much."

I know.

That's why, against the odds, I brought him here to fuck the built anxiety and stress of today out of him.

"Now moan for me."

When I begin to move, he has no choice but to obey—the pace determined by the spikes of lust that rush through both of us. This is the level of intimacy I can't deny in the slightest. Being connected to another. Enjoying the way his temperature spikes only with me while I fuck him from behind. Our energies and the way they begin to sync with one another is what heightens these sexual experiences to different astral planes.

Where his thoughts so easily drift into my mind and his emotions seek refuge in the depths of my heart.

When we fall into a rhythm, it feels as though we're one person. Every spike of lust, hunger, and devouring passion consumes our senses, leaving us moaning, grunting, and pleading for more.

A part of me wants to make this fast.

Another part wants this to never end.

I can't decide what the fuck I want between the two, so I run with my instincts, even as I sense the foreign energy getting closer this way. I'm hesitant to stop, especially when we've gotten this far, but what plays with my senses is how this foreign energy feels familiar and comforting.

I know this essence. I've sensed it recently.

How tempting it is to think it's the very princess who stole the show of the entry trials and left Orpheus and me horny to get this sexual tension tamed before we have no time to appease each other's needs.

Before my ears catch on to the approaching footsteps, I realize it's too late. There are not enough seconds to cast a spell or hide our auras that are synched into one unit.

The moment someone hits close to our radius, the sphere of magic that cloaks is energy and bodies lowers exceptionally, which leaves me one of two options.

See who it is and knock them out before they make a sound or face the consequences head-on.

My hips won't stop, the fullness that radiates through Orpheus and me too hard to resist. We're a lost cause when

together, and now someone was going to walk right in and witness our dirty little secret.

To see the sight of a Nephilim prince and Malevolence royal fucking each other like ruthless lovers.

When my eyes lock on the individual who turns into our lane, I need a moment to just breathe while my body hums in delight at the powerful being in my line of view.

Darling Nightmare.

She doesn't even notice us; her eyes are strictly on the array of books as they scan and stop on a particular book.

"No fucking way!" she hisses in disbelief before she grabs the book on the shelf as if it's the key to her breezing through N.M.U.

Only we're in the smut section of books.

She's carrying an expression that makes it seem she discovered the holy grail as she further inspects the book's spine, edges, back, then the discreet front.

"I wonder if I say the book was burned to a crisp by accident, I'd only pay a fee," she ponders.

Then she's grinning from ear to ear.

"Lyrica. You're coming home with me."

Lyrica. A smutty-as-fuck rockstar fantasy romance that's been sold out across all three realms for months.

Yet my Darling Nightmare found a copy.

Versus seeing a smutty scene coming to life before her eyes.

It's amusing enough to encourage me to say something while secretly hoping the vibes I get from her are on point.

She's not like every other student here whose sole purpose is to prove they're powerful enough to be here.

“Now, Princess. You can't possibly be kissing a book and being completely unaware of your surroundings.”

My voice is surprisingly tame, even though I'm managing to keep my pace while I fuck Orpheus nice and deep. I hate not to give him my full attention, but this is the one instance where I'll multitask for the sake of whatever is brewing with this new student.

Miss Ophelia, the little Viper of Orpheus and the Darling Nightmare of mine.

When her eyes lock on us, I watch all the emotions wash over her expression. Her shocking surprise morphs into hints of excitement while those wide green eyes of hers take us in from head to toe. She can't hide the flickers of lust that dance in those mesmerizing spheres of hers while those flushed cheeks are now bright red, making her look as though she gets beet red with a hint of alcohol in her system.

Her jaw ends up dropping as it sinks with every second she's just caught two professors of N.M.U. fucking at the hidden backend of the library.

And it's not even the official first day of classes.

Her stillness is one thing, but I can't help but let my guard down further, the sounds of Orpheus's moans and grunts reaching her ears from how her eyes widened at that moment.

I catch the way her legs press together, as if not to release a whiff of her arousal that would confirm this sight before she does the opposite in frightening her. The nips of her breasts can't hide the truth because they're pressing against the silk

material of her blouse, confirming our Darling Nightmare isn't wearing a bra beneath that blouse.

Our... I'm already claiming her. A dangerous woman to have in our vicinity.

This should be the moment where the alarms go flashing red in my mind, and I take advantage of her stilled shock to knock her out, but I can't seem to bring myself to it.

I want her to see this.

To acknowledge what I am to Orpheus and what he is to me.

We complement one another, and if there's ever a possibility of her joining the picture, that doesn't mean just one of us.

It means the both of us.

A package deal.

It sounds preposterous in my mind, especially when I'm looking at a woman who's surely five years younger than me—ten years younger when it comes to Orpheus—but this magnetic pull between us is far too strong to ignore.

Which is why I'm risking it all.

To be accepted by her in some way that doesn't get us reported to Headmaster Atlas.

“What shall my little Nightmare do, hmm?” I question with a panting breath. “Stay? Make a fuss? Leave and never come back?”

As though she's not red enough, those rosy cheeks grow redder by the second as she tries to comprehend my question.

I have to observe every movement and expression she makes, even though I'm on autopilot and fucking Orpheus to keep building the pace of our orgasms. I know it won't be much longer for either of us, but I want to enjoy watching this woman admire every bit of our unity until we come undone.

Let her watch me fill Orpheus' ass with my release.

“Dammit, Daemon. Not so rough,” Orpheus seethes and arches his back. “Fuck... you can't... keep going.”

Oh, but I can.

I have to because I need this Darling Nightmare to witness the grand finale before deciding whether she'll walk out of here remembering this confrontation or not.

With a chuckle, I press my body against his backside and grip his neck from the front.

“If you dare cum, Orpheus, I'll make sure the next punishment involves a certain little Viper you're lusting over.”

He knows I mean every word. I move my hand to wrap around his shaft and feel the way it twitches and further hardens at the mere mention of his little Viper.

He's doomed to be in a lust phase with this woman, and he can't try to deny just how badly his body wants it.

What will happen in the classroom when she's being taught by us?

It ignites waves of anticipation for me.

Doing the forbidden, like lusting over a student who has a palpable connection with you and your best friend, who you fuck on occasion.

Not only do her eyes express exactly what is running through her mind as she watches how I stroke Orpheus's cock, but her thoughts easily drift into my mind like second nature.

"Fuck... he's huge."

Her gaze then moves to his ass that I'm pounding ruthlessly.

"Which are round and rather perfect if you ask me."

I'm assuming she's talking about Orpheus' ass, but I see the threads of reasoning beginning to break through the layers of lust and desire.

"Heck, I should be running away."

"That look in your eyes is dangerously tempting, Darling Nightmare," I note and use Darling instead of little because I'm not in the mood to acknowledge our difference in age here.

I need to remind my mind that Ophelia is a woman who I wouldn't hesitate to fuck if she gave me her consent.

"Stay or go?" I question her to know where she stands.

Please don't run away...

"S-Stay," she whispers.

I'm smiling before I know it.

I want her to be ours.

"Come here, Ophelia." I sense the spike of intensity at my command, leaving me to make a mental note that dominance in the bedroom could be something Darling Nightmare enjoys.

All it takes is five steps to have her nice and close. Her scent gives the perfect mix of roses, pine, and sage, and the

essence that dances around her body invites a spark of need while delivering a wave of tranquility that washes through me.

So dangerous yet so deliciously tempting, I can't pull away, despite the risk factors.

I'm secretly enjoying her thought process. My eyes are distracted as they glaze over her tiny body. She's short at 5'6" compared to Orpheus and my height at 6'5", but I like our significant difference.

Admiring her only further entices my body, which is inching closer to my climax. I know how close Orpheus is to crumbling, but he's holding onto every stubborn strand within him to cum at the same time as me. From the way his eyes are beginning to glaze over, it's taking everything for him not to shoot his load right this second.

He's just as close.

Our Darling Nightmare can tell how close to our release we are. That has to be why she takes control of the conversation.

"You let me see this on purpose."

"I did."

"You're not afraid I'll tell everyone and anyone who will listen to me?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Why is that?"

"Because you are completely turned on by our display of punished affection." I don't deny it while I let my lips curl into a devious smirk. "Your nipples are like laser beams against that silky white blouse, and I'm sure a slip of two fingers into that clenched pussy of yours would confirm how wet you are."

Watching her bite her bottom lip does dangerous things to me. I almost catch myself stilling as I fight the urge to close the distance between us and suck that bottom lip until it's bruised by my lips.

"What do you want?" she whispers.

"That's not the question I want to ask," I counter and lower my voice further. "What does my Darling Nightmare want?"

"To see this again. To join in? To be sandwiched in the middle of both these handsome professors? Imagine if we fucked right here... in the library."

Hearing all those thoughts is music to my ears.

"This." She's being entirely truthful. "Not... now. Later. When I know both of you more."

"In exchange for?" I have to know what we're getting ourselves into.

"You allow me to still be able to explore my options," she reveals rather quickly. It's enough to make me realize why she sounds so rushed suddenly. *Someone is coming.* "I still get to see other people..." She trails off and can't help but be captivated by my ability to multitask. "Until I get in on this."

We share a look, and I have to slow down my pace so I can attempt to think straight.

"On whatever this is," she concludes.

"Meaning you like what you see?"

Does she see something like this happening with all three of us?

It's scary to hit it off like this.

Even scarier with our jobs on the line versus her attendance here at N.M.U.

Yet I want this to happen. For us to have a fighting chance to try this madness out.

“Yes?” she states breathlessly. “But...”

“But surely this is against the school rules? Professors can’t be with students, right? I mean... we shouldn’t even be here!”

Her thoughts are all valid in execution, but I don’t care about all those hindrances. Besides, there’s a saying that has proven time again that change is inevitable, despite the challenges and tribulations created to stop such a movement.

Rules are meant to be broken.

“One last thing,” she whispers and returns her gaze to me. “You finish what you started and tell Professor North I saw it all.”

The part of me that tickles with immense empowerment has me grinning far too sinisterly.

“*Why Darling Nightmare?*” I don’t mean to tap into my godly power, but it comes out without a bit of control.

“When he talks with that vibration of magic, I could bow to my knees and submit completely to him.”

Her thoughts only further empower me to go along with her plan.

“I just want to grind his gears,” she states the truth and points to the book she’s holding. “I want this.”

I stare at her because she’s absolutely serious with her declaration. She’s going to risk it all just to grind Orpheus’

gears and to keep a smutty book. I'd gladly pay millions just to get her a signed copy from the author.

Wouldn't Miss Hummingbird be excited to sign such a book for my naughty princess?

I stare at her serious face, then the book in her hand, and back at her face again.

“Deal.”

I can't refuse her.

We've come too far now.

“Sweet,” she praises and quickly puts the book back on the shelf. “Finish what you started.”

“You'll miss out,” I grunt and am struggling to control the volcanic spike of pleasure that's ready to obliterate my senses. It forces me to move faster as I'm sucked into chasing the thrilling high that's ready to reward us for our determination to enjoy the bliss of our releases.

“I won't,” she vows.

Deep down, I feel as though she already has a plan formulated into reality. A trait of hers she does so flawlessly when she critically thinks. She's absorbed in our jerking movements, and her thoughts only confirm it.

“Seeing these two handsome professors come undone at the same time? I'll get kicked out of this university for the sight.”

She's snapping her fingers just as I catch onto the new cloak of dread coming from the energy that's approaching us at a quick pace. It's interrupted by a sudden gasp, followed by a curse, but I'm unable to ponder about the noise of multiple

things falling onto the floor because I'm inches from my climax.

"Shit," I curse under my breath and sink myself as deeply into Orpheus' ass as I can.

He's left to cry out in ecstasy as he soars over the edge and ignites my climax with the tight hold around my cock.

I hadn't even registered when I'd gripped onto Orpheus' cock, but it doesn't matter now because his load is leaking down and along my hand as I end up stroking it a few more times. Orpheus is quivering in my grasp, his breathlessness matching mine as we have no choice but to catch our breaths.

"Just to watch those two hot beings cry out in bliss as they wither through the waves of ecstasy their climaxes delivers. How am I going to watch these two teach when this memory will replay again and again?"

I smirk at Darling Nightmare's thoughts, but I realize we need more time if I don't want this place smelling like hot sex on a boiling day with no A/C.

Tugging at the knotted part of my tie, I release the makeshift blindfold so Orpheus can realize we're not only close to getting caught, but we have unexpected company. I'm still deep inside him, which is why the moment he's looking for me and lands his eyes on her, his whole body spikes in temperature while his ass squeezes my shaft far too tightly.

This is the reaction he keeps having for only her.

I expect Darling Nightmare to shyly run away or try to hide from the approaching confrontation, but she does something unexpected.

She places her finger against her lips and gives a look that screams her thoughts that hum sweetly in my mind with her

saucy grin of triumph.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

With that, she spins around with something in her hand and turns away from where we are standing—only to crash into someone.

Shit. Time to face reality.



CONFRONTING A THORN IN OUR
EYE

-OPHELIA-

“O omph!”

Exaggerating a fall is such a burdensome task.

I’m fighting not to roll my eyes at my acting skills, but I get into the lead role for the sake of protecting two professors, who probably put me on their ‘we hate her list.’

Heck. I’m probably the LAST student they ever want to be stuck in a classroom with.

Truthfully, I believe only one of them hates me, but I’ll reevaluate the scenario in my head later.

In the bath.

With a vibrator...

“Ugh! What is the meaning of this?!” Professor D’Angelo snarls while keeping his voice low enough not to go against the volume policy.

His menacing eyes are glaring my way while I innocently blink a few times, as if I’m struggling to catch my bearings.

“Wait...” I begin and scan him from head to toe. “You’re...” I slowly trail off, noticing the lines of realization that morph on his face.

He doesn't want me ratting him out, now does he?

“Professor D’Angelo!” He quickly introduces himself while working toward getting on his feet. Now that I can get a quick glimpse of him, I realize Amy was right about the age difference. *I can guarantee he isn’t doing any quick combat classes in spell work with that slow speed.* “I’m one of the top professors here at Nephilim Malevolence University, specializing in *Malevolence Dark Magic and Artistry.*”

“Right.” As much as I want to try to act entertained, my face must show how uninterested I am in his statement.

“It should be an honored privilege to be in my presence,” he further emphasizes. “Students beg to be taught by one of N.M.U.’s greatest.”

“That’s swell and all, but that doesn’t explain why you were in my tri—”

“You’re Miss Guinevere, aren’t you?” he interrupts me before I can finish my sentence. “Why would you possibly be here, in this section of the library?”

“Why not?” I counter and watch as he blatantly stares back at me as though I insulted him.

Maybe he’s not used to students answering him with another question. A shame. I do this a lot.

“Wh-Why not?” he gasps.

“Yes.” My face couldn’t be more serious as I stare back at him. “Why should it be deemed wrong for me to explore every section of this library while I wait to surprise a professor for his birthday?”

“Surprise?” The poor man can’t comprehend where I’m going with this. “Which professor are you possibly referring

to? All the professors of importance are currently assisting with the entrance trials. None of them would have the spare time to entertain a new student like yourself.”

“But you’re here,” I voice the obvious. “Are you not using your spare time to entertain me with your self-acknowledgment and riddled attempts to try to turn the conversation around from the fact you were in my tria—”

“I-I am NOT wasting my spare time having these tedious talks with a new student who has yet to grasp the utmost privilege it is to speak to me, Professor D’Angelo,” he stresses as he puts his hand on his chest and lifts his head up with his eyes closed. “I was here, investigating a magic disturbance in this section that alerted the librarian. I volunteered to come and assess the area for any illegal activity, especially in a precious place like the Grand Library of Shadows and Secrets. I’m only doing my utmost duty to ensure the safety of these sacred books and students.”

“But there’s already a professor here doing that,” I casually voice as I sense a wave of warm energy behind me.

It almost feels like having a warm blanket placed on your shoulders unexpectedly.

“And who—” Professor D’Angelo begins, his eyes snapping open, only to realize I’m no longer alone.

The poor man is too stunned to speak. Priceless view for a cocky professor who enjoys constantly validating his worth.

“See?” I state without having to look behind me. “I wasn’t lying.”

“What... Professor Blackbird? Professor North?” He’s staring at them, then at my face. “Wh-Why would you

possibly be here in the section of magical interference with two N.M.U. professors?”

“Cake.”

I can feel the heaviness of all three of their stares, but it is Professor D’Angelo’s widened eyes and lowered gaze that prompts a tiny smirk to form on my lips. Lifting the plate in my grasp, I present the black frosted cake with rose designs, green vines, and even miniature snakes of gold.

“You didn’t know? It’s Professor North’s birthday,” I announce, as though it’s common knowledge.

“Wh-What?” Professor D’Angelo gasps.

“It’s Professor North’s birthday,” I repeat and slowly lift my head to see Professor Blackbird is the one standing behind me.

With the most seductive grin on those delicate lips of light pink.

He’s handsome up close, making me admire him enough to forget my train of thought.

“Are you second-guessing the date?” Professor Blackbird inquires, pulling me back to my task at hand.

He has to be Nephilim. Fae are so damn distracting.

“No.” I counter and give him a determined look. “I was assigned to bring the surprise to this location with the excuse of a spike energy source in this specific spot. Seeing as I have a few hours to spare with my early completion of the entry exam, it only seemed commendable to be a part of the surprise, right, Professor Blackbird?”

There’s the smile that makes his eyes twinkle so perfectly, the shades of blue and purple shifting to a warm honey gold

with hints of orange.

“You follow protocol perfectly, Miss Guinevere,” Professor Blackbird announces. “Wasn’t expecting any less from you. Makes me feel rather proud that we’ve been officially assigned as your professors for the majority of your specialized classes at N.M.U.,” he reveals, to my surprise.

“Wait... really?”

I turn my head, moving my gaze to Professor North.

His attention is briefly on the cake in my grasp. He looks as if he can’t believe I actually have an entire cake in my possession for him.

When his dusk eyes meet mine, I only have a few seconds to see his uncertainty, confusion, intrigue, and hints of desire that dance in those shadowed hollows before it’s sealed away with a blink.

Bringing back the man with a scolding expression.

“It was decided for your best interest, with Headmaster Atlas’ encouragement, for you to be assigned two different professors,” he announces with a serious tone. “Your performance during your trial was indeed up to par with N.M.U. standards of excellence and magic artistry. It was enough to deem you worthy to have us assigned in aiding your swift growth and advancement at N.M.U.,” he summarizes. He takes a brief look at the cake once more.

“Though the surprise cake wasn’t something I was expecting,” he grumbles in dismay.

I smirk deviously in return and turn around to face him. Leaning up to my tiptoes, I watch for a second as he grows rigid at my close movement.

“That’s why it’s called a surprise, Professor North.”

I lean back and watch how his cheeks begin to turn red.

“I win.” I mouth at him with a saucy wink that makes him look red kettle on the verge of exploding in three seconds flat.

“Ophelia Mineve—”

“Oh dear,” Professor Blackbird interrupted. “You forgot the wizard wand candles, Miss Guinevere.”

“Hmm?” I pull my eyes away from the amusing sight of grinding Professor North’s gears to see Professor Blackbird’s pouting expression. “Did I?”

I need a few seconds to think about it.

“Ah, you’re right,” I say with a frown. “That’s because... my new roommate was going to bring them with a lighter,” I conclude and proceed to step around Professor D’Angelo to make my escape.

“A lighter?” Professor D’Angelo speaks up, which forces me to stop after three steps and turn around to acknowledge him as he crosses his arms.

I’m only now realizing he’s pretty short in comparison to Professor North and Professor Blackbird.

“As a prestigious new student of N.M.U., I’d assume you’d be able to conduct a basic fire spell, Miss Guinevere,” he confronts with an eyebrow raised.

“Certainly,” I begin.

Professor North is glaring the living life out of this man while Professor Blackbird has a blank expression on his face.

Why is that more frightening?

Those who mask their emotions in heightened situations are always the most dangerous in any situation.

Meaning I have to think of how to get out of this before Professor Blackbird accidentally commits murder for me.

Though, who would deny how hot that would be?

Your potential Nephilim Fae professor killing another professor on your behalf. Romantic if you ask me.

“However, my magic is rather buzzed from the trial. It must have been due to my strained difficulty during the underwater stage. The confrontation I dealt with was rather puzzling. In fact—”

“We don’t need details regarding your experience during your trial, Miss Guinevere,” Professor D’Angelo interrupts. “Why don’t you summon your friend so we can celebrate Professor North’s birthday in the area where you wished to surprise him?”

Sneaky bastard.

“Most certainly...” I’m trying to think hard and fast. “Give me a second to—”

An arm effortlessly wraps around my waist, leaving me no choice but to look up at the culprit.

Until my lips are being captured by another.

For a single moment, I’m completely captivated by the far too familiar energy of buzzing properties—the intense spark races through me until I hear a sharp cackle of energy that follows with a glow of warmth.

I thought the atmosphere was weird with this sudden confrontation, but I can feel the spike of tension that consumes

our surroundings in seconds, making it almost suffocating to remain still.

The kiss is broken a second later and reveals someone I never thought I'd meet again.

Not here in the depths of the library with three professors...

“Jeez, Sweet Cruella. You could have at least waited for me to get the candles before abandoning me to surprise your favorite professor.”

The way my cheeks begin to warm up before I slowly lower my eyes to see the set of candles that are not only positioned perfectly on the cake but are lit with green flames.

Hold on a second.

“Favorite professor?” I cringe at the statement. “I don't have a favorite anything.”

“Now, don't lie.” The hold around my waist only tightens as the kiss on my cheek sends shivers through me. “I'm your favorite. My girl doesn't remember?”

“All I remember is what a nuisance you are, Asher,” I groan and side-eye him. *He's so lucky I'm in a pickle. He fucking knows it, too.* “Last time I checked, this was a public domain where no affection is allowed.”

“That's a hard rule to obey, Ophelia,” Asher declares as he releases me for his own safety. *Before I snipe the shit out of him.* He doesn't hesitate to stand right next to me, though, which forces all of us to acknowledge him as he lifts his thumb and runs it along his bottom lip. “You're too sweet to resist.”

My jock of a stalker ex-boyfriend.

I had to blame myself for this because whenever I dared think about this man, he'd always show up as if I summoned his existence like a knight to my imminent rescue.

“Asher Heathcliff,” the way Professor North growls proves he despises him more than me. “Miss Guinevere is right. No affection within these parts of the Grand Library.”

The way Asher smirks tells me he knows far too much.

Fuck... don't tell me he—

“Intriguing rule, if you ask me. I doubt everyone follows such when the aesthetics of this glamorous space of wisdom are romantic for those who love fiction that romanticizes dark academia folklore. At least, if you ask me,” he summarizes.

I'm positive Professor North sees that glint in Asher's eyes.

The reflection screams to his enemies, 'tread carefully.'

“Was the kiss really necessary, Mr. Heathcliff?” Professor Blackbird surprisingly speaks up. I'm sure he's interfering for the sake of calming the brewing storm building between us.

For whatever reason...

“I feel like you'd do the same, Professor Blackbird,” he begins and slides his arm across my shoulders. “If you haven't seen your girlfriend in eons, you'd be possessed to greet her the best way you know how.” He dares to further smirk in pride. “At least, in a way that's publicly appropriate, if you know what I mean,” he chuckles. “Then again, I guess it depends on whether you bend one way or the other.”

This man enjoys playing with fire.

“Asher,” I scold him. “We're supposed to be presenting Professor North the cake,” I remind him.

“Ah. Right!” He turns his attention to me, the two of us sharing a look that’s hard to peel away from.

A year had changed my jock of an ex-boyfriend.

Didn’t think he could get hotter... or dumber, but here we are.

“My bad, Cruella.” He gives me a wink.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Yes, yes,” he replies with the biggest grin.

He’s the happiest I’m sure he’s been. He always looks like he’s on cloud nine with me, which is weird when I’m deemed “boring and filled with nothing but misery” by everyone else who has ever seen us in the same room together.

Looking directly in Professor North’s direction, I dare to give him a smile.

“Happy Birthday, Professor North.”

All he can do is stare back at me, looking captivated by my warm expression.

“And he malfunctions,” Professor Blackbird mutters more to himself before he claps his hand. “Thank you so much, Miss Guinevere and Mr. Heathcliff, for helping with the surprise. I’m sure Headmaster Atlas will be thrilled to know you both volunteered to assist us with surprising one of N.M.U.’s favorite professors,” he proudly announces. “Why don’t we leave the library so Professor North can enjoy his cake?”

“He has to take a picture with it,” I voice and walk over to him until I’m in front of him with the presented cake. “Here you go, Professor North.”

He takes the cake almost like a robot fulfilling orders, but the mention of the picture seems to click in his mind.

“I don’t like pictures.”

“Are you a vampire?” I ask with a straight face.

“No.”

“Then you’ll survive,” I conclude.

“Why would he die if she took a picture of him as a vampire?” Asher ponders, grabbing our attention to him. He looks genuinely curious.

“He wouldn’t die,” I voice. “It’s just my sense of humor.”

“Hmm, I have to work on that,” he concludes. “How are you going to take the photo without a phone, Cruella?”

“Ophelia,” I correct him, but he’s right. “Um...”

“I got it,” Professor Blackbird volunteers.

“I don’t need one,” Professor North argues.

“What if it’s with Miss Guinevere? She did take the time to help make the cake when she should have been resting after her trial?” Professor Blackbird points out.

As if I didn’t snap my fingers and make a cake out of my vivid imagination.

“That’s a brilliant idea,” Asher agrees.

“No,” Professor North and I say in unison. We’re staring at one another the next moment—his gaze of scrutiny meeting my gaze of boredom.

Two peas in a pod.

“Just one photo,” Professor Blackbird encourages. “It’ll be a good memory for both of you.”

It seems unavoidable to refuse, with Professor D'Angelo standing there, staring at us like the Grinch who stole Christmas.

He's pissed he failed at whatever plans he was formulating to get Professor North and Professor Blackbird in trouble.

I'd have to think about why he knew they were both here. There was a level of confidence I felt with these two professors that made me feel as though they would have made sure no cameras were around to catch them in the act.

Then again, if Asher potentially clued in on what they did, I wouldn't be surprised.

“Ready?”

I turn my attention to Professor Blackbird's phone camera, noticing the case is a cute bat figure with the camera lens being the 'eyes' of the animated creature.

“Smile a bit more, Sweet Cruella,” Asher encourages.

“Stop calling me that,” I huff, which only makes my smile non-existent. I can only imagine Professor North looking even more miserable.

“C'mon, you two, try to smile,” Professor Blackbird encourages, moving his head back from the screen to add. “Or I can make you.”

Fae.

Manipulative, sinister, blessed beings who can make you do whatever they need you to without realizing it.

Never test their abilities of control.

“Smiling,” I announce, but genuinely give a smile at the thought of winning this unannounced challenge that unraveled

without warning.

“Got it.” Professor Blackbird declares.

I look up to my left to see Professor North isn't even looking in front of him.

He's looking at me.

“Happy Birthday, Orpheus,” I quietly say while maintaining my smile. “You should blow out your candles.”

He blinks a few times, and I can't read his expression.

“Thanks,” he finally mutters and proceeds to blow out the candles.

“I hope you made a wish,” I point out as I watch the streams of smoke that rise from the candle tips.

“I bet he did,” Professor Blackbird declares. “Let's go to the break room, Orpheus.”

“Hmph.” He doesn't seem excited by that at all.

“Ophelia.”

I look to see Asher offering his hand to me.

“I'll escort you back to your suite. You're probably tired, aren't you?”

Now that I think about it, I'm a bit winded from all that lustful adrenaline, matched with the sudden need to ignite that spell of raining books and the cake.

“A little bit,” I admit. “I promised to wake up Blair.”

“Roomie?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you said Mr. Heathcliff was your roommate?” Professor D'Angelo confronts.

Has this man not gotten tired of standing here?

“I am her roomie,” Asher announces. “Just not in the same suite.”

“What do you mean?” I inquire.

“I got upgraded to the suite opposite of yours. Wanted to tell you earlier when we got the candles, but you walked off,” he lies. “You met my roomie.”

His roomie? Who’s that?

“Ah...” It’s all I can say.

“C’mon.” He takes the steps needed to gently take my hand and tug me forward. “Let’s get going. We can catch up tomorrow, but for now, you should take a power nap before we head to the dinner chambers. I can give you a tour of there and anywhere else you want to go.”

Honestly, it could be useful.

“Sure.”

“Score!” he cheers happily and ends up letting go of my hand, so he can have his arm resting along my shoulders. “Are you gonna nap in my lap like old times?”

“No.”

“It was a shot,” he concludes and is leading the way.

I glance back to the three professors just as Asher decides to be the announcer of our departure.

“See you around Professor Blackbird, Professor North, and D’Angelo.”

“It’s Professor D’Angelo!”

“Yes, yes.” He dismisses him without a look back. “Have a good celebration.”

My ex just saved my ass... but at what cost?



MY SWEET CRUELLA IS MINE

-ASHER-

Does she even comprehend just how magnificently beautiful she is?

Ophelia Minerva Guinevere.

The woman I was forced to leave behind because I could no longer ignore the opportunity of attending Nephilim Malevolence Academy.

There was no warning.

A setup that left me devastated as I went from spending a lustful night with this dark beauty in my arms to waking up, tied to a tree, with a note from dearest Father.

“I’ll no longer entertain your foolish games. You’ve been selected. Before you are the gates that will lead you to your destiny. Disappoint me, and I’ll make sure you pay for it with your life.”

What a lovely way of saying ‘I love you. Make me proud instead of sleeping with the enemy. Thanks.’

I was left panicking whether or not my Sweet Cruella was snuggled safely in her own bed or if my father dared to harm her in any way.

No one dared do me the favor of giving me that sense of relief, leaving me to suffer with the unknown.

Every moment that followed had me vowing to be stuck in this arc of academic scrutiny until I got to see her again.

See my Sweet Cruella and remind her that I never fucking moved on.

That I never wanted to abandon her.

I bet that's what she thought. That I dared pull the same act as her twin sister by ditching her with no fucking warning.

She probably hates me...

Yet the moment I saw her enter the library and be the talk of those group of weak fuckers, I forgot my lungs require air to breathe.

She was here.

She's become an official student of Nephilim Malevolence University.

There's finally a chance for me to fix what was forcibly broken.

I can make her mine again. Officially and not some sort of secret I was desperate to hide for the sake of pleasing my father.

Maintaining our legacy.

That's all our families ever cared about. The burden of our family name through the generations and the power bestowed and carried down from one to another.

Until it landed in my lap.

Despite not wanting to be the next picked tool in this world where power rules and the weak are forced to obey.

Unlike so many who are fighting to get into this school simply for clout, I know the real reason why my father desperately wanted me to attend.

Gain power.

Find an outlet for magic.

Mate with a Merger who can further empower our families.

Rise to the top so the royals of Nephilim and Malevolence have no choice but to acknowledge our potential reign in this world.

Alliances.

Politics.

A cycle of power.

I despise all of it.

Have always loathed the idea of having to step on others by any means necessary to be deemed successful in this world.

All I want is to be surrounded by good people.

Make friends.

Love someone who kisses me like I'm their world.

Eventually, start a family and live a peaceful life without problems.

I never was one to love all the money and luxuries.

As a Heathcliff, though, that's not something I have a choice to deny. It's also the reason why I was born to be Ophelia's enemy.

Guinevere and Heathcliff don't get along.

For years, we never have. Two forces of immense strength, magic capabilities, skills, and royal roots from generations past, we've always been competitors, fighting and desperate to get rid of each other.

Initially, I thought I'd hate her.

I'd prepared myself to despise her the moment my eyes laid upon hers.

Yet that all went downhill, and then some.

She soon became an addiction I couldn't get away from. At least, not until my father forced me.

Does he know she's here? If he does... what will he do to tear us apart?

“Asher.”

My attention gravitates to the woman in question, and her dazzling eyes of ivory green reflect those hints of starry gold. To my surprise, she looks concerned for me.

Could be because we've been standing in front of her suite entrance for more than a minute.

“You can go now,” she prompts.

“And leave you behind?” I gasp in horror. “Why would I possibly do that, Cruella?”

“Ophelia.”

“Yes, yes.” She's gotten used to me dismissing every attempt she makes to correct my nickname usage. She wants to reply, but I catch onto the hesitation that follows.

That won't do.

I hate when she holds anything back from me.

When she's not her true self.

Before I can stop myself, my arm hooks around her waist as I pull her into a tight embrace. My affection surprises her. I'm sure she was even more surprised when I kissed her back there with no warning. It hadn't been my intention, but I couldn't stop myself from expressing what I'd been keeping captive for years.

My lust for her.

The burning love I've held on to all this while.

I've missed her.

Craved her.

Now, she's here, in my arms, where no one can manipulate my words of pure intention.

“Don't hesitate with me, *Ophelia*.”

I feel the slight shiver that runs through her as I hug her as tightly as I can without physically hurting her. She's not responsive to it at first—which is expected with how I just vanished.

“One minute, we were fine and dandy,” she mutters. “The next... you were gone. Why are you acting as if you didn't just...” She doesn't finish the sentence.

I knew she wouldn't.

Why did you abandon me?

Pulling back enough allows her to look up into my eyes, and I don't hide a single thing. My emotions are raw and written on my face, which is hard, even for me.

For her, though, she deserves to always see the 'real' me. She was always the first one to see through the mask that was

suffocating me in the depths of my family's mansion.

All we do is stare at one another.

No words.

No excuses.

Just silence.

“It wasn't your choice, was it?” She doesn't shy away from looking directly into my eyes.

She can always see right through me.

I trail my hand along her jaw, needing some form of touch to confirm this is real.

That I'm not dreaming, hallucinating, or in some sort of unexpected trial that's using my worst weakness against me.

This is what my father was worried about.

Sweet Cruella is my weakness.

Only I'm not sure she realizes it.

My thumb trails along her bottom lip, and her eyes take me in as I inch closer and closer. Her scent wraps around me, taunting my senses and sucking me in. That's what happens when I get right into her orbit.

She steals every thread of attention from me with her mere existence, and how can I refuse?

“Asher...” Her voice is barely there, a whimper at most. “Anyone can—”

“If I don't get a solid taste of you, I'll lose my mind, Sweet Cruella,” I confess with desperation, my lips mere inches from her.

“You didn’t ask the first time,” she grumbles and looks to her side.

“Ophelia.”

I have her attention again.

“Please.” I’m begging her. Not just with my tone, eyes, or desperate expression. My magic craves to dance with hers. My aura burns for the heated embrace. My heart beats swiftly at the thought of her touch, and my soul?

It seeks the one burning passion that makes us feel whole.

“Please.” All I need to do is repeat it for her to really understand how much I want her.

Want us.

“It’s not even a Friday,” she mutters, but her cheeks are growing rosy as she whispers, “Just a few seco—”

We both knew I wouldn’t let her finish.

My body wouldn’t let me waste a nanosecond with her permission to kiss her with intention.

Our lips collide, and my moan of relief echoes in her mouth as she gasps at my impatience. I don’t want to give her a sweet kiss.

I’m kissing her as if she’s the very oxygen I breathe.

She’s back in my arms, my hands gripping her ass, which looks so fucking good in the black tights. She must know black only makes her look more like a goddess than any other color.

But this white blouse makes her nipples extra tempting to suck on.

She presses against me as I grind against her lower half. The movement is subtle but effective in making her moan in relief as the two of us kiss with everything we have.

This is confirmation that the spark is still there. We're still burning for one another, and the chemistry that sparked between us the first day our families met at a function was no joke.

The night we snuck away and didn't hesitate to strip out of our clothes and fuck the night away.

She lost her purity to me.

The magnetic pulsations of our unity drive us mad with lust and immense desire.

Her arms are around my neck in no time, but it's not enough for me to feel appeased. Lifting her up, her slightly thick thighs and long legs easily station around my waist. I have to press her against the wall to really enjoy the feel of her warmth. To enjoy how buzzed my body gets when we connect in various ways.

Her touch, her feel, her taste, her scent.

It drives me straight into madness while keeping me captive in such a comforting hold.

If it wasn't for the sudden flickering of lights that turn completely off and leave us in pitch darkness, I don't think either of us would have stopped.

Breaking the kiss, we're catching our breaths and searching each other's eyes, which are buzzing with magic. I'm sure mine are glowing a unique shade of blue with hints of green—a common trait after I've enjoyed letting out a bit of electric currents from my system.

Her eyes, on the other hand, are no longer ivory green. They're red, with golden slits, and make her look like a predator ready to devour me in one take.

I fucking love it.

“You can bite me to death, and I'd die happy,” I whisper and give her a sweet kiss. It's nothing like the devouring, overpowering, energy-consuming kiss we just shared, but I do it because I need to validate my affection for her.

That I'm not in this for my own benefit.

“Please tell me you didn't wake up alone that night.”

The night I was taken.

“No,” she breathes. “I knew we had a political meeting that morning, so I didn't want your father walking in on us. I left when I knew you fell asleep.”

I sigh in relief and rest my forehead on her shoulder.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Thank the gods of Nephilim. I was scared he'd hurt you. I would have killed him if he did.”

“Who?” she quietly asks, and I'm only more thankful for the way her fingers gently run through my blonde locks. “Asher? Who set you up?”

“My father,” I confess, as if it's been a secret I've held for generations. “I woke up that morning tied to a tree, with a note that confirmed I was entered into N.M.U. by force. I couldn't leave... I just had to enter.”

“Meaning you went through the rose bush madness?” she whispers. “Wasn't that hard when...” She takes a second to think about it. “You weren't even ready.”

“That was the point.” I smile against her flesh before turning my head so I can press a firm kiss to her neck.

She shivers from my touch again, which makes me groan and suck until she’s whimpering.

“A-Asher. Anyone can walk in.”

Wouldn't I love that?

They want my Sweet Cruella. They better get ready to take the 2-in-1 package deal because I’m not going anywhere.

Let those professors or anyone else grasp that Ophelia is mine. If not, I'll mow them down one by one until there's no one left standing.

“Good,” I mutter and bite her flesh hard enough to make sure there’ll be a very apparent hickey in its wake. “You’re mine.”

“Possessive.”

“That was my punishment,” I whisper as I lean back to look into her glowing eyes.

She understands what I mean, that I’m answering the lingering question in the air.

“He knew we were fucking?”

More than that...

“He knew I was madly in love with you,” I confess before swallowing the lump forming in my throat. I can’t recall how many arcs I’ve been here, repeating again and again how I’d tell her the truth.

That I fucking loved her.

Adored her.

Wanted her to be my world all the time and not some secret I had to keep hidden in the tiny closet.

My confession leaves her speechless, but I don't need her words to see the effect my confession has.

Her cheeks turn red, her eyes shift back to emerald jewels, her breath hitches and quickens, and the tiny waves of her aura dance around us in pure bliss at our blazing connection.

I may not be able to read my girl as she does me, but when it comes to her body, I can read her as clear as day.

“I thought you got tired of me...” she admits and tries to lower her head.

As if I'd allow her.

My hand grips her chin, lifting her head and claiming her lips once more. The tension in her shoulders seeps away as our tongues chase and entwine. Her arms tighten around my neck, and her delicate fingers run through my hair. I love the feel of it all. To have her here in my arms, pressed between me and the wall.

All mine.

“Never.” The word is firmly said, even with how breathless I am after breaking that heated kiss. I know the only way to get her to understand me is the one way we've always communicated.

With our lips, our hips, our bare bodies, and desperate hands ravaging across our feverish flesh.

I'm tempted to risk it all here and now if it means I'd get to ravage her and have my cock deep inside her wet pussy. I haven't been able to be with anyone else.

She's all I need to thrive.

“Only you,” I whisper and lightly kiss the top of her nose. “I’ve only been with you, Ophelia.” I kiss her cheek. “I’ve dreamed every fucking night of you.” *I kiss her other cheek.* “Every damn night... the moment I close my eyes, you’re right there.” *I kiss her neck.* “You... don’t get how my life went into a complete standstill without you.”

“But...” She’s finding her words as she moves one of her hands so she can press it against my cheek. I quake at her touch while I briefly close my eyes just to enjoy the tingling warmth her touch delivers every time. “That was more than two years ago.”

“And?” I whisper.

“You’ve been here for two plus years and didn’t progress... because...”

Because I was waiting for you.

I’m scared to admit it now that she’s finally here. That what I’ve been waiting for is coming to fruition before my own eyes.

“Pathetic, isn’t it?” I whisper while keeping my eyes closed. I’m frightened to see her look of disappointment. I put my whole life at a standstill for her. Like an addict or better yet, a convict who can’t prevent themselves from doing a deed that leads them back to jail.

“Asher.” Her voice has never been so tender. “Look at me, my silly Dalmatian.”

She remembers.

I open my eyes, consumed by how she allows me to see her true feelings that seep into her face.

“Thank you for waiting for me.”

I really could die happy now.

Slowly, I nod before the two of us press our foreheads together. These intimate moments where words don't matter and all we need is a serenade of silence were always the most peaceful points in my life.

I couldn't wait to enjoy them again.

Only beneath the sheets, with her body wrapped in my arms, the two of us connected as one in a comforting embrace of bliss.

“Can we go back to Friday nights?” I end up whispering.

“Hmmm.” I like how she genuinely thinks about stuff. Some would think she's dragging on or trying to give off a cocky façade, but every second she takes is focused on answering the question asked. “If I survive by the end of the week, sure.”

That makes me chuckle.

“What makes you think you wouldn't?” I'm curious. “My Sweet Cruella isn't one to question her ability to get out of a tricky situation.”

“I wasn't referring to my survival at N.M.U., Asher,” she whispers, then leans in close enough for her lips to brush along mine as she speaks her next words. “I don't think I can survive not fucking you until Friday.”

Breathing becomes a thing of the past because now, all I want is her.



BLISSFUL HARMONY

-OPHELIA-

“**T**hat’s it. Take every inch into your sweet, wet pussy, Ophelia. Every. Fucking. Inch.”

I’m cumming the moment Asher Heathcliff is balls-deep inside me.

A shuddering mess is what I am with my legs spread wide, my body bent over, and my no-longer-ex-boyfriend finally filling me up after teasing my pussy with that explorative tongue of his.

Yup. I’ve missed this.

Missed him.

Craved the scorching heat of lust between us.

I always wondered what it meant to hear the saying “Sleeping with the Enemy,” but truthfully, those words were because our families, despite their encouragement of our ‘joined study sessions,’ were competitors who would never approve of this union.

Why did that make this relationship more desirable?

I’m in my new bedroom, naked, sweaty, and moaning in ecstasy as I fight to come down from my arch brewing, body shuddering high of a climax.

There was nowhere in my vivid imagination where I envisioned Asher between my legs, sinking his massive cock into my greedy pussy.

Especially on the day I enrolled in Nephilim Malevolence University.

Yet, here we are.

This is real.

I wouldn't want this any other way.

“How I’ve missed your greedy pussy,” he groans with hooded eyes that dance between blue and green. There’s only one more color that ever takes over those stunning eyes of his.

Purple.

A dark lavender that reflects a side of power no one has control over.

Except for me... *maybe.*

We never got that far into exploring how lethal my Silly Dalmatian gets with that switch flicked on versus the playful, silly jock who everyone thinks is too stupid to be here goes offline.

It doesn't matter now.

We're together again.

Fucking like lost lovers.

Unlike the stories that try to take things slow, neither of us hops on that scenario.

No one has time for slow shit.

“You better be on birth control, Ophelia,” Asher groans and admires my position. He slowly licks his lips, his eyes

trailing along my breasts that are still red from all his sucking and taunting with those teeth of his. “No way can I have you raw otherwise.”

“Protected,” I pant with anticipation, my body already quivering for more. “Are you going to fill me up?”

“That’s what you want, Sweet Ophelia?” He leans over, his cock twitching within while my pussy is squeezing him as tightly as I can.

We’re trembling for movement, but he wants to make me suffer a little longer.

Drag out this maddening intensity.

“Want your pussy filled with every shot of my load until it’s oozing out like a faucet?”

“Yes,” I pant at the idea before my lips are claimed by his. “Asher, please.”

“Arc after arc, missing your warmth, ruthlessly yearning your body, craving this soul-sucking pussy,” he groans and kisses me again. “We haven’t enjoyed the main course, and I can already rate this five stars for the sweet appetizer.”

“Sweet, huh?” I breathe with a saucy smirk that makes him chuckle low.

I’m gushing at the mere sound.

“Should I eat your pussy ruthlessly afterward, then let you have a taste of yourself on my lips?” Having him say it with such detail helps the scenario play through my mind.

So fucking tempting.

“Yes,” I pant in submission. “I want everything.”

To be nothing but a puppet for him to fuck into oblivion until I can't remember my own fucking name.

“Then it’s best I get moving if we both want dinner tonight,” he whispers against my lips and moves until he can tug on my earlobe. “Unless we skip and just feast on each other.”

“Skip!” I practically scream. He slides out and slams back in, making my body beg for movement. “Asher, please!”

“When you beg, it makes me want to torture you even more,” he admits with that husky voice that ignites goosebumps all over my feverish flesh. “But tonight, I’ll be nice.”

Thank fucking shadows!

“Hold on, Ophelia,” he urges as he sits back and grips my hips. I know he’s going to fuck me hard and fast with how his fingernails dig into my flesh. “I’m not going to be merciful this round.”

Can he see just how badly I want this from my needy expression that begs for him to give me everything he’s got?

“Entire time, eyes on me,” he urges, with his hooded expression that further darkens. “I want to watch you as you wither into oblivion.”

The ride of complete lust begins as he moves without an ounce of mercy. His cock glides effortlessly in and out of my dripping pussy, the sound of movement adding to our moans, grunts, and the strained squeaks of the bed that manage to survive our rabid movements.

Pleasure is coiling in the depths of my core while heat consumes me in waves, leaving beads of sweat to descend the sides of my face and down my naked body.

Asher is completely lost in the rise of pleasure that comes with every single thrust. Each movement is with intention—deep, hard, so fucking rough—while his dirty talk is just as raw as the intense connection that continues to pulse between us.

“That’s it, Sweet Ophelia. Do you see how you take me? This swollen pussy enjoying every pounding thrust? A fucking champ,” he breathes heavily. “Keep looking at me. That’s it. I’m all you need to focus on as I fuck you again and again.”

“Asher,” I warn him because I know I’m far too close to cumming.

“I see it, baby. You’re gonna cum just for me. Let me see you come undone. Let me hear you scream my name.” He bends over right then and there and lifts my hips just enough to hit a different spot.

“Asher!” I cry out as a wave of bliss destroys me. My eyes manage to remain on his until I have to lean my head back and grip the sheets for dear life, thanks to my shuddering orgasm.

“You know I need more than that, *Ophelia*.” He groans and stills for a moment so he can lightly kiss my neck. “You’re so fucking pretty when you cum all over my cock.”

I can only focus on breathing; the pulsation of magic fighting to leave me needs to be tamed, or things will get wild in here.

“Trying to reign in your magic, hmm?” Asher knows how in tune we are with one another. *How dangerous we could be if we let our energies clash, blend, and dance within the static atmosphere.* “I can’t wait for them to see what a dangerous couple we can be, Sweet Cruella. Those fuckers would quiver

in fear if they knew what a lethal queen you'd be in comparison to their weak asses.”

He lightly bites the crook of my neck. I know he needs to calm himself down for our sake.

He hasn't even come yet.

“Asher,” I breathe. “Turn me over.”

He chuckles against my flesh.

“You want me to cum, don't you?” He taunts and chuckles. “I'm not done enjoying your pretty face, Ophelia.”

He sits back and pulls out, and my pussy already misses his fullness. My disappointment makes him grin as his eyes shift in color.

Dark Lavender.

“Did you think I forgot I promised to eat your pussy out ruthlessly, my Dear Sweetness?”

Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.

My body is buzzing at the consuming husky voice, which is laced with dangerous magic that always makes me feel I'm at the edge of death's chambers.

“Ash,” I shorten his name on purpose, knowing the energies I'm dealing with. *The shadows that have taken control.* “Hello.”

“Hello, Sweetness.” He's more than pleased with my acknowledgment as his hands purposely grip my thighs. “You've missed me, haven't you?”

I bite my bottom lip before licking the tender surface. My eyes are admiring his body, which is dripping with sweat. All

captivated by his aura that dances dangerously across his muscled frame and is a dark violet with black ends.

I notice the marks that are beginning to bleed to the surface. The unique design of swirls, magic characters, and circles reminds me of the intricate tattoos that marked my flesh when I woke up in the body of water during the entry trial.

That must be his mark.

“I have,” I confess. “The real question is whether you’ve missed me?”

His appeased grin can’t get any wider.

“You know I’ve never been good with words, Sweetness,” he reminds me as his hands grip my hips with a tight grip that could easily bruise. “But I’m good at showing, aren’t I?”

I salivate in anticipation.

“You are,” I whisper, sounding breathless.

“Should I show you?” He trails his hands further down along my legs, encouraging them to spread so he can admire the sight of my glistening pussy.

“Please.” Staying still is the hardest part right now. “Please, Ash?”

“It always intrigues me how you can tell,” he mutters while he takes a deep whiff of the air. He sighs and closes his eyes. He’s in his own heavenly space. “This aroma never gets old.” He opens his eyes again, and they’re on the verge of being completely black.

“The shadows have missed your taste.”

That makes me smirk.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I purr and guide my hand down my body, stealing his gaze as he trails the seductive movement until my fingers are spreading the wet folds of my cunt. “Feast away.”

I don't need to tell him twice.

He dives right in.

“God!” I cry out in bliss, my hips lifting at the way this man's chilled tongue not only licks me right up but insists on thrusting into my blazing pussy.

He chuckles, the vibration making this more exhilarating as his tongue drops in temperature. His whole body is frigid, yet it only stimulates me further as my temperature spikes, as if I was born to be his blazing counterpart.

Within these walls, with our essence of magic clashing with immense desire, it's only a matter of time before we reach our peaks and give it all for the explosive high our releases can deliver together.

I squirm and wither. Lift my hips and arch my back. My mewls grow consistent as my moans grow louder, my body thrumming to this man's strum with his devious tongue that knows how to deliver the best amount of pleasure.

He sucks greedily and works me up, his thumb finding my clit and delivering spikes of pleasure that invite the pooling heat in the depths of my core.

We've never taken things to this level.

Been so loud and free and experimented with what we can do without bodies. Just the rise and drop of temperatures, matched with his dominance that encourages my submissive femineity, I feel in the depths of my soul that everything is going to be different between us from this moment onward.

A connection is brewing. A tide is rising. A knot between two people that can never be broken. A bond of irreversible unity.

It's frightening yet exhilarating. I've always acknowledged and accepted Asher in comparison to anyone else I've ever held an attraction to was the immense level of safety I feel with this man.

He'd kill for me if it meant no one dared mess with me.

I was confident about that.

“God, yes, yes, yes!” I'm tipping over the edge, but this orgasm is so different from the others. “More, more, MORE!”

The pleasure is rising, soaring, booming through me from my toes upward until my strangled cry echoes against the walls of my room.

“God! ASHER!”

I'm undone there and then, my pussy pulsating through the tidal waves of ecstasy. I'm squirting in this man's mouth, and he drinks me up like every droplet is holy water.

I silently scream, another orgasm rushing through me as he sucks me up generously, leaving me out of breath and trembling with aftershocks.

There's no space to even think as I try to even figure out what just fucking happened. Never—*ever*—have I experienced that euphoric high of an orgasm in my entire existence.

“I didn't know you were willing to make me your new religion, Ophelia,” he praises and licks the visible cream of my release along his lips. “But you're right. On these silk sheets, I am your god. A god of tainted shadows that only burns and destroys for you.”

This has to be his way of saying, 'I'm never letting you go ever again.' After tonight, there's no way I can let him go, either.

"You're stuck with me, huh?" I dare to breathe and rest my head back against the pillow. I'm thankful is present.

"Made myself clear and didn't even need my cock inside you," he notes, and I feel his tongue lick my left inner thigh. "Any complaints?"

"God, never."

"I've never heard you say god so many times in a thirty-minute lapse."

"Maybe because no one has treated me like a goddess in the heart of my bedroom," I admit and close my eyes. "Only gods who adore their goddesses are willing to put their powers and ego to the side and appease their woman in a way of continuous satisfaction."

I sigh.

"Maybe I read too many smut god books."

His deep chuckle is next to my left ear, encouraging me to open my eyes just enough to see a hint of his smile before he kisses my cheek.

"I enjoy your interest in expanding your knowledge in the fantasy realms of sexual pleasure," he praises. "Makes me intrigued as to what you'd allow me to do."

"As in this whole temperature difference thing?"

"I didn't think you'd notice," he admits and whispers. "Turn over, Sweetness."

My stomach flips with excitement, and I gather enough strength to flop over. The chilled surface of his chiseled body pressing along my backside makes me moan at his touch.

“You’re burning up like crazy,” he points out and nestles his head between my neck and shoulder. “You smell extra nice, though.”

I giggle at that because here I am, dripping in sweat from head to toe, with my room smelling like we’ve been doing the deed for hours, and he thinks I smell nice.

“Now, you have to be Asher because no way is Ash complimenting me like that,” I laugh.

“Boo, boo,” he mutters against my flesh. “You caught me.”

“Welcome back,” I whisper as he snakes his hand around the front side of my neck and lifts my chin up enough so he can lean in and kiss me passionately.

His cock is rubbing along my ass, making me moan at the feel of his erect cock impatiently needing some sort of movement to hype his body up for what’s next.

“That part of me is too rough on you,” he grumbles, as if he can just go into his subconscious and talk to Ash.

“You speak as if you can tell him off,” I point out and seek his lips once more. He happily kisses me until we’re begging for air.

“You’d think being born to use and manipulate shadows, I could stop them from taking over when they want to enjoy my woman.”

“Your woman, hmm?” I’m trying not to get sleepy just by talking to him. Having him draped on top of me without him putting his full weight is a tad comfortable.

“Did he wear you out?”

“No...” My quiet answer is far from the truth.

“Mhmm.” He kisses my shoulder, and it feels even better when he moves back and trails his lips along my flesh. Kiss after kiss contributes to my slipping consciousness, but the icing on the cake is having his hands lightly grip my shoulders and begin to knead them with the perfect massaging pace.

“Fuck,” I groan into the pillow. “Why did I forget about this...?”

That this man might as well be the god of the greatest massage therapy a man can deliver.

“I didn’t do it often enough to engrave into your system,” he points out and whispers, “We’ll make it our aftercare during Friday nights.”

“I’d praise you forever.”

He’s laughing now, the sound lighthearted.

“You’re really putting me on the god pedestal, aren’t you?”

“In the bedroom, you can be my god every fucking night,” I mutter and nestle my head into the pillow. My eyes remain closed as Asher does miracle work on my tense shoulders.

I didn’t realize how tense my body was.

“I have a bit of competition, though,” he notes. “Or am I imagining things?”

“Hmm.” I’m trying not to drift off, but it’s getting trickier by the second. “Depends on if they survive the first week of school.”

“I enjoy the idea of you being confident in what lengths I’d go to keep you, Sweet Cruella.”

“The real question should be whether or not you’d share me,” I mutter and moan when he hits a certain spot. “Fuck... can you massage that part a little more?”

“Avoiding your stretches after any form of activity,” he mumbles but does exactly what I ask, leaving me to moan in relief.

“So I can get lectures and massages from the one and only god in this room.”

“Funny,” his voice seems farther away now. “You know, crushing on your professors is dangerous.”

“Mhmm.”

“Yet you would have been right in-between them if the opportunity invited itself.”

“Hmmm.” That’s the best way of saying ‘fuck yeah.’

“Anyone else in line?”

“Hmmmmmm.”

“Meaning you have no clue.”

“Mhmm.”

I feel so content right now, so at peace, as though I’m drifting on a cloud that’s floating away, higher and higher.

Arms embrace me, my front side pressing into chiseled warmth like a firm blanket. Now, my body feels like complete jelly while the lull of tranquility purrs through my mind, making me far too sleepy.

I feel the need to stay awake and be of service to make things even, but I’ve missed being in these arms.

Being held like I’m someone’s entire world.

Peace, safety, immense love and affection.

This may have been what kept me moving forward back then... why we made our study days every Friday.

A weekly reminder of passionate comfort that alleviated the stress we gathered throughout the week prior.

“I don’t mind sharing,” I hear him say into my ear.

Maybe he’s waiting for my reply, which never leaves my lips. I’m too far gone to stop myself from being sandwiched between his warm embrace and the inviting arms of sleep.

“They just have to be worthy of a Gilded One.”

Slumber steals me away into the land of peaceful nothingness.



PREPARE FOR THE INEVITABLE

“**G**irl, you look like you got hit by a truck, fell off a cliff, crashed into raging waters, got saved by dolphins, and brought to the shore, only to get tossed into a bush of thorns and wrestled at least one bear.”

I can barely keep my eyes open as a yawn escapes me.

“A bear?” That’s all I could comprehend.

“That means you need an extra shot in your pumpkin spice latte. I know it’s not October, but I find PSL is a good luck drink on the first day of school.”

“What language are you speaking?” I question as I drag my feet to the bar stools at the inviting kitchen island.

Thanks to the tempting scent of crisp bacon.

“At least I know you’re slightly coherent since you realized I’m speaking in magic Latin and not complete English,” she announces and places the cup of pumpkin steamy goodness before me. “You’re not a morning person, are you?”

“Not after the best sex in years,” I grunt.

“Got it.” Blair couldn’t sound happier as I watched her sprinkle some pink stuff on top of the whipped cream. “That

should do it. Don't worry, it's not poisonous, lethal, or in any shape or form give you diarrhea."

I pause at the diarrhea part just to give her an arched eyebrow.

"What? People die from having the shits."

I smirk and proceed to take a generous sip of the warm drink. It doesn't take long for the magical effects to kick in. A few more sips and my mind doesn't feel completely frazzled. This is the perfect 'reboot' drink.

"Thank you for saving me," I groan. "Wait. What time is it? Why are you eating bacon for dinner?"

"It's six-thirty in the morning, Ophelia," Blair acknowledged with a proud grin. "So much for waking me up, hmm?"

"Aww, fuck," I groan. "Sorry, Blair. Um..." *How do I explain this?* "A lot happened when you took a nap."

"I heard," she says with a wink as she grabs plates of fruit and pancakes and brings them to my end of the island.

"Heard?" I'm struggling to catch up.

"I mean, the whole of N.M.U. would have heard you guys if I hadn't put up a soundproof spell. I'm not really good at it yet, so I only managed to secure the suite and not narrow it down to just your room."

Heat is rushing to my cheeks.

"So... you heard..."

"Every moan, grunt, scream, beg, and cry for more," she summarizes and takes a sip of her drink. "Ah. Pumpkin spice

latte is the best. This just hits the spot. I'm confident we won't die today."

Why is that funny?

I giggle before I realize it.

"I'm surprised you're not petrified right now," I point out as we pick our plates of a variety of breakfast food. I'm more focused on pancakes, bacon, and fruit, but there are hash browns, eggs, sausages, and a variety of vegetables. "I thought the walls would be plastered with 'she's a hoe' signs."

"Now, I wouldn't say you're a hoe," she counters. "Mr. Blonde with blue-green eyes didn't look like a hookup."

"You saw him?" I groan. "He slept here the whole night?"

"Snuggled against you, snoring up a storm. I knew right there and then that you have to love him in some shape or form to sleep through construction work noise."

"It's not that bad," I laugh. "Okay, I'll admit now, I'm a really deep sleeper. I use spells to wake me up because I feel as though I ascend to different universal planes otherwise."

"That's actually cool," she praises. "You know you can expand on that with the right teacher."

"Really?"

"Hmm. It could come in handy. I think I read if you can ascend in your sleep, you can save people from Death himself. Have no clue how it correlates, but I think we have a class in our curriculum that will teach us about the strings of life and death and how we can secure one's dead spirit and preserve their body so you can revive them."

"Why do I feel like that would be useful?" I ponder.

“Would be at a school where you can die before you reach class.”

“Lovely,” I comment and sigh. “That was my ex.”

“The way he was smiling out the door makes me believe he’s no longer your ex, huh?”

“The sex is to die for,” I confess. “But fuck. I couldn’t even satisfy him! He just did so damn good. I haven’t seen him in so long. He left abruptly... not knowing his family set him up basically.”

“Your families don’t like one another?”

“It doesn’t look that way on the forefront, but we’re supposed to be enemies. My parents, particularly my dad, doesn’t care. At least, he’s never given me the impression that he’s cared about the family feud. I think my mother was more antsy about it, but I guess when she lost her Gilded Merger status... well, competition was the least of her worries.

“His dad, however, seems to be the one who hates my guts and set him up to attend N.M.U. without his consent. He hadn’t been summoned to attend for three years, so I wouldn’t be surprised if his dad struck a deal and said, ‘You won’t embarrass me, boy’ and forced him to the gates.”

“That’s disgusting.” Blair isn’t pleased in the slightest. “If I was forced, dragged, and humiliated by being dumped at the gates of N.M.U. to enter a space where I could die at any moment, I’d survive, only to stay right in my place in the school curriculum.”

“That’s exactly what I think he did,” I admit. “But... deep down, I think he’s been waiting for me.”

“For you to attend?” Blair’s eyes widen with admiration. “Ophelia, that’s beyond sweet. What man would defy his

family legacy and act like an idiot just so he can stay behind and wait for his woman?”

“Guess it’s romantic,” I conclude. “Now, I’m not sure what I’m gonna do with Professor North and Professor Blackbird. I also have to figure out what Professor D’Angelo wants. I guess I should be grateful he didn’t catch the two fucking... which reminds me! I need my book!”

Blair’s just staring at me as if I lost my mind.

“Oh. Maybe I should explain what happened when you took a nap.”

“That would be generous.” She points to the black counter near the door. “I think that’s yours, though. Noticed it when I woke up to your lovey-dovey antics and went to soundproof our suite.”

“What is it?” I pop a bacon strip into my mouth and slide off my stool to walk over to the counter storage for shoes, keys, and other ‘out the door’ knick-knacks.

Before taking my final steps, I realize what it is.

“No fucking way!” I hiss and pick up the book, confirming it is Lyrica from the library with a sticky note on the front cover. “‘You held your end of the bargain, and we’ll make sure we hold ours. Have an enjoyable night.’ Oh, fucking shadows. There are two signatures.” I spin around to give Blair a look of horror.

“Meaning ‘they,’ as in Professor North and Professor Blackbird, both came by to drop off the book,” Blair summarizes.

“Meaning they heard me screaming for mercy, legs up in the air, getting my pussy pounded like a wild drum by one of their potential students!” I gasp in horror.

“Oh,” Blair slowly bobs her head. “So, he’s dead.”

“No! Blair, don’t manifest that,” I groan. “They wouldn’t kill him, right?”

The way she stares back at me makes me fear for Asher’s well-being.

Heck, his life is on the line.

“Nothing else on the sticky note?” Blair wonders. “Did you check the back?”

“Um...” I gently tug it off so it won’t leave any residue on the book’s cover. “Oh. ‘P.S. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure Orpheus doesn’t kill your boy toy... for now. You owe me, though,’” I read out loud.

“Splendid! He’ll survive a day,” Blair cheers.

“Blair! This is worse! Now I owe Professor Blackbird!”

“Now, are you going to explain exactly what went down because, from the gist of the initial conversation, it felt as if they owe you because you caught them fucking?”

“Ah, right. Ugh. Let me start from the beginning, but don’t tell anyone you don’t trust.”

“I won’t tell anyone, period, seeing as you’re my only friend.” She laughs. “Besides, my mom set me up for failure in the friend department, anyway.”

“Huh. What do you mean?”

“I went to the dinner hall this morning to get us breakfast, which is why the kitchen is thankfully in one piece. Everyone and their besties were whispering cruel things the moment they saw me. I don’t even know anyone there, but I guess

everyone knows me.” She laughs, but it’s an eerie sound in comparison to her usual whimsical laughter.

“Hold on. Why? They shouldn’t even know you. What were they whispering?”

“Slut. Whore. Liar. Fraud. Bitch was the top word, but I don’t take that as an insult.”

“But why?” I stress and watch her shrug.

“My mom probably found a way to spread my name and image around to say I’m a slut and got my older brother jailed to take his place or something.”

I’m speechless. All I can do is stare at her while she takes a generous sip of her PSL.

“I didn’t call my parents last night. Was gonna do it today... but after that... I don’t think I will.” She looks at me again, but I see the shift in those eyes, *the tears that swell in their serene beauty.*

“Blair...” I move back to the island and place the book on the stool so I can wrap my arms around her. “Don’t you dare let her win! Your mother wants to make you miserable when you’re the victim. Don’t let her try to make you regret doing what was right for you.”

“I keep telling myself that,” she confesses. “But... the walk of shame is hard when you’re alone, Ophelia.”

“You’re not alone!” I emphasize and lean back to cup her cheeks. “From now on, we’re a unit. They’ll realize if they mess with you, they mess with me, and no one wants to get caught messing with me!” I vow and wipe away her tears with my thumbs. “We’re partners, roommates. We’re going to cruise through N.M.U. and prove to your disgusting mother

and your dad that you not only deserve a spot here, but you're strong, powerful, and a fucking survivor!"

She slowly nods her head and sniffs a few times.

"I am a survivor," she repeats.

"A fucking survivor!"

"A fucking survivor! Thanks, Ophelia."

"Always," I assure her with a tight embrace. "Don't call them. Let them think whatever the fuck they want. If either of them cared, they would find a way to come here themselves and see you."

"I feel that's against the rules," she notes.

My lips lift at the corners as I pull back to look into her eyes.

"Sometimes, the rules are meant to be broken."

Don't worry, Blair. In this new space of trials, you'll have someone who always has your back.



**THE OFFICIAL DAY OF THRIVING
DISASTER**

“**A**ZRAEL!”

We both cheer at the sight of the 6’3” male, who’s further ahead. We come to a stop in shock when he turns around to give us a calm but surprised look.

“Ophelia. Blair. You two made it.” He doesn’t sound surprised by our survival as he moves through the crowd of new and old students to head back to where we’re standing.

Looking like baffled fools.

“What in tarnation happened to you?” Blair shrieks in horror.

I’m still trying to figure out what war this man went through to look like he survived a generational disaster.

Azrael tries to smile, but the poor man looks like his soul was tortured for years.

“I look THAT bad?”

Blair gestures over at me.

“Ophelia can’t even find words to describe you!”

“Uh...” I try, but I’m really speechless. “Yeah, she’s right.”

Azrael sighs and runs his hand through his long strands of hair, which are no longer black.

They're completely grey, as though he's aged beyond his years from stress.

The only unique thing that proves a glimpse of his immense power is in the depths of his now golden eyes.

“Let’s just say the trials weren’t very kind to me,” he confesses and points to his left eye. “See. Even got a scar.”

“Fuck,” I curse and can’t help but reach out to trace my hand over it. He doesn’t flinch, but I bet it hurts. “Do you want me to heal that for you?”

“You can?” Blair asks in interest.

“I could,” I validate. “Asher gets scars far too often because he enjoys getting into fights. He’s too cocky for his own good.”

“Asher?” Azrael inquires.

“Her ex-not-her-ex,” Blair points out with a smirk.

I just roll my eyes, though my attention is specifically on Azrael.

“The real question is, do you want me to heal it?”

He stares back at me for a long moment.

“Leave it,” he encourages with a small smile. If only it didn’t make him look so sad. “I think I need the reminder.”

“Reminder of the cruelty you experienced from the trial?” Blair inquires. “You don’t need to torture yourself, Azrael.”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “Just need a reminder that I’ll never trust my brother again.”

“Wait.” I move my hand away but give him a stern look.
“Alaric betrayed you?”

“Maybe.” His stern expression makes him look angered at the idea. “I wouldn’t have had this scar if he didn’t. Then again, a golden snake saved my ass, or else I would have died.”

“Golden snake,” Blair and I say in unison. “Ophira?”

“Hisssss.”

We all jump to see the very snake slithering out from Azrael’s grey locks.

“Well, shit. Hello, golden savior,” Azrael greets and smiles. He looks exhausted, the lines under his dark circles proving he probably didn’t sleep last night. “Thanks for helping me out during the trials.”

“Hisssss!” She moves hypnotically from side to side, like a dance. Then she’s reaching over until she’s slithering onto my shoulders.

You honestly wouldn’t tell if she’s on you or not if she doesn’t make her cute ‘hissing’ noises.

“Hey, Ophira. Thanks for protecting Azrael,” I greet and praise. “We actually like him.”

“Hisssss.”

“I’m glad to have someone who likes me here,” Azrael sighs. “Aside from my roommate, who’s pretty quiet, everyone is either giving deadly glares or plotting my murder.”

“Is that because of Alaric?” Blair questions.

“Could be. He’s telling everyone I tried to kill him during the trials.” Azrael shrugs. “I think that is why my mother says

being calm can lead to your demise faster than being a loudmouth.”

“But calm people have a higher survival rate.”

We turn our heads to see Asher approaching us with another tall man.

The man with red eyes.

“Y-You,” I declare and point at him the moment the two of them come to a stop.

He stares down at my pointed finger before those beautiful red eyes are back on me.

“Hades, you’ve already met my girl?” Asher inquires.

“I’m not yours.” I groan as my shocked expression melts to annoyance.

Asher just chuckles and hugs me from behind, as if we’re not in public.

“That’s not what you were screaming last night,” he hums in my ear.

“Hisssss..”

He moves back in time to avoid Ophira’s bite.

“Well, damn. Golden snake alert,” Asher whines and lets go of me. “Alright. Don’t want to be turned to stone, thanks.”

“She’s not Medusa stupid,” Hades comments. His voice has us all looking at him because it’s deep as fuck.

“You sound like the god of the underworld himself,” Blair says in horror. “I mean, it’s probably hot, but I’d have to second guess whether you’re about to kill me every second you speak.”

He rolls his eyes, his scowl reminding me of Professor North's constant look of annoyance.

"That's why I don't bother," he mutters, looking my way. "Guinevere?"

"Yup." I'm not surprised he knows my family name. "Obvious?"

"A little." He shrugs and points to Asher. "He's madly in love with you."

"Awww," Blair puts her hands together. "That's when you know it's legit. He talks to his best friend about you."

"I never said we were best friends," Asher groans but is looking at Azrael. "Bro, what the fuck happened to you? You look like you went through a time portal, gone through seven magical wars, and came back a survivor," he sums up and reaches out to take a few locks of Azrael's hair in his grasp. "Though I think if you're trying to go for that Lord of the Rings look, white hair looks better than grey. You look like an old man with a youthful face."

"Asher." I give him a 'shut up now' look.

"Shutting up," he declares and returns to Hades, who stares down at him.

"You become a golden retriever around her."

"I've always been like this," he counters.

Hades rolls his eyes again, then briefly looks at Azrael.

"Your bro actually betrayed you."

Azrael just frowns.

"Why do you make it sound as though you already knew that before coming here?" Blair ponders in intrigue.

“People love to talk a lot around here,” he admits and looks at Blair. “They’re calling you provocative names, yeah?”

“Ah...” Blair tries to smile it off, but it’s obviously bothering her.

“Don’t let it bother you.” He speaks with such reserve, then he looks at me.

“Let me guess,” I announce before he can begin. “I’m going to be some teacher’s pet, smart ass, who thinks she’s almighty and is only here because her sister went missing,” I summarize.

“Anyone who’s a fool to play around with you is just insulting the gods,” he declares, leaving all of us to stare back at him.

“Uh... what?” That wasn’t what I was expecting.

“Hades does that,” Asher confesses. “He has the ability to see things the shadows show him. It’s why he always knows what’s happening around the school. Think of it as though the shadows whisper info to him.”

“That sounds like a blessing and a curse,” Azrael admits.

“It is,” Hades admits but is still looking at me. “Be careful today. A few want you dead before sundown.”

“Fun,” I comment and dare to smile.

He smirks.

“I like her.”

“No,” Asher groans. “You can’t like her. That means I have competition, and there’s already a line!” He points to Azrael. “Don’t crush on her either.”

“Who said I was crushing on her?” Azrael asks.

“Don’t deny when she touched your scar, you were having butterflies fluttering in your stomach.”

“That’s what happens with women, Asher,” Blair points out and offers her hand. “I’m Blair, by the way. Nice to see you this morning.”

“Oh.” He blinks and stares at her hand. With a pout, he slowly works on shaking her hand. “Hey.”

“How do you go from a cocky ass to a shy fucker in three seconds?” Azrael ponders.

“Listen, I don’t talk to women, okay?”

“You speak to Ophelia just fine,” Azrael points out.

“I-It’s different! I love her.”

“And she’s a female,” Hades points out the obvious.

“Don’t join this!” Asher whines. “I’ll lose if you gang up on me.”

“Right,” he dismisses him. “Are we going to class? The seats fill up fast.”

“Are you going to let me sit next to you for once?” Asher inquires.

“No.”

“Boo,” Asher sighs in defeat.

“Azrael should sit with Blair,” he encourages.

“Why?” Asher ponders.

“It’ll help.”

That’s all he says.

We all share a look.

“I don’t mind,” Blair admits with a smile. “I wouldn’t mind sitting next to someone I know, though I was going to sit with Ophelia.”

“Ophelia should stick behind with Asher,” Hades suggests. “He wants to talk to her.”

“Why are you spilling my intentions out loud before I can process them, Hades?” Asher groans as he pinches his nose.

“Oh, well.” Hades doesn’t care. “We get our emblems today. Hope we’re in the same society.”

“We do?” Blair ponders.

“You want us to be together?” I’m curious about his admission of wanting us to be one unit. “Why?”

“We balance each other,” Hades announces, as if this is some sort of destiny. “Just missing one more person.” He briefly looks at Blair. “You’ll like her.”

“Me?” Blair questions and points to herself. “Sorry, Prophecy God of the Underworld, but I don’t get along with girls.”

“What about Ophelia?” Azrael points out again.

“Ophelia is different!” Blair admits.

“Why do I feel like I’m an alien of some kind,” I mumble. “You guys go ahead. You can save seats or something.”

“Alright!” Blair gives me a quick squeeze. “I’ll do my best to save you a seat. Not sure what the seating arrangement is like in N.M.U.”

She looks at Hades, as does Azrael, but he doesn’t comment on it. He’s just staring at me, which isn’t unnecessarily uncomfortable, but it is noticed.

Asher is already grabbing my hand and tugging me away.

“Don’t crush on her!” he orders Hades with a pointed finger.

I catch onto the way Hades simply smirks.

Why do I have a feeling I’m going to be the center of that man’s orbit?



“ASHER.”

He growls into the crook of my neck, his fingers sinking even deeper into my tight pussy.

I can’t even comprehend the pleasure that’s pulsing through me, knowing damn well we can get caught at any moment by a professor, student, or maybe Headmaster Atlas herself.

I’ve never done something so risky in public, yet here I am, plastered against the wall in this tiny alleyway, with Asher pinning me down with one arm over my head.

His other hand is enjoying the dripping delight of my pussy with his thrusting fingers, each movement making me fight off a moan that threatens to escape my pressed lips.

“You like being the apple of everyone’s eye, don’t you?” he grunts in frustration.

Oh, yeah, my Asher is peeved at me.

“Do I always have to remind you that I claimed you first?”

“No,” I squeak, then gasp when he presses against me while he’s stroking those fingers in and out.

“Yet your pussy is squeezing my fingers so fucking tight,” he moans. “You’re loving this. Being punished in public with a chance of us getting caught.”

“I...” My climax is building, and every thrust of his long fingers brings me closer to the glorious high.

“Don’t lie to me, Ophelia.” He groans into my ear and lightly bites the top bit of it, making me shiver at the pinch of pain. “You like that I’m punishing you on the first day of classes.”

“Y-Yes.” I can’t refuse him. Not when I’m so close. “Asher... please...”

“If you’re going to make me jealous, be prepared for the consequences, yes?”

“Fuck yes,” I groan and can’t stop myself from grinding my hips to meet his strokes. “Asher... a... bit more.”

“No one else gets to catch your interest,” he mutters.

“B-But...”

“Ophelia.” He stills his fingers as deeply as he can, making me whimper because I’m so close to the edge, I can fucking cry.

His lips are on mine but make no movement as his eyes are on the verge of dark lavender. It’s almost like I’m seeing both sides of my boyfriend in one lustful gaze. I’d be lying if I didn’t say it wasn’t the fucking hottest thing I’ve seen.

Seeing the heightened mix of jealousy and lust in your man’s gaze while he punishes you makes me want to do it again and again, like a disobedient child.

“You’re testing me,” he warns.

“I’ll be good,” I breathe and look at him with pleading eyes. “Please, Asher. Please.”

“You’re so lucky I love you,” he groans and proceeds to kiss the breath out of me.

Then he pounds those fingers mercilessly into me until I’m cumming.

My cry is muffled as his mouth swallows my moans, my body trembling while my cum drips down his fingers.

He releases my lips, letting me pant away. Pulling his fingers out, he doesn’t hesitate to show my clinging juice on his finger before he sucks his fingers dry like it’s the best-tasting thing he’s had this morning.

I can’t speak because he’s smothering me with a heated kiss that has me on my tiptoes while his hands slip beneath the black skirt I’m wearing so he can grip my ass.

“You taste good on my tongue,” he praises between kisses.

Finally, letting us both breathe, he patiently waits for my reply.

“Yes,” I finally manage to admit. “W-Were you that jealous?”

He needs a second to think about it.

“Hades doesn’t like women.”

“Oh.”

“But that’s the first time I saw a twinkle of interest in his eyes.”

“So I’m doomed,” I conclude.

“Not really,” he mumbles.

“Do you like Hades?”

He stares at me as though I called him ugly.

“Is that a yes?”

“No.”

“But...”

“You, yes. Hades... no.”

“You stalled there.”

“Ophelia.”

“Sweet Cruella.”

We stare at one another for a full minute before he groans.

“Can we stop talking about it?”

“Only if we reroute to this conversation later on.”

“Later, as in later in this arc,” he grumbles.

“Sure.” I can be patient. *He knows that.* “I won’t forget.”

“I know you won’t.” He cradles my cheeks and gently kisses me.

The sweet kiss makes me shiver and moan into his mouth, the two of us enjoying the slower movement of our lips and the tingling passion it ignites.

“You didn’t let me return the favor,” I mutter when he breaks the kiss. He can see I’m disappointed.

“Don’t look like that,” he mutters and places a kiss on my nose. “It’s not like I don’t want you. It’s... just I want to make sure nothing happens to you because of my father.”

“Are you that worried about your father’s interference?”

“Hades doesn’t warn just anyone that they’re a target,” Asher admits and pulls me into his arms. “I don’t like the idea of you getting hurt in the slightest. Makes me want to lose my shit and bring everyone down with me.”

I hug him back.

“Why do I feel as though that’s gonna happen a lot, regardless?” I ponder into his dress shirt. “You smell good.”

“You taste good.”

“Funny.” I smirk and inhale a few times. “Don’t worry. You know I can defend myself. I’m not an easy target, as many may assume.”

“Doesn’t give my dad the right to target you, to begin with,” he mutters into my hair. “Why are you wearing a skirt today?”

“Don’t like it?”

“Oh, I like it.” He doesn’t hide the immense excitement in his deep voice. He presses his groin against my lower half, making it obvious that he’s sporting a hard-on. “You don’t wear skirts in public.”

“You’re correct.”

“But?”

“Blair said the uniforms for the females are skirts, not leggings. Closest thing we can wear to leggings is pantyhose or knee-high socks, so I figured I better prepare myself for the inevitable.”

“Hmph.”

I snicker. “Don’t want anyone seeing my ass?”

“Your ass is definitely mine,” he grumbles. “I better be the first to have my cock deeply in that ass of yours.”

My pussy is already aching at the idea.

“My sex life is going from non-existent to very active, huh?”

“You’re complaining?”

“Nope.” I pull back to look into his eyes. “You okay?”

“I’m okay,” he assures me. “I need to walk this off, or I’ll enter the classroom with everyone knowing my business.”

“That wouldn’t fit your jock aesthetic,” I gasp in horror before something clicks. “Wait a minute. You’re in my class?”

“Mhmm,” he reveals. “Your schedule is pretty identical to Blair’s, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Then we’re in the same shit.”

“But you’ve been here for a while.”

“I told you, Sweet Cruella.” He lightly tugs on my bottom lip and gives me a consuming kiss that makes me almost forget my name. “I was waiting for you.”

Damn...

“I’m not going to be able to concentrate in class if you are all romantic like this,” I complain, knowing well my cheeks are blazing red.

My admission, matched with my shyness, makes him smile before he hugs me again.

“Let me go first. Go straight to class, though.”

“Alright,” I assure him and hug him back. “Do you think today is going to be crazy?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he admits with a sigh. “First week usually slays through half the student body.” When he pulls back, he sees my complete dread. “You’ll survive, though.” He winks. “If my jock ass can still be here, you can make it.”

“I’m not reassured at all,” I mutter. “Especially when you’re a smartass.”

“I love when you praise me.” He kisses the top of my head. “Now I have to go before I give up on the idea of classes and drag you home,” he concludes. “See you shortly, Sweet Cruella.”

“Bye, Silly Dalmatian.”

He smiles fully at that, making him look far too handsome for his own good. Now, his eyes are back to their blue-green oasis.

Watching him leave, I try to take a few breaths to calm myself down before fixing my attire.

It’s a bit chilly today, which is why I decided to wear a black turtleneck, black skirt, and white knee-highs borrowed from Blair because I couldn’t find my black ones. With simple black running shoes and my hair left down, my look was simple but not something I’d normally wear.

Especially this skirt.

Glancing at the end of the alleyway, I can’t help but squeeze my eyes because my vision is a bit blurry.

“Weird.” My eyes always give me issues during the morning hours. It’s as if they just can’t adjust well during the

day but are giving me 20/20 vision at night. “Guess I’ll wear my glasses.”

It’s not something I’d like to wear on the first day of school, but I’ve never gotten the chance to invest in contacts.

Plus, with how strong my magic is, contacts won’t last very long before they’re obliterated by my spiked essence when conducting a last-second spell.

Summoning my black thick-framed glasses is a breeze. Sliding them on, I end up taking the hair tie on my wrist and gathering my hair to put it up in a messy bun.

I’m not here to look like a stunning doll, especially when there’s no one to impress.

Heck, I have a boyfriend who’s willing to put everything on the line to finger fuck me in the alleyway before school starts.

I’m glad this is outside and not somewhere in the halls where the aroma of our dirty deeds would surely linger until someone figured out what had been done.

“Don’t make Asher jelly,” I conclude to myself as I give myself a motivational nod. “I’m fucking that up by noon.” I just know within my bones that someone will probably try to mess with him if I’m in the mix.

Stepping out from the alleyway only knocks me right into someone else.

“Oomph.”

An arm hooks around me, stopping me from falling on my ass.

Opening my eyes, I can only deep frown at the random dude, who I realize is one of the jocks from the library who was talking smack about me.

“Look who it is,” he teases with a cocky grin. “Miss Smart As—”

The way my whole body grows rigid is the only warning I get before swift waves of power rush past us so quickly, it's gone in a blink.

Leaving everything around us in utter disaster.

The screams of agony are only the tip of the iceberg, but I'm still staring at the jock looking down at me.

I notice I'm falling back again, but another set of hands stops me from falling to the ground.

“If he wasn't focused on your ass, he would have been able to finish his sentence.”

It takes everything not to tug my eyes away and acknowledge the man who's keeping me afloat, but my soul knows that if I look away, I'll miss the inevitable.

Watching this jock's body slide to the floor in two pieces.

Three, if you count his arm that was previously holding me.

No words can explain the true horror of witnessing someone perish in mere seconds before you, but then again, my mind, body, and magic are telling me that this can happen to me if I don't snap the fuck out of it.

Slowly glancing up rewards me with the sight of Professor North.

His attention is all on me as he stares down at me with an expressionless stare. It's as if whatever happened before my eyes is nothing but a delay in his plans, which I'm assuming is getting to his first class.

I'm slowing him down.

“Morning, Professor North.” I’m impressed that my voice doesn’t reflect the shock that’s making my heart gallop against my chest.

“Should I ask why you’re in between two buildings?” he sounds annoyed.

Figures.

“No.” I’m being honest. “But if you really want to know, it’ll probably piss you off or get me suspended before school begins, so we don’t need to talk about it.”

We stare at one another.

“I already feel like you’ll be nothing but a nuisance to me, Miss Guinevere,” he complains.

“A nuisance that makes nice birthday cakes?” I offer.

He briefly stares down at me before he helps me stand up properly.

“Seven out of ten.”

“Honestly, that feels like an A+ in your book,” I approve and try not to focus too much on the pool of blood at my feet.

“The melody of your moans sounds better.”

I almost miss what he grumbles under his breath, but I can’t confront him because the man is walking away.

As if twenty students aren’t lying sliced and dead on the school grounds.

“If I get into the classroom before you, Miss Guinevere, I’m marking you as late.”

Son of a—

I'm running until I catch up to him.

“That’s not nice,” I whine to grab his attention. “I’m wearing a skirt today, Professor North. A lady shouldn’t be running in a skirt.”

He pauses in his stride to take an up-and-down look at me.

This is my chance.

Before he can speak, I’m running ahead.

“See you in class, Professor North!”

As curious as I am to ask what the fuck I just witnessed—*and potentially experienced*—every nerve ending in my system is screaming for me to run to class before I perish at the hands of whatever invisible force that slayed my fellow students.

Today’s the official day of thriving disaster.



LESSON ONE OF N.M.U. — SURVIVAL

Finally.

I make a note to myself that I have to ride Asher's cock like my life depends on it because it's thanks to his musky cologne scent that led me straight to the classroom.

With my frantic mind, there's no time to review timetables when your life is on the line.

After the outdoor madness I just witnessed, everyone is rushing to get to their designated classes alive.

I've seen people die in my short life, but witnessing it happen inches away from me is making an imprint on my body's reaction to it.

Reaching the door to my class, I make sure there's nothing that could kill me by touch. Despite no signs, I decide not to take a chance as I use a flick of magic to encourage the metal door to slide open. There wasn't any time to admire the ancient cement walls or the unique artistry of the school's architecture, but the door mimics the aesthetic of one you'd see in a typical dungeon.

Engraved with unique incantations, designs, and symbolism, I have no time to decipher.

That could lead to my end if a test pops out of the blue, but as of now, I don't want to be late.

Professor North will be here any second now.

Walking into the classroom gives me a glimpse of the big space that has students squished like sardines. I don't know why I'd originally assumed the classes would be smaller with how few survived during the initiation trial process, but from one glance, there have to be at least five hundred students.

From a quick scan, I can tell I'm not the only one spooked out by whatever they witnessed minutes earlier. Some are crying their eyes out while others are rocking in their seats. A few are talking quietly to themselves to keep them as close to sane until class starts, while others are whispering to one another about whatever they survived.

I catch the sight of Blair sitting next to Azrael in the top right corner. Their concern for me is as clear as day, but I'm already moving my gaze away until it locks directly on those set of blue-green eyes.

Asher's panic is striking enough, I'm taming every nerve-ending not to flinch. His aura barely slithers along his skin, but I can tell it's fighting every strand of restraint not to reach out to me until I'm covered in a blanket of protection.

His shadowed cloak of protection.

I'm trying to be stoic, but I know he can see past the bullshit. Out of everyone in this room, my Silly Dalmatian can see through to the roots of my emotions.

The depths of my fear.

A boy is sitting next to him, eyes of orange with flickers of magenta, pink, and silver, observing my every move.

Searching for every quiver.

I'm not sure I like him sitting next to Asher.

Makes me feel uneasy. As if he'd hurt what's mine.

I begin to realize out of the entire room, there's only one seat left.

Thankfully, it's next to Hades.

Even better, a certain slithering Viper is moving along the oakwood surface that's painted black like the walls of the classroom. Honestly, without the window that allows the sunlight to pierce through and the dim lights, this place would be pitch black.

"Oh, look who it is?" The group from the library is sitting up front in the corner right next to the door.

Their apparent jock leader missing.

"What's up, Smart Ass? A bit of death frightened you to reconsider covering for your pathetic sister?" One of them gestures with a mocking grin.

His comrades laugh, and a few students around the room join in as if this is the perfect comedic relief.

I'm paying attention to my white socks, noticing how they're covered in blood.

Not my blood.

"Bro, where's Josh? He'll rave at seeing Miss Teacher's Pet is in our class. Bet you he'd enjoy killing her."

The others laugh like death is such a joyous thing.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, one that makes it hard not to curl my fingers into fists and glare venomously at these boys, who are acting as if life is not as precious as it is.

“He’s dead.”

All eyes are on me, my words shutting down every spoken word of mockery and curiosity.

“Wh-What?” his champ questions, noticing how my expression is void of emotion.

“Josh. Is. Dead.” I repeat, looking at his friend’s wide black eyes that realize I’m not lying. “A shame, really. If he wasn’t distracted, maybe he would have finished his sentence.”

No one says a word to argue with me.

The only sound that follows is my heel boots that click and clack loudly because of how I direct my boiling emotions into every step I take. Without much thought, I pull out the chair from the empty desk and lower into the seat in one smooth movement.

Everyone gasps.

It sounds like everyone.

“What?” I huff and look at the group of boys, who flinch at my menacing gaze. I don’t know if they’re frightened at the idea I may have killed their pal or that I’ve sat in a seat that’s secretly marked forbidden because there’s a golden snake slithering on there.

“Uh...” The dude looks pale, even with his darker complexion, as he points in my direction, just farther to my left. “Y-You’re sitting there.”

“Yes?” My patience is running out. “And? What? This seat taken?”

“N-No,” the boy next to him with dark blonde hair speaks up, his voice trembling.

“Then what’s the problem?” I hasten for an answer because I don’t like being the only one left in the dark.

“Hisssss?” Ophira is already along my shoulders and decorating my neck with her golden body, as if she’s now a new accessory to show off to the world.

“Hello, Ophira,” I greet her before my eyes are back on the library gang of jocks. “You guys got snake phobia?”

“N-No,” they admit but look like they want to run out of the room and to the hills of N.M.U.

“Then?” I press and cross one leg over the other as I lift my small bag and place it on the desk.

“No one sits there.”

I move my gaze away until it lands on the culprit of the voice, a short girl with purple hair. She seems pretty normal aside from the dark purple locks, but her gaze is odd to me.

Out of place. Not really there. Looney even.

“Because?” I’m still not following what the problem is.

“No one sits next to me.”

The room grows silent. The stillness in the atmosphere is only more noticeable as I turn my head to Hades. He looks completely calm, his red eyes all but on me. I don’t feel a spec of fear sitting next to him, so I’m confused as to what the problem is.

“What?” I just want him to repeat himself.

Because this sounds ridiculous.

“No one sits next to me,” he repeats.

“Because?”

He doesn't answer, and everyone else is too afraid to speak up.

I'm sure Asher would tell me, but if he's keeping quiet, that means it's information he wants me to pull from the source.

The way a bubble of laughter escapes me has everyone staring at me like I've lost my mind. Leaning farther back in my chair, I lift my legs up so my feet are on the desk, cross one over the other, and sigh in annoyance.

"Great," I declare, noticing Professor North is at the door. We share a look, one that gives me a glimpse into those dusk-colored eyes that show a speck of worry for my sanity. "I'm your new best friend, Hades."

I can smell the aroma of fear in the air.

"Get used to me sitting next to you from now."

"Hisssss," Ophira agrees,

I can feel Hades' lingering stare, even as I'm more interested in the chalkboard that only has one written thing on it.

Survival.

"You're a rarity, Guinevere," he admits.

"If that's your way of saying I'm weird, I'll take it as a compliment," I conclude. I'm more relieved that my heartbeat has calmed down.

"Good morning, Professor North." I decide it's my duty to put my 'Teacher's Pet' title to good use.

"Miss Guinevere," he greets as he walks into the classroom and scans his audience with emotionless eyes.

Those dusk-colored spheres really remind me of a black vortex that will suck your soul with no warning or remorse.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels that way, seeing as the tension in the room spikes the moment his eyes trail across the room.

He reaches the middle of the room to the single black desk and stands in front of it. He has no books, pens, clipboards, or anything in his grasp. Just him, standing there, looking hot as fuck now that he's wearing his black ensemble—black dress shirt with three buttons open, black dress pants, classy black dress shoes, and his black hair tied into a little ponytail.

The key pieces I notice that have me fighting not to drool are the single magic circle earring dangling from his left ear and the thick black glasses sitting on his face.

He wasn't wearing glasses earlier.

When he's finished taking in the entire space, his eyes land back on me.

Whether it's because I'm in the front sitting next to Mr. Forbidden Underworld or have my feet on the desk like a rebellious gothic kid trying to get in trouble, he doesn't speak up about his displeasure.

He gets right to businesses.

“My name is Professor Orpheus Maxwell North. I've been appointed the official professor for the Malevolence Dark Magic and Artistry class, which is the class you're attending today and only for today.” Knowing his words are going to ignite some sort of rebellious response, he lifts his hand to silence anyone from speaking up. He opens his mouth to speak but pauses as his gaze peers over to the classroom door.

I can't help but be just as intrigued, my eyes drifting over just as the thick metal door slides open to reveal a student catching their breath.

"I-I'm sorry for being late!" The student announces and rushes through the opening.

Only to be nothing but a pile of minced remains in a blink.

The gasps and screams echo through our room as we stare at the pile of flesh that sits in the exact spot where this huffing and puffing student once stood.

I uncross my arms, so I can hide them in my lap, but it doesn't do much to hide their trembling.

The light touch of warmth surprises me, my widened eyes lowering to confirm Hades' hand is on top of both my hands, which are clenched together and trying not to fidget.

"Breathe," he says so low, I'm positive no one else can hear him from the commotion of empathy igniting from watching a student die before our eyes.

I give a slight nod, coaching myself that this is going to be our new reality. Deep within, I can't help but acknowledge I made the right decision not to touch the door handle.

He must have touched and triggered something.

"Since this is your first class for this arc for many of you, it only seems fair to have a sense of mercy and allow both new and repeat students the opportunity to gain their essentials," Professor North carries on as if someone hadn't died in our midst. "By the end of today's class, you'll receive your cloaks, wands, and emblems, which will show which society club you will be assigned to. Details revolving around that will be reviewed and spoken about next week. No point in diving into

all the history and importance of these key items when seventy-five percent of you will be dead.”

The silence is chill-inducing.

“I’m not here to be your friend,” he begins, and his eyes seem to land on me. “I’m also not here to be your enemy.”

I notice he’s briefly acknowledging Hades’ hand on top of mine. His attention locks on him.

“Unless you entice me.”

Uh oh...

All I can do is side-glance over at Hades.

Only to witness the way the corners of his lips rise up.

I make a mental note to myself.

I’m surrounded by overprotective, over-possessive psychos.

“I’m not going to stand here and waste anyone’s time. You’ve noticed before arriving at your classroom, many students perished on the way. You’ll learn very quickly that N.M.U. isn’t a place to think is a safe space. It’s not.” His expression couldn’t be colder. “The Worlds of Nephilim and Malevolence are ruthless in nature. There are only so many rules, which aren’t many to begin with, that can protect you in the depths of the tainted wilderness to reach the towns, cities, villages, and the royal lands that try to discourage bloodshed.”

He scans the room and shrugs ever so slightly.

“Useless during the Hunt, but you’ll learn all about that with Professor Blackbird,” he sums up. “I’m sure you could tell that every seat is officially taken in this classroom. This is the allotted number we’ve allowed today. There could come a

time that five hundred seats can go down to two hundred seats.”

Some people’s jaws drop at the imaginative thought.

“Other times, you’ll come in, and there will only be one seat.”

The tension can’t get any higher at this point.

“We’ve only had that happen once,” he admits. “It felt real good to sit in that chair.” When he smiles, it’s as malicious as ever, while his dusk eyes darken.

Giving a glimpse of the Fae side, I’m confident is hidden somewhere in his emotionless demeanor.

Someone is vomiting in the back row, but I can’t peel my eyes away from Professor North.

Or mentally admit I’m turned on by this vibe of overpowering dominance he’s executing just by stating facts about his accomplishments.

“There are days where they’ll be safe days. Meaning that when you arrive at school, there’s no risk of you being killed. That will go in place from tomorrow until Thursday night. I’d suggest, if you survive today’s class, to take advantage of those days to gain more knowledge, purchase or upgrade the weapons of your choice, and make alliances if possible.”

Okay, this is getting frightening.

At the same time, I’m a bit exhilarated about what we could go through to survive.

“Again, we will dive into all of that later. I will gladly answer questions during our class today if our situation allows us.”

A whistle from the door has us acknowledging Professor Blackbird. He's not looking at the pile of student remains.

Oh, no... he's looking straight at me.

"Miss Guinevere. Since when do you wear the same glasses as Professor North?"

It's the most random question to ask, but I'm sure everyone is waiting for my answer.

Epecially Professor North.

"I borrowed them," I lie and point to my glasses on my face. "Some jock named Josh was hitting on me this morning, and when things went haywire, my glasses broke." I point to Professor North. "Professor North kindly felt pity for my blind in the morning self and allowed me to borrow his so I could get to class."

Professor Blackbird is all smiles as he casually walks into the room and manages to avoid the pile with one easy, long step.

It's crazy that he's wearing all-white, when he's next to his professional counterpart of all black.

"Wow. Professor North has a heart today," Professor Blackbird gasps and looks at him. "I guess with you being the first student to complete the initiation trials, you should get some advantages," he announces gleefully and claps his hands three times.

No one knows what that kindles, but Professor Blackbird only further smiles.

"You can request to know what your bonuses are later, Miss Guinevere," he announces and looks at Professor North. "Can we go now? The janitor needs to clean up before

D'Angelo comes here and barks our ears off on how we don't respect him and all that foolishness."

"Can't you try to be more professional?" Professor North inquires with an arched eyebrow.

"Why?" Professor Blackbird gives the cutest innocent look. "Most of them are going to die, anyway. I'll admit, I know a few may survive effortlessly. I have bids on Miss Guinevere and anyone on her team."

It's like they want everyone to hate and target me.

"Professors, you're setting me up for failure here," I point out and even have my index finger in the direction of Josh's group. "They're already mad I killed their captain."

"Wh-What! Why are you bringing us into this?"

"Cause I want to," I conclude. "Maybe you'll die faster, so more smart students survive this culling."

None of them can argue with me.

Professor Blackbird chuckles.

"If you guys learned to be as nonchalant as Miss Guinevere, maybe we'll break a record of survivors this round." He claps his hands once.

"We're on a time limit, so there's no point in any questions. You'll find out what happened in the school courtyard and at the door of this classroom once we've teleported to Nephilim. That's the reason why I'm attending today's class with Professor North. If you don't agree with that, I don't care."

Wow! He's direct and merciless.

“Form a group of six now and stay together until we arrive in Nephilim. I will teleport us all at random, so don’t waste anyone else’s time. We will explain the requirements of today’s class upon arrival, but until then, prepare yourselves because you’re ‘bout to learn the first lesson of Nephilim Malevolence University.”

“What’s the first lesson titled?” someone has the bold guts to ask.

Professor Blackbird smiles, and unlike before, this expression of excitement is what makes my heart skip a few beats.

The eyes of a murderer.

“Lesson One is simple,” he announces and slides his hands into his pockets. “Survival.”

I pray that’s what I’m able to accomplish by the end of today’s class.



WARNING FROM A GILDED VIPER

I 've never been manhandled in public before.

Sure. In the bedroom, matched with some foreplay, is always a wild ride, but literally being lifted, carried, and placed gently on Professor North's desk is a newfound achievement.

That I kind of like.

"Um..." I begin and stare at Hades, who just carried me like the golden grail before anyone could try to get close to me. I'm not the only one stunned by his actions, but it's the perfect distraction to get Asher, Blair, and Azrael over to us.

And the guy who was sitting next to Asher.

The moment he joins the group, my expression is as sour as ever.

Enough for Asher to notice.

"What?" he questions when he reaches me.

"I don't like you." The poor guy with orange/pink eyes is staring at me in surprise. *Just like half the student body, but I can't acknowledge them when my back is facing the rows of seats.* "Why is that?"

“I don’t know...” He admits with a pout of his lips before he looks at Asher for help.

“Ah. Ophelia, this is Kali Solanine,” Asher introduces. “He’s Azrael’s roommate. He also tutors me from time to time because I suck at magic incantations.”

I give him a ‘really’ look because I know this man better than I know myself.

He doesn’t need incantations to create some of the most terrifying spellwork. His Father made sure of that.

I look at this Kali friend again, and despite my lingering stare, he seems to stand his ground. A movement at the corner of my eye briefly steals my attention—Professor North and Professor Blackbird standing at the side of the blackboard.

Their gazes fixed on me.

I’m sure they can overhear what I’d previously said—like half the class—but I can’t tell from their expressions whether my instincts are on point or not.

Alaric betrayed Azrael. Why should I trust someone because they tutored my not-my-ex-anymore-boyfriend and is Azrael’s new roommate?

“Is it my appearance?” he innocently questions as he looks at everyone else.

“I think you look fine,” Blair speaks up but adds, “But I’ve also been saved by Ophelia’s instincts, so I’d choose her over you in a heartbeat.”

I’d be lying if I said her honesty isn’t the reason why I’m smirking from ear to ear.

“Does he really make you suspicious?” Azrael inquires. “He didn’t kill me last night, and I was completely knocked

out, thanks to my douche of a bro, so...”

He has a point.

“Sweet Cruella.”

My eyes land on Asher, who’s now standing in front of me.

“If you don’t want him on our team, then we could pick someone else, but we’re running out of time.”

The fact he’d choose my judgment over his friend and tutor must hurt Kali’s feelings, but he doesn’t show it. He’s standing tall, waiting patiently for my decision, which I commend. He doesn’t have to join us, especially when we’ve shown obvious apprehension, but I’d scanned the room multiple times when I entered the classroom on purpose.

To scout who would be a good fit if we were tossed into teams.

Sadly to admit, Kali’s magic fits our dynamic six.

“No one else fits my standards,” I admit. The few of the quiet curses and insults prove students are overhearing our conversation on purpose.

Not like there’s much privacy, to begin with.

Taking in Kali’s appearance from head to toe once more, I acknowledge his hazelnut brown hair, unique eyes of orange-magenta with bits of silver, and slightly tanned skin. He’s our height at 5’6”, making him pretty short, in my opinion, and he doesn’t really have much muscle compared to Hades, Asher, and Azrael. That could be a reflection that his magic abilities are strong, but then again, I don’t know what anyone is capable of.

He made it to N.M.U., so he has to be somewhat capable of surviving.

“Kali means ‘doomsday’ in Hindu, doesn’t it?” I bring up. The poor man is staring at me in bewilderment. “Solanine is a type of poison found in nightshade.”

He can’t hide his surprise at my quick deciphering of the hidden roots of his first and last name.

Sliding off the desk, I move around Asher so I can stand before Kali head-on. Being the same height makes the tension spike in our little atmosphere, but I’m zoning everyone out.

Leaving all my attention on the individual before me who I need to confirm is a friend or foe.

“So, my question to you, *Kali*, is whether you’ll lead our team to an agonizingly slow demise, or will accepting you into our reign of elites walk us down a path of absolute destruction?”

I can see the bubble of nerves in him, and I further play my taunting games by letting a glimpse of my aura flick around me. Whatever is being talked about in the room is no longer important because my signature move seems to silence everyone further behind me.

Ah. Pinch-drop silence can be so empowering.

“I was named after my mother, the previous princess of one of the Malevolence Kingdoms, Kali Anastasia Elvira. Despite the reference to doomsday and death, Anastasia in Russian means Resurrection. Elvira means truth and the name of the Mistress of Darkness in legends,” he explains.

“My Father’s surname was Solanine, and you’re correct about its deadly chemical meaning, but I proudly carry it, for I’ve been blessed with magic that can taint and destroy in

similar forms that mimic a poisonous substance.” Despite the risk of revealing what his magic or potential gift can be, he keeps his focus on me, standing his ground.

“If you believe I’ll be but a disservice to you, I’ll gladly let you replace me with another you deem worthy to be a part of your entourage,” he admits and bows his head slightly. *As if I’m a queen sitting on a throne.* “However, I’m confident I can be a loyal attribute, and I carry no ill will to any of you.”

Impressive.

My lips curl before I can stop myself.

“Alright then.” My approval is evident in my voice, but I lean in to whisper words I know very few would understand. ***“Hurt what’s mine in any shape or form and I swear to the gods of Nephilim and Malevolence to let your suffering be as agonizingly rich as the poison you reap upon your enemies.”***

I enjoy the way he swallows and nods his head ever so slightly.

“I like him,” I announce.

Asher isn’t the only one who lets out a breath they didn’t realize they were holding.

“Sweet Cruella, you had everyone fearing for their life a moment ago,” Asher notes.

“Really?” I look at him in confusion. “Why is that?”

“She doesn’t realize when she goes into a deadly serpent ready to devour her prey with no remorse state of mind.”

I move my eyes to Hades, who doesn’t seem fazed by my protective stance.

“I’m going to assume you’re referring to Ophira.” I point at the golden serpent as she comes out from her snuggled spot around my neck. I actually forgot she was there.

“Hisssss.” She happily moves from side to side.

“I was not,” Hades comments.

“Then it’s certainly not me,” I note and look over to Professor North and Professor Blackbird. I’m going to say something, but I notice the familiar energy behind the door of the classroom. “Professor D’Angelo is here.”

Watching the black and white duo go from intrigued to panicked is a sight I’ll keep in my memory banks. The two quickly spread out their stances and raise their left arms into the air.

“We’re leaving.”

We don’t have time to hold hands or prepare for the gravitation shift that has us gasping a second later.

The snap of our professors’ fingers sends us into the realms of Nephilim.



HEADS OR TAILS TO SURVIVAL

The first thing I want to do is vomit.

No, the first thing I do is vomit.

I've traveled to Nephilim a few times—by force—and each time has left me feeling as though my insides were ready to come right out of me. They say in scripted literature that the spike in magical essence, matched with the imbalance between oxygen and carbon dioxide, makes you feel as though you're on the verge of death.

Will you get used to it?

Maybe.

That's the frightening part of it all.

Not everyone is destined to live and breathe in the realms of Nephilim. Malevolence is far worse.

When it feels like I won't pass out, I close my eyes and train myself to calm down.

If my parents were here, they would have abandoned me long ago. The slower you are in recovering, the higher the chance you'll become prey to the various creatures hidden in the shadows of the fae world.

Some places have sympathy for our kind, especially when you carry the unique elements of a fae but are a human catalyst.

That's but a percentage of creatures that take pity on their food.

I've quickly learned that only the worthy are protected and saved in these realms, and that has to be earned, or else you're no different from any creature or monster trying to survive the harsh cycle of life.

"Fuck." It's taking me far too long to recover from this.

A nuisance.

I can already hear my parents echoing insults, repeating over and over again. The painful memories of their sheer disappointment in me. I'm positive they're waiting for that important call.

The phone call that confirms my death.

Opening my eyes, which are watery from the tense aroma of roses around us, I look around to see who's with me. My eyes go to the glowing being to my left—the sight making me freeze as I'm captivated by their glowing shell of infinite magic.

Either I'm hallucinating, or I'm potentially getting to witness a goddess in my presence.

She's on her knees, sitting back and staring at her hands that glow brilliantly with different incantations of white. Her hair is not only out of the hair tie, but it's floating entirely, those black strands now pure white with so much magic embedded in every strand, I can't even comprehend the power invested in her as a whole unit.

The aura that dances around her feels everlasting, a burning flame that would never dare flicker out.

Her clothes are bathed in layers of white essences, and the only differentiation between her magic and her flesh is the mystical sparkle of her skin that glimmers of glistening gold.

My transfixed gaze is met by eyes of red, the shade a few hues lighter than my eyes, which mimic crimson blood. Within those spheres of rose red are slits of green that remind me of a snake or even a dragon who's ready to acknowledge the threat in their line of vision.

Or, in my case... potential dinner.

The hairs on my arms rise in warning, but I don't dare move. Even if I could, I already know that if this was a game of survival between us, my chances of survival would be wiped out.

I can't imagine fighting against Guinevere.

I could be digging my own grave.

This being of infinite power could be a fae using spellwork to disguise themselves as someone I've previously carried a connection with. Then again, if that were the case, the person who'd most likely be used against me would be Asher.

I just met Guinevere... she can't possibly have such a stronghold on my emotions.

I'm double-guessing myself because I'd be lying if I denied how those haunting eyes of emerald with specs of gold hadn't followed me straight to my dreams. Seeing her shed tears and hearing the defeat in her whimpering sobs yesterday made me want to drop everything and find who hurt her. It may not have been any of my business, but for this stranger of delicate beauty, grace, and obvious smarts, I was going to fight

until the culprit who pushed her to tears felt a hint of my unrelenting wrath.

That's a reaction I don't pull.

I'm an emotionless tool.

A being who invites the shadows many are frightened of to use my body as a temple for their own mischief games in exchange for power and clairvoyance.

It's the reason why no one wishes to mingle with me.

Why is this woman changing me?

Realizing I'm a target for this woman who stares at me as though she's peering into my soul, I can only kneel here and wait for my end. My nerves spike when her left hand moves close to her lips, a single finger rising while the other four lower to her palm.

I brace for a spell, incantation, or some type of magical combustion that will lead to my death, but I'm rewarded with something else.

A quiet 'shh.'

My disbelief, matched with my confusion, makes her lips curl in delight, a foreign sight on this woman's face when she's normally acknowledging various things around her or giving a taunting expression that makes more than one male's cock twitch in irony.

Including mine.

“Our little secret.” Her voice is the most whimsical I've heard it. The tone is at a higher pitch than her best friend with blonde hair and pink eyes and makes me feel as though none of my problems should stop me from achieving my dreams.

A sensation of freedom without barriers?

There's no way I'm imagining any of this now, but I go along with spinning wheels because what do I have to lose keeping a secret?

At a school where everyone has troubled pasts and secret societies, this is nothing.

All I can manage is a nod, the action pleasing her enough to encourage the lowering of her hands to her lap. She admires our surroundings for a few more seconds, and I'm unsure how to describe the various emotions that flood her expression of flawless beauty.

Confusion, sadness, uncertainty, and hints of anger.

The last expression, which leaves me feeling unease, is the flickers of regret that flood her predator eyes, which begin to shift in color.

The emerald shade is back, inviting the normal round pupils of black and the twinkling glimmers of gold. The oozing layers of pure magic begin to extinguish, leaving a floating trail of white sparkles as her black strands begin to return to their silk texture.

By the time every hint of that infinite magic has depleted from the atmosphere, Guinevere is left to stare blankly upward.

“Guinevere?” I manage to croak in concern.

She doesn't answer me.

She just stares at the sky of twinkling mist and constellations.

“Shit.” I fear the worst, especially with the obvious absence of Guinevere's aura. That's exactly what led me to her

suite door the first time around.

The merciless power she flawlessly hides, as if it's no big deal.

My body aches in protest when I try to crawl over to her, but I fight against the begging urge to remain still. A few dragging pulls and I'm next to her, my hand touching her cheek.

“Guinevere.”

As if my physical touch breaks whatever trance that has kept Guinevere captive, she flinches in surprise, and her gaze darts to acknowledge me.

“H-Hades?” she croaks, only for her eyes to roll back and her body to drop forward like dead weight.

“Got you,” I hiss when my arms outstretch to stop her from face-planting on the uniquely tainted grass beneath us. I check her heart rate from the pulse point at her neck, and the feel of the beating rhythm of blood pumping gives me peace of mind.

“Fuck... we need to move.”

Easier said than done, especially when your whole team is down for the count. Pulling Guinevere into my arms, I lay her down, so her head is in my lap. I'm still concerned for her, especially with the absence of her aura, but I know one special tactic taught to children from powerful families is to seal your aura entirely when entering any new environment.

Voluntarily or involuntarily.

“Hisssss.”

I look down to acknowledge the slithering gold snake emerging from what I can safely see is Guinevere's bra. I can

see a glimpse of the black lace, but I quickly move my gaze away.

I'm not even into women...

That's another dilemma.

For someone who isn't into the female race and accepted that long ago, I'm sure emotionally responsive to Guinevere.

Dangerous.

“Hisssss. Hisssss.”

I blink and realize Ophira is inches from my face, moving from side to side as though to get my attention.

“Hello, Ophira,” I greet her calmly, despite my emotional response, which feels like it's malfunctioning. “We need to move, but everyone's unconscious.”

“Hisssss.” She moves from side to side.

“We can't remain here with no protection,” I mutter more to myself since I doubt Ophira can understand the real dilemma at hand.

Glancing around once more, I confirm all six of us are present. Asher is the closest, only three steps from Guinevere and me. Blair is slightly farther, next to a tainted oak tree that's covered in vines.

Azrael is to my right, surrounded by blooming roses, and Kali is hanging from a cluster of vines that's in a tree parallel to where Blair is lying on the ground.

We're practically in a wide circle, which could be a good thing to help me plan an impromptu barrier that can shield us until more of us gain consciousness, but I'm struggling to gather any source of shadow magic in this area.

Despite it being 'night' time in this realm and us being blanketed in darkness.

“Hisssss.”

Lowering my gaze, I realize Ophira is long gone from Guinevere's breasts and is slithering away. I'm not disappointed by the instinct to return to her habitat, but I'm left with uncertainty as to how to protect my team in this predicament.

No professors in sight, either.

“Ugh...”

My attention moves to my left, confirming one of my teammates has woken up.

“Doesn't matter how many times I come here, I fucking feel like death,” Asher complains.

“Join the club,” I mutter and grab Asher's attention as he manages to raise his head from the ground. His unique eyes of blue and green briefly land on me.

Then they lower to my lap.

And darken until I can't differentiate between the tainted lavender black shades that swirl into hollow voids.

“She's alive.” I get to the point. “She woke up after me. Passed out right afterward.”

The brewing craving of brutality that oozes off his frame eases down a few notches.

Jeez.

“You're madly in love with her,” I mutter in annoyance. “That's going to get you into some dangerous predicaments if you don't hide how important she is to you.”

Asher manages to move into an all-fours position. He needs to take a few breaths, a similar technique I used earlier, before he drags himself over to where I'm kneeling with Guinevere in tow. He doesn't answer me until his hand graces Guinevere's cheek and down to the side of her neck, where he can feel her jugular vein.

A few seconds of silence is enough for him to confirm his sweet damsel is safe and sound, but he doesn't seem satisfied.

He won't be until she's awake and bickering with him.

"I'm not trying to hide how important she is to me," Asher surprisingly declares.

When I meet his eyes this time around, they're filled with seriousness.

"She's not a secret I'm desperate to keep within my bedroom walls."

"Yet no one knew you were in a relationship with a woman outside of N.M.U. walls?" I don't know why I'm being combative. "I thought you were gay."

"What purpose would it deliver me if I told everyone I was madly in love with a woman I was forced to leave behind because of my shit of an ass father, who I'm not strong enough to eliminate from my life forever," he summarizes in one breath. "At least, not yet strong enough to eliminate him."

"You want to kill your father?" That's new. He's never mentioned it.

"He's the bane of my existence and the reason I've lost years' worth of being with the only woman who's ever made me feel alive," Asher grumbles.

I don't know how to respond to that.

So, I don't.

Asher clearly clues on to what his statement means when it comes to the years he's spent here at N.M.U.

The time he spent with me...

"I'm not saying you were a—"

"Rebound?" I finish his sentence and shrug. "If I was, I'd rather you be truthful about it."

"You can tell if I'm lying," he counters, leaving us in an awkward silence.

"Let's focus on the problem at hand." I divert the conversation to what's important. "Professor Blackbird did say our first lesson to learn is survival."

"Hades."

I'm forced to look at him because his hand grips my chin and moves my head, so my eyes are now locked on his.

"You weren't a rebound."

Guess his validation of "us" is important for him to say here and now.

"Anyone can hear you," I grumble, as though all of this is but a nuisance.

Despite how fast my heart beats.

"Ophira is shielding the space."

I frown at that as I look for the golden culprit of this apparent shield.

It takes a few seconds, but a glimmer of gold sparkles across a dome that makes itself present for a few seconds, confirming what Asher had just announced.

“Hisssss.”

Now, the serpent makes itself visible, the skin of invisibility exposing the golden scales along the massive creature that used its body to create an oval around all six of us.

“Thanks, Ophira,” Asher acknowledges her aid in shielding us.

“Hisssss.” The reply is loud with a pinch of magic that makes me feel like we need to be on high alert.

“Danger is approaching,” I whisper.

“We need to move,” Asher notes but looks over to Blair, Azrael, and Kali. “One of them has to wake up before we move. Can’t be imbalanced like this.”

He’s right.

“I’m attempting to use shadow magic, but it didn’t work.”

“What?” Asher frowns and lifts his hands up. They wiggle and outstretch as if waiting for a reaction, but nothing happens. “Well... great. This would have been a good time to recall that spell we learned from Professor D’Angelo about voiding magic nullification atmospheres.”

“And why don’t you know it?” I ask because I wasn’t in the class. Nor were we taught something as unique as that in my other classes.

“I don’t like Professor D’Angelo.” Asher gets to the point before he gently strokes Guinevere’s cheek. “Fucker is a fake ass who does anything that benefits him and not anyone else. He especially doesn’t care about the students. I skipped his class as many times as allowed. He only taught that spell

because he intentionally noted it when I came the next day to class after skipping for weeks.”

“A lot of people don’t like Professor D’Angelo,” I note.

“Good reason. Selfish prick.”

I’m going to ask more, but my entire body shivers with a jolt. *That’s not good.*

“What?”

“Something powerful is coming this way.”

“Great,” Asher sarcastically states in annoyance. “Ophelia? Can you hear me?”

I notice a slight stir in her head movement and a pinch of her aura flicker to life.

She’s waking up.

“Plan?” Even if Guinevere wakes up, we obviously can’t use magic.

“Nope.” Asher’s honesty has always either amused or annoyed me. “So let’s flip a coin and hope whatever side it lands on means we’ll survive this first trial?”

“First trial,” I mutter and sigh. *One out of three.* “Heads.”

Asher smirks and leans down until his lips lightly brush Guinevere’s.

Her aura doesn’t spike.

For a mere second, it blazes with restlessness.

“Tails.”

Time to flip that coin of life and death.



LESSON TWO OF N.M.U. — PATIENCE
CAN BE A BLESSING OR A CURSE

“Sweet Cruella?”

The hint of fear in Asher’s voice encourages me to wake up a lot faster. It’s harder than I’d like to admit, especially with how sluggish my mind feels in comparison to my body, which is tingling with caution.

Danger. Danger. Danger.

I know something threatening is coming our way, so I need to get up and surveil our surroundings, but this clouded fog of exhaustion is nagging at me.

Trying to pull me back into the inviting darkness.

Too bad I’m a stubborn bitch.

With a bit of persistence, I manage to open my eyes. The blurry vision of two people peering down at me has my eyes squinting to see who’s with Asher.

“You’re cheating on me, aren’t you?” I croak to who I only assume is Asher because of his blond hair.

The poor man looks confused as he looks at the other man in his company. It takes me an added minute, but I realize it’s Hades.

“Ophelia?” Asher sounds concerned about my sanity. “I’m not cheating on you.”

“Hmmm.” I need a moment. “Yeah... you wouldn’t cheat on me with another girl. My pussy is too good.”

Hades is coughing while Asher is chuckling.

“If we weren’t on the verge of potentially dying, Sweet Cruella, I’d happily remind you that your pussy is all I’d eat.”

“Tempting,” I croak. “Man, I feel like shit...”

“Nice welcome gift to Nephilim,” Asher notes and leans down to kiss me firmly on my lips. “We need your quick wits, Ophelia. Only three of us are awake, and danger is approaching.”

“Feels that way,” I mumble against his lips before giving him a light kiss. “When we’re done with this shit, can we fuck in the alleyway again?”

“Anything for you, Sweet Cruella,” Asher approves with a small smile.

“Madly in love,” Hades groans. “Disgusting.”

“You can join,” I offer as Asher slowly helps me sit up.

“Did you hit your head, Guinevere?” Hades ponders.

“Probably, but I doubt that would have anything to do with my invitation for you to join us in a threesome, Hades.”

His speechlessness makes my grin silly before I use my right hand to move the loose strands of my hair out of my face.

“Where did my hair tie go?”

“Not sure,” Asher admits. “You look hot, though.”

“All these compliments before our demise are making me more tempted to say fuck it and ride you, Asher,” I complain.

“Guinevere, question,” Hades states.

“Hmm?”

“Left hand or right hand?”

“Right,” I say and pinch my nose. “Twin sis is a leftie, though. Don’t get why, but I guess we have to have some differences, or how else would our parents tell us apart?” I hum as I look over at my red-eyed teammate.

My hand moves to my lips until my index finger is up and my other fingers lower, giving me the chance to make my hushed expression. The moment my index finger presses on my lips, I let my eyes darken and my magic flicker along the fingertip, igniting a single flame of fire that illuminates my face.

“Don’t tell anyone else, though. It’ll be a pain in my arse if she ever decides to come back and take her spot at N.M.U.,” I vow with a tiny smile before I look past Hades. “Now be a good demigod of the Underworld and duck for me.”

Those red eyes widen in realization before he ducks right on time—a stream of fire igniting outward the moment I let out a lengthy exhale.

The agonizing scream that comes from the creature in our midst is loud enough to shake the ground beneath us. My eyes widen to their full capacity and still can’t take in the ginormous creature that’s lit with flames.

Asher has me in his hands before I can think, but he’s not scooping me up in some princess style in hopes of running away.

He helps me stand up so I can widen my stance and outstretch my arms.

“HELLVE DE LASHA RA VUK!”

The spell leaves my lips before I can think, igniting flames of burning scrutiny to engulf the creature that is so damn massive, its head can mimic the sight of a mountain.

“Ophira!” I’m well aware the golden serpent is not only around us but is tightening our circle of protection. By the time her golden scale body is pressing against my legs, I know we’re in the perfect space to strengthen the protective barrier around us.

“We’re missing Kali,” Asher warns as he’s working on laying Blair along his feet while Hades has Azrael in his grasp.

“Poison King is chilling in Ophira’s mouth,” I announce as if it’s no big deal.

“Guinevere,” Hades says my name in a ‘really?’ tone that has me side-glancing his way.

“What? Just because I approved of his company doesn’t mean I have to save him in a nice manner. Besides, he said he wouldn’t get in the way.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side,” he calmly notes but is intrigued by my hands. “How are you using magic?”

“What do you mean?” I frown at him.

“Neither of us can use our magic,” Asher brings up, looking just as intrigued as Hades at my display of flaming destruction.

“Why not?” I don’t get it.

“There are no shadows to manipulate into other elemental forces,” Hades reveals.

It clicks.

“Ah,” I exaggerate the word and look between them. “You two good at keeping secrets?”

They share a look.

“You know I have no one else to tell,” Asher declares.

“Since Hades is here, yeah?” I counter and witness the hint of red that forms in his cheeks. “Alright, I won’t tease you.”

“Does this have to do with your gift?” Hades ponders.

“Maybe,” I draw out the word, then offer Asher my hand. “Hold me for a second, Silly Dalmatian.”

My man never loses out on a chance to have physical touch. He places his hand in mine and moves around me until he’s pressing me from behind and kissing my neck.

“What does my Sweet Cruella want from her Dalmatian, hmm?”

I giggle because he’s so fucking unserious right now with his flirtatious antics.

“You know we can die any second if Ophira’s protective bubble fails, right?” I remind him.

“And I’d die happy, embracing the woman I love.”

“Cringe-worthy,” I groan, but I look back at Hades. “This isn’t the gift given to us during our enrollment,” I clarify. “This is just me being a Guinevere.”

“GRAWR!”

We're forced to look up and ahead of us, the massive creature now towering over our tiny bubble in comparison. It opens its mouth, thousands of teeth glimmering in the moonlight.

It's sickening to look at, especially when we can see visible limbs and bodies in between its sharp teeth.

Student bodies... including some who are wearing the N.M.U. uniform.

"Stand behind Asher, Hades," I order without pulling my eyes away from the creature in question. It reminds me of a worm, but its maggot-like skin is made out of dripping liquid that is similar to slime. Its flesh is rotting, which overpowers the previous aroma of roses, but that's exactly what I need to take advantage of.

"Babe," Asher quietly whispers with a slight tremble in his voice. "That shit is about to kill us."

"You're right," I agree. "Now, be patient for me."

Patience is what's about to give us a moment of saving grace.

I let Asher's hand slip from mine, prompting me to clap my hands together. The sound echoes around us, making a sonic pulse wave that moves outward, but it's far too tiny to poke this fae creature.

"Guinevere." Now Hades' voice is trembling as the massive worm is preparing to attack.

"Patience," I drawl out the word before I finally sense an audience.

Five... four...

“GRAWRRRRRR!” Waves of water and slime begin to bleed off the creature’s flesh, rapidly spinning around its frame, as if in preparation for launching a destructive water tornado.

I can’t stop myself from smirking.

“Ophelia!” Hades shouts my name over the loud chaos, but I ignore him because my countdown is officially up.

One.

“Watch and learn, boys,” I purr as my body grows scorching hot. I feel Asher’s hands grip the sides of my waist. It’s the perfect surging boost I need as I clap my hands together.

The next shockwave is quadruple the size as it whiplashes forward to our menacing target that’s seconds from releasing its wrath our way.

“Boom.” The words ignite the surge of internal energy that gushes out in electric shockwaves of blue and green. Then the final bolt of lightning strikes the creature right in the center with the most unique shade of dark lavender I’ve ever seen.

“RAAWREEEEEEE!” The screech of pain pops my eardrums, but I can do nothing but unleash my aura of magic to boost the spell that’s coming to life before our eyes.

Multiple lightning bolts and shockwaves surround and torture the creature with not a hint of mercy. Intense winds flicker around us, the barrier around us struggling to hold its protective walls, but I’m fully immersed in watching this creature’s downfall, even as my eyes water and burn with magic.

I don’t stop until the fae creature releases its final outcry, its body wavering from side to side until it falls back and hits

the ground. The tremor of its demise continues to make the ground quake beneath us, but I know, without a doubt, that creature is dead.

“Shit...” Hades whispers.

I feel him on my left and notice how he reaches out and gently wraps his hand around my left wrist. I don't realize I'm injured there until he touches it, but something forces me to stare forward despite our obvious victory.

To watch the cloud of smoke continue to rise.

Until something is about to strike us.

“GUINE—” Hades can't finish calling my name, just as he can't move fast enough to try to prevent the black trident of shadows from piercing the protective bubble and being a second from piercing my chest.

A shame that I'm a hell of a lot faster.

My right hand not only stops the trident that's an inch from piercing my chest, but I get to enjoy the venomous sight of our enemy.

The sickening eyes of green that seething glare back at me.

“Nephilim is the perfect hiding spot for Notorious Worms. They sound more like a weak gang if you ask me, but don't let their name deceive you into thinking they're weak,” I announce. “Their true forms are hidden within the depths of their worm-like shells. It's not until you kill their hidden hosts do they come out and show their shadowed forms. They like acting like mermen with tridents because it makes them feel mighty outside of their underwater nests, but frankly, I feel as though you guys are just trying to mimic Zeus.”

“LARSHHHH!” It hisses in offense.

Smiling, I tilt my head to one side while my hand shakes uncontrollably at how I'm holding this fae creature's entire body, which is eight feet in height.

"Surprised a student can hold you off?" I offer. "I know... I'm a lot stronger than I look."

The Notorious Worm's eyes begin to widen just as darkness begins to ooze off my flesh.

Hades' shadow magic.

"It's not fair to mark your territory, so anyone who falls prey to the invisible threads is unable to use their magic," I lecture the creature with a hint of annoyance. "Doesn't make the fight even. Don't you think?"

"Lar? Lark Larsha!" It's trying to understand what's happening and even attempts to escape as it fights to pull its trident, but it can't get out of my tightened grip.

"Oh, no?" I try to act innocent and concerned for its panicked attempts to try to escape. Or even put some distance between us. "Did you think I wasn't going to finish what I started?"

"L-L-Larshaaaaa!!" It's scared now. *As it should be.*
"Lark!"

"Want a taste of the Underworld?" Hades gasps as the shadows leaking off my flesh quickly dart upward until they mimic a set of dragon wings. The shape is but an outline of shadows, but it quickly morphs into multiple tridents that are all pointed at our culprit.

The creature doesn't know where to look as it trembles in fear before it has no choice but to stare directly into my eyes.

Pleading for mercy.

“This is why you don’t play with a Guinevere,” I vow in sheer delight, ready to execute the three streams of power I’m drawing from—absorbing their essence, copying their traits, and using it against our enemy.

“L-La...” The creature looks hopelessly back at me. “LAWWAAAAAAAAAAA.”

Its cries make me smirk as I let loose of the trident entourage that’s ready to pierce the creature into the afterlife.

But I freeze them at the last second.

“What the...” Asher comments.

“Guinevere?” Hades questioned my stalled movement.

“You know, when a fae creature is crying, I thought your motherly instinct would kick in or something.”

With a blink, there’s the culprit that forms between us and the crying Notorious Worm. Poor thing is still trying to let go of the trident, but I’m not letting him.

“A shame I’m not a mother,” I remind Professor North, who’s observing me extra carefully with his narrowed eyes. “Unless you want to make me one.”

“Sweet Cruella,” Asher groans. “Can he not, please?”

“Wait... is she into Professor North?” Hades inquires with an intrigued voice.

“Why does your tone tell me that’s something you’re witnessing from the future?” Asher whines.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’m not the type to second guess what I see, but my magic is still flowing into Guinevere, so that could be the culprit.”

“Interesting gift,” Professor North mutters.

“Didn’t answer my previous question, Professor,” I whine and give him a smile. “But I can ask again after the trials are over.”

“Are you going to stop?” Professor North questions.

“Stop what?” I’m trying to act innocent.

Even if I’m guilty as fuck.

“You won’t let Lark go,” Professor North notes.

“He’s my enemy,” I acknowledge the obvious as I narrow my eyes. “Why should I? Isn’t the lesson about survival?”

“Was,” he grumbles. “We’re on Lesson Two... patience.”

“Patience would get me killed, Professor.”

“You were patient before Lark attacked you,” he points out with those darkened eyes that are focused on my curled lips.

This closeness and intense brewing of our magic essences make me want to ditch this place and find a quiet corner to kiss him for hours.

Would be a lot more fun than this madness we’ve experienced to survive.

“That was the lesson,” I voice. “Notorious Worms only show their true colors when they’re seconds from eating you up. They’re the most patient fae creatures in the forests. All I did was follow their methods of survival,” I counter.

“Ophelia,” Professor North mutters. “Release him.”

“No.”

“I don’t get what’s happening,” Asher admits to Hades.

“Me, neither,” he admits, only to realize something. “Uh... I can’t move my hand from Guinevere’s wrist.”

“Oh? Shit... I can't move both my hands. Ophelia babe? You good or on a trip to Nephilim Domination?”

“You're not in the slightest bit worried about suggesting that?” Professor North remarks as he glares past me to acknowledge Asher.

“Worried? Do you know how hot it would be to watch Ophelia dominate an entire fae realm? By her side, no less?” Asher sounds like he has hearty eyes and is gleaming over the imaginative thought. “It would be hot as fuck. Bonus if she takes over the realm, and we get to have thrilling sex after.”

“That's not something you tell your professor, Asher,” Hades complains.

“I thought you said he's joining the list here,” Asher suggests.

“You have no shame, huh?” Hades concludes.

“Shame? I have competition because my Sweet Cruella is capturing men like fucking shadow monsters. I don't think we'll reach the end of the arc before she has a harem of men ready to serve her like the queen she is.”

“And that doesn't bother me.”

“It bothers me if any of the harem members are douches,” Asher announces. “Which I'm not yet sure about when it comes to Professor North. He's not an open book at all.”

“True.”

“Can you two shut it for a moment?” Professor North grumbles before he snaps his fingers.

Whatever that does seems to freeze time and space because everything grows stoic.

Except for me and him.

“You can stop time,” I hum in excitement. “Excellent skill to have.”

“Don’t copy it,” he orders with a point of his finger in my line of vision. “What’s your bargain?”

“I never offered a bargain.”

“You’re waiting to offer one, which is why you deliberately put on a show, knowing Daemon and I were watching and grading you. But pulling all those stops and showing a glimpse of how catastrophic your magic can be at your first trial is going to get you killed fast here, *Ophelia*.”

“Hmmm. Having you say my name like that, though, is worth showing off, don’t you think?” I whisper. “Who can see us in this frozen space?”

“As of now, no one,” he admits.

“Not even Professor Blackbird?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Then I want two things,” I declare and quietly whisper. “Kiss me, Professor North.”

His Adam’s apple moves up and down from its place at his throat. One lingering gaze between us is enough to make him curse under his breath and seal my lips to his.

Kissing your teacher in the midst of your first exam is probably punishable by suspension, but why do I get all risky when this man is anywhere close to me?

Can I blame the Notorious Worm for hyping me up?

I wish the kiss was longer, but it’s done before it truly began, leaving us searching the other’s eyes for a form of

understanding as to why we're like this.

What is this magnetizing energy between us that makes me want to never leave his side again?

“What else do you want?” he decides to inquire. “Be quick. I can't hold this much longer.”

“I want the worm.”

His scowling expression is back as he stares at me with obvious judgment.

“Should I ask why?”

“No.” I don't need to give him an explanation. *Then again, he could be doing me a favor.* “But to sum it up, I've been here before. This same space. Only it was when I was six and that Notorious Worm was but a baby. Despite it being tinier, it didn't eat me when I was obvious prey. It waited for me to recover and be on my way, but I'd summoned a trident to be my weapon of choice,” I announce.

“A trident...” he whispers.

“Notorious Worms have a different form of mimicry magic that allows them to copy something that helps them protect their hidden shadow forms. Baby worms can interchange between their shells and their shadow bodies, so I witness it shift and make a trident like mine. I told it I'd come back one day, so to make something that it'll remember me from.”

I nudge my head to my right, forcing Professor North to follow my gaze and confirm the surviving roses that weren't completely destroyed by the battle that unfolded here.

Thanks to my spell work, of course.

“You're saying this creature is the one you met over ten years ago and made its nest decorated in roses to remind them

of you?”

“Mhmm.”

He looks unconvinced before he mutters, “That’s why it was calling you Mommy.”

My smile grows.

“Headmaster Atlas may not let you keep another pet, Miss Guinevere,” he resorts to being more professional.

“Can’t you go back to professionalism when time is moving again?” I offer.

“How frantic is your mind pulling three different streams of magic at once?” he counters.

“Like a sea of delusional catastrophe,” I note with a smirk as I whisper, “And it’s four.”

“I knew you’d do that,” he grunts and has my chin in his grasp. ***“Don’t mimic my magic, Gilded Viper.”***

“Or what?” I combat him, our lips brushing. “You’ll come to my dorm room and fuck me senseless.”

“You know that’s against the rules.

“Rules are meant to be broken, Orpheus.”

I can’t believe I’m taunting my professor after kissing him and am drawing out frozen time until he gives me what I want.

I love when people underestimate how dangerous I can be.

“Fine.”

I’m surprised by his easy admission.

“What?”

“Fine,” he affirms.

“Just not this Friday,” I counter. “That’s mine and Sweet Dalmatian’s time.”

My poor professor is going to lose his mind when it comes to me.

“You won’t show any more powerful spells for the duration of this trial,” he insists.

“Because?” I’m curious—*as usual*. “Protecting me from something?” I lean in so I can speak against his lips. “Or someone?”

“You don’t fully grasp the lengths fae will go to have you on their side of this brewing war.” He kisses me before I can try to combat him, the two of us moaning at the sizzling spark of power that pulses between us.

I almost slip up on using his own powers to keep time still, but he seems to rein in control as he releases my swollen lips, which tingle with numbness.

“I’ll pull some strings,” he finally summarizes. “No more showing off.”

“Don’t lie that you don’t love watching me slay,” I grumble, only to see his slight smirk.

“Am I the one eating popcorn?” he counters.

“No,” I grumble. “You do have a boner, though...”

He doesn’t look down to confirm my obvious observation.

“Eyes on what you want, Miss Guinevere.”

“That’s hard when everything surrounding me should be mine for the taking,” I whisper back and narrow my eyes on him. “Though I do have my eyes exactly where they’re meant to be.”

He bites his bottom lip.

“Eyes on what you want, Professor North,” I whisper and let go of any strands of his magic that kept time at bay. He’s already letting those threads slip away from his end, bringing us back to ticking reality. Despite the seconds clicking and the tension in the atmosphere spiking, his eyes never leave mine.

“My eyes have always been on what I want, Ophelia.”

The sound of that velvety deep voice within the hollows of my mind is shiver-inducing deliciousness, but we’re back and being watched by whoever the real observer of these trials are.

Guess I should play my part.

“I’m too tired for this,” I announce, and suddenly, Asher, Hades, Professor North, and the Notorious Worm are falling back with the release of my hold.

“Ow,” Asher groans. “Sweet Cruella. I’m too precious for rough handling.”

I look over at him while catching my breath.

“Precious my...” I trail off because I’m seeing two Ashers.

Or three.

“Fuck. Catch her,” Hades prompts as my body leans forward. I knew I was ready to play along, but allowing the wave of exhaustion to take over my body was a stupid mistake.

Arms catch me in seconds, and I’m wrapped in the comforting warmth of Professor North’s arms. His cologne taunts my nostrils, just like his magic, which feels as if it’s a blanket along my flesh.

“Shit, Ophelia,” Asher’s worried voice comes from my right.

“She’s okay,” Professor North admits. “What you three pulled off back there was impressive.”

“What us three...” Asher trails off.

“Well, this was about us surviving,” Hades comments. “That’s exactly what we did,” he stresses. “Only we should get bonus points for making it seem like Guinevere was doing all the work.”

The clap of hands draws my curiosity, but I’m trying to catch my breath while waiting for the world to stop spinning.

“That’s the most unique way of teamwork I’ve ever witnessed!” Professor Blackbird announces.

Why can I imagine him just floating in the air or something?

“Are you eating popcorn?” Hades sounds disappointed.

“I get hungry easily. Besides, it’s a good food to chew on when watching death and misery unfold before your eyes. Easier on the stomach, surprisingly enough,” he announces. “Guess I should deliver one of those bonuses on Miss Guinevere’s behalf.”

The sound of fingers snapping invites a wave of warmth that rushes through me from my head to my toes. Within seconds, my eyes are snapping open, and I’m able to sit up with ease.

“What the...” I begin and notice the others who were once unconscious are waking up.

“Huh?” Blair lifts her head, her blonde hair more like a bird’s nest of frenzy madness. “Where...wait. Are we in

Nephilim?”

“Why does it feel like I was asleep for a week?” Azrael ponders.

“You woke them up?” Hades questions before he reaches out for my left hand and inspects my wrist. “No, wait. You healed us.”

“Healed us?” I question and notice the injury I had on my wrist is gone. “Wait. He did.”

“Where’s Kali?” Blair inquires as she looks at our circle of people. “And what is that creature?”

“Larshae!” The Notorious Worm raises its trident at Blair, making her shriek, but golden scales quickly wrap around the shadowed creature and stop it from attacking.

“Ophira?” Azrael questions as we all look up to acknowledge the serpent in her bigger form. She opens her mouth and gags. A flow of acid-like liquid comes out before a soaked Kali falls out and drops to the ground.

“Hot!” he screams the moment he lands on the ground with an ‘oomph.’ “Hot! Ah!” He’s running in circles as if he’s on fire.

“Hold on!” Blair instructs and manages to get up to chase after the running-in-circles teammate. She ends up having to tackle him to get him to stop, but he’s fighting her to get his clothes off, which are burning from the acid.

I don’t know why all eyes fall on me, but even Professor North and Professor Blackbird are looking for an answer to this predicament.

“Honestly, in the beginning, it made valid sense to hide him in the depths of Ophira’s stomach,” I voice honestly. “He

can survive poison, and most venoms are acidic and poisonous, so he'll be just fine," I whine. "Just didn't think about the clothes part, but what's wrong with a guy being naked versus dead?"

"That's the problem, Darling Nightmare," Professor Blackbird admits with a slight smirk. "You observed wrong."

"I'm never wron..." I trail off because when I'm looking back at Kali, I realize the only thing that's survived the burning plague of his clothes are two pieces.

Oh...

Wait...

FUCK!

My jaw drops before I move my hands in both directions to cover Asher's and Hades' eyes. Azrael takes his own hands and covers his face, but Blair is completely enraptured by the sight of Kali beneath her.

"K-K-Kali? You're a GIRL?!"

That's the only thing that can explain her small breasts, which are wrapped with black bandages to keep them as flat as possible, and a pair of feminine boy shorts.

"Just announce it to all of Nephilim at this point, Blair," Kali grumbles. "And I was. Can't afford transition therapy, though. That's for rich fae and shit."

"Ah. Oh...Um..." Blair doesn't know what to say as she looks horrified. "O.M.G. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scream. Oh. What to do?! You need clothes! Um..." Blair looks like she'll have a full panic attack if this continues.

I can't help but have pity for her... *and Kali.*

“Professor Blackbird,” I begin and give him a look.

Please?

His smile is a genuine one as he claps his hands once. The gesture ignites a shift in all of our clothes, leaving us in a new set of uniforms that include red capes that shift to black.

“You’ve successfully survived your first trial and will regroup with the surviving groups of students,” he announces and looks over to the Notorious Worm. “Larkin, we gotta make you look less menacing, though, if you want to stick with Miss Guinevere.”

“LARSHA!” It cheers and begins to hop from one leg to another like a frog dancing with its trident in tow.

“You all have ten minutes to get sorted,” Professor Blackbird announces. “Then we’ll move to the next lesson.”

“Which is?” I want to know, just like my fellow teammates.

“Lesson number three,” Professor Blackbird begins and turns around. “Don’t trust the wicked.”

Why do I feel like we opened a can of worms?



LESSON THREE OF N.M.U. — DON'T
TRUST THE WICKED

“**I**t’s like he’s doing an offering dance.”

I try not to smile as Larkin, my new Nephilim Notorious Worm pet, is dancing around me, singing some sort of chant. Now that he’s wearing a miniature boy uniform, he doesn’t look as menacing.

Maybe that’s because I’m fine with shadowed monsters with menacing eyes that replicate the swirling movement of a black hole.

He’s currently 4’5” in height, though Professor Blackbird mentioned he can grow big or small depending on how he feels. When he’s not summoning the shadows that cloak every bit of his flesh, he looks more like a bandaged doll, similar to a mummy, but with black bandages.

His hair is long, which is why Blair and I helped braid it real quick as we took a ten-minute breather. I’m not sure if that was “allowed” in the trial curriculum, but it seems Professor North and Professor Blackbird aren’t in a rush to move just yet.

Something to do with Lesson Two revolving around patience.

“Lar Lar Larshae! Lar Lar Larshae!” Larkin stops right in front of me and raises his hands. Then he lowers them and stares at me in wait, which makes me pout and turn my head to one side.

“He wants me to do something,” I note.

Truthfully, I’m going by instinct here because even though I confronted this specific Notorious Worm fourteen years ago, I never could learn how to communicate with their breed.

It’s actually one of the hardest languages in the Nephilim language dialect dictionary to learn, but the majority assume the chances of interacting with a Notorious Worm long enough to interact with them is less than 0.005%.

Here we are, defeating the odds.

“He wants you to offer your dominant hand,” Kali announces, drawing my attention to him.

He was still carrying a scowl, especially after the whole grand “reveal,” but we all agreed that we’d respect his pronouns, even if it was something none of us were used to yet.

The world of magic was rather “slow” in that department, but at N.M.U., everyone’s pronouns were respected and officially documented, so slip-ups wouldn’t happen.

“You understand him, Kali?” Blair inquires.

“A little,” he admits with a huff. “Tried learning their language, but it’s fucking hard, and they say the percentage of one ever needing to communicate with one is 0.005%.”

So, my research is still accurate.

“Here you go,” I offer my hand.

Only to watch him stab me.

“Oh, shit!” Kali and Blair curse in unison as the commotion gets the attention of Asher, Hades, Azrael, Professor North, and Professor Blackbird.

“Fuck, did he just stab you?” Asher is in protective mode, but Hades and Azrael stop him.

“Hold on,” Professor North calmly states as Professor Blackbird walks over to us.

I’m fascinated at the pierced trident in question because not only is it glowing an ivory green, but it’s making me feel weird from the inside out.

“Um...” I nervously begin just as Professor Blackbird crouches next to me. “Am I dying?”

“No,” Professor Blackbird chuckles and places a hand along my back.

I shiver at the touch, feeling the protective warmth of his magic that helped heal all of us earlier. That shouldn’t contribute to why I still feel some sort of magical pull with him—maybe to a lesser degree than Professor North—but I’ll have to do my own research as to why that is.

When we’re not going through various trials.

“He’s laying an imprint on you,” Professor Blackbird reveals. “Most fae need to have some sort of connection with you to mark you as ‘one of their own.’ For Notorious Worms, it’s extremely rare for them to lay imprints on creatures outside of their hierarchy of fae. They’ve only done it for a few individuals who show great promise in their destiny and in certain fae beings destined to become royals. They never imprint on someone who’s already fulfilled their purpose or crowned royalty, which is why many courts in Nephilim or

kingdoms in Malevolence will send children and young teens into these forests in hopes they'll bond with one."

"Wh-What?" Blair stutters. "They send their children into this type of forest to face the creature whose width and length can measure the main castle of N.M.U.?"

"Faes deem it as a test," Kali explains. "If a fae child can face and survive a Notorious Worm attack, they're deemed impeccable of being raised into warriors, regardless of gender. Even the most elegant fae, who look like they'll never walk upon a battlefield, are raised with the same principles."

"And if they get injured or die?" Azrael inquires.

"Then they're better off dead," Kali states with a shrug. "Fae are ruthless. We all know that. If their offspring can't survive the hardships in these forest depths, then they're a disgrace. They would be mocked if they came back empty-handed."

"So, you're saying if they don't imprint with the Notorious Worm, that's it?" I'm trying to understand this properly. "How is it something rare when every fae is expected to do this as a child?"

I flinch when Larkin pulls his trident out, his ritual now complete. The wounds left in place bleed only for a few seconds as I watched the flesh begin to close until it was as if I had never been stabbed.

"What the..." I trail off and inspect my hand to confirm it's completely healed.

"They either come back with the shell of the Notorious Worm, which can be used to create various armor that is given first dibs to the child's family who slayed the creature, or they return with the imprinted Notorious Worm, like you claiming

Larkin as a pet,” Kali explains. “That’s why everyone wishes to imprint with them.”

“Why?” Asher questions with a pout.

“Regeneration properties,” Professor North announces. We look at him with his arms crossed and a stern look glued on me. “Notorious Worms have extremely fast regeneration magic. It’s written in their DNA and executed whenever they shed their shell skin. It’s why they’re able to grow new skin and allow it to grow and envelop them like a wrapped blanket. They then blend with their environment and hibernate to grow new layers and let their instinctive predator side take control in keeping the body alive with ‘food.’”

“So…” Hades is staring at me, then Larkin. “Isn’t he going to hibernate and eat whatever is near him to survive?”

All eyes are on me.

My eyes dart between Professor North and Professor Blackbird. I’m sure one of them has an answer, but neither of them says anything, making the silence that follows feel like an approaching plague is ablaze.

“Well, it was nice knowing you all,” I declare casually. “My sister can take my place when she hears about my death and comes back from wherever she is to avenge me.”

“You believe your sister would come to avenge you?” Azrael inquires.

“If she didn’t, my ghost would haunt her,” I scoff, making him smirk.

“That confident?”

“Very confident,” I vow.

“Larkin won’t eat you,” Kali announces. “The stab of the trident draws blood, which mixes with his magic and turns into a perfume that proliferates throughout their surroundings, which normally is their nest. By doing that, it leaves a scent upon its master’s body that’s permanent. Anyone within that radius is also deemed safe, so the Notorious Worm wouldn’t feast on its host or anyone carrying the unique scent. It also protects them from future Notorious Worms or any creature within that family tree of fae creatures.”

“What about family, then?” Azrael questions.

“Notorious Worms would never eat another who shares the bloodline of its master. Meaning the family and relatives are safe. The only time that would void if the worm was starved to the point it overrides the imprint due to the master’s neglect and sets out to eat the master as a form of revenge.”

I’m not the only one who cringes.

“Did you study them in particular on purpose?” Blair asks.

“No,” Kali huffs. “I was forced to partake in it as a child.”

None of us say a word as Kali rises from his crossed-legged position.

“By the way, Notorious Worms are always male. Just like how Notorious Caterpillars are always female and are usually in Malevolence,” he declares. “Can we go now?”

“Waiting on Larkin to be done,” Professor Blackbird notes and looks at the creature, who stopped dancing and is snuggled up against Ophira’s medium-sized body.

I didn’t even notice she’d grown in size to accommodate Larkin.

“Seeing as I doubt Larkin will wake up during the remainder of the trials, we’ll teleport him to your room in N.M.U,” the professor announces. “You’ll have the necessities to take care of him, and we will incorporate lessons on training your Notorious Worm into your private curriculum, Miss Guinevere.”

“Appreciated,” I whisper and look at my hand again.

“What about that massive skin?” Hade brings it to our attention. “If you’re saying other fae bring it with them and create armor, wouldn’t Guinevere be offered the same privilege? Despite not being a fae blood, it’s technically her right, yes?”

He may have a point, but one look at the gigantic shell makes me feel like an ant in comparison.

“I don’t think I can drag that back to N.M.U.,” I earnestly admit.

“I’ll handle that,” Professor Blackbird assures me with a rub on my back. I’m not sure he realizes he’s doing it, but the motion brings a bit of comfort. “None of you will need armor until you begin *Combat and Survival Roulette* in Arc Two, but as Hades mentioned, you did earn the shell in a team effort. So, if all of you survive until that time comes, you’ll be rewarded with such armor, which I’m confident no one else will be blessed with unless your peers go on a Notorious Worm hunt, survive, and can carry a one-hundred-ton shell.”

“Where is everyone?” I’ve been wondering why we’re the only ones left here.

“Are they dead?” Kali questions, looking as though he doesn’t care.

“Every team of students was teleported to spots that were deemed equivalent to the group dynamics’ strength. You can divide into tiers if you will,” Professor North explains. “So, the majority of your peers should be at the edge of the beach.”

“What tier is that?” Blair asks.

“Hmmm.” Professor Blackbird takes a moment to think about it as he stands and offers me his hand. I don’t hesitate to take it, his help much appreciated. “Level One. I don’t think that area is too difficult to overcome. As long as you avoid the water, the majority of the students should be alive.”

“Then what level is this?” Kali questions.

“Highest tier,” Professor North announces and briefly stares in my direction. “Or based on our example, Level Three.”

“Damn...” Azrael whispers and looks disappointed. “And I was unconscious the majority of it.” He turns his attention to me, then Hades and Asher. “Sorry, guys.”

“Me, too,” Blair speaks up as she stands. “It felt as if I was a sinking void. I tried to get out of it multiple times, but it was so damn hard.”

“Hmph,” Kali grumbles with a sour look. “More like a sinking space of darkness that never wants to let you go.”

“That’s the point,” Professor Blackbird reveals. “We wanted you all to realize how dangerous the element you all have the ability to use and manipulate in your favor really is.”

“What do you mean?” Azrael asks for elaboration.

“Why do you think the element of Darkness is normally deemed ‘evil?’” Professor North counters.

“Because it’s dark?” Azrael offers.

“Cold and Heartless?” Kali mutters.

“Destructive?” Blair offers with a pout of her pink lips.

“I don’t think Darkness is any of those,” I voice, gauging their attention. “I mean, any element can be tainted. Can create a world of chilled misery and heartlessness. Even fire, as scorching as it is, once it’s done burning everything in its path, it leaves what’s left behind with nothing but frost. All because it takes away the very warmth it brought.” I catch the slight uplift of Professor North’s lips.

“Excellent analogy, Miss Guinevere,” he praises. “Every element carries the same qualities you consider evil when it involves the dark element. That proves that all the elements are on the same tier. The only difference is how we, the hosts who can use these elements for good or evil, use them.”

“Which is what these trials are going to teach you,” Professor Blackbird continues. “Darkness can ignite pain in anyone who threatens its boundaries, but it can also deliver a sense of comfort, closure, or immense bliss. It’s up to you, the host, to determine how this specific element can be a source of power or contribute to your demise.”

“That’s why N.M.U. foundation element is the shadows. Why we maintain the literature that centers around dark magic and philosophies. Why we embrace the gothic cultures and try to maintain a dimly lit environment indoors, despite the sunlight outdoors during day classes. We’re shifting your mindset to move away from the ideologies surrounding darkness being something ‘bad’ and embracing it into an energy that can be used for good... in your favor. Or, specifically, in the realms of fae, a form of protection,” Professor North summarizes. “Once you’re able to realize how

beneficial the shadows can be, you'll begin to understand fae are considered the strongest magical race.”

“Not because they are beings who can tap into the pool of infinite mana, like some of us gifted Vipers and Shadows, but because they are taught at birth what we will be teaching all of you throughout your time here in N.M.U.”

“At birth...” Kali whispered.

“The moment a fae is born, they are bathed either in the elemental pool of light or the elemental pool of shadows. The realm they're born in plays a significant role in that, but they are introduced to either element right there and then. A babe has no fear of anything at birth. The world is infinite, and the power they can grasp is endless. When you're born to believe you can unlock anything this world and the realms beyond have to offer, where is the weakness?” Professor Blackbird questions as he scans our group.

“If that's the case, why are there weak fae?” Kali demands. “Or Hybrids that can't reach those heights? It sounds all phony to me.”

“That's the problem,” Professor Blackbird replies and taps the side of his temple with his free hand, making me realize he's still holding my hand after helping me up. “If you, the host, are already limiting your idealizations of what you can achieve in this world, then you're the key aspect to stopping you from being great.”

“There are plenty of other factors involved,” Professor North notes as he cracks his neck. “But all those are insignificant if you've cut all the barriers stopping you from unlocking your true potential. No one is born to immediately become an Olympic athlete or to join the Wicked Trials. Gilded Mergers aren't simply born. They are bathed and raised

no differently from any other baby born into the world. However, the moment they accept their fate and their destinies entwined with their potential Shadow, they unlock their potentials by tapping into infinite power and being the power source for those who wholeheartedly accept and connect with them.”

“When you think about it, power is an exchange,” Professor Blackbird notes. “Whether that’s with the atmosphere that provides us with the essence needed to kindle magic into a physical element or between each other. Regardless, no matter what you tackle in life, it starts with you. Training your body to endure physical challenges demanded in this world of survival. Mental trials you’re put through that can leave emotional turmoil in its wake. Most importantly, it’s your soul that will enable you the sense of freedom needed to be limitless. The moment you’re able to tap into their realm of acceptance, you’ll be dining at the same seats of royal faes who many of us deem as gods and goddesses.”

He lightly squeezes my hand, as if to give me a sense of reassurance, before his chilled hand leaves mine.

“Now that we’ve given you that private lecture, shall we get back to your trials?”

“I have one more question,” Kali speaks up with a stern look. “Why are you giving us special treatment?” He moves his gaze from Professor North to me, then over to Professor Blackbird. “Is it because of Ophelia?”

“Yes,” Professor North and Professor Blackbird say in unison.

“You’re doomed, my friend,” Hades notes to Asher, who groans.

“Can you two wait until she graduates before making a move on my Sweet Cruella, or I’ll never stand a chance here!” He points to Azrael. “And you’re at the back of the line.”

“I didn’t even say anything,” Azrael complains.

“She likes you!” Asher huffs and narrows his eyes at his apparent competitor. “She doesn’t know it yet, but the moment she does, I’ll be pushed aside.”

“You know how stupid that sounds?” Hades offers with a side glance that screams, ‘I’m standing next to stupid.’

“I like Azrael?” I question and look at Blair, who shrugs.

“I mean, he’s not bad. Better than his brother.”

“Do you guys hear yourselves?” Kali looks disgusted.

“Hearing just fine,” Asher argues and looks at both professors. “Carry on.”

Professor Blackbird laughs before he stretches his arms and puts his hands behind his head.

“Students who are chosen to have special mentors get special privileges, especially during trials like these. Normally, neither of us would be hosting a trial, but the curriculum has changed this year to be more accommodating to students’ adaptability. Having so many professors, especially in your first arc, has proven to be detrimental. Therefore, we’re trying to have fewer professor switches,” he explains.

“Miss Guinevere has been assigned two mentors, proving to be a rarity, seeing as not many are assigned multiple mentors. Due to this unique opportunity, thanks to her performance during the entry trials, situations like these benefit her and the team she’s assigned to,” Professor North reveals. “We are still judging and grading all of you, but more

precision is placed on Miss Guinevere by default because it's our duty to ensure she excels at an approving pace."

An approving pace... maybe that's why he told me to stop showing off?

The reminder makes my lips tingle, encouraging me to lick my bottom lip.

I pretend not to notice Professor North's gaze while Professor Blackbird checks his time.

"Let's get you all back in the field," Professor Blackbird declares and claps his hands once.

Before any of us can grasp it, our surroundings have already shifted, the scent of roses now replaced with a metallic stench of death and irony.

"Fuck," Azrael curses and tries to cover his nose with his cloak. "That smell."

"Rotten bodies?" Kali questions as he looks around, only for his face to pale.

I can see why just by lowering my gaze to my feet.

Dead bodies don't just surround us.

No. We're standing on top of a tower of human remains.

I have to shut down my emotions, or else I'll vomit everything I ate for breakfast this morning. Kali is already vomiting whatever he had this morning.

Blair is hiding her devastation, just like Azrael, but Hades and Asher are blank canvases.

As if they've witnessed this far too many times.

We're not the only ones who've arrived at this destination. Whichever teams that survived from our class are present, but

we're beginning to realize there are even more students here we don't recognize.

“Congratulations on surviving the first part of today's class. You have gained your uniform and cloaks, and now it's time to claim your emblems.” We're forced to look above to see Professor D'Angelo, who's floating on a hawk creature.

A pillar of red surges into the sky farther ahead. Estimating the distance from where we are to the glowing pillar of red, it's as far as a 5K marathon. That's not too bad if you're a runner, but I doubt this next trial is going to be one of leisure where we can take two hours to get there.

“Your professor will be at the next site, awaiting the survivors. Your task is to get to the red pillar in a timely manner. How long is timely? You'll find out soon enough.”

I didn't carry an ounce of hope he'd share such vital information. Unlike Professor North and Professor Blackbird, Professor D'Angelo looks as though he enjoys seeing his students suffer in dismay.

As if sensing my thoughts, his eyes briefly lowered to me and my team.

“Remember what the prime lesson is for this stage. Don't trust the wicked.”

His words ignite the sound of a siren horn, making us all flinch at the sound that could easily make our ears bleed.

“Let's move,” Kali emphasizes, but I end up grabbing his arm before he tries to jump off the tower of bodies.

“Wait,” I urge. “We need to stay in twos.”

“Why?” Kali questions.

“It’s easy for us to get separated, especially when we get to that forest part. By moving in twos, we’re each a unit that has each other’s back. If one falls behind, their designated partner helps them out. It’ll also make battling and ambushes easier,” I explain. “The entry exam needed us to rely on partners, and despite the end of that challenge, our roommates were chosen based on our overall performance, so I think teamwork is important at N.M.U.”

“Ophelia has a point,” Asher agrees and looks at Hades.

“I’ll take Azrael,” Hades declares.

“Then I’m with Sweet Cruella,” Asher says without a miss of a beat.

“Kali?” Blair offers. “I’ll work hard to not get in your way.”

I notice the way Kali begins to blush.

“Wh-Whatever,” he grumbles but briefly looks my way. “Since I promised not to be a hindrance, I’ll go along with it.”

“Appreciated,” I declare and look at all of us. “Alright. Let’s move.”

We swiftly make our way through the field of dead bodies. It’s a challenge in itself, as I see many familiar faces from this morning’s class.

Two of Josh’s friends are among the dead, igniting an eerie heaviness in my heart. One would feel sorry for them, but I’m unsure if dying during N.M.U. trials is a better outcome than dying on the battlefield during a fae war.

It’s known that the dead don’t move on when they die on the battlefield in both Nephilim and Malevolence, which some

say is where the curse really lies because their souls are used during The Wild Hunt.

Summoned against their will and used to unleash their anger on those racing to survive the wrath until the Hour of Victory has shone golden light across the lands.

Running toward the red pillar is a lot easier than I originally expected, but I don't let my guard down as Asher keeps my pace.

"You okay, Ophelia?"

I slow down just a tad to acknowledge Asher's concerned expression.

"Yes." I try to smile. "Just a little winded. Been a while since I've done a 5k marathon with death potentially knocking at our door."

He smirks. "You get used to it," he assures me and reaches for my hand. Squeezing it gently, he glances over his shoulder to see if the others are keeping up.

I follow his movement, noticing Hades and Azrael aren't too far behind. They're winded as I am, but their pace is similarly timed to Asher's and mine, which makes things manageable, despite our lungs feeling as if they're on fire.

"Where's Blair and Kali?" I have to ask because I can't see them.

Like at all.

We haven't reached the forest section yet. This place is mostly black bushes with dead leaves and bodies.

Asher frowns and comes to a slow stop as I do.

Hades and Azrael notice our pause and look behind us to confirm they don't see our two comrades.

Asher and I run back to regroup with Azrael and Hades.

"Where are they?" Azrael questions the moment we reach them. "They were just behind us. Blair was humming so Kali wouldn't feel like he was dying with his short legs."

"We're the same height," I point out, trying to distract myself from my internal panic. I don't feel like there's danger nearing us, but not seeing either of them is a problem. "Let me run a bit back and see?"

"No." The three of them declare.

I roll my eyes.

"Just because I'm the only female doesn't mean I'm in danger of going to get them," I vouch and look at Asher when he opens his mouth to speak. "And don't tell me it's dangerous."

He closes his mouth, which prompts a smile on my lips.

"Only go a few yards," Hades urges.

"Can you see anything?" Azrael requests Hades. I'm assuming he means if he can see the future.

"I feel we're going to be victorious," he admits. "However, I can't tell what our final number will be."

If we all survive.

"Then let's not waste time," I urge and begin running back the way we came in hopes of finding our two team members.

"Don't go too far," Asher calls out, to which I lift my hand up to give a thumbs up.

I decide if I run a full football field and don't see them, I'll turn back, but as I begin to reach the final yards mapped in my mind, I smell burning flesh.

It's so intense, I'm forced to stop and catch my breath because it feels like I went from a cooled atmosphere to a burning oven.

"What the hell?" I whisper and try to look for where the flames are.

"Hisssss?"

I flinch at the noise in my ear, looking at my shoulder to see Ophira.

"What the... Ophira? When did you get on my shoulder?"

"Hisssss." She's not paying attention to me. She's outstretching her body as if there's something in front of me.

"What are you seeing that I'm not?" I ask as I watch her poke her nose in the air.

It hits something.

An invisible surface?

I watch the riptides move along the magical force, making my eyes widen as I get a glimpse of what's on the other side.

Screaming students banging desperately against the wall keeping them captive.

It's only a moment, but it's as vivid as ever.

What makes my heart go rapidly is the sight of Blair and Kali among the pounding students desperately trying to get out.

"Ophira! Do that again!"

She doesn't hesitate to follow my request, and this time, when she pokes against the invisible surface, it remains long enough for me to know exactly where Kali and Blair are.

"There!" I immediately jam my hands at the invisible force, but instead of trying to touch something without magic, I allow my aura to wrap around my fists, triggering a reaction that sends my arms right through.

The screams that reach my ears make my drums pop, but I'm focused on pulling Blair and Kali out as they grab my arms for dear life.

Others are desperate to get out, but I realize in order to get these two out, I need to further spread my aura so it wraps around their bodies, like outlined silhouettes. It's tricky to envision in a panic, but I grit my teeth and begin to pull with all my might.

"C'mon!" I hiss and further widen my stance in desperation, feeling as if time is ticking, and I don't have any more time to delay.

The splintering screams are getting louder as the desperation to survive pulsing through the masses of students seems to invite a heaviness of dread through me. I ignore it for the sake of staying focused, determined to at least get out those who are attached to our team.

"Please!" I plead with all my might as I use every bit of strength to pull them both, which may disjoint their arms, but at least those can be fixed.

Can't fix you when you're dead.

"OPHELIA!" Asher and the others are screaming my way.

I dare look back by lowering my head farther back to see them racing toward me. The sight of them gives me a boost of

energy because I push more magic into my arms and wrap my aura around them to further empower our connection.

Enough to release them from the clutches on the other side.

I shriek when we all fall to the ground, but I'm already up because I notice a hand reaching to grab Ophira.

“Oh no, you don't!” I shout and grab the hand before it can get a hold of Ophira, whose body is still connected to the wall.

I use my other hand to grab her and place her on my other shoulder, but when I try to pull away, the person holding me is so much stronger.

“AH!” I can't stop myself from going through the wall, my feet all but giving up with the pulled force that takes me off my feet.

Entering the scorching world leaves me completely shocked in my spot as the hand that pulled me with every bit of strength drops to the floor.

The rest of the individual's body is a pile of melting flesh.

The sea of students that were banging against the wall is all but a few sole survivors who watch in complete mayhem the aftermath of their demise. I can't tell if a sea of lava came in and melted their bodies, but it wouldn't explain how a few individuals scattered around survived.

Deep down, I feel that's all irrelevant now, for our next plague is approaching.

“We need to get out...”

I look over to my right to see the girl with purple hair with a lonely look in her gaze. This time around, she's absolutely petrified as she quivers in place.

“Death is coming. We can’t escape this one. We’ll drown.”

“Drown?” I whisper.

“No fucking way am I dying!”

I’m surprised to hear Azrael, but when I look over to my right, I confirm it isn’t him.

But his brother.

“Alaric?”

He’s surprised to see me, and I don’t like his expression at all. It’s not just a little crazed.

He looks like he’ll kill anyone in his way to survive.

“If it isn’t the Teacher’s Pet,” he gleams. “If you’re here, that may mean I’ll survive.”

“What do you mea—”

I jump at the crackling sound that comes from behind me, drawing the attention of all of us ‘survivors’ as the sight of Asher banging against the wall as it becomes visible.

I’m surprised to see the brewing rage in his eyes as he keeps banging at the wall to keep it from returning to its invisible properties.

“See?” Alaric chuckles manically. “You always seem to have someone in your corner ready to save you.”

“A shame I’m usually the one doing the saving,” I mutter back at him, hoping it reminds him of the fact I saved his ass during the entry trials.

I regret it now. I knew my instincts never lied to me.

“Get us out of here,” he demands.

“And how will I do that?” I groan and point at the wall. “My friends wouldn’t be trying to save me if I knew how to get out.”

“Death is near. Death is near.”

We have no choice but to peer over at the purple-haired girl. She’s not interested in my team’s attempt to try to collapse the wall.

No. She’s pointing to our next threat.

“Is that a... tsunami?” I whisper and try to fathom how that’s possible, but then again, a wave of lava had come here and melted the students who were fighting to escape.

You might as well throw a tsunami into the mix, right?

My reflexes kick in before I mentally process it. My hand catches Alaric’s, but my strength falls short as the man lifts me up and throws me against the wall, which electrifies me.

My scream is a sound I haven’t heard escape my lips in a very long time, but the pain pulsing through me is so overwhelming, I can’t wait for it to end.

“HISSSSS!”

“AH!” Alaric screeches in pain, and I’m dropped to the ground.

“Fuck,” I curse and am heaving for breath, my whole body quaking with a hint of shockwaves.

What in the Nephilim realms was that?

“You’re a fucking merger, aren’t you?” Alaric demands and proceeds to kick me. I swiftly curl into a ball to protect my vital organs. “C’mon battery bitch! GET ME OUT OF HERE! I won’t die like the rest of my team. I certainly won’t lose

against my shithole of a brother! I'm the Alpha male! The one my father is waiting for! Change my place with Azrael, you selfish bitch!"

The kick to my head makes me hiss with anger before I shoot my hand out and send a wave of shadows that has enough force to send Alaric off his feet and a few yards in the distance.

I quickly shuffle to my feet, but I can't stand how my body is trembling furiously.

"Shit," I curse and inspect my body, only to notice the trail of blood dripping from my nose. "Nosebleed. Not good."

Nosebleeds signify two things when it comes to little old me. Either I'm surging with so much foreign magic I've absorbed that I'm about to 'internally' explode, or the other rare weakness of mine is my 'brain injury' that never really healed and was kicked into activity.

Leaning toward the second problem.

What concerns me is that no one should know that.

That's on my health record, and I'm sure the school administration has to know, but why does Alaric know that I have a left-brain injury that triggers nosebleeds and seizures?

I lift my gaze to the man who is staring at me with murderous eyes.

The tsunami is not only close, but the wave it invites is so massive, it can only be compared to the end of the world movies where a flood is about to consume entire cities in one swoop.

Seeing Alaric stand there with his manic expression and grinning lips is the first time I've feared death. Not because I

don't feel as though I can survive the threats that are about to collide with me, but because I fear what my death would ignite in those I left behind.

What would happen to my sister?

Her image comes to my mind and how we never got to confront each other. I couldn't ask her why she decided that night to abandon me and set out on a path that didn't include me in the equation.

Truthfully, I regret not telling her how important she really was to me or expressing just how much I loved her. She may have been Mother's favorite, but sometimes, I felt like she was protecting me from something greater—deadlier—and I wouldn't get the privilege of finding out what that was until our paths crossed again.

“Hissss?”

I feel Ophira's body as she wraps around my neck, and I realize she may perish with me as our doom is imminently ahead.

“Ophira. You need to go. I'll... be fine.”

I won't be fine.

It's the first time I've been willing to lie to save another.

“Hissss!”

I'm not sure what that answer means, but Alaric's manic laughter forces me to pay attention to him as he raises his hands in the sky.

“Ready to die, Guinevere?” He beams. “I'll find a way to survive this! I've been granted immunity if I get rid of you! This wave can't kill me. Not when I swore to destroy you. Now you're trapped with no way out, and you'll die by my

very hands!” He sprints forward and summons a spear of shadows. “Tell my team of weaklings in the afterlife that they were all a waste of space, and I’m the deserving survivor of this challenge! I’m going to be appointed king among the table of royals and riches!”

I shuffle back as close to the wall as I can, but the fear of touching it leaves me trembling in my spot. Looking over my shoulder, I realize Asher, Hades, Azrael, Blair, and Kali are all trying to interfere, but nothing they do is getting through.

The sight of Professor North and Professor Blackbird up ahead, running toward the others, makes me wonder if something is really wrong with this specific trial, but I won’t be alive to figure any of that out at this point.

For a moment, I lock eyes with Asher, and deep down, I wish I didn’t.

My Silly Dalmatian will be cynically heartbroken if I die here and now.

Our romance finally got a chance to be planted, and I was excited to explore it further, knowing we could do that while fighting to be the strongest we could be here at N.M.U.

There’s no way I can accept dying here, but I can’t figure out any other options that will protect me from a tsunami.

The need to use my magic is vital, but whatever was in that shockwave tapped me out.

Now, I can’t even defend myself fairly.

I begin to choke at the sudden tightness around my neck, only to realize Ophira is not only wrapping herself around my throat, but she’s already begun wrapping around my bottom half.

“O-Ophira? What are you doing?” I don’t understand her intentions, but she’s growing bigger and bigger while she continues to slither around my body.

The sight of Alaric running in preparation to pierce my body becomes tinier as Ophira begins to grow even bigger and hug me even tighter.

There’s no chance for me to even complain as I watch Alaric’s manic expression of glee begin to morph into a layer of realization.

“No!” He tries to run faster, as though he’ll make it in time. “I need to kill her! I need her blood! YOU SNAKE! DON’T YOU STEAL MY PREY! SHE’S MINE!”

His rageful expression is unforgettable, and despite the little interaction we had with one another, I feel as though his face will still haunt me if I survive this.

Because he looks like Azrael...

“I WILL OFFER THE BLOOD OF THE VIPER TO OBTAIN MY SEAT IN THE SOCIETY OF ROYALS!”

He screams as he’s only a few steps away. Pushing off the ground, he aims to strike me just as the tsunami is ready to destroy all of us.

Golden scales cover my sight at the last second, but I can’t stick around because I can’t catch a single breath with how tightly wrapped my entire body is within this makeshift cocoon.

The sound of screams and gurgles leaves me to wonder what was Alaric’s true end. What worries me more is what wickedness he dipped himself into after the entry trials to betray his own brother, contribute to his teammates’ demise, and now push him to kill me with no remorse.

I guess I won't know as my consciousness slips and the shadows begin to pull me down into an oasis of peaceful escape.

Professor Blackbird was right.

Never trust the wicked...



**EVEN DEATH WON'T STOP ME FROM
LOVING YOU**

-ASHER-

This is what true fear feels like.

Watching the woman you love stare into your eyes, knowing we're both helpless in stopping what's about to transpire.

I see the acceptance that forms in those mesmerizing eyes that can captivate me a mile away.

How they don't hide how much her approaching death hurts her pride.

This fight isn't close to fair. To be rendered helpless and unable to defend herself.

She was forced to face death without mercy...

It makes me seethe with internal rage.

"Ophelia..." I realize her name comes out as a quiet plea.

For some sort of miracle to happen that will make all of this come to a standstill, so I can think fast enough to steal her away from this madness.

She doesn't deserve to die this way.

She doesn't deserve to perish at all...

I notice the golden glint of scales just as Ophelia looks back, and it's patting her neck.

“What is Ophira doing?” Kali questions in urgency. “She’s choking her!”

“No.” We quickly look at Blair, noticing the signs of realization that flicker in. Her eyes glimmer from pink to gold. “She’s trying to protect her.”

“By choking her to death?” Kali argues. “W-We have to do something! If we hadn’t fallen behind, she wouldn’t have gotten pulled into that death trap!”

I realize Kali doesn't do very well in life-death situations, but I can hear the guilt in his voice that's more 'feminine' than usual.

“We can’t interfere,” Hades quietly whispers.

I sense the hidden dread in his voice, which is exactly why I’ve been avoiding looking his way, but I have no choice now because I need to prepare myself for what’s about to unravel before my eyes.

My love... is about to die...

“Hades...” Azrael can barely get our comrade’s name out of his mouth because the obvious sight of pooling tears in Hades’ red eyes is enough confirmation of what the future has in store for us.

For Ophelia...

“No!” Kali whispers and grabs Hades by the collar. “CHANGE IT!”

Hades seems surprised by Kali’s roughness, just as we all are.

“K-Kali! Hold on!” Blair tries to pull him off Hades, just as Azrael swiftly grabs Hades before he can be pulled down by Kali’s rough grip.

“FIX IT! You’re a demigod, aren’t you?! All those rumors that you can visit the Underworld and fae from Nephilim and Malevolence beg for your services to save loved ones! Is that all a fucking lie?!”

Hades tries to hide his displeasure, but it’s written all over his face.

“I can’t change destiny,” Hades whispers.

My hands clench into fists, and I force myself to look away from them and stare at what’s about to transpire.

My Sweet Cruella deserves to be seen to the very end.

Some would say I’m accepting this fate, but I’m not.

I need to see this with my own eyes, so my revenge can be that much more bitter.

Ruthless. Unforgiving. Destructive.

Tiny shocks of my magic begin to buzz at my fingertips, and I can feel the rise of rage beginning to consume me.

My girl is fully wrapped by Ophira, and despite the obvious move to protect her master, as Blair mentioned, it’s obvious Ophelia won’t be able to survive the protective measure.

Snakes may wrap around their babes in the form of protection in the fae realms, but you never witness the wrap around their eggs.

Eggs are fragile.

With just enough pressure, that layer of fragility will crack and destroy the space of protection that promotes their children's growth. In this case, Ophelia is an egg with a fragile exterior of skin and bone.

Wrap around it tight enough, and she'll break.

It's only seconds now, and I notice how Alaric, Azrael's brother, launches into the air with a spear in his hand. His gaze is nothing like Azrael's. The sheer intensity of murderous intent is so sinister to witness, it makes my stomach flip in disgust.

This is the man who betrayed his own brother to get ahead.

Deep down, I feel as though there's something deeper brewing that none of us knows about. I

"It's too late..." I hear Blair's whimpering voice, but I can't look away.

We watch in complete silence as the rushing tsunami crashes into the invisible wall with immense force. I can see the bodies from the massive towers piling against the wall like packed sardines.

It's sickening to watch, witnessing the blue waters taint to red and then black.

I'm counting every second in my head, keeping track of how long my baby has been under the water. *Did she manage to take a breath before Ophira cocooned her? Can she hold it long enough for me to get to her?* It's a waiting game, but how long until this wall will shatter and free what is mine?

"When is it going to go down?" Kali asks in haste, knowing well every second matters.

I can only assume he's directing the question to one of the professors, but neither of them seems to be able to answer.

The person who does speak only makes my blood go cold.

“Unless the wall is broken, the water will never go down until the next class.”

It's the slight mockery in this man's voice that makes me pull my eyes away to acknowledge Professor D'Angelo. His gaze only angers me further, making me realize he actually seems pleased by these results.

To see the end of my woman's life transpire before our eyes.

The longer I stare at him, the more enraged I become.

“Next class, as in, next year's first class,” he elaborates on purpose as he holds the reins of the hawk creature he's riding. “Anyone who wishes to claim the bodies of those they lost during this test, whether it be family, friends, or lovers, will have to submit a request with Headmaster Atlas, and you'll be given priority to do so next year when the yearly ‘clean-up’ is conducted in preparation of the next new set of first classes.”

He's joking.

This has to be some sick type of joke to make me lose my shit.

The truth is, I'm inching closer to my breaking point. I feel the loss of control happening every second that my Sweet Cruella is underwater.

“Y-YOU'RE LYING!”

We all look at Kali, watching how his whole body trembles. I can't determine if it's out of anger or fear, but his eyes are now a vivid orange as they overflow with tears.

“Their bodies will rot and perish by then! They’ll be BONE! How would we even give them the proper burials?! Let alone tell the difference of who’s who. Even faes believe in the afterlife and the road to places like Heaven or Valhalla! You can’t leave them in there. That’s barbaric! INHUMAN!”

To hear Professor D’Angelo laugh at those words leaves more than one of us speechless as he shakes his head.

“Do you think Nephilim Malevolence University is for the weak? The vulnerable? The forgiving?” The level of judgment in his voice is no different from his merciless expression. “This is the reflection of the reality of the world. The hierarchy of life where everyone has to fight to survive. Do you believe because you’re part fae, you’re special? That your survival is more significant than another, girl?”

Kali grits his teeth as the very ground he’s standing upon begins to bubble oddly.

“It’s OUR job as professors to teach you how to be the toughest, strongest, and highest of the food chain. To give you the key principals, tools, secrets, and skill sets to outlast any fae creature in the realms of Nephilim and realms of Malevolence. That’s exactly why this first week is what determines everything, or else why should we spend our valuable time training the weak, needy, and unworthy?”

“Un-Unworthy? Guinevere is more worthy than your ugly, snobby ass!” Kali screams.

“And yet I’m the one holding the title of professor while your new friend, who carried an ounce of sympathy for your weak, pathetic ass, is about to be in a continuous cycle of death for an entire year.”

Continuous?

“What did you just say?” Azrael barely gets the words out.

“I said what I said,” Professor D’Angelo doesn’t even pay him any mind. His eyes are still on Kali as they display so much merit after provoking the halfling. “So, instead of wasting my time throwing insults and rage my way because you can’t carry the burden of guilt on your own shoulders, I’d suggest you get moving, for you have one more test before this class is over.”

He then lowers his gaze to his fellow professors.

“Let me give my warm regards to you, Professor North and Professor Blackbird. It’s but a shame to lose a student of such high potential, but I guess this is a lesson for you both not to impulsively use your one-time mentorship on a student who looks like they’ll be a shining diamond among a field of coal,” he says like it’s a true shame on their part. “Maybe the rumors were true.”

He lifts his reins, preparing to whip the hawk to trigger its rising movement.

“Her sister would have been a better option.”

With a flick of his reins, the hawk creature screeches, and Professor D’Angelo is flying toward the red pillar.

The better option?

How dare he?!

He doesn’t know Ophelia.

Doesn’t know how much of a burden she had to carry on her shoulders.

He doesn’t know shit!

“Do something,” Kali whispers. “Professor North. Professor Blackbird. You have to do something! Y-You said there should be bonuses because of Guinevere’s performance during the entry exam! Can’t that be used to help her out?”

“We can’t touch the barrier,” Professor North announces.

I’ve never heard his voice sound this emotionless before. The different depth of baritone in his voice makes me quiver in fear.

Like he’s ready to unleash something none of us is prepared for.

“WHY NOT?” Kali screams. “Wh-Why are you two just standing there when she’s like your favorite student? Don’t you guys give a fuck?!”

“Kali...” Hades whispers in warning, but he moves his glaring orange eyes to him.

“DO SOMETHING!” Kali stomps his foot and proceeds to point to Azrael. “Your brother set this up! He helped in killing her!”

“I have eyes, Kali,” Azrael growls. “I witnessed exactly what he did, but in no shape or form would I ever betray Ophelia. Not after she helped us during the entry trial.”

“Kali, stop this.” Blair can barely keep it together. “W-We’re wasting time. If... If there’s a chance Ophelia is alive, then...”

“How can we get her out when our magic isn’t working?!” Kali shouts. “We tried and tried! Nothing was fucking working! If... If I’d just left you behind, we wouldn’t even be here!” Kali screams.

“Enough, Kali!” Hades snaps.

“I... tried,” she quietly admits as her shoulders sink. “I... I can’t run properly...” She’s shaking as her tears are falling.

“Blair,” Professor Blackbird tries to stop her from speaking further, but Kali glares at Blair.

“You can’t run properly? That’s your fucking excuse? Why the hell are you here then?! Endurance is KEY at N.M.U. You can’t fucking run when you’re attending an academy that focuses on survival.”

“Kali...” Now, Professor North is the one to warn him to stop.

“WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO PROTECT HER WHEN GUINEVERE IS DEAD!” Kali screams at the top of his lungs. He’s huffing and puffing while all of us are silent.

I can’t keep watching this madness.

Watching how easy it is to turn on each other in such a desperate situation.

Turning around once more, I stare at the waters, all while Blair’s quiet voice reaches my ears.

“My brother broke my legs so I wouldn’t be able to run away from him whenever he wanted to rape me.”

For a moment, I can’t get an inhale into my lungs.

“I... thought... after therapy and using my magic to cover my joints with gold... I thought it would help with my endurance... but... then the magic... cut off... and... I... couldn’t...” She can’t even finish as sobs leave her.

“Fuck,” Azrael curses, and I hear his footsteps. “Blair, don’t cry. It’s... it may not be alright, but you don’t need to say another word.”

“But... it’s my fault,” she weeps, and I can only imagine how her body shakes in defeat. “O-Ophelia... is my first friend. She didn’t even question my strength... even though she had to save me during the trials. Without her, I wouldn’t have made it. Without her... I wouldn’t have the confidence to do any of this! I’m just... a broken... doll to the world. A discarded... used... waste to everyone I’m supposed to cherish, but Ophelia... Ophelia didn’t care. Ophelia... didn’t mock me for being raped like everyone else calling me a prostitute! So... so why? Why does she have to die? Why does she have to suffer? It’s my fucking fault.”

“Blair...” Hades struggles to say her name.

I don’t blame him for getting emotional. I’m shedding tears as I stare at the one barrier that’s in my way.

The single culprit that’s putting the difference between me and Ophelia.

“I...” Kali tries to speak, but he can’t find the words.

“There are two major rules no professor can bend,” Professor North announces. “One: we cannot physically or magically interfere during a trial unless a significant piece in the trial will be damaged or destroyed upon impact. This includes third-party manipulation that may be involved and interfering in the trial at hand.”

That would explain him interfering when Ophelia could have obliterated Larkin during our face-off.

“Two,” Professor Blackbird carries on. “We can only interfere when we witness one student attempt to intentionally kill another. Meaning, if one attempts to stab, slice, or burn a student and the action is happening in our line of vision, we have an obligation to stop it.”

“If we don’t see it,” Professor North grumbles. “It’s none of our concern.”

“Those are the rules we abide by,” Professor Blackbird concludes. “In this case, any interference from either of us would not only disqualify all of you, including Ophelia, if she does survive, but we’d lose our positions as professors.”

From the way he says that last part so nonchalantly, I don’t think either of them cares about their positions.

The problem is, we’d be disqualified, kicked out of N.M.U., and have no future ahead of us.

We’d be better off dead.

“So... we just leave her?” Kali’s voice breaks. “Abandon her? Isn’t she only here because of her sister abandoning her family, which forced her to attend? I hear all the rumors. All the shit talk. She really... is going to suffer in those waters for an entire year...”

There’s no point in him finishing.

We can all envision what Ophelia and the rest of the students whose bodies still survived before the tsunami are going to experience.

Continuous drowning for an entire year.

Biting my bottom lip, I zone the world out while my eyes are glued on that spot that’s pitch black like the shadows we seem to worship in this world.

I can’t leave Ophelia behind.

No matter what anyone says, that’s the truth rooted in my very soul.

“What are you waiting for?”

The voice in my mind forces me to acknowledge the shadows that give me the strength to survive this cruel university for so long.

“You’ll let the woman you love die? You feel it. Her warmth is slipping away. Getting colder and colder.”

Ash...

“She’s the one who named me. The side of you that you once despised until she entered our lives and loved us. Cradled our flaws and imperfections. How long have we been but a weapon for our father to use and abuse? Are you going to let our savior perish because of the stupid wall?”

I... I’m not...

“Strength doesn’t hold you back, Asher. You fear those you deem as friends, believing you’re all but a monster. For those manipulated features and tainted scars to come to the surface and show how damaged we are, thanks to our Sweet Father. You’re scared of seeing the real you. The demon beneath our flesh.”

His chuckles make my ears ring, and my heart beats madly against my chest.

“You fear Ophelia won’t love us any more when she sees the damage the Heathcliffs have done to their own prodigy.”

The truth grips me to the core, but the pain of rejection from those I deem friends is nothing in comparison to the constant cycle of death my Sweet Cruella would experience if I don’t get her out of there.

Unclenching my shaking fists, I center my gaze on the very depths of the waters that spiral with death and blood. My eyes sting as I feel the flow of essence pool into my pupils, and I begin to see what others can’t.

The details of the floating bodies.

The limbs and helpless weapons that float with no purpose.

The golden scales of Ophira's wrapped body.

My hearing heightens at my internal command, delving through the sound barrier of the magic wall to invite the lingering screams of students who've not yet perished from the destructive waves and spiraling whirlpools. They mute one by one as I center my focus on finding one thing.

Ophelia's heartbeat.

I barely hear it.

The sluggish drum feels weaker and weaker with every beat, but it's enough to kindle the surge of urgency within me.

We have a chance.

A single shot in getting her out of this dancing madness.

“Asher?”

I hear Hades' warning voice, but I don't let him steal my attention from the newfound determination blossoming through me. Electric shocks pulse off my flesh, spiking with intensity and making my friends and professors gasp in warning.

“Get back,” Professor Blackbird warns. “Asher?”

“I think that's Ash.” Hades whispers, “Asher? What are you...” He trails off as I look over my shoulder to meet his surprised eyes. It's an expression I've rarely seen upon his face, but it only grows as his eyes widen at my shift in appearance.

The scars. The markings. The disgusting remains of what this temple of flesh has survived.

“She’s the only one who ever loved me,” I whisper and hear the odd sound of my own voice. It’s unrecognizable now, and that’s okay.

It won’t matter when all of this is over. I may lose everyone at my side, but at least the true reflection of myself would be the epitome of my lover’s survival.

“I’d rather be a monster the world hates than let her die, Hades.”

Slowly, I look away before I see the lines of fear and disgust. I center my essence on my fingertips as I begin to lift them toward the wall. The movement makes the wall pulse with instability, and that’s exactly the push I need to know that I’m stronger than this force before me.

“I’m coming, Sweet Cruella.”

Tears run down my cheeks as I notice how black my flesh has become.

“Wait for me.”

Even death won’t stop me from loving you.



LESSON FOUR OF N.M.U. — DEATH IS
AT EVERY CORNER

“You can't be here, Ophelia.”

I look at my surroundings, taking in the four white walls that keep us boxed in.

Lowering my gaze to my copy, I can't help but frown at her company.

“Odessa?”

Her anger confuses me.

“You can't be here!” she repeats and marches my way until her hands are gripping my shoulders tightly while her glaring eyes are filling with tears. “You need to go. You have to survive. You can't be here!”

“Where's here?” I shake my head. “I don't want to be here? I... was... in a trial... I think?” I struggle to figure out what went down. I just need a moment. “I had to face Azrael? No... Alaric. I was going to... die? Maybe. A tsunami. The others were behind the wall...”

“Who did you just say?”

“Alaric,” I repeat. “I will offer... the blood of the Viper...” I struggle to remember the rest.

“To obtain my seat in the society of royals,” Odessa finishes, leaving me frowning in confusion.

“How do you...”

“You’re going to find out,” she assures me as her anger deflates into sadness. “Dammit, Ophelia.” She pulls me into a hug, leaving me in bewilderment.

“Odessa. I don’t get what’s happening. Why do I feel like I’m not even scratching the surface of all of this? Isn’t this just a university that’s supposed to help us unravel our true strengths and weaknesses? To guide us on the path of learning what we’ll become once we graduate N.M.U.? Why is it not going that route? There were so many bodies. Dead students. Towers and towers, Odessa. It feels as if death is at every corner, and I don’t know my way out!”

I pull back out of her hug to stare into her eyes with pleading ones.

“Why aren’t you here? Why... why did you leave me to do this alone? I’m trying to show the world I’m strong. That I can survive it all, but Mom and Dad never trained us for this, Odessa! When we came to Nephilim and befriended the Notorious Worm child, no one explained their true purpose and why they’re used to prey on students for food. We escaped seas of molten that burned students to a crisp, then the tsunami...” I struggle to explain the intense fear I felt in that moment of despair. “It’s thanks to me that Alaric made it past the garden of roses, yet he was ready to pierce me with a spear! To betray me like he did his twin brother. Where’s the loyalty? Where’s the morals? Is this world of Vipers and Shadows only filled with despair?!”

I don’t realize I’m crying while my lips tremble uncontrollably.

“It’s okay, Ophelia. It’s... going to be okay.”

I want to believe her.

Whichever entity rules this Universe knows I want to accept that things will get better if I get the chance to return from this place, which feels like it’s between life and death.

But I can’t.

I can’t fathom returning unless I know what I’m up against.

“No, it won’t!” I shout back at her. “I’m dead, aren’t I? Is that why I’m here?!”

She struggles to come up with an excuse, and I’m left to finally realize something.

To realize the potential truth.

“Odessa.” My eyes widen to their full capacity as I’m now the one gripping her shoulders for dear life. “Don’t tell me...”

I can’t dare say it.

All she can do is give me a smile.

One that shatters my struggling heart because I know that look better than anyone.

The look of defeat.

“Why?”

It’s all I can ask.

“The night of our eighteenth birthday, when we got our powers, we were chosen to attend N.M.U.,” she surprisingly reveals. “I feared if our parents found out, they wouldn’t hesitate to send us. Despite us training our whole lives for that moment, having that invitation in my grasp left me fearing the

worst. *If I brought it from the mailbox home, our parents would have seen it and sent us to the gates to pursue the entry trial. I felt that it was my burden to carry as the firstborn. Not yours, so I decided to attend alone.*”

“Odessa...”

What can I say to her?

“I know it was stupid, Ophelia,” she pleads for me to understand. Her eyes are screaming for me to listen to her side of the story. “But for years, I’ve heard that twins who attend N.M.U. always turn on one another. It’s happened so many times that it’s deemed a curse. As if the deity that rules the school foundation ensures it. N.M.U. has the highest twin attendance rate because any twin who gains their gifts at the fruitful age range is automatically enrolled in N.M.U. I was scared if we attended together, the same thing would happen. I mean... everything was set for us to despise one another.”

She sighs and lowers her head in shame.

“Just because I came out a few seconds earlier, you were basically shunned by Mother. Everyone put me on some sort of pedestal, as if I’d be the one to bring honor and grace to our family heritage. My ultimate fear was that you’d turn against me. That all those years of torment and misery of being the ‘second’ child would lead you to despise me enough to kill me,” she reveals and lifts her head so she can look into my eyes.

“I decided the least I could do was attend on my own, so you could be free and no longer be tormented by Mother and the constant training we had to endure. I knew you were into the Heathcliff guy. I thought maybe you’d get to have a relationship with him, seeing as our families would have to try to get along, despite our obvious competitiveness. I just

wanted you to have a future that didn't put you at risk of entering this sinful world of shadows and bloodshed."

"Then what happened?" I whisper pleadingly. "Why didn't you ever come home? Or call us when you passed the entry trial."

She tries to smile, but it only makes my heart want to shatter in her name.

"He betrayed me." I can see the heartbreak in her eyes just as I hear the agony in her quivering voice.

"Who... betrayed you?"

"Alaric."

Now I'm completely confused because it doesn't make sense.

"Odessa... Alaric entered N.M.U. this year. Azrael is his twin brother and is on my team. Alaric betrayed Azrael during their entry trial, and he's the one who tried to kill me before the tsunami hit us."

"When I went straight to the entry gates of N.M.U. to participate in the entry trial, Alaric Hawthorne ended up being my partner through the challenge. I was the first in line, with him being second, and together, we made it to the golden gates, where I stopped the massive snake from killing us and used that creature as Alaric's living offering."

Just like what I did with Blair.

"What was your offering?"

"The roses growing outside of the fountain," she declares and watches how I smirk.

“Copycat,” I mutter. “The golden snake, Ophira. She’s the one that wrapped around me before the tsunami hit.”

I can see hints of relief in her eyes.

“Ophira... a good name for her. She helped me a few times. She’s loyal, and if you gain her trust, she’ll show you her real form.”

“Real form,” I whisper. “If you know that much, what happened after the trials? Why didn’t we hear from you?”

“I decided not to call home to say I’d arrived at N.M.U. I didn’t want them freaking out and especially didn’t want Mother putting further strain and torment on you. I thought I’d call once I finished an arc or two... but...”

“But,” I whisper in hopes she’ll continue.

“When we finished our first day and class, Alaric and I were brought before a council.”

“A council?” I never saw any sort of membership of the sorts.

“Fae from the realms of Nephilim and Malevolence. Some are royals. Others are deemed to be gods and goddesses. There is a mixture of males and females. They all wear cloaks that cover their bodies and faces, some of red velvet and others of gold silk.” I can see the stems of fear in her pupils as they dilate at the memory.

“We outperformed during our first class. Our skills and performance were sought after, and we were given a few options that would either force us to leave N.M.U. and return at a later date or to be taken in for special training that would ensure we didn’t potentially die every class.”

She shakes her head as if to get rid of the dark memories.

“I couldn’t give up after we’d reached so far. Our team was waiting for us, and if we took any option other than returning and continuing our attendance at N.M.U., our team would be sacrificed as an offering.”

“An offering.” I’m trying to wrap my head around it. “So, you decided to return.”

“I did,” she confesses. “But Alaric didn’t want to go back to N.M.U. Now that he realized how dangerous it was, he wanted more time to train and to come back with his brother. He was like me. He left without telling his family where he was really going, giving him the perfect alibi to come back and make some sort of excuse.”

“So, what happened?”

“He was given an ultimatum.” It takes everything for her to say the next words. “Kill the woman he loves before them, and he will be granted a shot at getting a position on their council. To be a part of their society of royals.”

“I will offer the blood of the Viper to obtain my seat in the society of royals...” I repeat the full sentence, realizing where they’re rooted from. “He loved you?”

She couldn’t look more defeated.

“Did,” she emphasizes the single word. “We’d been secretly dating before we got the invitations. It’s exactly why we contacted one another and went to N.M.U. together. His brother wasn’t interested in anyone, but I knew you were falling for someone, so we thought by going together and getting this attendance over with, we’d prevent the chance of you both attending. At the time, it made sense.

“N.M.U. isn’t a typical university where you take years to attend. You gain knowledge through trials and are given

opportunities to escalate. If you fall in the line of a professor's favor, you're granted more privileges and bonuses that protect you and your teammates. The goal was to get it over with, gain the knowledge and powers that could be of use to us, and come back to give it to you."

She wraps my hands with hers.

"That's why that night I let you mimic my magic, knowing an essence of me would remain within you. I used a spell that would allow my magic to remain with you, even though Shadow magic isn't your born element."

"It's not?" Now I'm confused. "I've always been using Shadow magic."

"Your magic traits stem from Nephilim, Ophelia. It's why you easily teleported here by accident, and I had to come find you," she reveals, as if we aren't the same age. She knows and understands things a lot easier than me. "My essence traits are the Shadows from Malevolence, which is why you're essentially carrying both traits."

"Alright..." I can't waste time trying to wrap my head around this now. "But why is that significant now? Why would Alaric kill you... that fucker actually killed you?!" I gasp in horror when it clicks in my mind.

"The bargain was too good for him to give up," she admits, but her eyes darken with hate. "But there was one last bit to the bargain."

"What was it?"

"He needed the blood of a Viper to seal the deal. He already 'killed' me, or at least, that's what he witnessed with his own eyes when he stabbed me in the chest. However, to complete the bargain, he needed to spill the blood of another

Viper.” Her brows scrunch together. “You weren’t supposed to be a target, though... but maybe that’s my fault.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “I’m not a Gilded Viper? That’s what Professor North calls me from time to time. Just like how Professor Blackbird calls me Darling Nightmare.”

“So you’ve crossed paths with both of them,” she sounds even more pleased. “Your base essence is Nephilim, meaning you’re destined to be someone’s Darling Nightmare. It’s their way of labeling the connection between a lover who can potentially become a Nephalem. Think of it as how Malevolence fae believe a Gilded Viper has the chance of ascending into a Gilded Merger. Either way, the female’s essence has to react to the fae royal and cause a significant reaction to prove their potential. However, most don’t get a chance to find that connected partner because they’re hunted for their blood.”

Hunted and killed for their blood... is that why so many die during the trials before they can reach the safe days at N.M.U.

Then something comes to mind.

“Wait... so because I have your essence... are you trying to say I’m connected to two people instead of one?” I question as my eyes begin to widen. “Hold on. If my original essence is of light and connected to Nephilim, I’m Professor Blackbird... Daemon’s Darling Nightmare.”

I’m piecing it all together, which makes me feel like everything is spinning.

“But I’m also a Gilded Viper... Professor North... Orpheus. I’m connected to him as well... that’s why our connection... just having him in my presence drives my body

insane.” It hurts to admit it because now I understand the predicament I’ve been put into.

What this proves when it comes to my sister’s fate.

“You were connected to Professor North, and I was connected to Professor Blackbird,” I say in submission as my shoulders sink. “Odessa... Orpheus is your Shadow? You’re connected to him. You’re destined to be with him.”

I’m not sure if I can say I’m disappointed. In fact, I’m happy that this new revelation means we’re both connected to someone.

“I know where your thoughts are going,” she admits. “But that’s not the case, sis.”

“What do you mean? Orpheus is your Shadow, and Daemon is mine. Isn’t that how it was meant to be?”

“It was,” she says, as if she needs to remind me of her predicament. “But destiny changed when Alaric stabbed me.”

“Because... you’re...” I don’t want to say it. “How are you talking to me if... you’re not supposed to be here?”

“Well, one, my essence still runs through you and grows stronger with how you’ve grown during the trials and first class. I’m not sure whether I’ll disappear along the path, but I’m here, aiding you the only way I can,” she admits. “But my body hasn’t been discarded yet.”

“Wait...” I’m trying to understand why that is. “When he stabbed you, they didn’t tend to you? Or...”

“Remember how we’ve been told that when you die on the battlefield in either realm, your spirit is rooted there versus when we perish anywhere else or in N.M.U., we still have the chance to ascend to the afterlife?” she brings up.

“Yes.”

“The N.M.U. part is a lie,” she admits. “If you die during a trial, your body remains stuck in that section of death for as long as it needs to.”

“What do you mean, ‘as long as it needs to?’ Our bodies shouldn’t belong anywhere but six feet under. That’s if there’s a body left.”

“Our bodies are just catalysts for fae and other fantasy beings. It’s our essence that they thrive on, and for rare cases like us, our blood,” she explains. “Our bodies remain in the place we perished, so if you drowned during the fountain challenge, your body remains there. If you died smelling the roses, you’re stuck there.”

“Stuck and repeat?” I whisper as I click back onto how we realized the cycle going on during the entry trial and the roses. “So... in your case, are you just being stabbed again and again?”

“I’m a special case,” she admits. “My body is somewhere in N.M.U. I don’t know where, but I’m sure since it’s been two years, it has to be in a place where certain beings are preserved. I was a part of a bargain, and Alaric didn’t finish it. Even if he doesn’t, seeing as he may have perished, your importance still stands because you still carry my essence.”

“So, this council will want me dead?”

“That’s where I’m not sure,” she admits. “They may want your blood like they do any potential Viper. Our blood can be used for certain rituals, which include reviving the dead. It must go at a hefty price in Nephilim and Malevolence. It’s exactly why there aren’t as many Gilded Mergers as of late. By the time these Vipers find their Shadows and grow together

into a powerful duo, the Viper is probably killed trying to survive N.M.U.”

“And they use their blood for potions or rituals that benefit the fae who will pay the hefty price to obtain such remedies,” I summarize.

“Not to say N.M.U. is bad,” Odessa presses. “I think there are multiple layers, and the council who gets special privileges to pick and choose is there to benefit in their own way. Just like we’re attending this university to find ourselves and potentially the Shadows we’re connected to.”

“But not everyone understands the Viper Shadow situation,” I note.

“That’s because most don’t survive to reach that lesson,” Odessa admits. “Gilded Mergers aren’t as rare as they make it seem. Everyone has the opportunity to become one when you meet someone magically compatible with you. The problem is, most don’t survive the trials and tribulations that steal their lives away before that can be initiated.”

“But with Orpheus, Daemon, and me...” I whisper and watch her slowly nod.

“The signs are showing and prove the council picked up that this may happen because we’re twins. The only difference is they didn’t think my essence was in you, something most twins are able to do but aren’t sure how to.”

“Is that why you left your essence in me? So, if you died?”

“You’d at least always have a piece of me,” she smiles almost shyly as her eyes briefly look away. “And that piece of me would be able to protect you until your time on this world was up. My only sadness is your destiny isn’t supposed to end here.”

“Neither is yours,” I emphasize and grip her shoulders, drawing her attention back to me. “Your body. If it’s preserved, doesn’t that mean I can find you?”

She stares back at me in confusion.

“Why would you find me?”

“What do you mean, why wouldn’t I find you? You’re my twin sister!”

“But...” she looks as confused as I previously felt. “I’m dead. I mean... kind of. I was stabbed, and I overheard them saying unless someone claims my body, I’ll be stuck in my dying state. Never said I’d be fully dead... but no one knows I’m here.”

“Odessa!” I shake her. “Hello?! I KNOW NOW! I can get you out!”

“But the council can’t know that,” she emphasizes. “Or they’ll work overtime to kill you. The bargain isn’t complete, so they’ll send whoever wishes a spot in their society of royals to claim your blood.”

“Then all I have to do is make sure I don’t die,” I stress. “Until they run out of people they can send!”

“But... that’s hard here, Ophelia. You need allies. Reliable forces who can protect you. You need a team who won’t set out to kill you or betray you. I know you may not have gotten your emblems yet... but still.”

“I got Ophira, who is a creature rooted in N.M.U. I have Larkin, the Notorious Worm from Nephilim. I’m sure when I get the chance to delve into Malevolence, I can find a creature ally there, and my team is solid! Asher, Hades, Blair, Azrael, and Kali. I know Azrael is related to Alaric, but I can see in

his eyes he never wants to be like his twin brother who betrayed him,” I summarize.

“Heck, if I’m connected to Orpheus and Daemon, I’m sure they’ll protect me some way or somehow. If they both realize I’m their Viper, I doubt they’ll let me perish. Right now, their jobs as professors may be a bit complicated, but maybe that can give me some sort of immunity as a student at N.M.U.? I’m not sure...”

Either way, there are people in my corner.

“I may be a direct, badass, teacher’s pet, no-filter bitch, but I can make allies. The right ones who I can work with and eventually trust as we continue to survive N.M.U. I’d never abandon them, and I’m confident they would never abandon me.”

I notice the sudden jolt that goes through me, making me gasp.

“Maybe you’re right,” Odessa whispers as hope floods her eyes. “I have one more question, though.”

“What is it, Odessa?”

“You believe if they brought you and Asher before the council, he wouldn’t betray you?”

“Never,” I say the word before I can process her words. “I know in my very heart, he wouldn’t, Odessa. Even if we’re torn apart because of his sick father... I bet my life, he wouldn’t betray me.”

She smiles and leans in to kiss my forehead.

“I hope he never does,” she whispers and hugs me tightly.

Another jolt rushes through me, making me gasp in pain.

“Ow...” I whine as Odessa releases me.

We both stare down at the floor, realizing it’s beginning to flood with water. At first, the shade of the blue waters is mesmerizing to witness, but as it gets to our knees, it begins to taint with blood, shifting from dark red to a murky black.

“Someone’s trying to bring you back,” Odessa whispers and smiles. “You’re gonna go back to the living.”

“Wait. Odessa. What about—”

Another jolt makes me choke and grip my throat. My body begins to glow a brilliant white, taking over my body, even as I try to gasp for breath.

“My Shadows will continue to protect you, Ophelia,” Odessa assures me, her hands gently holding my cheeks. I want to speak, but no words come out, making me fear I won’t be able to say what I truly feel.

That I love her.

That I’ll fight with every bit of strength to find her.

That I’ll revive her from the claws of death.

“I know,” she assures me as tears fill her eyes.

Her flesh is beginning to be covered by black energy, the essence consuming her as the white essence around me cloaks my body in a burning figure of white. We seem like complete opposites now, with my white flames flickering against her black ones but never intermingling.

Two energies that are opposites and never blend.

“I love you. I will fight to stay here as long as I can. If death comes for me, I’ll just have to make him a bargain he

won't refuse, so we get to each other again," she summarizes as if she can read my thoughts.

Despite the elemental differences and the murky waters at our necks, she pulls me in until our foreheads click. It hurts, yet the pain makes me want to hug her if I wasn't gripping my neck.

"Be fierce, my little sis. Prove to those merciless fae that we're allowed to exist. To live and love. Not everyone will give us their loyalty, but that only makes the connections that do survive even more worthy of preserving," she whispers. "May you survive dancing with Vipers and Shadows, Ophelia, and let them be the first to watch you burn their assumptions to a crisp."

Farwell, Odessa. Until I can see you again...wait for me. They'll feel my burn.



A TRIAL OF ILLUSIONS AND TRUTH

-OPHELIA-

The sound of me coughing my lungs out finally reaches my ringing ears.

“Ophelia!” Multiple people are calling out my name in relief, but I’m just trying not to slip into unconsciousness with how my world is spinning wildly. The frigid sensation running through me may be the reason why I’m shivering like a leaf while fighting for every breath that fights to fill my lungs with air.

I’m alive? I’m breathing... here... from the white room.

For a moment, all I can think about is Odessa and how she’s trapped in that square space with no one to talk to.

Just white walls, embracing you as the time ticks away. No movement. No interaction. A solitary confinement she didn’t choose to endure.

All because the man she thought loved her betrayed her for the sake of a royal position. The mere idea makes me want to look at every ancient book and scripture to find a way to revive his ass.

Just so I can kill him again.

“Ophelia.”

Even my teeth are chattering, which I can only assume is the noise that's added to the ongoing ringing in my ears. It's like they're recovering from being clogged for who knows how long, but that becomes insignificant when I register who said my name.

Asher? No... Ash?

I don't know why it nags at me, especially when I'm just trying to breathe and not freeze myself to death, but the odd tone in my Silly Dalmatian's voice is enough to get me using every bit of strength to open my eyes.

Despite my urgency, it takes a lot longer for me to open my eyes. When I do, my vision is so blurry, I'm not sure I'll be able to decipher who's peering down at me. At first glance, I can tell the person holding me in their arms doesn't look like Ash.

Their hair is a sort of silver mix with purple, the combination reminding me of Asher's eyes when he inches closer to unlocking Ash, but when I look into this man's eyes, they're different as well.

Frightening at first glance.

One eye is pitch black, while the other is pure white. Despite the obsolete shades, the rings of his pupils are a color that is distinguishable enough against both backdrops.

The person's lips are a dark red, almost as if they bit them for so long, they were on the verge of bursting out and bleeding continuously. Their flesh is pale, a sickly white that only makes seeing the magnitude of lines and incantations across their flesh.

Even with my blurry vision, I can't ignore the red marks that I can only assume are wounds or healing scars versus the

black incantations that looked as though they were drilled into this being's flesh and not accepted by choice.

The sight reminds me of something I'd once talked about with Father.

About the lengths families and hierarchies would go to ensure their child could never perish in any challenge or appointed trial. It was a sickening conversation, yet it was something done to children or young teens to give them the highest shot at surviving N.M.U.

Despite the experimental madness involved, it still couldn't guarantee their survival at the university, especially when no one could really tell what hidden agendas and trials were conducted and never reached the surface outside of the golden gates and brewing shadows of the university.

That didn't mean they wouldn't take their chances.

“Hideous, huh?” The odd depth in this person's voice is foreign to me, but my gut tells me otherwise.

It screams for me to focus harder to unravel who's beneath this layer of uncertainty.

Squinting my eyes, it takes everything to give my eyes a tiny spark of magic to make my vision clear. It takes a few failed attempts, but when that flicker of energy ignites through my pupils, I can finally get an accurate view of who is holding me.

I'm not sure how to feel when my eyes lock with theirs.

Their stare is mixed with relief and fear, the combination being such an odd outlook with his mismatched eyes. It reminds me of that feeling you experience when you look at someone crisscrossing their eyes.

“Sorry that you have to see such an ugly sight, Ophelia,” he admits, almost as if he’s ashamed of himself. “It was the only way to save you.”

I don't understand...

It really bugs me when I can't understand things. Frustrates me to my very core.

He's apologizing to me as if his image is that to be ashamed of, but what's the big deal? *No. Why is he even apologizing? Does that mean I know him?* It proves my mind is a tad sluggish from apparently dying, but the longer I stare at him while I zone the world out, the more I begin to see the tiny traits.

The specific color of those ringed pupils is a shade I can never miss.

Dark Lavender.

The realization hits me like a bus, and my eyes widen as I finally understand who this is.

“Silly... Dalmatian?” I struggle to get the two words out, but I'd rather the inner walls of my throat burn for ages than let this man give me such a face of repulsion.

The reflection of self-hate in his eyes, which are begging for me to see him.

Those eyes are already growing glassy in seconds before tears drop down one by one, as though it's about to shower on us.

“Hey... Sweet Cruella.”

That's all he has to say to make my eyes water while my lips and teeth continue chattering. I can recognize more features of him, but to take in his appearance and see just how

different he looks in this form makes me want to wrap him in my arms and never let go.

“Hey...” I croak. “Asher?”

He manages to nod, tears rolling down his scarred cheeks.

My poor love...

Just the thought of what Asher has endured in secret makes my blood boil. To think my Silly Dalmatian always tries to be the happy jock, who doesn't take life seriously and makes everyone smile through our stressful lives, has probably endured the hardest life in his father's clutches.

I bet these years at N.M.U. have been a blessing to him in comparison to the years he was in his family home, fighting to survive while covering his appearance with an illusion that would paint a sophisticated outlook that made the Heathcliffs good people.

“Sorry,” he apologizes again, as if he was the culprit to my suffering or something. “For hiding... this. You can break up with me. At least... you're alive.”

The immense sorrow in his voice is going to break my wildly beating heart if he doesn't fix that tone of his.

Does he really think I'm disgusted by him?

“Are... you... stupid?” The words I croak aren't really a reflection of how I feel, but seeing as my arms aren't really cooperating right now, I'm more frustrated that I can't hug the living shit out of him. “Asher... Heathcliff. If... you don't... fucking... kiss me right now...”

Talking is so damn overrated.

With a grunt, I manage to sit up enough to brush my trembling, frigid lips against his, despite my arms feeling like

dead weight.

Thank you, core strength.

It surprises him before he has to catch me from falling back because my core strength decided to say ‘fuck you, too’ and give out.

“O-Ophelia,” he looks completely surprised.

“First...” I breathe, realizing that small movement took the breath out of me. *Damn, my body can't even cooperate with me when I need it to.* “You... insult yourself... one more time... and we’re breaking up.”

He looks more surprised by that, but I keep going.

“Second... let me figure out how... to work my body again... and I swear... I’m killing your dad.”

The way he fights not to smirk gives me the push to get to my third point.

“Three... I... Ophelia... Minerva... Guinevere, love the shit... out of you,” I declare the best I can between pants. “So I don’t... give a shit... what you look like. Be a sexy, tatted fae warrior for all I give a damn. You... are... mine!”

I say that with every bit of air out of my chest.

“And... I feel like I’ll die again,” I groan and go limp because I can’t seem to catch my breath fast enough.

“Shit,” Asher curses. “P-Professor North. Professor Blackbird.”

“Wait. I thought you two said you can’t interfere,” I hear Blair’s voice. I’m glad she’s okay and here.

“Bonus,” is all I hear from Professor Blackbird before a hand presses upon my chest.

Followed by the feel of chilled lips pressing firmly on mine.

I hear Blair gasp while Azrael mutters, “Um... is that allowed?”

“I don’t think Professor Blackbird cares if you ask me,” Hades speaks up.

“But won’t they get in trouble for interfering?” Kali whispers.

“Bonus.” Professor North speaks up. “He’s simply giving her magical CPR.”

Magical CPR, my foot...

Truthfully, I can’t complain because my body goes from freezing to blossoming with warmth.

When he releases my lips, my body feels as though it can function, even though my arms seem to be the only thing prickling with numbness.

“Miss Guinevere? How do you feel?” Professor Blackbird asks.

“If you speak like Professor North, I’ll voluntarily die again,” I croak but manage to open my heavy eyelids. “Aside from my arms feeling like prickling weights, I can actually breathe.”

I watch him smile as those moonstone-colored eyes dance with color until they still on a sapphire shade with hints of mellow pink and dark orange. I’m not sure why all the colors resonate, but I feel as if he’s sad and relieved to see his student didn’t perish.

“Don’t be sad,” I whisper. “I’m good. I’d give a peace sign, but arms aren’t cooperating still.”

“That’s gonna take a few minutes,” he assures me. “Ophira accidentally broke your bones.”

Lovely.

“Hisssss.” The golden viper in question is running her little body along my face after seemingly moving out of my wet locks.

“No one is going to move the snake that almost killed her?” Kali questions.

“She didn’t try to kill her intentionally, Kali,” Blair argues. “If Ophira hadn’t cocooned Ophelia, she would have drowned. There’s a higher possibility of survival bringing someone back to life when their lungs aren’t completely filled with water.”

“And Professor Blackbird can heal broken bones,” Azrael notes the obvious observation. “We should be grateful Ophelia is alive. That we’re all still breathing.”

“Not for long if we don’t get moving,” Hades warns.

I want to look their way, but my focus is back on Asher.

“Asher Heathcliff,” I huff in annoyance at his obvious slowness. He looks like a deer in headlights looking back at me, but I pout my lips and try my best to look as annoyed as possible.

Professor North sighs.

“Mr. Heathcliff. Can you kiss your girlfriend so we can get a move on?” He sounds like he’s pleading for his own sanity. “Already endured enough theatrics for my daily threshold.”

“Theatrics?” It takes a few seconds, but I locate the scowling professor. *And this is the man connected to Odessa? Insanity. I need to get a return policy.* “I almost got murdered! Dying is not theatrical, Professor North.”

“It is when you see it enough times,” he grumbles.

“Weren’t you on the verge of tears a second a—” Professor Blackbird begins, but with a blink, I’m not only in his arms, we’re launched in the air, thanks to his swift agility.

I manage to glance down and see Asher, who’s not only outstretching his hand that triggers a scaled wall of black that stretches enough to protect our remaining comrades, but he’s next to push off the ground in time to miss the onslaught of black flames that threaten to extinguish him.

The rest of the team is making distance just as Professor Blackbird lands next to Professor North. They exchange a look before I’m offered to Professor North, who doesn’t seem to mind holding my body, which is still on the mend in the healing stages. My eyes are now glued to Asher, noticing his bare back that’s a canvas of scars and drilled incantations.

It makes my stomach flip in agony for him. He’s spreading his stance out while bolts of black lightning strike from the sky into his right outstretched hand that grasps a black trident made of shadows.

“Why is it so difficult for useless bastards to die?” Asher grumbles in his baritone voice.

I look at the culprit, who’s soaking wet a few feet away.

Golden spear in hand.

“You dare stand in my way.” Alaric struggles to say the words, his body completely battered with wounds, while one of his arms has been obliterated. He’s bleeding and dripping from the tainted waters, but that venomous stare is as vivid as ever. “Give. Me. My. PRIZE!”

“Last time I checked, you weren’t in line.” Asher says those words so calmly, yet his aura begins to leak off his body

like an active shadow of purple and grey. It's captivating to watch and frightening to acknowledge because the energy oozing out of him is at levels I've never witnessed. "Sorry, but we can't have two twins eyeing the same girl. It's rather problematic."

Two twins?

"GIVE ME MY TROPHY!" Alaric screams and somehow finds the energy to sprint toward Asher.

My body tenses up. I can't afford to watch Asher fight or even get injured without my involvement. I want to be able to protect him, but I'm a sitting duck with my arms still recovering from being shattered.

"Relax." Professor North's voice is so low, I know it was only meant for me as he holds me a little tighter. "Watch."

My body does what he commands, all while my attention is absorbed by the physical confrontation that's about to unravel into a catastrophe.

For a single moment, my eyes detour to our right. Professor Blackbird's aura spikes so strongly, every hair on my body rises from his essence, but the loud gasp that follows pulls me back to the battlefield.

Only to see Asher's still in place, having not lifted his trident a bit.

For a second, I can't fathom what just happened to leave Alaric to slowly come to a full stop. My eyes are being a bitch at long-sightedness, but I'm given enough seconds to narrow and focus on what paralyzes Alaric in place.

A golden arrow?

For some reason, I look to my left, just enough around Professor North to witness where everyone else has to be looking.

Staring at the culprit of the single strike.

“Azrael?”

There he stands, glowing so immaculately, like a descending angel, without the mesmerizing wings that would represent purity. A golden bow is in his grasp, and his eyes are so white, I can no longer see the pupils within.

It’s an alluring, magnetizing sight I’m sure you’d only witness in the holy parts of Nephilim, where those who bathed in the sun’s rays and avoided the shadows for years would be given the opportunity to see among one another.

How is Azrael able to tap into such essence?

Maybe it’s similar to how Asher hid his true appearance from the rest of the world.

“H-How dare you?” Alaric questions as he watches the flow of his blood begin to fall. “Do you know what you’re doing? Why are you interfering?! You fucking copycat! You BASTARD! That woman only raised a weak being, who thinks he can become an acceptable Shadow? You think crushing on that whore will get you points?”

“Jeez. Only had sex with my boyfriend and kissed two professors. Don’t know how that makes me a whore, but go on,” I mutter far too loudly when the tense silence awaiting Azrael’s reply continues.

I hear Hades’ snicker, though, and I glance up to see Professor North’s slight smirk. I notice he’s not looking at the battlefield. He’s just staring at me as if I’m the center of his world.

Giving him a pout, his eyes plead for me not to ask questions just yet.

“All to be a royal,” Azrael’s words draw my attention back to him because the word ‘royal’ reminds me of the confrontation with Odessa. “The real question is, brother, what did you dare bargain to lose your respect for the living?”

“Wh-What?” Alaric whispers and begins to cough up blood.

“I can’t spare any time on you,” Azrael whispers, while his eyes lose any hint of emotional attachment to the twin he once loved and respected. “May you reap every sin you’ve committed and carry the weight of every living creature you’ve slain in this lifetime for your own selfish gain.”

“You think your words can stop me?! I’M THE CHOSEN ONE! I’m blessed and favored! You can’t kill me! Your words can do nothing to me!” He laughs manically and proceeds to pull at the arrow, which only shocks him in return. He grits his teeth and continues to try to pull the arrow out, but the action only encourages the growth of a golden circle that widens every second beneath Alaric’s feet.

“Wh-What are you going?” he snarls. “This level of magic. What did you do? No, what did you bargain for?!”

His demands only make Azrael turn away, as if he’s had enough of this sight and is dismissive of his older brother.

“You’re not the only one who likes to gamble with life,” Azrael whispers, and I’m thankful my ears are no longer ringing, so I can catch the last set of words he speaks into existence. “You can’t win against a god, Alaric.”

A god...

Azrael begins to walk away, his path obviously toward the red pillar of light that seems to be getting dimmer.

This must be our cue to go.

“A-Azrael?” Blair calls out to him.

“Think that means we have to go now,” Hades urges. “Professor North? Professor Blackbird?”

“We’re not the ones participating in the class, remember?” Professor North offers, making all of us realize that they’re right.

They can do whatever they want, actually.

“Wait... what about Asher?” Kali urges. “He’s not going to kill Alaric, is he? I mean... he can’t, or else the professors have to interfere.”

“Let’s go, Kali,” Hades urges. “If you fall behind, you can’t use Blair as an excuse.” The way he says that part almost sounds as if it’s out of spite.

“You...” Kali begins but stops himself. “Coming.”

“Cowards! Cowards, Cowards, COWARDS! Come back and witness my reign! I won’t be slain by you dimshits!” Alaric screams with every bit of strength. I’m sure he’d pop a blood vessel if he wasn’t bleeding profusely. “I WILL JOIN THE SOCIETY OF ROYALS! I’m deserving! I’m an Elite! I’ve been raised by the strongest man to walk upon the lands of Malevolence. I will NOT perish!”

“You really talk too much,” Asher whispers, and my eyes widen because I realize he’s no longer in his spot.

He’s floating above his prey—the set of shadows shooting out of his back of scars and incantations creates the perfectly arched silhouette that mimics a pair of wings.

I hear my own gasp of surprise because what happens next is the most beautiful, yet the most excruciating death I've witnessed.

"This is for hurting what's mine," the shift in voice proves the being in control is Ash, just as he lowers his arm in one sweeping movement.

Alaric's screams are but a reflection of the true agony he must be experiencing at this moment, as the tips of Asher's trident pierce his face, his eyeballs stabbed by two of the three sharp edges. The third one hits something that is far too familiar, an item Asher had placed on Professor North's birthday cake yesterday.

A wizard wand candle...

The piercing strike not only cuts the candle in half, it also triggers a magical reaction that ignites the goosebump-inducing energy I felt from Professor Blackbird.

Only this chain reaction unlocks an array of elemental catastrophes.

Asher uses the seconds he has at his disposal to press his feet on Alaric's shoulders and use that platform to push himself with enough force to send him farther into the air.

Right before a tornado erupts into existence, causing him to be pushed even farther outward.

That's the least of the chaos unraveling before our eyes. The wind kindles a combustion reaction that causes the two sides of the candle to explode into wild flames of white and black.

If things couldn't get any worse, I feel the vibration of the ground itself, prompting me to look past Alaric and even

Asher as he lands on the ground to see the upcoming tsunami heading our way.

Before I can say something, Asher is running swiftly toward us, passing the elemental madness that's happening around Alaric as if it doesn't affect him.

The moment Asher reaches us, he spins around and claps his hands.

“Return what should have never been broken. Alla Le Vek No Rouche.”

The spellwork sends chills through me as the atmosphere intensifies around Asher with the outstretch of his arms in front of him. His spread hands charge with bolts of black and purple, and with a soft whistle from Asher's lips, it feels as if the spell has sealed Alaric's fate.

His screams are deafening, yet he still fights to get out of this invisible prison that I'm realizing is taking physical shape.

The golden arrow that still pierced deeply in Alaric's chest glimmers brilliantly shoots a tiny beam of light a few feet into the air. The flames and visible threads of wind crash into the golden beam of light and ignite the next golden beams that multiply and arch downward to hit the expanded golden circle beneath where Alaric stands.

By the time I can truly grasp what the golden magic has created, the tsunami is only seconds away from hitting him.

“I'M WORTHY OF THE SOCIETY OF ROYALS!” Alaric screams at the top of his lungs, even as his flesh begins to melt from the excruciating heat and his skin is being ripped apart by the slices of wind. “I WILL REIG—”

He's cut off by the crushing tsunami that consumes the golden cage created by Azrael's arrow. It makes me wonder if

there's some hidden metaphor signifying Alaric's captivity.

To be a captured tool in your own burning demise.

We prepare for the tsunami that heads our way, but before it hits us, the destructive waves crash into an invisible wall.

The wall that separates us from that side of death and this side that preserves the living.

I can't grasp how long we stare at the sight that begins to fade.

Until we're only looking at a reflection of the open path and tainted forestry and not the destructive sight of flooded evidence that displays what had transpired moments earlier.

"If this is your time to disqualify me, at least make sure Ophelia gets to the red pillar," Asher whispers.

Moving my gaze to him, we share a solemn look as he works on catching his breath. He looks absolutely exhausted, but I can tell he carries not an ounce of regret about what he contributed to.

Him... and potentially Professor Blackbird?

"And why would you be disqualified?"

I look over to Professor Blackbird, realizing he's completely turned around and has to look over his shoulder to acknowledge Asher's statement.

"I..." Asher begins but stalls with a pout of his lip.

"There's nothing I saw that deems you worthy of disqualification," Professor Blackbird declares and puts his hands behind his head as if to stretch. "Shall we get moving? Unless you two wish to lose out on the final trial and die here together like Romeo and Juliet."

“How romantic,” I comment, then lift my gaze up to Professor North, realizing he, too, isn’t peering in front of him but over at Professor Blackbird.

Did they really just ignore what transpired so that we could get a form of revenge?

“Shakespeare’s work is an appreciative form of art, you know?”

“To you,” Professor Blackbird notes and notices the way I look between them. He gives me a smile before he moves one of his hands from behind his head so he can press a single finger on his lips.

Replicating the same gesture I did in the library.

“I think that Lyrica book is something we should aspire to play out.”

With a wink my way, he’s taking the lead.

“Your arms should work, Darling Nightmare,” Professor Blackbird announces as he calls back at us. “Hug your boyfriend, and let’s finish this class. I’m hungry.”

Professor North lowers me to my feet, and I work on moving my arms with a few wiggling movements.

“Good enough?” Professor North inquires.

“Good enough,” I whisper in approval before I add, “What do I need to do to get more bonuses?”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Stop being a teacher’s pet.”

“Well, guess I’ll just focus on learning how to better survive these trials instead,” I declare. *As if I’d stop nagging*

his existence during class time. I spin around and use every bit of strength in me to run, jump, and crash into Asher.

It's so unexpected, he tumbles back, and we're both on the ground in a heartbeat. Before he can say anything, I seal his lips with mine in the most scorching kiss we've ever shared.

If we weren't playing with death, I'd happily fuck this man in this desolate place of destruction just to get my brewing frustration out with how he thought I wouldn't accept him, but I'll leave that for when we get out of here.

"Any day now, Miss Guinevere," Professor North says in annoyance.

I know he's not actually annoyed with me—maybe jealous—but I'm sure he's reminding me that we're on a time limit.

Breaking the kiss that has us both catching our breath, I press Asher's wet cheeks together and give him the best menacing glare I can muster without bursting into tears.

"If you dare insult this sexy, strong, chiseled powerhouse of a body in my presence again, Asher Heathcliff, I swear I'll put you at the back of the list, and so all the gods of Nephilim and Malevolence help you, for it would take AGES... no, CENTURIES, to get back to the front of the line. You hear me?"

He slowly nods his head while he admires my upset face.

"Now help me up!" He does exactly that before I let out a huff, standing at his left side and grabbing his hand with my right one.

"Wait..." Asher whispers and turns his head to look at my annoyed gaze. "I'm first in line?"

This golden retriever of a man!

The way I give him a ‘don’t make me leave you behind’ look makes him not only smile but lean in to give me a tender kiss.

“Don’t ever leave me like that again, Sweet Cruella.”

I know when all of this is over, we’ll have to confront the threads of trauma that will be left behind for us to face in the shadows of our own bedrooms—and nightmares—but for now, with Asher’s hand in mine, I think I’ll be okay to face that and more.

“Okay, Silly Dalmatian.”

Staring back at Professor North, who’s waiting for us to finish, he briefly looks at our joined hands and can’t stop himself from giving a genuine smile that lights those dusk-colored eyes.

“Ready for your final lesson?”

I squeeze Asher’s hand as tightly as he squeezes mine in return, the two of us ready to face this final crossroad together with our chosen team.

“What’s the final lesson, Orpheus?” I use his real name to gain his full attention because I want to know what this grand finale will instill.

Staring into my eyes, he lets me see the glimmers of vengeance that seek my acknowledgment.

“Trusting your professor.”



LESSON FIVE OF N.M.U. — TRUST
YOUR PROFESSOR

“Pick two individuals from your team and head into the red pillar,” Professor D’Angelo declares for all the remaining students from various classes to hear.

I’m squeezing Asher’s hand, thankful to be holding it so no one can see how my tingling hands struggle to stay still. I’ll have to look into the after-effects of ‘your arms being broken and healed,’ but for now, I’m thankful to Professor Blackbird for granting me another bonus.

I’m sure that’s the third one.

My free hand is gripping what’s left of my cloak, the tattered material barely hanging by its silky threads from the tsunami madness. It’s all I can do to hold myself together. After this rollercoaster of a first class, I know things will only get harder with every trial that follows, but the fear I feel right now surpasses anything I’ve experienced.

This can either lead to our immediate death or invite us into a trial we may not be strong enough to prevail.

The sad part of it all is that there’s no way of backing down.

We’ve come this far, after all...

This is what we've all endured days, weeks, months, and years of training for. What some have endured hours of torture and cycles of pain to reach this moment in time. I can't let my fear of dying stop my entire team.

Odessa believes in me. I have to keep believing in myself.

"Sweet Cruella."

I blink a few times, realizing Asher has not only called my name, but my five teammates are staring at me with concern.

"Yes?" I finally answer. "Did I miss something?"

"More like our whole conversation," Kali mumbles, then quietly adds, "You're okay, right?"

"Hanging in there." No point lying. "Have you guys decided who's going in?"

Blair, Kali, Hades, and Azrael share a look before the four of them point straight at me and Asher.

"Oh." I blink and look at Asher. I don't know why I'm only now realizing his image is back to how it has been since I met him. It makes me frown deep enough to have him arch an eyebrow my way.

"Don't want to go?"

"That's not the reason why I'm disappointed."

We share a look when I hear Hades' quiet chuckle.

"She likes the 'real' you," Hades reveals, as if he knows we're pressed on time, and Asher probably wouldn't clue on to what the problem is.

"Looked pretty badass to me," Azrael admits.

"You looked different earlier as well, Azrael," Blair acknowledges.

He blushes with all our eyes on him.

“Well... I guess we all have unique sides to us, right?” he offers and smiles appreciatingly around our group. “Not sure what this final trial is about, but if we survive it, I think it would be nice to spend a night destressing from this chaos.”

“A night?” Asher huffs. “Make it a damn week.”

“A month even,” Hades mutters and looks at Kali. “What’s wrong, Kali?”

“This is when we’re getting our emblems, isn’t it?” he brings up. “What if we’re not all together?”

He has a valid point. This really is the final point that will determine official allies.

Or foes.

“We won’t know the answer to that until we face that trial,” I conclude and weakly smile. “Despite it all, thanks for surviving with me.”

We share similar looks of hopefulness before Asher squeezes my hand.

“Ready to go?” Asher whispers to me.

I swallow down my fear, giving him my best strong front.

“Ready.”

With deep breaths, we make our way to the red beam of light that’s faded significantly in comparison to when we first saw its shining brilliance.

We’re next in line. Professor North and Professor Blackbird are nowhere in sight. I don’t like that they’re missing in action, especially when I’m not sure how this final trial is about to go down.

I don't want to admit that their presence left me feeling capable of doing spells I normally wouldn't attempt, but that's the truth. I felt a need to prove my worth to both of them, and through my survival, thanks to Asher and the rest of our little team, I've accomplished that and more.

Especially with their interference.

"Asher?" I whisper his name, stealing his attention for a moment. "That final spell from earlier. With the golden cage from the arrow. What did it do?"

What mark did it leave behind?

"Gave Alaric a taste of what the fallen upon the battlefields will experience," Asher reveals and has my hand in his once more as he looks forward. "Only... I'm not sure it's temporary."

"You were going to make it temporary?" I ask for clarification.

"I was, but that cage seals Alaric's fate, for every cage needs a key for the captive to gain freedom." He pauses so he can give me his full attention. "Just like every arrow needs a bow to help strike down their prey."

"Azrael set him up for continuous suffering," I conclude, but I don't carry an ounce of pity for the man who not only broke my sister's heart but ruined her future, thanks to his selfish greed for power and fame.

"Rightfully so," Asher admits, but I feel his eyes on me, even as I look away to see Professor D'Angelo's disappointment at my obvious presence.

I wouldn't be surprised if he wanted me dead.

“Ophelia.” My eyes return to those blue-green spheres.
“What are you hiding from me?”

He could always read me so easily.

“You know, I never ever tell you this enough,” I begin, realizing it was one of my biggest regrets when I found out he was attending N.M.U. without any notice. “I love you, Asher.”

I don’t care if those lined up behind us can hear my confession. I especially don’t care about Professor D’Angelo glaring at the two of us. I just have to say this now. Not because I feel like we’re inches from death but because he deserves to know that despite the distance, the trials, and whatever is ahead, he’d always be my first.

That’s the reason why I can open my heart to more.

“I love you, too, Ophelia,” he replies lovingly.

We give our best smiles as Professor D’Angelo loudly clears his throat.

“Any day now?” he prompts.

I’d normally have a good comeback for his uninvited comments, but nothing comes to mind.

“Yes, yes,” Asher huffs as he takes the lead with my hand tightly in his. “Goodluck, Professor D’Angelo.”

“Good luck?” He doesn’t understand Asher’s comment.

Neither do I.

“You’ll need it,” Asher replies, not slowing down his stride. “If we survive what’s ahead, I’ll make sure your life becomes a living hell.”

The Professor is left speechless while I notice how the beam of red is already struggling to keep its foundation.

Asher's words make me wonder what could have encouraged his comments, but I feel no need to question him, for I know one very important quality of Asher's.

If you threaten what's his, he'll ensure you reap the consequences.

“The choice is yours.”

Never has my heart hammered against my chest so violently.

The crippling fear and rooted déjà vu that's been nagging me the moment I witnessed that red beam of light up close should have been the only warning sign I needed to back down.

Yet here I am, standing in the exact spot as my dear twin sister.

Facing the man I vowed would never betray me.

It all feels like words now, as the pool of tears that form in my exhausted eyes can no longer resist the urge to fall down my flushed cheeks.

Now I understand.

Grasp exactly why Odessa was put up against Alaric, and why he betrayed her for the sake of the presented ultimatum.

Odessa had forgotten to mention one thing to me in the depths of the white room.

Either you choose to kill the partner you entered with or offer a significant family member up for sacrifice.

Odessa didn't go through with it because she loved Alaric.

She couldn't go through with it because I'd be sacrificed in the process.

This is the challenge presented before us.

The exchange and sacrifice, if denied, would lead to our failure and encourage the downfall of the four hopeful comrades we left behind.

All the trials and deaths we witnessed seem to be all in vain.

For one of us is going to return... and the other... is all but a sacrifice.

The devastation in Asher's eyes is enough for me to accept that this decision is too much to handle.

That there is someone else who holds equal or greater value than my existence in his life.

Oddly enough, I'm okay with that ending, despite being confident that in this lifetime, my destiny was meant to be entwined with Asher's.

All I can wonder is whether he's hoping to save his father. Or a younger sibling I don't know about? Maybe he's a twin and never got the chance to reveal that fine detail face-to-face.

Asher has always been one to speak about private and family matters to my face versus any other method of communication, so maybe he never had that opportunity to confront me about those hidden branches in his family tree.

Or I could be making excuses to ensure this betrayal isn't as heartbreaking as it is.

He had mentioned there being two twins in tow. Maybe he was implying himself and Azrael. I wouldn't necessarily count, seeing as Odessa wasn't present.

So this is how she must have felt. Defeated. Heartbroken. All hope gone of a future at N.M.U. and unlocking the true secrets hidden behind those golden gates of ivory green and roses.

It's a real shame, but I now finally grasp why twins are set up for failure.

One either dies during the trial, or if both survive the plague of challenges, they're left with no choice but to either separate during this final stage or sacrifice one or the other to claim the offered bargain.

So, they're really set up to perish at the hands of the person they cherish the most—their identical self.

The glimmer in Asher's eyes draws my attention to him, and I watch as those tears fall and his shoulders sink.

"It's okay," I whisper to him and gather the strength to lift my arm and wipe his tears away. "You have someone else you need to protect outside these shadowed walls."

This may prove that the first time around, he must not have walked into the beam of red light, but instead, his teammates made the sacrifice that allowed the rest of the team to achieve their official acceptance.

Then, because he stayed back to wait for me, he has to do this all over again to gain an emblem he's already acquired once.

All these sacrifices. The repetitive turmoil. Only to fail?

It's insulting...

"I don't have anyone left behind," I whisper to him, and his confusion makes me smile before I take a steady breath. "Guess Alaric still wins."

He barely hears my words, but it leaves him more baffled by my words.

His eyes are begging for me to elaborate on what I mean—to reveal what I was holding back from him—but it doesn't matter what I say before him and the council of cloaked beings watching in the depths of the shadows.

“Make sure you have no more repeats,” I encourage him as I proudly lift my head. “Go to your classes and stick around Hades. I know he'll never lead you astray.”

“Ophelia.” He struggles to hold back a sob.

“Be kind to Blair. I may not have known her long, but I feel as though we would have been the best of friends. She's been through a lot, and I'm sure it'll take years of healing for her to be okay, but I think she has untapped potential waiting to blossom and aspire,” I urge. “Azrael is a mystery, yet he's shown enough to prove how polar opposite he is to his brother. Just let him know that I thank him for being willing to give me a sense of vengeance at the risk of his own expense.” I'm trying to gather something about Kali, but it only makes me smirk. “Tell Kali I still don't like him.”

That's so fucking funny, we both snicker and struggle to hold back sobs. Composing ourselves quickly, I swallow the lump forming in my throat as I realize I'm really going to die.

The blood Alaric was desperately trying to obtain so he could rise to the society of royals was already in their domain. All of this was but a perfect setup to bring me to the very school my sister hoped to lead me away from.

Now, my death will, once again, benefit these hidden faes of royals and gods, and I'm sure deem Odessa and me completely useless for their continued advantage.

At least we'd die together... right?

“It is time!”

We do our best not to flinch at the booming command, and I look to Asher as he struggles to summon a weapon. It takes a minute for his trembling right hand to finally manage to weave out a blade out of shadow magic.

Ironic.

“Sweet Cruella...” I know he'd never be able to finish what he wishes to express.

“Let's meet again in our next life, Silly Dalmatian,” I quietly urge and hope one day we will meet again.

In a world where we're just two normal students attending university and getting lost in the lustful joy of learning and falling in love.

My ears ring as I await the single blow that will surely stab me in the exact place Alaric did to Odessa.

Straight into her chest... above her beating heart.

The gasp that leaves my lips surprises me as my eyes widen to their full capacity. The pulsing agony that washes over me is like nothing I expected, while the droplet of blood begins to drop on the black cement floor.

No words can escape my trembling lips as the shock begins to settle in, leaving me to quiver in place and accept that death is about to take its toll.

Except it's not upon me.

“The most precious person to me is Ophelia Minerva Guinevere,” Asher declares proudly as blood pools in his

mouth. “And the second most precious person in my life is me.”

“A-A-As...” I can’t even get his name out before I’m grasping his cheeks and lowering my gaze to his chest.

Confirming this man just stabbed himself.

“You knew this was going to happen, huh?” He chokes on his own blood, needing to let out a round of coughs. His knees give out, and I catch him the best I can, the two of us dropping to the ground, which is already pooling with his blood.

“Ash... Asher... no. No, no, no.”

“Don’t lie, Sweet Cruella,” he struggles to chuckle. “I can read you better than anyone.”

“Asher!”

“I have nothing left waiting for me,” he whispers and looks up at me with a solemn expression. “You, on the other hand, do.”

“No, Asher. No, no, let me take your place! You can’t die. I... I love you! You’re first... silly...” I sob before I can control myself as I hug him tightly. “Please. Please. Don’t die. You have to be there with me. We have to attend N.M.U. together! You have to prove to your bastard father that you’re invincible! Please!”

Don’t die.

Don’t leave me.

It’s as if we were destined to never have a happily ever after.

“Don’t worry, Cruella,” he whispers, his eyes beginning to droop. “You still... got... four men in line,” he assures me and

gives a sloppy smile. “I give... them... my... perm...”

He doesn't finish.

His body goes limp as the last string of his magic undoes his magical coverup.

“Asher?” I croak and shake him in hopes this is all just a sick joke. “Please... don't go.” My whimpering plea does nothing but make me realize that he's gone.

Just like that.

A man who loved my crazed, cocky, badass self had sacrificed himself for me.

“It seems you have failed.”

My eyes widen as I glare at the committee of hidden beings who hide behind cloaks so we can't see their faces.

Knowing I'd hunt every last one of them for taking what's mine.

“What did you say?” My voice isn't sane.

No. I've surely lost my mind.

“Your sacrifice was imminent. The bargain has changed. Either you offer yourself as a sacrifice, or your team will perish.”

The silence that follows is replaced by laughter.

Cynical laughter that leaves my trembling lips.

“That's all?” I whisper, and the way I laugh is as though I've won this trial. “Easy.”

Not only do the shadows of my sister come to my aid, but the sizzling burn of my own magic seeks revenge in the most ironic way possible.

I'm only missing one last piece.

Before any words can be spoken, I happily slice my left wrist.

The gasp from my hidden observers makes me grin from ear to ear. How rewarding it is to get a surprise reaction from these sinful bastards, who deem life as nothing but a charitable donation.

“This is what you want, isn't it?” I lift my wrist up to show how effortlessly my blood flows like water. “This is why I should be sacrificed? Because my mom was a Viper? Or better yet, a Gilded Merger. I'm important because of this source of life that keeps my heart pumping, yes?”

“Stop these theatrics!” the being snaps.

It just makes me laugh in mockery at them because I'm the one in the power seat.

“Being confrontational without fearing the consequences is not theatrical,” I whisper. “Acting as if death is but an occasion to be celebrated instead of mourned should be punished.”

My smile can't get any more cynical as I let the full extent of my aura loose.

I hear every single gasp from that steel table of cloaked fae, and what better way to show them just how smart I am?

There's nothing holding me back now.

“Ophira,” I whisper the name so effortlessly, yet my command reveals the eight beings sitting at their high table. Beams of light illuminate their cloaked figures, but that move isn't enough to satisfy me.

“Hisssss!” My golden serpent is already moving out of the hidden curtain of my hair, moving along my lifted arm, seething in hunger at the scent of my blood.

“I love when beings in high positions underestimate me,” I declare with pride. “Makes moments like these much more satisfying.”

“Complete the request!”

“The fountain in the entry trial. That’s the water you all use to water the roses. The gardens, the lands of the school grounds, and even use that water to ‘purify’ the remnants of death that remain every year, yes?”

I can feel their confusion.

“They say Vipers are sneaky for multiple reasons, but a snake, in general, is only a threat when they show their fangs in warning,” I stress with importance as I watch Ophira slither closer to my bleeding wound.

I’m feeling woozy by the second, but I force myself to finish what I started.

“The moment Ophira bites my wrist, her poison will spread through my blood. The same blood that still lingers in your fountain. The same blood you use to water your wildlife. The same water that’s surely filtered to other areas I’ve yet to discover,” I announce.

The air hasn’t been tenses.

“My blood bleeds upon the very ground of my Notorious Worm’s nest. The same nest that has enough water to preserve the roses that bloom there,” I remind, knowing these bastards surely didn’t think about these little things when I was fighting to survive. “The poison will trigger a chain reaction and kill everything in its path. The roses. The gardens. The lands that

are plagued with tainted blood. The only way to stop it is by getting one who shares my blood to undo my poison, but last time I checked, my sister is missing, and my mother is but a crazed outcast for not being a useful Gilded Merger for giving birth to little old me.”

My smile couldn't be grander as I lift my arms up and dare to take a bow.

Like we're preparing for a dance.

“Stop this madness!” the booming voice demands, but I hear a tiny quiver of fear.

I smell it in the very air I breathe.

“Then you'll have to offer me a bargain,” I offer and look at the floor where Asher's body remains. “We and those who share the emblem I'm destined to wear during our official attendance at N.M.U. will safely return to campus, where we'll be taught the curriculum that will give us the tools to survive your next set of trials.”

I pause, so they're forced to register every word.

“That is... if there are any more in the near future.”

They're struggling to reply, which cues Ophira's hissing sound as she lifts her body up in preparation for darting toward my open wound.

Fangs descend and are ready to delve into my flesh.

When they hesitate, I smile, knowing my end is imminent.

“Well, then,” I say my final words. “Prepare to enjoy what it's like to burn, for my destined shadows will ensure every one of you perish from having a hand in my demise.”

“HISSSSS!”

“STOP!”

Ophira freezes at the last second before she moves to wrap around my wrist. I don't flinch at the pain from her tightened grip because she gives me the perfect coverage to send my magic to the open wound.

Until it's completely healed.

“We will abide by your request,” the strained voice proves just how angry they are.

To have to submit to the demands of someone more cunning.

Like a Viper.

I gesture to the floor.

“My boyfriend is still dead here.”

The snicker that comes from behind me only forces me to look up and see familiar dusk spheres that glimmer with so much pride.

“And you say I'm impatient,” he mutters. “You're a nuisance, Miss Guinevere.”

“Good,” I declare. “You want that from your Gilded Viper, yes?”

His eyes darken in lust at my declaration.

“Certainly.” He makes sure the word of approval is heard, but the sudden chill in the air makes him tense up and look over his shoulder.

The single clap of hands forces all to acknowledge the person walking out of the shadows and into the single beam of light that illuminates us.

Not only do my eyes widen, but I feel the striking connection that makes it almost impossible to stand still. The pull is so strong, it takes Professor North to keep a hold on me, or else I'd be at that man's side in a heartbeat.

The distance between us charges the air, and I can only grasp the way my rooted essence blares to the surface until I'm illuminated in white flames.

"I-Impossible!" The authoritative voice gasps in surprise while another powerful voice chuckles menacingly.

"I've waited five long years for this moment, but to think it has finally been bestowed to me thanks to my patience is a reward worth celebration, don't you agree, Society?"

No one speak while I can feel the tremble that comes from the man struggling to hold me back.

I watch with glued eyes as the pure white hood of the cloak lowers gracefully, revealing the tall, chiseled man whose eyes shift to various pastel colors while his white locks begin to taint in shade until they're completely black.

Like the shadows that embrace his presence.

"To try to stop me from obtaining what's destined for me is one thing, but to consistently hurt what's mine in my presence feels like an act of treason, if you ask me."

"L-L-Lord Daemon of the Kingdom of Shadows!"

"My Darling Nightmare was right about one thing. It's very good you decided the risk was too great in letting her taint everything her blood has touched, for it would be the perfect ignition, in my humble opinion." He couldn't look more delighted.

And frightening.

“Ask me why?” he prompts them, and I can only imagine those cloaked beings trembling in defeat.

“Wh-Why, my Lord.”

“For the blood of my Bride is like a moth to a flame,” he offers. “Once together, there’s no other choice but to *burn*.”

I thought I was dancing to the tune of Destiny.

The reality is my world was always destined to burn...

TO BE CONTINUED.

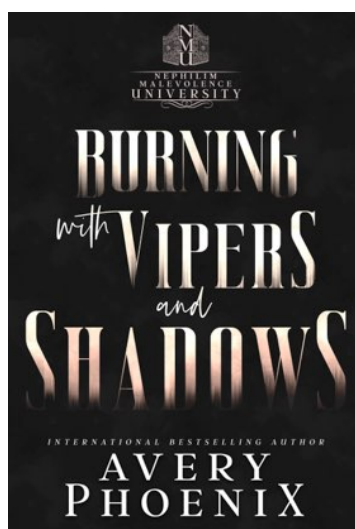
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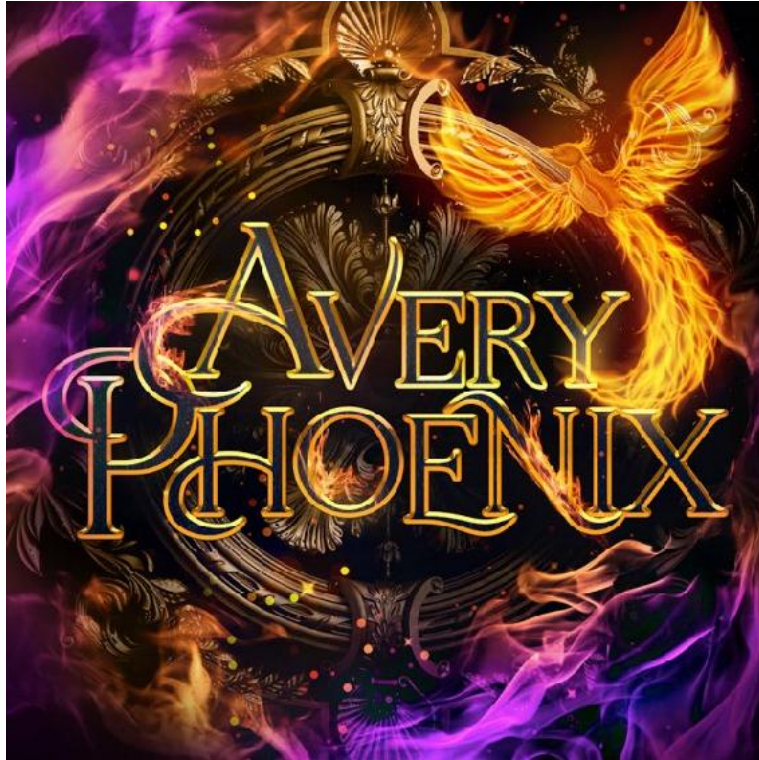
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