

SANTA CATALINA UNIVERSITY



REVERED

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CRYSTAL NORTH

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SANTA CATALINA UNIVERSITY

CRYSTAL NORTH

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For the ones as invested in Malia's story as I am. I love this world and wish I could keep writing it forever...but I also don't!

xoxo

PLAYLIST

I Get to Love You - Ruelle
Rock and a Hard Place - Bailey Zimmerman
Blessings - Hollow Coves
Straight Back Down - Dean Lewis
Broken - Lifehouse
One Last Flight - Austin Giorgio
Good Day - Avery Anna
I Love You More - Avery Anna
Ophelia - The Lumineers
Better Half of Me - Tom Walker
Power Over Me - Dermot Kennedy
How I'm Feeling Now - Lewis Capaldi
How Do I Say Goodbye - Dean Lewis
I Guess I'm in Love - Jezliah Almasco
Chosen Last - Sara Kays
It's About You- Train
Celestial - Ed Sheeran
If I Didn't Have You - BANNERS
We Deserve to Dream - Xavier Rudd
Stay Alive - José González
If This Is It - Newton Faulkner
Tahitian Blue - John Butler
Love Is A Verb - John Mayer
Monsters - Ruelle
Work Song - Hozier

Let It All Go - RHODES & Birdy
Carry You - Ruelle (feat. Fleurie)
It Goes On (from 12 strong) - Zac Brown & Sir Rosevelt

[Listen Now](#)

ABOUT REVERED

I am not crazy.

I am different, unexplainable. Magical.

The world is shifting beneath me, and I find myself no longer bound by the reality I once knew. This time, my own abilities simmer beneath the surface—an unexplored power awakening within me.

And now I am falling for the four men who have safeguarded me, wrecked me, and pieced me back together. Yet, part of me knows they are more than what they seem. Bound by secrets that tease and twirl at the edge of my consciousness, I can feel the echoes of a reality far more complex than I think I'm ready for.

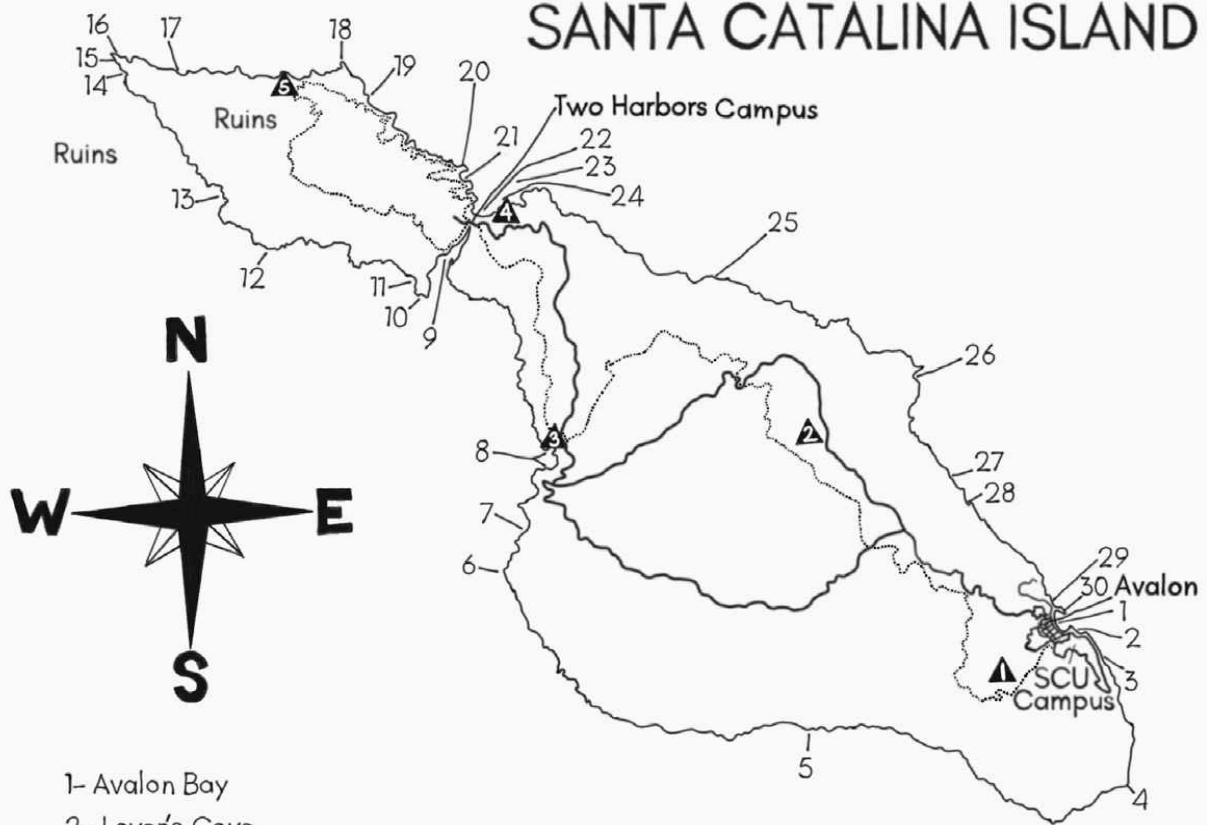
But like everything else, these echoes don't come alone. They're shadowed by threats lurking out of sight, poised to tear us apart... to shatter me.

What happens when you plunge headlong into love with not just one, but four men, only to be torn apart by a fate more cruel than any destiny?

Time is running out. Will love, magic, and sacrifice be enough?

Revered is book 4 in this paranormal why choose series, meaning our FMC will have more than one love interest and won't have to choose between them in the end. You need to have read the rest of the series to understand this one. Revered ends on a cliff-hanger, but the series will have a HEA in the next book, so enjoy!

SANTA CATALINA ISLAND



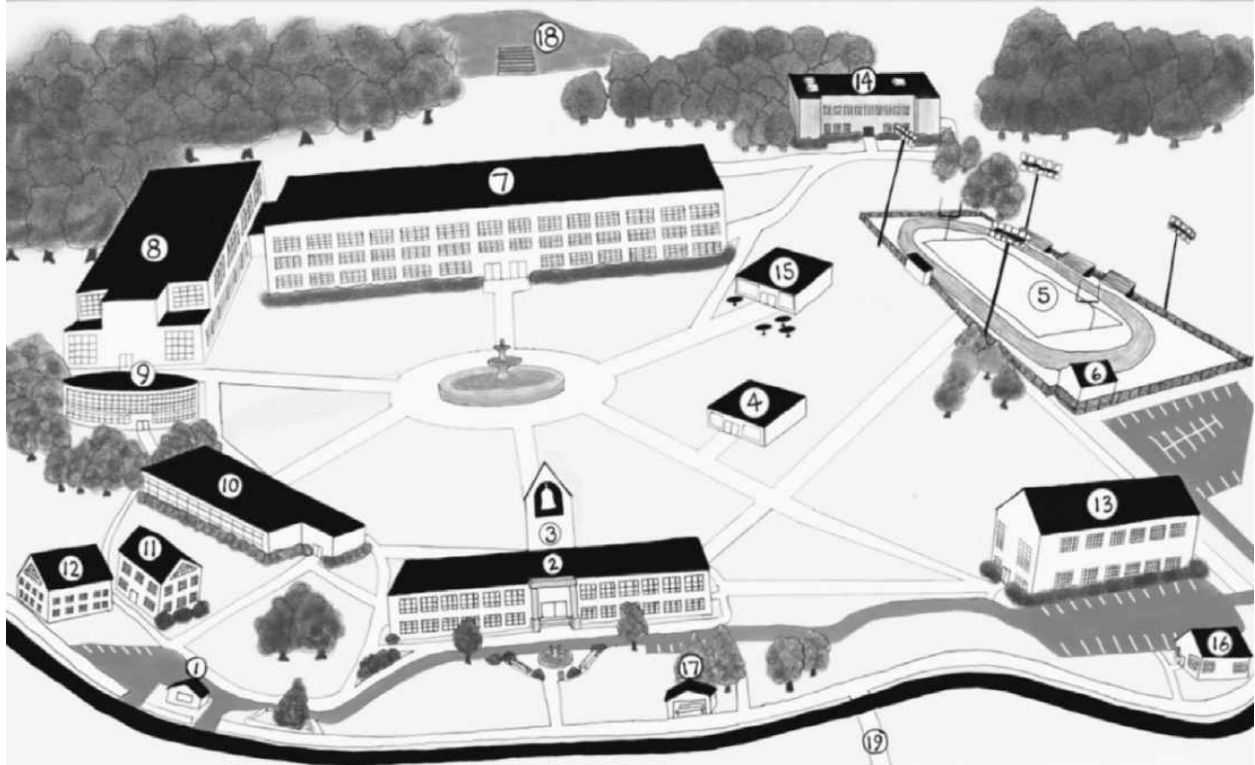
- 1- Avalon Bay
- 2- Lover's Cove
- 3- Pebbly Beach
- 4- Seal Rocks
- 5- Silver Canyon Landing
- 6- Ben Weston Point
- 7- Ben Weston Beach
- 8- Little Harbor & Shark Harbor
- 9- Catalina Harbor & Well's Beach
- 10- Catalina Head
- 11- Lobster Bay
- 12- Whale Rock
- 13- Iron-Bound Cove
- 14- Eagle Rock
- 15- West Point
- 16- Land's End
- 17- Black Point
- 18- Arrow Point
- 19- Emerald Bay & Sandy Beach
- 20- Lion Head

- 21- Cherry Cove
- 22- Isthmus Cove
- 23- Isthmus High Spot
- 24- Harbor Reef
- 25- Seal Point & Paradise Cove
- 26- Pirates Cove & Buttonshell Beach
- 27- Moonstone Cove
- 28- Willow Cove
- 29- Descanso Beach
- 30- Avalon Underwater Park

..... Trans Catalina Hiking Trail

— Primary Road

- ▲ 1 Hermit Gulch Campground
- ▲ 2 Black Jack Campground
- ▲ 3 Little Harbor Campground
- ▲ 4 Two Harbors Campground
- ▲ 5 Parsons Landing Campground



- 1- Security
- 2- Avalon Hall
- 3- Bell Tower
- 4- Book Store
- 5- Sports Field
- 6- Locker room/Equipment
- 7- Lecture Halls & Faculty Offices
- 8- Pool/Gym
- 9- Student Library
- 10- Cafeteria

- 11- Soloman Hall
- 12- Rafferty Hall
- 13- Tyson Hall
- 14- Faculty Housing
- 15- Cabana Cafe
- 16- Golf Cart/Bike Rental
- 17- Bus Stop
- 18- Lake
- 19- Cliff Path to Beach

PROLOGUE



VANCE

The door bangs against the wall with more force than necessary, but I don't give a flying fuck. It shouldn't have taken me this long to get here, and even longer to be allowed to see Malia. My student. My torment. *My client.*

The idiot on the desk said her lawyer was present, but no fucking way am I about to let Malia go through whatever ambush this is without someone by her side. Something's going on, we just can't join the dots in the right order to get a clear picture.

I take in the scene before me. The two police officers look pissed at the interruption. I don't give a shit about them. Malia, white as a sheet, is wincing under the grip some asshole has on her shoulder. Why is her 'lawyer' touching her like that?

My eyes snap to the lawyer and I'm already planning ways to kill him for putting hands on Malia when it registers who it is. Tanimola. No way is that asshole here, pretending to be a lawyer. Pretending to be *her* lawyer no less. He can fuck right off.

I knew he was up to something, and this just confirms it. But what? And did the elders send him, or is this an unsanctioned mission?

Definitely unsanctioned. He doesn't even *go* on missions. Yet another thing he's bitter about and blames me for. Like I wouldn't trade places with him in a heartbeat, if I could.

But then you would never have met Malia.

I could tell he wanted to argue with me in the interview room but couldn't without blowing both of our covers. I need to add investigating him to my never ending to-do list.

He still has his nails digging into her shoulder, and I'm about ready to shed blood over it. I didn't realise how invested in protecting her I was until I heard that she'd been taken again. It's not even about the mission anymore.

It's about her.

"Excuse me, *Tanimola*, but I believe you're in the wrong place," I spit. It's all I can do without facing a murder charge. I'm good, but not good enough to get away with killing him in front of two officers in a police station.

"There's no mistake. Miss Van der Zee has been assigned to me."

I watch through narrowed eyes as his grip on Malia tightens and she grimaces at the pain. Yep. He's going to die for that.

"She doesn't need a lawyer," I tell the room in general. "She has one. *Me.*"

"Miss Van der Zee, is this true?" One of the detectives asks Malia.

She confirms my identity – smart girl – and they question how I made it to the station before she was given her phone call.

"Her friend was present when you accosted her, and he contacted me immediately," I answer for her, but she nods. Good girl.

"Very well." The detective that spoke before sighs and turns to Tanimola who still has a hold of Malia. I wish I could kill him a hundred times over; I want to tear him to pieces in the slowest, most excruciating ways possible. "It would seem you're not needed."

With a low growl that bares his teeth, he finally releases Malia and storms from the room, giving me a wide berth as he goes.

I need to check if Malia's okay.

"I would like a moment alone with my client please, to check everything is in order before we begin."

“Absolutely not!” the other detective snaps. “Enough police time has been wasted! Besides, it’s an open and shut case, so let’s just get on with it!” His eagerness to continue rings alarm bells, and I commit his face to memory and add it to my shit list.

“If it’s so simple, then you won’t have a problem waiting another ten minutes,” I reply dryly.

“You can have five. I need a fresh coffee anyway. Payne, let’s go.”

Payne reluctantly leaves with the other detective, and the second the door clicks shut Malia spins to face me. She opens her mouth to speak – probably to ask a thousand questions – and I have to act fast.

Lowering my mental barriers, I *will* Malia to be able to hear my thoughts.

“Malia. Don’t react. I know you can hear me. We may be alone but they’re always watching. I am your lawyer and nothing more.”

She blinks to show she understands me.

“Did he hurt you?” I ask aloud, voice tight with barely concealed rage.

“No. He just squeezed my shoulder. His nails were really sharp though.”

Of course they were. My people are built like predators.

“Show me,” I demand through gritted teeth and she lowers the shoulder of her top to bare her skin to me. Five deep crescent moons mar her perfect flesh and I see red.

“Fuck.” Those indents are really deep. It should have drawn blood.

“I’m thick skinned. It’s fine,” she replies with a dismissive shrug. I know she thinks she’s helping by playing her pain down, but the reason why she’s ‘thick skinned’ makes me feel even closer to losing it. She’s ‘fine’ because she’s experienced much, much worse. And I want to kill every person who’s ever hurt her.

“It is *not* fine,” I tell her firmly. She winces at my tone, but can’t she see I’m not angry *at* her but *for* her?

“Did you... Do you know him? From...court?” she asks carefully.

“Our paths have crossed. But you don’t need to worry about him because *I’m* representing you, and I’ll be getting you out of here shortly.” And I’m going to kill him, the first chance I get.

“Okay. Thank you,” she whispers. Fuck. The urge to touch her is so strong. If I could, I’d sweep her into my arms, kiss those hurts on her shoulder and tell her that she never, ever has to thank me for anything.

“Now, have you said anything?” I ask.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Bhodi told me not to.”

Good man, Bhodi. Quick thinking on his part. I probably need to be giving him more credit than I currently do. He’s smarter than he looks, and I doubt many could have reacted so quickly and with such a clear head under those circumstances.

I’m convinced now that the call I got this morning which pulled me away from campus and teaching Malia’s class was no coincidence. Someone wanted me out of the way so that they could get to Malia without intervention.

“Good. Well done. Let’s keep it that way as much as possible. I can answer on your behalf if you’re happy for me to?”

“Yes, please.”

I’m relieved that she agrees. She seems to understand the gravity of the situation, even if she doesn’t entirely understand what’s going on here. What’s at stake.

“Okay. Take a seat. Are you alright? Are you really?”

I can see the fear on her face as plain as prose in a book and I wish, yet again, that I could hold her. Soothe her somehow.

“Don’t be scared. We will not let anything happen to you. I promise.”

“Okay.”

As if on cue, the door opens and the detectives return. They take their seats and then the onslaught begins. Questions are fired non stop at Malia and she lets me rebuff every single one. It feels like it goes on for hours, but in reality, very little time passes. I do note the behaviour of the two detectives though. The man, Payne, becomes increasingly agitated and aggressive, while the woman remains calm and in control. Calculating.

Eventually, she orders him to take five to cool off and they pause the recording. Just as they’re leaving, Malia speaks up, surprising me.

“May I get a water, please?”

“There’s one on the table,” Payne snaps.

“Don’t eat or drink anything they give you,” I quickly but silently warn her.

Malia reaches for it and I feel a flair of panic before she knocks it over, all while making it seem accidental. “Sorry! Could I have a fresh one?”

I quickly open my briefcase and hand her a safe bottle of water. She hesitates but takes it. I understand her concern. She’s caught on about the

water quite fast.

“You can’t give her that!” Payne complains.

“I can and I have,” I retort. I really dislike this guy. Might save myself the time of investigating him, and just add him to the kill list. With Tanimola and Malia’s parents. And those ‘doctors’ who thought they would treat Malia with shock ‘therapy’.

“Well, she can’t drink it.”

I almost laugh at his petulant expression, but there’s a steel in his eyes that tells me he’s not going to let this go. His agitation is suspicious, and his desperation to make Malia drink from his cup – which is likely drugged – is palpable in the room.

“My client has this specific water for medical reasons,” I lie smoothly, knowing that Reef will have taken care of Malia’s records by now. I’m glad I was able to message him to do it on my way over here. “If you don’t believe me, check her file.”

“Her file’s huge! It’ll take days to go through everything in there.”

“Exactly. Have fun explaining to the courts that she died of dehydration in the meantime.”

“But—”

“Payne!” the detective snaps. “Let’s go.”

They leave, and once I nod at Malia, she cracks open the bottle and takes a sip. I watch as she visibly relaxes and a little of the tension leaves her shoulders.

“You thought it was the other water. The one that makes you forget.”

She grimaces and shrugs slightly, taking another sip.

“This one just calms nerves. Please just trust me, and I’ll tell you everything when we’re out of here. I promise. No more secrets.”

I mean it too. It’s time to come clean and tell her everything. Even if it means our cover is exposed in the process. It’ll be worth it.

“Bhodi, Reef and Cove are waiting in reception for you. I promise, another twenty minutes, tops, and you can see them.”

I watch as her eyes fill with tears and a wave of sympathy for her washes over me. She’s not used to being cared about. It spurs me on to add, *“Oh yes, they’re beside themselves with worry for you, Malia.”* And then for some unknown reason – perhaps because I, too, was beside myself with fear when I heard she’d been taken – I confess, *“We all were.”*

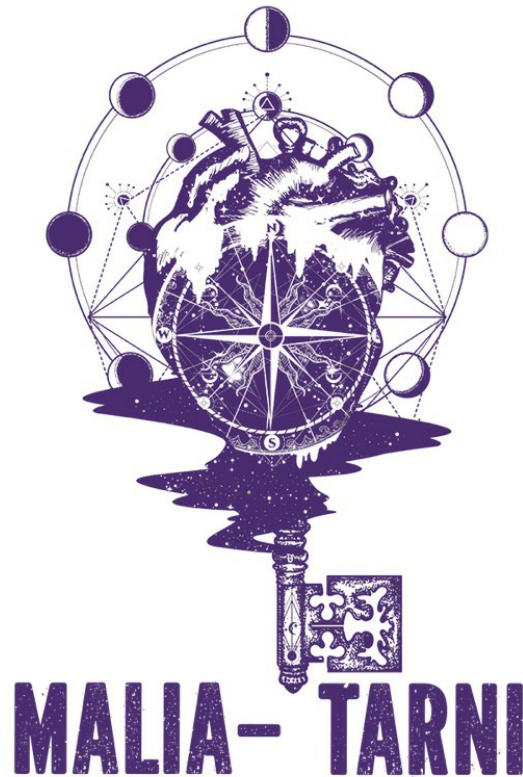
I watch her steel herself and feel a rush of pride at her strength and resilience, but before I can tell her how proud I am, there's a roar from outside the interview room, followed by a heavy thump against the door which makes Malia jump.

I spring to my feet and position myself in front of Malia, ready to defend her with my life if need be. *And not just because she might be the star.* But I can't think about that right now. I won't. That means admitting something I'm not ready to consider. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to consider it.

Even if it won't make it any less true.

Fuck. Am I falling for my student? Have I already fallen for the girl who might be the saviour of two worlds? When the time comes, will I be able to do what it takes and make the ultimate sacrifice?

ONE



MALIA-TARNI

“I’m sorry Miss Van der Zee, some new evidence has come to light and we’re going to need you to remain here a little while longer... We have an eyewitness who has come forward and who can place you at the scene of the crime for all of the murders and disappearances in question... In light of this new evidence, you will be processed and potentially charged with several murders.”

This has to be some kind of prank. Surely no twist of fate could be this cruel? They just told me I could go. I can smell my freedom on the salty sea air as the station doors open out into the night sky and someone walks into the building.

“I’m so sorry, Malia,” someone cries, sounding absolutely distraught. “I didn’t have a choice. I had to tell them!”

Are my eyes playing tricks on me? They must be. My ears too. Because there’s no way I’ve just stepped out of one fresh hell and into another. I must be hallucinating or something because there’s no way that I’m staring at

Summer – my only friend – and she’s the eyewitness they’re talking about. She can’t be. It’s impossible.

Why would she do this? Why would she lie? Oh dear god, what’s going to happen to me now?

I try to swallow, but my throat feels like sandpaper. I can’t believe what’s happening. My mind is racing, trying to make sense of it all. I’ve just escaped one nightmare, and now I’m already facing another, mere minutes later. I’m going to be sick.

My heart is pounding like it’s going to burst out of my chest. I look around, frantically searching for a way to escape. But there’s no way out of this. I’m trapped in a nightmare, and Summer is somehow at the centre of it.

She stares at me with pleading eyes, her hands knotted in her T-shirt. She looks terrified. But why? What does she have to be scared of? I wish I could do something to help her, but I’m frozen in place. I can’t even help myself, and out of the two of us, it’s me that needs more help right now.

The detective in charge of the case looks at me with suspicion. “Do you know this woman?” he asks, pointing to Summer.

I nod, my throat still dry. “She’s my friend. I don’t understand why she would lie.”

The detective gives me a hard look. “Well, she claims that you were the one who attacked her. She even has the bruises to prove it.”

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach. Summer was attacked? By who? Shit. Is she okay?

As I stare at her, trying to come to terms with what is happening, she looks away, unable to meet my gaze. I can see the guilt weighing on her, and it makes me sick to my stomach. Why is she doing this?

I take a step forward, and the police officer stops me with a raised hand. “You’re not going anywhere,” he tells me, his voice as unyielding as his expression.

I swallow hard, trying to find the words to defend myself, but they won’t come. My mind is blank, and all I can think about is Summer’s betrayal.

Summer is my only friend. We’ve been through so much together, and I confided in her my deepest secrets. Now she’s turned on me? I can’t believe it. What am I supposed to do?

I turn my back on her, and find four faces lined with concern. Maybe Summer isn’t my only friend. Right now, these boys I barely know are acting

like better friends than Summer has in a long time. Even the professor.

It's hard for me to believe it, especially considering that compared to how long I've known Summer, I've only just met these guys. Yet they already seem to care about me more than my supposed best friend. It feels like a weight lifting off my chest. Maybe, just maybe, I'm not as alone in this world as I thought.

As I glance over my shoulder, Summer is glaring at me from across the room. It's like she can sense the shift in my attitude towards her. But I don't care. I'm done letting her control my life.

"Hey, are you okay?" Cove asks, placing a hand on my shoulder. He's always been so kind to me. He looks visibly shaken and my heart goes out to him. He cares. He wouldn't look like that if he didn't. Maybe what the professor said is true – they all somehow care.

I nod, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. "Yeah, I'm..." I stop myself before I say 'fine' because I'm definitely not fine. None of this is fine. I'm confused, I'm hurting, and I'm terrified. I give Cove a little shrug. "Thanks for asking."

"Malia, we're all here for you," Reef adds.

I catch Bhodi's eye and he smiles at me, but it's tinged with sadness. I'm so grateful for his presence as well. To think I was going to sneak out to my classes on my own. If he hadn't followed me and insisted on accompanying me, they wouldn't be here now to help me. I've been an idiot.

"I guess I better go," I say reluctantly as Bhodi pulls me back into his arms for a fierce hug. As soon as he releases me, Cove is hugging me, and even Reef steps forward to give me a quick squeeze.

The prof doesn't. He can't anyway, even if he were a hugger – which I highly doubt he is – because he's playing the role of my lawyer, and the officers are watching.

"*Malia, listen to me,*" the prof's urgent voice pierces my skull, and my eyes snap to his. "*You mustn't eat or drink anything they give you. No matter how long they hold you, no matter how uncomfortable you get. Promise me you won't touch any of it.*"

I dip my chin in agreement, a subtle movement that no one would pick up unless they knew what was going on. The prof catches it.

"*Good girl. They're going to take you to a holding cell for the night and then they'll re-interview you in the morning. I will get you out of here first*

thing, even if I have to break in and steal you away myself.”

His words make warmth spread through my chest. I want to smile at how protective he’s being, how *nice*, but I know it would be too dangerous to do that. My every move is being watched, analysed. Now is not the time for smiling. Anything I do or say will be used against me.

I just hope the professor’s words are true: that he’ll get me out of here. He managed it once – well, almost – so I have to trust he’ll find a way to do it again.

“Come on, Miss Van der Zee,” an officer calls out, not unkindly. I hear Summer leave the station and I can feel Payne’s glee from across the room.

I try to hide my trembling. I want to be strong. I don’t want to let these guys down, or show weakness. But...it’s hard. I don’t want to stay here even for one night. Not on my own.

“You won’t be alone. We will be nearby. We won’t leave the mainland without you, and I will remain at the station for as long as I can.”

I shoot the professor a grateful look, but it doesn’t make it any easier to say goodbye and let go. Before, when they took me from the lecture hall, it was easier in a way because they were leading me. I didn’t have a choice. And even though I don’t have a choice right now, I still have to take the first step. They expect me to willingly walk along that corridor to my...to a *cell*. I don’t know if I can do it. My feet seem frozen to the floor. But I know it’ll be worse for me if the officers have to come and get me and drag me down there.

Cove, Reef and Bhodi each squeeze my hand and whisper promises: that they’ll see me soon; that they won’t leave me; that they’ll make someone pay for this. The professor patiently waits for me to say goodbye and then comes to stand by my side.

“Ready, Miss Van der Zee?” he asks softly. I blink up at him and eventually nod. What else can I do? “Lead the way,” he says to the officer who hurried me along.

“I’m sorry, sir, you can’t come back there with your client.”

The professor says nothing but stares at the guy until he starts to squirm.

“It’s ah, not standard practice...” he stammers. Still, the professor just stares. “But, I guess we could, umm, make an exception...just this once.”

The prof smiles – though it’s more like a dangerous baring of his teeth – and we follow the officer along the corridor to where the holding cells await.

Walking is like dragging my feet through quicksand, and my mouth feels just as dry. My heart rate increases with every step closer and chills cause goosebumps to rise on my arms, even though I feel clammy with sweat and fear.

The officer eventually stops and unlocks a heavy metal door, pulling it open on creaky hinges. I swallow hard.

“This is your stop, Miss Van der Zee,” he says nervously.

Before I can take a step forward, the professor moves ahead of me into the room and looks around the space. The room is scarce. A single bed bolted to the floor along one wall, with a thin pillow and threadbare blanket on top of a thin, lumpy-looking mattress.

In the corner of the room there’s a metal toilet – like the ones you’d find in public restrooms back home – and a matching basin. No wall. No privacy. No toilet paper.

The professor crosses to the taps and tests they’re working. He scoops some water into his hand, brings it up to his face like he’s going to drink it, but then suddenly pours it away with a shake of his head.

“*Don’t drink that either.*”

“I’ll see you in the morning, Miss Van der Zee,” he says, turning to face me and standing up to his full height.

I nod past the lump in my throat. I’m not going to cry. *I’m not.*

“Umm, well, it might not be morning,” the officer stammers.

“And why not?” the professor challenges. The officer gulps. He can read the room, and right now it’s screaming *danger*.

“B-b-because they m-might n-not get r-round to interviewing your client first t-thing.”

“My client is accused of committing several atrocious murders and you’re telling me that your colleagues *won’t* prioritise this case?” The professor’s tone is heavily sarcastic. No response is required. “I’ll see you *first thing* in the morning,” he stresses to me. “Try to get some sleep.”

With that he steps out of my cell, and the officer hurries to catch up with him, closing the door and locking it with an ominous clang.

I eye my surroundings and begin the grounding technique that my doctor had me working on. No, not my doctor. Reef. I need to stop thinking of him as a real doctor.

Fuck. I’ve been through so much in such a short space of time.

Focus, Malia! What can you see?

The bed. The toilet. The sink. The bars on the window. The moonlight shining in from outside.

Good. What can you touch?

I run my fingers lightly over the smooth walls, the cold metal of the footboard, the scratchy blanket, the lumpy mattress.

Focus on three things you can hear.

The drip of the tap – that will drive me crazy.

Focus. What else? Two more things. You can do this.

The ocean in the distance. And the occasional sounds of traffic out on the main road. It must be late because the roads don't sound busy.

What can you smell?

The ocean. Fresh paint. Better not to dwell on the other scents surrounding me.

One thing you can taste. Don't say fear.

Hope. I can taste the hope that those four men have given me. And because of them, I know that I can do this. I'm safe here. I'll be locked in a box for a night. One night. And I'll see the professor again in the morning. Nothing can happen to me here. I can survive this.



This is fucking bullshit. All of it. From the moment the lecture was interrupted to the second they led Malia away down the corridor to the holding cells.

“Fuck this shit,” I growl in frustration, pacing back and forth in the small waiting room. The officer behind the desk eyes me warily, like he’s afraid I’m about to start tearing the place apart, and I bare my teeth at him in a menacing grimace because I feel like I just might. “What is taking so fucking long?”

“I don’t know,” Reef says calmly. Which just pisses me off even more. He’s always so fucking calm. Of course he was able to pretend to be Malia’s therapist for weeks, the bastard never reacts to anything.

Me? I feel everything. Deeply and fiercely and in the moment that it happens. I’m reactive. But I don’t see that as a bad thing. I was able to think fast, follow Malia, and let everyone know what was happening. I doubt Reef would have fucking done that.

“Fuck!” I roar, done with pacing. The nervous energy has just wound me even tighter and I’m ready to explode. The urge to just let out all of my rage is overwhelming and I truly feel like *Hulking out*.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” the glorified receptionist sniffs. I shoot him a filthy look which makes him swallow nervously, but he holds his gaze. Prick.

“We’re not going anywhere,” I tell him firmly.

He opens his mouth like he wants to argue and Cove, the bloody peacekeeper, steps in. “We’ll be out of your hair in a minute.”

I want to hit him for being a people pleaser. Instead, I kick the trash can and resume my pacing.

“Boss?” Reef asks, getting to his feet. I spin round to see the prof coming towards us, the officer that dragged Malia away right beside him. I scowl. That fucker’s going on my shit list along with that smarmy fucker who came out of the interview room with the bestie. So called bestie. Fucking cunt. I knew she wasn’t trustworthy, but I’m yet to figure out her angle here. “Everything okay?”

The prof is unreadable as ever, but he nods once.

“Let’s step outside.”

I shoot the reception guy a look that clearly says *I’ll be back you fucker* and follow the others outside. It takes all my concentration to just stand still, so I miss whatever the prof was saying.

“What?” I blink and shake my head, really trying to concentrate on his words.

The three of them sigh like I’m a fucking child, but the prof does take it from the top.

“I said, Malia is okay. She’s in a holding cell for supes and I’ve warned her not to eat or drink anything – including the water from the tap. It’s laced with something, and I can’t risk her getting sick when we don’t know what kind of magic she has.”

“So she does *have* magic? For definite?” Cove checks.

“I’m almost certain of it now. There was a moment in the interview room and again in her cell...it doesn’t matter. I’ve promised we’ll get her out of here first thing in the morning and I’m about to pull some strings to ensure that I keep my word.”

“What do we do until then?” Reef asks.

“It’s too late to suggest someone tails the best friend.”

“She’s no friend,” I grumble darkly, plotting her demise off a cliff. If I make it look like an accident it doesn’t count as killing a girl, right?

“Indeed. But she’s also probably long gone by now, and frankly, she isn’t my priority. Malia is. So I propose you three get a hotel room here on the mainland tonight so that we’re all nearby. In the morning we’ll consider where we can take Malia, but she will *not* be returning to campus no matter how strongly she feels on the matter.” He eyeballs me angrily like this is all somehow my fault. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I mumble.

“What are you going to do?” Reef asks.

“Huh?” I blink but Reef’s attention is solely on the prof.

“You said the three of us should get a hotel room. What are you doing?”

“I’m staying here to watch over Malia.”

“Are they going to let you do that?” Cove tilts his head, considering. Probably wondering if he can stay too.

Fuck them both. If anyone is staying to watch Malia, it’s me. I’m the biggest. The strongest. I care the most.

“Now why would I let a little thing like permission stop me?” The prof grins, and in the spotlights illuminating the station, he looks demonic. Deviant. I fully approve. The smile falls from his lips as quickly as it appeared and he’s serious once more. Or maybe he was always being serious. “If they have Malia in a supe cell that means they’re suspicious of her, beyond the murders that is. Those cells are spelled to have adverse effects on their inhabitants and so I suspect Malia is in for a rough night. I want to remain close by to keep an eye on – or at the very least an ear out for – the situation.”

“Will she be okay?” I ask, frowning. I don’t like what he’s saying at all. What adverse effects? What does he mean, a rough night? Will she be in pain?

I fucking hope not. I’ll kill anyone who hurts her, that’s not the issue; I don’t want her to suffer. Fuck knows she’s been through enough. More than enough to last this lifetime and several others. The thought of her being in pain, the sort of pain where I can’t dish out revenge on the causer, kills me.

“That’s what I’m sticking around to find out.”

“That’s reassuring,” I retort dryly. “You should consider a career reading

kids bedtime stories.”

They all choose to ignore me. The prof hands some keys to Reef and passes over his credit card – I note that he doesn’t trust *me* with that, wanker – and we say our goodbyes.

I watch, torn between following orders and following the prof, as he turns and walks back into the station. Through the glass doors we see him talk to the grumpy officer on the desk who vehemently shakes his head, and then the prof takes a seat in one of the uncomfortable waiting chairs and pulls out his phone.

“Come on,” Reef says gently. “We have our orders.”

“And the prof’s credit card,” I huff. “Room service is on him. I need to eat or I’m going to kill someone.”

“It’s going to be a long night.” Cove sighs.

My brothers have the same worry, fear and devastation etched on their faces. That’s exactly how I feel. *A long night indeed.*



I'm fine until the lights go out. Then the trembling starts. I sit on the bed as long as I possibly can, but when my muscles start to ache from the shaking, I give in and curl up on my side, facing the door.

Always facing the door.

If my childhood taught me anything, it's that you never turn your back on it. Maybe my parents were just preparing me for this moment. Teaching me through practice how to survive a place like this.

At least I'm alone. No one can get through that door without me being aware of their presence. And even if there's nothing in here to defend myself with, at least I'll see them coming and can try to fight.

It's not normally in my nature to fight. It was beaten out of me early on. But I'm starting to realise some things are worth fighting for. Getting out of here and finally getting more answers, for one.

And them.

I shut that thought down, fast, shivering. It's so cold in here. Which is not

something which would normally affect me, but I guess I've been through a lot today. Summer would say *it's been a day*.

Fuck. Summer.

Fuck Summer.

Is she really the reason why I'm locked up in here? *Don't think about that now Malia. Get some rest.*

I try to keep calm, but the fear of the unknown is like a fog, obscuring my thoughts and making it difficult to concentrate. I can hear the occasional sound of voices emanating from outside my cell, but I can't make out what they are saying. The only thing I know for certain is that I'm here, and that I am in danger.

Thoughts of Summer swirl round and round in my mind, despite me not wanting to think about it tonight. Did she really betray me? Why is she framing me? Or worse, does she really think I had something to do with those girls' deaths and disappearances?

The thought of Summer suspecting me hurts more than the idea of her betraying or framing me.

The realisation makes my chest constrict and I'm in danger of having another panic attack, so I force my mind to clear until all I'm able to do is count how many bricks make up my cell.

Eventually I must drift off because I'm jerked awake by excruciating heat, like flames licking at my body, but when I open my eyes there's nothing there. The temperature of the room seems normal – maybe even a little chilled – and the iron of the solid bed frame bolted to the floor cools my overheated skin when I grasp it in a panic. I'm not used to feeling extremes of temperature and I can't help but wonder if I'm getting sick. Maybe it's just the complete overwhelm of everything...maybe my body is screaming that I need a rest. A break.

I was dreaming, but I can't recall the details. Was there a fire in my vision? I don't know for sure. But it feels like a memory, rather than a nightmare or fever dream. Which is weird. I'd definitely remember if I'd ever experienced being in a fire before – even as a child. That's the sort of trauma that imprints itself in core memories.

But fire's not something I normally dream about either. Usually it's the ocean. Even in my nightmares, the ocean calls to me. Some people dream about dying in water, drowning. Not me. My nightmares are always about

being dragged from the water. Taken away from the one thing I truly love. The one place I've always belonged.

I close my eyes once more and try to steady my breathing, but it's no use. I can feel something creeping around inside my head, like a spider web of invisible magic – it's probing and prodding, searching for answers to questions I don't know the answer to. Its presence is like a thousand invisible needles pressing into my mind, and I can sense that it is looking for something in me, something that I cannot seem to give it.

Those needles stab at my skin, white hot and burning. The temperature in the room reaches a crescendo and sweat pours from my body.

Just drink and the pain will go away.

My throat is parched. I cough and taste smoke, thick and cloying. My eyes sting from it. But there's nothing there.

A drink will make it all better.

I fall from the bed, my knees crashing hard against the concrete floor but I'm too distressed by the heat to care about the damage done. On hands and knees I crawl over to the small basin. My fingers slither up the basin, searching for the lip of the bowl so that I can grip onto something. Sweat trickles down my forehead and into my eyes, making it impossible to see. My fingers clench the sink and the heat from it causes blisters to erupt on my skin. I scream and almost crash back down to the floor, but my paralysed digits keep me locked in place. On weak, tired limb, I pull myself up to a hunched position, clinging to the basin like I need it to live.

Turn on the tap and drink. You'll heal.

I whimper at the pain in my hands as it takes me several attempts to turn on the tap. Cool water begins to flow and I eagerly run my blistered palms under the cascade.

Drink it! a voice in my head commands.

Scooping the water in the cupped palm of my hand, I gather the nectar and carefully bring it to my lips. Something makes me pause. A memory. A figure approaching through the smoke, shaking his head. *Don't drink that either.*

I blink and smoke is gone. The professor is gone. My hands are healed. There's no fire. No needles of pain.

I throw the water back into the basin and watch as it drains away, then I wipe the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. Swiping my hand

over my mouth, a cool bead of water catches on my lip and my tongue darts out to clear it away.

Instant pressure builds and builds inside of my skull until I can no longer bear it, and then I feel something crack inside me.

I scream and succumb to the darkness.

When I open my eyes, everything falls away – the darkness, the cell, the invisible magic – and I am suddenly in a place of light and beauty. I'm standing in a courtyard, surrounded by walls of white marble and a beautiful fountain with a statue in the centre.

Something in me recognises this place as the palace of justice, where those accused of crimes come to face judgement.

But how do I know that?

A figure is standing in the courtyard, and I know instinctively what to do. I take a few steps forward, and I can see that it is a woman, her face shrouded by a long veil. She holds a staff in her hands, and a voice speaks from within her – it is the voice of justice.

She points her staff at me and the invisible magic that had been torturing me comes to life. Flames erupt around us and wrap themselves around me like a snake. I can feel the magic tightening, squeezing the breath out of me as it searches for answers. I struggle to break free, to breathe and to think, but the more I fight the more it tightens around me.

Finally, it releases me, and I collapse to the ground, exhausted. The flames recede. When the woman speaks again, her voice is stern and immovable. She tells me that I must answer her questions, and if I do so honestly then I will be allowed to go free.

I answer her questions, one by one, and with each answer I can feel the invisible magic fade away until it is nothing more than a distant memory. The woman nods and tells me that I am free to go, and I don't hesitate. I turn and run, back to the freedom I had been denied before.

The air feels cool on my skin, and I take a deep breath. I'm free. I have escaped the cage of fire and my imprisonment by invisible magic. I have been judged and found innocent, and I will never forget the experience.

I blink and come round on the floor of my cell, the rough concrete kissing my cheek. The knowledge that I'm okay isn't enough to give me the energy to move, so I curl into a ball and will this night to end.

I'm innocent. Justice has said so.

Now I just need to convince the police of that.



It's utter torture standing out in the street, under Malia's window listening to her scream. Knowing she's trapped in there alone, confused, and suffering is enough to weaken any stone heart. But knowing that there's nothing I can do to help her, that I can't even tell her I'm here, it's enough to obliterate that stone into a million shards.

As I stand there, my heart tearing apart with every scream that rips through the night, I can't help but feel helpless. Malia's pain echoes through the silence of the night, and I know that I am the only one who can hear it.

But as the hours pass, the screams begin to fade, and morning intrudes. All I'm left with is the sound of my own thoughts. I know that I need to do something more to help her, to break her free from all that's holding her captive. But I can't, and that's what is keeping *me* captive.

In the light of dawn, I pace back and forth, my mind working furiously. Anger and frustration build inside of me as I try to come up with a plan. I know that I need to act fast, before it's too late. We need to find a way to give

Malia her memories back and to unlock the magic in her veins that's being suppressed. And I think the only way to do that might be to bring her before the elders. But doing so, taking her through the portal to our realm, might kill her in the process.

So I'll do all I can to avoid it.

As soon as the sun breaks over the horizon, I'm at the doors to the station, hammering to be let in. They ignore me for a good twenty minutes before finally relenting and unlocking the doors to grant me access with a reproachful look. I don't give a shit about their passive-aggressive bullshit. I just want to check on Malia. And get her out of here. But first things first, I need to see what state she's in after the night of hell they put her through.

I storm over to the desk. "I want to see my client, Miss Van der Zee."

"You'll have to wait."

Banging my fist down on the top of the desk, I bare my teeth at the officer. "I will not wait," I shout, doing nothing to control or conceal the rage in my voice.

"What seems to be the problem here?" The female officer from Malia's interview yesterday appears from the office.

"I want to see my client. Now."

"Very well, I'm on my way to speak to her anyway. You may as well follow."

She doesn't say anything else, turning on her heel and leading the way back down the corridor where I was forced to leave Malia behind last night. When she peers through the peephole, something must alarm her because she jerks back from the door suddenly and starts fumbling for her keys.

"What is it?" I demand, panic rising within me.

She ignores me and hurries to open the door, and the second she steps back to swing open the heavy metal, I rush past her into the cell. Malia is curled up on the floor and my heart hits my throat as I race over to her prone form, falling to my knees and checking for a pulse.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I find it, and gently try to rouse her.

"Is she okay?" the officer asks, with what seems like real concern in her voice.

I glower at her. "No thanks to you."

Malia stirs and I switch my attention straight back to her. "Are you okay, Miss Van der Zee?" I hate that with the officer here I have to play a role. I

want to scoop her into my arms but I really shouldn't with them watching.

She wretches like she's about to be sick and I quickly pull her hair out of the way, but it just turns into an awful hacking cough. She's yet to open her eyes but just from her sweat-soaked brow and pallid complexion, I can tell that something's not right.

"What the hell did you do to her?" I growl. "She was fine when I left her yesterday."

"I-I don't know. She was fine when I checked on her before my shift ended." The officer sounds really sorry, and I know she's not to blame but Malia shouldn't have been in a cell in the first place. Especially not a cell for supernaturals. It could have killed her.

"Who was on the night shift?" I demand, rage filling every cell in my body.

"That would be me," a second, familiarly smug and smarmy voice adds.

"Moyes, I was looking for you. You missed our handover meeting."

"What's wrong with her, Payne?" Officer Moyes asks.

"Beats me," he replies with a dismissive shrug that is a match to the short fuse of my anger. "But she's free to go."

"What?" Malia blinks, her face full of surprise.

"Why?" We both ask at the same time.

"There was an issue with the evidence. The witness statement has been redacted. And besides, she was found innocent last night."

"How is that possible?" I ask sharply, my head snapping up to stare at the officer whom I really dislike. It was so easy to pick up on Malia's discomfort around him yesterday, and I can see why she doesn't like him. There's something serpentine in him. He's not to be trusted.

"She was tested."

"How?" I grind out.

"Through trial by fire."

He shrugs again as officer Moyes gasps and turns to stare at him in shock. My rage explodes out of me and I'm on my feet, across the room and have him against the wall by the neck in the blink of an eye.

"That could have fucking killed her!" I bellow, crushing his windpipe.

"Payne, that was not sanctioned," Moyes snaps, before turning to me with a slightly softer expression. "You need to let him go."

I really fucking don't. What I *need* is to kill him for endangering her life

like that. The rage boils and bubbles and spits out of me and I don't give a fuck that his ugly smarmy face is turning fucking purple, there's nothing in this world that can stop me ending his life—

“Vance.” The softly spoken word. The delicate press of a scorching palm on the small of my back. The hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention at her proximity.

I drop him like the sack of shit he is, spinning to give her my full attention.

“Don't. Please.”

It's all she gets out before the last of my restraint snaps and I forget it all. Who she is. Who I am. Who we're pretending to be. Where we are.

I devour her lips like a starved man, gusting my hands in her hair and swallowing her gasp of surprise.

I am starved, having denied myself for far too long. I've wanted Malia since the moment I laid eyes on her in that bar. I've wanted my queen since the day I took my oath. I even denied my fiancée for my role.

I'm done denying myself the things I want. What I need. And right now, I need to kiss Malia more than I need anything else in this world or mine.

A loud throat clearing eventually pulls us apart and Malia cringes like she just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

I keep her close, allowing her to bury her face into my suit jacket as I glower at the female officer who disturbed us and shoot a dismissive sneer at Payne still coughing and spluttering on the floor.

“We're leaving,” I announce to the room.

“There's paperwork—”

“Fuck your paperwork. You can forward it to me. She needs medical attention and you better hope and pray that this doesn't come back to bite you on the ass. I'll send you the bill.”

I shrug my jacket off and throw it over her shoulders, which causes her to blush even more than being caught kissing. It almost makes me chuckle, but I'm still too angry about everything.

Scooping her up into my arms and exiting the cell, I carry her along the dingy corridor and out into the waiting area. Malia blinks in the brighter light, and I can see how truly awful she looks after spending one night in those cells.

Trial by fucking fire! They're lucky I don't burn this place to the ground

with all of them inside for pulling a stunt like that.

“Do you need anything?” I ask her, forcing my thoughts away from revenge. I need to calm down, I don’t want to scare her.

“My bag, phone and shoes. But it’s not important,” she quickly adds. I can see it on her face; she thinks she’s a burden. How do I make her see that she’s anything but?

“The guys grabbed all of that last night,” I settle for telling her instead. “The first time they let you go.”

“Oh, okay. I can walk.”

I tut and scowl. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not wearing any shoes.”

She tries to hide her smile as we leave the station and I don’t hesitate to continue carrying her away from that place. I plan to make it my mission to ensure she doesn’t ever have to return – which would be really easy if I *did* burn it down.

“This feels like a walk of shame,” she murmurs lowly. Maybe she didn’t mean for me to hear, because when I ask her how, she blushes once more. “I’m in last night’s clothes, with no shoes and I’m wearing your jacket.”

“There’s absolutely no shame in what you’ve been through,” I tell her, ignoring the innuendo. The last thing I need is to acknowledge the elephant between us and make things even more awkward.

Besides, if I had my way with Malia, there would be no *walk of shame* afterwards. Because I wouldn’t let her walk away.

“What do you want, Malia?” I ask, steering us onto safer topics.

“Umm,” she hesitates “want?”

She bites her lip and looks up at me through her lashes and fuck if I don’t nearly drop her when the lust sparks through me.

“Want to do, now, I mean.” Jesus. I can’t even get my words out. She’s got that much power over me.

“Oh. Umm, I don’t know?”

My brow creases at her wording it as a question, but I let it go for now. I’m entirely to blame for her hesitance around me, the uncertainty, but I plan to put that right, by building back up all that I tore down when I had my head in my ass.

“We can either head back to the island and the beach house, or if you’d prefer, we can stay here on the mainland for a few days. We have a hotel suite with plenty of rooms booked. Or there’s even the option to stay

somewhere else on the island if you need a change of scenery.”

“I just want to go home...to the beach house, I mean.” It pleases me that she calls it home, and I don’t hide my smile from her.

“It’s your home too. For as long as you need or want it.”

“Thank you. But...”

“But?” I prompt her gently.

“But a couple of days break sounds amazing.”

“I’ll ring the others and tell them we’re coming to the hotel. You can stay as long as you need.”

“Put me down then,” she protests, trying to wiggle free. I hold her tighter to avoid dropping her or doing something really stupid like spanking her ass for not letting me look after her.

“No,” I tell her firmly. “I can multitask.”

A beat passes, then she says, “I’m sorry.”

She tries to look away but I capture her gaze with mine and then slowly raise a brow. “Why are you sorry?”

Shrugging, she breaks the bond between us and looks away. “I shouldn’t have gone to class, like you said.”

Sighing, I shift her in my arms so that I can better see her face, and make sure she’s looking right at me again before I tell her, “They’re the police, Malia. They would have found and taken you eventually. You did nothing wrong, and Bhodi was with you. If anyone should be apologising it’s me.”

“You? Whatever for?”

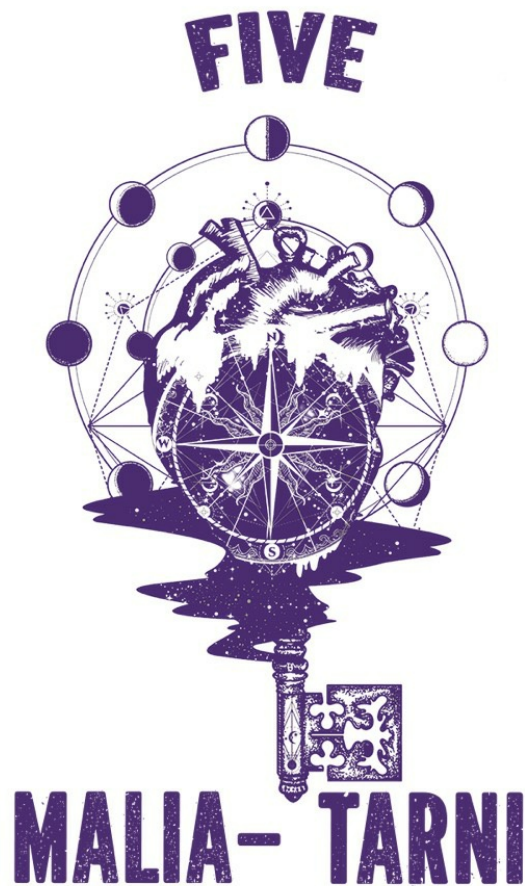
“The list is too long to even start. But I’m sorry I wasn’t in class when they took you.” I mean every word.

“You wouldn’t have been able to stop them, you said it yourself.”

I smirk. “True.”

“So neither of us have anything to be sorry for.” She gives me a soft, hopeful smile that makes me want to kiss her again.

I’m certainly not sorry for kissing her back inside the station if that’s what she means.



The guys are elated to see me when the professor drops me off at their hotel. I'm kind of sad that he doesn't stay and can't help wondering if he regrets kissing me. He must. And that hurts. Which is stupid, because I'm dating Bhodi and Cove and there's definitely also something there between Reef and me. My hands are more than full. I wasn't even interested in dating before coming here. I feel ridiculous now, like I'm trying to compete with Summer and her five guys.

But I honestly have no idea where that kiss with the professor came from. To begin with I thought it was a lingering fever dream from last night.

What a crazy night. I really want to tell someone about it, but I don't even know how to go about bringing it up with the guys. And I guess confiding in Summer is well and truly out.

My stomach growls and all eyes in the room turn to me, making my cheeks heat.

"Hungry, little dot?"

I nod. “Yeah, the professor said I shouldn’t eat or drink anything at the station.”

“Shit,” Cove curses, looking guilty. “We knew that. We should have ordered something already.”

“We could go down to the restaurant,” Bhodi suggests. “It’ll be quicker.”

“True. Malia, what do you want to do?” They both turn to me expectantly.

“Can we stay here and order food to the room? I’ve never done that before.”

It’s true, I haven’t, but I’d rather make out like ordering room service is some big, exciting adventure for me, than admit the truth. Which is that I’m scared. Really fucking scared actually. Last night was terrifying, and I never want to experience that again. I’m starting to think that someone has it in for me and is trying to pin these murders and disappearances on me for some reason. I just think it sounds insane to say it out loud.

It’s even more insane to think that that person could be Summer. I don’t think it is though. Whatever she’s done, I don’t think it’s *that* bad. She wouldn’t betray me like that. Not intentionally.

“Are you okay, Malia?”

“Hmm?”

“You disappeared for a minute.” Reef smiles kindly, and I know he means I checked out of the conversation, because I didn’t physically *go* anywhere. “We were asking what you wanted to order.”

“Oh, anything’s fine.”

“What do you want?” he presses gently.

My brain shuts down. “I don’t know. I’m too hungry to choose. Whatever’s quick.”

“Okay, leave it with us.”

I nod and go back to staring at the TV. The sound is off but I’m not even seeing the pictures, just flickers of moving light, colours and shapes.

“All ordered,” Reef says a few moments later. “You’ve got half an hour.”

“Do you mind if I go for a shower?” I ask.

“Of course not. Take as long as you need. I’ll leave some clothes out for you on the bed until Vance gets back.”

“What?” I blink slowly, trying to piece his words together.

“Vance, the professor, has gone to get you some more things. It was too

late last night for us to get anything.”

“Oh.” The thought of my professor shopping for clothes and...other things for me makes my face flame with embarrassment. I quickly turn away from Reef and dart into the bathroom to hide.

As I step into the shower, I let out a deep sigh. The hot water cascades down my body, washing away the grime and sweat from the past couple of days. Steam fills the bathroom, clouding up the mirrors and cocooning me in the illusion of safety.

No, I am safe here, with the guys. I know that. But I also know that whatever is going on, this is a temporary respite, and I’m not truly out of the woods yet.

Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back, letting the water fall on my face to wash away my embarrassment.

I try to focus on the events of last night, but my mind keeps drifting back to that kiss with the professor. It was...intense. Honestly, one of the best kisses of my life. Not that I’ve had many, but still. The guys are all great kissers. But the professor’s was something else. I could taste his fury and determination to get me out of there, and for the first time I felt like he genuinely cared for me, rather than just seeing me as a massive inconvenience or annoyance.

The door to the bathroom opens and I spin round to see who’s intruded. The shower screen is fogged up so I have to swipe my palm over it to peer out. Bhodi stands in the doorway, grinning at me.

“You’re letting the cold in,” I complain.

Taking that as an invitation to come in, he closes the door behind him, the grin never leaving his face. If anything, it gets wider as he stares at me.

Shamelessly, I stare right back.

He’s topless, wearing only the board shorts he had on the day we went to class, which feels like it was months ago now. While he unties them, I ogle his inked muscles, admiring the way they ripple with his movements in an effortless display of strength and power. The shorts fall to the floor and he’s gloriously naked, a confident smirk fixed firmly in place on his face.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Do you not think it would have been better to ask me before getting naked?” I raise a brow and offer him my own smirk in return.

“Aww, come on, little dot. I’m cold.”

I drop my eyes to his crotch for the briefest second and then return to his face. “I can see that.”

“Ouch, burn.” He laughs, crossing the bathroom space and climbing into the stall with me. The sudden rush of cold air makes me shiver, but Bhodi steps under the spray and wraps me in his arms.

For a moment, I forget about the professor and the kiss. Bhodi’s arms are warm and inviting, and I feel safe in his embrace.

When he releases me, he gently turns me on the spot so that I’m facing away from him and proceeds to wash my hair for me, taking care to work through the tangles and to massage my scalp. His hands drop to my shoulders and continue to rub until the tension leaves me, and I turn to putty in his hands.

Turning to face him, I nuzzle into his chest and take a deep breath, inhaling his masculine, heady scent. His hands roam over my back, tracing patterns on my skin that make my heart race.

“I missed you,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My body is already responding to his touch, and I feel a now-familiar ache between my legs. Bhodi seems to sense it too, because he trails his fingers down my spine, lingering at the small of my back. I bite down on my lip, trying to resist the urge to push against him.

But then he slides a hand between my legs, and all bets are off. I moan as his fingers find my clit, rubbing small circles that send waves of pleasure rippling through me. I whimper and lean into him, my body rocking in time with the touch of his fingers.

“Remember how I told you that I can’t control myself around you?” His words are hot and taunting against my cheek.

I want to say yes...but I can’t. Did he say that? He’s certainly implied it a few times.

He works a finger inside me, and I’m completely distracted.

But...what was the question again?

I’m so wet, so warm and so tight. Already coiled and ready to let go. Concentrating on his words is almost impossible.

“You remember...” he breathes against my ear. He pushes a second finger inside, and curls them in just the right way to make my brain melt.

I nod, and then mumble, “Yes. I do.” I have no idea what I’m admitting to. He makes me feel so good that I’m on the verge of falling apart. I never

for a minute thought that this is what I'd end up doing in the shower, but somehow Bhodi knew it was exactly what I needed.

I lean in to kiss him again, but he doesn't give me the chance. Instead, with one of his huge hands, he grabs my wrists and raises them over my head, forcing me up onto my tiptoes.

The new angle of his fingers is perfect. He's hitting that spot again and again. I wiggle my hips and try to get more of him inside me. He raises an eyebrow. "You want more?"

I nod, barely able to speak. "Yes, please," I rasp, barely recognising my own voice.

He fucks me with his fingers until I'm about to come. Then he pulls out and I whimper. Giving me an indulgent grin, he pushes his erection inside me.

Fuck. Despite the stretch of his fingers, he still feels huge, to the point of pain. I never understood how something could be deliciously painful until now. But it's so good, I want to sign up for a lifetime of it.

He fucks me hard and fast, and I ride his cock until my back arches and I can barely stand.

I groan. "Harder."

"You like it hard?"

"Yes."

He fucks me faster, harder, deeper. I've no idea how I'm standing. I've lost control and he's just dragging me along for the ride. I can feel my orgasm is imminent, yet somehow dancing just out of reach.

"That's it, little dot." He leans into me, puts his hand on the wall, and fucks me even more vigorously. God, it feels good, but where the fuck does he get his stamina from? "Come on my cock."

"Oh god," I gasp as his warm breath hits my ear. He leaves tiny kisses down my neck, over my collarbone, and toward my breasts.

Taking a nipple into his mouth, he sucks on it hard, and the sensation sends me hurtling to the edge. My entire body shudders beneath him, my orgasm taking me by surprise. He's wearing me out, but I don't think I've ever felt so good.

He's a relentless machine until he feels me relax beneath him and slows, kissing my neck sensually.

"You feel so fucking good, little dot." His tempo is languid, then he stills

as his cock jerks and pulses within me. “Oh fuck.”

I can feel him coming, his warm cum filling me. It triggers something in me, another, smaller release, and I tremble from head to toe.

“That’s it,” he breathes, still holding me in place.

We collapse into one another, out of breath and sweaty despite the hot water cascading over us. My head is tucked in against his chest, his lips against my shoulder, and we stay like that for a few moments. I’m not sure if it’s minutes or hours. I’m not even sure if I’m on this planet anymore.

“That was amazing,” I tell him breathlessly.

He chuckles. “No, *you’re* amazing, little dot.”

“Nu-uh. That was all you,” I murmur, still a little drunk on my orgasms and probably not making a lot of sense.

He laughs, pulling out of me and switching the water off. Helping me out of the shower, he then wraps me in a warm, fluffy towel and gently squeezes the water from my hair before wrapping that up too.

When he turns to me, his face is earnest and more serious than usual.

“It really scared me when the police dragged you out of the lecture hall. I was out of my mind with worry trying to get to you. It nearly killed me when I had to leave you behind at the station last night, with only the prof to watch over you.” He steps forward and kisses my forehead, the ghost of the kiss tingling on my skin long after he’s moved away. “Sorry, I got carried away.”

“What?” I blink, trying to get my head around what he’s telling me.

“I just needed to remind myself that you’re really here, and that you’re okay.”

“No, the other bit.” I frown. “What did you say about the professor?”

“Oh. Yeah, he stayed at the station with you last night. And I’m pretty sure that when they closed for the night, he hung around nearby, keeping watch outside.”

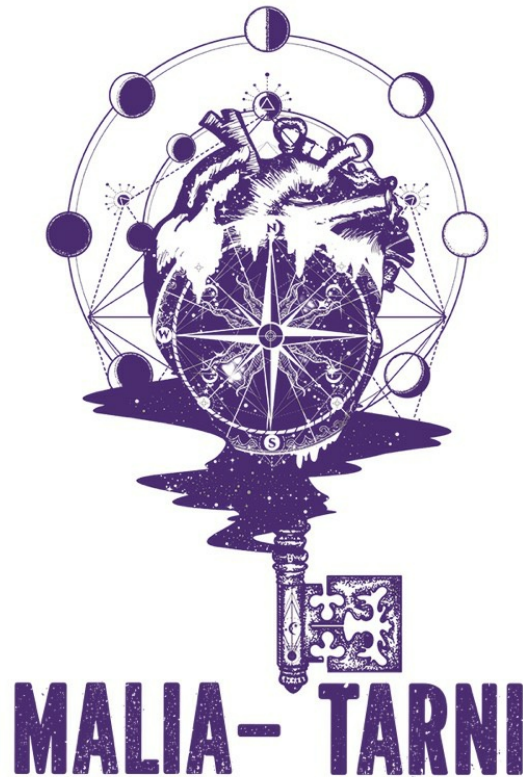
My jaw is slack, eyes wide. I had no idea. First the kiss, and now this revelation. I don’t know what to make of it all. Why would the professor do all that when he really doesn’t have to? He doesn’t strike me as the sort of person to do anything that he doesn’t want to...which makes me think, did he want to watch over me? Did he want to kiss me? Does he maybe like me... the way that I like him?

“Come on, little dot. Get dried and dressed. The food’s probably here by now.”

He kisses me once more and leaves, but I'm so distracted that it barely registers.

Why would the professor stay? Did he...did he hear me last night? I thought my cries were part of my dream, but what if they weren't? That might explain his rage towards the two officers. Though I can't help wondering why would he even care?

SIX



“Breakfast’s ready,” Reef calls, knocking gently on the door. I’m awake. I have been all night. And every night since I was in that station. The only time I managed to grab a couple of hours sleep was when Bhodi snuck into my bed two nights ago and fucked my fears right out of my head.

It was amazing, but it only bought me a couple of hours rest before the nightmares intruded once again.

I really thought that spending a few days in the hotel would help me feel better, but I think I’m just ready to go home now. Which is ideal, because today’s our last morning here. We have to check out just before lunch, and the prof has booked us tickets for the noon ferry back to the island.

It stings a little that I’ve not seen him since we left the station. Even when he dropped some bags of clothes and supplies off for me on the first day, he called Reef’s phone to come down to reception to grab them. I hope I’m being paranoid and insecure, but it really feels like he’s avoiding me.

Still, when we get back to the beach house, that won’t be an option

anymore, and I have a lot of questions for him that I'm going to demand the answers to. Starting with the water and what went down at the station. I deserve answers. I've been through hell, so I've earned them.

I roll out of bed and pull on the silk dressing gown the professor got for me. It's far too nice, and a completely unnecessary item. I assumed when the guys said he was grabbing me some stuff, that they meant basics and necessities. But I was overwhelmed by the thought and care put into each item he selected for me.

Which makes his reluctance to see me even more confusing.

I can't dwell on that right now, my stomach is rumbling. Since my night in jail – shudder – I've been constantly starving. The guys have teased me about it the last few days, joking that I could give Bhodi's appetite a run for its money.

I exit the bedroom Cove kindly gave up for me and meet them in the shared living space. The hotel, and this suite, is insanely fancy, but I miss the simplicity of the beach hut and having the ocean right outside the door.

"Morning, Malia, how did you sleep?" Reef asks with a smile.

"Well thank you, and you?" I lie with a returning smile as I take my seat at the fully laden breakfast table. He's been so attentive and kind the past couple of days, and I've found it easy to slip back into the easy conversations I used to have with him when I thought he was my therapist.

"Better than you, I think," he replies, gently calling me out on my bullshit. I grin as I start to pile an assortment of food onto my plate.

"I'm ready to see the beach again," I tell them all as Reef passes me a bottled water.

"You thought it was the other water. The one that makes you forget... Please just trust me, and I'll tell you everything when we're out of here. I promise. No more secrets."

I frown and reach for the juice instead. I need to keep a clear head and I'm not touching that shit until the professor explains what's going on.

I take a sip of the ice cold juice and then ask, "Does anyone want to surf this afternoon?"

"Hell yeah," Bhodi replies, Cove and Reef quickly agreeing with him.

"Great. I can't wait." Vitamin sea, just what the doctor ordered.

"I'll have to see if we can convince the prof to join us," Cove adds thoughtfully.

“The professor surfs?” I splutter. My mind immediately conjures images of him riding a woody, stiff as a board in his school suit. I giggle.

“Who do you think taught us?” Reef asks.

“Wow. Really? He seems so...” I trail off, not wanting to be rude.

“Uptight? Boring? Cantankerous?” Bhodi supplies with a wink.

“Umm, busy?” I offer.

They all laugh. “That was diplomatic of you. But yes, he does surf. He just hasn’t had much time lately, with everything...” Cove trails off.

“Because of me and the murders you mean.”

“Not at all. He likes to keep busy anyway. You’re not to blame,” Reef reassures me. “But, none of us have work today so maybe we can convince him to take a break.”

“That would be good,” I reply, feeling a little uneasy. Yes, I want to see the professor; we have a lot to discuss. But I don’t want an audience for it, and I can’t help but feel that his presence at the beach would throw off the easy vibe I have with the other three and my planned day of relaxation.

Oh well, I guess there’s nothing to do but wait and see.

Breakfast is delicious, the conversation light and easy, but I can sense that the guys are as keen to leave as I am. Once we’ve all finished, Reef tells me to use the bathroom first while he tidies the breakfast things back onto the room service trolley.

This time I manage to wash in peace, not bothering to shower if I’m going surfing later. I deliberately try to keep busy folding and re-folding my new items so that my mind doesn’t wander once more to Summer. *Is she back on the island? Will I get the chance to see her when we return? Should I just message her?*

Once I’m dressed and all my new things are packed in the new weekender-style bag that the professor got for me, I take it back out to the living space and dump it by the door. The others follow shortly after, and Cove insists on shouldering my bag and carrying it to the docks for me.

When we check out and reach the street, Reef surprises me by slipping his hand into mine.

“Is this okay?” he asks, nodding at our entwined fingers. His grip is gentle but sure, his hand nice and cool.

“Yes. It’s okay,” I reply, wanting to say it’s more than okay. *I have butterflies – just from holding hands!*

As we walk along the street, the waves crashing in the distance and the seagulls overhead, I can't help but feel a rush of excitement. Reef is not like anyone I've ever met before. He's kind, funny, and charming – like Bhodi and Cove – but there's something more, something deeper that draws me to him. There's something in his presence that soothes my soul.

My gut tells me that these guys are just good people, Reef especially.

I steal a glance over at him, taking in his chiselled jawline and gorgeous dark hair that's tousled in the light breeze. His striking green eyes are fixed ahead, but I can sense his peripheral attention on me. He's attentive like that. We walk in silence, Bhodi and Cove up ahead, and the only sound is the rhythm of our footsteps and the crashing waves as we draw closer to the ferry.

We board the ferry, Reef and I still hand in hand, and the four of us search for a spot to sit.

As we find seats on the deck, Reef pulls me into his side. The midday sun is blazing down on us, illuminating Reef's face. I can't help but feel grateful for this moment with him, away from the chaos of the other passengers who have opted for a little shade elsewhere on the boat.

I lean my head against his shoulder, and he wraps his arm around me as we sit in comfortable silence, watching the water and the seagulls flying alongside the ferry.

Bhodi and Cove wander off – to give us a little privacy I think – which is sort of nice.

After a few moments, Reef speaks up, breaking the silence. "I know we've pretty much just met, but I feel like I've known you for ages. Is that weird?" he asks, turning his head to look down at me.

I shake my head, feeling a smile spread across my face. "No, it's not weird. I feel the same way," I reply, tilting my chin up so that I can look into his eyes.

His eyes bore into mine, and my heart begins to gallop in anticipation. He leans in, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispers, "I'm glad we're on the same page, Malia."

My stomach flips with excitement as he takes my hand in his. The wind picks up, causing the seagulls to scatter and the waves to crash harder against the side of the boat as we gain speed out of the harbour. Reef pulls me in close, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my

shoulder. I feel safe and secure in his embrace, as if nothing could ever hurt me.

I shiver at his touch, warmth spreading throughout my body, my skin almost feverish where our exposed skin brushes. I turn towards him, our faces now only inches apart.

My heart skips a beat as he leans in, his lips soft and gentle as they meet mine, with the briefest hint of salt from the sea air. The kiss is like fireworks exploding in my chest, and I never want it to end. There's so much potential hiding in his kiss, I can taste it. It warms me right through and tastes like plump, ripe strawberries, warmed by the sun's summer rays. It makes my toes curl in the best possible way, and when he threads his fingers through my hair, I moan softly into his mouth.

We probably shouldn't be doing this in public, I think. But it's so hard to care.

As he pulls away, I can feel myself yearning for more, my lips tingling with the memory of his kiss. He looks at me, his eyes dark and intense, and I know that he wants me just as badly as I want him. I reach up to touch his face, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingertips.

He leans in again, his lips trailing down my neck this time, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. I shiver with pleasure, my hands gripping his shoulders as I try to anchor myself to reality. I thought Reef was going to be my rock, the steady reliable one I could depend upon. That kissing him would be nice...safe.

Wrong.

His hands move down to my waist, pulling me closer until there is no space left between us. My skin tingles and burns wherever he touches me, heightening my desire for him.

No, not desire. Burning *need*. There's nothing safe about the way he devours my lips. Nothing dependable, steady, nice.

He sets me alight.

We kiss until I can't breathe, and we're forced to pull away from one another. My own desire is reflected in his eyes, and I know he has no regrets, like me.

We spend the rest of the ferry ride wrapped up in each other's embrace, stealing kisses which are much tamer, but keep the fire burning within me stoked and desperate for more.

It's perfect.



The late afternoon sun glitters on the ocean, the light glinting and reflecting back on the smooth mirror-like surface. It's been a good twenty minutes since the last set of waves dropped off, and I've been enjoying just straddling my board and catching some rays, listening to the others' banter.

Surprise, surprise, the prof elected not to join us in the water – quoting some bullshit excuse – and I could sense Malia's disappointment. It makes me want to slap him silly for upsetting her like that after all she's been through. The rest of us are bending over backwards to make her happy – not that it's a chore, because I love making her smile – and he just ruins that in an instant with a single 'no'. Asshole.

We've managed to enjoy a few brilliant hours surfing without his scintillating company though, even if we've seen the last of the surf for the day.

"I'm hungry!" Bhodi whines.

"You know where the kitchen is," I retort with a smile. Bhodi can't cook

for shit. I mean, I'm not the best, but I do at least manage to avoid burning down the place when I attempt it.

"Reef, will you cook for us?" Bhodi asks in his best wheedling tone.

"I was thinking we could barbecue on the beach. It's such a nice evening."

"Sounds good, mate," I reply.

"What? No it doesn't," Bhodi complains. "Barbecuing takes ages!"

"You guys can go get it lit and set everything up for me," Reef replies.

"Why? What are you gonna be doing?" Bhodi asks.

"Malia," I mutter under my breath with a snigger. Malia blushes but I shoot her a wink to show I'm joking. I'm glad Reef put the moves on her on the ferry, and that she didn't freak out this time. She's had a smile on her face for almost the entire afternoon, and nothing makes me happier than seeing her shine.

"I want to take Malia to see the coves."

Well, that's code for wanting to fuck her in a cave if ever I've heard it.

"I'm going to die of starvation before you get back, aren't I?" Bhodi whines again, and I laugh outright at his dramatics.

"It's fine, we'll get the charcoal lit and get everything sorted. Take as long as you need."

"What's so good about a cave anyway?" Malia asks. "I could eat."

I bite back a grin at her cluelessness. Bhodi huffs and splashes water at us.

"Nothing. The coves suck."

"There's really nice rock formations and patterns and things. Some cool stalactites too."

"Are they the ones that go down or up?" Malia asks, tipping her head to the side, pondering.

"Down," Reef tells her.

"Something will be going down," I tease.

"Shut the fuck up, dude!" Bhodi tips me off my board.

Spluttering, I resurface and laugh at Bhodi's sullen expression. Yeah, he's finally realised that Reef wants some alone time with our girl, and he's salty about it. Too bad. He's just going to have to get better at sharing, because the three of us are all in, and I don't think the prof is too far behind. Bhodi will flip when he realises. He's such a petulant child. He never could share his

toys, and I can't wait to see him and the prof butt heads over Malia.

I swim over to Bhodi's board, laughing when he spies my intent and frantically starts trying to paddle away from me. I easily catch up to him, grab the tail of his board and dunk it under, flipping him off in the process.

Malia laughs as he comes up coughing and Bhodi and I exchange a glance and then wordlessly start swimming in her direction. She squeals and tries to get away, crying, "Reef! Save me!"

Reef laughs and pushes her board closer to us.

"Nah, I don't think I will. Get her nice and wet for me boys!"

Innuendo intended or not, I don't have to be asked twice. As Bhodi grabs Malia's board and flips it, I wrap my arms around her and pull her off, into the water with me. She screams, but she's laughing.

"It's so cold!" she lies.

"Rubbish!" I scoff. "The water's lovely!"

She's still wrapped in my arms, and I pull her closer, whispering in her ear, "I'll keep you warm."

"I thought you were meant to be getting me wet, not warm." Her cheeks blaze before the words have even finished leaving her mouth and the shock makes me cough, swallowing a healthy dose of sea water in the process. When I splutter, Malia giggles nervously, and it's the most amazing, musical sound.

"Oh, I can do that," I say, lowering my voice seductively.

"Yeah?" She leans in, and I have to bite back a smirk to keep my face straight. Too easy.

"Yeah, watch."

I splash water in her face and this time she coughs and then shrieks and retaliates. Within moments an epic water flight is under way, and the air is full of the sound of laughter and happy screams. I knew it was what Malia needed, but I hadn't realised just how much I needed it too. It's been an intense couple of days – weeks really – and this afternoon has been perfect for unwinding and letting go.

When we tire of splashing one another, we switch to races, completely forgetting about food and giving Malia and Reef some alone time, until Bhodi starts whining again.

"It's not fair. I only lost because I'm hungry!"

"You lost because I'm awesome, that's why," Reef tells him, laughing.

“You get a prize for being the winner at the only thing you’re good at. How’s that?”

“And what’s that?” Bhodi asks, his face lighting up.

I snigger. “Whining,” I supply.

Malia covers her mouth to hide her smile, but a giggle still escapes.

“You’re both jerks,” Bhodi complains.

“Oh, shut it,” Malia tells him, turning and diving under the water.

I dive in after her, and when she surfaces, she has the biggest smile on her face. We both do. I’ve never been happier than at this moment. I’ve never felt more alive or felt like this about someone before.

“You look so happy,” Malia tells me, and I know it’s true because I’m pretty sure I’m wearing a goofy smile. “Like you’ve won the lottery or something.”

“I am. I’ve never been so happy. It’s better than winning the lottery.”

Malia splashes water in my face and laughs, delightfully carefree. I pull her tight against me and kiss her until we’re both gasping for breath.

“Are you happy, Malia?” I ask her.

She nods. “I think we’re all doing really well,” she says.

“I agree. I’ve never seen you like this, you know.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“Happy. Relaxed. Like you don’t have a care in the world.”

“Right now, I have no cares. It’s a nice feeling. I wish it could last.”

She’s right. I agree wholeheartedly with her. Our pressing deadline means nothing to me, the weight of our worlds isn’t on my shoulders. I’m just a normal college guy, falling for an extraordinary college girl.

“I’m crazy about you, Mai-tai.” I don’t know what I was worried about, saying it, telling her. The words are easy to say. She stills. “You don’t have to say anything, I just wanted to tell you. I’m falling, hard. You’re the reason why I feel like this. Why I can’t stop smiling, why every day is a good day. Thank you.”

She blushes adorably and shrugs, “Umm, you’re welcome?”

She backs away, but doesn’t get far. I catch her and pull her back to me, kissing her once more.

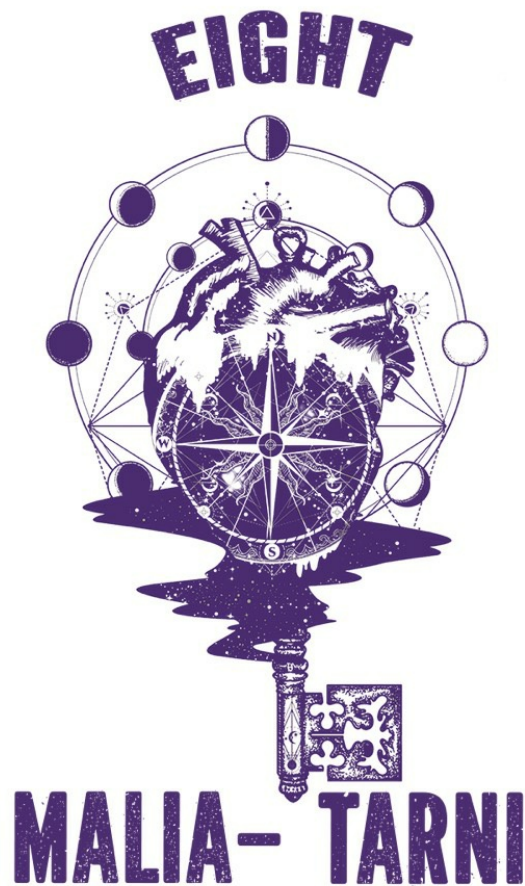
“You two have to come out sometime,” Bhodi yells from the shoreline. “I’m really hungry!”

Laughing, she withdraws from my embrace and waves to Bhodi. “We’re

coming, calm down.” Turning to me, she adds, “It’s like having a child, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but someone else’s child. One you don’t even like, let alone love unconditionally, but you’re contractually obliged to keep it alive. Cock-blocking dickhead.”

A loud laugh bursts free of her, and I realise I should have just said it. Told her straight. *I’m in love with Malia-Tarni Van der Zee.*



When the others leave, Reef and I stroll along the sandy beach, close enough that our shoulders nearly touch. The rhythmic lapping of gentle waves caresses the shore, creating ripples of water that resemble antique lace, while the salty sea air envelops us, carrying the sweet scent of sun-warmed palm trees on a cooling breeze. Paradise feels like an understatement in this moment.

We come to a stop, and Reef pulls me into his embrace, my back against his chest. Together, we watch the sun descend, its golden glow cascading upon the water like a shower of liquid fire. The shimmering rings dance upon the waves, reflecting the sun's fading light, and sailboats dot the distant horizon, their sails fluttering like animated flags in the breeze.

His voice, a breathy whisper, tickles my ear, sending delightful shivers down my spine. "Watching the sunset like this with you is beyond perfect."

Our footsteps carry us further along the beach, the calls of seagulls filling the air, accompanied by the rhythmic crash of waves against the shore. The

sun completes its descent, painting the sky with vibrant hues of orange and pink. Reef's words ring true; this moment is not just beautiful, it's pure perfection.

Silence accompanies our steps, yet the connection between us is electric, anticipation simmering in the depths of my stomach. I can sense Reef's awareness of it too, as his hand finds mine, his thumb tracing delicate circles on my palm. He leads me toward a secluded cove, hidden away from prying eyes.

We find a spot nestled among the rocks, where the sound of crashing waves fills the air. Reef draws me closer, his strong arms encircling my waist. Warm breath brushes against my neck, igniting a delicious heat within me. In Reef's eyes, I see an intense desire that makes my pulse quicken.

His lips graze my ear, his words barely a whisper. "May I kiss you again?" My heart flutters, and I nod in response, my body yearning for his touch.

Without further hesitation, he pulls me into a passionate kiss. It begins gently, a tantalising exploration, but swiftly intensifies with each passing second. His hands wander, tracing the curves of my body, fueling a blaze of desire. Waves of longing surge through me as my hands find solace in his hair, our tongues entwining in a dance of heated passion.

As we part, gasping for breath, Reef's eyes burn with hunger, sending delicious shivers coursing through me. Without words, he takes my hand once more, leading me into the nearby cave.

Inside, the air is cool and moist, dimly lit by a small opening in the ceiling. Reef draws me close, his lips trailing over my neck, setting my skin ablaze. The dampness amplifies the intensity between us, as my body aches for his touch.

Reef cups my face, his gaze penetrating mine with smouldering intensity. His eyes convey the depths of his passion, and I know that I am powerless to resist him any longer.

In a surge of desire, his lips claim mine in a fierce kiss. A soft moan escapes me as his tongue teases my lips, coaxing them to part. With eager anticipation, our tongues entwine, igniting an inferno of pleasure.

The coolness of the cave dissipates as our bodies press together, the longing for each other growing with each passing moment. Reef explores my body, awakening every nerve, each touch kindling a fiery need within me.

Lost in the moment, I surrender completely to the primal hunger that drives us.

As our kiss deepens, he removes my bikini top effortlessly and the cool cave air kisses my exposed skin. His lips part from mine, leaving a tantalising trail down my neck, his teeth grazing my sensitive flesh.

Arching my back, I press my body closer to his, craving his touch. His hands find their way to my breasts, and his lips continue their sensual descent, leaving a delicious path of kisses along my chest, his tongue teasing my nipples.

Sensations consume me, and desire floods through me, making me wet with desire and anticipation. The need to feel him inside me intensifies. I push him away slightly, locking eyes with him as I reach for the tie on his board shorts. Our gazes remain locked as I pull down his shorts, the desire in his eyes swirling with passion. Once naked, he removes my bikini bottoms and tosses them aside, before pressing his hands against my hips, and lifting me gently to place me on a small rocky ledge near the mouth of the cave.

Straddling the ledge, I feel the cool air caress my exposed skin, the crashing waves creating a symphony nearby. My heart races as Reef takes a step back, kneeling before me. He strokes my cheek, his eyes fixed on mine as his fingers explore my body further. Despite the surrounding shadows and the damp cave walls, nothing can distract me from this moment. My focus is solely on Reef and the desire blazing in his eyes, solely on the passion he holds for me. If I weren't consumed by my own longing, it would be hard to comprehend that he seems to want me almost as badly as I want him.

Leaning forward, I guide his face to the newly exposed skin of my body, relishing the touch of his tongue as it moves down, tantalising and arousing. My fingers entwine in his hair as I close my eyes, lost in the pleasure he brings.

Sensations electrify me as his lips caress the sensitive skin, and my hips instinctively move against him. I throw my head back, damp hair cascading down my back, surrendering to the pleasurable moans escaping my lips. Reef's hands press against my hips, guiding my movements as his tongue flicks and teases.

An insatiable need pulses between my legs, and with each passing moment, I grow wetter with desire. Unable to contain myself, I moan uncontrollably as Reef's hands find their way between my legs, gently

parting my legs further. He caresses the soft skin of my inner thighs, sending shivers up my spine.

Suddenly, his hot breath brushes against my most sensitive area, and I eagerly push my hips against him, yearning for his mouth. I crave the touch of his tongue on my core.

His tongue, barely grazes my sex until I can no longer bear the exquisite torment. "Please," I whimper, locking my gaze with his. "Please, Reef."

Granting my plea, he plunges his tongue into me, and I throw my head back, surrendering to the pleasure coursing through me. His expert mouth explores every inch, sucking on my clit and causing my body to tremble with desire as the need, the pressure inside of me, builds. I tighten my thighs around his head as he continues to lick and drive me wild with lust.

Lost in a frenzy of passion, I pull him closer, lifting my hips up and down as he lavishes me with his talented tongue. I teeter on the edge of blissful pleasure, torn between the need to fall into the abyss and the desire to remain in this euphoric state forever.

Holding my breath, my body tenses.

Then I surrender.

My body is shaking all over, and my mind is spinning, and I can't breathe. I'm having an orgasm so intense, I don't want it to end.

When I come back down to earth, Reef pulls away from me, and I can see his eyes. There's a look in them that I don't know. There's a glint there, and a fire. He licks his lips. My stomach clenches and my spine tingles. With anticipation. The look in his eyes is dangerous.

"I've been so patient," he tells me. "But I just had to taste you. Was that okay?"

I grab him and pull him into a passionate kiss, tasting myself on his lips and tongue.

"It was more than okay," I tell him when we break apart.

"We don't have to do anything else."

"We don't?" I ask, disappointment bleeding into my tone. I want to do more. So much more. It's like the floodgates have opened and I couldn't hold back even if I wanted to – which I don't.

"No. Now," he says, "let me feel and taste you again."

His lips find mine once more, reigniting the fire of our passion. As he explores my body with his hands, his touch sets my senses ablaze. The

weight of his palms on my breasts sends waves of pleasure through me, his fingertips teasing and pinching my hardened nipples. His hands roam, caressing my wrists with a tantalising touch, then gliding up my thighs, leaving a trail of anticipation in their wake. Lost in the intoxicating kiss and the electrifying sensation of our bodies entwined, a bold determination takes hold, compelling me to voice my deepest desires.

“Reef...”

“Yes, Malia?”

“What if I want...more?”

He pulls back just enough to look me in the eyes. Now that the sun has set, the light in the cove is rapidly diminishing, but I can still make out the details of his intense expression.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Please.”

“In here? Wouldn’t you rather go back to the house?”

I shake my head. “No. This is perfect.”

“You’re perfect,” he replies with a smile.

He pushes me gently back against the rock, resting his hands on either side of my head. I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself for the penetration that I know is coming.

He pushes his hips forward and I feel a sharp pressure as he enters me. I tense, waiting for the pain, but it doesn’t come.

“It’s okay,” he says soothingly, kissing my neck, making me relax. “You’re okay.”

The sensation of his lips on my neck and jaw makes me forget about everything else.

He pushes himself deeper into me and I sigh at how perfect he feels.

“You good?” he asks.

I nod. “So good.”

“You feel amazing.”

I blush, thankful that the cave is probably dark enough now that he can’t see it. I have no idea what to say to that. I’m hot, embarrassed, awkward. I tense. I don’t want to fuck this up but I’m doing it all wrong. I can’t do this. I shouldn’t be doing this—

“Breathe, Malia. It’s okay,” Reef says, immediately stilling his hips and peppering my face with kisses. “We don’t have to do this.”

“I-I want to. I’m just...being stupid.”

“You’re not stupid. You’re amazing.”

“That’s the problem,” I groan.

“The problem is that you’re amazing?” he jokes.

“No. You saying I’m amazing is the problem. I-I’m embarrassed.”

“Why are you embarrassed?”

“Because I’m nothing special and you’re saying all these nice things and I don’t know what to say because they’re not true and—”

Reef gently pries my hands away from my eyes to look at me. I hadn’t even realised I’d covered them. “Malia, look at me,” he says gently. “I played the role of your therapist for months—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“And I completely fell for you during that time.”

I freeze.

“Right or wrong, I couldn’t help myself. Your strength, resilience, compassion. There’s so much to love about you. You don’t have to say anything, and if it makes you uncomfortable I’ll stop complimenting you. For now. But rest assured, I’m not going to give up telling you how amazing you are, until you finally start to see it for yourself.”

Gazing into Reef’s captivating emerald eyes, my heart quickens, dancing to the rhythm of anticipation. Each word that escapes his lips feels like a harmonious melody, resonating deep within my soul. Once, I dared not entertain such thoughts about him when he was my doctor. However, the revelation that it was all a facade, a shield to safeguard my well-being, made it challenging to acknowledge my own burgeoning emotions. And now, as he bares his own sentiments, I find myself unable to resist reciprocating. Reef has been my unwavering anchor, my steady pillar of support, silently shouldering my burdens. It took me far too long to realise how much he means to me.

He’s different, unlike anyone else. With him, pretence and masks became unnecessary, for in my mind, he was solely my doctor. He’s acquainted with all my secrets, aware of the depths of my past, and yet, he never passed judgement or belittled me. He viewed me as an equal, never allowing my baggage to taint his affection. He cherishes me for who I am, not for the mask I must sometimes wear.

How could I not love him for such unconditional acceptance?

Drawing a steadying breath, I inch closer to him, our faces mere millimetres apart, the warmth of his breath grazing my skin. His hand rises, delicately caressing my cheek, sending delightful shivers coursing through me.

“I don’t know what to say,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

Reef smiles softly, his eyes filled with tenderness. “You don’t have to say anything,” he says, his voice low and husky. “You just have to feel it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, I’m ready. To feel everything with you,” I confess.

A radiant smile spreads across his handsome face and he leans in and captures my lips in a kiss that takes my breath away. This time I don’t tense, but melt into him, becoming putty in his hands.

I’m so lost in his kiss that it doesn’t even register that he’s started moving until I feel the tell-tale build-up of another orgasm. I break away from his lips, gasping for breath and trembling beneath his touch. I’m right there, on the edge, ready to fall...

“God, you’re beautiful,” he says, breaking our kiss to rest his forehead against mine.

An impassioned cry escapes my lips, and I surrender to the overwhelming bliss of yet another release, my eyes closing in ecstasy.

Responding to my pleas, Reef interprets them as a sign to pursue his own release. His hips intensify their rhythm, moving faster with an irresistible urgency. Ragged breaths escape his lips as he thrusts into me, the symphony of our bodies merging resonating throughout the cave. As Reef reaches his climax, his warm essence flooding inside me, synchronised with the pulsating rhythm of his shaft, ecstatic groans fill the air around us. Our bodies momentarily freeze in blissful union, and he gently rests his forehead against mine, both of us gasping for air in the aftermath.

After our passionate encounter, he doesn’t immediately withdraw. Instead, he tenderly returns to kissing me, his lips conveying a sense of cherished affection. His gentle strokes across my face make me feel precious to him, deepening the intimacy we share. Eventually, as our heart rates gradually calm, he slides out of me, his longing gaze lingering on mine.

Lying on the rock, I remain in a state of bliss, when he breaks the silence. “Want to head back to the beach for some dinner?”

“Yeah,” I say, sitting up and stretching. Reef gathers my things and passes them to me as I stand. I grimace, pulling on the cold, wet bikini. It’s not a nice feeling at all but I don’t regret what we just did. A little discomfort is totally worth it.

“Come on, Malia,” he says, extending his hand for me to take. “I’ve monopolised your time long enough. It’s time to get you back to the others and share you.”

His words should not make my cheeks flush with heat, but they do. I’m not ashamed or embarrassed by them, but aroused. I accept his outstretched hand, knowing that the connection we have formed is something worth embracing and exploring further.



After racing into the house to change and freshen up, I join Reef, Cove and Bhodi back out on the beach. The smell of the BBQ is making my mouth water, and my stomach is grumbling at having to wait.

To distract myself, I grab a notebook from my bag and start jotting down my thoughts. At this point, I don't even have the capacity to ask questions. I guess my brain is fried from the multiple orgasms Reef gave me in the cave.

I'm trying to figure everything out, but ideas and points are just circling around and around in my mind. I'm hoping that just getting it down on paper will be enough to quiet my mind. I'm not expecting to get answers today, but I need them soon. I glance down at the notebook and read through what I've written so far:

Voices in my head vs peace around the guys – why?

Water which steals memories – why do they all drink it? Does it affect them the same way it does me? Do the others even realise?

Why did Cove beg Reef to take my memories away? Can I get them back?

Then there's being hunted by shadows, periods of nothing...no recollection of what's happened.

The girl in the bathroom with cat's eyes and a tail. The fox-tailed cheerleader, the girl with the wings and the guy with...fangs? The one scratching like he had fleas, thinking about the moon and shifting, and the mermaid's tail I thought I saw in the ocean.

Shikari – what the hell are they?

Missing girls

Talk of supes and humans

Cove's magical underwater kiss

The guys think I'm leaking magic

The weird lady in my dream...the fire...

They're trying to stop their species being wiped out...but what are they???

They think I'm the one the bad guys are hunting – why???

What's the truth behind their protection mission?

What happens after?

SUMMER

“What are you doing, little dot?”

Bhodi snaps me out of my reverie and I just about manage to slam the cover of my notebook closed, hopefully, before he sees anything.

“Just jotting down some thoughts.” I sigh, thinking of the last item on my list. I really do need to speak to her. I’ve sent her a couple of texts since coming back from the mainland, but she’s not responded to any of them. *Maybe I should try and see her?*

“I see. Anything juicy?” My cheeks pinken even as I shake my head.

“That blush says otherwise, Miss Van der Zee.”

Somehow Bhodi addressing me so formally like the prof always does makes my blush deepen even more.

“Don’t call me that,” I mutter.

“Sorry, Malia.”

“It’s okay,” I reply awkwardly. It’s not even a big deal. Why am I making it one? Why is it okay for the professor to call me that, but not the others? “I’ll just go and put this inside anyway. Don’t want to get it all sandy.”

I quickly get to my feet and scurry towards the beach house with my notebook clutched to my chest before he can stop me.

I’m hit by a wall and the strangest sense of déjà vu, toppling backwards as soon as I’m through the front door. This time though, I don’t hit the floor, my notebook does.

“Jesus, watch where you’re going,” the professor snaps.

“Sorry.” Why am I apologising? Why is he snapping at me? He’s ignored me for days – after kissing me with no explanation – and now we’re back to the hostility...why?

I stare in dismay as the professor bends down and picks up my notebook, which has landed open on the page I was writing on. His eyes skim my

musings before meeting mine. I can't read the expression on his face; he gives nothing away.

"You have questions." He sighs.

"I'm overdue answers," I retort hotly. *Of course I have questions! What idiot wouldn't? What is it about him that gets me all worked up? None of the others get my blood boiling the way he does.*

"Maybe."

"Maybe? What the hell does that mean?" My anger explodes out of me, evaporating the lingering endorphins from my time spent with Reef in the cove. I swear for a second the antique reading lamp in the lounge flickers. "You owe me explanations!"

"I do."

Oh. That makes me falter. My anger leaves me as quick as it surged and exploded out of me. "Well, when am I going to get them?" I demand, hands on hips, trying to act like I'm still pissed. *No, not act like it. I am still pissed. I have every right to be.*

"Not now. Dinner's ready." He puts the notebook on the table by the door and reaches for the handle.

"Y-you can't just—" I splutter.

He pauses and looks back over his shoulder at me, the barest hint of amusement washing over his face, before his expression is carefully blank once more.

"What can't I do, Miss Van der Zee?" He raises a brow in challenge.

I ignore the way my heart races at him calling me that and try to focus on my confusing emotions. *Anger, Malia. You need to focus on the anger. Not... the other stuff he makes you feel.*

"You can't just...kiss me and leave me hanging. You've been avoiding me for days. It isn't fair."

He releases the door handle and turns back to face me, stepping closer, invading my space, and looking down on me. "And what exactly made you the most upset? The fact that I kissed you? Or the fact that I didn't come back for more?"

I gape at him. At his sheer audacity. Is he for real right now?

I take a deep breath and stand tall. He still towers over me, but I'm done cowering before him. "I'm upset because you asked me to trust you, promised me answers, and have deliberately avoided me since, so that you

don't have to keep up your end of the bargain!"

"I—" he takes a breath and then all of the fight seems to leave him. His shoulders sag and he looks ashamed of himself. "You're right."

"I am?" I blink.

"I have been avoiding you," he admits.

"Oh." I expected more of a fight. "Because you don't want to tell me the truth?"

"No, Malia." He shakes his head, and I swear my heart flips at him using my first name like that. "You deserve answers, and I want to give you them. I just don't have them all yet."

"I don't need everything..." I whisper. "Just give me...something."

"I know. I realise that now. And I'll give you what I can. Soon. I promise. Just...trust me a little longer, okay? I'm doing my best to get answers for you."

"But you could have just said that, instead of avoiding me and making me think..." I stop my stupid tongue from running away with itself.

"What did I make you think?" he asks, reaching out to cup my cheek in his hand. My heart pounds so hard it feels like it's going to burst out of my chest.

"It doesn't matter," I mumble, staring at the floor.

"You think I regret kissing you?" He strokes his thumb over my cheekbone.

Feeling brave, I raise my gaze to his. "Don't you?"

"I shouldn't have kissed you."

"So you *do* regret it."

"Never. I've been avoiding you because I don't trust myself around you. Not because I didn't want to give you answers, but because I want to kiss you again. And I know that if I'm around you, my control will snap. And I'll not stop."

Oh. Oh. What do I say to that?

I blink and he's right before me, somehow closer than before. My breath catches as he leans in.

"Malia—" he sounds pained. Agonised.

I know how he feels. This push and pull between us is too much. The constant hot and cold. His oil to my water. The gasoline threatens to combust between us...I feel like if we gave in, the world would burn.

It would be worth it.

I close the gap between us. Our lips are close enough to touch, if one of us just gives in that final millimetre...

“Dinner’s ready!” A shout goes up outside, making us jump apart, like we were just caught doing something forbidden. Which I guess we were. Or almost were. Fake or not, to the outside world, the professor is my teacher and I’m his student. I shouldn’t want him the way I do. We shouldn’t be getting close like this.

The professor seems to realise that at the same moment I do. He drops his hand from my face like I burnt him, and takes a large step back. The distance between us allows me to breathe, but I can’t hide my sigh of disappointment.

I want to push him, want him to surrender, want to know what his control snapping will look and feel like. I think I need to know more than he does.

I want him to kiss me again.

Every thought must be written plain on my face judging by his reproachful look.

“You’re trouble.” He shakes his head. “Fuck. Let’s eat.”

Before I can reply, he’s out the door and gone, once again leaving me reeling.



Watching Malia over dinner makes me want to throw my burger down and drag her back to the cave. She's lost her sparkle, and I don't know why. I hope she's not regretting what we did.

Sure, she's smiling. But even an idiot could see that it's forced. She's only joining in with the conversation when she's prompted to, and she seems a million miles away.

Is it because the professor has joined us for dinner? She seemed disappointed when he didn't join us for a surf, but now his presence seems to be making her uncomfortable, and I hate that.

I wish I could get her to open up to me like she did when she thought I was her therapist. There's no denying that our relationship has moved forward since she discovered the truth, but in some ways it feels like we've taken a huge step backwards into the territory of being virtual strangers once more.

Fuck. How do I put things right?

I watch as Malia pushes her food around her plate, barely taking a bite. Something is definitely bothering her, and I want to know what it is. I reach across the table and take her hand in mine. She looks up at me, surprise written all over her face. I can see the unshed tears in her eyes, and it breaks my heart. I know that whatever has happened has hurt her deeply, and I want to make it better.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask softly, squeezing her hand.

Malia shakes her head, refusing to meet my eyes. “It’s nothing,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s obviously not nothing,” I counter. “Talk to me, please. I miss that.”

She takes a deep breath, and her lips tremble as she speaks. “It’s the professor,” she says finally.

I feel a surge of protectiveness towards Malia, and a burning anger towards the prof for hurting her. Again. “What did he do to you?” I ask, my voice low and deadly.

Malia shakes her head once more. “I thought I was over...it all, but seeing him again... it’s brought everything back. I still don’t have answers.”

My heart sinks as I listen to her words. I know all too well the pain of not having answers. And it’s so much worse for her. We’ve still not come clean. Asking her to blindly trust us isn’t fair. I can see how much the secrets we keep are hurting her, and I’d give anything to put things right between us, but the professor gave his orders. We’re not to tell her anything until he says so. But we’re running out of time. I can feel it.

“Malia—”

“It’s okay, Reef. I’m being silly. The professor asked me to trust him a little longer while he gets answers, and I agreed that I would. I just didn’t expect to feel so...down about it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Still, I wish I could help. Make you feel better somehow.”

“I could do with a distraction. Do you maybe want to watch a film or something after dinner?”

“Absolutely.” I grin at her. “Want to ask the others to join us?”

She shrugs. “We can. Or you could maybe show me your room? I remember the professor saying you have a view of the forest. I’d love to see that.”

“We can watch a movie in my room, and of course I’ll show you the view.”

She immediately brightens, and I get a surge of warmth for being the guy to make her feel that way. We share a smile and return to our dinner, this time Malia’s much more present, laughing and joining in with Cove teasing Bhodi. Even the professor cracks a joke or two.

Malia fits into our group so well. She’s a perfect addition. I just wish it could last.

“Shall we?” I ask Malia once all the dinner things have been cleared away. She’s sitting beside a small campfire, practically in Cove’s lap, toasting marshmallows.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” She tries to extract herself from his embrace, but he wraps his arms even tighter around her waist and grins at me.

“Let her finish her s’mores first.”

“How many of those have you had?” I’ve been washing up and cleaning down the BBQ for a while.

“Not as many as Bhodi,” Malia giggles.

Bhodi comes out of the house, clutching his stomach and groaning.

“I’m never eating so much sugar again,” he complains. I laugh and shake my head. It’s always the same whenever we make s’mores. He overindulges and regrets it afterwards, but he never learns his lesson. “Where are you off to, pretty little dot?”

Malia flushes, and I don’t think it’s from the warmth of the fire. “Reef and I are going to watch a film.”

He brightens. “Oooh, I could watch a movie—”

“In my room,” I interject flatly. His face falls.

“Haven’t you stolen her away enough today already?” he grumbles.

“It was my idea actually,” Malia pipes up.

“Well, why can’t we all watch the film together in the lounge?”

“I want to see the view from Reef’s room.”

“In the dark?” He scowls.

I laugh. “Bho, your jealousy is showing. Check yourself.”

“I’m just saying, I think we should be sharing.”

Even in the firelight I can see Malia turn bright red. Interesting. “We *are* sharing, idiot. Tonight’s my turn. You’ve had weeks with her already, I’m playing catchup.”

“Umm, we can just watch the film in the front room, it’s no big deal. I guess it is kinda dark to look at the forest anyway,” Malia offers.

Bhodi grins, “See!”

“No. We’ve made plans, you’re just going to have to lump it, Bhodi. If you want one-on-one time with Malia, you have to ask her out.”

“Am I allowed out?” she asks quietly.

“If you’re with one of us, of course.”

“Have breakfast with me, little dot?” Bhodi demands.

“S-sure. I’d love to.”

“I’ll call for you in the morning then.”

“Call for me?”

“Yeah, knock on your bedroom door and collect you like a proper gentleman.”

“Oh.”

“Might want to knock on my door. It’s pretty late. We might fall asleep watching the movie.”

Bhodi scowls and flips me the bird. I laugh.

“Goodnight, guys,” Malia tells Bhodi and Cove. Cove squeezes her and pulls her in for a kiss, making Bhodi splutter in protest. With a sweet smile, Malia gets to her feet, crosses to Bhodi and wraps him in a hug before kissing him too. He’s so taken aback that she’s already pulling away before he realises what’s happening.

“You good, Malia?” I ask, holding out my hand for her to take again. I love holding her hand, the feel of her tiny, delicate bones in mine brings out some fierce protective urge in me.

“I’m good. Better than good.”

“Excellent.”

I lead Malia away from the starry night sky and the beach bonfire, and back to the house. We pass through the silent house – the professor having disappeared shortly after dinner – and up the stairs. I guide Malia to my room and open the door, leaving the lights off so that she can see the view better in the dark though the wall of windows opposite.

“Oh wow,” she gasps. Her fingers slip from mine and she crosses the room to stare out at the forest and the stars beyond. “This is spectacular.”

“Yeah, it is,” I agree. I never tire of this view. There’s no drapes or blinds on the windows, just the ability to turn the glass opaque at the touch of a button. I rarely use it though, because the beach and surrounding forest is always so deserted thanks to the wards we keep in place. And anyway, why would anyone want to close off this view?

“I thought Cove’s view was spectacular, but this is just as breathtaking.”

I smile at her even though her attention isn’t on me, and cross to my bed. Sitting down on the mattress, I watch Malia in silence for a few moments.

She looks so small and fragile, like a porcelain doll. Her long, brightly coloured hair cascades down her back in soft beach waves, and her skin glows in the moonlight. There’s a stirring in my groin as I watch her, and I can’t help but wonder what she’d look like naked, spreadeagled in my bed.

Suddenly, Malia turns around and looks at me, as if she can feel my gaze on her. I quickly avert my eyes, feeling a flush rise to my cheeks. But when I look back at her, I realise that she’s smiling.

“What?” I ask, feeling self-conscious.

“Nothing,” she says, still smiling. “It’s just...I don’t think I’ve ever seen you blush before.”

My cheeks burn even harder at that. “I’m not blushing,” I mumble.

Malia walks over to the bed and sits down beside me. “Yes, you are,” she says, her voice low and seductive. “And I like it.”

I turn to face her, my heart beating faster. The air between us feels charged with electricity, and I can’t help but lean in closer to her. Malia meets me halfway, her lips a mere breath away from mine.

Without thinking, I close the distance between us and kiss her. Her lips are soft and warm, and taste like the sea salt we’d been swimming in earlier. Her fingers thread through my hair, pulling me closer as we deepen the kiss.

We fall back onto the bed, our bodies pressed together as we explore each other’s mouths. My hands roam over her curves, feeling the softness of her skin under my fingertips. I can feel my arousal growing, and I know that I want her.

Breaking the kiss, I sit up and pull off my shirt. Malia follows suit, her nimble fingers undoing the buttons of her own blouse. Soon, we’re both naked and pressed together once more, our bodies slick with sweat.

I kiss down her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin as I make my way to her breasts. Her nipples are hard and begging for attention, and I take one between my lips, sucking gently.

Malia moans, her back arching off the bed. “Oh, god,” she gasps. “Don’t stop.”

I switch to her other breast, giving it the same attention before trailing kisses down her stomach to the apex of her thighs, and bury my face between her legs, tasting her sweetness as I flick my tongue over her clit.

Malia cries out, her fingers tangling in my hair as she pulls me closer. “Yes,” she moans. “Just like that.”

I could never tire of her taste, she’s addictive. I continue to lick and suck, bringing her closer and closer to the edge of orgasm. Her hips lift off the bed, seeking more of the delicious friction I’m providing.

When she finally comes, her body trembles beneath me. I crawl up her body, kissing her as I push my hard length into her tight, wet heat. Malia wraps her legs around my waist as I thrust into her, our bodies moving as one.

Her insides tighten around me, her pleasure rising with each thrust. She arches her back, digging fingers into my shoulders as I drive into her harder. My own orgasm is building, and I know this is going to be the best one ever.

A few more thrusts and then I throw my head back, letting out a groan as I reach my peak. I shudder as I fill her, the pleasure pulsing through me like the most epic wave.

Malia gasps, her body quaking beneath me. “Reef,” she whimpers. “Oh god, Reef.”

I collapse on top of her, both of us breathing heavily. I can feel Malia’s heart racing beneath me, and I know that she’s just had an orgasm as intense as mine.

I roll off her, and pull her into my arms. Her head falls to my chest as she sighs, her breathing slowing to a more normal pace, and I run my hands over her hair, loving the feeling of her naked body against mine. “That was amazing,” I whisper, kissing the top of her head.

Malia smiles against my skin, snuggling closer to me. “It certainly was.”

I groan. “We better get cleaned up. Do you still want to watch that movie?”

“I’m too comfy to move,” she complains.

“Come on, let’s shower together,” I suggest.

“I can’t move.”

I climb out of bed, ignoring her whimpers of protest, and open my bedroom door. Checking the coast is still clear, I scoop Malia into my arms and carry her to the bathroom.

I’m on my best behaviour in the shower because it’s clear that my girl is done and needs her bed. Once we’re out and I’ve carefully towel dried her hair, I lead her back to my room and back to my bed.

“Do you want a shirt or something to sleep in?” I offer.

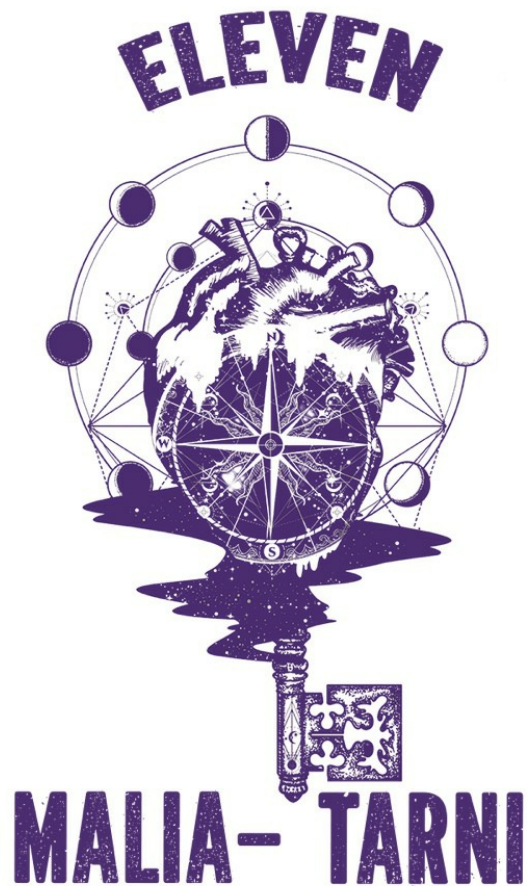
“No,” she says around a yawn. “Your arms will be perfect.”

Biting down the urge to tell her how perfect she is, I climb in beside her, pull the duvet up around us, and flick on the TV.

“Any preference on what movie you want to watch?”

She yawns again. “Anything. My eyes are already shut.”

I chuckle and kiss her, before switching off the TV and pulling her into my arms. My eyes drift closed, and I relax in her warm embrace. For the first time since I met her, I feel completely at peace.



I awake early the next morning, with Reef's strong arms around me. For a while I just lie there, enjoying the early almost-morning light starting to sneak in through the windows and admiring the vista beyond. I love dawn. Could never pick between sunrise and sunset. Both are beautiful in their own right and incomparable if you ask me.

Last night was amazing. Hell, the whole of yesterday was, if I'm honest. I can't believe how close to Reef I feel in such a short space of time. It sounds stupid to say I feel like I've known him forever, when I obviously haven't, but it's like something in his soul soothes mine. He's a perfect fit.

But I have a breakfast date to get ready for, and as much as I hate to leave the warmth of his bed and his arms, I'm looking forward to spending time with Bhodi too. I guess breakfast dates have kind of become our thing, and I'm excited to see what today's will entail.

Slipping from the bed with care so as not to wake Reef, I tiptoe across his room, snagging my clothes from last night. I grimace. I don't really want to

put them back on. It's only a short dash across the hallway. It's early. No one will see me, and besides, even if they do, I'm sleeping with three of them so surely it doesn't matter.

What about the professor? You're not sleeping with him – even though you want to.

I tell my brain to shut up. The professor has seen me naked before anyway. My skin heats remembering that moment, and then my blood boils when I recall what an asshole he was about the whole thing.

Clutching my clothes to my chest, I open the door, check the coast is clear, and then dart along the corridor to Cove's room.

I feel a touch of sadness when I see the bed's empty, guilty that he's given up his room to me indefinitely and I didn't even use it last night. I should talk to him about him moving back into his room. We could share a bed. Or I could...

What, rotate between the three of them on a nightly basis?

Shut up.

Shaking myself, I dump my dirty clothes in the laundry hamper and then pull a clean bikini, shorts and tank top from the drawer that Cove gifted to me.

Glancing at my phone, which someone has kindly plugged in to charge on the bedside table for me, I tap the screen to check the time. Disappointment washes over me when I see that there's no message from Summer. Feeling impulsive, I snatch it up and dial her number. It doesn't ring. There's no voicemail. It's just...dead.

That's odd.

I'm going to have to speak to the others about going to see her if I can't get hold of her, but for now I'll try sending her a quick email. To both her personal and her university address. Surely something will get through to her. I just want her to know that I'm not mad, I just need to know that she's okay if nothing else, but that I would really love to talk to her. I finish the email like I did my texts – by telling her that I love and miss her.

Done, I dart across the hallway to the bathroom to wash and brush my teeth, not needing another shower after last night.

I'm just finishing getting ready back in Cove's room, brushing my hair, when there's a gentle tap on my door.

"Come in," I call. Bhodi steps into the room, grinning. "What's got you

smiling like that?”

“You. You look amazing.”

“You were already smiling before you saw me,” I point out.

“I’m excited for our date.”

I raise a brow, not quite buying it. He’s not telling the whole truth.

He sighs. “Fine. And I just woke up Reef knocking on his door and he was upset that you’d already left without saying goodbye.”

“Reef’s upset with me?”

“More like, disgruntled he has to take care of his morning wood himself.”

“You’re gross.” I laugh despite myself and shake my head.

“Are you good to go?”

“Yeah. I’m looking forward to it actually. I was just thinking that breakfast dates are becoming our thing.”

“As excited as I am to have breakfast with you, I’d quite like to have a sleepover date too.”

I laugh. “I’m sure that can be arranged. So, what’s the plan?”

“Hmmm, well, I was going to take you to see the coves but Reef’s already done that.”

“We can still go. We didn’t ummm see much.”

Bhodi fixes me with a hard look. “I know that.”

I flush.

“But it’s okay because I have the next best thing planned. It’s a bit of a hike but we can take the golf buggy to get most of the way. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Let’s get going then, if we’re quick we might make it in time to see the sunrise.”

A few minutes later, we hop into the golf buggy and Bhodi drives us down a winding path. The sun begins to peek over the horizon as we make our way towards the trailhead. Bhodi grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

As we hike, Bhodi points out all the different types of plants and animals he recognises. He seems to know a lot about this place, and I can’t help but be impressed. He gets given a hard time from the others, but I think he’s actually pretty amazing. Eventually, we come to a clearing with a stunning view of the ocean. The sun is now fully up and the colours of the sky are breathtaking.

Bhodi pulls out a blanket he had packed and lays it on the ground. He invites me to join him, and we lie there together, watching the waves crash against the shore. I feel him staring at me and I turn my head to look at him. He leans in and kisses me softly.

The kiss quickly turns passionate and before I know it, Bhodi is on top of me.

“Umm, what happened to breakfast?” I ask with a breathless laugh, not really hating the way this trip has taken a change.

Bhodi grins down at me. “I have something else in mind for breakfast,” he says, his hand trailing down my body, hips grinding into mine. “Unless you’re not interested?”

My heart races as I look up at him, my mind already made up. “I’m definitely interested.”

Bhodi wastes no time, quickly removing our clothes and exploring my body with his hands and mouth. I moan loudly as he kisses his way down my neck, his fingers teasing between my legs. He makes short work of my orgasm, with quick, efficient strokes that have me trembling and crying out his name in no time at all.

I’m infinitely glad that Bhodi packed a blanket.

As we come together in a tangle of limbs and desire, I forget all about breakfast. For that moment, all that matters is the heat between us and the pleasure we’re giving each other.

I let out a soft moan as his lips trail down my neck once more, leaving a line of goosebumps in their wake. My fingers run through his hair, pulling him closer to me as I revel in the sensation of his body pressing against mine. His hands wander down my body, tracing the curves and valleys with practised ease, but it’s not enough. I’ve already had one orgasm, and now I want more.

“Stop teasing, Bho,” I beg.

“I’m not teasing, I’m exploring,” he replies with a mischievous grin. I’m seconds away from snapping something decidedly unsexy at him and have to bite my tongue instead.

“Bhodi, please.”

“Fuck, don’t beg like that, little dot. You make me lose control.”

“Good, I want you to lose control,” I tell him. “I want you buried to the hilt inside of me.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, lining himself up at my entrance. “Who ever would have thought that my little dot has such a filthy mouth.”

“So—”

“Don’t you dare apologise. I love it. What my little dot wants, she gets.”

He holds my face between his hands and leans in for a kiss. My lips move hungrily against his and I know I’m lost. The need inside of me is aching to be unleashed.

He reaches for the soft, round curves of my hips. He wraps his fingers around them and I let out a soft moan.

“Fuck it,” he murmurs, breaking away from our kiss.

“Wha—?” I don’t get any more words out as Bhodi slams into me, and my question morphs into a shout of surprise and pleasure.

“You’re so fucking warm,” he groans. “I could live inside your wet cunt forever.”

“Then why don’t you?” I ask, breathless. “Fuck me forever.”

I can hear the smile in his laugh and it makes me smile too.

“I can’t get enough of you, little dot,” he tells me as he thrusts into me. “You’re like a drug and I’m fucking addicted.”

I lean up to kiss him hungrily and he pulls me even closer to him, he’s so deep it steals my breath away, but that’s exactly what I asked for, so I’m not complaining.

“I love it,” I murmur against his lips as he picks up the pace.

“You’re mine,” he growls, thrusting hard and fast.

I lose myself in the moment, forgetting all about the world outside of this peak. As our bodies move together, the heat between us intensifies until it’s almost unbearable.

“Oh Bhodi, I’m so close.”

He keeps hitting that magical spot and I’m already lost.

“That’s it,” he moans. “Say you’re mine.”

“Oh, just like that, Bhodi,” I cry out. “Right there. I’m so close. Please—”

“You’re mine, little dot,” he tells me, his voice ragged. “Say it. Tell me you’re mine and I’ll let you come again.”

“Bhodi!”

“Say it,” he growls in warning.

“I’m yours, okay! I’m fucking yours, Bhodi, please!”

“Fuck yes,” he grunts. “Come for me, little dot. That’s it.”

I come undone. My body spasms and I clench around him as he surges into me, driving me right over the edge of my orgasm. I throw my head back in ecstasy as we reach our peak, my body tingling with pleasure. Bhodi follows me into euphoria and collapses on top of me.

As we come down from our high, we lie next to each other, our breathing slow and steady.

“How do you feel, little dot?” he asks between breaths, reaching over and taking my hand, his fingers entwining with mine.

“That was amazing,” I say softly. My eyes meet his and I smile, then my stomach ruins the moment by growling loudly. We both laugh.

“Guess I better feed you, little dot, before you go all hangry on me.”

“I could eat,” I say nonchalantly, not fooling anyone.

“I could eat you,” he retorts, making me blush.

“Bhodi,” I groan.

Seriously, how is it that during sex I think his dirty words are so hot, but the moment we’re done and he talks like that, I just want the ground to swallow me whole?

He laughs again and starts to unload breakfast from his backpack. I sit up and pull my clothes back on, too self-conscious to sit on the side of a mountain naked while eating breakfast. Bhodi doesn’t seem to care though. He lets it all hang out with zero shame. I sort of wish I could be more carefree like him sometimes. But then I remember that old Malia would never be on a date with a guy, let alone having sex out in the open air with multiple boyfriends.

Maybe I’m a little more carefree these days than I give myself credit for.

“What’s for breakfast then?” I ask.

“Only the breakfast of champions with this view.”

“English bacon sarnies?” I ask hopefully.

“Better.”

“Better than bacon? I don’t think so buddy. The sex must have addled your mind because nothing beats bacon, ever.”

Bhodi grins and passes me a bowl and spoon.

“Coco Pops?” I ask, staring down at the cereal he’s made for me.

“Coco Pops *with* sugar,” he clarifies.

“Umm, they’re chocolate flavoured, Bho. They don’t need sugar.”

“The sugar’s for you, not them. You need it. Besides, it tastes amazing.”

“Okay,” I reply dubiously, before deciding that eating chocolate cereal with extra sugar on isn’t the wildest thing I’ll have done today and trying it. “Fuck, that’s actually really good.”

He beams at me. “Told you!”

We sit in silence with just the crunch of our cereal providing the soundtrack to the magnificent view before us. It’s actually perfect.

When we’ve finished and Bhodi has bagged up the breakfast things to take home and wash, I turn to him.

“Do we need to be getting back for class?”

“Nope.”

I raise my brow at him. “Seriously? The professor will be pissed.”

“Malia, you’re not going to class anymore.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s not safe. Even when I was with you, you got taken. We’re not risking that again.”

“It was the police!”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re all in agreement with this.”

“But we’re out now. How is me being here on this cliff any different to me being in class with you beside me?”

“You need to lie low. This is secluded. A campus full of people isn’t.”

“This sucks.”

Bhodi nods sympathetically. “I know, but it’s for your own safety.”

I sigh, knowing he’s right. It’s hard to accept that my life has completely changed because of something that I still don’t understand. But I also know that I’m lucky to have Bhodi and the others looking out for me.

“What am I supposed to do then?” I ask, feeling lost.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says with a reassuring smile. “For now, just enjoy the view and the sunshine. And maybe we can find something fun to do later.”

I nod, trying to push away the feeling of helplessness that’s been creeping up on me. Bhodi is right, for now, I just need to focus on the present and enjoying the moment.

As we sit quietly, staring out at the breathtaking view, a sense of calm washes over me. Despite everything that’s happened, I’m here with Bhodi, happy and alive. And that’s worth everything.

Suddenly, Bhodi looks over at me with an intense gaze. He reaches over

to take my hand in his, sending tingles up my arm.

“Malia,” he says softly. “I don’t want you to worry about anything. I’m here for you, okay?”

I turn to face him, my heart racing. His eyes are so full of sincerity that I can’t help but flush.

“Bhodi,” I start, but he cuts me off with a kiss.

His lips are warm and soft against mine, sending shivers down my spine, his hands running through my hair, pulling me in closer. We kiss for what feels like hours, lost in each other.

“Bhodi,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

“Yes, Malia?”

I take a deep breath, gathering the courage to say what I really want to say.

“I don’t want to hide anymore. I want to live my life without fear. I want to be able to go to class, to walk down the street, to do normal things without constantly looking over my shoulder. I need answers. I need to know what this danger is and what the threat is. I also want to be with all of you, openly and without reservation.”

Bhodi’s eyes widen, but then a small smile forms on his lips. “Malia, I want that too. I want to be with you, in every way possible.”

I get a rush of excitement and nervousness all at once. Could it be possible that we can be together, without fear or hiding?

“I know it won’t be easy,” Bhodi continues. “But we’ll figure it out, together. I promise. Just give us a little longer.”

I lean in for another kiss, feeling more alive and hopeful than I have in a long time. Maybe, just maybe, there’s a way for me to be free again.



Bless the guys for trying to take my mind off things, but I'm bored. I like learning. I want to go to class.

The first week at home was good. I was grateful for the rest and the guys took it in turns to keep my days filled and busy. We had fun, did lots of surfing, had way too much sex...but as I approach the end of my second week stuck at home, I'm starting to feel like a restless caged animal.

I need freedom.

And to make matters worse, the prof has been missing since our BBQ on the beach. I'd like to think it's because he's busy trying to find answers for me, but I can't help but think he fed me a line and I fell for it. He's avoiding me again to get out of having to give me answers, and for every day that he's gone, my frustration grows.

And I *still* can't get hold of Summer. I've tried calling, texting, emailing, reaching out on all of her socials, and nothing. Not a word from her. She hasn't even posted online in weeks and that's so unlike her. I'm worried.

Even though she treated me horribly, she's still my friend. Or I'm still hers. Whatever.

I'm concerned for her.

I stare out of the window, watching the waves crash against the shore, feeling the sting of salt in my nostrils. I need to get out of this damn house, I need to breathe in some fresh air. I grab my phone and rush out of the room, hoping that one of the guys is available to take me out for a bit.

The first one I find is Cove and he greets me with a warm, genuine smile. "Mai-Tai! How are you?"

"Struggling. Want to get some fresh air with me?"

"Of course."

Cove and I make our way to the beach, walking side by side in silence. The wind whips through my hair and I breathe in deeply, letting the cool air fill my lungs.

Cove breaks the silence. "What's been going on, Mai-Tai?"

I hesitate for a moment before deciding to confide in him. "I just feel stuck, you know? Like I'm not moving forward in my life. And to make things worse, I still don't have answers."

Cove nods understandingly. "I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe a change of scenery will do you some good."

We continue walking, the sound of the waves lulling me into a sense of peace. Before I know it, Cove has led me to a secluded area of the beach, away from the house but in the opposite direction to the caves Reef took me to. We sit together on the sand, watching the sun set.

"I'm worried about Summer," I tell him after several minutes of silence. "She's not been online at all, which isn't like her. And she's ignoring all of my calls and messages."

"Maybe she feels guilty about what she did?" he suggests.

"Maybe. But...I'm worried something more serious might have happened to her. Are girls still disappearing?"

"There hasn't been any disappearances in a while," he admits.

"Oh, since when?" Cove looks uncomfortable and my heart falls. "Since I stopped going to class, right?"

"It might just be a coincidence, Malia. But it's part of the reason we want to keep you away from there. I know you're frustrated about being stuck with us, and worried for your friend. But I need you to promise me that no matter

how fed up you get, you won't go back to campus."

"I won't," I promise, meaning every word. I have no desire to repeat my time in police custody, and I don't want to be responsible for more missing – or worse, dead – girls.

"Good. We'd do anything to keep you safe, you know?"

"I know. And I appreciate everything you guys have done for me. I probably don't say it enough, but thank you."

"You never have to thank us, Malia."

"Because you're just doing your job?"

"Because we're all crazy about you and want to keep you safe."

His words make me feel warm inside.

As the sun sets, the sky turns to shades of pink and orange, casting a warm glow on our faces. Cove looks at me with intense eyes, and for a moment, my heart races and my worries slip away. I can't deny the attraction between us, but I also know that now is not the time.

Cove seems to sense my thoughts because he clears his throat and stands up. "We should probably head back now. Don't want the others to worry about us."

I nod in agreement and stand up too.

As we walk back to the house, I can't shake off the feeling that Cove wants to say something more. But he remains silent, and I don't push him.

When we reach the house, he gives me a small smile and pats my shoulder. "Get some rest, Mai-Tai."

"Actually I wondered if you wanted to cook together?"

Cove blinks at me and then smiles - a genuine one this time. "That would be great. Did you have anything in mind? The fridge is pretty well stocked."

"Umm, I was thinking maybe tacos?"

"Great choice. I'll text the professor."

"Why?" I squeak.

"Tacos are his favourite. There's no way he'll miss this."

"Ummm, okay." My stomach flips at the thought of seeing him again. "Shall I tell the others?"

"Yeah, you can do. They're in the basement."

"You guys have a basement?" I frown. "I've been here how long? How didn't I know that?"

Cove laughs. "It's not huge. There's a small gym down there. Reef and

Bhodi will be sparring.”

“S-sparring?”

“Yeah, like fighting. Bhodi has a fight coming up soon and Reef has been helping him train.”

“Bhodi fights?”

Another laugh. “Yes. Go see for yourself. It’s the door beside the stairs.”

“I thought that was where you guys kept the Hoover.”

Cove chuckles and shakes his head. “No, that’s in the laundry room. Which is also in the basement. You’ll see it.”

I nod, feeling my cheeks heat with embarrassment. I should have known better. It’s not like I’m a stranger to this place. I’ve been living here for a couple of months now. But ever since I met Cove and the others, it feels like I’m constantly discovering new things about them.

As I make my way to the basement, sounds of grunting and heavy breathing come from down the corridor. The door is slightly ajar, so I push it open and peek inside. What I see takes my breath away.

Reef and Bhodi are shirtless, their well-toned bodies glistening with sweat as they spar in the centre of the room. I watch in awe as Bhodi lands a punch to Reef’s stomach, causing him to grunt in pain. But Reef quickly recovers and delivers a blow to Bhodi’s jaw, sending him stumbling backwards.

My heart pounds as I watch them, transfixed by the raw power and intensity of their movements. It’s like they’re in their own world, completely oblivious to my presence.

Bhodi catches sight of me and smirks. “Hey, little dot. Enjoying the view?”

My cheeks burn. “I, uh, didn’t mean to interrupt. Cove said you guys were down here.”

Reef glances over at me, a smirk on his lips. “Don’t be shy, Malia. Come join us.”

I worry my lip, feeling a little overwhelmed. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What’s the matter? Afraid you’ll get hurt...sweaty...dirty?” Bhodi teases, his eyes glinting with amusement.

I shake my head. “No, I just don’t want to get in the way.”

Reef steps towards me, his eyes boring into mine. “Trust me, you won’t

be in the way. We'd love to have you join us."

My body tingles at his words. The thought of being that close to Reef, feeling the heat of his body against mine, sends shivers down my spine.

Before I can even process what's happening, Reef is standing in front of me, his hand extended. "Come on, Malia. Let's see what you're made of."

I hesitate for a moment as a mix of nerves and excitement course through me. But then I take a deep breath and reach out to take Reef's hand.

As soon as our hands touch, a jolt of electricity shoots through me, making me gasp and the lights above us surge. Reef's eyes widen in surprise, but then he grins and tugs me towards him.

"Okay, focus," Reef mutters under his breath, his words carrying a blend of determination and concern. Unsure if his words are meant for me or himself, I allow him to guide me onto the mat, positioning me directly across from Bhodi. With a careful touch, he adjusts my stance, ensuring my body is aligned for optimal power and stability and then he retrieves some gloves from a stand over on the far wall.

"All right, Malia," Reef says, his voice steady and encouraging as he pushes the gloves onto my hands. "When facing someone bigger like Bhodi, remember that technique and precision matter more than brute force. You have the advantage of speed and agility. Let's work on your punches."

He steps back slightly, creating a comfortable distance between us. "Start with your jab. Extend your lead hand straight ahead, keeping your elbow slightly bent. Aim for the centre of your opponent's chest or chin. Remember to snap it back quickly to guard your face."

I mimic his movements, my focus sharpening as I concentrate on Bhodi before me but just out of reach. With Reef's guidance, I throw a series of jabs, feeling the satisfying impact of my glove against an imaginary target.

"Good, Malia," Reef praises, his voice filled with genuine encouragement. "Now, let's add some power and variety to your punches. Shift your weight forward, rotating your hips as you repeat the movements. Your rear hand will be your power punch. Drive it straight out, turning your shoulder and pivoting your back foot for maximum force."

Following his instructions, I unleash a series of cross punches, each one stronger than the last. I expected to feel awkward and clumsy, but I don't. This somehow feels natural. I feel strong. Confident. The sound of my gloves meeting the air echoes in the training room, and fuels my determination to

succeed at this.

“Excellent,” Reef commends, his eyes shining with pride. “Now, remember to move. Use your footwork to circle around Bhodi, avoiding his reach and searching for openings. Stay light on your feet, ready to pivot and counter. And don’t forget to protect yourself. Keep your guard up at all times.”

As I absorb Reef’s advice, his presence becomes a source of reassurance and strength. Together, we continue to practise, honing my punches and footwork, preparing me for the challenge that awaits.

In that moment, with Reef’s guidance, a newfound confidence surges through me. I’m ready to face Bhodi, armed with technique, speed, and the unwavering support of my mentor.

Bhodi, however, seems unfazed by my efforts. He smirks, as if my attempts are nothing more than playful jabs. His overconfidence annoys me, igniting a new determination to prove him wrong.

With Reef’s guidance, I keep circling, searching for an opening. And then, unexpectedly, an opportunity presents itself. Bhodi lowers his guard for just a moment, and I seize the chance. In a split second, I shift my weight, channelling all the force from my core into a powerful cross.

The impact is greater than any of us anticipated. My glove connects with Bhodi’s chin with a resounding thud. He stumbles back, his eyes widening in surprise, momentarily stunned by the force of the punch.

Reef’s jaw drops, his eyes wide with astonishment. He didn’t expect me to land a hit like that, and I see pride and excitement in his gaze. I’ve surprised *all* of us.

I don’t waste any time revelling in the moment. Instead, I use the opening to my advantage. Before Bhodi can fully recover, I follow up with a quick combination of punches, driving him back even farther.

Reef’s voice breaks through the intensity of the moment. “Keep going, Malia! You’ve got this!”

I keep up the attack, my fists moving with newfound determination. The adrenaline rushes through my veins, fueling my every move. Bhodi, caught off guard, struggles to defend against the barrage of punches.

For a moment, I forget that we’re sparring and imagine Bhodi as the man who haunted my past. Every punch carries the weight of my past pain and fear, and I’m unleashing it all on him. My father.

But just as quickly as the fury consumes me, Reef's words bring me back to the present. "Malia, ease up!"

Realising the force behind my punches, I pull back, giving Bhodi a chance to regain his balance. He looks a bit shaken, but a fire of determination now burns in his eyes too. This is no longer a simple training session; it has become a clash of wills.

Bhodi takes a deep breath, his smirk replaced with a more dangerous expression. The atmosphere in the room has shifted, and we both know that this sparring session just got a lot more intense.

I turn to Reef, panting hard and pulling the gloves off.

"Sorry." I cringe. "I don't know what came over me."

Reef pulls me towards him and I stumble into his arms, my cheek crashing into his bare chest. Fuck, how is possible that he looks and feels and smells this good? The urge to taste him is overwhelming.

Bhodi steps up behind me, the heat from his body pressing into mine. I whimper, caught between them like some kind of filling in a sexy man sandwich, and I have no idea where to look, so I close my eyes and hope for the best.

Reef's arms wrap tightly around me, his hands resting on my lower back. I can feel his muscles flexing as he steadies me. I can't help but nuzzle my face against his chest, taking in his intoxicating scent.

Bhodi's hands slide down to rest on my hips, his breath hot against my ear. "Relax, little dot. We won't hurt you."

I shiver at the sound of his voice, my muscles trembling. "I-I'm not sure I can do this," I stammer, feeling completely out of my depth.

Reef's fingers trail up and down my spine, sending tingles down my body. "Just trust us, Malia. We won't let anything happen to you."

I nod, but their words don't really fill me with confidence. The whole atmosphere of the room has changed and the air feels charged with anticipation. My heart is racing. This is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. But I know that I need to be strong if I want to keep up with Reef and Bhodi. They circle around me like predators, their eyes never leaving my form.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, but it's no use. The adrenaline pumping through my veins makes me feel alive in a way that I never have before.

Reef is the first to make a move, lunging towards me with lightning speed. I dodge out of the way, but his hand still grazes across my cheek. The touch sends a shiver down my spine, making me gasp.

Bhodi takes advantage of my distraction, coming at me from behind. He wraps his arms around my waist, turning me into his chest and pulling me tightly against his body. Heat radiates off his skin onto mine, making me dizzy with need.

I try to break free, but his hold on me is too strong. Reef comes up behind me, his arms wrapping around my chest. I whimper as I feel the pressure of his muscles against me.

“You’re doing great, Malia,” Reef whispers in my ear, his breath caressing my skin.

Bhodi slides his hands down to my thighs, then lifts me off the ground. I gasp as he presses me against the hardness of his erection through his shorts.

Reef’s hands slide down to my hips, holding me steady as Bhodi grinds against me. My body feels like it’s on fire as the friction between us builds.

Bhodi presses his lips against my neck, his teeth grazing against my throat. I moan at the press of Reef’s lips on the other side of my neck, his tongue tracing patterns against my skin.

I’m completely lost in the moment, the feel of their bodies against mine driving me wild with desire.

How far can this go? I already feel way out of my depth.

The pressure of his arousal increases, rubbing against me until I’m sure there’s going to be a wet spot on my underwear.

“Malia, are you alright?” Reef whispers, his voice filled with concern.

“She’s fine,” Bhodi says, his voice husky with lust. “This is what we all want.”

Do they realise how much touching me like this is driving me crazy?

“Malia?” I jerk when Cove’s voice reaches me from the doorway. “Are you coming-oh.”

I cringe. Shit. I was supposed to be finding the guys for a reason. To tell them we’re making tacos, not to get stuffed like one!

“Shit, sorry, Cove. I, umm, got distracted.”

“I can see that,” he chuckles, not sounding like he minds in the slightest. “It looks like quite a show.”

I burn with embarrassment, especially as the guys still have me

sandwiched and held up between them.

“Umm, guys you can put me down,” I mutter.

“No can do,” Bhodi says with a cheeky wink.

“I’m meant to be cooking dinner with Cove.”

“I’m sure Cove would rather do this than cook. He can join us.”

I fucking melt and groan.

“As amazing as that sounds, I already texted the professor and he’s on his way for tacos. I’m not sure how he’ll react if he arrives and thinks tacos was a code word for orgy.”

I didn’t think it was possible to feel more mortified, but that’s done it. I wriggle in Reef’s arms and eventually Bhodi releases my legs so that I can stand.

“We better get cooking then,” I tell Cove.

“I fucking love tacos!” Bhodi cries.

“I would have loved where this was leading more,” Reef whispers in my ear. I shiver.

“Rain check?” I offer on a shaky breath.

“Oh absolutely, Malia. I’ll hold you to that.”

Still squirming with need and discomfort, I follow Cove out of the basement and back up to the kitchen.

“Do you need a minute?” he asks.

“No. I’m fine,” I tell him. “But I’m going to wash my hands because the guys were both really sweaty.”

He laughs as I do just that and then turns to the table where Cove’s got everything we need out ready.

“What do you want me to do?”

“You can fry off the meats and I’ll make a salad, some pico de gallo and some guac. Sound good?”

“Yeah. Grate some cheese too, please?”

“Of course. This isn’t my first taco rodeo.”

“What meats am I doing?”

“Beef mince, chicken and prawns.”

“Wow. Impressive.”

“Hopefully. It should be good. Shall we?”

I nod and turn to the stove, choosing to fry off the mince first. Cove puts some music on, and we work in companionable silence.

As I fry off the beef mince, Cove continues to work on the pico de gallo and guac. The aroma of the sizzling meat mixes with the earthy smell of the spices, and I can already feel my mouth watering in anticipation. Cove hums to the beat of the music, his movements smooth and effortless.

“You’re a natural in the kitchen,” I remark, trying to fill the silence.

He chuckles. “I’ve had a lot of practice. Reef does most of the cooking for us, but I like to have a go at it too.”

“You’re a good man,” I say, a smile forming on my lips.

“I try to be,” he replies, his eyes locking onto mine. There’s something in his gaze that sends shivers down my spine, something that I can’t quite put my finger on.

Before I can ask, he turns away and continues chopping. I watch him work, admiring the way he moves with such ease and grace. It doesn’t take long to prepare everything, and we’re just setting the table when Reef and Bhodi come up from the basement. They’re still shirtless, and the sight makes my mouth water all over again.

“Do we have time for a quick shower?”

“Together?” I squeak.

Bhodi laughs. “No, little dot. The only person I share my showers with is you.”

I feel like such an idiot but Reef winks at me. “You can shower with me anytime you want, Malia. But there’s no way I’m sharing that tiny space with the big guy.”

“I’m a delight to shower with, ask Malia,” Bhodi calls over his shoulder as he takes the steps two at a time.

“Do not use all the hot water this time, dickhead!” Reef calls after him. I giggle, and he comes over to give me a chaste kiss on the lips. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Sorry about earlier. I don’t know what came over me. But you looked good enough to eat.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t exactly put up a fight,” I say.

Reef’s eyes darken with desire and I roll my lip between my teeth. Oh shit. Does he like that?

“Umm...”

“I’m going to go and flush the toilet to get Bhodi out of the shower quicker. Save a seat for me for dinner, okay? I want to sit by you.”

“Sure.” I nod.

“Great.” He gives me another quick kiss and then takes off after Bhodi.

Cove snorts.

“What?”

“We all have it so bad,” he admits.

“Not all of you,” I mutter quietly, thinking of the professor and his absence. If he really comes back just because of taco night, I don’t know whether to be pissed or pleased.

“Hmm, agree to disagree on that one. What would you like to drink with dinner?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

“Soda it is then.”

“Pop,” I tease.

“Soda, pop, I don’t care what you call it. But you sure are cute.”

I busy myself with straightening the plates on the table to hide my blush. It doesn’t matter how many compliments these guys give me, it doesn’t get any easier to take. I blame a lifetime of being put down and ridiculed by almost everyone in my life. I guess that kind of damage will take a while to undo. But I feel like the guys are genuine with their kind words.

The front door opens, and my heart stalls in my chest as the professor walks in. He looks incredibly handsome in dark denim jeans and a white shirt which really pops against his dark skin. He kicks off his flipflops in the doorway and I’m mesmerised by his bare feet. Holy shit he has pretty feet. Is that a thing? Can I say that?

He clears his throat, and I drag my gaze up his body to meet the amused expression on his face.

I quickly avert my gaze, feeling my cheeks heat up. I can’t believe I just got caught ogling my professor’s feet. I hope he doesn’t think I’m some kind of weirdo.

“Good evening, Professor,” I say, trying to sound composed.

“Good evening, Miss Van der Zee,” he replies, a hint of a smile playing on his tone. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

“No, not at all,” I say, gesturing towards the table. “We were just getting ready for dinner.”

He nods and takes a seat at the head of the table, his eyes scanning the plates and cutlery. “Looks like I’ve made it in time to enjoy a great meal.”

I'm saved from having to reply by Bhodi thundering down the stairs, still soaking wet and in just a towel.

Fuck my life, this really isn't fair.

He kisses me on the cheek, falls into the seat beside the professor and starts loading up his plate before Cove has even put the dish down.

"I'm starving."

I can't help but shake my head at Bhodi's lack of manners, but the professor just chuckles and begins to serve himself some food.

Shortly after, Reef joins us, taking the seat beside me, and Cove places the final dish on the table and sits on my left. The room is filled with the sound of clinking cutlery and the occasional slurp from Bhodi, who is clearly enjoying the meal. I don't blame him, it does taste amazing.

As we eat, the conversation flows easily between the five of us. We talk about everything from our favourite books to the latest news and gossip on campus. I find myself completely engrossed in the gossip, hanging on Bhodi's every word.

At one point, I catch the professor looking at me with an intensity that makes my heart skip a beat. I quickly look away, feeling heat rising to my cheeks once again.

After dinner, the others retire to the living room to relax, and I stay in the kitchen to clean up. Reef, Bhodi and Cove are deep in conversation about some new surfboard design, leaving me alone with the professor.

"I'm sorry about earlier," I say, feeling embarrassed.

The professor quirks an eyebrow in question, and I'm pretty sure he knows exactly what I'm referring to.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he replies, his voice smooth and low.

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. "You caught me staring at your feet. I hope you don't think I'm some kind of weirdo."

The professor steps closer to me, his eyes locking onto mine. "On the contrary, Miss Van der Zee, I found it rather...intriguing."

"I... I don't know what to say." Nervous energy floods my system, and my body doesn't want to be still.

"You don't have to say anything," he murmurs, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. The action makes me nearly combust.

His fingers linger on my skin, sending shivers down my spine. I can feel his breath on my neck as he leans in closer, his lips barely grazing my

earlobe.

“You’re a very intriguing young woman, Miss Van der Zee,” he whispers. “I can’t help but be drawn to you.”

I’m completely lost in his touch, his voice, his scent. I can feel myself melting in his embrace.

“Professor,” I breathe, my hands on his chest. “I...I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” he says, his voice low and husky. “Just let me take care of you.”

With that, he presses his lips to mine, and I’m falling deeper and deeper into his spell.

His kiss is like nothing I’ve ever experienced, all-consuming and overwhelming. It’s like he’s drinking me in, savouring every moment. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him even closer, and he responds with a groan.

We’re lost in each other, our bodies pressed together in a fiery embrace. My heart is beating so fast I’m sure he can feel it, but he doesn’t seem to mind. His hands are all over me, touching me in ways that make me gasp and whimper.

Suddenly, he pulls away from me, his eyes dark with desire. “Come with me,” he says, taking my hand.

I don’t hesitate as he leads me out of the kitchen and down the hallway. We come to a door I’ve never been through, and he opens it to reveal a dimly lit library. Seriously? How many more secrets is this house hiding?

A large desk sits in the centre of the room, surrounded by walls of books. There aren’t any windows in the room, just soft lighting. It’s cosy, and it shouldn’t surprise me that this is the professor’s space. It suits him somehow.

Without a word, the professor pulls me closer, and we kiss again, his hands roaming my body. I can feel his hard length pressing against me, and I know what he wants. I want it too.

He lifts me onto the desk, pushing aside books and papers to make room for us. He kisses me deeply, his tongue exploring my mouth as his hands slide my dress up, and his fingers tug at my underwear, desperate to get them off.

I moan as he touches me, his skilled hands making me feel things I’ve never felt before. He pulls away from the kiss, his eyes locking onto mine as

he slowly removes his own shirt, revealing a toned chest and washboard abs.

I stare, my mouth agape. His body is a work of art, and I feel grateful to be able to experience it. His chest is sculpted and toned, and I can't help but run my hands over it and down his abs. He groans in response, his hands still working their magic on me.

Without a word, he spreads my legs and sinks down between them, putting his mouth on me. He works me over with his tongue, making me gasp. I know I won't last long under his skilled touch.

Soon, I'm writhing beneath him, lost in a sea of pleasure. His mouth and hands are everywhere, and I feel like I'm going to explode.

And then I do, shuddering beneath him as he brings me to climax. He continues to work me over, bringing me to the edge again and again, until I'm begging him to stop.

"Please," I gasp, my body shaking. "I can't... I can't take anymore."

The professor looks up at me, his eyes almost black with desire, and I can't take my eyes off of him. He slowly rises to his feet and kisses me again, his mouth tasting of me. I shudder at the thought, wondering how in the hell I've managed to get myself into this situation. And loving every minute of it.

"Fuck. I shouldn't have done that," he says, scrubbing a hand over his face and grimacing.

"W-what?" I ask in dismay, the high of my orgasm crashing to the ground as I stare at him waiting for him to smile and crack a joke.

"I mean, you're still a student, and I'm your teacher. I can't do this."

"Oh." I don't know what else to say. I'm just willing my eyes not to well up. I feel so foolish. I've not seen him for weeks, I've been dying for answers, and the second he shows up, every single question I have flees my mind and I'm parting my legs for him like a whore just because he touched my hair and paid me a compliment.

"I'm sorry," he says, closing his eyes and pressing his fingers to his temple, as if he's in pain. "I have to go."

"No!" I cry out, reaching out to stop him, but he's already gone.

Tears sting my eyes, but they're tears of frustration and anger at myself. I'm such a fucking idiot. What the hell is wrong with me?

I pull my dress back down, stuffing my underwear into the pocket and then wrapping my arms around myself. It doesn't work. There's no warmth or comfort in my own embrace.

I'm such an idiot.

With silent tears falling steadily down my cheeks, I exit the professor's secret library room, closing the door softly behind me. Try as I might, I can't keep my quiet sobs in, and one escapes on a hiccup.

I'm planning to sneak up to my bedroom but that plan is scuppered when I turn and meet the angry gazes of Cove, Reef and Bhodi.

What are they doing here? Oh god, I don't want them to see me like this.

"What the hell did he do?" Bhodi demands.

I shake my head, unable to get the words out past the lump in my throat. "N-nothing," I manage on my third or fourth attempt at speaking. "It's fine. It's nothing. I'm g-going to g-go to b-bed," my voice breaks at the end and I turn and bolt for the stairs, too ashamed of myself to answer their pleas for me to stay and explain.

"I'll kill him," Bhodi growls as I disappear upstairs. "I'll fucking kill him for hurting her again."



“I think we’d better find out what’s happened,” Reef suggests.

“We don’t need to know what happened. All that matters is that Malia’s upset and that fucking dick is responsible. Again. I say we just beat the shit out of him.”

“Let’s go after him,” I suggest. “I think he owes us an explanation at least.”

“Good idea,” Bhodi agrees.

“Someone has to stay here with Malia,” Reef says.

“I don’t think she wants company,” Bhodi points out.

“Yeah, but we still can’t leave her alone. Bhodi, you stay.”

“What? No way! I want to kill the prof. I’m not missing out on all the fun.”

“It’s not going to be fun, idiot,” I snap. “You’re in the best position to protect Malia out of the three of us if anything happens.”

It works like a charm, Bhodi puffing out his chest like a proud peacock.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. It should be me who stays. I can protect her.”

“Great, glad we’ve settled that then,” Reef snorts.

“You guys have your phones on you, right?” Bhodi asks.

“Yeah. Call if you need us.”

“Will do, but I expect I’ll be fine. I’ll give Malia half an hour and then check if she’s alright, take her a drink or some chocolate or something.”

“Alright. Hopefully this won’t take long,” I say.

“Try and get him to apologise. He can’t keep upsetting her like this. It’s like every time we take a step forwards with her, he comes along and pushes us all back three paces. I’m sick of it.”

I agree with him, we say our goodbyes, and Reef and I leave the beach house.

There’s no sign of the professor on the beach, and the short walk to the garage reveals his car has gone. He usually only uses it in emergencies so I know this means he’s worked up.

“Shall we take the golf cart? He’s probably en route to a bar in town somewhere.”

I sigh, knowing Reef’s right. “Yeah. Let’s take the buggy, it’ll get us there quicker and can hopefully minimise the damage he does.”

Obviously, we take the prof’s modified golf cart, which gets us into town much quicker than the university’s standard issue, and it only takes three wrong turns before we find the prof in a dark backstreet bar.

He scowls and knocks his drink back when he sees us walk in, before signalling to the bartender for another. I shake my head. Great, he’s probably half cut already.

“Go home, kids,” he sighs when we approach him.

It gets my back up when he’s like this. Patronising. The age gap between us isn’t that pronounced and we sure as shit aren’t kids, even if we’re masquerading as students right now.

Reef claps him on the back a little harder than is necessary, and I spy an empty table in the back corner. Nodding to Reef to indicate that I’m going to grab it, I leave him to drag the prof over. We need to talk, and sitting at the busy bar is not the best place for it.

It takes a good five minutes for Reef to force the professor over, and when they join me, they’re both laden with drinks. Reef slides one over to me but the professor keeps his four to himself. Jesus.

“What the hell is going on? Why is Malia in tears at home?”

The professor scowls and takes a long drink.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

I scoff. “Malia isn’t the sort of girl who cries easily. You did that. I want to know why.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“What happened in your study?”

He mutters something I can’t make out and empties his glass. Before he can start the next one, Reef’s hand shoots out and grabs the glass closest to him, swiping it out of reach.

The professor growls – actually growls at him – and quickly swipes one of the others.

I shake my head. He’s so immature and petulant when he’s like this.

“Tell us. We need to keep her safe and this could contribute to that.”

“Fine.” The professor sighs. “But it won’t make any difference.”

“Let us be the judge of that.”

“Malia is leaking magic.” He pauses dramatically and we wait to see what he’s going to add, but that’s it. He finishes the second drink and grabs the third.

“And?” I press.

“And nothing,” he snaps, taking a sip.

“But we knew that. Or suspected it at least,” Reef points out calmly.

“And besides, she’s in our house. It doesn’t matter if there’s a little magic around,” I add.

“You don’t understand.”

“Then tell us,” I insist, exasperated.

“Malia...she...I...fuck.” He pours the third glass down his throat.

“Just spit it out.” I’m losing patience.

“I crossed a line with Malia.”

“What line?” Reef asks sharply.

“The line a teacher should never cross with his student.”

“Did she...consent?” I ask tentatively.

The professor throws his empty glass at me with force but I catch it.

“Of course she fucking did!” he snarls. “I’m not a goddamn monster.”

“Sorry, but you left her in tears! What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re supposed to know me better than that.”

“Sorry.”

“Why was she crying?” Reef interjects, trying to get the conversation back on track. “Did you hurt her?”

“Not intentionally. Not physically.”

“Just explain! Whatever you’ve done can’t be worse than what’s going through my head!”

The professor shoots me a withering glare. “Clearly, because apparently you think I’m a rapist now.”

“I don’t.”

“You did.”

“Just explain...please.”

I end up downing my own drink, wincing at the burn. How the hell does the professor drink this stuff like it’s water?

“I’ve been avoiding Malia.”

“No shit,” I mutter, but not quietly enough if the prof’s glare is anything to go by.

“When Malia was at the police station, I kissed her, in front of the officers, and I didn’t give a shit. Until after, when I realised how stupid and dangerous it was, especially with me presenting as her lawyer.”

“Okay,” Reef says slowly, still trying to piece things together.

“So I kept my distance, not wanting to make things worse. When Malia confronted me at the house, I almost kissed her again and I knew that it wasn’t enough to just avoid her around the house. I needed to leave and put physical distance between us.”

“So why did you come back today?” Good question. I nod at Reef.

“Tacos,” he deadpans. “I thought enough time had passed. I’m usually a master of control. I thought I had a handle on it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“The second we were alone it was like my resolve disintegrated, I couldn’t keep my hands off her. There was this magnetic pull, I was powerless to resist. I thought I’d die if I didn’t taste her.” He shakes his head. “It was some of the most powerful magic I’ve ever experienced.”

My eyes flick to Reef, and I know he’s thinking about the same thing I am. Earlier when Malia went to tell the guys about taco night and within a few minutes I found her in a compromising position sandwiched between him

and Bhodi. Not that there's anything wrong with that, it just seemed incredibly out of character for Malia.

Come to think of it, the past couple of weeks none of us have been able to keep our hands off her. I never thought it was magical, just the byproduct of us all finally being on the same page with her.

"Fuck," I whisper.

The professor nods in agreement. "I know. It's like she's a drug and I can't get enough. But I can't do this to her. It's not fair. I'm her teacher and her lawyer, for god's sake."

"That's not real though," Reef points out.

"It doesn't matter. To the public, those are our roles."

"I still don't understand why Malia was crying though."

"Because I stopped."

"And she didn't want you to?"

He shakes his head. "God knows why, but no. She thinks she likes me. She doesn't know that it's just the prophecy drawing us together."

"I disagree," I say hotly. "My feelings for Malia are genuine."

"Mine too," Reef agrees.

"Maybe. But that's because you've had time to get to know her, to forge a real connection. Malia and I have butted heads since day one. The attraction now is just the magic of the prophecy, trying to ensure it comes true and we save everyone."

I'm not convinced but I can tell there's no shifting his perspective on this. Vance isn't ready to believe he could fall in love, and no amount of telling him how real all of this is will bring him on board.

Reef leans forward, his eyes darkening. "So what are we going to do about this?"

"I don't know," the professor admits, looking defeated.

"I can't control myself around her. Maybe we need to bring in someone who can help with the magic aspect of this."

"Who?" I ask, feeling a sense of desperation rise within me. We need to fix this, and soon.

"I don't know," he repeats. "But we need to do something before we all lose control completely. Maybe I should go back to the elders."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," I say carefully.

Reef nods. "I agree. I don't want to bring Malia to the elders any sooner

than we have to. We're still not a hundred percent sure she's the star, and if they think she is, they'll speed up the timeline on this mission."

"I'm not ready to say goodbye," I say honestly. "The thought of trading Malia to the elders for world peace doesn't sit right with me."

The rest of the conversation is a blur as we try to come up with a plan. All I know is that we need to help Malia, in whatever way we can. She's the one at the centre of all of this, and we can't let her become collateral damage in our quest to save the world.

As we finish our drinks, a plan begins to take shape. We'll need to seek out someone who can help us understand the magic of the prophecy, someone who can guide us through the murky waters of our destiny, but someone who isn't from our world. That way we don't run the risk of word getting back to the elders that we're stalling on our mission. It won't be easy, but we have no choice.

"I'll start looking for someone," Reef says, breaking the strained silence that has descended upon us. "Maybe there's someone in town who can help us."

The professor nods in agreement, his expression grave. "Start with the doc. She's the most well connected supe we know. And in the meantime, we need to keep our distance from Malia. For her own sake."

I feel a pang of sadness at his words, but I know he's right. We can't keep putting Malia in danger like this. We need to get our shit together and figure out a way to break the spell that's binding us together.

As we leave the bar and step out into the night, the prof's phone rings once and then cuts off. He looks at the screen and frowns.

"Who was it?"

"Bhodi." The prof hits redial, putting the call on speaker, but it just rings out.

Unease washes over me as I exchange a look with Reef.

My phone starts to ring and I snatch it out of my pocket, just in time to see the caller display before the screen goes blank.

"Malia."

We're running to the prof's car without another word.



Not gonna lie, it cut me up seeing Malia upset like that. As much as I want to kill the professor for hurting her, I'm glad I was the one made to stay and watch over her.

I didn't expect her to let me in, but when I took some chocolate and a soda up to Cove's room, she surprised me by saying I could come in.

I stayed with Malia in the dark, quiet room for what felt like hours. Her sobs eventually turned into soft whimpers as she drifted off to sleep.

That probably should have been my cue to leave, but instead I find myself still sitting here, watching her chest rise and fall with every breath. I can't help but feel an overwhelming urge to protect her from any harm.

She looks so vulnerable. Her face, usually so strong and full of life, is now peaceful but marked with silvery tear tracks. Her hair lies in a tangled mess around her face. The sudden urge to run my fingers through her hair, to hold her in my arms and tell her everything will be okay is compelling.

But I can't do that. Not yet, at least. I have to keep a level head and make

sure she's safe. I don't want to take any chances.

A noise downstairs has me carefully extracting myself from Malia's sleeping form and tiptoeing out of the room. I check the time on my phone, surprised by how late it is, but glad that the guys are finally back. I sneak down the stairs, frowning when I find the house in darkness still with no sign of the guys or the professor.

"Hello?" I call softly, not wanting to wake Malia when she's finally found peace.

No one answers.

I reach for the light switch and flip it, but nothing happens. The power must have gone out. I groan to myself and flick on the light that's on my phone.

As I walk down the hallway, a faint sound, like someone shuffling around comes from the prof's study. My heart races as I grip my phone tightly, ready to dial the guys if needed. I take a deep breath and cautiously peek into the library, shining my torch around the space.

There's no one there.

A muffled thud comes from behind me and I spin on the spot shining my torch out into the corridor. Another noise – this time a scraping sound – seems to come from the lounge, so I tiptoe my way back along the corridor to see what's going on.

Maybe Malia's awake and has come to investigate the noises.

In the lounge, at first I don't see anything, but then a figure steps out of the shadows. It's not one of the guys or the professor – it's a man I've never seen before. Or at least, don't recall ever seeing before.

He's completely nondescript, except for the wave tattoo on his wrist which marks him as one of the Aerwyna people.

"Who are you?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady. He may be one of us, but he's not one of *us* so I'm not letting my guard down at all. Not with Malia in the house.

Shit. Malia. I hope she's okay.

His lips curl into a sneer, and I know I was right not to relax around this guy. "I'm looking for something," he says.

I raise an eyebrow. "What are you looking for?"

"That's none of your concern," he responds, his tone smug.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I think it *is* my concern if you're in the

professor's house in the middle of the night.”

He takes a step closer to me and I take a step back, my heart beating faster. I need to keep myself between him and the stairs up to Malia.

“You don't want to get involved in things that don't concern you,” he warns.

I swallow hard, but stand my ground. “Sorry, but I'm already involved. You're not supposed to be here. So tell me what you're looking for, or I'll have to call the authorities.”

For a moment, he just stares at me, his eyes dark and intense. Then, he seems to come to a decision, and takes another step closer. “Fine. I'm looking for a girl. I think you know who.”

Before I can answer, he pulls a knife on me and charges. The blade blazes bright blue with magic and I realise how completely and utterly fucked I am.

Diving out of the way, I stab at my phone and hope for the best, but then I'm dropping the handset and fighting for my life.

His magic pulses through the air, crackling with energy and intent. His movements are fluid, precise, and deadly. I dodge another swing of his knife and lunge forward, my own suppressed magic flaring to life.

A gust of wind whips through the room, sending books and papers flying. He staggers back, momentarily disoriented, and I take the opportunity to strike. My hand glows with a blinding light as I land a solid punch to his chest.

He grunts in pain, but doesn't go down. Instead, he lashes out with his knife once more, and I barely dodge in time. The blade icy touch grazes my skin and then...blinding agony.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I realise that I'm not going to win this fight. But I can't back down now. Not when Malia's life is on the line.

With a fierce battle cry, my opponent unleashes a powerful blast of magic that sends me flying across the room. I crash into a bookshelf, sending it toppling over and crushing me beneath its weight.

Breathless and shaking, I struggle to lift the heavy bookcase off me. Blood is gushing from the wound on my arm where the blade nicked me, and I have a wound on my forehead. My vision is fuzzy, rapidly darkening. I'm still conscious, but barely. My eyes are hazy and my breathing is ragged and shallow.

He kneels down beside me and grasps the hilt of the knife, sinking it into

my flesh once more. I roar with pain, hoping that the commotion will awaken Malia, and she'll know to flee or hide. Pulling it out of my flesh, he seems to enjoy my hiss of pain. Blood oozes from the new wound and I press my hand to it, trying to stem the flow.

I cough, spitting up blood as I struggle to stay conscious. "What do you want with Malia?" I demand, my voice trembling with anger and fear.

"She's...special...the key to everything, but not like you're thinking...we need her..."

I don't understand what he means, but I know that I need to get Malia out of here before anyone else tries to come after her.

With a final plunge of his blade, he leaves the knife embedded in my shoulder and takes off for the stairs.

"No!" I try to yell, but the sound comes out weak and feeble. The darkness is coming for me, and I have no strength left to fight it. *Malia, I'm sorry. I've failed you.*



An almighty crash awakens me. My heart thunders as I strain to listen, but all I can hear is my own fear pounding in my ears.

Creeping out of bed, I grab my phone off the nightstand and dial Cove. A scream startles me, and I accidentally cut the call. Instinct tells me to run and check on him, but I know he'd expect me to run and hide.

Torn, I waver at the top of the stairs. What should I do? My mind races as I try to decide on the best course of action. I know Bhodi is a grown man who can take care of himself, but the sound of that crash was unmistakable. What if he's hurt? What if he needs my help?

I can't just do nothing. I begin to descend the stairs, my heart still pounding.

As I reach the bottom step, another sound – a low rumbling – seems to be coming from the living room. Could it be an intruder? Is Bhodi simply watching a movie at a high volume?

I tiptoe down the remaining steps, trying to remain quiet as I approach the

living room. As I peek around the corner, my heart leaps into my throat. There, in the centre of the room, stands a vaguely familiar face, a blazing blue blade in his hand. I look around for Bhodi but can't see any sign of him. Shit. Maybe he's on the floor, hurt, and I just can't see him past the couch.

My gaze flicks to the kitchen and then the front door. I wonder if I can make a run for it. Out the door, or to the kitchen for a weapon? Maybe I should retreat and try to hide after all. I eye up the door to the library room the professor took me to earlier. The door is slightly ajar. It would be stupid to hide in a room with only one exit.

No. I should return upstairs. Maybe I can use the balcony in Cove's room to escape. Maybe the rest of the guys aren't far. It's late, they should be on their way back from wherever by now, right?

Turning on the spot slowly so as to blend in with the shadows, I make my way back up the stairs. My mind is racing with a mixture of fear and confusion. Who was that person in the living room? Where is Bhodi? And why did he leave me alone in the middle of the night?

As I approach the top of the stairs, a faint creak comes from Cove's room. My heart leaps with hope that maybe Bhodi is okay. I rush toward the room, my hand reaching out to push open the door. But before I can even touch the knob, a strong arm wraps around my waist, pulling me back into the darkness.

I scream, lashing out with my fists and feet, but my attacker is too strong. Sharp pain radiates around my head as something hard strikes me, and then everything goes black.

When I come to, I'm lying on the floor of a dimly lit room, my hands and feet tied with thick ropes. I try to move, but the ropes cut into my skin, leaving me breathless with pain.

"There's no use in struggling, sweetheart," a man's deep voice says. I shrink back and shudder as his silhouette walks toward me.

What is going on? I don't recognise this place. I'm clearly inside a house of some sort, the walls and the floor built of stone. But there are no windows, nothing but the strange, greenish light peeking through the slits where the

walls join. It casts an eerie, rippling light throughout the room and if it wasn't crazy, I'd almost think we were underwater somewhere.

"Where am I?" I ask, my voice weak and strained. My head is pounding to the point that I feel like I'm going to be sick. How hard did he hit me? How long was I out?

"That's not important right now," he says, crouching on the floor before me. "What is important is that you're here with me. Finally."

I try to back away from him, but there's nowhere to go. I'm trapped, completely at his mercy. His eyes, a fathomless black, lock onto mine and I shiver in fear.

"You're the one who was assigned as my lawyer at the station," I realise, my voice coming out shaky.

What did the professor call him again? Tam-something? Tan? I can't remember. I should have paid more attention. Though knowing his name probably wouldn't improve my situation right now anyway.

He laughs, a deep rumble that bounces off the stone walls and sets my teeth on edge. "Yes, and my plan would have been completed much sooner if it weren't for Omo interfering."

I don't know who this *Omo* is, or even what language he just spoke, but I get the feeling he's talking about the professor. I don't know why, it's just a gut feeling.

"Are you the one that's been stalking me? Saying those...evil things about killing."

"Stalking? No, my dear. I've been waiting for you. Watching you from afar, yes, but not stalking. That's such a dirty word."

"Then what do you call it?" I snap, my anger overriding my fear.

"I call it fate," he says, leaning in so close that I can feel his hot, rancid breath on my neck. "The others are so stupid, the elders too. They think you're the key to saving the universe, but I know the truth. You're the catalyst that will destroy everything. Our paths were meant to align, you and I. And now, finally, we can finish this."

My heart races as I try to pull away from him. This man is insane. I need to get out of here, but it's not like I can escape him, tied up like this.

Against my better judgement I ask, "Finish what? What plan are you trying to complete?"

"I have to kill you."

He lunges for me, slamming me back against the stone wall and my head explodes with pain. A scream rips from my throat and I struggle to get away from him, but he is too quick and strong. He clamps his hand over my mouth, and I can barely breathe.

“Don’t fight it,” he snarls, his face a dark shadow as he leans in closer. “I know what you are. And I know what you’ve done.”

My whole body is shaking.

I’m pretty sure he’s going to kill me right now. I have to stall for time. Maybe if I can get him to wait, I can figure something out.

I try to breathe easily, to remain calm. He’s insane, but he’s also delusional, so I need to play along.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I whisper when he lets his hand fall from my mouth. My chest is heaving, and it takes every effort not to spit on the ground to rid my mouth of the dirty taste he’s left behind.

His fingertips run down my neck, then lower, trying to pull the low neck of my shirt away from my skin. I shiver with repulsion but I won’t cry. I won’t beg. I’ve endured worse.

“You’re a killer,” he says softly.

“I’m not a killer.” I shake my head and yank away from him, sobbing.

He grabs me by the shoulders, squeezing hard, his fingers digging into my skin then clamps his hand over my mouth again, this time smothering my scream of pain. It’s not the first time he’s dug his nails into my skin, but it is the first time it’s burned like tiny red hot needles driven into my skin.

“You killed them all,” he hisses, his eyes fixed on mine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shake my head.

“You killed the students.”

“I swear! I didn’t!” I didn’t kill those girls. I could never kill anyone. But someone has been making it look like I did, and this nutter is buying it.

“It doesn’t matter. You still have to die. It’s you, I know it is.” He turns away from me, muttering nonsensical things under his breath as he leaves, slamming the heavy wooden door behind him. A second later I hear the key turning in the lock. There’s no escape.

I shiver and back myself into the corner as best I can. I really want to wrap my arms around myself for some warmth, but I can’t with the way I’m tied. My shoulders burn and all of my limbs ache. The ropes are tied too tightly for me to escape.

But I'm alive. For now. I need a plan for when he comes back, but there's nothing in the room I can use for a weapon. I'm helpless.

Should I have run, back at the house? I wanted to help Bhodi but that backfired. I didn't even see him, much less save him. Could I have hidden from this lunatic, or would he have found me anyway? I don't think I could have outrun him.

This whole situation feels inevitable somehow. The irony that the guys tried to keep me at the house for my safety, yet that was the place I was snatched from, hits me hard.

I shake uncontrollably, my bones aching even more with every passing minute that cold seeps in. My eyes begin to droop and no matter how hard I fight it, I lose. The darkness claims me. I just hope I live to see another day.



Fucking hell, I can't believe these idiots left Malia home with just Bhodi for protection to come after me. Stupid, stupid fools.

I break every speed limit on the island as we race back to the beach hut. When we reach the garage, I make the decision to just fuck it. I'm not pulling over. The dirt track might be impassable to vehicles, but I'm going to give it a damn good go, and who gives a shit if my car gets totalled in the process.

"Don't do it," Cove says when I rev the engine.

"Fuck off," I snap. If they hadn't come after me, we wouldn't be in this damn situation. Hell, if I hadn't been seduced by the idea of tacos and seeing Malia again, I wouldn't have put everyone in this position.

"Cove's right. Don't total the car, we might need it."

"I don't care," I growl at Reef.

"We don't know what we're walking in to—"

"Exactly! I can get us there faster."

"What if Bhodi or Malia need to get to the hospital?"

That makes me hesitate. “Fuck.” Cutting the engine, I throw open my door and take off towards the house on foot. The others follow closely on my heels, and I swear we break records for the fastest mile run.

The house is in darkness, the front door wide open, which is never a good sign.

I run through the door, flicking the lights on and staring at the chaos before me. The place is trashed, but that’s not what stops my heart. Bhodi is trapped under the large bookshelf in the lounge, lying in a pool of blood. Shit!

I race over to him, Reef beside me, and together we lift the bookcase off of him.

Reef drops to his knees and checks for a pulse.

“It’s faint. But he’s still with us. Just.”

“Fuck. Malia?”

“No sign of her,” Cove says from somewhere behind me. He must have checked the house for her.

I feel like I’m going to be sick. The whole place smells like blood and death. How did we let this happen? I should have known better than to leave them alone. I should have stayed.

“Check the bedrooms,” I say, my voice hoarse. I can’t believe this is happening.

“I did,” Cove replies.

“I don’t care! Check again! Find her!”

Reef nods and takes off down the hall, calling out Malia’s name. I turn back to Bhodi, who is still unconscious, and I feel my heart breaking. He’s been hurt badly, and I don’t know if he’ll make it.

“Prof,” Cove says softly, coming up beside me. “We need to call an ambulance. Or the doc at least”

“Right,” I say, pulling out my phone and calling the doc. My hands are shaking so badly I can barely press the buttons.

“Professor. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“We need help. Bhodi’s unconscious and he’s bleeding out from multiple stab wounds,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

“A human weapon or magical?”

Fuck. I should have checked that. It should have been the first thing I did once I knew he wasn’t dead. I check his wounds.

“Magical. Looks like it was one of our blades.”

“How fast can you get him to me?”

“We can’t move him. How fast can you get here?”

“You can’t afford that fee.”

“I don’t give a fuck what the cost is. Get here now!” The line goes dead, and I realise I may have just made a grave mistake pissing off one of the most powerful, well-connected supes we know. “Fuck!”

“What’s wrong? Is the doc coming?”

“I hope so.”

I pace the room, pulling at my hair, wondering what I can do. We need to find Malia, but she could be anywhere by now. If I can just work out who took her, it would help narrow down the search.

“Look for clues,” I tell Cove. “Reef, keep Bhodi alive until the doc gets here.”

Cove nods and begins to search the room, rifling through drawers and looking under furniture. Meanwhile, I pace back and forth, trying to piece together the events leading up to Malia’s disappearance.

My phone rings and I hesitate before answering, wondering if it’s the angry supe from earlier. But when I see the caller ID, my heart races. It’s Malia’s number.

I answer quickly. “Malia? Where are you? Are you okay?”

There’s a moment of silence on the other end before someone speaks. “I thought you might like the opportunity to say goodbye to the girl before I kill her.”

“Tanimola,” I spit. “What are you doing with Malia? Do the elders know about this?”

Tanimola laughs. “Like I give a fuck about them. Say goodbye to her. Because she’ll be dead long before you find her body.”

The line goes dead and my heart drops as Tanimola’s words sink in. If the elders don’t know about this, then we’re on our own. I turn to Cove, who’s still searching the room, and motion for him to come over.

“Tanimola has Malia,” I tell him when he’s close enough. “I need to find her before he does something to her.”

Cove’s eyes narrow in anger. “Let’s go. He’ll be at one of the beaches.”

I shake my head. “You stay. Reef might need your help with Bhodi.”

He opens his mouth to argue, “But—”

“But nothing,” I cut him off. “Don’t argue with me, that’s an order.”

“Take weapons with you.”

I nod and race to the safe that’s hidden in my study. Unlocking the door, I load up with weapons – a mix of human guns and Aerwyna blades. Tanimola won’t be easy to kill, and there will be repercussions for doing so, but if it saves Malia’s life, there isn’t a price I won’t pay.

As I strap on my holster and check the ammo in my guns, my heart pounds. This is it. The moment of truth. The moment where I put everything on the line for the woman I love.

Fuck. *No.* I *don’t* love Malia. It’s for the mission. I care about her, greatly. But this isn’t love. It can’t be. It’s the damn prophecy bewitching me.

It isn’t real.

But I still have to save her.

I exit the safe room and head towards the front door, pausing only to check if Bhodi’s still with us. Reef nods, but his expression is grim.

Fuck. I can’t lose them both. I won’t. Tanimola has to pay for this.

Why the fuck has he taken Malia? Why would he want to kill her? He must know who she is, how crucial she is to our survival. Why would he jeopardise that?

I thought when he showed up at the police station that the elders had grown impatient and sent him to bring Malia in, but now I’m not so sure. It sounds like he’s working alone, or for someone other than the elders. But how and why? And why would they want Malia dead? I know why the Shikari want her dead, but Tanimola can’t be working for them otherwise he’d have killed her already. Right?

Running back along the trail, I send up a silent prayer of thanks to Reef and Cove for not letting me total my car, so that I can use it to track down Tanimola. When I reach the vehicle, I jump in and start driving blindly.

Several miles pass before my head’s clear enough to really think about where I’m heading. I don’t have a clue. He probably has her near the ocean, near the portal, but there’s several beaches that could be, spanning miles.

I need to think smarter.

I hit redial on the car’s smart system, praying he’ll answer when it rings.

“Yes?”

“You said I could say goodbye to her. Put her on the line.”

“As you’ve asked so nicely…”

“Just let me speak to her!” I roar. The steering wheel cracks under the force of my grip and it’s a struggle to keep the car on the road. The speedometer is creeping dangerously high, but I don’t let off the accelerator.

“Temper, temper,” he chides. I bite my tongue so hard I taste blood.

I’m about to give up and cut the call when Malia’s sweet voice comes down the line and I almost crash the car when I close my eyes in relief.

“Professor?” She sounds sleepy. Possibly drugged.

“Malia,” I breathe. “Are you okay?”

“Tired. My head hurts.”

I grind my teeth. If he’s hurt her, there won’t be a blade lethal enough for what I’m going to do to him.

“Malia, I’m coming for you okay.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry,” she says in a small, dejected voice. “You don’t have to.”

She’s already given up.

The urge to swear is compelling. “You have *nothing* to apologise for, Malia, nothing. Where are you?” I ask urgently. I fear that Tanimola will take the phone from her and cut the call.

“I don’t know.”

“Are there any windows? Anything you can see outside that might give me a clue?”

“No. There’s no windows. It’s just stone.”

“Okay. Stone is good. Is it sandstone?”

“No. It’s grey.”

“Is it cold to the touch?”

“Yeah. And it feels damp. There’s an eerie green light through the cracks and it feels like I’m under—”

“That’s all we’ve got time for. Say goodbye. Even if you’ve figured it out, you’ll never get here in time to save her.”

I refuse to say goodbye to Malia. I won’t let her think I’ve given up on her. And, beautiful, clever girl that she is, she gave me the exact clues I needed to know where to find them.

There’s an underwater holding cell just off the ruins on the northwestern side of the island. The portal to Aerwyna is located within the ruins themselves, and although the wards to repel unwanted explorers stretch along

a large section of that coastline, there's a deadzone about half a mile out to sea where the wards have deliberately been dropped so that the council of elders can hold prisoners awaiting trial in Aerwyna without the magic of the wards driving them insane or killing them while they wait.

As a member of the council, Tanimola would know this, and I'm willing to bet anything that it's where he's holding Malia.

I take the turning that signposts Iron Bound Cove and Eagle Rock, but I'm not heading for either of those beaches. The secret beach, Starlight Cove, is my best bet for getting out to the prison the fastest, and it's not on any street signs. I'm relying on the fact that Tanimola has probably overlooked my authority clearance as the head of the Queen's Guard and won't be expecting me to actually be able to access the holding cell. I'm relying on my position to ensure that I can.

Speeding down the winding road, I mentally prepare myself for what might come next. Tanimola is powerful and an influential member of the council. He'll not make it easy for me to rescue Malia. But I have to try. I won't let him get away with this.

As I approach the hidden entrance to Starlight Cove, I slow down and turn off the headlights. The last thing I need is to draw attention to myself. I park the car behind some bushes and get out. The night is pitch-black, but I can see the faint outline of the rock formations that hide the cove from prying eyes. I take a deep breath and start to climb down.

The rocks are slippery and jagged, and I cut myself more than once. But I don't care. I have to keep going.

When I finally reach the bottom, I'm standing on the small, sandy beach that leads to the water. The moon is high in the sky, and its light reflects off the waves, creating a beautiful, eerie glow. But I don't have time to admire the view. I have to find Malia before it's too late.

I scan the beach and the surrounding area, searching for any sign of Tanimola or his henchmen. But the beach is deserted, and the only sound that breaks the silence is the soft crashing of the waves. I take a few steps forward.

That's when I see it.

A flicker of light in the water, just beyond the deadzone. It's small, almost imperceptible, but I know it's there. It has to be the holding cell.

Without hesitation, I waded into the water. The coldness of it is a shock to

my system, but I push through it, determined to reach Malia.

As I approach the deadzone, there's a sudden shift in the air, a prickling at the back of my neck. The wards are strong here, and I can feel their power trying to repel me because I haven't paid the blood sacrifice to enter the portal. I force my way past it, drawing on my own magic to counteract the feelings of repulsion compelling me to turn around and leave.

When I reach the deadzone, the wards drop away, and I know I'm close. The flicker of light is now a bright glow, and I can see the outline of the holding cell just under the surface of the water, made of the same grey stone that Malia described.

I swim towards it, and when I'm close enough, I take a deep breath and dive under the surface of the water.

My lungs burn as I kick against the current to reach the small stone cell, and when I make it, I press my bleeding palms against the rock.

Please let this work. Please don't let me be too late.

The magic of the cell yields to my bloodline and I crash into the cell, landing heavily on the stone floor.

Shivering from the cold and gasping for air, I quickly climb to my feet and scan the cell. Malia is sitting against the wall, her hands bound behind her back, her ankles tied with rope. Relief floods through me at the sight of her, but it's short-lived.

Tanimola is standing in front of her, a wicked grin on his face.

"Well, well, well," he says, his voice dripping with malice. "Look who decided to drop by for an early visit."

I don't waste any time. I charge towards him, drawing my sword from its sheath. Tanimola smirks and holds up his hand, and a burst of magic sends me flying back, crashing into an invisible wall of water. Choking, I struggle to get back up, lungs burning, as I drag myself towards Malia.

Tanimola steps towards me, his eyes glinting with amusement. "You really thought you could take me on, Omo? You're nothing compared to my power."

I grit my teeth and summon all the strength and magic that I can, drawing on the energy of the water all around me. I sense a wave rising up, and send it crashing towards Tanimola with all the force of the ocean behind it.

But he's too quick, sidestepping the wave and sending a bolt of lightning towards me.

I manage to dodge it, but just barely. My clothes are soaked through, clinging to me as I stand up with sword at the ready. Tanimola laughs, a high-pitched, mocking sound that makes my blood boil.

“You really think you can defeat me? You don’t have the guts, Omo.”

I ignore his taunts and charge towards him again. This time, I’m ready for his magic. I sidestep his lightning bolt and slash at him with my sword. He blocks it, but he’s not quick enough to avoid my next strike. My sword slices through his arm, and he screams in pain.

“You’ll pay for that,” he snarls, his eyes blazing with fury.

Strike after strike of lightning shoots towards me, but the damage to his arm, and the blood loss, send his concentration off enough that the hits he scores are only shallow. Still, I know he has the advantage, and I need to finish this quickly. I slash at him again, adding magic to the point of my sword. He’s anticipating my follow-up hit so doesn’t move fast enough, and I leave a trail of burning magic down his side. As I dart away, he sends yet another bolt of lightning which catches me across the back and drags the breath from my lungs. We both collapse to the cave floor. This needs to end. Now. I know he senses that too.

He sends another burst of magic towards me, but I’m prepared. I counter with a burst of my own magic, and the two forces collide in a blinding explosion of light and sound. When the smoke clears, Tanimola is lying at my feet, unmoving.

I rush towards Malia, freeing her from her bonds. She clings to me, sobbing with relief.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you for saving me.”

I hold her tightly, knowing that we’re not out of danger yet. But for now, we’re safe.

“Is he dead?” she asks.

I pierce his abdomen with my sword and he doesn’t react. Blood floods out of the wound, staining the stone floor.

“He will be soon,” I tell her.

Malia throws her arms around me and I stagger backwards, only just managing to stop us from toppling over. The urge to keep her in my arms is strong, but I know we need to get out of here. Bhodi needs us.



I nearly wept with relief when the professor stumbled through a solid stone wall. He came for me. Alone.

There wasn't time to wonder about the others because my captor immediately hit the offensive, attacking the professor with a force I couldn't see, only feel. And somehow he fought back.

Magic is real. Everything they said is real.

As I watched the professor battle my captor, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The air around them crackled with energy as they traded blows, their magic ricocheting off one another and filling the room with a deafening noise. My captor was powerful, but the professor was cunning, and he was holding his own. I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of admiration for him. His strength and bravery in the face of such danger was unlike anything I had ever witnessed before.

By the time we make it back to the beach and climb up the cliff I'm trembling with exhaustion and shivering from the cold. The professor helps

me into the passenger seat of his car, even though he's injured, then covers me in a blanket he retrieved from the back. Getting in himself, he turns the heating up to full blast and places his bruised hand on my thigh, rubbing soothing motions back and forth. It does nothing to warm me up, but everything to calm me down as he drives us away from the beach.

I never want to return here again.

I can't believe that the professor rescued me from the hands of my captor, and fought so fiercely to keep me safe. Why would he do that after being so awful to me? I stare out of the window, watching the world outside as it blurs past us, my mind circling over everything that's happened, my stomach churning.

As we drive in silence, I can't help but steal glances at the professor. He has a look of deep concentration on his face. My emotions are all over the place and even though I still want to be mad at him, he saved my life.

Clearing my throat to break the silence between us, I whisper, "Thank you."

He turns to me, his gaze piercing. "I already told you, you don't have to thank me, Malia," he says, his voice soft and reassuring. "It's my job to keep you safe."

I nod, feeling a sensation in my chest that I can't quite place. Is it gratitude? Admiration? Disappointment that I'm just a job? Or maybe something else entirely?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, the professor pulls over and turns to me. "Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

I nod again, but this time I can't stop the tears from falling. "Yes." My voice is choked with emotion. "But I don't know how to properly thank you. You saved my life. Words aren't enough."

The professor's expression softens, and he leans in closer to me. "You don't need to thank me, I promise," he says, his breath hot against my cheek. "Just know that I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

A strange sensation in my stomach stirs at his words, and before I can stop myself, I lean in and kiss him on the cheek. Or that's what I intend to do. At the last second, he turns his head and my lips make contact with his. It's a gentle kiss at first, but then it deepens, and a fire ignites within me.

I quickly pull away, my cheeks flushed and my heart racing. His eyes are dark with desire as he looks at me, and I can feel the tension between us

thickening in the air.

The ringing of his phone startles me.

“What?” he snaps, answering the call through the steering wheel controls.

“You need to get back here,” Cove says through the line. His voice is all wrong, full of emotion and stress.

“I have Malia here, you’re on speakerphone,” the professor says tersely. I get the impression he’s warning Cove not to say too much.

“Malia! Thank goodness you’re okay....you are okay, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes. I’m fine.”

“We’ll see you shortly,” the professor interjects.

“Come to the campsite. The doc has moved him to operate.” He cuts the call before I can ask what he means.

“What’s he talking about? Who’s hurt?” I demand as dread fills me and threatens to make me sick.

“Bhodi.”

Shit! Of course. How could I have forgotten?

“W-what’s wrong with him?”

“He was stabbed. Several times with a magical blade. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

I don’t dare ask if the blade being magical makes a difference. “Is he going to be okay?”

“That’s what we need to go and find out.”

He doesn’t wait for me to reply, restarting the engine and pulling off into the dark night as guilt consumes me. By the sounds of it, Bhodi is gravely injured and I’m trying to make out with my teacher! I’m despicable.

It takes a minute for me to realise that we’re no longer heading in the same direction.

“Are we going to the hospital? Cove mentioned something about operating?” But I swear he also said campsite, but that can’t be right?

The professor’s jaw tightens, his knuckles straining around the steering wheel. “The hospital isn’t an option,” he says, his voice low. “We’re going to a private clinic.”

My heart races as I try to process what he’s saying. “Why? What’s wrong with the hospital?”

“Bhodi...he’s not exactly...legal. And we can’t risk the authorities getting involved.”

I swallow hard, my mind racing with all the possibilities of what he means. “What do you mean he’s not legal?”

“That was the wrong word to use. I meant that he’s not human, Malia,” the professor says gravely. “None of us are. And so we’ve got to keep him off the radar if we want to keep him alive.”

We pull into a dark, deserted parking lot and the professor turns off the engine. “We’re here.”

I look out the window, but I can’t see much of anything. “Where’s here?”

“It’s a camping ground. It’s run by the doc – Tami – who’s a supernatural, but not like us. Don’t stare and don’t say anything to upset her. Bhodi’s life depends on this woman and she can be...volatile.”

“I-I won’t.”

I step out of the car, the cold breeze sending shivers down my spine, and follow the professor to a small cabin barely visible in the darkness. He knocks twice, and a woman’s voice answers from inside.

“Who is it?” she asks.

“It’s the professor. I’m here with Malia,” he replies.

Footsteps approach, and the door creaks open. Cove is standing there, covered in blood.

“Come in,” he says, his voice low. “The doc is still working on him.”

We follow Cove inside, and he leads us to a small, clean, well lit room that’s set up as a small operating theatre. In the centre of the room, a young man is lying on a bed, his skin pale and covered in sweat.

“Bhodi!” I almost didn’t recognise him. The professor reaches out and captures my wrist to stop me from running over to him.

“He can’t hear you. We need to stand back and let the doc do her thing.”

I didn’t even notice the woman standing over him, diligently cleaning and tending to Bhodi’s wounds. “Shit, sorry. You’re right.”

The doc turns around to face me, scanning me up and down. Her eyes linger on me for a moment longer than necessary, making me feel uneasy.

“I’m Tami. You must be Malia,” she says, nodding at me.

“Yes, that’s me. Is he going to be okay?”

Tami nods again. “He’s stable now, but it’ll take some time for him to fully heal. He’s lucky to have made it out alive.”

I look down at Bhodi, feeling like a complete idiot for failing to help him.

“Can we take him home?”

“It’s probably best that he stays here for a few days, at least. You’re all more than welcome to stay though. Maybe later in the week he’ll be healed enough to travel but I’m not making any promises.”

“We’re not going back to the house tomorrow,” the professor says gruffly. I try to hide my surprise but obviously fail when he adds, “We need more security in place before we can return.”

“Oh.” Again, guilt swirls up, making my stomach twist and churn. This is all my fault.

“It’s fine. It’s a few additional wards, but they’re complicated to create and I’d rather we were working at full strength when we put them in place.”

“I see,” I reply, not really understanding anything.

“Reef, you can manage that in a couple of days’ time, can’t you?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Good. Look after everyone. I’m leaving you in charge.”

“Leaving?” I ask, panicked. “What do you mean?”

“I have to go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“I have to return home to speak to our council of elders.”

“Why? Because of what happened tonight?”

“Yes. Because Bhodi was attacked, and you were taken by one of our own. But also because I killed a man, and I’ll have to atone for that.”

“But it was self defence! He was attacking you. He almost killed Bhodi and he was threatening to kill me. They can’t punish you for that.”

“Maybe. But I still have to give them our side of the story.”

“Take me with you.”

“What?” The professor looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Take me with you. I’ll be your backup. Or a witness. Or whatever it’s called. I’ll corroborate your story. They’ll have to let you off if we’re both saying the same thing.”

“I can’t do that, Malia,” he sighs.

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe to take you to our world. But I really appreciate that you’d be willing to do that for me.”

“Of course I would. You saved my life. I’d do anything to repay that. But I really wish you didn’t have to go.”

“I’ll return.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I don’t know when it will be, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Without thinking, I reach out and fling my arms around the professor, pulling him into a fierce hug. He tenses for a moment, and then hesitantly pats my back.

I snort. “You’re really bad at hugs.”

“Sorry. Not had much practice.”

“It’s okay. I can teach you when you come back to me. To us. Them.”

“I’m coming back to you just as much as them, Malia. And I’ll hold you to the hugging thing.”

“Okay,” I whisper, swallowing past the lump in my throat.

“Okay. This is the part where you need to let me go.”

I nod, but my arms seem to be made of stone. I can’t let him go. I don’t want to. My heart is telling me this is it, I won’t see him again, and all I can taste is my regrets.

Gentle hands prise my arms from around the professor and as he steps back, my heart breaks a little. It’s nonsensical and I can’t explain it, but the urge to cry is overwhelming. It has to be the adrenaline wearing off. Today has been a lot.

“Be safe.”

“I promise you, I’ll try my best.”

I bite my tongue to keep from telling him that that’s not very reassuring.

“Look after her.”

The professor turns to Reef, who nods solemnly. “You know I will,” he replies.

Finally, the professor turns and gives me one last look before walking out of the door. A sense of loneliness washes over me as Cove closes the door behind him and I’m left in the small operating room with him, Reef, Bhodi and Tami.

“Do you want to sit down?” Tami asks me, gesturing to a small but comfy-looking chair in the corner of the room.

I shake my head, unable to find my voice. Tami nods understandingly and turns back to Bhodi, continuing her work.

I wander over to the bed and take in his injuries. His face is bruised and cut, and his shirt is stained with dried blood. I reach out to touch his hand, but

it's cold and lifeless. Panic grips me and I look up at Tami.

"Is he okay?" My voice is barely above a whisper.

"I've placed him in a coma. We're doing everything we can to help him heal."

"Will he wake up?"

Tami hesitates for a moment before answering. "We can't say for certain. It's up to him now. We'll keep monitoring him and doing everything we can. But he's a fighter. My best fighter in fact. He's tougher than tough."

I nod, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I can't lose him. Not after everything that's happened.

"We'll stay here with him," Reef says, coming to stand beside me. "You should get some rest."

I shake my head. "I don't think I can."

"You need to take care of yourself too," Tami adds kindly. "You've been through a lot today."

She's right, but I don't want to leave Bhodi's side. I'm scared that if I do, he'll slip away from me forever. But eventually, exhaustion catches up with me and I sink into the chair in the corner of the room.

I'm plagued by underwater nightmares, tinted with a greenish hue. I wake sweating and cramped, throwing off the blanket someone must have draped over me and needing to stretch my limbs.

I try to shake off the lingering feeling of dread as I rise from the chair, my eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through the curtains. Bhodi is still out of it on the table where we left him last night, and I don't know if it's wishful thinking on my part, but his colour looks a little better this morning.

I let out a sigh of relief as I approach Bhodi, cautiously checking his pulse to confirm that he's still alive. A wave of gratitude hits me as his pulse beats strong and steady.

Reaching out, I gently brush a strand of hair away from his face, feeling the weight of his head in my hand. His skin is cold and clammy, and I wonder if he's caught a fever.

Maybe I'm just worrying myself for no reason. Tami knows what she's

doing, she's bound to have been checking on him throughout the night.

"Bhodi, I need you to come back to me," I whisper. "I can't lose you."

"Morning, Malia," Reef's voice startles me and I jostle against the table, wincing. I hope that Bhodi didn't feel that. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," I lie, tearing my gaze away from Bhodi but unable to meet Reef's eyes.

"It's early. You could go back to sleep. There's a bed in the next room. You'll have to share with Cove, but it's better than the chair."

"Thanks. But I'm alright."

"Okay. If you change your mind, the offer's there. And if you need something to help you sleep and keep the nightmares away, I can speak to the doc."

It's pointless to ask how he knows, Reef's always been uncanny at seeing me, so I just nod my thanks and give Bhodi's hand a squeeze. There's no response from him.

As Reef leaves the room, the weight of the situation bears down on me. Despite the doctor's earlier reassurances, I can't help but feel a sense of helplessness. I know I need to be strong for him, but the exhaustion is weighing on me both mentally and physically.

I force myself to take a deep breath, trying to shake off the feeling of dread that seems to have settled over me. I need to focus on the present, on Bhodi, on keeping him alive.

I take a damp cloth and gently wipe the sweat from his forehead, hoping that it will help to cool him down. As I do, I notice something strange. Bhodi's skin is covered in small bumps, and there's a faint greenish tinge to his complexion.

My heart rate quickens as I realise what this means, and I turn to Tami, who is standing at the entrance of the room with a concerned expression on her face.

"He's infected, isn't he?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Tami nods solemnly. "It looks that way. We need to act immediately before it spreads."

I swallow hard against the lump forming in my throat. "What do we do?"

"I need to administer a special antitoxin."

I nod, knowing that time is of the essence. My fingers tremble with fear and uncertainty, and I knot them into my top to keep busy.

Tami quickly prepares the injection, gently pricking Bhodi's skin with the needle. We wait, watching for any signs of improvement, and after what seems like an eternity, Bhodi's breathing becomes less laboured and his eyes flutter open.

"Malia," he whispers, his voice weak.

"I'm here," I say, relieved that he's finally awake.

Bhodi looks up at me, his eyes filled with pain. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice barely audible. "I didn't want to put you in danger."

"It's not your fault," I say, taking his hand in mine once more. "Just focus on getting better."

Bhodi nods, his eyes already closing. I watch as he falls asleep, feeling that sense of relief wash over me again. For now, he's safe, and that's all that matters.

As I sit there, watching over him, my mind drifts back to the nightmares that have been haunting me. Maybe they're a warning, a sign of what's to come. Or maybe they're just a manifestation of my fears and anxieties.

Either way, I know that I have to be strong.



It takes five days for Bhodi to recover enough that the doc will grant him permission to go home. Unsurprisingly, Bhodi is a terrible patient, pushing the doc, Reef and Cove to their limits. I'm just so glad that he's okay. He can do no wrong in my eyes.

The doc's patience is wearing thin. It's easy to tell she's not used to sharing her space with anyone, let alone four extra people. She's polite and courteous about it, but I think she'll be glad to see the back of us today.

I can't wait to get home either. Reef's been at the house most days overseeing the extra security that the professor insisted upon, as well as adding additional safety measures of his own.

As we pack up Bhodi's things, I can sense a heaviness in the air. It's not just because we're leaving the doc's home, but also because of the events that led us here. The attack on Bhodi was a stark reminder that danger is always lurking around the corner, and that answers are now long overdue.

Reef and Cove each take one of Bhodi's arms to help him up from the

bed. He's still a little wobbly on his feet, but he insists he can manage. I grab his bag and follow behind them as we make our way out of the doc's makeshift hospital room and towards the exit.

The doc gives us a final wave as we leave, and I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt. We've been a handful, and I hope we haven't caused her too much stress. But at the end of the day, our priority was Bhodi's health and safety.

As we step outside, the fresh air hits me like a wave. It feels good to be out of the stuffy hospital room, but the reality of our situation sets in. There are so many unanswered questions, and the danger is still very real.

Reef leads the way to the car, helping Bhodi into the backseat before getting into the driver's seat. Cove takes shotgun, and I climb into the back with Bhodi, making sure he's comfortable before we set off. I'm grateful for the soft leather interior which cushions my aching body.

The ride home is mostly silent, the only sound coming from the radio quietly playing in the background as we all get lost in our own thoughts. My mind is racing, trying to make sense of everything that's happened.

When we finally arrive home, it's well past sunset. The house is eerily quiet as we make our way inside. Reef checks every corner of the house, making sure it's safe before giving us the all-clear and a run down of the new security features he's put in place, including video surveillance, alarms on all the windows, and a retinal scanner on all of the entrances. It feels excessive and absurd, but I don't voice those thoughts because it also makes me feel safe.

Inside, I follow Bhodi up to his bedroom, helping him settle into bed. Cove brings up a drink and his pain meds that the doc sent us home with, and Bhodi takes them without complaint. He must be feeling rough. I stay with him until he doses off.

After Bhodi is settled and sound asleep, I take a shower and change into fresh clothes. I'm tired, but starving, and the scents coming from downstairs smell too good to miss, so I make my way down the stairs. In the kitchen, Reef is cooking some sort of curry dish and Cove is setting the table for the three of us. The lack of places set for Bhodi and the professor makes me sad. How long will it be before we can all eat together again? I thought the professor would be home by now.

"Don't worry, Mai-Tai," Cove says, approaching me with a look of

concern and dropping a soft kiss on my cheek. “All will be back to normal before you know it.”

I give him a weak smile in return, not even convinced I know what *normal* is anymore, and we take our seats as Reef dishes up.

“This looks and smells amazing,” I tell him.

“Thanks, it’s one of my favourites.”

“I’ve never had a dish like this before.”

“It’s from our homeland,” he explains.

“Which is not...from around here,” I hedge.

“Correct.”

“Is that all you’re going to say?”

“I think we should wait until everyone’s present to have these conversations. Do you want some water?” He leaps to his feet and grabs three bottles from the fridge. I pull a face.

“No thanks, I’ll stick to pop.”

“You don’t like water?”

“Not *that* water.”

“What’s wrong with this water?”

“It makes me feel funny.”

“Funny, how?”

I shrug, not wanting to get into it. “Maybe we should wait until we’re all here to have this conversation too.”

Reef narrows his eyes at me for a split second and then lets it go. He leaves one bottle of water in the centre of the table and takes a drink from the second, watching me the entire time. When he’s done, he passes the other bottle to Cove, who hesitates and then pushes it away.

“I’ll join Malia on the soda,” he says. Reef shoots him an amused look but doesn’t say anything as Cove gets up and grabs us both a can of coke from the fridge.

“Thanks,” I say when he passes one to me.

Then an awkward silence descends. It’s the first time I’ve really been uncomfortable around either of them, and I can’t think of anything to say.

Finally, Reef breaks the silence. “We should talk about what happened,” he says, his voice low and serious.

I nod, relieved that someone else has brought it up. “Do we have any leads?”

Reef hesitates before answering. “Not yet. With everything that happened with Bhodi, the professor didn’t have a chance to fill us in before he left.”

I frown. “What about the police? Did they find anything at the scene?”

Reef shakes his head. “We didn’t involve the police. We’re under enough scrutiny as it is right now, and we didn’t want to give them an excuse to come investigating further.”

I glance down at my plate, suddenly losing my appetite. “What do we do now?”

“We keep looking,” Cove says firmly. “We can’t give up until we find out who was behind the attack and why.”

Reef nods in agreement. “And we need to be careful. We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet.”

A knot forms in my stomach at his words. “Would it help if I told you guys my version of events?” I don’t want to rehash it all, but if it could help, I can set my discomfort aside. It’s the least I can do considering Bhodi was probably attacked because he was trying to protect me.

“That could be really helpful, if you’re feeling up to it, Malia,” Reef tells me gently.

“Okay. So it was late and I’d fallen asleep, but loud noises woke me up. Bhodi was gone so I assumed it was him or you guys returning...” I launch into my story, pausing often to recall details or answer questions from Cove and Reef. I’m shocked by how patchy my memory is, because every time I close my eyes I can see my abduction playing out as clear as day. I struggle to remember the name of my captor but when I explain how I recognised him from the police station, Reef and Cove give me blank looks. Maybe the professor didn’t fill them in on the two ‘lawyers’ confusion. Even when I try to prompt them for a name, they come up blank.

The only thing they seem to agree on is that the attack wasn’t a random, isolated incident, and that Bhodi’s attacker was likely working for or with someone else, so even with his death, the danger was likely to still be present.

By the time we’ve finished discussing all the what ifs, buts and maybes, my dinner is cold and my stomach is painfully twisted as guilt eats me alive at all the trouble I’ve caused. Continue to cause. Am causing.

I should leave.

“Don’t even think about it,” Reef warns, clearly reading my thoughts. “We’re here to protect you, Malia. This is our job. You are not a burden in

any way.”

“He’s right, you know, Mai-Tai. We’d all take getting stabbed a thousand times over anything bad happening to you.”

I appreciate their sentiment, but it only serves to deepen my guilt. I’m putting their lives in danger, and for what? I still don’t understand why they’re so hellbent on protecting me.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. “I never asked for any of this.”

Reef reaches across the table and takes my hand. His touch is warm and reassuring, and for a moment, I feel less alone.

“This isn’t your fault, Malia,” he says firmly. “We’re here to help you, no matter what. And we’ll keep doing so until this is all over.”

I nod, feeling a little better. These guys are the only friends I’ve got now, and I need to trust that they’ll keep me safe.

We finish our meal in silence, lost in our own thoughts, though I don’t really eat much. When we’re done, I offer to clear up because Reef cooked, but the pair of them shoo me away, telling me to go and relax.

I creep back up the stairs to check on Bhodi, and find him fast asleep. It’s tempting to crawl into bed with him just to hold him close and reassure myself that he’s okay, but I don’t because I don’t want to cause him pain or risk injuring him. Instead, I close his door and creep along the hallway to my room, not hating the idea of an early night, finally back in my own – or Cove’s – bed.



I trust my brothers, I do. But if Malia says the water makes her feel strange, then I'm willing to believe her too. It could be as simple as it tasting different because she's not one of us, but I don't think that's the case. There's something going on, and so I'm going to experiment and see for myself.

Starting with cutting out the bottled water and switching to tap.

It's only been a few days and I can't say that I've noticed any difference, but I guess these things take time.

I've been having the strangest dreams though. Really vivid ones. Dreams of a woman in the water, her hair tangled and her eyes wild. In the dreams, she beckons me closer, and I can feel the pull of the current around me.

It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. I'm not one for superstitions or old wives' tales, but something about this feels off. I tried to talk to Reef about it, but he just shrugged and told me to stop worrying.

But I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. That maybe Malia is right somehow.

Deciding that I need to shake off this strange air of melancholy that's settled itself over me the last few days, I grab my surfboard from my room and make my way downstairs. A couple of hours out on the waves should clear my head.

"Are you going for a surf?" Malia asks, her head popping up from the sofa and a bright smile on her face. It looks a little forced around the edges though.

"Yeah. Wanna join me?" She nods eagerly, making me chuckle.

"Is that okay?"

"Of course."

"Great! Let me go grab my things."

She jumps to her feet and races off upstairs. While she's gone, I grab a few snacks for us and line them up on the dining table, hoping she'll stash them in her beach bag for us. I open the fridge and hesitate when I see the bottles of water all lined up perfectly, their labels all facing the right way. Instead, I grab a couple of cans of coke and then fill an empty drinks bottle with tap water and leave them with the snacks.

Bhodi appears from the prof's study and I raise my brows at him.

"What were you doing in there?"

"Just reading."

"You can read?" I tease.

"Haha. You going for a surf?"

"Yeah just waiting on Malia to grab her things. Do you want to come?" I offer. Bhodi grimaces.

"Nah. Not feeling up to shredding just yet."

I shake my head. "I know you still can't surf. I just meant do you want to come to the beach for a bit? You could always bring this mythical book you think you're reading."

He flips me the bird. "I might come and watch. I could use a little fresh air."

"Fair enough. I'll grab you some extra snacks."

He nods his thanks to me and goes to the fridge while I start pulling extra snacks from the cupboards. Out of the corner of my eye I notice Bhodi move to the sink, and I stop what I'm doing to watch as he opens a bottle of water, tips it down the sink, rinses out the bottle and refills it with tap water.

I stare at him.

“What?” He shrugs. “You’re not drinking it either.”

“You know about that?”

“I noticed you stopped drinking it and I know that Malia hates it, so I thought I’d see what all the fuss was about.”

“And?” I ask.

“Aside from some weird dreams and headaches, I’ve not noticed anything amiss.”

“Headaches?” I frown. I’ve been having headaches too but I didn’t put that down to the water.

“Can’t say for sure that it’s not a side effect of the attack and having a giant bookcase chucked on top of me, but yeah, they’ve been pretty bad.”

“And your pain meds don’t help?”

“I stopped taking those a couple of days ago.”

“You did? Why?”

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“I’m ready!” Malia beams, entering the kitchen with her board under one arm and a beach bag slung over the other. She’s in a sexy black one piece with tempting side cut-outs and some cut off denim shorts that make her legs look amazing. “Are you joining us, Bho?”

“Just coming to admire the view, little dot,” he tells her with a wink. She giggles.

“Can you fit some drinks and snacks in your bag, Mai-Tai?” I ask, pointing to the small pile on the table. She nods and starts loading up.

When she’s done, the three of us head out the door and towards the ocean. About halfway there Malia pauses.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her when she starts to bite her lip.

“We should have asked Reef if he wanted to join us.”

“Oh, he’s working. He’s not even at the house today.”

“Oh, okay.”

Just like that she releases her lip, smiles at me, and continues walking.

As we reach the water’s edge, I glance around at the other surfers out in the water. There’s a mix of locals here today, the place much busier than usual.

I notice that Malia seems a little edgy; she’s not normally this quiet. Maybe she’s just feeling a little out of place among so many strangers.

“Hey, you okay?” I ask her as we wax up our boards.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she replies, but I can tell that she’s not really.

“You sure? You seem a little on edge.”

She hesitates for a moment before shaking her head. “I’m just not used to surfing with so many people around. It’s kind of overwhelming.”

“You’ll be fine,” I reassure her. “Just try to focus on the waves and not the people.”

She nods, looking a little more relaxed now, and we make our way out to the water, leaving Bhodi on the sand with strict instructions not to eat all of the snacks.

The waves are good today, and I feel the familiar thrill of excitement as I paddle out. The water is cold, but I don’t really notice it as I focus on the waves. I have to admit, surfing really does clear my head. I can feel the tension slipping out of my body with every stroke of my arms.

As we get out to the break, we take our positions to wait for the perfect wave. Malia looks a little shaky at first, but as we wait, she seems to relax a little more. Bhodi is sitting on the sand, watching the other surfers intently. I’m too far out to make out the expression on his face but I can tell from the tense set of his shoulders and just knowing him too well that he’s probably scowling at them. He hates it when other people encroach on ‘our’ beach. Even though it’s some of the best surf on the island, we usually have this place to ourselves.

Malia and I catch a few waves, laughing and whooping as we ride them into shore. It’s not long before we’re both feeling pretty good, the sun warming our skin and the waves keeping us entertained.

And then, suddenly, everything changes.

I see her first, the woman from my dreams. She’s out in the water, her hair tangled and her eyes wild. I blink, thinking for a moment that I must be hallucinating, but when I open my eyes again, she’s still there.

I paddle over to Malia, who’s looking at me quizzically.

“Do you see her?” I whisper, pointing to the woman.

“See who?”

I look back and the woman’s gone. I shake my head, thinking I must have imagined it. But then, a few minutes later, she’s back. This time, she’s closer, and I can see that she’s not just some random surfer. There’s something off about her, something dangerous.

I paddle towards the shore. Panic rises in my chest, but I try to keep it

under control. I'm so busy focusing on the shoreline that I fail to notice the wave building behind me.

It's only when I feel the rush of water carrying me forward that I realise I've made a mistake. I've caught the biggest wave of the day and I'm not sure I can handle it. I try to adjust my position, but it's too late. The wave is huge, and it's dragging me at breakneck speed towards the sand.

Malia screams my name, and Bhodi jumps up from where he'd been sitting on the sand. But it's too late for them to do anything. I'm already committed to the ride.

The wave carries me towards the shore, and I feel the rush of adrenaline as I realise how fast I'm going. The wind is whipping past me, and my board is vibrating under my feet. I have no idea how I'm going to survive this.

The next thing I know, I'm airborne. The wave has launched me into the air, and I'm falling, falling, falling. I hit the water hard and am immediately caught in a rip current.

I struggle against the current, trying to get to the surface for air. The water is cold and dark, and I'm disoriented. My board is hitting me from behind, but I can't seem to move my limbs to get myself upright. I'm panicking and my lungs are burning. There's no sense of my magic within me, ready to activate and save my life.

I feel fingers around my ankle, fiddling with my leash and then suddenly it's gone and the Velcro strap is replaced by freakishly strong fingers which are pulling me down into the depths of the abyss.

Just as I think I'm about to pass out, strong arms wrap around me and pull me up to the surface. I gasp for air as I cling onto the person who's saved me.

"Are you okay?" someone yells over the sound of the waves. I don't recognise the voice. Must be one of the other surfers.

I nod, still coughing up water.

"Thank you," I manage to say.

He helps me onto his board and paddles us towards the shore. When we reach the shallows, he helps me off his board and I sit on the sand for a moment, catching my breath.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asks me again.

I nod, feeling a little embarrassed at how shaken up I am.

"Alright dude. That was an epic wave by the way. Shame you wiped out." I give him a tight smile, my lungs and eyes still burning. As well as my

cheeks. “You really should wear your leash, though. Christ knows if you’ll get your board back, or if it’ll be in one piece if you do.”

“Yeah. Sorry. I hope no one was hit by my board.”

“Nah, you’re all good man. No one else was crazy enough to attempt that wave.”

“Well, thanks anyway.”

“No problem. See you back out there sometime.”

He jogs back into the water with his board under his arm and then swims out to his friends. I scan the water but there’s no sign of the woman who had me so spooked.

Strange.

“What the hell was that all about? I saved your board for you, you’re welcome by the way. I better not have bust my stitches running down the beach for this piece of junk,” Bhodi pants, flopping down on the sand beside me with Betsy next to him.

“Thanks, mate.”

“What happened?”

“Not a clue,” I say, unwilling to share my crazy thoughts right now. I need to figure this out for myself before Bhodi starts weighing in with his special brand of scepticism.

“Cove!” Malia cries, racing from the ocean with her board in tow. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just embarrassed.”

She frowns and pouts. “What have you got to be embarrassed about? That was an epic ride. You did so well.”

“Thanks, Mai-Tai.”

“Do you want to go back out there?”

I shake my head. “Nah. I’m starving,” I lie. “I’m going to eat whatever snacks Bhodi’s left for us.”

“Fuck you, man. I didn’t touch a damn thing.”

I chuckle at Bhodi’s retort, feeling a sense of relief that the tension has dissipated.

“Sure thing, buddy.”

As we grab our boards and start walking back to where Bhodi was sitting, I can’t help but feel like I’m being watched. I turn around, scanning the beach, but I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

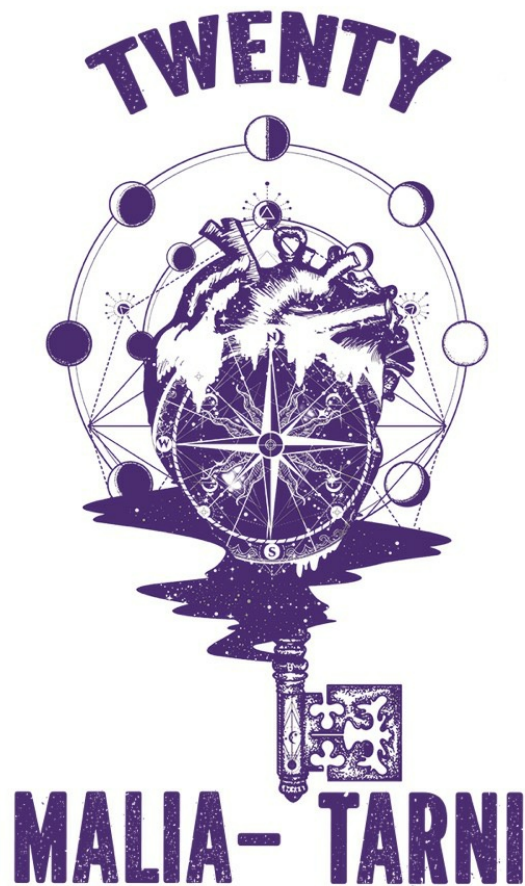
“Cove? You coming?” Malia calls out to me.

“Yeah, just a sec,” I reply, still looking around.

And that’s when I see her again. The woman from my dreams. She’s standing on the top of a nearby cliff, watching us intently. Her hair is whipping violently in the wind, and her eyes are fixed on me.

The hairs on my neck stand on end. *Who is she and what does she want with me?*

“Yo, Cove! Come on, man!” Bhodi’s yell snaps me out of my trance, and I tear my gaze away from her and rush to catch up with my friends. When I look back over my shoulder, she’s gone.



I don't know what went down in the water. Cove is way too shaken for it to be a simple case of wiping out, no matter how hard he hit the water. He was under too long. And I know for a fact that he had his leash on, so how could it have come loose and his board have ended up right along the shore?

Just before he caught that wave, I had the strangest feeling of being watched – and I don't mean by Cove or Bhodi. The air seemed to crackle with magic, almost like the rogue wave which came out of nowhere was conjured just to catch Cove unaware. But no matter the guys telling me magic is real, that sounds crazy even to my own ears.

We sit together on the sand, drying off and finishing the little picnic Cove put together for us. Cove and I share water from a reusable bottle while Bhodi drinks from the bottled stuff they all seem to prefer. It's been a few days now since Cove stopped drinking it, I should ask him how he's feeling, if he's noticed any changes. But it's not a conversation I want to have in front of Bhodi. Clearly, he thinks we're stupid because he's still drinking it without

complaint. I keep wondering if I'm being silly about the water, but then I recall what the professor said to me in the police station: You thought it was the other water. The one that makes you forget.

God, I really hope he returns soon. I need answers.

And now I feel like a dick for thinking that when he took off to defend his actions. He *killed* someone for me. We've not heard from him since. I've no idea what the punishment for murder is where he's from, and I'm here getting impatient about wanting answers over a bottle of water. I'm fucking selfish.

As I sit there on the sand, lost in thought, a hand rests on my shoulder. Cove, his face still pale from the incident in the water, sits down beside me, his eyes searching mine for something.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "I shouldn't have gotten so worked up back there. I just...I don't know what's going on."

I nod, not sure what to say. Cove thinks there's something going on too. He didn't just wipe out. I'm just as confused and scared as he is.

It was so weird, but for a moment out there, it felt like the water was closing in on us, like it was alive and trying to drown us. I could feel the magic. The professor was right – it's real. And it's dangerous.

I'm bone-tired by the time we head back to the house. Cove and Bhodi both look completely washed out too. I think we all overdid it today.

"Leave your board outside with mine and I'll clean them both off while you shower," Cove tells me.

"Thanks. But Bhodi can shower first."

"I won't say no to that, unless you want to shower with me, little dot. We could conserve water."

I laugh when he wiggles his eyebrows at me. "That's not a good idea."

"I'm fine."

"You're still healing," I insist.

"Exactly. I need someone to nurse me back to health."

"Then maybe you should take your medication!"

"You're such a grass," he snipes at Cove, before turning back to me. "I feel faint. Maybe you should chaperone me while I shower."

I laugh but shake my head. “You’re incorrigible.”

“My dick’s incorrigible.”

“Enough. Go shower.”

I’m still laughing as I push open the front door and step inside. Rounding the corner to the kitchen, I halt, the laughter dying on my lips.

“You’re back!” I exclaim, rushing forward and throwing my arms around the professor. He stiffens under my touch and I step back, frowning. “What—?”

He winces, unable to hide the grimace of pain on his face.

“You’re hurt?”

“I’m fine, Miss Van der Zee—”

“Bullshit!” I snap, frustration and relief and fear warring inside me and coming out all wrong. “Look at you.”

“What about me?”

“You’re hurt. I can tell,” I insist.

“There’s not a mark on me, so I don’t see how you could tell.” He folds his arms over his chest in challenge.

“It’s the way you’re holding yourself.”

He raises a brow at me, a slight smirk tugging on his lips. He’s mocking me, even though I knew the moment we met that he was left-handed from the way he tied his shoelaces, he doesn’t believe that I can read him. “And how’s that?”

“Stiff. Your movements are tentative. Hesitant. You stiffened when I touched you and your eyes are full of pain,” I reply with confidence, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

“Maybe I stiffened because I don’t want to be touched by you.”

I silently baulk at his harsh tone and try to ignore the pain his words cause to strike through my chest. Why is he being a dick? Is it because he’s hurt? *I’m* not the one who did this to him though, so why take it out on me?

He steps away from me, and I watch as he moves towards the kitchen counter, his movements still all wrong. He usually moves with so much confidence, with fluidity, but right now he’s jerky.

I don’t know why he’s being so cold to me. I thought we’d moved past this. He’s always blowing hot and cold – a saying which makes total sense to me now – and I can never work out where I stand with him.

“We missed you,” I say quietly, trying again. The man standing with his

back to me feels like a stranger, not the guy who killed to protect me.

When he doesn't respond, I take off up the stairs deciding to just have the first shower while Bhodi and Cove are still outside. The water from the shower can disguise the tears of disappointment silently sliding down my face.

How pathetic to cry over a man, Malia!

By the time I get out of the shower, there's a full scale screaming match going on downstairs. Deciding that I can't face it, I slip into Cove's room, get changed into shorts and a tank top, and pace the room.

The raised voices are clearly audible from below, even with the door closed, but I'm unable to discern what they're *actually* saying. I hope they're not fighting about me. I'm starting to feel like the burden of keeping me safe is becoming too much to bear. I'm not worth it.

As I pace around the room, I can feel the tension building up inside me. I'm angry, frustrated, and scared all at the same time. I don't know what to do to make things better, to ease the burden on those who are trying to protect me. It all feels...too much.

I'm too much.

My parents were always telling me so. They called me difficult, stubborn, reckless. They said I was a burden on them, that I caused them nothing but trouble. And now, as I stand here in Cove's room, I wonder if they were right.

The screaming downstairs grows louder, and I can't take it anymore. I need to get out of here. I need to escape the constant arguing, the tension, the fear.

I make my way to the balcony doors and open them, feeling the cooler evening air on my skin. Without thinking, I step out onto the balcony, before pausing. The guys have been through so much, all in the name of protecting me. It would be foolish to run away from their protection because of the guilt eating away at me.

Running away would place them in even more danger, and I can't live with that on my conscience, so I return to the bedroom and close the door once more.

Listening to the fight causes anxiety to swirl and churn within me though. It opens past wounds and triggers old trauma within me.

My breaths come in short gasps as I try to regulate my breathing. I can't

stay in this space anymore. I need to hide or I'll go insane. With shaking legs, I cross to the closet in Cove's room that I've never used and slip inside. The space is tiny, and just what I need. Sinking to the floor, I pull my knees up to my chest and begin my breathing exercises to calm my racing heart.

The darkness of the closet is strangely comforting, and I feel myself starting to relax. My mind begins to wander, and I'm suddenly transported back to a happier time.

I'm at the beach with my family, the sun is shining, and the waves are crashing against the shore. My parents aren't yelling at me, and I'm running around, chasing seagulls. For a moment, I forget about the fight downstairs, the danger I'm in, and the guilt I feel.

But the memory fades as quickly as it came, and I'm left alone in the darkness of the closet. My safe space.

The shouting has died down somewhat, but I can still hear muffled voices downstairs. I know I need to face them eventually, but for now, I just need a moment of peace.

Footsteps echo down the hallway, and my heart starts racing again. I'm not ready to be confronted by anyone yet, but as the footsteps stop outside the door, I hold my breath, praying that whoever's there will leave me be. I'm just...not ready to deal with them yet. Not when my own pain and trauma is still sitting so fresh at the forefront of my mind. I just need a little time to myself. Curling up into an even tighter ball, I burrow my way right to the back of the closet, gasping when I brush against something and the whole tiny, cramped space becomes lit up with an eerie blue glow.



“Malia?” I call, knocking gently at Cove’s bedroom door. I’m kind of glad that she felt this was a safe space she could come to, when living with all of us became too much. I still can’t believe that the professor has only been back in the house for half an hour and he’s already upset her and caused a fight among us. “Are you okay?”

When she doesn’t answer, I push open the door. The bed’s empty and she’s not sitting at the desk either. The doors out to the balcony are closed but because there’s no curtains, I can see she’s not out there anyway.

“Malia?” I call again, my concern making itself known in the slight waver to my voice.

“What’s up?”

I jump and spin around only to find Cove standing in the doorway.

“You scared me. I can’t find Malia. I thought she came in here.”

“Maybe she’s in the bathroom?” he suggests.

I point over his shoulder to the open, empty bathroom opposite my room.

“Maybe she went into one of the other rooms.”

“Maybe.” I’m not convinced though, she’s never let herself into any of our rooms before. It’s just not like her.

“She can’t have left, can she?” Cove asks, frowning.

“Highly unlikely. She’d have to climb over your balcony and drop down onto the sand below.” As I’m speaking, I cross the space and look out of the window. “Doesn’t look like she’s done that.”

“So she’s still here somewhere.”

“Must be.”

“Malia!” Cove calls, much louder than I did. She doesn’t answer. “If she’s here, why isn’t she answering us?”

“Maybe she went down to the basement and we just missed her. I’ll go and look. You go ask the others to help find her.”

“Fine.”

As I make my way down to the basement, my mind starts racing with all the possibilities. What if Malia is hurt? What if she’s sick? Or worse, what if she’s running away from something? I shake my head, trying to clear the negative thoughts. It’s better to stay calm until we find her.

The basement is dark and eerie, and I have to fumble for the light switch. When the lights come on, there’s no sign of Malia, so I head back upstairs.

“She’s not in the basement,” I tell the others once I’m in the kitchen.

“We’ll each go and check our rooms just in case. Maybe she’s in my office,” the professor suggests.

“I’ll check it, and your room too so you don’t have to deal with the stairs.”

He nods his thanks and I take off, pausing only when something occurs to me. “Check small spaces,” I call to the others, recalling Malia telling me that her parents once locked her in a cupboard for days on end as punishment for some slight or other, and that, rather than becoming afraid of small spaces after that, she embraced them and made them her safe space.

I don’t know what may have triggered her, but if she hasn’t left the house, she has to be here somewhere, and I get the feeling that this memory might be the key to finding her and discovering what’s wrong.

“Found her!” I sag in relief when the cry goes up a few minutes later and I race upstairs to see where Malia was hiding. It was Cove who shouted, so I head for his room even though we already checked it.

The door to his room is open and he's standing in the doorway to his closet, his silhouette lit up in a blazing blue.

"Shit," I hiss.

"Malia? I'm going to come in, okay? Don't move."

That blue light can only mean one thing, Malia has found – and somehow activated – one of Cove's weapons. The mystery is how? She shouldn't be able to see the blades that we carry, much less activate their magic.

This can't be good.

"What's going on?" the prof calls from downstairs.

"Bhodi, go and keep him in the kitchen. Tell him we'll be down in a minute. I want to check Malia's okay."

Bhodi gives me a nod and leaves.

"Here, Cove. Let me," I say, gently moving him to one side and pushing my way into the doorway.

I take a deep breath and step into Cove's closet. As soon as I enter, I'm hit with the scent of Malia's fear. She's huddled in the corner, her eyes wide with terror as she clutches something to her chest.

"Malia, it's me," I say softly, trying to keep my tone calm and reassuring. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She shakes her head frantically, but I can see the tears streaming down her face.

"It's okay," I try again, taking a step closer. "You're safe now. Let me help you."

That's when I see what she's holding. It's one of Cove's knives, the blue light still pulsing around the blade. She must have stumbled upon it in his closet and tried to pick it up, never realising the power it held.

"Malia," I say, holding out my hand. "Give me the knife. Let's go downstairs and sort all of this out."

Malia hesitates for a moment, her grip on the knife tightening. But then she slowly extends her arm, the blade glinting in the dim light. I take it gently from her hand and place it on the shelf behind me.

"Good," I say, giving her a small smile. "Now, let's get out of here."

I take her hand and lead her out of the closet, back into the safety of the bedroom. Cove is waiting for us, a concerned expression etched on his face.

"What happened?" he asks, walking towards us.

"Malia found one of your knives," I explain, keeping my voice low. "She

was scared and didn't know what to do."

Cove's expression softens and he puts a hand on Malia's shoulder.

"It's okay," he says, his voice soothing. "You don't have to be afraid. We'll keep you safe."

Malia nods, her tears finally slowing down. I get the feeling she's crying about more than just the knife.

"Are you hurt? Did you cut yourself?"

She shakes her head.

"Are you sure?"

She nods and I breathe a sigh of relief. Things would have been a lot more complicated if she'd cut herself on one of our magical blades.

Cove takes Malia into his arms and holds her tightly, kissing the top of her head. I can see the love and protectiveness he feels for her radiating from him. It's no wonder she feels safe with him.

I watch them for a moment before deciding to give them some privacy. I take a step back, but before I can make my exit, Cove turns to me.

"Thank you," he says, his eyes full of gratitude.

I nod, offering him a small smile. "Of course. Let's all go downstairs and sort this out once and for all. It's time. No more secrets."

The prof isn't going to like this, but tough shit. It's time the truth came out and this discussion, as uncomfortable as it will be, is long overdue.



I don't even realise I'm crying until Cove wipes my tears away. Fuck. I'm so emotional right now, I swear my hormones are all over the place. This isn't like me.

Cove keeps his hand firmly clasped around mine as he leads us downstairs a few minutes after Reef.

It's time. I'm finally going to get the answers I've been looking for.

As we descend the stairs, my heart beats faster and faster. I have so many questions.

Rounding the corner into the kitchen, I stare in horror at the sight before me. The professor has his T-shirt pulled up around his shoulders, exposing his back to Reef, who's rubbing some kind of ointment into his skin. I gasp and he jumps, hastily pulling the shirt back down, but it's too late. I've seen it.

"What happened?" I ask, rushing over to him and attempting to lift the material back up to get a better look. Concern for him overrides all other

feelings I may have toward him. I don't want to see him hurt.

"Nothing," he snaps, jerking away from me.

"That's *not* nothing," I scold him. "Your back is shredded. It looks raw!"

The professor sighs heavily and avoids my gaze, then takes a deep breath before finally responding. "I... This was my punishment for killing Tanimola," he admits reluctantly. His voice is quiet, but there's a waver in his tone that betrays his pain.

"I don't understand," I say, hearing a tremble in my own statement.

"Malia, the punishment for killing one of our people is death. The only reason why I'm still here today is because when the council went to retrieve Tanimola's body, it wasn't there. Without a body, there can't technically be a crime in our world, but I still had to be punished for attacking one of our own because I confessed to it. It was this or Trial By Fire."

Trial by Fire? Why does that sound familiar? I shake it off. That's not important right now. The professor is.

"Who did this to you?" I ask, my voice low and dangerous. I want revenge. How dare they do this to him when he was trying to protect me!

"It doesn't matter," he replies.

"It matters to me," I say firmly. "I want to know who hurt you."

The professor hesitates for a moment before speaking again. "It was someone from the council," he says finally. "Someone who has been holding a grudge against me for a long time and relished the opportunity to get even."

Reef and Cove exchange a worried glance, but I'm too focused on the professor to take too much notice of it.

"What kind of grudge?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter, this is our way."

"Whose way?"

"The way of our people."

"Will you tell me more?"

He sighs deeply. "I think it's time to tell you everything. Let's sit."

"Are you okay? Won't it hurt too much?"

"I'm fine. The salve that Reef applied is already working. I can barely feel a thing." I get the impression he's lying to me, but I let it go. If I start another fight with him, we'll get sidetracked and I might never get answers.

We all take a seat at the kitchen table, and the professor takes a deep breath before beginning his story.

“You see, our people have a long and complicated history,” he says, his voice serious. “We are not like humans. We have powers, abilities that set us apart from the rest of the world, and we don’t live in this place.”

“What kind of powers?” I ask, intrigued.

“Telekinesis, telepathy, the ability to control the elements, sense magic...” he replies.

“Alter memories?” I ask, thinking of before.

He nods. “Yes. We all have different powers and abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Some of our people don’t have any magic at all, but most do. We’re born with these gifts, but they come with a price. There are those who fear us, who want to eliminate us or steal our magic for themselves.”

“What happened to Tanimola?” I ask, frowning as I realise the real reason that the professor recognised him at the police station.

“He was one of us,” the professor confirms quietly. “He was an elder on the council, but it was a role he never wanted. He always wanted to be part of the Queen’s Guard, the head of it, in fact. He held a grudge against me when I was selected for the role over him.”

“You were the head of the Queen’s Guard?”

“I am. Or I was. It’s complicated.”

“Please try to explain.”

“The four of us were all a part of the Queen’s Guard. Chosen to protect and serve her until we die. Many years ago – because time works differently in Aerwyna – the queen vanished. Disappeared without a trace and threw our people into turmoil.”

“What happened?” I ask, leaning forward on the edge of my seat.

“We were summoned by the council and told that the queen’s disappearance was foretold. That there was a prophecy which could help save our people from eradication, and prevent the human world from being destroyed too.”

My eyes are like saucers as I take in every word the professor is saying. It’s like something out of a movie, and yet, somehow, I know he isn’t lying to me. Not about this.

The professor continues, his voice low and intense. “The prophecy spoke of a chosen one, a person who would have the ability to save both our world and the human world. The star.”

He pauses, dark eyes locking on me, and a chill runs down my spine as I

realise what he's saying.

"You can't mean me?"

The professor nods gravely. "Yes, you. We've been looking for the star for years, and we were close to giving up, when you appeared. All signs seem to point towards you being the star, especially as the prophecy said the four of us would be drawn to you. You, Malia, are the chosen one."

I stare at him, unable to believe what I'm hearing. "But...why me? It's not possible. I'm just a human. I don't have any powers or anything."

"That's where you're wrong," the professor says, leaning forward, his eyes boring into mine. "You do have powers, powers that have been lying dormant within you. The voices in your head aren't because you're crazy or sick, it's because you, too, have magic. And you've been slowly leaking it ever since we met."

I shake my head. "That's not possible," I whisper.

"It is. Think about it, Malia." He gets up and the guys immediately start to whisper. I'm too focused on the professor to work out what they're saying but the odd snippet comes to me and just confuses me even more.

The professor retrieves something from the lounge, coming back with my notebook in hand. I frown. I've been looking for that. I wondered where it had gone, was worried about who might have found it. "For starters, you wouldn't be able to see our weapons, much less activate the blades so that they glow blue. You shouldn't be able to see other supernatural beings. Girls with wings and tails, and guys with fangs—"

"And fleas," I joke.

"Because he was a wolf shifter."

"People can't turn into animals," I say flatly. My brain feels overloaded with information.

"And Cove shouldn't be able to breathe underwater. But he did. You've seen mermaids in the water and chalked it up to being crazy, but no matter how many drugs they pump into your system, they can't stop the magic within you."

This is all too much.

I push my chair back, needing to move, and wince as it scrapes loudly against the floor. I start pacing.

"You have it all here in your notebook, Malia," the professor says before starting to read aloud. "Why do you hear people's thoughts? Because of your

magic. Why don't you hear our thoughts? Because we have mental wards in place unless we choose to drop them and communicate with you."

"Like you did at the station," I whisper.

"Yes."

"But...when I'm around you guys, I don't hear *anyone's* thoughts. At all. It's...peaceful. It's what drew me to you in the first place."

"That's the prophecy. If we didn't bring you that peace, in order to forge a bond, we would never have found each other."

"You would still have been my professor."

"But I highly doubt you would have kissed me. Or any of us. Am I wrong?"

I shake my head. "No. It's out of character for me."

"We take you out of your comfort zone by *being* your comfort and your safety."

I know he's right, but still...this is a *lot* to take in. I halt my pacing and fix the professor with a hard stare.

"Tell me about the water."

A flicker of...panic? washes over his face, but it's gone so quickly I almost miss it. The professor sighs.

"There's different water. The one I brought you in the police station was to help calm you. It settles nerves and soothes anxiety."

"But the other water doesn't. The one you keep in the fridge. The one that they all drink too."

"You know what it does, Malia."

"I want to hear it from you," I say stubbornly, crossing my arms over my chest. He's admitted it's not regular water, but do the others know? I don't think they do.

"Boss? What's she talking about?" Bhodi asks.

"The water suppresses memories. It makes people forget," the professor says slowly, like he's reluctant to let the words leave him.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that when we left Aerwyna and agreed to give up our memories of home, we had blocks placed upon us to ensure that. The water keeps those magical blocks topped up."

"So the headaches and the weird dreams I've been having the last few days *are* because I stopped drinking the water?" Bhodi complains, groaning.

“You what?” The professor demands sharply.

“You heard me. Malia didn’t want to drink that shit, said it makes her feel funny. So Cove and I decided to stop drinking it too.”

“Christ.” The professor runs a hand over his face while I stare at Bhodi. I thought he was still drinking the water. I saw him swigging from the bottle. Unless he was emptying it down the drain and refilling it with tap water, like I did. “This is a clusterfuck.”

“Why did you steal my memories? Why insist on giving me the water on top?”

“Malia, I’m partly to blame for the memory thing,” Cove says quietly. I turn to him, hands on hips and raise an expectant brow.

“After our date, you looked at me like I was a monster. You were afraid of me, and I couldn’t bear it. When you got into that accident, I asked Reef to just take away the attack and the magic, so that—”

“So that you still looked good? Normal? *Human?!?*” My voice has reached shouting and I wince and take a deep breath to dial it down a notch. “You were breathing underwater! How is that even possible?”

“We’re from Aerwyna, it’s a different realm to this,” Reef explains. “Our magic is fuelled by the ocean. Have you heard of Yemaya?”

I pause, considering. Have I? The name doesn’t ring a bell. I shake my head. “No.”

“Yemaya is the goddess of the ocean. Our queen. I guess we’re sort of... water spirits? I think that’s what you’d call it in your world.”

“Is that why you all love surfing and live by the beach?”

Reef nods. “We’re drawn to the ocean. All bodies of water really, but the ocean especially. Just like you.”

“But I’m *not* one of you. I can’t breathe under water.”

“True,” the professor concedes. “But you’re not human either, and only Aerwynan people can activate our blades.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“You must have Aerwynan blood. Somewhere in your lineage. It’s the only explanation.”

“This is insane.” I cross to the kitchen, turn on the tap and grab a glass from the draining rack. Filling it, I take a long drink, buying myself time to let this information overload to sink in.

“It still doesn’t explain why you took my other memories,” I eventually

point out. “The date thing, I guess I can understand. But the other times?”

It’s Reef who answers, calm and gentle and reassuring. “You weren’t ready to know the truth, Malia. You were in such a fragile state, we just wanted to protect you.”

“Would you do it again?” I demand, anger starting to bubble up within me.

“No. Too much has happened. We couldn’t take everything away without risking serious damage to your health. Besides, no matter how hard we try, your magic keeps returning your memories to you. I don’t think we could stop you from remembering anything at this point.”

“How about not doing it again because I’m fucking human and don’t deserve to be treated that way?” I hiss, clenching my fists and digging the nails into my palms.

“You’re strong, Mai-Tai. Powerful. When we figure all this out and help you access your magic, you could be unstoppable.”

I stare at Cove, not believing his words. The professor clears his throat gently and we all turn to him.

“What?” Bhodi demands.

“Nothing.” He doesn’t look at us.

“Tell me more about this prophecy,” I say. “And the bad guys.”

“Please...sit down and I will.”

Sighing, I take my seat, force my fingers to unfurl, and drum my fingers on the tabletop instead, impatient and angsty and overloaded.

This is a lot. Too much. Why do you keep asking questions, Malia? Just say ‘thanks, but this is all the bandwidth I have for today’ and run for the hills. Run the fuck away.

“Shikari are the supernatural species who hunt our kind. They were once like us, but they grew greedy and corrupt. They’re hunting for this star that the prophecy speaks of, because if they can find it first and neutralise it, they’ll be able to infiltrate our world and destroy it, but doing so, with their armies, would likely wipe out this world too.”

“And these Shikari...are they what have been killing girls on campus?”

“Yes.”

“But why are girls vanishing now instead of dying?”

“We don’t know. We think the Shikari are still taking them, but rather than killing them on the spot, they’re possibly taking them to sacred locations

to complete the rituals needed to tear open the portals to our world.”

“But it’s not working.”

“Only the star would open the portal.”

“So their deaths are for nothing?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“That’s horrible,” I whisper, aghast. “Why are you protecting me and not them?”

“Because we can’t protect everyone. But by keeping you alive, Malia, we ensure that not one, but two entire worlds, survive.”

“Sacrifice a few to save many?”

“If we had any other choice, we’d take it. We don’t *want* anyone to die, Malia,” Cove says, reaching across the table to take my hand.

“I’m guessing it’s not the Shikari making me look like the murderer then?”

“No. They would just kill you if they knew who you were.”

“So who else is targeting me, and why?”

“We don’t know yet. But we’re trying to find out.”

I take a deep breath and slowly let it out before nodding.

“Are you okay, little dot?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“We know it’s a lot to take in, we’ll answer any questions you have, but you don’t have to ask them now,” Reef says kindly. “It’s okay to take some time, and we can give you space if you need it.”

I should ask them about the weird lady in my dream...the fire...Trial by Fire the police officer said. The professor mentioned it too. What does that mean?

But I don’t say a word.

“Okay. Thank you. I might have more questions later but for now I just have one.”

“Ask it,” Cove prompts, squeezing my hand. “We’ll answer.”

“Okay...if I’m this star that your prophecy seems to be talking about. How am I meant to save the world – *worlds?* – Because I can’t figure it out. You can’t just hide me from the Shikari forever, right? I get the impression they won’t just get bored and give up. So, how am I meant to save everyone? What do I have to do? I’m certainly not a fighter.”

There’s a pause as all eyes turn to the professor expectantly. Do the

others not know?

The silence stretches, becomes awkward, then downright uncomfortable. The professor refuses to meet anyone's gaze. Dread forms in the pit of my stomach, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

When he opens his mouth to speak, no sound comes out. He closes his mouth, swallows, tries again.

"There's a ritual that will reinforce the portals to our world. Make them impenetrable to the Shikari."

I frown. Something isn't adding up. If the guys are convinced I'm the star and I can somehow save both worlds with a simple ritual, why haven't they done it yet? Why am I only just finding out about this?

"But, won't the Shikari still come after me. Won't they kill me later to open the portal?"

I feel like the pieces of the puzzle are slipping through an hourglass, slowly coming together one by one. But I'm missing something. The bigger picture. It's like looking at an impressionist painting. Up close it's all blurred brushstrokes and dots, but if you take a step backwards you see it in its entirety and can make out the image.

I need to take a step back to see what I'm missing.

"They won't be able to," the professor admits.

"Why not?"

"Because the ritual to seal the portals is irreversible."

"How? Why?" Bhodi demands. Reef is silent, staring at the professor in disbelief, and Cove is squeezing my hand so tight my fingers have turned white.

I know. I know what the professor isn't saying. What he doesn't want to admit. The cruellest fate of them all: that I finally found someone to love me for me, and we can't be together. Because I'll seal the portal forever and they'll be on the other side of it, and I'll be stuck in this realm without them.

"Because the ritual demands the star's blood."

"Meaning?!" Bhodi shouts, jumping to his feet and looking ready to kill someone.

"Meaning, that we have to sacrifice the star to save everyone."

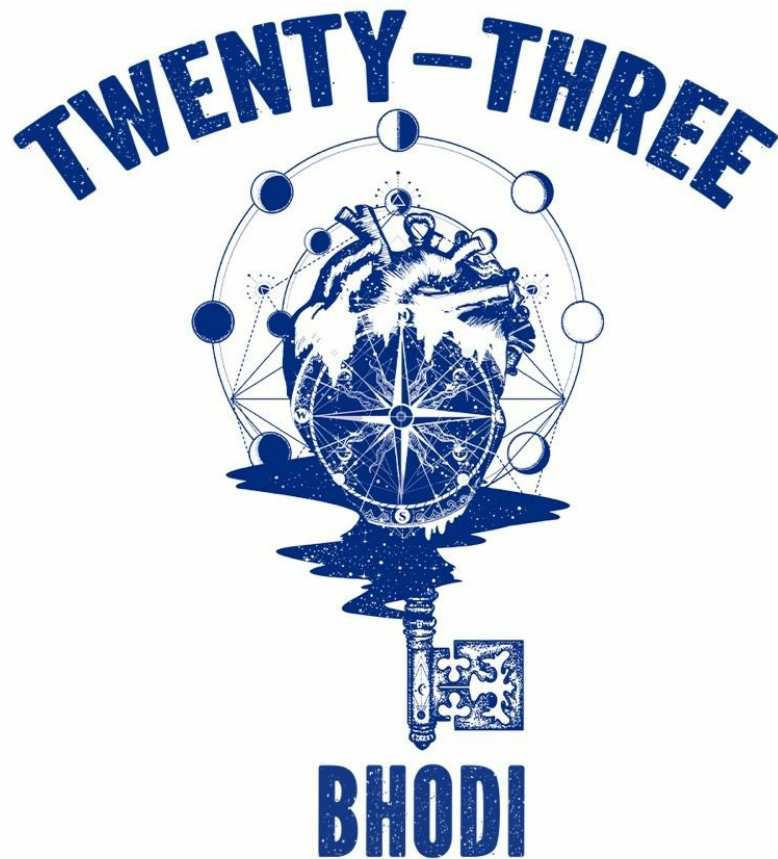
"S-sacrifice h-how?" I ask, swallowing past the lump in my throat, unshed tears burning my eyes.

The professor draws in a ragged, pained breath, blows it out and looks me

dead in the eye. His expression is swimming in regret.

“The star has to... You have to...” He breaks off, unable to say the words. I swallow painfully around the lump of disbelief, regret and emotion that’s lodged itself in my throat and whisper the words that he can’t.

“You have to kill me.”



“NO! No fucking way!” I yell, scraping my chair along the floor as I race round to pull Malia into my arms. “Not fucking happening.”

“Bhodi—” Malia’s reproach comes out muffled from where I’ve crushed her to my chest. I throw my hand over her mouth to quiet her protests and her pupils dilate.

Fuck. Is she turned on right now?

Focus, Bhodi! Now is not the time to be wondering if Malia has an asphyxiation kink.

I tell my dick to settle the fuck down and remove my hand from Malia’s face. She glares at me, but I see her nipples standing to attention. Fuck. I silently groan and then chastise myself.

“There has to be another way. We are not sacrificing Malia, do you hear me?” I bark, glaring daggers at the prof.

“We’ve exhausted all of the alternatives.” He’s completely unapologetic.

“And you had one job to do, find another way.” I hate this man, I hate

him and I hate this situation I've been plunged into.

"And I am sorry, for not doing that, but we simply do not have the time to go traipsing all over the world looking for another way to end the danger." He wearily rubs his eyes with the back of his hand, stressing his exhaustion.

"There has to be something else we haven't thought of. You're the fucking expert, find something—"

"I'm not the fucking expert, and have done everything I can," he snaps, anger coming off him in waves. "You want another way, look for one."

He's right, I do want another way, I want Malia to live, but I'm out of ideas. I can't bear to see her hurt, much less die. I bite my lip, staring at the skin, and swallow back the bile rising in my throat.

"This is fucking bullshit. I'm not having it."

I drop Malia and storm out of the house, slamming the door behind me. I can't take this anymore.

I need air.

I need space to think.

I need to find an alternative solution because I will protect Malia's life with my own. Even if it means killing my brothers to save her.

The rage bubbling up inside of me is demanding to be sated.

All I want to do is cause destruction and I have no outlet for it.

"Bhodi!" Malia's voice calls out behind me, but I ignore her, needing to get far away from her.

I know what I need to do. It's the only solution left.

"Bhodi, stop." Her voice is pleading. I can't continue to run from her. She takes my arm and anchors me.

"I'll be gone soon, you won't have to be this way anymore." She hesitates and looks away. I know what she's trying to say and I don't want to hear it.

"No." I leave no room for discussion.

"Bhodi—"

"No, don't say it. I won't hear it, okay, little dot? It's not happening. I can't—" I take a deep breath and do my utmost not to cry or plead with her. "You should go back to the house, Malia. It's not safe to be out here alone."

"I'm not alone. I'm with you."

"I'm leaving. Don't follow me, I can't keep you safe."

The ache in my chest is killing me.

I'm suffocating, my head feels like it's going to explode.

I have to do this, I have to protect her...

I force myself to take one last look at her. At her face streaked with tears, her bottom lip trembling as she tries to stand strong.

I fight the urge to gather her in my arms and never let her go.

To never let anyone hurt her.

To convince her to go away, hide somewhere, so she doesn't get hurt by the people sworn to protect her.

But I can't do it. I won't do it. Because I'm not strong enough.

With a choked sob which I disguise as a cough, I turn away from the woman who is stealing my heart. My stomach twists in knots. My heart rips in two.

"Go home, little dot," I whisper through the tears falling freely now.

"Bhodi—"

"GO!" I scream in her face, pushing her back gently and hating that she stumbles. I turn my back on her and take off running away from the beach. I need to get out of here. I need to fight.

I know the doc will give me shit about my stitches, but I don't care. If I die tonight, whoever I end up fighting will be doing me a favour. At least then I don't have to stick around to watch my brothers betray me by killing the girl I can't seem to stay away from. The one I don't deserve. The one I can't possibly live without. The one I love.

I'm sure that they're all waiting on me back at the house, but I'm not going back. I need to find someone else to fight, because I can't do this anymore. I can't fight my brothers, so a stranger will have to step in to fill their place. Because my rage is still pumping hot through my veins and the only thing that will sate me is quenching my thirst for blood.

I walk down the dark alley, my eyes scanning for any potential opponents or enemies lurking in the shadows. Obviously, I'm going to go to the camping ground and fight in the ring properly, but if any Shikari want to spring an attack on me tonight, I'd welcome it.

I need to release this pent-up energy before it consumes me.

When I reach the garage, I take one of the bikes knowing it will get me to the campground in Two Harbours much quicker. I hesitate before grabbing my helmet and pulling it on, then I gun the engine and take off, riding recklessly.

I stride into the reception area and am met by the doc, a sardonic

expression on her face.

“All healed, pup?”

I scowl at her. “Save it. I’m no pup.”

“But you *are* my patient.”

I fix her with a hard look and when she narrows her gaze on me, fully prepared to give me shit, I switch tactics and give her my best puppy-dog eyes despite just telling her I’m not a pup.

“I need to fight tonight, Doc. I’ll make you lots of money, I swear.”

She sighs. “I’m not paying you.”

“I don’t care. Hell, the mood I’m in, I’d pay you to let me fight.”

“Don’t kill anyone. I’m still recovering from saving your sorry ass. I’m not working tonight.”

“Fine.” I grind out, disappointed and pissed off. The doc doesn’t usually give a shit if my opponents leave in a body bag, but whatever. I’ll do my best, but I’m not about to make any promises.

“Get your ass downstairs and get ready. Don’t make me regret this.”

“You won’t. Who ever regretted making a shit tonne of money?”

She waves me off, and I head down to the pit where the fighting takes place. The basement room is rammed, a wall of noise hitting me as I enter.

Fight night is already well underway, with two opponents facing off in the caged ring.

I make my way through the crowd to the edge of the pit, watching the fight unfold. The two fighters are evenly matched, both throwing punches and kicks with deadly precision. The crowd roars as they exchange blows, blood spattering across the ring.

I feel eyes on me, and the electric atmosphere seems to increase through the crowd as whispers of my presence spread.

As the fight ends and the winner is declared, I step forward and climb into the ring, ready to face my opponent. I know I’m not in the best shape for a fight, but I can’t let that stop me. I need to release this pent-up rage.

My opponent steps forward, a hulking figure with bulging muscles and a sneer on his face. He looks like he can take a hit or two, but so can I. As I approach him, my fists clench at my sides. He’s clearly been in the fight game for a while, and I can tell he’s not going to hold back.

It’s odd that I’ve never seen him before. Before Malia came along, I was in this place weekly. Sometimes nightly. I know I’ve not been here for a

while, but the faces in the crowd are mostly familiar.

Not this guy though.

I strip off my shirt and brace myself as the bell rings. I expect him to rush me straight away, but he doesn't. Instead, we circle each other, sizing each other up, before I lunge forward and throw the first punch. It connects with his jaw, and I feel a sense of satisfaction as he stumbles back. But he recovers quickly.

We charge forward, fists flying. Soon, we're trading blows, the sound of the crowd fading away, replaced by the adrenaline pumping through my veins and the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

I duck and weave, dodging his punches and landing more than a few of my own. The sounds of the crowd cheering us on echoes through the pit.

As the fight wears on, I can feel my stitches pulling and my vision starting to blur. But I can't give up now. I'm still too angry.

I land a solid punch on my opponent's already bruised jaw, and he stumbles back. I see my opening and go for the knockout blow, but he recovers too quickly and lands a devastating punch to my gut. I gasp for air, stumbling back and barely able to stay on my feet.

The crowd roars, sensing a victory for my opponent. But I can't let that happen. I can't go back to my brothers with a loss under my belt.

I summon all the strength I have left and charge forward again, throwing punch after punch with reckless abandon. I can feel blood dripping down my face, but I don't care.

My opponent is reeling now, unable to withstand my onslaught of blows. I see the fear in his eyes, and I know I have him. I land a final punch to his nose, and he goes down with a sickening thud.

The crowd erupts into a frenzy, cheering and shouting my name. I stand there for a moment, basking in the glory of my victory. But then the pain hits me, and I realise just how badly hurt I am.

I stagger out of the ring, my legs weak and trembling. The doc rushes over to me, a look of concern etched on her face.

"I told you not to kill anyone," she says, her voice tinged with annoyance.

"I didn't," I mutter, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "But I think he's going to need some medical attention." I grin at her, a bloody, wild thing, and she tuts at me.

Shaking her head, she hurries off to tend to my fallen opponent. I push

my way through the crowd, a few regulars hitting me on the back because I made them very rich tonight.

Near the back of the room, almost out of sight, I spot a familiar face – a girl surrounded by four guys who keep their faces in the shadows. The girl's expression is easy to read though: she's devastated. Whoever she is, I'd say that's probably her boyfriend I just knocked out.

Whatever. Someone always has to get hurt in a fight, it's the way these things work. And tonight, it wasn't me.

As soon as I'm out into the night air, I collapse onto a nearby bench, panting heavily and wincing in pain. My ribs ache, my head throbs, and my knuckles are bloody and bruised. But despite all that, I can't help but feel a sense of satisfaction.

I needed this fight. I needed to let out my rage and feel alive again. And now, as I sit here catching my breath, I know that I can face whatever comes my way.

Especially saving Malia.

But first, I need to pummel more faces.

When I step back into the fight room, the girl, her bodyguards, and my opponent have gone.

It's only when I'm on my fourth fight that I realise the girl was Malia's so-called friend, Summer.

The realisation is such a distraction, that it gets me knocked out.

Twat.



The three of us sit in silence as we wait for Malia to return. As soon as Bhodi pushed her away and took off running, she was out the door after him.

“She’s coming back, right?” Cove eventually asks.

“Yes,” the prof replies tersely.

“I wouldn’t,” Cove mutters.

I shoot him a dirty look. “That’s not helpful.”

He shrugs, and I know he has a point. If someone told me they were going to kill me, you wouldn’t see me for dust. But I trust Malia. She’ll come back. She’ll need explanations. She’ll have questions. And she knows the danger that’s out there still.

When she returns, her face is wet with tears but I can tell she’s trying to hold it together.

“Malia! You came back,” Cove exclaims, getting to his feet like he’s going to race over to him. She holds her hand up to stop him and he halts in his tracks.

“Well, it’s pretty obvious that Bhodi didn’t have a clue, how about the rest of you?” Malia asks.

Cove shakes his head, looking shell-shocked. “I didn’t expect...this. I suspected it wouldn’t be good, but I only got there a split second before the prof told us.”

She turns to me and raises a brow. Her expression is pissed, but I think that’s just a mask to hide her hurt and devastation.

“I’m sorry, Malia. This is a lot to take in.” Her eyes narrow. “Fuck, that sounds shit. I didn’t know...”

“But you suspected.”

Reluctantly, I nod. “I didn’t think...I don’t know what I’m trying to say. I didn’t think it would be that bad. That it would be this hard. The plan was simple: find the star, save our world. I didn’t expect to fall—”

“For the job. Because that’s all I am to you guys, isn’t it? A job.”

“No, Malia.” I shake my head sadly. “It’s not that at all.”

How am I meant to tell her that I’ve fallen for her without making this whole damn situation a thousand times worse? If our roles were reversed would I want to know that the girl I love is planning to kill me, but loves me too? It’s too cruel.

Malia takes a deep breath and looks away, staring out the window at the ocean view. The silence stretches on, heavy and oppressive, until she finally speaks again.

“I need some time to think. To figure out what I want to do next.” She turns to me, her expression softening just a fraction. “But I need you to promise me something, okay?”

“Anything,” I reply instantly.

“If this mission goes wrong for whatever reason...if...if me dying doesn’t save our worlds, I need you to promise me that you’ll do whatever it takes to save yourself and the others. Even if that means leaving me...my body... behind.”

A surge of anger, hot and fierce, floods me at her suggestion. I open my mouth to protest, but the prof cuts me off.

“Malia’s right,” the prof interrupts, his voice strained and tense. “We have to prioritise our own survival. Otherwise, what’s the point? We still have a queen to find, protect and serve. Even if she doesn’t have a home to return to.”

“Malia, if it comes to that, we’ll all wish we were dead anyway. I don’t want to live in any world that’s ruled by Shikari,” Cove tells her gently.

He reaches for her hand but she pulls away, cringing.

“Sorry. I just need...some space,” she murmurs.

“Of course. I understand. I’m sorry,” he replies, sounding strained and oddly formal.

I watch the exchange, feeling a strange sense of detachment. It’s like I’m observing someone else’s life play out, not my own. But then I realise that I’m probably not the only one feeling this way. The tension in the room is palpable, and I can see it etched on everyone’s faces. We’re all scared. We’re all uncertain. And we’re all wondering if we’ll make it out alive.

For a moment, no one speaks. We’re all lost in our own thoughts, our own fears. But then I break the silence.

“We’ll make it,” I say, my voice surprisingly steady. “We’ll find a way. We have to. We can’t give up now.”

Malia looks at me, her eyes searching mine. For a moment, I think she’s going to say something, but then she just nods.

“I’m going to go to bed and sleep on this. It’s been a lot to take in, and I need time to digest it all.”

“Of course,” I tell her, sounding almost as formal and uptight as Cove and hating myself for it.

“Miss Van der Zee?” The professor calls, halting her exit.

“Yes?” I can tell she’s gritting her teeth, and her knuckles are white on the bannister. Why is he using her title like that? Now is not the time to be putting distance between us and her. We shouldn’t be alienating her. We should be falling over ourselves to find a solution that doesn’t result in her death, so that we can keep her. Not driving her away with harsh formality.

“Now that you know what’s at stake, please abide by the safety measures we have in place.”

“I will,” she replies tightly.

“I mean it. Do not leave this property.”

“I said I would, okay!” she yells, but her voice breaks on the final word and she takes off running, sprinting up the stairs two at a time. I want to hit him for being such a dick to her.

But I know that the professor is just as scared as the rest of us. He’s just better at hiding it.

I turn to Cove, who's still staring up at the stairs where Malia disappeared.

"She's right," I say, breaking the tense silence. "We all need some rest. It's going to be a long journey ahead."

Cove nods, but his eyes are still fixed on the stairs.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" he asks softly.

"I don't know," I admit. I think she handled the news better than I would have done if our roles were reversed and she's definitely taken it better than Bhodi did. "But we have to trust that she can handle this. We all have to trust each other if we're going to make it through."

Cove looks at me, his eyes full of something I can't quite read. But then he nods again, more firmly this time.

"You're right," he agrees. "We have to stick together. No matter what."

I smile at him, feeling a little bit of the tension dissipate.

"Get some rest, Cove. We'll see how she is in the morning."

"I'll go for a shower first," he says, clapping me on the back before taking off upstairs. I wonder if he'll check on Malia or if he'll let her be.

"I need you to go and find Bhodi," the prof says, drawing my attention back to him. I stifle a sigh. Of course he does. "You're the only one he'll respond to when he gets like this."

"I know," I say flatly. Just because it's not in my style to rant and rave and react to everything like him, it doesn't mean I don't understand how he's feeling. Blindsided.

This was probably a conversation the four of us should have had years ago, so that we were all working from the same page. What I don't understand is why the professor encouraged us to keep getting close to Malia if he was sure she was the star. He had to know we would develop feelings for her, and that we wouldn't be okay with just casually killing her when the time was right.

"I'll go looking for him. Maybe I'll try the camping ground."

"Don't. His stitches are still healing. He wouldn't go there to fight." I'm not sure I agree with the prof on that assessment. "Try the bars in town first."

I nod, even though my gut is telling me that he's absolutely lost all sense of reason – enough that he would risk his life by stepping into the ring before he's fully healed. But an order's an order. I have to try the bars in town first. Maybe once I've exhausted those options I can circle back and try Doc's

camping ground.

I just hope he hasn't done anything stupid. Or that if he has – because let's face it, it's Bhodi, and he's the most hot headed out of all of us – that I get to him in time.



“Malia?” I knock gently on her door, hesitant to let myself in, even if it is technically my room. “Can I come in?”

“It’s your room,” comes the muffled reply.

It’s not an invitation, but it’s not a no either, so I quietly open the door and slip inside. I’m trying to tell myself that I just want to check on her, make sure she’s alright. But I know that I need comfort myself right now, and I’ll only find that with her.

Inside, Malia’s curled up in the bed, her back to me. It stirs something inside me to see her taking comfort between my sheets, that my room has become her safe space, even despite the closet incident.

I take a step closer, watching her chest rise and fall. She looks so peaceful, so pure, and it’s hard to resist the urge to join her in the bed. I know I shouldn’t, but my body craves her touch. Perhaps now more than ever. But I’m not here to take advantage of her, I’m here to make sure she’s alright.

“Malia?”

“Hmm?”

I abandon what I was going to say. “Can I join you?” I ask tentatively, already moving towards the bed. Malia rolls over so she’s facing me, her eyes the only thing peeking out from beneath the covers, and nods, before shuffling back to make room for me next to her. I climb in, feeling the heat of her body against mine, and wrap an arm around her waist.

We lie there in silence for a few moments, just enjoying each other’s company, when Malia speaks up.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly.

“You’re sorry? What on earth for? You have nothing to be apologising for, Mai-Tai,” I say, reaching out to cup her chin and gently lifting her head so that I can look at her.

“For flipping out and leaving,” she says, staring at me with wide eyes that are still glistening with tears.

“Malia, that wasn’t flipping out. Not even close. You chose to remove yourself from a highly stressful, highly emotional situation. No one can blame you for that.”

“I don’t think I’m handling this well,” she confesses in a low whisper.

“I think you’re handling this better than the rest of us.” Unable to help myself, I drop a kiss to her forehead and linger for a moment.

“You really didn’t know?” she asks, pulling back enough so that she can meet my gaze. Her beautiful eyes search mine and seem to desperately plead with me to be telling the truth as I shake my head.

“I really didn’t. Maybe that was naive of me, but I thought we just had to find you and keep you safe.”

It sounds so lame even to my own ears that all I can do is pull her closer and hold her tighter.

Malia’s body relaxes into mine, and we lie there in silence once more. But the tension between us is thick, palpable, and I know I can’t let it go on any longer.

“Can I ask you something?” I whisper, my lips brushing against hers.

“Of course,” she breathes out, her voice barely audible.

“Why did you leave? Was it just to go after Bhodi?” I ask, knowing that it’s a loaded question, and feeling the first stirrings of jealousy within me, though I can’t explain why.

Malia doesn’t answer for a moment, and I think she’s not going to. But

then she speaks, her words halting and unsure.

“I needed to get away. From everything and everyone. I needed to clear my head, to figure out what I wanted.”

“And what do you want?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest.

Malia’s eyes meet mine, and I see the raw vulnerability there. She takes a deep breath before speaking.

“Right now, I just want to lose myself in you,” she whispers, her voice shaking.

My heart leaps in my chest, and I can’t hold back a smile.

“I want you too, Malia,” I tell her, leaning forward and pressing my lips to hers gingerly.

I savour the softness of her mouth, and the moaning sound of approval that escapes her as our tongues meet.

“It’ll be okay, you know,” I promise her as my hand moves up her side, revelling in the goosebumps that break out in its wake. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“I know,” she breathes out.

“We’re a team now,” I tell her, brushing my lips over her cheek, down her neck. “I’ve got your back. Bhodi too. I’m sure Reef is on our side, but... We won’t let them do anything to you. You’re no one’s sacrifice.”

“We’re a team,” she moans, arching her back to give me better access.

“I’ll always be there for you,” I promise her as I make my way down to her breast, flicking my tongue over her nipple through her shirt to harden it.

“Always,” she breathes out.

“Always,” I confirm, pulling up her shirt and tossing it aside as I move on to her other nipple, desperate to feel her bare skin against mine.

Malia shimmies out of her pants, kicking them out of the bed and onto the floor as I push her bra up to expose her breasts.

“I wanted to see you like this the moment I first laid eyes on you,” I murmur, my cock twitching as I take in the sight of her naked breasts.

“You’ve seen it before,” she says, her voice breathy with desire.

“I have,” I confirm, my hand reaching down to cup her mound through her panties. “But not like this. It feels different now.”

It feels different because I’m in love with you. Because I might lose you. And I can’t let that happen.

“It does,” she agrees, kissing me. Does she understand what I’m not

saying? Does she feel the same?

“You’re so wet,” I tease her, my fingers sliding across her mound in smooth, slow circles.

“You make me that way,” she tells me, arching her back in a silent plea.

“I can make it even better,” I promise her as I push her panties aside.

“Yes,” she breathes out as my fingers sink into her wetness. “Please.”

“I’m going to make you come so hard for me,” I murmur against her ear, my lips brushing against her skin.

“Then take me,” she moans, pulling away from me to remove the rest of her clothes.

I watch her hungrily as she strips, her tits bouncing as she kicks off her panties and discards her bra.

“You’re beautiful,” I tell her as I stand up to remove my own clothes. When I’m naked, she stares at me hungrily before reaching out her hand for me.

“Hold on a second,” I promise her, climbing back onto the bed and pulling her into my lap instead. I hold her close to me, just cherishing the moment and the warmth of her body against mine as I stroke my hand up and down her back.

When she starts to squirm in my lap, becoming impatient, I chuckle. She makes a noise of protest as I lay her down on the bed, my mouth making its way down her neck, across her collarbone, and down to her breast, my hand cupping her mound as my tongue licks across her nipple.

“You’re teasing me,” she whispers, her arms curling around my neck in an attempt to pull me closer.

“I want to tease you to make it last,” I tell her, my fingers sliding up and down her slit before I push them inside her.

“I want to come,” she whispers, her hips moving to match the rhythm of my fingers.

“You will. But not until I tell you to. You’re mine tonight. I’m going to have you how I want you, when I want you,” I tell her, my thumb circling her clit.

“Yes,” she breathes out.

My other hand moves up her leg, hiking it up so that I can push my fingers deeper inside her.

“That feels so good.”

“You feel so good,” I tell her.

Malia moans, her body arching into me as I rub my fingers against her clit.

“I need you to come for me,” I whisper against her ear.

“I need you inside of me,” she counters.

“Roll over,” I tell her.

Malia obeys me, rolling onto her stomach and arching her back as she spreads her legs. I get on my knees behind her, my hands landing on her ass as I spread her cheeks.

I press my cock against her slit, running it up and down, teasing us both.

“Cove, please—”

I push my hips forward, burying my length inside her in one quick motion.

“Oh my god,” she groans, her head falling forward as she takes my cock deep inside of her.

I move my hand up her back to grab a fistful of her hair. I gently tug on it, pulling her head back so that I can see her face contort with pleasure.

“That feels so good.”

“It’s so tight. So wet. You’re perfect,” I tell her, my hips rocking back and forth.

“Fuck, yes,” she groans, long and low. My dick pulses.

“This feels so good, Mai-Tai,” I say as I keep up the same rhythm.

“Don’t stop,” she begs, her hips grinding back against me.

“I’m not going to stop. Not until I make you come all over my cock,” I promise her, my hands on her hips.

Her body trembles beneath me.

“I’m so close,” she whimpers.

“Come for me, baby. I want to feel your pussy clench around my dick when you come,” I tell her, my fingers digging into her hips.

“Yes,” she hisses out. “I need this. I need to come.”

“Come for me,” I murmur against her ear again. “Come all over my dick.”

“Cove, I’m coming!” she cries, her pussy clenching tight around my cock.

I bury myself deep inside her, my hips bucking against hers as she rides her orgasm out. Eventually when she stills, I sweep the hair away from her

face and drop a kiss on her shoulder.

“Are you good?”

“Yeah. So good.”

“I want to roll you over so I can kiss you, is that okay?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she replies, already sounding sleepy.

“Stay with me, baby. I’m not done with you yet.”

I pull out and roll Malia onto her back before settling between her legs, my cock notched at her entrance and eager to resume where we left off. But I want to slow this down, want it to last.

I kiss her deeply, holding her face in my hands as I slide my tongue into her mouth and lose myself in her taste.

“You feel so good,” she whispers against my lips when I break for air.

“So do you,” I murmur back. “You’re like a dream.”

“You’re the dream,” she whispers again before kissing me back.

I slowly push my cock inside her. Her pussy is so tight and hot I know I’m going to be coming soon.

I don’t want to jump straight into fucking her roughly. We’ve done that. I want to be gentle. I want to take my time.

“I love being with you like this,” I tell her, my eyes locked on hers as I slowly rock into her. She gasps and moans when I bottom out. “Feel good, baby?”

“It’s perfect.”

“You feel like heaven.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to make a joke about dying the happiest man alive, but I stop myself, not wanting any reminders of earlier to trigger her sadness.

“Cove?”

“Mmmm, baby?”

“Keep moving.”

“I am moving,” I tell her with a chuckle.

“No. Go faster.”

“You sure?”

She just gives me a look, and I grin before increasing my pace. It was killing me, holding back, even though it was my idea. Why was I torturing myself? Malia’s mine, she’s in my bed, and I’ve got her to myself all night. It doesn’t matter if this is over in minutes, we can have rounds two through to twenty if needs be.

I wrap one of her legs around me as I keep thrusting into her. I gradually pick up speed, and Malia's moaning gets louder with every stroke.

"Fuck," I groan.

"I'm so close," Malia moans, her pussy squeezing around me. "Again. How is that even possible?"

I chuckle and she gasps.

"Do you want to come again?" I ask, my cock twitching inside her.

"Yes. Please," she begs.

"You want to come on my cock, baby?" I growl, my rhythm faltering.

"Oh, god, yes," she moans, her hips bucking up into mine.

"Come for me, baby," I tell her, my hands moving down to her ass to pull her closer to me. "Come all over my cock again."

Her pussy clamps down on me as she gets closer. "Come, I'm so close."

"Come for me, Mai-Tai."

She moans my name, and I feel her pussy tighten around me as she comes again. I grind into her, coming just seconds after she does.

"Fuck." I take a deep breath and slowly pull my softening cock out of her. "I'll be right back," I promise, jumping up from the bed and darting across the hallway to the bathroom.

I wet a cloth and wring it out before returning to Malia and cleaning her up. She blushes the entire time but thanks me instead of insisting that she can do it herself.

I discard the cloth in the laundry hamper and grab one of my clean shirts from the drawer, helping her into it.

"I have my own clothes in here," she protests.

"Shh, I know you do. But I want you to sleep in my shirt. Is that okay?" She nods. "Good."

"I'm going to use the bathroom." She climbs over me to get out of the bed. She could have just got out her side and walked round, but I'm not complaining about the view.

When she returns a couple of minutes later, she slides back into the bed beside me.

"I needed that," she says quietly.

"You'll be safe here," I promise her, lying down beside her.

"I'm safe with you," she whispers.

"You are," I say, taking her hand in mine. "Always."

She looks away from me, blushing, and I grin. She looks so adorable like that. I pull the covers over the both of us, cuddling up to her, but my heart beats double time. I mean every word. I'll do whatever it takes to protect Malia. Whatever the cost.

TWENTY-SIX



VANCE

That didn't go to plan. How did the others not *know* what sacrificing the star meant? How have I ended up being the bad guy here?

I paced back and forth in my darkened study, my mind racing with thoughts and emotions. We all know that sacrificing the star is the only way to save our world from destruction. But now, as I look back at the events that have unfolded, I can't help but feel a sense of betrayal and anger at my brothers.

They've been so blind, so naive to the true cost of the star's sacrifice. They haven't understood the immense power that it represents for us.

And now, here I am, the scapegoat for their ignorance. But they don't understand. They can't see the bigger picture, they're too caught up in the connection that they've formed. They don't see that a sacrifice is meant to be hard. If it were easy it wouldn't be called a fucking sacrifice.

I take a deep breath and sit down at my desk, scanning the ancient texts scattered across it. I need to find a solution, a way to make them understand.

There must be something? Maybe something we missed all these years. A second star. Or a different prophecy. Some of the elders hate me, maybe there's something they're not sharing?

No.

I shove one of the books to the floor in frustration.

They would never hide anything that helped the survival of their world.

I open another large tome, but as I flip through the pages, my heart sinks. There's no other way. Sacrificing the star is the only option we have left, and what's worse, is that time is running out.

But then, an idea sparks in my mind. A dangerous idea, but one that could work. I grab a pen and paper, and begin to write.

Hours pass as I meticulously plan out every detail, every possibility. Finally, I put down my pen with a sense of relief. The plan is risky, but it has to be worth a try.

The burden of being in charge weighs heavily on me.

But I know that I can't let my emotions cloud my judgement. I have to be strong for our people, and for the future of our world.

I stand up and stretch, feeling the tension in my muscles easing slightly. Taking a deep breath, I head out of my study and back to the kitchen. The house is quiet now. Reef has gone to make sure Bhodi doesn't get himself killed, and Cove has disappeared, no doubt to check on Malia.

I want to get out of here, go into town, have a scotch in my favourite bar, but there's no way I can leave. The last time Malia was only protected by one of us we almost lost them both, I'm not prepared to risk it again.

I reach for the scotch and then stop, deciding instead to make myself a cup of coffee. I lean against the kitchen counter, staring out the window as the machine does its thing.

The moon is high in the sky above the ocean, casting a cool glow over the darkened sand outside. It's a beautiful, solitary sight, but my mind is too preoccupied to appreciate it fully.

When the machine's done, I take a sip of my coffee and let out a deep sigh. The plan is uncertain, full of holes. It could easily go wrong or backfire, but they've left me no choice. I just hope that they'll see the bigger picture, and that sacrificing the star is the only way to save our world.

As I finish my coffee, footsteps approach. It's Reef, looking haggard and tired.

“How’s Bhodi?” I ask on a sigh. Like we need more drama right now.

“He’s fine,” Reef replies, rubbing his eyes. “He’s sleeping now.”

“Where?”

“Back at the doc’s.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I snap. “We’re already indebted to her as it is.”

“Well, she’s the one who let him fight knowing that his stitches weren’t fully healed, so the way I see it, this one’s on her.”

“She doesn’t work that way, and you know it. Besides, what are the chances she *let* Bhodi do anything?”

“True.”

“He was pretty messed up by the time I got there. He was fighting like he had a death wish tonight.”

“He brought it on himself. He needs a better outlet for his anger. He needs a better way to deal with his emotions full stop.”

“Like scotch?” Reef asks, raising a brow at the open bottle on the counter. I was tempted to add a healthy splash to my coffee, but didn’t.

I hold up my mug instead. “You can sniff it if you like. It’s virgin coffee, nothing more.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he replies sceptically.

I know what he’s saying, I’m obviously the pot calling the kettle black for saying Bhodi needs to learn to deal with his emotions, but Bhodi doesn’t have half the stress and complications on his shoulders to deal with.

We stand in silence for a moment, both lost in our own thoughts. I can feel the weight of the plan on my shoulders and I want to share it with him, but I can’t. The others need to stay in the dark about this, or it will never work.

“They’re going to have questions,” Reef points out.

“I’m well aware.”

He sighs at my shortness. “You’ve come clean with Malia. Maybe it’s time you came clean with the rest of us.”

“You were there. You heard everything. You all did.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean about the water and the memory loss. We deserve those memories back. It doesn’t impede our ability to do our job here.”

“It’s not my decision to make.”

“But Reef and Bhodi have already been experiencing dreams, possibly

flashbacks. They've stopped drinking the water, and so will I. Things will start coming back to us. We deserve to understand what those visions are."

"Like I said, it's not my choice to make. Just drop it."

We fall back into silence as I sip my drink and contemplate his points. He's right, of course, but it's more than I can take on right now. The punishment for disobeying a direct order from the elders is more than I can afford to pay right now. They need me here, on their team, protecting Malia. I'll have to find a way around the order, but there's more important things to focus on at this moment in time.

Reef breaks the silence after a few uncomfortable minutes. "So, what now?"

"Now, we wait," I reply, taking another sip of my coffee. "Until the time comes to make our move."

"And if it doesn't work?"

I clench my jaw, feeling a surge of anger and frustration. It has to work. If Malia isn't the star...if her sacrifice is all for nothing...it doesn't bear thinking about. "Then we're doomed. But we have to try. We can't just sit back and let our world be destroyed."

Reef nods in agreement, his eyes filled with determination. "We're sworn to do whatever it takes to save our world."

In his words I hear nothing but unwavering loyalty, but in his eyes, I see the unspoken *but*. But he doesn't want to kill Malia.

None of us do.

Unfortunately, I learned a long time ago that our desires and our duty often don't align.



I'm awoken from a fitful sleep in the night by someone thrashing in the bed with me. My heart leaps into my throat before I remember that Cove is with me. It's him beside me.

Rolling over, I take in his sleeping form. His usually relaxed, smiling, carefree face is troubled, a frown creasing his brow.

I watch him for a moment as he jerks and twitches, before deciding it's best to wake him and hopefully end whatever nightmare seems to be plaguing him.

I reach out and gently shake his shoulder, calling his name softly. He wakes with a start, gasping for air and looking around the room wildly. For a moment, he doesn't seem to recognise me, but then his eyes focus and he relaxes.

"Sorry," he says, rubbing his face with his hands. "I was having a nightmare...I think."

I nod, relieved that he's okay. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Cove hesitates, biting his lip. "It was about...us. About losing you."

I feel a pang of fear in my chest. "What happened?"

"We were in a car accident," Cove says, his voice hoarse. "And you...you didn't make it."

That sounds so mundane. I take his hand and squeeze it tightly. "I'm here, Cove. I'm not going anywhere."

He looks at me with such intensity that my heart skips a beat, but neither of us say anything. It's no surprise given yesterday's events that neither of us is sleeping well.

We lie there in silence for a while, simply holding onto each other, seeking solace in the comfort of our closeness. But I can't ignore the way my heart is pounding, the way my skin feels hot and alive with the desire that's always simmering just beneath the surface between us.

Finally, Cove speaks again, his voice low and rough with emotion. "I can't lose you, you know? I don't think I could survive it."

I turn to him, studying his face in the dim light filtering through the window. His eyes are dark and intense, his lips slightly parted as if he's waiting for something.

"I don't plan on going anywhere right now," I say softly, inching closer to him until our bodies are pressed tightly together. "I'm here, Cove. I'm right here."

His arms wrap around me, holding me close in a way that feels almost desperate. His body is responding to mine, and the desire I feel surges even stronger.

I can't help myself anymore. I lean in and press my lips to his, relishing the warmth of his mouth and the taste of him on my tongue. Cove responds eagerly, his hands gliding over my body as if he can't get enough of me.

We make love then, in the quiet of the night, our bodies moving together in a way that feels like we're trying to merge into one. It's passionate, intense, and as we collapse into each other's arms, both of us panting and gasping for breath, I know that I wouldn't want to face anything without Cove by my side.

Dawn comes early through the unshuttered windows, and I find myself staring at the view, reflecting on the night that passed. I never thought I would care about anyone like this, much less feel like my heart is being broken in four different directions. Is this love? Is it possible to be in love

with four different people?

It seems absurd. Absurder still to consider the professor alongside Cove, Bhodi and Reef, who I undoubtedly have stronger connections with, but I could no more imagine my life without the professor in it, than I can imagine it without Cove, Reef or Bhodi. I can't. I don't even want to.

While Cove sleeps soundly beside me, I think over all the information the professor threw at me yesterday. Especially the prophecy. I sigh. It seems especially cruel that fate would bring these four guys into my life, show me what love might be, only to have it snatched away.

Can I really be the star, the one they've been looking for? It seems impossible, but then again, so does the idea of magic and supernatural beings, yet I've seen for myself that it very much exists. Part of me is relieved that it's real, that I'm not crazy, but the other part of me is devastated.

I have to die. For their world to survive, I have to let them go. Forever. I knew this world was cruel, but this seems especially harsh.

As I lie there lost in my thoughts, Cove stirs beside me. I turn to him, hoping to find comfort in his steady presence. His eyes flutter open, and as they focus on me, I see the fear and pain that still lingers there from his nightmare.

I reach out to him, threading my fingers through his. "It's okay," I whisper. "I'm here. We're all okay."

Cove nods, but his eyes remain troubled. "I know," he says. "I just...can't shake this feeling that something bad is going to happen."

Like the end of the world? Two worlds. Yours and mine.

I understand his fear, but I can't let it consume us. "Let's not worry about that right now," I say, my voice firm. "Let's just enjoy this moment together."

Cove nods again, and I can feel the tension in his body start to ease. We lie there for a while, simply holding each other, basking in the warmth of our...love? It certainly feels like it, but I can't help but wonder if this is even real. The professor said the prophecy would mean they're drawn to me. Maybe what they're feeling is just the prophecy working its magic between us, ensuring that they find me.

But then again, there's nothing that says I would reciprocate their feelings. I know what I'm feeling is real. But what if it's not for them?

"Malia?"

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything. Last night, especially. I came to check on you, to give you comfort, but things ended up being the other way round.”

“You don’t have to thank me for anything, Cove. And you did comfort me.”

“Thank you for the water thing too. I never noticed how...foggy my head was until I stopped drinking it. That’s down to you. I’ve been having these dreams—”

“Like your nightmare last night?”

“Sometimes. But that was worse. Mostly I have these...almost like flashbacks maybe? To what life was like before being sent here.”

“You remember home?”

“Parts of it. I get snippets.”

“Do you remember the queen?” I ask cautiously.

“Not really. I can’t picture her, but when I have these dreams I can sense my love and loyalty to her.”

That stings more than I’d ever want to admit so I give him a soft smile, which I hope is all the encouragement he needs to keep talking, because I can’t force words past the sudden, unexpected lump in my throat.

See? It is the prophecy manipulating their emotions. They don’t care for you. They love her. They could never love you, not when they have a queen to serve and love and protect.

As he speaks, my mind drifts off to the memories of my own home, and the people who ruled over it. My mother was a fierce and powerful woman who commanded respect from all who knew her. Sure, she may have commanded their respect, but they didn’t truly know her like I did. They didn’t get to see the darkness within her, they were never on the receiving end of her wrath. Or her fists. I can’t help but wonder if Cove’s queen was anything like her, but then I can’t imagine the guys serving a ruler like that, so their queen must be very different.

My thoughts are interrupted as Cove reaches out and takes my hand, causing my heart to skip a beat. His touch is warm, and the rough callouses on his fingers brush against my skin.

“Malia, are you okay?” he asks, his eyes searching mine.

I nod, trying to hide the sudden rush of emotions that threaten to overwhelm me.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, pulling my hand away.

Yesterday was so much to take in, and I definitely haven’t even begun to process it all, because I spent the night losing myself in Cove. The perfect distraction.

Cove looks disappointed but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he stands up and stretches.

“I should get us some breakfast,” he says eventually. “Do you want to shower?”

I nod, grateful for the excuse to end the conversation and climb out of bed.

I can still taste the saltiness of his skin from last night. It was like nothing I had ever tasted before – a heady mix of sweat and desire. My mind drifts to the way his hands had roamed all over my body, the way his lips had traced every inch of my skin. I wonder if he’s still thinking about it too.

Suddenly, Cove’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “Earth to Malia, are you going for that shower?” he asks, concern etched on his face.

I blink a few times, trying to focus on his words. “What? Yeah, sorry. I was just...thinking,” I say, getting all hot and flustered.

He looks at me intently before leaning in closer. “About last night?” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

My heart starts racing as his hand lands on my thigh, inching its way higher.

“Cove, we can’t,” I say, trying to muster up some self-control.

“Why not?”

“Because I really do need a shower and I’m starving,” I say with a laugh. He takes a step back and grins at me.

“Okay, rain check? But only because I want to feed you so you have stamina for what I have in mind later.”

He laughs as my cheeks heat and ruffles my hair. “Go. Shower. I’ll see you downstairs, okay?”

I nod and slip out of his room and into the thankfully empty bathroom. Turning on the water, I strip out of Cove’s shirt and brush my teeth.

Stepping under the hot spray, I think about last night. I don’t think Bhodi came home, unless it was when Cove and I were busy. Distracted. I didn’t

sleep well in between those distractions so I'm sure I would have heard him if he did return. I hope he's okay. I've never seen him like that before.

As I lather my hair, my mind wanders back to Cove's touch. I can still feel the heat of his body against mine, his lips on my skin. My fingers trail down my own body, recalling every sensation. I realise that I'm not the only one who couldn't resist the temptation last night, as I feel my own arousal building.

I quickly finish my shower, turning off the water and drying off before getting dressed.

As I make my way downstairs, the smell of breakfast fills my nose. It seems like someone has cooked up a storm, and I can't help but feel grateful for the thoughtfulness. Rounding the corner, I find Reef and Cove working together in the kitchen, Bhodi and the professor nowhere to be seen.

We sit down to eat, chatting about anything and everything. It's easy to talk to them both, natural, so long as we don't address the elephant in the room. I feel like I can tell them both anything, even though there's still so much we don't know about each other.

Once we finish eating, Cove takes my hand and leads me outside. I'm not sure what he has planned, but I'm happy to just get some fresh air and clear my head.

It's a beautiful morning, and the sun is already bright and warm. The sand is soft, golden, and is already warming under our feet.

Cove steers me away from the beach though, around the house to the forest that borders the back of the property. The trees tower above us, and there's a slight breeze that bends the top leaves over us gently.

"It's beautiful here," I say, turning to look at him.

"I agree," he replies, stepping closer.

Suddenly there's a sharp pain in my head, as though someone has taken a dull knife and stabbed it into my skull. I wince and reach a hand up to massage my temple, but the pain only increases. I hiss, falling to my knees and shaking my head.

"Malia!" I hear Cove's voice and the sound of him falling to the floor next to me. "Malia, what is it? Are you okay?"

As quickly as it came on, the pain is gone again, and I look up at Cove from my knees, feeling foolish.

"Sorry. Just a headache."

Cove looks at me suspiciously, but after a beat he nods and helps me to my feet.

“Well, maybe I can help you relax somehow,” he says with a suggestive grin.

I shake my head, but let him pull me closer, right into his arms. His kiss is soft and not unwelcome, but I don’t want to take things further. My head’s a mess, and I don’t just mean from the sudden stabbing pain.

As if sensing my reluctance, he breaks off the kiss and presses his forehead to mine. His cool skin soothes the lingering niggling pain there, and I sigh contently.

“Shall we walk down to the ocean?”

“Sounds perfect,” I reply.

He laces our fingers together and gently tugs me in the direction of the beach, and I easily fall into step beside him.

I’m grateful for his company but at the same time, I asked for some space and he isn’t giving me that. I need time alone to think, but I don’t want to seem rude. How am I supposed to process everything when I can’t get a minute to myself?

As soon as I think it, frustration builds within me, like a slowly growing set of waves, until I feel my restraint break.

I pull away from Cove and turn to face him. He looks at me with concern – or maybe confusion – etched on his face. I can’t help but feel guilty for pushing him away, but I need to be honest with him.

I can’t help but feel like half of our problems wouldn’t exist if we’d all just been honest with each other in the first place.

Although if four random guys had approached me months ago and said ‘magic is real, and we think you’re some unknown supernatural being with the power to save the world...but only if we kill you’ I would probably have run away screaming and admitted myself to the nut house.

Maybe I should still run.

Focus, Malia!

“Cove, I appreciate your company, but I need some space to think. I asked for it yesterday, and you didn’t give that to me.” He looks a little wounded and I feel guilty so I add, “Last night was amazing. I loved it and don’t regret a thing. But it was the opposite of space. This morning, more than ever, I just need room to breathe. Is that okay?”

He nods, understandingly. “Of course, Malia. I understand. Take all the time you need.”

He stares at me until I become uncomfortable. I’ve never felt like this around Cove before. What’s happening to me?

“Alone?” I prompt him, hoping he’ll get the message and I can avoid any awkward confrontation.

His face twists in an expression of remorse but he doesn’t step back or give me space.

“I get it, Malia, I do. If we were at home I could absolutely give you space, but here, I can’t. The danger is still out there. We can’t risk losing you.”

Because you care about me, or because you care more about the star?

When he reaches for my hand again and tugs me forward, I snap. A surge of something white-hot and pissed off flares within me and a split second later Cove hisses and yanks his hand from mine.

“Fuck! Ouch. Did you feel that?”

Did I just...shock him?

That isn’t possible.

But then I think back to other times when I’ve lost my temper – mainly with Bhodi and the professor – and snippets of memories come back to me. Electricity surging. Lights glowing brighter. Bulbs blowing. Was I responsible for that? If so, how the fuck do I control it? I can’t just...not get angry for the rest of my life!

Your potentially very short life, Malia.

“Umm, no. Sorry. I think I did that.”

“It was probably just a buildup of static. It didn’t really hurt, it was more the shock than anything.”

“Haha, I see what you did there,” I deadpan. But when Cove grins at me like everything’s alright and reaches for my hand again, I slide it behind my back and give him a rueful smile. “Better not risk it. Listen, if we’re at home I want space until I’m ready to come to you. I know you still need to watch me when we’re out in public, so you can do that now. From a distance.”

With that, I turn and walk away, leaving Cove standing on the beach. I race towards the water, feeling the sand sliding and giving way between my toes with every hurried footstep. Once the cool water caresses my feet, I breathe in the salty air and let the sea breeze calm my nerves.

As I walk along the shore, I think about everything that has happened. The sudden headache, my conflicting emotions towards Cove, and strange dreams that have been haunting me. I've been trying not to think about those, but now everything is swirling to the surface. Feelings I don't understand threaten to overwhelm and choke me, so I stop and look out at the vast ocean, feeling small and insignificant in comparison. The waves continue to crash against the shore, a constant reminder of the ebb and flow of life, and it helps to put things into perspective for me.

On the one hand, the guys might really care for me. All of this could be genuine and real and exciting...but it would still be short lived. We're literally from different worlds and if the danger they talk about is as deadly and imminent as they're making out, then we don't have long to live in paradise anyway.

On the other hand, and perhaps a lot more likely, the bond between us is entirely fictitious, crafted by the magic of the prophecy to ensure we find each other so that I can fulfil my destiny as a sacrifice. In which case, what I'm feeling isn't real and won't last anyway.

It seems like whichever way I look at it, there's little hope to be had. Just choices. Do I run and save myself and hope for the best? Or do I stay and either hope they find another solution or give in to the inevitable?

I don't know. I wish I was still in contact with Summer. This is the sort of advice she loves to give. Obviously I wouldn't tell her all the finer details, but she could help with the guy stuff.

I wonder, not for the first time, where she is. If she's okay. What I did wrong to make her turn on me like that.

The wave of sadness that washes over me, on top of my frustration and confusion and fear, tips me over the edge and I break down in tears.

From his short distance away, I know that Cove must be able to hear me, but he stays back, giving me this time to myself.

I let the tears flow freely, not caring who sees me. I'm so tired of pretending like I have everything under control when the truth is, I'm scared shitless. I don't know what to do, I don't know how to feel, and I don't know who to trust. I've never felt this alone before, despite being surrounded by these four guys who claim to care about me.

A hand on my shoulder startles me and I turn to see Cove standing next to me, his expression soft and concerned.

“Hey,” he says gently. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head, unable to speak through my sobs. Cove doesn't say anything, just wraps his arms around me and holds me tight while I cry. It's a strange sensation, feeling so comforted and so vulnerable at the same time, especially when only minutes ago I felt suffocated by his presence. But Cove's embrace is warm and genuine, and for a moment, I let myself relax into it and forget about everything else.



“Guys, I’m worried about Summer,” I say, coming into the kitchen to find them all seated around the dining table. *Well, I guess that makes it easier than calling a ‘family meeting’ as they call it.*

It’s been a tense week since the professor dropped his truth bombs, with us all dancing around the issue and being overly polite and careful with each other. The professor has returned to downright ignoring and avoiding me, and the only time things feel normal is when one of the guys drags me into their bed. I’m exhausted by it all, but there’s no putting off this other issue that’s been eating at me for weeks now.

“Why?” Reef asks, turning his full attention on me immediately, even as Bhodi scowls and mutters something unkind under his breath about my best friend. *Ex best friend. Maybe. I don’t know.*

“I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something really wrong with her. Something’s going on. You heard how upset she was at the station. She seemed desperately sorry, and yet, since I got out, she hasn’t tried to speak to

me. Not even once?” I shake my head. “That’s not like her.”

“I think she’s shown her true colours, Miss Van der Zee,” the professor says to me. I’ve been struggling to look him in the eye since I watched him surfing in the sea the other day and he caught me ogling him. Now though, that’s the furthest thing from my mind as I stare at him with stubborn determination.

“You’re wrong. There’s something going on. Her behaviour is completely out of character, and it’s weird that I haven’t even seen or heard from her. Have any of you guys seen her on campus?”

“No. Sorry,” Cove says gently.

“And we’ve been looking for her,” Bhodi adds.

That surprises me. “You have? Why?”

“We just want to talk to her about—” Reef begins but Bhodi cuts him off.

“You didn’t think we’d let that go, did you? What she did. Betraying you like that and making up Christ knows what bullshit and lies. No. She’s lucky we’ve not been able to find her,” he growls.

“Umm, guys, she’s my friend.”

“Some friend,” Bhodi mutters, and although the others are trying to be sympathetic, I can see that they agree with him. It’s written all over their faces.

“Until I know for sure that she betrayed me. That she chose to do it, and that she wasn’t coerced or something, I’m going to keep believing the best in her.”

“Malia,” the professor says, drawing my attention from the other three and right back to him. God knows how I’ve managed to avoid looking at him when we’ve been in the same room as each other. I couldn’t look away from him now if my life depended on it. Something in his intense, dark stare causes my breath to catch, and he pauses a beat, a slight frown marring his beautiful face before he continues. “It’s thinking like that that could get you hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, though my words are far from weak. “But it’s who I am. I can’t be any other way.”

“It’s one of the things we love about you, Mai-Tai,” Cove says reassuringly with a warm smile that makes my stomach flip.

“Is she...do you think she’s okay?” I swallow, not wanting to say the words. With so many bodies vanishing and turning up dead on campus, I

can't consider that Summer may be one. I can't. I won't.

"I'm sure she's fine."

It doesn't reassure me.

"Can we try reaching out to her?" I cough. "I mean, can I? Can I call or text her?" They don't need to know that I've already been trying to do that almost every day.

"That's not a good idea." The prof shakes his head but he does at least manage to look sorry about it.

"There must be something we can do. Please guys. I need to know she's okay. She hasn't even posted on her socials, and that's not like her. She used to joke that if she didn't update her socials hourly, I'd know she'd been kidnapped." I grimace realising that the joke is in poor taste given all that's happened, but it's still true. I don't know how else to convey to them how serious this is.

"Well, there is one thing we could do..." Reef begins.

"What?" I jump on his idea.

"Summer likes to party, right?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Met her at the beach the night we met."

"Oh." My cheeks tinge pink. "So?"

"What if there was an exclusive beach party. Would that be her sort of thing?"

"Definitely."

"This is a really bad idea," Cove says, shaking his head.

"Let him finish," I say quickly, waving a hand at Cove to shush him.

"It's Bhodi's birthday next week. What if we were to host a party here at the beach – not the house, just the beach. Promote it on campus, spread the word. Would that be the sort of thing Summer would come to? Maybe with her...boyfriends?"

I nod. "That's exactly Summer's sort of party. She wouldn't be able to resist something exclusive."

"What do you say boss? We could draw her out." Reef turns to the prof and I realise that they're not doing this for me, but because for whatever reason they want to see Summer for themselves. That's fine. I can live with that. So long as I get to her first.

I hold my breath while I wait for the prof's seal of approval. Or not.

“I think it’s a horrible idea.”

My shoulders sag with disappointment and I sigh.

“But, we don’t have any others, so we’ll try it. On certain conditions.”

“Name them!” I cry, a little too loudly. The prof shoots me an amused look.

“The house is completely out of bounds.”

“Not a problem,” Reef agrees.

“What else?” I ask.

The professor snorts.

“One of you must be with Malia at all times.”

My heart sinks. “But if Summer comes, I want to talk to her.”

“And you can. With one of the guys there. We’re not risking your safety, Malia. Never again.”

“Okay,” I say. He’s right. And although I don’t think Summer will be open and honest with me if one of the guys is with me, I will at least be able to tell if she’s lying to me. Hopefully. Maybe I can lose whoever’s with me and grab a moment alone to speak to her. “Wait, what?”

“Something unclear, Miss Van der Zee?” I scowl at the way he’s reverted to using my full name after saying *Malia* like a prayer.

“You said one of the guys must be with me.”

“I did.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’m a teacher, Miss Van der Zee. I’m hardly going to party with my students.”

I guess that makes sense. Even though he’s not really a professor. I still feel a stab of disappointment though.

“You’ll be around though, right? At the house?”

“I’ll keep an eye on—out, for trouble, if that’s what you mean.”

I nod. It makes me feel better to know he’ll be close by, but I don’t know why. It’s not that I don’t feel safe with the others or I think anything bad will happen. It’s more...I feel sad for him I guess, missing out.

“Woohoo so I get to have a birthday party?” Bhodi whoops.

“You sound like a little kid,” I snort.

“There better be cake, little dot. If you’re throwing me a party, I expect cake.”

“And party bags?” I smirk.

He winks at me. “Nah, not for all the guests. You can just save a few party favours for me.”

The professor clears his throat loudly, and I turn crimson. Oh dear god, does he know what Bhodi’s implying? He’s not very subtle, but he is a bit older than us so maybe...

The prof’s voice in my head halts my spiral. “*Yes, Miss Van der Zee. I know exactly what Bhodi’s implying.*”

Kill me now.



I throw myself into party planning. What else is there to do? I'm not allowed to leave the house, not even to go to class, even though the murders and disappearances have stopped. Planning this party for Bhodi is an excellent distraction.

It means I'm too busy to hang out with the guys, though I'm using it as an excuse to avoid them if I'm honest. I'm still trying to get my head around everything, and they all have opinions on the matter that they wish to share with me. Cove keeps offering to help but I turn him down every time, preferring to stay in his room and work alone.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard, I try to keep my mind solely on the party, and my plans to sneak away to talk to Summer alone, my thoughts, keep wandering back to the prophecy.

I've made a decision about what I want to do. The guys aren't going to like it. But tough. This is my life and for the first time ever I get to be the one making the decisions that affect me.

Now, I just need to figure out when's the best time to tell them. I think I'd rather speak to each of them individually, rather than call a family meeting and have to deal with them four on one. I know that they will try to change my mind and talk me around, but I've made my decision and I won't be swayed.

"Knock, knock," Cove says, appearing in the doorway.

"Hey." I give him a smile that's only slightly strained at the edges. It's not his fault, it's the guilt making me feel like this.

"I just wondered if you'd changed your mind about that offer for help?"

"Which offer?" I ask with a laugh. "The first or the hundredth?"

"Any of them. All of them."

"Well, actually, I do have something you can help me with."

His face brightens and the eager expression reminds me of something Summer once said to me: *some guys are like golden retrievers. They're full of energy and are eager to please. But they can be a bit clingy, and need too much attention and praise.*

At the time I couldn't understand how she could compare boyfriends to dogs. I thought it was cruel, but now I can kind of understand what she was saying. She didn't mean it in an unkind way, but Cove is a bit like the golden retriever she described.

Thinking about Summer again, I wonder if she's still with those five guys she was seeing. I don't remember much about meeting them, but I do remember that none of them really gave off a golden retriever energy. If I had to compare Summer's guys to dogs, I'd say they were like those really scary, rabid zombie dogs in the first Resident Evil film.

"Malia?"

"Huh?" I stare at him. "Did you say something?"

"I asked what you need me to do."

"Sorry. I was thinking about dogs."

"Dogs?" He shoots me an amused but puzzled look.

"Yeah. It doesn't matter. Can you head onto campus and hand out these flyers I've made for the party? I didn't mention that it was Bhodi's birthday, just a beach party. I didn't want it to stop Summer from coming."

Cove stares at me a beat too long and I start to feel foolish.

Isn't that how parties are advertised? In all of the movies I've watched, that's how they do it. That, and word of mouth. At home in England, you

could only go to a party if you got an invite. But the last time I got one of those I was six and my parents didn't let me go anyway because I was *too unstable*. I've never been to a real party, especially not one for adults. I don't know proper invite etiquette.

Though I'm guessing party games like pass the parcel are out.

As soon as I think that, I remember being sandwiched between Reef and Bhodi after our sparring session and can't help but blush at the idea of being the parcel they pass between them.

"You went to all the trouble of making flyers?"

I blink to clear my dirty thoughts, praying my cheeks aren't on fire to give me away, and nod, passing him a stack to look at.

"That's really something, Mai-Tai."

Relieved, I give him a friendly, more genuine smile. "So you'll hand them out for me?"

"Of course."

"I could come with you if you like?" I offer, hopefully. Cove hesitates. He knows how badly I want to get out of the house, but he's torn between following orders and wanting to make me happy.

"If we took Bhodi and Reef with us it would be safe. There's no way the professor can complain if I have three chaperones," I quickly add, hoping to sway him.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Cove says, regret and sympathy lining his face. "You stay here and work on a list of what booze you want us to pick up, and I'll go and pass these out."

"Okay," I reply flatly, failing to hide my disappointment. At least they're letting me go to the party, that's something. I guess.

Cove gives me a quick hug and drops a kiss on the top of my head before heading out. I pause for a second, torn, and then decide to just go for it.

Racing out of the bedroom and along the landing to the top of the stairs, I decide that I'm going to put my foot down and demand that they let me out to go with Cove. I'm not a damn prisoner here, so it's time they stopped treating me like one, no matter their reasons.

I'm halfway down the stairs when the sound of laughter halts me.

"Surely you're not actually going to go and hand them out on campus?" Bhodi asks, still chuckling.

"What choice do I have?" Cove replies. "She asked me to."

They're talking about me. About the fliers for the party.

"Doesn't she get what an *exclusive* party is?"

"Don't be an asshole," Reef snaps at Bhodi. "You only have to know Malia for ten minutes to know she doesn't go to many parties."

Somehow his defence makes me feel even more pathetic.

"That's why I couldn't say no to her," Cove explains. "She probably got the idea from a movie."

Bhodi snorts and I feel unwelcome tears prick my eyes. I'm so stupid. I bet I've planned the whole party all wrong. I should have asked for help. This sort of thing would be Summer's idea of heaven if she was still talking to me.

What if she doesn't come? What if *no one* comes? It doesn't matter that it started off as a fake party to lure Summer out. I've worked so hard on it in a desperate attempt to apologise to Bhodi for almost getting him killed, and for the prophecy and his injuries from fighting, that I forgot it wasn't real. I was excited. My first proper party.

And now they're all laughing at me.

I turn around and quietly creep back up the stairs, blinking hard to ensure the tears in my eyes don't actually spill over.

"Malia? What's wrong?"

I freeze when I hear his voice. Against my will, my head lifts and my eyes search him out. The professor is at the end of the corridor, coming out of his room.

"Nothing."

His dark gaze narrows and his face hardens. The landing seems to shrink in size as he strides along it towards me, reaching me in a small number of large, confident strides.

"If it's nothing, why are you crying?" He reaches for my face and my breath catches, but then he stills.

"I'm not crying," I insist, forcing myself to breathe. *I'm not.*

"Well, why are you *almost* crying then, if you have to be pedantic about it?"

"It's nothing. It doesn't matter."

He sighs deeply and then looks me up and down. "Can you get changed?"

"Why?"

I've just been wearing my usual uniform of cut-off shorts and a tank top

thrown over my bikini. There's not a day that goes by where I don't go for a surf, if only to get out of the house for a couple of hours. Why does he want me to get changed?

"I'm going out. You can come with me. But not dressed like that."

I frown wondering what he means, but bite my tongue. I get to leave the house? And not just to go to the beach? I'll wear any-damn-thing he likes if it means a change of scenery.

I nod – probably a little too eagerly. Actually, I should probably calm down and question his motives a bit more. Why is he suddenly wanting to spend time with me after avoiding me for so long? I should ask him.

But I don't. Because whatever reason he has for this sudden change of heart, I'm all in. I need to shake up the monotony of being here.

"Good. I'll wait downstairs for you. How long do you need?"

"Umm, ten minutes?" I ask, rather than tell him. Always so damn desperate for his approval. Maybe Cove's not the golden retriever. Maybe it's me.

He nods and passes me, the cotton of his pressed shirt brushing against my bare arm and making the hairs stand on end. His scent envelopes me like a warm hug, even though he barely touches me and doesn't spare me another glance. He must have a new aftershave or something because he smells different. Amazing. But different. Even after he's gone, the warm spiced rum, vanilla and cedar wood scent lingers in the air and invades my senses. He smells heavenly. Divine. Irresistible.

Shaking myself out of my trance, I race into Cove's room and open the drawer that holds my things. All that greets me is a riot of bikinis, underwear, jean shorts and tank tops. If what I'm wearing isn't appropriate for him, none of these variations will be either.

Shit. I really want to go with him. I need to find something I can wear.

Suddenly I remember the weekend bag full of things that the professor chose for me when we were staying at the hotel after my arrest, and I pull it from Cove's closet, being careful not to touch and activate the weapons in there. *The weapons that I'm not supposed to be able to see.*

I push that thought aside. There's no time for a meltdown.

I rummage through the bag until I find a dress I remember seeing at the bottom and pull it out. Thankfully it's not creased. It's floor length, navy and plain, but features pretty crisscross straps on the back. I quickly change into it

and swap out my usual flip flops for my slightly nicer sandals. I add deodorant, a quick spritz of perfume, and then hastily run a brush through my hair. It's weird that the colour doesn't fade, no matter how much I surf and wash it. Not that I'm complaining. I love the vibrant colours that Summer talked me into, but I like holding on to this small piece of her, this reminder of our friendship, more.

Not wanting to keep the professor waiting – or give him time to change his mind – I rush down the stairs, lifting my dress so that I don't fall and break my neck. All conversation stops when I round the corner into the kitchen, and four sets of eyes land on me.

I guess Cove decided to just bin the fliers then.

"You look lovely, Malia," Reef says. Cove makes a noise of agreement and swallows hard. I start to blush even though I'm still mad at them.

"Shall we?" The professor asks. I bite my lip and nod, crossing the room with care. I'm so excited to be leaving that I want to run out of the door, but I force myself to keep my steps steady and even.

"It's not fair," Bhodi whines. "Why do you get to take her on a date and none of us do?"

I freeze at the door, unable to look back at Bhodi.

This isn't a date!

"Because I'm in charge," the professor replies.

Why didn't he tell Bhodi it's not a date?

"After you, Miss Van der Zee," the professor says, opening the door with one hand and gesturing for me to go ahead with the other. I'm too embarrassed to turn around and say goodbye to the others, so I stare ahead and force my feet to keep moving.

A warm heat sears through the material of my dress at the base of my spine, and I realise that the professor has put his hand on the small of my back. My steps falter and he catches me gently by the elbow, steadying me. My pulse races.

"Are you okay?"

I nod. Swallow. *Way too loud.* Cringe.

"It's a short walk to my car. I'm glad you have sensible shoes on."

"Do I need a jacket or anything?" I probably should have asked that before we left the house.

"No. I won't keep you out too late."

Maybe it's just me – I have almost zero experience with this sort of thing besides what I've read in books or seen in films – but his words *do* make this seem like a date.

I need to get a grip of myself before I fall apart.



I don't know what the hell I was thinking, asking Malia to go out with me. But it's too late to back out now, we're already at the car. I couldn't stand to see the crushed hope in her gaze if I said I changed my mind, it's too dangerous, I made a mistake.

When I saw her at the top of the stairs almost in tears, I don't know what came over me, but it was powerful. The need to protect her, even from the others who had clearly upset her, made my blood heat.

Bhodi was right to call me out about taking her on a date. Not that this is a date, but he doesn't need to know that. It serves him right for upsetting her. A quick word with Reef while Malia got changed made everything clear. She must have overheard him being his usual dickish self and got hurt by something he said.

Which is why I helped Malia through the door, my hand on the small of her delicate back, the heat of her skin searing me through the soft caressable material of her dress. The smirk I levelled at Bhodi as I went was just the

icing on the cake.

Except I shouldn't have touched her like that. Because for a moment I forgot what a drug she is to me.

I open the car door for her, trying to keep my hand from touching her again as she slides into the passenger seat but I can't help tracing the curves of her body, the way the fabric of her dress hugs her hips. My mind is racing with possibilities, fantasies of what could happen between us under different circumstances, but I push them aside. This isn't about me, it's about her.

"Are you alright?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

She looks up at me with those big, beautiful brown eyes and nods. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

I can tell she's lying, but I don't press the issue. Instead, I start the car and begin to drive, the silence between us feeling heavy and suffocating.

Unable to bear it, I switch on the stereo and the car's inbuilt entertainment system automatically connects with my phone and continues playing my playlist where it last left off. Monsters by Ruelle begins to fill the silence and Malia relaxes back into the soft leather of the seat.

"I love this artist," she murmurs, closing her eyes and getting lost in the music for a second.

I know, I almost say. I only started listening to the damn woman because Malia liked her, but then I could see why she liked her music so much and I became a fan myself.

As we drive towards Two Harbours, I can't help but steal glances at her. The way the streetlights illuminate her face, the way her hair falls in soft waves around her shoulders. She's beautiful. And that's not the prophecy talking.

This was dangerous and foolish. I shouldn't have brought her out. Not because I doubt my ability to keep her safe on my own, but because I doubt my ability to keep my hands to myself. Even in public.

"Where are we going?"

"I know a place in Two Harbours. It's quiet. Only the locals go there. There won't be any students who recognise us."

Why did I say it like that? Now it sounds like she's my dirty little secret. A teacher sneaking around with his student, dating her in the dark.

"Okay," is all she says, turning to stare out of the window at the passing scenery.

“I’m sorry you’ve been cooped up for so long, Malia,” I tell her earnestly.

“It’s okay,” she lies.

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You are. You do it all the time. Not big, dangerous lies, but small, innocent ones. The ones that slip from your lips without you even noticing. You always downplay yourself to the others, putting their needs and feelings above your own.”

“I don—” she pauses, looking at me and then grimaces. “I do. Sorry. It’s just easier to say I’m fine, it’s okay, it doesn’t matter, than to get into those difficult conversations that make people uncomfortable.”

“Fuck making people uncomfortable. If anything you have to say makes Cove, Reef or Bhodi feel uncomfortable, they don’t deserve you.”

Shit. Why did I say that?

“Sorry.”

“Quit apologising.”

“Sor—” She cringes. “Shit.”

That makes me laugh. I wasn’t expecting her to swear. It’s not that she never cusses, it’s just rare, unless she’s really mad at me.

“Don’t worry about it. So, do you want to tell me what’s upset you now, or when we get there?”

“Now. It’ll be better to just get it out of the way so I can enjoy myself, but you’ll think it’s stupid.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“I asked Cove to distribute some flyers that I made around campus. I asked him to take me with him and he said he couldn’t.”

“I can see why that would upset you, but you must understand that there’s not a thing I won’t do, a line I won’t cross, to keep you safe. Even if it means stealing you away from them when they’re assholes.”

“You think Cove was an asshole for not taking me?”

Shit.

“I think that there’s more to this story than you’ve told me so far.”

She nods. “You’re right. There is. I got mad all of a sudden. My emotions have been all over the place lately, and I decided that I would go downstairs

and *make* him take me along. Well, actually, I planned to confront you and tell you that I was going with or without your consent.”

A smile tugs at my lips at that because I love it when she shows a little fire. It doesn't happen often enough for my liking, the others pander to her too easily and keeping her cocooned in her own meekness and docility. The boys like her happy, her family want her submissive. I prefer her challenging me, strong and defiant.

“But you didn't get that far?”

“No. I heard them laughing and stopped on the stairs to listen.”

“I see and what did you hear?”

“They were laughing about the fliers. About the party. It made me feel stupid.”

“So you ran,” I finish flatly. She always runs away from difficult conversations with them, but always meets me head on in defiance.

“Yeah. It's silly that it upset me, but their comments made me realise how sheltered I've been.”

“Because of us.” I don't phrase it as a question, because I know the answer. My heart sinks and I'm left with a bad taste in my mouth.

“No. My whole life,” she corrects me. “At first it was my parents, but then it just became my personality I guess. It was easier to stay home and avoid trouble, or go out but remain in the shadows. I still do it now.”

“Were you like that before?”

“Before what?”

“Before your parents made you stay home and things?”

“I guess not. I remember loving to sing and dance. In my first year of school I'd talk to anyone. I used to compete in talent shows my friends and I would put on at lunchtimes and after school.”

“What changed?”

“I had an accident. We were in a car crash – my parents and me I mean – and after I recovered and was well enough to go back to school, I didn't want people to look at me any more. Everyone knew what had happened and whispered about me behind my back. Pity mostly. But there were unkind words too. And then the voices started.”

And then the voices started. So the trauma of the accident likely activated her magic. I mentally try to work out when that would have been if she was at school. She'd have been, what? Four, maybe five? With time working so

differently here compared to our world it's hard to pinpoint exactly when that would have been for me, but I'd be willing to bet it was around the time our queen disappeared and the Shikari increased their efforts to hunt us.

"We're here," I tell her softly, pulling into a small car park and cutting the engine. I climb out of the car and walk round to open Malia's door for her before she can, and she blinks up at me in surprise.

I don't offer her my hand to get out of the car though – I'm not that foolish. Or maybe I am, because when she brushes past me and her ocean scent with a hint of jasmine and blackcurrant hits me hard, I find myself crowding her space, coaxing her back against the car and pressing my nose dangerously close to the long column of her throat.

Fuck! Get it together, Vance!

I cough. Then wordlessly I pull away and take a deep breath to flush her from my system as her cheeks heat in that captivating way of hers. I hesitate before holding out my arm for her to take. When she takes it, I lead us to the small restaurant that I hope Malia will like.

Why do you care if she likes it? She needs to eat, you're feeding her. It's as simple as that.

Instead of feeling relieved when she drops my arm to walk through the narrow door, I'm disappointed.

This isn't a fucking date. Pull yourself together.

I shake off the momentary lapse of control and step inside after her. The place is cosy, with dim lighting and a light buzz of chatter coming from the five other tables inside this tiny space. All couples. All on dates. Fuck. I nod to the hostess who leads us to the only remaining small table in the corner, and I pull out a chair for Malia to sit.

As we wait in silence, I take a moment to observe her and fully take in the weight of her words from the drive over. It's clear that something inside her is breaking, and I know I'm to blame. I've been so consumed with protecting her that I've kept her from fully living. I've shielded her from the world and inadvertently kept her voice from being heard.

Impulsively, I reach for her hand. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asks, confused.

"For not giving you the opportunity to be yourself, to be heard. I've kept you safe, but at what cost? You've been living in the shadows for too long, like a prisoner, and it's my fault."

“It’s not just you,” she says softly, her thumb rubbing over the back of my hand. “It’s me too. I’ve allowed myself to be sheltered because it felt safe. But I don’t want to live like that anymore.”

“I don’t want you to either,” I reply, squeezing her hand.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “That actually means a lot to me, even if it’s not possible.”

There’s the elephant in the room: She wants to live, but we have to kill her. It’s a checkmate situation.

I grimace. “I guess we should talk about that.”

She shakes her head, looking sad. “I know we need to, and that I’ve been pestering you for answers, but I don’t want to spoil tonight. Call me naive, but I’d like one night of living in denial, if you can give me that.”

“I can give you that,” I vow. It’s a fantasy. One night of pretending. If she wants to be normal, then this can be a date. Fuck it. I think I need this as much as she does.

So we spend the rest of the night enjoying great food, deep in conversation, with Malia opening up about her fears and dreams, and me regaling her with funny anecdotes of my time in her world with the guys, and the severe learning curve we went through back in the beginning. Her giggles cause a weight to lift from my shoulders and I find myself smiling more than I have in years.

As we leave the restaurant and make our way back to the car, I can’t help but feel a sense of contentment settle over me. For the first time in a long while, I feel like maybe, just maybe, this is what happiness could look and feel like. If my plan works, maybe we could find a way to coexist in this world without the constant fear of being hunted or the pressure of fulfilling our roles as leaders of the Queen’s Guard.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

As we drive back to the cabin, my mind wanders to the possibilities of what our imaginary future could hold. I can’t help but think of Malia in a different light, seeing her not just as the fragile girl I have to protect, but as a woman I could grow to love. The thought both thrills and terrifies me, but I know one thing for sure: I’m willing to take the risk if we make it out alive.

When we finally arrive back at the beach house, I walk Malia to her room and linger at the door, not wanting to say goodnight just yet. She turns to face me, her eyes locking onto mine, and I feel a rush of desire shoot through me.

Without thinking, I lean in and press my lips to hers, savouring the softness of her mouth and the taste of her on my tongue. She responds eagerly, her hands coming up to grip my shirt as she deepens the kiss.

We break apart, panting and flushed, and I rest my forehead against hers. “Malia, I—” I start to apologise, but she cuts me off.

“Don’t say anything,” she whispers, her eyes shining. “Just kiss me again.”

And because I’m fucking weak, I oblige, capturing her lips in another searing kiss that leaves us both breathless. As we finally break apart, I know that there’s no going back from this moment, but that I’ve made a grave mistake. I’ve given her hope where there’s none to be had; we both bought into the fantasy a little too deeply tonight.

But in this moment, I can’t bring myself to regret it. Malia is like a flame, and I’ve been drawn to her from the moment I saw her. I know the dangers of pursuing anything with her, of giving her hope, but I can’t help but feel like it’s worth it. Worth the risk, worth the potential heartbreak.

She doesn’t know you have a plan. None of them do. It’s the hope that’ll destroy them.

I can’t clue them in. It has to be like this. It’s the only way. Because if I gave them hope and then it failed, it would kill them. I can’t be responsible for causing that kind of pain. I won’t. I love them too much to put them through that.

“We need to stop,” I tell her flatly, disappointment coursing through my veins, immediately dousing the flames she’s ignited in me.

“Goodnight, professor,” Malia whispers sadly, breaking the silence between us as she opens the door to her room.

“Goodnight, Miss Van der Zee,” I reply, watching as she disappears inside before turning and walking along to my own room.

As I lie in bed, staring up at the ceiling, I think about what this means for us. For our mission, for our safety, for everything we’ve been fighting for. But in the end, I know that I’m willing to take the risk. For Malia, for my brothers, and for myself. All for the possibility of something more. That’s all that matters. But they can’t know about it. That’s of paramount importance.



I'm so nervous about tonight's party. I hope Bhodi likes it. I hope people come, and most importantly, that Summer turns up and we get the opportunity to talk.

After my weird night out with the professor, which felt so much like a date, but wasn't, he surprised me the next morning by offering to help me with the party plans. Realising my mistake with the flyers but too embarrassed to ask the others, I readily accepted his offer, enjoying his seeming change of heart towards avoiding and ignoring me.

I'm glad he helped me prepare and fix some unintentional faux pas I had made, but I'm more glad that I got to spend time with him without us at each other's throats. There haven't been any more kisses, but there have been lingering looks, and – in my opinion at least – a lot of sexual tension.

Maybe that's just me though. But I don't think it is.

Either way, if it weren't for our time spent together this week, tonight wouldn't be possible.

Standing back, I admire our vision come to fruition. We've sectioned off a large part of the beach with tiki torches and an actual professional DJ is setting up over by the light-up dance floor that the professor insisted on hiring. He gave me the go-ahead to use his credit card for anything I wanted, but once he realised that I wasn't actually spending any money, he took charge. Given that the party is supposed to be a ruse to draw Summer out, I'm surprised at how supportive he's been and how much money he must have spent. All for a fake party, why?

As the sun sets and the partygoers start to arrive, I'm grateful again for the professor's help. Everything is perfect, and I know Bhodi will love it. I'm wearing the dress from my not-date with the professor and my feet are bare in the sand. It's cool, but the torches and bonfire are throwing out enough heat that I don't need a jacket. I double check everything, but the party is already underway and everyone is having a good time. I don't need to worry. I don't need to *do* anything.

But that's the problem. I need to keep busy otherwise I'll just stress about everything, especially with how many people are here.

I scan the crowd, hoping to see Summer. No sign of her yet. But I do see a vaguely familiar face over by the bar. Deciding that I could use a drink to settle my nerves, I make my way over, my heart pounding for some unknown reason. The guy sees me and grins, his dark eyes roaming over my body in a way that makes me shudder. I feel like tiny spiders are crawling all over my skin and when his black, soulless eyes meet mine, a sharp sudden pain stabs me in the temple.

"Hey there, beautiful. Want a drink?" he asks, his voice low and seductive. His dark hair is slicked back and immaculately styled, but everything about him is too perfect, too smooth. There's something not right about him.

I force a smile and shake my head. "No thanks. I'm good." Why did I say that when I came over here to get a drink?

I don't even want a drink. I'm not thirsty.

He leans in close, his breath hot on my neck and I hate it. I cringe away from him, trying to be subtle so that I don't come across as rude, but he doesn't seem to notice. "Come on, don't be shy. One drink won't hurt. It's someone's birthday after all."

He arranges a line of shots on the bar top and stares at me expectantly.

“What are they?” I ask, eyeing the shimmering liquids. Each one is a different colour and seems to be glowing. *Yeah, there’s no way I’m touching those.*

“They’re just a little something to get the party started,” he responds, his eyes roaming over my body again. “But if you don’t want them, I’m sure I can find someone who does.”

I suppress a shiver and force myself to stay calm, not wanting to cause a scene. “I really don’t want a drink, thanks.”

He shrugs and downs one of the shots himself before turning to leave. As he walks away, I’m relieved. There was something off about him, something dangerous, and I’m glad to be away from him.

I turn back to the crowd, scanning again for Summer. But my thoughts keep drifting back to the strange man at the bar. Who was he? Why did he seem so familiar? And why did he make me feel so uneasy? With a sigh, I decide to go find Summer and try to shake off this feeling. It’s probably just my anxiety coming out in different ways. Once I find Summer and speak to her, I’m sure I’ll feel better.

I weave my way through the crowd, checking every face I pass, looking for a familiar one. But as I move through the throngs of people, I can’t shake the feeling that someone is watching me. I glance around, but can’t see anyone staring back at me. Maybe it’s just my imagination playing tricks on me. It could be the professor; he said he’d be around tonight, keeping an eye on things. But that wouldn’t explain my discomfort.

As I continue to navigate the party, the butterflies in my stomach take flight. It’s not just the fear of being watched, but the anticipation of seeing Summer again. She’s the one who we wanted to come to this party in the first place, after all.

When I finally spot her, dancing in front of the DJ with a group of friends, my relief is palpable. I’m so glad she came. Even though I was sure an exclusive beach party would be just her sort of thing, I didn’t realise how anxious I was to see her until now.

Her hair is in loose waves around her shoulders and she’s wearing a form-fitting dress that hugs her curves in all the right places. She looks so much better than the last couple of times I saw her.

That fills me with mixed emotions, but it’s hard to explain. I’m glad she’s okay. Relieved in fact. Happy that she’s not hurt or missing or ill or dead. But

also...I'm mad that she looks so good. That she could take the time to come to a party hosted by apparent strangers, but can't find time to respond to any of my messages?

Slowly, I advance towards the dance floor, dreading that I'll have to cross it to get to Summer, but knowing that I need to. I haven't decided what I'm going to say. I don't know how this will go down. But I do know that now that I've seen her, I have to speak to her.

As I get closer, I realise that the feeling of being watched hasn't gone away. In fact, it's stronger now than before. It feels like multiple sets of eyes are on me as I glance around the party area, trying to spot the source – or sources – of my unease.

A dark-haired man stands on the very edge of the party, just outside of our tiki torch area, watching me intently. He's tall and muscular, with piercing eyes that seem to be locked onto mine and a sly smirk on his face that makes my blood run cold. His black suit hugs his broad shoulders making him look too old to be at a student party, and he doesn't look like a teacher. He looks like trouble. Something about him reminds me of the guy at the bar earlier, but aside from the dark hair, I can't pinpoint the similarity. It's more the feeling they both give me. Unease. Danger.

I try to shake off the feeling and focus on the party, but I can't shake the sense that this man is dangerous. He's not just watching me, he's studying me, like a predator sizing up its prey.

I give up on reaching Summer right now and turn away from him to walk back towards the bar, hoping to put some distance between us. But when I look back over my shoulder, he's still there, watching me with an intensity that makes my skin crawl.

My heart races as I try to come up with a plan. I need to get away from him, but I can't just run away from the party. I need to be smart about this. I should try to find one of the guys. Maybe Reef or Cove. They always listen to me. Bhodi might brush my fears off if he's enjoying his party. And besides, if I'm worrying over nothing I don't want to ruin his night.

I take a deep breath and make my way towards the crowded bar. I spot Cove's distinctive blonde hair and make a beeline towards him, trying to keep a low profile while keeping an eye on the man in the black suit.

"Cove," I say, trying to keep my voice calm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

“Sure thing,” he replies, flashing me a smile. “What’s up?”

I take him aside and explain the situation, telling him about the man in the black suit who’s been watching me all night.

Cove nods seriously, his eyes scanning the crowd. “I’ll keep an eye out for him. But we should probably tell Reef and Bhodi too, just to be safe. I’ll also send a text to the professor.”

I nod, relieved to have someone on my side and not thinking I’m crazy.

We make our way towards Bhodi, who’s holding court by the DJ booth, surrounded by a group of adoring partygoers.

“Bhodi,” Reef says, getting his attention. “We’ve got a situation.”

Bhodi turns towards us with a smile, but it fades when he sees the concern on our faces.

“What’s going on?” he asks, his voice serious.

I explain the situation to him, and he nods, his eyes scanning the crowd just like Cove’s did.

“Don’t worry, we’ll handle it, little dot,” he says, and I feel a sense of relief wash over me and I relax a little. “Reef, do you want to tell him to leave or shall I?”

“It’s your party,” Reef replies with a smirk.

“And you’re the scariest motherfucker out of the three of us,” Cove adds with a chuckle.

I mean, he’s not wrong. Bhodi’s still covered in healing cuts and bruises from his fight, and in the orange glow of the flames, he looks demonic as he grins at them, his eyes gleaming with excitement. He kisses me on the forehead and takes off in the direction of our unwelcome guest.

“Thanks guys. I’m just going to walk down to the water,” I tell them, spotting Summer walking that way alone. This is it, my moment to speak to her.

“Are you okay?” Reef asks.

“Yeah.” I give him a tight smile. “It’s strange being around so many people after so long with just you guys. It takes a bit of getting used to again.”

Reef nods his understanding. “Do you want one of us to come with you?”

I’m kind of touched that he’s asking and not insisting that they do. I look around and see Bhodi gesticulating wildly at the stranger, clearly willing to fight.

“I should be okay right? Bhodi’s dealing with the creepy guy.”

“We’ll keep an eye on you anyway, but yes, you’re safe here tonight.”

I let out a shaky breath, feeling like I can finally breathe again. “Thank you,” I say, looking at the two of them and smiling softly.

Cove puts an arm around me, his grip firm as he pulls me into him and kisses my cheek. “Don’t worry about it,” he says. “We’ve got your back.”

And with that, I leave them as I slip across the dance floor, through the crowd and down towards the water’s edge, trying to catch up with Summer.



I spot her in the distance, standing alone with the waves lapping at her feet. I'm trembling slightly as I make my way towards her, but my feet stumble to a stop when five dark shadows approach Summer from the opposite direction. She looks up and, seeing them, races towards them.

I hang back, watching.

As I watch Summer run towards the shadows, I realise that they're not just any group of people. They're her guys. Her boyfriends. There shouldn't be anything stopping me from joining them and asking to speak to Summer alone, and yet, I can't seem to make my feet move through the soft sand.

Suddenly, one of the guys grabs Summer by the arm and pulls her back towards him. She struggles, but he's too strong for her. He easily overpowers her. My heart sinks as she's dragged away. I know I have to act fast. My mind races as I try to come up with a plan to help Summer. My heart is beating faster and my palms start to sweat as I force my feet to follow them.

They pull Summer the length of the beach towards the caves where Reef

took me. Summer doesn't call out for help, but she does struggle against their hold. I look over my shoulder to see if Cove or Reef have spotted what's happening, but I can't see them.

As I draw closer to the group, I can hear their hushed whispers, and Summer's eyes widen in fear as one of the guys pulls out a small blade and presses it against her throat. My heart drops as I realise the severity of the situation.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to do. I know that I have to act quickly, before they hurt Summer. I know that I have to be smart about it too. These guys are dangerous; they won't hesitate to hurt me if they think I'm getting in their way.

I decide to approach them slowly, my hands held out in front of me in a gesture of peace. "Hey, guys," I say, trying to keep my voice calm and steady. "Are you enjoying the party? Summer, can I speak to you for a second?" I try to sound as confident as possible, hoping that they won't see through my façade.

The guys turn towards me, their eyes narrowed in suspicion. The blade is still pressed against Summer's throat, the whites of her eyes showing me how terrified she is.

I take another step forward, keeping my hands up. "I just need to speak to my friend Summer for a second, if that's alright?"

The guy with the knife takes a step towards me, pressing the blade against my chest and the sharp point digs into my skin, but I don't flinch. "You're lying," he spits. "Summer doesn't have any friends except for us."

I try to keep my eyes locked on Summer's, hoping that she'll see the desperation in my gaze. "Please, guys. Let her go. Whatever she did, she doesn't deserve this."

The guys exchange a look, and for a moment, I'm afraid that they're going to attack me. But then, the one with the knife suddenly pulls away, tosses the blade into the air, catches it and tucks it out of sight in his back pocket. He laughs.

The others join in and the sound makes the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end. The back of my neck tingles and anxiety swirls in my stomach.

"Summer?" I say, when she starts laughing too.

"Guys, give me a minute?" she asks, not meeting my eyes.

The guys nod and one of them even winks at Summer before they saunter

away. I stand there, watching them go, unsure of what to do or say.

“Hey,” Summer says, finally meeting my gaze. “You didn’t have to intervene like that.”

I shake my head, relieved that she’s okay. “Of course I did. I couldn’t just stand by and watch them hurt you.”

Summer smiles, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “You’re sweet. But I can take care of myself.”

“They had a knife to your throat!” I exclaim.

Summer laughs and shrugs. “I wasn’t in any danger, Malia.”

“You were struggling.”

“But did you hear me calling for help?”

She’s right, I didn’t. I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. It was a sex thing. It’s no big deal.”

“But...you’re bleeding.”

We stand there in silence for a moment. I can feel the tension in the air, the unspoken words between us. I want to ask her about what just happened, about everything, but I don’t know how.

Finally, Summer sighs, and then speaks. “Do you want to go somewhere else? Get away from here. I’m guessing you’ve sought me out because you want to talk.”

I nod, grateful for her offer. We walk down the deserted end of the beach, our footsteps silent against the soft waves on the shore. The tension between us is palpable, and I can’t help but wonder what Summer is thinking.

After a while, she breaks the silence. “I guess you have questions.”

There’s weight in her reluctant words. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s okay. It’s probably time anyway.”

I feel a jolt in my chest at her words.

Summer takes a deep breath. “It was just a BDSM thing. I’m into that kind of stuff, you know? And those guys were just helping me out with a little...play.”

My heart sinks at her words. I had no idea that Summer was into that. I thought she was going to open up to me about the police station, why she did what she did, why she vanished on me, why she’s been ignoring me...not her damn sex life.

But I can’t ignore the fact that Summer is bleeding. “What about the

knife?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. She looked terrified. Her fear was so real. Surely that wasn't just roleplaying?

"It was all part of the scene," Summer says nonchalantly. "It's just a flesh wound, nothing to worry about."

My mind reels at the thought of someone getting hurt for the sake of pleasure. I can't understand why anyone would do that to themselves.

"I don't think I could ever do something like that," I say slowly, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

Summer smiles at me, her eyes full of understanding. "That's okay, Malia. Everyone has their own preferences. It's not for everybody."

We continue walking down the beach, the sound of the waves providing a comforting background noise. I still have so many questions, but I don't want to push Summer and risk scaring her away.

As we reach the end of the beach, Summer turns to me, her eyes searching mine. "Do you want to talk about what's been bothering you? I can tell there's something else on your mind."

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of my thoughts. "It's just...I don't understand why you disappeared on me, why you've been avoiding me. And then seeing you with those guys, bleeding, and...I don't know, it's just a lot to take in."

Summer's expression softens, her hand reaching out to grasp mine. "I'm sorry, Malia. I didn't mean to make things difficult for you. I just needed some time to figure things out, and I didn't want to burden you with my problems."

"But you're not a burden," I protest. "I care about you, Summer. You're my best friend. I want to be there for you."

She smiles at me, her thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of my hand. "I know you do. And I'm grateful for that."

As I wonder how to broach the real conversation I want to have with her tonight, Summer takes a deep breath and begins speaking.

"Malia, I have to be honest with you. I know you probably want to talk about what happened at the police station. I want to apologise for disappearing on you, for ignoring you. I just didn't know how to face you after what I did. But seeing you here, standing up for me like that – even though you didn't have to – it made me realise that you're still someone I can trust. I'm sorry for pushing you away."

My heart swells with hope at her words. “It’s okay, Summer. I’m just glad you’re okay. And...I miss you.”

Summer smiles, a genuine smile that reaches her eyes. “I miss you too, Malia.”

We stand there, the tension between us slowly dissipating. I don’t know what the future holds for us, but for now, I’m just grateful to have Summer back in my life.

As we continue to stand there, Summer’s hand reaches up to brush a strand of hair behind my ear. Her touch sends a somewhat unwelcome shiver down my spine, and I can feel my heart rate quicken. Why? It’s just Summer. My only friend in forever. She’s the only one who could ever touch me before.

Before them. Now theirs is the only touch I welcome.

I shiver again and rub my hands on my arms to disguise it. Looking at Summer, I can’t help but wonder if this is a chance to start fresh or if it’s too late for us.

“I know things have been rough between us,” Summer begins, her voice low and soothing. Compelling, almost. “But I want to make things right. I want us to be friends again, at least.”

I nod, unable to find my voice. It’s not that I don’t want to be friends with her, it’s just that so much has happened. So much is happening. And I feel like I can’t tell her about any of it.

“Yo! Sum! Come on!” One of her guys shouts from a short distance away. Have they been this close the entire time?

“Sorry, I should get back to them. Making them wait will only make things worse for me.” I gasp and she winks. “In the best way, of course. Listen, I’ll call you tomorrow. We can meet for coffee or something or I can come to you wherever you’re staying. I’m guessing you’re still not in the dorms?”

I shake my head but something in my brain tells me not to give anything away. “A coffee would be good. We can have a proper chat and a catch up then.”

“Great!” She beams at me. She pulls me into her arms for a quick hug, chuckling when I tense under her touch. “Okay, Malia, I have to go. Enjoy the party!”

She drops me and races off towards her guys, leaving me standing alone

and feeling more lost than ever. As I watch her go, I think about the things she doesn't know. The things I can't tell her. When one of her men looks back at me, I feel that sense of unease rise up inside of me again.

I turn away from them, my mind wandering to the only touch I welcome now. Reef. Cove. Bhodi. The professor. They're the only ones that bring me to life.

The ones that fill me with a pleasure that I crave but can't have. Not forever anyway.

Deciding I can't face the party, I make my way back to the house, realising that aside from a pretty weak apology, Summer didn't actually give me any explanations as to why she's behaved the way that she has. Maybe I'm to blame for not demanding answers, but it was like when I was finally faced with her, the questions slipped from my mind like water through my fingers.

Instead of obsessing about that, I think about the thing that's been weighing the most heavily on me lately. The thing that's been eating away at me from the inside out. That I think I'm falling in love with them. With all of them. The ones who have to kill me.

And because I love them, I'm going to let them.



“Professor?” I turn back toward Cove’s room, dragging my eyes away from the revelry down on the beach. Even from up here on the balcony, I swear I can feel the heat of the bonfire pressing against my body, causing me to overheat even more.

I just needed a breather. Some solitude and solace from everything.

I should have known I wouldn’t truly be left alone.

“What are you doing here?”

“This is my house,” he points out, not moving from his space in the open doorway where the light from the room behind him casts his face in unreadable shadows.

“But this is Cove’s room,” I counter with a brow raised in amusement.

This isn’t the first time the professor and I have been on this balcony alone together. I’m taken back to the night Bhodi decided we should get drunk to distract me from my cravings and the professor getting mad when he discovered us. He dragged me up here then and we shared a moment when he

confided in me how hard it was to stand by and watch his brothers with the girl he wanted but couldn't have.

Me.

"Is it hard?"

"Excruciating."

"Why not just give in?"

"I've been trying to be a better man."

"Don't you worry that you might...snap?"

"All the time."

"Doesn't it leave you on edge?"

"Constantly."

"Is it worth it? The not giving in?"

"No. It isn't."

I need to kiss him like I need air to breathe.

I'm so lost in the memory that I almost miss his lowly spoken reply, "I'm enjoying the view."

"What? Of a load of pissed up teenagers frolicking on the beach?" I laugh to hide the desire in my voice. It's so obvious, even to my ears. How can he miss it?

"Who uses frolicking alongside pissed up?" he muses.

I love it when he drops his mental barriers and communicates with me like this. It makes me feel close to him, like there's a bond between us that the others aren't quite privy to.

"Me. Apparently." I flush but I'm hoping he can't see it.

"Why are you blushing, Miss Van der Zee?"

Fuck, when he says my name like that...but damn him too! Just because I can't see his face doesn't mean he can't see mine. I'm sure my gentle blush which might have been attributed to the heat of the bonfire is now a raging ruby which I can't hide.

"I'm guessing you're not one for parties?" I ask to distract him.

"Not ones with quite so many teenagers."

"You don't like teenagers." It's not a question. Every day I sat in his lecture hall, the disdain for his students was dripping from his every word. God forbid the poor fool who dares to ask a question of him. When we first met, I wondered why he would go into teaching, so it didn't really come as a massive surprise when I learnt that he isn't really a teacher.

He's not really my teacher. You could act on this...pull...between the two of you if you were brave enough. Stop letting him run away and finally give in.

"I can tolerate one or two," he surprises me by replying as he steps out onto the balcony and comes to stand right beside me. If I thought the flames from the bonfire were imposing, it's nothing compared to the heat emanating from the professor. "One in particular I'm inexplicably drawn to."

I bite my lip as butterflies explode into flight within my stomach and my breath catches. I keep my gaze trained on the mesmerising flames of the bonfire but with every flicker the temperature on the balcony rises by several degrees. I can feel the warmth of the professor's body as if his skin were pressed right against mine, but when I glance down at the railing we're both white-knuckling I see a perfectly respectable twelve inches between us.

It might as well be an entire ocean, or the tiniest sliver of silk. We're worlds apart yet inextricably entwined. It's thrilling and excruciating. So near and yet so far.

The professor shifts. The heat rises. And suddenly those twelve inches are six. I should look away. Never have six tiny little inches ever looked so threatening. So dangerous.

So tempting.

I blink, shuffle nervously, and then there's three. Did he do that or did I? Why is the distance between us diminishing without either of us seeming to consciously close the gap? If I unfurled my little finger and he did the same, we'd be touching. Sparks would fly. I know it. I can feel the energy, the *magic*, crackling between us. Does he feel it too?

Tearing my gaze away from the three inches of *possibility* between us, I find myself staring into his dark unreadable eyes.

Only, they're not unreadable tonight. It's like looking in a mirror. Everything I'm sure is showing plain as day on my face, is reflected right back at me in his heated look.

Attraction. Desire. Need. Want.

Somehow I manage to unclasp the railing, and then my body is turning towards the professor like a flower that has to follow the path of the sun. Like a magnet, our hands find each other, those little fingers brushing innocuously yet causing a fire to ignite within me.

I gasp, but the sound is swallowed by the professor crashing his lips

against mine. I feel the moment his control snaps, because mine explodes right alongside his.

Hands tangle in my hair, yanking me closer – *adios those three little inches* – and I stumble into his hard chest. This time, he doesn't let me fall to the floor, holding me captive against him and his exquisite kiss.

He sets my body, and I groan into his mouth, eagerly kissing him back. I've waited so long for this. Longer than I even realised. And it was worth every excruciating second we made ourselves wait.

Sure, we may have given into temptation and kissed and things before now, but not like this. Even in his study, it wasn't like this. I could feel him holding back then, now the restraint between us has been snuffed out like a flame.

This is finally it, I'm sure of it.

When he pulls away, dropping me like I burned him, and scrubs a hand through his dark hair, I whimper.

“Malia—”

“Don't.”

I wrench myself out of his spell and turn back to the beach, breathing hard. I can't take the rejection. What cruelty it would be to have all of this wrenched away now that I've finally had a taste? I *felt* his control snap. I could taste it. It was different this time. *It was.*

“Malia, I shouldn't. We shouldn't.”

“Because I'm your 'student'?” I spit, making air quotes around the word but refusing to look at him. I don't want him to see the tears shining in my eyes, the devastation written on my face. How can he say that something so damn right can be so painfully wrong?

He places a burning hot hand on my bare shoulder, and I shrug him off. I can't stand his touch. Can't stand knowing how amazing he makes me feel but being unable to enjoy it yet again.

“*You know it's not that, Malia. I'm sworn to protect you. It's a line we shouldn't cross.*” His voice in my head is smoother than any scotch I've seen him drink.

I'm hearing shouldn't, shouldn't, shouldn't.

But damn it, I *want* to. I don't think I've ever wanted anything as badly as I want to continue this with the professor.

“*I want you, Malia. I'm just trying to be a better man here.*”

I know it's wrong. I know it's dangerous. But I can't seem to help myself when it comes to him. He's got a hold on me that I can't explain.

"I don't want a better man. I just want you."

With a growl that makes my heart pound, the prof reaches out and grabs my wrist, his strong fingers encircling my dainty bones like he could crush them with zero effort. Even in shadow, his dark skin is a stark contrast against my creamy complexion, but no sooner than I've noted the differences between us, I'm distracted by him hoisting me into his arms.

"Do not make me regret this," he threatens, stepping back into Cove's room.

I half expect – and hope – he'll drop me on Cove's bed and continue what we started on the balcony, but of course he doesn't. He wouldn't.

With confident but slightly hurried strides, like he's rushing before he changes his mind, he carries me along the corridor, through the door and up the stairs to his attic bedroom.

I blush when I remember the last time I was here. He rubbed my feet and I lost myself in the music, his touch, the stars above me...and I orgasmed.

How mortifying.

He lays me down on the bed like I'm something precious, and then rises to his feet. The ceiling only just clears his head. From the low futon bed, I feel minuscule beneath him, gazing up at him like he's a carved statue of a god and I've come to worship at his feet.

"Keep looking at me like that and we're going to have a problem," he growls.

Not knowing what he means, I close my eyes. What else can I do?

He chuckles and I burn with embarrassment, but I can't open my eyes either.

There's a rustling of material and then the mattress dips under his weight, a pressure on either side of my hips and I risk taking a peek through my lowered lashes.

A squeak escapes and the professor laughs, before leaning forward and placing his hands on the mattress on either side of my head. I slam my eyes closed once more.

He's literally poised above me, over me, pinning me down beneath him but without actually touching me. I don't think my heart can handle this... whatever this is.

“If we’re doing this, you better keep your eyes on me.”

Ignoring his command, I whisper, “Last time you said to close my eyes.”

“Last time I was trying not to succumb to you, Ophelia,” he says reverently.

I frown. “O-Ophelia?” *As in Hamlet? Or the song by The Lumineers?* “What does that mean?”

“She could be the death of me or the making of me.”

I’ve no idea what to say to that, so I focus on his spoken aloud words instead. “And this time?”

“Open your eyes and see.”

Unable to resist the temptation, my eyes open of their own accord. The professor’s face is mere inches from mine and his stare is intense and seductive. I allow myself to look, to take him in, to enjoy this moment. His stare makes everything inside of me clench, and I long to reach out and trace the perfect Cupid’s bow of his lips with my tongue.

Reaching up with shaky hands, my fingers skim his biceps, dancing all the way up to his shoulders. His bare skin is flawless in the moonlight.

My eyes widen and, after a beat, slide lower. *Holy shit, he’s naked!*

“Professor,” I gasp.



Oh god, why did I say that? I cringe.

“If we’re doing this, you should probably call me something else.”

I look up from where his hips are straddling – but not touching – mine to his burning gaze.

“Are we doing this?” I check. I don’t know if I could ever look him in the eye again if he backs out now.

“We’re doing this,” he tells me firmly. “Now call me something else.”

“Like Sir?” I ask, biting my lip remembering the two other times I called him Sir. The time he hated it and the time he seemed to love it.

“Erm, what are you doing here, sir?”

“Professor.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m your professor, not your Sir.”

“Just lie back, put the headphones back on, and for the love of god, whatever you do, don’t look at me. You hear? Stare at the stars or close your

eyes again or something. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good girl." *Oh fuck me, I'll never survive if he calls me that.*

The noise that rumbles from his chest is animalistic and sets my core on fire, dragging me back to the here and now.

"My name is Vance. But you can call me Sir if you like, *Ophelia*."

"O-okay," I squeak again, absolutely freaked out.

I'm going to have sex with my professor. I've been lusting after him for months and, if I admit it, falling for him for weeks. And now we've finally given in to this spark growing between us, finally given ourselves permission to set it on fire, and *I can't believe we're doing this!*

Without waiting for permission, I reach up and hook my arms around his neck, pulling him down to meet me. My lips caress his, gently but not tentatively. He lets me take the lead, find my rhythm, set the pace. But I can feel the control coiled in the tension of his shoulders and know that I don't have long before he snaps and takes over. I remember the way his gaze darkened when I called him Sir. I know what's coming.

He tears his lips from mine, his breathing heavy. "I'll give you one last chance."

"What?" I ask breathlessly.

"Tell me to stop."

I can feel my desire curling inside me, waiting, aching, testing. I'm so close to having what I've craved for months, what I've needed for weeks. I know that I should tell him to stop. But the only thing I can think of is how much I need to feel him inside me.

The weight of our mutual lust is heavy between us, taut, ready to snap. I look up at him and whisper, "Don't stop."

His lips crush into mine and his hands grip my ass as he devours me.

Slow and sensual, and then hard and fast.

Maybe even a little rough.

I'm ready. I want it all.

I nudge my nose against his and break the kiss. "Do it. Show me."

My challenge is met with a flash of teeth and a growl that is out of this world as he starts to grind against me. "So fucking ready," he hisses.

“Yes,” I agree, pulling him down to me.

The kiss is hot and dirty and brutal. He consumes me. There is nothing soft or careful about the way he attacks my mouth, about the way he drags his teeth down my throat.

He’s going to leave bruises.

I rub myself up against him, wanting more. I feel him shift and grind against my core through the thin fabric of my dress. His hard length meets my soft wetness but never really connects.

I want to feel all of him, all of what he’s offering.

I need him to have mercy and just give it to me.

Because I’m pretty sure that he’s about to break me in two.

I tilt my hips, finding just the right angle, and suddenly he’s there. His hot, hard length pushes against my clit and through the cotton barrier. I’m so close to coming.

One of his hands releases my ass and slides down the back of my thigh, lifting my leg to allow him better access and I know in this moment that I can’t do this any longer. I don’t know where the hell his touch ends and mine begins.

He is all over me.

I am all over him.

And it’s all wrong.

But so fucking good.

He groans and bites down hard on my shoulder, and my core pulses with need at the sting of pain.

Abruptly, the professor pulls away, and stares down at me. I’m breathing hard and my eyes are hazy with desire. It takes a couple of blinks to focus on him.

“Exquisite,” he states after a beat of simply staring at me and taking me in. I feel my skin flush all over and a wicked smile tugs at his lips. “Best get comfy, Miss Van der Zee. This is going to take a while.”

I groan at his use of my title – though it’s not fair he can call me that while I don’t get to call him professor – but shift a little on the mattress anyway to show willing. It’s absolutely unnecessary because his bed is comfier than sleeping on any cloud, and the only discomfort I’m feeling is coming from within me – stupid nerves and excited butterflies – rather than because of his mattress.

He smirks again, but I don't hate it. It doesn't make me want to throat punch him anymore, only kiss the hell out of him. When he runs the palm of his hand down my breastbone, I gasp at the jolts of electricity coursing through me, and his smirk morphs into a genuine smile.

He has such a lovely smile. He should smile more. That dimple will be the death of me.

"I can hear you, Malia."

"In my head?"

"No. You said it out loud again. So you like my dimple, huh?"

"I suppose."

"Anything else you fancy?"

"Maybe."

"Let's see if we can change that maybe to a definitely."

As he leans in to kiss me, his warm breath caresses my lips. I tilt my head to meet him halfway once more and our mouths touch. His kisses are soft at first but become more urgent as his hands roam freely over my body. I moan as he bites down on my lower lip and his hand reaches down to cup my breast.

He breaks the kiss and looks deeply into my eyes, his voice husky. "I can't wait any longer," he whispers, as he pulls up my dress. Nerves gone, I sit and help him, my hands shaking as I discard the flimsy material. His gaze heats as he takes me in. I run my hands over his muscular chest. He pulls me close, and his erection presses against my thigh.

Laying me back on the bed, he removes my soaked underwear, kissing every inch of my skin as he goes. I'm completely naked now, and I feel so vulnerable, but also so turned on.

He continues to kiss his way down my body, my muscles contracting with every ticklish swipe of his tongue, until he's at the apex of my thighs.

His strong hands grip my thighs, and he spreads my legs wide open.

"Beg me for it," he says.

He's staring into my eyes, waiting for a response. I can feel his breath on my pussy and it is maddening.

Stubborn to a fault, I keep my lips clamped closed, even as I chastise myself. *You've wanted this for weeks, Malia! Don't miss out now because of your stupid pride.*

I risk a glance at him once more and the smirk is firmly back in place.

I've changed my mind; I *hate* that smirk. As if reading my thoughts, it widens into a grin and he leans forward between my legs and...

"Oh," I gasp as he blows cool air onto my pussy.

"Do you like that?"

I nod. It's good.

"Words, Malia," his tone is gentle but firm. He's not going to let me hide.

"Y-yes."

"Ready to beg?"

"Never." Why did I say that? I'm such an idiot!

He chuckles. "Challenge accepted."

Before I can ask what he means, he lowers his head, and because I'm expecting more cool air, it takes me by surprise when he kisses me *there* instead.

Not tentative swipes of his tongue, or even a talented dance around my clit. He's full on french kissing my pussy like he was my lips a few minutes ago. And it's so fucking hot.

I fist my hands in the sheets and try not to thrash.

"Please!" I wail fervently. I feel him smile against my oversensitive skin and when I bravely look down at him, he glances up and catches my eye.

He brushes my clit lightly, and I shudder all over. I'm on the very edge of orgasm, already, and I'm pretty sure he damn well knows it.

"Please, what?"

I'm rendered speechless. What do I even say to that? Please, what? What do I want? I sure as hell don't want him to stop, but I get the feeling he had no intention of doing so anyway.

He grins, a wickedly devious flash of teeth that reminds me of a predator, and then drops his head back between my legs. The warmth of his breath is against my skin once more and I clench the bedsheets around me, my fingers digging through the soft fabric. He's pressed his face right up against me, his hot exhalations grazing my skin and making me squirm. This time, I don't stand a chance. His tongue lashes at my already sensitive clit, like a whip yielded by a master who knows exactly how to hit his mark every single time.

With a wail, my orgasm rips from my body, leaving my throat raw.

"You're a naughty girl," he tells me, his voice low and husky.

"I'm not a girl," I breathe. I'm trying to remember that I'm an adult. I'm not a girl.

“A bad girl,” he corrects me. “I didn’t give you permission to come.”

He growls, and his teeth nip lightly at my skin, dragging his mouth up along my clit and my pussy lips, and then sliding his tongue down to my entrance.

I moan at his tongue on my most sensitive parts. I’m already so wet that my juices are dripping off my pussy lips, and I can feel the slickness against my inner thighs.

Fuck. What’s he doing? I just came. I can’t take...more.

Can I?

THIRTY-FIVE



VANCE

If ever there was a better visual for the dam finally breaking, Malia Tarni Van der Zee is it. She's obliterated my self-control with one taste. Cracks and fissures may have been appearing for weeks now whenever I'm around her, but it was the brush of her lips against mine that finally did me in. The dam broke.

And now that I've tasted her, feasted on her, I can't stop. If her kiss was a bomb which broke my self-control, her essence is the rushing water that decimates everything in its path.

She whimpers when I pass my tongue over her sensitive nub, and I feel a stab of satisfaction that I've wrecked her almost as thoroughly as she's wrecked me.

"I can't," she cries when I don't stop.

"Yes you can. And you will. Because you want to be a good girl, don't you?"

"Fuck," she hisses, swiping her hands across her brow and into her hair.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what, Malia?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl.”

My mouth returns to her sex, licking and sucking until she’s shuddering again. I thrust my tongue as far inside her as I can, lapping at her juices with vigour. Then I switch my attention to her clit, feasting on it until she’s mewling for mercy. I replace my tongue inside of her with my fingers, pressing down.

She gasps and jerks her torso up off the bed, so that she’s half sitting and staring down at me.

“What was that?” She pants. I repeat the action and it has the same effect on her, making me smirk.

“That’s the difference between being with a boy and a man, Miss Van der Zee,” I tell her, unable to resist gloating a little. I can tell she’s inexperienced, beyond what she’s done with the guys, so she probably doesn’t know her body as well as I do.

Fair play to the youth of today for learning that her pleasure should come first, and for working tirelessly to try and find that fabled little G-spot, but experienced men know there are a hell of a lot more ways to pleasure a woman, and know how to mix it up a little.

I don’t bother asking if she likes it; the rush of wetness covering my hand proves it. So I continue, returning my mouth to her clit and picking up my rhythm.

Within minutes Malia’s shaking her head, tugging at my hair, oblivious to the fact that she’s leaving a trail of smears all over my face. I fucking love it. Her scent, her taste, it brings something out in me. Something primal, savage, possessive.

She’s putty in my mouth, the waves of pleasure wringing it from her, but she refuses to be a passenger. Her control finally snaps and she lets go of her restraint, riding my face hard in an effort to chase the second orgasm that she swore she couldn’t have. She doesn’t want to be anyone’s passive partner, and I can admire that. She wants to be an equal part of the mutual pleasure. Which is fine, so long as it’s her pleasure. No reciprocation needed, this is enough of a dream come true.

She grabs my head and presses my face against her, burying me in her

cum, covering my nose and mouth. It feels like she's smothering me with her juices, but I don't care. I keep moving my tongue as that orgasm crests and crashes over her, and I wring it out into a third until she's a gibbering wreck on the sheets.

Slowly she comes down from her high and drops her thighs to rest on the bed, panting hard. My own senses are heightened and I can hear how rapidly her heart is racing.

Finally, I pull back and sit up, my face and mouth glistening with her juices.

"Exquisite," I say again, because it's the only word I can manage.

I bring my lips up to meet hers, to kiss her as she's never been kissed before. Our tongues tangle, and I can taste her on her tongue. She's sweeter than anything I've ever tasted. Addictive.

She looks dazed and ready to drop as I move to straddle her.

"I can't wait any longer. I need to make you mine," I tell her.

She nods sleepily. "Please, Sir," she begs softly. Music to my fucking ears. I love it when she calls me that. I love that she thinks we're almost done here. Like three orgasms are going to be enough to satisfy me. She's cute in her cluelessness.

"I need to get a condom," I tell her, kissing her chastely on the lips.

As I go to move away, she suddenly snaps her legs around my waist and locks me in place.

"Don't."

I raise a brow at her. "Are you sure?"

She nods. "I already know about...the other stuff."

I groan. Of course one of the others will have told her that our kind can't mate with humans. And although we're not convinced that Malia *is* human, the queen's guards are all given a procedure when their roles are assigned. Doesn't stop infections and other nasties though.

"I'm clean," I tell her. "But I want to protect you."

"And I want to feel you. Don't make me wait. Please, Vance."

Fuck. There she goes again – eviscerating what little control I managed to claw back.

I lower myself down, angling myself just right so that I'll be in the best position to make her see stars when I push inside her. I guide myself closer, pressing at her entrance. She gasps as I push forward, stretching her, and I

wince at the tightness of our first time together. I move her hips with my own to get her wetter and slide a hand between our bodies to stroke her clit. Her hips buck, I slide a little deeper and she cries out.

“Professor!”

I groan. She absolutely cannot call me that while I’m fucking her. She’ll be the death of me if she does.

To save my sanity, I silence her with a kiss, my hips still slowly working to seat me fully inside her. As our lips lock in a passionate embrace, I can feel her body surrendering to mine. Her lips part and our tongues touch, as we both lose ourselves in the heat of the moment.

The fire between us intensifies, and I quicken my pace, thrusting deeper and harder inside her now. Her walls tighten around me, a clear indication of how much she’s enjoying this. The sound of her moans fills the room, and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride knowing that *I’m* the one causing her pleasure.

For weeks now, I’ve had to listen in torment while the others have sealed their connection with Malia. Hearing her cries of pleasure at their hands has been driving me insane, and now I completely get why.

I’m addicted to the sounds she makes. Enraptured by the feel of her. Dependent on her pleasure to find my own. I’m lost in all things Malia-Tarni and there’s no going back.

I explore every inch of her body with my hands, caressing her breasts and trailing my fingers down her stomach. She responds with soft gasps and whimpers, urging me on. I can feel the tension building within her, and I know that she is close. I break the kiss and trail my lips down her neck, nipping and sucking on her sensitive skin. Her hands grip onto my shoulders as she arches her back, wanting more. I pick up the pace, my thrusts becoming faster and harder, and she meets me with each one.

As we move together, our bodies slick with sweat, I realise that I want more than just this physical connection. I want her heart, her soul, her everything. And I know that I will do whatever it takes to make her mine completely. Her moans become louder as I take her to new heights of ecstasy.

With one final thrust, she shatters beneath me, her body convulsing with pleasure. I follow soon after, my release exploding inside her. We lie there, panting and sated, our bodies entwined as we bask in the afterglow.

As we come back to our senses, I realise that I can't imagine my life without her. I've fallen in love with her. Of course I have. I would never have broken my oath for anything less.

Which means I have a serious problem on my hands.

I climb off the bed and she makes a small sound of protest.

"I'll be right back, relax," I tell her with a soft smile. She does that. Makes me softer. Better.

I pull on my clothes and pad barefoot down to the bathroom where I clean up and then wet a washcloth, returning to my bedroom with it.

"Where did you go? Is everything okay?" She sits up, clutching a sheet to her front, suddenly shy around me.

"Bathroom." I hold up the cloth and she blushes.

"I can do that." She holds out her hand, but I shake my head.

"Lie down. Let me."

She opens her mouth to argue, but I give her a stern look. Meekly, she follows my orders and lies back down.

"Good girl," I tell her and she preens. I give her a quick kiss, and then clean up the evidence of our loss of control.

Done, I toss the cloth away and pull off my clothes once more. Then I slip between the sheets and look down at Malia, already dozing off on my pillow. Her vibrant hair is still sticking to her forehead and I gently peel it off and tuck it out of the way. It's brighter than it was before, I'm sure. More evidence that she's still leaking magic for some reason. Everything would be easier if she'd just embrace her powers – whatever they may be – and unleash the full extent of her magic. At least then we'd know what we were dealing with.

"Vance?" Malia murmurs sleepily.

"Yes?"

"Please don't go back to being mean."

"I won't," I promise.

"Or ignoring me. I couldn't bear that."

"Shh, sleep now." I tell her with a kiss to the top of her head.

I realise that my problems are for another day. Right now, all I want to do is hold her in my arms and never let her go.

So I do.



Fuck, this party is banging. I'm having such a good time – everybody is – except, I can't find Malia. And I really want to enjoy it with her. She's absolutely blown me away with her party planning, and I feel bad for laughing about her flyers now. I've no idea how she's managed to bring this all together, or pay for it all, but it's amazing. The tiki torches cordoning off the beach was an especially nice touch. No need to worry about any drunk fucks drowning in our front yard that way. Though of course, there are always some idiots. I can see half a dozen people have stripped off to go skinny dipping, and I'm all for doing that with Malia, but in private, when it's just us.

Still, it's fun to watch.

Where the hell is she though? I've looked everywhere, and there's no sign of her. I'm not worried because I know one of the others will have eyes on her, but I'd still rather she was with me. I am the birthday boy after all, I think that gives me the right to claim first dibs on our girl tonight.

Maybe I can wind the party down early so that I can enjoy a dance with Malia, and we might move on to that swim after all. Although making love on a blanket beside the bonfire holds its own appeal too.

Fuck. I need to find her. At the very least I need a birthday kiss from her.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Cove asks, coming over to me with two bottles of unopened beer dangling between his fingers. He passes me one and I twist off the top, clinking the bottle neck against his once he’s done the same.

“Cheers.” I take a long drag and then look at Cove over the top of my bottle. “I thought Malia might be with you.”

“No. She’s with Reef I think.”

“You think?” I demand, a prickle of fear sweeping through me.

“Yeah. She’s with Reef,” he repeats, but more firmly this time. Who’s he trying to convince, me or himself?

Growling, I drain the rest of my beer, toss the empty bottle into the nearby bin that Malia must have set up to prevent our beach getting trashed, and stride off in search of Reef.

Cove tags along, hurrying to keep up with me at first and then easily falling into step.

“Did that guy go?”

“Yeah. I threatened to beat the shit out of him if he came back.”

“So you’ve no idea who he is? Or what he wanted?”

I shake my head. “No. He wouldn’t tell me shit. Cocky fuck. He definitely had eyes on Malia though.”

“Is the beach house still safe?”

“It has to be. It’s safer than ever. What more can we do?” I counter.

I spy Reef coming back from the house – alone – and run to meet up with him, whistling shrilly to get his attention.

“What’s up?” he asks, jogging over to me and Cove.

“We thought Malia was with you.”

Reef smiles, not sensing the urgency in my tone and it makes me want to hit him.

“What?” Cove asks.

“Malia’s absolutely fine,” Reef replies.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “She is? You’ve seen her?”

“I’ve heard her.”

“Huh? Where is she?” Cove frowns.

“In the house.”

“Alone?”

Reef’s grin stretches even wider. “The prof is with her.”

“I don’t get what’s so amusing.” I huff, feeling my patience starting to wear thin.

“The professor,” Reef explains, “is finally succumbing to Malia’s charms.”

My heart rate spikes, and I feel a surge of jealousy.

I don’t know why though. I mean, I should be happy for her, right? I know that she cares for the professor as much as she does me and the others, and I know how hurt she’s been by his constant rejection. Even though she’s tried to hide it.

But with every passing moment, the jealousy – and my anger – grows stronger. He’s treated her horribly, but she still wants him. Still needs him to fill a void that me and my brothers can’t. How fucked up is that?

As I stand there, staring at Reef’s teasing grin, I realise that I should have seen this coming. Malia has always been the one to surprise us all, with her out-of-the-box thinking and her ability to forgive and love whole-heartedly.

I can’t help but wonder what’s going on inside that house. Are they just talking, or something more?

Obviously, I know what Reef’s implying, but is he just winding me up? Should I go inside and see for myself?

“Trust me mate, you don’t want to go in there. The prof will kill you if you interrupt. I promise you, Malia’s having a good time.”

Does he think his words are helping? Because they’re not.

“Shit, guys! Look!” Cove exclaims.

At the sense of urgency in his tone, I tear my heated gaze away from Reef’s and turn to Cove. He’s pointing up into the night sky and when I follow the direction of his finger, I gape at what I see.

A dazzling white, blinding beam of light is shooting up into the dark sky, illuminating the tops of the trees and beach.

“What the—” I gasp.

It appears to be coming *out* of our house. Out of the roof light in particular, and there’s no way that on a clear night like tonight, it won’t be visible for *miles*.

“Shit!” Reef curses, the laughter finally dying from his face.

“What? What is it?” Cove asks when I’m unable to form any words at all.

“It’s Malia. It has to be!” Reef replies, suddenly sounding anxious.

“Is she okay? You said the prof was with her!”

I don’t know whether to run inside...or...what? I feel useless. Confused.

“What’s going on?” I finally manage to spit out.

“If I had to guess, I’d say Malia’s powers are fully forming.”

“How?” I demand at the same time as Cove says, “Why?”

Reef sighs like we’re frustrating and annoying him. “Why do you think? What’s the one thing Malia’s done with all of us that she’s not done with the professor before now?”

“They’re having sex?!” Cove whisper-yells. *Well, I guess he wasn’t just pulling my leg then,* I think as Reef nods. Cove looks mildly impressed. I’m horrified. “What do we do?”

“What can we do?” Reef chuckles, though it lacks humour. “Clearly, we’re too late to stop it.”

“Not about them having sex,” I hiss. Although, if I could have found a way to stop it, I would have. “About the goddamn beacon that’s shining in the sky like the bloody *Bat Signal* advertising the secret location of the damn star we’re supposed to be hiding!”

As my words hang in the air, a deep sense of dread settles over me. Over all of us, I think. The gravity of the situation sinks in, and I can feel the weight of our responsibility pressing down on my shoulders. The light that once seemed mesmerising now acts as a beacon for evil to attack, drawing attention to our hidden sanctuary.

“We have to do something.” My voice is filled with determination despite the fear bubbling within me. “We can’t just stand here and watch as everything we’ve worked for falls apart.”

Reef’s face tightens, his usual carefree demeanour replaced by a look of grim resolve. “You’re right. We need to act, and act fast.”

Cove nods in agreement, his eyes reflecting a mix of concern and determination. “But what can we do?”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing thoughts. “We need a plan. We need to find a way to neutralise that light, to protect Malia and the professor, while keeping our secret safe. And I think it’s time everyone went home.”

Cove’s eyes flicker with a spark of inspiration. “I’ll be right back.”

He takes off running towards the dance floor, pushing his way through the throng of people until he reaches the DJ booth. The music cuts off abruptly and Cove's jovial voice comes through the PA system. "That's all we've got time for tonight guys. The *Bat Signal* says it's time to depart. Please use the light to make your way safely off the beach. Thanks for joining us to celebrate, and before you all fuck right off, join me in wishing the birthday boy one last Happy Birthday!"

Cheers go up all along the beach, but when the music doesn't restart and the DJ switches off the lights on the dance floor, disappointed grumbles begin to break out.

Slowly, one by one, people begin to make their way off the beach, reluctant to actually leave when the party was seemingly in full swing.

The moment the light goes out, a sudden hush falls upon the beach. The air becomes heavy with anticipation, as if nature itself holds its breath, sensing the imminent danger that lurks in the shadows.

Without warning, a piercing screech breaks the silence, sending shivers down my spine. From the darkened abyss above, a swarm of Shikari descends like a malevolent storm. They fill the air with a bone-chilling rasp, creating an eerie symphony that echoes across the beach.

Panicked screams fill the air and the partygoers fight one another to flee to safety.

The Shikari, resembling sinister apparitions, glide effortlessly through the night. Their ethereal forms are shrouded in darkness, their presence suffused with an otherworldly aura. With their long, bony fingers and hollow eyes that exude an insatiable hunger, they are the epitome of all nightmare creatures.

Reacting swiftly, Reef draws his weapon, a gleaming cyan blade that reflects the faint light of the moon. His eyes narrow, determination etched upon his face as he steps forward to meet the approaching horde. The partygoers scatter, screams of panic still filling the air, reaching fever pitch, as the hunters swoop down, their presence like a chilling gust of wind.

"Go to the house. Alert the prof. Protect Malia at all costs!" he shouts to us as he steps forward and engages the first hunter, his blade slashing through the air with lightning speed.

The clash of steel against ethereal flesh resonates, and sparks dance in the darkness as their blades meet. Reef fights with a controlled fury, his movements fluid and precise, parrying the relentless attacks of his

otherworldly adversaries. He's always been the best fighter out of us, and I know that he can handle this.

But the hunters are relentless. They outnumber Reef, their strength fueled by the malevolence they embody and the feast of souls that they have stolen. They lunge and dive, their claws reaching for him, seeking to extinguish his light. It becomes a deadly dance, a symphony of violence and survival under the moonlit sky.

"Quick!" Cove grunts, grabbing my arm. His expression is filled with urgency as he pulls me along beside him.

We have to fight past the terrified crowd to reach the house. I want to stay, to help my brother fight, but I know that protecting Malia is more important. Even though it kills me, I race up to the front door of the house.

"You go!" I shout to Cove. "I'll stop them from following."

Reef's eyes meet mine, and he nods, signalling that he understands my plan.

I get surge of adrenaline as I realise it is my duty to defend our position.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself for the battle that lies ahead. With every ounce of courage within me, I charge into the heart of the fray, my own weapon raised high. The Shikari hunters encircle me, their pale faces contorted in a twisted mockery of human emotion.

Their icy presence brushes against my skin as they close in, their intentions clear. I shiver and fight back with the clash of metal reverberating in my ears. Each swing and parry carries the weight of my determination, the need to protect those I hold dear.

Time seems to stretch as the battle rages on, the beach becoming a battleground of light and darkness. The hunters press on, unyielding, their attacks growing more vicious and coordinated. But I refuse to falter. I refuse to let darkness prevail.

The professor joins me, battling by my side with weapons in each hand. He must have entrusted Cove to get Malia to safety, or to keep her hidden within the house.

Together, alongside Reef, we battle. But as I strike down one Shikari, another takes its place. They keep coming, their numbers seemingly endless. Yet, I fight on, fueled by a primal instinct to protect and defend Malia. The light within me burns brighter, pushing back against the encroaching darkness.

Through the corner of my eye, I catch glimpses of the prof's fierce determination as he battles beside me. We share a silent understanding, a bond forged through countless trials. Together, we continue, our weapons cutting through the air, each swing a defiance against the Shikari's evil intent.

But as the battle rages, I can't shake the worry that gnaws at my heart. I pray that Cove has found a way to protect Malia from the encroaching threat, that our wards around the house stand strong. For now, the Shikari seem to be focused on us, on the battle. And all I can do is hold the line, defending our sanctuary with every ounce of strength I possess.

My heart pounds as I watch Reef also engage the relentless Shikari in a battle for our lives. He's further down the beach, trying to lure them away from us, away from the beach house. Sweat trickles down my brow, mingling with the fear that courses through my veins. Reef's movements are a blur of grace and determination, his blade slicing through the shadows with unwavering precision.

But then, in a horrifying moment frozen in time, one Shikari manages to breach his defences. Its skeletal fingers find purchase on Reef's arm, and a surge of darkness races through him. A gut-wrenching scream escapes Reef's lips, a brutal cry of pain that pierces my soul. A surge of helplessness engulfs me as I witness his strength falter, his body convulsing under the grip of the malevolent force.

Before my eyes, the Shikari hunters vanish, leaving behind an emptiness that is as chilling as their presence.

Reef crumples to the ground, gasping for breath, his body wracked with pain. I rush to his side, my hands trembling as I try to offer some form of solace, but I'm at a loss for words. My mind races, searching desperately for a way to save him, to undo the damage that has been inflicted.

But as I look into Reef's pain-filled eyes, I see a flicker of determination that refuses to be extinguished. Despite the darkness that threatens to consume him, there is a spark within him that refuses to be snuffed out.

"Brother—" he calls out on a wheezing gasp.

Then the light leaves his eyes.



The moment the professor rushes from the room, Malia demands to know what’s going on.

“It’s the Shikari. They’re here, attacking.”

She gasps, paling. “Are people getting hurt?”

I don’t want to lie to her, but I can’t bring myself to say it either. I nod. “You need to get dressed and we need to hide.”

“We should help them!”

“No, Malia. We have to—”

“Summer’s out there! The others too!” she cries. “I need to make sure everyone’s okay.”

My heart sinks as I realise the depth of Malia’s concern for Summer. I understand her desire to protect her friend, I do, but Malia has no idea of the danger that awaits us outside. I can’t expose her to that. We can’t risk her safety like that.

Malia climbs out of the professor’s bed, pulling on the dress she wore at

the party before turning to me.

“Let’s go!”

“Malia,” I say, my voice filled with a mixture of urgency and tenderness. “I understand your worry for Summer, but right now, our priority has to be keeping ourselves safe. The Shikari are formidable, and we can’t risk exposing you to them, to their violence.”

Malia’s eyes well up with tears, her hands trembling with a mixture of fear and determination. “But Cove, Summer is my only friend. I just got her back. I can’t lose her again. We can’t just leave her out there. What if something happens to her?”

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to assuage Malia’s worries. “I know how much you love Summer, but we have to trust that she can take care of herself. She’s smart. She might find a safe place to hide until this chaos subsides. She might even have already left the beach. We can’t risk our own lives trying to rescue her right now.”

Malia’s shoulders slump as she wrestles with the difficult decision before her. She glances at me, her eyes searching for reassurance.

My heart aches, torn between my love for Malia and my concern for everyone’s safety. If it weren’t for the need to protect Malia, I’d be out there, fighting alongside my brothers.

I reach out and gently take her trembling hands in my own. “Malia, I understand how much Summer means to you, but we need to make a choice and stick together. I can’t bear the thought of losing you or putting your life in danger.”

Tears stream down Malia’s face as the gravity of the situation sinks in. She’s remembering the prophecy, all that’s at stake. She nods slowly, her grip on my hands tightening. “You’re right, Cove. Our lives are too valuable to throw away recklessly. Let’s stay here and hide. We’ll pray for everyone’s safety and hope that everyone makes it out alive.”

I don’t dare tell her how unlikely that is, that the beach is already littered with bodies – collateral damage from the initial Shikari attack. Instead, I smile, relieved that Malia had made the difficult decision to prioritise her safety. Pulling her into a tight embrace, I whisper what I hope are soothing words into her ear. “We’ll get through this, Malia. Together. We’ll find a way to keep each other safe, and when this is all over, we’ll search for Summer with all our might.”

The need to help my brothers and to know what's going on, wages war with my need to protect Malia, so I take her to my room at the front of the house. I keep the lights off and get Malia to hide in the closet once more, and then I arm myself with weapons and stand guard.

Keeping to the shadows and moving slowly to avoid detection, I cross to the window so that I can watch what's happening on the beach. From here, the sounds of the battle are much louder, more violent. I'm glad Malia can't see this. I'm already dreading the magic and work involved in clearing this massacre up. But that's a job we'll have to outsource, because we can't stay here now. Not now that our location has been compromised and we've revealed ourselves to the Shikari. Now that they know powerful Aerwynans live here they'll not stop hunting us unless they find the star.

As I peer through the window, my heart sinks even further at the devastation unfolding on the beach. The Shikari move with terrifying speed and precision, their dark forms clashing with my brothers. Explosions light up the night sky, and the air crackles with the sound of spells being cast and weapons clashing.

Amidst the chaos, I catch sight of Reef fighting valiantly against a group of Shikari. A surge of fear grips my heart as I notice that he's outnumbered, his defences weakening with each passing moment. My brother is hurt, blood staining his clothes as he struggles to fend off the relentless attackers.

Suddenly, the Shikari vanish. I should feel a sense of relief washing over me, but instead, dread settles in my gut, knowing that we've bought ourselves some time – but at what cost? Why have they vanished? I know that this is just the beginning of our battle. We've signalled our presence to a dangerous world, and now we must prepare for the inevitable storm that will follow.

Movement on the beach catches my attention and I watch in horror as Reef falls to the sand, his weapons dropping from his hand. Bhodi and the professor run to him, but my gut knows it's already too late.

I can't simply stand by and watch Reef hurt. Despite the risks, I know I have to act. With a firm resolve, I turn away from the window and hurry back to the closet where Malia is hiding.

“Malia,” I whisper urgently, gently shaking her shoulder. “The danger has passed for now. We have to go out there. Reef needs our help.”

Malia's eyes widen with a mix of fear and determination. She nods, understanding the gravity of the situation. Without a word, she emerges from

the closet wearing shorts and a tank, Vans on her feet. I'm impressed that she used her time hiding to change into something more practical for running, because that's what we're going to have to do. Run. Hide. Survive.

I don't know why the Shikari retreated, but I do know that they'll be back.

But first, we have to worry about getting Reef and Malia to safety somewhere else. We can regroup and come up with a plan later.

We race down the stairs and out of the house. Stepping onto the beach, the aftermath of the battle is like a sharp slap to the face and I hear Malia's pained gasp behind me. The air is still thick with the scent of smoke and the echoes of fading magic. Bodies lie scattered on the sand, a haunting reminder of the price paid in the fight against the Shikari.

But I can't bring myself to grieve for the needless loss of life. Not when my brother is lay dying on the sand.

I scan the area, heart pounding as I search for Reef amidst the chaos. And then, through the haze, I spot him, slumped against a rock, his body battered and bruised, Bhodi and the professor standing over him with stricken expressions on their faces. Rushing to his side to join my brothers, I watch helplessly as with hands trembling, the prof checks for signs of life.

The waiting nearly kills me.

When he stands and shakes his head, something is torn from my chest. An agonised scream tears the air in two and Malia shoves us out of the way to get to Reef's broken form.



Silent tears stream down my face as I stare at Reef's lifeless form. This can't be happening. He can't be... He's not... I won't accept it. I can't. He has to be okay. I need to tell him...

A heart-wrenching sob rips free of my throat, and I scream all of my frustration and fear and regret into the night sky. The sound reverberates around me, echoing my anguish. A wild rage consumes me, and I feel the intensity of my emotions turning me savage with the need to exact revenge.

I sink to my knees beside Reef's motionless body, the sand cool and sticky beneath me. It's black. *Why is the sand black and sticky?*

My hands tremble as I reach out, unable to resist the urge to touch him, to feel any sign of life. But his skin is cold, and the realisation settles like a heavy weight upon my chest.

"No," I whisper, my voice barely a breath, as if denying the truth will somehow change it. "Please, Reef, you can't leave us like this. I can't lose you."

My fingers brush against his cheek, and my feelings for him pour out of me like a living, tangible thing. It's a mixture of love, regret, and desperation, intertwining with the raw energy coursing through my veins. In that moment, the boundaries of my magic blur, fueled by my love and anguish.

Unconsciously, my powers surge forth, an untamed force responding to the depth of my emotions. The air crackles with an otherworldly energy, and a surge of power emanates from within me, radiating through my fingertips, hot enough to scorch.

Suddenly, there's a flicker. A subtle shift. As if the universe itself is responding to my plea. And then, against all odds, I feel it—a faint, almost imperceptible beat beneath my trembling hand.

Hope flares within me like a blazing fire, my disbelief warring with the undeniable truth of what I sense. Reef's heart is stirring, reawakening in response to the raw power of my love. It's as if my unleashed emotional outburst has jump-started the dormant spark within him.

Tears of disbelief mix with tears of gratitude as I press my ear against his chest, listening intently. With each passing moment, his heartbeat grows stronger, more pronounced. It's a melody of life that had been silenced, now finding its rhythm once more.

"Malia, he's gone," a gentle but firm voice says from behind me. I hold up an urgent hand to silence them. I need to listen. I need to be sure.

It's there. It's faint, but it's definitely there. I can hear it. I can feel it. I can *sense* it.

Reef's eyelids flutter and I gasp.

"Malia, what is it?" Cove urges, a mixture of confusion and hope in his gaze. But I can't speak, because doing so might break the spell of the moment. Might break my hope.

Reef is alive.

I know he is.

"Malia?" he murmurs – weak but filled with a glimmer of hope. There's gasps of shock from behind me, but I can't draw my eyes away from Reef to acknowledge them.

A surge of relief courses through me, tears streaming unabated down my cheeks. I gather Reef in my arms, holding him close as if I could shield him from all harm.

"Reef, you're here. You're alive," I whisper, my voice trembling with the

weight of the emotions I've just experienced.

"Impossible," someone whispers, awe-struck and disbelieving.

But my full attention is on Reef as his gaze meets mine. He's pale, but his colour is slowly returning. His eyes are glassy, lacking their usual sparkle, but the verdant vibrancy hasn't changed. He's still *my* Reef.

In this shared moment of disbelief and gratitude, we both understand the extraordinary power of love and the unbreakable bond that exists between us.

"Reef, can you heal yourself?" Bhodi asks urgently.

"Y-yeah. I should be able to. Just...give me a minute."

"Rest," I urge him.

"We need to move. It's not safe here," the professor says sharply, his voice snapping us out of our momentary respite.

I nod, my worry deepening. "Can we help him move to the house?" I ask, biting my lip as I fret about the fragility of his condition. A second ago, he was dead. Now, he isn't. It's almost too much to comprehend, but I can feel the delicate nature of his recovery within my soul, and I know that we need to be careful.

The professor and Bhodi step forward, their expressions a mix of concern, exhaustion, and determination. Together, we carefully lift Reef, supporting him as we make our way off the beach, but not in the direction I was expecting.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"We have a safe house," the professor replies. "If we can help Reef to my car, we can drive to the broken lighthouse at Land's End."

"That's a long way, right?" I frown.

"It's the northernmost point of the island, yes."

"Will he make it?" I'm almost too afraid to hear the answer.

"He's come this far. He has to," the prof replies firmly.

The journey is slow, every step filled with caution. Reef's breathing is shallow, and I hold my own breath, fearing any sudden decline.

When we reach the car, I release a sigh of relief. The journey should be a little easier now.

"Should I stay, pack some bags?" Cove asks as we settle Reef onto the back seat and I climb in beside him.

"No," the prof replies firmly. "We all stick together now and make do. The safe house is reasonably well stocked. We'll manage."

Bhodi takes the front passenger seat and Cove climbs into the back with me, pulling me into his lap so that Reef has room to stretch out. The professor drives cautiously but quickly, only slowing down when we pass through Two Harbours.

“Shouldn’t we take Reef to see the doc?” I ask, recognising the signpost for her *campground*.

“No. We need to get somewhere safe. Reef will be fine with some rest.”

He sounds like he’s trying to convince himself, so I say nothing and turn back to Reef. His eyes are closed, his breathing laboured, and there’s sweat on his brow from the exertion of getting off the beach.

Cove slips his hand into mine and squeezes, giving me strength. I can’t fall apart right now. Reef still needs me.

When we reach the dilapidated lighthouse, we settle Reef onto a bed, surrounded by the remnants of forgotten times. The space is sparse but functional, clean, and stocked with basics. It will do.

The professor swiftly sets wards in place, ensuring our temporary sanctuary remains hidden from prying eyes. The faint glow of magical protection fills the air, offering a modicum of safety.

Bhodi fetches water and supplies from the small kitchen area, tending to Reef’s immediate needs while the professor joins me at his side. We exchange a solemn glance, a silent acknowledgment of the risks we faced tonight and the urgency of our next steps.

He understands.

Reef’s breathing steadies, and colour begins to return to his cheeks. The wounds that marred his body slowly close, a testament to his own healing powers, bolstered by the surge of magic that brought him back from the brink.

My surge of magic.

I didn’t know I had it in me. I have no idea what I did or how I did it, but I’m grateful that the pain of losing Reef had unlocked something in me that was able to save him.

Remaining by his side, my hand gently grasping his, I pour all the love and strength I possess into him. Though the danger still looms, I refuse to let fear consume me.

Reef stirs, his gaze meeting mine once more. A weak smile tugs at his lips, and he whispers, “Thank you, Malia.”

A rush of gratitude fills me, and I lean closer, pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. “You don’t have to thank me, Reef. We’ll get through this. Together. Sleep now.”



The beach is deserted in the storm. It's not one I've been to before, and it gives me weird vibes. Like there's some powerful force trying to keep me away, but at the same time, something invisible is drawing me in.

It reminds me of when we were in school and had to walk down Conscience Alley for English lessons. Classmates would stand on either side of me and offer advice to the protagonist in my ear. Good and bad. Push and pull. Whispers on the wind telling me to go, and in the next breath, urging me to stay. *You don't belong here. This is home. Run away. Come to us.*

It's so confusing.

"Malia? What are you doing out here?" The professor asks, coming to stand by my side, his voice filled with concern. We've been at the lighthouse for a few days now, and watching Reef slowly recover has been driving me insane. I just need fresh air. Space. Solitude.

I should have known one of them would never be too far away.

I turn to him, my expression serious as I take a deep breath, the storm's

wind whipping through my hair. “Professor, I need to talk to you. It’s important.”

His brow furrows, and he nods, motioning for us to seek shelter at the foot of the lighthouse. We find a relatively dry spot under the protection of the gallery deck, and I glance out at the turbulent sea, the waves crashing against the shore with a ferocity that mirrors the turmoil within me.

“Professor,” I begin, my voice steady but tinged with an undercurrent of determination, “I’ve made up my mind. I...I’m willing to sacrifice myself for the prophecy.”

He blinks, surprise evident in his eyes, and he opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up my hand, silencing him for a moment longer.

“I know it sounds drastic, but hear me out please. The Shikari are growing stronger, and they won’t stop until they have complete control. If I give myself up, if I die for the prophecy, then all of you will have a chance to defeat them. My life, my sacrifice, will give you the time and the power you need to succeed. And it will save so many people. In both of our worlds.”

The professor’s face pales.

“Malia, no,” he says, his voice tinged with a mix of concern and desperation. “I’m trying to find another way. I just need time.”

“I think we both know that we’re out of time.” Tears well up in my eyes as I take his hands in mine, my grip firm and unwavering. “Last night was—”

“That was the prophecy confirming it. You are definitely the star Malia.”

“How?” I ask, brows drawing together as I cock my head to one side, considering his words.

“Apparently, after speaking with the others while you were asleep, it would seem that when you and I...”

He trails off and my face blazes with embarrassment. I don’t regret what we did. I can’t. But that doesn’t make talking about it any easier.

“Well, you know. It activated your magic fully and that acted as some kind of beacon, alerting the Shikari to your whereabouts.”

I release my breath on a sigh. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“So we are out of time,” I say flatly.

“We’ve bought ourselves a little bit by coming here to the lighthouse, but it’s a temporary measure.”

“What do you need for the ritual?” I ask. He hesitates and I press forward.

“Professor, I’ve thought about this. I’ve wrestled with the decision, and it’s the only way I see for all of you to have a fighting chance. The prophecy points to my sacrifice as the key to victory. We can’t ignore that.”

He shakes his head, his voice filled with a raw emotion. “Malia, you’re precious to me. I can’t bear the thought of losing you. We’ll find another way. There must be one.”

I squeeze his hands tighter, my voice softening. “Professor, I need your help. I need you there when I talk to the others. I need you to make them understand. I know they won’t like it. I know it will be hard for them to accept. But they need to know that this sacrifice could save them, save everyone. It’s bigger than me. Than us.”

The professor shakes his head, and he takes a step back, his gaze searching mine as if trying to gauge the depth of my conviction.

“Malia—” he says, his voice tinged with a mix of concern and desperation.

Tears well up in my eyes as I take his hands in mine, my grip firm and unwavering. “Professor, it’s time. We have to do this.”

He shakes his head, his voice filled with a raw emotion. “Malia, please.”

“What do you need for the ritual?” I ask again.

“I-it has to be on the full moon,” he confesses, his voice laced with regret and reluctance.

I blanch. “T-that’s tonight.” He nods and I take a deep breath. “Okay, let’s do it then.”

“No, Malia. It’s too soon. You need time to—”

“To say goodbye to people?” I tease with a gentle smile. Maybe it’s in bad taste to make jokes right now, but I don’t know how else to deal with the knowledge that my timeline just got shortened. Drastically. “Anything else?”

“We all need to be there. I’ll sort everything. Are you sure you really want to do this?”

“I am. I’m sure.”

“The others will try to talk you out of it.”

“I know. It’s why I want your help. Be on my side. Convince them with me.”

He nods but it’s more a reluctant jerk of his head. I can see the conflict within him, torn between his duty to protect me and his own reservations about the plan. I squeeze his hands tighter, silently urging him to trust me.

As we make our way back towards the entrance of the lighthouse, the weight of my decision presses down on me with every step. Doubts and fears creep into my mind, but I push them aside, focusing on the task at hand. Cove, Reef, and Bhodi are waiting for us inside, unaware of the revelation I'm about to drop on them, and they will need me to be steadfast in my decision.

I am. I have to be.

As we enter the lighthouse, the three of them turn towards us, their expressions shifting from curiosity to concern as they catch sight of my tear-streaked face. Cove steps forward, his voice filled with worry. "Malia, what's wrong? What happened?"

I take a deep breath, steadying myself before speaking. "Listen, everyone," I begin, my voice trembling slightly. "I've made a decision, and I need you all to hear me out."

Reef furrows his brow, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What kind of decision?"

My gaze shifts between their faces, searching for a trace of understanding. "I'm going to sacrifice myself," I say, the words heavy on my tongue. "It's the only way to fulfil the prophecy, to save both of our worlds from the Shikari."

Cove's eyes widen, and he takes a step closer to me, his voice filled with disbelief. "Malia, you can't be serious!"

Bhodi's voice trembles with anger. "You can't just decide this on your own! We're a team, Malia!"

Tears stream down my face as I meet their gazes, my voice unwavering despite the quivering in my heart. "It's my life, my decision to make, Bho. I've thought long and hard about this. The professor and I have discussed it, and we believe it's the only way to ensure your success. You never know, it might even bring your queen back."

"I don't want the queen back. I just want you," Bhodi insists stubbornly.

The room fills with a heavy silence as the words hang in the air. Each of them struggles with their own emotions, their conflicting desires to protect me and to find an alternative solution. I turn to the professor, silently pleading with him to speak up.

He clears his throat, his voice steady but filled with sorrow. "I understand your hesitation, but Malia is right. The prophecy points to her sacrifice as the

key to our victory. We must trust in the greater plan, no matter how difficult it may be.”

Cove’s shoulders sag, his eyes flickering with a mix of resignation and anger. “I can’t believe this. I won’t let you go through with it without a fight.”

Reef steps forward, his steps shaky but his voice determined. “There has to be another way. We can find it together.”

“There’s no time left,” I tell them sadly. “I can’t risk the Shikari attacking us again. I won’t lose you the way we lost Reef. What if I couldn’t bring him back? What if this magic that I have no idea how to wield or control fails me? How would I live without you?”

“How will *we* live without *you*?” Cove counters.

I give him a soft, sympathetic smile. “You’ll have each other.”

Bhodi’s gaze softens, and he reaches out to gently touch my arm. “Malia, please reconsider. We can’t lose you.”

Their love and concern wash over me, and for a moment, doubt threatens to engulf me. But deep within my heart, I know this is the path I must take. I draw strength from their presence, even as tears continue to fall.

“I understand your objections,” I say, my voice filled with gratitude. “But please, trust me. Trust that I’ve thought this through, and that this sacrifice is necessary. We’re running out of time.”

The room falls silent once more, the weight of the moment hanging heavily in the air. Slowly, one by one, they nod, their expressions a mix of resignation and unwavering loyalty. They stand by my side, united in their acceptance of my decision.

“When do we do it?” Reef eventually asks.

“It has to be during a full moon,” I tell him gently.

“But that’s—” I nod at Bhodi’s outburst.

“Tonight? I know.”

“No. It’s too soon. We won’t be ready in time,” Cove protests.

“The professor will arrange everything. We can do this. We *are* doing this. Tonight.”

“Malia, it’s too soon.”

“It has to be.”

The room grows tense as my words hang in the air. Cove’s frustration is palpable, his eyes filled with a mixture of concern and determination. Bhodi’s

hands tremble slightly, his voice pleading. “Malia, we need more time to prepare. We can’t rush into this.”

I take a step closer to Cove, meeting his gaze with unwavering conviction. “Cove, I understand your concerns, but the Shikari’s power is growing stronger with every passing day. Waiting is a luxury we can no longer afford.”

Reef’s brow furrows, his voice strained. “But Malia, we haven’t explored all the possibilities. We need more information, a better plan.”

I reach out, resting my hand on Reef’s arm, offering reassurance amidst the turmoil. “Reef, you’ve all searched for answers tirelessly. We’ve exhausted every lead, every option. I lost you yesterday. I can’t do that again. Sacrifices must be made, and this is mine to bear.”

The professor steps forward, his voice filled with urgency. “Malia is right. Time is of the essence. I will ensure all the necessary arrangements are made. We can’t falter now.”

Cove’s gaze darts between each of us, his expression a mix of frustration, fear, and reluctant acceptance. He lets out a heavy sigh, his voice laden with defeat. “Fine. If this is what it takes to save the world, if this is your decision, I’ll stand by your side.”

Bhodi’s eyes glisten with unshed tears, his voice filled with sorrow. “Malia, I don’t like it, but I’ll support your decision. Just let me promise you that we’ll find a way to make this sacrifice count.”

I grasp their hands, my voice filled with gratitude and determination. “Thank you, all of you.”

With a solemn understanding, we set our plan in motion. The professor busies himself with the preparations for the ritual, gathering the necessary tools and knowledge. Cove, Reef, Bhodi, and I spend our remaining time in heartfelt conversations, cherishing the moments we have left together.

As night falls and the full moon casts its ethereal glow upon the world, we gather in the tiny lounge, our hearts heavy but resolute as we enjoy our final meal together. The weight of the impending sacrifice hangs heavily in the air, but we draw strength from one another.

I take a deep breath, steadying my trembling hands, as the professor tells us it’s time to go, it’s time for the ritual.

As we leave the lighthouse, I feel a bittersweet mixture of fear and purpose coursing through my veins. I steal glances at Cove, Reef, and Bhodi,

their eyes reflecting a myriad of emotions—love, worry, and unyielding support.

In this moment, I know that I am not alone.

With tear-stained cheeks and a heart brimming with love, I take one last look at my companions before surrendering myself to the inevitable.



“Are you ready, princess?” Cove asks gently as the opening beats of Ruelle’s *Carry You* crackle through his phone’s speaker. Malia asked that we played music, but left it to Cove to find the perfect soundtrack.

I have to give it to him, the song he’s chosen is perfect, but the haunting melody causes a lump in my throat that’s making an already emotional situation even more heightened.

It guts me.

I don’t want this.

The voice sings about it hurting, about it being hard to breathe, about losing the will to fight and needing help to find the light...*I feel this.*

When Malia nods stiffly in response, Cove closes the gap between them to squeeze her hand and pull her close. He drops a tender kiss on her forehead and not for the first time I wonder if we’re doing the right thing.

I swallow thickly. There’s no going back now. *Tell me it will be alright.*

“It’s now or never, right?” Malia asks with a brave but wobbly smile on

her face. “We’ve been on borrowed time for a while now...I’m ready.”

She’s lying. She’s not ready. How can anyone be *ready* to die?

I’m not ready for her to die.

But I can’t back down now. If I show even a flicker of weakness, of indecision, or woe betide *regret*, there’s no way the others will go along with this. And we’ve come too far to fail our mission. To fall at the last hurdle would be...unthinkable.

We must remain loyal to our queen. *We have to* complete this mission.

“You’re the bravest person I know,” Reef says reverently, stepping up to Malia and taking Cove’s place. He too kisses her on the forehead. It’s such an intimate, tender gesture. If there was ever any doubt about how they felt about Malia before now, those forehead kisses confirm it.

They’re in love with her.

I’ve only ever kissed one girl on the forehead, and the desire to do so with Malia right now is overwhelming. What does that say about me? Have I fallen as hard as the others, or is it all just a cleverly designed manipulation by the prophecy to ensure that we’re drawn to one another? Is any of this *real*?

Would I even want it to be? If I, if we, all truly loved Malia, could we go ahead with this plan?

No. I’ve already lost so much, sacrificed so much. The others too. If I thought for a second that this was real love, there’s no way I could do it.

“I’m not feeling very brave right now,” Malia replies, a single, lonely tear slipping down her cheek as the chorus begins to play. It’s heartbreaking. Her bottom lip trembles even as she tries to hide her fear with a watery, tight smile. I hate it.

There’s no hiding it though. Her fear scents the air, thick and heavy. And we’re to blame for it.

Fuck. This sucks. The guys are going to hate me forever. They’re never going to forgive me for this. *Will I ever forgive myself?*

“Do you need a minute?” My voice comes out gruffer than I intended, and she flinches. I don’t need to make eye contact with the guys to know they’re all glaring daggers at me right now. If Malia asks for a minute, I’ll give it to her. Hell, if she asked us not to do this, I’d obey her every wish.

The prophecy was clear; this is what’s right. So why does it feel so wrong? Like I’m about to drive a knife through my own heart.

“Breathe, Vance,” Malia says softly, coming over to take my hands in hers. Her skin is so soft, the way her thumbs make soothing circles on the backs of my hands feels like velvet, but it’s my name on her lips that flays me. She never calls me Vance. “You can do this. You’re not alone.”

“I should be reassuring you.” I stare into her beautiful eyes, which are wide but without fear. All I can see is her concern for me. I shake my head. What right do I have to need her comfort?

“I’m ready,” she replies, calm, steady, sure.

“This way then,” I say, guiding her over to the stone altar with my hand on the small of her back. The heat of her skin burns me and I long to pull her into my arms and race away from here with her.

I can’t do this.

I hold her hand as she climbs up onto the dais. *This is wrong.* The others are still glaring at me but whenever their gazes land on Malia, all I can see is their heartbreak. Being the bad guy sucks.

On the dais, Malia perches on the edge of the altar and studies us intently.

“What is it, Mai-Tai?” Cove asks gently.

“You...just...”

“What is it?” I prompt, as gently as I can. It still comes out a little rough and everyone glares at me like the asshole I am.

“It’s just...” She sighs before continuing. “All my life I never really knew love. I never saw it in real life, and I never believed that shit I saw in films and read about in books.”

I frown, wondering where she’s going with this.

“But then you guys came along. And you showed me what real love could look like. Th-the love you have for your queen, your people and your world...the sacrifices you’re willing to make...that’s the kind of love I want — would have wanted. If things were different.”

She thinks we’re making sacrifices? When she’s the one who—

I shake my head, but I don’t know what to say to that. The guys shuffle uncomfortably too. They can’t declare their love for Malia, not when they’re about to end her life, and it feels clichéd or patronising to say anything else. Instead, Reef just squeezes her hand and gives her a tight smile.

“I lo—” Cove begins but the words die on his lips.

Malia looks at him with understanding. “Don’t make this even harder.”

“In a different world, we’d have loved you like you deserve,” Bhodi

murmurs darkly, too low for Malia to hear.

I grimace. He's right of course. Malia would be very easy to love. If things were different. I hear the elder's voice in my head, and I'm transported back to that day in the council.

You are so bitter. Your soul threads are twisted and frayed. Tangled so badly we fear you might never find your way home. If you are to find The Star to save our queen and our people, you must first save yourself. Sacrifice everything. When the time comes, Omí Saidé, you will have to make a choice. And I fear that the weight of our world doesn't rest on The Star's shoulders, but on yours.

What does it mean? If they'd just *help*. Maybe this could be avoided.

"I'm ready. Are you?"

Malia cuts through my twisted self-loathing and second guessing. It's now or never, like she said.

Never! Choose never!

"No." Cove replies emphatically. "I...I don't want to do this."

Malia smiles at him, full of understanding and pity. Maybe she understands how hard this will be for us. After. That we will have to find a way to live with what we've done.

"It's okay. It's one small life to save thousands. I'm insignificant, a no-one in the grand scheme of things. You have to do this."

I don't know how she can say that. How she can think she's nothing when she's literally saving the world. Two worlds. Billions of people. She's a hero, a goddess, someone to be revered and remembered, worshipped and adored. She's the opposite of insignificant; she's everything.

"How do we do this?" she asks. Her voice is so clear, so strong. I've never seen anyone look so terrified and sound so brave at the same time. I just want to crush her into my embrace and protect her from this cruel fate.

"Lie back. Try to...get comfortable."

She laughs, a hysterical sort of bubble that escapes from her throat and then apologises.

"Don't apologise. There's no right or wrong way to do this. This situation is unique for all of us."

She nods at me and lies back on the altar. I hate the grooves around the edge that are designed to catch and save every drop of her life's blood. Can't waste a drop, not when it comes to protecting Aerwynna. There can be no

possibility of her surviving.

“Ready,” she sighs. *I’m not.* I have to close my eyes and draw every ounce of strength I have. I pray to gods I don’t believe in, I call on the elders to help me, I beg our lost queen to save me.

No help comes. No one answers my desperate call.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and nod to the others. Silently, as one, we withdraw our daggers and take our places at the four corners of the altar.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, taking Malia’s hand and raising it up above her head and tying the binds in the corner. Reef does the same, the other two take hold of her ankles. Malia’s breathing hitches.

I can’t do this.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Reef reassures her, leaning down to kiss her lips and stroke an errant lock from her forehead.

He pulls back and the other two move in to kiss her too. I know I should. I want to. But I can’t. What kind of monster would that make me, to steal one last sweet kiss before I take her life to appease a prophecy I don’t understand and might not believe in?

“Ready?” I ask, more to myself than anyone.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Will you...will you all...hold me?”

I glance down at Malia, her eyes filled with tears. Fuck.

“Of course. You won’t be alone. Not even for a second.”

“Will it hurt?”

“No,” I lie.

“Liar.”

“We’ll do our best to keep your mind off it. I promise.”

“Will it take long?”

“Once the magic kicks in, no. It will be very quick. I hope you won’t feel anything.”

“It’s okay. I want to feel it.”

“Why?”

“To know it’s real. To make it count.”

“It counts. Even if you weren’t conscious for it, it will always count. You’re everything.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank you. I’ll make sure everyone knows what you did—”

“I don’t need that. I just want you to remember me. The four of you.”

“We could never forget you, Malia. Ever. I’m—we’re so proud of you.”

“Good. I’m ready.”

She closes her eyes and I can’t help myself, I lean down and kiss her. *I love you.*

I know it’s real, because if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t hurt this much.

Her eyes open in amazement and when she sees it’s me, she deepens the kiss. I want her to wrap her arms around me, but she can’t. I long to tear her from the altar and run away with her, but I can’t.

“Thank you,” she whispers when I pull away. “I love you too.”

The music reaches its crescendo and it guts me. It may as well be me bleeding out on that altar.

I nod to the others, and our blades light up. I place the tip at her wrist, right at the point where her pulse beats. She’s breathing so hard I can see the vein pulsing, the magic of the portal already calling to her blood.

“Ready?” Terse nods. “Now.”

Faster than light, we make our cuts, Malia crying out in pain. My heart clenches. She gasps. Her eyes flutter open.

“Is that it?”

“Almost, Mai-Tai,” Cove tells her. He’s stroking her skin, his eyes glued to her face and not on the blood that’s dripping from the wound he just made on her ankle. I tear my gaze away from the crimson elixir that’s starting to trickle into the stone channel.

“It-it doesn’t feel so bad. I can’t feel anything really.”

Reef shudders next to me and I see the sweat glistening on his brow. He’s doing this. He’s taking away her pain by stealing her memories of this moment as soon as they form. She can’t feel pain because *he’s taking it*, even though it’s draining him to do something so complicated, so instant.

We wait. We watch and we wait as her blood drains, and I *feel* the words of the song in my soul.

When the first drop enters the holding chamber below the altar, we sense the shift. Malia gasps again and her wounds begin to flow freely. The magic of the portal has had a taste of her blood and is demanding more, tugging and pulling greedily now to speed up the process.

It's killing me to watch, but I keep my promise. She will not be alone. I won't let go of her hand. But I have to finish this. My free hand grips my dagger so tight my knuckles turn white.

It's almost time.

The portal activates in a rush of wind and whispers.

I raise the dagger and my hand trembles. I tighten my hold; on the weapon and my emotions.

A blinding light bursts forth from Malia's body and I stagger back, almost losing my grip on her hand. The cries of the others tell me they're as surprised as me.

I blink like crazy, trying to clear the starbursts from my eyes but it's futile. I can't see a thing. I can just about make out the silhouette of Malia's body between flashes of light and darkness, still upon the altar.

It takes a minute but eventually my vision returns to normal and I'm able to see that she's not moving and a thick, sticky, tar-like substance is flowing freely from her wounds. Her life's blood. Her magic. Her essence. Literally running down the drain.

The ultimate sacrifice.

It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Did she realise? Sure, she knew what being the star meant. But did she grasp the seriousness of the situation? That she was literally not just saving the world, our world, but hers too?

The worst thing is, only the four of us will know what she did. Will remember her name. We have to honour her offering, make sure our people at the very least know who she was and what she did.

I won't let her be forgotten.

"Is it done?" I've never heard such raw emotion uttered in three single words, posed as a question, before. More shocking is that it's Bhodi who uttered them.

"Almost. The blood has to stop flowing. We need every drop." I feel like the lowest form of life saying this, hate how cold and unfeeling my voice comes out when I'm feeling anything but. How barbaric that the prophecy would see us slaughter the woman we love, drain every drop of her blood to fortify the decaying gates to our world and to, somehow, aid us in finding our missing queen and save our entire race. How agonisingly slowly her essence drains.

Taking a deep breath, I bury my emotions. There will be time to grieve for Malia later. There will be time to grieve for myself too. For now, we don't have much time.

"We're almost there. Remember, when the blood stops, we only have a couple of minutes before the gate seals. We must go through. We have to go back. The mission depends on it."

"What about Malia?" Another distraught three words. This time as expected, as they're from Cove. He was always the emotional one, the kind one. The one most likely to feel hard and fall deep.

I shake my head. "We spoke about this. We can't risk taking her through when we don't know how her blood magic works. We can't jeopardise our people on the unknown. She has to stay here."

"Yeah, well, *we* talked about this too," Bhodi snarls. "And we've decided we *are* risking it. We're not leaving her behind. She deserves a burial, a proper sendoff. Acknowledgement of what she's done for us all."

He's not wrong. But I don't know what might happen if we move her body. I'm torn. Do what's right or do what's *right*? I sigh. "Fine. Get ready to..." I almost say *grab the body* but Jesus, even I can see how harsh that sounds. But time is of the essence here.

I raise my blade once more. One final cut and it's done.

You can do this. You have to finish it. At this point, it would be cruel not to.

I close my eyes and bring the dagger down over her heart.

"Don't worry. I've got her," Reef tells me, crouching down and sliding one arm under her neck, the other under her knees. They must have undone her bindings at some point. He hasn't moved her, still letting the final drops drain away, but he's ready to move the second I give the signal.

She already looks so pale. Her vibrant hair, duller. Light still streams from her like a celestial being, but that too is muted. The whole world seems to have turned to grayscale. Like an omen. A message from the heavens that we've somehow made a grave mistake.

"Get ready..." My attention is fixated on the slowing trickle of blood coming from her chest. Where I stabbed her in the heart. Where I may as well have stabbed myself.

The skies turn dark, and Malia's light is extinguished like a candle.

"What?!" Bhodi yells.

“Shikari! Move! Now!” Blind panic claws at my throat. *No! Not now!* We’ve come too far to succumb to the darkness at the last hurdle. “Reef, take Malia through the gate. Go!” I don’t stop to see if he’s following orders. He’s a soldier for a reason. Our best soldier. But he’s also still injured and recovering, so he’s safer out of here. There’s no way we can take on...I glance to the skies and stagger back, overwhelmed. The skies are *black* with an uncountable number of Shikari. We’re outnumbered, outweaponed and outmatched. Fuck.

It’s a suicide mission. But we have to hold them off to allow Reef to get through the gate with Malia. We can’t allow the Shikari to get hold of her body. Her soul still resides within it, and the gate isn’t sealed. We have to protect our people. But more than that, I won’t allow Malia’s body, her memory, her soul, to be defiled and decimated by these vermin.

“Don’t let them get her blood!” I shout to my remaining comrades as we move as one to withdraw our weapons, the ceremonial daggers discarded on the empty altar where she once lay. We can’t use weapons stained with her blood to kill Shikari. The unthinkable would happen.

The second my fists wrap around the handle of my blades, they illuminate, firing a blinding light out into the darkness like Moses parting the Red Sea. Ordinarily, the sight of these weapons alone would be enough to make the Shikari withdraw, but not recently. They’re too bold now. Too desperate. The lure of the star, of her blood, is too strong. Even now, over the stench of a hundred Shikari, I can smell Malia’s blood soaking into the hot stone altar.

It’s as intoxicating as she is.

Was.

Fuck. I need to focus.

I hear the portal opening and closing behind us and I can only pray that Reef made it through with Malia. One less thing to worry about, but now we have to protect her blood.

Somehow the dawn sky darkens even more, the storm clouds of Shikari thicken and they gear up ready to attack. My hands tighten on my weapons.

There’s no way we’ll survive this.

But in death I can reunite with Malia and tell her all the things I should have said when I had the chance.

The Shikari attack with a blood-curdling cry that sends shivers down my

spine, and together with Cove and Bhodi by my side, we fight valiantly.

Until I'm hit and stagger back onto the altar that's saturated with Malia's blood. My own life's essence joins hers and I feel a bond forging that will tie me to her for all eternity. The events of this night have forever changed the course of our destinies, and my brothers must steel themselves for the challenges that lie ahead. Without me.

My vision darkens and my weapons slip from my grip. I fall to my knees and welcome the darkness.

Death will almost be worth it, to hold and kiss her again.

Did you love being back in Malia's story?

Do you want to see how it all ends?

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Finally, if you enjoyed *Revered* please consider leaving a review – even just a few words or a simple 'it was good'. It makes all the difference to authors like me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crystal North is now a full time romance author, after finally leaving education for good. As well as writing, she's looking after her savage preschooler, her man-child husband, their needy fur baby and her many houseplants, pet rocks and shiny crystals. She likes to read dark, twisty, stabby, steamy books, and dream up wicked new cliffhangers to torture her readers with. And if she ever finds herself with free time, she spends it reading her never ending TBR pile.

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I can’t wait to meet you! My DMs are always open for your thoughts and reactions to my books, and if you loved them, please consider leaving a review or blasting about them on your social media (don’t forget to tag me!)

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