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book three

ALBANY WALKER

HONED IN HAVOC

CORRUPT CREDENCE

BOOK THREE



ALBANY WALKER



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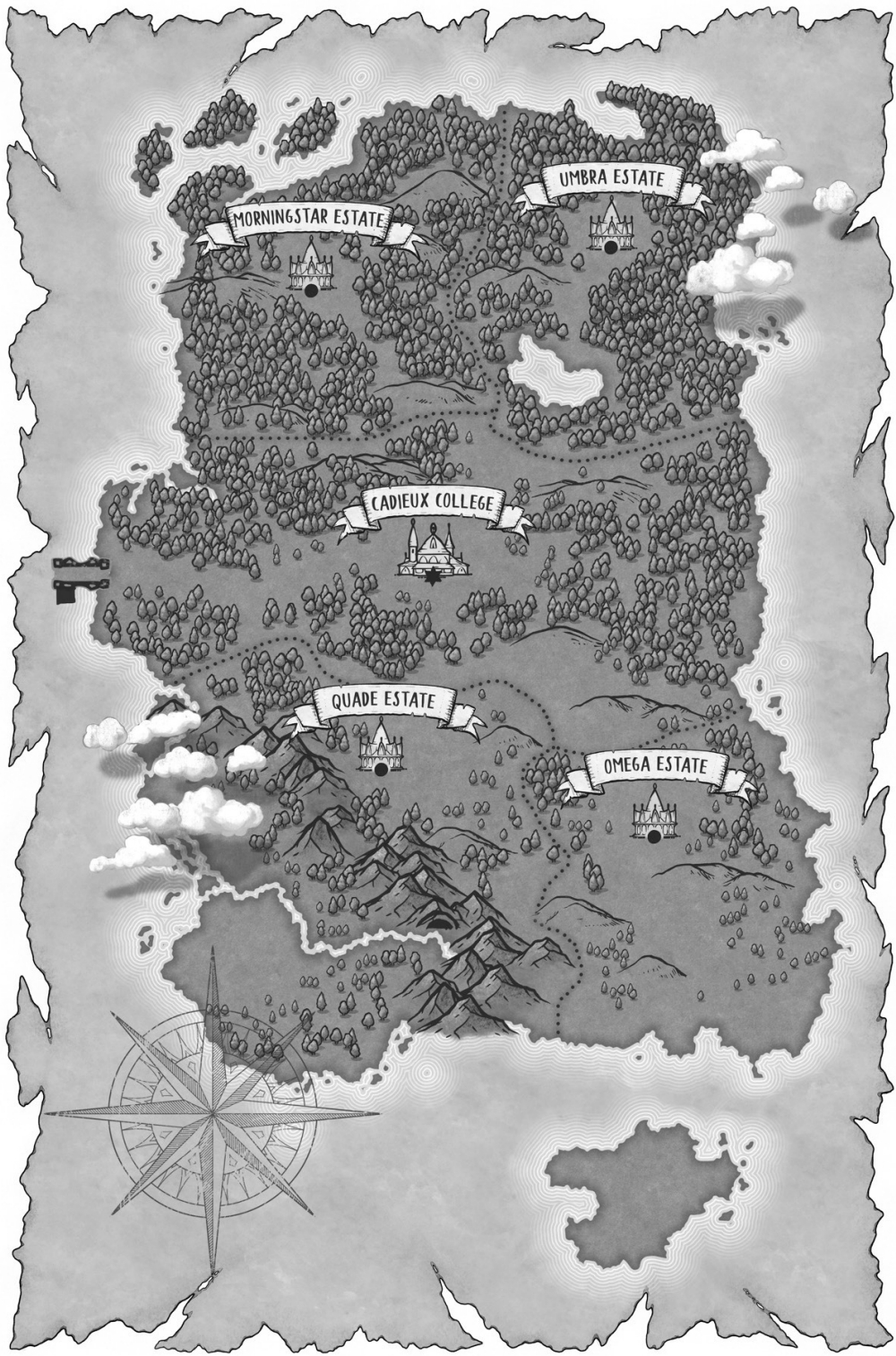
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Map of Cadieux Island

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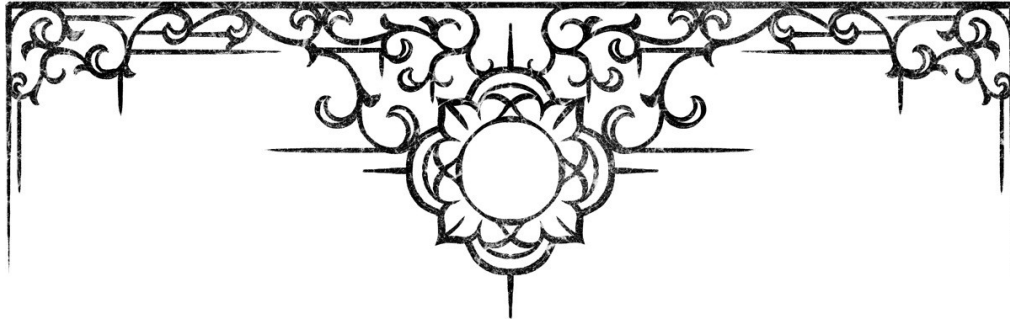
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NOVA

*H*ow many times can you wish someone would fall off the face of the earth before you have to admit that you might be willing to kill them with your own bare hands? Two, ten, or seventy-five? I'm well past those numbers.

Every single time I see Astrid, my desire to strangle her grows exponentially, as does my frustration with myself. I've been pretty much trapped in this house for the past week with Alden as my shadow when I leave my room.

Classes were put on hold after the "tragedy" on the water. There's a memorial today, and I've been told I must attend, but as badly as I want out of this house, I'm dreading it. I'm terrified of seeing Nox and Lucian. I'm sure they'll see me leaving as a betrayal, and I'm not sure I can argue with that, even though I did it to save them.

I keep going over the moment I decided to leave in my head, wondering if I made the right choice and knowing I didn't. I should have been strong and called them, explained why I was leaving and hoped they would understand and maybe even help me come up with a plan to get out of the mess we were in, but I panicked.

Looking back now, I see that Astrid took advantage of my rattled state. That's why she was so eager to get to me the

moment I agreed to leave the Morningstar territory.

I try not to think about the things I heard Lucian say on the phone—that they just used me, that I was nothing—but at night, when the room is strangely silent without them breathing beside me, it’s all I can think about.

A knock on the door startles me, even though I was expecting it. I find my thoughts drifting way too often to be considered healthy. When I rise, I smooth my hands down the sides of my black skirt. It’s the first time I’ve cared about my appearance since the day I returned to the Umbras, and it has everything to do with the possibility of seeing two brothers.

I’m faced with Rory when I open the door. His eyes roam over my face, but my returning stare is apathetic at best. I thought I actually liked him, or could learn to anyway in the beginning, but he was trying to buy my trust, just like his wife. At least I see him for what he is now—a mouthpiece for Astrid.

I get a flash of the lady who found me in the parking lot of Hooker’s, trying to warn me that I was in danger. I should be pissed at Lucian for interrupting us, because maybe she could have succeeded in convincing me when I didn’t listen to anyone else, but I can’t really muster up any ire toward him now, even despite how desperately I miss fighting with him.

“Are you ready?” Rory asks stoically.

I make a point of looking down the hallway. “I don’t see my warden. Are you sure I’ve been granted leave?”

“She’s meeting us in the car.”

I snort. “I guess I should have said my prison guard instead. I don’t expect her to do something as lowly as escort me.”

Rory’s face becomes tight for a moment, smoothing out some of the fine lines marring his features. It’s the only indication that what I said even registers, or maybe he’s bothered that he admitted Astrid was my keeper when I was alluding to Alden.

“I don’t suppose the dead man walking can be seen yet though, right? Considering there’s an axe over his head and you’re harboring him.” I feign innocence while talking about Alden. “Might be a bad look for the family.”

“I suppose you’re correct. I also suppose he won’t live very long, even after his name is cleared.” Rory looks at me pointedly, as if he’s divulging some wisdom I didn’t already know, but he’s wrong. I know Lucian will kill Alden the first chance he gets, I only wish he could have done it sooner.

The moment the thought registers, I almost feel bad about it, but as soon as the regret tries to worm its way into my heart for wishing him dead, I remember his part in all this. From the beginning, he’s known my role and what would be expected of me, and he didn’t have the decency to warn me, let alone do anything to stop it.

What I truly regret now, though, is asking Lucian not to kill Alden or speaking up for him at all.

“I see that’s not a surprise to you. Keep that in mind for later.” He lifts his hand and twists to the side, motioning for me to exit my room.

“Why would I keep that in mind for later?” I prod, feeling like I’ve fallen for some sort of ploy, but unable to refrain from asking anyway.

“All information is valuable, Nova.”

“You guys and the cryptic crap. Doesn’t it get old?” My question is rhetorical, but he answers under his breath anyway.

“A great deal.”

The rest of our journey to the waiting car is silent. I use the time to mentally prepare myself to see my grandmother. I never know what her approach will be. Some days, she pretends to be kind and sympathetic, but it never lasts long. The moment I don’t bend at the knee for her, she reverts to her tyranny.

Today, she goes right for the throat. “Is that what you’re wearing? Seems a little snug.” I wonder for just a breath if she’s going to try to make me change, but instead, she

continues after her insult. “Hurry, hurry, we’ve wasted enough time.”

I fight not to tug on the fitted black skirt wrapped around my thighs and butt. One of the reasons I chose it was because it was mine before I came here, and I don’t owe her or anyone else for it, just like my shirt, but my self-esteem takes a nosedive even as I pretend her words don’t bother me.

Rory places a guiding hand on my back, urging me forward into the back of the waiting limo. I always thought I wanted to ride in one of these things, but I’d rather sit in the trunk than ride next to her at this point.

As soon as the man outside the door closes it, Astrid begins lecturing me. “This event will inevitably get some press. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of the consequences if you choose to comport yourself in a less than desirable manner.”

“You’d do well to remember, Grandmother, that I’m not the only one who stands to lose something here. I think we know which of us knows how to survive losing everything.”

A contrived smile curls her painted lips. “You might just prove yourself to be an Umbra yet.”

“My name is Devlin,” I remind her before turning to look out the window. It’s probably obvious where I’m looking—the Morningstar gate. I’m not trying to hide it, since there’s no point, but my heart does an extra pitter-patter when I see the large, looming gate ahead of us. My muscles actually twitch, almost forcing me to get up out of this car and make a run for the iron entry on the opposite side of the lane.

There are two guards stationed in front of the Morningstar entrance, and one is Lev, their head of security. I swear he can see me behind the tinted glass, or maybe his scowl, which seems to be following me, is just a figment of my imagination.

I’ve never cared much about what people thought about me, or maybe I didn’t care about the surface things, like if they liked my clothes, where I lived, or if we got our groceries from an EBT card. None of that garbage mattered, but I care about

what he thinks of me. Moreover, I care about what Nox and Lucian think of me.

I shake my head, trying to get Gertrude's disappointed voice out of my mind, saying *I told you so* to the guys. Thankfully, the ride to the school where the memorial is being held is short, because I don't know how much more of my own thoughts I can take.

There's a line of similar vehicles, all expensive and black, in front of the school that we join. Just before it's our turn to actually get out, Astrid reminds me, "Don't be foolish."

Rory is the first to exit, followed by her, leaving me to scooch across the seat and trail behind them like an afterthought. It's not as if I had much of a choice to be here, but I'll take the opportunity to see if there is any speculation about what happened to the seven people who died last weekend other than a tragic accident. I think my absence from the guys has made me doubt that Lucian can get away with killing them.

I keep my eyes trained forward and ignore the people around us. None of them are the reason why I'm here. If Nox or Lucian were around, I would be able to feel their eyes on my skin. I just don't know if they would be staring daggers at me or acting like I don't exist at all, which might actually be worse. That's how they treat all the sheep.

"Mr. Umbra, would you like to make a statement about the recent devastating events that have befallen Cadieux College? First, one student goes missing, then seven others die in a boating tragedy. What exactly is happening at this school, sir?" The leading question is shouted from a small group of what appears to be reporters. Only a couple have separate camera people, while most of them are just holding up their cell phones to capture the moment.

Rory slides his hands into his pockets and lowers his gaze, but he approaches a female reporter who extends a microphone in his direction. I see his sorrowful mannerisms for the act they are—a façade of grief to cover the utter apathy of his real emotions.

I don't think anyone here actually cares about the people who died, least of all my grandparents, but they are good at keeping up appearances. Rory's remarks in response are too soft for me to hear, so I let my gaze wander, trying in vain not to look as if I'm searching for anyone in particular.

I see several familiar faces—students from my classes, teachers, and even a few men I know who work security on the island. A girl in dark pants and a fitted white top causes me to do a double take as she eats up the brick path leading to the mouth of the school with rushed steps. A strange feeling of dread hollows out my stomach. It's like seeing a ghost, until I get another look at her.

She's related to Grace, the girl Lucian killed and has since been presumed missing. She has the same heart-shaped face and pert little nose, but her eyes tell an entirely different story. She's focused, intent in a way Grace never was about anything other than her obsession with Lucian. Our gazes meet for a brief moment, but she averts her glare, dismissing me quickly. The slight stings a little, and I want to prove something to her, that I am worth more than a passing glance, but I rein in the wayward thoughts and pull myself together. This place is changing me.

I turn away when I feel Astrid place a small hand on my upper arm to get my attention. Her lips thin just long enough for me to notice the show of emotion, but she recovers quickly and motions for me to head toward the entrance of the school. Rory wraps up his interview swiftly and joins us as we walk the gauntlet of onlookers. I feel eyes assessing me with every step, but it's easy enough to ignore them. They are inconsequential.

The school hall is filled with soft murmurs. Whispers of conversations tug at my attention as my mind tries to piece together what's being said from every direction. Platitudes dominate, useless words people voice when they don't know what else to say.

I wonder if all these people would feel the same if they knew what those seven people did to me. Would they continue

to say what great kids they all were and how they didn't deserve to die so young?

We fall in step with the others, heading toward a set of tall double doors that somewhat mirror the library on the other side of the building. For just a moment, as we step across the threshold, I'm able to forget why I'm here and what is on the line as I take in the Gothic architecture of the auditorium. Memories of the first time I saw the school filter into my thoughts. It was only a couple months ago, yet I don't feel like the same person who looked at this school with awe and wonder, but the sight before me is still too beautiful to deny.

Acres of rich wood paneling line the walls, which lead to open boxes that remind me of a fancy theater we visited in Ann Arbor for a field trip when I was in elementary school. The seats are on a slope, all focused on a stage with a heavy red velvet curtain. In front of those shuttered curtains are easels filled with what look like professional photos of seven faces I barely recognize but know more than I'd ever want to.

The muffled sounds of footsteps on carpet create a hum that feels as if it's pressing in on my ears. I force myself to swallow, trying to get rid of the pressure, but it doesn't abate, not even as tension tightens my back when the feeling of being watched crawls up my spine.

I turn my head too fast to go unnoticed, and my eyes lock on two figures looming near the back of the expansive room. I'm not close enough to see their eyes, but I don't need to. I can feel them peeling off every layer of my clothes and skin, stripping me bare.

My entire body freezes, and I forget to breathe as the desire to run over to them tightens my muscles.

"Nova." Astrid's hissed prompt breaks the spell, and I drag in a much needed breath.

I have no idea how long I've been staring at the brothers, but it doesn't feel like it's been long enough, even as my heart pounds with the need for oxygen.

“I know this is upsetting. Have a seat, dear.” I don’t miss the warning note in Astrid’s tone, but I don’t care to heed it. Besides, I can’t seem to look away from the Morningstars. It’s like they’ve captured a piece of my soul.

Lucian shoves off the wall and walks away without a backward glance in my direction. I’m not prepared for the immediate pain in my chest or the feeling of rejection. There was some deep-rooted part of me that thought they would save me from the fate I imposed on myself.

When Nox joins his brother and walks away, I drop into the seat—not because I want to or because I was told to, but because my legs don’t seem capable of holding me up anymore.

I grit my teeth and focus on the stage, not really seeing what’s in front of me at all. The image of Nox and Lucian walking away without even a wave or head nod sours the tiny bit of hope I was clinging to. Something in my soul shifts. I don’t know how else to describe the hardening of my heart, but it’s too big to ignore.

Astrid digs her nails into my forearm as she places what would look like a comforting hand on my arm to everyone else. The pain barely registers, but her touch rattles the cage around my chest. With a slow, deliberate movement, I turn to face her. “Get your fucking hands off me now.” I don’t lower my voice, and I sure don’t soften my tone for her or anyone else’s benefit.

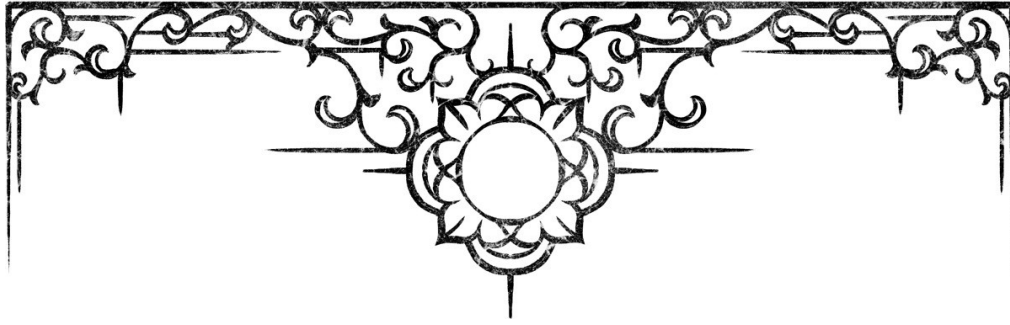
She snaps her arm back, and her eyes dart around quickly, assessing who else may have heard me. Rory leans forward from her other side, probably to intervene, but I snap, “Don’t bother,” then hold up my arm to display the four crescent marks she left behind.

His eyebrows furrow before he sends a questioning glare at his wife. There’s a silent exchange between them that’s lost on me, but neither of them looks particularly pleased when they resettle in their seats as if nothing happened.

A throat clears behind me, and on instinct, I look over my shoulder, seeing a face I recognize. Morozov is seated almost

directly behind me, but the look of complete disdain covering his features catches me off guard, and I quickly avert my gaze. Seems like my bravery may be reserved for the Umbras and their brute, because bravery is the last thing I feel when he looks at me. Shame tries to niggle its way past the lump in my throat, but I shove the useless emotion down.

The hair on the back of my neck actually tingles with awareness with him seated behind me, but I don't brush my hand over the strands like I want to so I can get rid of the feeling. Instead, I lock my eyes and chin straight ahead, pretending to ignore my fear of him sliding a knife into my back—or maybe I'm longing for it.



NOVA

The memorial is worse than I could have imagined. Too many people are allowed to litter the stage with their words and presence, sharing stories about the people who were willing to let me die on a bathroom floor.

I zone out after a few minutes, but the thoughts rattling around in my empty head are worse than the sugarcoated crap everyone spews. After a damn slide show and some sad music, it finally concludes. The floor lights brighten just enough to see Astrid dabbing at the corner of her eye with a tissue. What a fucking joke.

A snort of frustration escapes, but I don't bother hiding it. There's no point, since I know she's already pissed at me. Just before I can get to my feet and exit the row, my head is knocked forward, and I feel a pinch on the back of my neck. On instinct, I reach up and cover the spot as someone brushes past behind me. When I turn my head, it's just in time to see Morozov walking up the center aisle, leaving the auditorium after his hasty exit from the row behind me.

When the lights brighten to allow everyone to exit, I look at my fingertips after removing them from my neck, expecting to see some blood or something to explain the slight sting, but there's no evidence of him doing anything. I know he did

though. It's probably some sort of warning from Lucian, and I highly doubt it was an accident.

When I do get to my feet, I get a headrush, making me sway a little. As soon as I grab onto the back of the chair to stabilize myself, I recover fairly quickly. It's Astrid's presence behind me, urging me to move, that prompts me to release my hold and take a few tentative steps. When I don't crumple to the ground, I grow a little more confident and stride forward. After being on the receiving end of Lucian's and Nox's chilly reactions, all I want to do is get the heck out of here.

I wiggle and dip my way through the crowd, knowing it's going to piss off Astrid because I'm not staying close to her, but I don't care, or maybe I do care and I want to piss her off. Her threats aren't nearly as effective as Lucian's, and I never listened to his.

As I breach the doorway, I pull in a breath of cooler air from the hallway, but it's my only taste of freedom, because a man steps directly into my path. "Miss Umbra." He looks and sounds bored when he addresses me. I would bet a crisp twenty he's Umbra security.

"Devlin," I correct while meeting his gaze. He averts his eyes without acknowledging me further, so I step to the side to move past him, but he mirrors my movement.

"Your grandparents aren't far behind," he states as if I need the reminder.

I glance over my shoulder in time to see Rory and Astrid just a few feet away. "I hope they pay you well for your role in my incarceration, or maybe..." I put my finger to my lip and pretend to think. "You just like the thought of aiding in a false imprisonment. Is that how you get your kicks?"

The man's nostrils flare, but he doesn't show any other outward sign that my words affect him.

"In a hurry to get home?" Astrid asks when she reaches my side.

"If it means getting away from you, sure." It's surreal how easy it is to be a brat. It's like the filter I used to have of

niceties and platitudes eroded the moment she conned me into returning. I really don't care what she thinks about me, not when I know it won't have any effect on the outcome of the future she has planned for me.

"We just need to make a pit stop in the president's office." Astrid ignores my words while giving the security guard a plastic smile.

He nods once and turns to lead the way down the hall where I diligently follow without making a scene—anything to get out of this school faster.

"We won't be long," Astrid says, and the wall of muscle halts his footsteps, perfectly understanding her rejection of him joining her past the office door. I cross my arms and wait between them. I don't need to follow them into the office, and it's not like this guy is going to let me out of his sight.

"Nova," Astrid grits out. I bet it pisses her off that she even has to say my name, and I don't just fall in line like everyone else around her.

"Astrid," I retort.

"I would like to speak with you privately for a moment." A single sharp brow lifts on her too smooth face.

"People in hell also want ice water. Let's wait and see which happens first."

She reacts quicker than I do, slapping me across the face with enough force to make my head snap to the side and my hair fly out around me. In my defense, other than when I was attacked, which I still don't really remember the details of, I've never been hit.

I'm slightly embarrassed that I want to cry—not from the pain, though it does sting, but from the humiliation. I don't look back at her until I regain my composure which, blessedly, only takes a few seconds.

"Feel better?" I lick the corner of my mouth where I think her nail may have caught me, because the burn is a little more intense there.

“My goodness.” She huffs with wide eyes and takes a full step back from me. “You are infuriating.” She is blaming me for her reaction, which is par for the course.

“I don’t think this will surprise you, but I feel exactly the same way about you.” My hands are balled into fists, and the shame I felt for letting her hit me turns into something hot and livid. I know there’s no way either man watching would allow me to touch her, but the rational part of my brain checked out a while ago. The desire to strangle her sends a tremor down my arms, and my feet move involuntarily to take a step toward her.

A hand clamps down on my shoulder, just as Rory steps in front of Astrid to protect his wife. His eyes are squinted in what almost looks like concern, but I know it’s an act, just like everything else.

“Why don’t you go ahead, Astrid? I’ll bring *Nova* home.” The way he says my name with such tightness is at odds with his expression.

“Fine.” She pushes back hair that’s not out of place and storms off the way we came without looking back.

“You shouldn’t push her, Nova. You don’t know what she’s capable of,” Rory utters softly enough that I don’t think the guard who released my shoulder when Astrid walked away could hear him.

I look up at the ceiling in sheer exasperation, but what I see has every emotion I thought I felt turning to ice. Lucian is standing on the third floor, leaning casually on the wooden railing, and staring right at me with Nox at his side.

The heat on my cheek flames even more when I realize he could have seen what Astrid did, then sadness grips me. They both promised they would never let anyone else touch me, and I was a fool for believing them.

I drop my eyes before Rory notices I’m looking at something. “Can we go?” My voice cracks, but thankfully I know there’s no way the Morningstars could hear it from their perch. This hurt is way worse than the slap.

“It might be best if we gave her a little more time to cool off.” He reaches up like he might touch my cheek, and I flinch away from him. He slowly lowers his hand and steps back. “And your face is still pretty red.” The reminder is unneeded, but I’m not going to bark at him about it.

“It’ll just look like I’ve been crying, right? So was everyone else.”

“It’s only one side, Nova.” He almost sounds remorseful, but I can’t trust it. I can’t trust anyone here but myself.

“Okay.” I move past Rory to lean against the wall, trying to conceal myself from the prying eyes above.



LUCIAN

Impotence is not a feeling I know well, but it badgers me now as I stand on the third floor, waiting for Morozov.

“She looked upset... sad.” Nox pierces the silence with words I didn’t need nor want to hear. I don’t have a response for him. I fear if I open my mouth, I will scream in pure rage.

Astrid has taken everything from us. First my parents, now Nova, and I stood idly by and allowed it to happen.

The elevator chimes, and I stalk over to greet whoever is foolish enough to cross my path other than Morozov.

Luckily for everyone, the slim build of my tech specialist comes into view as the doors pull back and he steps out. “It’s done,” he states, answering my question without me needing to ask. I nod once, still incapable of much else in the moment, and the sound of heels echoing up from the floor below draws my attention.

Fury narrows my vision until the frail-looking, older woman is the only thing I see. Astrid is sauntering down the hall with a delicate sway to her slim hips. It would be so easy to break her. My hands tighten on the railing to keep me from going directly after her.

Nox, sensing my anger, joins me at the edge of the balustrade. The elbow to my side seconds later jolts me from the thoughts clouding my head, allowing me to see my lamb near the back of the small group. The rigidness of her back and stiff way she walks tells me how uncomfortable she is, but it's her beautiful face, cast with a frown, that reinvigorates my desire to kill her grandmother. I didn't think I could hate the woman more than I did after what she did to my parents, but I was wrong.

I could take Nova now. There's only one guard, and Rory would be easy to deal with. Nox grips my forearm tightly. He knows exactly what I'm thinking and proves it when he whispers, "Not now, we would never get her out of here safely."

My muscles slacken as the feeling of weakness rattles me. The sentiment is unfamiliar, yet it's visited me too often recently. I know Nox is right, the Umbras have too many people here for us to be successful in getting Nova back to our property, but I hate it.

The sounds of their soft murmurs float up, but their words are lost in the space. Nova is facing off with her grandmother, and pride tamps down the wrath simmering in my blood, but my breath catches when I see Astrid's arm lift, because I know what's going to happen. My entire body reacts to the slap as if I felt the blow, stiffening until I feel like shattering.

"Fuck!" Nox's grip tightens on my arm, but it barely registers. Nova shakes her hair out of her face and meets her grandmother's stare, while Rory and the guard step in to block my girl and protect Astrid.

The desire to launch myself over the spindly railing is almost too much to ignore, but the darkest part of my brain, the place I didn't know existed before losing my parents,

recognizes what a disastrous idea it would be. There's calm rationale there that I embrace. I will get Nova back. I will make sure there is no chance of anyone ever taking her from me again.

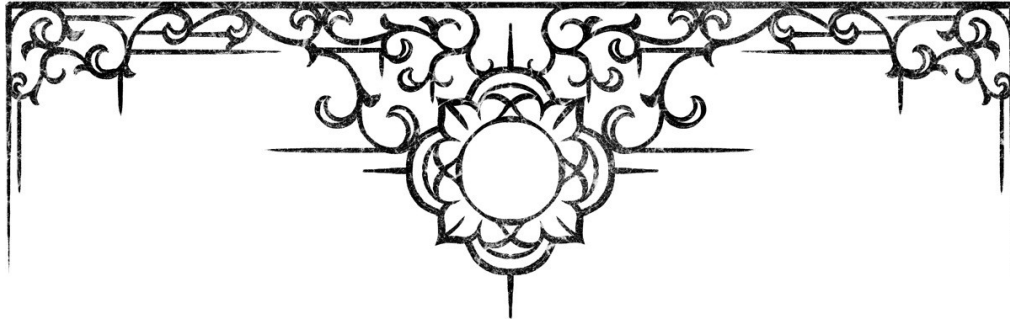
The tension in my body abates, and I'm able to take a deep breath. Astrid and the guard return the way they came, leaving Nova alone with Rory. He leans in to say something, and my lamb looks up. Our eyes lock, and her features slacken in surprise before she quickly drops her gaze to ignore me.

Darkness twists inside me again, and I know I'm on the brink of losing it, of risking everything just so I can touch her.

I tell myself she's being smart, not alerting Rory to our presence, but I know there's more to it than that. I saw her questioning face in the auditorium, and I knew she wanted some sort of sign from us that we understood what she did, but we didn't give it to her.

The truth is, I'm so fucking mad at her that there will be consequences to her actions, and ignoring her is only the beginning. I've spent the last week thinking about what I will do to her once she's back with us, and the ideas have only gotten more depraved. The tracking device currently lodged in her neck is only the first step, and it's never being removed.

The first spark of happiness I've felt in days rushes through my system when I think about her reaction to knowing I had her implanted with something that will make it impossible for her to ever get away from me, and how pissed she will be at me because of it. I can't wait to see how she will make me pay.



NOVA

With the chair propped under the doorknob to my room, I head straight to the bathroom and lock myself behind yet another door. My face isn't as red as I feared, but I still turn left and right, examining my features.

The slight twinge in my neck reminds me of the pinch I felt at the memorial, so I twist around and lift my hair. There's a tiny red spot that I run my fingers over. I wonder if there was a spider or bug on my neck that bit me when Morozov bumped into me.

Thinking about Morozov turns my thoughts right back to the Morningstars. I prepared myself for Lucian's fury, but not for such a chilly reception from Nox. I think I took the notion that he would still be on my side for granted, and the realization that he's not hurts way worse than the slap or anything else that's happened recently.

I want to cry again, even though I'm mad at both of them. My emotions are all out of whack, and I hate it. I want to rip this bathroom apart, break the stupid fucking mirror that only shows my stupid sad face, and scream at the unfairness of it all, but that would be useless.

I pull open the first drawer and sort through the items I never put there. There's a glass file, a tiny pair of cuticle

scissors, and a few other sharp little tools that I line up on the counter. I've been collecting things I can use as a weapon if the need arises, and these will go perfectly with my stash. I leave a few in the bathroom to use if I need them, but the glass file comes into the bedroom with me.

When Bridgett came into the room to "tidy up," I locked myself in my bedroom and spent the time cleaning it so she wouldn't be able to find and report my makeshift weapons under my pillow and mattress right next to the money I was absolutely shocked to find in my room when I returned. I keep thinking about ways to steal a knife, but the opportunity hasn't presented itself yet.

There's no way I'm getting caught off guard if Astrid sends anyone in here to get a head start on the baby factory. Knowing I have something, even if it's small, to protect myself, is the only thing keeping me sane until I can find a way out of this house and off this goddamned island.

An eerie calm settles over me, and I take a deep breath as a new thought enters my mind. Maybe leaving this island isn't the best idea. Maybe instead of running, it's time to stand and fight.



NOVA

I'VE ACCEPTED the fact that I'm slowly going crazy. It's been days since I've seen anything but the walls of my room, and you'd think I wouldn't have much to complain about. Food is served to me three times a day, just like the inmate I am, but I'm sure it's much better quality than what the guys get at county. I have the TV to keep me entertained, but how much

true crime and reality television can you watch without rotting your brain? Most importantly, no one has bothered me. Alden, Astrid, and Bridgett haven't tried to come into my room in the past week. I'm starting to think maybe I'd like to see someone for longer than five seconds when they hand me my tray of food, so I take a chance and leave my room for the first time.

I have the thick glass file tucked into the waistband of my leggings, but it doesn't make me feel very safe as I creep down the hall. I have a few goals in mind. I want to scope out the security situation, and if I can manage it, I'd like to get my hands on some better defensive supplies. Being at the mercy of my captors is getting old really quickly.

I freeze when I see the first person in the hallway. It's a male staff member, but I have no clue who he is or what he does. He gives me a deferring head nod as he passes me, but that's it. He doesn't demand I return to my room or ask what I'm doing, so I get a little more confident.

Each person moving around the house treats me with the same indifference. They don't speak to me, but they don't ignore me either. A welcome sense of relief loosens my limbs. When I reach the perimeter of the house, I know I have a decision to make, and it's not an easy one. I can head toward the kitchen and try to get a knife under the guise of getting some snacks, or I can try to get outside and see how that goes.

I know which option I'd like to choose, but I also know it's not the smart one. Thinking I could escape on luck alone is dumb, but the desire to get out of here is so strong, it's hard to ignore. It's like there's something telling me that this is my only chance, but I tamp that feeling down and head back to the kitchen.

Alden is leaning against the wall a few doors down. I had no idea anyone was following me, let alone him. My hand goes to my waist on instinct to feel for the file, but I try to make it look like I'm just planting my knuckles there in frustration. "Why are you skulking around behind me?" I don't have to project irritation, the feeling is genuine.

“Making sure you don’t get yourself into trouble.” He shoves off the wall and moves a few steps closer. I don’t back up, but I want to.

“What the hell kind of trouble could I get into in this museum?”

“You never seem to have a problem finding it.”

“Are you planning on following me everywhere I go?”

“That depends on where you’re going.” His voice raises at the end, making his remark sound like a question.

“The kitchen,” I say quickly, like I haven’t put any thought into the answer.

“You’re nowhere near the kitchen.” I can hear the skepticism in his tone.

“So kill me for not knowing my way around.” After the words are out of my mouth, I realize I should really think about filtering my thoughts, especially when I’m around people who couldn’t care less if I lived or died.

“It’s this way.” He tilts his head to the right and turns as if he’s going to show me the way. I don’t know if I should be a brat and hope he goes away or accept his offer and hope he leaves me alone. After a brief moment of thinking, I decide on the latter and approach him slowly, still making sure to keep some distance between us.

He watches me out of the corner of his eye as we walk through the expansive house. I can’t help but compare it to the Morningstar estate. It’s brighter here, but it feels so much darker, which makes no sense at all.

“I was surprised when I heard you were out of your room,” Alden finally says, interrupting my thoughts.

“It’s good to know you have people watching me.” The words are out of my mouth before I think. I probably should have kept that knowledge to myself too.

“Yeah, well, we all know you don’t want to be here.” He sounds disappointed.

I want to ask if he can blame me for not wanting to be here, but I think I've learned my lesson for the moment, so I keep my mouth shut. "I wasn't even sure I was allowed out of my room." Maybe changing the topic will get him to divulge a little information about the rules of my captivity.

"No one told you that you couldn't leave your room."

"No one told me I could either."

Alden shrugs in answer.

"Am I allowed outside? Will I be able to return to school?" I probably sound too eager, but anyone in my position would be, so I don't think that will be too big of a tell.

"Outside, sure. You'll be confined to the estate." He glances over at me for my reaction.

"What about school? Are they back in session yet?" I ask instead of making a big deal about going outside, because that feels like a lifeline if I've ever heard one.

"Most everything has transitioned to online for the time being. Attendance isn't mandatory, and the assignments have been reissued into a pass-fail situation, pretty much guaranteeing everyone will get a pass as long as they show the tiniest bit of effort." His tone suggests he doesn't approve of the school's lax protocol.

"It's been a crazy year," I mutter mostly to myself, not bothered by the change—not that it even really affects me anyway. I wasn't passing my classes on my own before all this happened, so it only seems fair everyone else gets a break too. I imagine it's pretty hard to study when one student is still missing, and seven others are dead. Life on campus isn't easy at Cadieux.

"The kitchen, as promised." Alden waves a hand, and the two women toiling around both stop to look in our direction. I note the difference between the Umbras staff and Gertrude. The weathered older woman is like family to the boys. She cares for them, and it's obvious she's more than hired help, but these two women—both in crisp gray dress uniforms that

include a small white apron—look surprised to see us, as if no one in this house would step foot in the kitchen.

“Hello.” I give them a sheepish wave.

“Do you need something, miss?” the older of the two inquires, turning away from her task to address me.

“Snacks, if you don’t mind.”

“Are the meals being delivered not to your liking? We stuck to the diet as requested by Mrs. Umbra.”

“Diet?” I question with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, yes. She said we should keep your calories and carbohydrates low.”

“Did she now?” I grit through my teeth, not expecting that truthful answer.

“I could request a change if you’d like,” she offers with enough reluctance that I know she doesn’t want to appeal for a change, nor will she make one without my grandmother’s consent.

I shake my head. “Don’t bother.”

“She didn’t say you couldn’t get your own food,” the younger of the two women pipes up while darting a quick glance over at the woman who is probably her superior.

A smile curls my lips. “That’s good to know. What’s your name?” I mosey farther into the kitchen while both ladies watch me as if my head is about to spin around and pea soup is going to make an appearance.

“Bethann,” she supplies easily. I wonder silently if she’s being nice because she thinks what Astrid has done crossed the line, or if she has another motive. Everyone in this place understands the hierarchy better than I do. Maybe she’s hedging her bets because she knows I will be the one in power at some point—if I stick around that long.

The thought is jaded and far beyond my normal concerns, but as it turns out, I’m adapting and learning how to survive,

which isn't a new concept to me. The fact that I'm thinking about how I can use her in return is new though.

When I start to open cupboards and cabinets, the older woman ushers me toward a door after looking toward the hall I came from, probably to see if anyone is around to see her showing me where the snacks are. I glance over to see the space empty. Alden is no longer trailing me, or at least he's no longer visible.

She opens the door to what turns out to be a huge pantry. The shelves are organized better than the Shop-N-Save back home. I head straight for the shelf stacked with little bags of chips in all different varieties after a brief perusal.

"We put those in the security guards' lunches," the woman confesses as if it's a crime to even have them here.

"Don't be shy to add a bag or two to my tray," I say mostly to chat since I know she's going to stick to my grandmother's plan. "So what's on the menu for today?"

"Roasted chicken with glazed carrots and a microgreen salad."

I pull a face. The only lettuce I like is iceberg, but romaine will do in a pinch. I hate the weedy crap though. It all tastes like bitter dirt. "Yippee," I mock and tug open a bag of Funyuns to crunch on.

"Is there anything else we can do for you, miss?" Not Bethann asks while glancing back into the kitchen as if she's afraid someone is going to catch me in here eating, or her talking to me.

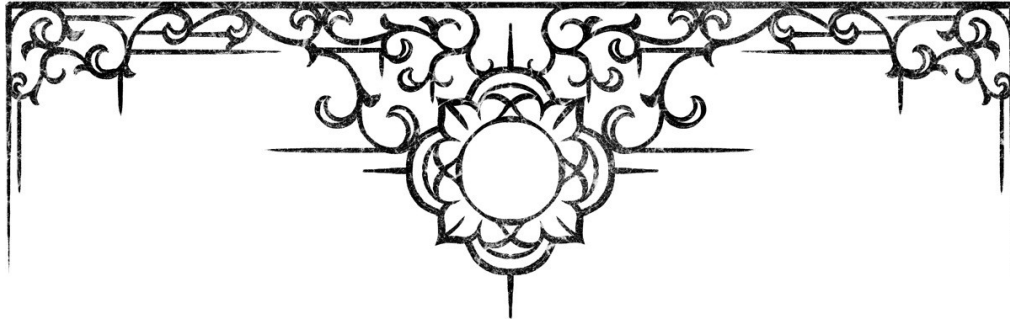
"Not unless you have a cream soda around here somewhere." I'm only half joking. I don't even drink pop often, but I would love a Faygo right about now.

"I'll put some on the order list," Bethann says quietly.

I grab another couple bags of chips before taking my leave. Snacks weren't really my main goal—moving around the house and getting a feel for what's going on was—but I'm not going to turn down the salty goodness. Plus, there's the added

benefit of knowing I'm pissing off Astrid. A win is a win, even if I didn't get a knife this time.

“Thank you.” I wave before checking if the coast is clear of Alden. I wouldn't be surprised to find him lurking down the hall just out of sight, waiting for me, but I don't see him on my return trip to my room to drop off my pilfered snacks, or even when I head back out to roam the mansion to see what other information I can glean.



NOX

I roll my head to the side and observe Lucian, who's glued to his phone per usual. Ever since we got home from the memorial a few days ago, he's been obsessed with tracking Nova and plotting to get her back. I was right there with him at first, but when nothing came of watching the little blip on the screen, I started to feel like time was being wasted. Maybe I should have just let him go after Nova when we were at school. There's a chance we could have gotten her out of there.

"Shouldn't we just go fucking get her?" I plead for what must be the tenth time in the past two days.

Lucian turns his head to glare at me. "Do we really need to go over this again?" I really hate it when he talks to me like I'm stupid. The pressure of getting her back is eating at both of us.

"We should fucking do something other than sit here with our dicks in our hands."

"We have a plan, Nox. We need to be patient."

"Why?" I shrug, pissed off. "Do you think they will mount a war on us if we manage to get her once they allow her out of the fucking house—*if that ever happens?*"

“I absolutely hope they want a fucking war, but not until they no longer have her. If we move against them now, we’ll risk them taking her someplace where it will be even harder to reach her, or worse, punishing her for what we did. The only fucking thing keeping me from losing my mind is knowing they still think they can win her over.”

“How the hell does that help you?” I snap, hoping his answer will offer me some kind of solace.

“What do you think they will do when they realize she will never agree to be what they want? They aren’t going to suddenly give up and let her go. They will do *whatever* it takes to make sure they have a successor.”

“Fuck off, I know that.” I spring to my feet after he voices the shit I’ve been thinking, which is why I want to go get her now. Fuck the founder shit and everything that goes with it. They could be letting someone touch her, and it’s driving me insane to know I’m doing nothing to stop it.

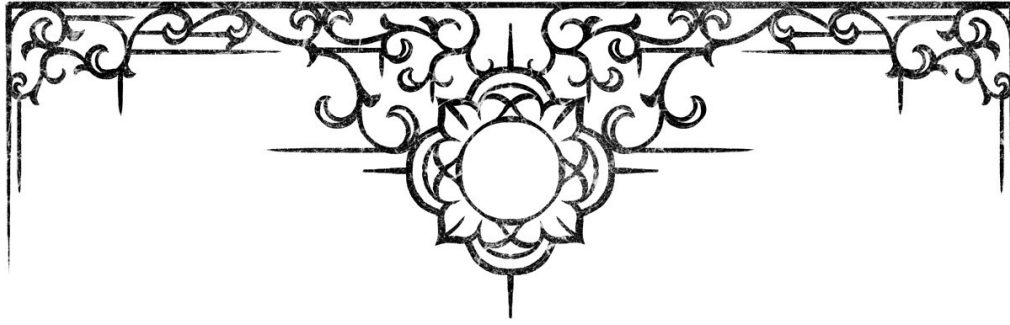
“That is why we can’t just storm their property and take her by force. There is too much to lose,” he reasons, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

“They could be telling her anything and filling her head with lies. She could hate us for leaving her there, or she could begin to believe them.” The words spill from me in a torrent of worry.

“I hope she believes them,” he says softly, unable to meet my eyes. “It will be much easier to convince her of the truth once we have her home safe than it will be to live with what they might do to her if she doesn’t go along with them.”

I drop into the chair as my legs come out from under me. I should have known my brother was two steps ahead of me and trusted him. His methodical approach has nothing to do with keeping our founding title or the island politics in order. Lucian is just as concerned for Nova as I am, which I already knew, but hearing him admit why he’s so against breaking into the Umbra estate and taking her is sobering.

“We will get her back, Nox. I promise.” I don’t take his vow lightly, but I also can’t hold him to it as much as I’d like to. The hardest part about all of this is realizing it’s completely out of our control.



NOVA

Every day I leave my room, I grow a little bolder, pushing deeper into the house until, on the fourth day, I finally decide to test Alden's words that I would be allowed outside on the grounds.

When I push the door open, I expect an alarm to sound or someone to jump out and demand to know what I'm doing, but I slip out the door and into the heat of the early afternoon without an issue. My heart, which is already beating like a scared rabbit's, skips a beat as the desire to run makes my breath catch in my chest.

The smell of the water brings memories of Nox and Lucian. A part of me wonders if I'll ever be able to stand near the ocean again without thinking of them, but I slam a lid on the thoughts trying to invade my head. This is about getting the hell out of here, not feeling sorry for myself because I was a fool.

Sweat dots my upper lip within minutes of being outside. I'm not used to it being this warm this early in the year. Back home, everything would still be gray and brown, waiting for spring to finally make an appearance.

The Umbra mansion sits much closer to the coast than the Morningstar's manor, allowing for a full panoramic view of the water nearly the moment you step outside. I stroll to a

covered seating area between the water and house to find some shade and see how long it takes someone to come find me.

Minutes pass with me pretending not to notice anything but the water, but I manage to check the watch on my wrist, which I found in a jewelry box in my room.

“I thought—” Alden’s voice startles me enough that I actually let out a small yelp when he begins speaking, but he continues undaunted. “You would have gone straight for the gate.”

“Jesus!” I huff under my breath. I thought I was aware of my surroundings, but clearly I wasn’t, because I didn’t know there was anyone near me.

“Jumpy?” I swear I can hear a smile in his voice, but I don’t look over at him. I want to hurt him almost as badly as I want to strangle Astrid, and I’m sure he will be able to see it on my face.

“You’d think I’d get used to someone creeping up on me, but I haven’t quite managed it yet.” I try to tame the snark in my tone, but I don’t do a very good job. At least I didn’t directly call him a creep like I wanted to.

He ignores my comment and divulges news I’ve been waiting for and dreading at the same time. “The Umbras have called a meeting for this evening.”

“Oh yeah, more secret crap in their underground lair.” I risk glancing over at him from the corner of my eye to read his expression. The last time a meeting was brought up, Astrid promised to somehow have the death warrant on Alden removed. I can’t tell if he’s excited about the prospect.

“The view’s not quite the same from this side of the island, is it?” Alden muses as he stares out at the water much in the same way he did the night he found me at the yellow house on the Morningstar property and expressed the same sentiment.

I search the shoreline, not sure exactly what he’s missing but seeing differences myself. The Umbra estate is all open, with the green grass fading into powdery sand without any interruption, and there aren’t any trees disrupting the view of

the ocean. Everything looks manicured, and it's as phony as everything else in this place.

That's when what's missing hits me—the wildness. The trees and forest hiding the main house at the Morningstar estate make it feel secluded, and the tall grass near the water or mounds of sand adds to its natural state. It's the feeling of being unrestrained that's missing more than anything.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if it's the same for him, but he seems to snap out of his daze and turns to face me. "You will be expected to attend the meeting," he warns solemnly, as if he thinks I might argue. Maybe I should, since I don't want him to know about the ideas running rampant in my head about how I can escape this place.

"Wow, something else I don't have a choice in," I deadpan, breaking eye contact with him.

"You confound me," Alden retorts.

"Confound you?" I scowl at his word choice.

"Yes, confound. I've seen where you came from and know how you lived." His chin is tipped up with an air of superiority, and it makes my blood boil.

I wrap my fingers around my thighs in an effort to keep them from balling into useless fists. "And?" I prompt.

"Do you really want to go back to that?"

"In a fucking heartbeat if it meant I never had to see your face or theirs again." I point toward the house. "You think being poor is worse than having your choices taken away from you?" I seethe, allowing my anger to show.

He doesn't answer for a breath, so I continue. "Yeah, let's talk again when you've actually been in my shoes." I turn my head away from him again, unable to stomach his face, but it was a foolish move.

Alden grabs my arm in a tight grip, and I look at him on instinct. His face is too close to mine, and his dark eyes are wild as they search mine. "I've had everything taken from me, even my last fucking name, so I know a thing or two about not

having choices, Nova. I thought you were smarter than this, stronger.”

I try to jerk my arm away to dislodge him, but he doesn't relent. “You don't know anything about me,” I defend, even though I shouldn't want to. I don't care what he thinks of me.

“I know that if you keep your mouth shut and do what you're told for a little while” —he shakes me by my arm— “then you can make all the choices. Stop thinking in the moment and open your eyes to what could be.” A droplet of spit hits my face as he rages.

I can't hide my sneer of disgust, but I manage to keep my mouth shut. I'm smart enough not to escalate this more, even though I'd like to pull the glass file out of my waistband and shove it in his eye.

Rage simmers in my belly, and any morsel of commiseration I felt about his death is extinguished. I just hope that when Lucian kills him tonight, I get to see some of it before I use it as a distraction to get the fuck away from the Umbras.



NOVA

A FAMILIAR BLACK robe is draped over my bed when I stomp into my room and slam the door behind myself. I look around, wondering what else they might have discovered while someone else was in my room. I check my money first, finding it in the same pocket of the wide- legged green pants I left it in, then I check my makeshift weapons, finding them all still in place. Either they aren't worried about them or didn't bother looking. I don't care which, I'm just happy I still have them.

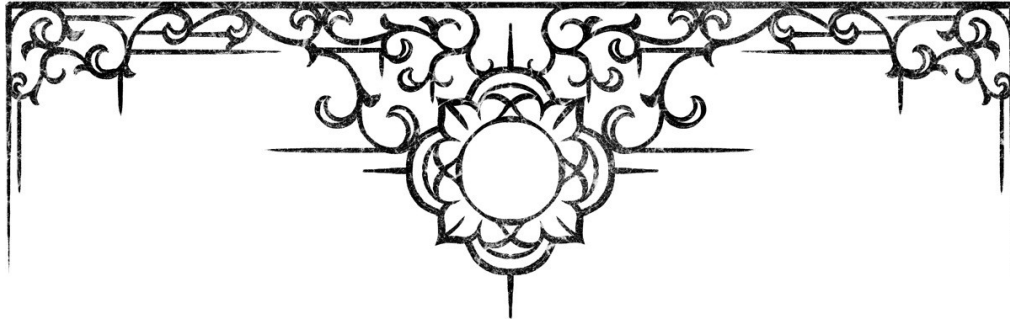
I take my time dressing, pulling on a tight pair of black leggings and a fitted black shirt. My hair gets pulled back into a slick braid at the base of my neck before I slide my feet into the worn, white sneakers I wore here. Other than wishing they were black, so it would be harder to see them in the dark, they

are perfect. I've worked countless hours in these shoes, stood on sticky floors, and walked miles home. There's nothing else I'd rather have on my feet to leave this place.

The knock on my door comes promptly at ten. I've been wearing the robe for the past hour, hood up and completely content. At some point, the fear of being trapped in the fabric disappeared, not that I'm surprised considering the reality I'm facing.

"All ready?" Alden's brows rise with what could be suspicion. I ignore him and his questioning stare and walk right past him. The money tucked into my underwear feels unpleasant, but thankfully it's soundless as I walk. The only other thing I had room for was the glass file. It's secured against my inner left wrist and forearm with a little tape just to be sure, but the tightness of the shirt is holding it in place for the most part.

My fingers are actually tingling with the desire to pull it out, but I don't. I'd never make it out of this mansion and off the grounds with it as my only weapon. I'm hoping I can get lost in the sea of robes tonight, but if I don't, or I get caught, it might be my only option.



LUCIAN

“*F*uck, they are taking her to the meeting,” I snarl when I see Nova’s tracker moving toward the gate across the street.

“Should we force them off the road and take her now?” Nox stands, ready for anything it seems. I was hoping they would leave her behind, then we could go in and take her while everyone was at the meeting, but that’s not going to happen now.

“No, we would have to kill all of them, and that would start a war with the other two families,” I reason, but I hate the words coming from my mouth.

“Who the fuck cares?” My reasonable twin tosses his arms in the air in frustration. “Why are you so afraid now? Isn’t that what you always wanted anyway? To get rid of them all?”

I stand too, pissed at everything and everyone, including myself. “The only thing I’m afraid of is losing her or you. I didn’t give a fuck about anything then, didn’t care about the risk, but I do now.”

“Bullshit!” Nox spits, even though it’s the truth and he knows it—he just doesn’t know what else to say.

“We will go to this stupid fucking meeting, and if there is any chance in hell of us getting her out of there, then we’ll

take it. They don't know we have a tracker on her, and they probably assume we won't be able to tell who she is in the robes or even know if she's there. This might be even better." A surge of excitement builds in my stomach as the idea grows.

Nox is silent for a long moment, thinking. "What if they keep her in their chambers?"

"What if they don't?" I counter.

"Do you think she would come with us?" He sounds less sure now.

"She won't have a choice," I reply. We both know I'm not exactly rational when it comes to my lamb, but she has a choke hold on me that I'm eager to indulge.

"Good." Nox surprises me with the absolute vehemence in his statement, proving I'm not the only one unbalanced. "Let's go."



LUCIAN

WE LEAVE a small contingent of security to protect the property just in case Alden or anyone else decides now would be a good time to fuck around and find out, but everyone else comes with us to the school. Not all of them will be permitted into the underground chambers, but I'm confident there are more than enough of us to handle any situation that arises.

Nova is already at the school. I was hoping they would leave her in one of the upper rooms, but when her tracker stopped reading, it confirmed two things. One, she's deep underground and the protections put in place to block outside interference work, and two, I'm addicted to seeing the dot on

the screen, which isn't a surprise. The moment she disappeared, my heart lodged in my throat, and I had trouble breathing.

I slide my phone into my pocket, knowing the device is useless to me now. Nox and I lock eyes. "We're not leaving here without her," I announce.

"Best fucking thing I've heard all week." Nox reaches for the door handle as if he can't wait to get inside.

I grab his arm, halting him. "If you get a chance to get her out without me, do it."

"Same goes to you," he replies instantly.

I don't tell him that won't happen out loud, but the denial is firm in my mind. Nox and I aren't the same. While I have no doubt he would protect Nova, I also know he's not capable of the things I am. One saving grace I'm counting on is the fact that all of the founding families' security would hesitate to kill us unless we were directly threatening their charges. I, on the other hand, will drop them all like flies if I have to.

"Stay close, but I don't want to be seen together. I'm sure they will be watching for pairs," I remind my twin. Any other time, it might bother me that I was allowing someone else to dictate my movements and actions as far as changing our patterns and behaviors, but I will use any advantage I can if it means getting Nova back.

Nox climbs out of the car first without another word and melds into the other black cloaks streaming into the school. It's the first time in a while I've been grateful that most of the founders have large families. After our uncle and his family were ousted from our family and stripped of their name, the Morningstars were left with only my mother, father, and us.

I believe that is why the Umbras had my parents killed. They tried to weaken us further, maybe even attempted to take over our quarter of the island, but the only thing they succeeded in doing was ensuring I would guarantee they received the fate they wished for us. Involving Nova only upped the timeline of their downfall.

As I merge into the group, I make an effort to look around, which is completely out of character for me, but I keep my steps slow and steady. It serves two purposes—I can look for my lamb, and it will help conceal me from their prying eyes.

The descent threatens to drive me insane. I'm only seconds away from shoving the people in front of me to create a cascade of bodies when I finally see the bottom. It was even more tempting knowing I could get rid of a few of the weaker people by letting them fall, meaning less I will have to handle later.

I'm certain Nova and the Umbras would have used the elevator from the president's office to get down here, but I don't know if they will allow her to sit with the rest of us during the meeting or keep her in the rear chambers.

Spotting Nox while I find my way toward the front of the main chamber is easy. He shifts his head in acknowledgment and takes a seat at one of the other tables a few rows behind me. As impatient as I am, I don't bare my arm to check my watch or phone because my tattoos would be a dead giveaway.

Several others are not as careful. I see Derry, the Quade I roughed up a little for talking to Nova when she first arrived. Looking back now, I know the reason I was so angry had nothing to do with me wanting her to be isolated and everything to do with me claiming her as mine in more ways than one, but the message was delivered, and he hasn't breathed in her direction since.

After she was attacked in the bathroom, I thought he or his family might have been involved in retaliation, but there hasn't been any evidence that suggests they were. It won't save them from me coming after them though, and soon, this entire island will be ours.

The heavy iron door protecting the presidential chambers whines when it opens, and I turn my head to look just as my stomach jitters. My eyes bounce over several figures until they land on one near the back, and I know with unwavering certainty it's my lamb.

I wiggle my toes in my boots to ward off the desire to shove myself away from the table and bum-rush her, and my heart thumps hard against my chest when I swear she looks at me. Everything inside me freezes until I have to force myself to take a breath and even my inhalations.

When she's guided to a seat with a hand on her shoulder, which practically presses her down, I almost lose it. I already stood by while Astrid struck her, and I'll be damned if I do it again.

Reluctantly, I drag my eyes off her and the fucker sitting way too close to her side when a single voice pierces the quiet hum, calling the room to order before beginning the Cadieux Creed.

We are the founders, eternally bound to those who came before us and forsaken by those who would command us.

Our purpose is to rule the compliant and guide the meek.

We heed our brethren, protect, and provide.

All things are ours to take and conquer.

We are but one of many, we bear the burden.

Trust only in ourselves, and seek approval from no one.

I DON'T RECITE the mantra, but those around me do, concealing my perceived offense.

Rory begins speaking almost as soon as the last word of the creed falls silent. His tone is all business when he says, "Good evening. I apologize for the short notice in calling you here, but pressing matters need to be discussed."

I wait with everyone else, eager for two very different reasons. I want him to get whatever the fuck is so important over with so I can get close to Nova, and everyone else probably wants to know what drama would warrant an emergency meeting.

"It has come to our attention that the previous decree involving the death of Alden Black, or rightfully Alden Morningstar, may need to be rescinded." Rory pauses and looks around the room as I bite my tongue to keep from

denying him the right to use our name in association with the traitor.

When no one speaks to deny the claim, Rory continues. “It seems that while Albert, his wife, and their son were ejected from the Morningstar estate, Alden was never truly stripped of his name and title, meaning he was still a Morningstar when he breached the property and calls for his death are no longer warranted or approved.”

I clench my teeth so hard my jaw aches. I want to deny his claim, but I can't. For whatever reason, my father never went through with the final paperwork to truly sever Alden from our family, and if I say something on our behalf, I will give away my location, which I fear is exactly what he wants.

I move only my eyes so no one will know my sights are locked on the only thing keeping me from losing my goddamned mind. Murmurs of disbelief fill my ears, but no one's voice stands out other than Rory's when he sighs. “Since no one is contesting this information, I'll assume the Morningstars already knew of this caveat, and since no harm has come to Alden, we will consider this matter fully resolved. We will not seek to dispute the fine we paid, even though it would be within our rights. Now, there is the matter of Alden working for the Umbras, which we never would have allowed had we known he was still a Morningstar. If I didn't trust my head of security so much, I would think he was an infiltrator for the other founding family.”

I taste blood in my mouth from biting my tongue to keep from speaking. I will set all of this bullshit right after I have my lamb back, or maybe I'll just wait until the Umbras and Alden are all dead and mount their heads on the dais for all to see if anyone else wants to say that shit again. I have no clue why my father didn't wipe their entire family out of our history, but I will fucking succeed where he failed.

“That's a bunch of bullshit!” Nova's voice rings clearly through the chamber as she pushes her hood back when she stands and faces off against her grandfather.

A sound escapes my chest at the sight of her, all pissed off and ready to argue, but knowing I was right, that even in a room full of people I could still find her blinded, churns something deep in my soul. I've never questioned if she was mine, but this confirms it further.

"You need to sit down, Nova," Rory says with a look of censure.

"Why? Are you worried some of these jackholes might find out you've basically kidnapped me and are holding me against my will?" She cocks out her hip and stares him down. That's my girl.

Another round of murmurs, this one louder, fills the chamber. Rory flicks his wrist upward and several people seated around the room stand. I rise too, hoping it looks like I'm heeding the signal as well, and walk with the others to surround Nova.

"Oh, I get it. None of these pricks care that you're a—"

"That's enough." The harsh voice cuts through her words.

"Fuck you," my lamb snarls with a look of pure hatred directed at the man at her side. Several things register in that moment. Nova has never looked at me the way she glares at him, and I know exactly who her ire is directed at—Alden. The fucker was here, right next to her.

Before I know it, my fingers are wrapped around the grip of my Glock, which is holstered at my back. It takes conscious effort to remove my hand from the weapon and slide it back into the sleeve of my cloak instead of putting a bullet in his head right now.

"Nova," Astrid says with a warning in her tone.

My lamb's eyes shift to take in her grandmother, but her expression of hatred never wavers. There is true abhorrence in her gaze. I'm pretty sure Astrid recognizes it too when she adds in a much softer tone, "We all have secrets, darling. Are you ready for yours to be spilled like blood and to suffer the consequences that will follow?"

Nova's lips thin as she keeps her mouth pressed tightly shut from the threat. As a group, we move closer to her, ushering her out of the room while she remains silent.

I don't look back at my brother or the rest of the people in the room as we're shut behind the iron door of the presidential chambers. I know the layout like the back of my hand. Our father made sure of it, even though I've never seen it in person.

My heart pounds hard against my chest. I'm close enough to touch Nova, and my fingers twitch with the need to feel her flesh, smell her hair, and taste her skin.

"God, that was stupid! Why would you defend them like you actually know anything about this?" Alden's voice isn't raised, but it doesn't need to be for the rancor to be heard.

"I didn't defend anyone. I called Rory out on his crap. *You* are not a Morningstar," Nova sneers, not backing down. I watch as Alden clenches his jaw and takes a step toward her. If he touches her, he'll die, along with everyone else in this room, consequences be damned.

"You can lie to yourself about them, but don't bother trying to convince me. I never thought you'd be like all the others who fall at their feet." He looks down at her as if he's disgusted. "Don't you get it? You could have everything they do, even more if you'd just grow up."

"You fucking people." Nova shakes her head slowly. "Everything is about what you can get and how much power you have. I *almost* feel sorry for you, but then I remember what sickos you all are, and I just wish someone would put you out of your misery."

"Keep acting like you are now, and you will know misery, Nova," Alden sneers before adding, "Don't let her out of your sight." He storms away.

I'm half tempted to follow after him and slit his throat, but I couldn't pull myself away from Nova if I wanted to. She is more important than retribution.

Once Alden is gone, my lamb looks around at the four of us left in the room with her. She does a double take after passing her gaze over me, and her breath catches before she averts her eyes hastily.

“I need to pee,” she says with too much emotion and starts walking in the same direction Alden went. I move to follow her.

“Just wait outside the door. It’s not like she can go anywhere,” someone says, sniggering, prompting Nova to flip him off over her head. My heart skips a beat. They are letting me take her alone.

She shoves the door open with stiff arms, and it slams against the wall. I ignore the other man’s instructions and follow her right into the bright white bathroom, and I don’t stop there.

My lamb fights like a demon when I wrap my arms around her waist and push her up against the wall. Her grunts and panting fill my ears as her elbow flies back and catches me in the ribs.

The sting fades fast as I run my hands over her sides, proving to myself she’s whole. When she shoves her ass back in a bid to get me off her, my brain short-circuits, keeping me from asking the question poised on my tongue.

My lapse is enough to allow her to spin. I catch a glint in her hand right before I feel something poke into my neck. Instinct tells me to back away, but I lift my chin, waiting for her to pierce my skin, but she hesitates.

“Have they touched you, lamb?” My voice is barely familiar to my own ears.

“I knew it was you. Are you insane?” she hisses, not removing whatever she has digging into my neck. In fact, I swear she applies more pressure. I think the only time my cock has been harder is when I was inside her. “Stupid question,” she mutters as I slowly reach up and pull my hood back.

“Have they touched you?” I ask again, needing to know the answer before I take her out of here. If they haven’t, then

they can keep breathing until she's home safe. If they have...

"No," she scoffs and steps back as if me asking insulted her.

I snap my hand forward to prevent her from moving and grip the back of her neck, but her hand is limp at her side, and whatever she was holding is no longer at my neck. Shame. The move must catch her by surprise, because she allows me to press my lips against hers, and I say, "If you ever try to leave me again, lamb, I will—"

She tries to shove me away when she interrupts. "You can drop the act, Lucian. I'm not letting you use me any more than I'll let them."

My grip never loosens, making sure she can't escape. "Open your mouth again," I demand, and she reacts exactly as I hoped, parting her lips, ready to tear into me, but I don't give her a chance. I spit on her tongue instead. Her look of shock makes the base of my spine tingle with the need to fuck her raw right now.

"I will use you, lamb," I promise softly as I skate my free hand down her body to cup her pussy through the stupid fucking robe, "over and over again, and if you leave me again, you will see how crazy I really am. Now swallow so I can get you home and you can properly apologize to us."

Nova's eyes blaze with anger, probably because I'm telling her what to do, but she wisely snaps her mouth closed.

"Do you miss having me inside you, lamb?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I knead her cunt with my fingers. I need to hear her reassurance and know she's been going crazy without me the way I have without her.

"You said I was a tool," she snarls instead of answering me.

"I would say anything if I thought it would keep you safe." I stroke the fingers of my other hand over the side of her face, recognizing the need to get us out of here before I give into temptation.

“I can’t tell if I want to believe you so badly it seems true, or if you’re lying to me,” she admits in a soft voice while her eyes search mine. Nova is rarely vulnerable, and the fact that she is now tells me how desperate she is for an answer.

“Remember you feel that way tomorrow.” I place a chaste kiss on her lips then pull away. We’re lucky no one has come in yet. I’ve wasted too much time. “Stay behind me no matter what.”

“What if I don’t want to?” she mumbles with a glower.

I glare at her over my shoulder before checking my phone. There’s only one person who could be messaging me.

Nox: Meeting is over. Hurry the fuck up.

Me: Got her. Leave.

I take those words to heart and replace the hood over my head just in time for the door to be shoved open.

“What the hell? Why are you in here with her?” Reacting quickly, I grab the guard’s outstretched arm and jerk him fully into the bathroom. It catches him off guard, so he stumbles, giving me time to grab my knife.

The blade slides under his chin and up toward the back of his head with sickening ease. His face is still covered by the hood, so I don’t get to see who I just killed, but the gurgles he makes as he tries to breathe around the knife in his throat tells me the job is done.

When he starts to fall, I release the handle of my blade and let him drop to the ground. It takes me precious seconds to drag him into the stall to conceal his body for the moment. Leaving the knife in doesn’t stem all the blood flow, but it helps stop it from looking like a massacre.

When I stand up, Nova is staring at me, and her face is a little ashen. She may be in shock, but at least she’s not screaming.

“Ready?” I ask.

She blinks quickly then nods once.

“Put your hood up and stay behind me,” I order.

She nods once more and covers her face.

“Here they are,” one of the guards says as we enter the chamber.

Rory and Astrid are standing among several other robed figures. “That wasn’t smart, but that doesn’t seem out of character for you, does it?” Astrid sneers.

“I was dumb enough to come to this island,” Nova retorts.

Rory gently places his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “See that Nova gets home safely. We have other matters to attend to,” he tells the guards while trying to rein in his wife.

I move even closer to Nova in a bid to keep anyone from separating us and wait for several of the figures to file down the long hall toward the elevators in the back. This almost feels too easy, but I don’t lower my guard.

“Where are the others?” one of the two that stay behind asks, leading me to believe they are part of the original guards who brought her here.

“One of them said he thought someone was in the bathroom.” You can practically hear Nova’s eye roll when she says it, surprising me with the answer and her ability to recover from the surprise of watching me kill someone. “I’m supposed to tell you he wanted you to go check it out with him.”

“How could someone have gotten into the bathroom, and why not say something sooner?” the guy grumbles with a sigh, but he stalks out of the room anyway, leaving only one other person for me to deal with. I wasn’t expecting the assist from my lamb, but I’ll take it. It won’t take long for the body I left in the bathroom to be discovered, and getting out of here quickly is paramount.

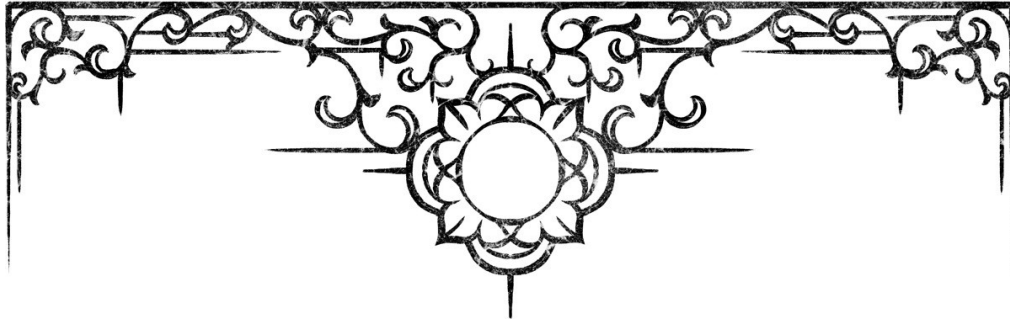
My gun would be the swiftest option, but also the loudest. While I’m still deciding if I should beat him to death with my bare hands, Nova moves closer to the guy who has his back turned to look down the hall where the bathroom is. I almost grab her arm and haul her back, but she picks up a heavy

golden chalice sitting on an altar-like table and swings it at the guy's head.

If I wasn't already infatuated with her, I would be now.

The guy crumples like a fucking paper bag, hitting the ground with a thud. Nova just stands there looking at him as if she can't believe what she did.

I pry the metal cup from her hand and bring her fingers up to my lips to kiss through the hood, then I head straight for the elevator down the hall to get lost among all the other robed figures.



NOVA

I'm sitting in the passenger seat of a black sedan. It's nothing like Lucian's usual choice of cars, but it doesn't have any problem speeding away from the school. When he turns toward the Umbra estate, my stomach seizes. I don't want to go back there. I don't ever want to see that place again. Tears spring into my eyes in a delayed response to escaping, and it's only now that actual fear sets in about what could have been if I hadn't gotten free.

I sniffle, and it seems to echo through the silent car like a gunshot. Lucian snaps his head in my direction, and I try to cover the weak sound by clearing my throat, but I ruin it when I inhale a trembling breath.

"Fuck!" he says harshly. I want to come up with some smart-ass response, but I can't. My throat's too tight to form words, and I fear if I even try, I'm going to start bawling and make it even worse.

I recoil in the seat, trying to get as close to the door as possible. I hate that he's seeing me like this, and that I couldn't hold it together for five more minutes, but the weeks I've been at the Umbras' estate have caught up to me, and there's nothing I can do to stop the emotions from rising.

My head hits the window when Lucian takes the turn too fast, peeling into the open gate of the Morningstar property

faster than he has any right to drive. The car jerks to a stop once we're beyond the first bend in the lane, and I frantically wipe at my face.

"I'll call Nox to come get you," Lucian says in a voice devoid of emotion. When he hits the unlock button of the doors, it's clear he wants me to get out of the car, but my body and head are not cooperating, because I just sit here, crying silently and hating myself because I can't stem the sorrow erupting from me.

"I need you to get out of the car, Nova. I promise you'll be safe. No one will get to you here." He can't even look at me. All I want is for him to hold me, but he can't stand the sight of me.

A hiccupping sob comes from my mouth as the self-pity morphs to anger. "Sorry, I am... too weak to be in your... presence. Believe me... I hate it more than you. I didn't let them... see me cry... once!" I can't seem to catch my breath.

Lucian practically throws himself out his door and stomps his way around the front to my side. I'm tempted to lock the door, and even the thought of climbing behind the wheel and running him over filters through my demented head, but I could never do it. Although he hurt me, hurting him is the last thing I want to do.

I prepare to get hauled out of the car, but no fear or worry accompany the notion. I can't wrap my head around why I find his brashness acceptable. When Lucian rips the door open and crouches next to me, I don't even flinch.

"You are not weak, Nova. Don't say that shit again or you're really going to piss me off." His words are harsh, but his hands are gentle when he tugs me from the passenger seat to sit in his lap on the side of the driveway.

I tuck my head under his chin and weep. It's messy and far from silent. Lucian strokes my hair and back, rocking me through the breakdown. I feel weak and broken, and worst of all, I feel like I might not deserve his kindness.

When I don't have any tears left, I find myself clinging to Lucian's shirt, still unwilling to let him go. His butt must be numb from the hard ground, but he never complains.

It's only a set of headlights coming up the drive that prompts him to stand, and in doing so, he hauls me with him to shove me behind his back.

The car stops a good distance away, and the rear door opens, revealing a silhouette. "Nova?" Nox asks with an air of urgency.

"She's here," Lucian answers before I can, and the next thing I hear are steps running on the blacktop. Nox slams into me with enough force to knock me off my feet, but his arms wrap around my body, keeping me from falling.

"Holy shit, you guys got out before they started the search. You could have answered your phone!" He kisses the side of my face, probably tasting salty tears, but he doesn't comment on it. Instead, he pulls both of his hands up to cup my face and demands, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I answer, belying the past ten minutes I spent crying.

"Take her to the house," Lucian instructs in the same, flat voice he used earlier.

"What? Where are you going?" Nox asks.

"To kill as many of them as I can." Lucian is already heading back toward the driver's side of the car.

"Please don't let him leave," I plead with Nox. He's the only one who can make his brother see reason.

"Ask him not to go," he whispers in my ear. "Tell him you need him to stay."

"Lucian!" His name comes out fast and rough, fueled by desperation I'm not sure I even understand myself. When he stops and looks over his shoulder at me, I beg, "Please don't go." Nox nudges me in encouragement. "I need you to stay with me. Help me feel safe." God, if he still leaves, I think my heart and ego might never recover. I just handed over power I

never wanted to give to the man who seemed to hate me on sight.

“I can make sure you’re safe by killing them all,” he bargains as if that is the better solution.

“I’d rather have you than have them gone,” I admit truthfully.

Nox pulls me tighter against his chest, and it feels like a reward for saying the right thing, but I can’t really take credit, because all I did was tell the truth.

Lucian’s head falls back on his neck, and he lets out a primal shout that sends a chill down my spine, but not from fear. Once the sound dies, he announces, “Get in the goddamned car,” then drops into the driver’s seat.

I look up at Nox, who is already staring down at me. “Do you think that means he’s mad at me?”

Nox’s smile is soft and knowing. “I think he’s mad you just realized how much power you actually have over him.”

“What?” I scoff disbelievingly.

“I also think you should listen to him and get in the car.” Nox avoids divulging any more info and urges me toward the passenger door. I’m not nervous to get into the front seat, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t feeling some kind of emotion. I just don’t know how to describe it other than awe.

He’s staying because I asked.



NOX

I climb into the back seat of the car, and Lucian hits the gas before the door even closes fully, throwing me back in my seat. I can't say I'm surprised. I have no doubt my brother was ready and willing to kill as many people as he could tonight, and I bet it had to do with the tears I tasted on Nova's cheeks.

The short drive from the school had me on edge, especially since I didn't want to rush out of the underground chamber and draw attention to myself, so it took me longer to get here than I wanted.

There was a part of me that was convinced they got caught and wouldn't be here when I returned. Even getting confirmation at the gate that they arrived before me wasn't enough to assuage my worries.

Seeing them huddled on the ground was both a knife to my chest and the swiftest relief. I wasn't upset he was holding her, my heart hurt for the reason why. What did they do to her? What happened that stopped them from making it to the house? Nova said she was fine, but she isn't, or she wouldn't be crying.

A guard greets us at the side entrance of the house, opening the door for us to enter then standing vigilantly at his post. I wouldn't expect the Umbras to storm our property any more than we would theirs, but desperation breeds bad decisions. I know how badly I wanted to say fuck the consequences and go take her from them, but the one thing that stopped us was the chance of Nova getting hurt. I doubt they have the same reservations, especially when they know it will be impossible to get her away from us now.

Nova takes in a deep breath, and her shoulders sag on the exhale. From her profile, I can see how puffy and red her eyes are now that we're in the light. She lets out a small sound that could be called a laugh, but it sounds too sad to classify it that way. "How bizarre is it that I'm relieved to be here?"

"I don't think it's bizarre. I think it should tell you everything you need to know," I comment as I slide my shoes off and kick them into the corner near hers.

"That I lost my mind at some point?"

“No, that this is where you belong.”

“With us,” Lucian adds, finishing my thought.

Nova searches my and my brother’s faces, her expression calm but scrutinizing. After a long second, she shakes her head as if to dislodge whatever it is she’s thinking and closes her eyes slowly. “It hurts to think too hard,” she admits, and I’m certain she’s not talking about physical pain.

“You don’t need to think, Nova, just feel.” I clutch her limp hand in mine and plant it over my chest, but she does the rest of the work by walking into my embrace and nuzzling her cheek against my chest.

She leans against me in a way that speaks to her exhaustion. I have a million questions running through my head that I’m not going to ask right now because there will be time later, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going a little crazy thinking about the last couple weeks and what happened to her in that time. I can’t help but notice she’s lost weight—not a ton, but she feels smaller, more fragile in my arms.

Tomorrow, I’ll ask Gertrude to make one of those snack trays that always made an appearance before Nova left. I bet I’ll have to sweet talk the old lady. She wasn’t shy about expressing her disappointment in Nova after she left. She seemed to come around a little when I reminded her that Nova didn’t grow up in this life like we did and didn’t know the lengths people will go through to get what they want. Even though we don’t know everything yet, I’m certain Nova left out of some misplaced idea that she was protecting us. Astrid pretty much admitted to manipulating her on the phone.

“Let’s go.” Lucian tilts his head toward the stairs. I’m not sure I trust him with her right now—not that I think he would intentionally hurt her. I just know my twin doesn’t always deal with his emotions in the healthiest ways.

“To bed, to sleep,” I state slowly while Nova is still in my arms. Lucian narrows his eyes on me, and I briefly think he might rip her out of my arms, but the rawness in his gaze shuts when he blinks.

“Yeah.” His voice is rough as he agrees.

It takes Nova pulling back from me to actually get me moving, and when I do, I’m right on her heels as she heads directly up to our rooms. Without prompting, she enters Lucian’s doorway. His room is first, but it’s also where we ended up most of the time anyway.

Once she’s inside, she inhales deeply and looks around as if something might have changed during the time she was gone. I watch her eyes skip over the furniture then finally land on the bed.

I wish her features would shed more light on what she’s thinking, but she seems closed off, or maybe I’m overthinking everything.

“Can I shower?” She glances at us over her shoulder.

“Don’t fucking ask questions like that,” Lucian snaps, but I know he’s not mad at her. He’s pissed that she feels the need to ask.

“Do you want me to get you anything?” I offer.

“I can do it,” she replies sullenly.

I elbow my brother in the ribs the moment her back is turned to get him to head toward the closet. “I’ll get you something to put on. You can get in the shower,” he tells her in a softer tone.

Nova pauses as if she’s going to say or do something. I imagine her saying something like, “Don’t forget the underwear,” but instead, she just agrees easily and heads toward the bathroom.

Lucian picks up a lamp from the table near the door and chucks it at the wall once she disappears through the door. “What was that?” Nova peeks out, her eyes wide in concern.

“I dropped something. It’s okay, baby,” I answer because I don’t think my brother is in the right place at the moment to console her.

She watches me for a second longer then closes the door partway, so it’s cracked a few inches. I never see the light

come on, but I'm sure the light from the bedroom is stopping it from being pitch black. It sets off warning bells though. Why doesn't she want the light on?

When the water turns on to mask my voice, I face off with Lucian, but he beats me to it.

"I'm going to slaughter them," he starts.

"How about you focus on what she actually needs and not what you want?" I murmur to keep my voice low.

"Did you see her crying? They fucked with her. I know they did."

"Yeah, I saw. I also heard her say she would rather have you here than them gone."

"She'll feel better knowing they are gone and can't hurt her again."

"*You'll* feel better," I challenge.

"Fuck yes I will." At least he doesn't try to hide the truth.

"I want them eliminated too, Lucian, but she is more important than revenge or peace of mind." I point toward the open door. "We take care of her, then them. Got it?" I don't leave the topic open for debate.

He narrows his eyes on me. It might intimidate someone else, but not me. I know I'm only telling him what he needs to hear. "They will die," he warns. "I don't care if I have to blow up this entire fucking island to make sure of it."

"Get her something comfortable to put on." I change the subject to try to bring him down. I really want to ask him if she told him anything about what happened, but I don't think it's a good idea if I really want him to stick around.

"I know what to get her," he snaps before stalking away.

When he's in the closet, I tap on the door. "Can I come in, Nova?"

"Did you need something?" Her voice is low and relaxed.

"Just to be close to you. I promise I'm not being pervy."

That gets a small chuckle from her that ends too abruptly. “You can come in, Nox. Leave the light off please.”

Despite the door being open, the room is filled with steam, telling me the water is pretty damn hot and impeding my view of her. I promised not to be a perv, but I still wanted to get a look at her to make sure she’s okay.

I hop up on the counter next to the sink and let the smell of the shampoo Lucian got her calm me. It’s such a simple thing, but I don’t think I will ever take it for granted again.

Seconds later, Lucian enters the room without knocking or announcing himself to place a pile of clothing on the leather bench near the door. It would probably be more logical to sit over there, but I’m closer to her this way. He must agree with me, because he positions himself next to me, leaning against the counter with his eyes glued to the glass stall concealing Nova in fog.

Long minutes pass in silence. I think of a hundred things to say, but nothing seems right, so I just keep my mouth shut.

There’s sweat on my face when Lucian finally says, “Do you want me to come in and wash you, lamb?” I’m surprised at the gentleness in his offer, considering how pissed he was only a few minutes ago. Lucian usually demands, but it’s clear he’s asking this time.

“I already washed up. I’ll get out,” she replies, sounding sleepy.

“You don’t have to get out. I just want to make sure you don’t need help.”

“It’s been a while since I could relax, you know.” She says it so plainly, as if it’s what’s expected, but it sours something in my stomach.

“Did they not let you shower?” I question.

“No, I could shower whenever. I just didn’t trust the lock to keep them out, so I didn’t waste time lollygagging.” The water turns off, and Lucian jerks the towel off the bar to present it to Nova the second she opens the door.

Even in the dim light, I can see her face is red and blotchy. What I don't know is if she was crying again, or if it's the heat mottling her skin. She cradles the towel to her chest while dipping her head to dry her face. I think about getting up and giving her some privacy, but I can't bring myself to. Instead, I decide to stay unless she asks me to leave, then worry I'm being too pushy.

"You guys are so quiet," she says while half holding the towel to cover up and half using it to dry off.

"Nox told me I'm a fuck up, so I'm trying to be good," Lucian deadpans.

"No, I didn't." My denial is quick and defensive.

"I needed to hear it," my brother admits softly while pulling another towel down to drape over Nova's hair.

When he starts massaging the sides of her head to dry her hair, her face tips up, and the look of absolute adoration in her eyes as she gazes up at him actually makes me a little jealous. I should have thought of that. Here I am, lecturing him about taking care of her but doing nothing but running my mouth.

Making myself useful, I slide off the counter and grab the clothes he brought in. I'm not surprised to find it's one of his shirts and a pair of white lace panties. I happen to know from the other times we've given her our clothes, the shirt will be a little snug over her tits and barely cover her ass. It's a look we both love, but I'm worried she might not be comfortable in it now.

Lucian moves to the side, allowing me to get close to her and offer the clothes. "I can get you some shorts if you want."

"Thank you, this is good," she replies before even seeing what I handed her.

I don't stop my eyes from running over her skin when she bends to step into the underwear and slide them up her legs. I don't see any sign of bruises or evidence she was hurt, but I've been most worried about the wounds we wouldn't see. Next, she slips on the shirt I gave her, pulling her long, dripping hair out of the collar. I was right when I said it would be tight over

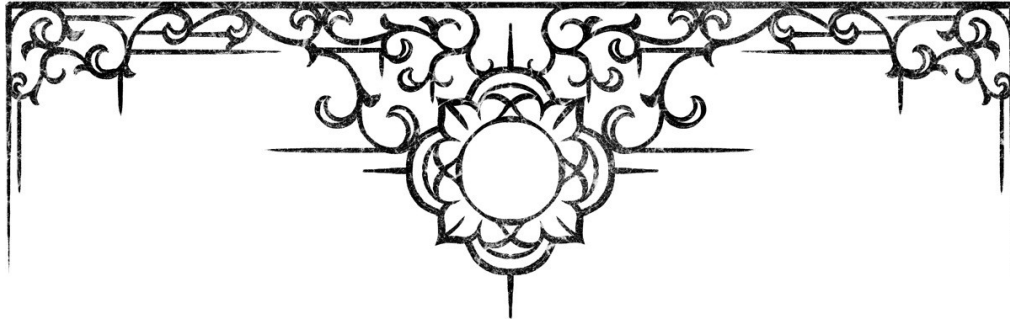
her chest, but she's not tugging at the fabric or trying to hide from us.

"I'm just going to brush my hair," she explains when we both continue to stare at her.

"If you want me to leave, tell me," Lucian says, voicing exactly what I'm thinking.

"You don't have to babysit me." Her reply is a little snarky, which is kind of a relief. I don't want whatever she's gone through to have changed her.

"Get used to it." Lucian shrugs in the same way he would have before she left, and it gives me even more hope that we will get through this.



NOVA

I'm too exhausted to feel awkward when I head straight for bed after leaving the bathroom. Flickers of thoughts run through my mind, like what they've been doing for the past couple weeks, why they gave me dirty looks at the memorial, and most importantly, what the heck I'm going to do now, because there's no way Astrid is going to let this slide.

Knowing if I make it to bed and shut my eyes, I'll pass out since I haven't gotten a restful night's sleep in a while, I get straight to the point. "Astrid is going to tell the other founding families about us. She's going to try to get you excommunicated or whatever."

"She can try," Lucian remarks as if he's not worried about it at all.

"I need to leave." I scoot my butt back against the pillows and headboard and heave out a sigh. Even as serious as this conversation is, I can't seem to keep my eyes open, so my blinks start to get longer and longer.

"Over my dead fucking body," Lucian snarls, which prompts me to glare in his direction, though I don't know how effective it is. I doubt anyone could take me seriously right now. I'm propped up in their lavish bed like some sort of pillow princess in a too small black T-shirt with my butt

cheeks hanging out, and all I care about is sleeping soundly for the first time in weeks.

“You don’t need to worry about that right now, Nova.” Nox’s response is much more subdued.

“But you do, she’s not going to let this go. They are all crazy.”

“When was the last time you slept?” Lucian tugs the covers I was sitting on, pulling me off-kilter.

“Yesterday.” I sound defensive.

“He means really slept. You already said you didn’t trust them not to come into your room. We can deal with this shit tomorrow.”

Lucian lowers himself to sit on the bed beside me after he pulls the covers up to my waist. He’s too calm. I don’t think he gets how far Astrid is willing to go.

“I need you to understand me being here comes at a cost, and I don’t expect you to protect me.”

His hand stills while he’s in the process of fixing the covers, and his light eyes lift to meet mine. Warning bells go off in my head. He looks dangerous, as if he’s allowing me a glimpse of what’s really going on inside him and the calm exterior is just a façade—not even a very good one. If I wasn’t so tired, I would have noticed how close to the edge Lucian really is sooner. Trouble is, even knowing this, I still have the urge to push him further to see what he will really do.

Self-preservation kicks in at the last moment, or maybe it’s just the knowledge I’m no match for him right now, but either way, I roll my lips in, signaling I’m going to shut up.

I watch his tongue run along his teeth behind his lips before he finally says, “I *will* protect what’s mine, and you, lamb, are mine in every goddamned sense of the word. Now, I suggest you shut those beautiful eyes of yours before I lose the tenuous hold I have on my temper. I’m fucking pissed you left us, and I’m trying to let you relax.

“Okay,” I agree quickly. I’m not worried Lucian will physically hurt me, he’s had too many opportunities to do so and not taken them, but that doesn’t mean I’m not worried about his reaction. I’m actually surprised he hasn’t threatened to lock me in a room or some crap.

“You’re still looking at me,” he warns only a breath later.

I scoot down the bed until I’m lying in the middle of the pillows and snap my eyes shut without another word. I don’t want to explain to him, or anyone else, why I would leave to protect them even though the answer is more than obvious.

Within minutes, the light gets turned off, and I have two bodies climbing under the covers beside me. I should already be asleep, considering how close I was when I first got in bed, but the last few minutes roused me, and my brain is running in circles.

Nox puts his head on my pillow, bringing his lips to my ear. The heavy breath he exhales warms my neck and makes goosebumps erupt on my arm. I didn’t realize I’d gotten cold, but his heat is just what I need for my muscles to relax again.

Lucian is lying a breath away, without touching me, flat on his back. It only takes a moment for me to gather the courage to reach across the short distance to lay my hand on his flat stomach. His breath catches as my fingers graze his perfect skin.

In the next heartbeat, he flips onto his side and bites my shoulder roughly. I feel his jaw tremble as he resists snapping his teeth together to bite harder, and there’s something so damn comforting about knowing I make him lose control, even just a little. The pressure of his teeth subsides, but he doesn’t back away. Instead, he curls his arms over my stomach, effectively pinning me to the bed with his body.

There’s no worry someone will come in, no worry I’ll have to fight to keep my body my own, only a serenity that I doubt I will ever take for granted again—especially when I know the crap will hit the fan tomorrow, if it hasn’t already.



NOVA

THE BED IS empty when I wake up. I know it's late because the room is brighter than it has any right to be, but I don't rush to rise. There are too many things I won't be able to put off or ignore any longer when I do. I'm also hesitant to go wandering around the house. I'm not looking forward to running into Gertrude, or anyone else for that matter. Just because Nox and Lucian don't seem like they want to throttle me doesn't mean she won't.

When I can't put off peeing any longer, I finally drag myself out of bed and lumber to the bathroom. I get a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the way to the toilet, and that's more than enough to tell me I'm a mess. My face looks swollen from all the blubbering, and my hair looks like a rat's nest from going to bed with it wet.

The bathroom door opens without warning while I'm still peeing. It startles me so badly I let out a squeak of panic as I squeeze my knees together. Lucian looks completely unapologetic as he stands in the doorway.

"What the heck? The door was closed. I'm going to the bathroom!"

He doesn't even bother with a verbal response, just shrugs with indifference.

"Can you leave?" I pull my shirt down a little farther.

"No, everybody poops. There's even a book about it."

"I'm not pooping, jerkface, but I'd like to wipe my cooch in private."

"There is nothing about your cunt that's private, lamb. I've seen it, touched it, tasted it." He's undeterred, and I'm pretty sure I'm detecting an edge of aggression in his tone.

"Can you just let me finish... please?" It grates on my nerves that I even have to ask again.

After staring into my eyes for an inordinate amount of time, he finally spins around and gives me his back.

I want to gripe that's not leaving the room, but I'm worried if I do, he'll change his mind and turn back around, so I wait until after flushing the toilet before snarking, "Thanks so much. There's nothing like being reminded of how little control I have of my own life."

I watch him stalk closer through the mirror until he's standing right behind me. "The difference is, *lamb*, I'm giving up just as much as I'm taking. Don't ever fucking compare me to those bastards again."

"What control have you given up?" I spin to face him after washing my hands. It probably wasn't a smart move. Being this close to him, seeing the dangerous look in his eye, and knowing I still want to push him proves there's something I still don't understand about myself, especially when it comes to this man.

His eyes slit in warning, but I still don't look away. "If you have to ask that question, you're not paying attention." His eyes flick down to my lips before he licks his own, and my stomach flips in anticipation. I know he wants to kiss me, or more appropriately, punish me with his lips, but he's holding back, and I don't know why.

"You're not like them," I admit, and he takes a step closer, trapping me between the counter and his body as if he's already won something with my admittance. "You're worse. You made me love you even when I didn't like you."

Both of Lucian's hands come up to encircle my neck as he uses his thumbs to tilt my head back. His touch is almost too gentle. It's not until that moment that I realize I don't want refined Lucian, I want all of him, raw and responsive.

A sick grin curls his perfect lips. "It takes an angel to love the devil."

"I'm no angel, pretty boy."

"You must be. What else could make me crave their chaos the way I need yours?" He's watching me as if I might truly

have an answer, but don't. I'm still wondering why it almost feels like he admitted he loves me too, even though it's not close to what he said.

He takes my lack of answer as some form of acceptance and says, "Besides, how else would the devil get to touch heaven?" His lips crash onto mine, and the feeling is nothing compared to what his words do to my heart.

Lucian devours me with his mouth and hands, touching every inch of my skin and making me desperate for more, until he stops abruptly, only to place his forehead against mine. He's breathing hard, and his eyes are sealed shut, as if he's hiding from something.

I curl my fingers into his shirt to keep myself from digging my nails into his flesh, just to make sure he doesn't let me go. "Fuck, I'd rather stab myself than ask again, but I need to know for sure if they touched you, Nova. Did they... do anything to you..."

It seems like he's struggling to say the rest, but I know what he's asking. He wants to know if my grandmother had me raped. "No," I admit softly before the rest of the confession falls from my parted lips. "I was so fricking scared, I even found things to use to protect myself, because I knew it was only a matter of time before they did."

"I'm so fucking sorry." He opens his eyes, looking as if he somehow let me down.

"You don't have to be sorry. If it wasn't for you, I might not have even tried to protect myself. You gave me the courage to do that."

"You shouldn't have to worry about protecting yourself, especially from them."

"I know, but at least I worked out what that lady at the bar was trying to warn me about. I'm guessing my mom knew she would have had the same fate if she stuck around. Astrid admitted there was some kind of an arranged marriage my mom backed out of when she left with my dad. I'm surprised

she even had a kid. It makes me wonder if having me was what turned her into a drunk.”

“No!” Lucian shakes his head. “You don’t take that shit on, Nova. If she couldn’t handle her business, that’s her fucking problem, not yours. You were not the cause of that shit.”

“Surely I was an accident at the very least.”

He places his palm over my mouth, effectively muzzling me. “I’m not good for this, lamb. I’m too fucking conflicted. I’m mad as hell she didn’t protect you better and grateful that she was a fuck up because it brought you to me. I don’t know the right things to say or how to fix it.”

Lucian Morningstar just admitted out loud that he isn’t perfect, and I think it rocketed him even further into that category in some weird way.

I peel his fingers down so I can speak. “I don’t need you to fix anything, Lucian. Sometimes just listening is more than enough, but rest assured, you’re doing okay.”

“Does that mean we can stop talking?” He presses his groin against me, showing me exactly what he’d rather be doing, but I play dumb. I can’t help but mess with him.

“And do what?”

He lets out a low rumble that comes closer to a growl than anything else, then he kisses me. It’s raw, making it nearly impossible to keep up with the sweep of his tongue and nips of his teeth. When he’s like this, acting like he wants to consume my entire soul, it’s easy for me to give into him. I don’t have the urge to prove him wrong or resist the pull he’s had on me since the first time I laid eyes on him. The evil bad boy who looked like a nightmare that might make all your dark desires come to life captivated me from the beginning, and I hated myself for it, almost as much as I thought I hated him.

Grabbing my hips in a punishing grip, he lifts me up and sets me on the bathroom counter. The stone is freezing for all of a millisecond until my overheated skin warms it. He slides between my legs with ease, all while his palm goes to my

lower back, making sure I can't escape the delicious pressure of him grinding against me.

All thoughts of the what-ifs and the worries plaguing me slide away. Lucian steals my entire focus, and I'm so damn grateful to have the ability to forget about everything, even if it's just for a little while.

"Lamb?" he whispers against my lips between nibbles. I hum a soft reply. "I'm so fucking mad at you." The rough undercurrent of his voice sends a warning jolt through my body. This isn't the Lucian I like to push. He actually sounds angry.

"Because I left," I surmise. It's not like it's unexpected.

"Yes, because you fucking left. You believed her over me. I told you I could handle my shit." He drags his mouth across my jaw and nuzzles my ear and neck sweetly, as if he's not scolding me at the exact same time.

I tilt my head to the side, and he takes advantage of the extra room, sucking on my skin between kisses. I'll probably be covered in bruises, but I don't mind a bit. "I was protecting you." The words are easier to say than I imagined they would be. It might have something to do with his teeth being at my throat, or maybe it's because my eyes are closed and all I have to do is feel the way he's touching me to understand why he cares. There's no way he could fake how he feels or the fact that he feels at all. Lucian is cold and indifferent to almost everyone, but I'm one of the few people he seems to care about, even if it manifests in ways most people wouldn't understand.

"The only thing I need protection from is you, but I don't think God herself could do that."

"Herself?" I question, amused.

"Nova, shut up before I make you."

"You can try," I retort on reflex. Lucian uses his hand on my lower back to pull me off the counter. I land on my feet, and I have to admit, I'm a little taken aback. When he applies pressure to my shoulder, forcing me to kneel, I know exactly

what he's doing, but the fact that he's unbuckling his belt with his other hand is confirmation.

Something dark unfurls in my lower stomach as my knees touch the cold marble floor. The desire to drive him insane with need has me gazing up at him with dark promise. He shoves his pants down his thick, tattooed thighs and grabs the back of my hair, fisting it into a messy ponytail. "Keep looking at me like that, lamb, and I might not ever let you off your knees," he warns.

I curl up my lip in a mockery of a smile. "Not smart to threaten a girl with her teeth so close to your..." I make a point to look at his dick, so he knows exactly what I'm saying. It twitches in what I might call anticipation.

He yanks me back by my hair and bends so his mouth is at my ear. "Your teeth so close to what?" he prompts in a gravelly voice dripping with need.

"Your cock," I reply without hesitation.

"Get up," he orders, releasing my hair and reaching for my arm to assist me. I scramble back to my feet, surprised by the swift change. "Strip and get in the fucking bed." He turns me to guide me out of the bathroom.

I glance over my shoulder once while heading into his room, but before I can get a good look at him, he demands, "Strip."

There's a tiny part of me that wonders if Lucian is going to try to punish me somehow as I pull the shirt over my head, but it dies when I feel his hand trace up my hip as if he can barely keep his hands off me.

When I sit down, I admit, "I wouldn't really bite you, pretty boy." I don't meet his eyes when I say it, because I have had the urge—not to hurt him, but the desire is still there occasionally. It's not like that should bother him, since he nips me all the time.

"Fuck yes you will." He pushes my shoulder, and I flop back on the bed. When he climbs over me, his shirt is gone, as are his pants.

My eyes bounce from tattoo to tattoo, unable to pick a favorite but loving every inch of him. With deliberate slowness, he lowers his body to mine, pinning me to the plush mattress from shoulders to toes. It should feel domineering, but instead, he feels like a living shield. I shift my legs to cradle him between my thighs, and Lucian huffs a harsh breath through his nose.

I love knowing how much I affect him, love knowing I crack the icy veneer he's mastered. "Why are you smiling, lamb?" he questions while rubbing his nose along mine in such a sweet gesture, I wouldn't have thought Lucian was capable of it a short time ago.

"You," I answer, telling him the truth.

"What about me?" He rocks slowly, allowing me to feel just how hard he is.

"Are you searching for a compliment, pretty boy? Need me to stroke something?"

I feel his puff of laughter against the side of my face. "Something like that," he agrees, but I feel the smile slip from his features immediately after, because his lips are still at my jaw.

"What's wrong?" I try to pull back, but he doesn't budge.

"Nothing, I just... I need you," he says after a short pause. Considering our position, it could mean he wants to have sex, but his tone makes me think it's something more. I wind my arms tightly around his neck and shoulders, curling my fingers in for even more purchase, and Lucian lets out a long sigh I feel all the way to my bones. It's the same kind of sigh I released when he held me in the bathroom underground. Even before I knew we'd get out of there, my body responded to the comfort he provided.

After a moment, his lips begin to move along my neck again, turning in toward my ear and then down to my shoulder. I loosen my arms, but my fingers still dig into his back. When he arches his neck, I return the favor, not holding back with my teeth this time. I'm tired of teasing and being teased. He

stills when I sink my teeth into the side of his neck. I'm not sucking or even trying to cover up the fact that I'm biting him. I give into the urge to go just a little deeper, and his hips grind against me.

My own urge to moan causes me to release him. I tip my head back and arch into his touch.

"I need you too, Lucian," I admit before running my nails down his back to reach his ass where I sink my fingers in to urge him on. Instead of obliging me, he kisses his way down my chest until his lips circle my nipple, and then he sucks my tip into his mouth, pulling hard enough that my back comes off the bed. My clit throbs as if he already has his hands between my legs, teasing me.

I shift under him, searching for more, but he only brings his hand up to pinch my other nipple, mimicking the feeling of his mouth. Warmth blossoms between my legs, and I feel myself grow wetter. "Lucian." I roll my hips against his stomach, showing him with my body how much I want him.



NOX

Hearing Nova whisper Lucian's name is almost enough to make me back away from the sight of them together on the bed, but my feet are rooted to the spot, even when my mind tries to tell me to give them time alone.

My twin turns his head just enough while still keeping his mouth on Nova's tits to see me standing at the entrance of the room. "Perfect timing, brother." His welcoming words are murmured against her skin before he sucks on the underside of her breast, leaving a mark.

Nova lifts her head off the bed, her eyes lidded with desire, and licks her lips when she spots me. I don't need any more of an invitation than her gaze. I strip as I enter the room, leaving a trail of clothes in my wake as I climb onto the bed.

Nova reaches for me with one hand, and I lean down and kiss her waiting lips. Her breath catches, and the slight pause of her tongue lapping at mine when he touches her gives me a thrill of excitement. Feeling her reaction to him while she savors my touch is something I will never tire of.

When Lucian shifts lower, giving me room to get close to her, I take advantage and press our chests together while he slips his head between her legs. She groans into my mouth, long and deep, and I swallow the sound as if it were my own.

“We need to get you nice and wet for what we have planned, *сладкая*.” He delivers the vow like the warning it should be. Lucian has been teasing her about taking us both at the same time for a while. Nova has never met the notion with outward excitement, but she hasn't dismissed the idea either. Even now, her fingers tighten in my hair, proving she's open to what we have planned.

My dick throbs at the thought of being inside her. She's already so tight, I can't imagine how she'll feel with both of us. When Nova breaks our kiss to squirm, tossing her head back and forth, Lucian lifts his head from her core, stopping her from coming.

His eyes slide from her face to mine quickly, and he tilts his head to the side, motioning for me to move. I slide away from her and lie on my back, every muscle in my body tight with anticipation.

Nova snakes her hand down the center of her body, as if she's going to take matters into her own hands. “Uh-uh, lamb.” Lucian grabs her wrist when her fingers are inches away from slipping between her legs. Her eyes slit open, and she lifts her head off the bed to glare at him. “We'll give you what you need. Hop on top.” He motions to me lying next to her.

Her head shifts against the mattress so she can see me, and I grab the base of my dick, more than ready to give her what

she needs. With one final glare at my brother, she rolls to her side and hikes her leg over my waist before sliding her warm, wet pussy over my groin and getting into position. Her mouth opens in a sweet little pout when I guide myself inside her.

The catch in her breath is the only sound of reassurance I need, but when her walls clamp down on me, I have to wonder just how long I'm going to last. The urge to lift my hips and bury myself balls deep inside her threatens to drive me mad, but I remain still as she leans forward, brushing her tits against my chest to kiss me.



LUCIAN

Nova slides into the perfect position, leaning forward to kiss Nox, and I waste no time climbing behind her. Her body tenses slightly when I put a small amount of pressure on the back of her neck with one hand and use the other to lift her hips. His dick is still inside her, but not nearly as deep as he was.

Once she's where I want her, I release her hip and fist my cock. The drop of cum hanging off the tip tells me I better fucking hurry. She jolts when I rub my head near the back of her pussy and tucks her ass a little like she's worried I'm going to shove my cock inside her there. "Shush, lamb, that will take a lot more preparation I don't have the patience for now. That will come later. Relax." I pull her hips back up, and she doesn't resist, but she's not exactly relaxed either. Curling the same hand around her leg, I slip my fingers between her and Nox and find her hard little clit screaming for attention when I spread her lips with two fingers and use the middle to circle the nub.

As if that's all she needed, she pushes back against me, and I force the head of my cock into her tight little cunt already filled with Nox's dick.

She makes a small sound of discomfort, and I watch my brother's hands come up to palm her tits. I don't move anything but my fingers, which I continue to rub slowly over and around her clit.

I don't get the same thrill I do when she inflicts a little pain on me, but there's something darkly fucking satisfying about knowing we're stretching her to her limits and how far she's willing to let us push her.

I try to move, to make her take me just a little deeper, but she's so damn tight I don't think I gain a centimeter. When her legs start to tremble from holding herself over Nox, I put a little pressure on the small of her back, pushing her farther onto Nox's dick, and she swallows another inch of me in the process. I hiss out a breath as she exhales with a wobbly moan.

I can feel her fucking heartbeat through the walls of her pussy. I'm so tempted to shove myself as deep as I can go, but I'm too worried about hurting her, so I just barely move my hips, sliding the skin of my dick back and forth while she strangles the head of my cock. "Ouch," she says softly with her fist near her mouth.

"Do you want us to stop?" Nox croaks roughly, not wanting that any more than I do, but he's nicer than me to even offer.

When she doesn't respond right away, I take advantage. "You don't want us to stop, do you, lamb? You like the way we fill you to the brink, don't you?"

Her tiny nod is barely perceptible, but it's there all the same.

"That's because you were made for us, *сладкая*. Look how well you take us both. Just wait until we're deep in that tight little cunt and you beg for more, harder, deeper." I get carried away with my words and start pushing deeper.

Her inner walls quiver with the invasion, and there's no stopping myself from coming, not that I would want to. Being careful, I fight the urge not to bury myself completely inside her. Instead, I use two fingers to pinch and release her clit over and over until she lets out her own cry and begins milking my cock with her orgasm.

She starts to swell almost instantly, and it makes it even harder to pull out of her pussy. Only the knowledge that we will be doing this again and again gives me the will to ease out of her.

My dick isn't even fully soft, but another jolt of lust clenches my balls when I see her puffy cunt dripping with ropes of cum. The tiny streak of red I glimpse before she collapses to the bed next to Nox proves how far we stretched her. I look away before I do something stupid, like use my fingers to shove the cum back in and feel how raw she is.

Nox rolls over to surround her with his body, kissing her shoulders and back. I watch as she curls into his touch like a content kitten getting stroked. When I climb over her legs to get to her other side, she jerks to look over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, we can wait until later to try again," I tease.

She reaches out her little hand and takes a swipe at my chest as I lie down. I grunt for effect, but it ends in a laugh as I pick up her fingers and bring them to my mouth to kiss and nibble. Her eyes close slowly before she lets out a soft sigh. I'm tempted to fall asleep myself, but the reprieve is short lived when she tugs her hand from mine and rolls to her side before sitting up, making a sour face.

"What's wrong?" Nox questions, his voice just as sleepy as I feel.

"Tender." She shrugs in explanation.

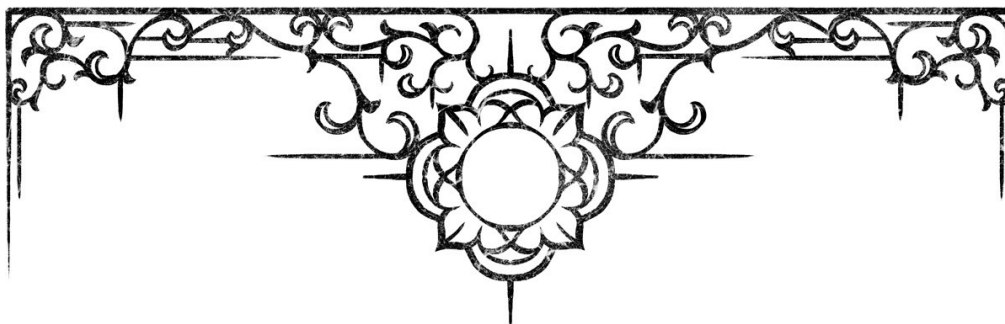
"I'll run a bath," I offer, suddenly bothered she's hurting now that I'm thinking with a clear head.

"I'm not going to say no," Nova tells me as if she thinks the offer wasn't real.

“I wouldn’t have let you if you wanted to.” I kiss her after getting to my feet.

“Don’t put any garbage in the water, no bubble bath or anything,” she calls loudly to my back as I head for the bathroom.

“No garbage,” I agree, not knowing what shit we even have like that.



NOX

You have forty-eight hours to ensure Nova's return.

I look at the text that was delivered to my phone shortly after Nova fell asleep between me and my brother on her first night back with us. Time's up, and I would be lying if I said I hadn't been waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm certain the three sentries at the gate means the thud is coming.

I'm not afraid of the Umbras or any of the other founders. This island and our standing don't mean shit to me, but it does to my twin, which means I can't ignore the contingent demanding an audience with us.

Each founding family has a representative present, meaning the Umbras have involved the other factions from the island. I'm curious to know how far the others are willing to take this. Will they knowingly try to take Nova against her will?

Under my direction, the gate rolls open, allowing Lucian, myself, and two of our most trusted to come face-to-face with the three other men.

To his credit, Lucian doesn't react to Alden's presence among the group, even though I know he would like nothing more than to kill him where he stands. I struggle to find the same cold indifference, especially after Nova told us some of the things he said to her, like she should just accept her fate.

My tone is full of venom when I demand, “Did you come here to die? Are these your witnesses?”

Alden’s nostrils flare, but that’s the only indication that what I said bothers him. “We’re here to demand the release of Nova Umbra.”

Whatever else he might have said gets drowned out by Lucian’s dark chuckle. “You demand?”

“Are you refusing to release the Umbra heir?” one of the other men asks, proving that’s all she is to him, an heir to a founder.

“Nova *Devlin* has come to us seeking protection. We are not keeping her against her will,” I reply. I really want to tell them to fuck off, or maybe just kill them instead.

“That is not the Umbras’ position,” Alden answers quickly as if he expected us to say as much.

“I don’t give a fuck what their position is, and you can tell them so... unless you’d like to try to collect her yourself.” Lucian loses a little bit of his apathy when he delivers a cold smile.

Alden lifts his hand to reach into his suit jacket, but he finds himself staring down the barrels of three guns, one of which is held by my twin, while the other two are produced by our security.

“I have a delivery for you,” Alden retorts with his hand still hovering near his chest. The other men shift around a bit, seeming uncomfortable because they are too close to Alden where the guns are pointed. I’m actually shocked at Lucian’s restraint that he hasn’t killed him already.

“Slowly, or you’ll find yourself with a hole in your head, just like your father.” Alden’s jaw tics at my brother’s mention of his father’s self-inflicted gunshot wound. Apparently, the disgrace of losing his name and place in the family was too much for his father, or maybe he was just weak all along.

Using two fingers, Alden reaches into his coat and pulls out a black envelope with the Cadieux College double C crest seal, signifying official business. I walk forward confidently

and take the summons from his outstretched fingers while meeting his eyes.

There's a burning hatred there I never noticed or never cared enough to see before staring back at me. This is just as personal for him as it is for us, but I don't understand why. Almost as if he senses my question, my cousin turns around, giving me and my brother, who still has a gun pointed at him, his back before heading directly across the street to the open Umbra estate gate.

The other two men take it as their cue and disburse back to two cars parked up the road. My eyes remain glued to Alden, which allows me to see an older woman who meets him just inside the gate before it shuts.

"Did you see who that was?" Lucian asks after holstering his gun.

"I thought she left town ages ago."

"So did I. What the hell would she be doing on the Umbra estate?"

"Who was it?" Lev questions as our gate slides closed.

"Anita Black, Alden's mother," I answer, but I have no idea what she would be doing back on the island.



NOVA

"Where have you two been?" I scan Nox and Lucian as if I might be able to find the answer on them. I searched half the house before giving up, and no one would tell me where they were, especially Gertrude. She's been a little cold since my return, but that's not much different than before.

“Working on restraint. What have you been up to?” Nox arches one dark eyebrow.

“Wandering around looking for you two. Do you have a secret bat cave under this island, fitted with its own secret entrance behind a waterfall?” I’m only half joking. I wouldn’t put it past them to have something of the sort.

“If I show you my cave, I’m keeping you there,” Lucian says as he deliberately brushes his fingers along my ass as he passes. He rarely misses an opportunity to put his hands on me. It was strange at first, but now I find myself looking forward to those little touches of reassurance.

“Knowing you, it would be more like a dungeon.” I let him see my playful eye roll.

“Try to run again, and you’ll get a one-way tour, lamb,” he warns, and I swear he looks excited at the prospect of locking me away. “Speaking of you wanting to make things up to me, I think it’s time for you to make your first amends.”

“Who was speaking of me making things up to you?” I don’t have to feign confusion.

“You’re the one who brought up how magnanimous it is of me that I haven’t punished you for leaving.”

“Magnanimous? Really?”

“I thought she would be more bothered with the punishment part,” Lucian says to his brother.

“Threats of punishment don’t concern me, pretty boy.”

“Why is that?” He crosses his arms over his chest and leans his butt against the ebony pool table in the middle of the game room. I entertain the idea of walking over, pushing him backwards, and mounting him. I actually take a step in his direction before reining in the desire to prove that he’s not the only one with power. This place has gotten to my head—he has gotten to my head.

“What are you thinking, Nova?” Nox is just over my shoulder, speaking near my ear in a tone that suggests he knows my thoughts have ventured into dangerous territory. I

break eye contact with his twin and glance up at Nox, the sweeter, yet oftentimes darker, brother.

“Taking my due,” I answer with a partial truth.

“Does that mean you want to punish me?” Lucian asks with a glimmer of lust, or is that hope in his gaze?

“How about whatever penalty you see fit to give, you take it first,” I offer, because whatever he has in mind couldn’t be all that horrible if he agrees to do it first.

Lucian tosses his head back and laughs with too much joy, and my stomach clenches for more than one reason. Seeing him so delighted is a rarity. Lucian suppresses most emotions, even when it’s just the three of us. I have a feeling it’s not because he doesn’t feel them, but because he feels them too much and doesn’t want to give that away. Then there’s the wonder of what he could find so funny and knowing it must have something to do with this punishment he’s referring to, and that involves me.

“Deal, lamb.” He agrees too quickly for me to take the offer back. The wide smile is still in place when he pushes away from the pool table and stalks over to me. I hold my ground, even when I have to tip my head back to keep our eyes locked. “Our first session will be tonight.” I become transfixed by his white teeth sinking into his bottom lip.

My heart is beating way too fast for me to pretend I’m unaffected, so I don’t even bother trying to hide the huskiness of my voice. “If you can handle it, so can I.” I don’t know why Lucian Morningstar makes me feel like I have something to prove, but he does, and worst of all, I like the person he makes me.

“We’ll both go first, and then it will be your turn, lamb. I can’t wait to watch you squirm.”

“Are you talking about coming first? Because that’s not new, you always seem to get there before me.”

Nox lets out a bark of laughter and shoves his brother’s shoulder, taking the joke the way I intended, but the way Lucian’s mouth drops open makes me think I might have

actually succeeded in shocking or offending him. “I was going to go easy on you, lamb, but I’m not feeling quite so charitable at the moment.” His light eyes rake over me, and I wonder if I went too far and really hurt his feelings. I prepare myself for Lucian to say or do something in response, but he just brushes past me instead, and there are no lingering touches in his wake this time.

Nox cups my cheeks in his palms while still fighting a smile. “Don’t worry, I promise you won’t have to go through with it if you don’t want to.”

“You know what it is then? It was already planned?”

“I know what it is because I know how his head works, but no, it wasn’t already planned.”

“What is it?” I ask softly, even though Lucian isn’t even in the room.

“Don’t say a fucking word, Nox,” Lucian chimes in from the doorway.

“I should have known he was listening.” I’m not proud of the pout on my lips.

“I wasn’t.”

“He knows me as well as I know him.” Nox drops a kiss on my forehead and backs away.

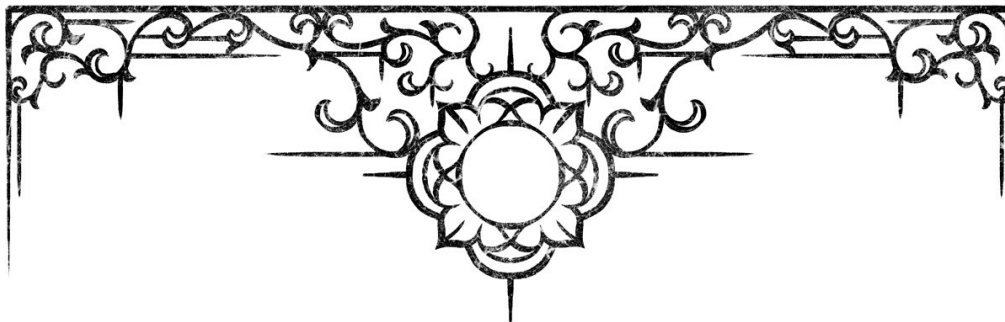
“So that’s how it is, a tag team, two against one.” I trade glances with them.

“It will be later tonight, but neither of us is tagging out,” Lucian challenges.

I scoff, but I’m the only one. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I finally ask when they don’t clue me in on the joke.

“He’s baiting you,” Nox replies dismissively, but when I peek over at his twin, he smirks and shakes his head slowly, denying his brother’s claim.

The butterflies in my stomach could be nerves, but they could also be excitement. Damn, I’m in so much trouble with these two.



LUCIAN

“Why are we here?” Nova looks up at me with a hint of trepidation, but there’s trust in her ocean eyes too, or she wouldn’t be here.

“Because no one comes to the house, lamb,” I confess and watch her take in the information before looking around the isolated area. We haven’t left our property, but we’re at one of the smaller houses farther inland.

“There’s already someone here?” The lilt in her tone makes it clear she’s asking who it is, but I’m not ready to tell her yet. I’m curious if she’ll go through with what I have planned. Originally, I decided it was happening whether she agreed or not, but having her back with me means I’m not as incensed as I was, so I won’t force her, no matter how badly I’d like to.

I avoid her question. “Are you ready?”

“Where’s Nox? You said he was meeting us.” She worries her bottom lip with her teeth, and the jolt of arousal comes hard and fast. I know what her teeth feel like when they dig into my skin, leaving her mark, and I fucking love it.

“He’s inside, waiting.”

Nova peeks around me, peering at the house as if there might be something inside that she’s worried about. I almost

tell her not to be scared, but the fact that I want her unconditional trust keeps me from reassuring her. In the next second, her chin lifts and she shifts her gaze back to mine to say, “I’m ready when you are.”

On instinct, I lift my hand, palm up, and she doesn’t hesitate to place her fingers over mine. The connection feels right, so I don’t release her before heading up the walkway to the front door.

A guard opens it for us as we step onto the porch. The entryway is empty, but I can hear Luna speaking excitedly, and just after that, Nox mumbles something back. Nova stops in place when she hears the other girl’s voice. Her head turns slowly to look at me, and the expression of sheer venom on her face would freeze another man in his tracks, but I just smile down at my malicious little lamb.

“Who else is here, pretty boy?” I don’t have time to answer before she uses our joined hands to jerk me down the hall toward the sound of muffled voices. Luna pops her head up over the back of the couch as we enter the living room area. Her wide-eyed expression could mean almost anything to someone who doesn’t know her, especially when she starts to stammer and fumble around.

“Why’d you stop?” Nox questions in a low tone, causing Nova to nearly squeeze the life out of my hand.

“Maybe she doesn’t like an audience. What the hell, Nox?” Nova asks then flings my hand away from her as if I’m to blame for what’s going down on the couch just out of sight.

“You guys are early. I thought I’d be done by the time you got here.”

“I’m sure the timing was planned down to the second.” Nova glares at me, but there’s pain etched into her features, making her mouth thin and cheeks red.

“You don’t have to do it, baby,” Nox cajoles sweetly, completely unaware that Nova has no idea what’s happening on the couch.

“Fuck you,” she spits, and Nox finally lifts up to look over the back of the couch, seeming pretty perplexed as to why she would be so upset.

“Nova,” I warn. Something about her cursing gets under my skin. It’s not that I think she’s too innocent, it’s just not like her, and I like her just the way she is.

“Shut up,” she snaps at me then points at Luna. “Get out!” Her voice is low and filled with anger.

Luna finally stands all the way up, and it doesn’t really help that she’s in a tiny pink and black pleated skirt that barely covers her ass cheeks and a pair of ripped fishnets to go with her low-cut top. I don’t even think Nova notices the black gloves she’s wearing or the tattoo machine in her grip.

“I’m not finished,” Luna counters with disdain.

When Nova takes a step forward, I wrap my arm around her neck and chest and pull her back into my embrace. She doesn’t fight, but her entire body is rigid. I lean close to her ear. “Look at her hands, lamb. It’s not what you think. I didn’t intend for you to think he was doing anything wrong.” I can feel how hard her heart is beating against my forearm, and when she reaches up to dig her nails into my arm, I sigh softly into her ear. It’s fucked up, but I love knowing she’s jealous and pissed off.

Nox hops up off the couch. His shirt is off, and his pants are unbelted, but they are still mostly up around his hips. He takes a long look at Luna, who seems to be pissy if the sneer on her lips means anything. “I don’t like to be interrupted. You’ve never brought your... whatever with you before.”

“I’m not a whatever, baby bat.” Nova tugs on my arm again, minus the nails, sadly.

“You did not just call me a baby bat.” Luna cocks out her hip.

“Chill,” Nox tells Luna as he pushes past her to come stand in front of me and Nova. “We usually go to her studio, but Luna agreed to come here. I figured the couch would be more comfortable than the table.”

“More comfortable for you,” Luna gripes under her breath.

“Stop talking,” Nova and I say at the same time, making Luna pull her head back in surprise.

We’ve always treated her with respect and never tried to mix it up with her even though I’m pretty sure she would have been down to fuck because I valued her art more than her pussy, but I can find a new artist if she even thinks about talking shit to Nova.

“Get your girl under control.” Luna feigns disinterest by glancing at her nails.

“I wouldn’t if I could,” I tell her but pretty much get ignored.

“You got half of that right. *Their* girl, as in both of them are mine.” My lamb stakes her claim on both of us.

“For the night.” Luna rolls her head on her neck as she says it.

“Nah, see, you don’t know us or her like that. We appreciate your work, but understand this—she is and always will be more important than you,” Nox tells Luna flatly.

I watch her dark purple eyebrows rise on her forehead before she rolls her eyes up to the ceiling. “Whatever, she just pissed me off by calling me a baby bat,” Luna grumbles with a shrug like none of this means anything to her, but I’m not buying the act.

“You pissed me off first by running your mouth. All I told you to do was leave,” Nova retorts, making sure Luna doesn’t get the last word.

The two girls stare at each other for a long moment, and I’m not sure how this is going to shake out, but it’s entertaining nonetheless.

“You’re right, I got defensive,” Luna finally says after the pause.

“And I jumped to conclusions,” Nova admits.

“Not that I can blame you. They should have given you a heads-up.”

“Yeah, they should have.”

I don't think I like how this seems to be turning around into our fault again. “Is this how girls fight?” Nox looks to me for answers.

“This is how grown women settle shit. We ain't fighting.” Luna has the audacity to look down her nose at my brother. I wouldn't normally let that shit slide, but Nova's body relaxes against me, and I suddenly don't give a fuck about the way Luna is looking at Nox.

“I'm Nova, and I'm not temporary.” She matches her tone and speech with Luna's just enough to seem almost friendly while delivering the warning.

“I can see that. Good to meet you. I'm Luna.” I watch the tattoo artist's eyes scan my lamb from head to foot in a way that makes me think she's checking her out, and not in a *I like your shoes* kind of way.

I tighten my grip on her body and scowl. Maybe I need to find a new artist after all. “Keep looking at her like that, and we're going to have a whole new set of problems.”

Luna lifts her hands in surrender. “She has beautiful skin.”

“We know.” Nox gives Luna a tight glare.

“Wait.” Nova spins in my arms, turning away from the other girl, which I like immensely. “This is your punishment? A tattoo?” Her blue eyes are bright and wide. Wait until she finds out what I want and where I want it.

I nod. “If you can't handle it...” I leave the sentence open, knowing I'm manipulating her. If I don't get my mark on her today, I will soon.

“I can handle it,” she replies right away just like I knew she would.

“You don't have to if you don't want to, Nova,” Nox cajoles. I could punch him in the face for opening his mouth, but I don't.

“Do I get to pick where it goes?” I can’t help but smile a little at her question. She knows me well enough to know I already picked out what I want.

I dip my head lower so my words can only be heard by her, and it gives me a chance to plant my lips on her neck and smell her skin. I don’t know how soap can make my mouth water more than any perfume I’ve ever smelled, but something about her makes it possible. “I know where I’d like to see it, but if you don’t like the spot...” I let her think she’s deciding.

“Let me guess, you want it where it will hurt the most.”

“Not even close, lamb. I want it where I can look at it every day and know what it means.”

“And what does it mean, Lucian?”

I fold her into my arms. “That you’re ours. That you will always be ours.” I feel her nails scrape my skin through my shirt as she grips the fabric, clinging to me while looking to the side to see Nox.

“Okay,” she agrees, speaking so softly I can barely hear her words, but it’s more than I need. “You’re getting it first though, and it means the same for you guys.” Her head is down when she makes the demand, but it doesn’t make it any less powerful.

I lift her face so she’s forced to look at me when I say, “Lamb, our connection goes much deeper than skin, but yes, we’re getting it too.” The subtle shift in her stare, the softening of her features, proves to be too much for me, so I lean in and kiss her. She opens her mouth without hesitation, responding to my touch as if there wasn’t a stranger in the room.

Thoughts of her riding me while getting tattooed make my dick hard, but that can’t happen. I’d wind up with a bunch of scribbles on my ass because there’s no way I could sit still, plus Nova’s pleasure belongs to me and Nox, and no one else will ever witness it. I’m already rethinking where the tattoo should be after Luna’s comment about her skin.

I ease the kiss with some lingering pecks, knowing I need to stop before I get carried away. “Can I see it?” Nova asks,

turning her attention to Nox. When he takes a step closer, she brings her hands up and covers her eyes. “Wait, no. I don’t want to. Is it big? How much does it hurt?”

Nox chuckles. “It’s on my back, you can uncover your eyes.”

Nova removes her hand and goes to my brother when he reaches for her. Watching her with him is like being able to see myself with her. If we weren’t different sides of the same coin, I don’t think I would be able to handle seeing her look at anyone else the way she looks at us. I feel the echo of what he does when he touches her and know every emotion behind his eyes as if they were part of my own, which makes it easy.

I glance over at Luna, whose eyes are glued to my brother and Nova. I can’t hear what he’s saying to our girl, but I imagine it’s something sweet and reassuring. She needs that just as much as she needs me to challenge her, but that’s not what concerns me right now. Right now, I’m watching the way Luna’s eyebrows are all scrunched up and how she can’t seem to take her eyes off the couple in front of her. I can’t tell if she’s enamored by the open display of affection between the three of us or confused, but she doesn’t seem pissy like she was earlier, which is what’s important. There’s no way I would let her touch Nova if I thought she would do something stupid.

“You ready to finish this tattoo up?” Nox asks Luna without turning around to face her.

“Yup,” she replies quickly, popping the P.

Nova returns to my side, making it a point not to watch Nox lie back down on the couch. “You really don’t want to know what it is?” I question while she comes close enough to touch.

Nova shrugs. “Brave or dumb. I’ll figure out which once it’s over with.”

I close the distance between us so I can feel the warmth of her skin brushing against mine with every movement. It’s almost enough to keep me happy, but in truth, I’d rather she be

attached to my side. “It means you trust us, little lamb, and that makes me very happy.”

She tilts her head up to look over at me. “Very? I didn’t know you did adjectives.”

“Are you surprised I have emotions, or that I let you see them out of the bedroom?” I lift a brow.

“Both, I suppose,” she admits. “Who would have thought the ice king would lower himself for the charity case.”

I almost chuckle at the absurdity of the words I spoke to her, but I can’t bring myself to do it, not when our eyes are still locked and it feels as if she could reach right inside me and yank out whatever she wanted. I don’t know that I would stop her because the truth is, the only feeling that seemed to register before her was anger. I lived to be pissed and to make sure everyone else knew it or suffered because of it in some way. Even Nox was a victim of my wrath. “I’d only ever bow to a queen, lamb. You should know that by now.”

The lifting of her lips into a tiny smile threatens to make me kiss her, but I manage to rein in the desire to steal the show of joy I caused. “It amazes me how you can be so arrogant and so sweet at the same time. I think it must be some sort of talent you possess.”

That does make me laugh, and I notice the sound of the tattoo gun change. From the corner of my eye, I see Luna peeking over at us even though she’s trying not to be obvious. The urge to tell her to get her eyes off me registers, but I fight that too. I want her to see that Nova belongs to me, and if she also realizes I belong to my lamb, then even better.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’ll show you my real talent.” There’s no way Nova would miss the suggestion and innuendo in my tone.

Her eyes squint as she begins to giggle in my face. The fact that it makes me smile proves she’s an anomaly. She’s making me laugh at my own cheesy remark. If anyone else laughed at that line, I’d probably be cruel in return, but the truth is, I would never say it to anyone else anyway.

Her hand comes up to pat my chest right before she dabs under her eye. It should be a blow to my ego, but it isn't. The whirr of the tattoo gun picks back up right before Luna says, "Almost done."

"Guess that means I'm next." I move away from Nova just enough to peel my shirt off and toss it on the back of the couch. Her hands reach for mine when I go for my button after opening my belt, and all the humor is gone from her expression.

"Is that necessary?"

"For it to be where I want it, yes."

"But..." She glances over at Nox who doesn't have his pants down, just loosened so Luna can get to the spot near the base of his spine.

"I'm not getting it in the same spot."

"But all your tattoos are in the same spot." She frowns.

"This one is different."

"Why?"

"Because it is." I wanted the tattoo where I could see it every day, and Nox wanted his on his back where it would be harder to see. We've always agreed on placement before, so it was never an issue, plus we love to fuck with people and make it even harder for them to tell us apart, but this is different. I don't know how to explain it more than that, but I know my brother liked the idea of Nova living on different parts of our skin too. It felt right.

"Okay," she says softly without more of an explanation, which I appreciate. I don't think I could give her more, especially with Luna sitting right fucking here listening to every word we utter like we're some sort of fucking K-drama.

"But where?" Nova whispers while hooking her fingers over my shorts. I look down, prompting her to follow my gaze to where her knuckles graze the empty patch of skin to the right of my dick. I keep my shit tight, but I already shaved a little extra so Luna wouldn't have to.

Nova's eyes go wide before she jerks her gaze back up to mine. "No, ouch," she says before crossing her legs and squeezing her thighs.

I chuckle at her response. "Not for you, lamb. Yours is going right here." I knead her ass cheek, and when I pull her against me to feel her body alongside mine, it's not even a conscious thought.

"On my butt?" She scrunches up her nose.

"Yep, and we're going to have to inspect it daily," I warn, only half teasing.

"You would." She rolls her eyes.

"You want a mirror?" Luna questions my brother, interrupting our hushed conversation.

"Nah, I'll check it out in a bit." Nox does a half push up to get off the couch.

"Alrighty. Let me cover it, then I'll wash up, switch my gloves and bags, and get started on the next one."

It only takes about ten minutes before Luna is ready for me. I jumped the gun a bit getting ready, but we usually go to her studio, and the process seems to go quicker there. She takes a long look at me after obviously overhearing my conversation with Nova about placement and asks, "Where am I going?"

Nova makes a face, probably at Luna's word choice, but doesn't respond.

"Right here." I pull my shorts down and over to allow her to see the smooth skin where I want it.

"Are you going to be able to sit still? I'm sure I don't need to tell you that's a sensitive area."

I don't bother responding, but I'm sure she can read the expression on my face.

"Okay." She looks down at the couch instead. "Drop trou and lie down."

Normally, her instructions wouldn't bother me, but they do now. "Excuse me, but nah," Nova interjects as she uses her body to angle Luna out of the way and glare up at me. "The shorts stay on, pretty boy."

"I need to be able to work if that's where he wants it," Luna argues even though Nova was speaking to me.

"I'll get a towel," I offer so I can cover my junk.

"I'll get the damn towel, sit still. Needs his johnson hanging out for a damn tattoo," she mumbles to herself as she leaves the room. "Where's the bathroom?" she hollers from the hall.

"I'll go help her." Nox is grinning as he jogs after her.

"I didn't think you guys would deal with a possessive girl." Luna eyeballs me like I'm some new creature.

"I will only ever *deal* with her." My tone is devoid of emotion when I speak to her. It's not even a forethought, it's just my natural state with others. Luna's features pinch, conveying a hint of doubt, but I don't need to prove shit to her, so I don't give a fuck what she thinks.

Nova and Nox return. She has a grin playing on her lips as she twists a small towel around like a little whip. I can just imagine it kissing my skin with pain, and by the gleam in her eyes, I know she's thinking the same.

"Turn around," Nova instructs, spinning her finger while looking at Luna.

The artist snorts but does as she's told and turns. "I've seen it before, honey. Who do you think inked the wings?" She's referencing the wings below my navel.

"I hope you have a good memory then, because you won't ever see it again."

Nox barks out a laugh and drops into the chair unbothered. I can't say the same. Possessive Nova excites me.

"Strip, Morningstar," Nova demands, and I shove my pants and shorts down my thighs with haste. "Now lie down."

Nox laughs again, the dick. He knows she's driving me crazy, and there isn't shit I can do about it right now.

I put my ass on the couch without breaking eye contact and do an awkward as fuck dance of getting my legs on the couch while still shrouded in jeans. Nova drops the towel over my dick then bends over to adjust the fabric. I have to clench my fists to stop myself from grabbing her around the back of her neck.

When she stands, she turns her head, making my cock twitch with her stare. "Seriously?" She plants her hands on her hips, clearly seeing the movement under the towel.

I grit my teeth and exhale out my nose, searching for something that will help the fucking semi I'm rocking. "It's not like I can help it. You're acting like you want to put a leash on my dick," I grate out.

"I'm going to put a leash on it and then use it to strangle you," she whispers harshly.

I groan, and Nox chortles like a schoolgirl.

"We doing okay over there?" Luna turns her head as if she might spin around.

"Fine, I'll let you know when we're ready," Nova responds, cocking out her hip to stare at me.

I shut my eyes and take a few more deep breaths, but it's at least two minutes before Nova gives the go-ahead for Luna to get started.

The minute Luna sets the side of her palm down on my groin, my dick deflates. It's not about her touch, because I don't feel a specific kind of way about that—it's knowing what's coming and focusing on that instead of Nova's bossy ass.

The first minute or two, everything goes okay, but when Luna wipes the excess ink off my skin, she gets a little too close for my lamb's comfort. "Hey now," she snaps.

"I thought you didn't want to see the design," Nox comments, trying to intervene.

“I’m not looking at the design.”

“I need this out of the way.” Luna nudges her hand, coming too close to touching my dick under the towel.

Before I have a chance to say anything, Nova reaches down, wraps her fingers around my dick, and pulls it to the side. “How’s that? Is it out of the way enough for you?”

“That’ll work.” Luna begins working again without missing a beat.

“Oh fuck!” I groan, and there’s no hiding the tension in my voice.

“Lucian!” Nova warns, but there’s no coming down, not when the burn of the needle is dragging across my skin and Nova has her hand wrapped around my cock.

“Stop, stop.” I shake my head, about ready to crawl out of my skin or come all over the towel. My mind doesn’t care that it’s Luna causing the pain, only that my entire body feels alive because Nova is touching me while pain and endorphins flood my system.

Luna lifts her arms up and leans back. “I told you it would hurt.” She’s got the reason I asked her to stop all wrong.

“Give us a minute,” Nova says without acknowledging the other woman’s comment.

“He’s never needed a break before,” Luna mutters softly under her breath, only leaning back a few more inches when I want her out of the fucking room. I’m just about to tell her that when Nova leans forward, and I feel her tits against my chest as she brings her mouth to my ear.

“Don’t you dare, pretty boy. You will not come with her hands on you, or you won’t touch me. Do you understand?”

I swallow as my cock throbs. My mind is splintering, debating how pissed my lamb would be if I stopped fighting right this minute while Luna doesn’t have her hands on me, and wondering if I really could keep myself from coming if I don’t. As if she knows I’m on the edge, Nova tightens her

grip, and a fucking grumble vibrates my chest. This is the sweetest goddamned torture.

“That sound you just made is mine. She doesn’t get to hear that. Get your shit together, Morningstar.” She leans back, confident her warning has been delivered.

“Watch your mouth.” I peek at her, seeing the seriousness in her features. The possessive glint in her eye makes my dick throb again, but I have myself under control—at least I hope I do.

“Say that again when we’re alone and see what happens,” Nova taunts.

“You can bet your ass I will. You better deliver the consequences, lamb.”

Nova nods once, then says, “You can finish now,” to Luna.

When I don’t hear the whirr of the gun begin again immediately, I break eye contact with Nova and see Luna’s brow pinch in puzzlement. It’s clear our hushed conversation wasn’t private. Nova turns her head, following my gaze.

“So you needed a handler. I shouldn’t be surprised,” Luna comments, and I know it sets Nova on edge from the shift in her body.

“Nah, he needed me. Finish up before I change my mind.” It’s a glimpse of the steel she has under her skin, the power and confidence that attracted me to her the first time we met. Luna must recognize it too, because the tattoo gun gets switched on, and Luna does as she’s told, making sure to keep her hands far from Nova’s hand, which is still covering my cock with the towel. I’m still hard when she finishes, so Nova nudges the artist out of the way after she cleans up the tattoo and covers it.

I don’t waste any time getting up off the couch and pulling my pants up far enough to walk, but I don’t bother with the button.

“We still a go for you?” Luna questions Nova.

I watch my girl swallow then give a brief nod. “Yup.” I know she’s nervous, but she’s also trying not to show it.

“I need to get reset and cleaned up. It won’t take long.”

I shuffle my feet like some hack worried about touching pussy for the first time, eager and edgy. If Nova doesn’t help me out soon, I’m going to have to go into the bathroom and choke one out. My balls are aching with the need to come.

“Okay, be right back.” My lamb tugs my fingers, the equivalent to pulling my chain, and I respond like a pussy whipped asshole, trailing behind her.

The moment we’re out of the room, I push her up against the wall and grind my dick against her ass. The sting of the tattoo rubbing against her, even through the material of my pants, sends a jolt of fire down my spine. I could come just like this, so I tell her, “You’re going to make me come.”

“I’m not doing much, pretty boy.” She pushes her ass back, belying her words. I pull my hips back just a little before grinding against her even harder. The groan that leaves my lips is a desperate plea for more.

Nova uses her body to push back against me again, but this time she’s able to get enough room to spin around. Our eyes meet, and she slowly lowers to her knees while holding my gaze.

My breath leaves my chest in heavy pants, but when she purposely drags her nails over the second skin covering my new tattoo, I kick my head back while squeezing my eyes tightly shut.

“I couldn’t help but see the tattoo, Lucian,” Nova tells me as she yanks my pants down roughly, making my breath catch.

“Oh yeah, couldn’t stop yourself from looking at my cock, lamb?”

“I have to admit, feeling how hard you were and how badly you needed me was quite the distraction.” Her voice is husky with her own need. “But knowing the permanent reminder of me, of us, would be etched into your skin forever was almost too much.” She licks my slit, and I have to slam

my hand against the wall to keep myself from collapsing into a heap on the floor.

“But you’re going to have to find a new artist, Lucian.” Her nails trace over the second skin again, and the burn has my knees shaking. “I’m not allowing her, or any other girl, to touch you again. Tell me you agree.” She blows a cool breath over the head of my cock, and I would agree to just about anything at this point.

I nod, my mouth slack and eyes hazy.

“Say it.” The demand is accompanied by her nuzzling my shaft with her soft lips and cheek.

“Yes... I fucking agree.” I pant the words she needs to hear.

“That’s my pretty boy,” she murmurs before swallowing me down and sucking so hard my back arches. I make a sound the devil would be proud to claim.



NOX

The thump in the hall is followed by soft utterances I don’t need to hear to understand. My brother was as close to the edge as I’ve ever seen him, but with a few words from Nova, he pulled his shit together. Just watching the two of them together was enough to bring me to the brink too, but considering I didn’t have Nova’s hands on me, I was able to take a step back and allow them their moment.

It doesn’t mean I won’t be looking for my own time alone with her later though. I get to see a different side of Nova, one she doesn’t even really show Lucian. She’s always sweet, but

she's somehow softer when we're alone, and I love that I get that piece of her.

Another loud thump has Luna looking toward the direction of the hall. "Pretty intense, right?" She tries to sound airy, but I see the ways she keeps darting her eyes between me and the hall. When she pulls at the hem of her small shirt, exposing more of her tits, I'm pretty sure I know the deal. "You think they'll be a while?"

I'm not the only one who felt the chemistry between Lucian and Nova, nor was I the only one affected by it. "Not happening." I shut any idea she might have down right away. While I might have indulged with others like her in the past, I'm absolutely not interested now.

"What?" she scoffs. "I was just wondering how long they were going to be is all."

I could argue, but it's not worth my time or effort. I don't tell her Lucian would be lucky to last five minutes. Instead, I tell her, "However long it takes."

The next sound that emanates from the hall answers the question more thoroughly than I could. If Lucian wasn't with Nova, I'd be worried about him. He sounds like he's in agony, but I know it's the opposite.

Luna's face flushes a bright red, then she drops her eyes to her equipment. Maybe she finally realized that's all she should concern herself with.

Less than five minutes later, Nova and Lucian saunter through the doorway. Nova can't seem to look in Luna's direction, but the girl is avoiding her too. It's actually kind of cute.

"You ready for your turn, Nova?" I question, and when her eyes go round in shock, I chuckle a bit at the unintended innuendo.

"My tattoo!" She catches on really fast.

"Yeah, that." I should call out my brother, because it seems like he didn't take care of our girl, but I'm not going to do it in front of someone.

“Where are you thinking for placement?” Luna is suddenly much more professional.

“Right ass cheek,” Lucian answers for Nova.

“Wherever she’s comfortable with it,” I amend.

“It’s a good spot for a first tattoo,” Luna remarks.

“Should I lie down?” Nova looks between us, and I can tell she’s a little nervous.

“Yeah, head this way if we’re going right side.” Luna kneels on the floor, getting into position, while Nova pulls her pants down enough that they end up right under her ass cheeks, offering a damn nice view.

Lucian drops into a spare chair as if his legs don’t want to hold him up anymore, and I take it as my cue to go over to Nova’s side. Before she can get on the couch, I take a seat at the end her head will be near. I expect her to lie on the cushion next to me, but she crawls over me until her tits are between my spread legs, then folds her arms under her chin on my thigh. I’m definitely not complaining.

“Do you want it visible in a bikini?”

“Yes,” Lucian and I say in unison.

“You okay with that?” Luna confirms with Nova.

“Yeah, I’m okay with that.”

“Okay, let’s get you inked.”

I watch Nova’s butt bounce around a little while Luna uses some sort of spray and paper towels. Next comes the razor. Nova jolts a little when the cold shaving gel lands on her skin. “We could use numbing cream if you’re nervous, but it needs to sink in for about ten minutes first.”

“Did you use it with them?”

“No, most guys turn it down. I don’t offer it to these two at this point,” Luna replies.

“I think I’ll be okay.”

“You can get it,” I tell her, knowing her decision not to use it has a lot to do with the fact that we don’t.

“I think I’d rather just get it over with.” She tips her head back to look at me the best she can from my lap without moving too much.

“Let me know if you change your mind or need a break,” Luna tells her then turns on the machine.

I feel Nova take in a deep breath and hold it for a few long seconds before finally releasing it. I stroke my fingers through her hair, and her body relaxes deeper into mine. The sound of the needle shifts as Luna ends her first line. “Doing okay?” Her question reminds me why we chose her as an artist. Not only is her work dope, but she actually knows what she’s doing, and it’s finally showing.

“Yeah, it’s not that bad. Unless it gets worse?” Nova adds the last part quickly.

“Nah, that’s about it for this, but it’s a lot different in other areas, like ribs or neck. That’s an entirely different beast. I don’t do many groin tattoos either. Most people don’t think they are worth the pain for as few people who will be able to see them, you know?”

“Yeah, I doubt I’ll ever do anything like that,” Nova agrees while Luna gets into a rhythm of tattooing and swiping with the paper towel balled up in her gloved hand.

When it’s nearly complete, Nova observes, “It kind of feels like I have a sunburn and she’s drawing on it.”

“That’s a pretty common description, or the eraser thing if you did that as a kid.”

“Eraser thing?” Nova questions.

Luna stops inking and rolls her eyes toward Nova. “Guys in my middle school who thought they were tough would do it all the time—rub an eraser on their hand until it bled. There’s this one guy who still has some scars, but I think he started liking the pain, ya know?”

“Weirdo,” I mock while looking at my brother with crazy eyes.

“Not all pain is bad,” he defends with a shrug.

“I think you have to like pain a little to be covered in tattoos.” Luna makes a few more swipes on Nova’s skin. Her ass cheek is pink from the abuse, but the tattoo looks even better than amazing because I know what it means.

The Morningstar markings are simple, with thin lines that almost make them resemble a star mixed with a cross. There’s a cluster of them, and some are smaller than others, but there are three identical in size and shape, one representing each of us, along with a few other shapes that could be open stars. I can imagine it filled in with constellations or being added to when we add to our family, but right now, it’s fucking perfect. I lean over and kiss her other ass cheek, keeping my lips away from the fresh tattoo.

It allows me to smell her musky scent. I know Lucian didn’t get her off, but she certainly wanted to if her body is any indication. I’ll be taking care of that soon. I bet she could ride me without me touching the tender skin on her ass.

I don’t miss the opportunity to tell her, “You smell delicious.”

“My butt?” She chuckles while shifting to dislodge me.

“Your pussy.” I trail my fingers over the unmarred skin of her left side, and she makes a little bit of a choking sound.

“I suppose I’ll accept that as a compliment.”

“As you should,” Luna confirms. “Men who like the smell of pussy know how to give head.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Nova shakes her head slowly as if she’s shocked to be participating in this conversation.

“Do you need aftercare instructions?” Luna is back to being professional when she poses her question to me.

“No, we know the drill and will take care of her.”

“I figured.” Luna stands with a little groan and peels off her third set of gloves for the night, dropping them into the small wastebasket I brought out of one of the bathrooms. Clean-up is pretty quick, just like the tattoos, and before long, Luna is being escorted out of the house by one of the security staff members.

Nova sits gingerly on her butt, as if she’s worried she’s going to hurt the tattoo, or maybe she’s worried about it hurting her. “You okay?” I question once she’s settled.

“Yeah. It’s weird though. It’s like I feel all jittery now,” she confesses.

“It’s adrenaline. You might get sleepy soon.” I watch her features to make sure she’s not hiding the fact that she’s in pain or uncomfortable.

“I don’t feel sleepy now,” she reasons.

“It could catch up to you in a little bit.”

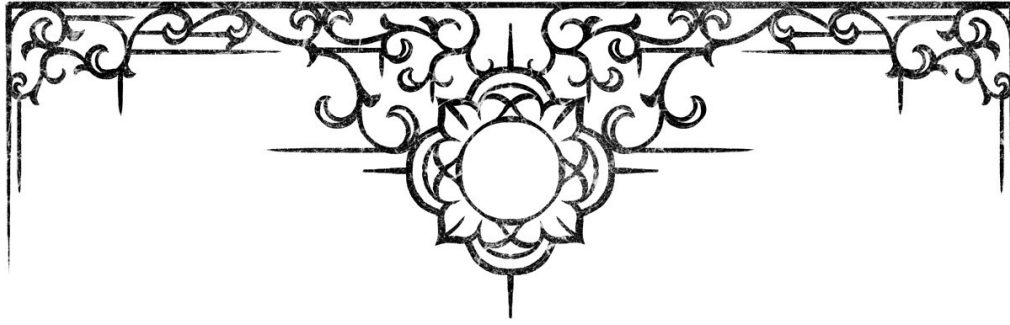
“So, little Morningstar, are you ready to head home?” Lucian inserts into our conversation.

“Little Morningstar?” she questions.

“You’re wearing our mark. I think that makes it pretty clear you’re one of us,” Lucian tells her. I continue to watch her for a reaction. She always corrects anyone who tried to call her an Umbra, but surprisingly, she doesn’t insist she’s a Devlin or deny his claim that she is part of us.

Hopefully, that means she will be on board for my plan, which even Lucian thought was a little insane at first. I don’t think it was my explanation on how it would simplify the immediate future and help with the bullshit founder rules that swayed him to my way of thinking. In fact, I’m certain it was knowing she would be linked to us forever, because that is the only thing he said before agreeing and making me promise to tell Nova it was my idea.

She still thinks I’m the saner of the two, and I doubt her theory most of the time, but I’m not one to argue when things are skewed in my favor.



NOVA

The tension in the game room is heavy despite having spent the last several hours together putting permanent reminders of our connection on our skin. It's a pretty simple tattoo, if you didn't know the symbolism behind it, you might just assume it was a celestial design, but the image showed up when I searched their name to learn more about the king of the campus who hated me a few months ago. Back then, I told myself it was because I wanted to know why he wanted me gone, but there was more to me wanting to know more about him that I couldn't deny even then.

The lore behind the name and symbol intrigued me almost as much as the man, especially knowing some people refer to it as the brightest star, the devil before he fell from grace, or the coming of dawn and renewal. I laughed about those interpretations back then, but I see the truth in them now.

The Morningstars have been the brightest part of my life in a very long time, and there's no doubt about the changes I've gone through with them.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about." Nox breaks the silent tension in the room.

"Okay," I mutter slowly, admittedly apprehensive.

"A mandatory meeting has been called for tomorrow night."

I'm not surprised by this. In fact, I've been expecting it because they told me to. What they didn't tell me, or even know themselves, is if I would be attending the meeting, so I broach that now. "For me too?"

"There are a couple ways we could handle this." Lucian bleeds into the conversation seamlessly. "We could ignore the summons altogether, but it wouldn't solve anything besides buying a few days, during which they would just grow more persistent with their endeavors. We could leave you here, but again, that will only be postponing the inevitable, it's not a long-term solution."

"Or," Nox says, "we could make your inclusion into our family official and challenge the Umbras' claim on you as their heir."

"Do you think I'm not their real granddaughter?" I question with a frown. God, that would solve so much of this, but I'm not that hopeful.

"We're certain you're their blood, they would have already made sure of that before bringing you here," Lucian divulges.

"I don't think I understand. How can we challenge me being their heir then?"

"We make you ours," Nox responds.

I snicker at the thought. "You're going to adopt me?" It sounds insane to say it out loud.

"We'll marry you." Nox doesn't miss a beat, but my heart does.

"You'll what?" There's no way I could have heard him correctly.

"You heard him," Lucian replies as if he's privy to what's going on in my head. "You will marry one of us. It would be both, but polygamy is against the law in every US state."

"You've checked?" The shocked utterance comes out of my mouth unbidden.

"I already knew, but I did consult our lawyer. There are ways around it, which we will take care of in the future, but

for now, you'll have to choose which of us will be first." It's a little strange hearing how matter-of-fact Lucian is while discussing this.

"It should be him. He's the one who will become the president, so it'll make a stronger case," Nox reasons.

Thoughts flicker through my mind. Some are focused on the facts presented, like wondering if this really would help keep me from the Umbras, but most of the things going through my mind are centered around my thundering heart and the tingles of excitement that are making me lightheaded. "I thought the families couldn't *mingle*."

"There are always exceptions." Nox scoots forward on the chair, seeming encouraged by my question. "We'll have to petition the founding families and make them vote."

I deflate. "They would never agree to that. You already told me it would look like we're joining forces with the Umbras."

"You're right," Lucian agrees.

"Then why are we talking about this?"

Nox isn't deterred by my reasoning. "If we get the Umbras to agree, we could overrule the other families."

"They would be the last to agree," I counter.

"If they don't, we will force the other two families to side with us. Blackmail is a useful tool, plus, I'm next in line for power, so they'll think they can use it as a bargaining chip, but we think we can make your grandmother see reason."

"What reason would she see to agree?" I feel like we're going in circles, and I'm not getting any real answers from either of them.

"We'll agree to give her the heir she so desperately wants by offering her our first born." Nox's words ring in my head for a blinding moment, then I'm on my feet, backing away from him.

"Are you fucking crazy? I'm not giving that woman my kid!"

“Watch it!” Lucian tries to censor my language, but I ignore him.

“I’m not even going to have kids for these people to use as pawns. I decided that the moment I understood what she wanted with me.”

Nox stands slowly with his hands lifted in a placating manner. “We would never really give her our child, Nova. She just needs to believe that long enough for us to get rid of her.”

“You’ll be having our *kids*.” Lucian puts emphasis on the plural. “And it’s not to make little brainwashed heirs, but there will be plenty of time to discuss that later.”

I shove the notion of having children deep down. Before all of this happened, I wanted children, wanted a big family if it was possible because I didn’t want to be alone anymore, but it was an easy decision to let the selfish notion go once I realized how they could be used and manipulated, and I’m not going to give myself hope for something different yet. “She’ll never agree anyway.” My voice sounds flat, and I know it’s because I don’t want to reveal my emotions.

“I don’t think you know how desperate she is, Nova. We will have to make her see this is her only chance.” Nox’s shoulders lower a fraction when some of the tension in his body subsides.

“How do we make her believe that?”

“We make her think it was her idea.” Lucian shrugs with indifference. “And if we can’t, then we’ll utilize the other founders to overrule her or kill your grandparents. I’m partial to the final option, but it has the potential to be the messiest.”

“This is so far from normal.” I drop back onto the couch and place my head in my hands. I knew the solution would never be simple, but this feels even more deranged than I imagined.

“I know it’s not fair to ask this of you, Nova, but we’re limited on options and crunched for time.” Nox settles across from me again.

“Can’t I just leave like my mother did? Wouldn’t that be better for everyone?”

“Not happening,” Lucian replies coldly.

“They would never let you go without a fight, and I hate to say it and make you think you’re beholden to us, because you’re not, but without us, you might not have ever known their plans, or they would have just held you against your will like they already tried.” The discomfort in Nox’s voice is evident as he speaks over his brother.

“We can’t figure out why they ever allowed your mother to leave in the first place. Our only guess is they assumed she would be back at some point, or they would bring her back with you,” Lucian adds.

“God, I hate her,” I snarl.

“She will die, lamb, very soon. I promise you won’t have to worry about her much longer.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to deny his claim or thwart the effort in some way, but I can’t bring myself to protest. I want her to leave me alone, and if she has to die for that to happen, I’m more comfortable with that than I should be. “Explain how we get her to think it’s her idea.”



NOX

“By simply presenting the facts while dropping a few breadcrumbs.” She’s right to question me. Convincing Astrid to allow Nova to become a Morningstar isn’t going to be easy, but we’ve been manipulating people our entire lives. I’m

confident we can do it, and if we can't, then nothing has been lost.

“She’s not dumb,” Nova counters.

“But she is impulsive and desperate. If she doesn’t go for it, we’ll kill her, and you’ll become the leader of the Umbras by default.” I worry Lucian’s calm demeanor while speaking of killing her grandmother might frighten Nova, but she doesn’t recoil. Instead, she’s pragmatic.

“I thought the families were banned from fighting to keep the balance of power.”

“Exceptions are made.” Lucian shrugs. “There’s a reason why we call the founding principles the corrupt credence.”

“Killing her will cause a war,” I caution so she’s not blindsided if we’re forced to take extreme measures.

“A war that is coming regardless. I’m tired of allowing others to think they can control me,” my brother counters. I’ve known it was his plan to overthrow the founders since our parents died. He may have been planning it even before then, but it was never discussed until after they were buried.

“I don’t want to be the cause of a war.” Nova sighs dejectedly.

“You’re not the cause, lamb. They chose their fate when they tried to take what’s ours.”

She chuffs. “I think they feel the same.”

“They don’t matter, only you do, and you didn’t want to be there any more than we wanted you there.” I don’t want Nova to blame herself for any of this, but I know she feels responsible, and her next words prove it.

“None of this would be happening right now if they would just leave me alone.”

“I’m sure they would have done something that pissed me off enough by now to warrant me killing them.” Lucian steeples his fingers to cover the bottom half of his face, trying to assure Nova again that this isn’t her fault.

“The only thing left to do is call her and see how she responds.” My knee is bouncing up and down with nervous energy. So many things could and probably will go wrong, but keeping Nova out of danger is our goal. Constantly worrying about them trying to take her away from us will drive all of us slowly insane.

“I still don’t think she’ll go for it.” She scoots back into the couch while shaking her head, but at least she isn’t trying to stop me.

Seconds later, the phone I placed on the arm of my chair rings on speaker. For a moment, I worry she won’t even answer the call, but she does on the end of the second ring.

“Hello?” That one word bleeds curiosity.

“Astrid?” I confirm, hoping she won’t ask whom she’s speaking to.

“You know who you dialed,” she drawls. “Are you calling to tell me my granddaughter has come to her senses?”

I bite my tongue to prevent myself from saying something counterproductive—it’s the reason I’m speaking and not Lucian, since he wasn’t confident he would be able to *grovel*, as he called it. “I was hoping you would listen to reason.”

She huffs, and I worry she might hang up the phone, but either her curiosity or her suspicion keeps her on the line. “I see things perfectly clear. You are depriving me of my heir.”

“We would like to offer a truce.” Even saying the words is hard. I understand now why Lucian readily agreed to me speaking.

“A truce?” She sounds genuinely surprised. “In what manner?”

“We want a relationship with her and are willing to help you build one in return.”

“You must think I’m a fool.” Scorn flavors her tone.

“Not at all. I think you’re pragmatic, and right now, you’re only seeing the short game. How do you think Nova will respond to being forced to provide an heir for you?”

“She’ll come around eventually. There is a price to pay for what we have.”

“You forget that she didn’t grow up with that knowledge. I think you already know Nova would sooner walk away from all of this than deal with the price you mentioned.”

“Which is why she has to learn of the rewards.”

“Which is also what we’re offering. If you permit her to remain with us, and give your blessing for a union, then we can teach her to see the rewards.”

Astrid lets out a dark bark of laughter. “And how does that benefit me?”

“In the long run, we will all benefit. Rory will only remain in power for a short time longer, and once his time expires, Nova will become the leader of the Umbras. How do you think she will treat the people who forced her into a role she didn’t want or value? Let us help her see what a gift she’s being offered.”

The long, quiet pause causes my heart rate to pick up even more, and the anticipation alone makes my mouth dry. “What do you mean, *union*?”

At least I know she’s listening to me. “Exactly what it sounds like. We will be married.”

“The others would never approve,” she counters quickly.

“We don’t need the others to agree, only us and you. If there is a tie, then Rory decides, and we all know you are the one who runs shit.” Stroking her ego is a necessary evil I can live with.

“You’re asking me to allow my last remaining heir to become a Morningstar on the grounds of her not being upset with me?”

“I’m asking you to think about the consequences of what you will have to do. There is no way Nova will agree to give you an heir willingly, not after all that has happened. She would be much more than upset with you if you had her

raped.” I voice the ugly truth, and the venom in my voice isn’t concealed.

Astrid huffs, as if me saying the word is somehow bothersome. “It wouldn’t have had to come to that.” She doesn’t know Nova at all if she actually believes that statement. “I would still be losing an heir to the Morningstars.”

“Nova is still an Umbra by blood,” I remind her, planting the first seed. “You would also be gaining a very powerful ally.”

The line goes quiet for another long moment before she inhales deeply. “You’ve given me some things to think about. You’ll hear from me soon.” With that, she hangs up the phone without so much as a goodbye.

Apprehension settles in my stomach. I expected a hell of a lot more pushback.

“Um...” Nova hums while twisting her head to the side. “Did that go better than you expected or am I being too hopeful?”

“It was way too fucking easy.” Lucian is just as suspicious.

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“I still think we should just kill her.”

“That would be a death sentence for you, unless you think you could take out all three families in one night or make it look like Nova did it.” I allow my frustration to make my lips loose.

“What?” Nova trades glances between us.

Lucian snarls his lip in lieu of cussing me out. “I’ll have the perfect opportunity tomorrow night. They’ll all be in one place.” He ignores my slipup and continues talking about his plan to kill everyone.

“Why did he say unless you make it look like I did it?” Nova questions, and my twin’s gaze darkens even more.

“Because he’s an idiot.”

I agree, but I don't admit it out loud.

"Nox..." She shifts her focus solely to me. "Why would it be better if it looked like I did it?"

I'm not going to lie to her, which is why I shouldn't have run my mouth. She wouldn't have cause to ask the question if I hadn't. "Internal squabbles happen."

"Internal squabbles?" She's incredulous. "Are you saying they wouldn't care if *I* killed her myself?"

"I'm saying it's not a death sentence for one family member to kill another in the struggle for power."

Lucian exhales through his nose, sounding like a pissed off dragon. I'm actually surprised that's all he's doing.

"Gosh, this is so messed up." She averts her gaze and stares at the ground.

My brother feels the need to add, "I would never let you take the fall."

"What fall? It's totally fine for me to off her." Nova's tone is dismissive, and I hate that I put the idea in her head.

"It's not going to come to that." I try to undo some of the damage I caused.

"But it will eventually. There's no point in pretending it's not the end goal." Nova rubs her hands down the tops of her thighs repeatedly in a restless movement. It makes me feel even worse.

"Everyone dies eventually, lamb. There's no point in you worrying about how or when it will happen for that bitch. I think I'll have Morozov reach out to Bridget. Maybe she can tell us what's been happening at the Umbra estate." Lucian changes the subject swiftly.

"Bridget?"

"Yeah, she's pretty pissed at Alden and damn near desperate to get off this island. In other words, she's easy to manipulate." Lucian rises to his feet, prompting Nova to crane her neck back to watch him.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Morozov. His girlfriend Vera is the one who opens the lines of communication. I won’t allow her to have my number or access to me.”

“You were meeting with her the day I...” *Left* is unsaid, but we all know what she means. “What did you find out then?”

“She told me Alden had a key to your room and used it often.” Lucian still hasn’t forgiven Nova for leaving, not even with the new ink on her skin and knowing she did it to protect us.

“Don’t be all pissy, pretty boy. No one hated it as much as I did.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.” My brother’s smile is sharp.

“Did she tell you anything useful?” Nova ignores his looming anger.

“She thought she did, but it wasn’t worth the million she was asking for.”

“She wanted a million dollars?”

“And to be set up somewhere else,” I chime in.

“She better hope she has more valuable information this time, or she’s not going to need help getting off the island. I’ll bury her under it for wasting my time.” Lucian pivots and saunters out of the room. The tension dissipates with his absence.

“He’s still mad at me,” Nova observes.

“He’s not mad, that’s just his default.” My comment makes her laugh softly. I get up from the chair and join her on the couch. “I shouldn’t have said that about making it look like it was your fault.”

“It’s the truth, right?” She waits for me to nod then continues, “Then I should know. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I don’t want you thinking he would do that, because he wouldn’t.”

“Want to bet? If he has to do something to her, he better make it look like I did it, or I will be pissed. He’s not going to die for her, none of us are.”

I let that topic go because I don’t want her thinking about it anymore. “How’s your ass?”

Nova’s eyes round when her brows shoot up on her forehead. “The tattoo!” she exclaims a little slowly. “Fine, I forgot about it until you asked. How’s yours?”

“Same. This tape stuff is more bothersome than the tattoo, but it helps with healing.”

“I was pleasantly surprised when I saw what you guys picked out. I figured it would be bigger and more...” She sweeps her hand out in a wide arc. “Property of the Morningstars.”

“Don’t give him any ideas.” I chuckle while wrapping my arm around her shoulders and tucking her closer to my side.

“I’m nervous,” she admits softly, picking at the material over my thigh.

“I know, and I wish I could take it all away, but all I can ask you to do is trust us. No matter what happens, we will protect you.”

She curls deeper into my side. “I hate that I have to ask you to. I feel helpless and weak that I’m allowing them to push me around.”

“You aren’t either of those things, Nova. You’re strong and too sweet for your own good most of the time, but I love you for it. I love you for giving Lucian the balance he desperately needs, but I love you even more for giving me a chance and still being willing to accept us after all the bullshit you were put through.”

Her head tilts back to look up at me, and there’s a soft smile playing on her lips. “I think it was denial that allowed me to see you guys for what you really are, that and a little

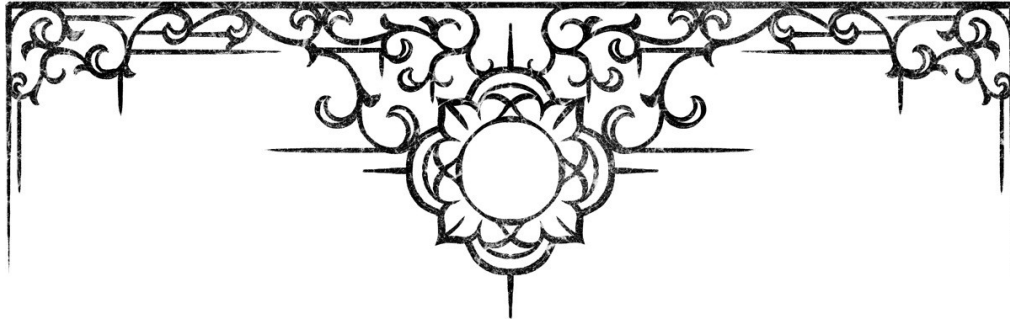
desperation.” She scrunches up her nose like she hates admitting it. “I didn’t think I could ever like someone who treated me like I was a piece of garbage, so I thought I was safe from your brother, but it turns out he was crawling under my skin the entire time, then I met you.” Her smile widens. “The perfect version of the guy who made my life hell for a few weeks, and I needed to know how you could be the same, yet so different. I think my knees nearly buckled the first time you touched my chin.”

“I’ll take that to mean you liked me before you liked him.” It’s not a competition, but damn it feels good to hear her admit that.

“Undoubtedly. There’s no way my pride could have withstood your brother without you. You showed me he was capable of being... him.” She seems to struggle for the right word to describe Lucian. “But you two together make the perfect storm. I didn’t stand a chance.”

“I’m grateful I demanded to meet you then, even though he was reluctant to let me.”

“Me too,” she admits softly before snuggling back into my chest. I toy with the ends of her hair, more content than I’ve been in a long time, even with all the shit we’re facing. I know we can make good on the promise I made to her. We will keep Nova safe and with us, no matter what happens.



LUCIAN

I debate asking Nova and Nox if they want to ride over to Morozov's with me since he's not on shift until tomorrow and I need to speak with him, but I decide to head over by myself. I'm not exactly pleased with my brother at the moment for blabbing about me framing Nova for her grandmother's death.

It's something I would do, but not to her. I would make it look like Rory did it if anything, like the old bastard took her out before offing himself, but now Nox's words are planted in Nova's head, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Morozov's girl answers the door when I knock. "Yes?" She sounds hesitant.

"I'm here for Morozov."

"He's sleeping." She looks over her shoulder.

"Wake him up, or I will. I'm not talking to you without him."

"Okay... Come in." She stands back, inviting me into the house I own.

Morozov is already coming down the hall once I make it inside. "What's up?" His hair is a mess, but he doesn't bother to tame it after pulling a shirt over his head.

“I need you to reach out to Bridget,” I tell the girl who’s walking around, fluffing pillows and shit.

“Me?” she asks as if I could be speaking to someone else.

“Yes. Make sure she knows I’m willing to pay, but keep it clean. Her calls could be recorded.”

“Now?” She looks at the clock on the wall.

“Is that a problem?”

“It’s kind of late. Should I wait until morning?”

“Just try,” Morozov tells her, speaking more gently than I would have.

“Should I call or text her?” she asks after picking up her phone from the couch.

“Calm, Vera.” His accent is slightly thicker than usual, but she nods, so it must be normal for them. “Call her and invite her to lunch at the Union since leaving the island isn’t an option at the moment.”

“Okay,” she whispers, then focuses on her phone. “It’s ringing,” she murmurs then brings the phone to her ear before speaking. “Hey, Bridget, it’s Vera.” Her eyes lock onto Morozov, who gives an encouraging nod of approval. I’m fucking glad I wasn’t around the last time this happened, I wouldn’t have had much hope for it working out, because the girl is as green as a potato.

“Do you want to grab lunch tomorrow? I’m buying.” Her eyes dart over to me, and I relax a little. Maybe she’s not that bad. “I’m going stir crazy just sitting in the house,” she continues. “What time?” Her eyes go really wide, and she giggles. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Does...” I hold up both of my hands, my fingers splayed to indicate the time. “Ten o’clock sound okay? Maybe we can take a walk on the beach or something too. I’m just really looking forward to getting out and having some company... Twelve o’clock?” She waits for me to agree, then remarks, “Oh yeah, that’s fine. I’ll meet you at the school. See ya.” She taps the button to hang up the phone, and Morozov is quick to walk over and give her a hug and compliment.

“Good job, Vera.”

I don't know that I would go that far, but she got the job done, so I'm not going to bitch.

“Do you need me?” my tech specialist questions after releasing his girl.

“Just that for now. We can go over the rest in the morning at the house. I'll be down at the offices early,” I say even though he usually arrives fairly early himself.

“*Хорошо,*” he agrees and walks me to the door.

Instead of returning straight home, I drive around the property, stopping at the vacant lot where the yellow house used to sit. Any evidence it was ever here has been erased. The unobstructed view of the ocean greets me, allowing me to see boats in the distance, but the sight doesn't calm me.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel, making the leather creak. I miss my parents, my mom especially, which makes me feel like shit for wanting her more than my dad, but that's life. We obsess over shit that's out of our control until we either learn to deal with it or make excuses for it. I justify my betrayal by telling myself that my mom would have wanted to meet Nova more, see the person who put me in my place and made me love her for it, but really, I just want to hear her call me *любимая* one more time and see her smile.

The Umbras took that from me just like they tried to take Nova, but thank fuck they didn't get away with it this time. I sincerely regretted not being able to kill her the first time I tried at the meeting after their death, but if I had, I never would have known about Nova, and that's not something I want to think about too much. I can't imagine a life without her at this point, and I will do everything in my power to make sure I don't have to.

The conviction of my thoughts allows me to let go of some of the anger eating away at me since the phone call with Astrid. The knowledge that permitting her to live, if even a short time longer, to ensure Nova is ours forever is worth more than her death to me now.

When I know I'm not going to snap at any wrong word, I start the car and make the short journey home.



NOVA

Nox's phone rings just as Lucian is about to walk out the door, causing him to curse harshly and stop in his tracks. We've been anticipating this call since last night, and of course it would come just before he planned to leave so he could be at the school well before the meeting Vera planned with Bridget.

Nox answers after placing his finger near his mouth to warn us to be quiet and puts the call on speaker. "Hello?"

"Hello." Astrid's refined voice resonates through the room.

The silence afterwards has me shifting in my seat, but Nox doesn't flinch. He waits for her to speak, which seems like some strange standoff she loses for talking first. "I've thought about your proposal, and I just don't see the benefit for me." I don't know if I should applaud her honesty or be appalled by it.

"Your granddaughter not despising you is a good place to start."

"I'm more sensible than allowing *feelings* to sway my judgment. I need reassurance for the long run that we will both have our objectives met."

Nox licks his lips before replying with an air of suspicion. "I know you wouldn't waste your time calling if you didn't have a solution in mind."

"It's good we understand each other." I bet if I could see her, she would have a smug look plastered over her Botoxed

face. “You want Nova, and I want an heir. I think we can both walk away with a win here.”

“How’s that?” Nox does a good impression of being leery.

“I’ll put our vote behind you to get married, and when Nova gets pregnant, we get an heir.” The stunned silence that falls over the room isn’t manufactured. I’m shocked that Nox was able to lead Astrid to this exact decision so easily. It’s almost frightening to think about them using their intellect on me.

“So the child would be an Umbra?” Nox questions after a long moment to absorb her words, but still controlling where the conversation goes.

“Otherwise we would be right back where we left off— with a child that is more loyal to the Morningstars than their real family. You would have to agree to give us full custody.”

“No!” Nox is vehement. I almost protest, because this is exactly what we wanted, but he continues before I can muster up a response. “She will never go for it. Fifty-fifty custody, and they bear your name,” he growls in mock compromise.

“I imagine you can sway her or lie. I don’t care how you convince her to sign the contract, but full custody is my only offer. Take it or leave it.” I can hear the smile in her words, the sureness that she’s backed us into a corner giving her joy, but I know she’s conniving. She could be playing us just as much as we think we’re playing her.

“Let me think about it,” Nox grates out through his teeth as if he truly is pissed off by her offer.

“The meeting is this evening. I expect to hear from you before then, or I will continue moving forward with my other plans.” The line goes dead without the need for Nox to respond.

“Oh my god!” I exclaim slowly for so many reasons, but mostly because it seems like the idea worked.

“I need to go. Don’t call her until I get back,” Lucian says before walking out of the room. I’m a little sad he didn’t

bother to say goodbye or give me a kiss, but he has a lot going on, so I can't blame him.

Nox gets right to business. "She'll try to work shit into the contract, like a time frame by which you have to be pregnant and anything else she can think up."

"But none of it matters anyway, right? You said we would never go through with it." I need the reassurance of his promise. Even thinking about signing a contract involving my possible future children makes me want to hurl.

"It doesn't matter because we would never let her have our children, but we still have to be smart. She could put any number of loopholes in a contract, like in the event of her death the child would still be kept away from us, or insinuating any future children belonged to her, taking away our ability to produce an heir of our own."

"We're talking about people, potentially our people" —I gesture between the two of us because I just can't say kid or child anymore, which will make it too real, and I have to be in a state of denial about this to even contemplate it— "like they are belongings, property to be traded and bargained over. It's sick."

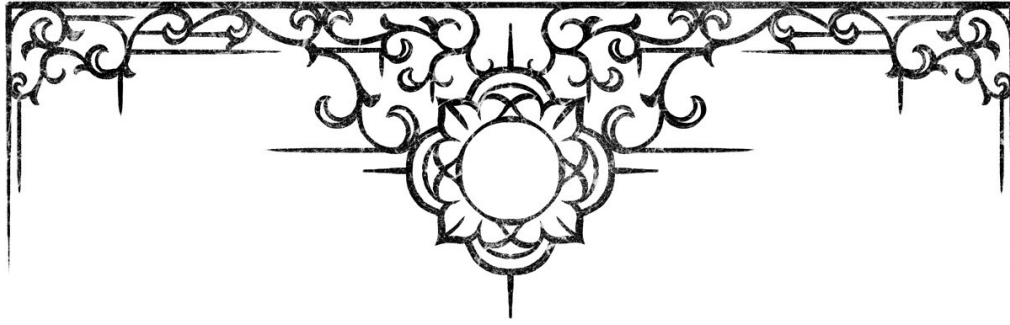
"It is," Nox agrees, and I'm taken aback by his comment. "It's fucked up, and it happens all the time, and not just in our world. Even though I know I'm lying, and I would sooner slit my own wrists before I let that bitch get a hold of my kid. It still makes me sick."

"Don't say that," I chastise him for even saying he would hurt himself. Nox does this indifferent little shrug that says, "I would do what needs to be done," without words, and I hate how easy it is to believe him.

"We're not doing it, you already promised. It's just talk," I confirm for both of our sakes.

"I know, no matter what." His dark eyebrows are high on his forehead as if he's now convincing me. "It's okay to still hate it, Nova. You wouldn't be you if you didn't."

“We’ll be careful,” I say, responding to his original sentiment while keeping my worries to myself. I’m sure they know them as well as I do, if not better.



LUCIAN

I enter the school through one of the few hidden entrances after making sure there's no one around to witness it. I don't have to worry about cameras in this area because no founder or their family wants evidence of what really happens at this school or under it.

It's barely ten in the morning, but I wanted to be here early in case Bridget is followed. I don't want the Umbras' security knowing I'm around.

The Union is quiet, so is the rest of the school. Regular classes still haven't resumed since the accident on the water several weeks ago, leaving only a skeleton staff of professors and workers to roam the vacant halls. I assume the only reason the cafeteria is still open is to feed the professors teaching remotely and island faculty members.

If Nova were here, she would whisper when she spoke as if she was afraid to disturb the ancient walls. She would also gaze at the ceiling with silent wonder. She never had to say how much she loved this school, it was clear in her gaze—that is, until she was attacked in the bathroom.

Her adoration for the building wavered then, but I still see the way her eyes trail over the spires and lead glass at times. It wasn't until I noticed her awe of the architecture—which was mostly overlooked by me since I grew up on the island—that I

gave it a second glance. She made me see there's more to it than stones, glass, and secrets.

I know what corridors to avoid and what areas of the school the cameras actually work in, and I use that knowledge to make my way up to the third floor. From here, I'll be able to see if anyone arrives at the school before or with Bridget. My plan is the same in either scenario. I'll keep my distance just in case, but that doesn't mean I won't have direct contact with the girl.

Morozov outfitted Vera and me with everything we would need for me to have eyes and ears on the meeting while no one else is the wiser. It's not even important for me to be in the building, but I wanted to see for myself how much the Umbras trust this Bridget girl.

I'm checking the app that allows me to see Nova's location for the twentieth time today when I get a text from my tech specialist.

Morozov: Vera will be leaving soon. You can turn on your comm when you are ready.

Me: On it now.

Morozov: Any sign of Umbra security? I've been monitoring the main gate, and no one has left the property that I've seen.

Me: Nothing yet.

I take the device from my pocket, which is barely visible once slid into place in my ear, and instantly hear the sound of someone breathing. "The line is live," I tell her, not expecting a response. Morozov assured me he would coach her on how to handle this, and I trust him.

"I'll have eyes on you the entire time." I hear Morozov's words as clearly as if he spoke them directly to me, then Vera's response comes through just a tiny bit louder.

"See you after lunch," she chirps too brightly.

"Relax," Morozov instructs calmly, and I'm pretty sure I hear them kiss softly.

I'm just about to say something when I hear her reply, "I'm good, sorry." I'm not sure whom she's talking to, but I'll assume it's me since I'm the one who had to listen to them for the past thirty seconds.

The girl rambles a few times to herself or to me on the drive to the school, but I ignore her for the most part. "I'm almost there," she mumbles as if she's trying not to move her lips.

"Don't try to hide anything, that would be more suspicious. Just pretend you're singing or something."

"Yeah, Ilya told me that. I see her." She still sounds like she's muffling her lips.

"Is she alone?" I question quickly.

"Looks like it. I'm getting out now. Let me know when you're ready to talk to her. Hey!" she calls loudly as a door slams.

"Hey," another voice responds from farther away. They make small talk for a few minutes, and my phone alerts me that I have an incoming message. It's the link for the video feed. I'm glad this wasn't on when she was saying goodbye to Morozov.

The bouncing on the screen as they walk down the hall to the cafeteria makes me want to look away, but I need to make sure Bridget isn't setting some kind of trap for Vera. She has more information about my family than I like, but I'm hoping the trade-off she's providing is worth it. If not, I'll kill her and hope it doesn't piss off Morozov too badly when his girlfriend becomes the last person seen with her before her disappearance.

"Oh, it doesn't look like everything is open," Vera says as they enter the cafeteria.

"Look around so I can see who else is in the room," I instruct Vera, and she shifts to the left abruptly, showing a table with a man and woman seated at it. "Calm," I grate out through my teeth, and her next movement is a little more natural.

“I’m okay with anything. Do you have a preference?” Vera asks.

“I think I’ll just get a coffee or something.” I’m able to see the scowl on the other girl’s face as she looks around.

“I could go with a latte and a muffin.”

The talk dies down until they are seated at a table tucked away in the corner. It’s not far from the table Nova was seated at when I went over to fuck with her. That was the day Alden put his hands on her and left a bruise on her arm. I didn’t know it at the time, but I saw it later, and I wanted to kill him then. I should have known then she was more than leverage to me.

Vera starts the conversation. “God damn, I’m happy to be out of the house for a minute.”

Bridget clicks her tongue and glances around as if she’s worried someone might overhear her before responding, “Yeah, I feel like a prisoner.”

“Really? That bad?”

“Pretty much. Since Nova got here, it’s been one mess after another. I just want out of here.”

“I thought you had something going with Alden.”

“Yeah, me too, but I dodged a bullet there. That guy is... messed up.”

I wish there was a way to make sure Bridget was clean. For all I know, she could have a transmitter on her feeding all of this back to the Umbras.

“Ask her why he’s messed up,” I urge Vera through the earpiece.

“What makes you say that?” she blurts a little robotically.

“Just some red flags. I figured since you called, there was more of a reason than just getting out of the house.” Bridget cuts straight to the point, making me think she doesn’t want to give any information away for free.

“Tell her if her information is useless this time, she won’t have to worry about being a prisoner, she’ll be dead.”

Vera chokes on her drink, spluttering a little before getting herself under control enough to recite my words.

“How can I trust you? You didn’t hold up to your end of the bargain last time.” She speaks directly to me instead of using Vera as a go-between.

“You didn’t have anything useful last time. You’re lucky I let you walk away then.” Apparently, she needs the reminder.

“There was something going on with the two of them,” Bridget counters after Vera repeats my words.

“Ask her if she’s heard anything over the past couple of days about what they are planning with Nova.”

“Astrid was *mad* when she disappeared from the meeting.” From the feed on my phone, I see Bridget wince with the words. “I’ve never heard her scream like that. I thought she was going to peel the plaster from the walls.”

Satisfaction curls my lips, but that’s not what’s important. “He says if she was that mad, then did she say anything or slip up?” Vera conveys my question.

“I need proof you’re not going to just leave me there after I tell you what I know.”

“Ask her if she was followed or if there is anyone watching her,” I instruct. Morozov hasn’t informed me of anyone approaching, and no one new has entered the cafeteria, but I want to be sure before making this conversation more personal.

“No, I’m not an idiot, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have spies in the school. Plus, there are cameras virtually everywhere.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Vera tells her after I remind her of the plan and where to go. Thankfully they don’t chitchat too much on the walk, and it gives me time to focus on getting to the destination before them. I take the back staircase marked closed. It’s the easiest way to get around and ensure I don’t get picked up by the cameras.

I arrive at one of the many hidden rooms in the school just a few minutes before Vera leads a wary Bridget into the space. The room isn't large, and all the walls are made of stone just like the rest of the school, but it lacks the polished effect of the main rooms and corridors. If I wasn't comfortably familiar with the place, I might think we were in a dungeon. I hope it evokes the same feelings in Bridget.

The dark-haired girl comes up short when she sees me already in the room, leaning against the wall, but she regains her composure rather quickly and enters. Vera shuts us into the room alone just as she was instructed.

I let the tension build for a few more seconds before shoving off the wall. Bridget takes a step back, but all it does is show her weakness. Nova is the only woman to ever truly stand up to me other than my family. I've admired her strength since the first time we met, even if it pissed me off to no end.

"I can make you disappear today," I promise, but it's not designed to make her comfortable.

She swallows and gives me a brief nod of acceptance. "I'll need resources." Her voice is strangled, but she manages to get the words out.

"And I need information," I remind her.

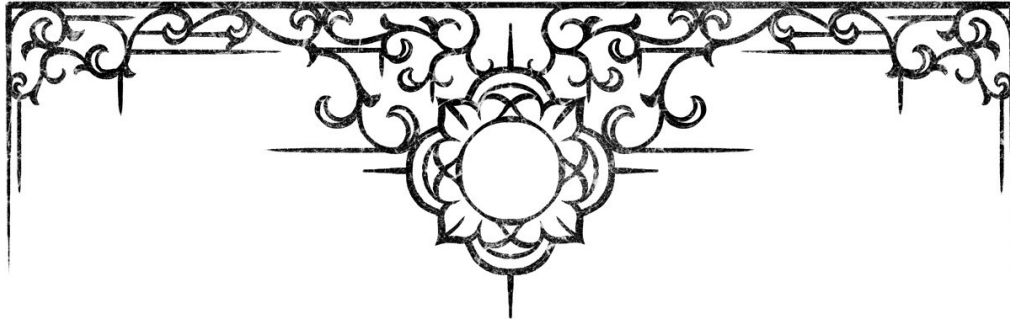
Bridget licks her lips. "What do you want to know?"

"If you want off this island as badly as you say you do, then I suggest you tell me everything."

"I mean, what do you want to start with?" Her eyes are on my face, but she can't hold eye contact for very long before she looks away to fidget. "Okay, I don't know all the details obviously, since they don't include me in all that, but I'll tell you everything I've picked up." Her tone is bitter. This is why I don't allow people I don't trust in my house. It's clear she feels slighted by the Umbras overlooking her, and I'm sure that was compounded when Alden dropped her as soon as Nova showed up.

"I'll have to go back a few years then if you want to know everything. This could take a while."

I cut the comm in my ear off, making sure this conversation remains between the two of us, and instruct, "Start talking."



NOVA

As the hours tick by while we wait for Lucian to return home, the unease filling my stomach with dread begins to grow. Every sound in the house has me watching the door for his arrival, and Nox seems to be just as eager even though he's trying to play it cool. The few times I asked what could be taking so long, he dutifully provided a reasonable answer and urged me to relax, which doesn't help me relax at all.

When I finally hear his heavy steps coming up the flight of stairs, I jump to my feet and face the door, ready to ask what took so long, but the scowl covering Lucian's features stops me.

"What happened?" Nox, undeterred by his brother's mien, demands while also coming to his feet.

"A fuck-ton," he snaps. "And it goes back *years*."

The word "years" echoes in my head. What does he mean years?

"Lev and Morozov are on their way up, so I only have to go over this once since we're pressed for time, but first, there's something I need to tell you, Nova."

My heart skips a beat when he looks at me. This is it, there's something he learned that is too much, and I'm going

to be sent packing, or worse, given to the Umbras. Lucian looks... I don't know how to describe it. He's pissed, that's for sure, but he looks hurt too, as if he's been betrayed.

"What?" I ask with equal parts dread and morbid curiosity.

"It's about your mom," he starts, and I get even more confused, especially when he walks over to me and holds my hand in his. I search his eyes, and the pain in his gaze amplifies when he squints on a wince. "The crash wasn't an accident."

"Huh?" It takes my head half a second to catch up with his words. "What do you mean?"

Lucian takes my other hand, gripping them in his own. "Astrid was keeping tabs on your mom from the moment she left the island. She did everything she could to get your mom to come home. She got your dad fired from jobs, bought houses you guys rented to kick you out, and all kinds of other shit in an effort to get your mom to return home."

After meeting Astrid and getting to see the real her, this doesn't surprise me. "What does that have to do with the accident?" Did my grandmother cause it somehow?

"Something happened. I'm not sure what, but it finally caused your mom to reach out to your grandmother and ask for help."

"Get to the point, Lucian!" I snap, trying to pull my hands from his, but he won't release me.

"I'm trying, lamb." His tone, more than anything, stops me from continuing to pull away. "The only way Astrid would agree to help was if your mother gave you to her. Apparently, up until that point, your mom didn't know that Astrid knew you existed. Your mom refused to hand you over, but Astrid wouldn't give up. She said she was going to report your mother for neglect and have you taken away, because as next of kin, she would have gotten custody."

"I wasn't neglected," I counter, but the wheels in my mind are already turning. I wasn't *really* neglected, but there were things that weren't right in our home, and the Umbras have

fancy attorneys with lots of money. It wouldn't have mattered if my family was perfect, and my mom would have known that. She never would have won against them. I'm surprised Astrid didn't try something like that sooner. She probably wanted my mom to come crawling back to her to have that control over her too. Plus, I doubt she thought my mom would last as long as she did without any help.

"Astrid thinks your mom caused the accident on purpose," Lucian finally says, and an ache stabs me in my chest.

"No," I scoff, but it lacks conviction, because the truth is, I'm not sure if it's something my mom would do. The fact that I'm here at all proves how little I know of my own family.

"Did you read the reports, Nova?" His question is soft, and so are his eyes, as he stares down at me with concern.

"Yes, I read every damn report, but I lived it. I know that didn't happen." I can't admit the betrayal out loud, even though I feel it ripping a hole in my chest. Would killing me, my dad, and herself really be better than dealing with Astrid? God, my head hurts.

"Okay, lamb." He touches his forehead to mine, and I know it's his way of telling me he's with me without saying the words. He'll believe whatever I need him to if it's what I want. I untangle our fingers and wrap my arms around his solid body. I've never felt small or delicate, but Nox and Lucian make me feel that, yet strong enough to stand with them at the same time. The weight of an additional palm lands on my back, and I know Nox has come over to be with us too.

"I'm sorry, but there's more I need to tell you, Nova. I don't want this to blindside you if any of it comes out." Lucian's words rumble through his chest, and I nod to tell him to go ahead. "They were at the hospital after the accident." He clears his throat. "But they left you there alone when the doctors told them your chances of carrying a child were pretty low because of the damage to your kidneys."

The hand on my back stills as my breath catches. I remember the doctors explaining something similar to me, but I was sixteen at the time and dealing with life-threatening

injuries, so I didn't care about having kids. I didn't want to be in pain or have my body look like Frankenstein, and I wanted my parents, so the notion of not having kids barely registered.

It wasn't until a checkup late last year when it was brought up to me again that I really thought about it, but it was in a different context. My doctor explained that when or if I decided I wanted to have kids, it would look a little different for me. I would need testing to make sure my kidney function was good, and I would more than likely be treated as high risk no matter what, but it was certainly doable with my current health. He also stressed that an unplanned pregnancy would be unwise in my condition, which wasn't even a concern then because I wasn't sleeping with anyone. He offered me birth control anyway, and I accepted. He said it would help regulate my periods and cramps, which was a win for me.

"Nova," Nox says softly, and it makes me realize I've been quiet for a really long time. The implications of what Lucian's telling me sinks in, and I step out from between them.

"I wasn't trying to trick you. The doctor told me I could have kids if I choose to and am healthy," I defend, then I immediately get mad that I have to validate myself with the excuse. "If I choose," I reiterate in a completely different tone.

"And I already told you, when we have kids, it won't be because we need heirs for our bloodline. I couldn't give a fuck if my kids wanted to walk away from this island and everything it represents."

"It would matter to you if I couldn't have kids, and that might happen in the future. You never know with a condition like mine."

"There are other options if you can't have a baby, Nova," Nox reasons. "But we aren't them. We want you, not what you can give us."

The anger and inadequacy that welled up with the notion that I'm not worthy if I can't have kids loses its grip on me, but it leaves me feeling hurt and relieved that the doctor in the hospital was wrong about the possibility of me having

children. His assumption might have saved me from a fate I don't want to imagine.

If Astrid would have swooped in then, when I was raw from the loss of my parents and desperate for any connection, I would have been so grateful I doubt I would have ever seen her for the monster she is. She'd probably already have me married off and pregnant by now. I shake those thoughts away and focus on the present.

I open my mouth to try to explain that I understand they aren't like the Umbras, but Lucian cuts me off. "There's still a lot more to discuss, I just wanted you to know those things before the others get here. I wish we could talk about all of this alone without involving them, but the time crunch makes that impossible."

The silence that fills the room feels so oppressive, it's as if none of us know what to say after all that, but thankfully it doesn't last long. Lev and Morozov make their presence known just a few moments later before entering the game room.

"I already told them about the deal with Astrid, so they are up to speed there," Lucian informs us then uses his body to usher me back over toward the sofa to sit down. "The Umbras, or Astrid, has known about Alden being a Morningstar since after our parents' deaths, maybe even before, but I don't have confirmation on that yet. Apparently, that news was supposed to be discovered after our untimely deaths, and he would be able to step in to take over the family as the last remaining heir." Lucian looks around like he's checking to see if we're all paying attention. "They made a few changes to the plan when Nova returned."

I feel every eye turn in my direction, and it's hard not to fidget under their gazes.

"What changes?" I make myself ask the question so I can prove I don't feel intimidated, but I'm only lying to myself.

"They decided Alden would become your husband, giving them control over both families and half the island."

“No, no!” I insist for my own pride. I don’t know why this is harder to believe than the other stuff. Maybe it’s because I thought I trusted him in the beginning and thought he was on my side for a minute. It would have been so easy to fall for him if he wasn’t a jerk.

“Yes,” Lucian says. The *I told you so* is left unsaid, but I see it in his face anyway. He turns back to his brother. “If we get her to vote with us to allow mixing of the families, then we will be giving her exactly what she wanted all along.”

“I don’t give a shit. The only way Alden is getting anywhere near Nova is if we’re all dead,” Nox retorts.

“Hell couldn’t even hold me.” Lucian nods toward his brother, and I’m a little embarrassed to say it makes me want to jump both of them for even making the promise. “But I wanted you to know she thinks she’s playing us.”

“Fuck her, and fuck him! Let them think we’re playing into their hands. It won’t make their deaths any less satisfying.”

Lucian smiles that dark smile he’s perfected at his brother’s words, and then the information keeps coming. “There’s another name to add to our list of *needs to die painfully*—Marissa. Apparently, our dear aunt has been scheming with the Umbras since her husband offed himself. Bridget seems to think she’s the real puppet master, and Astrid is just too damn stupid to see it.”

“My mother never liked her,” Lev chimes in before I can confirm my suspicions that Marissa is Alden’s mom. I try to think back to the time I spent at the Umbra estate. I don’t recall meeting a Marissa, but that doesn’t mean much. Most people outwardly ignored me, and I them.

“Your mother doesn’t like anyone,” Nox jokes halfheartedly, causing Lev to shrug, not disagreeing in any way.

“Did you handle the paperwork?” Lucian leans back against the couch and places his hand on the nape of my neck,

kneading. When Morozov answers his question, I know the move was intentional to keep me in my seat.

“You’ll both just need to sign the marriage license, the rest is taken care of.”

“We’ll do that before the meeting tonight.”

“Wow, pretty boy, your confidence is...”

“Sexy,” he inserts.

“I was going to say inspired.” I mean, they just brought up the topic of getting married, and now I’m supposed to sign the license in a few hours?

“Did you want a romantic gesture, lamb? If I got on my knees, I’d expect it to end with your legs over my shoulders, and unfortunately, there’s no time for that.”

I slap his thigh, causing the tips of my fingers to sting. “Now you’re just trying to tempt me.”

He grins while tightening his grip on my neck.

I can only shake my head at his antics. I’m used to Lucian saying whatever he wants when he wants, but usually there’s no one around to hear it.

“Any other surprises we should know about?” Nox brings the topic back around to the matter at hand.

“Just details we can sort out later.” Lucian continues to rub my neck, but it feels more comforting now.

“Astrid sent over the contract she expects us to sign. I looked it over and sent it to the legal team to pick apart. They should have the revised version back to us soon.” Nox didn’t even mention he did any of that while we were alone, and I feel bad for not noticing.

“They are cutting it pretty close. I’m sure Astrid will want to bitch about the revisions.”

“Either she thinks we’re idiots or really fucking desperate for the shit she tried to slip in,” Nox says, confirming his earlier assumption she would do as much. I’m not surprised.

“Probably trying to cover her own desperation,” Lev supplies.

“What did you do with Bridget?” I ask when there’s a lull.

“Nothing as of yet. If she disappeared now, it would raise too many red flags. Once tonight’s vote has been cast, and Astrid drops her claim on you, she’ll be dealt with. She knows too much, and I would never trust her to keep her mouth shut. It only took the promise of money to get her to spill her guts.”

My conscience tries to tell me that’s not fair, since she gave him what he wanted, but then there’s another part of me that seems to have awakened from being on this island. It’s a colder side that sees the wisdom in Lucian’s logic. She knows too much about me, secrets I didn’t even know myself, and I don’t mind the idea of making sure those secrets remain hidden.

As the war wages within me, Nox intertwines our fingers, giving me silent support as if he knew I needed it. I give him an appreciative smile in return.

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll go make sure the secondary team is ready to cover the grounds while we prepare for the meeting,” Lev says, requesting dismissal.

“We’ll be down soon,” is Lucian’s response, prompting the two other men to leave the room without another word.

I let out a long sigh. I’m tired. I’d like to just go climb in bed and pull the covers over my head for a day or two, but that’s not an option, and it probably won’t be an option for a long while. I feel like every time I think I have a grasp on the situation, we find out it was only the tip of the iceberg.

“It’ll be over soon, Nova.” Nox brings our interwoven hands up and kisses my knuckles.

“I doubt that very much. I feel like I’ve fallen into a made for TV movie where the drama never ends, but thanks for trying.”

“It would have to be Netflix. I don’t think our rating is PG enough for TV,” Nox jokes, making me laugh softly.

“Nah, I’ve already submitted all the secret footage to Pornhub.” Lucian joins in on the joke. There was a time, not so long ago, when I would have thought he was serious, but I know him better than that now.

“Is that what you were doing with that special camera I found that said it made everything look bigger?”

“That was for Nox, shush.” Lucian puts his fingers to his lips. I didn’t think they could make me smile right now, but it happens easily, and some of the tension in my body eases.

“Sure it was.” Nox snorts.

“Speaking of me being amazing, I got a little something for you, lamb.”

“I bet I know what it is.” I roll my eyes, waiting for the next sexual innuendo.

“I’ll take that bet. What do I get if you’re wrong?” Lucian sounds smug.

I know better than to offer whatever he wants, so it takes me a second to come up with an answer I can live with. “If I’m wrong, I’ll find that nail file I almost stabbed you with when you helped me escape.”

“And what will you do with the nail file?” he challenges with one eyebrow raised.

“That’s up to you.” My offer is dangerous, but I’m no longer worrying about what’s going to happen later tonight or even tomorrow.

Lucian tips his head back and chuckles softly. “Oh, lamb, I can’t wait until I have time to collect, because I know for certain you have no idea what I have for you. Let’s hear what you think.”

His confidence makes me a little leery, but I don’t have it in me to back down at this point. Besides, I knew what I was proposing when I made the suggestion. “Sex, it’s always about sex.”

Lucian’s mouth drops open in a wounded pout as he brings his hand up to his chest. “You hurt my feelings.”

“Liar. Tell me I’m wrong, and it doesn’t count if you offer your dick instead of sex. It’s the same thing.”

“Language,” he scolds, but there’s a smirk curling his lips that doesn’t waver as he reaches into his front pocket. I’ve seen Lucian retrieve a few things from his pockets—keys, money, and even a gun—but the light blue box in his palm about knocks the wind out of me.

“What is that?” I ask as my heart thuds so hard against my chest I’m afraid I’m going to have a heart attack.

“You’ll have to open it and see, but spoiler alert, it’s not my dick.”

I huff and tear my eyes off the little box to meet his eyes. There’s an unfamiliar expression there, something close to vulnerability.

“It’s a little box.” I almost choke on words.

“It’s not that little,” he defends.

“It’s way too small for your d—” The rest of what I was going to say is muffled by his hand.

“Just take it, please, and stop saying dick,” he pleads in a whisper. My chest tightens to the point of pain, and then I remember I have to breathe.

My hand trembles as I reach for the box. When the velvety texture hits my palm, my fingers curl around it protectively. I think I know what’s in this box after what was discussed today, but there’s a part of me that’s scared I’m wrong and this is some kind of joke.

“Do you need help opening it?” Lucian lifts his hand, and I snatch the box to my chest.

“You gave it to me, it’s mine.” I sound like a toddler, and it makes Nox snicker behind me.

“Then open it, greedy girl.”

“I will. Give me a minute, bossy boy.” I glower, feeling defensive of my own behavior. When I open my fingers, it allows me to see the name printed on top, but I didn’t need to

see it to know, because the brand is synonymous with the robin's egg blue color.

I push the little silver button near the bottom of the box, and the lid springs open, revealing a ring with a delicate platinum band and a single, squarish stone cradled in the center. I move the box from left to right, making sure the blue hue I see in the stone isn't just a reflection from the box.

My eyes start to burn, and I blink reflexively, trying to hide the fact that I'm about to cry like a baby.

"You can pick something else if you don't like it. I wanted something lighter to match your eyes, but this was the best stone they had," Lucian rambles, and the first tear falls from my eye. I hurriedly wipe it away, but there's no hiding what's happening.

"I..." I have to clear my voice before finishing. "I love it. It's perfect."

"You don't have to say that. We can change it," Lucian replies as if he thinks I'm lying to make him feel better.

"I'm telling you the truth. I love it. It's perfect. Completely unnecessary, but it's too late for you to take it back now, it's mine." It feels like my pinched fingers move in slow motion to reach for the ring, but before I can pluck up the ring, Lucian's tattooed fingers block me. A gasp of outrage leaves my mouth hanging open.

"I think I'm supposed to do this part, lamb," he says, knocking the box out of my other hand and taking hold of my fingers. The cool metal is surprisingly heavy as he slips it on my left ring finger, or maybe it's the stone itself that's weighty.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"Nova," Lucian warns. I don't know what his deal is with me cursing, since he does it all the time. It's not like I do it often either, but I did pick up the habit a little more when I was at the Umbras. It always made Alden make a comment about the Morningstars, which seemed to piss him off. I like pissing off Lucian, but in a different way.

“Sorry,” I mumble, thinking now’s not the time to irritate him, considering he just gave me such a lovely gift. Seeing the ring on my finger makes the clear blue stone look even larger. “Is it an aquamarine?” I question, because I’ve never seen one in this shade, but the chintzy little things they sell at Walmart can’t be anywhere near this quality.

“It’s a diamond!” Lucian sounds offended that I would even ask, but the weight on my finger feels suddenly like it’s doubled because of his answer.

“A diamond? It’s huge, and blue!” I counter, thinking he must be wrong.

“Does it look like an aqua-whatever she called it?” Lucian leans around me to ask Nox.

“I don’t fucking know.” Nox shrugs.

“Nah, we’ll exchange it for a clear stone.” He reaches for my finger as if he’s going to take it back.

I jump off the couch and ball my hands into fists behind my back. “Don’t even think about it, Lucian Morningstar.”

“I’ll get something better.”

“No, you won’t. Besides, there isn’t anything better. It’s perfect whether it’s a fricking piece of glass or diamond.”

“Let her be, Lucian. She loves it, and the one I got matches.”

I spin to face Nox. “There’s another one?” Why is my voice so high and panicked?

“He got the engagement ring, and I picked out the wedding band to give you when it’s our turn.”

“Oh my gosh.” This can’t be real. There’s no way this won’t blow up in my face somehow and I’ll lose everything. There’s a flutter in my chest, or maybe it’s my stomach. If that’s my heart, then I’m probably having a heart attack and about to die.

“Is she hyperventilating?” Nox’s voice sounds muffled around the ringing in my ears.

Lucian stands up and approaches me slowly. I want to tell him I don't know what's wrong, but I'm afraid to talk. "You have to breathe, lamb. In through your nose, out through your mouth," he instructs while keeping his eyes locked on mine. I remember him telling me something similar when I woke up in the hospital. I think I was having a panic attack. Is that what this is?

I shudder through a short, choppy inhale, and the following exhale isn't any smoother, but at least I know I'm breathing. There's an edge of dread trying to creep closer, but instead of thinking about all the things that could go wrong, I just keep focusing on my breathing, and eventually, my chest doesn't feel like it's about to explode, even though my heart is still beating way too fast.

It's not until I let out a long sigh that Lucian actually touches me. His fingers skate up the outside of my arm until he reaches my neck where he tugs me against his body. I'm as grateful for the contact as I was the space he allowed me when I couldn't breathe.

The urge to validate and defend what just happened coats the back of my throat, but I still don't have an explanation. I don't know how I could go from excited to terrified in the blink of an eye without warning.

"I would never pressure you, Nova." Nox's pain-filled words crush the lingering discomfort I wasn't sure how to address.

I step away from Lucian and face Nox. I know my face is still flushed red because my ears feel like they are on fire, but I don't let that stop me from telling him, "That's not—"

"You don't have to explain," he interrupts with wide eyes like he's done something wrong.

"If you think I freaked out because you got me a ring too, then I need to explain."

"Nova..." The disappointment in Nox's tone cements that I need him to know the truth.

“It wasn’t the ring. Either one. It was the thought of losing you. This—” I wave my arms around to include both of them. “That all of this is too damn good to be true, and it won’t last. That’s what made me feel like I was about to fall off a ledge, and I know it seems stupid that that’s what I was thinking, but it’s the truth.”

Nox doesn’t say or do anything to show that he believes me, and my heart cracks. I want to order him to tell me he believes me, even though I know it’s selfish. I hurt him, and I want him to make me feel better. “Nox.” I utter his name like a plea, and he finally answers.

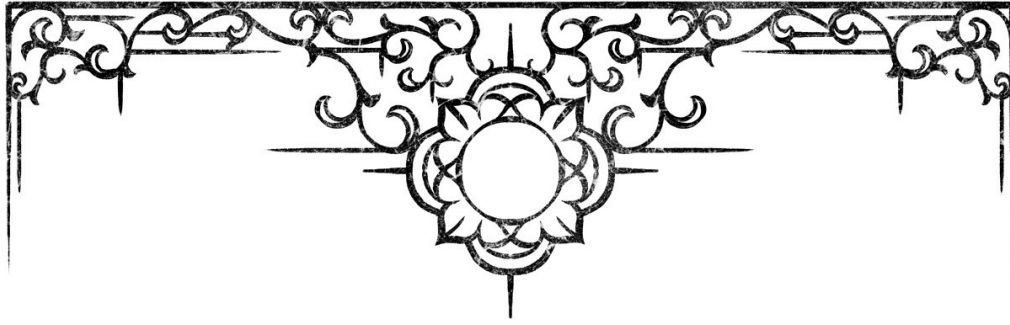
“Fuck, I’m sorry, Nova. I wasn’t trying to make it all about me, but... I guess it hurt seeing you excited about his ring and... not excited for mine.” Not excited is his kind way of saying freaked out.

“I promise that wasn’t it, Nox. All of this barely feels real sometimes, and I’m actually afraid of how far I would go to keep you and how much I need *both* of you.” Admitting this is probably the most vulnerable I’ve ever been, but it’s worth it as long as Nox knows I love him. Biting the bullet, I take two strides to the couch, crawl into his lap, and wrap my arms around his neck. There’s a part of me that’s worried he’ll reject me, but I don’t let that fear stop me.

Nox wraps his arms around me and strokes my back. “Sorry I made you feel that way,” I whisper softly into his neck.

“Don’t apologize. I’m sorry you had to explain, but thank you for telling me.” His response is equally soft, but it gives me hope he believes me.

I don’t have time to respond before a phone chimes, telling me our time is up.



LUCIAN

Nox's phone goes off, interrupting the moment between Nova and Nox. It never crossed my mind that my brother would think she panicked because he mentioned getting her a ring, but Nova knew right away.

I figured there was just too much shit too fast, and her mind finally decided she'd dealt with enough. I'm not happy I was right, but it's much better than being wrong, especially in this instance.

Nova scoots off Nox's lap and adjusts her clothes. She's still raw. I can see it in the way she moves and the way her eyes don't lift, but I won't push her, not now. As much as I love to see her strong and sure, I understand her fragility. She's never had anyone behind her, no one to hold her up when things got too hard. She's had to do it all on her own, but not anymore.

I fold her hand in mine as soon as she stops fidgeting. Her face tips up to look at me, and I don't say a word, just squeeze her fingers in a silent show of support. She took care of Nox, and now I'll take care of her.

"The revised contract was returned to Astrid for approval. I don't doubt she'll call to bitch about something soon." Nox tosses his phone back on the couch.

“We should head down to take care of our shit anyway. We don’t have much time left before the meeting.”

“I need to piss first,” Nox grumbles and heads toward the bathroom. The door barely has time to shut before his phone rings.

“Damn it.” I don’t exactly trust myself to keep calm when I’m talking to her, but I don’t have much of a choice.

“Hello?” I greet after placing the phone on speaker.

“Cutting it pretty short with all these changes, aren’t you? I’m not sure if my team will have enough time to read through everything. Are you sure you really want my granddaughter?”

“We had to weed out all the bullshit you tried to slip past, Astrid. I give you credit for being creative.”

“We are what we are,” she replies airily.

The sound I make is supposed to be a hum of agreement, but it comes out more like a growl, so I get to the point before this goes downhill even faster. “Well, considering the time crunch, we kept the revision very simple, so I’m sure you’ll breeze through it.”

“I had a glance. It does seem to be in order. However, the issue of a time frame is nonnegotiable. I think twenty-four months is very generous, but I must insist on a health screen right away.”

“Thirty-six, and I’ll agree to a physical,” I argue just to be contrary.

“Twenty-four. You need to remember, you came to me.”

“Fine!” I snap, even though it doesn’t matter because it’s all a lie, but I still hate to give her anything she wants. “Sign the contract.”

“It’s been a pleasure, Morningstar.”

“So has your granddaughter, Umbra.” I hang up before she can say anything else.

“Ew,” Nova groans while wincing.

“Can you wait until after we have the signed document before pissing her off?” Nox reasons.

“No.” I toss his phone back to him, and he deftly catches it.



NOVA

This stupid robe is getting too familiar, but the calm I felt last time seems to evade me now. Last time, I was just desperate to get out from under the Umbras, so the cloak seemed easy. The row of cars lined up at the curb of the school under the cover of night is jarring. I lose count of the amount of people emerging from the vehicles, and most of them came from the Morningstar estate. Even Gertrude donned a robe to accompany us.

I have no idea where she is now, but I'm confident she's among the ranks, as is nearly every security guard employed by the brothers.

The rear door we enter through is not far from the underground entrance, but it gives me a few seconds to admire the building I'm quickly growing to despise. If there was any way of me getting out of this meeting, I would have gladly stayed home, but Lucian and Nox both agreed I needed to be with them and at the meeting.

The muted conversations from the lower chambers float up the stairs before I even see the stone floor below. When we finally curve around the final bend, I see why the noise level was so much more noticeable. There's easily double the amount of people in the antechamber.

I let out a long, low whistle through my lips. It looks like all the families decided to come with force.

Nox, who's in the lead, arrows straight into the meeting room and takes the open seat closest to the platform where Rory and Astrid will eventually sit. My eyes find the door behind the chairs, knowing exactly what's behind them and wondering whatever happened to the guy I hit with the statue. It feels like a lifetime has passed since I was trapped in that room and desperate to get out, but at the same time, it seems like it just happened.

My stomach swirls with anxiety. It can't be anything else, because I haven't eaten anything in hours since I knew being here would have this effect on me, and there's no way I'm going to the bathroom down here—I'd rather piss myself.

The seats slowly fill until the remaining robed figures have to stand along the walls. Anticipation makes my leg bounce, making a rasping sound on the stone I can feel through my shoe more than hear on the floor. It seems to be in rhythm with my rapid heartbeat. The desire to get up and leave makes it nearly impossible to sit still. My only saving grace is the fact that I'm not the only one shifting around, waiting.

After what seems like hours, but in reality could only be a few minutes, the rear door opens to the back rooms and Rory walks out. His face is a blank mask. He doesn't even waste any time perusing the overfilled room. He heads straight for the lectern as more robed figures trail out behind him to fill in even more unavailable space.

"I won't waste time on formalities, as we have a crucial vote to get to this evening. Because of the nature of the vote, only one member of each family will be permitted to cast a vote. In the event of a tie, I will cast the deciding ballot as it has always been done." Rory finally takes a moment to pause and look around the room.

"As you all know, there are strict guidelines set forth by the originals which have impacted all of our families at one time or another. We've all dealt with those challenges in our own way, my family included. For years, we believed our line

would be absolved because we didn't have a blood heir to continue after our stay with little recourse. Other families have had their own struggles with similar rules created generations ago that have long been outdated. One family, the Morningstars, have petitioned to change one of those rules, which brings us to our vote today."

Those words must be some sort of a cue, because a figure concealed near the platform steps forward and presents an ornately decorated box, then places it on an otherwise empty podium. He pulls four curled pieces of parchment and four sleek black pens from the box before slipping back into the obscurity he came from.

"The Morningstars are appealing that the family members' mingling rule be absolved." I expect an outcry of some kind, or at least hushed whispers like in the past when information has been disclosed, but the room is utterly silent, and I'm afraid to guess why. "If this proposal were to pass, it would not be without caveats to ensure each family would remain loyal to the founding principle of the four, meaning the absconding family member may choose, or have the family choose for them, to which family their allegiance allies."

Nothing Rory says comes as a real shock to me, but the wording seems strange. Like he's leaving it open for a family member to be ousted or traded—then why it bothers me sinks in. It's because that's essentially what we're pretending to do, trade my child to them to get what we want.

I think I might puke. Nox's head shifts to watch me when I put my hand on my stomach to try and tamp down the nausea swirling in my gut. What if the lawyers didn't catch all the loopholes? What if we missed something, or the Umbras resurface years later and try to claim guardianship of my child like they did to me?

I mop at my upper lip with the sleeve of my robe, allowing the hood to soak up the moisture dotting my face. My skin feels too tight, like my body is trying to warn me of some impending doom.

“I will allow for a ten minute recess so families may choose a representative to pose any questions they may have before the final stage, and lastly to select a voting member to cast your decision.” Rory steps back from the lectern amid the eerie silence, and the seconds begin to count down in my head.



NOX

Nova is visibly agitated. She can't seem to sit still for longer than two seconds. I can barely pay attention to Rory's shitbag speech because I'm concerned she's going to get upset like she did earlier. There's too much going on, but I'm afraid we're nowhere near the end of the line. Tonight only solves one problem while opening the door to others.

I don't actually trust the Umbras to let Nova go without a fight, so the sooner this addendum passes, the better, but even then, I think the only thing that will allow us to rest is when Astrid and Rory are both dead.

“Who decided it was a good idea to do this crap under five trillion tons of stone and dirt?” Nova hisses. It's only then I realize Rory is no longer speaking and quiet conversations are being had all around the room.

“The same idiots who thought it was a good idea to put a college on an island,” Lucian replies conversationally. I use the table over our legs to hide my palm rubbing her thigh in an effort to comfort her.

“We'll get out of here as soon as it's over.” I don't bother trying to tell her it's completely safe, and that this place was designed to protect. Panic is irrational, I know that from my own experience.

“I’m not coming to the next secret dungeon event. You can lock me in the house and assign Gertrude to keep an eye on me.”

I’m surprised I can crack a smile amid the current happenings. I wish I could offer her the same in return. “She would probably force you to watch her cheesy reality shows and pretend she didn’t know how to change the channel. That’s what she used to do to us.”

Nova stills and turns to the side to get a better view of me. “Gertrude and reality TV? No way. What does she watch?”

She may not be smiling, but at least she seems somewhat distracted. “Tons, but she loves the one—”

“On the island. I almost forgot about that,” Lucian finishes.

“Survivor?”

“No, it’s the dating one. Everyone cheats on each other. It’s so fucking ridiculous, it has to be scripted, but she loves it.”

Nova snorts softly. “I think I would pay money to see that.”

Just when I think we’ve succeeded in making her forget where she is for a few minutes, she asks, “How long do you think it’s been?”

“It won’t be much longer,” I reply without any real knowledge because I know it’s what she wants to hear.

A short time later, Rory clears his throat. “Omega, if you have any questions, pose them now.”

“We reserve the right to contest any rulings at a later date but have no questions at this time.”

“What does that mean?” Nova whispers near my ear. I shake my head to tell her I can’t answer at the moment.

“Granted. Quade, if you have any questions, pose them now.”

“We reserve the right to contest any rulings at a later date but have no questions.”

“Understood. If there are no questions, we’ll begin with the vote. Please send one member from each family forward to vote yea or nay to allow intermingling of the families.”

I rise, as planned, pushing my hood back because there’s no point in concealing my identity, then walk to the table near the front of the room. I know Lucian has my back, but I still hate not being able to see what’s coming from behind me.

I’m the first to arrive and the first to jot the affirmative three letter word on the paper before placing it in the box. It’s all so formal and stupid. All these rules are self-imposed and self-governed. I’m like Nova, I think all this is a huge fucking waste of time to inflate egos and make otherwise weak people feel powerful because they can rule with money and influence. Those who hold true power don’t need others to validate them.

By the time I’m back in my seat, a petite figure, most likely Astrid, is pulling the votes from the box. They look over the papers, then separate them into two piles. I assume both the Omegas and the Quades have voted no, but I knew this would most likely be the outcome. We’re counting on Rory to break the tie. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous.

“The vote is unanimously yea.”

A sinking feeling drops in my stomach. Astrid’s words curl around an unseen smile. She knew the others would vote for the measure. I try to tell myself that she only thinks she’s winning, but there’s a nagging feeling we missed something.

I reach for Nova’s hand, no longer concerned with what someone might see or think. It feels like she’s slipping through my fingers again and there’s no way for me to stop it.

“Let the record show the rule has been adopted.” Rory isn’t smiling. Hell, he looks shattered, and I don’t know what that means.

Lucian rises to his feet, revealing his face from behind his hood along the way. Our eyes meet, and I know he senses the same thing I do. Something isn’t right. “Let’s go.” He practically lifts Nova out of the seat by her arm and puts her

directly in front of his body to shield her back. I take my place in front of her and head straight for the elevators.

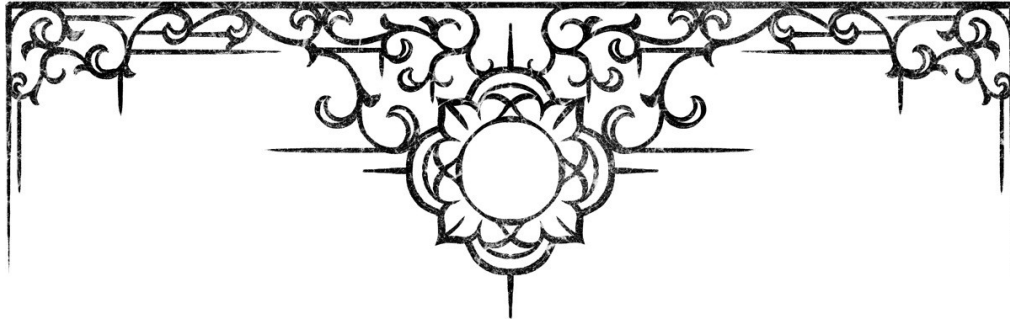
“Oh yes, the official announcements will go out tomorrow.” Astrid makes sure we hear her excited words. “Who am I to deny young love, and Alden is a fine young man, despite his last name.”

I stop dead in my tracks, causing Nova to bump into my back, but it doesn't stop me from looking over my shoulder. Astrid is grinning from ear to ear, waiting for my reaction. I bet she thinks she's shocked us, and that we had no idea of her plan to force Nova into marrying Alden, but she's as wrong as she is stupid. Besides, showing her cards now makes her even more ignorant. Did she think just because she told some people that Nova would be with Alden it would change anything? This is exactly why those papers were signed before we left the house tonight and the records have already been submitted to our lawyer, who sent copies to the state and county. Only needing a notary to witness and officiate them being signed made the entire process take less than ten minutes.

Nova is already Lucian's wife. The wedding will come soon enough.

“Too late.” Lucian lifts Nova's right arm, and the sleeve of her robe falls up her elbow to reveal her arm, but that's not what erases the smile on Astrid's face—it's the ten-carat blue diamond on her ring finger that does. “Besides, Alden isn't a Morningstar. We fixed that the moment we discovered our father's lapse.”

“What did he say?” a woman, who sounds an awful lot like Marissa, hisses, but we don't stick around to give an explanation.



NOVA

“*Y*ou knew she would try something.”

“We knew it was a possibility,” Nox agrees. Even in the elevator, they don’t shift to give me more room. I can’t say I’m bothered by their stance, not when it feels like we’re still behind enemy lines.

“So that really was it, huh?” I always thought you needed a pastor to say all that mumbo jumbo to get married with vows and stuff, but apparently most of that is for show. All you really need is a piece of paper and a notary. I wouldn’t have even known the date if it wasn’t already printed on the paper a few times.

“Don’t worry, I promise to make tonight much more eventful, and tomorrow, we’ll plan a party where everyone can see whom you belong to.”

“Being your wife doesn’t mean I belong to you.” I’m sure he can hear the disbelief in my snarky tone.

“Oh, I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me that, lamb. You were mine long before then.” His confidence should be off-putting, but it somehow isn’t, which just confirms I’m as codependent as he is. At least the banter distracts me until the elevator arrives on the main level, and I remember we aren’t out of the woods yet.

The minute the doors slide open, I notice several robed figures in the immediate area. My feet stay rooted to the floor until Nox strides forward, unconcerned. It's then I realize he was expecting them.

It takes us a few moments to navigate the building and reach the side where we parked, by that time, many others have joined us in leaving the building. It's eerie walking with a mostly silent group of people in dark cloaks. Add in a few tombstones, and it would feel even more like a nightmare.

We head straight for one of the waiting cars. How they know which is the correct one is beyond me, but we all pile into the back of a black car, and the door is shut immediately after, allowing us to be whisked away.

I turn my head to look out the rear window and see Rory watching from the shadow of the building. I can't read the expression on his face beyond that he doesn't seem outwardly angry like I would have expected from Astrid, but maybe he's just better at hiding his emotions than his wife is.

As we approach the gates of the Morningstar and Umbra estates, it becomes very obvious that while we got away from the school without incident, that's no longer the case. There's a line of men standing across the road, barring us from even reaching the gate.

"If they don't move, go through them," Lucian instructs as calmly as if he were saying to make a left turn at the next light.

The car slows slightly, making me question if the driver would follow through with the orders, but the men part just enough so the sedan is able to glide through the gap at a slower rate of speed. That's when I see even more men standing sentry along the Morningstar gate, as if to block the entrance.

"What are they doing?" I ask quietly, even though they wouldn't be able to hear or see me through the tinted windows of the car.

"Following orders," Lucian replies. He doesn't seem at all bothered by the show.

“What’s the point if they aren’t trying to stop us?” I look back through the rear window, wondering if they are all going to bum-rush the car and try to get through the gate with us, and what will happen then.

“It seems they were just trying to slow us down,” Nox answers as another car’s headlights come up from behind before it glides onto the shoulder next to us. The window lowers, and Alden’s face is the first we see. It’s not until Astrid leans forward that Lucian rolls his window down.

“Did you want to congratulate us?” he mocks without a lick of fear. I, on the other hand, am plastered to my seat, thinking a bullet could come flying through the window at any time.

“Something like that. While I must admit I’d hoped for a very different outcome, I see the advantage of our arrangement. I’m here to admit my granddaughter has chosen well for herself, and I’m very much looking forward to a mutually beneficial future for both our families.”

“At least you’re smart enough to know when you’ve lost.” Lucian throws her fake acquiescence back in her face.

“I never lose, Morningstar. You’ll remember that when you hand over *my* child. You’d think you would know better than to poke a bear offering to share her honey, especially one who gets to decide how that child lives.”

Lucian does this lazy half shrug. “Allowing me to deal with the traitor among you would go a long way in forging a true alliance between our families.”

Astrid cuts her eyes to Alden, who seems to be clenching his jaw to keep his mouth shut. “I’ll take your request under advisement. Until then, best of luck on a successful honeymoon.”

I grimace, knowing exactly what she means by that statement—she wants me pregnant. “No worries there, Granny. I’ll have her legs over my shoulders later tonight, but the runt will have to wait until at least after the party. We need to commemorate this historic union, after all.”

I dig my fingers into Lucian's thigh, and he drops his head back as a sound of exaggerated ecstasy leaves his parted lips. "Got to go, she's eager," he taunts, making it clear I'm the one who elicited that sound, just not how I did it.

The window next to us begins to roll up, but not before I see the scowl on Alden's face. Okay, maybe that was worth the embarrassment of Lucian goading them with our sex life.

The guards who were previously blocking the road all follow Astrid's car through the Umbra gate, while all the men still standing in front of ours move to the side, allowing us entrance. It's only then I realize they were guarding it for us, not against.

"I thought pretty much everyone was at the meeting," I mutter as we finally enter through the gate. It's strange how the iron fence once felt like a prison I wouldn't be able to escape if I needed to, but now it's a comfort to know it's there keeping everyone else out.

"We would never leave the house unprotected," Nox replies, giving my brain time to circle back to everything else that happened tonight.

We make the short journey up to the house and exit the car. I'm bone tired, and to be honest, I don't feel any safer than I did before the meeting. I know Astrid won't give up, even if she thinks she'll get our child eventually. She proved that tonight when she tried to make it seem like it was Alden I would marry, which doesn't even make sense to me unless she thought the Morningstars were bluffing about actually marrying me.

I voice my thoughts after we are in the house. "I wasn't expecting a unanimous vote."

"That one surprised me too," Nox admits.

"It just proves she's been working behind the scenes far longer than I thought." Lucian leads the way to the bedroom.

"What do you mean?"

"She couldn't have convinced both families to vote for the measure today. I doubt even I would have been able to pull

that off, and I have shit on the Quades that could ruin lots of lives. They were prepared for this eventuality. What pisses me the fuck off is knowing she'd already done all the work, and we could have figured something out without the contract."

"It doesn't matter now, it's done. I don't doubt she got a sick sense of satisfaction in making sure we knew she played us though. What I don't get is why she brought up Alden. It's like she needed us to know he was her endgame, which makes me question the shit that chick told you." Nox flops onto the bed with his arms folded behind his head.

"I knew it seemed too easy," I agree.

"Like he said, it doesn't matter now. We got what we wanted, and she'll be dead soon." Lucian heads to the bathroom, leaving the door cracked while he pees.

"What did we really get though?" I question Nox, unable to drop it like it seems Lucian wanted.

"We got you," Nox replies without really answering.

"Don't roll your eyes, lamb. He's right. They can't demand we hand over their heir and can't trick you into thinking they will ruin us if you don't do what they say. You are no longer an Umbra, and they have no sway over you. You are officially one of us."

I didn't even realize he was out of the bathroom, but Lucian's final words echo in my head. I never really felt like an Umbra, but it is admittedly weird to no longer be a Devlin either. There is no denying the thrill of excitement I get thinking of myself as a Morningstar though, even if it hasn't truly sunk in yet.

"I'm just worried what she'll try next," I admit, not focusing on the other things he said.

"We'll be ready, whatever it is." Nox closes his eyes and relaxes against the pillows. I wish I could be as confident as he is.

I feel Lucian approach my back, my skin tingling with awareness, and I think about the time I told him he made my skin crawl and he insisted that wasn't the case. His fingers

swipe the hair off the back of my neck and over my shoulder. “Now, about our wedding night...” His lips trail over my shoulder and up my neck, forcing my eyes to shut against the onslaught of arousal his touch causes.

“You said something about shoulders,” I tease.

“That’s only because I knew you wouldn’t be happy if I admitted I’ve been hard for hours thinking about you and that damn nail file.” He nips my earlobe, and I hiss in response. My heart stutters in my chest, skipping a beat.

“You remember our bet, don’t you, lamb?”

“I remember.” My response is a soft whisper.

He lets out a long breath through his nose, heating my skin inside and out. “Time to pay up. I’ll give you five minutes to get ready in the bathroom, or I will come collect.” Lucian steps back, taking all his heat with him, and I lose a little of the nerve that always comes with his nearness. Maybe it would be easier to make him come collect like he warned, but somehow, I know I won’t be getting off lightly if he does.

Without looking over my shoulder like I want to, I amble over to the dresser where I stashed the glass nail file. It took me a day or two to get used to not constantly feeling for it to make sure it was there. The need to have it eventually subsided, but I couldn’t bring myself to get rid of it.

Instead of heading to the adjoining bathroom, I leave the bedroom behind to seek out a room a little farther from Nox. I know without having to be told this won’t involve him. I honestly don’t think I would be comfortable if it did.

With remembered ease, I slip the file into the waistband of my pants. The coolness is a familiarity I never thought I would grow so comfortable with. By the time the glass matches my body temperature, I trick myself into thinking I barely notice it as I walk down the long halls of the mansion.

There’s a sense of urgency to find a place tucked away. I don’t want to be too easy to find, but I also don’t have any interest in getting lost tonight or waiting hours to be found. At the end of a hall, I find a door that almost seems like it would

lead outside, considering there's a window overlooking the backyard pool near it, but when I open it, I find a set of dark narrow stairs leading up.

A sound behind me has me entering the area I would have otherwise left unexplored considering how dark it is. My breathing sounds too loud, but it's nothing compared to the thundering of my heart as I dig my phone out of my pocket to use the light.

I glance around, making sure there aren't any cobwebs or bugs in the stairwell, then ease my way up to an attic. The ceiling is pitched at strange angles, making it hard to walk in some places. It reminds me of the ceiling at the school, only wood instead of stone, and a lot less imposing to stand under.

I find my way over to a stained glass window that looks like it belongs in a church and find the ocean in the distance. Tiny lights reflect off the water like floating stars. There's a feeling of utter isolation, like there's no one else around.

The door creaks open, and I drop down to a crouch. This really isn't part of our game, but it feels right, so I inch deeper into the shadows.

The footsteps on the stairs are slow and deliberate. As he grows closer, I start to worry it won't be Lucian, that somehow someone else has found me, and my heart starts beating even faster.

I tell myself to calm down. He must have watched me come in here. How else would he know exactly where I am? It's not until I see his achingly familiar jaw and the tattoos down his neck when I actually relax.

He's silent besides his footsteps, not saying words at all, but he knows I'm here. The air is charged with his intensity. I slip my hand into my pants, wrapping my fingers around the file, and try not to breathe.

He scans the room. The light from the window causes his eyes to glint before he continues his search of the space. The urge to pee hits me so hard, I have to use my hand to cover my

mouth, but I must make a muffled sound, because his head snaps in my direction.

My entire body trembles with the urge to run, but I force myself to stay put. Ever so slowly, Lucian turns to the side as if to walk in the other direction, but he changes course at the last second and runs right toward me.

I shoot up to my feet and screech like a banshee, but I don't run because I remember all the low parts in the ceiling, and I'm afraid I'm going to knock myself out.

His arms band around my body so firmly, it's hard to exhale, and he snarls, "Gotcha."

It only takes a second for my body to recognize his and relax in his embrace, which causes him to lighten his hold. It's the only advantage I need to shift my arm up and place the rounded edge of the nail file under Lucian's chin. I hear and feel his breath catch in his throat.

"Did you cheat, pretty boy, and watch where I went?" I accuse.

"No." He shakes his head, digging the round edge into his neck. I almost let up, because no matter how much I know Lucian loves pain, I could never really hurt him, hence the dull end of the object being used.

"Are you lying to me?" That thought does bother me, and the added pressure I apply is natural.

Lucian swallows roughly and licks his lips. "No." He bends his head forward, forcing me to let off on the pressure, then whispers, "But I will always know exactly where you are, lamb." His fingers find a spot on the back of my neck that twinges when he touches it. It's not painful, but it drags up a memory of when it once was—the day in the auditorium when Morozov sat behind me and the prick in the back of my neck.

"How will you always know?"

"Aw, come on, lamb. You're too smart to play dumb."

I huff out a breath in sheer exasperation. He knew exactly where I was when I was still with the Umbras, and when I felt

utterly alone, Lucian was with me—well, almost as good as with me for most of the time. I war with being grateful and pissed at the same time. He did something to me without asking or letting me know, and I can't even really be mad at him for it because it could have saved me. It's probably how he knew where to find me the day he helped me escape that fucking dungeon.

"I warned you that you wouldn't get away from me." He's the opposite of apologetic, but I wouldn't expect anything less from him. I'm not even certain I'd want him to be sorry. Maybe contrite or try to play it off like he did it for my own good, but that's not Lucian either.

"You could have told me you were doing it." I shove him with my free hand.

"If I would have gotten anywhere near you, I would have taken you back right fucking then, and remember, lamb, you left me. I wasn't certain you weren't trying to get away."

"Nobody could walk away from you willingly, you idiot," I hiss as emotions I can't separate drive me to struggle with him, but I'm so damn confused I don't know if I'm fighting to get away or to shove him to the floor so I can touch every inch of him.

"You did. Nobody forced you to get on that damn boat, Nova!" Now he's yelling, and it makes me mad that he still doesn't understand why I did it. I was willing, am still willing, to sacrifice myself for him and Nox, and it's terrifying to love them that much.

"I left because I love you and didn't want you to lose anything because of me!"

"The only thing I'm worried about losing is you, and I will do *anything* to make sure no one can take you from me again, even if it pisses you off. Matter of fact, I like pissing you off. It shows me I get under your skin the way you burrowed into mine." He drops his head so his face is right in mine and rumbles, "Get used to the tracker, lamb, it's not coming out. It's the least of what I'm willing to do to make sure you keep loving me."

I know I'm not supposed to like his dark promise, and that it should scare me to know the lengths Lucian is willing to go to, but there's comfort in knowing how important I am to him, and I don't know how to process my emotions. A snarl of frustration is the only sound I make before I palm the back of his head, jerk him to me, and bite his lip.

Lucian's hands come up to cradle my jaw, offering absolutely no resistance. In a frenzy, I tug at his clothes while kissing him. It's only when I'm loosening his belt that I realize I dropped the damn file a while ago, and I have no interest in looking for it.

He lets me push him back until he hits the wall next to the window with a grunt. My eyes rake over his exposed chest, and I love knowing I'm the one making him feel and that Lucian can't pretend I don't affect him. Curling my fingers, I drag my nails over his skin. If he wasn't covered in beautiful swirls of ink, you'd be able to see angry red lines in my wake.

His mouth drops open as his head lowers, but it's his eyes, which bore into me like he's afraid to blink, that give me the nerve to instruct, "Lie down," while stepping back.

His tongue makes a slow, lazy lap over his bottom lip as if he's thinking about whether or not to listen. "What's the matter, pretty boy? Are you too good to get dirty with the charity case?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "I was just thinking you might like something more comfortable than the floor." His tone drips with challenge.

"I'm not the one who's going to be on my back."

He smirks while his eyes grow lidded. Way more gracefully than I could manage, he puts his arm out behind him and bends his knees before catching himself with his palm as he plants his butt on the wooden floor. He makes the sprawl look sexy, especially when he tips his head back to gaze at me with anticipation.

"Don't tell me I got down here for nothing," he challenges when I don't make a move to come closer.

“I’m just waiting for you to actually listen.” I pretend I didn’t get caught up watching the lines along the side of his torso flex and stretch with his movements.

Lucian lets out a soft chuckle before bringing his hands up behind his head and lying back on the floor. I shimmy out of my clothes quickly then crouch to crawl toward him. The floor is cooler than I expected, especially since he didn’t react to it at all.

My knee hits a high spot on a board, and I let out a little hiss that makes Lucian lift his head to find me. He stays completely still as I crawl over his body until I’m on all fours over him. His head thunks back against the floor when I trail a hand over his chest and upper stomach in a gentle caress.

“Are you teasing me?” he drawls.

Instead of answering, I lower my face and kiss his jaw, working my way over to his ear. He shifts, tipping his head back to give me more room. When his hand comes up to hold the back of my head against his neck, I know what he wants.

The moment my teeth graze his skin, he huffs roughly. It spurs me to grow a little bolder and lower my weight over his hips. I can feel the material of his unbuttoned pants on my bare butt, and it makes me wish I told him to strip completely first, but I’m going to enjoy taking his pants off, and I think he will too. I don’t stop biting and kissing his neck until his other hand lands on my hip in an effort to keep me in place while he grinds his hips up. Only then do I move lower, stopping at his nipple to pinch it between my teeth.

His hips rock up so hard I move up higher on his torso. “Fuck, Nova, you’re driving me crazy.” His grip on my hip tightens, digging into my skin. I don’t mind a bit, but I need him to let go so I can continue my journey down.

As if he knows my thoughts, Lucian uncurls his fingers, and I shimmy down, dragging my nipples over his stomach until my face is right above the crotch of his pants. He lifts his head again and shakes it in denial. “Nuh-uh, lamb. If you so much as blow on my dick, I’m going to come, and I want to be inside you.” His eyes are so wide, he almost looks panicked.

I curl my fingers over his boxers and yank hard. A few stitches pop somewhere, and his shoulders come up off the floor when he jackknifes a little. I was very careful not to be over his dick or the side of the new tattoo, so I wouldn't scratch him there. I wouldn't risk hurting him like that even if he wanted me to.

"Christ, you don't listen." He groans softly, but I know by his tone he's not mad. I make a point of sending a cool breath of air over his now exposed dick, and it bobs. "Don't... Ugh." He doesn't finish his denial after I place my mouth over his tip and circle it once with my tongue.

Before he has a chance to recover or come, I release him from my mouth and shimmy his pants down his thighs, raking my nails over his skin. His abdomen muscles contract tightly as his body curls a little. When his dick bounces off his lower belly, there's a wet spot left behind from my mouth.

I don't even bother getting his pants all the way off before moving up his body and lowering myself over the ridge of his dick still pointed up toward his belly button. He lets out a strangled sound, and his hands slap my hips. I don't let his grip stop me from rolling my hips until the tip of his dick is pressed right against my clit, then I freeze. I'm just as worked up as he is, and if I don't slow down, I'm going to come before I really get started, and I want to torture him a little.

That thought jars me. It was too easy, too honest to ignore. I like making Lucian sweat, always have, and I can't see that stopping now that I know how much he likes it too.

"Fuck, Nova." His head is tipped back, and his jaw is tight enough to tell me he's clenching his teeth.

"Not yet." I rock my hips forward and back, feeling him slide up and down my slit. His head goes back even more as his back arches, and I see the tendons in his neck. He's glorious.

I lean forward so our chests touch and reach up to feel all that power along the sides of his throat. He swallows roughly against my palm, and my fingers tighten. His neck is far too

wide for me to wrap my hand around completely, but it doesn't stop me from curling my fingers to squeeze.

Lucian's eyes pop open for a brief moment then close as his hips come up off the floor. The slight shift means he's pushing the head of his dick against me harder, and it's my turn to make a soft whimper.

I lean back a little to keep my balance, and in doing so, I push against his throat even more to keep steady. I feel the sound he makes before I hear it. It's as deep and guttural as his demand. "Harder, lamb." His hands tighten on my hips, and he forces me up long enough to slip a hand between our legs and guide his dick farther back. Once I feel his tip at my opening, I take over and slam myself down before his hand is even gone, meaning I'm grinding on his dick and his knuckles.

I start to release the grip I have on Lucian's neck to shift my hand to his chest, but he removes his hand from my hip and grips my wrist, holding me in place. His fingers wrap all the way around, making me feel small compared to him yet powerful at the same time.

"Show me how badly you need me, lamb. Sink those pretty little claws into me and never let go." My hand tightens, and I rock against him until I feel the beginning of an orgasm building in my lower belly. Just as I start to convulse around Lucian, his eyes shut and he groans out a long, rough, "Fuck."

Two minutes later, when I'm just starting to catch my breath, I finally feel the rough wood biting into my knees and shins. I start to lift off Lucian, and he makes a sound of protest—maybe from the shifting of my weight, or maybe because he doesn't want me to get up—but I still move to the side and sit on my hip so my butt and cooch aren't right on the ground.

Lucian rolls onto his side too, curling forward so his face is nestled in the front of my thighs and his arm is wrapped over me. I don't know how he didn't complain about my weight being on him. Even this little bit extra makes the ground feel so much harder.

Now that my mind is quiet and clear, I start to second-guess what just happened and wonder how he feels about it

now. “I just wanted to touch your neck,” I start to explain. “I didn’t mean to...” I don’t know how to finish without sounding weirder than I already do, but I want him to know that wasn’t really my intent, or not to think it was anyway.

He lifts his face, and I get my first look at his dreamy eyes, all sleepy and content. I lift my hand to run my fingers through his dark hair. It’s messy and makes him seem softer somehow than when it’s perfectly slicked back to show off the hard angles of his face.

He leans into my touch, his eyes slipping closed on a long blink, and murmurs, “Admitting that will only make me want it more, Nova. I love knowing I make you lose control, love knowing I can make you forget about being a good girl who does the right thing. I want you raw and sweet. I want the real you—the you that you protect from everyone else because you’re too afraid of getting hurt.”

He manages to strip me bare with a few words. “It’s not fair that you can do that,” I tell him.

“Do what? See you?” He inches a little closer but pauses before lowering his face again. I think he’s waiting for my answer, but I notice him looking down at my leg. His thumb brushes a spot on my knee, and I click my tongue at the slight burn it causes. “You got cut?” He looks up at me.

“It’s nothing, just don’t scrub at it.” I shoo his hand away, but he’s undeterred, and instead, he leans down and plants his lips over the spot. I feel his tongue lick over the cut before I can scoot away. “Lucian!”

“What?” He acts as if licking blood off my leg is completely normal. I just shake my head, because there’s no point in arguing with him.

Sensing my acceptance of his weirdness, he puts his head in my lap again and lifts my hand to his head, telling me he wants me to keep rubbing. After about three minutes, when my legs are starting to fall asleep, he takes in a deep breath before saying, “I guess I should get you up off the floor, huh?”

“My butt would appreciate that, thank you.” I give him a quick, final scrub with my nails on his head before shifting.

He does this push-up type thing, stopping to kiss my lips once roughly, then hops to his feet. I groan at how easy he makes it look. I’m as stiff as a board. “Come on.” He extends his hand and hauls me halfway up before I’m ready.

“How is your back not broken?” I accuse, rolling my shoulders and twisting.

“Just tougher than you, I suppose,” he teases and bends to haul his pants back up his legs. When he turns to look for his shirt, I see a few faded crescent marks from my nails marring the tattoos on his neck. If I can see it in the low light of this room, then I can’t imagine what he’s going to look like downstairs.

I wince when a flush of heat washes through me that I’m certain isn’t from embarrassment.

“What?” He doesn’t miss my reaction.

“Your neck,” I whisper.

A dark smile curls his lips as he leans forward like he might kiss me, but he stops short. “Next time, I’ll make sure Luna sticks around so she can ink the spots. That way, you’ll always have the perfect grip.” He finally brushes his lips against mine then backs away.

“That’s not happening.”

“Want to bet? If I recall, you doubting me is how we got in this lovely situation in the first place.”

“She would probably get off on knowing what the marks were from, so nah, not happening.”

His laugh is pure evil. “I’ll make Nox do it then.”

“Oh, shut up.” I scowl and snatch up my pants from the floor before shaking them out and sliding them back on without my panties. I need a shower anyway.

Lucian hands me my shirt next, still smirking. “I could ask you instead,” he offers sweetly.

“Pfft, I know how that would work out. You could barely handle it when she tattooed you. Is that why you have a female artist?” I sound jealous and accusatory, but I didn’t like watching him get excited because someone else was touching him—or hurting him, I should say.

Lucian’s back straightens, and all signs of him teasing disappear. “That has nothing to do with her. I have never had that kind of reaction to anyone but you.”

“So that’s not your norm.” I gesture to the floor, so he knows I’m not only talking about the tattoo experience. I need to know who else Lucian has given that power to, even if it’s only an illusion because we both know the truth. He could turn the tables at any moment and stop me or anyone else from hurting him.

He pushes even closer to me, and I hold his gaze, pretending I don’t want to fidget under his attention. When only an inch separates us, he gently grazes his finger and thumb along my jaw. There was a time not long ago when the gesture would have made me flinch, but that’s no longer a problem. “Never, Nova. The things I want from you never even crossed my mind with anyone else.” His eyes scan down my body, and I feel the heat of his gaze lingering. “And I promise if you had your hand on my cock and a man was tattooing me, I would have had the same reaction. It had nothing to do with her.”

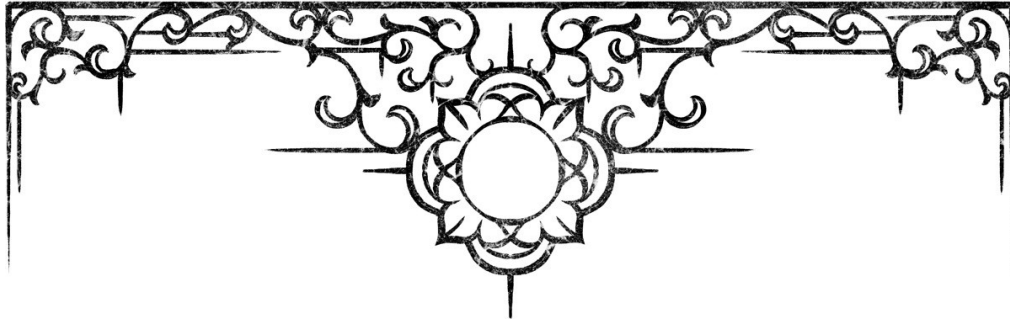
“Good to know,” I whisper softly, grateful for the reassurance.

“You’re welcome.” He lifts one eyebrow expectantly.

“I didn’t say thank you.”

“Are you sure? That’s what it sounded like to me.”

I scowl and spin away from him, heading for the stairway without responding.



LUCIAN

“Is this really necessary?” Nova pleads with Nox. I’ve already told her three times that she’s not getting out of this, so she stopped asking me. I never thought I’d have to convince my wife to have a fucking party to celebrate getting married. Hell, I’m not even sure I thought about having a wife more than in the abstract, but knowing she couldn’t care less if anyone knows we’re married is fucking with my head a little bit. I want everyone on the planet to know Nova’s mine.

“Yes, it’s important, and not just on the island. It’s what everyone expects,” he tells her, saying the same thing I did, but maybe he’s a little less of a prick about it than I was. What can I say, I was caught off guard when she balked at the idea.

“Fine,” she finally agrees, but her tone makes it clear she’s still not happy about it.

“It’s this weekend.” I don’t mean to sound like I’m goading her, but that’s how it comes off when I make the announcement.

“This weekend?” Her eyes about pop out of her head.

“What does it matter when it is? The deal is already done, lamb. It’s far too late for cold feet.”

“I don’t have cold feet. What the heck does that even mean anyway? It makes no sense,” she rambles, making me think

she does, in fact, have concerns about being married to me.

“What’s the issue then?” I prod, looking for a different explanation.

She looks at me, then at Nox, and I realize for the first time since bringing this up she looks sad, not mad or annoyed. “It feels... fake. Like, I know you’re only doing it for their benefit, and I don’t know... It makes me think the only reason we are married right now is because it made things simpler.” She uses the same word Nox used to convince her to go along with the plan in the first place, but I don’t care about what’s easy. What I care about is knowing she’s even more connected with us than before.

“Bullshit! Nothing about this is fake,” I snap, wishing I could find the cool indifference that comes so easily to me with anyone else, but I find it impossible to harness my emotions when it comes to Nova. Her eyes narrow on me in a clear sign she doesn’t like my tone.

“I know it’s not, because for some strange reason, I actually love you, but I’m still questioning if I actually like you,” she says with a glare.

Hearing her tell me she loves me takes a little of the sting from her other words, so I relax, but she’s not done.

“I’m just tired of being a joke, okay? People are going to question why you’re with me and make all kinds of assumptions that I might have been able to ignore before, but I seem to have a hard time keeping my mouth shut lately, and it’s a hassle when we’re already married. Plus, I know nothing about rich people crap, and it’s a waste of money.” She does this short little nod like she’s made her final point.

“Is that all?”

“You’re pissing me off, pretty boy.”

“Imagine how I feel when my *wife* acts like it’s a fucking chore to let people know we’re married.”

“I don’t care if people know, I just don’t want to deal with them.”

“You won’t have to deal with anyone, Nova, I’ll make sure of it, and you’re right, it is partly for show, all weddings are, but that’s only a small part,” Nox cajoles, telling her the things I should have when I probably would have just snarled at her more if he hadn’t intervened.

I knew I was being an asshole, but it’s dawning on me now just how much of an asshole. I was being selfish and assuming her not wanting to have the party was somehow about me, when really, it’s about her and the way people have always treated her, including me not that long ago. I’m not sure apologizing is the right move, but I don’t want her to continue being upset, so I bite the bullet. “Sorry I got pissy.”

Nox turns his head to look in my direction as if he might find someone else standing in my place. I ignore his reaction and wait for Nova’s.

“I didn’t mean to come off like I needed convincing,” she admits, and an awkward silence descends until I can’t take it anymore.

“Can we skip to the makeup sex part now?”

Nova clicks her tongue and shakes her head at my remark, but a tiny smile curves her lips, and that feels like a win. “Tell me what I need to do and what to expect.” She will face this just like she does almost everything—head-on.



NOX

My phone rings with an unfamiliar number, and I almost decline the call, but something stops me. “Hello?”

“We need to talk.” The voice on the other end of the line is familiar but tight.

“What do you want, Rory?” I should go find Lucian, or at least Morozov to record the conversation, but I don’t do either.

“In person,” is his only answer.

He must think I’m an idiot. There’s no way I’m falling for whatever trap Astrid cooked up. “I’m going to hang up,” I tell him, but I’m only bluffing.

“It’s about Nova,” he snaps.

“No shit, I didn’t think you were calling to confess to killing my parents.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with your parents’ deaths, Morningstar, but I know who did.”

I can’t come up with a quick enough response. I never could have imagined him admitting to anything of the sort.

“We *need* to talk,” he stresses. “I’ll even come to you.”

That catches me off guard too. I get to my feet, convinced I need to speak with Lucian now. I’m not as good at this bullshit as he is. While he spent time learning and plotting in regard to the Umbras, I’ve been wallowing. “You think I’m going to invite you over for tea?” I can’t help but add the familial dig.

It’s tough to keep my breathing even while I jog through the house to look for my brother. Good thing the fucker’s never far from Nova, which means I know he’s in the house somewhere. When I burst into the office, the door slams against the wall, but I don’t have time to wonder if Rory heard it or would care what the noise was.

Lucian grabs for the gun sitting on the desk, but he stops short when he sees me pointing at my phone.

“I think when you hear what I have to say, you’ll offer a hell of a lot more than tea, *son*.” He manages to make the “son” comment sound like an insult, implying my lack of experience, but I ignore it as if it didn’t register.

“Give me one reason why I would agree to meet up with you,” I reply then mouth, “Rory,” to Lucian, who’s watching my every move.

“I already gave you a reason. It’s about Nova. If you want to keep her and make sure she’s safe, then you’ll listen. I’ll be expecting a call from you or your brother in the next ten minutes, otherwise, I’ll have to do things my way.”

“What’s your way?” I question, knowing I’m not going to get an answer. The line goes dead, proving me right.

“What the fuck?” Lucian is already up on his feet.

“That was Rory. He said he wants to meet, and he’s willing to come here to talk. It’s about Nova.”

“What about Nova?” He slides the gun into the holster in his waistband at his back with ease. I don’t think I’ve seen him unarmed since Nova returned.

“I don’t know, but he said he knew who killed Mom.”

Lucian goes unnaturally still and hisses, “What?”

“He’s probably just trying to get over here to blow us the fuck up or something, right?”

“He knows he’d never make it on the grounds with any kind of weapon.” Lucian’s eyes go unfocused as he mutters.

“Do you think he wants to plant a bug or some shit?” I can’t make sense of what he wants.

“Just him? He didn’t mention Astrid?”

“No, now that you mention it, he didn’t say anything about her at all. He said he wants us to call back to arrange something, or he will have to handle it his own way.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” He heads for the door, and I’m right with him.

“No clue. I almost didn’t even answer.”

“I wonder if they got to Bridget. She was supposed to call Vera the second she could get off the island without raising any suspicion, but there’s been no word from her.”

We head straight for the other offices. Lev is seated at a desk like my brother was, and I don't see a weapon in sight, yet I know there are plenty within reach and probably several on his body I can't see.

"Get everyone together," Lucian instructs, then heads in the opposite direction. He doesn't have to tell me where we're going, it's where I thought we were headed in the first place.

"Nova!" Lucian shouts from the bottom of the stairs, then hops up two at a time.

"Jesus, what?" She pokes her head out of our room. We never slow our approach, so she scrambles back through the door before us. "I'm not even late." She looks over at the clock as if to confirm her words or check the time.

"Have you heard from anyone?" Lucian stalks around the room, searching for Nova's phone.

"Like who? The dress people?" She scrunches up her face.

"Like anyone. Where's your phone?" I question.

"You are the only two who even have my number." She pulls her phone from her back pocket and hands it over without prompting again.

"Several people have the number. They are just not allowed to contact you unless it's an emergency." Lucian snatches the device from her palm.

"Is there an emergency?" She looks toward me, running her eyes over my body from head to toe.

I clue her in. "Rory just called me. He said he has something to tell us about you."

"What now?" She drops back onto the bed with a huff. "I swear to God if this is more crap about heirs and bloodlines, I'm going to lose my shit."

"Nova," Lucian warns.

"Oh, be quiet, or I'll ask Gertrude to teach me how to curse in Russian." She manages to look down her nose at him even though he's still standing.

“It would never happen, *сладкая*.” He calls her sweet in Russian just to goad her and tosses her phone on the bed next to her after confirming there have been no calls.

“She’s warming up to me. Today, when she demanded I eat, she didn’t even sound that grumpy, and she didn’t slam my plate on the counter,” she brags.

“You know she loves you. If she didn’t, she would have already poisoned you,” I tease.

“What do you think he wants to tell us?” Lucian drags the conversation back to the topic.

“Your guess would be better than mine. What does he want for the information?” Nova’s question proves she’s growing to understand our world far better than she gives herself credit for.

“He wouldn’t say. He wants to meet us. Here.” My tone suggests how strange I think his offer is.

“Walking into the devil’s den? That’s pretty brave.”

“Or fucking stupid,” Lucian counters.

“So when will he be here?”

“We haven’t set up the meeting yet,” I admit.

“You think he has some other reason for trying to get on your property?”

“*Our* property,” Lucian corrects.

Nova gestures between us. “That’s pretty obvious.”

“No, he means as in yours too,” I explain, causing her to bunch up her nose. “But yeah, it seems strange he would be willing to come here. We always meet on neutral ground, like the school or even off the island for an exchange like this. Him coming here would be seen as a concession to us or imply there’s trust we don’t have.”

“So we’re thinking it’s some sort of trap,” she concludes.

“I don’t know, but there’s only one way we’re going to find out. Call him.” Lucian gives me the go-ahead. I’m a little

surprised he doesn't want to liaise with Lev first, but we both trust that he can handle whatever happens.

"Hello?" Rory answers on the second ring.

"This better not be a waste of time."

"I'm ready whenever you are." Rory doesn't waver.

"What are your terms?"

"The only thing I ask is that Nova is there. She deserves to know, and it may be the last time I see her."

I make eye contact with my brother. It almost sounds as if Rory thinks whatever information he has is going to get him killed. I just don't know if he thinks it will be us or his wife doing the deed. "You'll come alone and unarmed," I insist, not giving him any promises about Nova. There's no way she'll be anywhere near him until we make sure it's safe for her to be.

"Yes," Rory confirms. "It would be best if I wasn't seen walking directly through your gate."

"I'll call you back with a time and instructions."

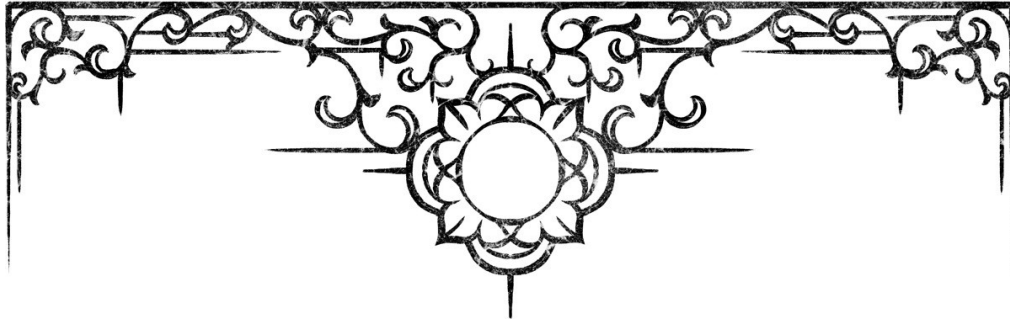
"The sooner, the better," he replies before hanging up.

"That was..."

"Unexpected," Lucian finishes for Nova.

"Yeah." Nova's eyebrows are furrowed in a clear sign that she's just as confused as we are.

"Let's go talk to Lev before Rory changes his mind, or someone does it for him." Lucian extends his hand to Nova to help her rise. I doubt he will let her out of his sight until Rory is good and gone, maybe not even then.



NOVA

Seeing the boat house fills me with a sense of unease, but I've been on edge since I listened in on the phone call with Rory a few hours ago. I was supposed to be meeting the dress people in one of the spare houses today, and I thought I would do just about anything to get out of that, but this just proves how wrong I was. It seems dumb that I was worried about trying on a few white dresses now.

There are men everywhere, and I know there's even more I can't see with sniper rifles pointed at the building, because I heard Lucian and Lev discussing them. I have to work hard not to scan the tree line for them. I can't see the water line from where we parked, but that also means anyone on the water or mainland wouldn't be able to see us either.

"He's waiting for you inside," a man I don't know by name tells us as soon as we exit the SUV. In the past, we've taken the UTV here, but Nox mentioned wanting better cover than the open vehicle provided, so we piled into the large truck with blacked out windows and made the short drive over.

"Any issues?" Lucian questions, placing himself directly in front of me.

"No, sir. He was alone and unarmed as promised. Lev handled the search himself."

We head straight for a heavy door one of the men has propped open for us. We walk in single file with me in the middle. I think they are in more danger than I am, but there's no telling them that, so I hustle inside the building, wanting cover for them just as much.

There are even more men stationed inside the open garage area. The ceilings are really high, but it's hard to see with all the boats and equipment filling the space. The smell of grease and oil hang heavily in the air with all the large bay doors sealed, but I understand the precaution. Having them open would leave most of the place exposed to the open water.

Lucian guides us up to a metal staircase that leads to an open balcony that overlooks the shop. Lev is standing near one of the few doors which I'm guessing are offices of some kind. His expression is stoic, which isn't unusual. He always seems pretty serious, but something about him just seems a little extra today.

"He didn't have anything on him. Seemed kind of pissed I made him strip and change so I could burn his clothes just in case." Lev shrugs.

"Has he said anything?" Nox asks behind me.

"Other than to ask what's taking you so long, no."

Lucian twists the doorknob and pushes the door open, but he steps to the side for me to enter before him. I hesitate for just a moment when I see Rory seated at a bare silver table in a thin white T-shirt. I've only ever seen him in suits, occasionally without his coat, but even that was rare. If I didn't just hear Lev say they made him change, I would have known just by looking at him that the clothing choice wasn't his own.

His eyebrows rise as if he's surprised to see me. Unexpectedly, I don't hate him on sight the way I do Astrid, or maybe it's just the obvious power shift that allows me to rein in my distaste.

My grandfather starts to rise but seems to think better of it when he sees Nox on my heels and Lucian still holding the

door. “Hello, Nova,” he greets instead.

“Hi,” I respond quietly while looking anywhere but into his eyes. It allows me to see his features shift into a mien of sadness, or at least that’s what the frown seems to mean to me.

With a hand on my back, Nox leads me to one of the three chairs opposite Rory and pulls out the middle one for me to sit.

“I wasn’t sure they would let you come,” he tells me.

Lucian chuckles softly. “The fact that you even say shit like that means you don’t know her at all.”

Rory winces a little from the jab. “You’re right, but my lack of effort doesn’t mean I didn’t want to. I did what I needed to so I could keep her safe.” He lifts his gaze to meet Lucian’s.

“From your wife?” Nox surmises.

My grandfather gives him a slow nod in confirmation. “And others, but we’ll get to that.”

Lucian pulls out the chair next to me and sits down, scooting it as close to my chair as possible. I’m not sure if he’s trying to make Rory uncomfortable, or if he’s feeling overprotective. “Why don’t we talk about that now?”

“Because I need you to understand that this wasn’t all Astrid. I need you to see she’s not the only one on this fucking island poisoned by power and hope that history will not repeat itself.”

Nox leans back and appraises the older man. It’s the first time I’ve heard him swear. I think I know why it’s weird for Lucian to hear me curse now. “You’re going to tell us how this is our own fault?” He sounds skeptical.

“How you bear some responsibility, yes.”

“We didn’t come here for a morality evaluation,” Lucian sneers.

“Especially when yours are as black as night. I’m too realistic to think otherwise. Instead, I’ll appeal to your self-

preservation. If all you care about is power and this island, then you'll end up just like Astrid, bitter and alone."

"She's not alone, she has you."

"If she did, I wouldn't be here now, would I?" Rory doesn't back down from Nox's statement. "I lost my usefulness to her when I couldn't give her any more children, but the reality she could never face was it was her who couldn't have more children. If it really was me, then she would have had me killed off a long time ago and remarried."

"Damn." Lucian's utterance almost sounds like he feels sorry for Rory.

"What does this have to do with me?" I ask, not sure I want to feel empathy for him.

"Everything," Rory says, not giving me a real answer.

I huff in frustration, causing Nox to curl his fingers over my thigh under the table. "Tell us what you think we need to know," he encourages. I don't know how everyone isn't able to tell the brothers apart with ease. It's always been so obvious to me from the way they speak and move. It doesn't matter that they look identical, all you have to do is open your eyes a little and it's so very clear.

"I'm sure you'll already know some of this, but for the sake of full disclosure, I'll start with your mother." He looks directly at me, and I realize I don't think he's ever said her name, not once, and it feels intentional. "Astrid put so much pressure on her, she ran the first chance she got, which left her just as miserable as your grandmother, but even more stubborn." He cracks the smallest of smiles.

"She cut herself off from us completely. The only thing that kept your grandmother from seeking your mother was the confidence that she couldn't make it without us, that sooner or later, our daughter would come home, and everything would be as it should have been. Astrid couldn't see she was the person who pushed her away, and if she could have just accepted your mother, she could have had everything she wanted."

“We kind of figured that,” I admit. “I also know you guys were at the hospital after the accident and left me there when you thought I couldn’t have children.” I don’t try to cover the harshness of my tone. I’d rather he think I’m mad and not hurt.

Rory leans forward on the table. “Who do you think paid the doctor to tell her that?” He stares into my eyes, pleading with me to understand, but it takes my mind a second to catch up.

“You paid him to say that?” I can’t understand why he would do that.

“Yes, and I would do it again if I thought for one minute it would keep you away from this place,” he snaps quickly, completely unrepentant.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Lucian look over my head at Nox.

“I don’t understand.” Doubt wiggles its way into my thoughts. Every time I think I have a handle on what’s going on, it’s like someone, or something, has to prove I don’t know anything.

“I was hoping it was enough to keep her away from you, but I should have known she would continue to check up on you. I thought she finally accepted it would just be us, that our line would end, but I was wrong, and I have your family to thank for that.” Rory shifts his gaze to Lucian. He may not know which brother is which, but there’s some part of him that senses the more volatile of the two.

“Our family?” Lucian’s tone is dismissive, as if he can’t figure out how the two could be related.

“Your father, to be exact. I’m sure he had no way of knowing ousting Albert from the family would set a series of events into motion that would change our lives, but he should have. Every decision we make has a greater impact than our intent, so we always have to weigh the outcome.”

“How the fuck could Albert’s affair and the consequences be at play here?” Lucian is a little more defensive now.

“This life, this island, changes people, and that’s exactly what happened to Marissa, his wife. She knew exactly what Albert was doing, everyone did, but she chose to turn a blind eye to his affairs so she could keep her happy little life, but your father decided to take that from her and her son without consideration of what it might do to them.”

“We’re still waiting to hear what that has to do with Nova.” Nox’s fingers tighten on my leg, but I’m not even sure he’s aware he’s doing it.

“You can’t figure out what two women who think they’d lost every chance at the futures they were promised could have in common?” Rory leans back in his chair with feigned bewilderment, as if he’s implying the guys are stupid.

Lucian’s jaw tics. “Again, what does that have to do with Nova?”

Rory exhales and shakes his head. “Marissa and Astrid fed off each other’s misery. They concocted a plan that would ensure they both got what they wanted. Astrid with her heir, and Marissa with her claws back into the Morningstars. After killing her husband, her son was the only way to get it.”

“What? He killed himself,” Nox scoffs, looking at Lucian, but I can already see the wheels turning in Lucian’s head. He’s putting all the pieces together much faster than me or Nox.

“She set up my parents too.” His tone is devoid of emotion, but anger radiates off of him in waves.

Rory’s brows lift quickly as if he’s stunned Lucian picked up on the truth that fast. “Yes, she set everything in motion, including pairing Nova with her son.”

I feel sick, but I don’t say anything for fear of puking my guts out. How much worse could this get?

“I’m not making excuses for Astrid, but if it wasn’t for Marissa, none of us would be here.”

“Bullshit. That’s an excuse if I ever heard one.” Uncharacteristically, Nox allows everyone to hear he’s angry.

Rory averts his gaze for a moment, not arguing with the truth. “Well, I can tell you it was her idea alone to kill you both so her son would be the last remaining Morningstar, then he would become head of the family.”

“What?” It’s my turn to gasp in shock.

“He’s been excommunicated from the family. It was done as soon as we learned of the oversight,” Nox informs him.

“That must be why he’s no longer her favorite boy,” Rory sneers. “I don’t know what they have planned now. Astrid doesn’t trust me anymore since I allowed Nova to escape from the school.”

“You didn’t allow me to escape.” I snort.

Rory tilts his head to the side and gives me a look of disappointment. “I left you there, giving you the chance, when she wanted you in the car with us.”

“You’re taking a lot of credit there,” Lucian drawls, dismissing his claim as well.

“I knew you would do something to get Nova back, but I don’t really care if you believe me or not. However, you have to believe what I’m telling you now. If you move forward with this wedding, you’ll die, and Nova will become a vessel for Astrid and Marissa. They’ll find a way to get what they want.

“She would never get close. I assume everyone who meets me wants me dead,” Lucian counters.

Rory shakes his head ruefully. “That’s actually sad, but you’re a prick, so I’m not surprised.”

Lucian shrugs, not arguing. “I’m the prick who will keep her safe when you didn’t.”

“She ended up in the hospital on your watch, Morningstar.” Rory’s comment makes it clear he and Lucian will never be friends, but the question is, can we trust him?

“Why did you really tell us this?” Lucian scrutinizes my grandfather as if he’ll be able to read the answer he’s looking for in his features.

“Because nothing else I’ve tried to keep Nova safe has worked. If I thought I could get her away from you, I would, but I know there’s no way of undoing all this. I failed. I’m fucking hoping you can keep her safe, so she can find some kind of happiness.” Rory is adamant, so much so that I actually find myself believing him, or maybe I just want to.



LUCIAN

“You realize telling us this, truth or not, means you’ve guaranteed your wife’s death sooner rather than later, yes?” I was going to kill Astrid anyway. The only thing he’s done is given me a reason to do it as soon as possible.

Rory keeps his gaze locked on mine when he admits, “Yes, I know.” His voice is gravelly with emotion. I wonder what that must be like, to love someone and still accept their death as the favorable outcome. I can’t imagine ever meeting that fate. Nova will always come first, but I also know I will never have to choose between her and our family, which is what Astrid has forced Rory to do.

“And what happens to you?” Nox asks while I’m still dwelling on dark thoughts.

“I accepted my fate when I stepped foot on your property.” He shrugs. Is that why he is so tolerant of what will come of his wife?

“You thought we would kill you?” I ask.

“I thought I would meet with an unfortunate accident, much like the boat explosion.”

I can't help the smirk that curls my lips. "They got off easy if you ask me." I neither confirm nor deny his assumption.

"I'm not sure their parents would agree, but actions have consequences, and you covered your tracks well."

I think there was a compliment in there, but I don't need to impress him, so I ignore it. "Why not take care of Marissa yourself if you felt her involvement complicated things?"

"I thought about it, but I'm just not like you." His comment and tone sound like he finds himself lacking, whereas it could have come off as an insult. I don't fault him for having a conscience. Nox isn't a killer either, and I would never judge him for it, but I do trust that if he was given a choice between someone else dying and Nova, he would make the right choice, morality be damned.

"How do you know Astrid no longer trusts you?" If I can use him to find out what she has planned, I will.

"She stopped talking to me and has become even more secretive."

"What about Marissa and Alden?" Nox knows what I'm thinking, he usually does.

"Marissa never trusted me. I'm pretty sure she hates all men besides her son, and even then, she only tolerates him to get what she wants."

"Alden respects you," Nova chimes in.

"I thought so too," Rory concurs. "Initially, he agreed that you should have a choice about your future, which is why I made him your protector, but that fell apart almost immediately. I should have anticipated that when he was confronted with the twins, he would become jealous. His mother had been poisoning him for years, telling him everything they have should have been theirs. Then, as if to prove her right in that they always take what's his, you end up with the enemy." Rory seems to be just as perplexed by the situation as I was in the beginning.

"Nah, he was weird from the get-go, nice one second and a jerk the next, and that was before I ever met the Morningstar

brothers,” Nova replies.

“He came to me right after you arrived. He was definitely conflicted, said you were nothing like he expected.”

“I bet.” Nova snickers. “You should have seen the way he looked at my couch, but I don’t care what he thought about me or anything else. I’m only mentioning him because I thought you could get him to talk to you.”

“I very much doubt he would be useful. He’s not the same person he was a few months ago, and he’s never been more than a pawn himself in all this.” Rory rejects the idea.

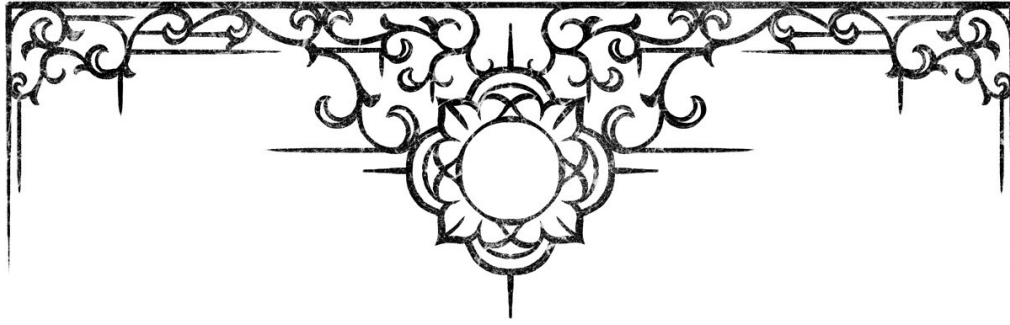
“I suppose that just leaves you then.” I never would have trusted anything Alden told him. Hell, I don’t even trust Rory, but I will use him.

“For what exactly?” He cocks his head as if he’s leery of my answer.

“To be our inside man. It’s a fair trade. We’ll let you walk out of here, and you feed us anything you can find out.” I make no promises about the future, because I honestly haven’t decided Rory’s fate yet.

“I won’t kill her for you. I won’t kill any of them, no matter what you try to hold over my head.”

“The fact that you even said that proves you don’t know me. I never expect others to do my job.”



NOVA

I thought I might be able to convince the guys to cancel the party after Rory left, but here I am, standing in one of the houses on the property, surrounded by a sea of white dresses I'm supposed to choose from.

I'm sure the two women who brought all the gowns are trying to be helpful, but we're all tense. I really don't want to be here. It seems even more ridiculous now after knowing how desperately Astrid and Marissa want Nox and Lucian dead. As for the women with me, I'm sure part of the reason they seem to be on edge has something to do with the team of security guards standing sentry around the room and house—or it could be the fact that I've tried on no less than ten dresses and hate them all.

“What do you envision wearing on your special day?” the older of the two women, Michele, asks. I scowl at the classification of *special day*. I'm more worried about it becoming the worst day of my life.

“Something simple,” I tell her again, because this isn't the first time she's asked this question or something incredibly close to it.

“What about silhouette?”

“No ball gowns or dresses that are fluffy just at the bottom.”

“Mermaid,” she corrects. “Neckline?” She makes a point of looking down at my boobs. We both know they are big. I feel like I’ve spilled out of every dress I’ve tried on so far.

“Nothing too low cut.”

“Okay, I’m starting to get a vision.” She feigns excitement. “How do you feel about lace? I think I have the perfect dress,” she says before I can answer, already heading to a rack across the room.

The gown she pulls is beautiful. It’s lace with a nude underlay, long sleeves, and a modest neckline. My issue is I wouldn’t want to walk around feeling nearly naked in front of a bunch of strangers. “Now this is a sample, so it might not be a perfect fit. You’ll have to use a little imagination, but we can get an idea.”

I sigh and take the dress from her, folding the long train over my arm just to get a few minutes alone in the bedroom.

“Call if you need a hand,” the younger woman offers as I head down the short hall. I can hear their hushed words as I make my escape, but I don’t care enough to listen.

When I open the door, I find Nox lying on the bed. “How did you get in here?” I’m not disappointed he’s here, even though I’m the one who insisted I do this alone. I’m a little surprised it’s him, though, who went against my wishes.

“You’re taking forever.” He lets his eyes roam up and down my body. I’m wearing a white silk robe that I hope I get to keep because it feels like magic against my skin.

“Some girls take months to pick out a dress. I’ve only been an hour,” I challenge.

“Forever,” he confirms. “You need help trying that on?” He sits up.

“It’s too small. I’m supposed to use my *imagination*.” I wave my hand whimsically.

“What the hell?” He curls his lip up in distaste.

“I’m not sample size, it’s not a big deal.” It kind of is though. If this wasn’t super short notice, I’d be pretty upset if

someone wanted me to try on a dress that might not make it over my hips and butt.

“Turn around, I don’t want you seeing if I can’t squeeze into this thing.” I spin my finger.

“Will you let me see it after?” he questions before turning.

“It depends on how bad it is,” I answer truthfully.

“Just let me see it, okay?” He turns to face the wall.

While keeping one eye on Nox, I toss the dress on the bed next to him and untie the robe. He peeks before I can even pick the dress back up. “Hey!” I scold.

“What? Just seeing if you need a hand,” he defends unapologetically.

I step into the dress, and I was right. It gets tight mid-thigh. I wiggle a little while Nox isn’t looking and manage to get it over my butt, but there’s no hope to get it all the way up my arms and over my chest to even attempt to see how it would look other than too small.

“Can I look?” he asks, peeking again. “Wow.” His eyes go wide.

“Yeah, it’s way too small.” I keep my hand over my chest to hold the top in place.

Nox stands and takes the two steps separating us with his eyes going everywhere but my face. “Lucian would kill me if I let you wear this dress,” he admits, and his palm skims up my side in a caress. “I think you should get it—not for this weekend, but I need to see you in this dress, Nova.”

His sweet words make my stomach flip. “It’s a wedding dress. I can’t just wear it to the store.”

His lips slide against my temple as he pulls me close to his body. I inhale sharply when his fingers trace over the wide open back of the dress. “We won’t be going to the store, Nova.”

My entire body softens against his just in time for the knock on the door. “Are you doing okay in there?”

“We’re fine,” Nox barks harshly.

“Oh, sorry.” Her receding voice makes it clear she’s walking away from the door. There’s a part of me that wants to be embarrassed, but it’s fleeting, especially when Nox begins pulling the sleeves of the dress off my arms, exposing my longline bra that looks a lot like lingerie.

“This might be even better than the dress,” he says, looking down at the swell of my breasts. I’m just happy to have movement back in my arms, so I lift them up and wrap them around his neck.

When he tries to push the dress off my hips, I hear a few seams pop in response, so I try to stop him to wiggle out myself, but he just tugs roughly, and the dress is suddenly pooled at our feet. “Yup, much better.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re going to have to pay for that,” I warn between soft kisses.

“Don’t care,” he mumbles against my mouth then backs me toward the bed. I fall onto the mattress with the slightest pressure, leaving Nox standing over me. His eyes roam from head to toe, heating my skin and sending a flush of warmth to my center. Nox is more than gorgeous inside and out. When he looks at me as if I’m the most desirable thing he’s ever seen, it’s almost too much, like I could never live up to his vision of me, but somehow, he makes me feel like I do with every touch, whisper, and glance.

He reaches behind his back and tugs his shirt over his head, revealing tight, tan skin inked to perfection. The black wings beneath his belly button always draw my attention, but it could just be the strategic placement. Nox unbuttons his pants and removes them along with his boxers, and something low in my belly tightens with arousal.

I don’t often get the chance to focus just on Nox, and I plan to make the most of our short time together now. When he bends down to kiss me, I reach for him because I can’t stand not touching him any longer.

Mindful of the other two women in the house and the security lurking around, I keep my sighs and moans to a minimum. No one needs a play-by-play of what we're doing. Nox urges me to lie back on the bed, then he plants his hand on the mattress next to me as he kneels. Everywhere our skin touches, heat licks my body until I burn. The white corset style bra isn't exactly comfortable, but when he runs his thumbs over the lace cups, it's like there's nothing between us. My nipples tighten, and I arch into him, needing more and not wanting to rush at the same time.

He tugs at a cup and pulls it down right before he kisses my exposed nipple. Nox hums as if he's savoring me. "You smell so damn good."

It's not the first time he's mentioned he likes the way I smell, and knowing it's not some fancy perfume or lotion makes it even more satisfying.

Nox skims his hand down my side and grabs my leg, hooking his elbow under my knee. It opens my thighs, and he takes advantage by slipping my matching white undies to the side. I'm more than glad I wore them to try on dresses now. His knuckles brush over the overheated skin of my lower lips, and he makes a sound of approval deep in his throat. "So wet already. I bet my cock will slide right into you."

I nod, thinking I would like that very much, but he glides his middle finger lower and pushes it in deep, as if he needed to test the theory first. My head rocks back, and my eyes close, even though I had every intention of watching him touch me.

He fucks me slowly with his finger, and my hips roll up to meet every stroke while I bring my fist up to my mouth to muffle the sounds that want to escape. When I find the strength to open my eyes, Nox is staring at me, his gaze hungry and filled with the promise of more. I reach for him in a bid to drag him closer. As much as I love the way he's touching me, I need more. I need to feel him against me, pushing as deeply as he can go. "Nox." His name leaves my lips like a plea.

“What do you need, Nova?” He keeps up the torturously slow pace of his finger sliding in and out of me.

“You, I need you,” I tell him.

After just a few more strokes, he guides himself inside me, and I let out a breathy sigh of satisfaction. My leg is still hooked over his arm, and with every thrust, his hips slam into mine roughly, as if he’s as helpless as I am not to race toward an orgasm. Tension sings in my body, tightening almost every muscle until I’m bowed against him with only my butt, shoulders, and head touching the bed.

When he sinks his teeth into his full bottom lip and throws his head back, I know he’s close too. “Oh God!” I cry out, then slap my hand over my mouth when I remember we’re not completely alone in the house.

He looks down, his eyes slitted with arousal, and uses his free hand to tug at my wrist, pulling my hand from my mouth. “Uh-uh, I love the way you sound, Nova.” He grinds against me hard, rubbing my clit, and I convulse around him. I’m not exactly loud, but I’m far from quiet as he guides me through the ecstasy filling my body and soul.

Nox follows me soon after, groaning through his own release. My leg starts to slip down his arm as we both forget to hold it up. I laugh softly, and he slips out of me. It makes me regret my amusement for a brief moment, but then he lies next to me and pulls me into his embrace.

Happiness curls my lips again, and I snuggle to get even closer to him. I know we don’t have much time, but a few more minutes won’t hurt. We’ve already kept them waiting longer than we probably should have.



NOVA

I HAVE a hard time making eye contact with the woman when I finally exit the room, but thankfully Michele handles my twenty minute absence like a pro. “That one didn’t work out?”

“No, I don’t think that one will work for the event.” I flush, knowing I’ll have to tell her I need to pay to have the dress fixed, but I’m unable to bring myself to do it right this moment while she’s looking at me. “Do you mind if I look around myself?”

“Sure, and if there’s anything else you’d like to see or a designer you love, let me know.” She backs away, giving me more room to search through the racks.

Every time I pause for more than a second or two while looking at a dress, she inches closer. “Do you want me to pull that one?”

“Can we make a maybe rack to help narrow it down? I didn’t realize trying on dresses was such hard work.” I make a joke while admitting the truth.

“Absolutely, just leave the ones you’re considering pulled out like this.” She tugs out the bottom of the dress, making it stick out. “And we’ll pull it for you to look at.”

I have five selected when I find the dress. I know it’s the dress the moment my fingers touch the fabric. My gasp must be some sign, because Michele does a little happy squeal and claps her hands. “That’s a sound I love to hear.”

I look back at her, then down the hall. “I want to try this one.” There’s no hesitation. If this dress looks half as good on me as it does on the hanger, then it’s the one.

“Perfect, let me get that for you.” She edges me out of the way and smiles at the satin gown in her hands. “Simple elegance, exactly what you wanted.”

As we approach the bedroom, I turn to face her. “Give me one second.” I crack the door open. “Nox?”

“Yeah?” He’s still in bed. He looks half asleep, and I think about letting him stay, but I just know this is the dress, and I want it to be a surprise. It’s so different from the last dress, I think he’ll really be stunned.

“I’m going to use the other room, stay put,” I warn.

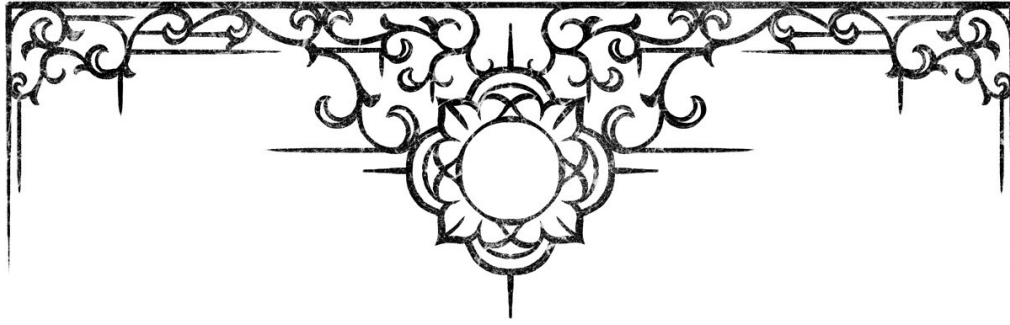
He props his head on his palm with a lazy smile. “You sure you don’t need any help?”

“I think you were helpful enough already.”

“I can get up so you can have the room.” He tosses the covers back, revealing his naked body, and I pull the door tighter around my head so no one behind me can see into the room. I’m too busy watching him to answer, so he turns his head to look over his shoulder and smirks. “You sure you don’t need a hand?”

Instead of answering, I pull my head back and slam the door shut, which makes him chuckle. It sends a wave of heat through my body even through the closed door.

“I’ll be right out.” I back toward the other door, hauling my dress with me. Once inside, I engage the lock just in case Nox gets any ideas, and then I lay the dress on the bed. I will forever deny the giddy little dance that happens next.



NOX

I'm standing in one of the offices on the main floor with Lucian. We're dressed in identical black tuxes with white shirts and black accessories. Nova is just on the other side of the door in an interior room that was originally designed to be a file room for this office, meaning there's no outside access to the space. Anyone who wants to get to her has to get through us first. I hate that she's alone, but I don't trust anyone besides Gertrude to be with her, and Nova shut that idea down really quickly when we suggested the old woman help her get ready.

Lucian argued we should just all stay together, since they are already married and traditions, or superstitions, don't apply, but Nova insisted we get ready separately. I honestly wouldn't have minded if he won that one, yet here we both are, eagerly waiting for her to allow us admittance to the room where she is.

Lucian, who's been quiet for the past hour, turns to face me, and I know by the look on his face and the feeling swirling in my gut that he's about to tell me something, and I'm not sure if I'm going to like it.

"Since she's mine on paper, she can be yours for the ceremony."

"What?" There's no way he said what I think he did.

“Yeah, you didn’t hesitate when it was time for her to pick one of us. You actually told her to pick me, so I’m doing this for you, for all of us. It’s what’s right.”

I take a step backwards and rub my hand over my face. I’m speechless. We’ve been planning this all week, but it was always Lucian who would stand up there with her, not me. No wonder Nova freaked out a little when we threw a wedding and marriage at her. It’s overwhelming.

“But you...” I begin, but I don’t know what else to say. *You said you would do it. You want this. What if she doesn’t want me?*

“Chill,” he says, probably sensing every emotion I’m currently struggling with.

“She’ll know it’s me. She always knows, and I won’t try to trick her into it.”

“Come on, you know better than that,” he replies. “We told her it was both of us from the beginning, and you know that’s the only way she would even put up with me.”

“You getting soft on me, bro?” I accuse, only half joking.

He shrugs, not bothering to deny my claim. “Besides, with you by her side all night, I can weed out the snakes and kill anyone who gets out of line.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Now that’s the brother I know.”

“I guess you better take this, but I want it back tonight,” he warns, pulling a thick band off his ring finger. The silver and black band is heavier than I expected. I know by the weight alone it’s platinum.

“I didn’t bring the band I got her. I probably should have,” I say mostly to myself.

“You can give it to her later. I have something for her too.” He pulls a hilt out of the inside pocket of his jacket, and the blade snaps into place. It’s a delicate stiletto with silver and black markings that match perfectly with his wedding band.

“Do I even want to know what you plan to have her do with that?”

“Probably not,” he says with an evil grin. I have no idea when my brother developed a masochistic streak, but I’m pretty sure it was the moment Nova inflicted the tiniest bit of pain, physical or emotional, and he realized he liked it, because I know it wasn’t before her.

“I think I’ll stick with the ring.” I close my fingers around his band. I want to make sure Nova is okay with his plan before putting it on. I know she would recognize me, but I don’t want her feeling like we’re trying to trick her into anything.

I glance over at the closed door separating me from Nova, and my stomach decides to do a flip, making me want to hurl. “How long do you think it’ll be before she comes out?”

Lucian looks down at his watch. “She knows we’re supposed to be out there in fifteen minutes, so she could be out any second, or she could make us wait an extra half hour. I never know with her. Why?”

“I might need to shit.” I chuckle, hoping I’m only joking.

“You better get it out of your system now. There won’t be time for potty breaks later.” Lucian isn’t joking at all, and his expression says I better shit myself before leaving Nova alone.

“I know, I was kidding. I just wasn’t expecting to be the one in the spotlight tonight.” That’s only part of the truth, but it’s enough. I don’t want him or Nova thinking I’m the one with cold feet.

“Don’t overthink it. You want her as much as I do, and this is how we get it.” He’s completely confident, and it helps settle my stomach. He’s right. I’ve known Nova was meant for us from the moment I saw her face at the gate, pleading for help for Lucian, who had treated her like total garbage even then. No one else would have done what she did and asked for nothing in return.

She’s always been too good for us, but I’ll be damned before I let her go. I’d rather spend forever earning her

affection. “I’m good,” I tell Lucian, actually believing it.

He walks over to the door separating us from Nova and raps his knuckles on the wood. “How’s it going in there?” he asks loud enough to be heard.

“Fine,” comes her reply, which is high and a little breathy.

“You sure about that?” He leans his shoulder against the doorframe.

“Is it time?” She avoids answering.

“Unless you want to be late. I don’t care either way.”

“Okay.” I barely hear her response this time because it’s much softer. “I need help with my zipper.”

Lucian reaches for the door handle without further prompting. My stomach flip-flops quickly, thinking about the last time I saw her in a wedding dress. I wasn’t prepared then, and I’m certainly not now.

He pushes the door open, revealing Nova in a white satin gown. Her tits look amazing in the deep vee neckline. “Say something. You hate it, don’t you?” Her head shifts the tiniest bit as she looks between us.

“Turn around,” Lucian demands in a gravelly voice. Nova spins quickly, causing the light fabric to swirl around her legs and opening up the high slit up her thigh. “Fuck,” he groans, capturing my sentiments exactly.

Nova glances over her shoulder to read the expression on my brother’s face after hearing his exclamation. Her hair is half up, allowing us to see most of her back through the open zipper. “The lady said it would be okay. She called it elegant,” she defends, still not understanding why we’re speechless.

“We’re supposed to let her walk around like this?” Lucian motions to Nova.

“Hey!” She spins to face us again, planting her hands on her waist, which is accentuated by the fit of the dress. The sleeves are billowy or some shit, it’s the only word that comes to mind. She looks like she stepped out of a jazz club in some old black and white movie my *дедушка* would watch.

“You look...” I finally get my mouth moving, but I still can’t find the right words to describe her.

“Fucking gorgeous.” Lucian’s crass statement is uttered as if he’s pissed.

“Gee, thanks.” She gives him a glare that would shrink my balls if it was directed at me.

“I can see your fucking nipples,” he snaps.

“You can’t!” she defends, looking down at the hardened peaks of her breasts against the thin material. “Oh, I thought you meant it was transparent or something.” She loses a little of her bluster and shimmies around like shifting the dress is going to change the fact that the white satin is so smooth and sleek it tents the fabric. “Everyone has nipples, pretty boy. I can’t wear a bra with this.”

“Are you trying to give me an aneurysm?”

“No, but a black eye might match your suit.”

My brother tips his head back and lets out a long groan at her threat. “You really are trying to kill me,” he mutters softly, then adds, “It’s a tux, not a suit.”

“Whatever.” She pouts, dropping her arms to her sides, but it doesn’t hide her curves. “If you hate it so much, you should have just picked out what you wanted me to wear yourself.” Her feelings are hurt. She still doesn’t understand why Lucian is acting like a dick, and I’m not capable of articulating an appropriate response.

I move past Lucian and head straight to Nova. I can’t stand to see her upset, especially for no reason. I lift her face with my hands so she looks into my eyes. “I didn’t think it was possible for you to look more beautiful than you did the other day, but this dress... you... divine. Stunning, along with every other word I can’t think of right now, because you look that amazing.”

Her head tilts in my hands, and her expression softens. “Are you just saying that to be nice?”

I laugh softly and kiss her forehead. “No, Nova. I promise it’s the absolute truth. It’s the same reason Lucian is freaking out. He doesn’t want to deal with everyone looking at you all night. He’ll probably kill a few people, or at the very least threaten them.” I shrug.

“Aw, wait, that’s not supposed to be sweet.” She locks down her features as if she’s disappointed in herself.

“For him, it kind of is,” I agree. “There’s something else though.”

“What?” She gives me her full attention.

“Are you okay if it’s me with you tonight?”

“Of course, why would you even ask?”

My shoulders relax with the ease of her answer. I knew I was worried, but I didn’t realize how tense I really was. “I just wanted to make sure since it’s Lucian you’re really already married too.”

“Nah, you’re not getting out of it that easily, sir. Just because we don’t have a signed piece of paper doesn’t mean you’re not on the hook with me.”

“I can deal with that.” I kiss her, feeling the cool material of her wedding dress under my fingers and wishing we didn’t have to put on a display for everyone here tonight.

A hard knock on the outer room door interrupts us. “I think that’s our cue,” I whisper.

Nova spins around, giving me her back. “Can you get the zipper? It’s stuck.” My fingers tremble when I reach up and jiggle the tiny zipper. It takes a second, but I manage to release the small scrap of satin that was stopping it from going up. When she turns around again, the dress hugs her figure even better.

“I’m going to enjoy knowing just how little is under this dress.”

Nova lowers her eyes and blinks, looking all sweet and shy from my statement.

“Go tell them we’ll be another minute.” Lucian gestures to the door when I finally pull away from Nova. After doing what he asked, I stay on the other side of the room, giving them a few moments alone. Their conversation is just between the two of them, but it must go well, because it ends in a long kiss.

When they join me near the door, I tell them, “Rory’s here.”

Nova runs her hands down her already smooth dress and nods her head to signal being ready. “One or both of us will always be with you,” I remind her before I open the door.

I watch Rory for his reaction to Nova. He seems startled for a brief moment, then he smiles softly. “You look lovely, Nova.”

“Thank you.” Her words are a little stunted. I can tell she doesn’t know how to handle Rory. It’s clear she doesn’t really trust him, but I don’t think she ever hated him the way she abhors Astrid, so I can already see her softening toward him. She’s too nice for her own good sometimes.

The older man extends his elbow, and Nova gives me one more quick glance before placing her arm through his to be escorted down the hall toward the chapel. The halls of Cadieux have been transformed for the event. There are flowers and candles everywhere softening the stone structure.

Since we would never open our property up to all the families and countless strangers, the school was the best option for a venue. It’s neutral territory, and we know every inch of the building. An added bonus is we’re only minutes away from our safehold in the event we need to escape.

Security is tight as I trail several feet back from Lucian, who is only a breath away from Nova’s heels. I was supposed to be the one escorting her to meet my brother, but we each take over the other’s roles seamlessly. When they turn in the direction that will lead them to the main entrance of the chapel, I keep walking and enter through the back. It only takes me a few seconds to find my way up to the altar.

The room is filled with people. I wish I could ignore them and only look at the doors as I wait for them to open, but making sure Nova is safe is much more important, so I scan the crowd, looking for anyone out of place.

I take comfort in the fact that Lev, who is standing center stage, has already been keeping an eye on everyone. His jacket hides the guns strapped to his body effortlessly. While I could never mistake him for a preacher or anything of the kind, he doesn't look completely out of place standing in front of all the pews.

When I'm finally in place, I spot Astrid sitting in the first row. She's dressed in all black as if she's attending a funeral. I would smile at the irony, but I don't want to give her a reaction. The spot beside her is vacant, reserved for the man walking Nova down the aisle. I wasn't sure about Lucian's idea, but I understood his position after he explained his reasoning. If Rory walked her down the aisle, the chance of Astrid protesting or doing anything to hurt Nova would be less likely because the current president is obviously giving his blessing.

Members of our security team are stationed in front of each window, along with large ribbons blocking any view from outside. We don't need a well-placed bullet fucking things up.

The chapel is small, meaning not everyone was welcomed to the ceremony, but every family head is present along with many other familiar faces.

When the soft music shifts to a recognizable tune, my stomach bottoms out again. Seconds later, the doors are pulled open by two women, revealing Nova. My breath catches in my chest, and emotion I wasn't expecting makes me grit my teeth. I wish my mom could see her, could know her.

I ignore the sudden need to blink and let my eyes roam over her even though it's only been minutes since I saw her last. She's holding a small bouquet of white flowers with nearly black centers dripping with jewels. She would probably object if she knew every stone is worth thousands, if not more.

Hell, I overheard her fussing about the cost of the dress with the shop ladies, and it was under five grand.

Her clear blue eyes are locked on mine, and I couldn't look away if I wanted to. From the corner of my vision, I see Lucian sneak into the room right after her and Rory and take up station in front of the doors he closes, barring anyone else from entering the chapel.

The next five minutes are a blur. I repeat some shit Lev tells me to, and so does Nova. None of it even seems important until he announces us as Mr. and Mrs. Morningstar and says, "*Горько.*"

Headless of the crowd, I lean into Nova and kiss her long and deeply, and she responds in kind until I have her pressed up against my body and several throats clear. When we finally break apart, there are several rounds of polite clapping. The smile on my face slips the moment I turn to face the crowd. It's not even intentional, but it is natural.

I find Lucian at the back of the room. He spares me a quick glance then resumes watching the gathering. Everyone is already on their feet as we make our way back down the aisle, but we don't stop to speak to anyone on the way.

Lucian opens the door just before we reach it and follows us out into the hall before closing everyone else in. The extra security outside circles us as we make our way to the Union. All the usual tables have been cleared out and replaced with large, circular tables covered in white and topped with flowers that are similar to the ones Nova is carrying.

Many of the tables are already filled, and they rise on cue when we stroll through, clapping. The coordinator explained that we would normally wait for the guests from the ceremony to enter before us and then be announced, but we decided it was smarter to keep people on their toes and not do what's expected.

Our table is against the wall without windows behind us, and it has a clear view of the room. I pull out the center chair for Nova, and she smooths her dress and sits down. Her flowers are placed into a special vase off to the left. I almost

sit on that same side, but Lucian nudges me to the right where I originally thought he would sit. “This would be easier if we practiced it this way,” I mutter under my breath, confident no one is close enough to hear me other than my brother and Nova.

“I wasn’t sure how generous I would feel today,” he answers honestly, making me laugh.

Nova still hasn’t spoken since her vows, and I start to wonder if maybe we shouldn’t have taken a few minutes to be alone before coming straight here.

Farther down the hall, I see Astrid speaking to the security stopping the group from the chapel from finding a seat. She looks pissed, but Rory is at her side playing peacemaker. When the orchestra begins a new song, the team parts and permits the other guests to enter the hall and be guided to their seats by the staff.

Astrid is the first through and still looks pissed about being denied entrance. Her table is in clear view of ours, not protected by any walls or obstructions. We wanted to put her on display, just how she likes it, and keep her exposed. Rory dutifully pulls out her chair, helping her sit before taking the seat next to her. We purposely left all the other seats at their table empty to prove how alone they really are.

Before everyone is seated, the staff gets to work offering food and drink, and the networking starts only a few minutes later. Founding families mingle with other elites, using the gathering as an opportunity to calculate future alliances and stoke old fires of retaliation—your typical wedding.

“Gosh, there are a lot of people here.” Nova breaks her silence but keeps her voice low. I place my hand on her thigh, conveniently finding the slit that exposes her leg, and slide my hand farther up than I should, considering where we are, but I don’t care. I wasn’t expecting to be so... consumed by her after the ceremony. I’m having a hard time even trying to concentrate. Maybe this is why Lucian wanted me up there instead of him.

“None of them matter,” I tell her truthfully.

“I feel like they are all looking at us.” She barely moves her lips as if she’ll get in trouble if she gets caught talking.

“They are, lamb. You’re a vision.” Lucian scans the onlookers with open disdain before wrapping his arm around the back of Nova’s chair. The move is intentional, designed to make everyone wonder just how close we all really are. I find it funny, especially when Astrid’s eyes widen, though her forehead remains uncreased. It’s never been more evident how plastic she is inside and out.

“Do we just sit here while they stare at us?” Nova begins to fidget with the items on the table.

“Горько!” is shouted loudly, and my eyes go directly to Gertie who is one of the few people with a glass already in hand. It’s raised to salute us after demanding a kiss to expel the bitterness of the drink with a sweetness.

I slide my fingers a little higher up on the inside of her thigh as I lean in for a kiss from Nova. She obliges easily, then runs her thumb under my lip—I’m guessing to wipe away the smear of whatever she has on her lips, making them shiny.

When I face the crowd again, I see we indeed have everyone’s attention. Calculated glances are thrown around the room. I’m sure many of them are surprised to find genuine affection between us, especially after the way Lucian and Nova’s relationship started. They probably figured our marriage was a business arrangement at best, or an act of revenge at worst. Not that I can blame them, it’s not as if we’re known for leading with our hearts.

The next hour passes with more food, more drinks, and even more curious glances. After sipping water since we arrived, Nova leans over and tells me, “I need to pee.” I take the opportunity to kiss the side of her head before rising and offering my hand to her.

Lucian, not missing a beat, follows suit in standing. I tilt my head to Lev, motioning to the hallway. The nearest bathroom happens to be the one Nova was attacked in, so I avoid that one and take her to the faculty one farther down the hall as planned earlier.

Our man standing guard in front of the door sees us and immediately enters the wooden door, checking to make sure it's empty, then comes out to give us the all clear. I'm tempted to check myself, but Nova drops my hand and speed walks right past him. Apparently, she's been holding it for a while.

"What do you think?" I question Lucian once she disappears behind the door.

"I think it's too early to tell. Everyone is still feeling each other out, pretending to be civilized." He understands I'm asking if he thinks anyone is going to make a move to try and kill us tonight. "Might as well piss while I'm here. Go make the rounds for ten minutes." He instructs then strolls past the guard and walks right into the bathroom with Nova. When I hear the lock click, I head back to the party.



LUCIAN

Knowing my lamb is alone, and it might be the only chance I have for several more hours, I push into the bathroom and engage the lock behind me. Nox wouldn't begrudge me this. He's had his hands on her all night, and I've been forced to endure while watching the horde of gaudy fuckers to make sure no one tries to put a bullet in our heads.

Nova steps out of one of the stalls with her dress hiked up around her upper thighs to keep it from dragging all over the spotless tile. I spy the black garter around her thigh holding the knife I gave her, and the speed in which my dick gets rock solid surprises even me.

"Lamb." My voice is deep, conveying the depths of my emotions.

“Pretty boy. Everything okay?” Her eyes roam over me as if searching for evidence to the contrary.

“Better since I have you to myself.”

She drops her dress and grins while walking over to the sink to wash her hands. Our eyes meet in the mirror, and the tension in the room becomes unbearable, or maybe it's not touching her that's agonizing.

In two strides, I have my hands on the swell of her hips. She arches into my hold, brushing her ass over my cock. Careful not to wrinkle her gown too much, I slip my hand down and find the slit in her skirt then glide my fingers between her legs. She's so damn warm, it sends an involuntary shiver down my spine.

“Don't we need to get back out there?” she murmurs, dropping her head back on my shoulder.

“No, I *need* to touch you.”

“What about me? Do I get to touch you?”

“That depends, lamb.”

“On what?”

“On how hard you work to convince me you need to.”

Nova drops her eyes from mine in the mirror and lets out a soft, breathy laugh. “I don't think that will be very hard. I have a secret weapon.”

“What would that be?” I push her panties to the side and slide my finger up and down her slit, making her let out a husky exhale.

I feel her moving, but she still catches me off guard when I hear the click of a blade opening. She's right, the sound alone is enough to make me do anything she wants. I sink my teeth into the side of her neck and shoulder to stop myself from making an audible groan or admitting defeat. She fights dirty, and I approve.

Her back arches even more, and I find myself wanting to push her against the counter, but I don't want to stain her dress

with water. Releasing my bite, I slide my fingers out of her panties and spin her to face me. If she's startled by the movement, she doesn't show it.

Her hands come up—one holding the knife—to land on my chest. Either she's pretty damn confident with the blade, or she doesn't realize how sharp it is. Either way, adrenaline floods my system, and I drop my mouth to hers.

Nova's hands slide down until I feel her at my waistband. There's no way I'm letting her get on her knees in her gown, but sitting her on the counter doesn't seem like too bad of an idea. The blower from the bathroom next to ours kicks on, and I wonder if it's Nox, but the thought is fleeting, especially when Nova breaks our kiss to look down.

She undoes my belt one-handed, then tugs at my waistband, pulling it from my stomach. The knife is poised over my groin to sever the button keeping my pants closed. Her eyes lift to mine, fully dilated to cover much of the ocean blue color I adore, but this might be even better.

“What are you doing, lamb?” My question comes out hoarse. I'm completely at her mercy.

“Yes, what are you doing, dear granddaughter? I didn't know you had it in you.” I look over my shoulder to see Astrid looking quite pleased with herself as she watches Nova. I'm sure the image of her with a blade at my balls looks much different to her than the reality of me trusting Nova with my life.

It only takes me a moment to fall into character and feed the old woman's assumptions. “Looks like my wifey takes the until death do us part line very seriously.” I pretend the tension in my body is from the knife and its proximity to my dick.

“Here I thought I would come congratulate the happy couple. Instead, I can't say how sorry I am that I interrupted.” Astrid snaps her fingers, and Alden steps forward like a beckoned dog. I no longer have to pretend to be angry. I just need to decide how I'm going to kill him. “I'm sorry you lost the advantage of a surprise, so let me make it up to you.”

Alden makes a move as if he's going to approach, maybe to try to take me out himself, but Nova flicks her wrist up and places the tip at my neck. I lean back from the bite of the blade for effect. "I don't need any help. He's mine," she sneers. I'll be damned if my sick head doesn't still enjoy her words as she follows my lead and pretends like she's on the verge of killing me.

Alden looks to Astrid for guidance, and she waves her hand down in a dismissive gesture. "Just stand by in case he tries something stupid, though I wouldn't suggest it. She did grow up on the streets, and it seems she picked up a useful trick or two." She actually sounds proud, which makes me want to punch her in the face.

Astrid comes a little closer to Nova to get in her direct line of sight so she doesn't have to take her eyes off me. "Once this mess is all taken care of, you can come home, Nova. There's no rush for you to marry. I think you've proven you have what it takes to lead the Umbras," she coaxes, telling Nova what she thinks she wants to hear.

Nova pretends to listen. "You won't farm me out?"

"No, dear. I never planned on going to such drastic measures," she scoffs, but we all know it's a lie.

"I want to decide my future," Nova adds, making it sound convincing enough that even I glance down at her. Could she be telling the truth? I dismiss the thought as soon as it forms. Nova has decided her future, and she chose us, *wants* us.

"She'll have you in a bed with your legs in the air faster than I would," I argue with the truth, pretending I need Nova to see reason.

"Don't be so crass." Astrid looks down her nose at me.

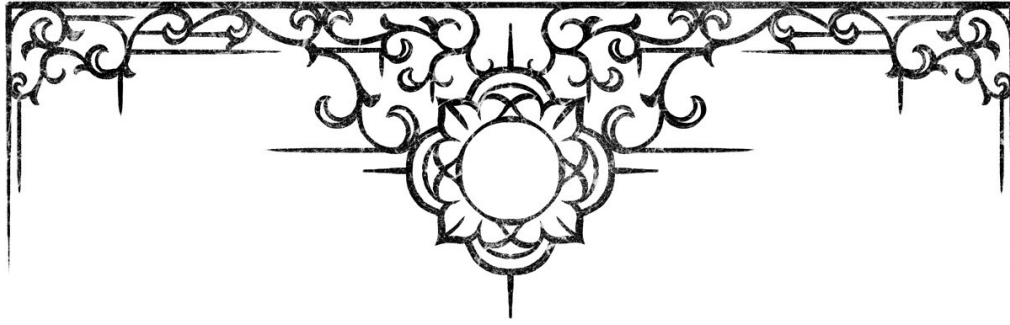
"What, you don't like talking about the fact that you were planning on pimping out your granddaughter for a kid you could control?"

"Shut up!" Nova shouts, and the metal of the knife kisses my skin. I only know she actually cut me because I can feel a

drop of blood running down my neck. She doesn't balk or even flinch at the sight of my blood.

“Finish him, kill him now!” Astrid exclaims excitedly, and I wonder if she's not a bit of a masochist herself. She's only a few inches away now, almost close enough that I'll be able to grab her and turn the fucking tables, but Nova moves before I can, practically throwing herself at her grandmother.

Nobody moves for a blink.



NOVA

The knife slides into Astrid's upper belly with incredible ease. For a moment, I wonder if it's not some kind of trick blade that retracts, but when she opens her mouth and coughs blood in my face, I know that's not the case.

Lucian runs at Alden in a flurry of movement, but I can't take my eyes off Astrid's wide-eyed stare as she literally clings to me. Her mouth opens and closes several times as if to speak, but nothing comes out but more blood. I look down to see my hand still on the hilt of the knife buried under her sternum. The blood rolls off my white satin dress, leaving behind macabre streaks of red.

A loud thud finally pulls my attention to the other side of the room, and I see Lucian viciously fighting with Alden. The sounds that fill my ears will probably haunt me in the future, but right now, I'm too numb for anything to really register other than wanting Lucian safe.

I jerk my arm back, and Astrid crumples as if I was the only thing holding her up. She's not dead, her gasps for air are too loud for that, but she's no longer a threat. In slow motion, I move toward Lucian with every intention of protecting him from Alden, but before I make it, Alden drops to the floor, and Lucian lifts his knee high into the air and sets his boot down right on the other man's face, kicking him down.

The crunch brings bile up the back of my throat, but the feeling of nausea still doesn't penetrate. Lucian turns his head, breathing like a maniac and bleeding from his nose and the corner of his mouth. "Nova!" he rasps, searching me from head to toe.

"I'm fine." My voice is flat when I respond. Lucian pulls his phone from his pocket and barks out, "West bathroom, now," without taking his eyes off me. Alden hasn't moved an inch, and Astrid's breaths are barely audible anymore. My ears start to ring, and a wave of dizziness crashes over me, making me reach for the counter to stay upright.

Lucian slips in the pool of blood on the floor when he tries to get to me, but thankfully he catches himself before going down. It rouses me enough that my head clears a little. There's no way I want to see him on the floor with the other two.

"I'm okay," I promise, but it doesn't stop him from running his hands over the blood that's beginning to settle into the satin material of my gown to check for a wound. "Lucian," I mutter, "you need to leave."

"What?" he scoffs, ignoring my instructions.

"I don't want anyone thinking you did this, Lucian. You need to leave."

"I don't give a fuck who thinks I did this." He raises his voice.

"I do. You will not lose everything because of what I did. Now get out of here." I shove his chest.

He gets in my face. "I'm not fucking going anywhere, Nova."

"I killed her," I admit, still feeling numb, but the consequences of what could happen are starting to sink in.

"I know, lamb. It was her or us. You did the right thing." He lifts his hands to touch my face but stops short when he sees the blood coating his fingers.

The door slams open, and Nox stops short of coming in. I see Lev behind him, but he doesn't even attempt to enter the

room.

“Oh my god!” A woman screeches farther behind them, spurring Nox to step forward, allowing the door to close and cut off the view.

“Are you okay?” His light eyes are locked on me, but I can’t respond.

I can’t let Nox see me like this. He isn’t like Lucian. He’ll think I’m a monster.

“You’re not a monster,” Nox chastises, indicating I must have said at least part of my sentence out loud. He steps over Alden. I still don’t know if he’s dead or not, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he was. His face isn’t even... I can’t look at it.

“Everyone will know,” I announce.

“No, they won’t.” Nox looks around as if there’s something that can make his story more true or some way to hide all the blood.

“No, I killed her,” I admit. “I stabbed her. It was easy.”

“Don’t let her say that for you,” Nox snarls harshly at his brother.

“It’s the truth. She thought I was going to kill Lucian, wanted me to, but I stabbed her instead. I would never hurt him.”

“I know, lamb. It was her or us,” Lucian repeats, but it still doesn’t change anything.

This time when the door flies open, Rory skids inside. His face is already ashen, so he must have had some idea what he would find, but nothing could prepare someone to see their wife of over forty years on the bathroom floor with a knife sticking out of her chest.

“Oh God.” His horror-filled utterance cracks the icy numbness holding me hostage, but it hardens my resolve. I will not allow this island or anyone on it to take anything else from me. This place killed my mom—maybe not directly, but she’s dead all the same—and it also tried to break me, but I’m still here, and I’m going to survive.

“She came in with Alden. He attacked Lucian, and I stopped it. I killed her.”

Rory cuts his eyes to me. “Nova, shut up. Do not say another word, do you hear me?”

Lucian steps forward as if he’s going to confront my grandfather, but the older man ignores the threat and opens the door and shouts, “Call an ambulance. My wife had a heart attack and hit her head.”

The security between us and everyone outside the room is too thick to see through, but I imagine there are several people out in the hall, trying to get a glimpse into the bathroom. As soon as the door is shut again Rory crouches over Astrid and pulls my knife from her chest. “Put this back wherever you got it from.” He tries to hand it to Lucian, but I slip the knife from his fingers, drop the blade back into the hilt, and hike my skirt to the side to put it back into the lacy black thigh holster Lucian gave me to put it in.

When I look back up, Rory is staring at me wide-eyed. “I’m sorry,” he mutters.

“For what?” I can’t fathom him apologizing to me right now.

“For allowing any of this to happen. I should have stopped her a long time ago. I’m sorry you had to do this as a result of my inaction.”

I have to lean against the counter—if I didn’t, I would have fallen over from the shock his words cause. “She was your wife,” I defend him.

“Yes, but you’re my granddaughter. I should have protected you better.”

Sirens interrupt the stunned silence in the room, and I start to panic. “They are going to know that wasn’t a heart attack,” I warn.

“The only thing they will know is what I tell them. Let’s get him into a stall. We can deal with it later.” Rory takes over giving instructions, and surprisingly, Nox and Lucian follow

them without question. “Let me do all the talking,” he says once Alden is out of sight.

The EMT that enters the room first doesn’t react to the bloodbath on the floor, and neither does the second. They don’t even ask any questions of us as they load my grandmother onto a backboard and some contraption that covers most of her head and face before concealing most of the blood over her torso with a white sheet. I don’t know how they manage to keep it from seeping through the material, but they do.

In what feels like seconds, they are racing out the door with Rory clinging to Astrid’s hand as if she’s still fighting for her life.

An announcement rings through the emergency speakers, requesting everyone gather their things and leave due to a medical emergency. We remain in the bathroom until, eventually, there’s a light tap on the door.

Lev doesn’t wait for a response before entering. “It’s time to go.” He’s holding a long black cloak, just like the ones worn at the secret meetings, and it’s the very first time I’ve ever been relieved to see one.

We’re ushered out a side door where we pile into an SUV and speed straight for home.



NOX

Nova has been shaking for hours, trembling no matter how many blankets we put on her after helping her shower. She says she’s fine, but I know it’s not the truth. There’s no way

you can be fine after killing your grandmother, even if the bitch deserved it.

I'm worried about her, but relieved Astrid and Alden are no longer a threat. Marissa is still out there somewhere, but I trust Lev and Morozov will find her so she can be dealt with too.

When the phone rings, Nova jumps and blinks several times, making me think she was in a daze. "It's Rory," I tell her and Lucian before answering on speaker. "Hello?"

"Everything is taken care of," he announces, sounding pretty damn exhausted. I can't blame him.

"You're positive?" Lucian questions. I'm sure he would rather be more involved to ensure this could never come back on Nova and to know exactly what happened, but there's no way he would leave her right now.

"Positive," Rory reiterates.

"We took care of everything at the school." It's my way of telling Rory that Alden has been dealt with and will never be found.

"Good. How is she?"

I look over at Nova, who's seated between my brother and me. "She'll be fine." I will my words to be true, because right now, she looks broken.

"We'll make sure of it," Lucian adds, rubbing Nova's leg over the blanket.

"Good, tell her... tell her I'm sorry. None of this is her fault."

Nova's head bobs when she swallows roughly. The first tear I've seen her shed after this ordeal falls from her lashes and drops to her cheek. I hate that she's crying, but I hope it's a sign her shock is wearing off. I should have never left the hallway to return to the party. Astrid and Alden wouldn't have gotten in the bathroom if I hadn't.

Even though we thought we took every precaution, this proves we didn't. Alden was never supposed to be at the

school, but he was, and we somehow missed him. “We’ll make sure she knows,” I finally say through my tight throat.

“I’ll destroy the contract and get rid of any evidence it existed. I suggest you do the same.”

The contract hadn’t even crossed my mind, but a weight I didn’t know was on my shoulders eases at his words. “It’s done,” Lucian remarks, and I look over at him to see if he’s telling the truth or jumping the gun to save face. His calm demeanor suggests the former.

“Good,” Rory says again and falls quiet. Eventually, he adds, “Call me if she needs anything.”

“She won’t,” Lucian says dismissively.

“I will...” Nova croaks over him then clears her voice. “I...”

“It’s okay, Nova,” Rory soothes when she seems to struggle for words.

“Let us know if anything changes,” Lucian says, making it clear he wants to end the call.

“You do the same. Take care of her.” The line goes dead, and Nova drops her face into her hands and sobs.



LUCIAN

Normalcy is slow, but it comes in little bits daily. The first glimpse Nova was really going to be okay came a day or two after the ceremony. She was in the shower before Nox or I woke up, and when she got out, there was no evidence on her face that she was hiding tears.

The next day, she went down for lunch. There wasn't any banter with Gertie or me, but I still counted it as a win.

Nox is keeping Rory updated on her, and I don't hate it. I don't necessarily like it either, but I'll pick my battles. I can admit Rory helped when it really mattered, not that we couldn't have handled the coverup and disposal of Astrid on our own, but his cooperation made things easier so we could be with Nova when she needed us.

A week after Astrid's death, I found the knife she used—the one I gifted her that matched my ring—on top of the dresser in the closet. I was worried it would hold too many bad memories for her, and I would even need to replace my ring, but a few days after that, it was moved into the bedroom where it could be seen at all times. During all this, Nova continued to slowly accept what happened. The times she would grow quiet and contemplative became less frequent until she eventually admitted out loud, "I'm tired of being sad. I did the only thing I could, right?"

She searches my eyes with concern, as if she was apprehensive about my response and reaction to her need for absolution. I don't think I've ever moved faster than when I pulled her into my arms and whispered, "Yes, lamb. She didn't give you an option. You were protecting yourself and us. I don't want you to be sad anymore either."

She shudders when she inhales, but there are no tears or sniffles. I don't think Nova will ever stop surprising me. To say I'm shocked she came to *me* for comfort is an understatement, but I'm so fucking grateful, even in my awed state. I'll never stop blaming myself for not killing Astrid first, which is probably why I've softened toward Rory. I understand him a little better, but I still hate him for failing Nova the same way I hate myself for it.

"Is it bad that I want to forget about it and pretend it never happened?" she asks my chest.

My heart aches, but my reply is smooth. "No. Dwelling on it won't help you. She's gone because you did what you had to so you could keep our future children safe, and keep me and

my brother safe. No one blames you, Nova, not even your grandfather.”

She inhales roughly again and finally lets out a sigh as she sags against me, allowing me to hold her up in more ways than one when she finally mutters, “Okay.”

I kiss the top of her head and hold her, rocking her in my arms to show her I’m here and there is no other place I want to be.

EPILOGUE



NOVA

I run my fingers over the heavy fabric of the cloak hanging in the closet. It's been nearly two years since I've donned one for a meeting or anything else, but tonight is the night Rory steps down and Lucian becomes president. I need to be there. Things will change after tonight, but we won't know how until after the ceremony.

The Umbras will effectively be defunct after tonight, but the truth is, Rory gave up operating as the leader after Astrid's death. It doesn't hurt when I think of her anymore. Therapy and time helped me understand why I ever felt pain in the first place. I mourned what she was supposed to be rather than what she truly was.

There have only been a handful of meetings since then, all called by a family from the other half of the island for trivial matters. Lucian thinks they were testing Rory's resolve. I don't care what they were doing, though, since I wasn't forced to attend any of those gatherings.

I pull the dark fabric off the hanger and flip it over my shoulders to cover my all black jumpsuit. Layering is key. It's

winter in South Carolina, and my blood has gotten thin from the sultry summers I've spent here. Michigan's cold seasons, which seemed so familiar to me, are a distant memory now. I think I've blocked out the dreary gray that covered everything for several months.

I clasp the robe but leave the hood off until it's absolutely necessary. I'm not keen on being smothered longer than I need to be. When I step out of the closet, I find Nox waiting for me, already dressed for the evening.

"You could stay here, you know. You don't have to come," he offers sweetly.

"And miss his coronation? Never." I grin. Lucian has always believed himself to be the king, and now he truly will be.

"Succession," the man of the hour amends while entering the room. "It's not a monarchy."

"Yet," I tease, which makes Lucian smile in my direction.

"Are you sure you want to come?" he asks just like his brother.

"Yep, but we get to use the elevator, right? Maybe I'll forget we're miles underground if I don't have to take the stairs."

"It's not miles," Nox protests.

"Yes, but we'll need to go soon." Lucian looks down at his watch. "We're meeting with Rory first."

The feeling of unease I used to get when I heard his name is long gone. We've actually been meeting for lunch or dinner at least once a month for well over a year. Our relationship is probably the healthiest in my life because I know the bond I have with the guys is far from traditionally healthy. I'm codependent, Lucian is possessive to the extreme, and Nox puts up with both of us.

"I'm ready when you are, Mr. President," I tease with a sultry Marilyn Monroe purr.

Lucian lifts his eyes and meets mine. The look is predatory, and I enjoy it much more than I should. It's on the tip of my tongue to tempt him into being late. I still love how I get under his skin and have the ability to affect him in a way no one else can, but Nox wraps his arm around my shoulders and hauls me away before I offer a challenge.

"The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get home," Nox says in consolation, but I'm sure he knows my ploy was only a distraction. As much as I want to be with them, I'm still not looking forward to going. The last time I was at something this important, someone died, and there's no one on my list I'm ready to get rid of.

"I know," I mutter.

I manage to sit still for the short ride to the school, but when we park, all my nervous energy has me rushing to get out of the SUV. Thankfully there's no one else around—the benefit of arriving early, I suppose. Nox is on my heels, placing his palm on the small of my back to usher me into the building.

My heart is beating fast, but I don't feel like running back to the car, so that's a start. The three of us head down the hall, spotting several members of our own security team and a few of Rory's. They ignore us for the most part. They've already done their job of making sure the building is clear of any would-be assassins.

Instead of heading to the secret elevator that will take us down to the underground, Lucian leads us to Rory's office on the main floor. A man opens the door on our approach. Other than the sounds of our shoes, the building is eerily quiet.

The reception desk is empty, as is the hall, but there's an open door at the end of a short corridor. Rory looks up from the box he's packing as we enter. His smile is a little watery. "Sorry, you forget how much stuff you accumulate," he comments, explaining the fact he's still packing.

"Do you need a hand?" I offer, shimmying past Lucian.

“No,” he answers. “I’m going to toss most of it anyway. I don’t really need a desk calendar or stapler anymore, not that I have in a while.” He hasn’t really been present here recently, at least in anything other than body to keep up appearances.

“What did you want to talk about?” Lucian slides his hands into his pockets. It should make him seem less dangerous, but he rarely fits the mold of normalcy. I accepted that about him a long time ago.

“The property,” Rory announces, placing a pen holder into the box. “I don’t want it divided among the families. It’s Nova’s, so it should go to her.”

“It’s not like you’re leaving tomorrow,” I reply, but when no one agrees with me, I realize maybe I’m wrong. “Are you?”

“I’ve been here a long time, honey,” Rory hedges.

“But...”

“I’m not leaving the area. I just don’t want to be trapped in that house anymore.” His voice is hesitant, as if he’s afraid of my reaction. That, more than anything, alters my response.

“Yeah, I get it.” The dismissive wave I make with my hand might be a little over the top, but I’m trying to catch up quickly.

“There are too many memories, Nova, good and bad.”

“You don’t need to explain, Rory. It was just unexpected. I totally understand.” I do, but it’s still shaken me. I’ve grown used to knowing he was just across the road, and that we would have another lunch date the next month, but things change and we adapt. That’s life.

“I want you to have the land, the house, everything. You can close the gates and never step foot over there, or you can tear it down and build something new, whatever you like,” he offers graciously.

“You don’t want to try that? Build something new?” I hate that my insecurities push me to ask the question, especially after seeing his face, but it’s too late to take it back now.

“No, honey. I need to move on.” He doesn’t meet my eyes, and I feel like he means in more ways than one but hasn’t gotten the courage to tell me that I’m too much of a reminder of his disappointments.

“Okay,” I say too airily to cover all the things I’m feeling—mostly abandonment.

“The trust will ensure the property is kept up and protected, along with paying the staff for the usual upkeep. You can, of course, make any changes you see fit, but I wanted to make sure it was as hands off as it could be for you, so there’s no rush to do anything with it.” Rory looks for some kind of response, and it’s Lucian who replies.

“I will make sure Nova gets the property,” he confirms, making me look in his direction to decipher the meaning behind his tone. “She will never need it because she will always have us, but I will grant you the favor of dealing with the other founders regarding this.”

His choice of words is formal. It helps me understand why he seems disappointed in my grandfather. Lucian is going to have to fight the other two families while Rory walks away. I’m sure the others assumed that when Rory was gone and there were no remaining Umbras, new lines would be drawn on the island dividing the estate equally, or at the very least creating more neutral space, but Lucian is willing to do whatever it takes to make sure it stays with me.

Warmth swells in my chest. He has proven time and time again that he will always step up to the plate for and with me, while so many others haven’t put in the effort. He may have started out as my enemy, but he and his brother are my saviors.

I walk over to stand between the two men who mean everything to me. The sadness I felt from Rory’s looming departure is erased with the knowledge that *they* will never leave me. They will always choose me, and I them.

“I hope you find peace, Rory,” I tell him, but my tone lacks emotion. I’m done wasting it on people who don’t deserve it.

He nods softly, understanding the goodbye in my words even if that wasn't his true intent right now. "I'm glad you found yours, Nova."

With those parting words, we all turn and file out of the office with Nox leading and Lucian at my rear.

They will always protect me, and all I had to do was love them to deserve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters

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