



OBLI VION

SOMETIMES LOVE ISN'T ENOUGH

L.K. REID

OBLIVION

SINS OF OPHELIA ASTER

BOOK THREE

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Also By L.K. Reid

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PLAYLIST

You all know how much I love music, and what a big part of my writing process it is. You can find an entire playlist if you click [here](#), and the full list of the songs I've been listening to while writing *Oblivion* is right below.

In The Dark – Solence

You and Me Now – The Broken View

Forgive Yourself – Renee Mooi, Todd Clouser

Burn – Nathan Wagner

Is It True? – Johanna Gudrun

Died Enough For You – Blind Channel

Alone Tonight – Digital Daggers

Petrichor – Cassyette

Running Away – Hollow Front

God Is She – In This Moment

Change (In The House of Flies) – Deftones

Winterblood – Emil Bulls

There's Fear In Letting Go – I Prevail

Breaking The Habit – The Broken View

Hurt You – Living in Fiction

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To all my demons.

Fuck you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The previous book in this series came out more than a year and a half ago, which is why I want to start this by saying thank you. Thank you for being patient, for waiting, for being kind enough to let me do things at my own pace and to come to terms with certain things. Thank you for your unwavering support. I truly hope you guys will see how much these characters grew over that time.

Ophelia is and always will be my first love, and I failed to see how much I actually liked her because I was too afraid everyone else would hate her. But you don't, and I can see that now.

Just like the previous books, this is a dark romance, and as such, the themes on these pages might not be everyone's cup of tea. There is violence, torture, mentions of child abuse, mentions of rape, cheating, drug and alcohol abuse. While reading this story and what these characters are going through, you might need a cup of tea, a glass of wine or something even stronger, because they definitely gave me hell while writing them.

Please note that this book ends on a cliffhanger, but the next one is coming out in March, so don't fret—the wait won't be long.

If you like this book and you want to tell your friends about it either through Bookstagram, TikTok or by simply leaving a review on Amazon, I will forever be grateful.

Thank you!

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“Bitter bravery, my silly little heart. You’re running away from him, but you’re tearing your soul apart.”

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PROLOGUE

Storm

4 Years Old

IT WAS DARK.

It was so, so dark, and I was hungry. But Mommy said I had to be a good boy to eat. I had to be good, otherwise she wouldn't let me out.

I was bad—very, very bad.

I ate the bread from the counter, and Daddy got mad. He was so mad, and I started crying.

He doesn't like it when I cry.

Mommy doesn't like it when I cry either, but I was hungry and they weren't here. The bread wasn't tasty, nope, but my tummy hurt so much and Mommy always gave me bread when I was a good boy.

I promise, I promise, Mommy, I won't take it again.

“Mommy,” I cried out, trying to open the door. She told me to stay in the wardrobe, and she would let me out later. But I was scared.

I am so scared.

“Daddy,” I tried to yell out again, but my voice only echoed around me. “Please let me out. I'll be a good boy. I

promise I won't eat again without you. I'm scared... Mommy."

They weren't coming.

They weren't coming, and it was so cold. My blankie wasn't with me and Mommy said I didn't deserve it.

And my hand hurt. Daddy squeezed it too hard, but he loved me. Mommy told me he loved me. He just didn't know his strength.

But I had to stop crying. If they came back and saw me crying, they would keep me here. And I didn't wanna be here anymore.

Maybe if I sat down and kept quiet, they would come back. They must. They're probably just taking their medicine now, but they would come for me.

Mommy told me it was a very special time when they took their medicine, and I had to keep quiet. If I didn't, they became very angry, and I didn't like it when they got angry.

It hurts when they get angry. Daddy tells me he hates me.

He told me all the time, but Mommy said he loved me.

Maybe if I was a good boy, they would also buy me that toy I saw on the big box. He had a cape, and he was a superhero. He saved people.

I wanted to be a superhero when I grew up. I wanted to be just like him, flying around with my cape. I used my blankie as my cape now.

Mommy told me I couldn't get it because I was a bad boy, and bad boys couldn't get gifts. But I was trying to be good.

Look, Mommy, I'm sitting. I'm a good boy.

I pulled my knees up, wincing as my hand connected with the ouchie there. I fell when Daddy pushed me, but it wasn't his fault. He just needed to take his medicine, and I was in the way. He told me I was always in his way, but I didn't want to be. Blankie wasn't with me, and I needed my blankie.

He got angry. He didn't want to push me, he told me so himself. He cleaned the red goo that came out of my knee, and I promised I'd stop crying. And I did.

I saw it on the big box one day. The lady bit her lip and she stopped crying, and I did too. Daddy smiled when I stopped crying, and my tummy danced as well. I smiled too.

But they got angry yesterday because I was bad again, and Mommy hit me. My face hurt, but I knew she wouldn't have done it if I'd behaved.

I think it was yesterday.

My wardrobe wasn't getting any light from the room now, so I think it was yesterday. I learned to count days, because Mommy told me to make sure she wakes up when the light goes out.

She told me light means day and dark means night. And when the dark goes away, that means it's a new day. She told me I was so smart, and she gave me a cookie. It was melty, and so tasty, and I was so happy.

Maybe she will give me a cookie again.

I crawled to the other side of the closet, where I pulled a robe from above. I was cold, and without a blankie, my hands started shaking. Maybe Mommy and Daddy wouldn't notice it.

My nose scrunched as I reached it, but it smelled like Daddy, and Daddy had those sticks he likes to light up. It smells like that, I think.

It didn't matter. I would just sleep here until they come back for me. I knew they would. They just played like this.

I pulled the material around me when something fell out of it. I couldn't see it properly, but lifting it, I could see it looked like Mommy's medicine. Oh no, she would be so angry if I touched her medicine. It looked sharp, pointy. I think I saw the doctor using it on the big box.

Mommy told me it was for her ouchie, and she felt better with it. That was why I shouldn't touch it. I could destroy it, and she would be so mad.

I didn't want Mommy to be mad.

It was long, almost bigger than my hand, but I dropped it down. Maybe Mommy wouldn't notice it. Or maybe I should put it back inside the robe.

I pulled it up, but the sharp part stuck in my hand, and it hurt. I tried shaking it off and it fell off. I got another ouchie, and Mommy was gonna be very angry that I touched her medicine.

I shouldn't have.

But as I pushed myself closer to where her medicine fell, the door swung open, the light illuminating my wardrobe. I closed my eyes because the light hurt.

It wasn't day yet. I counted. It was dark earlier. I didn't see any light coming through that little hole in the door.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

It was a man. A very big man, and he was smiling. It wasn't my daddy, and I didn't know him. Sometimes Daddy's friends were staying at our house, but I hadn't seen this man before.

I could see his face now, my eyes becoming better with the light. He had a scar above his eye. He had an ouchie as well.

"What happened there, boy?" He looked at my hand from where the red goo started dropping on the floor—the same color as when I cut my knee, when Daddy pushed me. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." My lower lip wobbled, but I bit on it, trying not to cry. "Please don't tell Mommy. She will be angry because I touched her medicine."

"You touched her medicine?" He looked at the floor, his eyes seeing Mommy's medicine.

"I'm gonna be a good boy. The bestest boy, but please don't tell Mommy."

Something passed over his face, and he looked at me again. He smiled then and extended his arms to me. Mommy

sometimes lifted me up, but she said I was too heavy now and she didn't want to have to carry a little shit around. I was a little shit. She told me that.

I didn't know what that meant, but I knew what heavy was. I didn't want this man to be angry at me because I was heavy.

"No." I shook my head. "Mommy said I'm a little shit, and she can't carry me around. I'm too heavy."

"It's okay, son." He smiled again. "I'm strong. See." He lifted his arm, showing big muscles. Maybe he was stronger than Mommy. "Come on now. Come here."

I stood up, taking one, two, three steps to him. His hands came around my middle, and as they connected with my stomach, I winced because I forgot my ouchie there. But I didn't cry. Mommy said I could never cry when other people touched me, even if I had an ouchie.

That one lady was here one day, and she saw my ouchie. Mommy said if I cried again, they would take me away from her. I didn't want them to take me away from Mommy and Daddy.

The man lifted me up, stepping back into the room.

"See," he told me. "I can lift you, and you're not that heavy. I have a son almost your age, and he is heavier than you."

"Really?" I asked him because I couldn't believe somebody could be heavier than me. "But Mommy told me I'm a heavy bur.. bud... bor—"

"Burden. She told you you're a heavy burden."

I nodded against his neck when he cupped the back of my head, stroking slowly. It felt nice, and suddenly I felt sleepy.

"Would you like to meet my son? Maybe you can play with him."

"But Mommy—"

"Your mommy told me it's okay. She told me I can take you with me if you want to come."

Mommy said it was okay? See, she wanted me to have friends. I knew she loved me, but she needed her medicine.

“If Mommy said so.” I smiled at him.

“She sure did.” He started walking toward the door, leaving the room. I didn’t see Mommy or Daddy, but it didn’t matter. I would have a new friend, and maybe Mommy would buy me that toy if I was a good friend.

“What’s your name, boy?”

Mommy didn’t tell him? Oh well, maybe she was excited because I was going to have a friend.

“Storm. But Mommy calls me Stormy sometimes.”

“Storm,” he said, looking at me. “Well, Storm. My name is Nikolai, and I think you will love what I have prepared for you.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. There will be lots of kids, lots of new friends, but first you will come with me to meet my son, Theo. My wife can’t wait to meet you.”

I was going to have friends. Lots and lots of them.

I can’t wait.

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OPHELIA

Present

SHALLOW SOULS AND BROKEN HEARTS.

I should've tattooed it over my ribs as a constant reminder of everything I was surrounded with. Redeemers, sinners, liars, heroes, and villains, and I always belonged in the last category. Maybe it was by choice, or maybe by the already written destiny I had to live with; my burden to carry, my demons to entertain.

And for so long, I'd danced with them as if they were my friends. My only companions when the dull pain in my heart turned into a constant thrumming. I always turned to the shadows when things became too much to bear. When real life became a constant reminder of every tragedy I'd caused, my pretty devil whispered sweet nothings into my ear, pulling me back into the oblivion where I didn't have to feel.

There was no sadness.

No happiness.

No love.

No fear.

No grief.

Just the pure nothingness where I could be who I was always supposed to be—the killer. Baba Yaga, the queen of the

night, of pain and fear... The one they all whispered about, but no one ever dared to say my name out loud.

And I longed to be seen, to feel the soft touch on my skin, even if it lasted only for a few seconds. At least I would've remembered what it felt like.

I had it. I had it all, and I'd lost it, because oblivion was much sweeter than *his* promises of tomorrow.

I lied to myself, to him, to all of them, when I said everything was going to be okay, because it wasn't. Nothing would ever be okay, but for a few moments when everything seemed perfect, I liked to pretend. And this... This was my last sacrifice for the one I loved, even if he hated me forever. My mind longed for happiness, but my soul was far too tainted to surrender itself to the feelings that didn't invoke misery every step of the way.

The scars on my back were nothing compared to the ones I carried deep inside myself, where all my fears and all my love laid hidden beneath the thick layers of broken pieces that I couldn't bear to even touch.

And I could've had a beautiful life. Maybe even a peaceful one, but the restless soul would always remain inside of me. And no matter how much my mind and my heart fought against each other, it was that third part of me, the core of who I was, that damned me every single time.

And this time, I broke my own fucking heart.

There was no one else to blame for the knife I pushed through my chest when I took off from the clubhouse, running away from the one good thing that had happened to me. I'd allowed my own fears to get the best of me, and instead of going forward, I went backward, ruining everything.

One step forward, ten backward—same old story, same old me.

Some people shed their old skin like snakes, changing every year, working on themselves, improving who they were. Me? I apparently didn't know how to change.

I wished that there was a manual on how to fix everything that was wrong with me; everything that didn't only hurt me, but the people around me. I wished I could go back in time and run as far as I could, instead of going into that basement when I was seventeen years old.

I wished I wasn't born with a dark mark on my heart, the one that every member of my family had. Maybe then I would've been a better person; less bitter, less vengeful, and more forgiving.

My eyes flickered down to the destroyed snake tattoo on my forearm and I traced the scars with the forefinger of my right hand, wincing, even though the pain wasn't there.

But the memories still were.

Like a kaleidoscope of pictures, they played in front of my eyes, reminding me of every fucked-up thing I'd done. Every bloody trail I'd left behind, every broken heart and every destroyed life, they all danced in front of my eyes, laughing at the regrets swirling in my mind.

And the most fucked-up shit I ever did—I broke a man who didn't deserve to be broken.

I broke the only person that ever gave a fuck about me. Maybe I wasn't the one holding that knife, but I was the one that lured Nikolai. I was the one he wanted and I let him hurt Storm.

But tonight was not the time to wallow in self-pity.

Not even when my eyes traveled from the ancient-looking grandfather clock that probably stopped working ages ago, all the way to the large, framed picture just above the fireplace, where the face of the man I despised with all my might, stood smiling, frozen in time.

He looked like a proud father, with his hands around the much smaller man I only saw in pictures Cillian sent me. Nikolai Aster stood there, hugging a guy that was my age, smiling at the camera as if he wasn't the boogeyman we all feared over the years.

But even a boogeyman wasn't immortal, and if I could've, I would've dragged him out of hell and back, just to hear him scream one more time. Just to see the fear in his eyes as the tip of my knife pressed to his skin, when he realized that I was no longer the little girl he could manipulate.

I used to be nothing more than a puppet for his sick, fucking games, and I was naïve enough to think that anything I ever did would be enough for him.

All I needed was love; just a dash of love, a dash of patience and maybe a little bit of softness, but he didn't know how to give that. At least not to me and not to my siblings.

But he knew how to shower Vincent Brown with everything he ever failed to give us.

I stood up and walked toward the picture, my body already knowing what I needed. I needed to see. I needed to make sure before I did what I was about to do.

But when my eyes zeroed in on Vincent's, I could see that there was no resemblance, not even a little bit. He wasn't Nikolai's son, or my brother, but he was something.

He was someone my father loved more than he loved me. I could see it in the way his hand squeezed Vincent's shoulder. I could see it in the proud, honest smile Nikolai wore—he was beaming, and I wanted to know why.

What was it that this scrawny little kid with glasses had that I didn't?

And what was it that made this kid hate me enough to lead my father back to me, when all I wanted was to be left alone?

My finger traced over the glass protecting the picture, and before I could stop myself, my hand wrapped into a fist, and with all my might, I smashed against the glass, letting it fall down over the fireplace, and all the way to the floor.

Wet, hot blood ran down my arm from the cuts on the side of my hand, but the pain never registered. I pulled out the knife I kept strapped to my boot and pressed the tip into the throat of the man I used to call father.

But he never deserved that title.

He never deserved anything from me, yet I gave and gave and gave until there was nothing else to give. Underneath all my hatred toward him, there used to be a seventeen-year-old Ophelia, still hoping that her father wasn't the monster she saw that night.

And as I ran the blade along the length of his body, cutting through the picture, that little Ophelia ceased to exist.

There were parts of me I wished never survived the darkness they threw me into. Parts that were far too weak to do what was right and what needed to be done, but not anymore.

These people—Vincent, the Outfit, and The Syndicate—had no idea what was coming for them.

The furies from hell were nothing compared to what I have prepared for them, and standing here, looking at the shattered glass and cut picture, the new determination set inside of me.

I turned around and walked through the living room and then down the dark hallway, where picture after picture of Nikolai and Vincent hung on the walls, and I marched straight into the kitchen.

Dark cabinets, a pristine floor... I couldn't wait to see Vincent's blood decorating this place. I couldn't wait to see his lifeless eyes staring back at me, because we both knew I was coming for him. The two bodyguards he always had with him were proof that he was afraid. And he had every reason to be. All the data Cillian managed to get from Vincent's computer, all those files with my name on them—Saudi Arabia, China, Russia, United States, Germany, France—every single mission I did. Photos of people I'd killed. People I'd loved and people I'd lost.

But two photos pissed me off the most—Storm and Maya.

They never should've messed with the people I loved, because even when those people, *my people*, hated me, when they wanted nothing to do with me, I would still burn the world for them and laugh as I watched it wither into nothingness.

And Vincent Brown deserved only nothingness.

I rounded the tall counter placed in the middle, and I had no doubt that the little weasel never even stepped inside this kitchen to cook. People like him had someone to do it for them, but it wasn't until I saw a white plate right next to the microwave that I started laughing.

Cookies.

Dozens of cookies, and the melted chocolate on them sent a zing of happiness through my veins.

Might as well eat while I wait for him to come home.

MY TONGUE DARTED OUT, LICKING OFF THE CHOCOLATE FROM my thumb as bright lights illuminated the living room from the outside, and the unmistakable sound of a car door slamming echoed through the room.

It was time.

I placed the plate down on the floor, with half of the cookies missing, and crossed my legs, waiting for him to enter. Flexing my fingers, I could see the door unlocking, and I wondered how long it would take him to realize that there was somebody else in the house with him.

His voice filled the empty space, bouncing off the walls as he babbled incessantly about the new program he was developing, and a crooked smile pulled at my face. I knew that after tonight, he wouldn't be programming anything.

“Alright,” he said, his footsteps echoing off the marble floors. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

My heart thundered in my chest, pure excitement coursing through my veins, and as soon as his silhouette appeared at the entrance to the living room, every muscle in my body pulled taut, ready for impact.

The bright lights almost blinded me, but I blinked through the sharp light, looking straight at him.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I started. “But I ate half of your cookies.”

“What the fuck?” he screamed and jumped backward, holding onto the wall as if that would help him tonight.

Unless he had a gun somewhere on his body, there was nothing helping him.

His bodyguards were held up.

His security system was down.

And I was ready.

“Hi, Vince.” I smiled and stood up, crossing the room toward the now destroyed picture. I could see the traces of my blood on the shattered glass and on the floor. I could feel his eyes on my back. “You have a really nice house.” I looked at him over my shoulder. “Sorry for the mess, but you know how it is. Sometimes you just need to smash some things.”

“What are you doing here?” He took another step backward, inching closer toward the security panel on the opposite wall. If only he knew.

“Do you know who I am?” I looked at him and frowned at what I was seeing.

His small frame barely filled the white shirt he wore, and the suit pants he had on were most definitely not tailored to his size. The black-framed glasses on his face seemed to be too big for him, and his entire appearance screamed of a person that didn’t like to be seen.

Maybe he liked to be heard, but never seen.

“Death,” he bit out and started pressing the emergency button on the panel, frowning when it did absolutely nothing.

But really? Death?

After all these years, I would’ve thought that they would become at least a wee bit innovative with all these nicknames they were gracing me with.

Baba Yaga.

Psychopath.

Death.

I mean, I didn't ask for a lot, but come on. It would've been nice to hear something new, especially from him, considering the height of his IQ and all these things he allegedly accomplished by himself.

"I mean, death is probably what's coming for you tonight." I grinned and stepped closer, twirling the knife in my left hand. "But that isn't my name."

"Stay away from me!" he yelled out, plastering his body to the wall.

Instead of hugging him, Nikolai should've taught him how to defend himself. Maybe then he wouldn't have been in this situation where it was quite obvious who was the predator and who was the prey.

And I didn't come here to play games.

"Stay away from me," I mocked, laughing at his terrified expression. It was easy for him, hiding behind his computer screens, hired bodyguards, and Nikolai Aster, thinking he was untouchable.

But no one was untouchable. That was one thing my dear daddy taught me. Everyone had a weakness, and it was always just a matter of time before that weakness would be found. Once it was, even a thousand guards wouldn't be able to save him from the fury living inside my bones.

"What do you want from me?" he asked. His eyes were darting all over the place, looking for an exit, for something to hold on to. He should've realized by now that no one was going to come to save him.

He should've known better than to poke the bear. Somebody should have told him what would happen when the said bear found out what he did.

"I came to play poker with you." I grinned as I knelt to pick up a shard of broken glass. Then I looked at him, playing

with the broken piece, moving it from one hand to the other. “Why do you think, you fucking idiot?”

The audible gasp that came from him fed the demon inside of me that wanted his blood. I’ve spent months pretending to be somebody else. I have spent months pushing this side of me aside, trying to be a better person. Trying to bury the anger that was the one constant companion over the last few years.

But my past wouldn’t let me. The people I wanted to forget couldn’t forget me. If this was the version of me they wanted, so be it.

I would be as cruel as they made me to be.

“Are you going to kill me?” His voice trembled as he asked, pressing his back harder against the wall as if he could somehow disappear into it.

“No, darling,” I answered as I stood up, then started walking toward him. “I am going to play with you, and you are going to tell me everything I want to know.”

“I can’t!” he bellowed, terror lacing his every word. “They’re going to kill me if I open my mouth.”

“Well,” I chuckled and stopped right in front of him, “what do you think I will do, Vince?” I pressed the pointed end of the glass against my thumb, letting it break my skin. I watched as the crimson dripped down my thumb. “Did you know that a human body can lose up to forty percent of its blood before succumbing to oblivion?”

“N-No,” he whimpered, shaking his head.

“Oh, Vince,” I murmured, approaching him slowly. Lifting my blood-stained thumb, I pressed it against his cheek. “You and I are going to have so much fun.”

“P-Please,” he begged. “I don’t know anything.”

My hand shot to his throat, my fingers wrapping around, pressing against the pulse point on his neck. I pressed my forehead to his and closed my eyes. “Don’t lie to me, darling. I hate it when people lie.”

“I-I’m not...” he trailed off, choking in my hold. “Ly-ing.”

“Vince, Vince, Vince.” I laughed, hitting the wall with the back of his head. “I am not a patient person, but for you,” I opened my eyes, “I will be a fucking saint. I would like to cut your throat open right here, right now, but I won’t do that.”

“D-Don’t—”

“You thought my father was a vicious person?” I chuckled. “He was an angel compared to me. The things I have planned for you... You are going to love it.”

“They’re going to find you.” He smiled weakly. “They’ll make you pay for what you did.”

“Let them. But you won’t be here long enough to see that happen.”

I pressed my lips against his bloodied cheek and pulled out my knife from the strap around my leg. “I will bury you alive,” I whispered before hitting the back of his neck with the handle of my knife.

He tumbled down to the floor like a sack of potatoes, right at my feet.

Right where he belonged.

I kneeled next to him, caressing his arm with the tip of my blade and pulled out the phone from my back pocket. I dialed the last number I’d called just before coming to the house.

“It’s done,” I said as Cillian picked up, not even waiting for him to speak first.

“I’ll be there in five minutes,” was all he said before he hung up.

The games were just about the start, and The Syndicate, the Outfit, and the Albanians had no idea what was coming for them. Because I wasn’t going to pretend anymore. I wasn’t going to sit tightly while they tried to ruin my life.

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OPHELIA

THE BLACK RANGE ROVER pulled up in front of the house not even ten minutes after my call. Turning off the engine, the lights shut down and a few seconds after the door on the driver's side as well as the passenger side opened, revealing two figures when I only wanted to see one.

The first one was my friend, my confidant, the person I could call in the middle of the night to help me bury a body, and I knew he would always come. The second one... I tried to kill the second one, but the bastard kept coming back. I tried to erase him from my life, but he obviously didn't take a hint.

I called Cillian, but Kieran... Kieran wasn't supposed to be here.

I stood up from the porch, scowling at Cillian, who kept grimacing as he approached me.

"Please don't start," he said before I blasted.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" I asked, pointing at Kieran, who was standing next to the car with his hands in his front pockets. "I called you, not him."

"I know, but he was with me."

"Kill—"

"I know, I know, but cut him some slack. He's been worried about you."

"He's been worried about me?" I scoffed. "Why?"

“Because you’re acting like a lunatic!” Kieran answered instead, his voice grating on my nerves. “Again. You’re on a path of self-destruction, just like...” he trailed off.

“Just like before, you mean?” I thundered and came down the stairs to where Cillian stood. “Newsflash, Kieran, I am not yours to worry about.”

“Goddammit, Birdy!” he yelled out and closed the distance between us in three strides. “You don’t really get it, do you?”

“No. Why don’t you enlighten me, Kieran?”

He wrapped his hand around my upper arm, pulling me closer to him. “I will always worry about you,” he breathed out. “I don’t give a shit whose bed you’re warming right now, but here,” he pressed his other hand against his heart, “you still belong to me.”

“Kieran,” Cillian started in a warning voice. “We talked about this.”

“Let go of me, Kieran,” I gritted out.

“Not until you start behaving like a normal person.”

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes. “Kieran.” I looked up at him. “I have a knife I’m not afraid to use.”

“You already used it on me, but if you really wanted to kill me, you would’ve done it already.”

“Kieran!” Cillian yelled out. “That’s enough.”

He pulled him away from me, and I finally felt I could breathe.

I made a terrible mistake, allowing him to think that he had a place in my life now. After everything we’d been through, all the heartache, hate, pain and destruction we caused to each other, it would’ve been the humane thing to let him down slowly. To tell him that what once was would never be again.

But no matter how many times I told him that there was no us, that there never would be, he pushed harder, trying to prove... something. But I wasn’t sure if he was trying to prove it to me or to himself. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to hold on

to the past because the future terrified him, or if he truly believed that there could ever be anything else between the two of us.

“No, Cillian.” He thrashed against Kill’s hold. “She needs me. She needs us.”

God, every new word sounded more and more pathetic, and I couldn’t take this anymore.

More than a month ago, after Nikolai attacked the clubhouse, injured Storm, and shattered everything I had, Kieran had showed up at the hospital, unannounced, pretending to be a white knight, trying to push through the wall of guards stationed in front of Storm’s room. He almost got himself killed.

Kieran almost got Atlas killed while he was trying to remove him from a livid Indigo. Kieran somehow got it in his head that I was his responsibility. That the night we all spent together meant more than it actually did.

I hated unnecessary scenes. I hated it when people couldn’t accept the facts.

“Kieran,” I murmured, ready to get this over with. “Let me get one thing straight and I don’t want us to ever again go back to this topic.”

“Ophelia, come—”

“Shhhh.” I lifted my forefinger and pressed it against his lips, shutting him up immediately. “I am talking, and I would truly appreciate it if you didn’t try to interrupt me.”

Both of them had their eyes plastered on me, waiting for what I was about to say. Cillian seemed calm, collected, but I knew that there was a tempest hiding behind the facade he was putting on. Kieran, on the other hand, looked like a rabid animal, shaking as Cillian held him in place. They might have been twins, sharing almost everything, but their personalities were worlds apart. Where Kieran would always do things before thinking about the consequences or asking for permission, because he thought it was his God given right to do whatever the fuck he wanted, Cillian always thought things

through. He was the planner. The one with the solutions. The quiet one, who used his words like knives, cutting through people when they least expected it.

Cillian didn't need brute force to make people understand or do things he wanted them to do, which was why he could also understand things from my perspective. Kieran couldn't.

“What happened between the three of us happened only because I was proving a point. To myself, to Storm, to anyone that was willing to listen. There was no love in what I did, and I thought I made myself clear that day. But in case you need another reminder, Kieran... I am not in love with you.” I accentuated every word. “I used to be, a long time ago. I used to worship the ground you walked on, but that was then, and that Ophelia doesn't exist anymore.”

I took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. “I will always care about you, that's true. But love has nothing to do with it. I killed the last piece of you that lived inside of me when my knife tore through your skin, Kieran. I don't need you behaving like a lovesick puppy whenever you see me, when there's so much more at stake.”

“You don't mean that,” he whispered.

“But I do. I mean every single word, and it's time for you to fucking let me go. I am not a chess piece on this fucked-up board of redemption you're trying to play. I am not the one you need to apologize to—Maya is.”

He winced at the mention of her name.

“I don't have time for lost boys and redemptions. Both of you know this very well. So, you can either fucking help me get through this or you can leave. It's up to you.”

“We're not leaving,” Cillian said. “I told you already that I am in this with you.”

“Then fucking control him!” I blasted. “These people are not playing around. If we're not careful, one of us is going to pay with their life, and I don't want any of us to fall into their clutches.”

The sound of the waves crashing against the shore traveled to us, and I knew it was just a matter of time before one of the neighbors noticed us standing here.

“We need to get out of here,” I said, looking around us. “His guards will soon realize that things aren’t adding up, and whatever was in that syringe I emptied inside of Vincent won’t last forever. Now, are you in or are you out?” I looked at Kieran.

Seconds passed by as he stared at me, but it felt like an eternity before he spoke again. “I’m in.”

“Good.” I nodded. “Now help me carry him to the trunk. Kill.” I looked at Cillian. “I need you to take Vincent to the cabin. I’ll meet you there tomorrow or the day after at the latest.”

“Where are you going?” Kieran asked when I turned toward the house.

“None of your fucking business, K.”

THE FAMILIARITY OF SANTA MONICA HIT ME AS SOON AS I crossed the border into the city driving toward the hospital, feeling as if it had been years since I last stepped in here, when in reality, it was only three days.

Sons of Hades needed a break from me, and I needed a break from the constant anxiety that was crippling me every time I sat next to Storm’s bed, begging some invisible force to wake him up. But the stubborn bastard kept his eyes closed even after the doctor removed him from life support, deciding that it was time for him to breathe on his own.

His vitals were good, his body was healing, but his mind was far out of our reach. I wanted to blame the doctors for putting him in an induced coma to help his body heal, but it’s been a month and a half since they did that. I just wanted him to wake up.

It didn't even matter anymore that he would probably want nothing to do with me, or that these were the last moments I would ever have with him. If I knew that he was alright, I could disappear from his life.

I would because there was no other way.

Kieran thought that this would be the perfect opportunity for me to run back into his arms, as if he didn't know that my heart didn't belong to me anymore.

It was there, right in this hospital, standing in front of me, with the person that wanted to set me free. And I fucked it up—as usual.

I'd spent half of my life, blaming other people for the mess of my own creation. It was much easier putting blame on others because then you didn't have to look in the mirror to see the real monster standing in front of you.

I was taught very well by Nikolai and his goons. The master of manipulation taught me everything he knew, but he never taught me how to stop loving when it was useless hoping for the other person to love you.

I had no idea how my mother stayed with him all these years. I had no idea what it was that Storm saw in me, when it was clear to everyone that could see us that I wasn't worthy of his time or his kindness. I was extremely good at running, at destroying the lives of other people, and they all had every right to hate me.

I wasn't going to apologize for who I was. Not to them.

Only one person deserved to hear my apologies, and he lay still on the sixth floor of UCLA Santa Monica, unmoving, unconscious, and it was all because of me.

Deep inside, I always knew that there was a connection between us, a wicked hand of fate, but I never imagined that my father was the one who destroyed Storm's innocence. And I regretted pulling him back into that world of darkness.

It was no wonder he didn't want to open his eyes. There was nothing worthy in this world.

But here, he has you.

He didn't want me, not anymore. Not after what I did and what I said. I always did the same thing to those I loved—I pushed and pushed and pushed until they stopped coming back. The devastation in his eyes as I uttered those disgusting words just before we were brought in front of my father would haunt me forever.

I often wished that there was a machine that could help me turn back time, if only to fix the mess I'd made. Or at least this one. If I knew what would have happened, I never would have let him come inside the clubhouse with me. I would have told him to stay far, far away, until I'd dealt with Nikolai.

Those were all silly, little dreams of a woman who wanted to change things that were unchangeable, and I needed to face the results of my actions.

Unmounting the bike in the parking lot in front of the hospital, I took off my helmet and brushed through my hair with my fingers. The reflection in the mirror on the bike showed how tired I was. The dark circles around my eyes were indication enough of how far I'd pushed myself this time.

People usually went to Malibu to relax and chill. I went to kidnap Vincent Brown.

Three days with little to no sleep turned me into a cranky bitch, and I just hoped that it wasn't Indigo's turn tonight to stay in the hospital. They all watched over Storm like hawks. If it wasn't for me threatening Indigo and Creed with my knife on that first day when we brought him into hospital, I would've been blacklisted as well.

I understood that they wanted to protect him, even from me—*especially from me*—but at this point, I didn't give a fuck what any of them wanted. They tried to kick me out, threatening me with violence, while the pain of almost losing him still shone in their eyes. But I wasn't budging. I wasn't leaving before I knew that he was alright. That I didn't destroy his life.

I was torn between the need to stay next to Storm and care for him and yelling at him even though he couldn't hear me. My anger was still there, still brewing in the pit of my stomach every time I saw the faces of the members of Sons of Hades. Forgiveness came hard to me, and the environment I grew up in wasn't filled with forgiving people. No, you paid with your life, for the mistakes you made.

You screamed into the night, begging for death if they even thought that you could betray them. And Sons of Hades—they betrayed my trust. They kept their secrets close to their hearts, never really letting me in.

But I had to admit that there were no saints in this game, and each of us had something we were guilty of. We all fucked up, one way or another. If I wanted to move on with my life, I had to stop holding on to the anger over stupid little things that didn't even matter anymore.

Hospitals and nightclubs were the only two places that were busy this late at night. When I looked down at the watch on my arm, one in the morning shone on the fancy gadget, telling me I was way beyond late. Atlas was going to give me that worried look of his, but he knew that even he couldn't stop me from doing this.

For me.

For Storm.

For all those people that The Syndicate fucked over.

The nurse manning the reception just looked at me as I passed, not trying to stop me this time. The last time I came back this late, they didn't want to let me in, but I'd managed. My boots squealed against the marble floor, and I paid no attention to the people passing next to me. I had only one goal, and that was to get to the sixth floor without anyone trying to talk to me.

I was still full of rage after that encounter with Vincent and Kieran, and I had to stomp it down before getting to his room. With my luck, Indigo would no doubt be in front, and I was too tired to deal with him tonight.

The volatile relationship between the two of us would always stay that way, especially after he tried to attack me a month ago. Which in the end, only ended badly for him—Atlas wouldn't even talk to Indigo anymore. I would be lying if I said that it didn't make a small part of me happy seeing Indigo distressed over such a thing.

“Look who's back,” a familiar voice piped up behind me just as I was about to step into the elevator.

God-fucking-dammit.

“Indigo,” I groaned, turning toward him with one leg inside the elevator. “What a pleasure.”

“I would say the feeling is mutual, but I don't have time for small talk tonight.” He looked raged, weary, but the two coffee cups he held in his hands made my mouth water, and I almost forgot how annoyed I was at him. “After you,” he said, coming closer to me and pushing me into the elevator.

“Is that for me?” I asked, stepping fully inside. “Because I must say, if you have coffee for me, then I might even be willing to listen to whatever you have to say.”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “It actually is. It's a, well, a temporary truce, for all our sakes.”

“A truce?” I laughed. “I thought you didn't know the meaning of that word,” I murmured, taking one of the cups from him.

Indigo pressed the digit for the sixth floor, on the panel inside the elevator, and as we started ascending, he turned toward me with a look that I didn't like all too much.

“What's going on?” I asked, sipping my coffee. “It must be something serious if you're willing to talk to me.”

“Atlas told me you'd be heading back tonight, and I realized it was about time for the two of us to have this talk.”

“Oh, really?” I scoffed. “And how did you come to this conclusion? Was it between trying to kill me for something I didn't do or because Atlas won't talk to you anymore?”

“I fucked up, okay?” He grunted. “But you have to understand—things weren’t really going well for you, and it seemed as if you sent Nikolai to us, wanting to kill Storm. He’s my friend, my brother,” he mumbled. “Seeing him in that state, unmoving, with you screaming over him, it set me off. It made me realize how short life really is, and I don’t know, I just snapped. I snapped at you, and I’m sorry.”

“Wow.” I was officially shocked. “Did that just come out of your mouth?”

“You’re going to make this difficult, aren’t you?”

“No, no.” I smiled. “Keep going. I like hearing you apologizing to me. Although, it really isn’t necessary.”

“It isn’t?” He frowned. “I thought you—”

“Hated you? Indigo, I’m the type of person that hates herself until twelve in the afternoon, and after twelve, I hate everyone else. So, I don’t really hate you. I merely dislike you, and you get on my nerves. But you don’t deserve my hate when, if I were in the same position, I would’ve done the same.”

“You would?”

He was so fucking confused by my reaction, and I must say, it was almost cute.

“Is this why you wanted to talk to me? Because I must say, it could’ve waited until tomorrow.”

“Unfortunately, this isn’t the reason. It was more of a prelude to the real shitshow that’s happening.”

I looked up at the numbers slowly changing on the screen above the panel of buttons, and something told me that whatever was about to come out of his mouth, wouldn’t be very good.

“Keep talking, Indy. We don’t have all night.”

“It’s The Syndicate,” he whispered, leaning toward me. “We found out who they were working with, and you know, the Red Manor.”

“Who?”

“Have you ever heard of Judah Blackwood?”

“Heard?” I laughed bitterly. “Indy, that guy should’ve been killed a long time ago. I’ve met him and I would like to say it was pleasant, but it wasn’t.”

“Well, I agree with you, but here’s the thing. There’s this guy Lars who contacted us, and he has information on Judah and The Syndicate. There’s this kid, Ash, and I’m going to have to help him.”

“Have to?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I don’t know, it’s just this feeling in my gut. But that’s why I’m going to have to head South for a couple of days, and I wanted you to know.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because no matter what, I think you’re the only person able to bring Storm back. Ophelia, we need him back.”

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OPHELIA

I USED to believe in miracles when I was a kid. You know, the fairytale ones, the magical fountains and wishes coming true, where the main characters ended up living happily ever after, because that magical well gave them what their heart truly desired.

I wished I could still believe in those things. Maybe then I would be able to cross the threshold of Storm's room and go to him, because my heart would still believe in miracles. But life taught me that miracles existed only in fairytales, and that good things happened only in movies.

In real life, the prince died, the princess never opened her eyes, and the kingdom crumbled down like a house of cards.

Storm's chest rose and fell steadily. All the bruises and scrapes that were visible on his face a month and a half ago were already healed. His eyes were closed, face relaxed, and I wanted to imagine that he was simply sleeping, resting after another busy day. But he wasn't.

I hated the smell of antiseptic in this fucking place, the plain, white walls, the machines beeping rhythmically with every new beat of his heart. I despised seeing him like this, powerless, weak, when his enemies circled, closing in on us.

We all fucking needed him to open his eyes, to tell me to shut my mouth and to set my head straight. I wouldn't even mind his hate if only I got to experience his touch one more time.

Realistically, I knew he would wake up, it was just a matter of time—at least that’s what the doctors said. But I wasn’t known for my patience, and one and a half months was a helluva long time.

The silence was deafening as I slowly crossed the length of the room and stopped at his bedside. How was it possible to miss a person so much when they were still right in front of you?

I missed his touch, his smiles, his wicked sense of humor, even the times when he called me out on my shit, because someone had to. I missed our fights, the way he understood me better than anybody else, and most of all, I missed feeling his love.

I was always on the run, from people, from emotions, from anything that could make me weak, and he knocked me off my feet and made me love him. I never even got to say it out loud. If I said it right now, he never would’ve believed me.

“Storm,” I whispered, taking his hand in mine. I pulled the chair that was always placed next to his bed closer and sat down. “I miss you, Stormy.” I chuckled brokenly. “I miss everything about you. If this is your way of telling me to fuck off, it isn’t funny.”

I traced my finger over the ink on his hands, going up his arm, praying for some kind of response.

“I know you’re a stubborn little shit, but this has gone on for longer than necessary, don’t you think? Open your eyes, love. Please,” I murmured, feeling the tears trickling down my cheeks.

I thought I’d cried enough in the very beginning, when we didn’t know if he would live or die, but every single time I sat here, I couldn’t help myself.

“We need you back,” I said. “I need you. I can’t do this without knowing that you will be fine. Please,” I begged. “Please, open your eyes. I know you hate me now and I know I deserve it, but I will always love you. Forever and always, Storm. That’s what I promised and I’m not going back on my

promise. So stop this, darling. Stop this nonsense and come back to us.”

I squeezed his hand with both of mine, my entire body trembling.

“I am sorry for everything I did. You will never know how sorry I am. I know it isn’t an excuse, but I’m not built like you. I didn’t know how to let you in, how to show you the things I feel. I know I deserve this agony, this pain, but you don’t have to punish the rest of them.” I took a deep breath and started talking again. “Indigo needs you. He’s lost without you, and I’m afraid he’ll do something that will get him killed. Atlas...” I trailed off. “I have no idea what’s going on with him because he doesn’t want to tell me, but I’m worried about him. I worry about them all.”

Yet no matter how much I talked, no matter how many times I told him I loved him, no matter how many sorrys I uttered, he never woke up.

Maybe Indigo was wrong after all.

I stood up and brought my face closer to his. “I love you, Storm. I love you more than you could ever imagine, and I’m sorry I was the one you decided to keep.” I pressed my lips against his forehead, closing my eyes.

I prayed in my head, pushing my energy, my everything, to him, through that one simple kiss.

“I wish I’d never met you, you know?” I chuckled and dried my cheeks. “Maybe if you never saw me, you wouldn’t be lying here. I broke you. I broke us, and I am so fucking sorry.”

But my words never had the intended effect. As I looked at his face after I sat down, there was no change. Not even the smallest flinch that would tell me he was listening.

I wished I could keep hoping, keep praying, but time was passing by and I had no idea how long we could do this.

All of us.

MY NECK OFFICIALLY HATED ME, AND I REALIZED THAT I HAD to stop falling asleep like this—with my butt on the highly uncomfortable chair and the upper part of my body on the bed. Birds chirped on the outside and only then did I realize that someone must have left the window open.

I had no idea how I missed it last night.

But after the information Indigo threw at me and my own emotional fuckery, checking the room was the last thing on my mind—and it should have been the first. With everything going on, I needed to be more careful. The last thing we all needed right now was for me to fall apart emotionally.

I had to be strong—for Storm, for the club, for everyone involved in this.

There was no place for mistakes, and one simple mess-up could cost us our lives.

I pulled myself away from the bed, cracking my neck left and right, wincing as the familiar throbbing in my body reminded me that I had to be more careful. I wasn't eighteen years old anymore, and after everything I'd put my body through, even sleeping in a fucked-up position meant a miserable morning.

There was no change as I looked up at Storm. The machines kept beeping, his steady heartbeat showing on the monitors, and those fucking IV fluids attached to his arms gave me goosebumps. I played this game every single morning I was here—wake up, bitch about the sleeping position I was in, look at him, look at all these machines, and feel the hope dying in me when I finally realized there was no change.

I should've gotten used to it by now, but there was no way I could ever get used to this sight of him.

The sound of the door opening had me whipping my head to the side and jumping up from the chair, ready for an attack.

But when a familiar face appeared, holding a cup of coffee I desperately needed, I relaxed, dropping my guard down.

“Well, you look beautiful today.” Atlas grinned.

“Shut up,” I mumbled and walked toward him. His arms spread out, welcoming me into a hug I didn’t know I needed until that moment. “How are you?” I asked, squeezing his sides before stepping back.

He handed over the coffee cup and kept on his brilliant smile, but I hated seeing the shadows around his eyes and the demons glaring at me from his irises. Something was bothering him. Something he didn’t want to say. Whatever it was, it could wait for another day.

“I’m good. You know me. Nothing can ever stop me.”

I highly doubted that, and the chirpy fucking sound of his voice betrayed him. He was masking something. But if he didn’t want to tell me, then fine. I could wait. I didn’t want to coax it out of him if I didn’t really need to. Whatever was bothering my friend had him fucked up and I would find out what—one way or another.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I heard Indigo spoke to you last night?”

Ah, there we go—one of the reasons behind those dark shadows around his eyes.

“And I hear you told him I would be here last night.” I narrowed my eyes on him.

“Hey.” He lifted his hands. “He asked. I told him. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No, there’s not, except for the fact that you don’t want to tell me what’s going on when it’s clear that something’s been eating you up.”

The vein on the side of his neck ticked, and he avoided my eyes, looking at Storm instead.

“It’s nothing, Phee. How’s our boy?”

“Atlas—”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” he blasted. “I really don’t, so please stop asking.”

“Bottling things up isn’t exactly helpful, Atlas.”

“You would know,” he snarled. “You’re the queen of hiding her emotions and look where that got you.” He winced as soon as the words left his mouth, but there was no turning back. “Fuck,” he cursed, placing his hands on his hips, and looking down at the floor. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you did,” I murmured, hiding my eyes from him. “I think, uh...” I looked toward the door, pointing at it. “I think I need to use the restroom.”

“Phee—”

He stepped toward me, and I stepped back.

“No, no, it’s okay.” I smiled, but even I knew that it looked broken. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay. I just need to go to the bathroom.”

I turned around and started marching toward the door.

“Ophelia, please. Don’t go,” he called out after me.

“Just stay with Storm, Atlas. I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t want to fall apart in front of him, and hearing my only friend here saying something like that shook me. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know what a fuckup I was, but knowing it and hearing another person say it were two different things, and both of them sucked.

Zozo wasn’t in Santa Monica at the moment. Indigo sent her North as soon as she got out of the hospital, keeping her as far away from me as possible. It sucked, but it was what he needed to do to protect his sister from the villain living inside their house.

I didn’t go back to the clubhouse after that day. I couldn’t. I still had nightmares of seeing them, Zoe, other members of the Club, Storm bleeding out in my hands... Every time I

closed my eyes I could hear it—the screaming, the gunshots, the words I tried running away from me.

It's your fault.

It's your fault.

Indigo said those same words to me as soon as we got to the hospital, and I believed him. In their eyes, it was all my fault. In my eyes, I knew I never should've gone to the clubhouse. I knew I should've run away long before that day, because if I had, my father never would've come for them.

He only did it to bring me back, to show me he still owned me—body, mind, and soul. He wanted to take the one good thing from me, but it backfired.

I rushed toward the bathroom, holding onto the cup of coffee as if it was my lifeline. As soon as the door closed behind me, I collapsed against the wall, hating this weakness coating my bones.

Pain was a powerful thing. It could bring the strongest men and women down to their knees. Having a constant reminder that you were the reason for everything bad that was happening right now, sucked.

My phone started vibrating in my back pocket, pulling me away from the misery and self-loathing I was drowning in. As soon as I pulled it out, I could see several missed calls and Cillian's name blasting on the screen.

"Hello," I answered as I pressed the phone to my ear.

"Oh, thank fucking God," he exclaimed. "Why the fuck weren't you answering your phone?"

"I was sleeping," I murmured.

"Then fucking sleep less!" he shouted.

"Hey, hey, what got into your panties today?"

"The Syndicate, Ophelia. They know your location. They know where Storm is, and they have a bounty on your head."

"What?" I pulled myself up, leaving the coffee cup on the floor. "What are you talking about?"

“Somebody talked, Birdy. Someone told them Storm is still in Santa Monica. Someone told them you’re there as well, and they’re definitely not coming for afternoon tea. You need to get the fuck out of there.”

“I can’t leave him.”

“Both of you need to get out. They’ll be there in one hour. You don’t have much time.”

“Where do I go, Kill? I can’t leave Storm. He’s still in a coma. It’s not like we can just wake him up.”

“Find a way, Ophelia. They’re coming to kill you. I mean it, get the fuck out of there. I’m arranging a car for you. It will be there in half an hour.”

“Kill—”

The line cut off before I could say anything, and I knew he wasn’t joking. The Syndicate was coming for us, and after my uncle took over, things were even worse than before. Or at least they seemed to be. They were relentless in their pursuit of me, and I’d be damned if I allowed them to catch me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I cursed, picking up the coffee cup and throwing it in the bin next to the sink. I looked into the mirror, seeing the dark circles around my eyes, my disheveled hair, and the tiredness sinking into the lines of my face.

“Think, Ophelia. Think,” I said out loud. I knew there was only one option...

We had to wake him up, one way or another.

I rushed out of the bathroom, running toward Storm’s room. Atlas came out, barreling toward me.

“Oh, thank God,” he said, out of breath.

“Atlas, we have a problem.”

“Storm is awake,” he said at the same time I spoke.

My entire body seized, my muscles locking in place, my brain repeating his words over and over again.

“What?” I asked, my eyes widening. “What did you just say?”

“He’s awake. He’s asking for you.”

I didn’t want his first day to end up like this. I didn’t want him to have to run for his life when he’d just opened his eyes after over a month of sleeping, but we had no other choice.

“Atlas,” I started, trying to calm my racing heart. “The Syndicate is coming for us,” I whispered, looking around us. Everyone looked suspicious—the doctors, nurses, even the family sitting in front of one of the rooms.

Any one of them could’ve been the mole that told them where we were.

“There’s a bounty on my head, and they’re not going to stop until I’m dead. That includes Storm as well.”

“Shit!”

“Call Indigo. Call the other guys and tell them to prepare a car for you and him. We need to get him out of here.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked, looking at me skeptically.

I’m going to say goodbye, I wanted to say, but I knew if Atlas was aware of my plan, he never would let me do it.

They wouldn’t be able to get out of here without someone distracting the soldiers The Syndicate would send. I didn’t want to have anyone else dead.

“I’m going to see him. You need to bring a wheelchair for him.”

“The doctor checked on him already,” Atlas said. “He’s okay, but he’s asking for you, Phee. He’s fucking mad.”

I gulped, knowing that in a few seconds, I would need to say goodbye. I would need to break my heart once again, and his as well, but it was for the best.

Storm didn’t need me. He shouldn’t have to live with someone who could only bring damnation to him. I needed to

say goodbye—to him, to this fairytale I was holding on to. I had to go my own way.

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OPHELIA

SECONDS TICKED by as I stood in front of his room. I could hear voices coming from inside, and I knew that the nurse was still there, going through the final checks.

Atlas said he was okay, that he was asking for me, but I couldn't bring myself to enter the room. I'd been both anticipating and dreading this moment ever since they put him into a coma, knowing that it wouldn't be a happily-ever-after reunion. Memories of that day in the Club were hazy, but the anger shining in Storm's eyes would be something that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The door suddenly opened, revealing the nurse I knew too well. She was one of the kind ones, one of the ones who understood my need to be here. She smiled at me, her eyes crinkling at the edges. Her graying hair was pulled into a neat bun at the back of her head, her face free of any makeup and those kind, brown eyes seeing more than I would have wanted her to.

"He's finally up." She grinned. "I'm sure you're relieved."

I nodded, because all the words I had in me were suddenly stuck in my throat. I kept going over everything I needed to tell him, but couldn't.

"Anyway," she stepped outside, keeping the door open for me, "I'll leave you two alone. He's all good, slightly dehydrated, but we're fixing that. He'll be up on his feet in no time."

Little did she know that he would need to be up on his feet in the next fifteen minutes.

“Thank you,” I murmured when she started walking next to me. “For everything,” I added as she looked at me. “I will never forget this.”

We didn’t talk that often, but she was the one who would always bring blankets for me, urging me to eat, to drink some more water, to keep fighting even when it seemed that nothing worked. She was the one to hold my hand when all hope seemed to be lost. I was grateful that I, at least, had someone on my side who wasn’t judging me for my mistakes.

“Don’t even mention it. I can see how much you love him.”

“Yeah.” I smiled at her. “I better go inside.”

“Go, go, he’s waiting for you. He asked about you at least five times.”

He probably asked because he wanted to tell me to fuck off one last time, but I wouldn’t think about it now. The most important thing was to get him the fuck out of here and somewhere safe. The clubhouse wasn’t an option right now, but I was sure that Atlas and Indigo would know what to do and where to go.

He didn’t need me—they didn’t need me. It was tough coming to that realization.

My heart hammered violently in my chest, slamming against my ribcage as I stepped closer to the doorway. I’d fought men twice my size, and I wasn’t afraid. Yet facing Storm, after everything we went through, made me want to run away.

I wanted to remember him when he liked me. When he wanted me next to him. I’d been storing those memories of us in a hidden chest, deep inside my soul, locking it with a key that I would never use. I could never use it because it hurt too much, knowing what I could have had.

I knew that the version I would get now wouldn’t be the man I knew from before, but someone furious with me and

with my choices. Even though he already told me to get the fuck out of his life, it sucked knowing that it was all coming to an end.

“Are you going to keep standing at the fucking threshold or are you finally going to enter? We don’t have all day, Ophelia.”

His voice washed over me, causing goosebumps on my skin. I almost whimpered because I could finally hear him. Even though he sounded angry, he was awake. He was here with us. His anger was better than the silence I was surrounded with for the past month, and if it meant that the fairytale I was so desperate to have would come to an end, so be it. He was alive, awake, and that’s all that mattered.

We didn’t have much time, but I wanted to see him one last time.

After today, he would never have to worry about me ever again.

Summoning the strength I didn’t know I had, I entered the room, and my eyes immediately landed on him.

He was sitting in his bed, his wide shoulders occupying the entire place, and I forgot how intoxicating he really was. His skin was pale, much paler than usual, with dark circles around his eyes, reflecting my own, but it was his stare that made me stop.

There was so much anger there, burning me, licking my skin with violent touches, and I knew I deserved it. I deserved everything he wanted to throw at me. But deep beneath that anger, all that rage he pushed to the surface, I also saw the love he had for me. Or at least something akin to the love I wanted him to feel. I mastered pretending that nothing ever touched me, pushing those that cared about me from my life. The two of us were more alike than we wanted to admit.

He looked almost funny in the hospital gown, but even in this environment, even weaker than he usually was, he was still the most imposing man I had ever met. The one I could

imagine myself spending the rest of my life with. If only I could.

“You’re still here,” he said, his voice raspy from the lack of usage. “I would’ve thought that you would be on the other side of the world by now.”

I winced at that. I understood why he thought that, why he decided to punish me with his words, slicing through the armor I’d erected around my heart, but it still fucking hurt hearing him say that. Did he really think that he didn’t mean anything to me? Have I made him believe that?

“I couldn’t do that,” I murmured, stepping closer to him, trembling from head to toe.

He stared at me as if I were a stranger, someone placed here to hurt him, to destroy him, and maybe he was right. Maybe both of us were made only for destruction and nothing more. Maybe the violence that lived in our blood made it impossible for love to survive.

His nostrils flared, his muscles flexing, visible even underneath the gown, and all I wanted to do was to climb onto the bed and hug him. To feel him against me. To hear his steady heartbeat. To feel those hands once more on my skin. To feel as if someone really wanted me in their life.

I’d spent years detaching myself from other people, afraid that they would get destroyed by the monsters living inside of me. For so long, I’d deprived myself of human touch, of love, of all these feelings that ate at my insides.

“What?” He laughed. “You suddenly developed a conscience?”

“No, I suddenly realized what was important in my life,” I retorted back, fighting to keep my voice steady.

“And what is that?” he asked, his eyes eating me up from head to toe. “What other pretty lies am I going to hear from your filthy mouth?”

I hated this. I hated who we were to each other now, and it was all my doing. I’d had a month and a half to go over things and to realize what was truly important, but for him, that day

happened just yesterday. Even though the wounds on his body had healed, the ones in his mind and his heart would take a lot longer to finally close.

“We don’t have time for this,” I mumbled, looking toward the window.

“Time for what?” He frowned. “Conversation. My darling, Ophelia, that’s the only thing we have time for. As you can see,” he spread his arms, “I don’t think I’m going anywhere any time soon.”

If only that were true.

“The Syndicate is coming for us.” I looked at him, getting straight to the point. I wasn’t going to sugarcoat this. I wasn’t going to withhold the truth from him. He deserved to know what was going on, and the lack of communication was what led us here. “They’re mainly coming for me, but they’re also coming for you. Atlas and Indigo are arranging everything. I know you don’t want to hear this, and I don’t need anything from you, but I am sorry.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” he barked. “But what do you mean they’re coming?”

I avoided his eyes.

“Ophelia? What have you done?”

“I shook the hornet’s nest.” I chuckled. “And they’re coming to take me.”

My phone vibrated, and I took it out from my pocket, seeing that it was Cillian calling me again.

“Kill—”

“Get out right now!”

“What?”

“They’re there, Birdy. They’re entering the hospital.”

“Fuck!”

“What’s happening, Sunshine?” Storm asked. I flinched at the nickname he used to use for me. His voice softened, the

anger that was so apparent moments ago disappearing completely. “Ophelia!”

The door opened with a bang, and I turned around ready for an attack. I saw Atlas rushing in with a wheelchair.

“We need to go,” I said. “Now!”

“I figured that out when I saw the two SUVs stopping in front of the hospital.”

He ran toward Storm with the wheelchair and started pulling the sheets off him.

“Will someone tell me what the fuck is going on?” Storm asked. “Atlas?”

“I told you already,” I said and then murmured into the phone, “I’ll call you back, Kill.”

I ran toward the two of them and started slowly pulling out the IV still connected to Storm. “This will hurt.”

“Fuck,” he cursed as I pulled out the needle, pressing against the wound with my finger. “As gentle as ever,” he spat out.

“Shut up, Storm. You can hate me later, but right now we need to get you out of here.”

Indigo ran into the room with Felix right behind him.

“We need to go, people,” Indigo said, as I took one of the Band-Aids the nurse left behind on the stand and attached it to his skin. His hand was blue from all the places where they probed him with needles, but he would survive. He fucking needed to survive.

Atlas lifted Storm off the bed with Indigo’s help, while Felix stood at the door, watching out for anyone coming. They placed him onto the wheelchair, while Storm groaned and bickered the entire time.

“I can walk, you know?”

“Yeah, eighty-year-old grandfathers could walk as well, but that doesn’t mean they are fast enough to run.” Indigo chuckled.

“Oh, fuck you.” Storm smiled. “At least I’m alive.”

“Yeah,” Indigo murmured, looking at me. “That you are.”

“They’re on the first floor,” Felix said. “Whoever gave them the info, didn’t tell them which floor you were on.”

“How many?” I asked, going behind them.

“Five inside the hospital, but there’s another SUV that no one came out of.”

Fuck, that meant at least ten.

“Ophelia,” Atlas started. “What are you thinking?”

“We need to use the service elevator,” I said then ran toward the door. “We don’t have much time. Come on.”

“Ophelia,” Storm warned, but if I was about to do what I planned to do, I couldn’t get distracted by him. Somewhere deep inside, he knew what I was about to do. He knew I would always put him first, no matter what, and I knew he would hate it. He would hate me for what needed to happen.

“Car is arranged?” I asked Indigo, avoiding Storm’s eyes.

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Tell them to go to the back. There’s an employee entrance. Is there anybody else on the ground?”

“Holland, Reaper and Skinny are hiding on the other side of the road, between the buildings.”

“Skinny?” I laughed. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, he’s definitely not skinny. Not anymore.” Felix laughed with me. “But the nickname stayed.”

“Okay.” I chuckled. “Tell one of them to check the employee entrance. I wouldn’t be surprised if the soldiers from the other car went there.”

We rushed out of the room, Felix in front of us, Atlas pushing the wheelchair, Indigo next to him, and me right next to Storm. Out of nowhere, his hand wrapped around mine, pulling my thoughts back to reality—away from the pain and the bleak future I was destined for.

“Sunshine,” he murmured, looking up at me. His anger was still visible, tangible even, but there was so much more that we couldn’t say right now, and I would forever regret not being able to hear those words. Questions lingered in his brilliant, green eyes, fear swirling, pushing to the front. I wanted to soothe him, to tell him it would be okay, that I would always be here for him.

“Not now, Storm.” I squeezed his hand. “Later, okay?”

“Promise?”

I wanted to scream, cry, break something, but I couldn’t. “I promise.” I knew I would have to break that promise. He didn’t deserve this. He didn’t deserve me constantly breaking his heart, but I had no other choice. None of us did.

The nurse who was in his room earlier saw us as soon as we passed next to the reception desk, her eyes widening at the sight of us.

“Oh no, no, no, no,” she said and started walking toward us. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“We’re going for a quick walk.” Atlas flashed her with his brightest smile. “You know, fresh air and all.”

“You can flash those pearly whites ten more times if you want to, but he is not allowed to be out of his room. Not yet. He is too weak to be outside, not to mention that his blood tests still haven’t come back.”

“Look,” I started and pulled her to the side. “You know who we are?” She nodded. “And you know what we do?” She nodded again. “Then you should also know that there are very bad people heading this way, with the intention to hurt him.” I pointed at Storm. “Please, we really, really need to get him out of here.”

She stood there, silently, looking at me, then at Storm, and it felt as if a million years passed before she spoke again. I liked her, but I wasn’t above knocking her out if it meant getting him away from here in time. I didn’t want it to come to that, but if I had to—

“Fine.” She huffed. “What do you need from me?”

It was obvious she wasn't happy with this, but she also understood what was at stake. I grinned, hope brimming brightly in my chest.

"Where's the service elevator?" I asked.

"Come with me," she said and turned toward the direction of the elevators.

I rushed after her and the rest followed, their eyes on my back. I just hoped we would be able to get out of here before they got to us. I didn't care about me, but these men didn't need to lose anyone else to The Syndicate.

"There." She pointed at the wide elevator further away from the ones we usually used. "It will take you straight to the basement."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I murmured, hugging her to me.

"Go. Go now."

She didn't need to tell me twice.

I ran toward the elevator first and pressed the down button. The rest joined me within seconds, and my hands trembled as the digits on the screen turned from one to six.

"Go, come on," I said as the doors opened, ushering them inside.

But as soon as I said those words, the elevators not too far away from us opened up and I turned around and saw them—five figures in tactical uniforms, similar to the one I used to wear.

Their eyes zeroed in on us, and I knew that they knew who we were.

"Go!" I yelled out, pushing Felix inside the elevator and stepping outside.

"Ophelia?" Storm said. "No, no." He thrashed against Atlas and Indigo. As I looked up at their faces, they finally realized what was going to happen. Storm tried getting out of his wheelchair but he was held down by Atlas and Indigo.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, looking at Storm. “I love you. I will always love you. I’m sorry for everything.”

“No!” He started pushing himself up again, trying to get out of the chair. “Ophelia!” he roared, pain and anguish lacing his voice. “Please!”

“Take him down,” I choked out. “Go, please.”

“Ophelia, don’t do this!” he bellowed as the doors started closing. “Ophelia!” His anguished roar echoed around me as the doors closed, and I could finally breathe, seeing the numbers going down toward the basement. I thought I knew what pain was, what it felt like, but this time, something cracked inside my chest.

Something vicious released from the anguish rushing through my veins.

I turned slowly, looking at the five figures who came closer to me, as if they were waiting for something.

“You know who I am?” I asked them, smiling through the pain of leaving Storm again.

They all nodded in unison, bracing themselves for an attack.

“Then you know you never should’ve come here. You never should’ve tried to attack what’s mine.”

I took out my knife, hidden in my right boot, and I ran toward them.

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OPHELIA

THERE WERE moments in my life where I wished I was born somewhere else, where I was someone else. But this last month made me realize that I liked who I was, no matter what. No matter the struggles, the breakdowns, the horrors I'd committed, I liked who I was because all that I went through prepared me for this moment.

To protect those I loved.

My heart hammered in my chest as I ran toward the group of them. I knew what people thought of me—that I was reckless, that I never planned, that I killed whoever and whenever I wanted, but none of those statements were true.

I was unhinged at moments, broken in places that would never be able to be glued back together, but I'd learned to find perfection in imperfect things.

There was a Japanese saying *Wabi-Sabi*, an aesthetic philosophy of finding beauty in things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. I saw myself in it maybe a lot more than I should've, but that's what I was.

Perfect in all my imperfection, and all my imperfections had prepared me for all this.

I slid down over the floor as the first guy jumped toward me. I knocked his feet off the ground, knocking him to the floor. He went down with a thud, groaning when my foot connected with his throat as I swirled around.

“Fuck,” one of them cursed from behind me, and I turned just in time to see one of them grabbing me. “You couldn't

have made this simple and easy, could you now?" he asked, pressing his hand around my throat, cutting off my air supply.

"I-I never make an-nything easy-y," I stammered and grabbed a hold of a knife tucked around his waist. I lifted it up within a second and slammed it into the side of his neck, turning it first right then left.

He gurgled, immediately releasing me from his hold, his hands flying toward his throat and pressing against the knife that was still sticking out from his neck. Blood rushed down his front, hidden by the black uniform he was wearing.

Stumbling back toward the wall, he slid down, choking as he pulled out the knife. His blood colored the white wallpaper in crimson as he started shaking and thrashing, his life slowly ebbing away from his eyes.

The roar behind me came too fast for me to react. Before I could duck down or turn around, an arm wrapped itself around my throat, holding me in a chokehold, while the palm was pressed to the other side of my head, adding pressure to my skull.

"We all wanted you dead years ago, you stupid cunt," he spat at me as he lifted me off the ground. "They told us to bring you in alive, but I'm pretty sure that no one would cry if I killed you right here and right now."

Black dots danced on the periphery of my vision, my legs thrashing in the air. I could see the death hugging the soldier I'd stabbed and the other two trying to lift him up off the ground. But what I didn't see was the nurse I talked to earlier, standing not too far away from us, holding a fire extinguisher.

"Was this how you planned to die?" The man holding me chuckled, biting down on my ear as he tightened the hold he had on me. My throat convulsed, my larynx crushed under the weight of his arm, and he knew I couldn't answer.

There was one golden rule for people of my size, and that was to never get yourself in this situation. He was too tall, much stronger than me, and the way he held me showed that he knew what he was doing.

But he obviously didn't know that I wasn't completely alone.

"Hey, asshole!" the nurse called out to him. He turned us toward her, shielding himself with my body. "This is still a hospital, you sick fuck!"

I blinked, trying to focus on her, but the lack of air in my lungs was making it harder to see anything clearly. I could see shapes and people in front of me, but I couldn't make out who was who. They should've run away when they could've.

The Syndicate had one rule, and that's never to leave any witnesses behind. They didn't give a shit if the people they were killing were innocent. Hell, I killed more innocent people than anyone could even imagine, and these men would stop at nothing to accomplish their mission.

"Get out of here, grandma," he hissed. "This has nothing to do with you."

She frowned. "Your mother should've washed your mouth out with soap, young man."

If I weren't in the current situation, I probably would've laughed. She took out the safety pin from the nozzle of the fire extinguisher she'd been holding close to her body, then aimed the nozzle right at us and pressed on the lever. What probably took mere seconds felt like hours as the white foam exploded from the extinguisher, covering the entire hallway in white.

Mayhem ensued, and people started coming from all sides, surrounding the soldier and me, hitting him with chairs, stethoscopes... His hold on me lessened, allowing me to get out of his clutches. I took a step back, coughing, trying to catch my breath. A pair of hands took a hold of my upper arms, turning me toward them.

I thought it was another soldier, but it was the nurse from before.

"You need to run!" she yelled over the cacophony of voices around us. "Now, while they're not watching."

"I-I can't," I wheezed. "They're going to kill you."

“Does it look like they’re going to do anything to us?” She arched an eyebrow at me and pointed at the craziness happening behind us. “Police are on their way, but you need to get out of here before they arrive.”

“I-I,” I stammered. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Just stay alive.” She smiled. “Trust me, honey, this is not the first time that someone else had to help those boys get their shit together.”

She pushed something into my hand. I looked down to see it was my phone—my broken phone—but the screen still shone brightly and I could see missed calls showing in the corner.

“Call your friends and get out of Santa Monica.”

“Will you be okay?”

“Darling.” she chuckled and started lifting the upper part of her scrubs. A tattoo I’d seen on so many other members of Sons of Hades stared back at me, right there on her lower abdomen. “We take care of each other. Now, go!”

She pushed me away from her and toward the exit stairs next to the elevators, and I didn’t think twice. I wanted to ask her questions. I wanted to know why she had it. Storm once told me that only Old Ladies got that tattoo, but I have never seen her in the Club. I had no idea who she was.

I hoped that the guys and Storm had managed to get out of here safely, but that look on Storm’s face, that final realization... fuck.

But it was better this way. It was better for him, better for me, better for everyone involved. I would just be holding him back, constantly reminding him of my father and what he did to him. If our paths crossed sometime in the future, I hoped he would be over me by then.

I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, thankful that they didn’t really manage to get any real punches in during the altercation. My phone started vibrating in my hand. When I saw Cillian’s name flashing brightly at me, through the broken cracks on my phone, a sense of relief washed over me.

I pressed the green button to answer and lifted the phone to my ear. “Hell—”

“For someone that is constantly on her phone, Ophelia, you are fucking terrible at answering it.”

“Oh, fuck off.” I laughed. “What was I supposed to do? Tell these soldiers to wait until I’m finished with my phone call?”

“You just dropped the call earlier, and I had no idea if you were alive or well!” he shouted.

“Hi, Cillian. I’m alive, slightly choked, but well. How are you?”

“Furious! I am so fucking furious at you.” He was breathing heavily and I could already imagine him pacing from side to side while talking to me. “Where are you?” he asked.

“Running down the stairs from the hospital. Storm and the others—”

“They made it out,” he finished before me. “I saw them leaving the hospital, and I must say, Storm didn’t seem to be very happy.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I knew he wouldn’t be happy about the way we left things, but he was the one who told me to get lost before he got injured. I was just following his wishes.

“Ophe—”

“He will get over it,” I cut him off. “I need a transfer from here, Kill. I can’t use my bike.” And that pissed me off even more. I’d bought that bike from Atlas, loved it with all my heart, and now I had to leave it behind.

“I’m waiting for you downstairs,” he murmured.

I stopped immediately, gripping the handrail. “You’re what?”

“Did you really think I would leave you all alone?” He chuckled. “Not a chance. Just get your ass downstairs and we

can get out of here.”

As soon as he said that, I could hear the doors opening from where I came, and I knew it wasn't one of the staff coming this way.

“Yeah, just give me a couple of minutes,” I murmured and cut the call, stuffing the phone in my back pocket.

I had no weapons on me, nothing to defend myself against them, and they definitely didn't come with rubber toys either. So I did what I always did best—I ran.

Heavy footsteps chased me down the stairs, but I was smaller, faster. Even though I could feel him advancing on me, I still had a chance to get out of here alive.

“You better stop running, Ekaterina!” God, I hated that fucking name. I loathed what it represented, the fact that it was always used by my father when he wanted to control me, when he wanted me to be his good little girl. And every single time, I went to him, like a good soldier, incapable of thinking for myself.

“Or what?” I bellowed, looking ahead of me, not once breaking my pace.

“This could've gone much easier. You don't want us to find your little friends and torture them.” Did they really think they could scare me with these tactics? “That redheaded friend of yours, what was her name?”

I stopped. *How did they know about Zoe?*

“Ah, so that got your attention?”

“Stay away from her!”

“We will,” he said, his footsteps slowing down. “If you surrender. None of them need to get hurt if you do what we say.”

“As if that ever worked out for me.” I laughed at him. “Didn't they tell you that I had the lowest score for following orders?”

“Dammit, Ekaterina!”

I looked at the plaque on the wall between the stairs, showing the sign for the first floor. Leaning over the handrail, I could see the exit door, close, so fucking close, but I could also hear him advancing on me.

I sprinted down, going as fast as I could, with him on my heels, praying to whichever force there was that the door was already unlocked.

Just a few more steps.

A few more stairs.

“Oh no, you’re not getting away this time!” he shouted behind me. That’s when I saw it, the door opening, illuminating the darkness we were chasing through, and Cillian standing right there with a gun pointed high up—at me.

“Kill, what the—”

“Get down!” he yelled out, and I ducked down at the last second as the gun went off.

The silencer he’d put on quieted the sound, but the body falling down behind me was a clear indication of what had just happened.

“Seriously?” I huffed, looking behind at the collapsed body not too far away from me. “I thought you were coming in to shoot me!”

“Come on, now!” Cillian came closer to me and picked me up from the stairs. “You’re the only person insane enough to hang out with me. Why would I want to kill you?”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “That gives me so much, what’s the word? Reassurance? And here I thought we were friends.”

“Aye, Ophelia.” He threw his arm around my neck, pulling me closer to him. “You are most probably my only friend.”

“That’s sad, Kill.” I squeezed his hand, trailing over the scars on his knuckles.

I hated the fact that we didn’t have time to talk about him, what with all my shit going on, and we needed to. He was

destroying himself right in front of my eyes, and I was too selfish to stop him and ask if he was doing okay.

“Kill—”

“Let’s not do this now.” He looked down at me as we walked toward the exit and out of the building. “I can hear it in your voice and I don’t want to talk about it now.”

The pain, the shame, the anger, shining in his brilliant eyes was enough to shut me up. “I mean, I wanted to get some burgers.” I changed the topic immediately. “But if you’re not hungry—”

“I could eat.” He nodded. “But you’re paying.”

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OPHELIA

WE PULLED up in front of a cabin I hadn't seen before, right on the outskirts of Los Angeles, far away from other people and their pretty vacation homes. Far enough so that no one would hear Vincent screaming tonight. Cillian often mentioned it was a safe house, but we didn't get a chance for me to visit this place, what with all the craziness going around.

This past month, my time was split between sleeping in the hospital, chasing the leads Cillian and Tristan threw my way, and trying not to lose my mind every time Storm kept his eyes closed no matter what we did.

My half-eaten fries were still in my hand, and Cillian ended up paying for both our meals when we went to Burger Jack on our way here—I had to fight him on that. But while he practically inhaled his food, I liked to take my time, especially with fries. When they become crunchy and you really needed to—

“Are you going to keep staring at that fry or are you going to eat it?” Cillian asked from my left, pulling me back from my thoughts.

“I'm thinking now of stabbing you with it, but I would be wasting a perfectly good fry,” I answered and bit down on the fry I was holding in my hand. “What is this place anyway? I didn't know we were about to start filming *Wrong Turn: Ophelia's Revenge*. I mean, I knew you had a cabin, but man.” I huffed, looking at the place. “Did you buy it from Leatherface?”

“You’re such a comedian.” He huffed and pushed the door open. “Come on. You need to take a shower.”

I gasped. “Are you saying I stink?” I asked as I pushed the door open, still holding my fries. “For the record, I have been running around for the last two days, and I didn’t have time for a long-ass bath like you did.”

“I’m just joking, Phee, but you should get some sleep. That fake smile you’ve been carrying around isn’t fooling anybody, least of all me.”

I stopped in my tracks. “Was I that obvious?”

“No, not to the rest of the world, but I know you.”

Crickets chirped around us, bringing the dark forest alive along with the other animals that decided to join in, while I ignored what he said.

It was easier pretending than thinking about the fact that there was a gaping hole inside my chest. If I started thinking about *him* and how I’d left things this morning, I would hightail it from here and go to him.

But I couldn’t do that.

I could never see him again. God, it felt like a thousand lashes whipping over my heart every time I thought about it. Ignorance was the best cure, and one day, Storm would thank me for letting him go.

I never understood that bullshit sentence about letting what you love go. I mean, we were supposed to fight for those we loved, weren’t we? We were supposed to do everything in our power to show them how much they meant to us, right? But if I had to choose between fearing for his life because he was with me or living with this pain from a distance, I would choose this every single time.

Now, I just needed to make sure that he wouldn’t be able to find me again.

“Come on, Phee. Last time I checked, Vincent was sleeping. You can wait until tomorrow to try and get some information out of him.”

“Any luck with your IT guy?” I asked, following him toward the cabin. “I have a feeling that Vincent won’t be very cooperative, all things considered.”

“Oh, I am not worried about that.” Cillian laughed and unlocked the front door. “I know his type. He isn’t a soldier and wasn’t trained like one. He will talk. Just give it some time.”

“We don’t have time,” I gritted out. “I need him to talk now.”

“No.” Cillian stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned to me. “What you need is a long-ass shower and a nap. Once you’ve had that, then you can do whatever the fuck you want. Until then, I don’t want to see you going anywhere near him.”

“Are you protecting him?”

“I’m protecting you,” he bit out and stalked toward me. “Recklessness won’t bring you the answers you’re seeking. After what happened this morning, I highly doubt you’re as calm as you’re pretending to be.”

“You don’t know everything, Kill.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “But I know that I will drag you to bed even if you hate me for it. So let’s not make this messy, and let’s not fight between ourselves, when we both have an enemy who needs to be flushed out.”

He was right. God, I hated that he was right. If I went to Vincent right now, I would get nothing but one more murder on my hands. Not that he didn’t deserve it, but we needed answers. Whoever The Syndicate and the Outfit was working with, apart from the Albanians, was someone powerful enough and someone who hated me more than those three organizations.

“Fine.” I huffed, surrendering at last. The fight evaporated from my body and the tiredness I was trying to ignore was suddenly catching up with me, holding my limbs in its unforgiving claws.

This whole mess was going on for far too long, and I wanted it to stop. I never thought I would be the one asking for a calm and peaceful life. Yet here I was, standing in the hallway of a cabin I didn't own, at twenty-five years old, and the only things I managed to keep over the years were scars and more trauma.

I liked to blame my father for everything I went through, but I was the one pulling the trigger every single time. I was the one running, and I was the one hiding. I couldn't lie anymore and say that everything I did was only to find Maya, because it wasn't.

She was found now. Kieran was getting her, but why couldn't I stop fighting? Even the death of the monster I always blamed for everything bad didn't appease the bloodlust fighting for dominance inside my body. Would I ever be able to stop?

Bad people always existed—behead one snake, the other one just took its place, right? But was I fighting now because I had to, or because I didn't know how to stop?

“Your room is down the hallway and then the first door on your left,” Cillian said as he came back to the entrance hallway where he'd left me earlier. I didn't like the concern on his face. I wasn't used to having help or people actually caring enough to have me fed, well-rested and safe. But he cared.

He always cared, hadn't he? that inner bitch I often tried to mute piped in. *You were just too blinded by Kieran to see who the better option was.*

Maybe if I actually looked at Cillian the way I used to look at Kieran, none of us would be in this situation. Maybe I chose the wrong brother. I knew that there was never anything between Kill and me, and there never would be. He loved me as a sister and I loved him as a brother. But lately, I've been thinking about all the choices I've made over the years, and this one question kept coming up.

If I had chosen a different brother, none of this would have happened.

“Are you okay?” Cillian asked, walking toward me cautiously as if I were a wild animal that could attack him if he made one wrong move. “Phee—”

“Yeah,” I answered, shaking my head. “I’m just...” I took a deep breath. “I’m just going to take a shower and a nap. It’s already too late to do anything.”

I was about to pass next to him into the living room, when he grabbed my upper arm, pulling me closer to him.

“Storm is going to be okay,” he murmured into my ear. “I might not like him in general, but he is a good man.”

“I know,” I whispered. “That’s why he can never find out where I am.”

I looked up at him, hating how shallow his eyes were. He was worried about me, trying to get me comfortable, trying to help me, yet he was falling apart right in front of my eyes. The long-sleeved shirt he wore was just the armor he decided to put on, to hide the scars from me, from Kieran, from the rest of the world...

“What do you mean?” He was confused by my answer and slowly, he released me from his hold.

“After this is done, Kill,” I looked around us at the cabin, “I am going to disappear for a little while.”

“What?”

“They’re not safe with me, and I don’t want to have a repeat of what happened in the clubhouse. You know as much as I do that what we’re doing here isn’t going to earn us any points with these three organizations, and it seems that there’s an even bigger fish at play in all of this.”

“Does he know?” Cillian took a step closer to me, the tick in his jaw more prominent as he stepped underneath the light.

“Who?” I arched an eyebrow. “Storm? Since when do you care about him?”

“Since I’ve realized that he is the best thing that could ever happen to you. I don’t care about him.” His brows furrowed. “I care about you and the fact that leaving him behind is eating

you alive. Would you really be able to forget what you've shared with him, huh? Love doesn't work like that, Phee. It isn't a switch you can play with. You can't just turn it off and forget about the person you love, just because it doesn't suit your current agenda."

"You don't know anything, Kill."

"Oh, yeah? He makes you feel alive, and not in a toxic way like Kieran. He makes you want to be a better person. The Ophelia I used to know would've killed Vincent yesterday, no questions asked. You would've killed anyone standing in your way and you wouldn't even blink. There you were, drowning, looking for an exit and life gave it to you. It sent you him. You were happy with him. Those months you spent with him without all this bullshit were the most peaceful months in your life."

"And then they took it away from me!" I roared. "I was done with this. Done with this life, with this mess, with everything! I just wanted to find Maya, and then I was going to stop fighting, running, all of it.. Yes, I was happy," I cried out. "I was so fucking happy, but my past couldn't let me go, and I fucked it all up. My father also decided to fuck it all up, and before I could enjoy any of it, the beauty of a simple life, it was torn away from me. So yes, Kill, I am running away from him. I am giving him the option to have a better life without me in it."

"That's a bitter bravery, my silly little heart. You're running away from him and you're tearing your soul apart."

His words cut deep, deeper than anything else I have ever felt, because he was right. He was so right, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I wanted Storm to be safe. I wanted Atlas, Felix, Zoe, even fucking Indigo, to be safe. And none of them would ever be if I stayed with them.

"I would rather break my own heart and tear up my own soul than watch them die," I mumbled. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a shower and go to sleep."

“Phee—”

He stepped toward me, but I didn't have it in me to stay and listen. As if I didn't know that I was running. As if I didn't know how bad it looked or how messed up all of this was. But his happiness came before mine. I couldn't save him before, but I could now.

Now I could give him what he always wanted—freedom.

PEOPLE MEDITATED TO GET INTO THAT ZEN MODE, OR whatever the fuck it was called—I tortured villains. Or well, the ones I considered to be villains.

That whole downward dog and all those other positions never did anything but piss me off even more. What fucking deep breathing? My first and last Yoga class ended up with me threatening the instructor and getting the fuck out of there. I know, I know, it truly did help many people, but it simply wasn't for me.

My brain didn't know how to shut up. Every time I closed my eyes and tried to meditate, something would pop up—a memory, a thing I needed to do, Storm, Storm, Storm... I found that playing with knives was my personal Zen, and as I stood here in front of the table, with my fingers dragging over the various shapes of blades, I found my peace.

“What are you going to do to me?” Vincent asked from behind me, tied to the chair in the basement of the cabin Cillian found.

Kill took one look at me this morning and dragged me out for a run. And no, my idea of fun wasn't trying to dodge all the tree branches and small animals that were skittering around. Insects weren't my idea of fun either, but there I was, five in the morning, running through the woods like a maniac.

I knew that cardio was important in my line of work. Especially taking into consideration how much I loved running away from people, feelings, and everything that made me feel

uncomfortable. But I preferred working out at night when my body was energized. Not at five in the morning before I'd even had my first cup of coffee.

But Cillian, the bastard that he was, knew that, and no matter how much I protested and how much I threatened to cut off his dick while he was sleeping, he still dragged me out, laughing the whole time.

So here I was, sweaty, annoyed, with my shoes covered in mud and God knew what else, standing in the basement after we came back, seething from the unreleased energy brimming inside of me. Vincent was going to find out exactly what I did to the people that pissed me off.

I couldn't kill Cillian—I liked him too much, and I knew he was only trying to get me out of this weird mood, but running... No, that wasn't going to happen again.

“Did you know I killed my own brother?” I asked him as I lifted the dagger with the red handle, a dragon wrapped around the hilt. “Didn't even blink, really. But then again,” I turned toward him, smiling at the blade in my hand, “he was a shitty brother.”

He gulped and asked, “Are you going to kill me too?”

Some people knew how to hide their fear, others not so much. Vincent Brown had such a shitty poker face that even a newbie soldier could see right through it.

“Are you scared, Vince?” I asked, approaching him slowly.

“N-No,” he stammered, but we both knew the truth.

After being sequestered to this basement for the last two days, he was quite literally shitting his pants. Cillian brought him here after our little rendezvous in Malibu. While I didn't care who fed Vincent or who brought him up to the bathroom, I was curious to know whether it was Kieran or if Cillian had somebody else on the side.

“You know what I hate the most, Vince?” I pressed the tip of the blade to his crotch and leaned down all the way to his ear. “Liars.”

He thrashed against the chair, but the restraints around his arms and his legs weren't allowing him to move too far away.

"You're going to burn in hell," he spat out, his eyes wild as he looked at me.

I chuckled. "It's a good thing I don't believe in your God, then."

Pale and with no one to come and save him, he looked so small, so insignificant, it was hard to believe that such a man could've been someone my father worked so closely with.

"What was he like?" I asked and stepped backward.

"Who?"

"My father." I walked toward the other side of the basement and picked up an old chair and brought it right in front of him. I sat down and looked at him, holding the dagger in my right hand. "I am actually curious to hear which version of himself he gave you."

"You're sick," he murmured, trembling in his seat. "I am not telling you anything."

"Come on, now. I'm not asking for much. I just want to know how my daddy dearest was with you. Did he tell you he loved you? How proud he was of you?"

"Go to hell, Ophelia!"

"Been there, done that and not really interested in going back." I stood up and pushed the chair backward. "Did he tell you how much he liked whipping me, while I was on my knees, begging for mercy in Siberian Gulag's?" His eyes widened, shock and disbelief evident in them. "No? He was a very good storyteller. I bet that he told you I needed to be saved, that he just wanted what was best for his darling daughter."

"I-I," he stammered. "No, you're lying."

"He also told you how proud he was of everything you did, and you pushed and pushed and pushed, trying to prove yourself to him. And that disappointed look on his face he

would have, every time you wouldn't be able to do something he wanted? Yeah, we all saw it."

"No, no, no." He shook his head. "I'm not listening to you."

"That's okay." I smiled and kneeled in front of him. "You don't have to listen to me. Your knees will."

His eyes shot open just as I tossed the dagger up, took it by the handle and stabbed it right into his knee.

"What the fuck?" he screamed. "Oh my God!"

Blood pooled out around the hilt of the knife, spilling over his beige pants, coloring them crimson. I pressed the knife deeper, turning it left then right, while he screamed, his voice echoing around us.

"You fucking psycho!"

"Who was my father working with?" I asked calmly, ignoring his words. "And don't play coy because there's a whole set of knives over there." I pointed at the table on the other side of the room. "Just waiting to be used."

"I don't know!"

"Eek, wrong answer." I stood up and walked away from him, going straight for the table.

"No, no, please!" he begged when he saw me taking another knife. "I swear I don't know!"

The blade of the knife shone underneath the morning light breaking through the square windows positioned closer to the ceiling.

"Please," Vincent cried as I approached him. "Don't do this."

"Who was he working with? I know about The Outfit and The Albanians, but who else?"

I walked behind him, pressing my hands onto his shoulders. The hilt of the knife touched the side of his face.

"Those are the only ones I know of," he answered.

“You’re lying to me,” I whispered into his ear. “And you know what happens to boys that are lying?”

“Nooooooo!”

I pressed the heel of my palm against the top of his hand, holding it tight against the arm rest. “Who is the third person, Vincent?”

“I will never tell you!”

“Suit yourself.”

His fingers straightened as I pressed harder against his hand, struggling to get away from me.

“Please, don’t. Please—”

“You need your fingers for all those fancy computers, don’t you?” I laughed. “But I’m sure you don’t need all of them.”

I pressed the blade of the knife to the knuckle of his index finger on his left hand and cut through.

“You crazy bitch!” he bellowed.

“Oops, sorry about that. Wrong part of the body.”

I lifted the knife, letting the blood gush out from his wound and pressed it between his index and middle fingers and cut through the skin, breaking the muscle.

“Are you going to talk?” I asked, holding the knife between his fingers, and looking at him.

“They’re going to kill you,” he answered instead, while tears ran down his face. “She is going to kill you.”

“Ah-ha!” I exclaimed. “So it definitely is a she,” I said and pulled out the knife, stepping away from him.

“Fuck,” he cursed, realizing what he did.

“Now all you need to do is to tell me who *she* is.”

A minute passed, a minute too long. As I took a step forward, toward his other knee, he started talking.

“Fine, fine, fine, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything, just please don’t kill me.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Oh?”

“I will. I swear I will tell you anything you want to know. Just promise me you won’t kill me.”

“Yet you almost killed the man I love.”

“That wasn’t me!” he panted. “That was Nikolai and his need for revenge. He told me he was saving you from a savage beast, from a man who didn’t deserve you. He just wanted to bring you home, to have his daughter right by his side.”

“Oh, how touching,” I mocked.

“I swear. That’s what he told me. That’s why I helped him, why I told him where you were. If it wasn’t for that little stunt you pulled when you ran away from them, I never would’ve been able to find you.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

“The traffic cameras caught you and my system recognized your face immediately. I thought you were finally running away from them, that he was right. I didn’t know—”

“Are you telling me that you wouldn’t have been able to find my exact location if it wasn’t for that traffic camera?”

“Well…” he murmured. “Yes and no.”

“Vince.” I grinned and stabbed the knife into the armrest, right next to his arm. “You better start talking or this knife will end up going into your throat next.”

“There is a mole inside Sons of Hades,” he exclaimed. “A girl. But she went rogue. She didn’t want to tell him your location.”

“A girl?” I narrowed my eyes on him. “What girl?”

“I only saw her once to give her a fake ID. She managed to get in as a bartender.”

“A bartender?” My eye started twitching because I could see where this was going. “What was her name, Vincent?”

He looked up at me, fear evident in every pore of his face. “Natalia. Natalia Asterova.”

I knew that name. I knew that there were other kids in my family, but I’d never met them. Never even saw them in a picture. Our families weren’t exactly close over the years.

“Which name did you give her, Vince?” I kneeled down in front of him.

“Nova. Her new name is Nova.”

Fuck my life.

“Was she the one my father was working with?”

“No.” He shook his head. “She was just the mole. But there is another person.” I stood up and walked behind him. “I swear to you.” He shook in his seat. “I’m not lying.”

“Who is this person?”

My voice was calm, but the rage burning inside of me was waiting to explode.

“Her name, Vincent!”

“I don’t know, okay?” he cried. “They called her Belladonna, but that isn’t her real name.”

“What does she want?”

“She wants to kill you. I only overheard their conversation once, but it was clear your father didn’t want the same thing. He was bargaining with her, but she had something on him.”

“What?” I asked, pressing the blade to his throat.

“I don’t know. Please, you promised.”

“I never did such a thing. Besides, how do I know you’re not lying?”

“Check my computers. Everything is there. Everything I ever did for them, it’s there. I have her picture, but that’s it. That’s the only thing I have.”

I pressed my lips to his pulse point and whispered, “Thank you, Vincent.”

He never managed to say another word. I pressed the blade to his throat, the sound of the skin breaking apart filling in between us. He gasped, choked, as the hilt went all the way through, cutting through his larynx, through his vocal cords.

He looked up at me, question after question in his eyes. Regret after regret, yet I had none as he took his last breath, gurgling on his own blood.

“Say hi to my father.”

“Dramatic much?” came from my right and I looked to the side to see Cillian standing there.

“Just a bit.” I smiled. “But we have a major fucking problem.”

“That we do.” He nodded and stalked out of the basement.

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OPHELIA

I STOOD behind Vincent's motionless body and leaned against the wall, banging my head, trying to think of everything that had happened while I was in the clubhouse. Nova was always there, but never in a million years would I have thought that she could be a mole.

I figured that there definitely was one as soon as that note found its way to my bed, but I thought it could be Creed, or just one of the other guys that wanted me gone, but Nova? Never.

Atlas had to be informed about this, Storm as well, but I couldn't move from the spot I was occupying for the last fifteen minutes. I could hear footsteps coming from above, Cillian going from one spot to another.

His voice was loud enough to even reach me downstairs, and he was angry. So fucking angry. He was on the phone with Tristan. I knew he heard most of what Vincent told me, but I had no idea if he was angry at me or the information we got.

I looked down at my bloodied hands, the crimson a complete contrast to my pale skin, smearing all the way to my elbows. The scar running through my snake tattoo looked angry with all the blood covering it, and the night it got destroyed slammed into me in full force.

How angry I was.

How wrong we all were.

There was somebody else out there, playing their own little game, using all of us as their little puppets. I wasn't sure if it

angered or saddened me. All those years lost. All those lives, and for what?

I was chasing shadows, fighting the wrong battles, never once thinking about any other possibilities. What other truths were hidden from me while I was running around, chasing demons that weren't mine to chase?

“Ophelia!” Cillian bellowed from above, waking me up from the haze in my mind. “Get your ass up!”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed away from the wall and started walking toward the door then upstairs to where he waited for me.

His chest was rising and falling with deep breaths, his hair in disarray while he clutched his phone in his right hand.

“That name, Belladonna,” he said as he looked at me. “I know that name.”

“I gathered as much,” I said flatly and sat down on the bar chair. “Tell me how?”

“Last year, we received a letter directly accusing you of Ava’s murder. As you know, we’ve blamed you for what happened long before last year, and it didn’t take long for us to start looking for you. It awakened something vile inside all three of us and we didn’t stop until we got to you.”

“So, you’re saying—”

“This person was playing with us all, and we went with it. We never once questioned what was written in that letter. We never once questioned the videos we got of you entering the house, but now that I think about it, it was the push we needed. Kieran was already half-crazy, thinking about you. Tristan, well, he just wanted justice, and I didn’t think twice before I started stalking you.”

“But I thought you were looking for me even before.”

“We were, but not like that. It was the fuel we needed, because you were so good at evading us.”

I nodded slowly, absorbing everything he said.

“The Albanians were the ones that told me about Maya and Kieran.” Cillian winced. “I was drowning all that time, just doing things to pass time and to find my sister. But when they told me about it, I was livid. I knew what I wanted to do, and that’s why it was so easy for you to catch me.”

“But the Albanians—”

“They were working with her... with Belladonna,” I murmured, while the pieces of the puzzle started falling into place. “But why?” I asked and jumped off the chair. “Why would somebody do that?” His face took a comical look, because we all knew why someone would want to destroy us. “Don’t look at me like that. We’ve all made plenty of enemies throughout the years, but no one that set on killing us. I mean, there are literally countries where I wouldn’t dare step foot in right now, but none of them would deliberately go after me.”

“This is personal,” he murmured, looking at the floor. “Whoever this is, knows all of us. They know what makes us tick, and they knew that bringing up our sisters and what happened to them would be the push we all needed to do something. They didn’t give a fuck who lived and who died.”

I looked through the window at the green forest surrounding us, the perfect, calm nature, yet there was nothing calm inside of me. If we weren’t careful, this person, whoever they were, could be the end of us all.

“I need to warn the club,” I mumbled and pulled out my phone. “And you need to speak to Kieran and Tristan.”

“I already did.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help myself and before I could stop it, the question tumbled out of me. “Where are they?”

“It’s better if you don’t know where Kieran is.” He chuckled. “But Tristan is up North, in Ventus City, setting up your house.”

“My house?” I frowned. “I don’t have a house there.”

“Well, now you do. You also have a new name.”

“What?”

“You wanted to hide from Storm, right?” I nodded. “And we need to hide you from our father and The Syndicate. You need a new identity for that.”

“But a new identity won’t bring me the people that did this to us.”

“No, it won’t. But it will definitely hide you in plain sight while we do what we need to do. Besides, I can’t have you running around as Ophelia Aster when that last name alone could kill you, even if they weren’t directly after you. And Ventus City isn’t owned by us, nor by the Club.”

“It’s owned by Italians,” I finished for him. “Do they know?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m about to find out.”

He started walking toward his room, right next to mine. “Pack your shit,” he said. “We need to get moving.”

“I will.”

“And Ophelia,” he called out again. “Be quick with that call. That’s the last time you’ll be able to talk to them until all of this is over.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, from today onward, you don’t exist. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, you’re dead.”

This was what I wanted, to no longer exist. Or at least to no longer exist for the people who knew me as Ophelia. I just never thought it would be like this.

My hands shook as I looked down at my phone and the familiar number I scrolled to. Atlas’s name was there as a reminder of everything I would need to give up. I couldn’t call Storm. I couldn’t talk to him because he wouldn’t listen to what I had to say.

But they needed to know about Nova.

I had no idea where she was. I hadn’t seen her after the shitshow my father caused, but I was pretty certain that she didn’t go far. If she was a mole The Syndicate had placed

within the lines of Sons of Hades, then she wouldn't just vanish.

If anything, she would dig deeper, burrowing into the very core of the club. If she was anything like me, anything like our family, she would go straight for the heart.

I pressed the little phone icon on my screen and pressed the phone to my ear, hearing it ring.

"Come on, come on..." I pleaded, begging whichever force there was for Atlas to pick up the phone.

"Ophelia?" he answered with a question. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Hello to you too, Atlas."

"Cut the crap. Storm is livid. He almost killed Felix for stopping him from going out. He's looking for you."

"Well, you need to stop him."

"What? No. That's insane. You need to come back, Ophelia."

"That's not going to happen and you know it."

"Phee—"

"I didn't call you to go over this, Atlas. I'm calling because this is the last time you will ever hear from me, and I need you to listen carefully."

I could hear shuffling from the background, and within seconds, he answered again. "I'm all ears."

"There's a mole in the club, just like we suspected. And I need you to keep an eye on them. Tell Storm and whoever else needs to know, but I suggest you keep it between yourselves and monitor her."

"Her?" I could almost see the surprise on his face.

"It's Nova."

"What?"

"Yep," I answered. "Her real name is Natalia Asterova, and she's been planted by The Syndicate. Why? I have no

idea. Not yet.”

“But she’s your—”

“Yeah, she’s my cousin, a distant one, but she’s from my family. I’m pretty sure she was the one that left a message in my room just before I ran away. I’m almost one hundred percent certain that she wasn’t there for me, but for Storm. Do you have your eyes on her?”

Silence descended, and I looked down at the phone, checking that the line was still open. “Atlas?”

“Oh, I have eyes on her all right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, darling.” He chuckled. That’s when I heard him, loud and clear.

“Who are you laughing with?” Storm asked Atlas, and I shivered at the sound of his voice. God, I hoped that one day he would understand why I had to get away from him. “Atlas?”

“It’s just a friend,” Atlas answered, chuckling nervously.

Goddammit, A. He would see right through it.

“Which friend?” Storm asked him, while I basked in hearing him one last time. “It’s Ophelia, isn’t it?”

“No!” Atlas answered, but the shuffling coming through the line told me that he wasn’t exactly in control anymore. “Dammit, Storm!”

Storm spoke directly to me, “You can talk to Atlas, but you didn’t have enough balls to stick around and talk to me?”

Anger laced every single word. There was no love, no nothing except for the red, hot anger.

“Answer me, dammit!” he roared, making me jump in the spot.

I slid down the wall, hugging my knees with my one hand and holding the phone with the other one.

“I thought I deserved more than silence from you, Ophelia.” He did. He deserved the world, but I couldn’t give it to him. “You are a coward,” he spat out, making me close my eyes at the violence coming off him. “A fucking coward who I never should’ve loved.”

Fuck.

Tears ran down my face and as I looked up, I could see Cillian standing there, watching me silently. I shook my head, trying to tell him to stay away.

“I wanted to give you everything, Ophelia. The world, this universe... I would’ve taken down the stars from the sky, only if you asked for it. But you ran. You fucking ran away from me, not once, but twice, and now you won’t even talk to me. I deserve better than you.”

“You do,” I whispered.

“Then why?” he yelled. “Why, Ophelia? You tore my heart out of my chest and stomped on it. Was I really that insignificant or are you really that coldhearted?”

I had no answer to that.

“Dammit! Answer me! I deserve that much. I deserve to know what I did wrong.”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “You did nothing wrong, but I was never yours to begin with, Storm. That’s the truth.”

Somebody shouted at him, the sound of a glass crashing came through the line, making me wince, but I kept the phone line open.

“I will find you, Ophelia,” he said, breathing heavily. “I will find you, and when I do, you will wish you were never born.”

The line cut off with those words, but didn’t he know? I already wished I was never born.

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OPHELIA

THE MOMENT I stepped outside of the cabin, Cillian started throwing gas all over the walls, covering the entire place. Numb after that phone call, I could only watch as he opened a trunk, dragging a girl that looked so much like me inside the house, before coming back out.

He didn't need to explain, didn't have to say anything.

I knew what was happening right in front of my eyes. As much as I wanted to be happy about the way things were about to unravel, I mourned the loss of happiness I thought I could have. Cillian was right—I was the happiest with Storm.

To know that I would never be able to look into his eyes without seeing all the hatred he had for me burned more than anything else in this world. How could you grieve a person that was still alive? It was almost impossible.

Cillian pulled out a box of matches from his back pocket and lit one up, then threw it right inside the cabin. It landed inside the hallway. It didn't even take a second before the flames started traveling all the way from the hallway, through the cabin and all over the place.

The blazing inferno burning in front of me was symbolically a new beginning for me, but I couldn't shake off the ugly feeling of doom spreading through my gut. I had a feeling that this was just the beginning of everything fucked up that was about to resurface. As I said before, we were poking the hornet's nest, and someone was going to get hurt in the process.

I just hoped it wouldn't be any of the people I cared about.

Storm's words reverberated through my head as the fire burned the last pieces of the cabin, leaving only the concrete floor. I believed him when he said he would find me, and I only hoped it would be after I'd dealt with Belladonna or whoever else was involved in all of this.

Cillian's hand slipped into mine, holding me tight. I had no idea if he was holding me or if he was trying to give himself strength.

"We need to go," he murmured, and I could feel his eyes on me. But I couldn't move.

"Firefighters are going to be here soon, and I want us to be as far away as possible once Storm finds out we were hiding here."

"Why?" I asked and looked up at him. "Who was that girl?"

"Someone who died, trying to find a better life for herself. Someone who looked just like you and who would be a good stand-in. Both of us died today in this fire, Phee. You from the bullet wound through your head, and me from the torture."

"Vincent—"

"Authorities will think it was me. I removed their teeth and left our IDs."

Sirens echoed somewhere in the distance, and he pulled me toward the car. "Come on. Tristan is waiting for us in Ventus City."

"You're coming with me?" I asked him as we walked toward the car.

He opened the passenger side door, and I got in, going on autopilot. He put the seatbelt around me and closed the door before going around the car and entering on his side.

"Kill?"

He nodded. "For now. I'm going to help you settle in and then I'm going to Emercroft Lake."

“Why the fuck would you want to go there?”

“There’s a lead there.” He turned the ignition on and started reversing the car. “Tristan thinks that Belladonna has a base there and I want to check it out.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“No,” he said and looked at me. “You are going to establish contact with the Italians. We will need help in all of this, and the only people who hate The Syndicate and the Outfit more than we do are them. I’ll need you to play nice.”

“Nice?” I laughed. “Have you met me?”

“You can be charming when you put your mind to it. We all need this, Ophelia. They have connections and manpower. You know as much as I do that this isn’t just some silly mission we’re doing. This is a full-blown war. If we’re not careful, we won’t exactly be the winners.”

I chewed over the words I wanted to spill out. That I wasn’t about to sell my soul for a piece of information or soldiers, but I couldn’t because he had a point. We needed the Italians. I hated it, but if I didn’t want to involve Sons of Hades, I had to find help somewhere else.

“What do I need to do?”

Storm

THE PHONE I WAS HOLDING CRACKED IN MY HAND, AND THE sound pulled me back from the whirlwind of thoughts angrily dancing in my mind.

She was gone.

Just like that.

No goodbye. No apologies.

Just, gone.

I thought I would never experience the pain she granted me with when I saw her in that place with Kieran and Cillian, but knowing that she deliberately ran away—again, might I add—spoke volumes. She didn't want me. She didn't want to have a life with me. If I rubbed my knuckles any longer against my chest bone, I would give myself a bruise.

“Storm?” Atlas's voice registered somewhere in the back of my mind, but I wasn't ready for conversation.

My body was still too weak to do anything, and I fucking loathed the fact that I couldn't just sit on my bike and go after her. Not out of love, no. She didn't deserve it. She didn't deserve to see that side of me ever again.

She'd managed to kill everything good I felt for her with her actions, and I'd be damned if I ever showed her even an ounce of compassion.

I was pissed when I woke up, anyone would be, but she was the only person I wanted to see. The one person I wanted near me wanted nothing to do with me, and that fucking sucked. My heart almost gave out when she stayed behind, fighting those soldiers, but I thought she would come back to me.

I thought she would come back home.

But it was obvious that Ophelia had no idea what the meaning of home was, and I was never home for her. No matter how much I tried to understand her, to show her that everything wasn't as bad as she made it out to be, her mind was made up a long time ago, and there was nothing I could do.

I was done begging people to stay with me if that wasn't what they truly wanted. I was done being soft toward her when all she gave me was pain and bad memories.

“Storm,” Atlas said again, wrapping his hand around my shoulder. I looked up, seeing him standing behind me with a concerned look on his face. “We need to talk.”

“If we're going to talk about her, then I have nothing to say,” I said, handing him his phone. “She made her choice.”

Atlas winced at my words, “It isn’t about her.”

He looked at the rest of the people sitting in the room at the new house we got. Well, they got because I was fucking incapacitated, sleeping like a fucking princess in the hospital, while they fought the battles I should’ve been here for.

I looked at Creed, Felix, Skinny, Nova, Indigo, and Zoe, and thanked the universe for giving me these people who loved me enough to stay.

Indigo suddenly stood up, looked at Atlas, and came closer to us.

“We really need to talk,” Atlas gritted out, pulling me up.

I shook him off and could feel anger brewing up in my veins. “What the fuck, A?”

“You need to hear what I have to say, and you’re not gonna like it. But the three of us need to talk.” He looked at the rest of the people in the room and then back at me. “Alone.”

My eyes volleyed from him to Indigo. Whatever it was put an anger I hadn’t seen in a very long time in Atlas’s eyes. I turned toward the rest of the people occupying the room and said, “Everyone, out.”

They obeyed almost immediately, eyeing me then the guys as they passed next to us. Zoe squeezed my shoulder as she passed, making me wince as she touched the wound that was still healing.

Standing up, I walked slowly toward the window opposite to where I was sitting and looked out at the backyard that came with this house.

I could already see us doing barbeques there, with all the families connected with the Club and all the kids running around. hated that my mind immediately went to Ophelia, knowing that she would’ve loved that shit.

“Talk,” I barked at Atlas, not bothering to turn around. My hand absentmindedly rubbed at the Band-Aid the doctor left on my arm where the IV line was attached previously. The

bruising on my skin had me wincing every single time I looked at it.

Waking up more than a month later fucked with my mind. So many things had happened, and this helplessness coursing through my body didn't help to calm down my racing mind.

“Ophelia told me—”

“I don't wanna hear her name, Atlas. As a matter of fact, I don't want to know anything about her.”

“This isn't about her,” he bit back. “This is about us and the fuckery that was happening right in front of our eyes. You can hate her as much as you want to.” He looked at Indigo then. “Both of you. But while the rest of us sat on our asses, waiting for you to wake up, she actually did something. She went out every single day, looking for answers. She fought, she clawed, and she got them. So you can either listen to me, or I'm out of here, Prez. I don't give a flying fuck.”

“Atlas—” Indigo started, but Atlas cut him off.

“No! He's hurt, I get it, but there are bigger things at play here. We can either sit around and hold each other's hands while we all mend our broken hearts, or we can actually do something.”

Slowly turning around, I narrowed my eyes at Atlas. His hair was in disarray, his eyes wild and cautious, and I couldn't blame him for tearing into me like this. This wasn't me. This weak, hurt, fragile person, wasn't me.

“Here,” he started, removing his cut.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Indigo asked, stepping closer to him.

“If you don't want to move your ass, then I am going to go with her.” My anger flared. “She's the only one actually doing something around here.”

“Atlas!” Indigo bellowed, but I cut him off.

“No, let him be. Let him go if this is what he wants.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Atlas asked. “After all these years, you’re just going to stand there, breaking your own promises?”

I said nothing.

“Do you know why she called?” I honestly couldn’t give a fuck, but a part of me wanted to know. “She called to tell me that Nova was a mole, planted by The Syndicate, most probably to get to you.”

That got my attention.

“Do you know why she left?” Atlas came closer to me with Indigo hot on his heels. “Because she’s protecting you. But you can’t see further than your own pride, no matter what. So what if she left? So what if your heart is broken? We both know that this isn’t even about your heart or the fact that she hurt you, but about your bruised ego. And the only reason why you would go after her is to show her what a man you are,” Atlas mocked, irritating me even more.

“I’m glad she left,” Atlas mumbled. “I’m glad, because you were suffocating her just like all the others were. You claimed you wanted to set her free, but setting her free only if she played by your rules wasn’t freedom at all. A cage is a cage, Storm, no matter what color the walls are.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, taking a step toward him. “I never wanted her caged.”

“Then why didn’t you tell her the truth?” Atlas asked, coming face-to-face with me. We were the same height, he and I, but I was much bigger than he was. I knew he didn’t want to fight me and I didn’t want to fight him, but he was going way over line. I also knew that in my current state, I wouldn’t be able to do jack shit if Atlas tried to attack me. “You haven’t seen her as I did, crying and begging you to come back. Apologizing over and over and over again for something she didn’t cause at all. You should’ve told her everything when you had the chance, and now it’s too late.”

“You need to shut your mouth, Atlas,” I seethed.

“Okay, okay.” Indigo came between us, separating us to the two opposite sides of the room. “That’s enough. Both of you. Ophelia isn’t our main concern right now.” Indigo looked at me. “Nova is.”

“Ophelia mentioned that it would be better to keep her around for now and to just monitor her,” Atlas said.

“And since when do you take orders from Ophelia?” I blasted.

“Since she makes better plans than you do, Prez.” Atlas grinned. “She at least has a plan right now. I don’t see us doing anything but sitting around. What’s next? Afternoon tea? Should I go and dress in my khakis and a button-down shirt and change my name to Edward?”

“That’s enough!” Indigo roared. “Atlas, you’ve made your point, now stop it. You can’t expect him to just jump up and start running around. The man just came out of the hospital for fuck’s sake!”

“I was only getting started,” Atlas murmured. “I don’t expect him to start running around, guns blazing, but I do expect him to talk to us, to actually do something. To give us orders.”

Taking a step back, I looked at my friend, my brother basically, hating that we were fighting about such a stupid thing.

“He has a point,” I murmured, avoiding their eyes. “I’ve been awake for the last two days and the only thing I did was think about Ophelia.” I looked at Atlas. “You’re right about me caging her, but I’m not the reason why she ran away. Trust me, nothing and no one would be able to hide her from me.”

“I get that.”

“But she is not the topic right now. Nova is.” I sat down on the beige couch they’d brought from the old house. “What should we do about her?”

“I say we interrogate her,” Indigo said and sat down opposite me on the chair I was occupying earlier. “We need to do something.”

“I think we should let her be,” Atlas piped in. “Keep her around, make them think that we know nothing. Use it against them. I think we need to be more careful around her, follow her, but without making it known.”

“Then it’s settled,” I said. “We keep her around and see what she’s up to.”

“I think you need to let her get close to you,” Atlas said, looking at me. “I have a feeling that Ophelia definitely wasn’t her target, but you are.”

“Got it.” I nodded.

Silence descended on us, each of us looking at each other. Indigo spoke first. “So, what are you going to do about Ophelia?”

I scowled at him and looked to the side, ignoring their burning gazes on my face. “I’m going to find her, one way or another.”

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STORM

COLD NIGHT AIR filtered through the open windows of my office, hugging me with its chilly hands, seeping through my skin, all the way to my bones. I would have given anything for a glass of whiskey right now, but I couldn't gamble with my health, at least not so soon after waking up from a coma.

The doctor came to check in on me again, but even the anti-anxiety medication he gave me wouldn't stop this irrational fear in my chest. I had no idea what it was, where it came from, but it lingered on the edges of my sanity. No matter how many times I'd told myself that everything was okay, something was at my insides, holding my chest in its claws.

Atlas was right—I had to get my head out of my ass and start acting. I'd spent too much time attached to that bed, unable to help my people. Instead of jumping into action, I stewed over a broken heart that didn't even matter in the end. I couldn't stand for longer than an hour, and the physical therapy the doctor recommended was just another obstacle I had to get over, but I would get there. I would fucking get better and help my people, my family.

Ophelia and I didn't matter if the people around us would get hurt. I had to put aside my personal needs and focus on what was important. I fucking had to.

It is easier said than done, my inner voice spoke out. Broken hearts can't be mended with a few words of encouragement, while hiding away from what was hurting you.

Then what was I supposed to do? Go after her?

It was obvious Ophelia didn't want to be with me. She wanted nothing to do with me. I wasn't giving up. I wasn't going to let her get away with this, but I had to set my priorities straight.

Chasing after someone while the rest of the world burned was a sure way to destroy everything we worked for.

Sons of Hades was already a mess, and I couldn't waste time chasing after a woman who would lead us toward our inevitable destruction. I couldn't choose her over them, even if I wanted to.

Every part of me, every atom of my soul, screamed at me. It wanted me to get up, to go to her, to show her who she belonged to, but I couldn't. Maybe Atlas was right. Maybe I had tried to cage her, thinking I was setting her free.

I knew more about cages than most of the people my age. I knew what it felt like being a prisoner, tortured and abandoned. Could I really do that to her?

Could I drag her back with me if that wasn't what she wanted?

I got up from the chair I was occupying for the past two hours, reviewing the documents sent by other chapters of our Club, trying to make sense of it all. Many of the members decided to get out after the whole fiasco with Nikolai, and with them leaving, most of our operations fell into pieces, bleeding money we didn't have.

We were the outlaws, the ones who couldn't really get a job in a grocery store, a bank or in some other establishment, because our records showed that we weren't people you wanted to have interacting with customers. The mechanic shops in several of our chapters were suffering because they didn't have people. They had no one to work in them.

Several of the warehouses we held were attacked in the past month by other clubs, because they thought they'd be able to take them from us. My guys managed to keep them all at bay, but for how long?

MCs were constantly at war, that wasn't anything new, but right now, we were getting attacked from all sides. I had no idea how long we would be able to withstand this without falling apart. These people depended on me. Their families depended on me. If I couldn't figure out the best way to move forward, we would disappear.

I walked toward the cupboard on the opposite side of my office, just behind the door, where the notebook that was passed down to me from our previous Prez lay. I took it out from the first drawer, my fingers dragging over the worn-out brown leather.

In the past, I'd decided not to use the numbers stored here, because I wanted us to succeed on our own. But looking at those numbers, these contacts told me that I needed help. We needed help.

We needed alliances that could pull us out of this mess.

Every molecule in my body rebelled against the idea, but I had no other choice. The numbers written here were to be used only in situations where there was no other way out for Sons of Hades. My predecessors made sure that we would have a plan B if something like this happened, but I never thought I would have to use it.

My feet carried me back to my chair, my body slumping down as I finally sat, hating the weakness still coursing through my body. Logically, I knew that it would take me some time to get back to my full strength, for my muscles to recover, and for everything to go back to the way it was.

But the irrational part of my mind hated being this weak. It hated having to rely on other people when we were used to doing everything on our own. I trusted my men, but I still hated the fact that they all looked at me as if I were fragile now.

All of them except for Atlas.

He had a vendetta on his mind, and I knew that look in his eyes. I carried the same expression so many times over the years. I was worried he would do something reckless,

something he would never be able to come back from, but I had no time right now to worry about him and his mental state.

I made a mental note to talk to him later about the things that were obviously bothering him, but we weren't an emotional bunch. We never knew how to discuss the things that were eating us alive, and maybe that was the main problem.

Lack of communication.

Lack of understanding.

I vowed I would change that once I became the president, but I did nothing so far. I only added more oil to the already raging fire, and we were now in a situation where everyone walked around, ready to explode from the inside out. The things they weren't discussing were bubbling inside their souls, threatening to erupt.

Opening the notebook, I shook my head, bringing myself to the here and now, trying to focus on the task at hand. We had a long road ahead of us, but the priority was healing the broken pieces of our club. Everything else could come later.

Faded pages in front of me held the numbers of people who could help us, but nothing came without a price. Everything we did in this line of work had consequences, and nothing was for free. I skimmed through the pages, looking for the one number I needed right now.

If they didn't want to help us, then I would find another way.

With steady hands, I picked up my phone, tapping out the number left years ago. I just hoped it would still work.

I pressed the phone to my ear, hearing the ringing sound. One ring, two rings, three—

“Well, well, well,” a voice I had never heard before spoke, chuckling through the line. “I never thought I would see this day.”

“That makes the two of us,” I grunted, leaning into the chair. “Who am I talking to?” I asked, knowing that their

leadership changed several times over the years as well as ours. The old bosses were no longer among us, and I hoped that the man on the other side would uphold the agreement our sides had made a long time ago.

“Nico.” He chuckled. “Nico Romano.”

Blood froze in my veins, but I swallowed down the words threatening to erupt. Nico Romano was now apparently the head of the Italian family, the strongest one, the powerful one we needed to get through this mess.

“Nico,” I started. “My name is Storm Knoxx, and—”

“I know who you are,” he said, amusement evident in every single word. “And I think I know why you’re calling.”

“Good, because we need to talk,” I murmured, hating myself for succumbing to this. “We might need your help.”

“I’m all ears, Storm. Talk, *amico*. We don’t have the whole night.”

What was I getting us into?

THE THROBBING IN MY SKULL WAS NO DOUBT THE RESULT OF my conversation with Nico. I didn’t like the man, but he did have a point—we needed each other if we were going to survive in this new world. The players on the chess board had changed, and if we didn’t work together, both of our families would fall down and crumble.

The only problem was the demands he had.

Blood for blood, he said, and like a stupid fool, I’d agreed because I saw no other way. Nico didn’t want money, he didn’t need more soldiers, he didn’t need protection. But he did need to strengthen his bloodline, and for that he needed me.

Italians were a force of their own, but they wanted more, just like we did. They weren’t happy with only holding the North. They wanted a lot more, and we were the key to that. Well, my bloodline was a key to that.

My eldest daughter would be the key to that if I ever had one. I just hoped that one day he would change his mind, but something told me that he wasn't a man that often did that. If Ophelia and I ever smoothed out our differences and decided to have a family one day, I knew she would never forgive me for this. But it was already done, and there was no going back.

We agreed to hold a meeting, three weeks from now, in Ventus City, and I knew in my gut that I'd made the right choice. But at what cost?

"Storm?" Atlas's voice traveled toward me as he opened the door of my office, softly knocking on the wood. "I need to talk to you."

I didn't like the tremble in his voice, or the way he observed me with those big, blue eyes of his. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong, and that feeling I'd been trying to push away came back in full force, slamming in my chest.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I stood up, rounding the table and going straight toward him. Atlas walked slowly inside the office, keeping the door open. I saw Indigo standing there, his face upturned toward the ceiling, his eyes closed, the fear evident in his posture.

I looked from him to Atlas, who kept looking at the floor instead of me, as if he feared meeting my eyes.

"Atlas?" I approached him, questions lingering in the back of my mind. "What happened?"

"I don't know how to say this," he answered, his voice breaking with anguish. "I really don't know how to say this."

His head shook, his hands on his hips, but he still couldn't look at me.

"I thought it would never happen, you know? I thought it could never happen. Not like this."

"Atlas." I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Buddy, you're not making any sense. What happened? Why do you both look as if somebody—"

And then it dawned on me.

Someone had died. Someone both of them knew.

“Oh, fuck,” I murmured. “Is it Zoe? What happened, Atlas?” I asked him and then looked at Indigo, who slowly came inside the room. “Indigo? Is it Zoe? Why are you both looking like this?”

“I need you to sit down, Storm,” Indigo mumbled, his anguished eyes finally connecting with mine. “I really, really need you to sit down.”

“Fuck no!” I thundered. “I’m not a cripple. I don’t need to fucking sit down. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“They said it happened fast,” Atlas started. “The fire... The fire swallowed it whole, and they couldn’t... Oh, God,” he sobbed, turning his back to me. “I can’t tell him, Indigo. I can’t fucking tell him.”

“Tell me what?” I asked, getting impatient with the lack of the answers. “Indigo?” I looked at him just as he leaned back against the wall. “Tell me what is going on, for fuck’s sake!”

Seconds ticked by, but it felt as if hours had passed before either one of them started talking. My mind raced, creating imaginary situations that might have happened. Something bad happened. I had never seen either one of them behaving this way, ever.

Not even after Las Vegas.

Not even after I had just woken up.

We’d been through hell and back together, but these two men couldn’t even look at me right now.

“If you’re not going to tell me—”

“It’s Ophelia.” Indigo was the first one to speak up, closing his eyes as soon as her name rolled off his tongue.

“What?” I stumbled as I took a step toward him. “What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “Indigo!” I thundered. “Tell me what is going on. What about Ophelia?”

“Ophelia is dead, Storm,” Atlas murmured sadly as he turned around to look at me. “They found her body in—”

“No.” I shook my head, taking a step back from him. “That’s not true.”

“It’s all over the news, Storm,” Atlas continued. “She was in the cabin, not too far away from here.”

“No.” I rejected even the thought of it. “She can’t be dead,” I mumbled, looking at the floor. “She can’t be dead,” I repeated, unable to comprehend the news.

“I’m sorry, Storm,” Indigo said, but his voice only fueled the fire starting inside me.

“Shut up!” I bellowed, looking at him. “She isn’t dead,” I said. “She can’t be dead. She... She’s strong, she’s—”

“Storm,” Atlas said right behind me, his hand on my shoulder. “They found her body. It happened this morning, after we spoke to—”

“Liars!” I yelled out, moving away from them. “They’re all liars. That isn’t Ophelia.” I laughed brokenly. “That can’t be Ophelia.”

My heart hammered violently in my chest, my palms sweaty, my eyes burning from unshed tears. “She can’t be,” I murmured to myself. “It’s impossible.”

“Storm.” Indigo approached me slowly. “I have that buddy in the police department,” he said, but I didn’t want to listen. “The description of the girl matches Ophelia.”

“Noooo!” I yelled out, sliding down onto the floor, my legs unable to hold me upright anymore. “I didn’t tell her,” I whimpered. “I didn’t tell her everything. I didn’t tell her—”

“I’m so sorry, Storm.” Atlas sobbed somewhere on my left side, but I couldn’t see him. Both of them blurred in front of me, hidden behind the tears erupting from my very soul.

“We needed more time,” I cried out. “I needed more time. Fuck!” I slammed my fist into the floor. “She can’t be dead,” I murmured.

“She is,” Indigo answered, and I hated having him here.

“This is all your fault,” I sneered at him. “What did you tell her?” I looked up at his fucking face. “What did you do to her while I was asleep?”

“Storm.” He stumbled backward, lifting his hands in front of him. “I didn’t say anything. I didn’t tell her to leave.”

“Calm down, Storm,” Atlas piped in, but it was too late.

I was getting up, going after Indigo. “What did you guys do to her while I was away? She left, died alone.” My voice broke. “Why did she leave me?”

“Storm,” Indigo murmured. “We fought, but I encouraged her to go to you, to be with you. I blamed her in the beginning, but I knew it wasn’t her fault. I apologized to her.”

“Liar!” I thundered. Reasoning wasn’t going to work for me right now.

But worst of all, I knew it wasn’t their fault. It was mine. I didn’t fight hard enough to keep her by my side. I didn’t try hard enough to show her how much she meant to me.

“How did she die?” I asked, looking at Atlas. “How?”

“Bullet to her forehead,” Atlas answered, swallowing heavily as if even thinking about it made him sick. “She, uh,” he stammered. “There was another body in the cabin. They think it’s Cillian Nightingale.”

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

I didn’t think. I couldn’t think anymore.

I often read about out-of-body experiences, but as I walked toward the desk, all the way to the other side, my body had a mind of its own. My arms pushed everything from the desk, slamming it to the floor. Someone was screaming, yelling, and it took me a moment to figure out that it was me.

The animalistic cries erupting from my chest were like nothing I had ever felt.

I thought my heart was broken before when she left me, but nothing could ever compare to this. She died alone, far away from me, afraid, thinking that I didn't love her, that I would hurt her.

"I did this," I sobbed, collapsing in the chair. "I fucking did this!"

"No, Storm," Atlas argued, shaking his head. "This isn't your fault."

But it was. How could he not see it? This was all my fault, and I had to live with the consequences. My soulmate, the one person who could both lift me up high and tear me down, was dead. I would never hear her voice again.

I would never see that smile on her face.

I would never touch her, hold her, kiss her, show her how much I loved her. I would never get to grow old with her now.

I'd wasted so much time brimming with anger, letting it eat me alive, that I failed to see what was really important. Nothing mattered anymore if I couldn't have her next to me.

"I want to see her," I murmured, looking at the mess on the floor. "I need to see her."

"That can be arranged," Indigo murmured from the other end of the office. "But I must warn you, Storm... it won't be pretty."

"It doesn't matter."

It didn't matter. If Ophelia was truly dead, I had nothing left to live for anymore.

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OPHELIA

IT'D BEEN years since I last went to the Ventus City, and it felt almost comical that I would come back here while running away from Storm, when I actually ran away from here when I found Kieran with that bitch.

My fucking brain hurt from thinking about it all.

Cillian kept quiet the whole time we drove, only speaking up when I asked him if we could stop to eat. I had no idea how he managed to drive all this time, but I wasn't going to ask. I was too tired to even offer my help, and something told me that he wouldn't have accepted it either way.

I wondered if they already discovered the bodies and if Storm knew I was still alive, or if he believed the coroner's report.

News about the fire in the middle of the forest broke approximately one hour after we left, and I turned the radio off as soon as the broadcaster started saying my name. It felt good getting away from that, but it was also wrong, hearing your name in association with death when you were still very much alive.

The sun broke through the morning clouds ten minutes ago, and when I looked around, I realized that I had never been in this part of the neighborhood.

"Where are we?" I asked as Cillian took a right turn onto a street with only three houses.

"Home," he murmured before turning the ignition off and getting out of the car.

I watched as the front door opened, revealing a sleepy looking Tristan who hugged Cillian as if he hadn't seen him for months, when I knew that wasn't the truth. Kill tried spending as much time as possible with his youngest brother. If he wasn't with me or doing this or that job, he was visiting Tristan.

My eyes ran over both of them, noticing similarities but also glaring differences that could only be seen by people who knew them long enough.

While Cillian looked like the type of person who could kill you if you blinked wrongly, Tristan was a cuddly bear. But wolves often hid in sheep's clothing, and I knew what a lethal son of a bitch he could be.

I pushed the door open, deciding to join them and stretch my legs. Driving for so many hours, with only a couple of breaks in between, was not my idea of fun, but I understood that we needed to put some much-needed distance between us and Los Angeles.

"Birdy." Tristan chuckled as he came down the stairs and walked toward me. "You look like hell."

"It's nice to see you, too." I smiled when he hugged me, enveloping my entire body. "Last time I saw you, you wanted to sell me."

"Well, last time I saw you, you wanted to kill me." He laughed. "But it's a good thing that neither one of us succeeded."

He draped his arm around my shoulders and started walking back toward the house. "You guys must be exhausted, and Kill, you could use a shower."

"Ah-ha." I pointed at Cillian. "See, I'm not the only one who stinks."

"So, both of you are going to turn against me now?" Cillian asked as we entered the house. "I think I'm going to call Kieran to have some backup."

"Don't you dare," I gritted out.

“Uh, I think it’s much healthier for all parties involved if Kieran doesn’t know what we’re up to,” Tristan said.

Cillian’s eyes widened, and he looked from me to Tristan. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the fewer people who know about this entire stunt, the better. Come on.” Tristan let go of me and walked toward what looked like a kitchen. “Your new papers are here.”

I followed after him, with Cillian right behind me. My eyes zeroed in on a bowl on top of the kitchen counter.

“Cookies!” I exclaimed and ran straight for them, ignoring both Tristan and Cillian and the passports lying on top of the table in the middle of the kitchen. “Oh my God.” I grabbed the first one, stuffing my mouth immediately. “And they’re with chocolate,” I mumbled, eating the first one in just a couple of bites.

“Seriously?” Cillian asked, dragging his hand over his face. “Did you have to put those there?” he asked Tristan.

“Hey, it’s her new house. She deserves to have some cookies.”

“Yeah, but—”

“If you’re nice, I might even share them with you,” I said, hugging the bowl of cookies to my chest.

“No offense, Birdy, but you look like you might attack us if we tried to take even one,” Tristan said while Cillian laughed.

“I’m still hungry, okay?” I scowled, lowering down the bowl on top of the counter. “But fine,” I huffed. “I guess the cookies can wait.”

I took two steps toward the table in the middle where both of them took a seat and took the first passport that was laid in front of Tristan, opening the first page with all of my information on it.

“Emilia De Luca,” I said, frowning. “Really? Do I look Italian to you?” I asked both of them, holding the passport that

had my picture but a different name.

“I mean, your temper—” Tristan started.

“And your love for food,” Cillian continued. “You do love pasta.” He shrugged.

“Yes, but Italian?”

“This will help us with the Romanos. Besides, you can’t exactly be invited to their parties if you’re not Italian. Nico Romano is the one holding the reins right now, and I don’t want him shooting you as soon as he hears your name,” Tristan answered.

“I already know Nico Romano, dum-dum.” I huffed and sat down. “We met three years ago.”

“And you’re only telling me this now.” Cillian scowled at me. “You let me have that entire conversation with you about the Italians and what needed to be done, and you’re just casually dropping this bomb on us now. What did you do to him?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Ophelia,” Tristan warned, and I hated sitting here under this much scrutiny.

“I technically didn’t do anything, but he did want to kill me at the time.”

“What. Happened?” Cillian bit out every word separately and got up from the table.

“I smoothed it all out, but he still might want to smack me for stealing his Ferrari that one time.”

“You—” Tristan started and then stopped himself, clearing his throat. “That was you?”

“It’s not such a big deal. He owes me a favor now, and he invited me to his wedding.”

Cillian was pacing from one side of the kitchen to the other, holding his hands on his hips. I could see that he wasn’t a happy camper with the information I shared, but it wasn’t like we had time before to reveal all these things.

“So you’re telling me,” Cillian growled. “That you had a connection with Nico Romano and his family, but you failed to say so before.”

“I thought his father or whoever was still in charge!”

“That’s beside the point, Ophelia!” Cillian roared. “We could’ve avoided a lot of things if you’d only told me. And now you’re saying he invited you to his wedding.”

“Oh, yes.” I nodded. “He’s marrying this non-*famiglia* chick, and it’s been such a big uproar—”

“Ophelia!” Cillian screamed, making me jump in my seat.

“Fine, fine, I’ll stop dicking around. Yes.” I looked at Cillian and then at Tristan. “I know Nico Romano and he owes me a few favors. No, I didn’t know he’s in charge now. And yes, I am going to go to that wedding.”

“You’re not going to that wedding,” Cillian growled. “You’re supposed to be dead, for fuck’s sake!”

“When is it happening?” Tristan asked at the same time.

“What date is it today?” I looked at him.

“Uh,” he mumbled and pulled out his phone. “It’s June 2nd.”

“Ah, fuck.” I stood up and pulled out my phone. “The wedding is tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” they both asked at the same time.

“Yes,” I murmured, typing a message. “Tomorrow.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Cillian seethed. “For a world-class killer, you are a mess.”

“Well, excuse me if it slipped my mind. But between trying to find whoever this Belladonna person is, worrying about Storm and trying not to get killed, his wedding completely slipped my mind.”

I left the kitchen and entered the living room that was just on the opposite side. I needed a dress, and I needed to RSVP as fast as possible.

“What are you doing?” Cillian asked as soon as he entered the room.

“Getting a dress, Kill.” I looked at him. “What size tuxedo do you wear?” I asked him.

He narrowed his eyes on me, distrust evident on his face. “Why?”

“Because I can’t go alone, and I can’t go with Storm. It’s going to be all lovey-dovey, and it will look as if the Cupid himself puked all over the place, and I can’t—”

“Did you not hear what I said earlier?” He scowled. “You are not going.”

“The hell I’m not,” I retorted. “This is a perfect opportunity to talk to him and to get him on our side. If I try to get to him later, I might not succeed.”

“Ophelia.” Cillian exhaled slowly, rubbing his temples. “As of today, you are officially dead. Hell, the news reported it as well. Don’t you think it’s idiotic to go to the wedding, in the middle of the day, showing your face like that?”

He did have a point. I knew he had a point, but Italians were as much against The Syndicate and the Outfit as we were. They didn’t work with the Albanians, and they definitely didn’t work with Storm.

“Kill, I need to do this. This is the perfect opportunity.”

“God fucking dammit, Birdy,” he murmured and stood up from his chair, pacing the length of the kitchen. “I burned down that cabin for you, for us, so that you wouldn’t need to live in fear of getting found. So that we could get all these things in order before you actually revealed that you were alive. Going to this wedding is suicide.”

“Then it’ll be my suicide, and not yours,” I growled. “I don’t need your permission, Cillian. I don’t need anyone’s permission to do whatever the hell I want.”

“I’m not letting you kill yourself, Ophelia,” he glowered. “We will find a different way. You’re not going to that wedding.”

“Cillian,” I murmured. “I am going. You can’t stop me.”

Silence ensued, our heavy breathing filling the space of the kitchen, while Tristan looked from Cillian to me.

“Brother,” Tristan said. “Maybe she does have a point. Maybe it would be the—”

“No.” Cillian shook his head. “You know as well as I do that this wouldn’t give us what we needed. This would only put us out there for everyone to see. Who knows if the Italians have moles who are working for Belladonna or one of these other parties. This plan won’t work.”

Maybe he had a point. Maybe I shouldn’t be doing this, but goddammit, I couldn’t miss this opportunity. Besides, I wanted to see my friend. I wanted to see that happiness was possible even in this line of work.

I walked toward Cillian who was glaring at me as if he would strangle me any minute now. And maybe he would, but he had to understand that I would do this even if he didn’t agree with it. The only catch was—I wanted him to agree.

“Kill,” I murmured, pulling his arm toward me, and entwining our fingers together. “You know I have always loved you more than I have loved my own brother.” Tristan chuckled at that. “But I don’t need a guardian or someone to tell me what I can and can’t do. I need your support and your help.”

Minutes passed, both of us suspended in time, looking at each other, breathing slowly, when his eyes suddenly softened, relenting finally.

“Okay, okay, okay,” he started and came closer to me. “I’ll go with you. But for fuck’s sake, you gotta start telling me these things sooner.”

Nodding, I hugged him without warning, and it felt good having someone with you that actually didn’t want you dead. “I’ll try to be better about it, okay? Just don’t yell anymore. My brain is already fried as it is.”

“Fine, I won’t yell, but we should both go to sleep now.”

“Can we watch a movie later, once we get up?”

“No, because it seems that you need to get yourself a dress and I need a tuxedo.”

“But after?” I grinned and looked up at him.

He tried looking serious, but that mischievous twinkle in his eyes told me that he wanted one peaceful night as much as I did.

“Fine, we can watch a movie tonight.”

“Fuck yeah!” I jumped and moved away from him. “I hope you like *Lord of the Rings*, because I haven’t watched it in forever.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh, yeah. I need my Legolas fix.”

“Ophelia,” he warned as I ran toward the kitchen to get my cookies. “We are not watching it again.”

“You already promised, Kill.” I smirked, taking my cookies. “Now show me the way to my room, before I fall asleep right here.”

Tristan kept chuckling quietly, while Cillian glared at me, but I knew he was looking forward to it as much as I was. I knew he loved Arwen as much as I loved Legolas.

“But you can’t tell Kieran?” He pointed at me, serious as a heart attack.

I imitated closing the zipper over my mouth and throwing away the key. “Cross my heart.”

“Go to sleep, Birdy,” Tristan said, laughing at Cillian and the defeated look on his face. “I’ll catch you later.”

Cillian showed me the way toward the stairs leading to the first floor, and then toward my room.

I didn’t bother with the lights, using the natural light coming through the ceiling-high windows to go through the room. A single queen bed occupied the right side of the room, facing the large LED television screen on the opposite wall.

I looked to my left and saw the walk-in closet, chuckling as I walked toward it. I had, what, a small backpack of clothes, yet they gave me the room with a walk-in closet and what seemed like an en suite bathroom.

I had a feeling that Tristan was under the assumption that I was still the seventeen-year-old Ophelia, who had a closet filled with clothes dictated by her father, just to appear as someone who could fit in. Now, I didn't have an issue with pretty clothes or girly shit you could wear while brunching with your friends, but it'd been years since I stopped trying.

Makeup? Mascara was my best friend on those days when I actually didn't feel like killing anyone.

"Well." I sighed and sat down on the bed, untying the laces on my boots. "It is home for now."

Or for the foreseeable future, but I couldn't stay here. No matter how good Tristan was, and how well made those IDs were, Storm would find me no matter what. I was starting to think that the only way to evade him was to leave the country, which was exactly what I was planning to do. Even if he thought that I was really dead, he was one person I knew that wouldn't be fooled by the girl Cillian placed in that cabin.

Storm would take one look at her and he would know it wasn't me. I just hoped hiding here would give me enough time to figure everything out and get away from here.

Once this shitshow was fixed and they'd paid for what they did, I was planning to vanish.

Europe was beautiful during the summer, and apart from England, Russia and Poland, I hadn't been to the other parts. Ibiza sounded like a fucking amazing idea right now.

Falling down onto the bed, my entire body bounced, making me chuckle like a little kid. I couldn't remember the last time I slept well. As the sleep started overtaking my consciousness, I just prayed that Atlas would be able to stop Storm from coming after me, at least long enough to finish my job in Ventus City.

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STORM

IT WASN'T HER.

The body lying in front of me, on the metallic table, wasn't Ophelia. I knew deep inside my heart that I might shatter once I finally came here, but I knew with no doubt that this wasn't her.

The face of the female in front of me was unrecognizable from the fire, but I knew Ophelia. I knew every curve of her body, every line of her face, and this person in front of me, whoever she was, wasn't my Ophelia. I thought relief would course through me once I realized that it wasn't her, but instead, a new wave of anger slammed through me, destroying everything in its path.

She was so adamant on getting away from me that she would fake her own death?

Didn't she think of me or the people she knew who would mourn her passing? Didn't she think that just hearing about her death would shake my entire world?

I stepped closer to the woman lying on the table, trying to figure out what sorts of horror she went through to end up in this place. To end up as a puppet for a fucked-up person who obviously didn't know when to stop running.

Ophelia would obviously stop at nothing to hide her tracks, to protect herself, never once thinking about the people she was leaving behind. She didn't care about me. She didn't care about the people who loved her, and this was only additional proof.

To think that I mourned her, that I cried for a wicked bitch.

Looking down at the arms of the woman, it was obvious that she had no tattoos unlike Ophelia. Did she really think she would be able to fool us all? Maybe the authorities believed this story, but not me. The woman in front of me was frail, too skinny to be Ophelia.

She didn't have a broken snake tattoo around her forearm. She didn't hide monsters on her skin. She was just another victim of a woman who had no boundaries. Ophelia pushed and pushed and pushed, and unless I stopped her, she would keep pushing until she burned the world around us.

"Are you okay, Mr. Knoxx?" the policeman standing in front of me asked. I had no idea what to say.

I wasn't okay, not even remotely. Ophelia lied—again. She made me believe that I'd lost her, that I couldn't breathe at all, while she was probably laughing God knows where, enjoying shattering me once again.

This was all a game for her, and I was a fool for believing Atlas's words that she was different, that she had changed.

Monsters could never change who they really were, and Ophelia was just another wolf hiding in plain sight, taking and taking until there was nothing left.

"Mr. Knoxx?"

"I'm fine," I murmured, my eyes lingering on the destroyed face of the woman in front of me. "It's just a lot to take in," I lied.

"Is it her?" he asked, expectantly looking at me. "Is it Ophelia?"

I wanted to tell him the truth. I wanted her to be chased not only by me, but by the police as well, but I lied.

"Yes," I murmured. "It's her."

I wasn't going to allow any of them to get close to her. I wasn't going to tell them she was actually alive, because then I wouldn't be able to get her myself. She would have no idea I would be coming.

She had no idea what I had in store for her, and she would regret ever running away from me.

This I could promise.

“I would like to pay for the funeral once you’re done examining her,” I said, looking straight at him.

Whoever this woman was didn’t deserve to die like this. She didn’t deserve to die alone and scared, getting used as a puppet by a psychopath that Ophelia was.

“Could you let us know, please?” I asked him, faking the sadness as much as I could. Anger was what lived inside of me now, and I couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of here and break something. “We’ll be in touch,” I said as I started walking away from him, and straight through the door, leading to the hallway where Atlas and Indigo waited for me.

Both of them stood up at the same time, their concern for me misplaced, because there was nothing they should worry about.

“It isn’t her,” I said, walking past them, heading toward the exit.

“What?” Atlas exclaimed.

“What do you mean it isn’t her?” Indigo asked at the same time. “It has to be her. They confirmed—”

“She played with us,” I grunted, my sole focus on getting home and getting hammered. Fuck the medication. I needed alcohol if I was going to survive this. “She faked her own death to get away from me,” I murmured, while the two of them followed.

We went through the hallway, passing through the exit door, and straight out into the cold, night air.

“Storm,” Atlas started, putting his hand on my shoulder as soon as we stepped outside. “What are you going to do?”

I pondered over it for a second, but I knew what needed to be done.

“I’m going to find her.” I smiled coldly. “And I am going to bring her down to her knees. That I can promise you.”

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OPHELIA

SOMETHING WAS TICKLING MY NOSE.

I swatted at it with my hand, still clinging to those last remnants of sleep, refusing to get my ass out of the bed. My back hurt. My body hurt as if I went through five rounds of MMA fighting, and I didn't want to face the crazy reality I was living in.

It was bad enough that my dreams weren't my own anymore but were instead filled with Storm and his pained face as he yelled out for me. That pathetic, fucked-up part of me wanted to believe that he did it because he still cared, but that part of me was slowly losing to the realistic part that knew he would never love me ever again.

The tickling came back, and as I opened my eyes, I saw Cillian's smiling face in front of me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked, groaning as he pressed the feather against my cheek, going all the way to my lips and then to my nose.

"Well, good morning to you, too." He chuckled and sat on the bed.

"What time is it?" I murmured, closing my eyes again. "And why the fuck are you waking me up?"

"Well, darling..." he trailed off. "It is ten in the morning and—"

"Ten?" I exclaimed, opening my eyes, and immediately getting up. "We need to get going." I jumped off the bed,

heading straight for the bathroom. I looked down, right next to the door, and saw my backpack lying on the ground.

Cillian or Tristan must have brought it in at some point.

“The wedding is at—”

“Three in the afternoon,” Cillian finished, still sitting on the bed.

I stepped out of the bathroom, eyeing him and how calm he seemed. “Why are you not freaking out?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “We don’t have clothes for the wedding and I’m not planning on going in my jeans and tank top.”

He stood up and leisurely walked toward the wardrobe, opening the door right in front of me. “Because...” he stepped inside and within a second, came out, holding a garment bag. “While you were getting your beauty sleep, Tristan and I arranged everything.”

My eyes widened, my eyebrows hitting my hairline. “You didn’t sleep?”

“I took a nap.” He shrugged and shoved the bag at me. “Here, try it on.”

“What’s this?”

“A dragon.” He rolled his eyes. “What does it look like?”

“Har-har.” I scowled and took the bag from him.

Walking back toward the back, I started unzipping it and almost gasped when I saw the blood-red color inside. “What the—”

My hands went inside the garment bag of their own volition, touching the silky fabric.

“You should try it on,” Cillian murmured, leaning against the wall next to the wardrobe. “I think it’ll fit you.”

“How... When—”

“Contacts,” was all he said. “The hair and makeup people are coming in about an hour, so you should hit the shower if

you want us to get there on time.”

I looked at him, tearing my eyes away from the dress hiding inside the garment bag.

I was never a girly girl, always more on the tomboy side than the dressing-up type. Ava was the one who always had to drag me to do something fun. Dresses reminded me of my father and his constant need to have me looking like a princess when I was anything but.

Yet, standing here, holding this dress, made me realize that I yearned to have something normal in my life. Calm, even boring. I was tired of the constant running, the constant fighting, and I wanted a life where I didn't have to look over my shoulder every single second.

“Thank you,” I whispered, standing in the middle of the room, at a loss of words. “I-I don't know what to say.”

“You're not alone, Birdy. You were never alone. But you need to let us help as well. This,” he pointed at the dress, “is nothing. After everything we all went through, I think we all need someone to hold our hand from time to time. Someone who can help us. Someone who can save us.”

Shadows hid behind every word, and I could hear the hidden meaning behind it all.

We'd been fighting fights that weren't our own. All of us—Kill, Kieran, Tristan, me, my sister, even my traitorous brother—were all thrown into a world we never wanted to be a part of, but it wasn't as if anyone ever asked us.

“We're family, you know,” he mumbled, staring at the floor. “And family helps each other.”

I wasn't someone who cried often. I wasn't someone who knew how to articulate her emotions. But in that moment, I wanted to cry for the little boy hiding behind that tough exterior, scared and broken, but still standing regardless of everything that had happened to him.

He rarely talked about the monstrosities he committed, or the ones he saw, but the scars were there, pushing to the surface. The demons he battled, the vices he had, they were all

he could use to forget about all those things that were shoved right at him.

“Kill,” I said and placed the dress on the bed, then walked toward him. “I hated my brother,” I mumbled, looking up at him. He still avoided my eyes, but he needed to hear me. I took his face in my hands, rubbing his right cheek with my thumb. “But you are the brother I always wanted to have.”

He shuddered as soon as the words erupted from my mouth. Before I could react, he had me engulfed in a hug, holding me tightly.

His face disappeared in my hair at the crook of my neck, his entire body bending down as if he could disappear into me. Body trembling, hands shaking, he held onto me like a lifeline, and I let him, because I knew how hard it was letting go.

We all carried our emotions locked tight, hidden from the rest of the world, because we were taught that they were nothing but distractions. They were nothing but weaknesses.

It didn't matter if it was love, fear, anger, pain, or happiness. All those could be used against us if our enemies knew where to look. Mental health meant nothing to both of our fathers, and everything Cillian was going through was always swept underneath the carpet, ignored until the point of breaking.

And when he broke—and he did—they all pretended as if they couldn't see that the reason for his pain was standing right there in front of their mirrors. Even Kieran ignored what was going on with Cillian because he couldn't face the truth.

He couldn't face the fact that his brother, his twin, wasn't as strong as he wanted him to be. But if strength was walking numbly through life, ignoring everything that ate our souls, then I didn't want to be strong. If falling apart and asking for help meant getting better, finally getting happier, then I would rather fall apart ten thousand times than pretend that everything was okay.

“Kill,” I murmured against his shoulder, rubbing his back. “Why didn't you sleep?”

He tried getting away from me, but I tightened my hold on him, locking him in my embrace.

“You know you can’t keep going on like this,” I said matter-of-factly, knowing full well that this might blow up in my face. “Does Tristan know?”

He groaned as soon as the question rolled off my tongue, and I knew the answer. None of them knew. Whether or not they noticed, I had no idea, but they had to start noticing, and fast, because he wouldn’t last long enough if he kept going on like this.

Cillian was always leaner than Kieran, taller as well, but now as I hugged him, I could almost count every single one of his ribs, and that had nothing to do with him deliberately not eating. Those scars on his body, the track wounds, the fact that he barely slept, it was a perfectly paved road to death. I didn’t want to lose another person I cared about.

His cheeks were sunken these days, light completely missing from his eyes, and if it wasn’t for those bags filled with white, I knew he wouldn’t be able to stand here in front of me. I was afraid to even ask what he had rolling around in his veins.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do,” I whispered, hoping that this time he would truly listen to me. “But you need to get help. You need to do something, Kill.” My voice broke, and I shut my eyes, unable to think about the different outcome. “I can’t lose you, too.”

“Birdy—”

“No.” I shook my head. “I know.” I shuddered. “I know we all have our vices and our demons, but Kill... This is quite literally killing you. This is taking you away from us. I know your brain might tell you differently, but you are so loved, Kill. You are needed.”

I took a step back and took a hold of his hands, holding him tightly. “I need you.” I sniffled. “Your brothers need you as well.”

His eyes were glassy, bloodshot, and I wished I could erase those dark circles around them. “They’ve already lost Ava,” I continued, uncaring how much this could hurt. “They won’t survive losing you too.”

“I know,” he mumbled.

“You told me you would get better,” I exclaimed. “You promised me, yet you’re only getting worse and worse.”

He stepped away from me and leaned against the door, looking at the ceiling. “Because I don’t know how to stop,” he said. “I don’t know how to close my eyes and erase all those people I’ve killed from my vision, from my memories. They’re all around me, all the fucking time,” he gritted out. “I know you understand.” He looked at me. “I can hear you sometimes, screaming in your sleep. I know they haunt you, too.”

I looked to the side, feeling his eyes on my face.

“You don’t have to hide from me,” he stated. “I know we’re talking about me right now, but we will need to talk about you too and the fact that you’re constantly running away from Storm.”

I winced at that and turned around toward the window. It was surprisingly sunny for Ventus City, and I wondered if this weather would hold for the rest of the day. I was trying to ignore the remark Cillian made.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied. “I’m doing it—”

“For his good,” Cillian finished for me. “We both know that’s a load of bull, but whatever helps you sleep at night, Birdy. I’ll go now and we will finish this conversation some other time.”

I swirled around, arching an eyebrow at him. “How did we go from talking about you to talking about me?”

“It’s a magic trick.” He chuckled, but that smile never reached his eyes. “I gotta go now, but...” he looked pointedly at me. “One hour and I’m expecting to see you downstairs. And wash your hair.”

My hand automatically shot up toward my hair, touching the knotted strands at the back. He had a point, but the annoyance swirling in my gut wouldn't let my mind move away from what he said.

I couldn't voice it, couldn't even think about it, so how could I tell Cillian that the reason I constantly ran from Storm was because, deep down inside my heart, I knew I wasn't worthy of love. I wasn't worthy of Storm, and after what I did, I wasn't worthy of happiness.

It wasn't my knife that placed him in the hospital, but my actions were the ones that took him away from the Club. If only I wasn't such an insecure, terrified little girl, I would've talked about my issues with him. But my emotional intelligence equaled one of a toddler and throwing tantrums and running away were easier than facing the truth.

Maybe one day I would be able to admit everything out loud.

One day I would be able to say that I was scared to be loved.

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OPHELIA

I DIDN'T RECOGNIZE the person staring back at me in the mirror.

It was me, but it also wasn't me. At least not the me I was used to.

The girl I often saw in the mirror had sunken eyes, pale skin, hair up in a ponytail or just generally disheveled, and she looked like she'd just crawled out of a swamp. But this girl... This girl glowed.

My hair fell over my shoulders in soft waves, shining underneath the light. My eyelids were masterfully colored with soft brown and taupe colors, finished with the sharp yet thin eyeliner, making my blue eyes pop even more.

The foundation made my skin glow and the bronzer they applied to my cheeks made me look otherworldly. It just... It wasn't me.

Not entirely.

"I-I look," I stammered, pressing my hands to my stomach, unable to look away.

"Otherworldly," Eric, the stylist who came in, said from behind me. "Like a Goddess," he gasped. "Goddess Emilia."

My entire face scrunched as compliments kept rolling off his tongue, the new name I was supposed to get used to, sounding foreign, while his hands held my shoulders, as if he too knew that I was about five minutes from running away from here.

Still wearing my sweatpants and the white tank top, I could see all my tattoos, all my scars, and I knew it was still me. I was essentially still the same devil they all feared, but this makeup, this hair... it made me think of Ava, of Maya as well, and all those nights we'd spent together, dressing up for no one in particular.

Maya was the one who bought me my first lip gloss. As I touched my crimson-colored lips, I hated that she still wasn't here with me, and Cillian didn't want to disclose her location.

"*Kieran is on it,*" he'd said, as if he didn't know that I had trust issues. I was a control freak who rarely trusted that other people could do the same job I could. But he was also right when he said that I couldn't be in three places at the same time.

Unless I wanted to fail at all of them, then I had to be patient and wait.

I tilted my head to the left and then right, and saw Cillian approaching me from behind, carrying something in his hands.

"What's that?" I asked, looking at him through the mirror. Eric stepped aside, eyeing Cillian with obvious interest. I almost laughed when Cillian winked at him.

But when Cillian placed something on my neck, I looked back at him then at the necklace he was clasping in the back.

"I've had this for a very long time," he mumbled, and my hand went straight for the pendant lying on my chest now. "It was supposed to be your birthday gift, but, eh..." He shrugged. "We kinda weren't talking."

We both started laughing just as he stepped back, letting me eye the pendant.

A small dagger lay on my skin, with a red ruby etched into its handle. It looked almost the same as the first dagger I ever had. The first one I ever used to kill someone. While it should've been bittersweet and something I wouldn't want to remember, I knew what Cillian was trying to do.

We all had our ups and downs, but just like I could see his struggle, he could see mine as well. Today, more than ever, I

needed a reminder of who I was and what I was capable of. I needed to remember that I could be both Heaven and Hell.

Thank you, I mouthed, looking at him.

Cillian simply nodded and disappeared back toward the kitchen. I could hear his and Tristan's hushed voices, but they quickly quieted as Eric started talking, pulling my attention back to him.

"Now," he grinned, "it's time for the dress."

"WILL YOU STOP FIDGETING?" CILLIAN BARKED AS SOON AS we parked in front of the church, his eyes scanning the area, staring at all the people walking toward the entrance.

"I hate weddings," I murmured, scratching at my face, and immediately remembering there was makeup there now. "I hate funerals as well, but weddings..." I cringed. "They're the worst."

"Well," he looked at me, "you'll survive. This isn't a social call. We're here to talk to Nico and to get the Romanos on our side."

"Trust me, they're already on our side. I just need to get him to listen. I hate doing this on his wedding day."

"Since when do you care if it's his wedding or not?" He scowled and exited the car.

I followed shortly after, slamming the door harder than necessary. "Since I'm trying to be a better person, douchebag. Since I'm trying to be a better friend."

He looked toward the church and then back at me, relaxing momentarily. "I know." He huffed. "I know. I'm just not too comfortable being here. Nightingales and Italians are not exactly best of friends. Not to mention that someone could start talking and all our efforts would go up in flames."

"Since when are Nightingales and Italians not talking?" I frowned.

“Since always, Ophelia. You’re not the only one with a target on her back.”

He turned his back to me and started walking toward the grand staircase in front of the church. People were taking photos, laughing, genuinely enjoying the day, yet here I was, already annoyed at my friend.

I caught up with him in a matter of seconds, striding over the gravel road, miraculously well in these heels, and took his hand.

“We need to chill,” I murmured, eyeing the other guests. “Both of us. I’m pretty sure that there will be people here who won’t be too happy seeing the two of us together. I’m also sure that the news of you working with me will travel faster than I want it to.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about, too.”

The crowd cheered and sang with the live band that was playing in front of the church, and I wondered if this was a typical Italian wedding or if they were just winging it however they wanted it to go. Eyes were plastered on us, and I already recognized some of the guests, scowling as soon as they noticed me.

“That’s Chiara Romano,” I murmured, looking at the dark-haired girl standing with a guy I didn’t know.

Her emerald-green dress hugged her body, showcasing her bare back much like mine was. But where mine fell in loose waves against my backside, hers was a tight fit, revealing the tattoo of a snake that took up more than half of her back.

The last time I saw Chiara, she was holding a man at gunpoint, with her heel right on top of his crotch. People thought I was insane, but they should meet her.

A bright smile took over her face the moment she spotted me, and I knew she wasn’t faking it.

“Ophelia?” she asked, her eyes widening, shock evident in them. “What are you doing here? I thought... I thought you were dead.”

She all but ran toward me, ignoring all the other guests that were trying to get her attention. I let go of Cillian who stepped aside at the same moment she slammed into me, hugging me to her. She might have looked small and frail, but she was one of the fiercest women I had ever met.

“It’s been too long, my dear friend,” she mumbled into my ear and stepped back to look at me. “And you look stunning. Holy shit, am I glad you aren’t dead. I was about to head down South to kick someone’s ass as soon as the news reached me.”

“You do, too.” I smiled, forcing my heart to calm down. “I’m here because your cousin invited me. As for the whole *Ophelia Aster is dead* story, well,” I chuckled, “I’m gonna tell you all about it later.”

“Fine.” She scowled. “But you need to tell me everything. Nico invited you?”

“The one and only.” I looked at Cillian and pulled him closer to me. “This is Cillian,” I said.

“I know who he is,” she stated, eyeing him from head to toe. “Cillian Nightingale,” Chiara purred, taking a step closer to Kill. Her hand splayed over his chest, her head coming only to his shoulders. But no matter how tiny she was, she had a special effect on men.

And Cillian wasn’t immune.

I chuckled, looking at both of them, lost in each other. Without either of them noticing, I slipped away, going directly inside the church.

White roses decorated every row inside the church, and even though a part of me wanted to cringe at the setup, because it simply wasn’t my style, I had to admit, whoever arranged it had a very eclectic taste.

The sweet scent penetrated through the air, but it wasn’t sickening. It was just enough.

People were already getting seated, talking to each other, happy for the soon-to-be married couple, and I felt like a complete outsider. I was friendly with some of Nico’s cousins, but I couldn’t see any of them here. Knowing how late they

always were to every single thing, I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case now.

I turned around to see if Cillian was anywhere to be seen, but he and Chiara were obviously still talking outside because I couldn't see either of them.

Tightening my hold on the small, black pouch Eric basically threw at me, I turned back toward the altar and started walking toward the fifth row on the left side that was still empty. I kept my head down, hoping people wouldn't really look long enough at me to figure out it was really the infamous Ophelia Aster.

“Ophelia?”

A voice behind me stopped me in my tracks, and I slowly turned around, pressing my hand to the knife strapped around my leg. But the person standing right behind me wasn't an enemy.

He was as far away from an enemy as a person could be for me.

“Cole!” I squealed and ran straight toward him.

His wide smile and relaxed stance made me loosen up, and as I threw myself in his embrace, I almost missed the woman standing next to him.

“Addison?” My eyes widened as I took her in, disbelief coloring my features. “I don't believe it.”

We'd met only once, and looking at that period of time, it felt like another lifetime.

Her dark hair was slicked back, a cerulean dress falling freely down her legs, hugging her curves and leaving nothing to the imagination. Her bright, inviting smile beckoned me to her, and I hugged her next, holding her tightly.

“You two look,” I murmured, stepping back, and looking at them. “I don't have words. Last time I saw you, you were —”

“Trying to run away from him?” Addison said, taking Cole's hand in hers. “Well, a lot of things have changed. You

look different, though.” She smiled. “The same but different.”

“Addy,” Cole kissed her hair, “don’t start.”

“What?” She looked up at him. “She looks beautiful, but that’s not it. Last time I saw her she looked like the devil himself and look at her now.”

“I grew up?” I chuckled.

“You?” Cole scoffed. “When was the last time you killed someone?”

“Cole,” Addison gasped, looking around us. “We’re in church.”

He shrugged. “So what? It’s not like God doesn’t know how many people we made disappear. So,” he turned toward me, “when was it?”

“Uh,” I stammered and looked to my right. “Yesterday.” I grinned, earning a full belly laugh from him.

“See.” He hugged Addison. “Wolves change their fur, but their nature? Never.”

“Yeah.” I frowned. “We never change.”

But that wasn’t the truth, was it? And Cole knew it. I hated that saying, because it implied that none of us were capable of change when that was far from the actual truth. He was proof of it and knowing what his stance was on the girl now holding his hand, what he just said made no sense.

But I understood what he meant, and I also knew that deep beneath that brilliant smile he was sporting now, the same devil he always was still pulled all the strings. No matter how much makeup I wore, or how many nice dresses and perfect smiles I put on me, the bloodthirsty side of me would always exist.

“Where are you sitting?” Addison asked, breaking through the tension between Cole and me.

“Uh, I’m not really sure. I was about to sit there.” I pointed toward the fifth row that was now fully occupied. “But now I don’t know.”

“We can just sit here.” She started walking toward the seventh row that was still half empty and pulled Cole with her.

I could feel his eyes on my face, but I avoided looking at him. It’d been years since I last saw him and I knew we had many things to discuss, starting with my alleged death. It was ridiculous, feeling butthurt over the comment he made but mixed with my feelings and everything that had been happening right now, it just didn’t sit well with me.

Addison went in first, Cole after her, and I sat right next to him, keeping my gaze plastered toward the altar. There was only enough space for Cillian to fit if he even wanted to sit with me right now.

“Phee,” Cole whispered, and I turned toward him, seeing the apologetic look on his face. “I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“It’s okay, Cole.” I smiled, hoping it reached my eyes. “I know you didn’t mean anything bad. It’s been a truly fucked-up period of my life. But that’s not on you.”

“Do I need to kill someone?” he asked, and I erupted in laughter, earning a glare from a grandma sitting two rows in front of us.

“No, you idiot.” I swatted his hand. “I can do that myself. But,” I looked up at him, “I do need to talk to you, and Nico as well.”

“Hmm,” he mumbled. “At the reception?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“And Ophelia,” he said, looking straight at me. “You need to explain what happened in Santa Monica. We all thought you were—”

They all thought I was dead, but he never got to finish the sentence.

The soft music started playing around us, and I turned toward the entrance just in time to see Nico entering with a worried look on his face, heading straight toward the altar.

I had never once seen him nervous, not like this. I’d seen him angry before, numb, complacent, but nervous? Never.

He fumbled with the buttons on his suit jacket, and I started laughing as he passed next to me. He was obviously sweating through his suit. He looked down at me, surprise evident on his face and for the first time since he entered, he smiled as he continued toward the area where he would wait for his bride.

“You think she’ll show up?” Cole whispered, making me laugh again.

“You’re a terrible person, Cole.”

“I never said I was the good one. But look at him.” He cackled. “He’s about to combust if this wedding doesn’t start soon.”

As soon as he said that, I felt a presence on my right and turned to see Cillian standing there.

“Really?” He frowned seeing Cole next to me and sat down. “Cole Mancini?”

“Play nice,” I gritted out. “Cole.” I looked at him. “This is —”

“Cillian Nightingale,” he answered, taking Addison’s hand in his. “We’ve met.”

I didn’t need to be a genius to know that it wasn’t a friendly kind of meeting.

“Well, shit.” I chuckled nervously. “Just remember boys,” I looked at Cillian then at Cole, “you’re not allowed to kill each other until after the wedding.”

“Nah.” Cole shook his head. “He’s not the problem. His brother on the other hand.”

“Kieran?” I stared at him, confused. “What does he have to do anything with—”

I was cut off by the wedding bells and a version of “Here Comes the Bride” I had never heard before.

All the guests stood up and looked toward the entrance of the church. Nico was fidgeting at the altar, fixing his collar, his

jacket, the flower in his pocket, but as soon as she stepped inside, he only had eyes for her.

I had never met his future wife. We hadn't exactly been in touch over the years, but as I looked at her, in her long, princess dress, she looked absolutely brilliant. The veil hid her face, but the smile she wore was clearly visible through the white lace.

And she only had eyes for him.

While everyone watched the bride, I turned around and looked at Nico. The love shining through his eyes, the sheer happiness wrapped around him, was almost too much to look at. It felt wrong seeing this moment between them, as if it was something that should've been private.

No matter how much I hated weddings, deep inside of me, I hoped that I would get to live long enough to have someone look at me like Nico was at Alessia.

Like she was his entire world.

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OPHELIA

THE PARTY WAS in a full swing and I couldn't wait to go home.

The bride was happy, dancing with her family, with Nico, and I felt like a sore thumb, sticking out in a crowd that didn't really want me there. They were all watching, waiting to see what the great Baba Yaga would do, as if it was some sort of exhibition.

I just couldn't wait for all of this to be over.

Cillian was God knows where, with Chiara probably. Cole and Addison danced in their little, dark corner, oblivious to the world, and I kept chugging vodka as if it was water, praying for the numbness to take over.

I didn't think that being surrounded with so much happiness would affect me this way, but here I was, in the middle of the most beautiful event I had ever attended, miserable because my heart stayed back in Santa Monica, crying for the man who hated me.

I was pathetic, that's what I was. A pathetic, sad girl, who broke her own promise to herself. I vowed never to fall in love again. I vowed that after Kieran, I would never allow myself to experience such a weakness. Instead of focusing on the job and dragging Cole and Nico to some quiet corner to discuss everything that needed to be done, I sat here at this round fucking table, miserable as fuck.

No wonder the other guests who knew who I was, observed me as if I were going to snap any moment now.

I tightened my hold on the tall glass filled with vodka and chugged the rest of it down, wiping my lips with a napkin as soon as I slammed the glass down on the table.

Suffocating.

I was fucking suffocating, and I couldn't sit here anymore.

The need to get out of this room, out of this reception, was as strong as ever. Getting up was not such a good idea, and neither was having six glasses of vodka. I swayed on my feet, grabbing the backrest of the chair to steady myself.

My teeth were tingling, my tongue numb, and I could feel the darkness coming in fast, taking over my body.

“Shit,” I mumbled, swallowing slowly, as if that could sober me up.

These heels weren't made for walking while intoxicated, but I didn't have the strength to bend down and take them off.

Scanning the crowd, I prayed I would be able to catch Cillian, but the idiot disappeared as soon as the food was served. That was more than an hour ago. Wherever he went, it better be good, because I was going to punch him in his pretty face as soon as I saw him.

Pressing a hand to my throat, I could feel the droplets of sweat gathered on my skin. I knew it had nothing to do with the temperature in the room, but with the fact that my body and my soul hated large crowds. Especially when I felt like a wild animal in a cage.

This dress wasn't me.

This makeup wasn't me.

These pretenses, where I plaster that happy smile on my face, were not me.

“Ophelia?” someone said from behind me. Rolling my eyes, I turned around, expecting to see one of the other wives or girlfriends standing there, but when I managed to swivel around, holding that fucking chair, it was the last person I would expect to see.

Mainly because I knew that Nico would rather cut his own kidney out than let his pretty wife anywhere near me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, taking a step forward, her hand outstretched toward me. But I couldn’t bear a human touch right now. Couldn’t bear to have someone care for me because I was seconds away from falling apart.

And I didn’t want to fall apart. Not here. Not in front of these people.

“I’m okay,” I gritted out and took a step back, swaying on my feet like a newborn calf.

“You don’t look okay,” she murmured, and I fucking hated how perfect, how kind, how nice, she seemed. She was everything I never would be, and I hated myself even more for wishing to be someone I was not.

Someone who wasn’t broken from the inside out.

Someone kind enough to approach a stranger and offer my help.

I was a selfish cunt who only ever thought of herself and her own needs, and this pretty angel in front of me should not be standing this close to the darkness.

“Darling.” She grinned. “You can either let me help you or I can have one of the guys carry you for me. The choice is yours.”

Damn. Maybe she wasn’t so nice after all.

“Why are you even here?” I narrowed my eyes at her. I rarely ever trusted other people, and in those rare situations where I did, I had to have a damn good reason for doing so. Or at least that’s what I liked to think.

People were rarely kind, at least not to me. I couldn’t exactly blame them. The sheer association with me could bring only pain and misery, and I understood when others evaded my company. I understood, but that didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt like hell.

Just look at what happened to the Club. They took me in, treated me like one of their own, and look what that got them?

How many died? How many of them lost their siblings, spouses, mothers and fathers, and all because of me and my fucked-up family.

My free hand flexed at my side, the anger I was feeling slowly seeping through my bones, all the way to my fingers. It was a living, breathing thing, ready to attack anyone who dared to talk to me at that moment. But if I even looked at Alessia wrongly, Nico would have my heart in five seconds and he wouldn't care if others saw it or not.

"Nico will be pissed off if he sees you with me," I mumbled, thankful that I didn't drink myself into a stupor. The last time I passed out from alcohol intake was almost a month ago, shortly after Storm ended up in the hospital.

I promised myself I wouldn't try to drown my sorrows with vices that I wouldn't be able to escape. Well, joke's on me, I guess, because I definitely broke that promise as well.

"Nico doesn't tell me what to do." She smiled. "And I've wanted to meet you ever since he told me about you stealing his car and giving him the chase of his life."

I frowned. "You did?"

"Yep, yep." She laughed. "He wants to protect me, I get that, but he doesn't get to tell me what to do or who to hang out with. I am his wife, not his prisoner, and if he can't remember that, then he can go fuck himself."

I looked at her, really, really looked at her—her dark hair, brilliant, fierce eyes, and I understood why he fell for her.

"I heard you gave him hell when he kidnapped you."

"Hey," she pointed at me with her index finger, "I was hungry, sleepy, and they pissed me off at work. He apparently expected a damsel in distress, and he got me."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad he got you," I said, smiling for the first time since we came to this party. "But if you don't mind," I rounded the chair and sat down, "I need to sit down."

Her dress shuffled behind her, and within a second, she was next to me, pulling the other chair closer to mine.

“How much did you have to drink?” Her right eyebrow was arched, and I felt like a kid caught in the middle of a heinous act by her mother.

“Uh...” I looked away from her. “A few?”

“A few?” she exclaimed. “A few is two or three, and you look and smell like you drank a distillery.”

I rolled my eyes and rubbed at my temples with my index fingers. “I had ten, okay?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, woman.” She started looking around. As soon as she saw a waiter, she flagged him down. He all but ran toward her, no doubt knowing who the wedding was for and whose bride she was. “Darling, could you bring us one large, still water? With ice, please.”

He swiftly nodded and rushed away from us.

“You’re going to drink it and then,” she laughed, “we’re going to drag my darling husband to that little room over there.” She pointed toward the door on the other side of the room. “And we are going to talk.”

“Talk?” My eyes almost bulged out of my head. I needed to talk to Nico, not to her. “Uh—”

“He doesn’t hide anything from me, and a little bird told me that you might need our help.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just stared at her, hating that the vodka blurred the lines in my mind.

“You seem confused.”

“Because I am,” I blurted out. “They usually keep wives out of the business.”

“Ophelia,” she started and placed her hand on top of my knee. “They might be kings. They might think that they have the upper hand, and we let them be macho and whatever they want to be, but us...” she trailed off and leaned closer to me. “We are the queens, aren’t we?”

I could only nod, completely taken aback by the situation at hand.

“Now, we’re going to sober you up and we will talk. I have a feeling that we are going to be very good friends.”

Something inside me warmed up, feeling her words in the core of my being.

“I would like that.”

CARBS AND WATER WERE A CURE FOR EVERYTHING. BROKEN heart? Get yourself a hamburger. Pissed off? Drink some water and have a pizza.

Drunk as fuck? Stuff your face with the best Italian bread, chug down a liter of water, and pray that you wouldn’t pee yourself.

Alessia wasn’t kidding when she said that she would sober me up, and I had never seen someone so determined to get me up on my feet. After the water came to our table, she kept pushing it at me, all the while talking about her job, her life here, and how much she hated the big wedding. But Nico wanted it and they decided to compromise.

He would get a big wedding, fit for a king, and she would get a honeymoon in New Zealand, even though he hated flying more than he hated the American version of Italian food.

There was something comforting in the way she spoke, how happy she was, how content, and I yearned to have that one day. She was stronger than me. She didn’t allow bad things to break her mind, or to break her relationship.

She fought for him even when he wanted to push her aside.

And Nico tried—several times.

As soon as the alcohol started dissipating from my system, or well, at least I was able to walk properly, she took me to the room she had pointed to. As she opened the door, I realized it was an office of sorts.

I didn’t want to sit anymore, and instead, I walked toward the bookshelf on the opposite side of the door, lining the entire

wall.

“A bookworm?” she asked, joining me immediately.

“I used to be,” I whispered, dragging my fingers over the spines of old books. “I can’t remember the last time I was able to sit down and read a book. There’s always something that needs my attention, or I’m always on the run.”

“Are you still on the run?”

She sat down on the sofa chair situated across from the large mahogany table and looked at me.

“Sometimes I feel I will always be on the run.” I chuckled, but even I could hear how broken it sounded. “But maybe one day, I will be able to have a house filled with books,” I shrugged. “It’s a dream at least.”

“And it will happen.” She grinned. “I am sure of it.”

I opened my mouth to ask her about her family, when the door slammed open, revealing a pissed-off Nico.

“What the fuck, Tesoro?” He breathed heavily, fear etched into every pore on his face. Without even looking at me, he went straight to her, pulling her into his embrace. “You can’t just disappear like that.”

“You were busy with your buddies. What did you expect me to do? Wait around?”

“No.” He shook his head, taking a step back. “But I don’t expect you to go into small offices with the Queen of Carnage herself.”

“Oooh,” I exclaimed. “I actually like that one.”

“Darling,” Alessia started, taking his hand. “If she wanted to kill me or any of us, she would’ve done it already. I’ve heard of Ophelia Aster. We all have.”

Continue please, as if I’m not here.

“Besides, if she was so dangerous, why did you invite her?”

“I didn’t think she would come,” Nico answered and looked at me. “No offense, Ophelia, but you aren’t exactly a social person. And you were supposedly dead, so I didn’t even think about it, until I saw you earlier.”

“None taken.” I laughed and perched my ass on top of the table. “But she is right, you know? We both know that if I came with sinister intentions, we wouldn’t be having this conversation now. You would probably be chasing my ass around, if you were still alive, and the rest of the Capos would be organizing themselves to catch me.”

His eye twitched, but he couldn’t hide the small smirk dancing on his face. “You’re so sure of yourself.”

“Nico,” I arched an eyebrow at him, “you know how good I am. I don’t need a small room to kill someone. And I like Alessia.” She grinned and stepped in front of him.

“Now that we’re done with that,” she spoke. “I think we need to talk about business.”

“Tesoro,” Nico growled, warning evident in his voice. “We talked about this.”

“No, nope.” She pressed her index finger to his chest. “You talked, I listened, and I decided that I do not agree with your reasoning.”

“I still control the Mafia, Tesoro.” He grinned like a Cheshire cat, thinking he won.

“And I control your dick.” She smiled sweetly, but I could see the warning written all over her face. “So if one of your *soldati* are able to suck your dick as well as I do, please go ahead and call them. I don’t give a flying fuck that you control them. If you want me, you’ll need to listen to what I have to say.”

Well, hot damn. The balls on this girl.

Nico opened and closed his mouth, but words never came out. He looked at me, then back at Alessia, and I forced myself to stifle the laughter threatening to erupt from my chest. One look at his face and I knew I was failing.

“Do you talk to Storm this way?” he asked me directly, and I deflated. How he knew about Storm, I had no idea, but I didn’t exactly appreciate being reminded of him.

“No,” Cillian spoke as he entered the room. “She just runs from him and waits for him to find her.”

“Kill!”

“What?” He shrugged. “It’s the truth. But no, she usually threatens his life and his family jewels, and then runs. I think that the chase excites her.”

“You’re an ass,” I gritted out, but he just kept smiling at me.

I took a good look at him, really good look, and he didn’t have to say where he’d been—it was written all over him.

The white shirt he wore had lipstick stains on its collar. His hair was in disarray and that after-sex glow was almost blinding. But the red hickey on his neck was what sealed it.

“You had fun?” I asked him, wiggling my eyebrows.

“Shush it,” he whispered, looking at Nico. “I don’t want to get killed tonight.”

“Okay, okay.” Nico huffed and sat down on the sofa chair, pulling Alessia down on his lap. “We’re all here. We—”

The door suddenly opened, revealing Cole.

“Well, now we’re all here,” I said, grinning at Cole.

“You started the party without me?” Cole asked and strode inside the room, taking a stand right next to the bookshelf.

“We wouldn’t dare to do so,” Nico murmured, rolling his eyes. Nico’s hand was splayed protectively over Alessia’s stomach, and one look at her then at him told me everything I needed to know.

“You’re pregnant,” I blurted out, my eyes widening as soon as the words came out of my mouth. “Shit.”

“How do you know?” Alessia asked, smiling at me while Nico glowered at me.

“You’re not drinking and it’s your wedding. The way he’s behaving around you.” I pointed at Nico. “It’s quite obvious.”

“Then you know why I don’t want to get involved in this shitshow that’s happening around us,” Nico said matter-of-factly.

“I do.” I nodded. “But I also know that this shitshow isn’t only mine. Where do you think The Syndicate, the Outfit, and the Albanians would attack once they’re done with me and Sons of Hades?”

He didn’t like that answer but fuck it. I wasn’t sugarcoating things today,

“She has a point,” Cole piped in, his hands in the pockets of his trousers. “As much as I would like to avoid getting involved with all of this, we all know that those motherfuckers wouldn’t think twice once they’re done eliminating one of their enemies. What will we do then? It might be too late.”

“Then what do you suggest, Cole?” Nico asked him, holding onto Alessia like a lifeline. “We all have our own issues to sort through and getting involved in this was the last thing on my list of priorities.”

“But don’t you get it?” I asked, stepping forward. “These people don’t care about the territory. They don’t care about honor or code. They don’t give a flying fuck that they could kill innocent women, children, and men. They don’t care, Nico. I’m not asking you to attack them right now.”

“Then what are you asking, Ophelia?” Nico exclaimed.

“I’m asking for your support. There is a big possibility that they won’t even look your way. Even more, I won’t have to ask for your help unless absolutely necessary, but I want to know that I have it should I need it.”

“And how do you plan to take them down?” Cole asked. “You must have some sort of plan.”

“We do,” Cillian answered instead, placing his hand on my shoulder. “My father only cares about his personal image. Hell, his associates do too.”

“And what about The Syndicate?” Alessia was the one to ask.

“I am going to deal with them,” I answered. “My father is gone. It’s only a matter of time until I get to meet with my uncle. He never wanted America. He was happy in Europe, taking over territories. He and my father never saw eye to eye, and I’m planning to use it.”

“I hear there’s a bounty on your head,” Nico interrupted, earning a soft slap on his knee from Alessia. “What?” He looked at her. “She’s a walking target. Showing up here after faking her own death isn’t exactly the smartest decision.”

“That’s what I said, but she didn’t listen to me,” Cillian said and smiled. “But, I, for a fact, know that they’re not allowed to kill her.” He looked at my frowning face. “They need you alive, which means that there’s something they want.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?” I asked, hating being blindsided.

“I just found out, Birdy,” he murmured. “Your uncle doesn’t want you dead. He needs you for something, and I’m sure he will let you know what.”

“So what?” Nico asked and stood up from the chair, lifting Alessia with him. “We just sit around and wait?”

“Au contraire,” Cillian said. “We get ready.”

“We fight,” I added. “If needed. But I need you.” I looked at Nico then at Cole. “I need allies. I know I might not be your favorite person, but I will never forget this. I will forever be in your debt.”

Silence descended on us, all five of us waiting for the final verdict to be announced.

“I told you a long time ago, Ophelia,” Cole said and walked toward me. “Whatever you need, whenever you need it. You’re almost like family to me, and I can guarantee that the Mancini family will stand by your side if it comes down to that.”

“Thank you,” I murmured and squeezed his upper arm. I looked at Nico and I could see he was breaking.

He nodded at Alessia who smiled at him and then looked at me. “The Romano family will stand by you as well.”

Relief washed over me and for the first time in months, I felt like I could breathe.

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OPHELIA

EVER SINCE WE came back from the wedding, I felt as if something big was about to happen. Something ate at my insides and my spidey senses were constantly tingling. Cillian told me I was just being paranoid, but my senses never once failed me, and I had a feeling that they weren't wrong right now either.

Cillian shared what he found out about my uncle. It turned out that my grandfather was still alive and well and living in Russia. One other thing my father lied about. But what did they want with me?

When Cillian told me that there was a bounty for my head, I thought they were planning to kill me, to avenge my father. But nothing was ever as simple as it seemed. I feared that there was so much more I needed to unravel until we got to the end of this story.

The biggest question I had was about Belladonna.

I never pretended to be a saint. I knew what I did, who I was, and I knew that all the monstrosities I'd committed would come back one day to bite me in my ass. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember any woman I'd wronged. Well, I could, but they were all dead—I'd made sure of it.

No remorse.

No pain.

No witnesses.

Those three were the main rules of The Syndicate and I followed them to a T. But then who was after me and why? Why now?

My brain hurt from all the questions flickering around, and I knew I couldn't continue like this. I'd had Cillian and Tristan working on uncovering the truth. I had two Italian families working on my side, high on alert, and they would let me know if they found anything.

But it'd been ten days since the wedding and we were still at point zero. No new leads. Nothing that could let us move forward. Even The Syndicate and the Outfit were quiet, and the Albanians... They had their own mess to clean up.

Three days ago, their leader was killed. Agon was not a man I mourned, but no matter what transpired later on and what their initial goal was, he still gave me a purpose when I had nowhere else to go. When I felt that death was the best option for me.

The news shook the entire underground community and the fact that it happened during the day, right in front of the school his daughter attended, didn't sit well with me. If he was working with The Syndicate and the Outfit, who would kill him and why?

I mean, why was a silly thing to ask, considering that he murdered, or at least gave an order to murder, half a dozen people. He wasn't exactly a teddy bear, but it made me even more wary. Maybe walking outside like this, when everything was going up in flames, wasn't the best idea, but if I spent another minute inside that house, I would go nuts.

I had my gun strapped in the waist of my pants, hidden by my hoodie, and I thanked the universe for a rainy day today. It'd been hot as the devil's ass for days now, and sweating wasn't something I liked to do.

But I needed to clear my head, and with the house completely empty, with only me inside of it, I needed an out. I wanted to start running at night again, but Cillian warned me that it wasn't safe. I had new documents, but I still looked like

me. And most of those who were after me knew exactly how I looked.

It wasn't as if I wore a mask every time I went on a mission, and whoever this Belladonna person was, definitely knew me. I just hated that I had no idea who she was.

I'd been walking for the last fifteen minutes, and I started realizing that the neighborhood our house was in wasn't that bad.

It seemed as if mainly families occupied it, at least judging by the number of kids playing around and parents walking in groups on the streets. I wished I could just sit in the car and go into the city, but with Nico and Alessia on their honeymoon, I knew it wasn't safe for me to walk around unprotected. Nico gave me his word, but we both knew that there were people in the *famiglia* that didn't exactly agree with his decision.

So, I laid low, hating every single moment of it.

I was about to take a turn and go back toward the house, when a bright, pink warehouse pulled my attention.

I was standing at the crossroad, where if I turned left, I would be going straight toward the city, and my house was just behind me. But on the left side, not too far from the crossroad, the pink warehouse stood with a bright, neon sign.

Clearview Shelter.

I didn't know there was a shelter over here.

My legs pulled me in that direction on their own volition, and just like always, I followed my instinct, going straight for the building.

The paint was peeling off. The place looked run-down, but the large banner of a happy puppy playing with two kids in front of the building started choking me. All those times I begged for a puppy, just one puppy to play with, and all those times my father slapped those questions out of me, while my mother just stood on the side, watching him take his frustrations out on me.

All those times I felt lonely even with my brother and sister around me, and all those birthdays where the only wish I had was to get a puppy.

But it never came, and I stopped wishing. I stopped dreaming a long time ago. But after that conversation with Alessia, something woke up in me. A need, a yearning, and even if those dreams never came true, I knew I needed to start dreaming again.

Hoping.

Praying.

I believed in Kieran and that he would be able to bring back Maya, but I didn't want her to come back only to hate me and avoid me because I was a shell of the person I once used to be.

With renewed determination, I strode toward the main entrance of the shelter, and walked right in, stopping only when a blond receptionist greeted me with a smile on her face.

"Uh," I stammered. "Hi."

"Hi," she replied back. "Can I help you with something?"

I walked toward the long, white reception desk and looked around. This place needed some funding as soon as possible, but that wasn't why I was here.

"I want to adopt a dog," I blurted out without thinking, and as the thought settled, I didn't feel regret for saying it. Yes, I moved a lot, my life was hectic, but if I could save one of them, then I would be on the road to doing something right.

She straightened up, beaming at me.

"Did you already visit our website?" she asked.

"No." I cringed. "Was I supposed to?"

Shaking her head, she continued smiling, her bubbly personality waking up the awkward side of me. "No, no, it's not necessary. Only if you want to have a look at the dogs that are already in. But," she walked to my right and came right out of the desk area, "I can show you if you'd like."

She pointed toward the tall, white door that was probably leading to the area where the dogs were.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I would like that very much.”

“Follow me,” she announced, and just like a puppy, I went after her, following her every move.

She unlocked the door and as soon as she opened it, the barking sounds filled the space, muting down every thought I had. We went straight into the area where several cages lined the wall on each side.

“There is a board with every dog’s information right on the cage,” she said. “I’ll leave you to it and I’ll be right in front of the door.”

But I wasn’t listening to her anymore. I was already striding toward the cages, hoping that I would be able to bring one of them home with me.

Some of them were right at the front, barking playfully and yapping, but none of them pulled at my heart like the one in the very last cage on the left side.

I knew enough about dogs to know which breed he was even before I looked at the board, but the sad look in his eyes was what made me stay.

His fur was black, with brown spots on his chest, above his eyes and his paws, shining underneath the weak light. But while the other dogs barked, howled, and tried to get my attention, he only sat there, simply looking at me as if he could convey everything with one simple look.

“Hey, buddy,” I said and kneeled, placing my hand on the cage. “You’re such a pretty boy.”

His tail wagged, and slowly, almost carefully, he came closer to me, and sniffed my hand. I saw a rottweiler once before, but I forgot how big and majestic they were.

“You’re such a sweet boy,” I cooed as he pushed his head against the fence, trying to reach my hand. “Yes, you are.”

“I see you’ve found our longest resident here,” the girl from before stated. I hadn’t noticed when she came back.

“He’s such a good boy, but people see his size, his breed, and they don’t even want to look at him.”

“He’s beautiful,” I whispered, pushing my fingers through the fence, trying to reach him. “Why would they leave him?” I asked and looked at her.

“Ah.” She came closer and sat down on the floor right next to me. “His family got him as a puppy, but when he started growing and growing and growing, they decided he was too much for them. They dumped him here about a year ago. He was still just a puppy back then.”

“Why get a dog then if you’re not gonna take care of it?” I asked, looking at him. “Does he have a name?”

“Not really,” she answered sadly. “We try not to get too attached to some of them, because we know that there could come a day where we would need to say goodbye.”

“You mean once they get adopted?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He’s been with us for over a year and they’re planning to, you know...” she trailed off.

“They’re planning to do what?”

She leaned toward me as if she didn’t want him to hear her. “To euthanize him.”

“What?” I shrieked. “But why?”

“Those are the rules. This isn’t a no-kill shelter unfortunately, and he isn’t the first dog that had the same destiny.”

He laid down on the floor, right on top of his paws and looked up at me.

I couldn’t leave him here. I couldn’t let them do this to him. I knew what it felt like, being unwanted, and this poor dog didn’t deserve it.

“I want to adopt him,” I announced, never moving my eyes away from him.

“What?” she asked, her eyes widening in shock. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” I murmured. And as if he knew what was going on, his head suddenly perked up, his tongue lolled out and I could swear he was smiling at me. “What do you say, darling?” I asked him, smiling at him. “You wanna come home with me?”

“Wow,” she breathed out, and as I looked at her, I could see the tears pooling in her eyes. “I’m sorry, I just...” she trailed off. “I prayed and prayed and prayed that someone would take him. He’s the best dog. A true king. He doesn’t care about cats. He gets along with other dogs, and we even managed to teach him a few tricks, thinking it would help with his adoption process. But most of the people that come here want smaller breeds because they think rottweilers are dangerous.”

She suddenly stood up and brushed her pants.

“And they’re not. I mean, in all honesty, every single animal is dangerous if you don’t work with them.”

“Oh, I know. I was attacked by a shih-tzu once and they’re a small breed.” I laughed. “I know about rottweilers and the stigma around them, but I’m sure we will be just fine.”

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” she asked. “He needs to go out at least three times per day. They’re active dogs and they like to play, they like to listen, and—”

“I know and I want him.”

With the way he was looking at me, he wanted to come home with me too.

The girl started to go out toward the door when I asked, “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Diana,” she answered. “I’ll get those papers done for you. Oh, but wait.” She stopped suddenly. “What are you going to call him?”

I looked at him, but there was only one name in my head.

“Kaiser,” I answered. “An emperor.” As soon as his name rolled off my tongue, Kaiser stood up and started licking my hand.

“You like it, don’t you?” I asked him, grinning from ear to ear.

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OPHELIA

I HAD a feeling that Diana skipped a few steps through the adoption process, but I was glad to get out of there with Kaiser walking right next to me.

I was completely unprepared, but the shelter sold collars and leashes, and since I wouldn't be able to drag a large bag of dog food, I bought a smaller one just to have it until tomorrow. Grocery shopping was long overdue, and while it was never something I enjoyed doing, it gave me an excuse to get out of the house and I was definitely going to use it.

Diana also explained the commands Kaiser already knew, recommended a veterinarian in the area, and snuggled with Kaiser, tearing up when we finally left the shelter.

I expected him to pull, to try and go here and there, but all the way home, Kaiser walked next to me as if he'd been doing it every single day of his life. I grinned every time he looked up at me. I had never seen gratitude like the one shining through his brown eyes.

I had never wanted to cry as much as I wanted to cry for him. He wasn't walking next to me, he was practically jumping as we walked home. Never once did he try to step away from me. A dam I didn't know I was holding opened up in me, and halfway home, I started choking from the emotions too strong for me to handle.

"I'm sorry, darling," I whispered as we stopped just one block before our house. "I'm not sad." I scratched him behind

his ears and kneeled in front of him. “I just don’t understand how anyone could leave you.”

He licked my face, his paw coming on top of my knee as if he understood. As if he knew.

“But I am not going to leave you, you know.” I smiled wobbly. “I will never leave you.”

That smile of his spread even wider, his tail wagging, and I knew it was the best decision I could have made. I made many mistakes, but this here, this was something good.

I did one good thing in my life, and it filled me with a happiness I hadn’t felt before.

“Let’s go home,” I murmured as I stood up, and he immediately fell in the line, on my right side, right next to my leg.

I was lost in my thoughts when we crossed the street, but as we passed the two houses before ours, I knew something was wrong.

And Kaiser did as well.

He stopped at the same time I did, his tail high up, his ears perked back, and his entire body strained, ready for whatever was coming. But it wasn’t about what was coming at us. It was what was standing right in front of my house.

Three unknown SUVs were parked on my front lawn, with one more on the side of the road, right behind my car. The windows were tinted black, and I didn’t need to be a genius to know that they didn’t belong to Cillian or his friends. Besides, if we were expecting company, he would’ve told me about it.

This was The Syndicate.

I wrapped Kaiser’s leash around my hand and started walking toward the house, expecting at any moment that they would get out of their cars. But they never did.

I walked over the lawn, on high alert, yet I knew that there was no running now. I was tired of running, tired of constantly being afraid.

Kaiser sniffed at the door, growling softly as I pushed it open, and I knew there was someone inside.

“It’s okay,” I cooed at him. “They’re not going to hurt us,” I said, but I didn’t believe my own words.

I dropped the plastic bag with his food on the floor as soon as we stepped inside. It didn’t take a second for them to appear in front of me.

Three soldiers stood in front of me—two coming out from the kitchen and one from the living room. But unlike the ones in the hospital, these ones didn’t wear masks. I recognized one of them, but not the other two.

“Andrei.” I nodded at the one standing in the middle, while Kaiser stood in front of me, covering me with his body. “It’s been a long time.”

Andrei grinned at me. “Could’ve been longer to be very honest,” he said. “But I must say, I’ve missed having you around.”

“I’m pretty sure the rest of your buddies don’t feel the same way,” I mumbled, looking at the other two.

They were unarmed, or at least they seemed to be.

But Kaiser didn’t trust them, and neither did I.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, spreading my legs. The three of them weren’t the only ones here, that much I knew. If it came down to a fight, I was heavily outnumbered, but I could run.

Or at least I could try to run.

“We came here to talk,” a voice came from the living room. It was a heavily accented voice, and I immediately knew who it was.

I only met him once in my life, and from what my father told me, he was the nightmare haunting the streets of Eastern Europe.

My uncle walked into the hallway from the living room, stopping right in front of the soldiers. He looked so much like

my father, it was almost like seeing a ghost—the same blue eyes, the same dark hair streaked with silver. But he was taller than my father, and the viciousness in his eyes was worse than anything I had seen in my father’s eyes.

“You’re here to kill me,” I stated, never moving my gaze from him.

I could fight, I could run, but Lazar Aster was not the kind of a man that would ever give up.

“No.” He shook his head. “I came here to talk,” he said and took a step forward but Kaiser suddenly stood up and barked at him.

He grinned at the growling Kaiser and then looked up at me. “I see you have quite a protector there.”

“I do, but he’s not the one you would need to worry about, *dyadya*,” I murmured, narrowing my eyes on him. “You already tried to kill me once.”

“Oh, that wasn’t me,” he murmured. “Those men are no longer part of The Syndicate.”

“You mean, they’re no longer on this Earth?”

“Well...” He shrugged. “They attacked my niece, my darling Katya,” he said.

“That’s not my name,” I gritted out and pulled Kaiser closer to me.

“Katya, Katya, Katya,” he started and took a step backward. “No matter how much we try to run away from our true selves, it is almost impossible.”

“Well, I could try.”

“You could.” He nodded. “And you could suffer your whole life, because that isn’t who you really are.”

“You don’t really know me, so you can’t really speak for me.”

“Don’t I?” He tilted his head to the side. “I know you. I know you better than you would think.”

I didn't have time for this and I hated the way he kept looking at me, perusing me, dissecting me. The last time I saw him was more than five years ago, when I last visited Siberia. When my father threw me outside into the snow, into the winter, while my back bled out and my soul cracked apart.

This social call of his was not needed.

"If you're not here to kill me—"

"I'm not," he interrupted.

"I don't believe you."

"I understand that you don't, but I am not here to kill you, Katya. I would never do that."

"Why's that?" I took a step forward and Kaiser followed my lead. "And don't give me some bullshit excuse about us being a family. I've met more enemies than friends carrying my own blood."

"Ophelia." He said my name almost like a prayer. "I am not here to kill you."

"Why?" I argued. "I killed your brother. I betrayed The Syndicate. You know better than anybody else what the punishment for that is."

"*Da*, I do know. I know because I executed men and women for betraying us, but you didn't betray The Syndicate." He smiled. The motherfucker smiled. "You betrayed my brother, who, let's be honest, wasn't a man worthy of living."

"I don't understand."

He looked back at the three soldiers standing behind him, and with one move of his head, dismissed them and looked back at me.

"Do you know who gave you your name?" he asked as he sat down on the staircase, placing his elbows on his knees.

"My father," I mumbled. "I already know this story. The moment he saw me, he—"

"He gave you the name worthy of an empress, of a queen. He loved you so much. He would've done anything for you."

“Yes, yes, save me the sentiments. My father never loved me. He only wanted to use me.”

“*Da*, Nikolai used you.” He scowled as soon as he said his name. “But he isn’t the one who gave you your name. Your father did.” He stood up as I frowned at him. “Your real father.”

“N-No,” I took a step backward. “That’s not... What are you talking about?”

“You see, Ophelia, I could never kill you.” His facial expression softened as he kept coming toward me. “*Moy malen’kiy drakon*,” he murmured. *His* little dragon? “I could never kill my own daughter.”

No.

That’s impossible.

“You’re lying,” I whispered. “You’re fucking lying.”

“I never lied to you, *malysh*. I never could.”

“B-But... Nikolai... He,” I stammered, my eyes wide and frightened. “He—”

“He used you against me. He used your mother as well. But you...” he stopped approaching me right in front of Kaiser. “He always knew that I would do anything for you. For my only child. He knew I would stay back in Europe, letting him have everything else. And he tortured you for my sins. *Mne zhal’*, Katya.” This couldn’t be. “I’m sorry for everything, but he had the most important person in my life and he was using you.”

“But, in Siberia...” I trailed off, trying to remember everything. “You could’ve saved me back there.”

“*Net*, Katya. I couldn’t have.”

“Why not?”

He took a deep breath and slowly released the air. “Because he would’ve killed your sister if I’d tried to take you away back then.”

“Maya?”

“Yes, Maya.” He nodded. “I needed time to figure out how to protect you all. I needed time, *moy malen’kiy drakon*,” he murmured. “That’s why I’m here. I want to tell you everything.”

“I-I,” I mumbled. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just hear me out. Yeah? And if you want me to get out of your life, I will try to respect your wishes.”

“So, you’re not here to kill me?”

He started laughing. “Definitely not. Killing my brother was the best thing you ever did.”

Well, holy fucking shit.

FIVE PAIRS OF EYES WERE PLASTERED TO ME, AND I TRIED TO avoid each and every one of them, fidgeting on the couch in the living room, while Kaiser sat on the floor, right in front of me.

Lazar, my uncle—no, *my father*—sat on the opposite side, staring at me, waiting for me to say something. But the words weren’t coming, and I needed a minute to process everything he’d said.

He and my mother were together before Nikolai and my mother? Nikolai got her hooked on drugs, got her pregnant with Theo, and swept her away to the US, keeping her away from Lazar.

“So,” I started, swallowing the nerves wrapped around my throat. “You’re telling me that almost everything I ever knew was a lie?”

“No, not everything. But most of the things.”

“I was born in Saint Petersburg?” I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. “And my mom managed to run away from Nikolai?”

“*Da*,” he answered.

“But a few months after I was born, he found her and took us all back to Croyford Bay?”

“*Da*,” he simply confirmed, as if what he’d just told me wasn’t something that changed everything I ever knew.

“I just—” I started, but stopped myself, closing my eyes. “I can’t believe all of this. You’re telling me you’re my father. You’re saying that the father I always knew wasn’t my real dad, and that the reason he behaved that way with me was because he was trying to get back at you?”

“I’m sorry, Katya.”

“Your sorry isn’t cutting it right now, old man,” I gritted out. “Do you have any idea what I went through?” I asked him, anger like I had never felt before, boiling in my veins. “He took everything from me. My youth, my innocence, my fucking mind!” I bellowed. “He destroyed me, and you’re telling me that you didn’t even try to—”

I couldn’t even say it.

“I fucked up, Ophelia. I know that.”

“So, you want me to forgive you? Is that why you’re here?” He winced as if I’d physically slapped him, but I couldn’t care about his feelings right now when my brain was still trying to connect all the dots.

“No, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Why then?” I yelled out.

“Because I wanted you to know the truth.” He stood up and walked toward the window. “I’ve been looking for you, but it was as if you fell down a rabbit hole. No matter what I did, you were nowhere to be found.”

“I was hiding! I was trying to survive. I did things I never should’ve done, and I did it all so that I wouldn’t get killed by the big bad Syndicate. And you’re telling me that all that time I’ve spent in hiding was for nothing, because my father wasn’t really controlling the real Syndicate?”

“I don’t have words expressive enough to explain myself or to tell you how much it hurt me, not knowing where you

were.” He turned toward me, and even though I could see he meant every single word, I couldn’t forgive him for abandoning me. “The moment you escaped, I turned my back on him. Nikolai wasn’t part of the real Syndicate for a very long time, Ophelia. My father, your *dedushka*, cut him off.”

My *dedushka*, my grandfather. The man was more a myth than a real person to me.

Konstantin Asterov was a man Theo met, but me? Never. Nikolai always made it seem as if that side of the family was the one that wanted nothing to do with us, but in reality, he was the one they wanted nothing to do with.

We were just collateral damage.

“I looked for you. We all did. Your grandfather, your cousins, we all looked, but no one could ever find you.”

“Well, one of you found me.” I smirked. “And she didn’t tell you.”

Lazar frowned. “Who?”

“Natalia,” I answered. “Natalia Asterova.”

“*Suka*,” he cursed and turned toward Andrei whose expression was as murderous as mine at the mention of Natalia’s name. “She wasn’t part of The Syndicate. She wanted to be, but she failed her exams and we never allowed her to be a part of us. She ran to America, and she worked with your father.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I wish I were.”

I lifted my legs from the floor and hugged my knees to my chest. “What about the Sons of Hades?” I looked up at him. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

“I tried. But I was too late.”

“He almost died,” I murmured. “The man I love almost died because of Nikolai, and you’re telling me you were just too late?”

“Storm Knoxx, *da*?”

“*Da.*” I nodded. “He almost died and you’re standing here giving me all these excuses that mean nothing to me! My whole world shattered and no amount of excuses could ever give me back those days where I blamed myself for everything that was happening.”

“I know.”

“*Poshel na khuy!*” I thundered. “Fuck you and your excuses.”

“I know, Ophelia.”

“Stop being so calm!” I yelled. “Why are you not angry, huh? Why did you let him destroy me?” I cried out, hating every single moment of this.

Everything I went through, every scar on my mind, every wound on my body, it all could have been avoided if my real father had done what he was supposed to do. He didn’t protect me. Didn’t protect my mother.

“You’re too late, old man,” I murmured and wiped away the tears cascading down my cheeks. “I don’t need your apologies. I don’t need your excuses or your family.”

“Ophelia—”

“No,” I cut him off. “You weren’t here when I needed you. You weren’t here when I cried to the skies, begging for someone, anyone, to save me. You abandoned me!”

“I know,” he whispered, his eyes glassy.

“You don’t get to just waltz in and pretend that we’re gonna have, what? A father-daughter relationship?”

“I don’t expect that. But I was hoping that we could talk. That we could mend the burned bridges and everything that’s happened.”

I looked at him, really, really looked at him.

Years and years of self-loathing, of destruction, hatred, pain and anger, and this man could have stopped it all. I could have had a normal life. I could have had a happy life.

I could have been someone else. Someone like Alessia, free to love, free to fight for those I cared about. But no. All I got was the darkness coming at me from every corner, and belief that I was the monster.

Like father, like daughter. That was what people always told me.

I grew up thinking I was the same as Nikolai. Thinking that the rotten things lived inside of my genome, and that there was no escape from that.

“Ophelia.” He murmured my name, as he sat down on the sofa. “I’m not going to pretend that I didn’t fuck up. I did. I messed up so badly. If I were you, I wouldn’t forgive me either. My papa gave me so much shit about the way I handled things, but I just want you to hear me out.”

I refused to look at him.

“Nikolai promised me he wouldn’t hurt you as long as I did what he demanded of me. As long as he had control over the West, he promised he wouldn’t involve you in this world. When I saw you in Siberia, I knew he was lying. I knew he would try to destroy you, just how he destroyed your mother. But you were stronger than him. You are stronger than all of us.” He took a deep breath and looked toward the door. “I confronted him, planned to take you away, but he was faster. Before I could get to you, he had you shipped away from Siberia.”

He took my hand and squeezed tight, but I refused to react to that.

“He was a monster who always wanted things that didn’t belong to him. He always wanted more and more and more, and his greed almost destroyed us all.”

“Did you know about the Red Manor?” I asked. “Did you know he kidnapped young boys and used them as sex slaves?”

He cringed at that name. “No. Not until recently. But we still don’t know the location, and the people he was involved with are the ones holding the reins now. Logan Nightingale is

the one leading that right now, and we're trying to stop it, but I can't be everywhere."

"What do you mean?" I looked at him.

"*Sindikát* needs a leader, Ophelia. They need someone strong enough to take over."

"No." I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

"Just hear me out."

"No," I said and stood up. "I am not going back to that world. I don't want anything to do with it."

"Ophelia, whether you want to admit it or not, you were born to lead. You were born to take over."

"No. Nope. Absolutely not. I refuse to be that monster again. I refuse to kill innocent people."

"You wouldn't," he argued and stood up after me, earning another growl from Kaiser. "I just want you to think about it. Please," he begged. "I don't want to leave you like this, but this is one of the reasons why I came here."

"So all that bullshit about connecting with me—"

"That's all true. But I know it will take time for you to trust me. I know that this is the only way. Here." He took out a black card with a red dragon on the back and extended it to me. "My number is there. Just think about what I said."

"I-I," I stammered. "I honestly don't think this is a good idea."

"The Syndicate isn't as bad as Nikolai made it out to be. Yes, we are definitely not the good guys, but the real Syndicate isn't going after innocent people. That was his MO not ours. Just think about it and call me if you need anything."

He started heading toward the door but stopped in the middle of the hallway.

"And Ophelia," he called out. "Agon will never bother you again. I've made sure of it."

"You did that?" I asked and went after him. "Why?"

“He’s been working with someone who wants you dead. And he’s been working with Logan Nightingale. I couldn’t get to that *svoloch*’, but I will. He’s going to learn what the real meaning of pain is.”

I stood there, holding the card in my hand, gaping at the man who was my father. My real father. And I had nothing to say.

He killed Agon for me.

He would kill Logan for me, and he just offered me his entire empire.

“I expect to hear from you soon, *drakon*.” He smiled. “But if I don’t, I know where to find you.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked.

“No, Katya. I would never threaten you. Even if you decide you don’t want to handle The Syndicate, I will understand. I just don’t want you to make any rash decisions right now. And, Ophelia,” he looked down at Kaiser, “I had the same dog when I was your age.”

My mouth opened and closed, my eyes following his every move as he went out of the house, followed by the three soldiers inside. Andrei came out of the kitchen and stopped right in front of me.

“You know we used to call you *chernaya vdova*, a black widow?” He smiled.

“I know.”

“Then you should also know that we never wanted to follow Nikolai’s orders, and we left before that day.”

“Which day?”

“The one in the club.”

“Don’t lie to me, Andrei. The men that were there—”

“Were the men that are now locked up for what they did. Lazar is not Nikolai, Ophelia. Trust me.”

With those words, he turned around and left with the others, leaving me all alone with my jumbled thoughts and more questions than answers.

Everything just changed.

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OPHELIA

CILLIAN FOUND me in front of the house, sitting with Kaiser.

“What the fuck?” he exclaimed as soon as he saw me and immediately stopped a few feet away from us. “Why is there a bear in front of you?”

“He’s not a bear.” I chuckled. “Meet Kaiser.”

“Did he escape from a zoo or something?”

“Don’t be an idiot, Kill.” I stood up and grabbed Kaiser’s leash. “Come and say hi.”

“He looks like he’s going to eat me, Birdy. I’m not so sure about this.”

“Well.” I shrugged. “It’s either that or you’re sleeping in front of the house.”

His eyes flickered from me to Kaiser who kept wagging his tail, wanting to play with him. I was starting to believe that dogs knew who we liked and who we didn’t like. He kept pulling me, wanting to go to Cillian.

“Are you sure he won’t eat me?” Cillian asked, slowly approaching us.

“I’m pretty sure I bite more than he does, Kill. So just come here and introduce yourself to him. He’s not going to do anything to you.”

Cillian looked up at the dark sky above us, then down at me, huffing and puffing, with his hands on his hips. But he

understood that Kaiser wasn't going anywhere, and it was better to be friendly than to be afraid.

"Fine," he exhaled. "But if he eats me—"

I rolled my eyes. "He's not going to eat you."

"But if he does—"

"If he does, I will bury your remains behind the house and you can haunt me for the rest of my life."

He took a step forward, then two, then three, until he finally stopped in front of Kaiser, slowly extending his hand to his snout, letting Kaiser sniff him.

But Kaiser was having none of it. Within a second, he pulled harder than I anticipated, making me extend the leash, and jumped on Cillian, knocking him down on the ground. His butt moved from side to side—not only his tail, but his body covering Cillian who was squirming on the ground while Kaiser licked his face.

Laughter erupted deep from within my belly, making me bend over while Cillian tried getting away.

"Get him off me! Ophelia!"

"I-I." I was crying from laughter. "I can't stop."

"Ophelia Ekaterina Aster!" Cillian yelled out. "He's going to eat me! I'm telling you. He's checking if I'm tasty!"

"Oh, my God!" I laughed and sat down, letting go of Kaiser's leash.

"You're a monster, Ophelia," Cillian mumbled. "A real monster."

"He likes you," I exclaimed, unable to take my eyes off them. "He really, really likes you."

"And I would like him even more if he didn't try to lick away my face."

I felt almost sorry for Cillian but watching him like this with Kaiser was much needed after the day I'd had.

“Kaiser!” I bellowed. “Come here,” I commanded, and within a second, Kaiser got off Cillian and came to me, pushing his head toward my hand, asking to be petted.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Cillian groaned as he stood up, wiping his face. “That dog is insane.”

“He’s just showing his love.” I chuckled.

“Well, he didn’t have to do it in that way.”

Kaiser turned around and looked at him. “No.” Cillian stepped back, glaring at Kaiser. “We’re not going to do that again.”

Cillian started wiping at his pants and walked toward me, taking a seat right next to me.

“So, what’s with that cryptic voice message you sent me?”

I could feel his eyes on the left side of my face, but I couldn’t look at him. I still couldn’t stop thinking about everything that had happened in the past couple of hours. It was as if the planet Earth was suddenly turned upside down, and nothing made sense anymore.

“My father came to see me,” I murmured, keeping my hand on Kaiser’s head.

“Your what?”

“My father.”

“Nikolai is alive?” he exclaimed. I could almost hear his thoughts and the direction they were taking.

“Not quite.”

“I don’t understand, Ophelia. You just said your father visited you, but Nikolai—”

“Nikolai isn’t my father. Well,” I chuckled sadly, “not my real father at least.” I looked at him, hating the fear and anger written all over his face.

“What are you talking about?”

“My real father is Lazar, Kill. Lazar Asterov.”

“Uh, say again?”

“The man I thought was my uncle is actually my father, and he knew. They all knew, but Nikolai used me as leverage against him.”

A thousand questions flashed through his eyes, but he kept his mouth shut, letting me talk.

I told him about my mother, about Russia, about everything Lazar told me. He took it all, grimacing at parts, hugging me when it became too hard to continue, and he kept quiet the entire time.

“I don’t...” he trailed off. “I don’t know what to say, Birdy. This sounds like a fucking telenovela.”

“But wait.” I grimaced. “That’s not all.”

I stood up and looked down at Cillian.

“Lazar wants me to take over The Syndicate, Kill. He wants me to control it, and I don’t know what to do.”

“What?”

“Yep,” I answered. “He wants me to take over, to be the next, what? Leader?”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Shaking my head, I paced from left to right. “I have no fucking idea, but with everything going on, I think maybe I should take it. Maybe this could help us.”

“Are you sure?” he asked carefully. “After everything that’s happened.”

“I don’t have to say yes now. I don’t have to do anything right now, but it is an option. He wants to get to know me. He wants to make up for all those years. I don’t know if I could let him. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to let him in.”

“Phee,” Cillian murmured and stood up, taking my hand in his. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. We can talk about this, go through the pros and cons. You don’t have to decide right now.”

“But it could help, right? It could help us to flush out this Belladonna person and to clear up the mess Nikolai left

behind.”

“Yes, it definitely could.”

“Kill,” I looked up at him. “He’s going to kill Logan.”

He winced as soon as I said his father’s name, but I knew it wasn’t because he felt bad for him. I had no idea what Logan did to Cillian, but it was obvious to everyone around that there was no love lost between them.

“Let him. Ask him if he needs help, because I would gladly put a bullet through his fucking head.”

“Look,” I started saying and stepped toward the front door. “I think... I think I’ll try to meet him here and there. I mean, he seemed genuine enough.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just another trap?”

“Yes. No.” I huffed. “I don’t know. I just know that something here,” my hand pressed to my stomach, “is telling me that he’s honest and that he wants to try. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing, having his support. Logan is now leading this entire operation, and I know that there are other assholes involved. Powerful people who need to be stopped. Having Lazar Asterov and his entire empire backing us wouldn’t be such a bad thing, would it?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It wouldn’t be a bad thing, but I think we need to be careful. He may have cleared out his house, but Nikolai had quite a lot of supporters. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of them tried to harm you, while pretending to be on your side.”

“I know, and I will be careful. But for my own sake, I think I want to try at least. I don’t know. Just to try to have some kind of relationship with him. I believe him when he said he tried. I just can’t shake off this feeling that all of this could’ve been avoided if they weren’t trying to wage the war on my back.”

“Well, if he’s willing to try now, maybe you should really hear him out.”

Maybe I should. But would I really be able to let go of the past?

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OPHELIA

One month later

July

ONE SINGLE MATCH was all that was needed to set the fire. You wouldn't have imagined that such a small thing could cause such destruction, and I felt that my entire life was made out of matches, set to burn one by one, destroying me and everyone around me.

All the secrets.

All the things I was never told about.

All these years living on this Earth, convinced that the blood running through my veins was nothing but a poisonous tar set to destroy everything I'd held dear. It was a heavy burden, carrying this last name. Sometimes I wasn't sure if I projected this picture of myself just to keep other people away, or if this was who I truly was.

The whispers in the dark, the names they gave me, they all piled up on top of my back, getting heavier and heavier with every year, and I carried it because I thought I had to.

I didn't need a shrink to know that the regrets I had didn't only stem from everything I'd done, but also from everything Nikolai did. I had a feeling that I would never truly uncover every monstrous deed he'd committed.

I labeled myself, made myself believe that this was all I could ever have, all that I could ever be, and I was wrong. So

fucking wrong. I'd pushed people away, cheated, killed, maimed, and I knew I would do it again if only to protect those I loved.

It'd been a month since Lazar visited me, and now standing here in the middle of the street, as the sun kissed my skin and sweat rolled down my back, I had no idea what I was going to say to him. I didn't want The Syndicate. It was never my intention to take over even when Nikolai did everything to steer me in that direction.

All I wanted was a small place where I could finally find peace, without horrors, without violence, without anything vicious darkening the skies of my life. Was I ever going to get there?

I rushed across the street, heading toward a small coffee shop standing on the corner of Fifth and Haldon, my hands shaking from nerves for the first time in years. I had no idea what I was going to say to Lazar.

I couldn't get over the fact that he let Nikolai do all those things—torturing me, my mother, my sister... I couldn't forgive him for abandoning us, for being yet another person who didn't try too hard to keep me in his life.

It was like a repetitive song over and over again, because no matter what, it seemed that I wasn't worthy enough for any of them to fight for me.

I thought for sure that Storm would come. I thought that he would know better than to believe I'd died in that fire, but I hadn't seen any bikers, or anyone really. Everything had been quiet, too quiet for me, and I had no idea if this was the calm before the storm or if I'd become too paranoid in my life to truly relax.

Kieran was going after Maya.

Nico and Cole were working overtime to protect both their assets and me. Tristan was slowly uncovering the things I never would have imagined about Nikolai and the secret society he was entangled with.

But there was something in the air. Something that wouldn't let me rest. Even as I sat down on one of the chairs overlooking the entrance to the park where families came and went, I couldn't relax my brain long enough to stop looking for possible threats.

I had to hide who I was, but there was only so much I could do. I pulled out my phone, checking the time.

I hated being the last one to come to the scene, and it was no different now. I was supposed to meet Lazar at three o'clock, but I decided to come here fifteen minutes earlier. I wanted to believe him, to truly trust him, but I couldn't.

There would always be a part of me that wouldn't be able to trust other people. Even though it could be my downfall, it could also be my salvation.

Cillian suggested I color my hair, and I still couldn't get used to the blond hair, framing my face, reflected on the dark display of my phone. The long-sleeved shirt I wore wasn't such a good idea, considering that summer was here and everyone around me walked as if they lived in California and not in Ventus City, surrounded by mountains. But I couldn't risk showing my tattoos.

Ordinary passersby wouldn't know who I was, but there were still people planted by those who wanted me dead, that could look like regular folk, but were sleepers, tasked to watch and search and report as soon as they found something.

I knew that if Lazar wanted me dead, I would've been dead by now, but I couldn't shake off this feeling of doom, wrapping its long talons around my lungs, making it harder to breathe. I should've felt safer now that Nikolai was dead, but it was as if his death started a domino effect and no one was safe.

Not even me.

“Good afternoon,” a man spoke from my left, and I turned my attention from the park and passing cars to look at him. “What can I get you today?”

He was around my age, his blue eyes kind, shadowed by darker eyebrows and sandy hair. I finally relaxed when I saw the apron with the logo of the coffee shop I was sitting at.

“Uh...” I looked at the table in front of me and then back at him. “Iced mocha, please.” I smiled. “And a butter croissant.”

He started writing down the order as I saw a familiar car parking just next to the coffee shop on the side of the road.

Lazar stepped outside, taking in his surroundings much like I did earlier. I couldn't see any guards, but I knew that they were around—watching, waiting. I had an inkling that as much as I didn't trust him, he had every reason not to trust me either.

My heart thundered in my chest, slamming against my ribs, and I couldn't help myself but start noticing similarities between him and I. I always thought I looked more like my mother than my father, apart from the eyes, of course, but where Nikolai's were always cold and calculating, Lazar's held a hint of warmth that I had a feeling he didn't show all that often.

I stood up as he started walking toward the entrance to the coffee shop, years and years of Nikolai scowling at me whenever I wouldn't do it for those older than me ingrained in me no matter how hard I wanted to resist.

I almost waved at him but stopped myself at the last minute.

And then what, Ophelia? You're going to wave, kiss him on his cheek, thank him for abandoning you all these years?

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” I mumbled to myself. I hated that cynical, distrustful part of me. I hated it with all my might, because that part got me into more trouble than good over the last couple of years.

Just a second before he went through the door to the inside area of the coffee shop, Lazar looked my way and smiled.

He fucking smiled while I stood there, frozen, at a loss for words, because that smile didn't look like something a person

who wanted to harm me would do.

Others could call me a fool, but this wasn't a man who would beat around the bush to get what he wanted. Yet, he let me choose. He didn't force me, didn't make me go with him when that was the first thought I had when I saw all those cars.

If only I could get rid of this ache inside my chest, if only I could stop fighting with myself, I could allow my heart to truly open to him and to hear him out. But the road toward redemption was a long and testing one, and I couldn't just stop my brain from having certain thoughts when it was wired that way.

“Ophelia.” He beamed as he walked toward me, his arms outstretched, ready for a hug.

I didn't think twice this time. I allowed myself this one moment of weakness where I could pretend that he was a loving father and I was just a daughter he was meeting for an afternoon coffee.

I plastered myself to his body, enveloping my arms around his middle and squeezing as tight as I could.

His hands landed on my shoulders, before one hand went to the back of my head and the other one to the mid of my back, holding me to him for a second longer than a normal hug would take.

I shuddered and took a deep breath, realizing that this was what I wanted. For someone to choose me, to trust me, to hold me. I wanted someone, anyone, to see past the façade I was trying to put on.

Heavy was the mask we had to wear, but how else would we be able to protect our hearts from the outside world, when everything around us was trying to hurt us. Love, relationships, friendships, families, they all left scars that turned into gaping wounds, and the only way I knew how to stop the blood was to press that mask to my skin.

I had no idea when it became a part of me, something I couldn't get rid of, but everything that happened over this past year made me see that I needed to get rid of it. I kept talking

about the peaceful life, about the things I wanted to see and do without the violence marking every segment of my life, yet I didn't know how to let go of that last piece of me that belonged in the past.

"It is so nice to see you, Katya," Lazar murmured against my hair, and somewhere far away in my mind, I knew I should let him go, but I couldn't.

My arms tightened around him even more, my body refusing to let him go. I yearned for this normalcy, and I didn't want to think what would happen to me if he turned out to be just another monster in my life.

"Should we sit down?" he asked, and I reluctantly stepped back, letting my arms fall.

I expected to see a smirk on his face when I looked up, but all I saw was a face filled with regrets and eyes telling the story of pain so grave, making me gasp out loud.

"Y-Yeah," I stammered and took the seat I was previously occupying, while Lazar sat across from me with his back to the street. "So," I started, realizing that I needed to try.

I had to try to make this work, dammit. I refused to think of myself as somebody damaged, somebody who couldn't heal. I never thought about family as something that could be your safe place to return after long travels, but I suddenly wanted it.

I wanted happiness, celebrations, birthday parties, gatherings... I wanted to know my cousins, to have a relationship with them. It was unlike me, unlike everything I ever wanted, but for the first time in my life, there was hope for something better.

Lazar wasn't a saint, that I was sure of. Nobody from my family was, but I wanted them no matter what.

"So." He smiled, drinking me in. "You've changed your hair?" he asked with a chuckle.

"I had to." I shrugged. "You know how it is. I have the Albanians on my tail, the Outfit, Nikolai's associates," I whispered. "I had to blend in."

“It suits you,” he commented. “You look just like your mother now.”

My heart constricted, unable to forgive and forget all those times my mother couldn't even talk to me. Frowning, I leaned on the table and looked to the side.

“I'm not sure if that's a compliment or—”

“It's a compliment, darling. I know she wasn't the best mother, but I hope that one day you'll be able to forgive her.”

“I highly doubt it.” I grimaced. “You knew her as the woman you loved.” I looked at him. “I knew her as the monster who gave me to Nikolai, letting him do whatever he wanted with me.”

Now it was his turn to grimace. Maybe I wasn't being fair. Maybe I was petty, but I didn't need to have reminders of my mother. I wanted nothing to do with her.

I couldn't understand how she could let us get destroyed in such a way. How could she be so weak?

“Forgive me, Katya,” he murmured. “I didn't mean to bring back those painful memories.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled, hating that I couldn't let go. I couldn't stop the memories whooshing in like an avalanche, reminding me of tears, pain, broken bones, and broken hearts. She stood there, watching it all, not even flinching when Nikolai broke my left arm because I dared to disobey him.

“It's alright.” I cracked a smile. “On some level, I understand that she was miserable, but she was weak, and weak people have no place in my life.”

His eyes flickered over my face, taking me in, as if it was the first time he was truly seeing me.

“Do you think I am weak?” he asked, leaning back into the chair.

“That remains to be seen.” I chuckled. “But as much as I love this conversation we have going on, that's not why we're here.”

“Oh, really?” He laughed. “Straight to the point, huh?”

“Why waste our precious time, sitting here, when we could get to business.”

“And here I thought you actually wanted to get to know me.”

“I do,” I blurted out, closing my eyes immediately as regret washed over me. I’d spent years hiding my emotions, my thoughts, and ever since Storm took me to Santa Monica, it was as if all of that shattered, leaving me wide open to the world. “I do want to get to know you. I might not trust you at the moment, and I might hold a grudge because you left me with Nikolai—”

“I didn’t have—”

“A choice,” I finished for him. “I know, and I’m trying to understand, but you also need to understand that I need a lot more time to process all of it. I’ve spent years fighting for a man that was a monster, thinking he was my future. I thought I would never be able to get away from him, but I did. And then you come in, telling me all these things, and I don’t know what to think.”

“I understand.” He nodded. “I didn’t expect you to run to me or to trust me immediately. I can’t even imagine the horrors you went through, but I want you to know that I am here and I am not going anywhere.”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach, fighting each other and my underlying fear that every single word coming out of his mouth was a lie.

But I’d learned how to read people over the years. I’d learned to look for signs, those little tells, and he had none.

Lazar Asterov was as honest as he could get and I knew he was an ally I needed to have.

“You mentioned the Albanians,” he said, frowning. “I dealt with them.”

“You did.” I nodded. “But there are rumors that the new head of the family is still coming after me. There’s something

else you need to know.” I lowered my voice as the waiter came back with my coffee. “Thank you.” I grinned as the waiter placed the tall glass in front of me.

“You’re welcome.” He looked at Lazar almost immediately. “Can I get you anything, sir?”

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Lazar answered, looking at me as if I’d grown two heads as I all but attacked the coffee, completely ignoring the croissant sitting next to it.

“Coming right up,” the guy answered and stepped away from our table.

“What?” I asked and looked at Lazar when he continued staring at me.

“It’s just...” he trailed off. “Sometimes it is easy to forget how young you truly are, until now.”

I leaned back and took the glass with coffee in my right hand, scowling at him.

“It’s because I didn’t have time to be young,” I bit back. “But I know now that everything I went through was meant to make me stronger, and in some weird, fucked-up way, I am actually thankful for it.”

“Yeah, well...” he cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re strong, but I hate to see that sadness in your eyes.”

Flinching, I avoided his eyes, stirring the coffee with a straw.

“I know all about your time in Santa Monica, Ophelia,” Lazar said. “Where is he? Where is Storm?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My throat closed up, my lungs seizing at the mere memory of him, and I hated that just a mention of his name could render me speechless.

“Katya—”

“He hates me.” I smiled, sorrow lacing every nerve of my body. “And he has every right to hate me. He ended up in the hospital because of me. I ran from him, almost destroyed his

club thanks to Nikolai, and I cheated on him. Well.” I laughed. “I did think he betrayed me as well, but that’s beside the point.”

“I don’t think he hates you, *dorogoy*. That man would’ve gone through fire to get to you.”

“That was before I screwed everything up. He thinks I’m dead, so I don’t think that he’s coming.” Then it dawned on me. I looked at Lazar, my eyes narrowing. “Why are you asking about Storm?”

“Because,” he laughed, “I don’t think he hates you as much as he wants to hate you. Besides, you wouldn’t go to the other side of the country when you’re in the middle of a war just to find somebody who you hate. You wouldn’t continue looking for a person who was allegedly found dead in a cabin.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know everything.” He chuckled. “I know that Sons of Hades are right now in Ventus City, looking for you.”

“What?” I exclaimed, suddenly realizing why I felt the change in the air, the terror gripping my soul. “That’s impossible. He thinks I’m dead. He...” Fuck. “He told me he would find me and destroy me,” I mumbled, realizing that Storm never once thought I was dead. He was biding his time, looking for me while I thought I managed to fool them all.

“You are as stubborn as I am.” He huffed just as the waiter returned with his order. “There’s a very thin line between love and hate, and even though he might think that he hates you right now, he’s actually miserable without you. I know you’re not ready to take over The Syndicate, but I think you need him as much as he needs you.”

“What are you now, a relationship counselor?” I grunted out, annoyed that he knew more than I did.

“No.” He shook his head. “I am just somebody who has been around a lot longer than you, and I know how a man looks when he sees his entire future in a woman.”

I shut up at that. I had no words, nothing to say, because he was right.

He was so fucking right, and what did I do? I just ran away from Storm, too much of a chickenshit to stay and talk things through. Back in the clubhouse, just before Nikolai shattered everything around us, he still wanted me, still wanted to talk, and I resorted to the oldest recipe in my book—I was a motherfucking bitch.

“If they’re here,” I looked around me, “then that means that I need to move.”

“Or maybe, just maybe, you could stay and hear him out. You know, communicate and all that.”

I looked at him pointedly, trying to figure out where all these words of wisdom were coming from.

“What if he tries to kill me?” I asked.

“He won’t,” Lazar argued.

“But what if he does?”

“Ophelia.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes. “That man is crazy for you. And if you are the kind of a woman who wants to spend the rest of her life regretting leaving him, then you should run. You should come back to Russia with me. But I know you don’t want to do that. I know you are a fighter, so I’m asking you now, are you going to fight for him or are you going to run from him?”

I stared at him for a second, my muscles strained and the need to just run away at the forefront of my mind.

But I had no fucking idea what I wanted to do.

LAZAR’S WORDS RANG IN MY HEAD AS I WENT HOME, AND NO matter how hard I tried to shake them off, I couldn’t forget what he’d said.

What was I scared of? Storm? Or letting another person have that much control over me?

I had no answer.

Deep inside my heart, I knew that Storm wouldn't hurt me, at least not physically, but he would make me pay for what I did. And he would do it with a smile on his face.

I gripped the steering wheel tightly, just sitting in front of my house, unable to move. I hated change. Hated it wholeheartedly, but change was inevitable no matter how much we wanted to avoid it. Humans weren't made to sit in one place with everything going on in the same way it always did. I needed to accept it and move on.

If only I could get my ass out of here and into the house, then I could start packing. I could start planning because I wasn't ready for Storm's wrath.

Call me a coward or whatever other name you had for me, but I wanted to give him time, to let him heal from what I did. I didn't even try contacting Atlas or Indigo, but I didn't need to have that to know that Storm wasn't happy with me.

And the fact that we'd faked our deaths only for me to be able to run away from him, would make him even madder. And a furious Storm wasn't something I was ready for.

His name preceded him, and I knew that the version of him I got when I first came to the Club was nothing compared to the version of him he solely reserved for those who wronged him. And right now, I was just another person who had betrayed him.

I slowly removed the key from the ignition and opened the door, my limbs heavy, my heart breaking because I knew I wouldn't get to see him. I needed to get as far away from here as possible.

Ventus City was the perfect hideout for me, but it didn't last long enough.

I would need to tell Cillian, to let him know what was happening. If I was lucky, I would be out of here within the next couple of hours.

Slamming the door shut, I started walking toward the house, fucking hating the heat enveloping me. I missed Santa Monica, the breeze, the beach... I fucking missed him and Zozo, and the shenanigans she was always doing, trying to make me laugh, trying to evoke all these emotions from me.

I even missed Indigo and his grumpy ass. I worried about Atlas and the cracks in his eyes. I hated that I couldn't talk to him all these months.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even realize that Kaiser wasn't barking, and he always barked whenever I came home. The air was heavy with emotion, too quiet, too ominous after everything that Lazar told me. As I opened the door, I couldn't see my best friend waiting for me.

There were no sounds in the house. There was no pitter-patter of his humongous paws, and my heart squeezed painfully in my chest.

"Kaiser!" I called out, slowly stepping inside, preparing for the worst. "Where are you, buddy?"

I was trained to hear things that others might not, but the only thing I could hear was the tick-tock from the clock in the hallway.

"Kaiser!" I called out again and walked straight toward the stairs, freezing immediately at the vision in front of me.

The man who owned my heart and my soul sat on the couch in the living room, with a sleeping Kaiser right next to him. Storm dragged his hand over Kaiser's fur, grinning at me and my shocked face.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head.

That grin of his only became larger when he saw my terrified face. As he stood up, looking at me, there were no traces of the pale skin he had back in the hospital.

Wide shoulders, hair longer on the top and shaved on the sides, he seemed larger than life, standing there in front of me. I was like a brick wall, cemented to the spot, hating the weakness in my limbs as he started walking toward me.

I was sure the others were here, and even if they weren't, I wasn't a match for him. And I refused to hurt him no matter how much he wanted to hurt me. I couldn't bring myself to do it even if it was self-defense.

I couldn't leave Kaiser, not with him, not when he probably knew how much Kaiser meant to me.

The scent of leather, oak and gas enveloped me in its embrace, and I closed my eyes, unable to look at the face of the man who was here to hurt me. Sometimes pain ran skin deep, but what he felt for me, the pain and anger he had, that one ran soul deep.

That kind of pain consumed him, made him insane from needing to hurt me. I saw it earlier when he looked at me and as I opened my eyes, I could see it now.

I tilted my head backward, refusing to back down. His long legs closed the distance between us in mere seconds, and before I knew it, he was standing right in front of me, towering over my body.

His chest was almost fused with mine, and I waited for the punishment that was about to come. But instead of the pain I expected him to inflict on me, his hand trailed over my arm, to my shoulder, his fingers dancing over the fabric of my shirt, and all the way to the loose strand of hair falling on my face.

He tucked the hair behind my ear and bent down, his breath whooshing over my earlobe.

"Hello, Persephone," he whispered. His teeth came out, biting down on my earlobe, eliciting an involuntary moan from me.

"You're mine now," he gritted out, wrapping his other arm around my body, pulling me to him. My chest pressed against his stomach, feeling the hard planes of his abdomen. Heat erupted from my core and I shuddered, remembering all the other times he held me close.

His hand snuck to the back of my head and he removed the hair band I put in earlier when the heat became too much, letting my ponytail disintegrate, my hair falling down my

back. His fingers went over the nape of my neck, through the messy strands, and he gripped me tight, pulling my head backward.

“You’ve been a bad girl, Ophelia,” he murmured, looking me straight in the eyes. “And you know what bad girls get?”

“Please don’t hurt him,” I whimpered, begging him to spare Kaiser. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

I used to love his smile. I used to love the way he looked at me, but the hatred oozing out of him right now, the sorrow reflected in his orbs, was enough to have me gasp out loud. The wickedness with which he observed me, the anger with which he held me, it was too much to bear. My eyes closed of their own volition, unable to look at his.

“Look at me, Ophelia,” he ordered, but I shook my head, refusing to witness this. “Look at me!” he thundered, and like a pet obeying its master, my body obeyed him.

My eyes opened, unable to look anywhere else but at him.

“This,” he gripped my hair tighter, “this is your doing.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“You don’t get to avoid me anymore. You don’t get to hide from the things you did. You belong to me. Only me. Your body, your soul, your black fucking heart.” He chuckled darkly and bent down, biting down on my shoulder blade. “You belong to me, and as your master, my darling, I will do whatever the fuck I want with you.”

“Storm,” I whimpered. “Please—”

“Shut your filthy mouth,” he gritted out. “You don’t talk unless I allow you to talk. You don’t exist for anyone else but me. I. Own. You.”

Maniacal laughter erupted from my chest, rendering him speechless. “Did you forget who I am, Stormy?” I glared at him. “Go on, do your worst. But at the end of the day, the only person who would be in pain would be you. The only person you will hate will be the reflection in the mirror, telling you how much you fucked up. But I shouldn’t have expected

anything else from you. It wasn't as if you wanted to talk things through before."

"Shut up!"

"Make me," I said, going on my tiptoes.

I should have seen it coming. I should have known how he would react, but I didn't.

His lips slammed down on mine, his hands gripping my hips then going toward my chest, squeezing my breasts. I clawed his neck, running my hands over his shoulders as we fought for dominance.

I should have known that I wouldn't be the winner this time. I should have known that he would win this time.

Something pricked my neck, and I detangled myself from him, stepping back. My hand instinctively went to my neck, my brain looking for blood, but there was nothing there.

And then I saw it. The syringe in his hand. The satisfied smile on his face.

"I hope you like pain, darling." He took a step closer and pulled me to him. My limbs started getting heavy, my mind foggy, and the last thing I saw before I fell into the dark abyss was the torturous look on his face.

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STORM

I'D BEEN SITTING HERE for the last thirty minutes, unable to step away from her.

There was a part of me that wanted to get up and get out of this room, leaving her behind, but I couldn't. My heart wouldn't allow me to do that.

Instead, I sat here like a creep, staring at the woman who tore my heart out of my chest and stomped on it as if everything we'd shared didn't mean anything to her. She betrayed me, ran away from me—not once but twice—and I still couldn't get her out of my head and out of my heart.

I should have let her go. I should have forgotten all about her by now, but I couldn't forget the fear in her eyes when she came here for the first time. Or the way she clung to me, even tonight, when all she should have done was run as far away as possible.

I couldn't forget the scent of her skin, like honey and cinnamon, forever etched in my mind. I couldn't fucking forget her. She had a permanent spot in my heart, hiding in the deepest, darkest corners of my soul. And as much as I wanted to hurt her, to inflict the same pain on her, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I should have woken her up by now. I should have had her chained and down in the basement, but the moment we stepped inside the clubhouse, my body steered me upstairs, right next to my room. Atlas grinned at me, Indigo seemed

concerned, and all I wanted to do was to bury myself inside her and live there forever.

It was fucked up, falling for the daughter of the man who almost destroyed me in more ways than one, yet I couldn't help myself. She always saw the worst in herself—the darkness, the scars, the pain—but I saw more.

I saw so much more, and God, I wished I didn't.

This would all be so much easier if I didn't love her. I constantly had to remind myself that it was the hatred I felt, but sitting here in the darkness of this room, watching over her, made me realize that I didn't hate her. Not even a little bit.

And that pissed me off.

Ophelia whimpered in her sleep, tossing from one side of the large king-sized bed to the other. My chest tightened, my body hating her discomfort. I jumped to my feet, her cries getting louder and louder, and strode across the room all the way to her.

My body ached to be with her, to feel her, to touch her, to love her, but my mind was at war with my heart, reminding me of everything she had done.

Her cries were getting louder with each passing second, shaking, wrapped in the sheets I threw over her. I wanted to stop caring, to tear this feeling out of me, but she was forever etched in my soul, in my bones, and I knew I would always choose her, even when I wanted to hate her.

“Fuck,” I cursed, ignoring the red flags my mind was pushing at me, and toed off my boots just before sliding in after her, pulling her body to mine. She fit me like a glove. Without a second thought, I wrapped my arms around her middle, holding her as close as possible.

Her body shook, her mouth open, panting, crying, but I didn't relent.

“It's okay, Sunshine,” I murmured against her hair. “You're safe. You're okay.”

“Please!” she yelled out, thrashing against me. “Don’t. Please, please, please...”

Fuck, I wanted to help her, but I didn’t know how. I wanted to give her comfort, but I wasn’t the man who knew when to say the right words. I didn’t know how to deal with this.

“I’m here, Phee. I’m here,” I mumbled, hoping she would hear me. “You’re okay.”

“Please, don’t hurt him. No, no, no, no!”

“Dammit,” I groaned. I looked down at her face, illuminated by the lamp standing on the bedside table, my heart constricting at the sight of the tears cascading down her face.

“Phee.” I shook her gently. “Hey. Wake up, darling.”

“It’s my fault. It’s my fault,” she kept mumbling. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Storm.”

Fuck, she was dreaming about me.

I didn’t want to spook her or trigger her even more, so I took her hand in mine and pulled it to my lips. “I’m sorry, darling,” I murmured, kissing her hand. “It’s gonna be okay. You’re going to be okay. Just, wake up. Wake up, Sunshine.”

Her chest rose and fell, her breathing erratic and I was powerless to stop the nightmare from happening. I was powerless to do anything.

Her eyes suddenly flew open, frantically looking around the room until they landed on me. As if I’d burned her with my presence, she pulled herself up, pressing her back to the headboard, getting away from me.

Again.

The anger from before surged back, coming to the surface, licking my skin with its poisonous little tongue, but I couldn’t stop it. God, she infuriated me. She pissed me off more than any other person, and I needed to figure out if I could keep loving her and going on like this.

Her words from the hospital rang in my head, but what was love if you wouldn't show the other person in actions what you really meant.

"W-what," she stammered. "Where am I?" she asked, looking at me.

Beads of sweat clung to her skin, and she clutched that sheet as if it could protect her from me. I'd removed her pants earlier, her legs naked in front of me.

"Storm?"

"What?"

"What am I doing here?" she asked again, narrowing her eyes at me.

Her defiance knew no bounds, but right now, she should be begging me for mercy instead of sitting here, fresh from the nightmare, demanding things.

She should have been begging me to spare her and that dog of hers that tried to tear Indigo's arm off as soon as he woke up, but no. She was the same as ever, the ice queen, the emotionless, manipulative woman I'd gotten to know.

I moved away from her, needing some space.

"Storm," she said again and I could hear the sheets rustling. "Why am I here?"

"I don't fucking know!" I thundered, turning toward her. She looked stoic, cold, untouchable, while my insides fell apart at the mere sight of her. "I wish I could forgive you, but I can't."

"I didn't ask for your forgiveness," she said. "So I am going to ask you again." She moved closer to the edge of the bed, sitting on her knees. "Why am I here?"

Red. She made me see fucking red, and within seconds, I was right in front of her, pulling her head back, holding her hair in an unforgiving grip.

"Because I can't let you go." I bit down on her lower lip. "Even when I hate you. Even when I can't stand to be in the

same room with you, because you make me bleed.” I pressed my hand to my chest. “You make my heart bleed, but I can’t fucking let you go.”

“Then hurt me,” she whispered, looking up into my eyes. “Show me how much it hurts. Show me how much I fucked up.”

“You have no idea what you’re asking for,” I mumbled against her lips. “No idea, Persephone.”

“I do.” She grinned. “I want your darkness, every single part of you. I want to get lost in the hatred you feel for me and I want to forget everything else. Touch me, Storm.” She bit down on my jaw. “Hurt me.” She wrapped her hands around my neck, clawing at my skin. “Show me what a monster I am. Show me how bad I was.”

“Fuck,” I growled and pulled her face to me. “This means nothing.”

“It never did,” she whispered, and if it was pain I was seeing in her eyes, I chose to ignore it. “Give me all your demons.”

And I did.

I pushed her down on the bed and crawled after her, pushing her all the way to the headboard.

“You’re driving me insane,” I groaned, biting the inside of her thigh, reveling in the moans escaping from her mouth. My fingers danced over her smooth skin, going higher and higher all the way to her red, lacy panties. “And these.” I kissed the spot I bit and pressed my hand to the scars I made.

To my name that would forever be etched on her skin.

“These drive me insane.”

“Storm,” she moaned. “Please.”

“Are you wet for me, Sunshine?” I asked and looked up at her, my hand grazing over the edge of her panties, avoiding the place she wanted me to touch.

“Y-yes,” she whimpered.

“Look at you, so pretty.” I pushed up the shirt she wore, all the way above her breasts. “So wicked.”

“Storm!” she yelled out as I pressed my finger against her core.

“You’re drenched for me, aren’t you? I can see it. Are you going to beg me, Sunshine? Are you going to ask me to touch you?”

“Just do it, for fuck’s sake!” She groaned, throwing her head backward.

I pulled her panties down, revealing her bare pussy. Her heady scent snuck inside my nose, and I didn’t even realize how much I’d missed this—seeing her like this, touching her like this.

She was mine. All mine.

“There’s my pretty pussy,” I cooed, looking down at her center. I pulled her panties all the way down, throwing them across the room as soon as they slid off her legs, and dove, pressing my lips against her skin, my tongue licking the path from her pelvis to her clit.

“Storm,” she groaned. “I’m going to stab you with something if you don’t get to it.”

“Patience.” I chuckled. “I’m not talking to you now.”

I trailed my finger over her legs, all the way to her pussy, spreading her lips with my thumb and forefinger.

“I’ve missed you, darling,” I murmured, pressing my lips to her clit. “And you...” I inhaled deeply, pressing my nose to her skin. “You smell divine.”

“Oh, God,” Ophelia groaned, earning another chuckle from me.

“Your owner has been a very bad girl, and I’m sorry for taking it out on you.”

“Please,” Ophelia begged. “I can’t take it anymore.”

She could and she would.

“Shhhhh,” I hushed her, pressing kisses all over her pussy, except where she wanted me the most. “Are you going to be a good girl, Ophelia?” I asked and looked up at her.

“Yes,” she moaned, her eyes hooded, filled with lust. “Anything.”

“Anything?” I chuckled.

“Just do it already!”

I pressed a finger to her opening, closing my eyes as her heat wrapped around me, clenching tightly. “Fuck,” I groaned, my dick pressing against my pants, hard as a stone, wanting out. He wanted to play with her, to show her who she belonged to.

“You’re so tight,” I mumbled, adding another finger. Her mewls and moans spurred me on, my fingers pushing in and out, going faster and faster. She clenched around me as I hit her G-spot, her back arching on the bed, her hands gripping the sheets thrown around her.

My tongue flicked over her clit, going in circles, while her cries of ecstasy fueled my need for her.

“Storm! I-I’m going to—”

“Not yet,” I growled and pulled away from her.

“Nooooo,” she cried out, anger and need mixing together in her eyes. If she could, she would’ve had me pinned down in one second.

I covered her body with mine, wrapping my hand around her throat and pulling her to me. “You only come when I tell you to come,” I murmured and pressed a kiss to the corner of her lips. “And you only get to come on my dick. I want to feel you, I want to see you undone, crazy, unhinged.” I pulled her lower lip between my teeth, rubbing her clit with my other hand.

Her dilated irises mirrored my crazed need for her, and without preamble, I unbuckled the belt, unbuttoned my pants, and lowered down the zipper. My cock sprung out, pointing directly at her pussy.

“You want this, don’t you?” I grinned as her head bobbed up and down, her fingers going down my chest.

“No,” I growled and pushed back, swatting her hand away from me. “You don’t get to touch me, darling. You don’t get to do anything.”

“But—”

“Your touch feels like a thousand suns mixed into one,” I said and pushed my pants down to my knees. “Your love feels like poison, Ophelia, and I’ll be damned if I let it touch me again.”

Her lips were set in a thin line, her eyes shadowed by sorrow, but I didn’t give a fuck about her feelings right now. All I needed and all she could give was the sweet release.

“Get on your knees,” I commanded. “Now!” I barked when she refused to move immediately.

I could see the tremble in her arms, but the fear never showed itself on her face.

She turned around, obedient for the first time in her life, and without me asking, she removed her shirt, letting it fall in front of her.

“That’s my good girl,” I murmured, getting closer to her.

I palmed her ass, grinning as she wiggled underneath me. My palm landed on her right ass cheek with a whack, rewarding me with another moan from her.

My cock jumped, begging me to fuck her. And I couldn’t wait anymore.

I entered her with one swift thrust, both of us moaning on impact.

“Fuck,” I cursed, steadying myself, feeling her heat around me. She clenched and unclenched her pussy, her entire body shaking as I held her hips with my hands.

Relentless, uncaring if it would hurt her, I started thrusting in and out—almost bottoming out and slamming back in, the sounds of our bodies coming together echoing around us.

“Fuck, I needed this,” I grunted, bruising her hips.

“Please, Storm,” she pleaded. “Please, let me come.”

I looked down, seeing her hand on her clit. Her face was pressed to the pillow, her cheeks flushed, eyes lost to the pleasure.

“Not.” Thrust. “Yet.” Thrust.

I smacked her ass again, increasing my pace.

“Tell me you’re mine!”

“Storm!”

“Tell me.” I smacked her ass again, loving the redness on her skin.

“I’m yours!” she yelled out.

My cock throbbed, snug in her heat, and all I wanted to do was to slam faster, to show her who she belonged to. She needed to understand that no matter what, she would never be free of me.

I didn’t give a fuck if she hated me, if she wanted somebody else... She. Was. Mine.

“And you will never run from me, ever again!” I growled, holding her still, bruising her creamy skin. I wanted my mark on her, I wanted the whole world to know that she belonged to me and only me. I would kill any man who even dared to look at her, let alone to touch her.

I might never have her heart, but her body was made for me. Her pussy was branded with my name, and even though I couldn’t trust her, I couldn’t let go of the past and the way she behaved, this I could do.

I could fuck her, make her scream my name, make her see that only I could make her feel this way.

“This pussy is mine,” I grunted, moving my hips. “This body belongs to me, Ophelia. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t!” she screamed, her blond hair falling over her face.

Without breaking the pace, I slid my hand over her skin toward her neck, and wrapped it around her silky hair, pulling her head backward. Her legs opened wider, her boobs up in the air, and like a man possessed, I slammed and slammed and slammed inside of her, chasing my release.

My hunger for her pushed me over the brink of insanity, wickedly beckoning me to her, and even though I tried to forget her taste, her smell, the way she looked and screamed when she came, I fucking couldn't.

“Storm, Storm, Storm... Oh, God!” she screamed, clenching around my length. “I need to... I can't... Please!”

I pushed her down to the bed, my body covering hers and bit down on her shoulder, my teeth almost breaking the skin. The tingling sensation traveled over my shoulders, to my lower back and all the way to my tightening balls.

“Now,” I grunted, licking the spot I just bit. “Come for me, Ophelia! Scream. Come on, baby.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” She moaned, thrashed, and if it wasn't for me holding her in place, she would've ended up on the floor by now. “Stoooooorm!”

“That's it, baby.” I pistoned my hips, my release chasing after hers. “Fall apart for me. Your pussy feels divine.”

I snuck my right hand between her legs, rubbing against her clit and prolonging her release. She pushed her hips against me, seeking, wanting more, and I gave it to her.

Like a man possessed, I quickened my pace, lost in the heat of the moment.

“Fuuuuuck,” I drawled out, my release coming in like an avalanche, exploding all around me.

With an eruption, my body became weightless, and like an out-of-body experience, I could see us, how perfectly the two of us fit, and it hurt so much more that she refused to see it.

I collapsed on top of her, barely holding myself to not suffocate her. Her hair tickled my face, her scent, and the scent of sex lingering on her skin, seeping into mine, while my heart

constricted in my chest, wanting so much more than what she had to offer.

Her dog barked outside, no doubt displeased with his current accommodation, and I knew she would soon ask about him, but I was too tired for any kind of conversation tonight. I just wanted to forget it all. Forget the love, the lingering hate, the anger, and the pain, and close my eyes while holding her.

But I couldn't.

I rolled off her, detaching my dick from her heat that was already getting semi-hard just by having her here. He always wanted her, my body wired to please her, but my mind couldn't agree with that.

It would've been so much simpler if we didn't have all the emotions attached to ourselves. If we were nothing more than animals, looking for their next rut, doing whatever the fuck we wanted.

But I had responsibilities, plans, and Ophelia didn't exactly fit into them. Not anymore.

I stood up from the bed and picked up my discarded pants, slowly putting them on. I didn't even get to remove my shirt.

Her eyes lingered on me, but when I turned toward her and looked at the mess we'd made, she looked at the window, avoiding my gaze.

"I want Kaiser with me," she murmured, detached from the moment and what had just happened between us.

"You don't get to make demands, Ophelia. You're my prisoner."

The laughter that bubbled out of her was the last thing I expected and as she looked at me, a thousand emotions flashed through her eyes, before she hid them behind the familiar mask she always wore.

"Did you already forget who I am, Stormy?" She chuckled and pulled herself up, her boobs on display, her nipples begging me to taste them, to take them in my mouth.

Fisting my hands, my jaw clenching, I looked straight into her eyes. “How could I ever forget? You’re the woman incapable of love, so let’s get one thing straight, yeah?”

I went over the bed, leaning over her and wrapped my hand around her throat, pushing her into the mattress.

“You are going to play by my rules, Sunshine, because if you don’t, you won’t get to see another day.”

I’d seen men bigger than her, with more fear than she had, but that defiant smile never slipped off her face.

“Then kill me, Stormy. If it will make you feel better, just kill me. Take a gun, a knife, whatever you want, and kill me.”

Growling, I increased the pressure on her throat, pinning her down with my body on top of hers.

“You can’t do it.” She choked but continued talking. Her hand suddenly flew up, her fingers wrapping around my throat.

Taking me by surprise, my body too relaxed around her. She flipped us around, pushing me onto my back and sat down on me, her bare pussy on top of my hardening dick.

“You can’t do it, baby boy.” She grinned. “And you know how I know this? Because I would rather die than harm you.”

My Adam’s apple bobbed, my body strung tight, waiting to see what she would do next. Her hips swiveled on top of me, my cum still dripping down her thighs and onto me, but neither one of us cared about it.

Ophelia dove until her face was in line with mine, her teeth biting down on my lower lip.

“Now get the fuck out of my room and bring me my dog, Storm. I’m not going to ask twice.”

She suddenly stood up, leaving me on the bed with the raging hard-on, my body weeping for her. She fucked me over within seconds and I allowed it. I fucking allowed it, because no matter what, she would always have more control over me than other people did.

Ophelia disappeared into the en suite bathroom and slammed the door behind her, leaving me all alone with my thoughts and my thundering heart.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, dragging a hand down my face.

I could hear the water running, and I almost ran inside after her. But I needed to get out of here.

Jumping off the bed, I almost ran out of the room. I didn't bring her here to love her. I brought her here to punish her, and I needed to remember that.

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OPHELIA

I BARELY SLEPT.

No, well, that's a lie. I cried, closed my eyes for ten minutes, took three showers, but even they weren't enough to wash his scent from my body.

I stripped the bed bare, sleeping on the mattress and pillow without the pillowcase, but nothing helped. And as I stared now at my discarded clothes I later on threw from the bed, and the crumpled sheets in the corner of my room, I knew I couldn't stay here.

Lazar was wrong.

There was only so much a person could forgive before their love turned into poison. And what we had, it wasn't love. Maybe it could have been. Maybe it would have been if I wasn't Ophelia Aster, incapable of staying and trusting people, and if he wasn't a man who scared me.

And the fear I felt wasn't because he could hurt me, but because he could shatter my insides, and the glue I used to put myself together over the years could only withstand so much. He was a tempest who could shake the very core of my being, and I was terrified that I would lose myself in him.

I'd spent so many years lost in what other people wanted me to be, that I forgot what I wanted. I forgot my love for books, for art, for music... I forgot that I wanted to travel the world and see all the wonders from all the continents.

I forgot that I wanted a dog until Kaiser came into my life. I forgot it all because I was too busy pleasing others, losing

my own identity.

In this past month, I'd discovered that I loved iced mocha more than anything else. I'd discovered that I hated broccoli no matter how they were made. I'd discovered artists, songs, movies, and I did it on my own.

And staying here, being with him and putting him above my own needs was something I didn't want to happen. Even the years I'd spent far away from Nikolai and The Syndicate were filled with death, remorse, and anger, and I'd allowed those things to take over my life.

I'd allowed those feelings to shape who I am, when I was so much more than just a killer. I wanted real love. The kind that didn't hurt and didn't make me feel lacking, and that's what my love for him was.

This toxicity, this circle we were all stuck in, had to stop. We couldn't go on like this.

I pulled myself up from the bed and I knew it was still too early, but I couldn't sleep anymore, or well, pretend to sleep. The flashbacks of last night ran through my head, that same motherfucking nightmare, repeating for the past couple of months.

Storm on the floor, bleeding out, with Nikolai standing above him, grinning maniacally.

I shouldn't have goaded him. I shouldn't have allowed that to happen, but I did, and now I had to live with consequences. It even slipped my mind to ask him to use a condom, and I should have. I fucking should have.

No matter how much it hurt, I didn't expect him to stay celibate this past month, I had no right, but it still hurt thinking about all the girls he'd probably slept with, blaming me for everything that'd happened. If he did all that, I couldn't exactly blame him for trying to exorcise me from his bloodstream, because I would have done the same.

I would have done even worse things to mend the gaping wound on my heart.

The T-shirt I found in the wardrobe was too big for me, reaching all the way to my knees, but I had no other choice. I had no underwear, no pants, no shirts, and I wondered if this was what he wanted, to keep me in the room all of the time, while he did whatever the fuck he wanted.

Well, he had another thing coming if that was his plan, because no matter how much I regretted the things I'd done to him, I was no one's prisoner, and he should have known better to know that it was a terrible idea bringing me back here.

The Outfit was still after me, the Albanians as well, and he was putting a target on his own back by keeping me with the Club. Didn't he learn his lesson the last time?

I opened the window, reveling in the dash of fresh air clearing my mind and the scent that kept lingering throughout the night. Trees surrounded the property and I couldn't see the fence, unlike the old house.

It was obvious that they'd all moved after the fiasco with Nikolai, and it seemed that we weren't in the city anymore. Birds chirped, the sound of a motorcycle came from the other side of the house, and if this was a different life, if we weren't at war, I would've liked it here. I would have liked to stay here.

Kaiser would love it here.

My window was overlooking the backyard, my eyes zeroing in on the three barbeque stations located on the far left. Tables lined the yard, and I remembered the last barbeque party I saw and what I did on that same day.

The sound of the door opening behind me pulled me back from memory lane, and as I turned, I all but ran toward him.

"Atlas!" I yelled out, throwing myself at him, hugging him to me. And if my heart broke a little bit because he didn't hug me back immediately, I would never say, because it didn't take him more than five seconds to envelop me in his strong arms.

"I missed you so much," I murmured, my voice muffled by his shirt.

“Oh yeah?” He chuckled. “Is that why you made us all think you were dead?”

I winced as soon as the words came out of his mouth.

Detaching myself from him, I looked up at his face and the shaggy blond hair that needed a cut, hating the dark circles around his eyes and the lifeless stare he was gifting me with.

“I would say I’m sorry, but—”

“It needed to be done,” he finished for me and leaned against the doorframe. “Doesn’t mean that I had to like it.”

“I know.” I nodded. “And if there was any other way, I would have done it, but—”

“I know, Phee.” Atlas smiled for the first time. “But you should have known that he wouldn’t stop looking for you even in hell.”

“He was only looking for me because he wanted to punish me.”

“You said that, not me. But he was insufferable without you here. When our contact in the police called to inform us about your alleged death, Storm lost it, Ophelia. He almost attacked Indigo because he made a joke that the world was a better place without you in it after we saw the body.”

“Shit.” I winced.

“Yeah, shit. He smelled like a distillery for a week. He was like a feral wolf, walking around with a permanent frown etched on his face. We went through a lot of shit together, but I have never seen him look like that.”

“I-I,” I stammered and sat down on the bed. “I’m sorry.”

Atlas took a deep breath and walked inside, closing the door behind him. “Look...” He took my hand and sat down next to me. “I’m not happy with what you did, but I’m sure you had your reasons. I’m just saying these things to you so that you can understand what was happening without you around here.”

“Oh, come on, Atlas.” I chuckled sadly. “You guys are better off without me.”

“Maybe, maybe we’re not. Zoe refused to stay, Storm kept trashing his room, Indigo disappeared for two weeks, and Creed and I were trying to keep the place running. Then when he saw the body, he immediately knew it wasn’t you. The rest of us were sure it was you, but he knew, Phee. He knew it wasn’t you because he knew you better than the rest of us.”

The laughter of children traveled toward us, Kaiser barked, and I looked toward the window, suddenly suffocating in this big room.

“I tried to stop him. I tried to talk to him, to explain why you left—again, might I add.” He grinned. “But he wouldn’t listen. And let me tell you something,” he murmured. “He keeps saying that he’s doing this because he wants to hurt you, but I know him, Phee. He needs you, and you need him.”

“He doesn’t need me,” I argued. “And I don’t need him.”

“Could have fooled me. Is that why you two had sex last night, keeping the rest of the house awake?”

My face burned, and I avoided looking at him. Fuck, was I that loud?

“That’s not—”

“Whatever you wanna say, keep it for yourself. You guys can keep lying to yourselves, but it’s obvious to all of us that it would be better if you just kiss and make up.”

“We can’t, Atlas,” I whispered. “I cheated. I ran, Nikolai almost killed you all because of me, and there’s no way that we could come back from all that.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “But maybe you should both remember that communication is key, and you aren’t the only one that fucked up. Are you forgetting that he lied to you, kept you in the dark for months?”

“I’m not.”

“Then hold him accountable. Yeah, what you did was fucked up, but if he truly loved you, if he truly understood

you, he should know why you did that.”

“Wow, dude.” I looked at him. “You’re making me look like a saint.”

“We both know you’re not a saint, but you’re not the villain of this story and that’s what he needs to remember as well.” Atlas suddenly stood up, holding his hand out for me. “Come on, let’s go see that dog of yours.”

“What?” I asked, my eyes widening. “I thought—”

“You thought you were a prisoner, didn’t you? Don’t be silly, dude. We all know that this door wouldn’t be able to keep you in, and besides... If he wanted to lock you up, he wouldn’t have placed you in the room next to his.”

I stood up, arching an eyebrow at him. “He did what now?”

“Your rooms are next to each other.” Atlas laughed at my expression. “Come on, I’ll show you around and maybe you can scare some of the guys with your presence.”

“Me?” I pointed at myself. “Scary? Have you looked at you guys?”

“Oh we’re scary, but they all start shaking whenever I mention the infamous Baba Yaga.”

I scowled as soon as the famous nickname rolled off his tongue. “I hate that name. Like, I hate it from the bottom of my soul.”

“Too bad, darling. It fits you.” He strolled toward the door and looked back at me. “Put on some pants. I don’t want Storm to kill any of the guys. God knows that his temper isn’t what it once was.”

“Storm can fuck himself if he wants to. Unless he provides me with proper clothes, I’m going out like this.”

I walked toward him and opened the door, stepping into the hallway.

“You do know you’re wearing his T-shirt, right?”

That motherfucking son of a bitch.

“Would you like me to remove that as well and go naked instead?” I asked him, ignoring the fact that I didn’t have shoes on. “Come on. Kaiser isn’t a patient dog.”

“So, he’s the same as his owner?”

Flipping him the bird, I looked left then right, but there was no exit in sight. “Where the fuck do we go?”

“This side,” Atlas said as he passed next to me, going left. “This house is much bigger than the last one, but I like it. I think you will too.”

Yeah, I already liked it. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was that it wasn’t my home. It never would be.

True to his word, Atlas showed me the rest of the house, taking me through the enormous living room that was empty at this time of the day, kitchen, the bar area, avoiding the part of the house meant for gatherings.

But I didn’t exactly give a shit about any of those. I just wanted to see Kaiser.

Atlas led me to the backyard that I saw previously from my window and to what looked like a garage, where Kaiser’s angry barks were coming from.

“Why am I not surprised that you got yourself a rottweiler,” Atlas said, unlocking the door of the garage.

“What, did you think I would get a shih-tzu or chihuahua?”

“Oh, I can imagine you, carrying those designer bags with the dog inside.”

“Atlas,” I growled. “Shut up and open the door.”

“Fine, but if he tries attacking Indigo again, please let him. That man deserves it.”

“Hmmm, and why is that?”

Atlas’s shoulders stiffened, his hand resting on the doorknob of the garage, but I wasn’t going to skirt around the issue anymore. Something happened between them, and we were going to talk about it.

“Atlas?”

“Let’s not talk about it?”

“Yeah, absolutely.” I smiled, looking at the shocked expression on his face as he turned toward me.

“Really?”

“Absolutely not, dude. We’re going to talk and we’re doing it today.”

His groan would have been funny, but I knew he was avoiding the topic of Indigo, and whatever happened was bad enough to make him feel like this.

“I’m the queen of avoidance, Atlas, and we both know that it never did any good for me. The only thing it brought was more pain, regrets, and anger from the other party, so we do need to talk. I don’t want to see you like this, moody, grumpy and sad.”

“And what if I don’t want to talk?”

“Then I have appropriate torture methods that have proven quite useful, and trust me, you will beg to talk if I start using all of them.”

“Fine, fine,” he relented. “We will talk. But you can’t meddle and you have to promise me that you won’t try to maim and torture him.”

“Ah, so we are getting somewhere.” As if I didn’t know that all of this was connected to Indigo. “But I can’t promise you that I won’t try to hit him if he fucked you over.”

“How do you even know who I am talking about?”

“Dude, seriously?” I asked. “There’s only one person you couldn’t keep your eyes off, and that person lives in this house. So unless you’re trying to tell me that there’s another man out there who made you look like a lovesick puppy, you can’t stand there and pretend that I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Maybe it’s a girl.” He chuckled. “You’ve been away for a month.”

“You’ve been having a pity party for one for more than a month. So, cut the crap and open the door. Kaiser is waiting.”

Atlas started laughing. “Yes, boss. One angry rottweiler coming right up.”

“He wouldn’t be angry if you guys allowed him to sleep with me. He’s not used to this anymore.”

I closed the distance between Atlas and me, and pushed him aside, opening the door myself.

“Kais—” But I never managed to finish the sentence, because Kaiser came straight at me, jumping up and pushing me down on the ground.

His tongue lolled out, licking all over my face, as if he hadn’t seen me in weeks, when in reality we were separated only one night.

“I missed you too, buddy. Oh yes, I did. Yes, I did,” I cooed, my fingers rubbing behind his ears, over his thick neck, and all over his body.

The moment he saw Atlas, he rushed toward him, jumping up and trying to do the same thing.

“Oh no.” Atlas stepped backward, but Kaiser wanted to play with him. “Phee, get him away from me.”

The frantic look on Atlas’s face was comical, and I had no intention of stopping Kaiser from playing with him.

“He likes you,” I said as I stood up, pulling the T-shirt down and covering my upper thighs. “You should be happy.”

“Yeah, well, I would like him a lot more if he stayed away from me.”

“You know...” I came closer to them and pulled Kaiser away from Atlas, holding him by his collar. “Cillian had the same reaction initially, and it turned out that he really loved animals but didn’t know what to do with them. Is that the situation here? Or are you scared of him?”

“I’m not scared,” Atlas exclaimed. “I’m not scared of anything.”

“Except of him.” I pointed at the last person I wanted to see today, strolling toward us.

Kaiser immediately turned his body in front of me, his teeth coming out as he growled at an angry-looking Indigo.

“Look who’s back,” he said as he came closer to us. “The queen of darkness herself.”

“Awww, and here I thought that you’d missed me.”

“I see you got your dog.” Indigo looked at Kaiser who was trying to get away from me and go straight at him. “He almost bit my arm off last night.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have kidnapped his master and separated him from me. Did you think about that?”

“I think that he needs to be put down, just like some people I know.” He pointedly looked at me, the hatred shining through his irises.

“I can also let him go and we will put you down immediately. I have a list of people who need to be eliminated and your name is underlined in red,” I said, loving the fear taking over his face. “If you’re going to say something, say it, Indigo. This whole, *let me be sarcastic* bullshit, doesn’t really work on me. You don’t want me here? That’s dandy, because I don’t want to be here, but if you want someone to blame, you should look at your boss and blame him, not me. But if you ever try to threaten my dog or me.” I took a step forward along with Kaiser, while Indigo took one backward, flinching as Kaiser pulled to go after him even harder. “You should think twice. You might be part of Sons of Hades, you might be Storm’s friend, and I might act tamer now than I did before, but don’t think that I wouldn’t slaughter you and everyone you love if you cross me.”

“Okay, okay.” Atlas stepped in, trying to defuse the situation, but it was already too late.

Indigo was shitting on me ever since I came to the Club a couple of months ago, and while I understood that people had issues with who I was and what I did, they never voiced it in the way he did.

“You both need to chill,” Atlas commanded, but I wasn’t listening to that bullshit. I’d been trying to be chill since I came here, suppressing everything I was to appease others.

“I’m going to be chill as long as he stays away from me. You might think you’re a hot shit around here, Indigo, but the things I’ve seen and the people I know.” I chuckled. “You would never see them coming. Trust. Me.”

“Fuck you,” Indigo spat out. “You’re walking around here as if you own the place, when in reality, you’re just a filthy Aster whore, only good for fucking and using to get what we want. You mean nothing to him.” He smiled.

But men like Indigo had no idea that their words couldn’t harm me. They entered through one ear and exited through the other.

“That’s enough, Indigo!” Storm thundered, shutting him up immediately.

I had no idea when he came, but I was grateful for him. If he hadn’t shown up, his man would’ve been missing a limb or two if he continued talking.

“Prez.” Indigo’s eyes widened, looking at Storm. “I didn’t ___”

“I think you’ve said enough,” Storm answered, his words clipped. “Get back inside.”

“Oh no,” I intercepted. “Please let him stay. It’s been a long time since I made someone bleed and I wouldn’t mind seeing his fucking body on the ground,” I bit out, ignoring the tempest behind Storm’s eyes.

“Ophelia,” Storm warned.

“What, Stormy? He’s allowed to talk to me like that, yet I’m not allowed to defend myself? Are you all out of your mind?” I looked at the three of them. “You’re acting as if I’m this damsel that needs someone to protect me.” I looked at Atlas and Storm. “You are acting as if I wouldn’t be capable of killing you. You’re forgetting that your rules don’t apply to me ___”

“Phee.” Atlas came closer to me, putting his hand on my shoulder, but I shook him off, pissed at all of them. “Please.”

“No,” I answered and stepped back with Kaiser. “You wanted war?” I looked at Storm. “Well, this is war.” I smiled. “If any of your men even dare to look at me wrongly, I can promise you that they will not be seeing the next sunrise.”

“You can’t say that,” Indigo whined. “She can’t say that.” He looked at Storm as if he could help him.

“I went away, you motherfuckers. I went away, leaving all of this behind because I didn’t want to deal with any of you. I deserve a place where people are going to respect me and want me there, and I never found it here. So what if I killed people for a living? Are you trying to tell me that every single kill of yours was only against bad guys?”

None of them answered.

“Are you trying to tell me that the people you slaughtered didn’t have families, lives and whatnot? It’s easy to act as if what happened to you is the end of the world, because you’re closing your eyes to the pain of others,” I told Storm, looking straight at him. “It’s easy to make me the villain because it fits your agenda.” I looked at Indigo. “I don’t want to be here. But you brought me back and now you’re trying to tell me how to act?” I scoffed. “Well, fuck you.”

I pulled Kaiser with me, his body never relaxing as we passed by Storm and Indigo.

“No dogs in the house,” Indigo dared to say.

“Watch me, Indy. Fucking try me, bitch.”

“Sunshine,” Storm said. “Wait.”

“Fuck you, Storm. Fuck you and your merry band of leather-wearing asshats.” I turned toward him, glaring the entire time. “Kieran was an asshole, still is, but at least he knew where he fucked up and he tried to fix it. You need to get down off your high horse and look in the mirror. I’m not the only guilty party here. And please,” I rolled my eyes, “keep your dogs on a leash, because I won’t hesitate to put them to sleep.”

I could hear them talking, calling out to me, but I ignored all of them. It wasn't my fault I was born with this last name. It wasn't my fault that darkness was the only thing I knew up until recently. But I stood by what I said—they are not saints, even though they're trying to act that way.

Each and every one of them had fucked up at least once in their life, yet they looked down on me as if I was the worst person ever to walk on this planet.

Maybe not Atlas, but the disgust in Indigo's eyes raised my hackles, and I'd be damned if I allowed another person to talk to me that way.

A man was sitting on the staircase as I walked in, his eyes widening as soon as he saw me and Kaiser.

“Good, you know who I am,” I said.

“I-I,” he stammered.

“I don't have time for niceties today, so I will get straight to the point. I need a leash for my dog because he needs his walk and I need to get away from here before I kill someone.”

He looked at me as if he was seeing a ghost, but he didn't move.

“Do what she says,” Storm barked from behind me, igniting my anger even higher. “And find her some pants and shoes as well. She can't walk outside like this.”

“On it, Prez.” The guy scrambled, leaving me alone with Storm.

“You can't threaten my men like that, Ophelia,” he said as soon as the man was out of the earshot.

“Your men can't treat me like I'm a common whore, brought here to please their boss.” I looked at him pointedly. “Once they learn how to control their filthy tongues, I'll start controlling my murderous urges.”

“God,” he exhaled. “And to think that I used to fight for you.”

“Oh no, buddy. You never fought for me.” I stepped closer to him. “You expected me to fall on my knees and worship you. You expected me to love you no matter what, but that’s not how love works. You’re blaming me for what I did, and I respect that, but you played your part as well, Storm, so stop acting like a motherfucking saint and own your mistakes.”

I started walking upstairs with Kaiser in tow and turned one last time.

“And for fuck’s sakes, just let me go. Let me go and live your life freely without me. It is obvious that the only thing we are capable of is hurting each other, and that isn’t working for us.”

I didn’t wait to hear his answer and started walking back up, but as soon as I came to the top of the staircase, I heard it. Almost a whisper, meant only for him to hear, but I caught it, nevertheless.

“I can’t.”

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STORM

AVOIDANCE WAS my best friend these days, and ever since Ophelia blasted at Indigo, Atlas, and me, I'd been avoiding any places where she could possibly be. And it felt as if she was everywhere, even though I knew through Atlas that she only went for breakfast before everybody else and she took Kaiser out for a walk every morning, afternoon, and evening.

I had no idea who brought her food for Kaiser, I would guess Atlas, and I couldn't bring myself to go to her.

She wanted me to let her go, and every single time that thought even entered my mind, it was as if a knife sliced over my heart, bleeding me dry, because I couldn't imagine my life without her. I'd been placing all the blame on her, and she was right—I fucked up too. I knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't react well if she found out about our deal with Logan, and I still did it.

I still kept her in the dark, refusing to share all my secrets with her. I chased her, brought her here under the pretense of wanting to hurt her, but I was lying to myself, and if I kept this up, I would lose the woman I loved.

But I didn't know how or where to start. I didn't know how to approach her, because every time I did it seemed that we either ended up arguing, glaring at each other or fucking, and none of those were ingredients for a healthy relationship.

So instead of facing her and doing the healthy thing, I chose to sit here in my office, nursing this whiskey, trying to

forget what I had agreed to do once she was here. And I knew she wouldn't forgive me if I went ahead with it.

But what was I supposed to do? I had to think about the Club, about all those men and women depending on me. It wasn't only our chapter anymore, the entire country was affected by the Outfit and The Albanians, and I hated that The Syndicate had gone quiet.

There was nothing on them. Not one single thing, and while I wanted to believe that they'd stopped chasing Ophelia, I knew her uncle was still here, and it was only a matter of time before he took the first step.

The door of my office suddenly opened, revealing Indigo.

My mood immediately went from bad to worse, and even the verbal lashing I gave him the other day didn't help to suffocate my anger. The way he talked to her, the way he behaved was something I couldn't condone.

His misplaced anger toward her because of what her father did many years ago had no place here now. And I didn't appreciate the fact that he tried talking for me, ruining even the tiniest chance of me getting her back.

It was devastating, knowing that the woman you would die for lived just next to you, yet you couldn't do anything about it because you needed to put your duty before your feelings.

"Yes," I said when Indigo kept standing there, avoiding my eyes.

I understood his anger, I knew where it was coming from, but Ophelia wasn't the one that destroyed his family, and it wasn't fair toward her that he treated her like an enemy.

Atlas told me what she did during that month and a half while I was out of commission, trying to find the way to take them all down, and she did it by herself. She stayed by me, when she could have left as soon as they admitted me to the hospital. She could have gone back to The Syndicate, and I was sure that they would have taken her because she was the best at what she did.

But she'd stayed, she'd tried, and my men didn't make it any easier on her.

And the fact that I'd fucked up even more afterward wasn't sitting well with me.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Indigo started, clearing his throat. "Maxwell is here, and the others are slowly arriving for the gathering tomorrow."

The fucking gathering. I tried not to think about it and the scene I was going to create, but I couldn't back down now. I couldn't show weakness in front of these men.

This chapter here in Santa Monica was my family, but the others—they wouldn't think twice if they thought I was weak and incapable of leading the Club.

"I know we discussed the rooming plan and all of that, so I'm going to show them to their quarters, but you should know that they're arranging a party."

"Great," I groaned, placing my elbows on top of the desk. I chugged down the remains of the whiskey in the glass and dropped it on the wooden surface. "Who's arranging it?" I asked, knowing that the parties in other chapters were nothing like the ones here.

"Rip is doing it." Indigo winced. I groaned and pressed my forehead against the desk.

"We need to make sure that the families aren't here tonight. I don't want small kids around once the party starts happening."

"Got it," Indigo answered, staring at me.

"Anything else?" I grunted.

"What about, you know..." he trailed off, squirming.

"Ophelia?" I asked, straightening up. He better not start with another one of his rants about her, because we would have a problem. "What about her?"

"Uh, Atlas told me that she doesn't know about the gathering yet, and well, with the party tonight, maybe we

should let her know.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

“But—”

“You’re not telling her, Indigo.” If anyone was going to tell her, it would have been me.

“She’s free to come and go as she wants, and I’m pretty sure she will end up coming down for a party.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t mind that.”

His eyes widened at my statement and I knew he had something more to say.

“What is it, Indigo? I don’t have the whole day.”

“It’s just, uh, Rip saw her earlier, and you know how he is.” Fuck. “So, she was being, well, her usual self, and he liked it.” He stopped talking and lowered his voice. “He liked it a lot.”

“What are you trying to say, Indigo?”

“I don’t know, actually. I just... I would have killed a person if they talked to Zoe in the way I talked to Ophelia, and while I might not like her, I was wrong. I know you still love her. I know you brought her here, pretending to hate her, but I can see how you look at her, and Storm, you’re not going to like seeing Rip all over her even if she could handle herself.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Seconds ticked by and I thought he would argue with me, but he simply nodded and turned toward the door.

“I just don’t want us to have bloodshed tonight, you know. And she...” Indigo murmured. “She’s capable of turning you into a bloodthirsty monster.”

With those parting words, Indigo left my office, and even though I didn’t want to admit it, he had a point.

Just hearing about Rip taking an interest in her made me see red, but I had to control myself. I had to show them a cool

front, where even she wouldn't be able to have control over me.

But will you be able to handle seeing her with another man? My inner asshole piped in, and I fucking hated that even my subconsciousness knew I wouldn't be able to handle it.

I wouldn't be able to handle it at all.

Ophelia

A PARTY WAS HAPPENING DOWNSTAIRS, THE MUSIC PUMPING through the walls, louder than I liked, annoying both Kaiser and me.

I couldn't slip through without seeing all of them gathered together. And that guy that tried hitting on me earlier, God... Some of them really had no idea how to talk to people, least of all women. It was easy to forget what some of the other bikers were like, when I had Atlas and Storm around me.

Speaking of Storm, I barely saw him in the last three days, and I'd be lying if I said that it didn't affect me. It sucked because I hoped that he would finally come to me to talk.

I tried looking for him, to maybe apologize for some of the comments I'd made, but he was nowhere to be found. Atlas didn't want to talk about him, angry at Storm as well and the way he handled the situation.

Atlas also refused to talk about the asshole who fucked him over, and even if I didn't have a reason to hate Indigo before, I definitely did now.

I spent my days with Kaiser, ignoring everybody else, and surprisingly, they all left me alone—except for Atlas. Both of us apologized to each other for the way we handled the situation, and he filled me in about some of the other things that were happening in the Club, but I didn't know that they were having a party.

Moreover, I had no idea they were inviting other chapters, because the men I saw coming today definitely weren't from the Santa Monica chapter. Truth to be told, I wanted to go down there. I truly needed to talk to Storm, and he couldn't avoid me forever.

He brought me here and if he didn't want me here, then he should let me go. I wasn't about to run again, but he had to man up and speak out instead of hiding behind his duties.

A knock sounded on my door, Kaiser immediately jumping up and barking at whoever was on the other side. I walked toward the door, wondering who it was.

"Who is it?" I asked, aware that at parties like these, people would start looking for empty bedrooms just to have sex.

"Your favorite person," a familiar voice called out, and even before she finished the sentence, I was opening the door, spreading my arms into a hug.

"Zozo!" I screamed, happier than ever to see her.

Kaiser pushed his head between the doorframe and my leg, staring up at her. "And who do we have here?" she asked, hugging me. "Is he yours?"

"Zozo, this is Kaiser," I told her and he lifted his head, beaming at her.

She took a step back from me and kneeled right in front of him. Extending her hand, she let him sniff her first before petting his head.

"You're such a good boy, aren't you?" He was an attention-seeking whore, that's what he was, but I only laughed when he rolled down on the floor, showing her his belly. "I leave you for a few months, and you get yourself a dog, change your hair color... What else did you do?"

"I missed you, Zozo," I said, squeezing her arm. "I really, really missed you and I'm so glad to see you."

"Of course you did." She grinned. "I'm awesome. Buuuut..." she stepped inside, letting me close the door after

us while Kaiser vied for Zoe's attention. "I missed you too, dude," Zoe added. "I'm also kinda pissed at you for disappearing this last month. But I get it and I'm not holding it against you."

"Really?" I narrowed my eyes on her. "Is that why you stayed away even though Storm brought me here?"

"Okay." She rolled her eyes. "Fine, maybe I am holding it against you. But just a little bit. Teeny tiny bit, but it's only because I cried a river of tears thinking you were dead. And then I cried some more when I found out you weren't dead."

"Oh, Zoe." I hated the fact that I was the reason for even a little bit of her sadness, but no matter what she said, I knew she understood. She was one of the rare people that understood me better than I understood myself.

"I'm fine, we are fine." She pointed at herself, then at me. "But don't do that shit again, okay?"

"I promise." I smiled. "So, what have you been up to?" I asked as I sat down on the floor with Kaiser next to me.

He pushed his snout in my lap, waiting for me to start petting him. His tail wiggled, and I have never met a dog that liked meeting new people more than he did. I expected him to be weary, to be scared considering how abandoned he was, but he embraced this new life he'd gotten, and maybe, just maybe, I could learn something from him.

Zoe plopped down on the bed, her red hair bouncing around her shoulders. "This and that, you know? I just needed to get away from all of this for a while. I'd been unconscious for the most part, but the nightmares." She shuddered. "The nightmares kept me awake even for the things that I haven't witnessed with my own eyes. I know that compared to you guys and what you went through it truly was nothing, but still..."

"It was a traumatic experience," I started when she kept her mouth shut, seemingly lost in thought. "And every single person reacts differently. The first time I had to kill somebody

I thought I would die.” She winced at my words. “But I got used to it.”

“How do you even get used to such a thing?”

“It was either that or getting killed, there was no other option. You are lucky because you had your brother. It doesn’t matter that I want to strangle him myself, but he still protected you from the horrors of this world. And trust me, Zozo, if you knew the monsters walking among us, you would never even leave your house. Sometimes the innocent looking ones were the worst kind. Other times those that had a reputation of being vicious and scary were actually angels compared to them.”

“You mean, like you?” She chuckled.

“I’m not an angel, and trust me, I did things I am not proud of. Sometimes I can still hear their screams, I can still see their eyes and the sadness suffocating the life out of them, because they knew it was the end. The people I’ve killed weren’t always bad guys. Sometimes they just happened to be at the wrong place and at the wrong time, but I still did it. So believe me when I say, I am no one’s angel.”

“I think you are. I have only ever felt truly safe with my brother and you, because I know that you would risk your life to save mine. And as much as it might sound selfish, I know I wouldn’t be able to defend myself like you do. I know I wouldn’t be able to kill a person even if they attack me.”

“You’d be surprised what you are capable of when you’re put in a situation where you had no other choice but to kill and destroy,” I murmured, looking at the floor.

All those people I’d killed. All those innocent and not so innocent lives I’d taken.

Some of them weren’t even legal enough to drink, and to think that I took it all away from them because I followed orders... It haunted me, and it would continue to haunt me. There was nothing I could do to redeem myself in the eyes of the universe for everything I did.

A thousand good deeds wouldn't be able to wash away the stain from my soul. I didn't know what I did to deserve a friend like her, but I was grateful that there was at least one person in my life who loved me for me and who cared enough to be angry because I disappeared.

Anger, sadness, fear, they all came because we cared. Maybe it was another person, maybe it was a new job interview, but if we didn't give a fuck, none of them would ever appear, and grateful didn't even begin to cover how I felt because she still loved me no matter what.

"So," Zoe started. "You do know there's a party going on downstairs, right?"

"I know." I nodded.

"And you're just going to sit here, ignoring the free booze and the possibility of meeting new people."

"What's the point? They all hate me anyway."

"Not all of them. Trust me." She slid down the bed and crawled toward me. "There were people who mourned you, Phee, and it wasn't only Storm and me. You got friends here. You have a place here."

"It's okay." I shrugged. "I'm just a painful reminder of who my father was. But," I looked at her and her worried face, "I'm wondering why there are new people around. What's going on?"

"You don't know?" Her eyes widened, and something akin to anger flashed across her eyes before it completely disappeared. "There's a massive gathering of all chapters for Sons of Hades, happening tomorrow. Storm didn't tell you?"

"Storm is ignoring me, Zozo." I smiled sadly. "He doesn't owe me an explanation for anything or what is going on here. He made it clear that I was his prisoner and even though I could, I don't want to run again."

Silence descended on us and I could see the anger licking her skin, flushing her cheeks, and I knew I wouldn't like the words that would come out of her mouth.

“Get up,” she said, immediately standing up. “We’re going to the motherfucking party, and Storm or no Storm, you have the right to live a little. Get up, Ophelia,” she barked at me. “I’m not going to ask twice.”

“You’re lucky I like you, you know?” I said, slowly detaching myself from a sleeping Kaiser and standing upright. “If somebody else tried to command me like that, they’d be—”

“Dead, I know.” She grinned. “It’s a good thing you like me.”

She had no idea.

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STORM

I HATED THIS.

This party, these people occupying my house, my chapter, but I had no other choice if I wanted to keep the peace between all of us. I had to comply with what they wanted if I wanted to keep everyone happy.

In reality, all I wanted was to go up to Ophelia's room and bury myself inside her sweet heat. My dick started hardening at the mere thought of her, groaning when my hand pressed against my length as people milled and chatted around me.

Rip and Maxwell were sitting on the opposite side of the room, right in front of me, groping the two girls who came earlier to sit on their laps.

The stripper pole we installed in the middle of the room was unoccupied, but it was only a matter of time before one of the girls, or even guys, would find enough courage, or well, would get drunk enough to step up and start using it.

I could see Atlas's blond head on the left side of the room, chatting with one of the prospects from the Seattle chapter, and my eyes almost immediately flickered to the other side where Indigo stood with his arms crossed over his chest, staring at the two of them. He needed to get his head out of his ass if he didn't want to lose Atlas forever.

We never exactly talked about what had happened, but by the time I came out of the hospital, the icy demeanor Atlas displayed every time Indigo was around could only come from

a broken heart. I didn't need to be a genius to know that Indigo had fucked up and was now paying the price.

“There you are.” Nova’s annoying voice pulled me back from my thoughts and I looked to my right, seeing her standing right there.

I should have eliminated her by now, but I couldn't risk exposing ourselves to whoever spied on us. It was better to keep her close and to keep her entertained, all while investigating who she was working for.

It wasn't The Syndicate, it wasn't the Outfit, and judging by what Atlas discovered, it was someone that wanted to eliminate Ophelia. And I didn't like it.

Not one bit.

That saying of keeping your friends close, but your enemies even closer was what I was using right now, and I used all my strength not to sneer at her every time she came to me. And knowing that she was Ophelia's cousin made my blood boil even more.

Truth to be told, if Ophelia ever found out that I slept with Nova when she ran away, she would cut off my balls and serve them to me on a platter, especially because she was the one to warn us about her. And there I went, filled with vengeance and the need to forget those cerulean eyes, fucking myself over by sticking my dick in this woman.

She couldn't take a fucking hint and I was too tired to try and shake her off tonight. She went on a trip one week ago, and while she knew that we looked for Ophelia, she didn't know that I found her or that I brought her back with me.

Every time she spoke to me, she couldn't hide her disdain toward Phee and what she'd done. And maybe I was blind to see it before, masking it underneath all the anger I'd felt, but it bothered me that I allowed myself to get entangled with her.

I just hoped Ophelia wouldn't find out.

“I missed you,” she cooed in her sugary sweet voice, raising my hackles because I hated when women talked like they were five years old. What was the point? I once thought

she was a cool girl, here to earn some money and to escape her previous life, but if there was one thing I hated the most it was people lying to my face.

I wasn't worried, though. Her time would come, and I would be the one to put a bullet through her head.

"I was busy," I said, looking ahead where Rip and Maxwell sat, when she threw her leg over my lap and sat down.

"I know," she murmured, rubbing her palms over my chest, but I felt nothing. I wanted to throw her off my lap, to lock her down so that she wouldn't be able to reveal anything to her boss, whoever he or she was, but we were playing a game and it was better if she still thought she was undetected.

"You're always so busy, so grumpy." She smiled down at me, and when her face started lowering to mine, my hand shot up instinctively, gripping her throat. I didn't want her lips on mine. There was only one person in this house who could claim them, and it wasn't Nova.

"Yes," she moaned, grinding her pussy on top of me, but my dick didn't respond. Hell, he almost shriveled just thinking about Nova and what she wanted from us.

"Don't," I barked, pushing her away from me.

Nerves covered her face, but she masked it faster than I could comment on it, and determined to stay on top of me, she turned around, giving me her back, while her front turned toward everybody else.

Rip looked toward us, his eyes hungrily devouring Nova's body. I wanted him to take her away from me, but I knew he wouldn't do that if he thought that she belonged to me.

Clubs didn't have many rules, but whenever one of our members claimed a girl, she was off limits for his brothers. And even though it didn't seem that I wanted Nova, she was still sitting on top of me, thinking she meant something to me.

I caught Atlas staring from the corner of my eye, disapproval written all over his face, but we'd argued over this too many times to count, and as soon as he caught me looking

at him, he turned around continuing his conversation with the prospect.

Nova danced on top of me, her head bobbing in the rhythm of the music, and I just wanted this night to finish. It wasn't until she started talking again that I started paying attention to my surroundings.

"Who is that?" she asked, looking toward the right side of the room where a crowd had gathered, and I saw a mane of red hair accompanied by the blonde who haunted my dreams.

My entire body stiffened when those angry eyes connected with mine, staring at Nova on my lap, with a fire that could burn us both.

Fuck, this wasn't good.

Indigo shook his head as Zoe said something to him, but Ophelia kept standing in the same spot, her eyes never wavering from us. The pain, the anger and most of all, the hatred shining in those blue orbs was enough to send shivers all over my body. I wanted to explain this to her, to tell her it meant nothing, and even though the rational part of my brain knew I wasn't doing anything wrong because we weren't together, my heart refused to listen.

It belonged to her and it knew that we were betraying her by sitting here with her enemy.

"Is that Ophelia?" Nova asked, her hands fisting at her sides and the poisonous hatred dripping from her every word.

"Shut up, Nova," I said, trying to move her away from me, but she wouldn't budge.

"Why is she here?" Nova bit out, just as Ophelia took a step closer to where Rip and Maxwell were sitting, their eyes devouring her whole. I hated that I couldn't claim her in front of all these people. I hated that I needed to play the game when my entire body screamed to just get there and get her away from here.

The way she was standing there, staring at us, I thought she would march over here and throw Nova off my lap, but she didn't.

The wicked smile that appeared on her face chilled me to my bones and I knew that there would be no niceties tonight. That was the smile she wore when vengeance was the only thing on her mind. She had that gleam when she killed that man a couple of months ago, and I knew without a doubt that tonight wouldn't be as peaceful as I hoped.

A girl passed next to Ophelia, carrying a tray with shots, and without taking her eyes off me, Ophelia took one glass from the tray and downed it in one sip, licking her lips.

Fuck. Me.

She was dressed in a black T-shirt Atlas bought for her, black pants and the military boots that shouldn't have made her look as hot as they did.

Rip suddenly stood up, throwing the girl that was on top of him off, and walked toward Ophelia, ignoring my burning stare. Atlas was grinning from ear to ear, watching the situation unfold. As Rip stopped right behind my Sunshine, she threw her head back, grinning at him.

My body was ready to jump up, to claim her, to show them all who she belonged to, but I couldn't. I fucking couldn't and it was killing me.

“Did you bring her back?” Nova asked, but her voice was lost on me, hidden behind the wall of fog that was starting to take over my brain.

Rip's hands landed on Ophelia's hips, moving her in the rhythm of the music, while she ground her ass against him.

Her blond hair spilled over her shoulder and as his face dipped down toward her neck, his lips pressed against her soft skin, right where I'd kissed her the other night. She looked at me, her lips moving, talking to him, and it took all my willpower to stop myself from getting up.

Indigo came closer to them and said something to her and then looked at me, but she simply laughed at him, pushing Indigo away from her. His lost eyes landed on me as if he was begging me to do something, but what could I do?

If I stood up now, I would never be able to go through the day tomorrow and the entire speech I had prepared. If I took her to her room, I wouldn't be able to look in her eyes tomorrow once I shattered all the trust and hope she had in me.

And I could see that she did. She still wanted me as much as I wanted her, but she would hate me after tomorrow, because once again I was putting the Club before her, and I had nobody else to blame but myself.

Rip dragged his hands over her sides, her eyes begging me to do something, but I couldn't. God, I hated myself right now.

Sorrow reflected back at me, suffocating me, and I buried my face in Nova's neck, unable to look at her anymore. I always blamed her and the things she did, but I was the one killing us now. I wasn't a fool. I knew that she would have run away by now. She could've been far away from me, but she stayed as if she wanted to prove to me that no matter what, she still wanted this.

How could I tell her that my heart bled for her, my soul screamed for hers, and my demons cried knowing that they would never get to dance with hers ever again? I was a bastard, a sick fuck that couldn't let her go, and even her hatred was better than never seeing her again.

Nova took my hands in hers, pressing them against her stomach, and as if on a cue, my head shot up, my eyes landing on Ophelia. The misery she felt was evident on every part of her body, and as my lips moved over Nova's shoulder, Ophelia's hand shot up, landing right above her heart, as if she was keeping her insides from spilling out.

And I felt the same.

Something cracked inside of me from seeing her like this, from hurting her like this, and maybe a month ago I would've been happy doing all of this and breaking her apart, but now... Now I fucking regretted every single choice I'd made.

She lowered her head, nodding, understanding washing over her. My chest seized, my skin too tight for me to bear, and I knew I broke the last piece of her heart that she may

have kept for me. When her eyes landed back on me, emotions weren't there anymore.

A void stared at me, swallowing me whole. My heart thundered as Nova pushed my hands down her bare thighs, but I didn't say a single word while my heart cracked open, losing the woman I loved.

I could feel eyes on me—Atlas, Indigo, Zoe even Creed—and all of them looked at me with disgust, with anger for what I just did, but I fucking did it for them. I did it for all of them.

I broke Ophelia and me so that they could be safe.

Music picked up, the sensual beat irritating my skin, and without a preamble, Ophelia detached herself from Rip and walked toward the pole. Her hand caressed the metal surface before she spun around in the beat of the music, her body twisting and turning as the female voice sang about being haunted.

I was going to be haunted for the rest of my life, and I just hoped that she would be able to forgive me once everything was said and done.

Rip went down on his knees, worshipping her, beckoning her to him, and not once did she look at me. Everybody looked at her, but she was lost to the music, ignoring her surroundings, ignoring me.

This was what I wanted, this needed to happen... Then why did it feel as if my soul was breaking apart? Why couldn't I breathe?

"You're a stupid, stupid man," came from my right and I turned to see Indigo sitting there, unaware when he had approached. "A fucking idiot, Storm."

"Fuck off, Indigo," I growled and leaned back, closing my eyes, trying to erase the picture of her from my mind, but it impossible. "I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah, right." He scoffed. "What are you doing, Storm?" he asked, his eyes on me.

"What I had to do, to protect my family."

I opened my eyes just as Ophelia went down on the floor and started crawling toward Rip, her perky ass right in the air. She arched her back and bent backward over her knees, her eyes closed, and all I wanted was for her to look at me.

Maybe she would understand if she looked at me. Maybe I could tell her everything she needed to know if only she looked at me.

But she never did.

The song slowly bled into the other, and before I could react, she was up on her feet, pulling Rip with her.

“Fuck,” Indigo cursed as they started walking toward the hallway, hand in hand, as if none of us existed. “Storm.” The warning in his voice was clear, but fuck this shit.

I couldn’t let her sleep with him. I couldn’t let her get away with him.

I pushed Nova off my lap, and almost ran after them, avoiding every single member in my way. The two of them were already close to the stairs; his arm was wrapped around her shoulders, his lips pressed to her hair, and I wanted to tear him apart.

Limb by limb, I was going to destroy him and then I would show her who she belonged to.

But as if she heard me, she stopped right before they started going upstairs, and Rip looked back at me, a satisfied smirk dancing on his face.

“Sunshine—”

“No,” she said, her voice void of emotions, of anything that made her who she was, who I loved.

“You can’t—”

“No, Storm.” She shook her head. “Go back to the party.”

“I can’t,” I growled.

“Yes, you can,” she answered in a flat voice. “And you will. Trust me, you will.”

“Please, Phee. I didn’t—”

“Dude, I don’t know what you’re doing but you’re overstepping,” Rip said.

My eyes flickered to him, the need to destroy him riding me hard, but I paced myself.

“This has nothing to do with you, Rip,” I gritted out. “Nothing at all.”

“Storm,” Ophelia murmured, taking a step closer to me. “Let me go, Storm. Just let me go.”

“I fucking can’t!” I roared.

“You’ll have to,” she said calmly. “Because I am finally letting you go.”

“No, Ophelia. Please,” I begged her. “We can go and talk. We can—”

“Go and talk with Nova, Storm,” she answered, tilting her head to the side. “I don’t belong to you. I never did. I can see it now as clear as day. The love I had for you was just a figment of my imagination. Just another fucked-up thing to keep me from drowning in darkness, but it wasn’t real.”

“You don’t mean that.” I shook my head. “You don’t.”

Rip looked at her, then at me. As if an understanding dawned on him, he finally stepped back, and without a word, walked away from us.

“I was never meant to be yours and you were never meant to be mine,” Ophelia continued. “And that’s okay. Go be with Nova, Storm. It’s obvious who has your attention, and that isn’t me.”

I opened my mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to tell her about threats, about the things I needed to do, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything but stare at her.

“That’s what I thought,” she murmured and walked away from me, taking my heart with her.

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OPHELIA

I ONCE GOOGLED the true meaning of sorrow, and until yesterday, I couldn't truly understand the words written on the screen, because what I used to feel was anger and not sorrow. At least not in its true form.

But last night... Yesterday, I finally understood what the tightness in my chest was, and an unexplainable need to simply disappear. I understood what this shattering sound in my ears was—it was my heart falling into pieces, fragments shattering on the floor of that room as my eyes zeroed in on the man I loved with the woman that was out to hurt me.

Maybe I didn't have the right to feel this way. After all, I made my bed and now I had to sleep in it, but the logical thoughts had no place where the heart was involved, and mine... Mine always wanted things that were bad for us, no matter how much it hurt. There was a heart-shaped hole in my chest, filled with void, covered in darkness I allowed to control my life, and now I had no other choice but to accept that the life I once wanted to have was slipping through my fingers.

For all my brave and bitter words, I was in reality just another girl that played with fire and got burned. I thought I could protect myself if I ran away, but I was already in too deep, and this shield I wielded my entire life wasn't going to protect me again.

I made a mistake that cost me more than anyone would ever know. And maybe tomorrow I would be braver, stronger and of a sound mind, but today I just wanted to succumb to

darkness, to grieve for something that would never be. I often prided myself on my strength, the ability to brush things off even though they would be able to destroy and eat the last remnants of my sanity, but I knew now that I never truly brushed anything off.

All I'd managed to do is to bury them deep down, covering them with fake bravery and fake strength, but they couldn't have stayed buried forever. I could feel them pushing forward, breaching the invisible wall I'd built, and one by one, they were going to eat me alive.

I think that even when I ran from him, I expected him to chase me, to show me that he truly wanted me no matter what. And wasn't that what all of us wanted? To have someone that would choose us no matter how fucked up our minds were, and no matter how many bad things we did.

I guess I expected him to forgive me in a way, holding onto hope even when I pretended that there was none.

I didn't expect him to be there with a woman I wanted to murder for the things she did, especially not since I'd told Atlas about her real intention. And from the look of the things, this wasn't the first time they were together. This wasn't the first time he held her like that. There was familiarity there, and that smug motherfucking smile on her face when he buried his nose into her neck... God, it shouldn't hurt like this.

Love shouldn't feel like this. I shouldn't be fucking feeling like this.

My hand flew to my chest, my palm pressing against my breastbone as if the pressure could lessen the numbness spreading from the center of my body through my bones. Yesterday morning, no matter how angry I was that he didn't come to me, that he didn't try to talk, I still held onto hope.

I held onto the fact that he still couldn't keep his hands off me, knowing that it might take months for him to forgive me, but I could wait. I could learn to be patient. It all fell into the water when I saw him with her.

Holding her, caressing her while a thousand emotions flickered over that face I loved so much.

My vision blurred, the tears I'd been keeping at bay for so long, releasing from my body with the anguished cry.

"I've lost him," I sobbed in the empty room, alone in my misery.

Maybe Nikolai was right. People like us weren't born to be loved. The only thing we knew how to do well was to destroy, to shatter, to show our ugly side to the world. These last couple of months I tried to be good. I tried to keep my tongue, to show emotions instead of hiding them from the rest of the world.

I tried to change the things that scared other people. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to open myself, to come with terms that I did monstrous things. Things that weren't okay.

I fucking tried!

I gripped the top of the duvet in my hand, my fist squeezing as hard as possible, my knuckles turning white from the force, trying to erase this agony, but there was no use.

Kaiser whined, lying next to my feet, looking at me with those round, brown eyes, as if he could understand what I was going through. And maybe he could.

People abandoned him as well, leaving him in a metal cage with no hope for tomorrow, and in a way I think that's why I took him. I could see the pain reflected in those brown eyes. I could see the understanding when he looked at me.

They judged him because his breed was illegally used for dog fights, portraying them in a wrong way, and no one even stopped to learn more about him. About his big heart, his goofiness... They didn't allow him to show them love, to show them that he could be more than what those other people portrayed his breed as.

"We are not so different, are we?" I asked him, whispering as I slid down the bed and sat right next to him. He placed his head on top of my thigh, looking up at me with the understanding I had never seen on another human being.

“They put a label on us, Kaiser,” I murmured, wiping my tears. “They refused to believe that we could be something better.” I placed my hand on top of his head, rubbing the spot behind his ears.

“You were labeled because bad people used your cousins for something bad, forcing them to be vicious,” I took a deep breath. “And I was labeled for all the things I was forced to do when I had no other choice. I didn’t have a choice, buddy. I didn’t have a fucking choice.”

He started whining, pulling his head backward to lick my hand.

“And I ran, you know?” I smiled hollowly. “I ran because I was scared. Because I didn’t know better. No one has ever shown me better.”

He placed his paws on top of my legs, as if to show support.

“I cheated on him, and I am so sorry, you know? None of them would ever know how sorry I am.”

“Ophelia,” Indigo spoke behind me, my entire body stiffening at the sound of his voice.

Kaiser raised his head, growling softly at the man standing somewhere behind us, and I grabbed his collar, holding him to me. The last thing I wanted to have today was a bloodshed because my dog didn’t like one of the members of the Club.

“I, uh...” He stammered. “I came to apologize,” he continued, yet I still couldn’t turn my head toward him. “The way I behaved toward you, well,” he chuckled brokenly. “It wasn’t right. And I’m ashamed of myself. I’m ashamed of every single word I’ve told you, and it wasn’t your fault.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” I asked, containing the emotions overflowing in my body. “I have never met you. I never even had anything to do with the Club until Storm brought me here. I know I am not a saint, but—”

“It wasn’t you,” he murmured and I could hear him walking further into the room, Kaiser’s eyes stuck to his every movement. “It was your father. Nikolai.”

I winced at the pain lacing his words, at the heavy atmosphere surrounding us, but maybe this was what we needed to move forward. I never wanted to hate Indigo, not when he meant so much to Atlas, but he gave me no choice.

“He slaughtered my entire family, except for me and Zoe. And honestly, seeing you and the same craziness in your eyes that he used to carry, it brought back all those memories I’ve tried to bury.”

“I’m nothing like Nikolai, Indigo,” I bit out, hating that he would even compare me to that man.

“I know,” he said, his breathing calm and controlled while a war waged inside of me. “I know that now, and seeing you these last couple of days, I understand that you could have been like him, but you aren’t.”

I wasn’t a fool. I sensed the change in him and considering that I never heard him opening the door, I was pretty sure that he heard my monologue earlier.

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know that you aren’t a monster, Ophelia. And you were right the other day, We all made mistakes. We killed, maimed, hell,” he chuckled. “I did things that would make a grown ass man cry, but you don’t see any of us shunning me for that. Yet we did that to you. We were blinded by rage, by sorrow, by loyalty to Storm, and we forgot that underneath that mask you’re constantly wearing is still a beating heart and a human being trying their best to do things differently.”

“And look what that got me,” I smiled and finally looked at him. His eyes widened at the sight of my tear-stained face and the emotions I rarely showed to other people. “I tried to change who I am these last couple of months, Indigo. I really did.”

“I know,” he nodded and sat down on the bed. “I didn’t want to acknowledge that, but I know you did your best.”

“And I didn’t run. Not this time. Because I thought we could fix it, you know,” I whimpered, unable to hold myself back. “I thought that if I repented enough, that if I showed

how good I could be, he would finally be able to talk to me. I know I fucked up. I really do. I'm not pretending to be an angel, and I'm not saying that my mistakes were nothing compared to his, but it's just..." I trailed off.

"It hurts," Indigo said, understanding reflected in his eyes. "I don't know what you're feeling and I'm not going to pretend that I understand, but I'm asking you not to give up on him."

"How?" I exclaimed. "He obviously gave up on me."

"Storm, uh," he scratched the back of his head and looked down at the bed. "He reacts badly to betrayals, no matter who it is. But he loves you, Ophelia," Indigo looked at me. "And I think he's just as lost in all of this, but he will come around."

I contemplated his words, thinking about everything he just said, and I never doubted that Storm felt something for me, whatever that was, but sometimes love wasn't enough. Sometimes other factors had more impact on two people and love simply wasn't strong enough to withstand the tempest of life.

"I can't promise you anything, Indigo, but," I took a deep breath and slowly stood up, keeping Kaiser next to me. "I'll try not to give up. Although, I'm not the only one that needs to try."

He nodded. "I understand, and that's all I'm asking. Just to have a bit more patience. He will come around."

"Right," I murmured, taking Kaiser's leash from the nightstand and attaching it through the hoop in his collar. "I'm pretty sure you didn't come here just to chat with me. You need something."

"Yeah, uh, I came to pick you up, actually. The gathering is happening right now and—"

"He wants me there."

"Yeah," Indigo winced. "If you don't want to, I will—"

"No," I shook my head. "I'll come there. I just need to take him out and I'll be there. Give me half an hour."

Indigo nodded and stood up, walking toward the door.

“Indigo,” I stopped him just as he reached there. “I will need to talk to you later on. Both you and Atlas. There’s something you should know, and whatever you want to do with that information is up to you, but I think you should know.”

“I don’t like the tone of your voice,” Indigo frowned, looking at me. “Is it bad?”

Nodding I rounded the bed, and came closer to him.

“It could be catastrophic if we are not careful.”

TRUE TO MY WORD, HALF AN HOUR LATER I STROLLED through the hallway leading toward the backyard, already cringing at the loud noises coming from the outside; music, people talking and yelling, and that one voice I wanted to avoid because I couldn’t bear to look at him.

But I told Indigo I would try to hold on. I would try to hold on to the hope that one day Storm and I would be able to find our way back to each other. Maybe it wasn’t today, maybe it wasn’t going to be tomorrow, but there was still hope. And as long as that one spark lived inside of me, I would be patient and wait.

He was worth the wait, and if I wanted this to turn into something more, something pure and beautiful, I had to stop my toxic thoughts and habits from pushing forward.

As soon as I stepped through the sliding door into the warm afternoon sun, it felt as if dozens of people turned to look at me. Some of them quickly averted their gazes, some lingered on me, following my every step, and as Storm spoke over the microphone, standing on a small stage, I felt proud seeing him there, leading all of them.

My eyes searched the crowd, looking for either Atlas or Zoe, and when I spotted them standing next to each other, right next to the barbeque on the other side of the backyard, I

started walking toward them, avoiding the eyes of the crowd that started getting more and more interested in me. I had no doubt that most of them knew who I was, but while the chapter in Santa Monica never tried to harm me, I had no idea if the others would feel the same way, considering that my family did more harm than good in the past couple of years.

Storm talked about unity, strength and the current war against the Outlet and The Syndicate and I realized that I should have told him about Lazar and everything I'd found out. It was obvious that they all resented both of these organizations when the cheers and calls for revenge ensued through the crowd, and as I finally looked up, feeling his eyes on mine, I froze in the spot.

Warmth was long gone from those irises and the man I was looking at wasn't Storm I knew, but the ruthless President of Sons of Hades. The person I knew didn't seem so cold, so vicious, but the harsh lines on his face, the way he observed the crowd and drank me in showed a completely different side of Storm.

"They were after us for so long, and now it is time to destroy everything they love," he announced while my blood ran cold as everybody else agreed with him.

I looked toward Atlas and Zoe, Atlas's eyes widening when he spotted me. He started moving through the crowd, trying to reach me, but I was frozen in place as Storm continued talking.

"How are we going to do it?" Somebody asked from the crowd, but I couldn't locate the source of the voice.

"Easy," Storm's hollow chuckle washed over us. "We have something they want." He looked at me, that wicked smile spreading on his face. "She's as pretty as she's lethal and we will use her to get to them."

No, no, no.

I started shaking my head, stepping backward and hitting the man behind me.

“Sorry,” I murmured, apologizing to him, but I was in a trance.

Atlas finally reached me, his frantic eyes looking over me.

“I’m sorry, Phee,” he murmured. “I have no idea what he’s doing. This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“I’m pretty sure most of you know her name. A psychopath, a murderer, a liar and a thief. My favorite one is that she’s a runner, loves getting away from tricky situations.” Every word rolled off his tongue so easily, piercing through the invisible armor I wore, shattering under the heavy onslaught. “Some of you call her Baba Yaga.” Storm laughed with the crowd. “She’s an ice princess, a perfect assassin, and she’s our golden ticket to bring these motherfuckers to their knees.”

The crowd roared while my knees shook, my hands clutching to Atlas as if he could save me from this pain flooding through my veins.

He sold me.

Storm sold me.

He only wanted to use me.

“She escaped me once, but she’s here now. She’s a perfect pawn, so eager. So hungry for acceptance and love.”

“No,” I whispered when somebody else came from my left. I turned my head to see Indigo’s pain-stricken face staring down at me.

“Did you know?” I asked him, going over everything he told me earlier. “Did you fucking know, Indigo?”

“No,” he shook his head, looking straight into my eyes. “I swear to you, I had no idea he would do this. He wasn’t supposed to do this, dammit.”

“We need to get her out of here,” Atlas said, looking at Indigo. “He’s going to give her to them. He’s going to—”

“And there she is,” Storm cut through Atlas’s words, looking at us. “A true killer.”

People turned around, their eyes landing right on me, witnessing the humiliation and pain rolling off me.

“Isn’t she beautiful,” Storm chuckled, mocking me. Erasing every perfect moment we ever had. “But her beauty can be deceiving people,” he continued. “Trust me. I’d know.”

All of them laughed, whispering, talking about me, their eyes dragging over my body.

“Bring her up here,” he commanded, his eyes plastered to Atlas and Indigo, but neither one of them moved. “Indigo,” Storm barked when we kept standing in the same spot, my every hope disappearing into thin air. “Atlas!”

He took my heart and broke it—again. I could hear the pieces falling down, shattering with a splintering sound. My house of cards fell apart, leaving numbness behind.

I looked up at him one last time, putting all my emotions in that one look, my eyes blazing with pain, anger, shame, and hatred. So much fucking hatred.

Nova stood on the side of the stage, snickering into her hand, her proud eyes flickering toward Storm.

But I wouldn’t go down without a fight, and if any of them thought that they could use me for their own gain, they had another think coming. I wouldn’t go down easily. I wouldn’t give them what they wanted.

Smile spread over my face as I stared up at Storm. The time stood still, everybody waiting for me to fall apart, to shatter in front of them. He built me up all those months only to destroy me in one single day, only to show me that everything he ever felt was just an illusion I fell for.

I straightened up, letting go of Atlas, rolling my shoulders backward.

My heart was shattered, but my mind... My mind wanted revenge. My body hummed from the pent-up energy, and Storm had no idea what he just did. He made an enemy where there wasn’t one, but he would find out what happened to people that dared to cross me.

He would find out what happened to men who tried to control me.

He took a step back on the stage, shock replacing the smug smile he carried, and for a second, the sorrow so similar to mine appeared on his features, before he replaced it with the cruel mask he currently wore.

“Ophelia,” Indigo murmured as I took a step forward. I turned around, looking at him with completely new eyes.

These people weren’t my family. I had a family, the one that wanted me with all my broken and fucked-up pieces. I had people that cared about me more than any of these mongrels ever would. That family would have never put me through this.

Those friends would never allow something like this to happen. They would have warned me or at least taken me away from here.

These friends, this Club... They all deserved the wrath I would inflict on them.

“Please,” Indigo begged, and whatever it was that he saw on my face scared him enough to plead with me. “Please don’t ___”

“Zoe will be safe, Indigo,” I said with conviction in my voice. “Zoe and Atlas will be safe, but the rest,” I grinned, feeding him poison through each word, “the rest should fucking run, Indigo. I told you I’ve tried to change, I’ve tried to be better, but you people wouldn’t let me. You people want me to be a monster. He,” I looked toward Storm who was waiting on the stage, “wants to portray me as a monster. He wants to use me, to sell me to the highest bidder. But I’m not for sale, you stupid fucks. I was never for sale.”

“Ophelia, don’t do this. He’s hurting. He’s—”

“He’s a coward. He’s a motherfucking coward, Indigo, and he will now find out what happens to people who fuck me over. I gave him my heart.” I smiled sadly before looking back up, numbness taking over my bones. “Now he’s going to get my anger.”

I slipped through the crowd, my head held high, because I knew I was better than them. I would never do this to someone I loved, to someone I cared about. I would never do this to someone I considered a friend or family.

Even when I hated them, I never ever wanted to destroy Cillian and Tristan. Kieran deserved my wrath, he deserved what I did, but I never would have subjected them to such humiliation. Even during those darkest moments, I still cherished the years we'd all had together, because they used to be a vital part of my life.

Men snickered as I passed, their eyes devouring me. Women sneered, as if that could save them from my anger.

"Please welcome," Storm said as I came closer to the stage. "Ophelia Ekaterina Aster!"

He laughed in my face, while the rest of them booed and called out for my death.

"We should kill them all!" someone shouted.

"Murderer!" another person joined in.

"You should burn in hell!" the third one added, and I took it all in.

I took them all in as I walked on the stage, standing right next to Storm.

The man I loved.

The man I now hated.

My head turned toward him, tilting to the side as the wicked grin took over my lips, spreading wide. He didn't deserve me.

I would have died for him. I would have died for every single one of them. I would have accepted them and forgot all the filthy words and filthy stares, but now... Nah, they didn't deserve that.

Storm's wide eyes narrowed at me, the understanding finally flashing through them.

Without a word, I stepped toward him, placing my hand on his chest.

“Awwww, poor wittle Stormy,” I cooed, grinning from ear to ear. “You finally caught big bad Ophelia Aster.” My voice echoed around the backyard, picked up by the mic. “Congratulations, darling. Scary Hades finally caught Persephone.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, his eyes looking down at me.

I snatched the mic from him and took a step backward, unleashing everything inside of me.

“Do you all know the story of Hades and Persephone?” I asked the crowd that was looking at us with bated breath. Some nodded, some stood stoically looking at me as if I was nothing more but the chewing gum on the sole of their shoes. “It was this great, forbidden love, where Hades snatched her from her world and brought her to hell,” I said and looked at Storm. “What you failed to realize is that Persephone was scarier than Hades. Scarier than any of them, really.” I looked toward the crowd, reveling in the fear wafting in the air. “She was the Goddess of Death, darlings.” I chuckled. “A vicious Goddess, unable to ever forgive and forget.”

Silence descended on us, not a single person speaking out.

“You wanted a fight, Storm?” I asked him, taking a step closer to him. “You wanted to destroy me, darling?” I pressed my hand to his sternum, moving slowly toward his heart. “I am going to give you a war, Storm.” I looked up at him, my hand wrapping around his neck. I pulled him down to me and lowered down the mic, away from us.

I pressed my lips to his jaw, feeling him shudder underneath my touch. My mouth moved toward his ear then, the words I’d been keeping, freely spilled from my lips.

“I loved you, Storm. I wanted to wait, to be patient, to show you that I could be better. Now, my darling little God, you are nothing. You are less than nothing, Storm. You are just a weak man who couldn’t do what I needed him to do. Now

you and all of these fuckers standing here, cheering for my demise, are going to find out what it is like to be subjected to my wrath. Ask Kieran, Storm. Ask him how I erased him from my life as if he meant nothing.”

“Sunshine,” he whimpered, his hand landing on my shoulder, but I shook him off, unable to bear his touch.

“I am Baba Yaga for you now,” I murmured, pulling back. “Don’t you forget that.”

“I-I,” he stammered.

“I am expecting to have my phone and all my belongings delivered to me in the next hour, Storm. If they’re not there, you’re going to have one less member in the club.”

I stepped backward, creating the distance between us, and threw the mic at him.

“This is going to be so much fun, Stormy.” I laughed. “So much fucking fun.”

I turned around and started going down the small set of stairs, seeing the steam coming off one of the barbeques that was placed close to the stage, and I strolled right there. I hadn’t had breakfast, and if these people thought that they could control me, or that they could keep me locked up, they should rethink their strategy.

I stopped in front of the barbeque where the hot dogs were getting prepared, when someone from behind pushed me, almost making me fall on top of the boiling surface.

Turning around, I saw Nova standing there, her anger evident on her face.

“You can’t talk to him like that!” she screeched, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “You are nothing, Ophelia. Nothing!”

“Did you just push me?” I asked calmly.

“Yes! I should’ve pushed you harder.”

Ava often talked about the people who were all bark but no bite, and Nova... Nova was one of them. I could feel her

hatred for me coming in waves, clouding her vision. I could feel the others looking at us, and there was no fucking way I could let this go.

I wasn't keeping the peace anymore. I wasn't pretending I was a peaceful person anymore.

Turning toward the barbeque and the scared face of a boy who couldn't have been more than sixteen who manned the station, my eyes zeroed in on the long knife lying right on top of the table, glinting under the afternoon sun. In a second, my hand wrapped around the black handle, and before Nova or anybody else could react, I turned toward her and came closer, pushing her down to the ground.

Her screams echoed around me, her lips moving, but I couldn't hear a word from the pounding in my ears.

"I thought I made myself clear, *shlyukha*." I grinned as her eyes widened, recognizing the word. She could pretend she was American, but she understood Russian just like I did. "*Ty deystvitel'no dumala, chto ya pozvolyu etomu uyti, Natalia?*" I asked her. Did she really think I would let this go?

Her lower lip trembled when I used her real name, but she never answered, too careful to keep her cover.

"*Ya znayu vse*." I chuckled, pressing the tip of the blade to her throat. "I know everything, Nova. But I thought you would be a lot more skilled, darling," I hummed. "I guess not."

"Storm!" she yelled out. "Help me!"

Her eyes filled with tears, fueling my rage toward her and him. I moved the knife from her throat, toward her chin, and all the way to her lips, leaving behind red angry marks on her perfect, pale skin.

"He can't help you now." I grinned. "None of them can."

"Ophelia!" Storm thundered, coming down the stage. I pressed my hips harder onto Nova, keeping her pinned down. "Get off her."

"I'm not one of your guys, Stormy." I looked up at him, keeping one hand in her hair, holding her down on the ground.

“You can’t order me around.”

“You’re in my house!” he yelled out, coming closer to us.

“Ah, ah, ah.” I grinned as he came even closer. “One more step and your darling little girlfriend dies, Stormy.”

“Ophelia, please,” he said, pleading with me. “Let her go. She won’t do the same thing again.”

“Oh, I know she won’t,” I murmured, pressing the blade into her lower lip, cutting the first layer of the skin. Her painful whimper echoed around us, around the crowd gathered on all sides.

“This is not you,” Storm argued. “This isn’t who you are.”

“This is exactly who I am, Storm. This is exactly who you said I was. I’m just showing it to you. I’m just showing my true face.”

“Stop this,” he whispered. “Please.”

“You started it,” I answered. “Now you get to see the real me.”

“Let me go,” Nova gurgled beneath my body, the blade slipping deeper into her lip, blood pooling around. “Please.”

Crimson colored her chin, dripping down. Her hands were plastered on the ground, as if she could brace herself against me.

“Sure thing, darling.” I pulled the knife away, leaving behind the split lip right in the middle, bloodied and destroyed. “I’m afraid she won’t be able to suck your dick for quite some time.” I looked at Storm, shrugging. “But she has her hands.”

I pulled myself back, sitting on her and looking over all of them.

“Well, she’s going to have one hand.”

Nova kept left hand on her lip, tears streaming down, mixing with blood, but her right hand stayed on the ground.

My palm burned against the handle of the knife, fire licking my skin, my soul, pushing me forward. Without

thinking, without warning, I lifted the knife and slammed it down, the blade going straight through her hand. Muscles tore, fragile bones and ligaments screaming as the silver blade went all the way through, straight into the ground.

“What the fuuuuuuck?” she screamed, trying to move but her hand was pinned down to the ground, stopping her from getting away from me.

“Ophelia!” Storm roared when I wrapped my hand around her throat, pressing harder than necessary. Her eyes rolled back in her head, her air supply cut off.

I bent down over her, my lips right next to her ear.

“Next time, it will be your throat I’ll be cutting through, darling.”

Storm slid next to us, pulling out the knife from her hand, while I stood up, creating some distance between the two of us.

“Are you insane?” he asked, pulling her closer to him.

A part of me knew it sucked seeing him with her, caring for her, holding her, but the viciousness took over and I didn’t have it in me to care anymore.

“I am.” I nodded. “But you knew that already, Stormy.”

“Storm,” Nova whimpered and cried, her lip bleeding, her hand immovable as Storm cradled her head to his chest. “It hurts.”

“What have you done, Ophelia?” he asked, disbelief clear in his eyes. “This isn’t—”

“What you wanted? Who I am?” I asked and kneeled, looking at the two of them. “You should know, Stormy, that this is exactly who I am. It isn’t my fault that you forgot what I could do.”

I stood up and stepped away, turning toward the barbeque.

“And about The Syndicate, Stormy.” I looked down at him. “The Syndicate belongs to my father. My real father, Storm, who actually wanted to stop the war.”

Shock murmurs around me, and the thousand questions on Storm's face fueled the fire burning through my veins.

"Nikolai wasn't The Syndicate. He wasn't even my real father, but congratulations, Stormy. You've just made an enemy out of a man who wanted to see me happy and to create an alliance with you. I hope you all are ready."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, his front suddenly pressing against my back. I had no idea when he stood up.

His hand wrapped around my throat, turning me around to him.

"What are you talking about, Ophelia?" he bit out, the vein on his temple throbbing. "Your father?"

"Lazar Asterov is my real father." I grinned. "Lazar Asterov who killed an Albanian leader because he was after me. Lazar Asterov who is after Logan Nightingale and the people involved in all sorts of monstrosities against kids. Lazar Asterov who told me to stop running and to embrace what the two of us had."

"No." He shook his head. "That's impossible."

"That Lazar Asterov will be coming for your head, darling. You made an enemy out of a very powerful man, Storm. You have no idea what you've done."

I pushed him away from me, my soul loving the confusion and pain flickering over his face. His eyes connected with mine and everything that he tried to hide earlier was now on a display, reflecting back at me.

But the time for talking, time for emotions and fixing things should have happened three days ago. He should have known that I wouldn't react kindly to the way he behaved and the things he said.

"I told you, Storm. I am going to destroy you and your merry band of leather-loving fucks. Just watch me."

And he did.

"Keep your fucking bitch on a leash, Storm. Next time it will be her head that'll meet my knife."

He watched me as I pushed through the crowd and went all the way to the house. It was such a shame that none of it mattered anymore because I was going to burn this entire place to the ground.

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STORM

Two months later

TIME MOVED SLOWLY when the one you always wanted wouldn't even talk to you. She took Indigo and Atlas under her wing, the two men I trusted with my life, who now wouldn't even look at me. What I did during that gathering would haunt me for the rest of my life, but I had no other choice with the threat hanging in the air.

That letter I got... God, I had to sacrifice one of them and I chose to sacrifice her like the fool I was.

She wouldn't look at me. Wouldn't talk to me. Zoe hated me. Atlas ignored me. Indigo looked at me with both pity and anger, and I had no idea how to deal with any of that. I had no idea what to do or how to act, when I had to put up this front for everyone else.

Rip approached me after the gathering telling me how stupid I was for letting her go. I knew that even without him telling me, but I had no answer to any of their questions.

It was either sacrificing Ophelia or every single chapter throughout the country. And I couldn't do that. I couldn't make a choice that would destroy thousands of them, when it was clear that whoever was after her was somehow infiltrated into every single chapter I had.

I didn't have time to talk to her about it. I didn't have time to talk to anyone about it, and I just did whatever I thought

was the best. I thought she would be able to understand, to forgive me, but I had to make it seem as if she never meant anything to me.

But now, two months after the gathering, I could see that there was no going back.

She was true to her word, and once an hour passed without her phone and her personal belongings in her room, she cornered one of the prospects and brought him to me, demanding for her items to be returned or she would kill him.

I believed her, but I wanted to try and talk to her one last time. I should have known better and now I had to live with consequences.

I held the letter the real villain of this story sent me, trying to wrap my mind around it, looking for any clue that could reveal the person that wrote it, but there was not one single thing that could tell me the truth.

I had a feeling Nova had something to do with this, and contrary to the popular belief, the only reason why I still kept her next to me was because I needed to find out who she worked for. If I spooked her now, I would never be able to get to that person.

My guys were following her every move outside of the Club, but so far there was nothing that could reveal the real culprit.

There was no signature, no obvious gender, and all my contacts came up blank when I told them about this. The leaders of other chapters were aware, cautious and aware of the threat, but we were going nowhere.

Two months later we were nowhere near close to resolution and it was eating me alive.

I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to hold her, to show her how sorry I am for the vicious words I spilled that day. I would get down on my knees if she would just talk to me. But I couldn't reveal any of these, because I knew that there were people in my own chapter that were working with the enemy.

But if it wasn't The Syndicate, was it someone from the Outfit? Was this Logan?

Knock came on the door, and I hurriedly folded the letter and pushed it into the first drawer, hiding it from everybody else.

"Come in," I said, leaning back in my chair.

Atlas walked inside, dark circles around his eyes and worry etched in the lines of his face. I didn't like this look, and the first thought that came to my mind was that something happened to Ophelia.

"What's wrong?" I asked and stood up even before he could say a word. "Is she okay? What's going on?"

Anger he felt toward me flashed in those eyes, but he quickly schooled his features, standing in the same spot.

"She hasn't been feeling well these last couple of days," Atlas murmured, keeping his voice even. "She hasn't been sleeping, and she started puking everything she ate a couple of days ago. We thought it was a stomach bug, but we're worried it might be something else altogether."

"She's been sick, and you didn't think to tell me about this?" I roared.

"It isn't like you would care, Storm," Atlas chuckled, looking at the ground. "I don't mean to be rude and I know you are technically still my boss, but anything that happens with her is none of your business."

"The hell it isn't!" I thundered and came closer to him. "She is my business. She is everything I need."

"You have a funny way of showing it, but I didn't come here to talk to you about your inability to create a proper connection with her, or the fact that you betrayed us all by selling her like that."

I swallowed audibly, bracing myself for an impact that his words would make, but he didn't try to hurt me. He didn't spew hatred at me, not like all the other times.

Atlas was tired, they all were, and while I had no idea what they were doing behind closed doors, I knew it was something massive and none of them would utter a word of it.

Nova wanted me to kick them all out. She mentioned several times that they were betraying me by siding with Ophelia, but I wanted them to. She needed people she trusted, and even if it meant that I would be losing my friends, she needed them more than I did.

“I want to see her, Atlas.”

He shook his head and looked up at me. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Please, Atlas. I’m going to go crazy over here. She needs me.”

“No, Storm. She needed you—past tense. Now she doesn’t need any of us, but by some miracle she still wanted Zoe and me with her, even Indigo. I don’t know why, but she didn’t push us away when you shattered her soul into a million pieces.”

“I-I—”

“It’s too late, Storm. The reason why I’m here is that I wanted to ask you to call a doctor. We have no idea what’s going on, and the last thing I want to see is her in a hospital bed, because her health deteriorated.”

“I will call the doctor, but—”

“There are no but’s, Storm. I would rather take her to the hospital, but she’s too weak right now and I don’t want to move her unless absolutely necessary. So you can call the doctor or you don’t have to. But you are not going to bother her unless she wants you to.”

I was at a loss for words. My best friend, the man I knew for so long, was turning his back on me, choosing her. And even though it hurt feeling this gap between us, I was glad she had him.

Atlas was the most loyal person I have ever known, and the fact that my acts pushed him away from me, told me that it

was worse than I expected it to be. Other guys wanted to go after Ophelia after what she did to Nova. Some of the other chapters wanted her head, but I stopped them.

I had to stop them, because none of them would be a match for her. Especially not because she had Indigo and Atlas on her side now.

“Fine,” I huffed and turned toward the desk, walking to the right side where my phone laid. My fingers trembled as I dialed the number of Doctor Charles, his deep timbre of a voice pulling a smile at my face.

“Did you get yourself in trouble again, Storm?”

“No.” I chuckled. “A friend is sick. She’s been puking for days, and I don’t want her to go to the hospital right now. Would you have time to come over today?”

“Did she eat something bad?” he asked, and I could hear shuffling in the background.

“I don’t think so.” I looked at Atlas. “She’s been weak, unable to keep anything down, and it doesn’t really sound good.”

“Ah, I see,” he chuckled.

“You see what?” I frowned and sat down, feeling Atlas’s eyes on me.

“Don’t worry about that, Storm. I’ll be there in about an hour, unless traffic stops me from exiting the city. I’ll let you know once I’m close.”

“Thank you, Doc.”

“Don’t mention it. I told you already, I’m one call away.”

“Still,” I smiled. “I appreciate it.”

We said our goodbyes quickly and dropped the phone, leaving me alone with Atlas once again who looked at me expectantly.

“He’s going to be here in about an hour,” I said and stood up, walking toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Atlas asked, following me into the hallway.

“I might not be able to see her, and I know she hates me right now, but I want to be close to her at least if nothing else. I’m not going to disturb you, but she needs me even if she doesn’t want to admit that.”

The huff coming from Atlas almost made me stop, but I understood this protective bullshit he was spewing.

They were protecting her from me and my viciousness, and I couldn’t blame them for that. But they wouldn’t be able to stand between us for much longer. It’s been too long since I last saw her, since I spoke with her, and all those little glances I’d managed to steal whenever she would come down to eat were not enough to satisfy the angry beast living inside my chest, that wanted to tear me apart for the mess I made.

“Fine, Storm. But she cannot see you. Promise me she won’t see you.”

“I promise.”

But we both knew I was going to break that promise.

Ophelia

I WAS THE WORST PATIENT EVER.

Cranky.

Annoyed.

Tired.

And I just wanted it to stop.

I had no idea if this was just a bug going around, a flu, or if I ate something bad, but whatever it was had to fucking stop. My legs were plastered against the cold tiles in the bathroom, while Zozo kept checking my forehead for fever.

“I don’t have a fever,” I mumbled, pulling myself up. “I probably ate something.”

“For five days, Ophelia?” She asked, arching her perfect eyebrow at me. “Yeah, I’m not buying it. You barely ate anything, living off crackers these last couple of days and water. Dude, you can’t even smell bacon without running toward the bathroom to...” She trailed off, her eyes widening. “Oh, shit.”

Frowning, I leaned against the wall looking at her. “What is that face for?”

“When was your last period?” She asked, coming closer to me. “Think, Ophelia. When did it happen last?”

“Ah, it was just recently,” I answered, breaking my head to remember. “It was—”

“It never came,” she stated, her hands on my shoulders.

“No, no,” I shook my head. “It did. It was July. I’m sure it was July. Sometimes it’s late, you know. The dates were always irregular for me.”

“Phee,” Zoe smiled, holding me tight. “You never got it, because that packet of tampons I bought for you back in July is still standing on the sink, unopened.”

“Fuck,” I exhaled and stumbled through the door to the bedroom, immediately falling down on the bed. “It can’t be.”

“Do you think you’re maybe—”

“No!” I exclaimed, pulling myself up. “I can’t be. It’s just... It’s impossible. I have an implant, and Storm and I... We were together only once.”

“Phee.” She approached me slowly, almost carefully.

“No, Zoe.” I shook my head. “It’s impossible. I can’t be a mother,” I trembled at the mere thought. “I am not capable of being a mother. My own mom had no idea how to be a mother and look how I turned up. No, this has to be some virus or something.”

“If it was a virus, we would have gotten it as well, but the rest of us are fine.” Zoe sat down next to me and took her hand in mine. “You complained the other day that your boobs were aching, and frankly dude, they kinda got bigger. Your mood swings, cravings—”

“I was hungry, okay?”

“You were hungry at three a.m. and you wanted pickles.” She looked at me pointedly. “Just think about it, Phee. Would it be so bad?”

“Oh, come on, Zoe!” I stood up, unable to take this. “I don’t even know how to take care of myself. How would I take care of a child?”

“But you wouldn’t be alone,” she argued, coming after me. “We would be here to help. Atlas, Indigo, me—”

“But he wouldn’t be here!” I roared, hating that it still affected me. “God, I wanted to strangle him, but the fact that he doesn’t want me kills me every single day, Zozo. I want to hate him, I want to wrap my hands around his throat and fucking kill him for what he did two months ago, and I can’t. I can’t harm him, even though my father begged me to come and kick his ass. And if I am pregnant, I wouldn’t want a child growing up in a world where everybody hates their mother.”

“They don’t hate you. They’re afraid of you, and people often mask their fear with hatred because they don’t know how to deal with it, or how to express it. Fear makes us do terrible things, but it doesn’t mean that we’re bad people just because of that.”

“Their actions spoke louder than any words could, Zoe. I told you already. The moment I find out who Belladonna is, I am getting out of here. I stopped Lazar from coming to the Club, but once everything is done and you guys are safe, I am leaving. I can’t continue living like this, begging someone to love me, to show me the true meaning of happiness. I deserve to be free of all this bullshit, and if I am pregnant,” I trailed off.

“Would you keep it?” she asked, and it felt as if she slapped me across my face.

Nikolai never wanted me, that much was obvious, and even though I knew now why, it didn’t help to erase the years of torment I went through.

I never wanted to have kids. I didn’t think I was fit to be a mother, but maybe... Maybe I wouldn’t be that bad at it. I knew what I shouldn’t do. I knew what a child shouldn’t go through, so maybe, just maybe I could do it if I was really pregnant.

“We don’t even know if I am pregnant or if I’m just sick.”

“Yeah, well,” she sat down again, crossing her legs. “Something tells me you are.”

“Stop it,” I murmured, pacing the room. “I don’t see how that could happen.” Even if I actually liked the idea.

Having someone to love you unconditionally, no matter what, was what I always wanted. But I didn’t want to bring a child to this world just to use it for my own selfish gains. If I truly were pregnant, I would protect its innocence from everything and everyone, even if it meant protecting them from me.

“Come here,” Zoe patted the spot next to her, beckoning me to her. “Come to Auntie Zoe.”

“You’re not an auntie yet,” I mumbled, but I went to her, defeated, making it harder to walk.

“He wouldn’t want us, Zozo. You saw how he looked at me. You heard what he said. He only ever wanted to use me, and I don’t know if I would ever be able to trust him again.”

“I know, Phee,” she mumbled, hugging me to her. “But something tells me that there’s more to the story, and maybe you two should really talk. Maybe you should hear what he has to say. He’s been miserable these two months, following you around like a lost puppy, trying to approach you but stopping himself every single time. You’re hurt, I get it, and you have every right to be, but I hate seeing you like this when you could be happy instead.”

“There’s no happiness for me here,” I whispered, staring at the crack on the wall. “And if I am pregnant or if I ever get kids in the future, they wouldn’t be subjected to the same things I was. I would protect them from this world even if that is the last thing I would ever do. No one should go through the things I did, or Storm, or Atlas and Indigo, even you.”

“Why me?” She asked.

“I know about your family, Zozo. Indigo told me on the day of the gathering when he apologized to me. I know what Nikolai did.” I looked at her, waiting with bated breath for her words, but instead of them a shaky breath escaped her instead.

“I don’t remember them, Phee,” she smiled sadly. “Indigo remembers, and I have some pictures, but I don’t remember my mother’s smile or my father’s smell. I don’t remember any of it, and it sucks.”

“But you never hated me.”

“Were you the one that killed them?” She asked, turning her head toward me.

I shook my head, avoiding her eyes. “No.”

“Exactly. We are not our parents, Ophelia. The mistakes they made are not the ones we are necessarily going to make. And even if they were monsters, even if they destroyed the innocence we were clinging to, they taught us something. They taught us how not to be like them. Nikolai showed you what a real monster looked like, how he behaved, and I know that you would do everything in your power to behave differently.”

Nikolai killed the pieces of me I held dear, isolated me from people I loved, but he never could kill my determination to differentiate myself from him. During those early years I believed that the only way was the one he showed me, but I was wrong. And while the years I’d spent on the run weren’t the ones I would want to remember, they showed me that I could separate myself from that kind of living.

My stomach lurched suddenly, the emptiness eating me from the inside out, burning through my gut.

“Shit,” I jumped up and ran toward the bathroom, falling down on my knees right in front of the toilet seat.

Zoe ran after me, pulling my hair back as the acidity ran up my throat, all the way to my mouth, my body convulsing, trying to empty even the water I drank earlier.

I could hear the main door opening, hear Atlas’s voice, but I couldn’t move away from the toilet.

He came earlier to tell us that the doctor would come, but I didn’t realize that an hour had already passed. Indigo was outside with Kaiser, the two of them finally bonding and realizing that they weren’t a threat to each other.

“Zoe?” Atlas called out just as another avalanche tore through my body. Breathing through my nose I spat the saliva that pushed to my mouth, but nothing else came. “Oh shit,” came from the entrance to the bathroom and as I turned my head to the left side, I saw Atlas standing there with the doctor I hadn’t met before.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, breathing slowly, calming my racing heart.

“Did she eat anything today?” the doctor asked, frowning as his eyes went over me.

“Crackers,” Zoe answered. “But she puked those out an hour ago. Some water, but that’s it.”

“I need to examine her. Now.” He commanded, turning his back to us and walking toward the room. “She needs fluids.”

Atlas lifted me up, putting me in front of the sink and turning the tap open.

“I’m okay, Atlas,” I mumbled, patting his arm. “You can let go of me.”

“I don’t think so,” he argued. “You look ready to collapse and I’m not having it.”

I wanted to ignore him, to show him that I could stand on my own, but my knees were disagreeing with my mind, my muscles sore and painful from the lack of food and fuel in me.

I put my hands underneath the cold water, splashing it on my face to try and come back from this spiel.

I washed my mouth, but even the thought of putting some toothpaste in made me press my lips together, pushing down the nausea that threatened to attack again.

Atlas led me all the way to the bed, where the doctor stood, waiting for me.

He placed his bag on the nightstand next to the bed, keeping it open. His worried eyes dragged over my body, landing on my face and the frown etched there wasn't something I liked to see.

"We haven't officially met, Ophelia," he started as I sat down on the bed. "But I've examined you once before when Storm just brought you back and I must say—you've lost a lot of weight. My name is Doctor Charles."

"Aww, is that a compliment, Doc?"

"No, darling," he smiled, taking my hand in his. "It's concerning, especially given all your symptoms."

"I think I ate something, so it must—"

"I don't think so," he retorted and sat down next to me. I scooted further away from him, making more space. "When was the last time you had your period?" He asked, my eyes widening since Zoe asked exactly the same question.

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

"Guys," he turned back toward Zoe and Atlas. "Could you give us some space, please? I can call you once we're done here."

"Uh," Zoe mumbled looking at me.

"It's okay, Zozo," I nodded. "I'll call you once it's done."

"Just holler if you need us," Atlas said, pulling Zoe with him and out of the door.

The doctor looked back at me, smiling softly as if what he asked me wasn't something that could shake my entire world.

“I don’t remember. But I have an implant to prevent the pregnancy, and—”

“Implants tend to malfunction sometimes, especially when they’re there for a longer period. When was the last time you went to your gynecologist to have it checked? It should be changed every couple of years.”

“Two-three years ago,” I answered, staring at him in shock. “I can’t really remember. You’re saying I could really be pregnant.”

“I am almost one hundred percent sure that you are, Ophelia, but I can’t be sure until we do the test.”

He pulled a box out of his bag and put it in front of my face.

“Shall we?” He asked, and all I could do was stare at him as my hands wrapped around the pink box, containing the pregnancy test.

But what if it’s positive?

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OPHELIA

THERE WERE things haunting me over the years. Innocent people I'd harmed, whereabouts of my sister, the need to separate myself from Nikolai, and many more, but nothing ever shocked me as much as the little plus sign on the pregnancy test.

I couldn't be a mother.

I would be a terrible mother. My mom was the worst role model, my father was catastrophic, I couldn't raise a child.

Oh, God.

I was carrying a child.

Storm's child.

My hand flew to my stomach instinctively, as if I could already protect the embryo hiding inside.

"You don't seem very happy about this news," Doctor Charles remarked, holding up a prescription he wrote for prenatal vitamins. "There are ways you know."

"Ways for what?" I looked at him.

"Ways to terminate pregnancy. If this isn't what you wanted, then the abortion could be—"

"No!" I yelled out, moving away from him all the way to the headboard. "You're not going to harm my child."

"Hey, hey," he said calmly, holding his hands up. "I'm not going to harm your child, but I want you to know that it is your choice, and whatever you choose, you have every right to

it. But..." he smiled and placed the paper down on the nightstand. "It seems that you want to keep it, and that's amazing. But if that's the case, you need to start taking prenatal vitamins, and you need to visit a doctor. I'm going to give you a number of private clinic in the city, and the doctor that works there is amazing. He will take good care of you."

"Oh my God." My hand flew to my mouth, the realization slowly coming to me. "I'm pregnant. I'm really, really pregnant."

"Yes," he nodded. "But you're also malnourished and you need vitamins and to get checked out. They will also need to remove that implant from your arm. I'm going to set up an IV now to give you some fluids and to get you relaxed. I don't like what I'm seeing and we need to put some weight on you."

I stared at him as he prepared the needle, attaching it to my hand, and it was like watching a movie, completely unaware of everything that was happening.

"I'm going to let them know you're okay and that they can come in."

I nodded, unable to form words.

"Doc," I said as he stood up, collecting his things. "Please don't tell Storm," I pleaded with my eyes. "I, just..."

"Don't worry. He might be paying me, but you're my patient and as my patient your medical conditions can't be discussed with anyone outside of this room, unless you want me to."

"Thank you."

I was in a daze, lying down on the bed and staring at the blank spot on the ceiling when the doctor left.

Holy shit.

I was going to be a mother. I was going to be in charge of a small human being. They will need to be fed, clothed, taken care of...

Fuck, I couldn't even take care of myself. I couldn't even remember to eat most of the days, not to mention anything

else. They would need me to be strong, to protect them.

Tears pushed forward, blurring my vision just when the door opened, revealing worried Zoe and Atlas.

“Phee,” Zoe approached me, taking my other hand in hers. “What happened? What did he say?”

Atlas stood at the foot of the bed, crossing his arms over his chest, observing the two of us.

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered, hiccuping.

“What?” Zoe asked.

“I’m pregnant, Zozo,” I looked at her, then at Atlas. “I’m fucking pregnant and I don’t want to give up my child, but I’m also terrified because I don’t know anything about kids and I never really wanted them. And what if something goes wrong? What if I get attacked, or what if Storm doesn’t want him or her because I’m their mother? What if he hates them? I don’t want my kid to be hated!” I cried and cried and cried, until I couldn’t see anymore, my entire body shaking.

“Hey, hey,” Zoe murmured, whipping my tears. “You’re not alone. You’re never alone, Phee. And if he doesn’t want him or her, then it’s his loss. Your kid is going to be amazing just like its mom is. You’re going to be an amazing mother, Ophelia. I just know it.”

“She’s right,” Atlas said, coming close to my side. He crouched down, his head on the same level as mine. “And you’re not alone. This kid is going to be loved, cherished and spoiled, and we will all make sure that nothing bad comes to him or her.”

“I’m just,” I whimpered. “I’m scared. I’m terrified. I’ve made more enemies than friends over the years and I don’t want my kid to suffer because of my mistakes.”

Zoe stood up and went to the bathroom, bringing back a glass of water.

“Here,” she pushed it at me, while Atlas pulled me up into a sitting position, careful not to move the needle inside my

hand. “Drink this. You need to calm down and we need to make a plan.”

I gulped down the water and placed the empty glass on top of the nightstand, right next to the prescription the doctor left.

“I need to start taking prenatal vitamins, and I need to make an appointment with the doctor in the city, to get checked out and all that shit.”

“Okay,” Zoe nodded. “Are you going to tell him?” She asked, and she didn’t need to add the name to know who she was asking about.

Storm.

Was I going to tell Storm?

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “I’m not even sure that he would want to know.”

“If it were my kid, I would want to know,” Atlas said. “But the situation isn’t going in his favor right now, and I understand if you decide to keep it for yourself, at least for now.”

“Ophelia,” the door banged open, revealing a frenzied Storm at the entrance. “Charles doesn’t want to tell me anything. He’s keeping it all to himself, and you can hate me tomorrow and every single day afterward, but I need to know you’re okay.” He stepped inside the room and Zoe and Atlas both started slowly moving away from me, giving us space.

“I can’t explain the things that have happened, at least not yet, but I need you to be okay. I need you to be okay, Ophelia,” he fell down on his knees next to my bed, reaching for my hand. But I couldn’t handle his touch right now. I couldn’t handle this hot and cold game he was playing.

He either wanted me or he didn’t.

He either claimed me in front of everyone else, or he shamed me.

He couldn’t have both, and I wasn’t going to forgive and forget. Not this time.

“I thought I told you already, Storm,” I gritted out. “You’re not welcome here.”

“Please, Phee,” he begged, holding onto the duvet. “Just tell me you’re okay. Tell me you’re not sick.”

“I’m not sick, Storm. Now get out of my room.”

“Why do you have an IV drip attached to you?”

“Because I’m fucking tired, Storm!” I tore at him. “I’m exhausted and you’re only making it all worse by being here. You’re only reminding me of what betrayal looks like.”

“I didn’t... I’m just...”

“Go and worry about Nova, Storm,” I murmured. “And make sure you keep her away from me,” I looked at him. “The next time she provokes me, the next time she tries to do anything, I will cut her down without even thinking about it. You know who she is, you know what she’s doing here, Atlas informed you, and you’re still dipping your dick in that. I guess you always were weak for Aster girls,” I snickered.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” he mumbled, but I could hear the anger pushing forward. “I have my reasons.”

“And you can keep them, as long as I don’t have to see you anymore. You can go and fuck whoever you want to, be with whoever you want to, Storm. I’m nothing to you, we both know that.”

“That’s not true.”

“Save me, please. At least be a man enough and admit out loud that your main goal was always this.”

“No,” he shook his head and looked up at me. “My main goal was to have you next to me, but you didn’t want that.”

“You never asked me what I wanted, and if you did, I would’ve told you that I wanted you. But I wanted you without any secrets, without all of this bullshit. You told me that day that you never wanted to see me again, and trust me, once we’re done with this insanity, you never will again.”

“No,” he growled, moving to the bed and pinning my other hand above my head. “You’re not leaving me!” he roared. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Just watch me.”

“Storm!” Atlas yelled out and within seconds pulled him off me, throwing him to the other side of the room. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Her!” He pointed at me. “She’s what’s wrong with me,” he breathed out. “I wish I never had met you,” he told me, looking straight into my eyes, shattering the last piece of my heart.

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” I murmured flatly, and turned to the side. “I want you to leave, Storm. I’m too tired for this bullshit.”

And he did. He left without a word, disappearing faster than he appeared.

My heart ached, my body trembled, and the tears I didn’t know I had spilled over my eyes onto my cheeks, shaking me to my core.

“Don’t cry, Phee,” Zoe murmured, wrapping herself around me. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“He does,” I exhaled. “He knows very well, but this is who the two of us are. The pieces of a puzzle that would never fit together. We’re terrible together. Toxic, and I don’t want my child to grow up in this. I don’t want it,” I cried out.

“Shhhh.” She tried calming me down, but the reality was that she wasn’t the one I wanted to have here with me.

It was him. It was the man my body and soul cried for, but he didn’t want me.

Not really.

Storm

I HATED MYSELF TONIGHT.

I hated what I said to her, how I behaved, and it seemed as if my mind and my heart couldn't cooperate together, and every single time I would talk to her, I would only make things worse.

But God, she could make my blood boil like no one else, and all that talk of leaving, of getting away from me felt like a million tiny shards embedding themselves into my heart, because even if she didn't want me to touch her, to kiss her, to show her what I felt, I wanted her around.

It was toxic, possessive, downright insane, but I couldn't bear seeing her with somebody else. I was tethering on the edge of insanity, and every single smile she granted to other people was like a punch to the gut, pushing the green monster living in my soul to the forefront, making me do things I would never really do.

The other day I almost broke the chair, holding onto it as she spoke with one of the prospects, completely ignoring me. I was even jealous of Atlas and Indigo, even though I knew that neither one of them looked at her in such a way.

I was a jealous motherfucker, and I didn't know what to do.

I wanted to hate her for making me succumb to this, but I couldn't. She wasn't the one that pulled the trigger. It was all me.

Stumbling through the hallway, I couldn't bring myself to go to my room. Half of the bottle of Jack Daniels I'd downed earlier should've numbed the pain. It should have made things better, but it only made everything worse.

I could feel her, right here in my heart, killing me with her coldness, but I understood that armor better than anybody else. I just wished we didn't have to come to this. I wished I didn't have to break us.

I had no idea what time it was, but I needed to see her, to hold her, to tell her how much I love her. Waves of despair crashed against my body, pushing me to her, drowning me in this sorrow I caused myself. My palms landed on the wooden door leading to her room, caressing the surface as if it was her, and I just hoped she would let me in. She would let me hold her, just tonight.

Just one night where I would forget that I messed up the best thing in my life.

Maybe it was the alcohol talking, but I forgave her already for what she did. I didn't want to acknowledge it at first, but the fault didn't only lie on her—it stood on my shoulders as well. I lied to her, kept the secrets when she told me so many times that she hated those more than anything else.

She hated being kept in the dark and I made her believe she meant nothing to me. I made her believe that she was only a tool for me to use, when the reality was completely different. I could live without Ophelia. I could spend the rest of my life without her smile, without her soft touch, without seeing that sweet side of her she so rarely showed, but I didn't want to.

I didn't want to wake up without her tucked to my side. I didn't want to think ten years from now what would have happened if I did things differently. And these obstacles keeping me from her... I could fix it. I would fix it all.

I would show her, tell her, keep her and hold her, make her believe my every word. I would erase the pain from her cerulean eyes and I would make her heart beat for me again. I could do it.

Pushing the doorknob down, I was surprised to find it unlocked. I hoped it would be, but I also feared that she would have locked it, thinking that she now had more enemies than friends in this house. But she didn't know that half of my chapter almost bit my head off for what I did. She didn't know that both men and women came to my door, demanding to know what was going on.

Demanding me to apologize to Ophelia, to do what was right. Those that cheered against her during the gathering,

those that wanted her gone were the members from other chapters that didn't know her as well as my people did.

They didn't know that Ophelia didn't mind getting down on the ground to play with little Clara when all the other kids were at school. They didn't know that she prepared ginger tea and breakfast for old Harvey when he caught the flu a couple of months ago.

They didn't know that her eyes shone whenever her friends spoke about the things they loved, the things they were passionate about. They didn't know that she would die for those she loved, for those she considered a family, and I made her believe that we didn't want her here unless we could use her.

Humid air caressed the bare skin on my arms, my eyes zeroing on her sleeping form. Her back was turned toward the door, that fucking stand that held the IV drip earlier pushed to the corner of the room, and only the soft light peeking through from the bathroom illuminated the room, showing me Ophelia's bare back.

Her knees were pulled to her chest, her hands tightly pressed against her chest, as if she was shielding herself from the rest of the world, even in sleep trying to protect that heart I loved.

My feet carried me to her, my heart thundering in my chest, pushing me to her.

Floor croaked underneath my weight, but I didn't care if she woke up or not. I wanted her to see me, to feel me, to understand why I did things this way. The truth almost spilled over my lips when I saw her today, when I saw the fragile state she was in, and while I knew that my actions had nothing to do with her health, I still blamed myself.

I should have been the one caring for her. I should have been the one holding her hand, bringing her water, and showering her with love, not Atlas and not Zoe. I had no idea what happened after Atlas pulled me from her, but the moment I stepped into the hallway, I saw Nova sauntering toward Ophelia's room, her eyes widening when she saw me.

Maybe she was going to see me, maybe it was a sheer coincidence, but I knew I had to do a better job of keeping her away from Ophelia. I hated Nova, and I wanted nothing more than to see her perish, but we needed her to figure out who sent her to us. Who planted her here in my chapter.

Ophelia shivered, lying in the middle of the bed, and as silently as possible, I removed my boots, then my belt, letting my pants fall down, leaving me only in my boxers. My shirt followed, thrown to the floor before I sauntered toward her, sliding onto the bed and pulling her to me.

Her back pressed against my chest, her ass wiggling against my dick, stirring desire deep inside my groin, but I didn't come here to fuck her. I came here to show her I still cared even though I couldn't act on it in public. There were only a select few people I trusted enough to show how I truly felt about her, and the majority out there didn't have to know that my desire and my need for this woman came before everything.

Placing my hand over her stomach, I held her to me, burying my face in her hair, inhaling the sweet scent of cinnamon and vanilla.

My thumb circled under her boob, her body responding to me even when she hated me. Her back arched, her backside pressing against my hard and aching dick, nestled between her ass cheeks.

"Fuck," I groaned, closing my eyes when she started wiggling against me.

"Storm," she moaned. "What are you doing here?"

Her sleepy voice pulled at the invisible string connecting me to her, the bond that was created years ago when I didn't even know that she would become my everything.

"Holding you," I murmured, refusing to back away even if she didn't want me here. "Just let me hold you, Sunshine. Just tonight."

Silence descended on us and I tried not to move. I didn't want to spook her, to make her think this was only for my

selfish gains. Her hand, much tinier than mine, landed on top of mine, holding me there at her stomach. She shuddered in my embrace, and I pressed my eyes closed, hating how much I loved and hated this.

I hated this chasm between us, this hollowness we created by not communicating properly. It took two to tango, and both of us fucked all of this up.

But what did we expect would happen when two broken and dysfunctional people fell in love? Neither one of us knew how to do things in a healthy way like the rest of the people. Neither one of us knew how to trust, how to love without limiting the other person.

I didn't know how to let her go, even though that would be a humane thing to do. She didn't know how to keep her poison from dripping on my skin, and like a wild animal, every time she would get cornered, she spat it at me without thinking about the consequences.

They would have killed her at the gathering for what she did. They wanted to take her away from me, but Rip and Maxwell stopped them, knowing what she meant to me. Even a blind man would have figured it out by now, and I had no idea what would happen to me when she finally realized that I couldn't give her what she wanted.

At least not yet.

"Loving you hurts, Storm," she murmured. "It burns as if a thousand suns fell down on me, scorching me to the bone. And I don't know if I can do this any longer, Storm."

"No." I shook my head, holding her tighter as if that could show her what I felt for her. "Don't say that."

"It's the truth. You're like a burning sun, Storm, and standing in your shadow is killing me."

"No," I murmured, turning her to me. Tears glistened on her face, my chest constricting at the sight of them. I hated seeing them. I fucking hated myself for putting them there. "Don't cry." I wiped the wayward tear from her cheek. "Please, Sunshine. Please."

“I don’t even know why you’re here, Storm,” she whimpered. “I don’t know what it is that you want from me. One day you hate me, the next you want me, the third one you’re ignoring me and then you go and say those things.”

She tried pulling away from me, but I wouldn’t let her.

“Why are you here?” she asked, whispering as if somebody else could hear her.

“Because I can’t stay away from you. Because you belong to me as much as I belong to you.”

“Storm.” She chuckled brokenly. “This is not how people behave when they belong to each other.” Her head lifted, her eyes landing on mine. “This is not what love is supposed to feel like.”

“Phee.” I caressed her face, her soft skin. “This ache that I feel in my heart, this expansion of my lungs every time you walk by, this is what love feels like. And I might not know how to say it or how to show it, but I’m begging you. Don’t give up on us.”

“I wasn’t the one that gave up,” she murmured, tracing patterns on my chest. “You did. You pushed me away this time. You decided I wasn’t good enough, and I’m just listening to what you asked of me.”

“Baby—”

“It’s okay, Storm.” She smiled, pushing me down on the bed. She straddled me, her center rubbing against my crotch. “I just,” she took a deep breath, “I want this one night. One night where it’s only you and me. One night where the outside world doesn’t exist.”

She pressed her lips to my sternum, dragging them down my body, all the way to my stomach.

“Sunshine,” I groaned as her fingers played with the waistband of my boxers, tempting me, pushing me to the brink.

Her tongue came out to play, licking the path of my happy trail, slowly lowering down my underwear, until my dick

bobbed out, aching, ready for her.

The wicked smile on her face as she looked up at me made my heart beat like crazy. The fastened *thump-thump-thump* in my ears made it hard to concentrate. As she kept pushing my boxers lower and lower, I lifted my ass, allowing her to remove them altogether.

They landed at my ankles, and I kicked them off, careful not to move her, not to break the spell.

Her hand wrapped around the base of my cock, pulling a grunt from my lips.

“Phee.” I moaned her name like a prayer rolling off my tongue. Her blond hair fell down like a curtain, and my hands itched to touch her, to feel her, to see if this was real.

I fisted her hair in my hand, her lips parting in a moan as I pulled harder, but like an eager little kitten, she dove, her lips wrapping around the head of my cock.

“Fuck!” I could feel her tongue circling around the head, pressing against the vein that ran on the underside of my member. “Yes, baby,” I moaned, throwing my head backward.

Her hand couldn’t close around my cock, and as if she had done this a thousand times before, she wrapped both her hands around me, dragging them up and down in the same rhythm as her head bobbed, driving me to madness.

“Oh, God!” I yelled out as she hollowed her cheeks, taking me deeper and deeper with every new movement. My hips had a mind of their own, pushing up into her hot mouth. Tingles raced all over my body, settling deep in my groin.

“Ophelia.” I pushed her head back, her lips releasing me with a loud pop. “Turn around, baby girl. I need you to sit on my face.”

“W-What?”

“Take off your underwear, Phee.” I grinned, satisfaction coursing through me when she started doing exactly what I asked. The wet spot on her white panties told me everything I needed to know—she wanted me as well.

In one swift movement, I turned her around, her pussy right in front of my face. My fingers dragged from her stomach, all the way to her pussy, while her hips swiveled on top of me.

“Get down to business, darling.” I chuckled as she waited for me to start.

“Storm,” she moaned as my thumb pressed softly against her clit. “Please.” Her head fell down, her hair caressing my throbbing cock, and I pushed my hips higher, needing her mouth on me.

I grabbed her hips with both hands, pulling her closer to me, and as my lips closed around her swollen clit, she gasped, squeezing my cock in her hand.

“Fuck,” I groaned, my voice vibrating against her center.

“Yes,” she moaned, dropping her head down to my cock, but it wasn’t about me or my needs any more.

I dragged a finger through her folds, her moans muffled by my dick, and pushed three digits inside of her.

“God, you’re soaked, Sunshine. I could live here forever.”

My fingers pushed in and out, dragging against her inner walls clenching around my digits. My tongue lapped at her, and like a man starved I gripped her hip with one hand while the other one pushed and pushed and pushed, until the quivering I was waiting for started in her core, her hips moving against me, searching, yearning for more.

“That’s my girl,” I murmured as her body rebelled against her, crazy with need.

Her head lifted off me, and I would give everything to see the look on her face now.

“More!” she screamed out, pushing her pussy against me. “Please, please, please... I’m almost there! Almost... Oh. My. God!” she thundered, shattering around me, spasming on top of my body.

I couldn’t wait anymore. I didn’t want to wait anymore.

Grabbing her sides, I pulled her around, nestling her right on top of my dick. I dragged through her wet folds, her hands falling on top of my chest.

She slowly took my cock in her hand and positioned me at her opening. I couldn't wait to feel her again. I needed her with a thirst that only she could quench, and I pushed inside with a slam, pistoning my hips upward.

"Fuck!" I groaned at the same time as she moaned, her lips opening in an O, her eyes closed.

"Look at me, Sunshine," I commanded, settling deep inside her. "Open those pretty eyes."

Cerulean blue eyes flashed open, blinding me with their beauty. Desire flashed in them, heat swallowing us both, and I started moving my hips, going up and down, slowly, driving her insane.

"Storm!" she complained, trying to push her hips faster, seeking the release. "Faster."

"I want you to ride me, Sunshine," I murmured, pulling her by the neck, closer to me. "I want you to show me how you want it."

A wicked smile spread over her face, and unprepared for her to slam down on me, I grunted as she first picked herself up and slammed down with the force that made me see stars.

"Fuuuuuck," I groaned.

Her hips started moving up and down, the slapping of our bodies echoing around us, while her lips lingered close to mine, my hand wrapped around her neck, keeping her in place. Her hooded eyes drank me in, and I couldn't waste another moment without tasting those plump lips.

I bit down on her lower lip, soothing it immediately with my tongue, before I slammed my lips to hers, devouring her, drinking her in, absorbing her moans and her cries.

Her entire body shook, her release peaking, rushing toward us.

“I need it harder, Storm,” she moaned through our kiss. “Harder. Please.”

I took a hold of her hips and started pulling her down on me with a punishing grip, pistoning inside as if it was the first time for me to do this. I chased the release. Chased the sweet oblivion only she could provide.

Her hand snuck between her legs, rubbing against her clit as we fucked all this pent-up energy, both of us lost to desire and heat.

“Are you going to come for me, Sunshine?” I asked, pulling almost all the way out, keeping her in the air.

“Storm,” she growled, looking down at me. “Don’t you dare.”

“Tell me what you need.” I grinned.

“Storm!”

“Tell me!” I thundered.

“I want to come,” she whimpered. “I need to come. I need it so badly. Please,” she cried. “Please, please, please—”

“Fuck!” I growled, slamming her down on me.

I had no idea what happened, or if it was her words that spurred me, but before I could even blink, my release was rushing through my veins, pulling from every corner of my body. Her body bounced on top of me, her cries of pleasure fueling the beast inside my chest.

Dark spots danced in the periphery of my vision, but I could only see her. Her tits bouncing underneath the loose T-shirt she wore. My fucking T-shirt.

“Come on, baby!” I yelled out. “Give it to me.”

“Oh, God,” she cried. “Storm!”

“That’s it.” I could feel her walls closing in, clenching around me. “That’s my good girl.”

A scream tore out of her chest, her entire body shaking as I pumped inside, chasing my own release. My seed spilled

inside her, coating her walls, and from this position I could see it spilling down her thighs, glistening with the wetness that spilled from her.

She collapsed on top of me, with my dick still inside her, and my arms wrapped around her, holding her to me.

Both of us breathed as if we had just run a marathon, the endorphins coursing through me, seeping into her, and the tiny, sleepy smile that appeared on her face calmed down the demons threatening to take over me.

“I love you, Storm,” she murmured, piercing me straight through my heart. “And I hate you.”

“I know,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head. “I fucking know.”

And I needed to fix it.

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OPHELIA

I WAS ALWAYS bad at games.

I hated playing them and I hated when somebody else tried playing them with me, but this thing with Storm, whatever it was, was my favorite game. I could play it if it meant having him at least at night.

Nights were magical, when he would come to me, holding me, caressing me, telling me how sorry he was for everything. But days... Days tore at my heart like vicious beasts, showing me that nights were nothing but illusions he was creating for me, stealing more and more of my heart.

It didn't help that my emotions were at an all-time high. It also didn't help that I still hadn't told him about the pregnancy or the doctor's appointment I was supposed to go to today. It's been ten days since Doctor Charles visited me, and while the nausea and my overall energy seemed to get better, everything else got worse.

My mood swings were terrible—one second I was laughing with Zoe, the next I was crying because I saw a puppy on television, and then I was getting angry because I was crying.

It was insane these last five days, and it felt as if since the moment that pregnancy test showed the little plus sign, everything turned upside down.

I hadn't talked to Cillian, and judging by the sarcastic messages on my phone, he was pissed that I hadn't called. Lazar tried calling the other day, but I told him I was busy.

I was busy hiding in my room, while the rest of the world outside partied, waiting for the night to come, like a pathetic little girl.

And that pissed me off even more.

What was I even doing? Why was I allowing him to do this to me? I swore I would get back at him, that he would know the real meaning of pain, yet I was letting him back in without even a proper conversation.

We still had to sit down and talk about Belladonna and what Logan was doing in Winworth. Tristan had enough evidence to put Logan behind bars, but the other man who was running the show with him, Judah Blackwood, was an influential member of high society, and it was much harder putting anything on him.

I needed to talk to Storm because I knew he had people all over the place. People who could dig up dirt better than maybe even Tristan could.

I didn't want to ask Lazar for help, not yet at least, and it was my last resort in case I really, really needed it.

I stood up from the bed, ignoring the gnawing hunger in the pit of my stomach, and went out of the room. This couldn't wait any longer and I knew if I waited for him to come tonight, we wouldn't be talking. We would be fucking like rabbits.

The moment I stepped outside of the room, I heard the door opening from the neighboring room, fully expecting Storm to come out. But it wasn't him.

Nova closed the door quietly, sneaking out, wearing Storm's cut. The Sons of Hades emblem stared at me as she stepped outside, tiptoeing around until she turned toward me. Her eyes widened, and the smugness she wore earlier was nowhere to be seen.

She wasn't expecting to see me here. She didn't expect to be caught, but she was.

What was she doing in his room? Was he still with her even though he came to me every single night?

“I, uh,” she stammered, taking a step back from me. “I was just—”

I put my hand up, shutting her down immediately. I couldn't talk, couldn't think, and if she kept babbling, I would do something I would regret. The green-eyed monster cackled in my core, wrapping those talons of despair around my heart.

He tricked me—again. He told me pretty lies, while he led the life he wanted, doing whatever and whoever he wanted, keeping me on the side, hiding me as if I was his dirty little secret.

“Ophelia—”

“Stop talking, Nova.”

She started stepping away from me, slowly at first, creating some distance between us. “I'm sorry,” she mumbled, and all but ran away from the floor, leaving me alone to deal with what I just witnessed.

He was still with her. Her disheveled hair, runny makeup, and the state that looked like she just rolled out of his bed, told me as much. He let her wear his cut, and I couldn't handle that.

I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't play this game anymore.

I opened the door, praying that he wouldn't be inside. When I saw the unmade bed, clothes thrown all over the place, but no sign of him, I knew where I would find him.

Every Wednesday, they had a meeting, or church as they called it. The gathering of members of the chapter to discuss everything that was going on. Outsiders weren't welcome, and it didn't matter if you were married to one of the bikers or if you were just staff, you weren't allowed to enter.

Well, that was about to change.

I ran downstairs, avoiding the people sitting around the place, each of them looking at me as if I were crazy. And maybe I was.

I was insane for trusting the man who only ever broke me, instead of building me up. Two people were needed for a relationship, for companionship, and the fact that I would have his child who would need our attention told me that he wasn't ready for that either. He wasn't ready to commit to anyone, least of all me, so why was I still here?

Why didn't I accept it when Cillian told me he would pick me up?

Because you didn't want to run. You wanted to stay for the first time, to try and fix things.

Yeah, I did. I wanted to fix things, but there was nothing to be fixed. I couldn't fix something that never existed.

I passed next to Zoe who started following me, without saying a word. I loved her, but I needed her to let me do this.

"Zozo, I'm about to do something very stupid, and I need you to stop following me."

"Not a chance," she answered from behind me, and as we crossed through the hallway leading to the basement where they held the meetings, I knew I wouldn't be able to stop her.

"Suit yourself," I murmured and slammed the door open that was leading to the basement and rushed down.

Zoe was right behind me when I stepped in front of the long, square desk where several members of the Sons of Hades were sitting, with Storm at the head. Others were standing around, looking at me as if I had grown two heads.

"Since it is impossible to get a hold of you," I said, looking at Storm. "I figured you all should know this, since you're most probably discussing the Outfit and everything else."

Atlas stood up from his chair, but I didn't move toward him.

"Ophelia," Storm growled, looking at me with a pissed-off expression. "You're not supposed to be here."

"I know." I nodded. "I'm well aware of your rules, but I figured, why not? Anyway." I cleared my throat. "Around three months ago, I made an alliance with the Italians, mainly

then Romanos and Mancini families, and they are acting as my protection detail, also looking for clues to take down Logan Nightingale and Judah Blackwood.”

Chatter broke around us, everyone talking at the same time, while Storm kept sitting, anger seeping through every pore of his body.

“Shut the fuck up!” I thundered. “I wasn’t finished,” I said as they all quieted down. “Albanians are after me,” I announced. “And they’re apparently working with someone called Belladonna.” Storm’s eyes widened as soon as I uttered the name, and I knew. I fucking knew that he had information he wasn’t sharing with me. “Right.” I chuckled, shaking my head. “Belladonna has been after me for years, and I have no fucking idea who she is.”

“How do you know it’s a woman?” the man sitting next to Storm asked, but I didn’t know his name.

“Because I tortured and killed a man who knew things about her, and he confirmed it to me.”

“Fuck,” Atlas muttered, taking a step closer to me.

“Nuh-uh.” I moved away from him. “They need to know.” I looked back toward the crowd staring at me. “You already know that Lazar Asterov is my father, and he won’t touch the Club as long as the Club leaves me alone.”

“What?” somebody asked, but my eyes were plastered to Storm. They obviously weren’t at the gathering to witness the shitshow.

“Tristan Nightingale is close to gathering more evidence against his father, and we will be turning it in, unless I get to him first, which means he’s going to be dead then. But I would rather put him behind bars where he belongs.”

“Ophelia,” Storm gritted out. “Stop talking.”

“Why, Storm?” I asked. “I need you to know who is after me so that you will be able to protect my unborn child.”

Silence.

There was nothing but silence around us as they all stared at me, shell-shocked. Millions of emotions thundered over Storm's face, but none of them was a relief.

"Is it mine?" he finally asked, gripping the desk. "Is it fucking mine?" he bellowed and stood up, his palm landing on top of the desk with a thud.

"No, Storm." I smiled. "This child is mine and it will never have a father. And if it is a boy, I will make sure that he never ends up being like you."

I turned around and walked toward Zoe who stood in the same spot where I left her when we just entered.

"And Storm," I looked at him one more time, "tell Nova I said hi. Your cut looks amazing on her."

And I ran.

I ran upstairs, toward the front door and all the way outside. Zoe followed after me, opening and closing her mouth, but nothing came out.

"I need you to drive me to my doctor's appointment," I told her. "I also need you to go and get my bag." I grinned. "All my things are inside."

"Are you fucking insane?" she asked me. "You... He... You can't just tell him like that!" she exclaimed. "I thought he would have a heart attack."

"I hoped he would," I murmured and walked toward her car parked in front. "We can talk about this on the way, but I'm giving him five more minutes maximum before he comes barging after me."

"I'm gonna give him—"

"Ophelia!" came from inside the house, stopping Zoe mid-sentence.

"Even less," she finished, pointedly looking at me. "I'm going to go and fetch your things, so please try not to kill each other before I'm back."

The door slammed open, hitting against the wall, and Storm stood there, breathing like a bull during a fight.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he asked, stalking toward me.

“I’m out of here,” Zoe said, running inside the house, taking a large circle around a furious Storm.

He walked toward me, stalking me like a prey, but I wouldn’t bow down. Not now. Not today.

“You’re pregnant,” he bit out as if the word itself offended him. “When were you planning on telling me that?”

“Never.” I shrugged. “Frankly, I don’t think that you deserve to know.”

“Is it mine?” he asked again, breathing through his nose. His hand wrapped around my upper arm, pulling me to him. “Is the kid mine?”

“I told you already,” I bit back, pushing him away from me. “This child is mine. Only mine. If you’re asking me who the sperm donor is, then yes, it is you.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can fuck the fuck off with your accusations right now, Storm, because I am not the one sleeping with other people. You are!”

“I’m not sleeping with anybody else!” he roared. “I’m not the one who cheated months ago.”

“Months! Months ago, you stupid motherfucker. If this kid was from another man, then I would have been showing by now, but I’m not. I only slept with you.” I pushed at his chest. “Only your dick has been inside of me. Only your lies were surrounding me.”

His eyes were frantic, a vein throbbing at his temple, breathing like a bull ready to attack. His fists clenched and unclenched on his sides, and the anger I had never seen on his face before hit me right in the center of my chest.

Even if I had told him five days ago about my pregnancy, he would probably have reacted in the same way. The only difference now was that I had barged into their precious little meeting, airing the dirty laundry for everyone to hear. At night he held me like I was cherished, whispering sweet nothings in my ear, but I saw him now for what he truly was.

A liar.

A cheater.

I made a mistake months ago, but how long was I going to be paying for that? How long would I have to repent? Did he want me to get on my knees? Did he want me to beg for his forgiveness?

If he did, he would never get it. I kneeled for no man, especially not for him. Especially not after seeing Nova coming out of his room. I blamed the pregnancy hormones for succumbing to him, my heart stronger than my will to resist him, to kick him out of the room.

The heart wanted what it wanted, breaking every single morning when my hands touched the cold side of the bed where he slept. I was just a side piece he was using to satisfy his sick urges, to enact his fucking revenge. I was weak when it came to him. Weak when I should have been strong.

Weak because no matter what, I never lied. I did love him. What I felt for Kieran a long time ago was nothing compared to what I felt for Storm, and that was why it hurt so much more. My ego was shattered when I found Kieran in bed with that fucking bitch, but Storm...

My ribcage was too tight for my heart, my lungs suffocating under the pressure of everything that was going on, but I wasn't alone anymore. This child, this miracle, came first. It came before Storm, before me, and I'd be damned if I allowed anyone to destroy my peace.

I looked at him, really, really looked at him, my eyes taking in the strong jawline, the small scar on his chin, wide, powerful shoulders and those arms that made me feel safe when the darkness was too close, slipping through my

defenses. I pulled back the memories when his eyes shone with happiness and love, instead of this hostility. I ran down the memory lane where the future seemed brighter, free of all these chains keeping the two of us apart.

My actions turned us into enemies, and I doubted that anything would ever be the same. This domino effect I started couldn't be undone, it couldn't be stopped, and I was tired of fighting. Tired of constantly wanting more than life could offer me. I was tired of begging for love, for understanding, for forgiveness, constantly trying to prove myself.

I dragged myself out of hell once, survived assassins coming for me, people I loved betraying me, and I would survive this as well. I had to let him go.

I had to let the idea of us go.

“Look, Storm.” I started talking first, unable to bear the silence wrapped around us. “I am terrible at this, terrible at expressing my feelings and my needs. The only way I know is the toxic way, and I can't keep living like this. I can't keep praying for something that will never happen.”

His breath hitched as I dropped my head, as if he could feel what I was going to say.

“I'm tired of loving people that can never love me back.” I smiled hollowly, sorrow latching on every single word rolling off my tongue. “Two months ago I told you I would make you regret it, that I would make you all pay for what you did to me, but now... I don't want to do anything, Storm. I want to find out who's after me and I want to eliminate the threat. I talked to Cillian already, and they'll be submitting everything to their contact in the FBI. Logan Nightingale will be gone soon enough, and we will handle the rest.”

His hand lifted toward my face, but I took a step back, unable to bear his touch right now.

“I honestly don't want anything from you anymore.” I chuckled, looking at the floor. “I probably would have told you about the kid, but knowing our history and how things were going, I didn't want to upset you again.”

“Ophelia—”

“No, no, let me finish, Storm,” I murmured and looked up at him, my eyes brimming with unshed tears. God, I hated my hormones right now. “I am going to let you go.” I nodded, pressing my lips together. “And I hope you will let me go as well. If you want to be a part of his or her life, I am going to be okay with it, but you and I...” I trailed off. “You and I can never be together. This,” I waved with my forefinger between us, “this can’t go on. It hurts too much. It’s painful to even think about it, and I want to be happy, you know? One day I want to be happy. You might think that I don’t deserve it, that I don’t deserve having anything pure in my life, but I want it.”

He kept quiet, his feelings flashing right in front of my eyes, but he didn’t reach for me.

“I don’t know how to be with you, Ophelia,” he finally murmured. “I forgave you already, you know?” He smiled. “But there are things... Things I can’t tell you, and I can’t be with you.”

The final splinter etched itself into my heart, right into the left chamber where Storm used to live.

“I don’t know how to move forward with you.”

“I know.” I sniffed, wiping the wayward tears from my cheeks. “I know you don’t. And I can’t wait for you anymore. I can’t wait for someone to choose me, to love me, to take care of me, to be my equal. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to shatter you, but I did, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being me, Storm.”

“No—”

“Wait.” I put a hand up stopping him when he tried to approach me. “I am sorry for being who I am and for not being a girl who could love freely.”

“You’re giving up,” he grunted, more of a statement than a question. “You’re giving up on us and you promised you wouldn’t.”

“You gave up on us months ago, Storm. How is it fair that you expect me to keep waiting when you’re messing around

with a girl who betrayed us all? Huh? How is that fair?”

“I didn’t sleep with her,” he bit back. “I haven’t been with anyone else since you came back into my life.”

“You don’t have to lie to me anymore, darling.” I smiled, seeing Zoe at the entrance with my bag in her hands. “I need to go, Storm.”

“Where are you going?” he asked, trepidation rushing to the surface. “You’re not leaving.”

Rolling my eyes, I answered, “I’m not leaving. I have a doctor’s appointment to make sure everything is okay.” My hand automatically flew to my stomach, a smile spreading on my face at the mere thought that there was a precious life growing inside me. “They need to make sure the baby is healthy and that I am healthy.”

“Can I come?” he suddenly asked, and no matter how much it hurt to deny him, to stop him from experiencing this with me, I still wasn’t ready to have him there.

I wasn’t ready because I wasn’t sure if he wanted to go out of obligation or because he really wanted to go.

“No.” I shook my head. “I need to do this alone.”

“Phee—”

“Are you ready to go?” Zoe jumped in, cutting Storm in the middle of the sentence. “I have your things.” She lifted my bag, ignoring Storm.

“Yep,” I answered. “We’re taking your car?” I asked her, controlling the onslaught of emotions trying to erupt.

Her simple nod was all I needed to turn away from him and start walking toward the car.

“Wait!” he called out, running toward us just as we reached the car. “Atlas should go with you.” His eyes pierced into mine. “You, uh... I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Humor me,” he pleaded. “I’ll get him to follow after you.”

Seconds passed as we stood there, staring at each other, but I knew that this was a fight I wouldn’t be able to win. There were people out there that wanted to hurt him, and by that, they would want to hurt my baby. I could fight, but Zoe couldn’t and I had to be careful right now. I had to make sure that the safety of this baby came before my pride.

“Fine, have him follow us. He will want to know what’s going on either way.”

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OPHELIA

THE SMELL of antiseptic snuck inside my nostrils, and no matter how much I rubbed my nose, it wouldn't fucking go away. Zoe kept cackling from the corner of the room, while I sat on the tall table, chair, whatever the fuck it was called.

"Can you stop fidgeting?" Zoe asked, trying to hide her laughter. "Everything is going to be fine."

"I'm not nervous," I exclaimed, lying straight through my teeth. "I'm good. Everything is good. Dandy."

"You are *so* nervous." She laughed. "But you have no reason to be."

"Shut up, Zozo." I huffed, trying to relax. But she was right—I was so nervous and I had no idea why.

Okay, I knew why. Because I wanted this kid. I wanted it with every single atom in my body, and I wanted it to be healthy, and happy and safe, and all the other things I was worried I wouldn't be able to provide. I was worried I would be a terrible mother. I was worried I would either be too suffocating or too relaxed.

What if he or she got hurt?

What if they got sick?

I didn't even know how to make proper eggs without burning something, not to mention a homemade soup. Could kids even eat those things you could buy in a supermarket? Is it healthy for them?

Oh God, I would need to learn how to cook. I would need to learn how to change diapers, how to carry him or her, how to do all this shit, and I couldn't even take care of myself.

“What if something happened to them? Jesus on crack, I couldn't—”

“Ophelia.” Zoe suddenly stood up, pulling me back from my thoughts. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't fucking breathe.

There was a brick right on top of my chest, pushing me into the soft cushions of this table or whatever the fuck it was, but I couldn't move it. I clawed at my chest with my fingers, trying to remove the pressure, to release the breath stuck in my lungs, but it wouldn't move.

“You're turning blue, Phee,” Zoe said, grabbing my hand. “Breathe with me. Come on, in...” she inhaled. “And out...” she exhaled.

“I-I can't,” I choked. “Zoe—”

“Yes, you can.” She smiled softly. “Come on, Phee. In and out. Slowly, breathe with me.”

“He doesn't want us.” I hyperventilated. “And I told him I was letting him go. But I don't want to let him go,” I cried, looking at her. “I don't want to let any of this go and I don't know how to stay and go through all of this.”

“You're going to be fine, Phee.” She caressed my cheek. “You're going to be fine because you have us. You have me, Atlas, Cillian, Tristan, even Indigo. You have all of us. Come on. Breathe for me, Phee. You need to calm down.”

I tried and tried and tried, but my body wasn't cooperating, my mind pushing all these images, telling me I wasn't good enough. Telling me I would fail at yet another thing, and this was something I couldn't fail at.

“I never wanted kids before,” I whimpered. “I couldn't imagine myself as a mother, but now... Now I want them. I want them. Zoe,” I grasped her hand in a tight grip. “I don't want it to be taken away from me.”

“No one will take your kid away from you, darling.” She tried calming me down, but it wasn’t working. Nothing was working.

“I want Storm,” I cried, my emotions getting the better of me, mixed with my crazy fucking hormones and the anxiety rocking my body. “And he doesn’t want me, Zoe. Why?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” She huffed, immediately letting go of my hand, and stepping toward the door.

I clawed at my throat, trying to open my larynx, to take a breath, but there was no use. I would be terrible at this. Hell, I was getting a panic attack just by thinking about it. I would fail.

I would fucking fail and they would take my kid away from me, and it was the only thing that could love me, that wouldn’t judge me.

“Sunshine.” His voice came from my left side, but I knew I was imagining it. He wasn’t here. I told him not to come. I told him because he doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want us. “Hey, hey.” Strong hands took mine in, and I held onto that lifeline.

“Look at me, Ophelia,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my hands and as I turned my head, I saw the worried, blue-green eyes, shining for me. “That’s right. Come on. Breathe for me, baby. Slowly, slowly,” he mumbled, calming me down.

“Storm?” I choked out, holding his hands with a punishing grip, but my breathing slowly leveled out. I followed his breathing, inhaling and exhaling, filling my lungs with much-needed air.

“I’m here, baby girl.” He dragged his hand over my hair, and leaned over, pressing his lips to my forehead. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“What... How—”

“Did you really think I would let you go alone even if you didn’t want me here?” He smiled slowly, looking at me how he used to – with care and need and something akin to love. He looked proud, sitting here, lending me his strength.

“But, you said—”

“I was an idiot.” He chuckled. “I was a motherfucking idiot, darling, but I’m here now. And I’m not going anywhere.”

The door suddenly opened, revealing the doctor who examined me almost one hour ago and who took enough of my blood to fuel a motherfucking blood bank.

“Oh good,” Doctor Pavlowski said, grinning at the pissed-off expression on Storm’s face. “Dad is here as well.”

“Your doctor is a guy?” Storm gritted out, his eyes following the doctors every move. “I don’t like it.”

“Well, I didn’t like seeing Nova coming out of your room today, but we don’t always get what we want.”

His eyes narrowed at me, making me chuckle, that little green monster staring back at me through his eyes. He was jealous of my doctor.

Storm’s hands tightened around mine, his body completely turning toward the doctor as if the man would jump on me right this moment.

“You’re going to change doctors,” he grunted when the doctor started going through the papers he brought inside. “Like, immediately. You need to have a female doctor.”

“Absolutely not.” I smiled. “Doctor Pavlowski is the best one.”

“He’s a guy.”

“And?” I asked him, lowering my voice. Both of us were whispering at this moment, amusing the doctor that was now sitting behind his desk. “He probably knows his way around pussy better than some girls.” I grinned, fueling the jealousy that was so obviously rocking Storm right now.

“You’re not helping,” Storm bit out, his eyes flashing with anger that for the first time wasn’t aimed at me.

“So,” the doctor started, looking at us over his glasses. His slicked, gray hair gave him the look of a silver fox, and I had a

feeling that the nurses and other doctors around here had a hard time keeping themselves in check around him. Diplomas and other accolades hung on the wall next to his desk, and my research already told me that he had more than thirty years of experience in gynecology, especially with pregnancies. I wasn't going to change my doctor just because Storm suddenly remembered what he felt for me.

"Is everything okay?" Storm was the first one to ask, beating me to it. "Are they okay?"

"Oh yes." The doctor grinned. "Mom and the babies are okay. Your hCG is elevated, which is absolutely normal with multiple pregnancies—"

"Did you just say multiple?" I asked, pulling myself up into a sitting position. "As in, more than one baby?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean." He smiled softly. "There is a huge probability that you're going to have twins, or maybe even more."

"More?" Storm asked, his eyes widening, skin changing color almost immediately. "More than two?"

The doctor nodded slowly, his lips tethering on the edge of the laughter, but he kept himself in check. "Yes, more than two."

"There are two babies or more in her stomach right now?" Storm pointed at me, still looking at the doctor. His left hand gripped the edge of the table I was sitting on, while his other one gripped mine, shaking as the questions rolled off his tongue. "Like, there are two kids?" He looked at me. "We're going to have two kids?"

His fear was palpable, sweat beading on his eyebrow, and I started laughing at the pure disbelief flashing through his eyes.

"I am going to be a father to two kids?" he gulped, asking me, then looking at the doctor, then at me again, his skin becoming paler and paler with each passing second. I had a feeling he would already be down on the floor, collapsed if it wasn't for the fact that he was sitting down.

"Would you like to have some water, Mr.—"

“Storm,” he finished for the doctor, his eyes firmly plastered on my stomach. “My name is Storm.”

“Stormy.” I placed my palm on his right cheek, pulling his face to me. “Are you okay?”

“I, uh,” he stammered. “I don’t know,” Storm whispered. “We’re going to have two kids—”

“Or more,” the doctor added for him.

“You’re not helping, man,” Storm groaned. “How are we supposed to... What am I supposed to... Holy shit, I’m going to be a father.”

“I thought we already established that you’re going to be a father.” I laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re scared?”

“I’m terrified,” he exclaimed. “I am not... What if I fuck it up? Oh shit.” Some kind of realization dawned on him, and he turned toward the doctor, avoiding my eyes. “Doc,” he started, swallowing heavily. “You’re sure they’re okay?”

“Well, the tests show that everything is perfectly fine. Ophelia has already started taking her vitamins, and I am going to give her some more since multiple pregnancies tend to be a bit harder on a mother.”

“But she’s gonna be okay, right?” he asked frantically. “They’re all going to be fine, right? Nothing is going to happen to them?”

The doctor stood up and walked toward the two of us, and I just wanted to laugh at the comical expression on Storm’s face. Moments ago, I was panicking over the prospect of even being pregnant, but now knowing that there were most probably two of them growing inside of me, and seeing Storm panicking even more, somehow it all made me calm down.

I could do this. Even if I had to do it all alone, I could do it.

“Look,” the doctor started, pulling the chair closer to the table where I sat, right in front of the weird looking machine that I assume was an ultrasound. “Multiple pregnancies can be tough, I’m not going to lie to you. But she is healthy.” He

pointed at me. “Her blood work is okay, and we will keep monitoring her throughout the pregnancy to make sure everything is okay.”

“So, all is gonna be fine?” Storm asked again, sounding like a parrot at this point.

“Stormy,” I murmured, pulling his hands in my lap. “Everything is okay.”

“But, he said—”

“Every pregnancy is different, Storm,” the doctor said. “Complications can happen even with the singleton pregnancy, so it is important that we monitor mom and the babies throughout it all.” He looked at me then, pulling closer. “You mentioned that you have an implant in your arm.”

“Yeah, I do. But it’s obvious that it isn’t working.”

“When did you get it?” The doctor asked.

“Ah, around two years ago I think. Maybe three. I can’t remember the exact date.”

“Hmm, that’s weird.” The doctor hummed, scratching his chin. “Usually these implants last for up to three years.”

“Maybe mine malfunctioned,” I added.

“Maybe,” the doctor agreed. Storm started chuckling.

“What are you laughing at?” I asked, frowning at him. “This is a serious conversation.”

“Oh no, nothing.” He chuckled. “Just that your implant kinda failed to do its job.” He looked at me, grinning from ear to ear. “I wonder why.”

It took me a minute to connect the dots and what he was insinuating at, when it dawned on me.

“I can’t believe you.” I rolled my eyes.

“What happened?” the doctor asked, confusion on his face. “What did I miss?”

“Storm here,” I pointed at the man in question, “is insinuating that his sperm was stronger than the implant.”

The doctor's eyes widened, and a choking sound ensued as he tried not to laugh, while I rolled my eyes at Storm's laughter echoed around us.

"I mean," Storm shrugged, "if the shoe fits..."

"I wish you hadn't come today." I sighed, dragging a hand over my face. "This would have gone much smoother."

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't have been able to hold your hand during your panic attack. He wiggled his eyebrows, and something clenched around my heart, seeing this completely different side of him. "Admit it, you wanted me here."

"Never." I grinned. "I definitely didn't want you here."

"Is that why Zoe pulled me in, telling me to take care of my woman?"

"Hmm, I don't see Nova anywhere." I looked around, pretending I'm searching for her. "Do you?"

The doctor slowly moved away from us, giving us privacy, when Storm wrapped his arm around me, his hand going straight to my neck, squeezing it softly.

"You're behaving like a bad girl," he murmured in my ear, his teeth nipping at my earlobe. "And you know what bad girls get?"

Biting down on my lower lip I stopped myself from moaning in front of the doctor, and this motherfucker knew exactly what he was doing.

"Storm," I whispered, eyeing the doctor who was completely ignoring us. "Not here. And I'm still pissed off at you."

"That makes the two of us," he growled in my ear. "As soon as we get home, you will see what the bad girls get."

Fuck.

My panties were drenched just from the sound of his voice, and it didn't help that lately everything he did made me feel unhinged. He wore black pants the other day, no T-shirt and

boots, and I swear, I wanted to jump him in the middle of the den, uncaring that other people were around us.

Two days ago he came strolling into my room, and he didn't even manage to get his pants down before I was on him, devouring him, pushing him on the bed.

My boobs ached daily, my pussy was constantly drenched, and the fact that he never stayed in the morning pissed me off even more because he wasn't there to clench the thirst rushing through my body.

"So..." the doctor cleared his throat and turned back to us, our little moment stopped immediately.

Later, Storm mouthed, grinning from ear to ear, and all I wanted was to get this done and to go home with him.

"We need to get over some things, Ophelia, and I'll be scheduling an ultrasound for you in the next few weeks."

"Okay." I nodded, my cheeks burning. The doctor didn't need to be a genius to figure out what was the context of Storm's words to me.

"Do you remember when you had your last period?" the doctor asked, sitting down on his chair and opening my chart.

"Uh, more than two months ago I think. I just..." I huffed. "I was too busy to even think about it."

"Do you have any idea when the babies were conceived?"

"The beginning of July," Storm answered instead, proudly sitting next to me. "I just got you back," he said, looking at me. "It was the beginning of July."

"Good, good," the doctor murmured, writing down the details. "If the calculations are correct, and judging by your blood tests, you're somewhere between seven and eight weeks pregnant."

"I'm sorry, doctor, I'm confused," I said. "I only started puking the other day, and I had no other symptoms prior to that."

“Ah, it’s because every pregnancy is different. I had a patient who only found out she was pregnant at around six months. She didn’t even show until the seventh month. The other one found out she was pregnant at less than three weeks. It happens, and it is absolutely okay.”

I hated feeling as if there was something wrong with me because I didn’t have any symptoms before. I hated that it mattered so much to me, when the logical part of me knew it was absolutely okay.

“Did you have any spotting?” the doctor asked, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

I shook my head, looking down at my lap. “No,” I murmured. “I’ve been craving pickles, though.” I smiled, remembering when I woke Zoe up to come and eat with me. I didn’t even know I was pregnant back then.

“Pickles, huh?” Storm asked, smiling. “They’re my favorite.”

“It seems that they’re their favorite as well,” I murmured.

“Okay, guys,” Doctor Pavlowski exclaimed, standing up. “I scheduled you for an ultrasound in four weeks. That’s,” he looked down at his calendar, “October first. The nurse outside will give you your prescription and will take all the necessary details. Keep eating healthy, keep exercising.” I chuckled at that. I couldn’t remember the last time I did any physical activity, not to mention an exercise. But I probably should. I’d read somewhere that it was better to be in good physical shape as it helps with the birth.

“We will figure out the due date when I see you next time, but I’m assuming it will be somewhere around February or March.”

“Are we going to be able to see their gender during the ultrasound,” I asked, moving slowly down the table when Storm’s arm shot out, wrapping around my middle and helping me to step down.

“We will see. Most of the time we are unable to see the gender before eighteen weeks, but it could be possible if the

little ones coordinate with us.” He chuckled.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Storm murmured, taking my bag from the table. “We appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“One last question though,” Storm said just as I was in front of the door. I frowned, looking at him, and for the first time he seemed really nervous. Not about the pregnancy itself, but the expression on his face was one I haven’t seen before.

“Are we able to, you know?” He looked at the floor, avoiding the doctor’s eyes.

“Are you able to do what?” the doctor asked.

“You know, with the pregnancy,” he murmured.

“I don’t follow.”

Storm took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and blurted out. “Are we able to have sex?”

The doctor started laughing, I almost fell down on the floor, and this man who didn’t seem embarrassed by anything turned as red as a tomato, waiting for an answer.

“You absolutely are.” He laughed. “The babies are safe in her womb, so there’s nothing that could harm them.”

“Not even my—”

“Storm!” I shrieked. “It’s going to be okay.” I laughed, wrapping my hand around his bicep, pulling him to me. “He said there’s no harm.”

“But I just want to know.” He pouted. “I want to be sure that my big—”

I pressed my palm over his mouth, his eyes crinkling at the corners, laughing at me.

“Thank you, Doctor.” I laughed nervously, dragging Storm out of the office, all the way keeping my hand over his mouth. His tongue dashed out, licking my palm, sending shivers all over my body.

His pupils dilated as soon as we stepped outside, his arms wrapping around my middle, ignoring the rest of the world. The door closed with the thud as soon as we exited, but neither one of us moved, and as I removed my hand from his mouth, the brightest smile took over his face.

“I’m going to be a dad,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine. “You’re pregnant.”

“Mhm,” I murmured, still in disbelief.

“We’re going to have twins.” He chuckled, the sound breaking with the sob tearing through him. “Oh God, Phee,” he whimpered, holding me plastered to him. “I fucked up. I fucked up so badly with you.”

“It’s okay,” I mumbled, caressing the back of his neck, his short hair tickling my palm. “I told you already, I have it all figured out.”

“I know you do, and I’m sorry you had to be figuring it out by yourself. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, hey.” I placed my palms on his cheeks, holding his head up to look at me. “These kids are all that matters now, Storm. Whatever happened between us is irrelevant, but them... They’re important now.”

“I know,” he answered. “And I promise you, I will make this right. I will make all of this right.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to jump right into it, to let him take me away, but just because he came here, just because he held my hand, didn’t mean that all the other things suddenly disappeared. He still refused to talk to me.

He still refused to tell me what was going on with Nova, and I didn’t want to wait.

“I wasn’t lying earlier when I said that I’m tired of begging people for love and for understanding, Storm,” I mumbled, wrapping my arms around him. “These kids, they are yours as much as they are mine, but if we want them to have a different life than what the two of us had, we would find a way to coexist. Whatever is going on with you, I don’t want to know. But I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

I stepped backward, letting him go.

His eyes brimmed with unshed tears, a thousand questions lingering in them. Years of pain and sorrow, love and understanding, it was all there. But I needed more than this. I needed actions, real words, proper communication, and it was obvious that he wasn't ready to give that to me.

"We will always be connected, you know. We will always have this." I pulled his hand and pressed it to my stomach. "But until you decide to let everything else go," I released him, "you can't have me. Not like this."

"I don't know how to have you any other way. Not right now at least."

"I get it. And I hate it." I looked down. "Which is why I'm going to start looking for my own place and—"

"No," he thundered, his expression changing from soft to angry within seconds. "You're not leaving the Club."

"Storm—"

"No, Ophelia," he argued, shaking his head and taking a step closer to me. "You said it yourself today. There are people who are after you, and we still need to discuss all those things you just threw at us. I spoke with Atlas and he filled me in on some things, but I think we need to involve Cillian and Tristan, and we need to work together."

"Yeah, but," I stammered. "You hate them."

"I don't." He shook his head. "Not really. The only one I don't want to see anywhere near you is Kieran, but the other two," he shrugged, "I guess they're fine."

"Storm." I chuckled. "You do know that Cillian and I—"

"I don't want to know," he growled, his head turning to the side. "Don't tell me that if you value his life."

"All I was going to say is that there was nothing going on between the two of us," I grinned. "He's like a brother to me."

Well, a brother that you once fucked, but who's counting, that inner bitch of mine cackled like a hyena.

Fuck off, I mumbled internally. He didn't need to know that.

“Let's go home,” Storm said, pulling me toward the exit where Zoe waited for us.

I guess that that was as much as we would talk properly today.

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BELLADONNA

I LOVED PLANS.

I loved them when I was a kid and I love them especially now. The pieces of the puzzle were slowly falling in place, pawing a path for me to do what I wanted to do all these years.

To make Ophelia Aster suffer as much as I did.

She was weak now, much weaker than years ago, allowing herself to fall for a man that couldn't protect her from me. No one could protect her from me. Ophelia Aster destroyed my life, took everything I loved from me and I was going to return a favor now.

My eyes flickered over the board on the opposite side of my desk, going over the photos of the people I had to go through. It would have been easy just getting to her, killing her, taking away her life, but she didn't deserve to go out that easily.

I wanted her to suffer, to feel what I felt. To drown in her sorrow and in her pain, choking on all these emotions until death was the only thing she could think about. I used to be docile, weak, allowing other people to rule my life, but not anymore.

Now I was in charge, and it was hilarious watching all of them running around, trying to figure out who I was. But I did my homework, and I covered my tracks well enough so that they wouldn't be able to find me.

It was funny how easy it was to hide in plain sight, but none of them could find me. Cillian and Tristan came close a

couple of times, Italians did as well, but I knew more than they did. I knew all their dirty secrets, all their hidden skeletons and all the things they wanted the world to forget.

But I would never forget them,

I could never forget how each and every one of them fucked me over. They forgot about me as if I had never meant anything, leaving me alone in the dark world that she destroyed.

And they were all going to pay.

I stood up from the desk and walked toward the board, taking the red marker from the desk with me. Logan Nightingale's picture stood on the left-hand side, right next to his fucking sons, but they weren't the ones I would need to destroy.

At least not yet.

I popped the lid off the marker and placed it on the high table in front of the board, my eyes going over their pictures.

Ophelia Aster.

Storm Knoxx.

Cillian, Tristan, and Kieran Nightingale.

Logan Nightingale.

They were all going to pay for what they did to me. For how they abandoned me.

I should have probably thanked Ophelia for getting rid of Nikolai and his little minion, but we would need to keep that for when I finally meet her in person. I couldn't wait to see the look on her face, the shock, the disbelief...

"Miss," suddenly came from behind me, and as I turned around, I saw Ivan, standing at the threshold, holding a beige envelope in his hand.

"Yes, Ivan," I answered, turning toward him. I might have been tiny, but all these men knew that they shouldn't fuck with me if they wanted to live. They stayed behind after Nikolai died, running away from Lazar Asterov and Sons of Hades,

but they should have known that I was not a better option than them—I was worse.

“T-This came in mail,” he stammered, looking at the floor.

Some of them tried to take over, to kill me when they had just joined, but they failed to remember that I had been in this game much longer than they were, and nothing and nobody was going to stop me.

I waved my hand, beckoning him toward me.

“What is it?” I asked, taking the envelope from him as he slowly approached me, his hands trembling as they released it.

“I don’t know,” he murmured, looking at my collarbone instead of my eyes. “It was addressed to you, so none of us opened it.”

“Hmm,” I murmured, turning the envelope over in my hands. It was a plain, beige envelope, heavier than what I would have expected. Belladonna was scribbled in cursive on the backside, but there was no return address.

This was from Nova.

A smile broke on my face as I placed the marker I was holding on the desk, tearing through the envelope within seconds.

“Is everything ready for tonight?” I asked Ivan who was still standing in my office. “Are the guys prepared to go down to Santa Monica?”

Tonight we were going to destroy them all in one turn. Storm thought he could fool me, that he could hold on to Ophelia and still have his club, but he couldn’t. I was clear from the very start, and he knew what was at stake.

He could either choose her or his precious, little Club, and it was obvious that he chose her.

“They’re ready,” he mumbled, standing tall like a soldier would. “They’re just waiting for your command.”

“Good.” I grinned, pulling out the papers and photos from the envelope, frowning as I saw the name of the clinic on top.

“What the—”

No.

She wasn't.

She couldn't be.

My hands shook as I sat down on the desk, holding on to the papers like a lifeline. Page after page of her blood tests, her scheduled scans... Pictures of her visiting the hospital today during the day.

Holy fucking shit.

Ophelia was pregnant.

“Ma'am,” Ivan started talking, and I lifted my hand effectively shutting him up.

The entire plan just changed. Everything changed with this revelation.

I held up the photo of her with Storm and Zoe as they exited the clinic, both of them serious, lost in thought. She still wasn't showing, but judging by this report, she was somewhere between seven and nine weeks pregnant.

“Ivan.” I looked up at him. “Tell them to come back to the compound.”

“What?” he asked, his eyes widening. “But the plan—”

“The plan has changed,” I murmured, looking down at the photo. I took the marker in my right hand, still holding the paper in my left. I circled around Ophelia's stomach, where her precious cargo grew. “Everything just changed.” I grinned.

I wasn't going to take their lives or their precious Santa Monica chapter. I would take what they stole from me.

Standing up, I placed the papers on the desk, rounded the other side, and sat down. I opened the drawer on the right side and pulled out the paper with my name on the top, taking the black pen from the holder.

I lifted my head, my eyes zeroing on Ivan. “Why are you still here?”

“Uh, I have a question,” he answered, fidgeting.

“Well, go on then. I don’t have an entire night to wait for you to open that mouth of yours.”

“We’re not attacking Santa Monica tonight, but what about San Diego?” He grinned. “Are they good to go?”

This man pissed me off more than anyone else, but his thirst for blood rivaled my own. He hated Sons of Hades with passion, and it helped that they were the ones we were going to destroy.

“Go ahead.” I smiled. “I want the head of their president. Storm is due for another present from me.” I chuckled. “You can go now.”

Ivan simply nodded and walked out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Little miss *I will never have kids* was pregnant. Well, I guess I would be doing her a favor if I took them away. After all, she killed mine. An eye for an eye, or whatever it was people said. She would be left with nothing once I was finished with her.

I turned my attention back to the paper, holding the pen in my right hand,

Dear Storm, I started writing, the ink etching itself into white paper.

I thought we had an agreement, an understanding, but I can see that you already made your choice, and you made the wrong one. You chose her and San Diego paid for that sin.

I hope you like my little gift. It’s not so often that I get to send them—lack of friends and all that shit, but I like to think that the two of us are friends.

Don’t make the same mistake again, Storm.

I’ll be watching.

B.

TO BE CONTINUED

Find out what happens next in Delirium, the fourth and final installment of the Sins of Ophelia Aster Series, coming out on March 25th, 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never really know how to start this part or generally what to say, because words can't really sum how thankful I am for every single person who has helped me on this crazy journey. I often joke that I'm a small potato author (which isn't really a joke), but to know that there are still people out there who want to read my books and who are interested in what I have to say, is still mind-blowing for me.

I wish I could mention every single person who has contributed to me finishing this book, but if I did that, we would end up having at least ten pages only for Acknowledgments.

First and foremost, I want to thank every single reader who has reached out to me, talked to me about these characters, about Ophelia, and the pain she went through. I like to think that she grew up a lot from that very first book, and so did I.

To my Zoe, ZoZo, my loudest cheerleader—I'm not someone who often says those three words, but man... I really, freaking love you.

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Thank you so much for reading, and I truly hope you loved living in Ophelia and Storm's head as much as I did.

Until the next time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



L.K. Reid is a dark romance author who hates slow walkers and people being mean for no reason. She lives with her two cats, Freya and Athena, and she’s still figuring out the whole “adult” thingy.

In her opinion, Halloween should be a public holiday, and she also has a small obsession with all things historical—especially Greek mythology. During high school, she wanted to be an archaeologist, and ended up studying law, but obviously neither one of those professions worked out.

If she isn’t writing, she’s most probably watching horror movies, listening to music, reading, or plotting upcoming books.

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