

KY KATANA

A FIVE SENSES SERIES STANDALONE



HEATHER MARIE ADKINS
CHERYL KAHN

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EPILOGUE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—CHERYL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—HEATHER



Something told me I needed to wake up.

A niggling feeling in my gut, like I'd forgotten to finish my chores that morning, and I knew I'd be in for it when I got home. *Oka-san* had little patience for when her daughters skimped on their responsibilities.

She always liked to remind us that the Aether thrived on service and togetherness. We were a remote farming community—sunrise to sunset, we performed our duties, and that was what kept our lives peaceful and happy.

Yes, Oka-san. I get it, Mama.

Five more minutes. Five more minutes, and I'll get up.

But I didn't feel the firmness of my mattress under my body, or the soft, worn quilt my oka-san's grandmother had sewn during the war.

No, I recognized the soft rumble beneath me: a gentle rocking motion, coupled with the steady swish of the wind just outside my window. Not my bed, then.

A moving car.

I'd probably fallen asleep on the way to the market. I did it all the time; it drove my dad crazy because I was supposed to be watching the stock in the back, making sure it didn't cartwheel over the tailgate of his rust bucket truck on these rough, rural roads. Not napping.

But I loved the peace of being in a moving car, especially with my oto-san, who had a special kind of peace all his own.

He balanced my mother's chaotic energy with quiet contemplation that seemed to seep into everything around him.

If I didn't open my eyes, my father—Or the man I called "Father," at any rate. He didn't have a hand in birthing me, but he did raise me.—would have some choice words for me by the time we made it to the market. To be fair, though, he was the one who'd just let me sleep without poking me in the side with a stern, "Kita! *Okiro.*"

Kita.

The name jolted me. A ghost from the past. A layer I'd shed the moment I'd left my family and flown around the world in pursuit of greater things.

I'd been Ky since leaving Japan. Since leaving home.

Then I was Bravo.

The past few months slammed into me like a punch to the gut. Suddenly, everything came rushing back, most of it remembered information that was pretty damn important to the story of my life: I was no longer in Japan, living on my adoptive parents' farm in the safe seclusion of the forest.

I'd moved to the US. Gone to college. Leapt drunkenly off a Panama City balcony into a pool and destroyed every bone in my body...

...only to find myself in the selfish grasp of the United States government, who really wanted to know how I'd survived that fall.

For the first time since consciousness returned, fear made an appearance. A sharp, stabbing ache in my chest that opened a yawning pit in my stomach.

I'd been kept in a four by four cell. Tortured in the name of science.

Seriously injured on a daily basis and forced to perform like a monkey.

I thought I was dead, after that last time.

So how the hell had I made it into a moving vehicle?

And why?

Worse still, *with who?*

No way to figure out what the hell was happening until I opened my eyes.

Didn't do me any favors, unfortunately, because all I found on the other side of my eyelids was more blackness. Something smooth but rough shrouded me head to toe, pinning me in place even as it was loose around me, more like a bag than any kind of binding.

The fear in my gut roiled like it was sentient. I swallowed back bile and tried to lift a hand. Pain lanced through me, a bolt of lightning that shredded my nerve endings all the way up my arm and into my torso. I bit my tongue, eyes watering through my need to scream and let out the pressure.

Leftover injuries and pain from the lab. From the last experiment.

"You're not working hard enough, Bravo. Why are you holding back?"

I blinked up into the bright spotlight shining down on me in the darkened laboratory. Dr. Hurst loomed over the table where I was strapped down, my wrists and ankles tethered to cold metal that dug painfully into my shoulder blades.

The older man was hardly taller than me, thick in the middle, with nearly colorless brown hair in a comb over that waved madly when he got excited.

Right now, his comb over was deathly still. He was a too-bright face on a backdrop of ink, giving the impression we were alone in the room.

We weren't. We never were.

"We ask so little of you, Bravo," Dr. Hurst murmured, using his soft, soothing I'm-your-friend voice like he hadn't just shoved a surgical grade steel rod through my rib cage.

Like I wasn't bleeding out right there on the table.

“Use your powers,” he cajoled. “Show us what you’re capable of, and you get a break in your room.”

I laughed dryly and tasted blood in my mouth. “You mean my jail cell?”

In the moving car, I gently slid my arm over until I could feel the skin of my abdomen beneath my fingers. My skin was still tacky with blood, but the hole where he’d stabbed me had already started to heal on its own.

At least my body took care of me.

I’d refused to cooperate with Dr. Hurst.

And look where that got you, Ky.

Dead.

Well... Maybe not.

This felt too real to be hell. And heaven wasn’t on the dinner menu.

I raised my fingertips to graze fabric that had the slippery roughness of nylon. Moving gingerly, so I didn’t end up exploding in yet more fireworks of pain, I trailed the fingers of one hand over the fabric by my hip, then took a deep breath before lifting my arm to continue my exploration on the fabric above me.

My fingers bounced over something rough.

A zipper.

I blinked, even though I was still in such pitch darkness I couldn’t see a damn thing. I was zipped in a nylon bag.

Awareness settled over me like a shroud.

I was zipped in a *body bag*.

Nausea rose once again on the heels of true, unadulterated panic. I was in a body bag. Probably one other dead bodies had occupied before, and the level of anxiety and despair rising in my chest felt no different than if I’d been buried alive.

Dear Gods, did I *actually* die? And somehow come back to life in the hearse?

I struggled to control my breathing, to get a hold of my emotions before they spiraled out of control. I was desperate to rip open the zipper, to breathe fresh air, to wipe away the tangible feeling of a dead body in the bag with me even though I knew I was alone, banded by the nylon with nowhere to go.

But... why would I be in a hearse? The government didn't care about me. I'd been a medical marvel, a freak they wanted to study.

I'd seen the forms.

Twenty-year-old student. Japanese born. Blood alcohol level .15%. Survived five story leap from balcony to pool. Every bone in her body fractured; presumed brain dead.

Until the hospital noticed the accelerated healing.

Until I woke up.

And the scientists came for me.

Why would they send me in a hearse to a funeral home? Ten out of ten, they had a body farm somewhere where they tossed the bodies when their research killed unsuspecting citizens. Whether or not those citizens were members of an alternate race like me.

So, either I was on my way to a date with the dirt six feet under because I had actually died on that laboratory table and had miraculously come back to life... or something else was going on.

Somewhere outside the body bag, something rustled. Muffled static met my ear, then the low notes of music. Channels changing, a cacophony of sounds and songs until the radio operator stopped on a rap song I didn't know.

My heartbeat rocketed.

I needed to know who was out there. Who was driving this car.

Closing my eyes, I paused long enough to take three slow, steady breaths. On the other side of unconsciousness, my body could have a chance to do its work—healing me faster than the normal human. Despite how weak I was after my most recent torture session inside the lab, I could already sense my natural healing beginning to work and recuperate. The all over aches and pains were vanishing little by little. The hole in my gut didn't burn quite as hot as the sun.

Naturally accelerated healing. One of the things Dr. Hurst had found endlessly fascinating about me.

Oh my God—what if it's Dr. Hurst driving this thing? Where's he taking me?

Maybe I hadn't died. Maybe I was being moved to another secret facility for more testing.

If that was the case... I had every intention of getting the hell out of here before that happened. Death would have been preferable over another day with those people. Another day of being sliced and diced and forced to perform like a circus monkey.

I kept my eyes closed and raised my arm centimeter by centimeter, so as to not hurt myself further or draw the driver's attention. I scraped at the fabric above my head, searching for the origination point of the zipper. The rolled hem of the bag met my fingertips, and I dug into it, working by feel alone until my fingernail breached through a small opening.

Bingo.

The great thing about zippers was they could be opened from the inside, too.

The rapper on the radio continued his lyrical chant, giving me just enough cover to start working the zipper down. At the first *skrich*, I froze, holding my breath as I waited to see if the person on the other side of my nylon prison had heard it.

Nothing moved but the car.

I slid the nub again, ever so slightly. Then again. So slowly it could have driven me crazy if I let it, but I didn't want to broadcast that I was conscious by just ripping the zipper open

at regular speed and sound. Clearly, the driver hadn't expected me to wake up—maybe at all, given how I wasn't bound by anything but the body bag.

So for now, I had the upper hand.

As I worked the zipper down, the car slowed and turned, shifting me on the slippery interior of the canvas. Rougher terrain made the wheels rumble a little deeper than they'd done before as the driver picked up speed again.

Finally, I got the zipper open over my face.

Gray twilight spilled in on me, much brighter than it would usually have been, if not for me being buried alive in blackout fabric. I blinked rapidly to force my eyes to adjust. A tan roof hung low over my head, and to my right, two headrests and a high center console separated my position in the back seat from the driver in the front.

On first glance, seeing only the driver's profile, I didn't recognize him. He had sharp features: a nose that turned up, a jutting dark brow, candy brown skin, and thick lips. His black hair, cut in a high and tight fade with a side hard part that only added to the sharpness of his look, was military grade.

He glanced down at the console and grabbed a huge styrofoam cup, then took a sip through the straw before returning it to the cup holder. I didn't recognize the gas station name on the cup, but in that moment, with more of his face visible, I recognized *him*.

I'd seen him watching me. Back in the lab, when Dr. Hurst was experimenting with my abilities. When the evil mad doctor had been cutting me open, making me bleed, forcing me to heal myself...

This guy was a guard at the facility.

He was young. Maybe not much older than me, mid-twenties at the most. He wasn't in his usual MP gear. He'd dropped the camo for a black leather jacket, but the last vestiges of daylight glinted off a chain around his neck that likely held his dog tags. I remembered his face peering at me

from the corners of the room, from open doorways, from behind glass windows.

Always watching with his sharp brow furrowed.

So... what the *actual* hell was I doing in a body bag in his car?



Suddenly, as if prompted by the guard's face, I found myself right back in the lab.

Dr. Hurst bent low over a laptop, his hand hovering over the keypad.

"Again, Collins," he said, speaking to his assistant, before he turned to eye me shrewdly.

An electrical cap clung to my shaved head, wires dangling loosely around my bare shoulders. The tiny scrap of a tank top and cotton shorts they allowed me put all my odd markings on display, and with that young, hot soldier watching from the corner of the room, I was highly aware of the gross factor.

But he wasn't looking at the strange purple, starfish-like markings that dotted my torso, chest, and shoulders. He watched quietly as Dr. Hurst's assistant stepped forward and swiped at my arm—again—with the surgical knife.

Sharp pain jabbed through me, and I sucked in a breath. Blood welled up on my skin, surrounded by the fresh marks I'd already begun healing.

Dr. Hurst nodded at me. "Again, Bravo."

I wanted to rake my nails down his face. Tear his eyes from his skull and throw them across the room. Honestly, I wanted to do it to the assistant, Collins, too, and the guard in the corner. Watching me, all of them, constantly watching me, like I was a sideshow freak.

But hard to rip someone's eyeballs out with my hands bound to the arms of my chair.

So I closed my eyes and focused on the bleeding wound. I concentrated my energy on that small injury and released any hold I had on the previous cuts. That was what this particular experiment was for, after all—showing Dr. Hurst what control I had over healing one injury while inundated with multiple.

I wanted to deny him what he desired, but the consequences of disobedience were worse.

I shook off the memory. The soldier was sipping on his gas station soda again, and beyond his face, snow-covered trees passed at a quick clip framed by gunpowder gray skies.

Snow? In the desert?

I'd glimpsed the surroundings outside the compound once. They'd bound me to move me from one building to the next, but they hadn't drugged me because Hurst wanted me clear-headed for the next round of tortur—*experiments*. The land around the compound had been hot, bright desert melting beneath a strong orange sun. Distant rust-colored peaks dominated the landscape, and there most certainly hadn't been trees, green or otherwise.

I wasn't an expert on weather patterns in the North American continent, but I was ninety-nine percent certain, as weird as America was, it didn't snow in the desert.

Which meant he'd packed me up and carted me off into the wild unknown somewhere.

If he's obsessed with me and pulled some kind of Misery situation... Ugh.

The thought was just bizarre enough to alleviate some of my panic, though.

I needed a plan. The good news was, he and I were alone in the car, which evened my odds of escape. He didn't know—yet—that I'd awakened, so I had the element of surprise on my side.

Keeping my gaze firmly on the soldier, I breached the slit in the body bag with one hand and reached blindly over my head. My fingers found the door panel, then tripped over the various planes of plastic until I found the handle.

What was the plan if it opened? I was still burrowed inside a half zipped body bag.

Don't think about it, Ky. Just get your ass out the door. Worry about the injuries later.

Not that I needed to worry, anyway. I pulled on the handle and nothing happened.

Child locks.

Of course.

He may not have tied me up, but he's not stupid.

I'd always found it easy to see soldiers as nothing but meat-sacks with empty heads. All brawn, no brains. The more muscles a guy accumulated, the more space they lost for important things like common sense or book smarts. But in seeing them like that, it was easy for me to underestimate them.

I couldn't afford to underestimate the man who'd kidnapped me from a secure government facility.

I slithered my arm back inside the body bag, still staring at the soldier's ridiculously handsome profile.

Like somehow, the fact that he was attractive meant he wouldn't hurt me.

I was pretty sure all the girls murdered by Ted Bundy had thought the same thing.

Where do I go from here?

Mainly, I needed to escape the car with whatever method I could take. But first, I needed to prepare my body for incidentals.

Weeks in the lab being purposefully injured in a dozen different ways, plus being kept locked up in a tiny cell with no

room to move, had made me weak. I needed to be able to fight and run.

Run, mostly.

Hopefully.

In my current state, I didn't have high hopes that I could fight—and win—against a trained soldier. Not even with Aether martial arts training on my side. My family and the clan of people who'd raised me were pacifists, not fighters. Our martial arts, while still a fighting art, were more about inner peace and meditation than taking someone's head off their shoulders with a well-placed roundhouse.

I tugged the edges of the body bag closed over me, leaving the zipper open, and settled my hands beside me so I could take stock of the situation. The wound in my rib cage was the biggest source of pain right now. Though Dr. Hurst had ensured the rod didn't hit anything important on the way in, the injured tissue was close enough to my lungs that it hurt to breathe. Shallow breathing in order to not feel like the steel rod was still bisecting my ribs wouldn't help me run, so that injury in particular had to go.

I closed my eyes and centered myself, letting my limbs go limp. I focused on that fiery pain in my torso, focused on containing it with my metaphorical hands. Once I was sure I had the whole of the wound contained between my palms, I started knitting the skin together. I dragged the energy to complete the healing from other less important areas of my insides. I didn't need to worry about any of my other internal organs at this point, so they took the hardest hit. The moment I tugged energy from my digestive system, a ravenous hunger hit me and I had to shove the feeling away to keep my focus on the wound.

I hadn't had to do this in a while—siphoning energy from healthy but nonessential places into the parts of my body that really needed it. It wasn't ideal but it was necessary, since I didn't exactly have the time or opportunity to relax, recoup, and completely heal.

My skin heated in patches where the markings marred my body. I'd had them my whole life—purplish patches in the shape of starfish that dotted my torso and arms. They were bigger and darker on my waist, smaller on my chest and shoulders and even smaller and lighter on my biceps before they finally ended right before my elbows. I'd spent my life in long-sleeved shirts because of the hideous markings, which was especially uncomfortable given they blazed with heat when I was in the midst of healing myself.

It had sucked being self-conscious about my starfish the entire time I was being tortured, since they put me in a tank top in order to observe my body during healing.

I gritted my teeth as the last vestiges of the wound began to seal, tissues knitting together, forming fresh, healed skin. Then I pulled the healthy energy into my heart and lungs, bolstering the blood flow inside them so that I'd have the endurance to run.

My limbs seemed okay after a tentative check, but they'd been unused for way too long to be fully operational. I knew that. So I targeted other healthy organs, mainly my kidneys, and gave a push to my arms and legs. They began to tingle and twitch, ready for action.

I'd deal with my internal organs later.

After I was safe.

First step—subdue the soldier.

Second step—jump from the car. You'll heal.

Third step—deal with kidney failure as needed.

My heart rate ratcheted, though I had a feeling it wasn't from the healing I'd just done, but from what I was about to do. And why wait? The longer I put this off, the more likely he was to stop the car and find out I'd awakened.

I had to act while I had the upper hand.

So I threw back the edges of the body bag and leapt up, going right for the soldier's head.



I went for his eyeballs.

Soft tissue was the easiest thing to harm and the hardest to heal. When I was younger, my aunt, Emiko-san, worked in a small office where one day, she accidentally pulled a stack of papers too firmly from her coworker's grasp. They flew back and one sliced right across her eye. I remember her being bed-bound for an entire week; I took her soup and read to her when my oka-san couldn't. So I learned early just how sensitive our eyes could be.

I had often fantasized about bringing that kind of pain down on Hurst.

Or hey, maybe I had a thing for eyeballs.

Either way, I wrapped my hands around the soldier's head and dug my fingertips into the cavities of his face before he even knew I'd moved from inside my bag.

The soldier grunted, and the car swerved wildly as my hands blocked out his sight. My fingertips dove into the soft, mushy parts of him, and I didn't hold back. If I ruptured an eyeball, that was the price he paid for kidnapping me.

Crashing the car wasn't my first choice of self-defensive maneuvers, but at the very least, it would give me an opening to flee. So when the wheels hit the rumble strips at the side of the highway almost immediately, I leaned into the idea of crashing out so I could get the hell out.

I managed to wrap one arm around his neck, leaving the fingers of the other hand pressing into his eye. Hauling back

on him, I used my entire body weight to wrench his neck over the back of the bench seat. I couldn't yank him very far since he was wearing a seatbelt like a good little soldier.

He grabbed for my head, scrabbling for purchase. Unlucky for him, they'd shaved my head back at the compound. Between my lack of grabbable features and his awkward angle, with my body still being behind him, he had no recourse.

His head bobbed hard in the opposite direction of my hand on his face, and he managed to loosen my grip on his eyes before I could cause lasting damage. In the same instant, his hands returned to the wheel and righted the car. He over corrected, and the front end careened wildly.

I jerked with the motion, my body swinging to the left though I refused to lose my grip on him and tried to grab harder. Tighter. The skin on his cheek tore beneath my short, rough fingernails as my hand slid away from his eyes, though my other arm remained firmly planted around his neck. I got a knee beneath me on the seat to right myself, but in the midst of losing my balance, the guard took advantage.

One strong arm snaked around my back, curling from the front like a tentacle. He got a grip on my bicep and hauled me off my knees. The world tilted and whirled as I was forced into a front flip over the bench seat. I hit hard, the back of my head, neck, and upper shoulders taking the brunt of the blow. My legs and feet slammed into the dashboard, and painful shock waves rippled through my joints.

The guard grabbed my neck, pinning me to the seat. "Damn! You're feisty outside your cage."

He had a voice like molasses—thick, deep, slow. The kind of voice that could drop panties back at Florida State.

I couldn't breathe through his grip on my neck. He held me with absolute certainty that he could control me. One hand was draped over the steering wheel, the other on my larynx, his body surprisingly relaxed despite the fact I'd startled him when I'd come up out of the bag and he'd nearly crashed the car. Blood trickled where my fingernails had raked across his

right cheekbone, and his right eye was streaked red with burst blood vessels.

His nonchalance, and his clear dismissal of my capabilities, infuriated me.

I rolled my hips back and donkey kicked his head.

Both feet hit home, right on the side of his face. He released me with a violent swear, the car swerving again. I scrambled to sit up, my heart pounding in my throat, and glanced wildly around the cabin for something to help me.

I noticed a gun belt on the floorboard.

While there wasn't a gun in sight, there was a collapsible baton. I'd seen them opened for use at the compound, though I'd never been unlucky enough to be at the end of one them.

Only threatened.

While he got the car under control, I snatched up the baton, flicked it open, and threw my back into the swing as if I were playing for the championship.

Heavy metal connected with his forehead with an audible crack.

The guard slumped over onto the steering wheel, and the truck went into a tailspin.

I was flung back against the passenger side door with such force that my own head cracked against the window. The glass shattered on impact but didn't fall apart around me, held together by the thin layer of plastic and extra dark tint. My fingers opened reflexively, and I lost the baton to the floorboard.

My vision swam.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

Crack. The surgical steel rod hit the back of my head, and pain blossomed through my skull. Tears stung my eyes. They were going to give me brain damage, at this rate, and I honestly didn't know if that was damage I could heal.

Theoretically, they believed I could, after the pool incident. In reality, I was just tougher than the normal human.

But here, in this lab? I'd die in this place. In that moment, I knew I would.

"Again, Bravo. Show me how you can fix it."

I spat blood, aiming for his face. An arc of scarlet appeared on his pristine white coat. "Screw you, doc."

The flashback passed as quickly as it hit me—as quickly as the blow to my head. I'd healed the place where Hurst had hit me over and over again, but my skull striking on the window brought up all sorts of phantom pain, both physically and mentally.

Fumbling at my hip, I found the door handle and clung for dear life as the truck continued swinging. We spun twice more, tires squealing, metal groaning. Then we came to a screeching halt, teetered undeniably close to rolling over but didn't, and bounced back with a metal creak that sounded like a whale screaming.

Then total silence fell.

The guard was out cold. He'd collapsed against the steering wheel, face pointed in my direction and hands loose in his lap. His seatbelt had kept him from any harm in the spin-out.

Blood poured from an open wound in his forehead where I'd smacked him with the baton. His eyes were closed but cracked open just enough to make me question if he were truly unconscious.

I didn't stick around to find out.

The door handle popped beneath my fingertips, and I shoved open the door with a mighty heave that made my still-healing torso burn. The truck was still in gear, still rolling, albeit slowly now since coming to a spinning halt. Jumping out of the lifted truck, I hit the ground on bare feet and snow crunched between my toes. The shock of it sent a jolt through my system and pumped up my adrenaline.

If I got frostbite on my extremities, so be it.

I took off.

The road bisected a forest of evergreen trees covered in that thick blanket of snow I'd noticed out the window right after I awoke. I headed for the closest line of hulking giants, stumbling a few times as I tried to find my land legs. I hadn't had much opportunity to stretch my legs and get my cardio in, what with being imprisoned and tortured by the government for these past few weeks, so I wobbled like a newborn fawn.

I couldn't let that slow me. I didn't know for sure if the guard was actually unconscious, or if he would wake up the minute I walked away. We needed some necessary distance between us before he did.

So I fell into a stumbling sprint through the trees.

Within seconds, my lungs were burning from the cold, dense air, and I'd lost all sensation in my feet. I couldn't even feel the ground beneath me, they'd gone so very numb.

But I couldn't stop. I wouldn't. This was true freedom for the first time in ages. For the first time in I don't know how long. This snowy winter wonderland didn't exactly broadcast where the guard had taken me, or if it was winter rather than just cold. If it was winter... That meant at least five months had passed since the trip to Panama City. If not more.

God, what I'd give to be back there.

Even with what happened.

No one to blame but myself on that front.

My energy flagged after a much shorter period of running than I was used to. I stumbled, righted myself, but stumbled again, and pitched forward to the ground. I hit on my hands and knees, twigs digging into my palms, snow coating my bare parts and melting instantly against my body heat.

I paused, breathing hard, watching the fog push past my lips on the crisp, cold breeze.

Just keep going, Ky.

I pressed against the ground, dragging one foot beneath me, but I lost my balance and had to catch myself on both hands again. While I was bracing myself and breathing through the struggle, I heard noise behind me.

The steady thump of pursuing footfalls.

Fear pressed me into movement. I launched to my feet on that single leg beneath me and took two steps before I collapsed again. I didn't fall all the way down this time, thanks to a solid tree trunk in my path. I slammed shoulder-first into the bark, and snow rained down from the branches above, coating my bare shoulders and head. My shoulder throbbed from the hit, and my skin burned where the bark scraped it raw.

I ignored it all and settled into a limping gait. If he couldn't see me, he couldn't find me. I didn't need to be fast—I needed to be invisible.

Invisible, I could do. If there was anything the Aether clan was good at, it was being invisible, and even though I hadn't been born Aether, I'd been raised in their lifestyle.

I lightened my steps until I was almost flying over the balls of my feet. I flitted in and out of tree trunks, pausing behind the largest of them before sprinting for the next. But where I would have been light and quick on my feet at any other normal time, I wasn't now. There was a sluggish quality to my moves, like I was pressing through water, swimming for a shore I couldn't reach. The riptide reached up and dragged me down.

One by one, my muscles froze up and lost the ability to keep going. A dozen small injuries flared, including the throbbing at the back of my skull from slamming into the passenger side window. I gave a half-hearted attempt at healing something—anything—but I'd expended all my energy back in the car before I ever even made it out of the body bag.

My pursuer came closer, his boots heavy and sure on the ground.

I came to a stop and sagged against a tree, breaths coming too fast, my head swimming.

I couldn't do it anymore. I closed my eyes and tried to make myself as small as possible, to hide behind the tree in such a way that I wouldn't be found.

What did this guy *want* from me?

Nothing good, I imagined.

Nothing any better than what the team back at the compound had done to me.

Maybe I hadn't died under Dr. Hurst's brutal hand, but I knew with a bitter certainty that I sure as hell may die here.

I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed that the tree would protect me. That the guard would run right by, blinded by the blood in his eyes, by the sheer expanse of white snow and gnarled undergrowth in the woods.

But in the soft stillness of the wilderness, a hand fell heavy on my shoulder.



I whirled around with every intention to fight, my fists flying uselessly.

The soldier grabbed my right fist before it got very far, then he wrapped a lightning quick arm around my neck and dragged me into a headlock. His muscles were concrete bulges against my windpipe, locking out my breath.

I gasped for air, arms flailing. His grip pulled me off balance, and my weak muscles protested. I lost all ability to hold myself on my feet, especially at such an uncomfortable angle. Everything caved in—arms, legs, torso. I fell heavily, my body weight dragging on his arm.

He followed me down, undeterred, and rolled me to my stomach with the ease of a man who'd clearly arrested people before. His knee pinned me to the ground through my lower back, and he yanked my hands behind me. Something cold and plastic slipped around my wrists and tightened with a sharp click.

He released me and backed away, where he plopped to his butt beside me on the snow.

“You’re wily. I’ll give you that,” he said, a little breathlessly, with his arms resting on his knees. “Twenty four hours ago, you were as good as dead. I didn’t think I’d need to worry about you coming out of the body bag swinging.”

The snow burned against the side of my face, melting and soaking into my skin. The useless scrap of fabric that

masqueraded as a tank top had ridden up in the struggle, and my bare stomach pressed into a hill of frigid snow.

Surprisingly, *that* felt good, given the injuries I'd been unable to fully heal.

I sneered at him, though I probably looked more deranged than threatening in my prone position, face-first in the snow. "Not my problem you underestimated me."

"And I won't make that mistake again." He leaned forward on one knee to meet my gaze, his hand alighting on my bound wrists as if I might tear through the strange zip tie bindings.

"I'm pretty impressed," he added. "You're a lot stronger than you look."

"Maybe you're just a lot dumber," I shot back.

He chuckled, and a small dimple appeared in his left cheek. "You got big balls for a little girl."

"One of us has to."

He laughed again, and this time, it sounded almost surprised. He hadn't expected the poor little tortured foreign girl to be so witty.

He stood in one fluid motion, demonstrating all that dangerous grace he'd more than likely picked up in the military. Then he bent down and gripped my bound wrists, yanking me bodily off the ground as if I weighed nothing at all.

Sure, I was thin, but beneath the lankiness, I was nothing but muscle. Which meant this guy had some serious strength of his own.

The kind that could seriously harm me.

I found my footing, attempting to ignore the fact that I couldn't *actually* feel the soles of my feet or my toes. Frostbite, while painful, probably wouldn't keep me down for long, as long as I could find the reserves to heal fast.

Deep, shadowy forest spread all around us, clogged by thick evergreen trunks and fallen detritus. Invisible birds sang

on the crisp, gray air, but nothing moved. I heard no sounds of distant traffic, no indication of any human movement. The thick shadows beneath the canopy of evergreens faded into inky black speckled only by intermittent bursts of gray light from above.

Not sunshine, not really. More like beyond the canopy lay only cloud cover—that depressing gunpowder gray I’d seen out the car window.

We were in the middle of snowy nowhere.

“Come on,” he said, yanking on my hands. “There’s not a doctor up here to amputate your toes when you lose them.”

I planted my feet in the snow and refused to let him pull me forward. “Where is here?”

He scoffed and yanked at me again. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

I yanked back—harder. “No. You don’t. And I don’t have to make this kidnapping easier, either.”

He rolled his eyes, then met my gaze as he said, “I didn’t kidnap you. You were mostly dead. You can’t kidnap a dead body.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘mostly’ dead. And clearly, I’m not dead. Ergo, kidnapped.”

“No, but they thought you were,” he clarified with an unconcerned shrug. “Hurst, Collins, the rest of the team. And if it weren’t for me, you’d actually *be* dead. A pile of ash at the bottom of the incinerator. Nothing left of you but the silver fillings in your teeth.”

“I don’t have fillings. I floss.”

The quip made him guffaw. When he laughed—and subsequently smiled—it made his face light up from within. That stupid little dimple popped up in his cheek.

I couldn’t let myself be seduced by that charming smile, though. At the end of the day, this guy was just an evil cog in the government machine.

And I wouldn't let him forget it.

His soft chocolate gaze glanced down at my feet. "Seriously, Bravo. Your feet look bad. Let's get you back to the truck before I have to cut them off myself." He flashed me another disarming smile. "Even though I know you can grow them back."

I know you can grow them back.

Dr. Hurst leaned over me, his surgical gloves covered in my blood. "I know you can grow it back, Bravo. Just do it, and I'll let you rest."

The room swam around me. He'd drugged me this time—enough to keep me from losing my mind as he sawed my hand off at the wrist. The local anesthetic—the block—had kept me from feeling the pain, at least, but I was literally missing a hand.

The bastard had cut off my freaking hand.

And he had no proof I could grow it back. Only theories. Hunches.

"Don't let me down, Bravo. Do your best."

I closed my eyes and pressed through the lightheadedness, the loss of blood, the pain that I knew waited for me. I gathered my energy and began to build.

I screamed.

And didn't stop.

This guy had been there, standing guard. He'd watched as Dr. Hurst sliced off an actual limb on my body, then forced me to expend every last ounce of my energy to regenerate it. I'd been in debilitating pain for weeks after, with a fever that I couldn't shake that had originated from my markings. A bit of a blessing really, since Hurst had given me a reprieve of sorts.

Sometimes, I still felt phantom pain in that wrist. The regrown hand felt alien, like a limb that didn't actually belong, and if I caught sight of it at the right angle, it looked like it belonged to someone else.

A fair amount of unbidden fury rose to the surface inside me, like a wave cresting against the beach. I planted my feet on my metaphorical surfboard and rode it right in.

I kicked the soldier in the balls.

All of the air in his lungs expelled as he hunched over, both hands cupping his family jewels. He bent low, groaning like a little baby, and nearly fell to his knees in the most dramatic way possible.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“You *watched* them torture me,” I hissed. “You just stood by and watched every time they stabbed me, cut me, and sliced me.”

He straightened, one hand still pressed into his groin. “I’m base security. Watching is my job.”

“Security doesn’t require watching quite so closely.”

We eyed one another silently for a long moment. He *had* watched closer than he should have—I could see it in the shrewd look in his eye, in the shame touching his slumped shoulders.

“Yeah, fine, I watched,” he admitted.

I blanched. “Are you a sociopath? Do you like watching people be tortured?”

“Of course not,” he snapped. “Don’t be stupid. I knew you had something I wanted.”

The wording sent a shudder through me. “My body?”

His eyes widened, and he held up both hands, palms out. “Whoa. I mean, sure you’re hot, but no. I need your... *abilities*. That healing thing you do.”

I did my best to ignore the whole *you’re hot* thing, which sent a rush of heat to my face, and focused on the actual facts. “You need my healing?”

He offered me a hand. “Let’s try this again. The right way. I’m Dex Reyes.”

I raised an eyebrow and turned just enough to wiggle my frozen fingers at him. “Hard to shake hands with my wrists bound together.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He chuckled and dropped his hand, then swiped the fingers of his other hand over his face. His fingertips came away covered in the blood still leaking from his forehead. “Sorry about that.”

Now that we weren’t fighting or running, I could see the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow on his chiseled jaw, see the exhaustion in his eyes. I didn’t think his fatigue came from the seeping wound in his head, either. How long had he been driving?

I once again asked the most burning question on my mind. “Where are we?”

This time, he actually answered.

“Alaska.”

I gaped at him. “You have to be joking.”

Holding both arms wide, he said, “Welcome to Grayson Hollow. Off the map, off the grid. We almost made it to my cabin, too, before you woke up.”

He didn’t reach for me again, but inclined his head, indicating for me to start walking. I was so taken aback by the fact he wasn’t going to attempt to manhandle me again, and that we were basically at the top of the world and a thousand miles from the desert where I’d been tortured, that I obeyed.

Reyes hovered close as we settled into a slow walk, but he kept his hands to himself.

“My brother, Charlie, he’s... Well, he’s sick,” Reyes said, the words rushing out as if he didn’t like giving them life or putting them out into the universe. “I need you to heal him.”

“Not gonna happen,” I snapped, shocked at his audacity. The man had kidnapped me and expected me to just perform for him like a trained dolphin? Been there done that at the lab. My performing days were over.

I tripped over an upraised root hidden in the snow, and my uncooperative feet got tangled beneath me. I pitched sideways, right into Reyes' path, and he snatched me out of thin air.

His strong fingers pinched tightly on my biceps. The way he caught me pressed me firmly up against him, torso to torso, and I suddenly became all too aware that my tank top and shorts were soaking wet. And torture chamber dress code had never included underwear.

Reyes stared down at me, his dark eyes gleaming in the half-light. Shadows fell across his face, casting deep valleys where his angular bone structure jutted out. He was beautiful the way marble statues of gods in Italy were beautiful—inhuman with a bit of unreality. Too pretty to be real. Too devastating to look away.

I shuffled my feet beneath me to stand and pulled away from his grasp so quickly I nearly pitched backward.

He released me without comment.

“Once you help Charlie,” he went on, as if I hadn't denied him or accidentally thrown myself at him, “I'll let you go—no questions asked, nobody tailing you. I'll make sure PsyOps never knows you're even alive.”

PsyOps? Was that the organization that had held and tortured me? My head was starting to hurt, and it wasn't just from the litany of injuries I'd picked up between the compound and now.

Unaware of my confusion, Reyes gently took my elbow and began to guide me forward as he continued speaking. “They still think you're dead, you know. Hurst and his team. You're off their radar for now. You're safe.”

“But not safe from you.”

He adjusted his grip on my elbow and held on as we stepped over a thick fallen tree in our path. But he was careful, I noticed, to leave his grip soft enough that I knew I could pull away if I wanted to.

“I don't intend to hurt you,” he said.

“All the best intentions in the world don’t justify what you people did to me.”

“I didn’t do anything to you,” he pointed out.

“Silence is just as loud as action.”

He had no witty response to that.

In the uncomfortable quiet that followed, I considered running. I didn’t necessarily need my hands to run, so the bindings on my wrists weren’t that much of an impediment. But it took all my energy and effort just to lift my frozen feet and keep putting them one in front of the other. Despite the danger of the situation, I was actually looking forward to the warmth of the car to thaw out my extremities.

I wasn’t dead, like the team at the desert compound thought, but I was pretty sure my body temperature had fallen to dangerous levels.

The reminder of how close I’d come to real death prompted me to ask, “Why did you take me if you thought I was dead?”

“I knew you weren’t dead,” Reyes said simply. “I’d seen you do some pretty crazy healing.”

“I’m not immortal.”

“I’m not so sure I’d count that out,” he said, flicking an appraising glance in my direction. “But let’s just say, I had a hunch you’d pull through when Hurst called time of death.”

“So... what? You decided to steal my body?”

“I called in some favors. Got put on third watch that night. When I pulled you out of the morgue drawer, you had a pulse. Faint, but there.”

“And you just walked out with my body, nobody questioning you?”

He flashed a wicked grin. “I handled your cremation. It’s not a job most guys volunteer for.”

“And you incinerated... what?”

“A few small animals—bodies I grabbed from the desert. Some packs of computer paper. An old wooden chair.”

“Enterprising.”

“I love my brother,” he said simply.

The ease with which this giant bulldozer of a soldier could admit to loving his brother surprised me. Guys like him typically hid their feelings, but he wore his affection on his face as he continued speaking.

“You’re really going to like Charlie. Wait until you meet hi—”

I interrupted him before he could try to whittle my reserves. “I will *never* help you. Not for all the money or promises in the world.”

Reyes sighed, his gaze scanning the trees ahead. At this point, I had assumed he knew where we were going to get back to the car. I hadn’t exactly mapped my steps through the forest while running for my life.

“Look,” he said, “I know you’re pissed. You have every right to be. But just give him a chance, will you? He’s a good guy.”

“Better than you, I hope.”

Reyes flicked a withering glance my way, but there was a darkness in his tone as he replied, “Yeah. Better than me, that’s for sure. He doesn’t deserve wh—”

Reyes cut off and came to an abrupt halt.

Startled, I stopped too, then followed the line of his gaze through the trees. The shadows ahead had lightened, and through the thinning trees, I could see Reyes’ giant truck sitting sideways in the road. Both doors were still wide open, and warm air fogging from the tailpipe told me he’d left the engine on when he got out to chase after me.

And stalking around the driver’s side door was a hulking man in a blue uniform.

A cop.

I didn't even stop to consider my next step.

I screamed for help.



The cop whipped around, one hand going to his gun as he scanned the trees for the source of the scream.

Reyes grabbed my arm and hissed, “*Really?* You could wake the dead with that screech.”

I yanked against his grip and ignored him, tugging against his grasp in an effort to reach the cop. “Hey! Help! He’s kidnapped me!”

I expected Reyes to get spooked, maybe to drop my arm and run, but instead he groaned out loud and began dragging me toward the truck.

That should have been my first indication something was wrong with this situation.

The second was when we breached the trees, and the cop dropped his hand from his weapon and laughed. “Dex Reyes. What are you doing out here?”

Still holding my bound wrists with an iron grip, Reyes offered his other hand to the cop for a shake. “Chad Duncan. Good to see you, man. It’s been a minute.”

Duncan towered over both of us, a solid six-foot-five-million inches. He had a bald head that gleamed as if he’d just shined it and hard, flinty dark eyes set deep in his face. His gaze raked over me, head to toe, then dismissed me just as easily.

Tone casual, he asked, “Anything I need to worry about?”

“Nah, man. Just my brother’s crazy ass girlfriend. She’s strung out on something. I caught her running barefoot through the woods and screaming about ant people taking over the world. I told Charlie she was crazy but he never listens to me.”

I gaped at Reyes, shocked at how quickly he’d made up the story, how callously he’d spoken about this imaginary girl in front of him. The lie came so easily to him. I wondered just what else he’d so easily lied about.

His intentions, maybe.

I steeled myself and whipped around to face Duncan. “He’s lying. He kidnapped me from this laboratory where they were conducting experiments on me.”

Duncan offered me an indulgent smile. “Sure he did, princess.” To Reyes, he said, “Car trouble?”

“Hit a patch of ice trying to avoid ramming into her,” Reyes replied, indicating me with a tilt of his head. “Should be functional though. Just spun out.”

Duncan nodded, and his gaze shifted to the wound in Reyes’ forehead. “You okay?”

Reyes reached up with his free hand and tested the edges of the gash. “Hit the steering wheel.”

“Oof,” Duncan said with a wince. “Well, get out of the road before some logger comes through and plows into you.”

“You got it, Dunc. Thanks for looking out.” Reyes’ fingers dug deeper into the soft tissue on the inside of my wrist, and he pushed me toward the truck.

“Hey! No!” I yelled, tugging against him. “Duncan! I’m being held captive! My name is Ky Katana. I need help!”

As he walked away from us back toward his squad cruiser, Duncan lifted a hand and waved, but didn’t look back. Reyes dragged me back to the passenger side of the truck as the cop put his car into gear and pulled off the shoulder to leave.

I screamed as loud as I possibly could. Loud enough that I hoped it haunted that piece of crap until the day he died.

Especially once they found my dead body, and he recognized me as the girl he *could* have saved.

On the bright side, maybe he'd be the one to identify me and put Reyes behind bars.

As Reyes put his hand on the top of my head to guide me into the truck, a sudden pulsing desire to run swept over me. Despite my injuries, despite the numbness in my limbs, despite the absolute exhaustion from expending both my metaphysical energy healing and my physical energy running, my mind and body suddenly decided they weren't done fighting.

And I had the tiniest opening under Reyes' arm.

A calm stillness rippled through me like the ocean before a coming storm. I pretended to lift a leg and enter the car...

...then tossed my foot down, ducked his arm, and *ran*.

The world blurred past me, just pale wintry colors and a bone-deep chill that made me feel like I'd lifted out of my body. I watched from above as I ran and stumbled and ran, but surprisingly didn't lose my balance, even with my hands bound.

I had no earthly clue how I'd gathered the energy for this. My whole body had reached meltdown mode. My legs felt too heavy, my arms were useless weights dangling from my shoulders. I ran so hard I couldn't breathe and the frigid air burned my eyes, freezing tears on my cheeks.

This was my last ditch effort at freedom.

Or death.

The only way to find out which came first was to keep moving forward.

I dodged low hanging trees and jumped over piles of debris. The ground slid precariously beneath my bare feet, while whip-thin branches scraped my exposed skin. I couldn't keep my eyes on the path ahead. I was moving too fast to take my gaze off the path right at my feet. So I didn't notice the trees thinning until the gray sunlight hit me.

And I realized that the ground vanished up ahead.

I gasped and threw on the brakes. My feet slid on the ice hidden beneath the snow, and I pitched forward, unable to throw my hands out to catch myself. I hit the ground face first, snow and dirt digging into my eyes and nostrils. I rolled backwards and huffed at the snow caked in my nose, then shook my head like a dog to dislodge all the dirt in my eyes.

The sudden and abrupt stop sent my heart into my throat, where it remained as I used my shoulder to wipe off the rest of the dirt. Only inches away from where I'd fallen, the ground disappeared. I lay on a cliff, the edge of the dirt like a jagged chop where a giant had cut off a piece of the earth.

I gazed down at a river flowing far beneath me, chunks of ice swirling on the quick-moving currents.

“Ky!” Reyes’ voice met my ears from nearby. “I’m not going to hurt you!”

He used my real name. That small detail gave me pause—he’d only known me as Bravo, the code name the facility used for me. He’d called me Bravo back in the woods when he’d joked about chopping off my frostbitten feet.

But he’d obviously heard me give my real name to the cop and cared enough to remember it.

Maybe... Maybe he wasn’t a bad guy?

He kidnapped you, Ky.

I shook off that momentary lapse in judgment. I didn’t believe him. Not an inch of my mind believed that he wouldn’t hurt me. He’d sat by and let Hurst cut into me like a science experiment, and all Reyes ever saw was something he could use for his own needs. The first chance he had to steal me away from Hurst, he did it.

Happily.

He lied with an insane amount of ease to that cop. And they were buddies, clearly, so there’d be no help for me from any local authorities.

I wasn’t any more safe with Dex Reyes than I’d been locked away and being studied—tortured—by the government.

So I had a choice to make. I struggled to my knees, one leg sliding out to balance me. I glanced over my shoulder as the wind whipped around me, cutting through my skin, leaving my body feeling like ribbons of exposed bone and viscera.

Reyes appeared, crashing from the trees at breakneck speed.

He came to a halt and bent over, hands resting on his knees as he caught his breath. “Jesus... how are you so fast? Come with me. You have nowhere to go. You’re going to die out here.”

“I’d rather die,” I told him calmly.

Then threw myself over the cliff.

I had no option. No other recourse. I didn’t want to end up back at the lab with Hurst. I didn’t want to end up at Reyes’ cabin being forced to do whatever he wanted against my will.

I wanted the Aether. I wanted Japan and my mom and dad and even my annoying younger sisters.

I wanted that slow, green life. Martial arts on a mountaintop. My hands in the dirt, swirling water in the rice paddies, tossing feed for the chickens as our rooster pecked my bare toes.

I had thought I didn’t want that life, but the real world had shown me otherwise.

So I chose death.

Weightless and free, I opened my legs to the air like a star and plummeted to the roiling, angry waters below. The river rose up to greet me like an old friend, and I slammed into the surface with an explosion of pain that was all too familiar.

Then everything went black.



I’d gotten used to Tallahassee’s humidity, but Spring Break in Panama City had reached a whole new level of heat.

I bent over the balcony railing and stared out over the glittering lights of the city at night. It was loud here. Everywhere I turned, lights flashed, people walked and laughed and shouted, and music filtered from open bars and beach parties in a cacophony of noise like nothing I'd ever heard before.

Part of me longed for the dark, silent forests back home. The gentle voices of my family in the fields with me. The bleating of livestock, the soothing trickle of rain on mountain grasses as I sat beside my mother and learned to meditate.

Oka-san's voice, soothing and lyrical: "Good, Kita. Focus on your breath. In... Out... yes. Count with me."

There was nothing meditative about Panama City. The place was loud, the colors vulgar and unnatural, and the air tasted vaguely like sour beer twenty-four-seven.

Flora appeared in the open glass doorway behind me. "Ky! There you are."

She was an adorable blonde with an hourglass figure encased in her polka-dotted bikini, brilliant blue eyes, and the kind of sparkling personality that made everyone sit up and take notice. How I'd rotated into her sphere of influence was still beyond me, and I hadn't been fully accepted, either. Her friends treated me like Flora's pet project. I remained forever on the outside.

It wasn't a language barrier. Aether had taught me fluent English with barely a hint of an accent. But maybe it was the culture—moving from slow and easy rural Japan to a fast and loose college town. It had been a shock to my system, even though I'd made the move specifically for that experience.

Spring Break in Panama was really testing my limits.

And it was only the second day.

Flora took a step onto the patio and handed me a clear plastic Solo cup heavy with something unnaturally red. "Tequila sunrise. It's my favorite."

I stared down at the syrupy concoction. "What is it?"

“Just drink it, you goob. You’ll like it.”

I turned up the cup and let the too-sweet concoction hit my lips, barely able to contain the grimace. It was all sugar, which I’d come to realize—over these past two semesters—was the sorority girl alcoholic beverage of choice. Pure sugar in a variety of names.

“Mm. Good,” I said with a nod, my eye twitching.

I drank three of them because it was expected of me. Marissa kept popping up with plastic shot glasses full of booze that burned on the way down. Someone turned on music, and we danced for hours, until the sunset had vanished and the stars were a blanket over the ocean. One of Flora’s minions complimented my dancing and called me graceful, and I responded with a “Thanks, you too!” that left my face burning with shame.

People skills weren’t a strength for me on a sober day, much less when I’m being plied with alcohol.

Flora tried to include me, but still I was on the outside, standing in the corner, mostly ignored, quiet with my thoughts, growing steadily drunker.

The party moved to the balcony, then to the pool when they grew tired of watching everyone swim below. I was too nervous to show them my swimsuit—the full on bodysuit with long sleeves and a mock neck that covered my markings. Back home in Japan, riding the waves in my mock neck looked normal. Here, in the land of tiny waists and big breasts and scraps of bathing suit that were just this side of obscene, I’d stand out like a rogue wave on a calm sea.

So I stayed above, looking down at Flora in the pool with her long blonde hair like the arc of the sun around her, and her perfect body on display. Golden skin completely unmarred by a single blemish. She climbed up on the diving board and did this beautiful flip into the pool. Everyone cheered and chanted her name.

I wanted to be seen like Flora.

I wanted to be recognized like Flora.

I wanted to *be* Flora.

Sixteen summers old enough to be on a surfboard had made me a strong swimmer. I figured doing a front flip off the balcony into the pool would be cake compared to some of the waves that had dragged me under over the years. I set the last of my tequila sunrise on the rickety table at my knees between someone's lacy red bra and a pack of Black & Milds. Then I climbed up on the fence separating me from the outside world.

And jumped.



For the second time in as many hours, I woke up in a moving truck.

I gasped at the air and sat up quickly, flailing my limbs for purchase. The last thing I remembered was hitting the river's surface: the pain, the ice, the cold, the water closing around my head... I was still there, in that moment, even though my body recognized the warmth of the heater, the blanket wrapped around me, and the solid leather seat beneath me.

"Hey, whoa," Reyes said, snatching my left wrist before I backhanded him in my panic. "You're safe. Chill."

I stared at him, my brain taking two seconds too long to catch up with the current state of affairs. "I jumped off a cliff."

"Yeah, you did, you effing crazy person." Reyes released my wrist and then kicked the heater up a notch. His hair, which had been gelled to perfection before, was soaked through and lay flat on his forehead. He'd ditched his leather jacket and black t-shirt for a soft cream-colored flannel coat.

Had he jumped in after me?

Hand back on the wheel, he glanced over and said, "You sure do like jumping off tall surfaces into bodies of water. You got a death wish?"

"I got a 'get away from the crazy guy who kidnapped me' wish," I snapped. I ducked down under the blanket, tucking my arms against my wet shirt. The blanket was one of those shiny silver aluminum ones emergency personnel used for

people in shock. I couldn't be surprised Reyes had one stowed in his truck.

Soldiers were never not soldiers.

Reyes tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "They called it a suicide attempt. In Panama."

I swallowed and looked away, my gaze pulling to the trees passing outside the shattered window. The broken glass effect made the sea of green and white look like cresting waves and white caps.

"It wasn't suicide," I insisted.

"You jumped from a fifth-floor hotel balcony and crash landed in the pool."

"I was *aiming* for the pool."

"Well, congratulations, you made it. Barely."

I bit my lower lip and leaned against the door, wishing I didn't have to have this conversation or talk about these things. That jump had changed everything. It had ruined my life. I'd likely lost my scholarship after vanishing for so long. God knows what happened to my apartment back in Tallahassee, or Sushi, my African cichlid who'd lived alone in his tank, eating from my hands and giving me the friendship I hadn't quite gotten from the humans around me.

I'd been too different. I tried too hard to fit in, and like predators, my classmates took notice.

I spoke again. "I wasn't trying to kill myself. I was just trying to be... seen."

He tossed me a look. "How the hell weren't you seen? You'd stand out in a crowd."

I flushed hot and ducked lower, the blanket crinkling against my lips. I didn't know whether that was a dig at my above average height or a compliment on my looks.

I'd stood out back home in Aether, too. The alt-race clan who'd raised me were small people. Even my oto-san had stood barely five feet tall, thick and sturdy like a Sakura tree.

I'd always felt like an outsider among them—this tall, hulking monster of a girl, limbs too long, body too thin. At least I hadn't felt so physically different at Florida State, surrounded by girls of all shapes and sizes.

But the core insecurity was always there.

Reyes took my silence as a reason to keep talking. "I only know you as Bravo. So your real name is Ky?"

"What, you didn't read that in the news when you were looking up my 'suicide'?"

His jaw tightened. "I'm trying to be civil. I think you deserve to be called by your real name."

My real name. The name Oka-san gave me, Kita, wasn't even my real name. Then I'd come here and chosen another name for myself. A new identity on top of a new identity.

I'd spent the entirety of my life living with someone else's name.

"Ky," I said. "Ky Katana."

"It's nice to officially meet you, Ky."

I turned bodily in my seat to level an exasperated gaze on him. "I truly cannot say the same."

For a long moment, Reyes kept his gaze on the road ahead and silence fell between us. The woods outside the car window had grown even thicker, pressing in more menacingly than they had before. We really were in the middle of nowhere. Cold, snowy wilderness probably overrun by bears looking for a tasty meal.

The truck's heater sure felt nice.

Reyes broke the silence. "You didn't die at the lab, Ky, but you would have. Eventually."

I threw myself back against the seat and burrowed into the blanket again. "Trust me, the thought crossed my mind many times."

"You won't die in my presence. I can promise you that," he went on as if I hadn't spoken. "I don't want to hurt you. I'll

keep you safe, as long as you help my brother. So it's me or the lab. You choose—I'll turn around right now and deliver you to Hurst."

The idea sent a wave of terror crashing through me. My heart jolted, but I carefully kept the emotion from my face. "The lesser of two evils, huh?"

He shrugged. "If that's how you need to see it."

"Tell me something," I said, "was it the hospital?"

Reyes flicked a gaze in my direction. "What do you mean?"

"Did the hospital turn me in to Hurst? I only just guessed at what happened to get me there. But it's so stupid, like something out of a sci-fi movie..." I trailed off.

Reyes sighed and sat up straighter. He brushed one hand back over his hair, and it mussed beneath his palm, sticking up wildly. "It wasn't the hospital. Not directly. Hurst has software implanted in all the major lab work companies around the country. Labcorp, Quest, Unilab, Genzyme—if they do diagnostic testing, in facility or out, he's tapped into their system. Any anomalies give PsyOps an instant alert."

I clutched the blanket tighter between my fists. "My blood was an anomaly?"

"Yeah. You had genetic markers that don't belong in a normal body. I don't really get the science. I'm a foot soldier, not a scientist." He flashed me a smile, showing off that stupid dimple again.

What did it mean that my blood wasn't normal? Was I something more than human? I never knew my family—my clan had been killed off by the Summum Malum not long after I was born, and the Aether took me in. They were somewhat more than human, too, but not in a Captain America, Winter Soldier, Avenger kind of way.

Or... were we?

"Anyway," Reyes went on, "he gets the alert, he jumps on a private jet and gets there before the patient is discharged."

“So he just kidnaps anyone who has different blood?”

“No, not just anyone. People who...” Reyes trailed off, lips pursed as if considering his words.

I picked up the thread of his thought. “People who won’t be missed.”

“No family, no social network,” he agreed. “You were low risk, not even being an American citizen.”

“I have a family,” I said hotly.

Reyes turned his head fully to look into my eyes. “I have no doubt someone misses you.”

We locked eyes for an interminable moment, and it was as if he could see inside me. To the little girl I’d been, the orphan who’d always felt outside her own family, who sought a new life in the US only to feel outside everything here, too. I didn’t like how deep his dark gaze penetrated inside me, or how my emotions felt stripped bare for his eyes.

Then Reyes broke contact, his gaze returning to the road ahead.

“Does Hurst work on his own?” I asked, ignoring the flutters in my chest. “A freelance evil villain?”

“He’s not a villain. He’s changing the world.”

“He cut off my hand, Dex.”

Reyes grimaced. “Civilian casualty in the war between good and evil.”

“I think you should question which side you’re actually on.”

Reyes tilted his head, acknowledging my statement while avoiding the subject. “To answer your question, no. Hurst doesn’t work alone. He’s government funded.”

“Of course he is. What are they doing, trying to build super soldiers or something?”

“Something like that.”

The truck began to slow, and we turned into a small, almost invisible drive through the trees. The wheels crunched over fresh, untouched snow, while branches weighed heavily overhead, bowing beneath the inches of snow clinging to their limbs.

“Won’t you be missed?” I asked, watching the trees slide by outside my cracked window. “At the lab. By the military.”

“Nah. I had a lot of V-time built up.”

“Ah, I see you’re one of those go-getter types. You probably work on Christmas, too, huh?”

Reyes ignored my jab. “Put in my request, told ‘em I had to be home for a couple weeks for Charlie’s treatments. Short notice but important.”

“Me being the treatment. Not an actual doctor’s facility,” I pointed out.

Reyes’ tone was dark as he replied, “Doctors can’t do anything for him. But you might be able to.”

“And if I can’t?” I asked softly.

“Don’t let me down,” was all he said.

We were so remote here that I felt like we’d left one planet for another. Even the Aether lived closer to civilization than this. Between the endless trees and the empty sky and the fact that the cop’s cruiser had been the *only* vehicle I’d seen on the entire drive...

This was the top of the world, and there was *nothing*. A vast, cold wasteland, cold to a degree I’d never felt before and could surely kill me if I ended up lost in the wilds.

No one to hear me calling for help.

No one to come to my rescue.

No one even knew where I was.

My experience at the lab may not have killed me, but out here, in the middle of nowhere, Dex Reyes might.



With Reyes' declaration to *not let him down* ringing in my ears, I stared out the windshield and clung to the security of my aluminum blanket as the trees thinned. The drive curved sharply right, and Reyes took the turn with the practiced ease of someone who had done it hundreds of times, then we burst from the thick forest into a wide clearing.

I hadn't had any expectations in mind of our destination. Reyes had mentioned that it was a cabin, so maybe in my head I'd built up this picture of a worn-down log structure in the middle of dark woods. The kind of place you found in horror movies haunted by the hollow-eyed, half-naked girl who'd been murdered there, but not something found in real life.

That wasn't what waited for us.

Smoke curled from the chimney on top of a two-story A-frame painted deep blue with cheery white shutters. A large glass lean to was built off one side, panels steamed and frosted over, and an honest to God well perched in the front yard with a wooden bucket leaning against the snowy cobblestones.

The cabin sat on a hill at the edge of a cliff, the drive winding up the snow like a silver river on a mountain. And beyond the house was the ocean with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. Choppy white caps stretched as far as I could see.

"Holy crap," I muttered, sitting up straighter. The blanket fell away but I barely noticed, too focused on the view. "*This* is your place?"

“This is home,” Reyes confirmed.

He’d barely put the truck in Park before I opened the door and stepped out. Reyes barked my name, and there was a flurry of motion from the driver’s side, but I ignored him and walked toward the cliff’s edge.

“Do not jump off that!” Reyes shouted, followed by the slam of his door.

Exasperated, I snapped, “I’m not going to jump, you moron.”

I just wanted to see the ocean.

My old friend spread beneath the gray sky, wild and choppy. Far below, a strip of rocky beach inched out into her waters, and gnarly waves crashed against the earth, beautiful in their ferocity.

Give me a board and an hour. I’d straighten her out.

Reyes appeared beside me. “What are you doing?”

“Admiring.” I turned my back on the view and the longing it rose in me.

Somewhere beyond that horizon lay Aether. Thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean, as vast and wild as the universe, but beyond it was home.

I eyed Reyes. “How’s a soldier afford something like this?”

“Smart investing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He smiled, dimple deepening. “You probably shouldn’t.”

“Why do you live so far from base?”

His expression darkened. “I have my reasons. And you ask a lot of questions.” His fingers closed around my elbow, and he guided me away from the cliff. “Come on. You need to get out of those wet clothes and get warm.”

I didn’t protest. Even after a ride in the warm car, my toes still didn’t have any feeling in them. I needed rest and food so

I could recoup my losses and heal.

Getting away from Reyes would be easier then.

Even if I had to jump in the ocean and *swim* to Japan to get home.

The steps creaked beneath our feet as we climbed to the front porch. Two white columns held a slight roof to protect the entrance from the elements, and Reyes dug out his keys to unlock the latch. When he opened the door, a rush of warm air that smelled floral and tropical blew around me, beckoning me in. It reminded me of the forests of Aether—decadent, green, a living thing.

Reyes closed the door behind us and threw the bolt. Then he slid open a key pad built into the wall and tapped in a fast code. A mechanical whir heralded a clunk as a bolt slid into place. Simultaneously, little thunks echoed from around the house, and one right by my elbow.

A window. A bolt on the damn window.

“Is this prison?” I asked sarcastically.

“Do you want it to be?” he replied. “Your move, princess.”

“Dex?” A voice called from upstairs. Quick footsteps pounded across the ceiling above us, then a boy appeared at the top of the steps. He took the stairs two at a time as he said, “Hey, man! I didn’t expect you home til next—”

He stopped short as his gaze lifted from the floor and met mine.

I’d thought he was a boy because of his enthusiasm and how quickly he’d come to see his brother. But I was wrong—Charlie was my age, maybe older, but with a boyishly handsome face that didn’t carry any of the hardness his brother’s did. He was taller than Reyes, more willowy, with longer features and surprisingly pale brown eyes that twinkled in the soft amber glow of the hallway light. His hair hung longer, dark strands folding into his long lashes and curling around his ears, and a short beard colored the lower half of his jaw and lips.

Where Reyes seemed cut from glass, Charlie was cut from light.

Reyes glared at his brother. “You didn’t have the bolts slung. I’ve told you before, you keep the doors and windows locked when I’m not here.”

Charlie blinked at me, then his gaze dropped to my lack of clothes, before he turned an accusing gaze on his brother.

“Tell me you didn’t,” he said, a hard note in his soft voice. He completely ignored Reyes’ reprimand.

“They basically killed her,” Reyes said. “If I hadn’t taken her—“

“I told you *no*, Dex. I can handle my own crap. You ignored my wishes, like you always do.”

“I had an opportunity, and I took it.”

“Yeah, and now, you’re going to lose your job.” Charlie shoved both hands through his long hair in a move very similar to the one I’d seen Reyes do in the truck. Except his long hair stayed wild, sticking up in every direction. “How are we going to afford this place? We’re going to lose our home because you can’t listen to me.”

“I’m not going to lose my job,” Reyes assured him. “The plan was foolproof. Well... it was until she woke up,” he added, a hint of amusement in his tone as he glanced at me.

Charlie shoved himself between me and Reyes, his hands hovering over me as if he didn’t know where to start. “Are you okay?” he asked, his gaze sweeping over the scratches and dirt and bruises and god knew what else was visible on my bare skin. “Jesus, what did he do to you?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Reyes argued. “She did all that to herself.”

Charlie’s pale brown eyes met mine. They looked almost amber, translucent like gems. He cocked an angular brow in question.

I shrugged. “I tried to run.”

“I can’t blame you,” Charlie growled, throwing a dire look at his brother. “This meathead totally kidnapped you.”

Reyes groaned, reaching for the buttons on his flannel jacket with one hand as he yanked open a closet door. “I wish you’d both stop throwing that word around. It wasn’t a kidnapping.”

“I’m buying you a dictionary,” Charlie said wryly. He smiled at me. No dimple like his brother, but his smile reached his eyes completely, and he turned into a ray of sunshine that chased away the grayness of the outside world. “What about a shower? Warm clothes?”

Against my better judgment, I found myself melting in the warmth of his presence. “That would be great.”

Clearly, he’d had no part in my kidnapping, and if the context clues were correct, he’d actively warned Reyes against taking me. Maybe I could use his compassionate nature to my advantage—get friendly with him and convince him to get me out of here. He clearly knew the code for sliding the bolts, since Reyes had gotten on him about not locking up.

Maybe I could convince him to share that little code with me.

As Charlie turned to go up the stairs, motioning for me to follow, Reyes reached out and snatched at my arm. He drew me in, face hard and unreadable.

He was... shirtless. Without his flannel coat, every inch of his caramel skin was on display—hard muscle, deep lines, biceps bulging in his arms. My breath caught in my throat at the utter perfection of his body.

But after Charlie’s calm and sunshiney demeanor, Reyes looked darker. More unpredictable. I could see the predator in him—the manipulator who’d used his dimple to charm me even as he’d bound my hands like a prisoner.

He was dangerous in more ways than one.

“Don’t bother trying to climb out a window,” he said softly, tone low enough that Charlie wouldn’t hear it. “Those locks are military grade and controlled by passcode. Even if

you got out, you'd die of exposure before you found anyone to help you."

I glared at him, and yanked my arm out of his grasp. "You're an ass."

He shrugged, his hand falling back to his side. "We fight for the people we love. Unless you're the kind of person who runs from them."

With that, he whirled on his heel, military-style, and stomped off towards the back of the house, vanishing beneath the staircase.

I stared after him, stunned.

What did he know about me leaving Japan?

How much closer was Dex Reyes watching when I didn't even know it?



By the time I ran the hot water down to the lukewarm dredges at the bottom of the tank, I could feel sensation in my toes again. I spent another couple of minutes in the tub focused on healing what I could, so when I finally stepped out into the steamy bathroom, my starfish markings ran unbearably hot. Just the energy generated from taking a shower had helped, though. My healing ability was doing its work as best it could for now. All I needed was a big meal and a good night's sleep. I'd be good as new tomorrow.

And after that, I could try to formulate a plan to get out of here.

I found a pair of worn black sweatpants and a long-sleeved henley waiting for me on the bed when I came out of the bathroom. I had to tie the strings extra tight on the pants, and the shirt was so big it fell off my shoulders, but I just buttoned it all the way up, tucked it into my waistband, and went with it.

Reyes already knew about my starfish markings, and Charlie had seen them when I came in, so who cared if they were visible?

At least I was warm.

The bedroom was small but nice—neutral colors, a soft comforter on the bed, a window overlooking the ocean. I thought about staying surrounded by the curtains, gazing out over the sea until the sun set and I couldn't see it anymore, but I could hear footsteps in the hall.

Charlie was pacing the landing, his phone sideways in his hand as he played some kind of game. As soon as I emerged, he looked up and pocketed the device, a smile lighting up his face.

“Feel better?” he asked, his gaze dropping to the bare skin visible around the shirt’s neckline.

I waited for the cringe or the open disgust on his expression, but it didn’t come. His gaze just shifted back to mine with that soft openness and welcome.

“Warmer, at least,” I agreed, wrapping my arms around my chest. “Thanks for the clothes.”

“Yeah. Sorry they’re a little big.”

“They’re great,” I assured him. A shiver peeled up my spine, and I hugged myself tighter. “How do you live here? It’s so cold. Even inside with the heat.”

“You get used to it after a while,” Charlie told me. “Or you build a greenhouse.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What now?”

He led me back downstairs, and through the hall where I’d seen Reyes go earlier before my shower. We passed a dark, empty kitchen—where I noted a second entryway, red light blinking on the key pad—and a closed door behind which I heard rap music playing. Reyes’ room, I presumed.

The hall ended in a mud room where several pairs of boots slouched against the wall next to a cushioned bench and a clothes rack loaded down with jackets. A third exterior door waited here, but when Charlie opened it, it didn’t lead us to the outside.

It led us into a greenhouse.

The jungle had been uprooted and rearranged into this small space. Green covered every inch of available space in trees and bushes and flowering plants that grew from every surface, even up the walls. The humid air hung thick, cloying with the smell of florals and vibrant earth. A table near the

door lay flung with the tools of the trade—buckets, spades, back up planters, gloves, and a big metal sink.

“I spend most of my time in here,” Charlie told me, leading me down the central path. “With the plants, obviously, tending to them. But I also like... this.” Still walking, he held out a hand and pushed aside the big leaves covering the pathway, to reveal a sitting area.

Overlooking the ocean.

I walked under Charlie’s arm, only barely noting the arrangement of the seating area and the Oriental rug beneath my feet. I was drawn by the tall windows, nothing but fogged glass between me and the ocean.

Swiping a hand on one of the frigid panes, I opened a space to look out.

My breath caught in my throat. The view I’d admired from the yard when we arrived spread before me. I couldn’t see the dark rocky beach and crashing waves from this vantage point, but the fading sun spread over the mercurial ocean as far as the eye could see. The mountains off to the left curved into the ocean, snow-covered hilltops vanishing into the clouds.

“This is a beautiful view,” I said.

Charlie came to a stop next to me, both hands shoved in the pockets of his gray sweats. Beneath the sleeves of his white band shirt—the Red Hot Chili Peppers, old school and one of my favorite bands since discovering American music—his arms were taut and wiry, his skin a deep rich toffee.

“I like it here,” Charlie said. “Just gets lonely sometimes, you know?”

I looked up at him, surprised by how close he was and just how far I had to crane my neck back. I’d always been the freakishly tall girl, but with Charlie, I felt small. Feminine. Not because he was all strength and muscle, but because I could look up at him, the way girls were supposed to be with guys.

I shoved that feeling aside and took a step away from him.

“So, you like plants?” I asked.

Charlie nodded. “Always have. They feel comfortable. You know how the sheets feel when you get in bed at night? Cool and clean, you wanna burrow in and stay forever?”

“I know the exact feeling,” I replied, thinking of that little double bed upstairs and how good a night’s sleep would feel in a real bed again. The hospital gurney I’d spent the past few months on hadn’t done good things for my posture. Or my joints.

Or hell, my mental health.

“Plants make me feel like that,” Charlie went on, a rose tint rising in his cheeks. “I know, gardening is usually a girl thing or whatever.”

His embarrassment was cute.

“It’s not a girl thing,” I said. “My father loves plants. He can grow *anything*. It’s like he was born to do it. Anytime my mother would ask if we’d seen him, the answer was almost always ‘he’s in the garden.’”

“Sounds like my kind of guy.”

“Mine too,” I said fondly, realizing as I said it just how much I meant it.

“Is he here? In the States?”

“Japan,” I replied. “Where I was born.”

“Do you miss it?”

Six months ago, I would have said no. *Now...*

I didn’t have any reason not to be brutally honest. With him—and with myself.

“I miss him very much,” I said.

Charlie squeezed my shoulder. “You’ll see him again soon. I know it,” he promised me, leaving his hand where it lay.

A beat of silence passed, the two of us just comfortably existing in the same space. It was the damndest thing because it reminded me of being back home with the Aether,

meditating in the forest with my mother and sisters. That kind of comfortable silence that spoke of family and unconditional love.

I'd taken that for granted.

We were interrupted as Reyes appeared, slinking into the sitting area in his combat boots. He'd showered and re-styled his hair into his hard part, and replaced his jeans with a pair of black sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt.

"Boring her ear off with plant talk?" he asked.

"Welcoming me to his home with plant talk," I shot back, glaring at him. I reached for Charlie's hand, surprising myself with my boldness as he slipped his hand from my shoulder and linked his fingers with mine. "Show me your favorites. I want to hear all about them."

I don't know what made me do it. I knew a lot about plants already, having grown up in a farming community, but Charlie's earnestness spoke to something inside me. He radiated peace, the way my family did back home in Aether, and his open honesty was, quite frankly, a breath of fresh air after everything I'd been through at the lab.

I'd stepped into this house with no intentions of helping Reyes' younger brother, only to find myself charmed by him.

A smile brightened Charlie's face. "Yeah? Great!"

He tugged me back into the leafy jungle without a second glance at his brother. Reyes, however, followed silently close behind us. His shrewd gaze burned like a brand into my back.

Charlie's hand was warm in mine—hot, even, for normal human standards. I glanced at him, noticing for the first time the hint of sweat at his hairline and the redness in his neck. The greenhouse was humid, sure, but the temperature was fairly balanced by the ten degree temps outside the glass.

It almost seemed like he was running a fever.

"I like plants that look like something else," he told me, leaving the main aisle for a secondary path. If he wasn't feeling well, he didn't let on. "When I think about nature, I

love the way patterns mimic, you know? Like the way some crystals crystallize in patterns like trees. Or how ocean waves look like dune waves, and how the spiral exists across the whole of nature in animals, plants, weather patterns, even in our DNA.”

His voice had become more animated, and along with it, his face had turned transcendental. There was a purity to his excitement that made *me* excited by osmosis.

“Mimicry is an important part of survival in nature,” Charlie said, stopping next to a long, low planter overflowing with colorful buds. “Certain plants mimic patterns to look like animals and keep the predators away. Others mimic patterns to look like something enticing to draw bugs and birds in so they can propagate. And some just look like things we know because we give them the association.” He dropped my hand and cupped a large flower in his palm, so gentle the stalk barely touched his skin. “This is the Bird of Paradise.”

“It looks like a bird,” I said with a laugh. The orange flower feathered from a thick bud that lay vertical with a pointed tip—like a beak and a feathered headdress.

“It’s named after the actual bird of paradise, a type of bird from New Guinea.” A muscle tightened in Charlie’s jaw, and he let go of my hand to lean against the shelf’s edge. He absently rubbed at his elbow as he added, “But the flower originates from South Africa.”

I eyed him, cataloguing his actions in a split second. He looked fatigued all of a sudden, like just the walk through the greenhouse had taken the energy out of him. Clearly, his arm was bothering him, and with the sweat on his forehead...

“Do you need to sit down?” I asked.

He flashed a smile and straightened, idle hand falling away from his elbow. “No. I’m fine.”

I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but behind me, Reyes’ sharp tone piped in. “Charlie. Don’t push it.”

Charlie held up a hand in placation. “I’m fine. Just the normal stuff. You know how it goes.” To me, he said, “Don’t you love the colors?”

“I do!” I agreed. “I can imagine how beautiful this looks on a backdrop of green jungle. But you said it’s not mimicking the bird on purpose?”

“No. Humans just associate it that way, because that’s what we do—place our expectations on other people and things. But the bee orchid mimics on purpose!”

His hand dropped to mine again, and I grasped his palm as he whisked me away to another path. He moved with the same grace and quickness as before, easing my mind somewhat over his little episode.

This aisle of plants hung even thicker than the rest—giant branches dangling low and ivy creeping up the wall behind the row of planters. The bee orchid had three delicate purple flower petals behind a fuzzy structure that looked a heck of a lot like a bee’s fluffy butt.

Charlie tapped the fuzzy piece. “This lures male bees in who want to mate with the ‘bee’ and then in turn, they end up pollinating the flower. It’s nature at its deceptive finest. Mimicry to ensure survival.”

Mimicry to ensure survival. Was that what I was doing at Florida State? Just trying to make myself look like something else so I’d fit in to the world I thought I belonged in?

Unconsciously, I reached for the neckline of my henley and tugged it higher, pulling the edges closer around my neck. I’d forgotten, momentarily, about my skin being on display. The reminder of being different, and trying so hard to fit in, stung.

I’d never fit in.

Not as I am.

Charlie reached for me and carefully unhooked my fingers from the shirt. “You shouldn’t hide them. They’re beautiful.”

I blinked at him. “I’m...sorry?”

“Are they birth marks?” he asked, one thumb coming to rest on my collarbone. His finger burned hot against my skin, against the starfish shaped mark I knew rested there.

“I think so,” I said, cheeks hot. “I’ve always had them. As long as I can remember. I didn’t... I didn’t know my birth parents. So I don’t know... Well. You know. I was probably born with them.”

Dear God, Ky, shut up. You’re blithering.

His pale brown eyes caught in the warm overhead light and blazed. “They remind me of *Stapelia grandiflora*. The Starfish flower.”

I gathered my shirt in my hands at the word ‘starfish’ but stopped myself before covering my skin again. “There’s a flower named for starfish?”

“It’s a nickname,” he explained. “Because of the size and shape of the flowers. The flowers can be all different colors, but my favorite are the dark purple. Just like your birthmarks. They’re soft like velvet, even though they grow on cacti.”

For the first time since we walked away from the windows, Reyes spoke. “That’s more like it,” he said with a laugh. “She *is* like a cactus. Sharp and thorny. Did you see what she did to my face?” He motioned to the remnants of my scratches on his cheek and the taped up gash in his forehead from where I’d cracked him in the head with the baton.

“You deserved all of that,” I told him.

He flashed me a predatory grin, and that damn dimple sent a shiver up my spine. “Probably not *all* of it.”

“Cacti don’t have thorns,” Charlie corrected. “It’s a common misconception. In reality, they have spines.”

Reyes regarded me, looking me up and down before he agreed. “She’s got a spine, for sure. I don’t know that I’ve ever met a woman with that kind of backbone.”

I couldn’t pass that comment off as anything but a compliment. And against my better judgment, his compliment pleased me.

Disgusted with myself, I refocused on Charlie before I fell down a dangerous hole. “Do you have a starfish flower I can see?”

Charlie shook his head. “Cacti don’t do well here. I’ve tried.” His thumb brushed once more over the mark on my skin, and his eyes grew soft, unfocused. “A lot of people don’t appreciate the starfish flower. It’s developed a mimic, too—it puts off the smell of rotting meat to draw flies and bugs to pollinate it. The more common nickname is ‘carrion flower’ because of the smell.”

I wrinkled my nose, suddenly not quite so excited to be associated with this plant.

Then Charlie’s gaze sharpened and met mine again. “Moral of the story is sometimes you do what’s necessary to survive in a world that really wants to kill you.”

Sometimes you do what’s necessary to survive.

A phrase I intended to cling to.

“Sounds like a smart flower,” I murmured.

“I have a few flowers native to Japan,” Charlie told me, his face lighting up. “You’ll love the Japanese Canopy. I bet you’ll even recognize it from back home.”

He took my hand again, but before we could take a single step, Charlie halted suddenly.

His whole body went tense, head to toe. His fingers tightened uncomfortably on mine.

“Charlie?” I asked.

Then he collapsed.



I tried to catch him, but my reflexes weren't great. Not after everything that happened at the lab, or even after everything that had happened since I opened my eyes in that body bag.

Charlie slumped against me then slid down my body. I scrambled to get a grip on him, to hold him, but he just kept falling, a dead weight all the way to the ground. I managed to cradle his head and go down on my knees with him so that his skull didn't smack the hard concrete floor, but instead eased into place following his body.

Reyes leapt into action, his face going hard as he shoved me aside. "Get out of the way."

I jumped back, falling onto my backside as panic made my body temperature spike. "What's happening? Is he okay?"

Charlie's head lolled on the ground, his skin ashen.

"I told you he's sick!" Reyes snarled, bending low over Charlie without even looking at me. He rolled Charlie to his back, and Charlie's eyelids fluttered but didn't open. Reyes pressed a hand to his brother's forehead, cheek, and then neck.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Could you stop asking questions for five minutes?" Reyes griped. "He's running a fever. He needs the cold." He slung Charlie's limp arm around his neck, then slipped a hand around his waist and under his knees. With a grunt and a heave, he pulled Charlie off the ground, then walked off into the plants.

I remained on the concrete, my knees curled beneath me, and considered trying to make a run for it.

Reyes was going to be distracted for a few minutes, at least. I was surrounded by some perfectly good glass I could break to get out of this greenhouse—and heavy metal patio furniture with which to do it.

But... something made me stay.

Concern for Charlie, if I was being honest.

A small part of me, too, couldn't bear the thought of hurting his precious greenhouse. I'd only spent a short time in his presence, but the love and care he'd put into this garden had been obvious from the moment I walked in. Damaging the windows in such cold temperatures would only hurt the plants, and in turn, hurt Charlie.

Charlie wasn't the Reyes brother I wanted to hurt.

So, I scrambled to my feet and hurried after the two of them.

I reached the edge of the greenhouse right behind Reyes as he strode to the glass wall where a small innocuous door had been built into the panes. He kicked it open unceremoniously and charged into the room. Frigid air swirled out around him, chasing away the warmth of the greenhouse.

I followed him in, glancing around at the small space in confusion. A cot lay unfolded against the far wall next to a small table that held several bottles of water and a paperback book on tree species. Other than that, the room was empty, surrounded on three sides by fogged glass panes and a view of the back yard.

“What is this? A prison cell?”

Reyes snorted. “It's a sauna. Grab a towel and wet it. Cold water only.”

I spared a second to glare at his back as he carefully lowered Charlie onto the cot. But my concern for Charlie outweighed my irritation at Reyes. I backed out of the room and backtracked to the sink at the front of the greenhouse. A

pile of towels lay on a shelf built into the shingles of the house. I snatched one up, wetted it under the faucet as the metal sink rang beneath the stream, then hoofed it back to Charlie's side.

Back in the small cold room, Reyes had opened the windows.

The windows in this room had screens. They *opened*.

And they didn't have mechanical locks.

I filed that piece of information away, suddenly buoyed by the idea that I could escape this place and go home. *Without* maiming Charlie's precious plants.

I held out the wet towel. "Here."

Reyes snatched it from my hand without looking at me and began to tuck it around Charlie's head on the pillow. "There's Tylenol in the basket beneath the table."

I knelt down to shuffle around inside the wooden crate, biting back a retort about how I wasn't his slave to boss around. Right now, Charlie was what mattered, and if Reyes said he needed the Tylenol, I'd get him the damn Tylenol.

Even though I wasn't entirely sure *why* I was so invested in a stranger's well-being.

And even though I really wanted to lob the entire wooden crate at Reyes' slicked-back hair.

The room was *freezing*—a thermometer affixed to the wooden table declared it to be ten degrees, give or take. I shivered, my fingers growing painfully cold as I dug out the Tylenol.

By the time I had the bottle rattling in my hand, Charlie's eyes were open.

"You know your name?" Reyes asked, popping open a bottle of water from the table.

Charlie's lids fluttered. "Captain America."

"You are not that pansy ass pretty man." Reyes shoved the water bottle at Charlie's hand, then snatched the Tylenol from

me without sparing me a glance.

Charlie laughed weakly. “You’re just mad he’s pretty, and you aren’t.”

“Hey.” Reyes tapped the Tylenol bottle on Charlie’s shoulder. “Watch your mouth, kid. Take your pills.”

The exchange was so wholesome I couldn’t believe it was Reyes kneeling at my feet.

Charlie glanced past his brother and caught sight of me hovering behind him. “Aw, jeez, Ky. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

I waved his apology off. “Don’t you dare say you’re sorry. I’m just glad you’re okay. But…” I trailed off, casting a glance at the back of Reyes’ head. “Do you think it’s smart to be in this kind of cold right now? If you’re sick?”

Reyes rocked back on his heels and squinted up at me. “You don’t know shit about what he needs.”

“Dex,” Charlie said sharply. The two of them locked eyes in surprisingly similar glares, then Charlie broke eye contact to smile at me. “This is my cold room. One of the symptoms… I know Dex told you I’m sick. Sometimes I need cold, but it isn’t safe to sleep outside unprotected. So I come here.”

Why on earth would he need cold like *that*? Because he had a fever? Oka-san used to give me hot ginger tea with honey to beat fevers. One time, I remember a cold bath when I was little, but a cold room? In *Alaska*? An ice bath at thirty-two degrees was a lot different than a nap in a ten degree room.

That just seemed excessive.

“*This* is why we need you,” Reyes explained, his tone a lot more even than before. He picked up the wet towel and felt it with the back of his hand, then winced and turned it over so the cooler side touched Charlie’s skin. “Charlie needs you. The doctors have done everything they can, but he keeps getting worse.”

“I can’t heal someone other than myself,” I argued, a pit yawning open inside me. “I know how much it hurts to see someone you love suffering, but it isn’t within the realm of my powers. I can only heal myself.”

“What would you know about watching someone you love suffer?”

“A lot, actually,” I snapped back.

“What if you tried, Ky?” Charlie asked tiredly. “I don’t... I don’t like what Dex did. You shouldn’t be here. But you shouldn’t be *there* either. At least here you’re safe.”

“Am I?” I countered waving my hands dramatically at Reyes.

“Dex wouldn’t hurt you,” Charlie insisted. “Just try. And if you can’t, no harm done.”

“It’s not a matter of whether or not I *want* to help you. I *know* I can’t heal someone else.”

Something changed in Charlie’s face—he somehow recognized the despair I was trying desperately to cover up. But before he could point it out or ask me to talk about things I wasn’t ready to talk about—things I’d probably never be ready to talk about—Reyes charged forward.

“*Bullshit*,” Reyes said. “I watched you *regrow a limb*.”

On the cot, Charlie’s eyes widened, and he turned his head on the pillow to look at me. “Really, Ky? Wow, what happened?”

The concern on Charlie’s face brought me a little peace.

“I regrew *my* limb. My *own* limb,” I pointed out. “I can’t do that for someone else.”

“Charlie doesn’t need a limb. He just needs the cancer to go away.” Reyes crossed his arms over his hoodie. “I saw them cut your liver out.” Charlie gasped as Reyes continued. “You grew it back. In exactly ten minutes.”

I shuddered. “You know how long it took?”

Those were the worst ten minutes of my life. I could feel my body shutting down the minute they detached my liver. They left me cut open, because *hey she'll fix that too*. Without my liver, my blood couldn't clot properly. I was bleeding uncontrollably, watching every ounce of my life drain from the wound as I tried to race against time and regrow the organ.

They'd promised they wouldn't let me die.

They'd promised if I flatlined, they'd put it back in.

They'd promised they had the *best* surgical staff in Nevada for this.

I'd almost bled out in the time it took me to grow back enough for my system to regulate. I was weak for days afterwards.

I planted my feet, my hands balled into fists at my sides. "You watched them do that. You watched them pull my liver from my body, knowing that the human body cannot survive without a liver. You watched them attempt to murder me."

Reyes had the good grace to look cowed. His shoulders slumped, and he shoved his hands in his hoodie pocket. "I knew you'd fix it."

"You don't know shit about me," I snarled in a mimic of what he'd said to me about Charlie's needs. "I could have died right there, and *you* would have been just as culpable."

"But you didn't," Reyes said, his tone indicating that it seemed simple, utterly black and white to him. "You can deny it all you want. Hurst was convinced of your ability to use your powers to heal others. He was already working on a protocol based on the hypothesis. He was going to use other PsyOps patients in the trial."

The idea made me absolutely sick to my stomach. How many people would have died during his torturous experiments? Because of *me*?

If that really was in motion, it was a damn blessing I'd "died" and Reyes had kidnapped me.

I was surprised by how even I was able to keep my voice when I responded. “Hurst was throwing shit at the wall and hoping it would stick. And you ate it up like a freaking psychopath.”

Charlie, who’d been volleying between us like an observer at a tennis match, held up a hand. “Wait...” He shook his head as if shaking off the final vestiges of being unconscious. His eyes sharpened more, focusing on me. “Let me get this straight. They chopped off your hand at that place?”

The brutal reminder stung. My wrist tingled at the incision mark, even though it was no longer there. Anybody looking at me wouldn’t see the scar, but I could see it.

I could *feel* it. A core wound, deep inside me, deeper than any scar could show on the outside.

“Yeah, they cut off my hand,” I admitted, cradling my right arm to my chest. “Without anesthesia.”

“And your liver...”

I nodded, carefully keeping my attention on him. I didn’t want to go back to that place in my mind. I didn’t want to see the stump where my hand should have been, or the slimy organ they’d pulled from my body and the way I’d begun to go faint almost instantaneously. Both times, there’d been so much blood. Both times, I could have bled out and died.

Both times, I thought I would die.

Both times... I wanted to.

Charlie stared at me in silence in for so long I almost thought he’d passed back out, even with his eyes open.

“You’re *going* to heal my brother,” Reyes snapped, grabbing me by the bicep and yanking me away from the cot. Away from Charlie’s probing gaze. “Then I’ll let you go. In the meantime, you can stay out of our business.”

We didn’t even make it to the door before Charlie snapped, “Dex. I want to speak to you alone. Please.”

Reyes’ fingers loosened on my arm, and he glanced back over his shoulder. The two men seemed to share some kind of

quiet communication, and then all the bluster faded from Reyes.

He let go of me and motioned to the greenhouse. “Go. Wait out there.”

I blinked at him. “In the greenhouse?”

“No, in outer space. Yes, in the greenhouse.” Reyes rolled his eyes, then stepped back and closed the door to the cold room in my face.

I stared at the splintered wood for several long seconds.

He’d left me alone in the greenhouse. With the big windows and the heavy metal patio furniture capable of breaking glass.

This was my one shot. And after what had just transpired, I intended to take it.



I left the cold room door, making a beeline toward what I thought was the external wall of the greenhouse, only to find myself back at the sink near the entrance into the house. The door that led into the house was wide open, but I knew all the bolts on the windows inside were locked, which meant no outlet there.

I shouldn't have been surprised to be turned around—the place was an honest to God jungle. Charlie had to have been cultivating this greenhouse for years, and the thought gave me pause, though it didn't stop me from turning a circle and hurrying toward the sitting area now that I had my bearings.

How lonely must he have been up here? From what I'd gathered, he'd never gone to college like me. Which meant no parties. No girls. He hadn't thrown back syrupy shots in a frat house and danced to bad hip hop all night. He hadn't sat at a local bar with his buddies to watch the Seminoles kick ass. He probably hadn't had a first date.

I mean... I hadn't really had one of those either, to be honest.

But I'd left my home to experience all of that and I had. To a point.

And all this time, Charlie had been up here at the top of the world. Alone with his plants and his pain and fevers so bad he slept in a ten degree room.

I grabbed the cushions off one of the heavy chairs and tossed them aside. I felt for Charlie—really, I did. But I knew

there was nothing I could do for him. I also knew Reyes would lock me away forever until I healed his brother. I couldn't do that; I *knew* it wasn't possible. And then what happened when Charlie finally died of his disease? Would I be blamed? Would Reyes kill me then, lost in his grief and fury?

I couldn't stay here.

Hefting the chair between my hands, I carried it to the wall of glass panes overlooking the ocean. In the time Charlie had taken me on a tour of his greenhouse, the sun had set outside, casting the world in darkness. I put the chair down and swiped at the condensation on the glass.

Nothing but pure black beyond the panes.

I can't go out there, I reasoned. It's pitch black. I bet it's sub-zero. How stupid would I be if I left the safety of warmth and light for that? If I survived the lab only to die in the Alaskan wilderness, I'd be the dumbest girl on Earth.

"Alaska," I muttered, kicking the chair. "Why did it have to be Alaska?"

Raised voices from the cold room met my ears. If I wasn't going to attempt to break a window and flee into the great beyond—literally—I'd at least let my curiosity get the best of me and go eavesdrop on the brothers.

This time, I knew better where I was going, though of course if I hadn't, I still could have followed the voices.

"You remember that time Shannon put that knife through your hand?" Charlie was saying as I walked up to the closed door.

"The one and only time," Reyes growled.

Shannon? Was that his ex? I placed my palm flat to the wall and pressed an ear against the cold frosted glass.

"Yeah, and after you punched her we ended up in that group home for eight months," Charlie snapped. "Because you can't control your temper."

"She stabbed me. What the hell do you want from me? *'Please, ma'am, can I have another?'*"

“She was a seventy-eight year old woman.”

“A seventy-eight year old psycho,” Reyes countered, “who had no business fostering kids.”

I pulled my hand away from the wall, heart skipping a beat. Charlie and Reyes were *foster* kids?

They were orphans. Like me.

But the foster system... God.

Back at school, Flora had told me horror stories about her little brother who'd been adopted out of the foster system. He'd been traumatized into muteness, and it had taken years for her parents to bring him out of that.

At least I had the love of a good family. Oka-san and Oto-san loved me no less than their own daughters.

Charlie was speaking again. “You fought back against Shannon. And you punched that guy who locked me in the closet. What was his name... Luther?”

“Screw that guy. I heard he ended up in prison for molesting another kid.”

“Jesus,” Charlie muttered. “I guess I got off easy.”

“Neither of us got off easy.”

A beat of silence passed. Neither of the shadows on the other side of the glass moved.

Charlie's tone had shifted to something darker when he spoke again. “I need you to be honest with yourself, Dex. How can you stomach what they did to her, knowing how we were abused by the system?”

“It's not the same,” Reyes said flippantly. “What they're doing at PsyOps is for the greater good of all.”

“It's not the Avengers, man,” Charlie countered. “They're not saving the world with a little property destruction in the process. Those doctors are hurting flesh and blood people. Hell, that literally goes against the Hippocratic oath, if you ask me. They're straight up criminals.”

“Every advancement has been built on the backs of human guinea pigs,” Reyes said. “You think the first human who ate poisonous mushrooms—and taught the rest of his tribe what not to eat—wanted to die?”

“That’s not the same, and you know it.”

“It *is* the same,” Reyes insisted. “We can’t advance as a society without getting our hands dirty.”

“You admit it’s dirty, then. What they did to her. What they’re doing to others?” His voice raised at the end of the sentence, posing a question.

Are they hurting others, too? he was asking.

I leaned in again, pressing my face against the glass. I knew they could see my shadow, same as I could see theirs, but I didn’t care. I didn’t want to miss his answer. He’d revealed Hurst’s plan to attempt using my powers on other PsyOps patients, but it hadn’t occurred to me, maybe naively, that those other patients might have been treated just as horrendously as me.

But Reyes glossed over the prompt. “What they’re doing is necessary. And I’m thankful I got to see it, because I got to see her in action. She’s incredible—wait till you see. She can fix you.”

Incredible. For my powers. For something I had no control over, no knowledge of beyond what I’d managed to teach myself to do.

I was flattered he thought so highly of me to kidnap me and force me into medical servitude.

“If she says she can’t, I believe her,” Charlie said firmly.

“Charl—“

“No, Dex. If I’m meant to die, that’s just the way things go,” Charlie said softly. “I know you don’t like to talk about it and you don’t want to hear it, but I have myeloma, Dex. I have a fifty percent chance of surviving another four years, and odds are, I won’t make it that far.”

His voice was so matter of fact. Cold, even. The fact that he'd held on to such an optimistic attitude for so long was sweet and spoke to his character in a way nothing else could.

Life was so unfair. Why did good people, *young* people with whole lives ahead of them, have to suffer?

You suffered too, Ky, I reminded myself.

But I didn't die. Charlie will.

Whether I try to heal him or not.

"You have to let go," Charlie added.

"Never."

"Let Ky go," Charlie went on as if he hadn't spoken. "She says she can't do it. She deserves to go home and live her life. What we're going through—that's not her problem."

"She can *cure* you. I don't have a single doubt."

Charlie's tone grew hard. "Because you watched her cure herself from torture?"

"It wasn't like th—"

"For you, maybe it was some great science experiment. Some great expansion of human knowledge. For Ky, it *was* torture. The worst kind of it."

His empathy touched me. Warmth unfurled in my core, and I turned my back on the cold room.

I didn't want to eavesdrop any longer. I didn't want to listen to what a strong, good person Charlie was, or how broken and desperate Reyes was to save his brother. Hearing that made me feel less like a victim, and I *was* the victim here. Losing hold of that inner pain, losing hold of that grudge against Reyes for what he'd done, would sap the winds from my sails.

It would take away my only reason for denying Charlie the compassion of at least *trying*.

I sank into a chair in the sitting area and stared blankly at the cushionless chair I'd left next to the glass windows. It was

my ticket out of here. I could swing that sucker, break the glass, be home free. Maybe even go find Reyes' keys, steal the truck, safely get the hell out of the state.

Or I could try to heal Charlie.

If Charlie would die anyway... I could *try*. What was the harm?

But just the thought made old wounds and panic bubble up inside me.

I was still sitting there a few moments later when Reyes shuffled into view through the hanging leaves. He stopped across from me and noted the cushions on the floor and the chair sitting catty corner near the windows.

He smirked. "You must think I'm an idiot."

"The thought crossed my mind."

He stared at me with those dark, emotionless eyes. Not for the first time, I saw him as inhuman—nothing more than a statue. A beautiful statue someone had hewn from rock and left to haunt the world.

Finally, he said, "Charlie's going to sleep in the cold room tonight."

I nodded, unsure why he was even telling me.

"You should get some sleep. We get up early in this house."

I shrugged. "Yeah. Fine."

In the blink of an eye, he picked up the chair and swung it with all his strength at the glass.

My whole body tensed, ready for the crash.

It didn't come.

The chair bounced off the glass with a dull thunk. He tossed it aside, swiped his hands together, and said, "Reinforced bullet proof polycarbonate. A for effort, Katana."

Then he stalked away, leaving me sitting alone in the greenhouse.

A prisoner.



I was awake at the bedroom window, watching the thick darkness outside and wishing the sun would rise to chase it away, when the external lock on my door clicked open.

I ducked back through the protection of the curtains and glanced at the glowing digital clock on the nightstand: just past five a.m. My bedsheets lay rumpled from my sleepless night, the warm down comforter dangling off the bed and spilling like a waterfall onto the floor. My nest of pillows still outlined the indentation of my body, though they hadn't done me any good when I was tossing and turning, still fuming over the way Reyes had treated me.

I considered leaping across the room, diving into those pillows, and yanking the covers over my head to pretend to be asleep. To avoid having to see either of the other human beings in this house. To not have to pretend to be okay with this situation. To just be left alone with my regrets and bitterness and sense of negative self-worth.

But even though the thought occurred to me, my body didn't act fast enough.

I peeked through the curtains shrouding me as the door opened.

Reyes appeared in the doorway, haloed by the hallway chandelier and looking sleep rumpled and sexy. His short hair stuck up on one side, and his sweatpants hung dangerously low on his hips, revealing the taut V of his ab muscles.

No shirt.

The bastard.

He looked at the empty bed, his brows drawing together, before he glanced around the room to seek me out. Our gazes met, though I stayed within the comfort of the curtains.

I carefully kept my eyes on his face, though it was a near fight to not let them drift southward. “Oh, is the prisoner free to move about the house?”

He swiped at his stubble, his lips tightening. “It’s too early for your shit, Katana. Charlie made breakfast. Come eat.”

Then he vanished without another word.

Good riddance.

Though he *had* said the *only* thing that would have made me leave this room: breakfast.

The turkey sandwich I’d made myself before bed—under Reyes’ watchful eye—had worn off somewhere between one lost sleep cycle and the next. I’d awakened with hunger pains almost worse than I ever felt at the lab. Hurst hadn’t exactly fed me well while I was imprisoned, but at some point, the hunger disappeared under the chaos of being tortured and experimented on like a lab rat.

So while the turkey sandwich had been absolutely delicious, it hadn’t really quelled the ache I had for something warm on my bones. In fact, eating it had only made me want *more* food. I was ravenous to eat everything I possibly could, especially with my need for sustenance in order for my natural healing abilities to work at peak efficiency.

I felt ten times better than I felt when I went to bed last night, but I hadn’t hit one hundred percent yet.

Shoving aside the curtains with a sigh, I looked around for some kind of shoes but came up empty. I was still in my borrowed henley and sweats from Charlie, though in the middle of the night when the cold had really set in—physically and metaphorically—I tossed a robe from the closet over the whole lot and tied it at the waist. I checked the knot now to ensure it was still holding strong, then I left the bedroom bare foot, casting one last look at the bed that had let me down.

I descended the stairs and passed through the hall of the quiet, empty house. Warmth and delicious scents spilled from the kitchen before I even made it to the doorway. My mouth began to water.

Charlie sat at a pale oak kitchen table, his hand wrapped around a coffee mug and the newspaper open on the table before him, next to a plate left with nothing but crumbs. To his right, another plate soaked in crumbs and syrup sat beside a half-drunk cup of coffee.

Clearly, Reyes had decided to eat before he released me from my cage.

“Good morning, Starfish,” Charlie said, his eyes crinkling into his wide smile. “How’d you sleep?”

I paused just inside the door, stunned by his nickname. My markings almost seemed to pulse in response, as if the reminder made me instantly aware of them. But not in the usual way, when I hated my starfish-shaped blemishes and wanted to carve them off my skin.

His nickname instilled an odd kind of affection in me for my markings.

Despite the warmth that rose in my chest, I carefully kept a neutral expression.

Charlie hadn’t kidnapped me, but he was still complicit.

“I didn’t sleep as well as I thought I would,” I told him, falling back into that brutal honesty he seemed to stir in me. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. It always passes,” he assured me. He pointed at a towel-covered dish on the table. “Pancakes. There’s maple syrup and blackberry jam. Coffee in the brewer on the counter.”

I went for the coffee first, drawn by the strong, earthy scent. I’d never had coffee before leaving Aether. The clan didn’t believe in mood altering substances—they saw such things as obstacles to connecting with the gods, so herbal teas and meditation had been our drug of choice.

After my first sip of a Starbucks latte in the Narita International Airport the day I left Aether, I had to disagree with my old clan. Espresso had me seeing God in *everything*.

Several mugs waited on the counter. I took my pick, choosing a plain white mug that said GLOCK in giant black letters and filling it nearly to the brim, then I carried it to the seat across from Charlie. An empty place setting already waited for me.

“You like cream or sugar?” he asked, gently nudging a silver serving tray towards me. A small pitcher of cream and a matching dish of sugar cubes rested on a mirrored surface, complete with tongs.

I couldn’t help but feel outside my own skin. Charlie was being the consummate host—friendly, inviting, accommodating. I felt like a friend who’d been invited over for a casual meal together. He’d brought out a *tea set*.

But the reality was so much darker.

I wasn’t a guest. I was the victim of a kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment.

It was so bizarre... so *uncomfortable*.

And this situation in particular was even more confusing because being in Charlie’s presence didn’t bother me the way I wanted it to.

As if he could sense my thoughts, Charlie closed his newspaper, his gaze remaining on the small black and white print as he laid it carefully on the tabletop next to his plate. “I just... I don’t want you to hate us, Ky.”

I reached for the tongs and chose a sugar cube, then dropped it in my coffee before I said, “I don’t hate you.”

Unfortunately, he picked up on my subtlety.

“I don’t want you to hate *Dex*, either,” Charlie said pointedly.

I raised an eyebrow, putting the tongs back and swapping for the cream pitcher. “Too late.”

“He means well.”

“I’m an orphan, too,” I said, tugging the towel off the pancakes. “You don’t see me kidnapping women.”

“He’s not an orphan,” Charlie said quietly. “I mean yeah, his ma’s dead. Overdose when he was nine. But our dad’s doing hard time. Forty years for dealing.”

“Pot?” I asked, aghast at the length of the sentence.

“Heroin,” Charlie corrected me. “He laced it with stuff he shouldn’t have. A lot of people died.”

“Oh.” I stared down at the two pancakes I’d picked off the top of the golden pile. I didn’t want to feel sorry for Reyes. I didn’t want to feel inspired by the fact he’d come from *that* only to rise up, get a good job with the US military, and buy this beautiful home to take care of his kid brother.

I blinked, raising my gaze to Charlie. “You said ‘his’ mom.”

Charlie shrugged. “Different moms. Same deadbeat dad. It’s the reason we’ve been able to stay together all this time.”

“And *your* mom?”

“No idea. She dropped me on my aunt when I was baby. Nobody ever saw her again. I ended up in the system before Dex, then the system brought us together. One thing they got right, I guess.”

I upended the syrup bottle over my pancakes as an excuse to avoid his searching gaze.

A part of me had always felt slighted by the universe that my biological parents had been taken from me so young. Oka-san and Oto-san never kept my past from me, telling me up front that I came from a line of powerful alt-race people who had led private lives in the mountains. Unfortunately, my people had been *so* private that my adoptive family knew nothing about them, and therefore nothing about my healing abilities. Not even enough to help me hone my powers or fully understand my capabilities.

Despite all that, however, I'd been lucky. Lucky to have them. Lucky to be loved as much as they'd loved their own two daughters. Lucky to have survived the cataclysm that destroyed my clan, lucky to have been found wandering shoeless by Oto-san.

Lucky.

And sometime in the past few years, I'd forgotten how lucky I was and started dreaming of something more, as if what I had at home wasn't enough. My sojourn at the lab felt like karma coming into play.

"You should try your pancakes with jam," Charlie said with a smile. He picked up the small jar and held it out. "It levels up the taste, I'm telling you. It's local too. Dex picks it up at the farmer's market."

The label was handwritten and numbered. I hesitated, but ultimately reached out and accepted the jar with a pang of homesickness.

Summer began with plum season.

I knew warm weather had finally come to stay when the smell of boiling plums filled the house. I'd wake up at the crack of dawn to the tart, fruity scent on the air, beckoning me, and I'd race Etsuko to the kitchen. I'd beat her, being taller and longer-legged, but Oka-san always made sure there were enough plums for both of us to mill. Hikari, three years older than us, always pulled the covers over her head and rolled her eyes at us for being "dumb babies."

But those moments in the kitchen with Oka-san and Etsuko were magical. The heat from the stove. The humid scent of plums, purple on the air, touched by pounds and pounds of sugar. Sunshine crawling lazily across the stone floor, and the cat asleep, following the light as it moved, as we poured jars and jars of our mother's special recipe to take for sale to the market.

Those days were so pure.

Pure like Charlie.

I hadn't realized I'd stopped with my knife just chilling in the jam jar until he said, "Ky? Are you okay?"

I shook off the weight of memories and dug the knife deeper. "Fine. Just thinking of home. My mom makes a delicious plum jam."

"I don't think I've ever had plum jam," Charlie said. "I'd love to try that one day. Your mom's jam."

I paused briefly in my slathering and swallowed back my surprise.

He... expected us to stay in touch?

My confusion continued to mount in his presence. Mainly because, at the idea, I thought I'd like to keep in touch with Charlie, too. And that was a wild, wacky thought to have considering the circumstances.

I finished covering the pancakes with the blackberry jam and then dug in. A comfortable silence fell between us broken only by the clang of my fork on my plate and the soft swish of Charlie's newspaper.

Mornings at home were like this too. Oto-san didn't care much for newspapers, because the news outside Aether had no bearing in our slow, isolated world, but Oka-san loved her magazines. She'd flick through thick pages covered in celebrity gossip, sipping her jasmine tea while Oto-san polished off a plate of rice, nori, and kobachi, small plates of vegetables—a light breakfast before he went to work in the fields. When our bellies were full, we'd go to the family altar together, all five of us, and perform our daily prayers to the gods, asking for blessings on ourselves and the world at large.

Oka-san always said a little extra prayer for whatever celebrity had gotten themselves into trouble in her magazines. I used to think it was so dumb—those celebrities had everything they could ever possibly need. In retrospect, I realized Oka-san didn't pray for them because she was starstruck. She prayed for them because they *didn't* have the fulfillment of life like we did in Aether.

She thought they had a definite lack and needed guidance.

I glanced up at Charlie, wondering if he prayed. If he believed in something outside himself, something that gave him comfort at the thought of his impending death. The chandelier over the table cast a soft amber glow over him, turning his wavy brown hair into a shimmering halo of riotous curls. His long dark lashes blinked against his dark skin, and the scruff on his face made his wholesome, boyish good looks balance into something harsher.

He glanced up and caught me staring. Flashing a grin, he asked, “Do I have egg on my face?”

“What? Uh, no. You had eggs?” I glanced at his plate, realizing for the first time that there was no syrup there.

“I can’t have pancakes,” he told me with a shrug. “Anything inflammatory like gluten or cheese just puts me back in the cold room.”

“Oh. You can’t have *cheese*?”

He laughed. “Don’t look so horrified. I’m used to it.”

“Seems kind of unfair that you cook pancakes for someone else and can’t eat them yourself.”

Charlie flipped the page in his paper, smiling down at the headlines. “I take care of Dex, he takes care of me.”

“He doesn’t deserve you.”

“Maybe,” Charlie agreed with surprising honesty. “But he’s my family.”

The man in question appeared in the kitchen doorway, looking dangerous in black jeans and a long sleeved black thermal. He glowered at us as he crossed the kitchen floor in his thick black boots, then ripped open a cabinet and extracted a thermos.

“I’m going to go fix the window on the truck,” he said without looking back at us. “Spiny over there shattered it with her head yesterday, and we’ve got weather moving in tonight.”

“Spiny?” Charlie asked, amused.

“Yeah. Like a cactus, right?” Reyes poured the last of the coffee from the pot into the thermos. “A spiny pain in my ass.”

To me, Charlie said, “Is your head all right? I’ve got Tylenol.”

“I’m fine,” I assured him.

Reyes capped his thermos and glowered at me. “She may look sweet and innocent, but don’t let that fool you,” he warned his brother. “She’s enterprising and resilient.”

“I’m surprised you even know the meaning of such big words,” I retorted.

He offered me a pointed glare, then tossed his coffee back for a swig.

Honestly, I wasn’t surprised he drank his coffee black. Like his soul.

Regardless of whether or not Reyes *did* have a soul, the idea occurred to me that if I could somehow convince him to let me come with to the outside world, I might be able to formulate a getaway plan.

“Can I come?” I asked.

He cradled the thermos against his chest and appraised me. “Why?”

“Because you have me locked up like a prisoner, and I love the ocean.”

“Nah, that’s not it,” he countered. “You think you can try to find a way to escape.”

Charlie sucked in a breath. “Jesus, Dex. Don’t be an ass.”

Reyes shook his head and started for the door. “I don’t think you need to go anywhere.”

“Let her get some fresh air,” Charlie insisted. “It won’t hurt anything.”

“Have you seen my face?” Reyes pointed at the fresh butterfly tape on his forehead gash. Bruising colored half his

forehead. “I haven’t hurt her once. But she beat the shit out of me.”

I smirked, looking down at my plate to sop up more syrup for my next bite.

“Dex.”

“Charlie,” Reyes said, mocking his brother’s exasperated tone. He eyed me shrewdly. “Fine. You can come. But I’m handcuffing you to the damn car.”



Charlie loaned me an old pair of Wellies and several sets of warm woolen socks. Three pairs added enough width to my long thin feet to keep the boots on, and I slipped into a borrowed hoodie, gloves, and beanie, along with one of Charlie's coats.

It hadn't flown by my notice that when it came to me needing something, Charlie was the one who provided. Not Reyes. Even though he was the older brother—and he was the one who'd dragged me here. If it were up to him, I'd probably have stayed in the scraps of cloth Hurst put me in, locked in the bedroom until I agreed to do what he wanted.

Charlie, on the other hand, was a normal human who knew how to do normal human things like accommodate guests with normal human necessities.

I followed Reyes outside into the growing dawn light, sucking in a breath at the blast of arctic wind that cut through every layer on my body. My hands and feet immediately began to tingle with the memory of my hypothermic adventures the day before, so I shoved my hands deep into the pockets on the coat and burrowed my face into my scarf.

Plastic sheeting had been tossed over the broken truck window, presumably to keep the window from breaking all the way and letting the elements in overnight. Reyes opened the door and extracted the plastic, tossing it aside, then he snatched my left hand and clapped one wrist in handcuffs.

“Hey!” I said, jerking my hand in his grasp. I hadn't even seen him pull the handcuffs out, he'd moved so fast.

Reyes cocked his head, staring at me point blank as he snapped the other cuff to the ring formed by the door latch. “Did I stutter?”

I hadn’t actually thought he’d been serious about handcuffing me, but I should have realized he meant it. The man had carried me out of the government laboratory in a body bag, after all.

Reyes patted the handcuff connected to the door, his face dimpling with his grin. “Let’s see you get out of this.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned back against the side of the truck, as far as I could get with my hand tethered to the door. Reyes set to work demolishing the shattered window, while I looked out over the ocean on the horizon, wishing I could just go down to that rocky beach and get away from him.

I’d gone surfing the day I jumped off the balcony in Panama City. Two of Flora’s guy friends, Trevor and Noah, had announced they were going to grab some waves, and I’d been quick to ask if I could come, too. They hadn’t seemed too keen on the weird foreign chick coming along, but when we got out there and I wiped the ocean floor with their asses, they picked up a little more respect for me.

I think. I ended up in a coma four hours later, so I never got confirmation beyond the dozen high fives and impressed catcalls I’d gotten during our two hours together.

Staring out over the open Alaskan ocean, I thought, *I’d give anything to be on that water. Cold or not.*

As Reyes swiped a gloved hand over the broken glass, he said, “I don’t get why you won’t just give it your best effort.”

I stared at him, feeling like I’d walked into a conversation that had started without me. “What?”

“Healing Charlie.”

I buried my chin in my borrowed coat. It was Charlie’s, and it smelled like him: earthy and sweet. The phantom of his presence calmed me some. Enough that the irritated squiggle between Reyes’ thick dark eyebrows didn’t make me want to punch him.

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“No, you don’t,” he agreed, kicking the glass away from the door. He pulled it wider, and I had to move with him to stand in the yard while he started unscrewing bolts on the inside panel. “But doesn’t Charlie deserve help?”

My gut reaction was an automatic *yes*.

Charlie deserved more than his lot in life. He deserved to be healthy. To not be locked up in this house at the top of the world, isolated and cold, the way I’d spent my entire life locked up in Aether, isolated in a forest in the middle of nowhere.

Reyes went on. “He’s a good kid. One of the best. Honestly, I think if you don’t help him, you’re a sick monster.”

I scoffed and tried to cross my arms over my chest, forgetting momentarily I was tied up like a pitbull on a backyard leash. “*I’m* a monster? You’re the sick one. You watched them murder me and then kidnapped my body.”

Reyes straightened and pointed the screwdriver at me. “You weren’t dead. And I didn’t kidnap you.”

“Your understanding of English is lacking,” I retorted. “And I’m the one who’s English as a second language.”

He rolled his eyes and stripped off his leather jacket, baring his thick biceps beneath his tight thermal shirt. He crouched to take hold of the door panel and lifted it off, muscles bulging.

I looked at the ocean in a bad attempt to hide my salivating.

Dex Reyes was a monster, but he was a *really* sexy monster. My knee-jerk attraction to him was just as confusing as my affection for Charlie.

“I know you don’t believe me,” I said, tucking my one hand deeper into Charlie’s pocket while the fingers of my cuffed hand froze, “but I’ve never been able to heal another person.”

Reyes huffed as he set the panel down against the rear gate of the truck. I tried my best not to notice how tight his blue jeans were, or how thick his hips and thighs were, now that they weren't covered by his jacket.

"Come on," he said, wiping his hands on his jeans as he returned to the dismembered door. "You could *try*."

"I have tried," I snapped.

His head swiveled, and he stared at me. Hard. "You have?"

I grabbed hold of the handcuffs chain with my tethered hand, giving it a tug. Not that I could escape or anything, but because I didn't want to look into his eyes or hold his gaze. I didn't want to see his pity or feel like there might be anything resembling compassion inside him.

"When I was twelve," I mumbled, "my best friend was hit by a car."

Reyes stood in my periphery, fully facing me now.

I continued staring at the handcuff chain.

"We were walking on the road," I said, remembering the day as plain as if it had been yesterday. It had rained all night. Heavy monsoons that had left standing water all over the plains and the forest. We were carting bags of apples to the general store where the Aether bartered with one another for things they needed. "A car full of tourists was passing through. They'd gotten turned around. Ended up on private land. One deep puddle, and they spun out. Right into Kimi."

The car had been so silent. When I thought of car wrecks, I thought of screeching metal and tires, but it wasn't. Just the swish of tires on the sodden road, the splash of a puddle, and then Kimi's body slamming into the hood with a dull, wet *thunk*.

The car passed so close to me that it jostled my coat. It could have been me.

It should have been me.

In the moment, I froze. I watched her body sail through the air and slam into a tree. She slumped to the ground like a

broken doll. The car spun out and came to a stop, and I glided to Kimi on feet I barely recognized, feeling like I'd fallen into a dream.

She'd been conscious. Struggling to breathe. Her limbs at odd angles and blood bubbling from her lips.

I kept those details to myself, though.

Out loud, I said, "I tried to save her. I did my best, and it wasn't enough. She died in my arms."

Reyes swore under his breath and swiped a hand through his hair, looking away from me, looking out over the ocean. "Damn, Katana. I'm... I'm sorry."

Don't say that, I thought, cringing. I don't want to believe you mean it.

"It was the gods' timing," I said, parroting something I'd heard my parents say over and over in the days after. When I wouldn't get out of bed. When I couldn't stop crying or screaming or begging the gods for answers.

It's the gods' timing, Kita.

The gods are in control, Kita.

We are simply leaves in the gods' winds, Kita.

I'd railed against the gods ever since. I'd railed against the idea that we were hopelessly flawed and at the utter mercy of beings we couldn't even see. Maybe that was when the detachment began—when I could no longer worship with my pious clan or believe that silent pacifism and relinquishing to the gods' whims was the pinnacle of existence.

Maybe that was when I'd fallen out of favor with the Aether and started dreaming of something more.

Reyes hadn't moved, still standing between the door and the passenger seat.

Suddenly, strong arms encircled me from behind. I tensed, terror shooting through me, but on the heels of my fight or flight response to being touched without warning, I got a whiff of Charlie. The scent from the jacket I wore, only stronger.

Charlie turned me into his hug, holding me tight. “I am so sorry that happened in front of you. I can’t imagine how you felt or how that’s affected you ever since.”

I was too shocked to lift my untethered arm and return the hug. I just stood there, wide-eyed, the ocean like a silver mirror beneath a choppy gray sky behind him.

“You need something?” Reyes asked.

Charlie’s voice rumbled through my chest as he replied, “Yeah, my hibiscus needs to be repotted.”

“You say these things like I have any idea what the hell you mean,” Reyes replied, amusement lacing his tone.

He released me, and I blinked up at him, trying to find the ability to say *thank you*. But I couldn’t find my voice. Old tears lodged in my throat, a lump I couldn’t swallow.

Charlie looked past me at his brother. “All the bigger planters are in the loft. I didn’t think it was wise to climb a ladder today.”

“Smart move,” Reyes replied. “I’m glad you came to me.”

I glanced over to see him toss down the screwdriver. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the handcuff key to unlock me. The warmth of his skin seeped into mine as he unlocked the cuff, his fingers so close to mine it was almost like he held my hand.

I didn’t like how his ability to be tender and giving to Charlie brought up feelings in me. He’d taken a whole panel off the car and was in the middle of a major repair, but the minute Charlie asked for help, Reyes jumped. It seemed so counterintuitive to who Reyes was as a person, but knowing their background together—and Reyes being the older sibling, always looking out for the younger—I guess it only made sense that he’d picked up the habit. Especially when they were young and being raised by inattentive or downright abusive foster parents. Add his illness on top of everything else, and seeking to keep Charlie healthy and happy just felt normal.

I was the idiot who found Reyes’ attentiveness sexy. At the same time, I’d started growing the same inner need to keep

Charlie happy, too.

Twenty four hours with these two had sent my entire state of being into confusion.

Charlie tossed an arm around my shoulder and steered me back toward the house. “Sorry to interrupt your fresh air.”

I leaned into him, thankful for his borrowed heat. “No apology necessary. You probably saved your brother from a ruthless murder.”

Charlie laughed. “I don’t think you could murder someone.”

“You don’t really know me,” I pointed out. “Maybe I’m a killer already.”

Or maybe if I wasn’t given my rightful freedom soon... I would be.



I hadn't noticed the "loft" the night before. Though, to be fair, I'd still been a little shell-shocked at the evening's events, so noticing the smaller details hadn't been a priority.

The little alcove was situated above the entry door to the greenhouse, a simple open attic-type space that appeared to be crammed full of old planters. Dex dragged a ladder from the corner and opened it, then climbed up.

Charlie craned his head back as he said, "It's got a crack in the side. Red color. Like blood. There might still be dirt in it."

Reyes leaned on the rung of the ladder and raised an eyebrow at his brother. "You can't just use the closest one?"

"I need the red one."

Reyes sighed but he latched on to the ladder and continued climbing.

Charlie winked at me. "He doesn't understand how much attention to detail is necessary to keep these plants alive."

"Probably the same attention to detail he gives you?"

Charlie laughed, a low, sweet sound. "You aren't wrong, Starfish."

While Reyes started digging through planters above us, Charlie leaned against the edge of the work table and brushed both hands back through his soft waves.

"You look tired," I said. "Have you had enough sleep? Do you need to hydrate?"

Charlie chuckled. “Speaking of attention to detail. You’ve been here less than a day and you’re as bad as he is.”

My cheeks flamed. “Sorry. I just... It’s easy to forget to take care of yourself.”

He reached out and thumbed my chin, his gaze thoughtful. “I appreciate your concern. Exhaustion is just a normal way of life for me.”

Even though his hand fell away almost instantly, my chin tingled from his brief, cold touch. The chill in his fingertip assured me he wasn’t currently running a fever—hopefully—and the casual way he touched me, however briefly, felt warm. Comforting.

The ladder clattered as Reyes began to back down it, cradling a large red planter against his body with one arm. “This it?”

Charlie straightened and took two steps forward to reach for the planter. “Yes. Perfect.”

Once he had the planter in hand, I followed him to the end of the work bench where a bag of soil sat beside several trowels, a watering can, and various other gardening tools. The plant to be rehomed sat in a much smaller pot on the table, little sproutlings spilling around the edges. Having a bit of a background with plants from growing up Aether, even I could see the plant had outgrown its walls.

Charlie set the new planter on the floor, then cursed low under his breath. “I forgot the scraps from the kitchen. I was going to add them to the composter, maybe throw a couple eggshells in the planter with the hibiscus.”

“Eggshells?” I asked.

He nodded. “If you bury eggshells with your plant, it adds nutrients to the soil without waiting on the carbonation process with the composting system.”

“I’ll go get them for you,” I offered. “Where is it?”

As Charlie explained to me where to find his bucket of scraps, and where he’d left that morning’s eggshells, I noticed

Reyes watching me carefully from the corner of my eye. Before I left the room, I glanced at him to gauge his mood, wondering if I'd done something to piss him off yet again.

But there was a different light to his eye. Something softer, more thoughtful.

I couldn't overthink *that* situation, for sure.

The house hung heavy and quiet as I hurried through the mud room and down the short passage to the kitchen. I gathered the sour-smelling red bucket of compost scraps from beneath the kitchen sink, then nabbed four eggshells out of a bowl on the back of the sink. I paused, caught by the sight outside the window above the faucet: the ocean beneath pure white sunlight.

The clouds had parted, allowing a shaft of vivid light to splash down upon the choppy waves. I stared at it for a long minute, mesmerized, before I shook off the reverie and turned around to go back.

Reyes stood in the kitchen doorway.

We stared at each other in silence for a long, long minute.

Without speaking, he crossed to me and reached for the handle of the bucket.

Irritated, I snapped, "You didn't trust me to do this *one* thing?"

His fingers closed over mine where they were wrapped around the plastic handle. I tried to tug away from his grasp, but he locked me in with his tight grip.

Then pulled me closer until we were chest to chest.

I leaned back, shocked at the intimacy. He wasn't much taller than me, so we were on the same level and nearly eye to eye.

His lips were entirely too close.

"I trusted you to do as Charlie asked," he said, voice low. His breath brushed across my lips as his gaze searched mine. "You listen to him better than you listen to me."

“*He* didn’t kidnap me,” I snapped, channeling my emotions into anger.

Because I didn’t want to acknowledge what his touch was raising in me. Desire, hot and real, spreading through my body like lava.

Everything about Dex Reyes was a red flag. His ability to kidnap a woman, not to mention his ease at watching people be tortured in the name of “science.” His quick temper, his surliness, his sarcasm. None of it endeared me to him. On the contrary, every bit of it infuriated me beyond measure and made me want to pummel him with the nearest blunt object.

But his fingers on mine... His body pressed against me, his muscular leg easing between my thighs with that godawful proprietary arrogance...

The rush felt as heady as the pot I smoked the night I nearly died in the pool.

Guys like Reyes were bad news, and girls like me were the paper on which they printed their lies.

Reyes leaned in to my ear. “Maybe one day you’ll like me as much as you like him.”

“I won’t be here long enough,” I retorted, ashamed at the breathlessness in my voice.

Reyes slipped his fingers between mine and took hold of the bucket, pulling it from my grasp as he stepped back. His warmth vanished in an instant, and the cold of the kitchen rushed into the space he’d occupied.

“Don’t forget the eggshells,” he said, then turned and left.

I remained rooted to the floor, clutching the eggshells so hard in one hand that they cracked into shards. A shiver worked its way through my body.

What the hell had brought on *that*?

I swiveled on wobbly legs and dropped the eggshells on the counter—slightly more crushed than before. I turned on the water in the kitchen sink, then splashed my face liberally in a vain attempt to forget the sensation of his breath on my

lips. Reyes made me feel out of control, like he was a train without brakes speeding toward me on the tracks and I didn't have the strength to leap out of the way in time.

If I didn't pull myself together, he'd run me through and leave me to die.

Back in the greenhouse, Charlie was already elbow deep in the new planter, smoothing dirt around the hibiscus sprouts. Reyes stood beside him dumping trowels of soil into the old planter to fill the space the roots had once filled.

Reyes looked up and raised an eyebrow. "You get lost?"

"Yeah, somewhere in the desert," I shot back. "When some psychopath kidnapped me."

Reyes rolled his eyes and dug into the bag for more soil. "I'm getting tired of being accused of kidnapping."

"Well, you did," I replied, at the same moment Charlie said, "You *did* kidnap her, Dex."

We exchanged a look, and the gentle smile on Charlie's face helped soothe my ruffled feathers. He bumped me with an elbow and offered me a wink before he bent back low over his hibiscus.

Reyes glanced between us, his eyes hooded and dark. He pointed the gardening trowel at me. "Don't test me, Katana."

I rolled my eyes and picked up a trowel of my own, mimicking his threat. "I'm not scared of you, Reyes."

The thought occurred to me that I could probably do some damage with a gardening trowel. For a small tool, the tip of the pointed shovel head was mighty sharp. I could shove it in his eye. Or his jugular. Charlie would be too surprised, too shocked, to even react—maybe even too weak and sick to try to stop me. But even the thought of doing something so violent in front of Charlie's sweetness left a sour taste in my mouth.

Not to mention, I still wouldn't be able to get out of the damn house with that year 3000 security system.

Reyes took a step forward, the trowel waving menacingly. But before he could say anything, Charlie batted at his hand.

“Don’t be like that, Dex,” Charlie chastised. “Breathe. In and out, man. You’re getting worked up again. You want another episode like last night?”

Reyes’ dark gaze slid away from me, and he met Charlie’s eye. Tossing the gardening trowel down on the counter, he turned on a heel and stalked away.

A moment later, the door into the house slammed shut.

“He gets into moods,” Charlie explained.

“He’s an ass,” I countered. “That’s not a ‘mood.’ It’s a whole lifestyle.”

“He’s just high strung and needs deescalation. Once you know him, it’s easy to keep him in line. He’ll never admit it, but that’s my job, I think. Balance out the tension in him, keep him steady.”

I nodded and grabbed another handful of dirt from the bag to add to the container Reyes had left behind. In that way, Charlie reminded me of my family. Of the whole Aether clan, really. Pacifism was a core tenet of their belief system, so most carried an unwillingness to engage in confrontation and a sincere talent at deescalation. They never started fights—not with each other, and not with outsiders. They truly believed that all of humanity’s problems could be solved by communication and compassion.

While on the surface, the idea seemed naive or too wholesome to be true, at the root of it, sometimes I thought they were right. And watching the way Charlie could so carefully maneuver his brother through his “moods” only added to my suspicion that my family had been right all along.

I’d been the one who lost my way.

“There’s something about you that triggers him,” Charlie went on as he carefully snipped a dead leaf off the plant in my container.

I shot him an irritated glance. “*I* trigger *him*? I’m the one who should be freaking triggered. He committed a felony against me.”

Charlie nodded once, a smile quirking one side of his lips. “I don’t mean it like that. I just mean, I think maybe you remind him of his mom. Obviously I never knew her, but from his stories, I can tell she was pretty strong willed and independent.”

“Aren’t most girls nowadays?” Then I amended my statement to add, “At least most girls in the modern world, anyway.”

My little sister, Etsuko, could have never been called strong willed or independent. She’d been the perfect daughter all my life—calm, quiet, studious, obedient. Hikari, our elder sister, had been the same, though she’d had a lot more personality. I’d done my best to imitate them both. To be the kind of woman the Aether expected. But at the end of the day, maybe there was just too much of my natural clan in me.

Of course, I could only guess at that, given that I knew nothing about my people.

Only that I never quite fit in with the Aether, no matter how hard I tried.

You didn’t fit in at school, either, I reminded myself.

Charlie smoothed the dirt on the planter in front of me. “I don’t know that anybody is quite like you, Starfish. You’re one of a kind.”

I stared up at him, startled. For the briefest moment, I actually thought he could read my mind and he was agreeing with my train of thought.

The back of his neck turned pink, the flush rising in his cheeks dark enough to be seen under his caramel complexion.

He was *complimenting* me.

Being different... was a compliment.

“You don’t really know me,” I said.

“I feel like I do. I know things that matter,” he said. “Not the dumb stuff that people talk about like ‘what’s your favorite color’ or ‘are you a fan of Harry Potter.’ I’ve seen more real stuff about you than that.”

This time, my cheeks were the skin growing hot. I smoothed my trowel over the full pile of dirt in the planter. “Green is my favorite color. And yes, I love Harry Potter.”

We exchanged smiles briefly, then both of us turned back to our planters.

“I’m sorry for everything,” Charlie murmured, setting his trowel aside. “Trust me, I’m appalled that Dex dragged you into our problems. I hope you can find it in yourself to understand why he did what he did.”

“You could let me go,” I said softly. “There are screens in your cold room. I could cut one and get out.”

Charlie patted at the dirt with both hands, a muscle working in his forehead. His usual sparkling eyes and constant smile had vanished. “I don’t want this anymore than you do,” he said. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure Dex lets you go home. As soon as possible. But I can’t just let you run, Ky. It’s dangerous out there.”

“I survived torture. I think I can survive the Alaskan wilderness.”

He reached into the bag of fertilized dirt and extracted another giant cup of it, then sprinkled it on top of the planter. His next words seemed slow. Careful. “Look... I intend to keep you safe. I don’t expect anything from you with your powers. I believe you about... you know. Kimi.”

I looked up to meet his eye, surprised. “You remembered her name.”

His eyebrows knitted together. “Of course I do. I mean, I know you weren’t talking to me when you told the story, but I listened. And she deserves to be called by name to honor her. She lived once. And if no one has told you before, you are *not* the reason she’s gone.”

I swallowed back a rising lump in my throat.

My voice came out small. Broken. “Why can’t I just go?”

Charlie wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tugged me into him. He rested his chin on my head, reminding me he

was tall enough to do so, and against my better judgment, I sank into him and returned the hug. The scent of him surrounded me, and he smelled earthy, like the Aether forest after a long, cleansing rain.

“When it’s safe,” he promised. “You can go when it’s safe. The weather moving in... It’s the type that kills people, Ky. And the thing is... I kind of like you. Okay?”

I nodded, my face pressed against his soft t-shirt. Despite myself, I didn’t want the hug to end, even though I knew he was just saying whatever he needed to say to appease me.

“My favorite color is purple,” he told me, voice rumbling through my chest. “Like your starfish.”

I wrapped my arms tighter around him.

“‘Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times’,” Charlie murmured.

“‘If one only remembers to turn on the light,’” I finished. “Dumbledore.”

“Good man.”

Like you, I thought, though I didn’t say it out loud.

Dumbledore did a lot of things wrong, a lot of things he maybe wasn’t so proud of, for the good of the wizarding world.

No matter what argument I posed to Charlie, he’d continue to follow along with Reyes just to keep the status quo, exactly as the Aether clan had done for thousands of years. He’d keep me imprisoned because I was safer here than out there, and that was the right thing to do—keeping me safe, even at the expense of my happiness.

And Reyes? He’d never let me go—not until I did what he commanded and attempted to heal his brother.

I knew if I tried, it would bring back the trauma of attempting to heal Kimi. I knew I couldn’t fix Charlie, but what I *didn’t* know, was if I could hurt him in the process.

Because Kimi didn’t stop breathing until I tried to fix her.

I'd carried that guilt for years.

So, if I wanted out of this mess—if I wanted a chance to go home—it was up to me.

The only option I had left was pain. My best bet for freedom would be to find the right moment and harm *myself*—something they would never see coming.



The snow began after midnight. Sleep eluded me after the night's revelations and events, so encased in the curtains with the cold emanating from the glass in front of me, I watched the first of the flurries begin to flutter over the ocean like falling stars in the darkness outside.

My mind kept turning over and over that moment in the kitchen with Reyes. The way he'd pressed against me, all hard muscles and bad boy charm. The way he'd dug in, leg spreading my thighs until we were interlocked together in a way no other man had ever touched me.

But maybe that was the problem. I'd daydreamed of a guy like Dex Reyes for years—the kind of hot, bad boy showcased in American magazines. Probably no girl had ever been able to say *no* to a guy like him. Those sharp edges and that damn dimple were both the kind of thing that left girls swooning in the dirt at his knees—and probably doing other not so lady-like things down there, too.

Like everything else in magazines, the reality of the bad boy wasn't so beautiful.

If it weren't for Charlie, I'd be able to cling to my hatred. Other than his affection for his sick brother, Reyes had no real redeemable qualities. If there was one thing I learned growing up among the Aether, I learned to value the true nature of a person—not their looks.

Reyes likely thought he existed in some kind of morally gray area. Yeah, he'd kidnapped a government test monkey after she'd nearly been killed, but he'd done it for Charlie. In

his mind, a bad deed done for a noble cause cleared out any wrongdoing, which was exactly how he'd managed to excuse Dr. Hurst's experiments.

Even still, as I crawled beneath the tower of covers on the bed, I couldn't stop thinking about his body on mine.

Dex Reyes was going to be the death of me—one way or another.



I opened my eyes the next morning to a world of white outside. My bedroom door was unlocked and open several inches—open enough to make sure I still had my privacy but also open enough for me to see almost right away that I'd been released from my prison.

I tied on my bathrobe and found Charlie in the kitchen in the same chair he'd occupied the day before. Instead of pancakes and brewed coffee, I found him hunched over a bowl of cereal that had barely been touched. His skin looked flushed, his long curls matted to his forehead with sweat. I paused by his side and pressed the back of my fingers to his forehead, the way Oka-san used to do to me.

“You're hot,” I observed.

Charlie nodded. He didn't bother lifting his head from his hand. “I think it's going to be one of the bad days.”

“You need something more substantial than Cheerios,” I told him.

“I didn't have the energy to cook.”

“And your brother couldn't step up to do something for you?” I asked, irritated.

“He stayed up late fixing the truck before the storm came in.”

I rolled my eyes. Seemed to me that a sick brother should come before a broken window, but I wasn't Reyes, thank the gods.

“Stay right there,” I told Charlie, patting his shoulder. “I’ll whip something up for you.”

I remembered him saying yesterday that high protein foods were important for his recovery. I didn’t know much about myeloma beyond that it affected the blood, which was probably why protein was so important. Kidneys and blood and protein all somehow worked synergistically, even if I didn’t quite understand the medical marvel of it all.

I chose a couple eggs from the fridge, then shuffled around in the veggie drawer until I found a green bell pepper and a couple of small tomatoes. I also found a hunk of fresh ginger and broke off a small piece, tossing it on the counter before I dove back in for orange juice. Surprisingly, I found oranges but no premade orange juice, though I shouldn’t have been surprised given the bachelorhood of the house.

I hand-squeezed Charlie a few ounces of OJ first, then put the glass in front of him with a stern, “Drink up. Vitamin C.” Then I put a cup of water in a saucepan to boil and found a clean skillet in the drawer beneath the oven.

While I finely sliced the ginger and diced the other veggies, Charlie asked, “Where did you learn to cook?”

“My mother,” I told him. “She’s a phenomenal cook.”

“She makes the plum jam.”

“Yes!” I glanced at him, pleased he remembered. “She makes *everything*. And when me or my sisters were sick, she always said that good whole foods straight from the earth and a cup of honey-ginger tea were the cure.”

“Too bad it can’t cure cancer.”

My gut clenched. Charlie’s usual bright, sunshiny demeanor had vanished this morning. He seemed pale and wan and almost colorless, especially with only gray storm cloud light filtering in through the curtains over the sink.

I supposed it was hard to keep a positive outlook every single day. Particularly on days when his body fought back with a vengeance.

“I wish it could,” I told him softly, dropping the ginger slices into the boiling water.

He stayed silent, his eyes closed and his chin resting in his hand while I finished his breakfast. I plated a small serving from the omelet I made him and packaged up the rest for the freezer, thinking he could have it on the next day he felt lousy, then I drained the ginger tea, added some honey, and put it in a mug in front of him.

Charlie sat up and reached for his fork. “Thank you, Starfish. This smells great.”

“Eat up. Then maybe a couple hours in your cold room will help you be right as rain.”

He shook his head. “I was thinking of a dunk in the ocean. It’s the only thing that helps on the worst days.”

My heart skipped a beat. “You’re going to go down to the ocean?”

He shoved a fork full of omelet in his mouth before he lifted his gaze to mine. “I hadn’t fully decided. Why? Would you like to join me? It’s pretty cold out there.”

I wrapped my arms around my bathrobe-covered chest, my heart skipping a beat. “I’m not afraid of a little chill.”

Charlie laughed and reached for his tea. “You haven’t felt a chill like this one, Starfish. That, I promise you. But I’d try to keep you warm, if you wanted.” He glanced away with a shy look.

We chitchatted over breakfast, though conversation was short and intermittent with Charlie not feeling too hot. After I loaded the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, I met Charlie at his room for some borrowed snow clothes—a waterproof onesie snowsuit, extra socks, and layers upon layers of shirts and sweatpants. I suited up, careful to cover every inch of exposed skin that I could.

I’d need to be protected once I ran.

I thought I’d get away with joining Charlie alone—and without bindings—but no such luck. Reyes clapped me in

cuffs, though he at least bound my hands in front rather than behind, and the three of us left the house together, bundled up against the cold.

The snow wasn't falling quite so heavily as it had overnight, though Reyes warned us more was coming and to keep our little escapade quick.

We navigated the rocky path down the cliffside as the waves frothed and crashed against the beach below. Even with a hat pulled low over my ears and my snowsuit hood pulled up against the frigid air, I could hear and feel the power of the water being manipulated by the weather. I lifted my face to the air, basking in that roar, anticipation like a balm to every wound I'd ever had.

When we stepped off the path onto the rocks, I drifted immediately toward the ocean's edge, oblivious to Charlie and Reyes. I stepped up to the edge of the water where the waves came closest, then took several steps forward, following the water back into the ocean. Then I skipped backwards as the next wave crashed. Over and over, like I was the little seven year old girl accompanying a bunch of old Aether men to the beach all over again. Communing with the sea. Learning to surf.

Falling in love with her. The ocean, my lover and my teacher.

Even my bound hands couldn't keep me from the dance. I danced with the waves until I was dizzy, until the cold burned my cheeks and I was breathless from the effort of mucking through the rocks in boots too big for my feet. Then I trudged back to Charlie's side and slumped awkwardly to the beach beside him in my five thousand layers.

"Where's your brother?" I asked, glancing around the empty beach.

Charlie pointed a thumb over his shoulder to the cliff. "He went back up to the truck."

A vise grip I hadn't realized was tight in my chest suddenly loosened. I let out a breath and sagged against the

rocky outcropping behind me, some of the tension I'd carried for days vanishing at the idea of some Reyes-free time.

"You really love the ocean, huh?" Charlie said, kicking his legs out in front of him on the snow. At some point while I was meditating with the waves, he'd jumped into the ocean, clothes and all.

While Reyes and I had layered up to come outside, Charlie had opted for a white long-sleeved t-shirt and gray sweatpants. He was soaked to the bone, his t-shirt clinging to muscles that were *surprisingly* cut for a chronically sick shut in. His waterlogged sweats were plastered against his thighs, and a thin line of bare skin beneath his wet shirt glowed tan despite the overcast sky.

My immediate worry was that he'd get pneumonia doing this, but he'd told me he did this often. He must have had some kind of preternatural ability to withstand the cold, because even I was shivering under all five of my layers. And I was *dry*.

The snow was already melting beneath my borrowed snowsuit, but I didn't care. The music of the waves crashing rhythmically against the shore had eased every nerve in my body. The snow suit could melt every inch of snow beneath me and soak straight through the clothes underneath, and I'd stay right here. Forever. Happy to be cold and wet next to Charlie and the ocean.

Especially with the view—both the one before me and the one beside me.

Both were easy on the eyes.

"My clan lived deep in the forest with mountains behind us and the ocean before us," I explained. "My oka-san said my love of the water was obvious from the first day I came to them. Neither of my parents ever discouraged me from the water, as long as I finished my chores first," I added, laughing. "There was a surf club—a bunch of guys who surfed on the weekends. Oto-san bought me my first board when I was seven. Three weeks later, I was better than most of the men."

“That’s nuts to think of such a little girl surfing big waves. But I can totally see you as a surfer. I bet you’re cute in a wetsuit.” Charlie’s cheeks flushed redder than they already were from his fever and the cold air.

I bit down on my bottom lip, hiding the smile that had attempted to cross my face. I was still sore about last night, about Charlie showing his true colors with following Reyes’ lead and keeping me locked away.

The problem was, while I could very easily hold a grudge against Reyes, I didn’t find it quite so easy to hate Charlie. Something about his presence felt right. Comfortable. Peaceful.

Even now, he didn’t try to force conversation. He was content to sit beside me and listen to the roar of the ocean. To live slowly and presently, just like the Aether did back home.

“The only thing missing is a sunset,” I told him.

Charlie laughed. “It’s barely ten a.m. *Sunrise* was like an hour ago.”

“Tell me the sun setting over the ocean isn’t the most beautiful sight in the world.”

He glanced at me searchingly, then his gaze slid away, back to the choppy waves. “One of them, sure.”

“If we sit here long enough, will the sun set again?”

Charlie leaned back on his elbows, looking for all intents and purposes like a boy sunning on a tropical beach. “I know our days are short but they aren’t *that* short. Sunset’s usually around six thirty this time of year.”

“You Alaska people are weird. How do you live with so little sun every day?”

“Healthy doses of Vitamin D supplements and an emotional support lamp,” he quipped. “But you know, I’d love to see the sun set over the Mediterranean. You ever been there?”

I shook my head. “I left Aether and came straight to the US. Visited a few states, enrolled in school, then ended up as

the government's personal experiment. You?"

Charlie cringed at my flippant explanation of my whereabouts. "Nah. Not yet. It's on my bucket list, though. If..."

He trailed off, but I knew what he was thinking.

If he lived.

I couldn't even imagine how it felt to know your days were numbered. And not in the abstract "we all die some day" thought that never seemed to get too far from our minds.

But in the "my time is any day now" kind of way.

I leaned over and rested the tips of my fingers on his wet arm—awkwardly, given the handcuffs—and met his eye. "I'm sorry, Charlie. I'm sorry you have to go through this. And I'm sorry I can't fix you. I truly wish I could."

He reached for me, his thumb brushing over my chin again. It was such a sweet, simple gesture. Not at all possessive like Reyes' sexual domination, but just the same, Charlie's fingertip left a sizzle in its wake that had little to do with his fever.

Gods help me. I had some terrible stockholm syndrome attraction to a psychopath, and a sweet, slow-motion desire for a guy with a swiftly coming expiration date.

No matter what I did, this strange interlude in the Alaskan wilderness was bound to end badly.

Maybe even with one—or all of us—dead.



We stared at each other for too long.

In the gray daylight, his pale brown eyes glowed warmer than ever, despite his illness. On a backdrop of the ocean spreading down the rugged, evergreen-covered coast behind him, I thought I saw notes of green in the brown, like he carried plants in his eyes the way he did in his heart.

I didn't find anything uncomfortable about the way he seemed to look right through me to the innermost part of me. It felt like we were communicating on a level I wasn't fully familiar with. But I think we understood each other. I think Charlie *saw* me, really saw me—the good, the bad, the ugly.

And he still wanted to sit on this beach with me.

Charlie mussed his wet hair with one hand, and droplets flew off like ice crystals. He flashed a grin that looked a lot more energetic than any other had today. "I want to show you something."

I followed him back up the path. He moved slowly, one arm always hovering near me while I navigated the rocky path with my bound hands. He apologized for the cuffs four separate times.

I knew he meant it, too.

By the time we crested the top of the hill, a light snow had started to fall again—just like Reyes had promised. The man in question was draped under the hood of his truck, tinkering with something inside the engine block, and he barely acknowledged our presence as we passed him by.

Not that I cared.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Charlie led me around the house and past the protruding greenhouse to a small detached shed. The little structure had seen better days—the red paint had peeled to reveal gray, weathered wood and the corrugated metal roof was rusty. He jiggled the door handle several times before he got the lock to unlatch, then he motioned for me to follow him into the dusky interior.

Charlie held out an arm like a game show host. “Look. They were here when we bought the place. The previous owners left them behind.”

My heart skipped a beat as I stepped into the dim, musty gardening shed. Against the far wall, two red surfboards rested against the uneven wooden slats, a dusting of snow across them from the small openings in the wall. One board had fallen over and nudged up against the other like two drunk friends holding one another up at the bar. I recognized the folds of rubber hanging on a nail beside them—wet suits. Two of the full body kind with the head covering, too. Necessary for surfing arctic waves.

I walked further in and brushed my fingers over the dusty rubber.

“I don't know if they're still usable,” Charlie offered. “We haven't touched them since we moved in about three years ago. So they've gone through some weather.”

I dropped my hand and turned to meet his eye. “I could teach you how to surf.”

He held up both hands. “No, thanks. I'd like to keep my feet firmly on the earth.”

“Think about it!” I insisted. “You get in the water to help the fever, so you're already *in* it. But instead of walking, you could surf. You'll be in the water *and* getting exercise, and isn't exercise important for healing?”

Charlie's gaze clouded. He looked past me at the surfboards, his eyes faraway. When he spoke, his voice came

out as dull and dusty as the wet suits. “A *cold* can be healed. A fractured bone can be healed. You have to have a disease that *can* be healed to be healed.”

He looked so... lost. His fear shone through without his usual optimism to balance it out, and I could see just how scared he was of his cancer.

Scared of death.

My heart constricted. I crossed the shed in two strides and wrapped my arms around him.

I didn't care that he was soaking wet. All I wanted to do was squeeze that desperate, devastated look off his beautiful face.

He melted against me, returning the hug as he rested his chin on my head. The wind rattled the shed, making a high-pitched whine as it brushed past the nooks and crannies, but inside, we were warm and safe and comfortable.

And not alone. Neither of us were alone.

Charlie released me first. He slipped out of my hold, giving me a little affectionate shake. “You give good hugs, Starfish.”

“Ditto,” I told him, wishing I had some really great nickname with a really sweet back story to give him.

Starfish was *really* growing on me.

“Come on,” he said, casting his gaze at the roof. “That wind sounds wicked. I think the second front is moving in.”

He stepped away from me, his boots heavy on the floor. I tucked my handcuffed hands against my snowsuit, bracing for the cold as I followed behind him. But when I reached the square of daylight, I paused just inside the door before following him out.

Several gardening implements rested against the wall. I assumed they were his summer tools—the stuff he used for the yard when the weather allowed him to plant outside rather than just in his greenhouse. Several shovels rested side by side, blades down and handles up—some of them pointed

gardening trowels, some of them heavy duty snow shovels. Plus a hoe, a rake, and three pairs of gardening shears in various sizes.

I lifted my hands and looked down at the cuffs binding my wrists together.

Would gardening shears cut through the metal links?

The better question was, could I steal a moment to find out?

Not right now, I couldn't. Charlie smiled in at me, waiting for me to join him in the wind.

I stepped outside—and something thwacked me on the side of the head.

The cold was immediate. I gasped against the snow melting down my face and neck. While Charlie cracked up at my side, I whipped around in the direction the snowball had come from to find Reyes dusting snow off his black gloves.

He flashed a devilish smile. “Oops. It slipped out of my hand.”

I swiped at the snow on my face, but it didn't do any good since it was already liquid and soaking through my neckline.

“Are you serious?” I screeched at Reyes. “It's negative nine hundred degrees!”

Reyes grinned, his dimple popping into place to give him a mischievous look. “Don't be so dramatic, Katana. It's just a little snow.”

Charlie rested one hand on the shed's door frame as if to hold himself on his feet as he declared, “You handcuffed her and then threw a snow ball at her! That's horrible!”

His admonishment, however, was tempered by the fact he was *still laughing*.

I leaned down and shoved my bound hands into the snow, thankful for the borrowed gloves. I started carefully scraping together a pile.

Reyes crossed his arms over his chest. “You really think you can throw with your hands like that?”

I ignored him and worked on packing a tight ball between my hands. The cuffs didn’t hinder my movement so much that I couldn’t make a damn good snowball and shove it down Reyes’ throat.

Reyes laughed and turned back to his truck. “She’s not going to do anything.”

I started packing the snow a little tighter, all thoughts of gardening shears out of my mind as vengeance crept in. I could run to him and shove the snowball down the back of his t-shirt. I could mash it into his face like a bride at a wedding. I could clap his ears with it. Truly, I had no shortage of options, even with the handcuffs.

But Charlie snatched the ball out of my hands. “Here, allow me.”

Then he punted the snowball at Reyes’ head full force.

Reyes didn’t have a chance. He hadn’t expected it, especially not from his brother, and turning away like that had been an arrogant judgment call. The snowball hit the side of his nose like it was a bullseye and snow exploded in his face and mouth. He gaped at the air like a fish out of water for several seconds, snow falling from his lips and eyelashes.

I stomped my foot and whined, “But *I* wanted to do that!”

Then Charlie and I crowed with laughter.

The snowball fight began in earnest.

I wasn’t the fastest at packing and throwing with the handcuffs slowing me down, but we fell into a natural Charlie-and-me against Reyes battle, so I wasn’t working alone or getting ganged up on. For every one snowball I managed to lob at Reyes, Charlie got in three. Reyes, of course, pegged me as the weaker partner, and I got the brunt of his carefully positioned throws. If they’d been actual bullets, I’d have been toast two minutes in, but the snow just marred my wet suit and settled into the openings in the fabric that I had missed.

Eventually, I took a snowball to the face and went down spluttering. On my front in the snow, I started gathering a giant arm full of snow—not just a snowball, but a snow pile, bigger and bigger, packing it in tight so that I could pick it up between my handcuffed arms without losing too much of it.

Charlie recognized what I was doing and started tossing snowballs faster and more furious to draw Reyes' attention away from me. His ruse worked—the two brothers began an intense battle, yelling insults at each other and throwing snowballs like they were playing for the World Series title.

So when I got my giant snowpile together and carefully stood, activating those old Aether martial arts muscles to move quickly and gracefully, Reyes didn't see me coming. But Charlie did. And with a wolfish smile that made him look just as dangerous as his brother, he swiped out with one leg and took Reyes down to the snow.

Then I popped up behind him and dumped my whole arm load on his head.

Charlie and I roared with laughter as Reyes cursed and flailed, shaking his head like a wet dog.

“Job well done,” Charlie told me, offering me a hand for a high five.

I slapped his palm with mine, then bowed deeply. “Couldn't have done it without you, partner.”

We both collapsed to the snow on either side of Reyes. If my hands weren't tied, I'd have thrown them out in the snow like a star on the ground, but I had to settle for stretching my legs and resting my hands at my navel. The dull gray sky overhead hung low and cloudy, snowflakes swirling towards the ground heavier than before.

I was breathless from the battle, and I knew Charlie had to feel exhausted too, given that he was having a bad health day. Maybe not so much now, given his energy during the snowball fight. The ocean must have helped him.

She helped me all the time, too.

Reyes sat up, snow falling off him in piles. I'd expected him to look disgruntled or to lose his crap on me, since that seemed to be his pattern, but instead he shook his head and grinned. "All right. All right. You got me. Can you both behave yourselves while I go take a piss?"

Excitement rippled through me. Was he suggesting leaving me out here alone with Charlie? Was he running a *fever*? Reyes watched me like a hawk and never let me out of his sight. First, he'd allowed me private time on the beach with Charlie, now this. I could come up with two explanations for this development: Either he'd been body snatched by an alien or he was in a good mood.

Whichever way the wind blew... this was my moment.

Charlie waved a hand at him, though he didn't open his eyes. I just lifted my handcuffed hands and did my best to look weak and unassuming.

I'm a poor little girl, all bound up. Surely I can't get into trouble if you leave for only a minute...

I stared at the sky, listening to Reyes' boots crunch over the snow. The sound faded with distance, and a moment later, I heard the door to the house open and close.

I eased to a sitting position, eyeing Charlie. He had an arm laying over his eyes; exhaustion radiated from him. While the cold had chased away the heat inside him for a time, it was obvious he didn't feel well. The hike down to the beach had winded him enough, then add on a raucous snowball fight, and his strength was tapped.

That was good news for me.

Calling up my old Aether martial arts training, I rolled to a squat position on the tips of my toes. With my hands bound, my balance was a bit more precarious, but I still managed. Then I swept to my feet and stayed lifted on my toes as I took off at a light clip across the snowy yard.

Charlie didn't move nor did he seem to even hear me walking away over the wind.

The door to the gardening shed still hung open from when Charlie and I had walked out and into the snowball fight. I passed out of the coursing wind and into the still, silent interior. My heart pounded against my rib cage as I kneeled down beside the gardening shears. I finagled the shears against my stomach, finding the right angle to allow my right arm to rest on the handle as I shoved the handcuff links between the blades.

Please work, I silently pleaded.

I shoved my arm down, jamming the other handle against my thigh as I put my body weight on the cut.

No deal. The shears ground against the metal links but weren't powerful enough to saw through.

I huffed and sat back on my heels, glancing over at the other two pairs of shears. They were smaller, and both looked older and more worn than this one. If this guy couldn't cut the links, neither of the others would either.

I fisted my hands and let them rest on my knees, considering my options. I had a perfectly good pair of gardening shears that could cut through plant stalks and small tree limbs, but not metal. And I'd already had the thought that in order to free myself, I might have to hurt myself.

Hurst already cut off your hand, I reminded myself. *Without anesthesia, too.*

And I didn't need to cut off my *hand*. I just needed to get free of the handcuffs, which meant only one hand needed out from the restrictive ring.

I could lose a thumb. Use the blood to wiggle free.

The idea made me feel faint. I recalled vividly the hot lights beaming down from above. My arms and legs bound to the operating table so tightly my hands and feet tingled from the blood loss. The sound—dear gods, the *sound* of the bone saw on me, the way I felt that grinding vibration in every corner of my body.

The screams I couldn't believe had come from me.

And Reyes had watched it all. He'd watched them do that to me, then he perpetrated his own crime against me and acted like *I* was the problem.

I ripped the glove off my hand with my teeth and spit it aside.

Gritting my jaw in a mixture of renewed fury and anticipation of the pain, I shoved my left thumb between the blades.

I can do this.

I've lived through so much worse.

Closing my eyes, I slammed my elbow down on the handle.



Sharp blade cut through skin and muscle, then ground against bone. I bit my tongue to keep from screaming and pressed harder on the handle, putting my whole body weight behind the effort.

White hot pain radiated from the base of my thumb. A rush of blood to my head sent me keeling backwards into the wall, barely able to keep myself upright against the flush of adrenaline. I started shaking all over, maybe from the pain, maybe from the adrenaline, maybe from the effort of trying to cut off my thumb at such an awkward angle.

And of course, I wasn't lucky enough that one swift snip would do the job.

I glanced down, assessing the situation. My thumb still clung stubbornly to the fatty part of my hand, though blood flowed freely and quickly. I could probably maneuver it aside and be able to slide out of the cuff, but I couldn't keep it attached if I wanted a clean cut to be able to heal and regrow the finger.

So I had to keep going.

Somewhere outside my cocoon of hot pain, I heard Reyes call my name.

Time was up.

Gritting my teeth harder, I slammed my elbow down on the shears with everything I had.

The blade finally cut through.

Through an almost physical haze of red pain, I smoothed the blood down my wrist, coating every inch where the cuff rested against my skin. Then I ripped my hand from the cuff, desperately trying to ignore the debilitating pain and the blood pouring from the gaping wound. I stood and weathered a brief moment of lightheadedness, before I reached for the closest weapon I could find: a heavy duty snow shovel.

Charlie will forgive me, I thought. I hope he will, anyway.

At that instant, Reyes' shadow darkened the doorway.

I didn't hesitate.

The snow shovel connected with his forehead with a meaty thud, right where I'd cracked him with the baton only two days ago. My blood was already soaking the handle of the shovel, so the force of the blow rebounding from his skull sent the slippery tool flying out of my grasp. I didn't bother sticking around to see where it landed.

I leaped over Reyes' slumped body and out into the daylight.

Charlie called out my nickname, horror in his voice as I flew past him dripping blood on the carpet of snow. But I didn't stop, not even to apologize even though inwardly I was chanting it like a mantra: *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* I sprinted as fast as my borrowed boots would let me.

I didn't look back.

Flying as fast as my legs could carry me, I cleared the small side yard and crashed into the thick forest, leaving the cabin behind.

Several moments passed in a blur of icy wind raging past me. I heard no shouts or pursuing footfalls. No evidence that I'd been followed. I ran as fast as my body could handle, until my lungs burned from the cold and my muscles protested having to navigate the obstacles of the forest floor. I ran until I physically couldn't anymore, until my body needed a break, and then I ran some more which was probably a bad idea.

Eventually, I collapsed.

I leaned against a tree, sucking in deep, aching lungfuls both to calm myself and to catch my breath. My legs couldn't hold me anymore, so I slid down the trunk, rough bark catching against Charlie's snowsuit. I landed in a pile of useless, shaking limbs and let my head fall back against the tree.

Everything around me here looked the same as everything I'd already seen. Just dead trees and snowdrifts and more dead trees, all of it cast in shadow that seemed even darker than normal because of the storm. Snow fell in earnest, penetrating the intertwined branches above and accumulating on my snow suit, on my face, on my eyelashes. I'd kept my hands tucked into my pockets as I ran, but after a time, I'd lost feeling in my fingers.

My thumb had gone from painful to debilitating to...barely noticeable. While the frigid cold had done a lot towards making sure I didn't feel anything in that hand, it still ached but in an absentminded sort of way, even as there was an absence of any sensation in the rest of my fingers.

Blood had soaked my right pocket. My skin clung to the fabric, tacky with dried blood, as I removed my injured hand to assess the damage. The raw, gaping wound still trickled, but slowly, as if the cold had helped staunch the flow. I couldn't really feel much at all—even the pain had faded in the terrible cold.

I peered down at my thumb with a grimace; it didn't look real, all that mutilated meat and gore like something out of a Hollywood special effects department. Thankfully at least the bleeding had slowed to a crawl.

Though of course, that likely meant frostbite was setting in.

I removed my borrowed scarf and wrapped it tightly around the wounded hand, tucking the edges into my fist—what was left of my fist, anyway. *Can you even have a fist without a thumb? What if I can't regrow it? Then I'll never have a fist again.* The thought of walking through the rest of my life without my thumb felt as debilitating as the pain.

But it was as dumb thought—one borne from the struggle of the last couple days. I already knew I could regrow an entire hand. My thumb would be a cakewalk after that nightmare.

Clutching my arm to my chest, I used the tree to regain my footing. The handcuffs dangling from my other wrist hung heavy, the metal so cold on my bare wrist it felt like fire. I shoved the whole lot of it back into my pocket, then I fell into a quick power walk, face turned down from the howling wind. I pulled inward and started working on healing and regrowing the thumb.

My body warmed from the inside as my powers began to work. The markings on my torso and biceps pulsed with heat, reminding me of their presence. *My starfish*, I thought, Charlie's face flashing in my mind's eye. My purple starfish. Like the cactus.

Purple is my favorite color, Charlie had said.

I shoved away thoughts of Charlie and what he must have thought of me now, after I'd brained his brother and then ran off into the snow storm. I couldn't think about that or concentrate on any unnecessary guilt when I was still missing a damn thumb.

I could only focus on keeping my feet moving, one after another, and pushing my energies into my healing abilities.

The power grew inside me like the swift roll of lava beneath my skin. It peeled away from my markings, down my arm, and into my hand where it heated the frozen limb from the inside out. A new kind of pain settled in—the pain of frostbitten fingers being warmed again. That pain grew and grew, and my powers heated more and more, until I no longer recognized the cold or the wind or even the fact that I had a whole body to go with the mangled hand.

I screamed and fell to my knees, shattered by the feeling of new bone and muscle knitting on my frozen hand. I immediately drew back on the healing, abandoning any possibility of fixing the damage right now. Doubled over in the shadow of two giant evergreen trees, I started crying completely against my will as I struggled to crawl beneath the

low hanging branches for any kind of protection from this storm.

I could barely see. The driving snow had turned into a wall of white that stung my face and eyes. No matter how I shielded my face with the hood, the snow and icy wind penetrated straight through. I felt like the air itself wanted to claw my eyes out, and had the means to do so.

I huddled between the two trees, shivering violently as seconds, moments, minutes ticked away. The snowsuit might as well have been lace for all the good it was doing against the force of the wind. I could no longer drag a breath into my lungs without pain, and my mutilated hand was a problem of the past. I felt no pain from the dismembered thumb, no pain from the frostbitten fingers.

I knew I didn't have long before I wouldn't even feel the cold at all. I'd be unconscious.

Then I'd be dead.

Contrary to Reyes' absolute belief in my abilities, I didn't think I could come back from death.

Somewhere beyond the haze in my head, I heard a strange sound. Like a motor, whirring under the howl of the wind. I squeezed my eyes shut against the forceful snow and focused on the sound. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Was this what it was like to hallucinate before death?

Death made me think of Kimi. Her pupils had been so wide in those final moments. Her mouth gaping, gasping for breath, blood bubbling on her lips. She'd been so pretty, even dying. Had her life flashed before her eyes? Had she hallucinated too?

Two globes of warm light slashed across me.

I felt entirely outside my own body as I watched the vehicle park, both headlights still pointing right at me. The engine died down—though the howl of the wind didn't—and then a dark figure appeared silhouetted by the glow.

I'd have recognized that arrogant swagger anywhere.

Reyes.

He'd found me.

I had no energy to fight and nowhere left to run.



I backed against the tree trunk, hoping and praying the ground would open up and swallow me whole. Drag me under. Hide me from him.

That, however, was only wishful thinking.

Reyes squatted down and peered through the branches. Blood had dried in rivulets down his face from where the snow shovel had reopened his forehead wound. He looked like a victim of trauma.

And I *felt* like one.

“Jesus, Katana. You’re a pain in my ass,” he snapped, taking one knee to the ground as he reached into my shelter to grab me.

I tried to cringe away but I didn’t have great control over my frozen limbs. Instead of scrambling backwards, I just fell sideways, and Reyes snatched at my snowsuit to keep me from falling all the way to the snow.

He hauled me from beneath the branches and out into the cold, driving wind.

Furious at his manhandling, I somehow found my footing and my missing strength. I jerked from his grasp and threw a punch at his face with my good hand. Reyes caught my fist in his fingers then redirected the blow away from him, which sent me whirling. I stumbled three steps away but didn’t fall.

That would have been humiliating at this point.

“If you don’t want to die, you’ll get on this damn snowmobile!” Reyes snapped, pointing at the headlights behind him. “Don’t be an idiot, Katana.”

I cradled my injured hand against my chest and stared at him. Everything felt... slow. Like I was moving underwater, unable to keep pace with reality. A wave had crashed over me, capsized my board, sent me into the murky depths where the sun couldn’t reach, and I couldn’t find the surface.

Somewhere during the race to freedom before my hands froze and the blood loss reached worrisome limits, my consciousness had drifted outside of my broken body.

All the crap the lab put me through, and it’s the cold that finally nails me.

I didn’t want to willingly climb onto that snowmobile with Reyes. I’d cut my own damn thumb off to get away from him, and the thought of giving up now and letting him take me right back to his prison of a house...

A pit of despair yawned open inside me, bigger than the whole forest, bigger than Alaska itself.

But unfortunately, I wasn’t an “idiot” as he’d so eloquently put it. I’d pulled off an escape by the skin of my teeth only for the timing to be the worst possible. If I tried to keep running now in the middle of this awful white-out storm... I’d die.

Actually die this time. Not a false death witnessed by a hopeful soldier.

Just oblivion.

Reyes was the better choice at staying alive. He’d been the better choice before, too, the night he pulled me from the lab. I hadn’t had a choice then, but I did now. The smart choice, the wisest choice, was to go with Reyes and hope I’d have another opportunity to run.

I balled my hands into fists at my sides and threw my shoulders back, going for haughty and unafraid, though I probably just looked cold and wet. “If I come back with you, you aren’t putting me in handcuffs again.”

Reyes laughed from his stomach. “Are you seriously standing in the middle of a blizzard trying to *bargain* with me?”

I charged forward and slammed both my hands into his chest, shoving him backwards. The blow sent a lance of white hot pain through my mangled hand, but it was worth it as he stumbled. His arms windmilled, snowflakes whirling around him in the headlights’ glow, and he keeled over backwards right onto his butt in the snow.

“If I come back with you”—I bit out each word with a hint of venom—“you aren’t putting me in handcuffs again.”

Reyes stared up at me from his bottom, snow driving around him and painting his hair white. He looked stunned that I’d had the energy—or maybe the audacity—to shove him off his feet, but even more, he looked impressed.

Good. Maybe he needed to remember that I wasn’t a damsel in distress. Even now. I always had a choice, even if that choice meant choosing death over getting on his stupid snowmobile.

The wind howled like a werewolf, slashing through my clothes and stinging my bare skin. But I stood my ground, pretending I wasn’t turning to ice in his presence, that I wasn’t begging internally for him to agree to my terms and get me the heck out of here because I had no other choice.

Reyes stood carefully, taking his time and dusting the snow off his leather jacket before he caught my eye again. “No more handcuffs. No more locks.”

I almost didn’t hear him over the howl of the wind, and with everything about me moving at half-function. Several seconds passed before I processed his words.

My heart skipped a beat.

“You mean it?” I demanded, unsure whether I could actually believe him or not. “Promise me, Dex.”

He cocked his head. “You’ve never used my name before.”

“You’ve never used mine,” I shot back. I was always on guard with him; always hair triggered by everything he said and did. I felt like a live wire anytime I was in his presence—irritated by his very existence, not just because of what a jerk he could be but because I wanted him.

Even right this moment, with a missing thumb and blood soaking the left side of my body, both of us shivering and wet, I wanted him. I wanted to touch that electricity and feel it magnify inside me—even if it burned me alive.

And I hated myself for it.

When he spoke again, his tone was so low I had to strain to hear over the screeching wind. “I promise you, Ky. No more handcuffs and no more locks. I’ll give you the god damn keys to the snowmobile and let you go when this storm is over. Just come with me before you die out here.”

I waited a beat of silence, looking for any dishonesty in his expression, waiting for a scoff or a smirk or something to indicate he wasn’t going to be true to his word. But he simply stood there in the snow, a black silhouette illuminated in the snowmobile’s headlights.

I wrapped my arms around my snowsuit and stepped around him, carefully avoiding any contact with him as I beelined to the snowmobile. The promise of warmth was enough to make me want to race him to the seat.

Reyes beat me there and tossed a leg over, settling on the back of the bench. He patted the space in front of him, which was a relief because I didn’t think I had the energy to hang on to his back for the drive.

Part of me wanted to keep careful distance between us, but the moment I sank onto the leather in front of him, all the energy sapped from my body. I leaned back against his chest and closed my eyes as we took off into the snow.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew, Reyes’ hard fingers dug into my shoulder as he shook me awake.

“Ky. We’re here. Come on.”

“Here where?” I asked sleepily, the words slurred as I blinked at our surroundings.

This wasn't the cabin. Reyes had parked the snowmobile diagonally on a patch of fresh snow in front of a low-slung metal building lit by a single industrial streetlight that could barely cut through the driving snowflakes. A front sidewalk had recently been cleared by snow shovel, leaving little ravines of snow up and down each side, but the new storm had brought a fresh layer of white to cover the concrete. Behind the metal building, a strange orange dome that reminded me of the big ball at Disney World rose up into the sky.

I'd spent a couple days at Disney World with Flor last fall, right after we met. The reminder stung bittersweet. Not just because the memory of warm weather made me want to weep, but I'd been so naive and innocent then, desperate for Flor to like me and keep me like a pet.

I didn't even feel like that version of me anymore.

“It's the hot springs,” Reyes explained, grabbing both my elbows to boost me off the snowmobile. “Home is too far to reach in this storm. We'll wait it out here.”

Charlie's boots clung heavy on my feet, tripping me up as I tried to follow Reyes to the door. He noticed my struggle but didn't mention it, and I hoped it was because he wasn't keen to find himself on his butt in the snow again. He silently slipped an arm around my waist and hauled my weight up against him, helping me walk the rest of the way in silence.

A small sign dangled from a suction cup hook inside the glass door, declaring the hot springs *Open*, while a placard sticker below listed out the hours of operation—*9 to 9, Tuesday through Saturday*. We both kicked snow off our boots on the rubber mat, then Reyes reached past me to shove open the door.

Heat escaped out into the cold, and I gasped in exultant relief at the tropical wind. My feet propelled me forward into the small lobby, drawn by the promise of warmth and light after my foray into the freezing dark woods.

A short, muscular man behind the U-shaped counter looked up from the desk to greet us. He had close set dark eyes and a broad forehead. His dark brown hair was swept into a high ponytail long enough to drape to his shoulders, and his beard hung past his collarbone intertwined with braids and ribbons. Tattoos covered the majority of his exposed skin, even curling up his neck. Several tiny dots were tattooed in a single file line up his chin.

He smiled at me, though the gesture didn't seem to reach his eyes, then he nodded at Reyes. "Dex. Haven't seen you around here in a while."

He had a soft accent I didn't quite recognize, being not native to this country. My guess was something colloquial, native to Alaska. His gaze immediately went to the blood on Reyes' face, but he didn't react or mention it, as if he were used to people showing up at his spa looking like they'd just walked off a battlefield.

Reyes shrugged. "We haven't needed your services till now. My friend here got caught out in the storm. Can we get an hour in the springs for her to warm up?"

The man tapped a few keys on his keyboard. "If you've got two hundred dollars."

I jerked, surprised at the cost, but Reyes just reached into his back pocket and extracted his wallet. He handed over a credit card, completed the transaction, and then put a hand on my lower back to guide me towards a door marked "Dressing Room."

"Do you need help?" the front desk man asked.

"We got it," Reyes said.

Beyond the dressing room door, the ceiling lay lower and the lights shone dimmer, giving the wide open area a kind of hushed, sleepy feel. The door closed behind us, cutting out the soft whir of the heating system, and Reyes turned to me, tugging his keys from his pocket.

He shuffled through for the handcuff key, then held out a hand to me. My hand shook as I pulled it from my pocket and

offered the handcuffs up to him.

Reyes slipped the key in the cuff around my wrist while he nodded to a wall of cubby holes filled with folded white clothes.

“Pick out your size. The cubbies are all marked,” he told me as the circle of frozen metal fell away from my skin. Palming the bloody cuffs in one hand, he pointed at a narrow, red metal door. “I’ll meet you through there.”

I nodded, and he left me to my own devices.

The significance of the moment wasn’t lost on me, even in my frozen haze. Sure, I couldn’t actually leave or go anywhere in this weather, but Reyes had left me alone in a room I could easily leave. I had a feeling it was a strategic move, meant to get in my good graces.

It worked.

The building’s heating system rivaled anything I’d ever felt, hotter even than Charlie’s greenhouse, so some of the freeze had begun to seep away in my extremities. My lower knuckles burned painfully, especially those on my injured hand since I’d discarded my glove in the shed before chopping off my thumb. But my fingertips had a disturbing absence of feeling.

I thought—though I wasn’t sure—that meant frostbite.

In the cubbies, I found a variety of sizes in white tank tops and white cotton shorts. I picked out what I needed, then fumbled with the zipper on the snowsuit, cursing low under my breath at my useless fingers.

There wasn’t a force on this earth that could convince me to ask Reyes for help undressing.

I rubbed my good hand on a soft white towel until it began to tingle and some feeling returned. My fingers were still stiff and unwieldy, but I managed to get hold of the zipper and drag it down with great effort.

Though it took me some time, I dressed in the tank top and shorts, then I left my wet things draped over the bench,

grabbed my towel, and followed Reyes through the red door.

Heat hit me like I'd opened an oven.

A glass dome soared high overhead, encompassing a wide, placid pool of water that steamed like a freshly poured cup of tea. Two streams stretched from either end, both vanishing beneath the walls to the outside. Warm amber lights filled the space so brightly, I felt as if I'd stepped into the mid-day sun.

The room, though big, was as humid as Charlie's greenhouse, though unlike the greenhouse, there was nothing "green" in sight. Just the rocky shores of the hot springs and a system of wooden pathways built around them to allow for multiple entries into the water.

Despite the lack of ornamentation, there was something beautiful about the sparsity. It had the same life as the beach back at the Reyes house—the smooth rocks, the water, only without the roar and power of the crashing waves. The pool here lay smooth and unhurried, trickling only at the small deltas that branched out under the greenhouse and into the dark, stormy evening beyond.

I should have loved everything about this aesthetic. But as I stood there on the wooden dock, shivering, I felt a prickle at the nape of my neck.

The Aether learned early to trust our intuition. As humans, we were hardwired from the birth of our species to recognize when a situation posed harm to us, whether it was an environmental danger or a person who meant to hurt us. The Aether in particular were attuned to the warning signs: the prickle at the back of the neck, the hairs raising on our arms, the hollow in our gut.

The beauty here at the hot springs only went skin deep. On the surface, the water and the space surrounding it exuded peace and happiness, but if I closed my eyes and breathed deep, I felt something different. Something opposite.

Something... dark.

Something that made me want to run farther and faster than I'd ever ran from Dex Reyes.



Reyes appeared at my side as if he'd popped out of space and time. "All set?"

I jerked around, startled.

He'd ditched his outerwear and his clothes, but instead of putting on the cult-like white garb this place offered, he stood on the dock in his underwear. His entire body was on display—smooth pecs, washboard abs, thighs like tree trunks, and boxer briefs that clung to every inch of his pelvis beneath a V-shaped muscle.

I swallowed, unable to draw my gaze away from him no matter how desperately I wanted to.

This place was exactly like Reyes. Both hid their danger well beneath a pretty surface. His dimpled smile and the smooth wooden docks forming pathways around the springs were a pretty Band-Aid covering up something unmentionable. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"What is this place?" I asked Reyes, wondering how much he knew about it. "You've brought Charlie here before, that guy said."

"His name's Amaruq," Reyes said. "He's the one who bought this land and opened this place two decades ago. He's an Inuit healer."

"Inuit?" I asked, testing out the new word.

"Alaskan native tribe," Reyes explained. "Pretty big 'living with the land' culture. His tribe, local to this area, has

believed this hot spring to be a mystical source of healing. For centuries.”

“So they think if people swim in the hot springs, they’ll be healed?”

“Not sure if it’s that simple, but yeah,” Reyes agreed. “Back in the early days, right after Charlie’s diagnosis, I found out about this place through a friend—another guy back at the base who swears his ma had her cancer cured by bathing here. So I packed up Charlie and brought him here, four, maybe five years ago? Time runs together.”

I nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“Anyway, there’s plenty of legends about this place being a ‘healing’ spring. Lots of stories back in the lobby, people who send cards after they come and get better, I don’t know. All I know is it didn’t work for Charlie. It... I think it made him worse.”

“How so?”

“The fevers? The way he burns? That’s not a symptom of his cancer. His cancer is more insidious, more based in bone pain and exhaustion, not fevers. Those didn’t start until after we came here.”

“Couldn’t that be a coincidence?”

Reyes’ countenance darkened. “I don’t believe in coincidence.”

I thought past the comforting warmth of the water lapping at the dock near my toes, to that darkness I sensed lying beneath. I couldn’t rule it out, what Reyes was saying—even if I couldn’t explain what was wrong, something *was* wrong with this place. Something was off. It pinged on my radar, even if I couldn’t define it.

Reyes looked out over the water and shook his head. “And they’re not normal, are they? A normal fever needs Tylenol. Rest. Maybe a cool bath. But a dip in forty-five degree water? Not normal, Katana. Not in any world.”

I shivered and wrapped my arms around my torso. “No,” I agreed, “not in any world.”

Reyes tore his gaze away from the hot springs and noted how I’d curled in on myself. Part of the chill was my romp in the woods and the frostbite in my extremities, but some of it was his words.

This place.

“In you go,” Reyes said, his hand alighting on my lower back. “Not for healing, but for dethawing.”

I laughed dryly and let him propel me forward to the edge of the dock. I clung to the metal bars of the ladder and dipped my toes into the water to test the temperature. The burn took a minute to travel from my toes to my brain, and I jerked my foot away, sucking breath into my lungs.

“It’s not as hot as you think,” Reyes said, gently taking my elbow. “That’s the frostbite. Let me help you.”

I glanced at him, ready to rip my arm from his grasp, but I honestly didn’t have the energy in me anymore. I *wanted* to be warm again. Why was Alaska so damn cold?

Reyes gripped my elbow tighter and guided me forward, forcing me to step into the hot water on the first rung of the ladder. I hissed at the sudden burn and squinted my eyes shut, but I descended each rung until I hit the rocky bottom. The springs stung around my thighs, waving as Reyes joined me, then he guided me out into deeper waters.

As I waded, the burn faded, leaving only the warmth behind. By the time the water’s surface reached my waist, I had feeling in my feet again. A wave of gratitude crashed within me, because if I’d gotten feeling back, I hadn’t actually ended up with frostbite in my toes.

Score one for small victories.

Though I still wasn’t brave enough to put my wounded hand under water.

“Better?” Reyes asked as he circled around to face me.

I nodded, hugging my injured hand to my chest.

“You should try to heal that,” Reyes told me. “This place sees a lot of bodies on the daily. You put that wound in this water, you’ll probably get a damn infection.”

I knew he was right, but my anxiety rose at the idea of even attempting such major work after everything I’d already been through. My body had reached meltdown mode; I hadn’t even been able to easily unzip my snowsuit, how the heck was I going to regrow my thumb?

But it had to be done.

Hugging my injured hand tighter to my chest, I called on my powers from deep inside. I closed my eyes against the rush of pure, hot energy coursing through my body. My markings grew warm, warmer than the water lapping around my waist, as my abilities “turned on” and ramped up.

I needed to heal not only my thumb, but the rest of my fingers and toes, too, and I couldn’t be certain I had the energy to do it all. The hot water helped though, more than I expected it to, so I set my sights on the fingers first, easing away that emptiness of frostbite. Little by little, the last of the numbness in my fingers wore away until the pain returned. With a few good pulses of energy, the sharp ache left behind ebbed until they felt normal again. I did the same with my toes, though I was ninety-nine percent certain they’d survived the cold. I figured better to be safe than sorry.

Then all that was left was my thumb.

I focused on my hand, on the sharp, dull ache where the fleshy meat of my hand hung open and raw. The injury didn’t even look real—my hand didn’t even look like a human hand—but I still studied the wound, clinically detached. I’d become entirely too unaffected by injuries, too unbothered by the sight of open wounds.

I could thank Dr. Hurst for that. After a girl’s had her hand cut off and steel rods shot through different parts of her body, she just doesn’t get queasy anymore.

Once I had my powerful energy in hand, I funneled it to my thumb.

The explosion of pure, unadulterated pain made me gasp for air.

The frostbite had nothing on this. My powers targeted the inner injuries, stitching muscle back together and regrowing bone simultaneously. The bone hurt the most—a sharp, white pain that I had to breathe through while lights danced behind my eyes. As the bone lengthened, the muscles did, as well, sheathing the fresh bone growth as it grew into place.

I turned inward for a time, lost in the chaos of pain and heat, exacerbated by the hot water lapping around me. I pushed on, gritting my teeth against the sharpening ache, calling up fresh skin to begin covering the raw muscles. Skin cells knitted together, wrapping around the growing bone and muscles, and I bit back a scream.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

I halted the movement of energy inside me and sucked in a ragged breath. Then another. And another, until I felt balanced again.

I peeled my hand away from my torso and held it up for perusal. I'd regrown half my thumb. It jutted from the joint, a little nub with a thin bony end. Not ideal, but it would have to do for now, until I could recoup some of my energy and fix the rest. At the very least, it was functional and it was no longer an open wound.

Holding my breath, I let the hand drop into the water, then let out a low hiss of pain.

“How'd it go?” Reyes asked.

I jumped—I'd completely forgotten he was there.

While I'd been healing, he must have ducked beneath the water and washed off the rivulets of dried blood on his face. Now the gash on his head looked raw and angry from the heat, though at least it was no longer bleeding.

I held up the nub and wiggled it, water flipping away from the pointy end. “It's a work in progress.”

“God didn’t create Eden overnight,” Reyes remarked sagely, then laid back to float, effectively cutting off any further conversation.

Not the kind of phrase I expected to come from Dex Reyes, but sure.

I ducked down beneath the hot water until only my head remained in the steamy air. The depth was just comfortable enough for me to kneel on the rocky ground. I closed my eyes, pressed my fingers together at my waistline in the Aether’s common meditation sigil, and began to breathe.

Meditation used to come easily to me, even as a kid, but it had become harder as I got older and my worries grew larger. Shutting down the internal voice that constantly shouted out my worries got too difficult, so my practice trailed off for months before I left Aether and never went back.

Surrounded by the hot springs, I felt somewhat cocooned from the horrors of reality. It was probably the safest, calmest, most comfortable I’d been in months, even with that strange dark energy shifting just outside my psyche. I fell into meditation easily, noting my thoughts with a kind of outside interest before letting them flow away. I kept my focus on my breath and on the way the water caressed my neck, the two sensations grounding me in the moment.

My focus on the water was how I knew when Reyes came close to me again. Waves lapped at my skin, and my eyes popped open to find him on my level, just a couple feet away.

Our eyes locked.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“You didn’t exactly hide your tracks, trampling through the snow like an elephant.”

“My father would be so ashamed,” I joked tiredly. “‘Tread lightly, Kita. You never know who is in pursuit.’ I always thought he was just paranoid but here we are.”

Reyes raised an eyebrow. “Kita. Is that your real name?”

Was it my real name? Not anymore than Oto-san and Oka-san were my real parents. Not any more real than my relationship to Etsuko and Hikari being “real” sisters.

“It’s what my family called me,” I said, which was the truth at least. “But no. It’s not my real name. And neither is Ky. To be honest, I don’t know my real name, and I probably never will.”

I was horrified to hear the hitch in my throat on that last word.

But Reyes, if he heard it, chose not to comment on it. “You know, your identity is whatever you make it. You can reinvent yourself externally a hundred times over, but who you are inside—how you feel, how you think, how you react—that’s your real identity.”

I nodded, since I didn’t trust myself to respond. “That’s pretty deep coming from a meathead soldier.”

He shrugged. “I’ve had a few identity changes in my life, too. Not my name, I mean. That’s stayed the same. But I’ve reinvented. Had to. Usually you come out better in the end.”

“Your life in foster care?”

“Yeah. And life out of it, you know? You jump from one fire to the next in this life. All you can do is the best you can do.”

I found it easier to stay in my own lane and keep Reyes in the lane I’d put him in—callous, sarcastic, driven for his own needs at the expense of others. I’d put a lot of my own spin on who he was as a person, and this conversation was wreaking havoc with the barriers I’d built.

The truth was somewhere in the middle. Reyes had a multi-faceted personality—good and bad qualities, all wrapped in one person, just like anyone else. I didn’t want to view him in that way, because it blurred the boundary and made me think he was worth saving.

I had to remember that his moral code didn’t align with mine.

Not after he'd silently watched me be tortured in the name of science.

He could redeem himself, though. Maybe not enough to earn a permanent place in my life, but enough for us to break free with clear consciences.

"Did you mean it, back there in the woods?" I asked. "Am I free to go after this storm ends?"

Reyes looked away, his gaze scanning the placid waters around us and avoiding mine. "I meant it. I'd prefer you not take the snowmobile since we really do need that, so I'll call you an Uber, if that's okay."

I laughed at the absurdity of that—taking an Uber from my kidnapper's house.

He finally looked at me. "Did you mean what you said earlier to Charlie?"

I cocked my head. "I said a lot of things to Charlie. You're going to have to be more specific."

"Yeah, you did," Reyes agreed, voice low, face expressionless. "Only two days here, and you've built a friendship with him."

"He makes it easy."

"He's a good man," Reyes agreed. "It's why I fight so hard for him. You told him you wished you could help him."

I gently waved my hands in the water, enjoying the brush of it between my fingers and the warmth of it on my newly grown nub. "You were eavesdropping."

He flashed a dimpled grin. "I'm not proud."

"I meant what I said."

"I could tell. I believed you when you said it." His eyes drifted away again, like it did every time he had to say something he didn't want to say. "Look... I'm sorry," he said gruffly, his gaze leveled on the nearby dock instead of me. "I—you know, not just this"—he waved a hand vaguely—"but

everything. Standing by while they hurt you back at base. Kidnapping you—”

“Aha!” I cried, pointing at him accusingly. “You admit it!”

Reyes rolled his eyes. “Yes, Katana, I admit it. I kidnapped you. But aren’t you kind of glad I did?”

“Ask me when I’m done growing my finger back,” I quipped, waving the sad little nub at him.

“I didn’t do that. You did that to yourself,” he pointed out.

“You forced my *hand*.” I waved my nub again to really drive the joke home. Reyes groaned, but in a good-natured kind of way.

This was the first I could remember him looking relaxed. He sat in the water, just a head and shoulders bobbing a few feet away from me, but there was something about his stance that had eased. He didn’t seem as tense or on edge, but the moment I realized that, I also realized I felt the same. The hot water had cleared my head and rested my muscles. All the tension I’d been holding inside for months...since I jumped off that freaking balcony and changed the course of my fate... All that tension had vanished.

I remembered being that girl, afraid to put a bathing suit on and get in the pool.

Look at me now, I thought, amused. Wearing a skimpy borrowed tank top and shorts, as bare and open as any normal coed.

“I accept your apology,” I said, then in a teasing tone, added, “So what are you going to do to make it up to me?”

He stared at me for a long second, then held up a finger. “I want to show you something.”

As he turned around and started sloshing out of the hot springs, I watched his retreating back, confused. I shuffled on my knees across the rocky floor, following after him, my interest piqued.

He climbed the ladder from the water, boxer briefs soaked and just this side of obscene with the way they clung to his

butt. I averted my gaze, my cheeks flaring hot, and a moment later, he was splashing back towards me.

Reyes flashed me a picture on his phone screen. “I had these made before I ever took you from the facility.”

I blinked at the image, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. There were three documents within frame—an Alaska driver’s license, a United States passport, and a credit card. The name on all three matched: Kira Cook.

But the image on the license and the passport was *me*.

He’d gotten a hold of my actual passport photo—the one I’d had taken back home in Japan when I was secretly planning my escape from Aether. I had no idea how he’d gotten it, or what hoops he’d had to jump through to get these made, but it took time. Effort.

More time and effort than he could have put forth in the less than three days I’d been with him.

“A credit card?” I asked, confused.

“A debit card,” he corrected. “It’s a checking account. There’s about five grand in there. I was hoping it’d be payment for you curing Charlie, but I guess now we can call it hush money. You’ll have everything you need to get out of here and go start over. Be someone new.”

Stunned, I slid both my hands around his to cup the phone. I stared down at my new identification, and the new life he’d put together for me. He placed his other hand against my palm so that he was holding me, holding him, our hands cupped together as if we were praying over his phone.

And maybe I was—because the new girl waiting for me on the screen felt like an opportunity to start again.

“I was too cocky,” Reyes went on as I continued to stare at the phone screen. “I didn’t look past my own needs. I wanted you to be the answer. To be able to heal him. I’m sorry you aren’t. Sorry I didn’t trust you when you told me.”

The feeling to accept his apology was on the tip of my tongue, but I felt too overwhelmed to give into it.

“No more locks,” Reyes said softly. “No more closed doors. When the storm eases up, I’ll help you get on your way. To the airport, to the highway, to a boat, whatever you want, wherever you want.”

I finally found my voice. “Kira?”

“I thought if I kept it something close to Ky, it might be easier for you to pick up using. I didn’t even know the thing about your name from home. Kita.”

“Maybe there’s a little bit of psychic in you,” I said, wondering if he could carry some kind of alt DNA.

Reyes chuckled. “Doubtful.”

I read over the details he’d chosen for me, and I realized the address on the ID matched the cheery numbers next to his front door. He’d given me *his* address. The house he’d locked up like a prison, the house he’d spent so much time and effort protecting. He’d handed it over to me and made it mine, too.

My voice came out a little breathless when I said, “You were being serious. You never intended to kill me.”

“I’m not a killer, Ky.”

“No. I know, just... You always intended to let me go.”

The water parted, and Reyes’ free hand drifted to my face. He placed a finger beneath my chin and lifted my face until our gazes met.

“In the interest of honesty,” he said, voice husky. “I have thought about keeping you around. But I’d want you to *want* to stay.”

We stared at each other for too long. Heat built between us that had nothing to do with my abilities or the hot springs, and everything to do with biology.

Just a boy with a well-executed plan.

And a thankful girl with a future.

I closed the distance between us—and kissed him.



Water sloshed around us as our bodies crashed together. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I noticed the plop as Reyes dropped his phone into the pool, but neither of us reacted. His arms snaked around me, yanking me against him with a ferocity that stole the breath from my chest.

Reyes' lips were warm, slightly salty from the hot springs. He returned the kiss feverishly, his mouth forcing mine open, his tongue sliding against mine as if he were claiming me. His fingers dug into my hips, an uncomfortable pressure that still sent a thrill of desire shivering up my spine.

My fingers slid over his smooth, slippery chest, and I cupped his cheek, trying for some kind of intimacy like in the movies. But his fingers hardened and he turned into the kiss, devouring me, not as if he desired me as a woman, but as if I were a life raft on a stormy ocean.

There was violence in his kiss, the same way he carried his anger with him on a daily basis. My body didn't seem to mind, reacting to his kiss and touch like I expected, but my mind railed against the whole situation. Something didn't feel quite right; something felt disjointed, like I was trying to fit two puzzle pieces together when they didn't match at all.

But I pushed past the unease and allowed myself to sink against him, to disappear into his kiss. Even with the hard hands and devouring kiss, I could enjoy it.

As long as I didn't think too hard about all the one hundred and fifty thousand reasons Reyes wasn't the right guy for me. In the heat of the moment, desire won out.

Reyes cupped my hip, his hand going places no other hand had gone, sliding to palm my butt and drag me against him.

Then, out of nowhere, my starfish markings flared hot.

I did my best to ignore them. In the back of my mind, I thought maybe it was happening because I'd just expended so much energy trying to heal my thumb. Some kind of leftover fatigue brought out by the desire coursing through me and heating my skin. So I ignored it. I stayed behind the darkness of my eyelids and tried to enjoy the kiss.

Until Reyes let out a little cry.

My eyes popped open, and I released him, my first thought that I'd bitten him or something in my ineptitude. I couldn't step away from him, though—we were connected.

By... stems?

I couldn't make sense of what was happening right away. It was too odd, too like something out of a horror movie.

Long root-like spines connected me to Reyes. Six of them, each originating from my starfish-shaped markings. The heat had grown nearly unbearable, but I hadn't noticed, being submerged like we were in the hot springs. At the end of the spines, starfish-shaped "hands" had latched onto Reyes in the same place on his body that they existed on mine.

"What's happening?" Reyes barked. Real fear shone in his dark eyes.

"I—I don't know!" I cried, trying to step away. The roots had suctioned onto Reyes so that I couldn't move away. I couldn't break the hold.

"Let me go!" Reyes snarled, shoving me.

I stumbled but the spines holding us together were too taut to allow me to fall. My disbelief quickly turned to anger at his callous behavior, and I shoved him back, glaring at him like I could take him out with just a well-placed look. We both stumbled, and I slammed into his chest. To his credit, despite the terrifying situation, he caught me.

I noticed, then, that the gash on his forehead—the gash that only ten minutes ago had looked raw and angry—was beginning to stitch together. The edges were tightening right before my eyes, sealing in a thin line that seeped a few droplets of blood before it vanished entirely.

Leaving not even a scar behind.

All at once, each of the six suction cups released Reyes and gently eased back into me. The sensation felt a little like regrowing limbs—a sharp pain, a kind of suctioning sensation, but gone just as fast as the spines disappeared.

Reyes stilled, his brow crinkling together. He touched the smooth, unmarred skin on his forehead, confusion tightening his expression even more. I couldn't tell if he'd felt the skin knitting together or if the pain he'd been dealing with silently had just vanished, catching his attention.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

He shook his head and pulled down his hand, looking at it like he was looking for blood. A hint of disbelief colored his words as he replied, “No. It doesn't hurt at all. There's no wound there anymore.”

“No scar either,” I confirmed.

“You healed it. Did you know—”

“No,” I interrupted, the word firm and not up for debate. “I didn't know I could do that.”

“So that also means you don't know how it happened.”

“I know as much as you do,” I pointed out, waving a hand between us to indicate what had just occurred.

“But we could recreate it,” he said, his voice breathless with something akin to excitement. “Maybe it's the water. The hot water. You like the ocean right? And those markings, they *are* oddly starfish shaped, like Charlie said. Maybe you're some kind of water creature, and it's the water that makes it work.”

“My birth clan lived in the mountains,” I argued. “Why would a water-based clan live in the mountains?”

Reyes grabbed my elbow, a gleam in his eye. “I don’t know, Katana. But we’re going to go cure my brother. Right now.”



The drive back to the house on the snowmobile seemed to take ages longer than it should have. Reyes nearly vibrated with anticipation at my back, while excitement thrummed in my veins as I imagined Charlie’s face when we told him what had happened.

When we told him that I could heal him.

When I absolutely *would not* tell him what had transpired between me and his brother.

I didn’t even want to think about that, let alone mention it out loud. And the idea of telling Charlie... it didn’t sit right. My heart stalled at the thought that he might hate me or think less of me for giving in to such baser desires without any real emotion to back it up.

So, I used my excitement over healing Charlie to completely ignore what had happened before the spines came out. At some point, me and Reyes would have to discuss the kiss and what it meant, but in the meantime, he seemed as happy to ignore it as I was.

Because, for me, the truth felt murky.

Did I kiss him because I had true feelings for him? Or did I kiss him because he did a nice thing for me that momentarily let me forget all the rest? I didn’t think I had feelings for Reyes—at least, not any that didn’t want to make me put my fist through a wall, and I may have been naive when it came to love, but that was not any kind of healthy love. Even I knew that.

Whatever the answer, I didn’t have the energy for it right now.

The storm had abated somewhat, but snow still blew into my eyes around the shield as we flew across the landscape

back to the house. I huddled inside my wet snowsuit, already missing the warmth of the hot springs.

Lights glimmered in the windows as we roared to a halt in front of the house. The curtains at the picture window in the living room fluttered and a silhouette peered out, then vanished. As Reyes helped me climb off the seat, the front door opened and Charlie took the porch steps two at a time, calling my name.

Before I could even take a single step toward the beckoning lights spilling from the open door, Charlie rushed up to me and threw his arms around me.

“Jesus, Starfish,” he murmured against my hair. “I thought you were a goner.”

“I almost was,” I told him, relaxing into his embrace.

The moment he wrapped me up, warmth suffused my limbs and lit me up from the inside out, greater than the hot springs ever could. Closing my eyes, I soaked in his greenhouse scent. That was Charlie to a T—earthy and full of life despite the looming expiration date.

Charlie grabbed my shoulders and gently moved me away. “Come on,” he said roughly. “Let’s get you inside where it’s warm. I have a surprise for you.”

I’d expected a lecture for my rash and destructive actions. I’d expected judgment for braining his brother with a snow shovel. Or, at the very least, for him to express disappointment in me for making such a stupid decision to race off into an active snowstorm.

But there was nothing in his expression except relief as he slipped an arm around my shoulders to lead me inside.

I marveled at his absolute absence of judgment. Every step I’d taken out of line—and out of Aether values—had gotten me lectures and judgment from my parents. They did their best to accept me as I was, being from another clan, but I always fell short of what they wanted from me. So, while they never stopped me from my behaviors, and even tried to

accommodate my needs like with surfing, their judgment was always there.

Charlie's silent acceptance was the single most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced.

I settled comfortably against his body for the walk to the porch steps. The snow had grown deep in my absence. I had to lift my knees almost to my chest to walk, but having Charlie to lean on helped me along the way.

Heat wavered out the open door like a mirage on the horizon. I stamped my boots on the front porch trying to rid myself of as much snow as possible, but I still carried a bucket load inside with me to the heated foyer.

Charlie kicked off his snow boots in the corner, then knelt to help me with mine. "I have tea," he told me as he untied my shoelaces and began to loosen them. "It'll warm you right up. You'll need a bath too. Just let me know if you'd rather do it before or after dinner, and I'll get it going at the right time."

"Charlie, give the girl time to breathe," Reyes barked, kicking off his boots in the opposite corner. "She almost died. I already warmed her up in the hot springs."

Charlie glanced up at me with a frown. "Are you okay?"

I realized immediately what he was asking me. Not because of his exact words, but something deeper in the meaning of his question. It had nothing to do with my physical well being—not in the way I'd been caught in the snow or had injuries to deal with.

No... Charlie had felt the darkness at the hot springs too.

We locked gazes.

"I'm okay," I assured him. "But we should talk about that later."

"If you start to feel... hot," Charlie murmured. "You'll tell me?"

Shock rippled through me as I realized what he was telling me without actually telling me. The fevers, the supernatural

heat in his body, Reyes standing chest deep in the hot springs, telling me Charlie's fevers got worse after he visited.

I don't believe in coincidences.

Charlie knew the fevers originated from the hot springs.

"Of course I'll tell you," I said softly.

"Right then." Charlie stood and quickly unzipped my snow suit, already dragging it down my arms as he continued. "I have a surprise for you with dinner."

"Dinner can wait," Reyes said gruffly.

But I cut him off with a stern look. "If Charlie made dinner, we're going to eat it, then we'll talk about what happened."

The two of us had an eye-locking moment full of just as much meaning, except where Charlie and I had experienced mutual understanding and support, Reyes and I battled with our eyes.

But he threw his hands up and stalked into the living room in his socks.

Charlie helped me step out of my boots and snowsuit, then we left it all in a soggy pile on the floor. He noted but didn't mention the copious amounts of blood dried into my borrowed sweatpants on the left side of my hips.

In the living room, the coffee table had been shifted closer to the big picture window that looked out over the snowy front yard. Charlie had taken the cushions off the couch and placed them carefully around the table. Place settings waited for us, as well as a ceramic tea pitcher and traditional handle-less Japanese cups.

Charlie grinned and held out a hand, indicating the set up. "What do you think?"

"What'd you do to the couch?" Reyes griped. "I paid good money for those cushions."

But I recognized immediately what Charlie had done for me.

“It’s a traditional Japanese meal,” I said, walking further into the room. A big bowl of white rice sat next to a casserole dish of cubed chicken covered in a dark, sticky sauce and copious amounts of green onion.

“I didn’t have a lot to work with, meal-wise,” Charlie told me. “Just what was in the pantry. But the tea is jasmine, so that’s authentic, yeah? And the mugs, we already had those. I picked them up at the secondhand store in Anchorage last year. Just liked them.”

“This is perfect, Charlie.” I knelt on the cushion closest to me, warmth seeping through my heart the same as the hot springs had seeped through my frozen body. I picked up the delicate ceramic mug, cradling it in both hands.

With a start, I realized my left thumb had completely regenerated.

I blinked at it, wondering how on earth I’d missed the final growth. When I’d been weak back at the hot springs, I’d ended healing it with just a nub, but now, I had a fully functional thumb again.

Had it healed alongside Reyes? And I’d been too lost in the kiss, and then in our subsequent fight and excitement, to even notice?

Charlie knelt on the cushion to my right and picked up the ceramic pitcher, turning it up over the tea cup in my hands. “I thought you might be feeling homesick. From things you’ve said.”

The hot tea warmed the sides of the mug, which in turn heated my cold hands. “How’d you know I’d be back?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t. I just hoped.”

As he focused on pouring my tea to just below the top, I stared at his handsome face and wondered how on earth he’d become such a beautiful example of hope. He’d been dealt a crappy hand at life but he approached everything with such optimism, like a ray of sunshine packaged in a ridiculously good-looking body.

It only made sense that Charlie had given me a slice of home in this table and this meal.

Charlie *was* home. He was everything good and perfect about Aether that I'd taken for granted. This reminder he'd created for me was much more welcome than I ever thought it would be.

Reyes was right, after all. My identity was what I made it, and at the end of the day, Aether lived inside me and guided my every move. I didn't have to be the girl my parents always hoped I would be, but I could still live with that girl in my heart. She could be a part of my future.

Reyes crossed his arms, his jaw tight. "This is great but we have news."

Charlie set the tea pot down and looked up at his brother. His brow crinkled as he studied him. "Hey—didn't you have a giant gash in your forehead when you left?"

Reyes dropped his arms to his sides and grinned. The expression chased away his typical sour expression and made him look younger. "That's the news. Ky healed me. And she can do the same for you."



The steady rush of water filling the tub settled my nerves, the way the ocean's waves could calm me and put me into a kind of meditative zen state.

Charlie's fingers brushed beneath the flow of water as he kneeled on the rim of the tub and tested the temperature. "I'd planned on running you a bath after dinner. Never occurred to me I'd be getting in with you."

I laughed, but my breath caught in my throat.

This was *Charlie*. I was about to get half-naked in a tub with *Charlie*.

With Reyes, it had only been natural. He was the kind of guy who'd probably charmed panties off girls anytime he wanted. Good girls who *never* would have made out with him in public. Throwing caution to the wind probably happened by osmosis just by being in his presence because he was wild and untamed.

Charlie was pure innocence. Sure, he was just as good looking as his brother, but he was the kind of guy I wanted to protect, the kind of guy I could put on a pedestal to worship for his beauty and kindness. Almost as if he didn't feel real at all. At least, not the kind of real this world demanded.

Charlie flexed his fingers at his sides, looking at the tub, then at me, then the tub again. "Do we... should I keep all my clothes on? Shirt, too...?"

His gaze met mine, and his obvious discomfort set me more at ease. We were both out of our depth here, which made

things easier. I didn't have to pretend to be okay or hide behind my snark. I could be vulnerable with him.

"Um, I think I need access to your skin," I said, flushing hot. "So we'll need to be shirtless."

He nodded, swallowing visibly. "Even you?"

"I, um, I have a tank top underneath," I assured him, waving at my torso.

Of course, what I didn't tell him was it was just a white tank top from the hot springs that I'd pilfered since I didn't have a bra here. The minute the fabric got wet, all imagination would go out the window.

I turned my back to him and reached for the hem of my borrowed t-shirt. It was his, of course. Everything I'd worn or used or eaten since coming to this house had been from Charlie. He had this kind, giving soul that maybe I'd started to take for granted exactly like I had my family.

I'd heard before this idea from psychology that we were most discourteous to the people we loved. So we saved our politeness and our charity for strangers, while treating the people we loved with a lack of respect or courtesy. Looking back on my life with the Aether, I was definitely guilty of that.

I didn't want to be guilty of that with Charlie.

I stripped off my t-shirt and folded it carefully, laying it on the closed toilet lid. The air in the bathroom was cold—much colder than the steamy air from the hot springs or greenhouse. I glanced around and found a stack of towels beneath the sink, then rolled one up to block the cold seeping in beneath the door.

When I turned back to Charlie, he stood shirtless and utterly at odds with Reyes. Where Reyes had been short and muscular, built like a brick wall, Charlie's torso was long and lean, trim with visible muscles but not overly cut like he'd spent time in the gym molding his body. Charlie's body was like mine—built in the real world through swimming in the ocean, gardening, simply *living*.

He glanced at the water, his wavy brown hair falling across his forehead. “Um. You first?”

I stepped over the rim of the tub into the water. Where the hot spring had been just slightly over-hot, Charlie had picked a perfect temperature. I folded in on myself into the water, tucking into one end while Charlie went for the other.

The tub was deep but narrow. Even as I situated myself face to face with Charlie, our knees knocking together beneath the surface, I realized it wasn't going to be close enough. At least, I didn't think it would be, though I couldn't be sure since I didn't understand anything about my starfish spines yet.

“I think... I need to be closer?” I posed it as a question, maybe to ask permission or because I had the mental equivalent going on of “I don't know what to do with my hands.”

Charlie nodded.

I untwisted my legs and slid them on either side of his hips, easing closer. When he realized what I was doing, a flash of surprise crossed his face, but then he carefully straightened his legs beneath me. I sank onto his thighs, my heart pounding in my chest.

We faced each other in the warm water, steam swirling around us, and the situation was so similar to what I'd experienced with Reyes except... I was nervous. A heavy anticipation hung in the air that I don't think had anything to do with healing Charlie.

A thrill of desire that wasn't just because he was a gorgeous man.

A thrill of desire because he was *Charlie*. He was that feeling of home.

I placed my hands on his chest.

He lifted both of his, and his gaze darted around me. “Can I—is this okay?” he asked, indicating my waist.

Charmed by his request for consent, I nodded.

His hands settled on my waist just above the waistband to my shorts. His fingers were hot like the rest of him, which I assumed came from the low-grade fever he'd been running since his dip in the ocean. His fingertips chased the remaining chill from my body and I settled in more, some of the tension seeping away. My knees cradled his sides, and his knees supported my bottom.

As close as Reyes had yanked me to his body during our kiss, it never felt this intimate.

Charlie's voice came out a little breathless as he asked, "What do we do?"

"Let me try a few things."

I closed my eyes and pulled on my healing powers the same as I would have if I were healing myself. I hadn't needed to do that with Reyes, but surely with the water and us physically touching, I had the right recipe for my powers to transfer.

Even though the markings heated up, nothing else happened—no spines came out to root into Charlie.

I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on my thumb. Even though it was no longer injured, having already been healed completely, I thought maybe the memory of it mangled and dismembered would make the healing begin. Again, my markings swelled with heat, but nothing else happened.

Frustrated, I sat back on Charlie's thighs with a sigh.

"Are we missing something?" he asked. "Some action or word that might have triggered it with my brother?"

I bit my lower lip. The only thing missing from the situation with Reyes... was the kiss.

Oh God.

This is awkward.

"So, something else did happen," I told him, my mind racing ahead to choose my words. "When we were in the springs, Dex said something pretty profound and... well, I kissed him."

Lines formed at the corners of Charlie's eyes, but he carefully smoothed the frown away. "I see. So we should... are you comfortable with that?"

I couldn't deny the pull I felt. Straddling Charlie like this had awakened every inch of my body. I was acutely aware of his warmth, of the solid way he fit between my thighs. He readjusted his hands on my waist, fingertips loose, and the muscles in his chest flexed beneath my palms. I pressed my fingers tighter against him, curling closer.

"I'm comfortable," I told him, a little breathlessly.

Then my breath caught in my throat as his lips met mine.

Charlie felt fluid against me, liquid as a wave caressing a shore. His soft lips parted, inviting me to take more but not demanding anything. Heat flushed through my body that had nothing to do with the hot water, and I tentatively opened my mouth and tasted him.

My heart felt like it would explode out of my chest. I couldn't draw air into my lungs; I could hardly function. All I wanted was to be closer to him, to know him better than I knew myself. Where kissing Reyes had been chaos and flashing lights and a swift fall in the dark, kissing Charlie was the soft breeze through the trees, the sunshine filtering down through leaves the color of new life, the dewy softness of the earth beneath me and a lazy blue sky above.

Kissing Charlie felt like coming home. Felt like I was complete, for once since leaving my family behind.

I pressed deeper into him, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. Charlie's hands caressed my back, careful to stay in socially acceptable places because that was just who he was as a person—sweet, caring, respectful. He had no idea that I wanted his hands all over me. I wanted him to know me like no other man did. I wanted him to erase the memory of Reyes' hands where they didn't belong.

The heat I'd come to associate with my healing abilities flashed through me.

This time, instead of ignoring it, I let it rage for several seconds before I broke the kiss because I wanted to see it happen this time. As I pulled away, the spines appeared in my periphery, moving lightning quick as they attached to Charlie's body.

I'd warned him of what to expect, so his pale brown eyes widened and he stilled. "What now?"

"I think it just...works," I said.

Charlie splayed a hand across my back. Bare fingertips caressed the bare skin at my lower back beneath the tank top, and I wanted more of that.

"Ky," Charlie said, nuzzling my chin with his nose, "can I keep kissing you?"

"I wish you would," I whispered, not trusting my voice.

He lifted his face, and his soft lips slanted across mine again.

I knew I should have felt awkward about making out with Charlie right after I'd done the same with his brother. Here I was, about as inexperienced as a girl could be, but seducing two guys in one night like some drunk girl at a party just looking to get close to someone to chase away the loneliness.

Kissing Reyes hadn't chased away the loneliness. If anything, kissing Reyes had made the loneliness gape wider, a monster inside my chest, jaws hinging to devour me.

Kissing Charlie worked. He was sunshine in my arms, illuminating all the dark, sad corners in my soul, filling me with light.

He broke the kiss, pressing his forehead against mine. "Sorry. I—I'm tired all of a sudden."

As soon as he mentioned it, I realized I could *feel* his exhaustion. Maybe it was our connection through my spines attached to his body, or maybe I was simply exhausted too. It had been a long night full of emotional turmoil, physical pain, and loads of healing.

"Rest," I said, giving him a little shove. "Lay down."

Charlie sank back against the sloped tub and pulled me with him until my body lay atop his beneath the water. I nestled my face against his chest, cradled by my spines and his arms.

“You know this is magnificent, right?” Charlie asked, his voice rumbling through my cheek.

“This is rather nice,” I agreed with a sigh, resting my fingertips on the bare skin at his collarbone.

“No, not the bath, though I agree,” he said with a chuckle. “Your abilities. This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen.”

I flushed hot with pleasure. “You aren’t...grossed out? By the spines?”

Charlie wrapped his arms around my waist and hugged me to him. “Of course not. They’re part of you. I could never be grossed out by anything that’s a part of you.”

I listened to his heart beating as his words settled on my skin. I wanted to ink them in. Remember his acceptance forever.

He thought me “magnificent.”

All the years I’d felt awkward. All the years I’d been the tallest girl in the room, all the years I’d been self-conscious about covering my markings. All the years I’d felt like my skin didn’t fit right, and all it took was one sweet man with one sweet word to chase those ghosts away.

Charlie’s breaths became deep and even beneath my cheek. I counted along with them, slowing my own breath until we were breathing together. The energy inside me pulsed, pouring in a circular motion from me into him then back into me. For the first time in weeks, I felt nourished and comforted.

And I fell asleep.



I awoke to the slosh of cold water around me and Charlie stretching beneath me.

I blinked into the dim bathroom light, slightly disoriented from sleep. I had no idea how much time had passed, but it was enough that the bathwater had grown cold though the night remained dark outside the window.

My spines had vanished back into my body at some point while we were sleeping. I wish I knew the logistics of how they worked—whether they pulled back in when they knew the healing was done or if they pulled back in because I fell asleep.

If it was the latter, what if I didn't fully heal Charlie?

Pressing against his chest with both hands, I sat up, my knees resting on the porcelain on either side of his thighs. Charlie's palms came to rest on my hips, his thumbs caressing lazy circles on patches of bare skin above the waistband of my shorts. He stared up at me with dark intensity.

"How do you feel?" I asked, part of me nervous that the answer wouldn't be what I wanted to hear. What if I'd been capable of healing Reyes' tiny cut but *not* Charlie's life-threatening illness? The two "injuries" were not even close to the same.

Charlie grinned, his whole face transforming with the expression and shining from the inside. "I'm *starving*."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that a good thing?"

“That’s a *great* thing,” he assured me. “One of the symptoms of my cancer is loss of appetite.”

“I’ve seen you eat!”

“I force myself to eat,” Charlie corrected me. “Not because I’m hungry, but because I know my body needs the fuel. Right now, I’m ravenous, and I want to put dry clothes on and go eat everything in the kitchen.”

I laughed, but I untangled myself from him to get my feet beneath me so I could stand. Before I could even lift myself off the ground, however, Charlie surged up from the water, snatched me around the waist, and kissed me.

It wasn’t the sweet but hungry, lust-inducing making out we’d done before falling asleep. This was a thorough, closed mouth kiss—a plea, a prayer, a gratitude. But his lips on mine still sent my body temperature spiking in a delicious kind of way.

I clung to his wet shoulders, my head spinning.

He broke the kiss quickly, then in a husky voice said, “Thank you. For healing me.”

“I only hope I did. It was my pleasure.”

“Mine too,” Charlie replied with a wicked grin.

Charlie left me in the bathroom with fresh clothes so I could take a steamy shower and warm up. I had a shiver I couldn’t shake, though I didn’t know if it came from residual frostbite from my evening in the woods, or if I’d expended more of my energy than usual on Charlie’s healing. I stood beneath the shower head for a long time, my eyes closed and the scalding water pouring down my body, until I felt like my inside temperature matched my outside.

Drying off and dressing afterward took the wind out of my sails. I found myself balancing on my shoulder against the bathroom wall, one foot in Charlie’s sweatpants while I breathed through a wave of nausea and dizziness.

I’d gotten sick a few years back. Illness was unheard of in Aether, for the most part, but we weren’t completely remote

from the modern world. Someone brought in the flu, and it tore through the clan with a vengeance. I thought I was going to die, my symptoms were so severe.

I felt now a little like the flu was coming on.

I managed to get both legs in the pants and pulled them up, giving the strings a tug to keep them on my hips. As I jammed the t-shirt over my head, I found myself wishing I had a blood relative to turn to for this kind of stuff. Was it normal for me to feel like this after healing someone else? I'd never felt sick after healing myself—not in this way, anyway. Healing major wounds like those inflicted on me by Dr. Hurst had left me feeling loose and weak, but not really *sick*. I'd just needed time to refill my reserves, for my body to reset itself. If I'd been properly fed and rested and taken care of at the lab, I would have recuperated even faster. Even without the self-care, I still rejuvenated in record time.

Right now, though, I felt sluggish and worn. An ache had taken up residence in my lower back. I wanted to crawl into bed and stay there for a decade.

Instead, I grabbed the blanket off my bed, wrapped it around my shoulders, and went downstairs to check on Charlie.

I found both brothers at the kitchen table, Reyes nursing a glass of something amber-colored and Charlie bent over an overflowing bowl of Lucky Charms.

“That’s what you decided on? Processed sugar?” I teased as I sat in the chair between them.

Charlie smiled, losing a couple marshmallows in the process. “It’s the first course. I have a pizza in the oven.”

Reyes tapped his fingers on his glass as he said, “I haven’t seen him eat like this since before the diagnosis. I think you may have pulled it off, Katana.”

“I’m really happy to hear it.” I propped an elbow on the table and let my head sink onto my hand, exhaustion settling over me.

“You look like crap,” Reyes said, ever the gentleman. “You good?”

I shrugged. “Recuperating, I think. I don’t exactly have experience at curing another person’s terminal illness.”

Reyes stood and crossed to the cabinets, picking out another short glass. He upended a bottle of Irish whiskey over the glass, then dropped in a couple ice cubes from the freezer.

“Here, drink this,” he said, setting the glass in front of me. “It’ll help.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I replied, giving the alcohol a little shove in his direction.

He shoved it back to me. “Whiskey is medicinal. It’ll perk you back up.”

The Aether built into my brain came out. “Whiskey is a mind-altering substance that can pickle your organs and lead you to regret.”

Reyes shoved the glass even closer to me. “And it can help you forget you’re struggling. Drink the whiskey, Katana.”

“Terminal,” Charlie said, breaking through our semi-argument. The timer on the oven started to ding, indicating his pizza was finished cooking. “I’m not terminal anymore.” He turned wide, shocked eyes on his brother. “I’m not going to die.”

“Stay positive but let’s not put the cart before the horse,” Reyes said, clinking the ice in his glass. “We’ll call in the morning and make an appointment with Dr. Sanjay to verify.”

Charlie left his half-eaten bowl of Lucky Charms to retrieve his pizza from the oven. A wave of heat rolled out into the kitchen, smelling of yeast, oregano, and melted cheese. “Clinically, I feel great!”

“Clinically, I’m glad,” Reyes assured him. “Medically, we’re going to verify. Comprende?”

The ache in my lower back twinged, and I sighed deeply, knowing I was going to drink this stupid whiskey if at least to get some fuzzy-headed relief from my symptoms. I tossed

back a big swig, squinting against the way it burned on the way down. Then I shifted uncomfortably, trying to reach the spot on my back to massage the pain away.

Charlie sat his plate—piled high with slices—on the table, eyeing me. “What’s wrong?”

I sat up straighter and twisted at the base of my spine, using the chair as a hinge to really dig into the stretch. “My back hurts. And I’ve got this sharp ache in my chest here, too,” I added, rubbing my sternum at the core of the pain.

Charlie exchanged stricken glances with Reyes. “You don’t think...”

“No,” Reyes said. “No way it works like that.”

I looked between them, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“The biggest symptom of myeloma is pain,” Charlie explained. He dug his fingers in his sternum. “Pain here, and pain in the lower back. My lower back pain causes weakness in my spine and legs. That’s why Dex doesn’t let me use the ladder to get into the greenhouse loft.”

“*Caused*,” Reyes corrected sternly. “Your cancer caused weakness. Past tense.”

“Cart before the horse, huh?” Charlie shot back with a snarky grin.

“So what,” I said, wrapping my hand around my glass. “You think I take on the symptoms of the person I heal?”

Charlie picked up a slice of pizza with a half-hearted shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

I shivered—partly from the cold, partly from the idea that by healing someone else, I’d carry their symptoms into my body. All I could hope was they would remain symptoms and not manifest as the actual illness.

It sucked not knowing the ins and outs and limitations of my abilities.

Reyes tapped my glass. “Drink more. I’ll go make a fire in the living room, and we can relocate there to keep you warm.”

I sipped my whiskey and watched him leave, somewhat stunned. I glanced at Charlie. “Did he just make a decision specifically for my well being?”

Charlie grinned through his chewing. “Even caterpillars fly eventually.”

I polished off my whiskey while Charlie finished his pizza, and by the time we joined Reyes in the living room, a glorious fire roared in the grate. I made myself a pile of pillows on the floor before the fire and nestled into my blanket, letting the heat roll over me to warm up the shivers.

Charlie showed up with a bag of chips and a jar of premade queso, stretching out on the floor beside me.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am to eat cheese,” he said as the metal lid popped beneath his palm.

“I’m not sure we can call that cheese,” I said.

“Fake cheese is just as good,” he declared as he dunked a chip all the way in. He glanced over his shoulder, a big grin stretching across his face. “Dex pulled out the keyboard. Must be a party.”

I looked back to see what he was talking about. Reyes was rolling a freestanding electric keyboard into the living room—one straight out of the eighties.

“You’re kidding me,” I said, unable to keep the giant smile off my face. “Dex plays the keyboard?”

Still chewing his cheese-soaked tortilla chip, Charlie cracked the top on his can of Coca-Cola and returned my grin. “Sure does. You never would have expected it, right?”

“In my defense,” Reyes piped up wryly, “I did it to impress a girl in high school.”

“This girl is suitably impressed,” I replied. “Play me a song, maestro. Something dedicated to Charlie and his brand new future.”

And my brand new future, too. The one that lived, for the moment, on Reyes' water-logged cell phone.

Reyes kneeled on the couch cushions, eyeing the keyboard with one brow raised in thought. He positioned his hands over the keys, and seeing him like that seemed so absurdly out of character that I laughed.

He smirked at me, then started playing. It took me about five seconds to realize he'd chosen "Eye of the Tiger."

Reyes pulled one hand off the keyboard and pointed at Charlie. "This one's for you, tiger. The last known survivor. Stalking his prey in the night."

Charlie and I both groaned, and Charlie dug a decorative pillow out from under his butt to throw. Reyes ducked the pillow and started singing.

Of course he had a nice voice.

The devil probably did too.

Reyes' voice fell into the background as I gazed ahead into the fire.

I felt flushed. Hot. That was often a symptom after I did any kind of healing on myself, and not abnormal at all, but I couldn't help but think about our conversation in the kitchen. About me taking on Charlie's cancer symptoms.

And Charlie's fervent voice asking me to tell him if I started to feel hot.

"No fever since the healing?" I asked.

Charlie dug a chip into the queso dip. "Fever? No, not yet. But I don't think that was ever related to my cancer." He paused, digging the chip a little deeper, his attention focused on the dip rather than me. "But... you felt it too, yeah? At the hot spring."

Reyes launched into the chorus of the song, the key changing as a backdrop to our conversation.

I nodded. "Something's wrong with that place."

Charlie winced. “And I think I brought it home with me. *In me.*”

I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “How so?”

“The first time we went, after Dex learned about the place from his friend back in Nevada, we signed in and paid the fee, and Dex let slip about my cancer. Amaruq offered a ritual, saying it would connect me deeper to the healing powers of the hot spring. Dex has always been desperate about my illness, so he agreed.”

“You didn’t get a choice?”

Charlie offered a wry grin. “Dex never gives me a choice.”

The statement was benign but powerful. His isolation here at this house at the top of the world—that alone was a choice he didn’t get to make.

“So, we get in the hot spring,” Charlie went on, “and Amaruq does his thing. I wasn’t really paying attention. I didn’t feel great that day—I tried to talk Dex out of even going. But I’m just dead on my feet, swaying in the water while Amaruq is chanting and waving incense around me. And out of nowhere, the heat from the hot spring felt like it entered my body.”

“Like it seeped through your skin?” I clarified, thinking of how the heat from the fire had warmed my insides just by sitting here.

“No, more like...” He paused, his face scrunched up endearingly. “Like lava was pumped in my veins. And that feeling never went away. It goes dormant sometimes, but then when I have the hot days, it’s back with a vengeance. Stronger than ever.”

“Lava. Why specifically lava?” I asked, a niggling of fear and worry growing inside me.

“I don’t know. Just a feeling, I guess. And... I sometimes taste sulfur,” Charlie added in an almost hushed whisper. “Like bad eggs?”

“Like brimstone?” I asked, my heart pounding.

He shrugged. “Whatever you want to call it, I can taste it. Metallic in the back of my mouth.”

“Come on, losers!” Reyes yelled, interrupting the moment. “This isn’t a solo concert. Sing or I’m busting out Journey!”

Charlie leaned back on his elbow, a lazy smile blanketing his face. He looked incredibly at ease in his own skin, more so than I’d ever seen him in our short time together. “Bust out Journey, and maybe I’ll sing!”

Reyes immediately changed chords to *Don’t Stop Believin’*, and even I had to join in.

But the conversation Charlie and I had been having never drifted far from my mind.

I had an inkling something more was at work here in the Alaskan wilderness.

Something of an alt nature.

And Charlie had been dragged right into it.

As an alt myself, that meant I was now irrevocably entwined, too.



The blinding spill of sunlight across my face greeted me the next day.

I cringed away from the light, rolling into the back of the couch without anywhere else to go. My legs were dangling over the arm of the couch, while my head was propped on someone else's legs. The someone else kicked with an almost indecipherable, "Get off!" and I realized it was Reyes, passed out on the other end of the couch. I must have collapsed over onto his legs when we both fell asleep.

Sitting up and away from his sleepy violence, I blinked blearily around the living room. Evidence of our celebration lay scattered everywhere—the balloons we'd spent way too much time blowing up in an attempt to "fill the living room"; mountains of shaving cream from the "war"; the TV still idly playing one of Charlie's favorite movies; Reyes' keyboard, on which I'd learned how to play *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*. We'd been on a rager last night, all three of us elated to have a whole and healed Charlie.

Even though alcohol hadn't been involved in my celebrations, beyond that first "perk me up" glass, I felt hungover.

I groaned and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. The sunlight leaking through the curtains was too bright and made my skull feel like it could explode at the slightest move. My whole body felt warm, though my fingers were ice cold, and I was so tired I could have gone back to sleep. Some of the way I felt could be attributed to our impromptu late night

celebrations and a lack of sleep, but some of it I was certain came from how much energy I'd spent healing Charlie.

I healed Charlie. The reminder rippled through me. My head lolled back on the couch cushions, and I lifted my hand to study my new thumb. I couldn't even tell there had been an injury, much less that I'd cut off the whole thumb. I thought the skin looked too perfect, too shiny, too new, but I also had a feeling I only felt that way because I knew it was brand new.

And Charlie was healed.

Charlie lay on the love seat, his long legs draped over the arm of the couch and his arms tucked against his torso. At first glance, he looked peacefully asleep, until I realized he was shivering.

I sat bolt upright, the blanket falling away from me. I shoved it aside and rushed to the love seat, pressing my hand against Charlie's forehead.

Hot.

Very hot.

"Charlie?" My voice came out tentative. Scared.

His eyelids fluttered at the sound of my voice, but he didn't open them.

On the couch, Reyes stirred. He sat up and stretched, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Damn. We slept in."

"Dex... something's wrong."

Reyes took one look at the expression on my face and shot to his feet, joining me at Charlie's side.

"He's burning up," I said. "I don't think he's conscious."

Reyes didn't hesitate. He leaned down and picked up his brother, once again showing off his strength as he carefully cradled the taller man against his chest. I followed him from the room, through the back of the house, and into the greenhouse.

Snow covered the glass overhead, glistening as the sunlight shone through the thick sheen and gave the

greenhouse a soft white glow. Reyes made a beeline to the cold room and kicked open the door, where he gently lay Charlie atop the cot.

“What happened?” he demanded, going to one knee to rustle around in the basket beside the bed.

“I don’t know,” I said. “He was like this when I woke up.”

“He was healed last night. How did he get a fever?”

“I don’t know, Dex,” I said sharply. “I know you’re worried, but don’t blame this on me. I’m still reaping the effects of healing Charlie’s cancer. Don’t be a jerk.”

He glanced up at me then, noting that I stood beside him wrapped in a blanket and shivering myself. I half expected him to lash out at me for getting an attitude with him, but he clamped his lips together in a thin, pained line and nodded once.

“Fine,” he said, glancing back down to snatch the Tylenol from the basket. “Get on the cot and work on him again. Maybe you missed something.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” I argued. “The spines stop when they stop!”

But then I remembered that I *did* fall asleep during Charlie’s healing. With my lack of knowledge about my powers, I didn’t know whether the healing continued or not while I was unconscious.

Maybe this *was* my fault, and I didn’t even know it.

Pulling off my t-shirt, I tossed it aside and wrapped an arm around my breasts self-consciously, wishing my hot springs tank top hadn’t stayed wet on the bathroom floor last night. Reyes didn’t even look at me, his attention entirely focused on uncapping a thermometer and sliding it into Charlie’s mouth.

I crawled onto the cot and tucked myself against Charlie’s side. How was I supposed to do this with him unconscious? And what if the hot water really was an important part of making this work? What if I *had* to face him in order for the

spines to work correctly but he was unconscious, supine on his back and immovable?

Gods, what I wouldn't have given to have access to my real clan. To the people who could help me make sense of this ability.

I also wished I didn't feel so much like I had a fever myself.

The thermometer beeped, and Reyes pulled it away, his expression grim. "One-oh-eight."

Panic skittered into my bones.

I didn't have another option. With a fever like that, permanent damage to his brain and organs were a very real probability that I wasn't willing to risk.

"Can you get me some juice?" I asked hesitantly, cringing in anticipation of Reyes lashing out for me daring to express a need when Charlie was all he cared about. "I need to hydrate and replenish to be able to be my best for Charlie."

Reyes didn't lash out. He didn't even protest. He stood and left the cold room.

When he went into stoic mode, I knew he was beyond worried about his brother.

Reyes had no sooner left the room, than Charlie's eyes opened.

He stared up at the snow-covered glass and took a deep, slow breath. His head rolled on his pillow towards me, his eyelids fluttering as he came out of sleep.

"Ky?" he murmured, my name thick on his lips.

"I'm here," I said, relief spilling into all my empty corners. "Can you turn to me? We need to try to heal again."

He rolled into me, one arm slithering beneath me as he dragged me closer to him, chest to chest. "Starfish..." he murmured, a sly smile quirking his lips. "You're naked."

"Shirtless," I corrected with a smile, my cheeks burning like brands. "You have a fever."

His eyes closed again. “I thought I felt weird last night.”

“How’s your pain level?”

He gave a small, slight shake of his head. “No pain. Just... hot.”

No pain. I took that as a good sign, then, given what he’d said about the pain attached to his cancer.

“What about weakness?” I prodded. “How do your arms feel?”

“Strong,” Charlie said, flexing his muscles around me with an amused grin.

The cancer really *was* gone—I was certain of it. So why did he get a fever again? It didn’t make any sense.

Until I considered the hot springs. Just the reminder sent a chill of doom shivering up my spine.

“Where are we?” Charlie asked, eyes still closed.

“In your cold room. Trying to get your temperature down.”

“You know where I could get cold?” he said, his words slightly slurred. “The Arctic Circle. Take a walk with the polar bears.”

“The polar bears would eat you.”

He chuckled. “Sure, but they can wait until I see the Aurora Borealis...” He trailed off on these last words, stumbled up by the pronunciation in his feverish stupor. “Can you imagine how beautiful? Nature is wild. You’re like the Auror- Rara. Aura-rara... The Northern Lights,” he amended, his arms tightening around me. “A beautiful, natural phenomenon.”

A happy flush warmed its way up my cheeks, chasing away the chill of the cold room.

“Tired of being here,” Charlie mumbled, nuzzling my hairline. “This stupid house in the middle of nowhere. There’s so much out there.”

“You have no idea how much I relate to that.”

“But you still miss home.”

“I lost my perspective on home,” I said, a pang opening inside my gut. “My home is worth missing. Your home is a prison.”

“I love my brother.”

“I know. But you can love your family and still want more.”

After a beat of silence, Charlie said, “I ran away once. Like you.”

I waited, curious to know more.

“Right after we moved here,” he explained. “I hated Dex for bringing me here. It’s so damn isolated. We got into it. I punched him. I left.”

I raised an eyebrow, shocked to hear he’d punched his brother. The two of them were thick as thieves, both so quick to jump when the other said *How high?*

“Is that when Dex had the fancy locks installed?” I asked.

Charlie laughed. “No, that’s just Dex. Always been paranoid. Think that comes from growing up in some not great areas. We witnessed a few violent crimes back in the day.”

“That’s awful!” I couldn’t imagine sweet, sunshiny Charlie watching someone get gunned down, or hiding in a closet while his foster family was robbed. This was a whole new side of him—one that matched better with Dex. I sometimes forgot they’d lived the majority of their lives together and witnessed the same things, given just how different their personalities were.

“Charlie, I need to try to heal the fever,” I said, cupping his face between my hands. He was so, so hot.

“Does that mean I get to kiss you again?” he asked, opening one eye to peer at me.

A flush suffused me from head to toe, warring with the already warm exhaustion settled in my limbs.

“Yes,” I said frankly. “Since I’m not sure if the water is an important part of this, we definitely should try the kiss at least.”

Both his eyes opened, and he trailed his palm down my arm, to my waist, then his fingertips paused on my ribcage. His pupils dilated. “I don’t promise to behave myself.”

“I don’t think you have the energy to do anything other than behave yourself,” I teased, even though his hand resting just below my bare breast had sent desire ricocheting through my body.

He nodded and puckered his lips in the most adorable and endearing way, but he clearly couldn’t get up the energy to do more than that.

I leaned in to him, tentative and soft, too worried I might hurt him if I weren’t careful. He returned the kiss, his hand drifting up to brush my hair away from my face. His palm felt like fire on my skin, like I’d come too close to a stove, and the words *one-oh-eight* echoed in my mind.

Conscious or not, that was a deadly and dangerous body temperature.

The spines came out hesitantly this time, but I felt them the moment they activated, so I thought maybe I was becoming more in tune with them. They latched onto Charlie and the heat of my healing ability flared through my starfish markings. Between that and Charlie’s long, fever-wracked body pressing against mine, I thought I would suffocate.

I broke the kiss and pressed my forehead to his while the spines did their work. Heat flowed between us in waves, leaving Charlie’s body for mine, where my abilities did their literal magic to annihilate the threat.

After several long moments, the spines retreated.

Charlie let out a long sigh. The fingers of one hand brushed back and forth on my bare shoulder, sending a shiver through me—a mixture of cold and elation at being touched. His extreme heat had dulled to a more normal warmth, which was great, but exhaustion cut like a knife through my psyche.

My abilities had done a lot for me over the years, healing scrapes and bruises, then healing the big injuries Dr. Hurst had inflicted on me. But Charlie's cancer had wiped me out in ways I never expected. I wanted to close my eyes and sleep for days.

For a moment, I did close my eyes.

"I'm starving," Charlie murmured. "Can we make a sandwich?"

"I'll make you five sandwiches," I teased, then got up to do just that.

Reyes wasn't in the kitchen, but a glass of OJ—the leftovers I'd squeezed Charlie the day before—had been left on the counter, the sides already condensing. I helped myself to half the glass, feeling a little bit of a revival from the crisp, bright taste of the citrus, then began digging around in the fridge. Having a purpose of feeding Charlie helped me shove aside my supernatural exhaustion, and I set about constructing sandwiches.

I decided the five I'd promised him was probably a little overkill, so I settled on two—a savory turkey and cheese paired with a sweet peanut butter and jelly. Both, in my opinion, were excellent for when a body didn't feel good. While assembling both, I had to take breaks, to pause with my elbows resting on the counter as waves of nausea and exhaustion washed over me. I forced myself to finish the glass of orange juice and to eat a piece of turkey wrapped in cheese, even though I could barely stomach food. I considered brewing a pot of coffee, but the amount of steps involved seemed insurmountable right now.

By the time I carried the plate to the cold room, I was looking forward to laying on the cot in the cold while Charlie ate.

Instead, I found Reyes on the floor next to the cot, staring at the thermometer.

The look on his face wasn't triumph

"Better?" I asked.

“One oh seven,” he said gravely. “Charlie said you healed him, and he felt better. But as soon as he took his Tylenol, he passed back out. What happened?”

My heart pounded. I set the plate on the small table beside the cot. “It worked. I felt his body temperature go down, and the heat came into me. I’m still dealing with it. I feel like I ran a marathon while I had the freaking flu.”

“We need a doctor,” Reyes said grimly. “None of the usual remedies are bringing this down, and your ability isn’t either.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “The cancer symptoms are gone. So why the fever?”

“I told you the fevers started after we went to the hot springs. I always suspected they had nothing to do with his cancer. I have a feeling when we get to the hospital, they’ll confirm my suspicions.”

“What suspicions?”

“That the cancer is definitely gone... and the fever had nothing to do with it.”

Reyes managed to rouse Charlie and get him to the foyer, where Charlie put on his boots without our assistance, despite his lingering grogginess. But his energy flagged after doing just that small thing, and Reyes had to help him into his coat.

I followed the two of them to the door to see them off, worry like an acid in my gut.

What if Reyes was right and the fevers weren’t a symptom of the cancer? Even Charlie had hinted at the theory last night during our celebrations. So, did that mean the fevers weren’t symptomatic of an illness at all, and therefore my powers wouldn’t do any good against them?

Charlie passed out into the snowy cold, and Reyes paused inside the open door frame, his hand darting up to the keypad.

Shocked, I snapped, “What are you doing?”

Reyes’ hand hovered over the keypad, and he glanced over his shoulder at me. “Locking the doors.”

“You told me I’m not a prisoner anymore.”

“And you haven’t really upheld your end of the bargain,” he snapped back.

“There were no conditions! You freed me before we even realized I could heal Charlie!”

“It’s not safe outside right now anyway,” Reyes countered, avoiding my gaze. “It’s negative two degrees. Just stay inside, and we’ll be back soon.”

He tapped in the pass code—way too fast for me to see more than the number four—then he vanished out onto the porch. The door slammed shut behind him, followed by the instant finality of every lock in the house clicking into place.



I stared at the closed—and locked—door, fury boiling in my veins as if I were made of anger rather than blood.

He'd gone back on his word. He'd *promised* me. He'd given me the grand gesture of the ID card and the money, then he'd ripped it all away in one single action.

I stomped to the keypad next to the front door and eyed it, playing a few scenarios in my mind. If Reyes were a dumb man, he'd probably just use his own birthday. Or Charlie's birthday. The problem with that theory was that Reyes could never be considered dumb. He was intelligent and calculating, not to mention cunning, or he never would have ended up on my super secret military detail.

Whatever code he picked would have a theme nobody could ever guess.

Or... what if he *had* made it something as simple as Charlie's birthday? On the other hand, it was *so* simple, people like me would never have thought he'd do it. Reverse psychology.

I couldn't even try, though, considering I didn't know either of their birthdays.

Just for giggles, I tried 1-2-3-4. The keypad beeped three times while flashing red twice, then the lightbulb went out again. It had been a long shot, but I heard no tell-tale *thunk* of locks opening in the house.

How many times could I try a code before the system would lock me out like a cell phone locking out the wrong

pin?

If all else failed, I could demolish the keypad with a blunt object and hope it short circuited the whole system.

Despite my overall exhaustion, I wandered through the living room, my gaze traveling from the TV stand to the magazines on the coffee table to the bookcase full of knickknacks that belonged in a suburban housewife's home, not a double bachelor pad. Then again, everything here was nice, the furniture matching, the walls painted in complementary colors. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn Reyes hired an interior decorator to make sure Charlie had a nice home to live in.

Given he was stuck here twenty-four-seven.

I thought of his fever-induced confessions: *Tired of being here. This stupid house in the middle of nowhere. I ran away once.*

Even though they'd come out of his delirium, his statements rang with truth. I'd spent my first couple days here calling myself a prisoner, and maybe I was but the real prisoner, the one serving a life sentence, had been Charlie from the beginning. I'd found it easy to see his sunshiney demeanor as proof that he was perfectly fine with his situation, but like alcohol at a sorority dorm party, fevers had a tendency to bring out the truth.

Nothing on the bookshelf had anything personal to offer, and the magazines on the coffee table were clearly store bought, the spines never even cracked. So I left the living room and passed through the opposite door into the unused dining room. This space was sparse with only a long mahogany table, eight chairs, and some abstract paintings on the blue walls.

Another doorway connected to the kitchen, which had quickly become my favorite room in the house. Although if I really gave it thought, that trait came from Aether, where the kitchen was always the warmth and heart of the home. Another deep-seated trait I'd carried with me from my parents. One I fully intended to keep.

I rifled through the kitchen drawers, thinking maybe they'd have some personal files stashed away here, but it was all kitchenware and towels.

In the narrow hall that led to the greenhouse, I stopped to test Reyes' door, but as I expected, it was locked tight. The man locked up everything about himself, inside and out. I'd never even seen the inside of his room, not even in passing.

I left the cool hallway for the steamy humidity of the greenhouse.

There were so many nooks and crannies here. The greenhouse was as big and open and welcoming as Charlie himself, and also like him, just the teensiest bit chaotic. I looked through the drawers in his worktable and found all manner of things. Some things, like the pile of acorn shells or the package of tortillas, gave me pause and raised my eyebrow.

But nothing personal. No copies of a driver's license. No birth certificates.

It was dumb to think Reyes would leave things like that just laying out anywhere. But I had to hope I'd find some kind of lifeline. Something to go off of. Something to *do* rather than just sit here and seethe.

In the area with the cushioned patio furniture, I flopped down on one of the nicer chairs and slouched in the seat, rubbing the space between my eyes. The headache I'd awakened with had intensified, and my whole body felt hot and achy. I'd never had to use my powers this much back home, or even at college in Florida, and so I'd never really learned my limits.

Between what I'd had to do for myself for these last few months, plus what I did for Charlie last night... I think I learned my limit.

I sat up, intending to go make myself some ginger tea in the kitchen, and realized I'd missed a drawer. The wicker table next to this chair had a single thin drawer tucked under the plate glass top.

I opened it... and found a book.

The small, thin book had a plain green leather binding, so my first thought was some kind of classic literature or first edition—a collectible, which would explain why it was tucked away. But then I opened the cover and realized there was handwriting inside.

The first page was dated not quite six months ago.

It only took me two years of constant begging, but Dex finally let me out this weekend. We drove up to Kenai Fjords National Park. Nothing could have prepared me for this place—a land of mountains, glaciers, and cerulean water so blue it looked unreal. Craggy fingers of rock dotted the coast, jutting into the sky like some kind of giant had lain beneath the sea and reached for the sun. Even the cloud cover and fog couldn't take away from the beauty of this strange world where mountains, sky, forests, ocean, and glaciers meet. I stood at the edge of the Ice Age and looked into the eyes of the universe.

Goosebumps prickled over my arms. I smoothed a palm over the page, stunned by the simple beauty in Charlie's words. I had no idea he was such a good writer.

I paged forward, skimming passages. Several were anecdotes from his trip, then they fell into a routine recap of his days here. I found several pages of sketches and informational guidesheets about plants from around the world, and each had a list of specific places where they could be found. I came across a three page listing of "Places I Want to Visit and Write About," as well as several loose leaf print outs detailing how to submit work to *Lonely Planet* and *The Travel Channel*.

I refolded the loose papers and stuck them back between the pages, my mind putting the pieces together. Charlie had dreams. Actual dreams that didn't include this small house in remote Alaska. But his illness kept him here like an insidious prison built inside himself, and Reyes was the warden.

I paged forward, soaking in Charlie's writing. Even when he wasn't writing about plants or places he'd like to visit, his

writing was beautiful. He described a Mediterranean dinner he'd cooked in such gorgeous detail that I could taste the tabbouleh salad. I found myself falling into his words and getting lost there for some time.

The word "birthday" snapped me out of the haze.

On April twenty-seventh, Charlie wrote, *My birthday was pretty low-key this year. As always.*

April twenty-seventh.

I'd *definitely* seen Reyes type in a four.

The whole passage was melancholy, and it left me wanting to take Charlie somewhere exotic for his birthday. We could toast his birth at the top of the world in Machu Picchu. We could dine on a cafe patio in Paris, sipping champagne and wearing berets like we were bougie types. We could take a safari in the Congo and photograph gorillas on a wildlife preserve, so he could write about them later.

I could take him to Japan. To Aether.

Share my home with him. My oka-san could cook him a real traditional dinner, and we'd eat by candlelight on my mother's cushions while my oto-san asked Charlie his intentions toward his daughter.

We could be normal.

Carrying the journal with me to the front hallway, where the keypad jeered at me in the dim light, I typed in the numbers 0-4-2-7—the month and day of Charlie's birthday. The system beeped three times, then the red light at the bottom of the keypad flashed twice and went dark.

"Okay," I muttered under my breath. "Guess it's not that."

So I tried 0-4-0-3—the month and year Charlie was born.

Again, the keypad beeped and flashed.

"Okay," I murmured, and let out a breath to rein in my patience. "Maybe reverse the numbers?"

2-7-0-4.

More beeping, more flashing.

I stomped my feet and looked wildly around the hallway for something to bash the keypad with. I'd actually reached for the end table, ready to throw the ceramic lamp and stupid lacy doily on the floor, when I stopped in my tracks.

There was a framed picture of Charlie next to the lamp.

He lounged in one of his wicker chairs beneath brilliant golden sunshine that turned his soft brown curls golden. Through the greenhouse windows behind him, I could just barely make out the blurry blue of the ocean.

In the picture, he was laughing, the kind of laugh that tipped your head back and came from a genuine place near the heart, deep in your core. He looked tanned and happy and pure, like someone had taken that sunshine and bottled it in human form. Anyone looking at this picture would have never guessed he had a terminal illness.

But I knew. I could see it in the lines creasing beside his eyes. In the tension he held in his shoulders, carefully hidden but still there. Even in this photo, he was hurting. He was laughing, but he was hurting.

I touched the glass, my heart aching. Someone as wonderful as Charlie didn't deserve what had happened to him. I'd been so hopeful I'd cured him. So thankful my powers had come through for him.

And I realized, standing there with my fingertip pressed against Charlie's heart, I had no intention of leaving this house until I knew his cancer was gone.

No matter what it took.

This quest to find a code to the keypad was nothing more than something to keep me busy until he got back.

Tucking his journal against my chest, I whirled on my heel and returned to the greenhouse to read—and to plan on how I'd escape this house *with Charlie*.

And with both of us whole and intact.



I'd polished off both sandwiches I'd made for Charlie, and was reading the last few pages of his journal, when the security system beeped with the long, low tone that indicated a door had been opened somewhere in the house.

I shoved the book back in the drawer where it belonged, then hurried through the greenhouse and down the hallway, heart skittering at the thought of being caught reading Charlie's personal words. He probably wouldn't have minded much, but the idea of disappointing him in any way made my insides constrict.

Being back on my feet reminded me that healing Charlie had taken a lot out of me. Just the journey from the greenhouse to the front door winded me and made me long for a warm blanket and a bed. I could have napped while they were gone, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Reyes was helping Charlie shrug off his big winter coat when I arrived in the foyer. They both glanced at me with nearly identical expressions of exhaustion.

"What happened?" I asked, my heart stuttering.

Reyes answered. "The cancer is in remission."

His declaration hit me right in the knees. I swayed into the door frame and latched on with both hands, relief crashing over me. "That's good. That's great!"

Charlie grinned and held up both hands, gesturing to himself like he was showing off a prized sports car. "My bloodwork was *flawless*. Doc used that exact word."

“And the fever?” I asked.

Reyes’ jaw tightened, and he unzipped his own coat. “They don’t know. They couldn’t figure out why he’s running hot. Just gave him a new prescription for fever reducers. Stuff he’s already been using.”

I clutched the door frame tighter. “They can’t find *anything*?”

Reyes opened the closet door to hang his coat. “They sent off for some extra tests. That’s all we know right now.” He hung Charlie’s coat on the hanger beside his, then turned back to us, pointing a finger at his brother. “You. Go get some rest. And you,” he looked pointedly at me, “we need to chat.”

I exchanged glances with Charlie. He looked as thrilled as I was about being bossed around, but I could tell he was too wiped to fight back. He paused on his way to the staircase and dropped a sweet kiss to my hairline. I interpreted it as a *thank you*, full of gratitude and appreciation for what would hopefully be his second chance at life.

A second chance that I hoped like hell included traveling the world and seeing his writing published. Not more imprisonment here at the top of the world.

As long as we can figure out the fevers, I reminded myself. I had a growing worry that they had very little to do with Charlie’s health situation, and everything to do with the hot spring.

Charlie trudged upstairs to his bedroom, while I followed Reyes to the kitchen.

I took a chair at the table, curling my knees up to my chest as I watched him slump to the fridge. Reyes opened the small cabinet high above the fridge and extracted a bottle of alcohol—something different from the whiskey he’d had the night before, this one a clear liquid with a silver and black label.

“Bad day,” Reyes said, throwing himself into the chair across from me. He thumped the bottle on the table between us. Jose Cuervo, but not the cheap stuff Flor used to have the hobos outside the liquor store buy her.

“Bad day,” I agreed. “At least he’s resting now.”

Reyes cracked the top on the alcohol, then glanced at the kitchen cabinets with a look on his face that said he wished he had telekinesis.

I rolled my eyes and stood, crossing the linoleum in my bare feet. As I opened the cabinet to grab him a coffee mug, I said, “So the cancer’s gone. What happens next?”

“Yeah, the cancer will no longer kill him, but the fevers might,” Reyes said darkly. “The doctor’s concerned about brain damage. Organ damage. A human body can’t sustain a hundred and eight degree temperature for long without casualties. It’s the highest it’s ever been.”

I put the mug on the table then sank to the edge of my chair, my heart seizing in my chest. “I don’t understand why my abilities could heal the cancer but not the fevers.”

Reyes picked up the bottle of cristalino and uncorked it, splashing some of the silver liquid into the mug.

“We still have the option of a blood transfusion,” he said, shoving the mug to me.

I’d gotten the mug for him, not me. I didn’t want the tequila, but I also didn’t like the turn this conversation was about to take, so I accepted the mug anyway.

“But the cancer is gone,” I said carefully. “If Charlie’s particular brand of cancer targeted the blood, and the cancer is gone, what good would a transfusion do?”

Reyes paused long enough to turn the bottle up and take a long, dramatic swig. He slammed it to the tabletop, making the whole table shiver. “I’m not thinking about the cancer. I’m thinking about the fact that something in you gives you the ability to heal. If we can get that ‘something’ into Charlie, maybe he’ll heal himself.”

“You’re guessing my abilities originate in my blood. We don’t know that for sure.”

“No,” Reyes admitted, his fingers drifting to pick at the label on the bottle. “But I know for almost every living

creature on this planet, blood is our life force. It's the fuel that keeps our bodies functioning."

I rolled my eyes. "A lot of important processes keep our bodies functioning. Blood is just one piece of the puzzle."

"Look, I don't have some woo-woo magical ability," Reyes snapped. "My ability is listening to my gut. Letting my intuition guide me. My gut got you here, and you healed Charlie even though you had *no idea* you could even do that. So, this is the next logical move to me. The move I feel in my gut. We do a blood transfusion and get some of your blood in Charlie's body."

"Your 'gut' doesn't have any other ideas that don't have to do with my blood?" I asked, exasperated. "I've had enough of needles for the rest of my life after what they did to me at the facility. You of all people should know that."

"You fought against trying to cure him, saying you couldn't do it, and yet... it worked."

"It *kind* of worked."

"Now you're fighting against a blood transfusion that might also 'kind of' work."

"My blood isn't the answer," I said shortly. "You say you have gut intuition. Well I do too. I was misguided about my ability to heal Charlie. I'll give you that, because I wasn't raised by my own clan. I don't understand my powers fully. But this isn't the answer. You're grasping at straws and putting me in the middle. Again."

Footsteps in the hall cut off Reyes' retort.

We both turned to the doorway to see Charlie peering in, blinking into the bright kitchen lights.

"Everything okay?" he asked, his gaze landing on the bottle in Reyes' hand.

Reyes stood. "I should be asking you the same. What's wrong?"

Charlie shrugged. "Just hot. Going to the cold room."

“I’ll come check on you in a bit,” Reyes assured him. “You need rest.”

“Yeah, yeah, Ma.” Charlie winked at me, then disappeared back into the dusky hallway.

Neither of us spoke for a moment as we waited to hear the door to the greenhouse open and close. Silence settled back over the first floor, broken only by the fan whirring to life in the fridge.

Reyes sat back down. “Ky, I think you’re a miracle. You’re *our* miracle. You’re Charlie’s only hope at getting rid of this, and I’m not willing to give up on him. Or you.”

“You’re putting way too much stock in my ability.”

“Someone has to,” he countered. “You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit for how powerful you are. You have the kind of power that gives people hope. You give *me* hope, and that’s... not a normal emotion for me.” He caught my gaze, then reached across the table and put his hand on mine. “I believe in you, Katana.”

I stared down at his fingers wrapped around mine, and anxiety yawned like a void in my gut.

Sure, Dex Reyes believing in me should have given me some kind of boost. Ego boost. Self-esteem boost. Something.

But at the end of the day, the truth remained that I didn’t even believe in myself.

And if that killed Charlie, it might as well kill me, too.

I threw back a quick, fiery gulp of the tequila, expecting it to burn on the way down. The cristalino had an edge to it like original tequila, but it was smoother and richer. I glanced into my mug, surprised, and took another slower drink.

“Just think about it,” Reyes said. “I’ll need to talk to a buddy who works medical at Pendleton. Get some pointers on how to do the transfusion. Promise me you’ll sleep on it.”

“Fine.” I took another drink, settling into the warm sluice of tequila. The more I drank, the more it chased away the headache I’d been nursing all day. The more I could ignore the

heat in my body, the weakness in my limbs, the pain in my back. The more my head simply floated toward the ceiling.

I smiled up at the lightbulbs.

“Blood,” I said out loud, turning my thoughts over in my suddenly boozy head. “I don’t know if the answer is blood. The answer may be in the water. Oh! *Blood is thicker than water*. Did you know that’s a misquote?”

“Lightweight,” Reyes remarked, a smirk in his tone.

“No, seriously,” I said, sitting up straighter and attempting to look more sober than I actually was. The tequila hit me hard and fast, and while it had done that back at school too, it hadn’t worked *this* fast when I was downing tequila sunrises at PCB. I could only guess my whole system was in chaos, and my reserves were so low that my body just said ‘screw it. Let the alcohol in.’ “*The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb*. That’s the actual quote, which is quite the opposite of what people think ‘blood is thicker than water’ means. The real quote means the bonds we build with the people we choose to have in our lives are much more important to our well being than the bonds of our biological family.”

“What does this have to do with Charlie?”

Water. I rotated the mug on the table, focused on the patchy cartoon Batman on the side rather than on Reyes. “What do you know about the hot spring? Really?”

Reyes slouched in his chair, resting the bottle of tequila on his abdomen. “I don’t know. Not much, I guess. It’s been there forever.”

“Has it though?”

He eyed me. “What are you thinking?”

I shook my head slowly. “I’m... not sure. It’s a theory but there’s no real weight behind it. I’m hesitant to go deeper until I know more about the hot spring. Can we get more info about it? Does that Amaruq guy keep records?”

“There’s a library in town,” Reyes offered. “They’ve got a huge room dedicated to the history of the area and the native tribe, the Sugpiat. They’re the ones who discovered the spring and passed ownership through the generations. Amaruq just happened to be the one who modernized it and built the spa.”

“Can we go to the library?”

Reyes glanced at the clock. “Sure. They won’t open again until Monday morning. In the meantime, you can think about the blood transfusion while I get together what we need.”

Again with the blood transfusion.

“Why are you pushing the transfusion so hard?” I demanded, my reservations loosened by the tequila. I picked up the mug and swigged a little more for courage. “Charlie isn’t actively dying anymore. Between me and the fever reducers, we can keep him stable a few more days until we can get to the library and see if my theory carries any weight.”

“First off, you haven’t even told me your theory, and I don’t operate on faith. Secondly... I’m on a time crunch,” Reyes said with a shrug. “I have to get back to work.”

At the word “work,” every muscle in my body seized. I could feel my limbs pulling in on themselves, attempting to make me smaller, to pull attention away from me. Phantom pains twinged in my side, in my wrist, at the back of my skull.

Everywhere Dr. Hurst had torn me open in the name of science.

I stared at Reyes, astonished. “You have to *what?*”

“My V time’s drying up next week. I have to report back to base on the seventh.”

I slammed my mug into the table. “You have to be kidding me. You’re going back there? To that place? After everything you saw them do to me, after getting to know me, after what happened...” I trailed off.

Reyes’ dark eyes grew darker. “After *what* happened, Ky?”

But I shook my head—I had no inclination to return to that night in the hot spring, especially now, after hearing he planned to return to the lab. Where other people, people like me, were being subjected to the same kind of torture.

“I was right in my first estimation,” I said, my tone scathing and just the faintest hint of my natural born accent sneaking into the words along with my emotions. “You’re nothing but a psychopath who gets off on girls being tortured. I keep trying to make excuses for you. I tell myself you did it for Charlie because your love for your brother transcends anything else. But at the end of the day, you’re no better than Dr. Hurst or his spineless assistant. You’d chop off my hand if it would get you what you want. Hell, you’d probably kill me if it would save Charlie.”

“Yeah. I would,” Reyes snapped. “Because for me, blood is thicker than water.”

I stood, fury boiling over inside me, and I threw my coffee mug at his head.

Reyes ducked, and he would have been fast enough if he hadn’t been so concerned about not spilling his bottle of tequila. He fumbled the bottle, caught it, then jerked right back into the path of the mug. It clocked him square in the forehead—and shattered.

In the stunned silence after the last piece of cheap ceramic tinkled to the floor, blood welled up on his forehead. He had a new gash almost exactly where the old one had been.

And he deserved to keep this one.

I turned around and rushed from kitchen without another word.



The lights were still on in the greenhouse, but not in the cold room. Off in the distance beyond the condensing glass, the last vestiges of sunset painted the sky over the ocean a brilliant red, reminding me that it was still early in the day even though I felt like I could sleep for years.

Charlie lay on his back, splayed across the cot with one arm draped over his eyes. I stopped in the doorway, my shoulders loosening at the cold air as it chased away the residual heat in me. He didn't move, and his breathing remained deep and even.

I didn't want to wake him. Reyes was right that Charlie needed rest, especially after what his body had been through in the last twenty-four hours. Hell, in the last couple years, even. What I felt on the healing side of the equation couldn't have been half of what he'd felt for years.

Even though I didn't want to wake him... I wanted to be near him. A small part of me wanted to be close to him in case he needed me—in case the fever spiked and my powers could ease the heat to a manageable level. But he'd been battling these fevers since long before I ever showed up in this house, so my presence was a moot point, and I knew it.

What I really wanted—the secret need inside me that I didn't even want to admit to out loud—was a need to curl up beside him and let him hold me.

I wanted to be held. To be understood. To be seen in the way only Charlie could see me.

But I also didn't want to wake him up.

So I turned to go.

“Starfish?”

I whirled back around. He'd lifted his arm off his eyes, and his soft, sleepy caramel gaze was leveled on me.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?” I asked.

“No. Having a hard time falling asleep,” he admitted, lowering his arm to his side. “Where you going?”

I moved further into the dim room. “I didn't want to bother you.”

“I wish you would,” he said, his expression softening as he held a hand out toward me.

My body moved forward on its own, my stomach fluttering as I closed the distance between us. I laid my fingertips in his and he drew me in closer, bringing my knuckles to his lips. I felt his kiss from the roots of my hair to the soles of my feet and everywhere in between.

“H-how do you feel?” I asked, unable to hide the way his benign knuckle kiss had made me breathless.

“I'm not hot right now but my head is killing me.”

“Have you taken some Tylenol?”

He shook his head.

I busied myself locating the bottle of acetaminophen, then I cracked open a fresh bottled water so he could wash the pills down. Charlie dutifully took the pills and almost polished off the water, then lay back down on the cot with a sigh.

The Tylenol rattled as I tossed it back into the basket beneath the table. I gazed down at him in the dark, and he looked as if he were made of shadows, ethereal and untouchable. We stared into each other's eyes for a moment longer than socially acceptable, but it didn't feel weird or wrong.

It felt like a connection. Something between us, so deep inside we had no control over it. Something almost supernatural in nature. I wondered if it came from how intimate the healings were. If maybe a little part of me had taken up residence inside Charlie, making us kindred spirits.

Finally, I asked, “Mind if I lay with you?”

A small half-smile played at his lips, and he opened his arm for me.

I didn’t hesitate. I crawled onto the cot, curling into the curve of his arm. He remained on his back, while I lay on my side, pressed against his warmth with my fingers resting gently on his strong heartbeat. For several long moments, neither of us spoke. I listened to the steady waves of his breaths in the silence, imagining he was the ocean and I was on my board, sitting, cresting, meditating. Charlie was as steady as the ocean, which was probably why the moment I collapsed into his sphere, I breathed easier.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Your brother is a pain in the ass.”

Charlie laughed. “Can’t argue with that. He’s been a pain in my ass for years.”

“He’s too controlling. Too moody. I threw a coffee mug at his head.”

“I have no doubt he deserved it,” Charlie assured me, his hand brushing my hip in soothing circles. I could barely feel his fingers through the thick gray sweatpants I’d borrowed from him, but I was hyper aware of his hand. Hyper aware of *my* hand resting on his heartbeat. Our thighs and bodies cradled together like we were more than friends.

Were we more than friends? Did I *want* us to be?

I really didn’t know yet. I’d been here a matter of days, but a lifetime had built between us.

I just wanted to be here with him. It felt easy and not as confusing as being around Dex.

Charlie sighed, squeezing his arm tighter around me. “I’m sorry you got dragged into this mess.”

“I’m not sorry about that,” I said, realizing in the exact moment I spoke that I meant it. “I was able to cure you. I was able... I mean, I met you.”

I kissed you.

I want you.

Things I could think in the safety of my own mind but was too gun-shy to say out loud.

“Dex really is a good guy,” Charlie said, oblivious to the fact that his brother was the furthest thing from my mind at the moment. “Girls like him because he’s all broody and angry. That ‘bad boy’ crap.” Charlie’s tone told me everything I needed to know about his feelings on the “bad boy” crap. “You know what that attitude covers up? Pain. Sadness. It’s not who he actually is, no matter how he presents himself. He’s a lost, scared, lonely eleven year old being beaten by an old man the state’s paying to feed him.”

“I don’t believe our pasts should be an excuse for bad behaviors,” I argued.

“Not an excuse,” Charlie said. “Just an explanation. It helps us understand a person better. I think somewhere along the way, humanity lost the ability to empathize. To really get to know each other on a cellular level. We picked up cell phones and computer screens and lost the art of connecting to each other in a meaningful way.”

I realized then that I hadn’t seen him playing on his phone the way my friends at school had. He’d had it in hand the day I arrived, but I hadn’t seen it since. Every time we’d been in a room together, he’d put all his attention on me.

Back at school, I could sit at Steak ‘n Shake with Flor and she’d never look up from her phone screen. I’d try to make conversation, try to draw her in, but whatever she was scrolling was so much more important to her than talking to me. I hadn’t picked up the habit in the months we’d spent

together. I didn't even know what had happened to my cell after my free fall into the pool.

I guess I could thank Aether for teaching me how to be present.

I wondered who had taught Charlie, or if this was just him. Pure, wholesome, empathetic Charlie.

Splaying my fingers wider over his heart, I asked, "Were you once a lost, scared, lonely eleven year old being beaten by someone you should have been able to trust?"

Charlie shrugged, the movement jarring beneath my head. "Sure."

"But you're nothing like him," I pointed out.

Charlie's voice darkened as he replied, "You'd be surprised how much we're alike."

Silence stretched between us after his declaration, and I wondered if he could sense my amusement in the lack of sound. I couldn't see Charlie as anything like Reyes. He wasn't moody or sarcastic or constantly angry. But the two were similar in their capacity to love one another, and in the way they put each other first, themselves second.

There were worse qualities to share than love and loyalty.

The glass overhead creaked from the weight of the snow, and tree branches scraped near our heads. Greenhouse ASMR was sixty seconds from putting me to sleep when Charlie spoke again.

"I heard Dex mention a transfusion. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. Just passing through."

I nodded. "He thinks it might help the fevers."

"I don't think there's a physical answer to the fevers."

I tilted my head back and rested my chin on his chest to look up at him. "You think something happened at the hot springs?"

It wasn't a question. Just a redirection back to what we'd been talking about before Reyes made our ears bleed with a

half-drunk rendition of Journey.

Charlie's dark eyes glittered in the shadows. "Yeah. I do."

"Have you ever heard any weird lore about the place? Or noticed anything strange? Anything... abnormal? Other than what happened with the heat entering you."

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he considered the question, though he didn't have to think for long. "Actually, yeah. The ohia lehua grows there on one bank of the springs, near a small cave outside the spa."

I gave him a wry smile. "I'm going to need a little more explanation than that, Greenhouse Guy."

A mischievous grin spread across his face, and he squeezed my hip affectionately before he explained, "The ohia lehua is a plant endemic to Hawaii. Meaning it doesn't grow anywhere else in the world. Specifically, it thrives in the basalt left behind by former lava flows."

"If it's endemic to Hawaii, how did it make its way to Alaska?"

Charlie shrugged. "It's possible someone shipped a cutting here."

"But if it's meant to thrive in lava rock in a tropical climate, how is it surviving here in the cold?"

He winked at me. "That's the forty million dollar question."

We fell silent again as I rolled thoughts over and over in my head. Charlie had said he felt like lava had entered his veins when he was "cured" in the hot spring, and that's when the fevers started. As if that weren't concerning enough, a lava-loving plant only native to Hawaii just happened to be growing near the hot spring.

I grew up in an alt-clan ruled by the air. Elemental magic was a fact of life I'd known about since the moment I was old enough to learn about it. Fire, Earth, Water, Air, Spirit, each was connected to magical disciplines that alt races inherited from the relics associated with them. Over time, new relics

had been discovered or manufactured by alt races to amplify our powers, and each had to be associated with some kind of element in order to fully activate.

An element like lava.

The problem with these manufactured proto-relics was that they often had a mind of their own, and could be manipulated by the person wielding them.

Which made them very, very dangerous in the wrong hands.



I dreamed I was flying over Hawaii while volcanoes actively erupted on the ground below. The chain of small islands stretched like a curved limb beneath me, cradled by the cool blue of the ocean's arms. Inside the slim green landmasses, bright fiery orange lava spurted from the tips of conical mountains and slid down the sides like veins filled with blood. The tableau was both beautiful and terrifying, the way I imagined it would feel to look into the eyes of the gods themselves.

The dreams were so vivid that I could feel the blistering heat on my skin. I flew too close to the largest volcano and ash got caught in my lungs, in my throat. Raw sulfur coated my tongue, and a backslash of hot lava slammed into me. I looked down at my hands and the skin at my fingertips was peeling away, burning off as bits of lava ate away delicate flesh to leave behind only my skeleton.

I awoke with a start, sitting up abruptly as I gasped for air. Sweat soaked my tank top and sweatpants, and my hands still burned as they had in my dream when I'd watched the skin burn away to bone. Breathing through the confusion of waking up, I flipped my hands over, searching for blisters but finding only smooth skin.

The cold room had turned the pitch dark of midnight. Outside the frosted glass, a lonely owl hooted to the night sky, the only sound beyond Charlie's breaths beside me.

Charlie's... wrong breaths. Quick. Shallow. Pained.

In the same moment I realized something was wrong with his breathing, I realized the heat from my dream had been real and was rolling off his sleeping form.

Blearily, I reached out for the small lamp on the nightstand, but in my sleepiness and haste, I knocked it on the floor. I fumbled in the dark, found it, and flicked it on before returning it to the nightstand.

Charlie looked pale and wan in the dim amber light. Dark shadows had formed beneath his closed eyes, and his eyelashes fluttered. Sweat beaded his hairline, accompanied by a vicious shivering like he was standing wet in subzero Alaskan temps without a coat.

Panic set me into motion. I grabbed the blanket from the bottom of the cot and jerked it up to cover us, to try to offset his shivering, while I climbed on top of him, straddling his waist.

Charlie's eyes opened but they didn't quite focus on me.

"Pancakes sound great," he said, his voice hoarse. "But only in flannel. The green kind. Like Christmas."

"I'll make you pancakes," I promised him as I clutched at his t-shirt to yank it off him. "Flannel or maple, your pick." I humored his delirium. "But we have to get your body temperature down first."

I managed to wrangle the t-shirt over his head, and he flopped back down to the pillow like a rag doll. His head lolled sideways as his eyes closed.

"Did you know mistletoe is white?" Charlie said, words slurred. "White like snow. Not red. They make you think its red but it's not. Its white. Like snow."

"That's fascinating," I said, my heart in my throat. I hated to hear him sound so delirious, so broken. "I'm going to kiss you now, Charlie. Okay?"

"No!" he said, waving a weak hand between us. "No. I only kiss Starfish."

My heart fluttered happily at his declaration. I cupped his face in my hands, gently turning his unfocused gaze to mine. The flutter in my chest skipped a beat as his eyes focused on me. “I am Starfish.”

His eyes widened. “You glow like starlight on the ocean floor.”

“You’re out of your mind,” I told him, then leaned in to capture his lips.

Despite his fever and delirium, Charlie reacted immediately. His lips parted beneath mine, and one hand slithered behind my head to press me closer. The intimacy of our bodies molding together, of his lips on mine, made me breathless and dizzy. I could hardly focus on my spines emerging or the healing taking place. All I could breathe was Charlie.

Slowly, he laid back on his pillow, tugging me with him. I cupped his scruffy face in my hands and kissed him thoroughly, half of my attention on the rush of heat and power in my core as my spines did the hard stuff. His kisses turned lazy. Content. He splayed his hands on my bare back, his fingers roaming and leaving heat in their wake though I didn’t know if it came from his fever or my body reacting to his touch.

When my spines retracted, I opened my eyes and gently broke the kiss, though I stayed bent over him, straddling his waist as his hands drifted to rest on my hips.

Charlie’s eyelids fluttered gently. The heat in his body dissipated beneath my hands, a visible, tangible difference. Slowly, he opened his eyes and focused on me. The wild, almost feral look in his eye vanished as his pupils narrowed. He took a deep breath and let it out, both hands tightening on my legs.

I loved this moment. I didn’t love the fevers or the way they made him lose himself, but this moment, after the spines had done their work and I could watch him come back to me little by little... I found peace in seeing him return like he’d walked through the fire and survived to tell the tale.

We stared at each other as my spines finished gathering back into my body.

“You are magic,” Charlie said in a low, husky voice I didn’t think had anything to do with his fever.

Charlie sat up, and I had to latch on to his shoulders to balance myself before he kissed me again—this time with all of him.

When he pulled back, he pressed his forehead to mine and murmured, “Thank you.”

We settled back beneath the blankets face to face, both of us curled on our sides and pressed up against each other on the small cot. I couldn’t speak for Charlie, but I was spent after the healing. My eyelids hung heavy, and my limbs felt weighted and unwieldy.

He gave me a sleepy smile, then lifted one of my hands to his lips to kiss my palm.

With my other hand, I smoothed his dark curls away from his forehead. “We’re going to figure this out,” I told him firmly. “We’re going to find a way to get rid of these fevers once and for all, even if it’s the last thing I do.”



The weekend passed in a series of fevers and moments I wanted to both cherish and curse. I spent most of my time with Charlie in the greenhouse, helping him trim dead leaves, mulch new growth, and do normal maintenance on his plants—stuff that had fallen to the wayside in the recent weeks of his illness.

His energy, despite the cancer being gone, was still subpar, especially when a fever began to creep in. After the first couple times, I could even watch it happening in real time. The sluggishness would set in, and his words would begin to slur like he'd downed a fifth of tequila too fast. His intelligent brown eyes would turn to confusion, and he'd mumble something unintelligible before trudging off to the cold room. The fevers forced him into reduced capacity and removed some of his natural personality, some of that "sunshine" I'd come to adore.

I'd lay with him, heal him, then we'd start the cycle all over again.

I hated watching him struggle to do the simplest tasks in his greenhouse during an episode, but there was only so much I could do without wearing myself down. Every time I healed his fever, it dragged me further into exhaustion. I'd run hot for an hour or two, and often needed a nap after doing the work, so it always seemed like either Charlie was struggling or I was.

And even when I healed him, the episodes seemed to come back faster and more aggressive than before, further making it

hard for me to keep him in peak condition.

I couldn't help but wonder—if this *was* related to an alt relic, could his cancer have been the only thing standing in the way of the energy consuming him? Because now that the cancer was gone, the fevers only seemed to get worse and worse.

Between the way I went down after a healing, and the way the fevers kept burning hotter, I'd all but cast out any doubt that the fevers were supernatural in nature. I was itching for that trip to the library to find out more about the hot springs. I considered asking Reyes to take me to the springs to look around over the weekend, but he was quiet and sullen, locked away in his room most of the time when he wasn't tinkering under the hood of the truck.

To be fair, I knew it probably wasn't safe to wander onto the hot springs property without properly preparing, either. Without knowing exactly what we were up against and how to keep ourselves safe, we'd just be wandering blindly into trouble. Even Reyes had been guarded around Amaruq, the guy who owned the spa, which meant his natural intuition told him something was “off” about the man.

My guess was Amaruq was either alt or he was allied with alts, which meant he had supernatural backup. I had a human soldier with an attitude problem, a sick normie, and healing powers.

Not the greatest troops to launch into a blind battle.

So, I bided my time with Charlie in the greenhouse and hoped Monday would bring answers.

Late Sunday night, I awoke slowly to Charlie's fingers turning circles on my bare shoulder. He was spooned behind me under the covers, and I could tell immediately that the heat of his body was wonderfully normal tonight.

I glanced over my shoulder and smiled at him, which prompted him to lean forward and kiss the starfish marking on my arm. Then he moved higher to the one on my shoulder, and even higher to the one near my collarbone.

With each kiss, my own temperature began to soar. My breath caught in my throat, and I found myself surprised at how quickly he could elicit a physical reaction from my body.

We hadn't discussed this—whatever *this* was between us. But he'd gotten bolder in his affections, and I didn't protest.

His lips pulled away from my collarbone. "Let's go surfing."

Shock poured icy water on the desire rising in me. I flipped around, staring blankly up at him. "I'm sorry—what?"

"Surfing. You and me. With the gear in the shed."

"It's the middle of the night."

"I know. Pretty exciting, yeah?"

I blinked at him, then rubbed my eyes with extreme exaggeration. "Am I still dreaming?"

His caramel gaze roamed over me, one hand curving around my stomach beneath my t-shirt. "Sometimes when I wake up and see you next to me, I'm pretty sure I'm still dreaming. Either that, or the cancer killed me and God managed to do me a solid in heaven."

I laughed out loud, my hand flying to my mouth to cover the sound before it echoed and woke up Reyes. My cheeks flushed hot, and pure happiness sifted through my body like raindrops in the sunlight.

"I would love nothing more than to go surfing with you," I said. "But it's going to be freezing. And probably dangerous."

Charlie flashed a wicked grin that looked a little too similar to Reyes. "Dangerous doesn't scare me."

We bundled into clothes that would be easy to strip out of in the garden shed, then Charlie took a panel out of the cold room windows. I remembered standing here that first night and thinking to myself how these windows might be my only chance at escape. I just never thought I'd be using them to sneak out to surf with Charlie.

Tonight, running wasn't even in the cards.

We folded ourselves small enough to peel through the open window, and when we were on our feet in the frigid air, we shared a grin before breaking into a sprint across the yard. The garden shed loomed darkly out of the wide expanse of snow gleaming beneath a brilliant half moon in a clear, cloudless sky.

I had to beat the dust of the wet suit, but its integrity seemed to still be intact as I peeled it onto my body. The cold in the rubber took my breath away, but once my skin began to warm the material, it felt warmer inside the wetsuit than I'd felt in sweats. We topped off our full body suits with surfing gloves that were a little worse for the wear, then each grabbed a board and made our way to the beach.

The ocean lapped at the shore with gentle hands, though further out, the waves were choppy and wild—perfect for an experienced surfer like me.

Not great, however, for a not so experienced surfer like Charlie.

“You need to stay near me,” I told him as we dragged our boards across the rocky sand. “If you get caught in a riptide, I’ll have to save you, and I’m going to be too busy riding the waves. Got it?”

Charlie laughed. One dark curl had slid out of the built in hood on his wetsuit and it flounced against his forehead in the moon’s light. “Aye aye, captain.”

I splashed into the shallows, my breath catching in my throat at the sudden intense cold even with the rubber protecting my feet. But I forged ahead, unable to keep the smile off my face. The moon glinting off the dark ocean felt like an invitation, and the waves rolling with whitecaps beyond the shore looked like hands waving me on.

I’d come home.

“Follow my lead!” I called to Charlie. “We’re going to paddle out!”

I slid onto my belly on my board and began a front stroke, angling out towards the waves against the breaks. The board

rose and fell beneath me, water splashing into my face like shards of ice, but my adrenaline was already pumping, already warming me and preparing me to do what I loved.

When we reached a good place to rest, I stopped paddling and sat up, straddling my board. I waved to get Charlie's attention. "You stay here!"

He gave me a thumbs up, then sat up himself, mimicking my position. He only wobbled slightly before finding his balance, and I felt a little puff of pride for him.

I dropped back down and paddled for the waves. The ocean became an extension of my limbs, especially in the night, in the dark, where my arms and legs vanished beneath the surface and became invisible to the naked eye. I was nothing but torso, board, and ocean like some great sea turtle carrying the weight of the world on my back.

The world rocked steadily beneath my board while I paddled into place. I pressed up from the board onto my fingers and toes, poised as I waited until the right moment and gauged the dark wave cresting ahead of me. Then at the last minute, I shoved off from the board and stood, finding my balance for the drop.

My stomach ended up between my ears, and I laugh-screamed all the way down. The wave broke apart around me, catching me in its grip, and I was still laughing as the ocean swallowed me whole.

For a moment, I lost all sense of everything but the water. No sound, no smell, no sight. Just the water embracing me from head to toe, hugging me like a mother welcoming me home. The depth of silence pressed in on me, a snug sweater, a favorite coat, one that smelled like Charlie. In the pitch black, I floated weightless, arms and legs spread like a starfish, and it was Charlie's face I could see in the dark.

Then I kicked against the choppy waves and broke through the surface to the sound of my name being frantically called.

I treaded the rough waves, turning circles until I found Charlie paddling furiously in my direction. I lifted a hand high

enough to be seen just to let him know I was okay, then grabbed for my board. By the time he reached me, I was already out of the water and wiping salt from my eyes.

“That wave *ate you*,” Charlie said breathlessly as he glided up beside me. Worry tightened the skin between his dark brows. “You okay?”

“I’ve wiped out way worse,” I told him with a shrug.

“You’re a bit of a daredevil, aren’t you?”

I held up my fingers, thumb and forefinger apart to indicate just how much. “A teensy bit.”

“Whatever makes you happy makes me happy,” he said with a chuckle.

We stared at each other, and Charlie glowed in the moonlight. He’d so easily accepted my love for letting the waves toss me around, and he hadn’t judged me or told me I shouldn’t do something so dangerous. Oto-san had let me learn to surf, but neither of my parents had ever fully accepted the risks I liked to take.

The Aether didn’t take risks. Risks led to complications.

But Charlie just grinned. “You looked like a badass out there.”

I blushed. “Now it’s your turn to go look like a badass.”

“There’s no way.”

“Oh come on. You’re connected to the board. When you wipe out, you just use the cord to find the surface.”

“*When* I wipe out, huh?” Charlie asked, amused.

“It’s a given for first timers,” I told him with a grin. “If I’m really being honest, it’s a given for everyone. The ocean takes no prisoners. She’ll throw you into the depths and try to hold you down.”

Charlie winced. “That doesn’t help your case,” he joked. Then he patted the water beside his board. “This is the furthest I’ve ever been in the ocean.”

I blinked at him. “Really?”

“I have memories of my abuelita,” Charlie said, gaze drifting up to the starry sky. “Not many, but a few. She died when I was five. I remember her stories more than anything. She had this old well in the backyard and every time she pulled a bucket from the earth, she said a prayer. I used to ask her why, and she’d say to honor the earth for its bounty and to appease it so it wouldn’t turn on us. She told me this crazy story about her great-grandmother who was said to have saved an entire village from a mudslide. I mean, super crazy story that she used her hands to part the mud and not a single drop even touched the houses. She said our family was touched by the gods, but that leaving the earth beneath our feet could spell disaster for us.”

“You went swimming that first day I came here.”

“I got in the water,” he said with a grin. “I didn’t leave the ground.”

I kicked at the water, thinking of Charlie in his greenhouse. The way he seemed to be a plant whisperer, growing tropical flowers that shouldn’t exist in Alaska with little effort.

Could he have alt in his lineage? If I was right, and we were dealing with some kind of elemental proto-relic giving him the fevers, it would explain why the relic latched on to him. Like attracts like, and all.

“These are baby waves,” I promised him. “Let me teach you. I won’t let you run on a wave I think will be too much for you. You just gotta trust me.”

“I do trust you. Completely.”

We stared at each other in the dim starlight for several seconds, then I dropped forward and tucked my hands into the water, breaking the reverie.

“Come on, plant boy. Let’s straighten out some waves.”

I led him out to the right place, where the waves weren’t so high and rocky, and I gave him a brief tutorial. With surfing, the best teacher was just *doing* it, so no matter what tips and

tricks I could tell him, he wouldn't learn a thing until he put feet to board.

And he did.

I watched Charlie stand and wobble, nearly collapsing sideways as the wave bloomed beneath his board. But he didn't fall—he rode the baby wave, a giant smile crossing his face, and when it crashed under him, he flipped head over heels into the ocean.

Oof. Nobody's first time was perfect.

I leaned forward, paddling to join him. The water swayed beneath my board, rocking me with the same kind of loving warmth I could remember my oka-san using when I was little, and the same kind of calm filled my soul. Charlie's dark head popped out of the water two feet ahead of me, and I put on a burst of speed to reach him.

"How you holding up?" I teased, offering him a hand.

"I'm thoroughly impressed by your lower body strength," Charlie quipped, and he used me as a pendulum to get his leg over his own board. Once we had him upright, sitting astride his board in a mimic of my position, he added, "This is *hard*."

"It definitely activates a lot of muscles you don't realize you have," I agreed. From our vantage point, I could see the lights burning in the greenhouse above the cliff. I motioned to it. "The house is pretty from here."

Charlie glanced at it but only gave a half-hearted shrug. "It's a house."

"You're bored here," I observed. From reading his journal, of course, though as far as I knew, he hadn't figured out I'd delved into his most private thoughts yet.

"Can you blame me? You're the most exciting thing to happen in years."

He'd started to stray from me, so I reached out and dragged him back by the knee. He continued drifting closer with the momentum and our knees bumped together. He

hooked his leg through mine and dragged me in, our boards knocking together.

His hand slipped to my face, then his fingers tangled in my hair. “You’re even more beautiful wet.”

I snort-laughed, which was entirely stupid and inelegant, but he just grinned.

His thumb brushed over my cheekbone. His eyes glittered in the starlight like he carried the universe inside him. He was too much life, too much sunshine in human form, to be stuck here at the top of the world.

“You could leave now,” I told him gently. “With your cancer gone, you could be free.”

His hand fell away. “I can’t leave Dex.”

“Dex doesn’t even live here,” I pointed out with an eye roll. “He spends his moments here with one foot out the door ready to race back to the base and help torture other girls like me.”

“That’s not fair, Ky.”

“No, but it’s the truth isn’t it? Charlie, you’ve outgrown this place. You’re just like the hibiscus I helped you repot when I got here. You’ve outgrown your tiny ceramic pot, and you need a bigger one. Like big as the whole world.”

“I can’t imagine trying to tackle the whole world on my own. All the peace I’ve ever known is this place.”

I held my breath for a beat of silence, then said, “I could come with you.”

His long lashes shadowed his eyes as he said, “Oh?”

“You and me,” I said, my heart pounding. “We could see the world together. If you want.” When the silence dragged a little too long, I rushed to add, “Of course, I don’t have to be there. You could just go. I know we barely know each oth—”

Charlie cut me off. “Are you in love with my brother?”

“God no!” The words spit from me like an oath.

“But you kissed him.”

My cheeks flared hot despite the subzero temps. “I did. Once. I’ve kissed you a lot more than that.”

His gaze darkened, and one hand came to rest on my hip. He dug his fingers into my wetsuit and dragged me closer, our boards knocking together. “Did you like kissing him as much as you like kissing me?”

Not for the first time, I glimpsed a bit of something dangerous in Charlie. Maybe there was a small part of Reyes in him, after all. I didn’t know him fully yet.

I wanted to, though. I wanted to know every inch of him. I wanted his flaws, his quirks, his kindness, his curiosity, all of it.

I wanted to call him mine.

And the that thought *terrified* me. Did I want Charlie because we’d been thrown together in this shared trauma? Did I want him because we had some kind of connection through our healing? Some kind of kinship through whatever magic coursed through his veins in these fevers?

I had no answers.

When I didn’t respond to his question, Charlie’s fingers released my hip and he reached for my face, his fingers twirling in my hair where it had escaped the hood on my wetsuit. He pulled back—hard—exposing my face to the starlight. In his uncharacteristically dominant grasp, a thrill of desire unfurled inside me.

“Did you like kissing Dex?” Charlie said gruffly.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I said, my voice breathless.

“But we need to,” Charlie said. “Because I’m not going to share. Did you like kissing my brother?”

I couldn’t lie to him. Something in me railed against the idea of it, of tainting this beautiful, blossoming thing between us with lies.

“Yes.” I nearly whispered the word. There were so many nuances to what happened with Dex. Yeah, my body enjoyed the kiss, but my soul hadn’t. Not really. It had felt jarring and unnatural—there’d been no connection.

Not like with Charlie.

Charlie’s eyes darkened. His hands fell away from my face, and despair crashed over me.

Had I ruined everything?

But then he grabbed my waist and yanked me off my board.

I went momentarily weightless as he lifted me from my board as if I weighed nothing at all. I latched onto his arms, his strong, wiry muscles bulging beneath my palms as he dragged me onto his lap. His board wavered beneath us but we didn’t overturn.

We balanced perfectly, he and I.

Charlie stared down at me, his head haloed by starlight and his caramel eyes glowing with a mixture of determination and desire.

“Then I guess,” he said, his lips only inches from mine, “I just have to make you forget him.”



The door to the cold room slammed against the wall, startling me from a deep, dreamless sleep.

Something wet and flaccid flopped to the floor nearby, and I came out of the cocoon of covers to see one of the wetsuits from last night's late night surfing jaunt in a pile on the floor.

Reyes stood in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest so hard his meathead muscles bulged. He indicated the pile of wetsuit rubber with his chin. "Please tell me you didn't do what I think you did."

Charlie popped up behind me, his voice thick from sleep. "It was my idea."

Reyes leveled his dark glare on his brother. "Two days ago you had terminal cancer, and you're still fighting fevers. Going surfing in the middle of the night sounded like a good idea?"

Charlie lay back down and tucked a hand under his head, looking casual and unbothered by his brother's temper as he grinned. "I mean... it was a great idea. Wasn't it, Starfish?"

"I'm not getting in the middle of this," I said, then ducked beneath the covers to avoid them both.

But inwardly, I couldn't help but agree.

Last night was *exactly* what I needed.

"I always take dips in the ocean on my hot days," Charlie went on. "What's so different?"

"You went out into the ocean. Sick."

“With a safety buddy and a flotation device strapped to my ankle,” Charlie pointed out.

I fought the urge to snort at my new title—safety buddy.

“Get your ass out of bed, Katana,” Reyes snapped. “The library opens in thirty minutes.”

His heavy boots stomped off, and I emerged from the covers to catch Charlie’s eye.

“How the heck did he know?” I asked.

“He knows everything,” Charlie said with a shrug. “Knowing my brother? He probably has cameras on the ocean.”

He rolled into me, tugging my body against his. I draped the covers over our heads and snuggled against his chest, wishing I could stay here forever.

“Come with us?” I asked.

Charlie sighed, flattening his palms against my back. “I want to but last night took it out of me. I think I need to rest.”

I raised my face to his and smiled. “I understand. I’m still glad we did it.”

“Me too.”

I showered and dressed in record time—because gods forbid I keep Reyes waiting—and when I walked into the foyer, I half expected to find him holding a pair of handcuffs, despite all the progress we’d made on me not being a prisoner. But he stood by the front door, sans handcuffs but car keys jangling impatiently in one hand as he stared at his phone.

I made quick work of zipping into one of Charlie’s overly large jackets, then Charlie pulled me into his arms and dropped a proprietary kiss to my forehead.

“Be careful,” he said, then raising his voice to address us both, he added, “Don’t kill each other before you get back.”

I hid a smile, and Reyes gave Charlie the bird, then we exited out the front door into a cheerful, sunny daylight.

We rode in silence to the library. I considered apologizing for last night just to try to keep the peace, but the fact was, I wasn't sorry. I'd had an incredible time—the best time I'd had in months. Years, even. Being on the waves with Charlie, teaching him how to ride them, the high had been unreal.

After getting caught, I was lucky Reyes hadn't gone back on his word about taking me to the library. He very well could have reneged on our deal for me playing a part in putting Charlie in danger, even if it hadn't been my idea. He'd locked me away in the house to take Charlie to the doctor, after promising me freedom, so I felt like I could call this new situation a win.

Reyes turned the radio down and remarked, "You're supposed to be taking care of Charlie, not dragging him into the ocean in the middle of the night."

"It wasn't my idea."

"He needs reining in. You have to be the grown up when it comes to him and make the decisions best for his health."

I eyed him askance. "He's a twenty year old man, Dex. He doesn't need a mother."

Not to mention the heat between us had nothing motherly about it.

"You don't know him like I do," Reyes argued. "He's impulsive to the point of disregard for his own well being."

"I think you don't give him enough credit. Or enough room to breathe," I added with an eye roll.

I thought of my parents back at Aether, dictating my every move and judging me if I stepped out of what they considered natural Aether behavior. Their need to control me may have been more gentle than the way Reyes controlled Charlie, but it had been control all the same.

"You haven't spent every day of the last five years watching him die," Reyes snapped. "So don't presume to tell me what I should or shouldn't do."

Something akin to pain crept into his tone.

It was such an odd emotion to hear coming out of the soldier's mouth that any snide remark I had queued up to say just melted away. I'd only been here a short time, and I'd already genuinely wrapped myself up in Charlie's situation. Dex had been by his side from start to finish. If it hurt my heart to see Charlie dealing with the fevers now, it must have been a nightmare for Dex from the beginning.

And now, even with confirmation the cancer was gone, his emotions wouldn't just go away. The trauma wouldn't just disappear.

Just like my trauma from Kimi's death hadn't disappeared just because I'd healed Charlie.

"I'm not going to stop fighting for him," I said softly. "This trip to the library? It's for him. To find answers to the fevers."

"You still haven't told me what we're looking for."

"I'm still in research mode," I said, going for vague.

Because the fact of the matter was, I didn't trust Reyes. He was too wrapped up in Dr. Hurst and his sick experiments. He didn't need to know anything about alts and relics that he hadn't already observed with his own eyes.

"Bottom line, you don't have to worry about Charlie anymore," I went on. "I'm not leaving until he's safe."

"I appreciate that, Katana. I really do," Reyes said, flashing me a rare and genuine half-smile.

Our gazes caught briefly, and his seemed softer than usual. If my assurances helped ease his mind over Charlie, I guess it wasn't such a bad thing.

Reyes turned his gaze back to the road. "But I'll always worry about him. It's my job, you know. Especially when I go back to work. I'm out of V time. Who knows what trouble he'll get up to with me gone so long?"

A sick void yawned inside me at the reminder.

Back to work. At the base. Watching other people like me be experimented on in the name of science.

“Why don’t you put in for a transfer?” I asked, going for nonchalant. “Surely the military has postings up here. Closer to home.”

He shrugged. “I like my post.”

His matter of fact statement cut through me like a knife. With Reyes, I felt like we were always taking one step forward, two steps back, and it always came down to his decision to actively take part in Hurst’s torture chamber.

Maybe it wasn’t a testament to his character. Maybe he really was the kind, sensitive guy I sometimes glimpsed when he was around Charlie, and his ability to stand watch at Hurst’s lab had everything to do with a paycheck.

But what if it didn’t?

What if, underneath it all, Reyes turned out to be exactly the monster I imagined him to be when I woke up in his truck a week ago?

We left the empty, tree-lined back road for a two-lane highway that had recently been cleared of snow. After ten minutes, I started noticing signs of civilization—homes built back off the road with smoking chimneys; passing cars; even a gas station where an attendant in mechanic’s blues used a snow shovel to scrape the sidewalk.

Another left turn put us on a narrow street lined by closely-packed buildings and cute light posts of black iron. Open signs hung in windows at a coffee shop and a clothing boutique, while more little signs declared an art gallery, a community theater, and an Italian restaurant called Mama Maria’s. Under a blanket of snow, the tiny Main Street looked like something out of a picture perfect romance movie.

Too bad nothing else about this situation screamed romance.

I thought of Charlie, and that kiss on the surfboard last night. A high moon and starlight, the waves rocking us together, *that* had been romance.

Reyes found an open spot on the street and cut the engine, gesturing to the small brick building outside my door.

“Library,” he said gruffly. “I’m going to go grab coffee at the cafe. You want something?”

I stared at him. “You’re letting me go into the library alone?”

“I don’t do books unless I’m sufficiently caffeinated.”

“I’m surprised you can even read,” I quipped. “I thought guys like you used their fists, not their brains.”

“You’re a regular comedian,” Reyes said wryly. “Get out of my truck and don’t get into trouble before I get back.”

I shoved open the heavy car door and stepped onto a snowy sidewalk that crackled beneath my boots. Behind me, Reyes’ door slammed shut and his own steps disappeared across the street, leaving me blessedly alone for the first time since he’d dragged me to Alaska.

I paused on the sidewalk for a minute and turned my face up into the cold sunshine. Even with my eyes closed, the light penetrated the thin skin of my eyelids, turning my vision orange. The sun didn’t feel warm, not like the sun in Florida, but it still felt good on my skin. It felt normal. Natural.

It felt like Aether.

After the brilliance of the sun, the library foyer hung dim and cramped. The place looked like it had been here for two hundred years, all dark wood paneling and greenish fluorescent lights, all of it begging for a modern update. It made me long for the library back at school, all airy light and high ceilings, inviting rather than claustrophobic.

I wondered, for the first time really, if I’d ever go back to school or if it had simply been a stop over that led me here.

And where would this stopover take me next?

Behind the U-shaped service desk, a pretty white-haired woman stood scanning books. She wore bifocals and a pink silk scarf over her white Oxford shirt, her flaxen hair in a short, stylish bob.

I walked up to the counter, my gaze dropping to her name tag. Patricia greeted me with a genuine smile.

“Good morning! How can I help you today?”

Her kind, smiling face felt like a gift from the universe after the quiet, sullen ride with Reyes.

“I’m looking for any information on the healing hot spring outside of town,” I told her, wishing I’d asked Reyes the name of the place. “The one owned by, uh, Amaruq? I don’t know his last name.”

“Oh, you want the Eleanor E. Mutt room,” Patricia said sagely. “That’s where we keep extensive records on the Sugpiat people. Nell herself was Sugpiat and ensured we had what we needed financially to compile as much information as possible. She was extensively proud of her heritage, you know.”

I nodded, like I had any idea who Nell was or what the heck Patricia was talking about. Being proud of your heritage was something I could understand, though, even if I couldn’t really put it into practice myself. This experience, both the torture at the lab and the whirlwind situation with the Reyes family, had taught me a decent amount of respect for Aether.

But my heritage? I didn’t even know what that was.

The Eleanor E. Mutt room was cozy, though just as cramped as the rest of the library. Four walls were lined with bookshelves, some of them with glass doors behind which sat Sugpiat artifacts or rolled scrolls. A chandelier dangled at the center of the room over a work table, while several comfy chairs sat scattered near the shelves.

I didn’t really know where to begin, so I just picked a shelf and started scanning titles. I found a dozen ancestry texts right away, then browsed past several geographical surveys and census reports bundled in binders. The few historical texts scattered in between made no mention of a hot spring in the index, so they went back on the shelf as duds.

Finally, I came across a large leather-bound book with “hot spring” in the index, marked by several page numbers.

I settled into a high-backed chair and hauled the book onto my knees. The chair molded to my body, and I nestled down

into it, letting my head rest against the cushion as I paged forward in the book. For a time, my focus zoned in on skimming pages so I could get the context of the work as a whole before I went straight to the index numbers.

The room's silence and solitude might have hung heavy on me once upon a time, but now I took comfort in it. Nobody was around to bother me, to want something from me, to hurt me. I could pretend I'd come here on my own accord for fun, for the pleasure of paging through a book with the scent of old literature like perfume on the air.

I checked the index one more time, then flipped to the first mention of "hot spring."

Right as the door swung open, admitting Reyes from his jaunt for coffee. He held two iced drinks, both the color of dark chocolate.

"Here." Reyes shoved one of the plastic cups at me.

"Iced coffee?" I asked, taking the cup from his fingers. "You know it's like nine degrees outside, right?"

He slumped into the other high-backed chair beside me and gave his own cup a swirl, ice cubes sloshing. "Yeah, but they have the best iced mocha in town."

"Are you sure it isn't the *only* iced mocha in town?" I said, amused.

Reyes rested his head on the seat back and closed his eyes, lifting his straw to his lips without a response.

I left him to his chocolatey treat, took a sip myself—inwardly declared it delicious—then tucked back into the book.

The first mention of hot springs just detailed a history of springs in the area, describing how the geology of this part of the state had primed the area to boast these waters. Ancient volcanic action beneath the crust had heated the earth, and the mineral waters typically stayed a balmy one-sixty-five. The passage mentioned several by name, none of them what I was looking for.

The second mention brought up Grayson Hollow specifically.

“The Kodiak Spring,” I said out loud, glancing at Reyes. “Is that Amaruq’s spring?”

Reyes nodded.

“The Kodiak Spring,” I read, “is a year-round wonder, available to tourists thanks to the enterprising Sugpiat who settled Grayson Hollow long before colonization.”

Reyes snorted. “Enterprising. More like criminal. The man makes off with bank on the daily.”

I ignored him and kept reading. “The Kodiak Spring held great esteem to the Sugpiat people and became a sacred place of pilgrimage in the early nineteen hundreds.”

But the information stopped there. The next paragraph launched into a detailed explanation of Sugpiat pilgrimage sites in Alaska.

“That’s it?” I mumbled, more to myself.

I set the book aside on the end table next to my barely touched iced coffee, then returned to the bookshelves. I opened nearly a dozen books before I finally found one that had the name—Kodiak Spring—in the index.

Too excited to get to the nitty gritty, I stood right there next to the bookshelf and paged back to the entry. I skimmed several paragraphs, my excitement blooming wider.

“The hot spring wasn’t always there,” I said out loud, my heart thrumming. “Scientists say it bears *no* evidence of having existed before the late eighteen hundreds. The spring just popped into existence out of nowhere, seemingly overnight.”

Reyes didn’t bother to open his eyes. “Do hot springs do that?”

“No, of course not,” I muttered, turning the page and skimming the next bit of info. “Not without supernatural help. It looks like the locals called the spring *kiak*, which I guess is

how the name Kodiak came into being later.” I read further, searching with a keen eye for anything that screamed ‘alt.’

Nothing.

“Kiak,” I said under my breath, tossing the book onto the table with the first one. “Kiak.”

I scanned more indexes, this time looking for both Kodiak and kiak. It took me two shelves and three paper cuts, but I finally found one. But instead of saying “kiak spring,” the index indicated a kiak *stone*.

My palms grew immediately clammy.

I carried the book back to my chair and perched on the edge, my heart hammering. Did I want to open this jar? Release Pandora’s box onto the world?

Of course I did.

Because I wanted to save Charlie.

So I turned to page one hundred and eight and started to read.



I read three pages in the silence, anticipation growing like a tangible creature in the room.

“The *kiak* stone,” I finally said out loud, startling Reyes from his doze.

He opened heavy-lidded eyes and stared at me. “What?”

“Legend says the *kiak* stone was birthed from core of the Earth herself,” I told him, giving him the Cliff’s Notes version of what I’d read. “The ‘fiery red stone’ appeared at some point in Sugpiat ancestral history and became a focal point of worship in this region.”

Reyes shrugged and closed his eyes again. “Not the first time a native tribe has worshipped some kind of idol.”

“Sure,” I murmured, just to keep the peace. Because this wasn’t just “some kind of idol.”

It was a proto-relic.

I was certain of it.

I traced my fingertip over the page. *Unfortunately for historians, the legendary kiak stone went missing in the late eighteen hundreds.* I slid my finger further down the page, eyes skimming for key words.

“Divine intervention,” I muttered.

I didn’t even realize I’d said it out loud, until Reyes asked, “What was divine intervention?”

“The Sugpiat stated when the stone went missing, it was divine intervention. According to this text, the stone was never mentioned—or seen—again.”

“Sounds like someone stole it,” Reyes offered.

I hummed what could have been assent, but I didn’t agree.

Because it sounded like someone came along, realized the stone was magic, and *activated* it. Thus creating the Kodiak Hot Spring as it was known today.

The relic hadn’t disappeared.

It was there.

Somewhere.

I spent more time at the shelves, searching for the two key words. I found mention of the Kodiak Hot Spring in a narrow tome that was copyrighted in the nineteen-forties. A scant two paragraphs explained how the Kodiak was a blessing given to the Sugpiat people by the gods during a time of great despair. A wandering man with flames for fingertips gifted the hot spring and then vanished completely. The story, of course, was framed as native folklore—his flaming fingertips were supposed to be some type of metaphor for his ability to bring about change for the Sugpiat people.

But I knew better. All “folklore” had a basis in reality, and most of the time if a figure seemed unnatural or “magical” in history, they were typically of an alt race.

While the story seemed like basic folkflore to normal humans, I saw it for what it was—a description of an alt-race man showing up and using the kiak stone to create the hot spring. Proof of my concerns.

I thought of the evidence we had. The kiak stone. The man with flames for fingertips. The possibility that Charlie had alt blood in his lineage. All of the dominoes lined up with my suspicions.

At some point in Sugpiat history, a strange alt had heard of their magical stone. He’d showed up, intending to harness the energies for himself, but something went wrong while creating

the relic, which erupted the hot spring and cast his identity from the history books. Knowing the nature of the relic—the nature of Charlie’s fevers and his story of the lava entering his body—this poor unsuspecting alt had probably boiled alive and sank to death beneath the surface.

More than likely, the man with “flames for fingers” had charged a proto-relic with fire in a subzero climate. The unbalance that would cause could result in the relic going rogue, constantly reaching for alt energy in an effort to get to a better place.

Like a polar bear caged in a tropical zoo, the relic had gone mad in its captivity.

“What are you thinking?” Reyes asked.

I glanced over my shoulder to find his eyes open, his shrewd gaze locked on me.

I closed the book and set it aside, carefully considering my words.

Oto-san taught me everything from growing herbs to driving a car to steeping tea. But he’d also taught me that spilling alt secrets was as dangerous as spilling blood in the water near a school of sharks. Races survived because they held their secrets close to the chest and guarded each other’s secrets with the same courtesy.

Reyes, as a member of Dr. Hurst’s team and a soldier in the US military, was the enemy. No matter what tentative friendship we’d built. No matter that he was capable of love and protection when it benefited him.

He was the shark in the water.

“I’m still thinking,” I said, finally raising my gaze to meet his. “But I think it’s time the three of us take a trip to the hot spring.”

“Right now?” Reyes asked.

“Right now,” I agreed.

The only thing left to do was find the rogue relic and do whatever it took to balance the scales—before it killed

Charlie.



I lay back against the seat back in Reyes' truck, exhaustion settling into my bones. He'd stepped back into the coffee shop, this time for sustenance of some kind, and I'd begged off, too tired to walk across the street. Even though nearly twenty-four hours had passed since my last healing for Charlie, the lingering exhaustion was still there. I felt dizzy, maybe even a little feverish, which meant now probably wasn't the *best* time to visit the springs.

Part of me wanted to just go back to the house, check on Charlie, and then get some rest before we tackled the next right thing. But we were out and about, so it made sense to go ahead and stop by the hot spring, maybe even interrogate Amaruq and get a lead on what he knew.

If he knew anything at all.

I was still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and consider the idea that perhaps his family opened the hot spring ages ago, and he had no clue as to its origins or any knowledge of the kiak stone.

The driver's side door jerked open, and Reyes climbed into the driver's seat, his face grim. "Charlie's not answering the phone."

I sat up quickly and shot him a glance. "Does he ever ignore your calls?"

"Never," Reyes growled, putting the truck into gear. His tires screeched on the wet asphalt as he tore away from the curb and pointed the truck toward the cabin.

A million explanations and fears vied for my attention as Reyes flew us down back roads. I'd just had the thought that it had been twenty four hours since Charlie's last healing, and that had been the longest break all weekend. What if we'd put him in danger by leaving him? What if our late night surfing jaunt had done more to harm him than I could have ever imagined?

I'd never forgive myself.

We made it back to the cabin in record time, gravel and snow spraying beneath the truck tires as we skidded to a stop directly by the front door. Reyes was out the door and already keying in the code before I managed to untangle my seatbelt and follow him.

As I passed through the open doorway, my heart hovering in my throat, I could hear Reyes' heavy boots crashing through the house as he called out his brother's name on his way to the greenhouse. A door slammed open, then as I skipped quickly down the steps into the greenhouse humidity, I heard the door to the cold room hit the wall.

"Charlie?" Reyes yelled, the question heavy in his tone.

I pushed through the hanging ferns on a beeline to join him, but Reyes surged back toward me, his dark eyes wild.

"He's not in the cold room," Reyes barked, holding up a cell phone. "But his phone is."

My growing worry surged to panic. "Why would he leave his phone? Maybe he just went to the bathroom?"

"Maybe," Reyes said darkly, then shoved past me, yelling Charlie's name again.

We searched the whole house, top to bottom, but Charlie wasn't in his room, the bathroom, or anywhere in between. Reyes' panic grew so thick, so heady that it pierced through my own walls and I began to feed off his anxiety.

I stopped by the kitchen window, looking out over the ocean outside. The sun was high and bright this morning, and the surface of the water was smoother than I'd ever seen it, so that it looked as if a million diamonds glittered across the earth.

The beach.

He'd gone to the beach.

I knew it the way I knew that his fevers were being controlled by a proto-relic still hidden at Kodiak Hot Spring.

Reyes was standing in the middle of the living room, one hand shoved into his high and tight fade so that little hairs jutted out everywhere.

“He’s on the beach,” I told him, barreling past him to the front door. I didn’t bother to stop to see if he’d follow.

My boots crunched over icy snow, sinking precariously to the gravel and grass beneath. The sun hadn’t grown warm enough to melt the inches of dust on everything, but the top layer had turned crystalline under its touch. I ran as fast as I could in the too-big boots and felt the crunching in my skull, throbbing in time with the headache I’d had since leaving the library.

I took the slope at a precarious speed that turned even faster—too fast—as I spotted an unmoving pile near the edge of the ocean. My body angled dangerously and I struggled to keep up with my own momentum, nearly falling as I came off the cliffside and onto the rocks.

Charlie was sprawled on his back near the water, his clothes soaking wet and his legs close enough that the wave’s fingers reached for him, clutched him, and then released him over and over. I slid to a stop beside him and fell to my knees, sucking in a breath as I reached for his neck.

His strong heart beat met my fingertips.

I sagged over him, clutching my fists in his shirt. “Oh, thank the gods,” I gasped out, burying my face in his neck. I didn’t care that he was wet, or that the cold would freeze my skin. I breathed in his scent and felt his heat, and right there at the edge of the water, I prayed.

Just get us through this.

Help me help him.

I can’t do this alone.

I conjured up an image of my oka-san’s living room altar in my mind. I remembered her steady voice describing our gods to me in detail, explaining what aspect of our lives each ruled over and how we should reach out anytime we were in need.

Give it over to the gods, Kita. They're always there for you.

Even when I've forgotten?

Reyes came to a stomping halt beside me. "Is he..."

"Alive," I croaked, raising my head. "But unconscious."

"Let's get him in the car. To the hospital." Reyes leaned over, preparing to pick his brother up.

Always ready to pick his brother up.

"No." The word came out sharp. Firm. I kept my body in the way, draped over Charlie's, and met Reyes' thunderous gaze with my calm one. "We go to the hot spring."

"Now is not the time, Katana!"

"We go to the hot spring," I repeated, slowly, firmly, "we go to the hot spring and you trust me. Just this once. I need you to trust me."

Reyes clenched his fists at his side, and I thought he was going to argue. I braced myself for it, prepared myself to argue as if Charlie's life depended on it.

Because it might.

But he sighed, relaxed his fists, and nodded. One single nod, giving his trust over to me.

"Let's get him to the car," I said, backing away so he could reach his brother.

As an alt, I'd probably be able to track down the relic with my own senses, but the fact of the matter was, Charlie was connected to this relic, witting or not, and we'd waited too long.

As far as I was concerned, the timeline had changed.

We were going after the proto-relic—now.



Charlie woke up enough to help us support him on the way to the truck. We all strapped in, and Reyes took us on a wild ride while I clung to Charlie's limp, wet body to keep him from crashing into the walls of the truck every time Reyes took a corner at light speed.

The heat rolling off Charlie's skin filled the cabin, turning it almost as humid as his greenhouse. Given the nature of the situation, I finally put my theory to voice for Reyes—not about the hot spring and the kiak stone and what they meant in the alt world, but why Charlie was devolving now.

“I think he's been infected by a supernatural phenomenon. Something not of this world,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “His cancer was a barrier to this thing. The illness was destroying his body, but it was also keeping this thing from spreading and getting worse because it can't gain anything from a diseased body.”

“What the hell are you going on about, Katana?” Reyes snarled. His anxiety had reached peak levels, visible in the wildness in his dark eyes and the clenched jaw. “Because it sounds a lot like magic. Which isn't real.”

I bit my tongue, wanting to lash out at him, to argue with him. But if he wanted to not believe in magic, I wasn't going to change his mind.

“Again, I'm asking you to trust me. We go to the hot spring. We look for this phenomenon. I promise you—if it's there, and I'm damn sure it is, we can appease it and heal Charlie.”

“Appease it?” Reyes scoffed, jerking the wheel as he took a left turn at an unhealthy speed. “Jesus, are you talking about that stone thing? The one you found at the library? That false idol? It’s folklore, Katana. It’s not real.”

“Everything is folklore until it isn’t,” I countered. “If you do nothing else for me, do this one thing. Humor me. Help me get to the stone. If my plan doesn’t work, no harm done. Okay?”

That muscle clenched in his jaw again, and he didn’t look over at me as we rounded another curve through the trees. But he said, “Yeah. Whatever. As long as it doesn’t make him worse.”

I clutched Charlie tighter and bit down on my lower lip, worry blooming through me.

I couldn’t promise that.

Charlie’s head lolled on my shoulder with the next turn we took. He pressed his face against my neck and reached for my hand, almost unconsciously. I looped my fingers with his, ignoring the heat as I tried to give him support and encouragement just by being close to him.

It’s almost over, I promised him. We’ll fix this.

No matter what it takes.

I saw the sign before the hot spring’s dome came into view. *Kodiak Hot Spring, The Area’s Premier Healing Spa!* My lip curled at the marketing gimmick. People may have come here in the past and felt like they’d been “healed” because of the proto-relic’s strong magic permeating the springs. But it was a lie. Maybe the relic hadn’t hurt them the way it had hurt Charlie—and I had my theories about Charlie’s alt lineage to thank for that—but the healing those people experienced wouldn’t stick. It was like putting a band-aid on a bullet hole.

The tires hydroplaned beneath us as Reyes swiveled into the empty parking lot. I guessed most people hadn’t bothered to come out after the big storm just yet, though one lone figure stood on the sidewalk, clearing snow with a giant shovel.

I held tight to Charlie as Reyes slammed on the brakes and threw the truck into *Park*.

On the sidewalk directly ahead, Amaruq straightened and jammed the shovel against the ground, leaning on it with one elbow. He eyed us as we climbed from the car, his shrewd gaze landing on Charlie as Reyes supported him.

“Everything all right?” he called.

A muscle tightened in Reyes’ jaw. “It’s fine. We need an hour in the hot spring.”

“Sure thing,” Amaruq said with a shrug. “Come on in.”

We stepped from the frigid cold into the humid lobby, and Amaruq took his place behind the reception desk to check us in.

“All three of you?” he asked, tapping on his keyboard.

“Yes,” I spoke up before Reyes could answer. “Also, I wanted to ask a question, if that’s okay.”

Amaruq leveled his dark gaze on me as if he’d only just seen me for the first time. “Sure.”

“Do you know anything about the kiak stone?”

His expression didn’t change. No tensing of the brow, no tick in the jawline, no squint in the eye. But there was the *slightest* hesitation. Not much, but enough that I noticed it.

“Never heard of it,” he told me with a shrug. His gaze dropped to his computer screen. “Four hundred ninety.”

Reyes sputtered. “Four hun—Jesus, that’s like double what you usually charge.”

“New fee for walk ins,” Amaruq said. “Next time, make an appointment.”

He collected the ungodly amount of money then sent us on our way to the dressing rooms. I separated from Reyes and Charlie to go into the girl’s room alone this time, but right before I opened the door, I felt something like a hot poker jabbing me in the back.

I glanced back to find Amaruq watching me.

Hard.

He knows, a little voice whispered in my ear. My third eye, my subconscious, my intuition, whatever you wanted to call it.

He knows you know.



Dressed in my white tank top and cotton shorts, I joined Charlie and Reyes on the humid docks beneath the sweeping overhead dome.

Charlie offered me a weak wave. He was standing on his own two feet without help from Reyes, but I wasn't sure how long he'd last that way.

"You are absolutely not to get in the water," I told him.

He saluted me. "Aye, aye, Starfish."

Reyes crossed his big arms over his bare chest. "What now?"

I ignored him and turned my attention back to Charlie. "Where did you see the ohia lehua?"

His caramel eyes brightened. Suddenly, at the mention of the exotic plant, all exhaustion and pain fled, and the real Charlie emerged.

"Over there," he said with a bit of excitement in his tone. He waved a hand toward the south wall, where the spring exited the dome beneath a frosted glass panel. "It's growing just outside that window."

"I need you to stay here," I told him, then to Reyes, I said, "Keep an eye on him. He's going to be weak being here."

I hurried over to the far end of the dock, the furthest I could go before I had to get in the water. The ladder felt slimy beneath my feet as I climbed down into the hot spring, and I wasn't sure if it was from algae or from some kind of mental ick I felt being back in this place. That pulse of dark energy

lapped at my consciousness hungrily, and I recognized it this time.

It was recognition. The proto-relic knew I wasn't human, and like with Charlie, it wanted to take my body and try to find a more hospitable environment for itself. Charlie had never had any training in keeping dark magics out of his psyche, but I had.

And the stone hated me for it.

“Where you going?” Reyes called. He walked beside Charlie on the dock, both of them drifting towards me at Charlie's pace—which wasn't very fast in his current state.

“Just stay there,” I repeated, then leapt off the last rung and hit flat footed on the smooth stones at the bottom of the hot spring before I moved off into the water.

I didn't waste time wading through the hip deep pool. I dove in and picked up a quick breast stroke, aiming for the canal where the hot spring fed out into the daylight. By the time I reached the edge of the building, I was breathless, which only served to remind me how out of practice I was—and how much healing Charlie had affected me these past few days.

The glass dipped beneath the surface by several inches, presumably to deter spa users from swimming beyond the boundaries. Where the water lapped at the glass, the surface had been discolored and warped by the constant heat and wearing away. I swiped a palm over the foggy glass, opening a crystal clear space through which to see beyond the window.

I didn't need Charlie next to me to point out the ohia lehua. It quite obviously did *not* belong to this landscape, especially with the foot of snow still covering everything else. Thick, oval leaves of pale green cradled soft red flowers that looked like fireworks exploding—a splash of color on a white backdrop. Three branches arced out from the central trunk, giving the whole plant a vaguely asymmetrical bonsai appearance.

Beyond the plant, a rocky outcropping swept up the side of a low hill. I thought I saw the shadow of a cave, exactly as Charlie had described.

Holding my breath, I dove beneath the water, then inched through the narrow channel that led outside.

I came up into *frigid* air.

The dueling forces of the hot water and the cold Alaskan temperature outside slammed into me, sending my whole nervous system into a tailspin. I gasped at the cold air, drawing it into my lungs even as the lower half of my body continued to draw in the heat of the water. I dipped beneath the water until only my head was left exposed and paused for only a moment to give myself a chance to adjust, then swam for the bank where the ohia lehua was draped across the water's surface.

I came up out of the water, sucking in another breath as my wet skin met the cold air. One branch of the ohia lehua reached toward me, fluffy flower dragging against the water's surface. I cradled the fluffy red bud in my hand.

"You don't belong here," I whispered to the plant. I heard echoes of myself in the phrase—*You don't belong here, Ky. You don't belong with these people. You don't belong in this country.*

You don't belong you don't belong you don't belong.

People don't go places they "don't belong" because it's *comfortable*. They go searching for more. Searching for better. Searching for themselves.

The ohia lehua didn't grow here because it belonged in the cold Alaskan temps. It grew here because what it loved—what it longed for—was just below the surface.

My gaze tripped past the ohia lehua—to the small, barely visible cave opening in the rocks.

Nowhere left to go...but down.



The water lapped around me, followed by a splash as someone came out of the water to join me.

I whirled around, throwing my fists up, ready to fight. My first instinct was that it was Amaruq, here to stop me from reaching the proto-relic, and I was ready to knock him out if he even tried.

But it was Reyes.

Reyes swiped a hand over his face, flicking water from his eyes. His deeply tanned skin burned red from the heat of the water. “What the hell you doin’, Katana?”

I pointed at the cave. “Going underground. You need to go back and keep an eye on Charlie.”

Reyes glanced past me to the cave, then scoffed. “I’m not letting you crawl into a wild cave alone. There might be bears in there.”

I almost laughed, because bears were the *least* of the worries I actually had.

I managed to keep my chuckle to myself, and started, “But Charlie—”

“Charlie’s fine,” Reyes cut me off. “He’s resting on one of the deck chairs inside. He was probably asleep before I even left the dome.” Reyes raked a glance around us, then pointed off to the south. “This area is enclosed. Look at that.”

I followed his motion, surprised to find a tall stone wall enclosing the clearing. Two edges butted up against the

sloping hill. The hot spring clearly continued under the wall at one juncture, but for the most part, this place was entirely cordoned off against the domed building.

The revelation didn't surprise me. Someone knew there was a proto-relic in this cave. Maybe even Amaruq.

"I guess there's no going back for towels or shoes," I said under my breath. If the only way into the cave was by diving under the water, towels and shoes were a moot point.

Reyes shrugged. "So, are we going in then?"

I hesitated only a second. The truth I didn't want to admit to myself was that I didn't really want to go into that cave alone. I knew what we were up against, but I didn't *actually* know. What lay inside could be much, much more dangerous than I'd ever imagined, and having back up wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Too bad my back up had to be Reyes.

Leaving the hot spring had to be one of the hardest physical things I'd done to my body, and I'd jumped from a balcony to a swimming pool at dangerous, deadly heights. I'd regrown a liver, a hand, a thumb, and still nothing compared to the fiery cold of my wet skin slipping from hot water to Alaskan temperatures.

Goosebumps raced across my flesh, and the cold dug deep at my core, setting up a shiver I couldn't stop. I stepped carefully across the snow towards the small cave opening, reminding myself that I'd healed frostbite once before and I could do it again. But every footfall brought an unearthly chill into the pads of my feet, until I could no longer feel them at all, and anxiety over my well being—and that of Reyes, too—dug deep into my gut.

I paused at the edge of the cave entrance, gazing down into pure darkness as I fretted at my bottom lip with my teeth.

Reyes sloshed up beside me, his breath a fog on the air. "No time like the present, Katana. At least in there, we'll get a moderate temp. Sixty. Maybe higher, the further we go down. Out here, we'll just freeze to death."

I nodded—I knew he was right.

So in we went.

The ground began sloping downward almost immediately. Sharp rocks dug into the bottoms of my feet, edges like knives. I clung to the wall of the cave, thankful for the grooves that had been carved out over time because they gave me solid handholds. I slipped and slid, silently wishing I had a towel. Or shoes. Or a flashlight, even.

The ground began to angle steeper, and with it, my heart began to pound faster. I didn't like caves. I didn't like the heavy press of earth above me or the sensation of being completely engulfed by enough dirt and rock that a single collapse would suffocate me. Water didn't faze me, but earth? Earth felt like too much.

Maybe it was my upbringing at Aether, in the open air, in open spaces, where the sky and the world stretched around me, wide and free.

I slipped again and fell backwards. Reyes' strong grip latched onto my damp bicep and kept me from keeling over straight to the ground.

“Careful,” he grunted.

I couldn't even see his face in the dark. Daylight was fading quickly behind us, nothing more than a glimmer from the cave opening. How was I going to find the proto-relic in a total blackout?

I grasped the knobby wall and opened my mouth to suggest we turn back.

But Reyes let go of my bicep, a bit of wonder in his voice as he said, “You see that?”

I could barely see *him*, much less see *that*, whatever *that* was.

“See what?” I asked, embarrassed to hear the tremor in my voice.

“Light ahead,” Reyes murmured. “Flickering like a campfire.”

Excitement pulsed in my belly and sent butterflies through my chest.

Flickering like a campfire.

Flickering like... lava?

The promise of light—regardless that the light indicated the danger I'd known all along was real—put me back into motion. At least we wouldn't be blindly traipsing around in the dark.

The slope turned precarious, pebbles slip-sliding beneath my feet and dropping off into the darkness ahead. I kept both hands on the cave wall and tested the floor ahead of me with every step, terrified that one wrong footing would send me pitching into the darkness like the stones.

I'd had enough of plummeting from high places.

The wall curved to the right, carrying me closer to the glow. Red illuminated everything, growing stronger the further I walked, giving everything a red tinge that made it seem as if we'd walked into the glowing bowels of the Earth's core.

Heat billowed from up ahead, warming me and drying the remaining water on my bare skin, though my wet clothes continued to drip frigid drops on my feet.

Reyes' strong, sure tones drifted to meet my ears. "What are you walking me into, Katana?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I tossed back over my shoulder. "But do me a favor, okay? Don't touch the stone."

"What stone?"

Instead of answering, I powered forward and into a high open cavern.

I realized the light we'd been seeing was suddenly less like firelight and more like a heartbeat: Pulsing. Hungry.

The cavern glowed like the bowels of an imagined hell, lit by skeins of orangey-red painted through the walls like veins. Nine strong branches emerged from the central point like tree

roots, growing in number the further they reached away from the source. Where the branches met, a deep divot in the cave wall held a hunk of the same glowing material, this one solid and burning like fire made flesh. Heat rolled from the relic, almost visible where it pressed against the cold cave air, hazy and ethereal.

Stones skipped away from my toes, and I halted as I realized the floor just... stopped. I leaned forward to watch rocks plop into dark, disturbed water far below.

Water that boiled like a pot on my oka-san's stove.

Reyes sucked in a breath. "What the hell?"

"It's the origination point of the spring," I explained, taking a single step away from the edge to tighten my grip on the wall. "This isn't a natural hot spring. It's a normal mountain spring being warmed *by* the relic."

"Relic? The false idol?" Reyes reached past me, pointing at the pulsing hunk of glowing orange in the cave wall. "You can't mean that thing."

"I do," I said, swallowing as I raked my gaze over the way-too-living veins. "The relic needs a warm environment to stay stable. Here in this cold cave, it's highly unstable and it's heating everything around it in a bid to keep itself alive."

"It's not alive."

"Not in the sense you think," I agreed. "But it's sentient. In a way. And it needs to be stabilized so it'll stop affecting Charlie."

"How is it giving Charlie fevers from miles away and underground?"

"It connected with him. Everything on earth is made of water," I pointed out. "We're like seventy percent water, right? The relic is tied to the rocks and through the rocks to the water and through the water, it can infiltrate a human body. It took to Charlie and now part of it lives in him."

"Why Charlie? Why not every other person who comes to the springs for healing?"

I had my theories, of course. But those theories I didn't intend to reveal. Some secrets were meant to be kept. I knew Reyes loved his brother, but I also knew Reyes believed in Dr. Hurst's experiments. If my theory was correct—if Charlie did have alt lineage and perhaps even hidden powers—he wasn't safe.

Even from his brother.

So instead, I said, "We don't know that it hasn't done the same exact thing to others. Maybe those with better immune systems just aren't affected," I offered, trying to come up with some possible reason why Reyes had never been bothered by the water.

We stood there in silence a moment, staring out over the deep chasm of boiling water to where the proto-relic glowed in the cave wall. The pool lapped pretty far below—twenty feet, maybe more. A crescent shaped shore lined the edge of the cave, another path leading away from the water and into darker depths. A shallow rim spread around the upper part of the cavern, where we stood, and I thought if I could edge my way over to the stone, it should be within reach.

But everything in my body warred against making that journey. Taking hold of that dangerous stone.

I was the only one who could.

"We have to get it out of this cave," I said, putting it into words so I couldn't take it back. "We have to get it out of here and take it somewhere hot. It needs to be in a warm environment. Not a warm environment of its own creation like this one, but one warm all on its own."

"Like the desert?" Reyes said. "We can drive it to base."

The thought sent a prickle of terror skittering up my spine. A proto-relic that close to Dr. Hurst and his team of sociopaths?

No, thank you.

"It needs to be kept warm here," I said. "Moving it that far is too dangerous. It's volatile, and could cause so much more damage on a drive that long."

“What’s the plan?” Reyes asked.

I glanced over my shoulder at him, surprised at how easily he’d put the plan in my hands. He was always the one in charge, always the man with the plan—even when plans included kidnapping unsuspecting women.

But in the blink of an eye, he’d accepted that I had the knowledge here. I had the power.

I didn’t really know what to do with this information.

“I’m going for it,” I told him, indicating the stone with my chin. “You stay here. Play lookout.”

Reyes looked back the way we came—we couldn’t even see daylight anymore. “Are we expecting company?”

“I hope not.”

I skirted the edge of the drop-off to the water, trying not to think about what falling into a boiling pot would feel like. I’d read somewhere once about a man falling into the hot springs at Yellowstone and all his skin boiling off his body.

I liked my skin exactly where it was, and I didn’t relish the idea of growing an entirely new epidermis. If I even survived long enough to get the chance.

The heat bubbling off the water was almost as intense as the waves coming from the relic. I felt two waves of intensity slamming into me, and I began to sweat as if I’d taken another dip in the springs. I moved with purpose, keeping my focus on the sliver of ground beneath my feet, making sure my every step had a safe place to land.

Several moments passed in tense silence. I could feel Reyes’ stare burning a hole between my shoulder blades, could feel his concern on the air as sure as the heat. Funny, since he was so sure I could survive anything and heal anything.

Now he finally realizes I’m just as fragile as anyone else, I thought, amused.

Before I knew it, the relic was overhead.

The heat was *painful* this close to the stone. I held up a hand, testing the air in front of the stone, and my fingertips blazed like I'd touched a lit stove.

I remembered my dream. The way my fingers blistered and the skin peeled away revealing my bones.

God, I hope that wasn't a premonition.

I reached for the relic, hoping like hell it didn't burn me.

“Stop!”

I froze, on my tippy toes with one hand raised toward the stone's cavity.

I glanced back over my shoulder into the red-light darkness to find Amaruq standing at the edge of the boiling lake—holding a gun to Charlie's head.



Fear lit in me no different than if I had fisted the lava-filled stone and let it burn me from the inside out.

“Charlie,” I gasped, the word barely a sound at all. I tried to step forward, like I could magically float across the cave and get to him before something bad happened.

But I slipped on the rocky shelf, and flailed wildly back toward the wall, my heart pounding from both fear for Charlie’s well being and a near death plummet.

I had nowhere to go but down into the boiling waters. No way to reach him without wings.

And while Reyes believed I could heal anything, and Charlie believed my healing starfish were beautiful... I definitely couldn’t fly.

Way behind me, where I’d left him at the entrance to the cavern, Reyes roared and took a single step toward the edge of the chasm.

“Don’t!” I shrieked, panicked at the thought of him throwing himself into the boiling water like a dummy. Whatever my thoughts on Reyes, Charlie loved him, and I’d be damned if he was going to die in front of his little brother trying to be some big hero.

I didn’t know for sure if the water was hot enough to kill a man, but I didn’t want any of us to find out.

“I’ll kill you!” Reyes roared, his fists balled at his sides. “Get your hands off him!”

Charlie stirred at his brother's voice, but then he swayed on his feet, his weight sinking back against Amaruq. He was too far gone to help himself or fight back.

Not that fighting back was much of an option with a gun pointed at your head.

"Step away from the kiak," Amaruq said, his voice booming and oddly calm, despite the wildness in his eyes, visible from even up here on my ledge.

"I don't have anywhere to go," I called back, bluffing for time.

Amaruq turned the gun on me. "I could shoot you down. Your choice."

I crossed my arms over my chest and had a split second to consider my options. Would he actually shoot me? The possibility was there. He looked unhinged, ready to do whatever it took to keep me from the stone. But if I appeased him and walked away, I lost my chance at getting this stone out of here and saving Charlie.

Charlie, whose head lolled on Amaruq's shoulder. He seemed in and out of consciousness, not fully comprehending what was happening.

Time was up, and Charlie was my priority.

I decided to stay right where I was, and do my best to distract Amaruq. Maybe Reyes could pull off some kind of jump on him, if I kept the man focused on me.

"Why are you so obsessed with a rock?" I asked, tossing a nonchalant look at Reyes, hoping he could read my mind. Or at least my body language, as I held up my arms and sidestepped away from him, carrying Amaruq's sight with me.

"It's not 'a rock'," Amaruq said, spitting the words like it was a curse. "The kiak was as divine gift to my people. Decades ago. It has brought prosperity to my family during a time of great upheaval and poverty."

I had no doubt about that, given his exorbitant hot spring prices.

“The gods live within the kiak,” he went on, raising the gun almost as if he were using it to praise the stone. “It gives us divine protection, and in return, we keep it safe.”

“It’s not safe here,” I pointed out. “And it’s not divine. It’s a rock that holds a natural element, a natural magic that exists in a realm beyond the one we know.”

“No!” Amaruq roared. “I hear them. I hear the gods in my head whenever I am near it. Even now, I hear them. I hear them, and they want you dead!”

The gun exploded.

I dropped to a knee on the narrow rock shelf beneath me. The bullet hit the wall somewhere overhead, and chips rained down on me from above. My heart leapt into my throat, heartbeat pounding hard enough to choke me.

So that answered my question whether Amaruq would actually shoot me or not.

My fear, which I’d managed to keep somewhat under wraps, escalated. None of us were safe from him.

And none of us, not even Amaruq, were safe from the proto-relic.

Amaruq believed gods were speaking to him through the relic, when in reality, the proto-relic itself was likely communicating with him in the only method it could. It had gotten a hold on him, in a similar way to how it had taken control of Charlie. Begging for help, begging for someone to give it what it needed.

But Amaruq wasn’t alt, so it couldn’t feed off his energy. He also didn’t have an alt background, and therefore have the knowledge of what the stone needed.

I came up on my knees, tentative as I held up both hands in a gesture of surrender. “I’m here to help the kiak! Please listen to me!”

“No. I must protect the stone.” Amaruq’s deranged voice had become strangely calm. His arm tightened around Charlie’s neck, and he jerked the gun back down to Charlie’s

temple. “Come down, or I’ll kill your friend. He seems half dead, anyway.”

I winced at his callous declaration. I couldn’t even imagine how Charlie felt right now, so close to the very object that had been causing him so much harm.

“Please don’t do that,” I called down, desperately trying to control the waver in my voice. “The kiak is a very special stone, and I can help you preserve it.”

Amaruq jerked the gun around again.

“The kiak needs warmth!” I yelled as the gun blasted. I dropped to my belly, hands flying to protect my head as more rock chips rained down.

If he wasn’t careful, he’d shoot the proto-relic, and probably blow us all up in the process.

We had to get Charlie away from him.

I lifted my head enough to peer through my arms in the direction of the cave entrance where Reyes had been stationed. Relief flooded me as I realized he was gone—which meant he’d found a way to climb down.

Hang on, Charlie. Help’s coming.

I had to keep Amaruq distracted.

“Amaruq!” I pleaded. “Please! Listen to me! The kiak needs a warm environment to thrive.”

“This cavern is the warmest place in the area,” Amaruq argued. “What more could it need?”

“Warmth that it didn’t create itself,” I explained, keeping my face pressed to the stone beneath me. From his angle, I hoped like hell he could barely see me, much less get a bullet in me laying flat to the ridge. “It needs natural warmth. We’re here to give it what it needs.”

For an interminable moment, he didn’t say anything. I took it as a good sign, that perhaps he was actually going to listen to me. Even if he didn’t immediately believe me, I just needed him to *pause*.

Come on, Reyes. Where are you?

I raised my head to look down at Amaruq. He had the gun pointed in my direction, but his finger wasn't on the trigger.

I called that progress.

"I come from an ancestry of people who care for these kinds of stones," I said, then carefully, one hand at a time, pushed my torso off the ground. My heart hammered uncomfortably as I gave myself over to the gun's range, almost in time with the pulsing orange glow of the proto-relic. "I was raised with the knowledge of how to protect stones just like the kiak. Your people came into ownership of the kiak with no knowledge of how to properly care for it. Let me help you. I won't take the stone away from you, I promise."

"Promises mean nothing in this world," Amaruq snarled, tightening his grip on Charlie.

A small moan escaped from Charlie's throat, and suddenly, his eyes flew open. I could see the whites of his eyes in the dim red light as his gaze darted around. As he catalogued his surroundings, noted Amaruq gripping him in a deadlock, and me, kneeling beneath the pulsing stone. I watched his beautiful mind awaken, the way it did when he came out of the fevers back in the greenhouse, and saw him come into awareness of what was happening.

Then in a single fluid motion, he lifted an arm to knock away the gun and kicked back at Amaruq's shins with one leg.

It was a powerful, stunning move, like a viper striking. The gun went flying, discharging in the process, and Amaruq doubled forward at the blow to his shins.

Charlie pivoted away, slipping out of Amaruq's grasp. He stumbled, clearly still unstable from the episode, and then went down hard on his butt. He wasn't fast enough to catch himself and tumbled all the way backwards, his head smacking the rocky ground so hard even my body trembled.

Amaruq regained his composure, straightened, and began to stalk toward the gun.

No. No. No.

I glanced around wildly, and seriously considered throwing myself into the boiling water.

Then Reyes sprinted into view from the dark corridor behind Amaruq.

I'd never been so happy to see him.

The calvary had arrived, and now it was my time to do my job—get the proto-relic. Reyes would subdue Amaruq, then the three of us would get the hell out of here and find a warm place for the relic to decompress.

Healing Charlie in the process.

I couldn't hesitate. Every human in the history of humanity had touched something hot early in life, burning themselves and learning a valuable lesson. But I had to shove aside those ingrained self-preservation needs as I reached for the stone.

As long as it didn't turn me to ash, I could heal.

I latched on to the pulsing proto-relic.

My fingers instantly felt as if flames had licked up my skin. I flashed back to my nightmare once more, remembering the sight of my finger bones emerging from charred skin. I gritted my teeth against a scream, ignored the smell of burning flesh, and yanked the proto-relic from the wall.

It tore from the surrounding rock with a sound like roots ripping from soil. Small chips and pebbles rained down from above, bouncing off my bare arms and shoulders, and still I held on to the proto-relic, teeth gritted against the numbing pain.

A rumble started somewhere deep within the wall.

I planted my feet wide as the ground began to vibrate beneath me. More rocks flew off the wall, and the pulsing orange veins seemed to grow sharper, brighter, hotter. The orange lightened until slivers of pure white slithered through the cracks, and the veins widened, pushing against the rock on either side of the many channels.

The rumble grew louder, like a train had started echoing through the cavern. Rocks flew off with little pings, and then

suddenly, the veins opened.

Lava began to pour from the walls.

My breath caught in my throat. The stone had begun to cool in my hands, but now the heat coming off the seeping wall was unbearable. Lava puddled on the shelf at my bare feet, and I couldn't back away. There was nothing but a free fall into boiling water behind me, and the shelf on either side was quickly building with streams of slow moving lava.

I clutched the cooling proto-relic to my chest and began to slide along the ridge, picking my way over the building streams as my heart jackhammered in my throat. I registered the sound of fighting from the rocky beach below, but I couldn't turn to check on either brother. One wrong step, and I'd plummet off the shelf into water now filling with stream after stream of burning hot lava.

I rotated as I stepped over a particularly thick stream of lava. The heat saturated my legs and felt too close, too strong, but I clutched the stone to my torso and shifted ever so carefully, widening my stance almost beyond my physical limitations.

The position put me at an advantage to see what was happening on the beach below.

Charlie was against the rock wall, painfully tugging himself to his feet. Reyes sparred with Amaruq, the two men exchanging blows. I could see Reyes' military training in his precision and strength, but Amaruq was no slouch either, and blood trickled from beneath Reyes' nose. I scanned the beach for the gun, but didn't see it, and I hoped that meant Reyes had thrown it into the damn water.

I carefully lifted my back leg over the wide river of lava and found my footing on the rocks to continue slithering forward.

In that same instant, Amaruq landed a blow to the side of Reyes' head, sending him sprawling to the ground.

I gasped, choking on hot, sulfurous air.

Amaruq took three strides away from Reyes, dropped to his knees, then whipped around.

The gun.

He'd found the gun.

He turned the barrel on Reyes so fast I barely had time to register what was happening.

The gunshot cracked through the cavern with the ferocity of a nuclear explosion. I fell against the cavern wall, cringing in on myself, throwing my hands over my ears.

Reyes' body jerked on the rocky ground—then fell deathly still.



Blood poured from the gunshot wound in Reyes' side, soaking the rocks beneath his too-still body.

Charlie roared—a sound part fury, part absolute despair—and threw himself at Amaruq.

Amaruq wasn't expecting it. Probably because he saw Charlie as the sick kid, and not as a boy with the same background as Reyes, the tough foster kid, the brother of a soldier who planned for every eventuality. Who probably taught his brother self-defense.

Charlie hit the man full force. The gun flew out of Amaruq's hand, and he keeled over under Charlie's weight, straight to the ground. Charlie reared back and let loose a powerful punch.

Blood arced from Amaruq's face. He was momentarily stunned, trapped beneath Charlie's body as he prepared to throw another bone-shattering punch. But Amaruq regained his senses faster than I expected, and faster than Charlie expected, too.

He reached out, snatched something off the ground, and swung it hard at Charlie's head.

I heard the *thunk* clear as day over the boiling water and creeping lava.

I screamed his name as Charlie collapsed.

Amaruq shoved him aside like a discarded piece of trash, then rose, tossing down the rock he'd used to knock Charlie

out. Blood poured from his nose and painted lines down his chin on either side of his dotted tattoo, making him look even more deranged than he had before.

He swiped a hand over the blood and stared down at his red-drenched fingertips as if surprised by it. Then his wild gaze pinioned me to the cavern wall.

“The kiak!” he roared, taking two steps forward until he reached the edge of the water and could go no further. “Return it to its cradle immediately!”

“It needs a new environment!” I shrieked, unable to keep my emotion from my voice. Both Reyes and Charlie were unmoving, blood pooling beneath both of them. I could see Reyes’ shallow breaths racking his chest, but Charlie made no move at all.

Oh no. Not Charlie.

Not my Charlie.

My anger rose like lava inside me.

“The kiak is happy here!” Amaruq looked around, his gaze raking over the streaming lava where it hissed as it met the water. “This is its home! Put it back, you bitch!”

I realized then exactly what he was recognizing too—the lava wasn’t cooling and solidifying upon hitting the water. Regardless of how hot the water was from the relic’s influence, lava was lava—the minute it hit the water, it should have started steaming and solidifying to rock.

Instead... the roiling pool was *filling* with lava.

“Oh god,” I muttered, clutching the relic tighter. Its influence on this cavern wasn’t just skin deep. Nothing was natural here. Everything was out of balance.

Amaruq pressed both palms against the side of his head. “The stone belongs here!”

“It doesn’t belong here,” I argued, but I was staring at Charlie. Begging to see him take a breath.

I needed to get down there, for both of them. If they died...

I could heal their injuries.

I couldn't bring them back to life.

Amaruq groaned and doubled over, clutching his head tighter. "Yes, my gods, I know. You belong here. I won't let you go. I won't let her take you."

I glanced down at the relic, my lip curling. Was the stone still communicating with him or was he so far gone in his delusions that he was making stuff up as he went along?

His hands fell away from his head, and he took a deep breath before looking up at me once more. "Yes, my gods. You shall have him."

Then he turned and started walking toward Charlie.

My skin ran cold. Despite the heat of the cavern and the burns still sizzling on my fingertips, every inch of my body turned cold as ice.

You shall have him.

"What are you doing?" I shouted, stepping forward until my toes gripped the edge of the shelf. Lava traced rivulets on either side of me, billowing with heat.

But Amaruq ignored me. Or he didn't even hear me, still mumbling to his "gods" as he bent low over Charlie. He grabbed both of Charlie's biceps and yanked him off the floor with almost supernatural strength.

Charlie didn't wake. His head lolled back, soft curls bouncing away from his forehead.

Amaruq slipped an arm around Charlie's chest and began to shuffle to the water.

In an instant, I saw exactly what he was trying to do.

He was going to sacrifice Charlie to the stone. Throw him in the water to appease the gods for this situation—or at least, what he believed would appease the gods.

The proto-relic didn't care who lived or who died. All it cared about was reaching a place of balance where it could exist without destroying the earth around it. In the end, the relic was a force of nature, and nature always wanted balance.

I couldn't let him throw Charlie in that water. If the water didn't kill him, his connection to the relic—and the lava magic flowing inside him—would.

But what could I do from way up here? I had no idea how Reyes had gotten to ground level, but it had taken him several precious minutes to do so while I stalled Amaruq. I didn't have minutes.

I didn't even have *seconds*.

Amaruq dragged Charlie closer to the edge, still mumbling under his breath.

I was absolutely useless on this rocky shelf. Charlie might as well have been worlds away, completely out of reach. Reyes was going to bleed to death, and Charlie was going to boil to death, and what would happen to me when Amaruq turned his sights on me?

He still had the gun, and I still had yards to go before I'd reach the cave exit.

I'd end up shot off the edge of the rocks. Falling into the boiling water anyway. Then all three of us would be dead, and the kiak stone would be left to its devices until another unsuspecting alt came along and got dragged into its web.

For the briefest moment, I entertained the thought of using Amaruq's distraction to run. I could probably slither as fast as my legs could take me, then run run run, back to the hot spring, back through the dome, out of the spa, and into Reyes' truck.

But that wasn't going to happen. Even the thought made me sick to my stomach. I'd never leave Charlie to die. Not without doing my damndest to save him.

Even if that meant taking my own life in the process.

Life at Aether, off the grid and working with my hands, had made me strong. Surfing had only made me stronger. All I needed was to close some of the gap between me and Amaruq, and I could hit him in the head with the kiak stone.

Could I throw the stone hard enough to reach him? Maybe.

Could I throw precise enough to miss Charlie? I didn't really know.

But I wasn't afraid to take the chance if it meant saving his life. If it meant at least one of us could walk away from this. I'd died half a dozen times already, on that balcony in Florida, on a laboratory table in the desert, and each time, I'd welcomed it as an end to my pain.

Charlie deserved a chance at the future—at traveling the world, living his dreams, and seeing his name in print.

I just wished I could be there for all of it.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, pulling in that zen my oka-san taught me so many moons ago. Remembering her bloomed a deep pang of regret in my gut. My parents and sisters would never know what happened to me. I'd walked away from them and left them nothing.

Breathe in, breathe deep.

Let it go.

Planting my hands on either side of the rock, I launched off the platform with all my strength. I sailed through the air and flashed back to the hotel in Panama City—flashed back to the cliff I'd leapt off in a desperate bid to escape Reyes. Neither had killed me, but both had changed me.

This final leap might just do the job.

At the apex of my jump, I locked my gaze onto Amaruq's head and threw the kiak stone. I only got to see the stone in motion, arcing towards the distracted man, before I began to fall. I fell faster than the stone, faster than gravity, faster than I'd fallen for Charlie.

And I hit the lava-filled water.



The sun set over the Eiffel tower, its lights twinkling like a thousand stars on a backdrop of purple *so close* to the exact shade of my starfish.

I sat across from Charlie, a steaming mug of coffee in one hand as he bent low over his notebook. His hair was longer, curls flopping nearly down his cheekbones, and he looked healthier. Caramel skin smooth and dark, eyes flashing with merriment as he glanced up at the tower then back down to his words.

I sipped my coffee. Bold, sweet, thick on my tongue, it tasted like life and adventure, two things I'd spent my life desperate for.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

Under the table, Charlie's foot curled around my leg, and he tugged me into him until our limbs were intertwined. Travel looked good on him. Pain no longer touched his eyes. Exhaustion no longer stooped his shoulders. He looked relaxed. At ease. Totally in his element.

“I'm writing about our kiss at the top,” he said, a sly smile painting his face golden as he inclined his head toward the tower.

“It was a good one,” I teased.

“The best,” he agreed.

We stared at one another, and I fell into his eyes with the same force I'd fallen into the lava.

The lava.

The truth rushed in.

“Was it worth it?” he asked, his features bleeding together like a watercolor washed clean. “Dying for me?”

I reached across the table and interlocked our fingers. Already, the color had begun to seep out of our surroundings, out of his dark hair, his amber eyes, until only grays remained.

“You were worth it,” I told him. “I didn’t hesitate.”



Consciousness returned sharply and like fire on my skin.

I surfaced as if from deep water, though I wasn't wet. I couldn't feel much of anything, really. My mind pieced sensations together in increments. An annoying beeping sound. The distant *whoosh* of air conditioning, an industrial strength floor sweeper cleaning with a high-pitched whine, footsteps. Voices nearby, garbled and speaking over one another, mention of antibiotics and room numbers.

Panic flooded my senses.

The laboratory.

I'd been taken back to the laboratory.

I shot upright, gasping so hard I lost my breath. I choked on the air and bent forward, coughing and clutching at my blanket-covered knees.

The lab had never given me a blanket before.

Strong, sure fingers appeared in my line of sight over the white blanket. The hand slid to rest gently on my thigh, careful to avoid my hands.

My hands.

Oh my gods.

They looked like melted butter. Red scar tissue mottled every inch of my hands and wrists, reaching up my forearms until the skin became smooth once more just before the place on my biceps where my starfish markings began.

“That’s the last of the burns,” Charlie said softly. “We’ve been waiting for it to heal, but...”

I glanced to my right and realized it was *his* hand on my thigh. He sat in a chair beside my bed wearing a fresh hoodie and blue jeans, his eyes bright and his hair clean. If it weren’t for the stitches on his temple and the spread of bruising around the wound from where Amaruq hit him, I wouldn’t have ever known he’d almost died.

His hand drifted from my leg to my face, worry scrunching his brow. “Do you know your name?”

I laughed. Out loud. My voice was hardly a croak as I replied, “Not really. Kita. Ky. Kira. Unknown name of origin.”

Charlie’s lips quirked up on one side, but there was more concern than amusement there. “Identity crisis aside... We’ll just go with ‘Starfish.’ How do you feel?”

Before I could formulate a response, movement over his shoulder drew my attention. Reyes appeared in the open doorway clutching a steaming styrofoam cup in one hand. He looked a lot worse than Charlie—deep shadows painted the skin beneath his eyes and he walked stooped over, as if his whole body was in pain.

I got a rush of memory—of his form crumpled on the rocks and his gut pouring blood. A lot of blood.

“You’re alive,” I said, surprised at the level of relief I felt to see him up and moving, even if painfully.

Reyes’ gaze dropped to Charlie’s hand still cupping my face. Something hardened in his dark eyes.

“So are you,” Reyes replied. “I was starting to wonder.”

Charlie moved to pull his hand away from my face, almost guiltily like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. I snatched his fingers from mid-air. My hands ached bone deep, but I ignored the pain and cradled his hand against my knees. The old me worried he’d feel the scar tissue on my palms and recoil; the new me knew without a doubt that Charlie would hold my hand no matter what state it was in.

Moving my arms, however, revealed that my right arm was connected by tubing to an IV stand beside the bed. I remembered my sudden belief I'd been back at the lab, and I looked wildly around the room trying to place where we were. Even though it was nondescript—white walls, metal doors, medical supplies—it screamed “hospital.”

“I can't be here!” I said, the words hoarse. “They'll find me! Hurst's little lab flunkies, they track the blood labs—”

Reyes stepped further into the room, his free hand moving to rest on his side where he'd been shot. “You're in the morgue.”

I stared at him, unable to make sense out of what he'd just said. “I'm... what?”

“In the morgue,” he repeated. “I know the coroner. He's treating you here. Off the record.”

Charlie's voice was thick as he added, “We couldn't... We know you heal, but you were... bad, Ky. Really bad.”

“Third degree burns to your entire body bad,” Reyes added as he crossed to a chair on the opposite side from Charlie. He set his steaming styrofoam cup on the small stand next to my bed. “It's a miracle you're alive.”

“Again,” I quipped.

Reyes acknowledged my effort at a joke with a half-grin. “You needed medical care. I needed medical care.” As he lowered himself carefully into the seat, he nodded at Charlie. “Dodo over there got a concussion.”

“Better a concussion than a gunshot wound and perforated internal organs,” Charlie shot back.

I whipped my head around to Reyes, shock dumping over me like a cold water and waking me fully. “Perforated organs?”

“They're fine now,” he said glaring at Charlie. “Cooper fixed me up. He's a whiz with a needle. And he's been monitoring you as you healed.”

Cooper. My assumption led me to believe that would be the coroner friend who'd agreed to piece us all back together without notifying authorities. What the heck did Reyes tell him about me? And why I couldn't be processed into the medical system?

"Cooper knows I can...?" I let the question trail off instead of finishing it out loud.

"He's kind of a weird dude," Reyes explained with a shrug. "I think he's psychic, if we're being honest. You can trust him."

As if summoned by our conversation, a man entered the room in a white lab coat. His eyeglasses were perched on his head atop wispy, wild blond hair that looked like it hadn't been brushed recently, and his round cheeks were ruddy beneath vivid blue eyes.

"Ah. She's awake. Marvelous," he said, crossing the room to my side. "You've done pretty well, Miss Cook. How are you feeling?"

Miss Cook. Reyes had given him my new assumed name, the one he'd created for me. I took that as good news—that I'd leave this morgue with my future intact.

I gave the coroner's question some thought and did a quick scan of my body, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Other than the achy hands, I didn't feel much else. "I'm fuzzy."

The coroner—the infamous 'Cooper,' based on his stitched nametag—nodded. "I've had you heavily medicated while you healed. It was best for you. We can cut that back." He reached for the IV hanging beside my bed and adjusted the rolling dial on the tubing. Without looking at me, he asked, "What about your pain level? Anything?"

"My hands ache," I said, lifting both melted, molded messes away from Charlie's.

Cooper *tsked*. "We kept waiting for them to heal. My guess is your body was in such bad shape that it's going to need a bit of time to recuperate before you can finish healing yourself."

He spoke so matter of factly about my healing powers that it threw me off. He was an unassuming kind of guy, like the kind of guy who wore socks with his sandals and made terrible puns at his kid's soccer game just to make them groan.

But... could he be alt?

I held up my hands, palms facing me, and stared down at the ruined skin. Somehow, I had a feeling the burns on my hands had little to do with the lava-filled water I'd plunged into and everything to do with touching the fully loaded kiak stone.

The stone.

What happened to the stone?

Despite how safe it was to discuss my abilities with the coroner, I wasn't willing to bring up the proto-relic in front of him.

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"Almost three days," Cooper replied. "Not long, considering the damage. You want to try some food?"

I blinked, and checked in with my stomach.

Yep—famished. Not abnormal after a major healing episode.

I nodded, and the coroner excused himself to go track me down something to eat. The situation felt so bizarre, I almost thought I was still dreaming. Sitting in Paris, watching Charlie write in his journal while the electric lights of the Eiffel Tower illuminated the night.

But Charlie's hand in my lap felt more real than that dream.

That dream felt more like a *possibility*.

"What happened?" I asked softly. "After I jumped in."

"I only know that I woke up two inches from the edge of the pool," Charlie told me. "Amaruq was dead—a giant gash in his head. I could see his skull." Charlie grimaced. "The stone lay beside him. And you floated on the surface of the

water just within reach. I dragged you out and gave you CPR. You weren't breathing. You didn't..." His gaze slipped away from mine, and his voice caught in his throat as he went on. "You didn't have a heartbeat."

Shock chilled me from head to toe. "I was dead?"

Charlie shrugged. "I don't know. I guess. I gave you CPR and suddenly you were breathing, and I felt your heartbeat again. It was a brief time, if you did die."

"And you brought me back," I murmured, moving my ruined hand over his in a gentle, affectionate pat. I didn't have the feeling in my fingers or the muscle energy to hold his hand, so I simply stroked his skin and wished I could feel him through the scar tissue.

"Of course I brought you back. And you saved my life."

"I killed a man," I clarified, a sharp pang of regret twisting in my chest.

"You had no choice."

Our gazes locked into place. Even in this place, surrounded by bustle and noise and the scent of heavy duty cleaning liquids, beneath the jaundice of the fluorescent lights, our connection remained as strong as it had been at the ocean. I sank into him as if he were home; as if home could maybe be a person and not a place, not a destination.

I loved growing up in Aether. My parents did their best and my sisters were my best friends. The core memories I carried were irreplaceable, and not for one moment did I regret my life there.

But maybe Charlie was the answer to filling the hole inside me that had plagued me my entire life. The hole where I longed for an identity, for a heritage, for somewhere to call home that was all mine.

He could be home.

When our eye contact carried on longer than normal, Reyes cleared his throat. "I got shot."

“I remember,” I said wryly, reluctantly dragging my gaze away from Charlie. “But clearly you’re fine now.”

Reyes rotated his styrofoam cup on the stand, looking at me with an unnerving lack of emotion. “It was touch and go there for a minute.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “He was already conscious by the time I had you breathing again.”

“Did my whole body look like...” I indicated my ruined hands.

Charlie winced. “It did.”

A horrific thought occurred to me, and I raised a hand to my hair. Instant relief shot through me as I fisted handfuls of it, only to realize it was wispy and insubstantial. Some of it had been burned off.

Charlie must have seen the horror in my eyes, because he squeezed my knee reassuringly. “It’ll grow back.”

I nodded, still fisting my numb fingers in my hair. It had been hard enough when Hurst’s minions had cut it short; but for it to be gone? My grief was illogical and overwhelming.

“The stone?” I asked.

“We can thank Charlie for that big idea,” Reyes said, slouching deeper in his chair with a pained grimace. He pressed gingerly at his abdomen beneath his t-shirt. “It’s in the greenhouse.”

I blinked, turning back to Charlie. “That’s genius.”

He flushed, though the blush was barely visible on his caramel skin. “You said it needed a hot environment. The greenhouse fit the bill.”

“Your fevers?”

“I’ve had one attack in the three days since the cave,” he said. “So I think it’s calming down.”

I nodded. “Give it another couple days, it’ll balance out. You don’t intend to... stay here? Keep it in the greenhouse?”

Charlie laughed. “No. I don’t intend to stay. I was thinking of taking it south—way south. My mom’s parents were from Colombia, so I thought I’d go check out my roots, you know? Find somewhere in the rainforest for the stone to rest. Somewhere far, far away from people.”

I squeezed his fingers. “That’s a perfect idea.” I looked at Reyes, and noticed his gaze sharp on our connected hands. “Are you going to Colombia too?”

His eyes darted up to mine, and his expression went placid again. “Nah. I’ve gotta get back to work. Before I don’t have a job to go back to.”

I couldn’t stop the little curl to my nostrils. “After all this, you’re still going back there? To the lab?”

“What do you want me to do?” he snapped. “Just abandon my career? You’re basically on the lam, and if I don’t show up, they’re gonna know something’s wrong. Plus, how are we going to support ourselves without my paycheck?”

I jerked, taken aback. “First of all, I don’t expect you to support me at all. Whatever gave you that idea?”

“I thought...” His dark eyes flitted away from mine and locked onto the IV stand behind my head. “I thought you’d want to stay. With me.”

A stunned silence filled the space between us.

Beneath my palm, Charlie’s fingers twitched.

I didn’t know what I’d expected, but it wasn’t this. It wasn’t Reyes thinking we had something or that we *could* have something. We’d shared the kiss in the hot spring, sure, but it had been driven by something primal, something I didn’t even understand. Something I blamed on the dark stirrings of the kiak stone and my appreciation that Reyes intended to release me.

But the man had kidnapped me, imprisoned me, and held little regard for me as a human being beyond what I could do for him. That wasn’t the basis of a relationship.

Plus... he didn't know about me and Charlie and the ocean.

I'm not going to share. I guess I just have to make you forget him.

He didn't know I'd already chosen.

Reyes sat up, pressing his hand into his injured side with a grunt. "Look, I know you think Dr. Hurst is some evil mastermind. But the lab is doing good work. They're pulling for an end game that will be for the greater good."

"The fact you *truly* believe that is sad," I said, and I meant it. I felt sad for him, a bone deep sadness that he was too easily manipulated.

Too lost already.

Still, I tried again, because Charlie loved his brother, and I loved Charlie.

"There's tons of other jobs out there," I offered. "Even within the military. Or you could go into private security—you've got the skills for it."

"I don't want another job," he insisted. "I'm proud to be exactly where I am."

"Where they torture people. Where they tortured me," I reminded him.

"It wasn't torture."

Fury tightened every inch of my body, and I had to fight with my desire to come off the mattress and throttle him—ruined hands and all. "You and I remember it a little differently."

Charlie stood abruptly, his arm sliding around my shoulders. I leaned into him, and realized he was shaking.

"You're no better than Lucinda," he snarled.

Reyes gaped at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"She stood by and let David beat us. Or have you forgotten? You have the scars to prove it."

“This is nothing like that.”

“It’s everything like that,” Charlie shot back. I’d never heard him use this tone with his brother. Not even that first night when I arrived and they’d argued in the cold room about me.

Charlie’s voice was as cold as that room.

“I don’t even know who you are,” Charlie said. “Whoever you are, it’s not my brother. My brother joined the Marines because he cared about people. My brother joined the military because he wanted to save the world from injustice. My brother wanted to be Batman.”

I had to fight the urge to giggle at that. Not appropriate at such a tense moment.

Reyes scoffed. “The lab is doing more to save the world than I was doing swabbing floors at Lejeune.”

Charlie raced on, his words stumbling faster, as if he’d found his pace and wasn’t going back now. “I know you think you care for Ky. You have a thing for her, it’s obvious.”

At this, it was my turn to blush. Too bad my skin didn’t hide it like Charlie’s did.

“But how can you possibly expect her to return those feelings for someone who took part in her abuse? Not only that, but you aren’t even *listening* when she tells you it was torture. You’re not the least bit interested in a differing point of view, and you sure as hell don’t care about changing your ways.”

Reyes stood too then, his hands balling into fists at his side. “There’s nothing to change.”

“If you think that, you’re an idiot,” Charlie said smoothly, his fingers tightening on my shoulder like I was giving him a solid foundation while his entire world collapsed around him. “You don’t deserve Ky. Or me.”

Reyes took a single step back, his balled fist going to his gut. Not to his gunshot wound this time, but to his core, as if Charlie’s words had been a knife. His gaze dropped to me.

“You with him on this?”

I lifted my ruined hand and entwined my fingers with Charlie’s near my shoulder. I didn’t even care that it ached or that I could barely feel sensation in the pads of my fingers. I clung to his hand as if I owned it.

“There’s nothing between you and me, Dex,” I said softly. “There never was. I can’t be with someone who’s following orders he knows are wrong. I’m going with Charlie.”

Reyes met his brother’s eye. “Is that what you want?”

Without hesitation, Charlie said, “More than anything.”

“So that’s that. You’re leaving.” Reyes’ tone turned ice cold. “Are you going to check in? Let me know where you are?”

Charlie’s body stiffened against me. “Actually, it might be best if you don’t bother contacting me until you come to your senses. Until my real brother makes an appearance and leaves the facility that wants to hurt my girlfriend.”

The two men faced off in stone-cold silence.

I was floored. I’d never intended to drive a wedge between the brothers. Not on purpose, not by accident, least of all in a romantic way. And here Charlie was, cutting ties with his only family, the person he loved most in the world.

I felt terrible about it, but a little part of me felt vindicated because it seemed Charlie saw the changes in his brother, too. Charlie saw that Dex wasn’t as good a person as we wanted him to be. Maybe he wasn’t evil. Maybe he wasn’t a bad person.

Maybe he was just lost.

We couldn’t be lost with him.

Finally, Reyes dragged in a breath. He dropped both hands to his sides, and his shoulders slumped. He narrowed eerily emotionless eyes on Charlie and said, “I guess you don’t have a ‘real brother’ at all.”

Then Reyes turned on his heel and stormed out without looking back.

Stunned silence filled the room like smoke.

Somewhere close by, the heat kicked on with a gentle whir. Charlie sank onto the edge of the mattress, trembling as his emotions—which he'd so carefully held back during the exchange—finally emerged.

A single crystalline tear crested over his long dark lashes.

“You beautiful soul,” I murmured, using my thumb to brush the tear away. “I may be in love with your big heart.”

I shifted over and tugged on his arm until he slipped onto the bed beside me. Then I looped my arms around his neck and held him, wishing Reyes could be a better person, wishing I could take this pain away from the man I'd come to care so much for.

Pulling back slightly, I looked up into his stricken face. “You'll bloom wherever we go. Just like your hibiscus.”

I almost thought he wasn't hearing me, wasn't going to acknowledge me, but then his face softened and he turned his gaze on me.

He didn't say anything. He just kissed me.

And it was enough.

EPILOGUE



Sunset came early in Alaska—something I wouldn't miss in the slightest as we traveled south. But for now, a heady orange glow had settled over the yard and the house, casting long shadows beneath a clear, purple sky. The late afternoon and evening still stretched ahead of us like a promise—plenty of time to get on the road, to put some distance between us and Grayson's Hollow, to start our new life together.

I checked the knot on the bandana covering my wispy hairs as I surveyed the trunk of our rented SUV and racked my brain for anything we might have missed. We weren't taking much on the road with us, but we weren't leaving anything important either.

As far as Charlie was concerned, we wouldn't be coming back to this place. I hadn't expected him to cut ties so completely to his precious greenhouse. He'd put so much work into turning that place into his perfect version of paradise. Even I grieved the idea of everything inside dying in his absence.

But he was adamant about not returning—ever—so anything that got inadvertently left behind would be lost to us.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see Charlie approaching, only his legs and arms visible around a giant red pot with an overflowing pink plant.

“We're taking the hibiscus?” I asked, amused. The planter was so big it would need its own seatbelt. It was the same

plant we'd repotted my first day here, the one that had outgrown its little planter.

The way Charlie outgrew this life.

Charlie craned his neck to peer around the bushy plant, a wide smile touching his lips though it didn't quite reach his eyes. In the twenty-four hours since we'd come back to the house and found all of Dex's things gone, the sadness in Charlie's gaze hadn't eased.

He needed time. The good news was we had an entire world of that at our fingertips.

Charlie deposited the pot in the trunk next to his big suitcase, then brushed his hands off before he slipped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

"We're taking the hibiscus," he said firmly.

"I'm surprised you didn't pack up the whole greenhouse."

Charlie squeezed my shoulder affectionately, and his gaze wandered off to the right, to where the greenhouse poked above the edge of the house. "It's time to shed the old and bring in the new," he told me. "But the hibiscus reminds me where I came from. Reminds me of you, and that first day, when I knew I loved you the moment you got your hands dirty with me."

"Are you sure it wasn't because I reminded you of a stinky cactus?"

Charlie dropped a kiss to my bandana-covered forehead. "It's definitely because of that too. Do you need help packing anything?"

"I got everything," I assured him.

I didn't have much to my name. I'd picked up some outfits and two pairs of shoes in town with the money Reyes had left me in my bank account, and a duffel bag to stuff them in. Together, Charlie and I had pulled a kind of Noah's Ark on the contents of the house—two plates, two bowls, two forks, two bath towels, two pillows... two of *everything* we might need for later when we were done traveling, when the kiak stone

was safe, and we made somewhere else a new home base. He had some money in savings, and I had my “income” from healing him, so we had something to start over with. But the less we had to buy later, the better.

We didn’t need *things* when we had each other, a road map, and a destination in mind. An ever-changing destination, one distant place after another as we traveled the world together.

“Did you get the stone?” Charlie asked.

I slipped away from his grasp and walked around the car, opening the passenger door. “Fits perfectly.”

He peered in at the soft-sided cooler resting benignly on the floorboard. Red and black with solid zippers, it had a strap for easy carrying and was small enough to take anywhere, like a purse but for a supernatural proto-relic rather than lipstick and a wallet.

Inside the cooler, five hot packs pressed tight around the kiak stone turning the well-insulated cooler into a small, warm environment to keep it happy. We’d have to build in stops along the way to reheat the extra packs and keep it warm, but it was a small price to pay for a wonderful lack of fevers.

Charlie hadn’t had a single one since I’d left the morgue.

I put a hand in my pocket and fingered the little paper card that rested in my new jeans. The coroner had handed me his card and promised me his silence in a way that made me believe a little bit more that he was alt. He’d promised help, if we ever needed, and somehow, I believed him.

Given that right now, Charlie and I only had each other, it would be nice to have a network even if it was simply one man in the middle of nowhere Alaska.

I used the restroom and washed my hands, which still hadn’t even attempted to heal. As the water rushed over the mottled skin, I reminded myself that the burns were badges of honor. I’d found a proto-relic, saved Charlie’s life, and now the stone couldn’t find and hurt anyone else. Burns were a small price to pay. A price that may, eventually, heal.

For the first time in my life, I had complete and utter faith in my abilities.

I did a final walk through on the house, but it was unnecessary. If anything, it was nostalgic—viewing the greenhouse where Charlie had told me about plants that mimicked, visiting the cold room where I’d slept beside him as if he were already mine before I realized it, the bathtub where he’d kissed me for the first time. This house had been a prison but it had also been a turning point—for both of us.

I couldn’t wait to see what happened next.

When I was sure we were leaving nothing behind we might need, I met Charlie in the foyer, where he held up my new jacket with an indulgent smile.

“You ready?” he asked.

Today, his soft brown curls lay over his brows, nearly the same color as his eyes. The bruising on the side of his face looked worse than it felt, he’d promised, and like my scars, I saw it as a badge of honor. He’d walked through fire and come out intact.

What a miracle we are.

I picked up the nice leather gloves I’d bought in town and slipped them over my ruined hands, before I stepped into the jacket. It didn’t smell like Charlie. I’d spent days wearing his clothes, wearing his scent like a brand, so the fresh off the rack scent seemed jarring.

But it was mine. Something that belonged to me, the way Charlie did now. I zipped it with a smile. Soon, it would smell like me.

I didn’t know who I was. Not on an existential level, not on a soul level. But I knew what I loved—traveling, surfing, learning. I knew what I stood for—independence, freedom, compassion. And I knew that life with Charlie might just be the healing I needed to discover who I really was inside.

The sun glittered off the ocean beyond the cliffside. I tore my gaze away from ripples like golden diamonds and opened the passenger door, then climbed up into the rented SUV.

Charlie took the driver's seat, car keys jingling in the contented silence as he settled and stuck the key in the ignition.

The engine purred to life. It sounded like the sun rising, like a triumphant roar, like a thousand new beginnings.

Charlie rested his hands on the steering wheel. "Destination Colombia. But where to first?"

I reached across the center console and put my hand on his knee. "Find a coast road and head south. We'll figure it out from there."

Charlie navigated the gravel drive, turning us around and away from the A-frame cabin that had almost become his tomb. He didn't look back, but I did.

I stared in the sideview mirror and watched the sunset shimmering on the ocean as we left it behind, knowing we'd find the water again. Over and over.

And we'd do it together.

As a family.

*Thanks so much for reading Ky's story! Reviews mean so much to indie authors like us and if you could take a moment to click a rating or leave a review, it would mean the world! Thanks,
Cheryl*

Looking for more? This standalone takes place between the events of *Touch* and *Taste*, both [available on Amazon](#). You can also sign up for my newsletter at www.cherylkahn.com. I'll only ever email with bonus content and book updates.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cheryl once worked as a corporate attorney and yoga instructor, but when the pandemic scaled back her yoga teaching, she reassessed her passions. Following a dream that began in 6th grade when she and her best friend penned a story in a spiral notebook during recess, Cheryl now spends her days crafting stories with care and a lot of heart. When not at the computer, she can be found sweating at the gym with friends, walking her rescue pup, and glued to her Kindle. She lives in California with her college sweetheart, now husband. Connect with Cheryl and receive exclusive Five Senses Series material by signing up for her newsletter at www.cherylkahn.com.

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USA Today bestselling author **Heather Marie Adkins** writes too much but still too little. She also has too many cats, not enough tattoos, and a torrid love affair with procrastination. With a penchant for the paranormal, Heather spends her days fueled by coffee, Ancient Aliens, and spooky podcasts. When she's not plotting her next book or binge-reading like it's the end of time, she's planning another trip to Disney World—against her husband's better judgment. Her new adult paranormal romance, *Wiccan Wars*, is [available on Amazon!](#)