



2

FAIRHAVEN  
ACADEMY

OMEGA'S  
AFFINITY

CARA BRYANT

# OMEGA'S AFFINITY

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

FAIRHAVEN ACADEMY: BOOK TWO



[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CARA BRYANT

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Copyright © 2023 by Cara Bryant

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover by Cauldron Press.

✿ Created with Vellum

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

*For my brave, beautiful mother.*

*Please skip the sexy bits.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CONTENTS

[Content Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Want more of the Fairhaven Academy series?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Cara Bryant](#)

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# CONTENT NOTE

The Fairhaven Academy series is a paranormal academy reverse harem omegaverse romance. There are no shifters in this omegaverse. This series contains explicit sexual scenes between the heroine and one or more partners at a time. This is a “sweet” omegaverse, meaning there is no dubious/non-consensual sexual activity between the heroine and her love interests. While there are no male/male scenes in this book, future books will contain explicit male/male scenes.

This book contains: dark themes, magical violence, controlling behavior by a parent, parental abuse, strong and sometimes derogatory language, references to sex and sexuality, misogyny, sexual assault, stalking, medical trauma, mistreatment by a law enforcement officer, and other themes some readers may be sensitive to.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 1



*T*ell myself that I can claw my way back from this, that it's just another broken heart, another beautiful dream dashed to dust at my feet.

I tell myself that I will swallow down every poisonous thought, lock them away in the darkest part of my heart.

Lock them away like my father locked away my magic.

But that's the thing about betrayal, isn't it?

It's a potent poison, a devastating draught of venom and thorns. You can lock it away, but it's insidious. It breaks through its confinement like a bitter barb, never dulling as it pierces the most tender parts of you. It makes you bleed, makes you scar, rips you open again and again.

I remind myself that I survived my debutante ball, when I crashed like a wave into the arms of the alpha who chose another. I survived Cassian Leclerc.

I tell myself I'll survive Luca Anders too, but I don't believe it.

I don't believe I'll ever rise from this pit, this dark despair. That, one day, I'll be stronger for it.

Ian raps at the edge of my worktable with his scribe and I startle, looking up into my professor's ice-blue eyes.

What must he see in my drawn expression, in the creases around my trembling lips? His own expression softens, the stern set of his mouth dropping into a worried frown.

“What is it? Are you unwell?”

I am a fragmented shell of the mage I was when I stood before him during my midterms, when I was first able to call my magic and cast spells when he bid me to. Now I am raw and numb all at once, feeling both everything and nothing.

I don't get a chance to answer.

Whispers curl through class like smoke and, one by one, my classmates drift to the tall windows that span one side of the classroom. Their shocked whispers, their gasps, they build into a cacophony, the roar of a storm, making the hair on my arms stand on end.

Professor Reinhardt tries to call the class back to order, but whatever draws the class away from their worktables is magnetic: a force of nature that not even I can resist. I cross the classroom on leaden legs, dread sinking low in my belly.

Knowing.

Knowing that the sight outside the rain-spattered windows will send me to my knees.

Long slashes of red and blue light cut across the classroom, catching on the polished tops of our worktables and dancing along the walls.

They might have been beautiful if I didn't know what they meant.

“No!” Alyssa gasps, reaching back and grabbing my hand, tugging me up to the cool glass.

I let out a shuddering breath when I see him, his shoulders hunched up around his ears, his black leather jacket stretched taut across them, ink-covered hands bound behind him in a pair of handcuffs. His long, blond hair slips free from its knot and clings to his face, wet from the November rain.

“Luca,” Alyssa whimpers, when it's me who should be whimpering for the alpha as a uniformed officer shoves him into the back of the police car.

I don't. My throat burns with a whine I swallow down, along with all the bitter thoughts.

Everything and nothing all at once.

Both raw and numb until... until all the chatter around me fades like I've got cotton wool in my ears.

Until all I hear is my name in his voice, screamed in his mind, echoing in mine.

Fear and agony lace through the tormented "Juniper!" as it echoes in my mind, a final broken plea, a desperate confession.

I blink away the sheen of tears making my eyes sting and turn away from the window, closing my eyes and taking a steadying breath.

Alyssa wraps an arm around my shoulder, and I hear her voice, but it's far away. Leagues away, swallowed up in a storm of anguish. His anguish and mine.

And what a perfect storm it is.

Just for one second, in the tempest of my agony, I doubt myself.

Doubt that he betrayed me in the worst way possible. That for as long as I've known him and maybe longer, while we courted and kissed, while I fell in love with him, he was a soldier in the army calling for the eradication of my kind.

That he could have watched as a scribe was held to my throat, as the thorny magic of an omega trap tore at my skin, watched as briars made scars he would later kiss.

And that's when I fall, just like I did that day, to my knees, trapped once more in dark thorns I can't escape.

Then Marcus is crouched beside me, and I let myself slump against my stoic, steady honor guard. He helps me to my feet and guides me back to my worktable as the blue and red lights recede, sucked from the room like all the oxygen from my lungs.

I meet my professor's gaze across the room and concern crinkles his eyes once more. His attention flicks from me to the cellphone in his hand, as he scans whatever's on the screen, before returning to me.

He taps his scribe against his desk as the class settles slowly, the clamor fading to silence. He grits his teeth, a muscle in his jaw ticking, and then addresses us in a grave voice.

“Classes are canceled for the rest of the day.” His gaze slips to me. “All omega students are hereby forbidden from leaving campus until further notice. Dismissed!”

I shove my things into my bag: jerky, automatic motions that crumple papers and crush the corners of my notebook.

Ian sets a hand on my shoulder, and I know the class must be empty except for me, Alyssa, and Marcus.

He nods to Alyssa. “Miss O’Neill, is there an alpha you trust in the absence of an honor guard?”

The alpha she trusts bursts into the classroom at that very moment. Darika sweeps Alyssa into her arms, covering her face in desperate kisses. “I don’t know what the ever-loving fuck is going on, but Mercury is in retrograde and the world is on fire, and we’re going back to your cottage. I’m locking you in and we’re eating chocolate and drinking tea and you’re not allowed out until it’s safe again, saints fucking help me.” She startles and looks up at Professor Reinhardt. “Uh, sorry, professor. Um, saints freaking help me.”

In any other circumstances, I’d expect a wry smile, but Ian is stone faced. Afraid. “You’ll be safe with Miss Modhi?” he asks Alyssa, and the other omega nods. “Good. She’s right. Stay in your cottage until further notice.”

I watch them go. Raw and numb. Something twinges inside me as Darika wraps Alyssa close, as though she might disappear on a gust of November wind.

When the door clicks shut behind them, Ian sets his other hand on my shoulder and turns me to face him. His scent, spicy cedar and bright bergamot, wraps around me, dulling the sharp edges of anguish inside me until the rawness fades away, if only for the moment. I want to sway toward him, to fall into his arms and find comfort and strength in them. In him. “It has to be a misunderstanding,” he says.

It is. It's my misunderstanding. My misplaced belief in all of Luca's lies.

"Are you all right?"

I force a stiff nod and duck my head so he can't see the lie written plainly across my face, in my trembling lower lip and teary eyes. "I'm fine."

He sighs and steps away, crossing his arms, idly pacing the aisle between rows of worktables. "I'll have to cancel our lesson for this evening. With what happened, I'm sure all the staff will be in meetings most of the night."

"I understand."

Saints, please let him ignore the catch in my voice.

Finally, he nods. "Be safe, Juniper," he pleads.

But all I hear is the plea in Luca's voice, the terror as he called out my name in his mind.

That I was his last thought as he was forced into a police car.



LET my courage light my way through the storm.

Fairhaven's motto has never rung more hollowly than it does as I hide away from all of Marcus' concerned questions, alone in my nest.

As I rip the list of places Luca and I planned to see on the back of his motorcycle to shreds and then frantically look up the spell to make the list whole again.

As I wish for his flannel, for his wine-and-cherries scent with all of my broken traitorous heart.

There's no courage in the way I curl beneath all of my blankets in the dim light of my nest, tracing the shapes of the tattoos that adorn the backs of his hands on my sheets, paths I memorized when he held me close.

He lied to me, and I believed him.

And now he's gone from my life, disappearing in the back of a squad car, while I hide in my nest like a coward.

A coward who will not survive this.



CLASSES RESUME the next morning and though the Fairhaven student body talks, no one seems to know what happened yesterday, why the police came and took away one of their peers. The lockdown has yet to be lifted and Marcus hasn't let me out of his sight once, not even in the safety of the omega residences' powerful warding.

Did the police search Luca's room, I wonder as I take my seat in Foundations in Magic. And if they did, did they find what I found?

Did they find the curling horns, the molded black leather of a Baphomet mask, an upside down seven-pointed star emblazoned on its forehead?

Cold sweat sends a chill up my spine.

The masks, brutal and bestial, haunt me, both the one I found in Luca's steamer trunk and the ones I see around campus. The ones that watch me from across the quad. The ones that adorn the faces of Fairhaven students and teachers alike—but only in my mind.

Marcus thought they were a response to the trauma I'd suffered at the hands of the Soldiers of Saint Aldous. But time passes and still I see them. A masked figure watched me as I made my way to class this morning, head down to avoid the weight of its sinister stare.

Even now, I might turn in my seat and find Kelvin Montrose watching me, a mask transposed over the alpha freshman's face. Is he one of the Soldiers of Saint Aldous like Rad? I know Andrew Radcliffe is a member of the Soldiers of Saint Aldous, can still feel sickness churning in my gut when I remember his orange-and-anise scent. The scent that choked

me when he held a scribe to my throat, his face hidden behind a mask. The scent that made mine grow sour with fear when Andrew Radcliffe tried to rape me in the small stand of trees beside the library.

And Luca is one of them. A Soldier just like Rad.

How furious he was when he found out about my assault. How his alpha nature raged out of control.

And, oh, how I *believed* him. Every single pretty lie.

I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste coppery blood, focusing on the pain.

Pain I can control.

Professor Hayes sweeps into the room and drops an odd collection of steel and glass instruments on his desk, then whips his scribe toward the blackboard, covering it in formulas. He turns to the class, honey-brown eyes alive with energy.

“We’re soldiering onward today, class. Even as the world falls down around our ears. We will persevere. And today we do that by beginning your instruction in the science of magic. We covered it briefly before midterms, but now we’ll be digging deep into this facet of magic for the rest of the term. I hope you haven’t forgotten your high school physics and calculus! Oh, come on now, don’t groan.” He twiddles his scribe in his fingers. “Scribes out. I’m going to need a volunteer for today’s demonstration.”

We’ve never needed our scribes in Foundations in Magic before, as everything we’ve learned has been based in theory and covered through lectures and assignments. I draw my scribe from my bag and roll it between my fingertips, the steel warming as my magic flows into it. Saints, I’ll never tire of this feeling.

“All right, class. Call your magic and cast a beam. Straight up into the air, if you will.”

I do as instructed and then look around the room as my befuddled classmates do the same. Professor Hayes considers the class for a moment and then turns to me, drawing the



attention of all my peers. They stare at me and the bright beam of my magic casting a pool of light on the ceiling, and whispers rustle through the classroom like autumn leaves down the paths that crisscross the quad.

Professor Hayes beams at me. “Strong and steady, Miss Rose. You’ll do perfectly. Could you come to the front of the class, please?”

For the first time since coming to Fairhaven Academy, I stride to the front of the classroom, my head held high, the tip of my scribe blazing.

Knowing that I will not fail this time as I have so many times before, that the magic that was once locked away from me now rises at my call.

Professor Hayes has me shine the beam of my magic across the front of the classroom and skims his palm over the top of it, letting out a proud grimace of pain when sparks crackle against his skin.

“Strong indeed,” he says, just loud enough for me to hear.

I risk a glance around the classroom, catching the light of my magic reflected in the wide eyes of my classmates. Kelvin Montrose, who called me fucking worthless, scowls at me, and it’s almost enough to make me smile.

“This, class, is magic in its most elemental form. Pure energy, waiting to be shaped by your intention! But *is* it energy? Or is it light? Is there matter in the stream of magic Miss Rose has cast? Or is it something that defies what we know of the natural world, the rules and order by which we exist? Scholars, scientists, and philosophers have been asking these questions for centuries. The earliest alchemists smelted gold with their own blood to make the first scribes we know of. They thought magic existed in a mage’s *anima*, our very life-force, in our breath and in our blood. Now, these blood-smelted scribes were incredibly effective. Does anyone know why?”

Kel doesn’t bother to raise his hand or rise from the disdainful way he slouches behind his desk. There’s a sick

pleasure in his voice when he lazily throws out the answer. “Blood magic is the strongest magic there is.”

Professor Hayes frowns. “So some say, yes. Which is why blood magic has been outlawed. Blood is indeed, a powerful magical amplifier, but it isn’t the only amplifier. Miss Bowen, another amplifier?”

“Words of power?”

“Quite right. Beyond blood and words of power, there are all kinds of things that can amplify magic: plants, symbols, tools like crystals...” He turns to me with a grin. “You’re probably tiring after casting for so long, but I promise it’s for a reason.” He snatches a faceted crystal orb off his desk and holds it in the stream of my magic and I startle when I feel my magic crackle back along itself like a live wire. “Ah, you felt that one, didn’t you?”

Magic buzzes in the air around me, catching in my hair like static electricity. It sparks along my skin just like it did before my father locked it away, potent and powerful, sending a shiver skittering up my spine.

That’s when the whispers start. Whispers only I can hear. Awe and envy from my classmates. Covetous rage and slurs from Kel where he slouches in his seat at the back of the class. I hear his voice, laced with disgust, in my mind.

*Fucking cunt. Rad should have—*

A sharp knock comes at the classroom door and Headmaster Langford steps in, followed by an all-too-familiar mage inspector.

And that’s when I understand.

Senior Mage Inspector Mattis, here to question me in connection to Luca.

“Miss Rose, I’m afraid I’ll have to steal you away from your studies. Professor Hayes, you have my apologies. Apparently,” the headmaster says, his usually jolly face set in a stern glare, “this couldn’t wait.”

*Anders' whore*, I hear in Kel's disdainful voice. *Finally getting what's coming to her*.

My magic snaps back into my body, sparks burning the tips of my fingers, and I stagger, kept from falling only by Marcus appearing at my side, my bag in one hand.

*There's no way she had anything to do with it...* I look up at Professor Hayes, but his words went unspoken.

Just as Mattis' do when I meet his glare with one of my own. *Spoiled omega cunt*.

Just as Rad's did when he swore to dominate, degrade, and defile me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 2



Mattis taps a stack of photographs against the polished top of Headmaster Langford's stately, carved wooden desk. Disdain pours off him and I shy away as he tosses one of the photographs down onto the desk.

"Do you know this alpha?"

I pick up the picture with shaking hands, already knowing it'll be Luca's pale green eyes staring back at me.

He's gaunt under the too-bright lights of the police station, dark bags under his eyes, and has a hardness to him I've seen only a few times before—when he swore he'd protect me and, like the naive omega I am, I believed him.

"Yes, I know this alpha. Luca and I were friends."

"Just friends?" Mattis shoots me a pointed look and I notch my chin up, glaring back at him. The mage inspector wants to see me suffer. He wants to bring me low and shame me.

But I've already been brought lower than I thought possible.

And the only shame I feel is for falling so completely, so naively, for a lie. "I fail to see how that's of any importance. I told you I know him. What other questions do you have for me?"

"Where were you on Sunday afternoon, between the hours of one to five-thirty?"

My heart skips a beat, kicking in my chest. "I was at St. Matilda's diner with a group of friends, including Luca, until

around two. I was with Luca for the rest of the afternoon after that.”

“Where?”

“We were in his dorm room.”

Mattis sneers, but I merely raise a brow in challenge. “And what were you doing with Mr. Anders?”

“Once again, Mister Mattis, I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”

“Were you two alone?”

I grit my teeth. “We were.”

Mattis lets out a derisive huff of a laugh. “What do you think your father would say if he knew you’d been spending time in a degenerate alpha’s dorm room?”

“You would have to ask him that. If you don’t have his contact information, I can provide it for you?”

He doesn’t call my bluff. He waves me off with a surly snarl. “Can anyone corroborate your whereabouts that afternoon?”

“I can,” Marcus says, speaking for the first time since Mattis showed us into the headmaster’s office. He draws his phone from his pocket and then nods to the charm that sits between my collarbones on a glittering chain. “Like many omegas under an honor guard’s protection, Miss Rose wears a tracker at all times. Her whereabouts are tracked down to the minute in an app that only I have access to. Certainly, Senior Mage Inspector, you could demand the release of her location data, but you’ll need a warrant.”

I look up sharply. There’s a hardness in Marcus’ voice I’ve never heard before, but he isn’t finished. “I think we both know what can happen when an omega’s location isn’t safely guarded. If you want this data, return with a warrant and go through her family’s lawyers.”

Mattis scowls at Marcus and I can’t help the quiet thrill that sends a warm flush rising in my cheeks.

The mage inspector scoffs and snaps the photographs back into an envelope, then scribbles down a few details in his leather folio.

“You may be able to prove your whereabouts with the app data, but that doesn’t confirm that Mr. Anders was with you.”

I purse my lips and then do the scariest thing I can think to do: I smile up at the mage inspector. “Are you calling me a liar, Mister Mattis?”

He smiles back. “You’re an omega, Miss Rose. Manipulation is in your very nature.”

“You’d never say the same about an alpha, and you would never accuse an upstanding alpha of lying, so write this down,” Marcus cuts in, his voice stony. “I saw them both enter his dorm room at 2:17. Juniper came out at 4:43, alone. I did not see Mr. Anders leave the room, so unless he rappelled down from a third-floor window, I can confirm that he was with my client in his dorm room for most of the afternoon.”

My honor guard stares down the mage inspector until Mattis grudgingly takes down the details in a hasty scrawl.

“I may not like your kind, Miss Rose, and I may find you a particularly unpleasant specimen—the very worst kind of omega—but might I offer you some advice?”

“Can I stop you?”

Mattis rolls his watery blue eyes. “Pick the company you keep with greater care. The so-called *friend* of yours I have behind bars isn’t an alpha you should associate with, and not just for your reputation. For your safety.”

“As if you’ve ever cared about an omega’s safety,” I spit out. This... this is the very mage inspector who told me I should take greater precautions when I was caught up in an omega trap—a spell that had been banned hundreds of years ago. The very alpha who accused me of inviting the advances of the alpha who tried to rape me, who was ready to see charges brought against me for defending myself with magic I didn’t even have. “If you don’t have any other questions, I have classes to attend. May I be excused?” I don’t duck my

head or bare my neck like a good omega would, because the mage inspector has already decided I'm anything but. But better alphas have thought worse about me. Senior Mage Inspector Mattis? He can go straight to hell.

I snatch up my things without waiting for his permission and stride from the headmaster's office with my head held high, and I don't crumble, not even when the headmaster gives me a soft squeeze on the shoulder, accompanied by a knowing frown.

Just what does he think he knows?

He can't possibly know that an alpha I thought I loved deceived me in the worst way, that he isn't the first alpha to do so. That every alpha I think I love ends up betraying me.



WHATEVER BRAVADO GOT me through my interview with the mage inspector abandons me as I enter the stream of students making their way from morning classes to All Saints' Hall for lunch. I duck into the small alcove around the statue of Saint Briac and scrub my hands over my face, wishing I was anywhere else.

"What happened with Luca, sweet-tart?" Marcus asks softly.

I've been expecting the question since I fled from Luca's dorm room, tears and fear in my blue eyes. And still I can't voice what I saw in Luca's dorm room. I can't tell Marcus that I found a mask buried in the trunk of the alpha I love.

Loved.

Saints, even now, with Luca behind bars, part of me hopes there's another explanation for what I found buried beneath old band tee shirts. That someone planted the mask in his trunk to get him in trouble. That he didn't even know it was in there.

"He lied to me," I manage, my voice raw and raspy.

“And the mage inspector?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” Someone could have found out about the mask, just as I did. Saints, it could even be something *worse*. What if the mage inspectors found evidence that ties him to one of the scenes of the Soldiers’ crimes? I sit down heavily at the base of the statue. “But if whatever they think he did happened Sunday afternoon, well, he couldn’t have done it.”

Marcus sits beside me, and I lean into him, dragging his winter-wind scent into my lungs. I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t let myself get this close to my honor guard, shouldn’t be so comforted by his scent and presence.

But where Luca lied to me, with Marcus, I lie to myself. In these moments when he pulls me close, I pretend he *isn’t* immune to my scent, that we could ever be more than we are now.

“Thanks for sticking up for me with Mattis,” I say quietly.

“He’s cruel,” Marcus sighs. “The worst kind of alpha. I can’t stand people like him. If I didn’t think it would have gotten me fired, I would have socked him straight in the jaw for how he treated you.”

Warmth flushes through me and, saints, why must I always fall for the wrong alphas? The alphas who don’t truly want me—or *can’t* want me. The ones who will never be drawn to me. Who will never love me or mate me. “I like that side of you,” I admit. “The takes-no-bullshit side.”

Color rises in his cheeks, and he looks toward the quad. “Think you’re up for lunch and your afternoon class?”

I stare down at my hands. “No to the former, yes to the latter. I’m not ready to face everyone just yet.”

My honor guard stands, brushes off his jeans, then offers me a hand up. “Come on, then, sweet-tart. We can head back to the cottage for lunch, and I’ll make you a spicy cup ramen.”

I know it’s his job—to keep me safe and well—but I don’t know if any other alpha will ever care for me like Marcus Haley does.



And that breaks my already broken heart.



IT'S EASIER to face my enemies than it is to face my friends.

Alyssa and I don't share our Tuesday-Thursday classes like we do our other classes, and it's a relief. My best friend saw Luca being dragged away, saw how it knocked the air from my lungs. She noticed Luca and I didn't show up for movie night on Sunday.

She'll ask questions. She'll want to know if Luca's okay, ask me why he was taken away in handcuffs. She'll want to know if I'm okay, what she can do to help me get through this. And I have no answers for her.

But while I don't share my Tuesday-Thursday classes with Alyssa, I do share them with Kelvin Montrose.

He leans up against my desk before Dr. Spencer arrives to our History of Magic class, staring down at me, his face flicking between his strong alpha features and the gruesome visage of Baphomet, captured in black leather.

"Do you know what happens to alphas who try to rise above their station, witch? The ones that fuck *our* omegas?"

Marcus slowly rises and looms over the alpha freshman.

Kel cowers. It's barely perceptible, and he straightens quickly, glaring up at my honor guard. "Watch yourself, Haley. You're just the help. I could get you fired in an instant."

I make a show of rolling my eyes. "Then I'll say what he can't. Fuck off, Kel. I'm not afraid of you."

"You were when we had you trapped—"

He means when Rad tried to rape me. When Rad ordered him to hold me down.

Vile, vile creature. Loathsome alpha bully. Rage pounds through me and my magic sings through my veins. I don't call

it, don't put any intention behind it, but the power is so strong it's euphoric, flushing out all my rage.

Kel lets out a howl of pain and drops to his knees, clutching his head. "Wh-what did you do to me, witch?"

Dr. Spencer sets down her briefcase, assesses the situation coolly, then nods to an alpha in the front row. "Mr. Glenmore, it appears your classmate is unwell. Would you please escort Mr. Montrose to the infirmary?"

As the other alpha helps Kel to his feet, Dr. Spencer fixes me with a considering stare. "Mr. Haley, if you'd take your seat, please. Your charge is safe now."

As Dr. Spencer starts into her lecture, all my euphoria drains from me, leaving me hollowed out. Numb and raw once more. I know now that I just used some kind of magic against Kel, just like I once used it against Rad, against Cassian. It rises within me when my emotions do, hot and volatile.

And strong. So very strong.

I've never read about magic like this, magic cast without spell or scribe.

I sink a bit lower in my seat. Saints, in the tempest of my emotions, I barely registered what Kel said about alphas who try to rise about their station. He can only be talking about Luca, I'm sure of it. Did Rad and his ilk do something to Luca? Is he being punished for being with me?

And if he is, how did Rad *know*? Sure, I've been seen with Luca, but we were careful. Touching like lovers, kissing, only when we knew we wouldn't be seen.

I can still feel his touch, the brush of his calloused fingertips over my collarbones, along the curve of my hip. How I had yearned to see those tattooed hands moving over my body.

I miss him.

Underlying the maelstrom of fear, anger, and sorrow that ripped through me from his betrayal, it's the betrayal of my own heart that hurts the most.

Because I do miss him.

Because I emptied my laundry hamper searching for his flannel shirt, desperate for his scent, desperate for *him*, only to remember that I left it in his dorm room. Because I shredded his list of places for us to visit, only to piece it back together as quickly as I could.

Weak and pathetic. Naive. I should have trusted my intuition the first time I saw a mask transposed over his motorcycle helmet. But like the flighty, pathetic omega I am, I let myself fall.

I fell and I was betrayed, and in my despair, I betray myself with every pump of my traitor heart.



I SKIP dinner to study in the library, but in truth, I spend most of that time crying in the ladies room. By the time I slump into my seat for tutoring, I feel wrung out. Exhausted.

The moment he enters the study room, Simon pulls me to my feet and sweeps me into a hug that starts healing the cracks of my broken heart. “Junes, I’ve been so worried. I texted and —”

“Sorry,” I mutter. I turned my phone off Sunday night after Luca’s first text, begging me to let him explain, and I never switched it back on.

He holds me close and saints, he’s so warm, so real.

My tears come hot and fast, soaking into his navy sweater, but he doesn’t pull away. If anything, he wraps me tighter, rubbing soothing circles on my back until my trembling relents.

“It’s been... it’s been a lot.”

“Then fuck tutoring for tonight. Go home and get some rest, kit-kat.”

“I don’t want to be alone right now,” I tell him in a whisper. Not with my thoughts, not with this agony hollowing

me out.

“Tell me what you need,” he insists.

“Answers,” I croak, my throat burning with tears.

“About Luc?”

I nod against him, and he gives me a tight squeeze before releasing me. He holds me at arm’s length, his hands on my shoulders, just like Ian did the day before.

“All right, here’s what we’ll do. I didn’t see you at dinner, so I’m guessing you skipped. We’ll go back to my room, order a pizza, and I’ll start hacking the Fairhaven PD’s database.”

“What about tutoring?”

He rolls his hazel eyes. “Fuck it. The only thing I care about right now is you, pizza, building a blanket fort, finding out what the fuck happened, and maybe making some s’mores. I got these chocolate-covered marshmallow candies from Poland, and I was waiting until I could try them with you.”

“You’re kind of the best,” I admit, stepping forward to wrap my arms around him once more. “Thank you, Simon.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 3



“Let me just finish something real quick,” Simon says when I finally knock at his door.

I remember the last time I heard someone say that in these halls, and slump to the ground with a sigh, curling into a ball, resting my chin on my knees.

Marcus watches Simon disappear into his room, then slides to the ground across from me.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” he asks in a low voice.

I look up sharply and stare into his gray-green eyes. I want to believe I can confide in Marcus, but my honor guard sees the world in a way I no longer can. Marcus believes that good will win out, that doing the just and honorable thing will be rewarded.

But I’ve seen how the world rewards people like Andrew Radcliffe. Like my father.

If I had told Marcus about what I’d found in Luca’s room, Luca would have been hauled off by the cops that very night, not the next day.

“If you don’t want to talk to me, at least talk to Simon or Alyssa, all right? I hate seeing you suffer like this. It tears me apart.”

Saints, those earnest words make me want to crawl across the hallway and into his arms.

I don’t.

I can't.

Simon finally pops his head out into the hallway. "All right. Blanket fort ready. Marcus, you can join us if you want. It's a roomy blanket fort." He shoots my honor guard a beaming smile and Marcus clears his throat awkwardly.

"I'm good out here."

"Let us order you some food at least. I'm the reason you didn't get dinner," I insist. "Though, I'm guessing you're not much of a pizza fan?"

"Michelangelo's makes a mean antipasto salad," Simon offers.

"Yeah, that works." Marcus digs out his wallet, but I wave him off.

"Don't worry, Father's paying for this one. Let him lecture me for ordering pizza."

"Like literally every academy student ever," Simon says, rolling his eyes. "Junes, your father's done a lot of shady shit, but denying you any kind of junk food might just be his greatest crime."

I elbow him lightly and then let him pull me into his dorm room.

Summer sunshine and salty sea air hit me the moment I step into the room, and I take a quick step back, shaking my head to clear it. The scent is too familiar, now forever steeped in heartbreak.

"You okay?"

I hesitate. "Yeah. I just thought..." What did I think? That I'd picked up Cassian Leclerc's scent in Simon's room? It's possible Cassian's been here. They're both juniors, after all, and likely share a number of classes they might study for together. "It's nothing."

It isn't nothing, but I refuse to let another alpha's betrayal drag me down tonight, not when my beta tutor is being as sweet as chocolate-covered marshmallows.

Not when he's built me more than a blanket fort. Saints, it's practically a nest, and when I step beneath the twinkle lights, I let the pure wonder overtake me.

Sheets drape from the tall posts at the end of his bed, and he's pulled the mattress onto the floor along with a flannel duvet and every last pillow in the room.

He sheepishly hands me a stack of blankets. "It helps Ellie out sometimes," he says.

Nesting, he means. Simon Monroe knows how to make a blanket fort that's more nest than fort because he's done it for his younger sister.

"You do your thing and I'll order us some dinner. What do you like on your pizza?"

"Everything," I tell him, digging the credit card my father gave me out of my bag and handing it over to him.

"Everything it is."

I bury my face in the soft blankets and can't help the way my lips turn upward in a smile, the way my cheeks heat. I should feel self-conscious nesting in front of Simon, but I don't. I kneel on the soft mattress, the scent of summer sunshine filling my senses. For now, I let it be a much-needed comfort. I carefully arrange pillows and blankets until I'm satisfied, and then sit cross-legged, a wash-worn patchwork quilt wrapped around my shoulders.

Simon smiles at me, his hazel eyes crinkling. "That one's always been my favorite. Our mom made it for me. Well, Ellie's mom. Long story. May I come into your nest?"

"Yes, please," I say, reaching for him.

He sits beside me, leaning back against the pillows and nods in approval. "It's a lovely nest, Junes."

Junes. How I once longed to invite a certain alpha who called me that into my nest, to hear *his* approval. Still, I can't help but preen at Simon's.

"You're really good at this," I admit. "Dealing with emotional omegas."

“Ellie has given me a *lot* of practice.”

“You’re a good brother.”

He rubs at the back of his neck, suddenly bashful. “I try.” He reaches for his laptop but doesn’t open it.

“Dig before or after dinner?”

“Is it cowardly that I want to wait?”

It *feels* cowardly, like whatever courage carried me through midterms has all but vanished.

“You don’t think he’s guilty...”

“I don’t know, Simon. I... I broke up with him Sunday afternoon.”

“Oh, kit-kat. What happened?”

I swallow hard. “He was lying to me about so many things. But Simon, whatever the police think he did... I’m his alibi. A mage inspector questioned me this morning about his whereabouts.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah. The mage inspector wouldn’t tell me what they were charging him with, but Luca has a record. If he’s found guilty and gets put away again, it’ll be for good. And I can’t face that prospect yet.”

Even though he lied to me. Even though he may have been among the mages that attacked me. I beg the saints that it’s not all true, but even my cracked, naive heart won’t let me believe it. Deep in my gut, I know there was something he wasn’t telling me.

“Shit, Junie. I can’t even imagine. All right, I’ll start the script, because breaking through the police department’s firewalls may take some time, but we don’t dig until after pizza. And while we wait, we make s’mores. Deal?”

I force a small smile. “Deal.”

Simon opens his laptop, types for a few minutes, and then sets his laptop aside. Out of sight, but not out of mind.



“All right, so I have no idea if this is going to work or if I’m going to set the dorms on fire, but...” He digs around in his desk drawer and finally draws out a colorful box of chocolates and a box of graham crackers.

“I’ve never had a s’more before, actually.”

“Yeah, because your father is history’s greatest criminal. You didn’t even get to do, like, nature scouts?”

“Nope.”

He passes me one of the candies. “Ptasie Mleczko. It means ‘bird’s milk,’ but let’s pretend it doesn’t, because I really want to like these, so we can try the frappe and caramel ones next.”

The chocolate is smooth and creamy and the vanilla marshmallow absolutely decadent. “Oh, saints. Yeah. We need the frappe and caramel, too.”

Simon grins and then pulls out the graham crackers, carefully breaking two in half. He frowns down at them, then sets a chocolate-covered marshmallow on each, heating them until they melt with a quick spell. He sandwiches the s’mores together and hands me one. “Not traditional, but until the next bonfire, it’ll do.”

The s’more is sticky and sweet, the graham crackers the perfect counterpoint to the rich chocolate and marshmallows. At my pleading look, Simon chuckles and hands over the other before making himself another one.

“Everything you ever dreamed of and more?”

I know he means the s’mores, but sharing them with him in a blanket fort nest? It really is.



WE’RE JUST FINISHING up our pizza when Simon’s computer chimes. He grimaces, cleans his hands with a spell and a paper napkin, and then hauls it onto his lap. He frowns and taps at a few keys and then does something I’ve never seen a mage do

before: he murmurs a spell and magic flows from his fingertips into his computer.

“You’re really using magic to hack them, aren’t you? I didn’t even know that was possible.”

It seems there are more mysteries than answers when it comes to magic—including my own.

“They’re using magic to protect their data. Honestly, their firewalls are surprisingly sophisticated, but no match for me.” He types for a moment, squinting down at the screen and then his glasses flash white as the webpage changes.

He shoves his glasses up his nose and frowns as he keys in a string of letters and numbers.

“I’m in,” he says, just like he’s a hacker in a movie, but his expression grows grim seconds later. “Holy shit, Junes... Fuck.”

The pizza in my stomach turns to lead, sinking low and heavy in my belly. “What is it?”

“An omega went missing and her pack thinks Luca could have taken her. Grace Cassidy. She graduated from the academy a few years ago, lives in the city of Fairhaven with her pack...”

I sink and I float all at once. Raw and numb. Feeling everything and nothing all at once. An omega was taken, but Luca... Luca couldn’t have had anything to do with it. “Why would her pack think he took her?”

Simon hesitates, looking over the top of the screen at me. “They claimed that he coveted her. She frequented Quill & Clover, I guess, and he worked on one of the pack’s cars at the garage, but I’m damn sure he didn’t ‘covet’ her. Junie, that alpha has eyes for you and you alone.”

I look away, working my lower lip between my teeth. Is that true? I can hardly tell truth from lies anymore. If only I had one true thing I could anchor onto, something about my time with Luca that I could know, with absolute certainty, was the truth.

“Never mind that he’d never kidnap anyone. There’s no way he could have been anything but friendly toward her.”

“When did she go missing?”

“She was in town with her pack on Sunday afternoon. They reported her missing around 4:30.”

“When I was with him.”

“So, they’ll hold him for a bit and eventually, they’ll have to let him go.”

“Maybe.” Saints, is this what Kel was insinuating? That they’d set Luca up to take the fall for a missing omega? If it is, then they might not know about the mask at all.

Which means they may not have planted it in his trunk.

The cracks in my heart pull apart like ice floes. If Rad and his friends didn’t plant the mask, then it truly was Luca’s.

But if Rad, Jaime, and Kel did set Luca up to take the fall for Grace’s kidnapping, they’re doing it to hurt *me*.

In fits and starts, I tell Simon what Kel told me, leaving nothing out. Not the horrific insinuations, not the foul slurs.

“Okay, get the cops back here, because I’m going to punch that fucker right in the face,” Simon swears. “How could he —”

I don’t tell Simon that Kel got some of what was coming to him, that I hurt the alpha somehow. “You can’t fight Kelvin Montrose, Simon.”

“I know,” he sighs. “He could make things worse for Luc if I do.”

Luc. It’s the second time he’s called Luca that and it’s so familiar it warms my heart. Whether through their shared Transmogrification class or the nights we’ve all hung together, they’ve become friends.

Fuck. I’m not supposed to find anything about Luca heartwarming. He may not have taken Grace Cassidy, but saints only know what he *has* done, what crimes he may have committed behind that fearsome mask.

I scrub at my face with the heels of my hands. I begged Simon for answers, but as I finally bid him goodnight, as he hugs me close and whispers comforts in my ear, I have more questions than ever.



I CAN'T AVOID my fellow Fairhaven omegas forever. Wednesday night comes far too quickly and, with it, Omega Seminar.

Bitsy plunks me down in one of the chairs in the small semi-circle. "All right, Junie. Spill it. What the fuck is going on? Why'd the cops take your alpha?"

"He's not my alpha anymore," I mutter, wishing I could flee back to the safety of my cottage, the comfort of my nest.

"Whoa, what?" Ellie asks, sitting down in the chair beside mine. "Since when? What happened?"

I know she's asking me what happened between me and Luca, but somehow that's more painful to talk about than the crimes he's been accused of. "An omega went missing in Fairhaven."

"Grace Cassidy," Bridget says, cutting in. The senior omega almost always keeps to herself, never joining in our conversations before or after class, so to hear from her about a missing omega is like a punch to the gut. "She was a senior when I was a freshman. We still meet up for coffee a few times a month."

"Holy tits," Bitsy says, sitting down heavily on Ellie's other side. "That's fucking rough. But Luca didn't do it?"

I sigh. "We were together the whole afternoon after we left the diner."

Bitsy waggles her eyebrows and then frowns. "Wait, you said he's not your alpha anymore?"

"He lied to me. The whole time we were together. Our whole relationship was... was a lie."

“Oh, girly,” Alyssa says softly. “I’m so sorry. I honestly thought he was one of the good ones.”

“I don’t buy it,” Bitsy cuts in. “Not for a minute.”

“I’m struggling a bit too,” Ellie admits. “Junie, he can’t have lied to you. He was crazy for you.”

“Literally, no alpha in the history of alphas and omegas has ever loved an omega more.”

Love.

It’s then that I realize that Luca never told me he loved me. My eyes prick with tears. I guess there was one lie he wasn’t willing to tell, one lie too heavy for even his conscience to bear.

He couldn’t tell me he loved me.

“And no way in hell did he take Grace,” Bitsy swears.

Leigh sweeps into the room, setting down her shoulder bag and a new stack of readers. “So you’ve heard that one of our dear omega alumni was taken.” She purses her lips. “You girls must all be careful about the alphas you trust. No matter what pretty lies they tell you, you must always protect yourself first and foremost.”

“Grace is mated to a wonderful pack,” Bridget says, scorn sharp in her voice. “She didn’t trust the wrong alphas. She was *kidnapped*. And you’re blaming *her*?”

“All this time,” Bitsy muses, “and you’ve been telling us how we need, above all else, the protection of a pack.” She levels a hard stare at our Omega Seminar teacher. “I suppose this means that the protection of our future packs is no longer enough? If that’s the case, Mrs. Parsons, just how are we meant to protect ourselves?”

For the first time all term, Leigh has no stern retort. Fear and exhaustion wear on her pretty face, making her look older than she is.

Bitsy’s right and Leigh knows it.

If a mated omega can be taken off the street, then the protection of a pack isn't enough.

I trusted the wrong alpha and I'm still stinging from it.

Naively, I believed a broken heart was the worst that would come from Luca's lies.

But what if he was getting close to me to do what someone did to Grace? What if he planned to turn me over to the Soldiers of Saint Aldous as soon as he'd gained my trust?

I have no pack and too many enemies.

I *must* learn to protect myself.

I must.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 4



I throw myself into my classes because I can't bear to be left alone with my own thoughts. I work even harder than I did leading up to midterms when I was attempting to learn half a semester's worth of magic in little more than a long weekend. I read and reread my textbooks and practice spells late into the night, determined to master each one.

Determined to progress in my magic enough to learn the magic that will let me protect myself.

I keep myself busy until Friday afternoon, and then the quiet comes crashing down around me. Campus is still locked down and while omegas are allowed outside the omega residences now, parties have been discouraged. Not that I'm in the mood to force smiles and act like I'm not one strong shove away from breaking into a million pieces.

The tears come when I flop down in my nest and switch my phone on for the first time all week.

I scroll quickly through the group chat with Alyssa, Bitsy, and Ellie, reply to a text from my brother Hawthorn, who cheekily wondered if I'd recovered from my All Saints' Eve hangover, and then I tap Luca's name in my notifications.

I swallow hard and tap the last voicemail message he left me.

"Juniper, you have to believe me," he swears, his voice distant, swallowed up by the wind gusting across the quad. "It's not what you think. Please let me—"

Someone calls his name, and the call cuts off, leaving me staring at the screen of my phone, tears streaming down my cheeks.

I shatter. For the first time since I fled from his dorm, running all the way back to my cottage, the dam of numbness breaks, and I feel *everything*. Raw sobs claw free from me, tearing at my throat and racking my body as I try to curl so tightly into myself I'll disappear.

My grief is a horrible thing, as every happy memory I made with Luca sours: our first time meeting on the bridge when he growled that he *liked* when I perfumed for him; how we studied on the bridge while it stormed, lightning flashing as rain pounded the shield he'd created; the way he swept me up into his arms on the Feast of Marmora and kissed me like I was the very air he needed to breathe; the way he touched me, veneration in his hesitant touch, the first time he took me to bed; how he purred for me that day like a mate would.

How I gave him all of myself on All Saints' Day and how he made me yearn for a pack for the first time in years.

How I was so sure that *somehow* he would be my future. My alpha.

He saved me from my despair, was the one to help me temper it with joy and hope. He kept me going when I thought all was lost.

And now I've lost him. Everything that was, everything that could have been.

Some of it *had* to be true.

Please, saints save me, let some of it have been real.



I WAKE EARLY the next morning with a dull headache and a throat scratchy from crying myself to sleep and find a text from Marcus from last night flashing on my phone.



*<<Made you tea and left it on the landing. Please, Juniper, tell me what I can do.>>*

Sure enough, there's a mug of tea on the landing, now stone cold. I pick it up and drift down the stairs to pour it out. Only to find Marcus asleep on the sofa, one of his precious paperbacks on the floor beside it.

My heart squeezes and I make my way down the stairs as quietly as I can, determined not to wake him. I'm watching the kettle so I can take it off the heater before the alarm sounds when I hear a sleepy "Juniper?" behind me.

I look over my shoulder and a smile curves my lips as I take my honor guard in. He's mussed from sleep, his hair in disarray and his eyes squinted against the gray morning light filtering into the small cottage we share. "Hey. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you so early."

He glances at his phone through one cracked eye. "It's six. That's not early."

I pull down another mug and hang a tea bag from its handle. "It is if you were up late last night trying to care for me. Thank you for the tea, by the way."

"You didn't drink it," he guesses.

"I didn't get your text until this morning." I squeeze a bit of honey into my mug and then pour water into both of them. "You didn't have to sleep on the sofa."

"I wanted to be close in case you needed anything. I've been worried about you."

My traitor heart squeezes again and, while Marcus may be immune to my perfume, I know he cares for me more than most honor guards care for their charges. Bitsy's honor guard, Connor, just barely tolerates her antics, and Ellie's honor guard, Jace, is as professional as can be. Neither is the type to accept a cup of tea while staring up at their omegas, their eyes crinkled in concern. Nor the type to offer to share the other half of the woolen blanket that's normally folded on the back of the sofa because the gray November morning has left a chill in the cottage.

I take the other end of the sofa, curling up under the blanket, and wrap my hands around the hot mug. “I’m going to be okay,” I say quietly.

“I know. But that doesn’t mean I won’t worry until you are. And, fuck, Juniper, an omega was just snatched right out from under her pack’s noses.”

“It wasn’t Luca,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

He blows on his tea and then nods thoughtfully. “I know. I heard what Kel said. I don’t know much about Pack Montrose, but I don’t doubt Pack Radcliffe’s reach. They could have made it happen.”

“They’ve got the Soldiers of Saint Aldous behind them. Rad’s one of them, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Jaime and Kel are too. Rad wants to hurt me, but kidnapping omegas... that has the Soldiers of Saint Aldous written all over it.”

Marcus takes a sip of his tea and frowns. “Why kidnap a packed-up omega, though?”

I chew on my lower lip and shrug. “I don’t know. Ransom money to fund their attacks?”

“Whatever the reason, if the Soldiers are getting more aggressive—if they’re taking omegas—we’ll need to be more careful. I’ll need to be more vigilant.”

“I need to learn to protect myself,” I say. “I want to work on my shields.”

“Let’s go to Saint Aldric’s Hall then. We’ll have more room to work, and it’ll be good for you to get out of the cottage.”

“You’re probably right,” I muse. I’d much rather *work* than mope around the cottage, even if my every instinct is telling me to nest and hide.

But there’s no hiding from what’s coming, and I need to be ready.

I need to be strong.



MIST CLINGS to the grounds as we make our way across the quad, and I truly am glad to be out of the cottage. I can't pass a full Saturday trapped in my nest with my thoughts about Luca. Not when Saturday used to be *our* day. Our day for studying and dates and ill-fated picnics. Not when I cried every last tear I had last night, grieving for what I lost, what I'll never have.

"Junes? Junie, wait up!"

Cassian.

Another alpha I trusted, who broke my heart just as brutally as waves break on the shores of Rose Beach. I swore to myself that I wouldn't fall for Cassian Leclerc again, but then he took a hex to save my life. I woke up with him at my side in the infirmary, a vase of my favorite yellow roses on the table beside him. And then he smiled as beautifully as the rising sun when I cast my very first spell.

He jogs up to me, his sea salt and sunshine scent wrapping around me, banishing the misty morning's biting chill. Saints, it's the first time I've seen him out of a Fairhaven uniform in years. Seeing him in gray joggers and a Fairhaven hoodie that's worn and fraying at the cuffs, his dark hair damp from the rain makes my stomach flip in a way that's far too familiar and far too dangerous.

"Where are you headed so early?" His voice is missing the tone of reproach I've grown so used to during our Peer Advising sessions. It's... it's friendly. And saints could I ever use a friend right now. Especially a friend who doesn't know how my heart was flayed open, who won't treat me like I'm fragile.

"Saint Aldric's." I smile tightly. "I have a lot of catching up to do."

"I was just heading there myself. Mind if I join you?"

The Cassian who's been driving me to tears every Friday afternoon this term wouldn't care if I minded; he'd puff up his

alpha chest, scowl at me, and join me regardless. But the Cassian standing before me smiles, that bashful curl of his lips I so fell in love with during our summer romance.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammer. “That’s cool.”

Can he hear the way my heart races, pounding out a runaway beat in my chest? Saints, I hope not. Flowers, a few kind words, and a sweet smile won’t erase the horrible things he’s said to me this term. They can’t. Not if I want to be anything more than the stupid, naive omega who trusts all the wrong alphas.

He falls into step beside me, shortening his gait to match my pace. “I got the results of your midterms in my email this morning. You should have gotten the email as well.”

“I-I haven’t checked it today.” I’ve been avoiding my inbox as much as I’ve been avoiding my phone, and I only just caught up on my texts and voicemails last night. “Did I... did I do all right?”

Cassian rolls his eyes, but there’s a familiar twinkle in those smoky quartz depths and a wry smile on his full lips. “You know you did. Top marks in History and Foundations, a B plus in Spell Crafting and Restorative Magic, and a B minus in Casting and Omega Seminar.”

A B minus Ian vowed to drop from his grade book if I do better on my final exam, and my enigmatic professor knows, just as well as I do, that I will.

“You should be incredibly proud of yourself, Junes. After what your father did to you, the fact that you learned half a semester’s worth of magic in less than a week is a feat few others could have accomplished. I have no doubt you’ll end the term with straight A’s.”

My own lips twitch into a smile, and it’s genuine, not the automatic smile of an obedient, agreeable omega. “You know what? I *am* pretty damn proud of myself. And you’re right. I’m going to finish my first term at Fairhaven with straight A’s.”

“You’ll end up wiping the floor with me. I really struggled during my first semester.”

My breath catches at his admission. Cassian’s a powerful mage—I can’t imagine him getting anything less than exemplary marks. But that term... that term was right after our ill-fated summer romance, right before my designation revealed me to be what we all knew I’d be all along: an omega. Right before he told me he’d found another the moment I rushed into his arms at my debutante ball, and he broke my heart.

“You seem to be doing pretty well now,” I say.

“I had a good tutor,” he says with a shrug.

“That’s one thing we have in common.” Without Simon, my magic might still be locked. Without his dutiful tutoring in the days leading up to finals, camped out with me in St. Aldric’s Hall, I might never have done as well as I managed to do on my midterms.

St. Aldric’s Hall rises through the morning mist, foreboding and impenetrable, a veritable fortress turned into classrooms and practice spaces for the more volatile and dangerous magic students might learn at Fairhaven Academy. The combat magic classes meet inside the hall—classes that, as an omega, I’ll never be allowed to take.

Which is a shame, seeing as we’re the ones that seem to need those skills the most.

Cassian gets a room across the small stone hall from me and Marcus, and I watch him move through a few warm-up exercises before he starts firing off spell after spell into the warded walls of the practice room. I wonder, as I watch him move, fluid and powerful, a true alpha predator, what an affluent mage like Cassian would ever need with combat magic.

I stretch my arms out in front of me and roll my neck before grabbing my scribe and turning to my honor guard. “All right, do your worst, I guess.”

“Sweet-tart,” he says dryly, “I’ve seen how you cast shields. I saw Professor Reinhardt covered in black ink when your shield rebounded his spell back onto him. I wouldn’t do my worst unless I had a death wish.”

He settles on casting a stream of wind and I cast shield spell after shield spell, creating a protective dome around myself. I grit my teeth, pouring more and more magic into my spell as Marcus funnels more into his. I break before he does, his gust of wind knocking me to my ass. I bite out a curse, and suddenly Marcus is at my side, ready to help me to my feet.

“Fuck, Juniper, I am *so* sorry,” he says with a grimace.

I let him help me stand and then brush off my leggings. “You had the stronger spell. I need to get better at my shields. No harm done. Except to my pride.”

“If I may provide some constructive criticism?”

I roll my scribe between my fingers. “Please, anything that’ll help me do better.”

“You’re casting a full shield, but I’m only attacking you from one angle. You’re wasting your magic and focus. This time, direct your intention to where my spell is coming from.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” I admit. “Is the spell any different?”

My honor guard shakes his head. “Just the intention behind it. Ready to try again?”

I nod and stand at the ready in the center of the training room, already envisioning my shield spell. When Marcus’ gust of wind comes, it knocks me back a step before I can snap my shielding spell into place. I imagine it like a knight’s shield, letting my intention flow into it, letting my magic protect me.

“Good. Very good,” Marcus calls over the rushing sound of the wind. He circles me and I follow him, turning and drawing my scribe through the air so my shield is always in front of me.

He says something over the wind, but I can’t hear him. I cup my hand around my ear, and he drops his spell in an

instant.

His phone rings from his pocket and he reaches to silence it, but I shake my head. “Take it. What if it’s your mom’s doctors?”

He looks down at the screen, face drawn. “I’ll only be a few minutes. All right? We’ll be back at it shortly.”

“Marcus,” I say, exasperation sharpening my voice, “just go take the call.”

He answers the phone just as he leaves the practice room and I take the opportunity to grab a bottle of water.

“He was saying that your control is improving,” Cassian says. He rubs a hand through his sweat-damp hair and leans up against the glass wall. “He’s right. And you’re probably casting well ahead of your peers. Want a hand?”

I glow from the compliment, finally hearing the praise I’ve always wanted to hear from him, and I nod.

He twirls his scribe in his fingers so it catches the light, and then casts three quick sigils I immediately recognize as the first three parts of the butterfly lights spell he used to cast to impress me when we were younger. It’s the fourth sigil I recognize too late.

A spark careens toward me and cracks against the back of my hand. “Ow, fuck!” I snap, shaking my hand.

Cassian doesn’t look sorry in the least. He arches a brow in challenge and his smirk, oh saints, his *smirk*. I want to prove him wrong. I want to show him what I’m made of. I want to tackle him to the ground and kiss that smirk off his smug face.

I have my shield in place by the time the next spark darts my way. It sizzles against the shell of my magic, bursting like fireworks. I block spell after spell, following him as he circles me just as Marcus did. He casts faster and faster, pelting my shields with sparks, until I’m breathing hard, sweat sticking the back of my shirt to my skin.

He fires a barrage of sparks at me, and I meet them with my own magic, pouring more power into it as he presses his

attack. Sparks fly, sizzle, fall around me like... like shooting stars.

My heart seizes just for a second at the memory. At the thought of nestling against Luca as we watched the stars fall. A spark strikes me and singes a hole in my tank top.

Cassian crosses to my side in two long steps. “Junes, shit. Are you okay?”

I swallow hard. In truth, I hardly felt the spark. It’s nothing to the painful rending in my chest, the ache in my heart. “I got distracted.”

“Your shields really are improving. And your reflexes are faster than I thought they’d be. You’ll never have an alpha’s reflexes, but you’re swift on your feet and cast quickly.”

“Another round?” I challenge, trying to mirror his superior smirk.

He laughs, his face open and warm with an affection so familiar it makes my heart squeeze. “Yeah, okay.”

We go three more rounds until his phone chimes with a text. I grab my water bottle and drink half of it down while he furiously taps away on his phone screen.

When he looks up, his face is shuttered, all the boyish openness from before utterly gone. “I have business to attend to.” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Keep practicing, Juniper. Those shields will never stand up to *real* hexes.”

The glass door slams hard behind him, the whole pane rattling, and I watch him go, feeling like I’ve just been hit by a million hexes, singed by shower after shower of sparks.



## CHAPTER 5



The morning's mist still hangs heavy over campus as we leave Saint Aldric's, but the silence is just as heavy. I try to ask Marcus about his mother, about the call he took while I was working through my shields with Cassian, but his answers are brief and stony. Like the first time we met and made the long drive from the Connecticut coast north to Deer Island, he resists every attempt I make to pull him into conversation.

But I'm keeping things from him too.

And when I see the figure on the rise of the cliffs that crash down into the ocean, an all-too-familiar mask on its face? When the figure's gaze seems to follow me as I make my way back to the main quad with my honor guard? When the hairs at the back of my neck stand on end, chilled by fearful beads of sweat, and I can't shake the feeling of being watched?

I keep that to myself.



THE LOCKDOWN on omegas doesn't lift the following Monday and Marcus stays as close—and as stony—as ever, only leaving my side for my evening lesson with Ian. My Casting professor's office is in the basement of Saint Guinnette's library, just a few doors down from the seating area for Café Ciel.

It's no wonder he was able to get to me so quickly when I tried to unlock my magic. The real wonder is that he was able to perform the spellwork that saved my life. The magic and emotion that flowed between us.

*My darling.*

I work my lower lip between my teeth. We haven't spoken about that day, about how tenderly he held me as he gave me the greatest gift I could have asked for: my magic. Still, he looks at me differently now. Still stern, but more protective. Worried.

After half of a semester of exchanging heated looks and cutting words, things have changed between me and my imperious professor, and I can't seem to find my footing around him anymore.

I steel myself, pick up two coffees from Ellie, who's working the bar at Ciel, and stride toward his office as Marcus posts up at one of the tall café tables with a book and a black coffee, within earshot should I need him.

Walking into Ian's office is like walking into an explosion frozen in time. There are stacks of paper and books *everywhere*, some even spelled to remain suspended in midair, as if he'd been walking around reading and simply left the book floating when he moved onto something else. Mugs from Ciel cover every surface that books don't—more than I count, and I wonder what his usual order is at the café just down the hall.

I'm so used to seeing him in front of our Casting class, in command and put together. I hang on every word of his lectures along with the rest of my classmates. He's decidedly more ruffled by this time of day, shirt untucked and wrinkled, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, dark hair in disarray from him raking his hand through it as he reads. Like Simon, it seems my Casting professor gets so engrossed in his reading that the world around him falls away.

He doesn't even notice when I knock or step into the room. I set my bag down quietly and slip into the chair across from his desk, and when he turns the page and doesn't acknowledge

me, I take out my Spellcrafting textbook to get ahead in my reading.

When he finally does look up half an hour later, he blinks at me in shock, bright blue eyes owlsh behind his glasses. “Saints, how long have you been here?”

“I got here promptly at seven, like you instructed.” I can’t help the little cheeky quirk of my lips.

He checks his watch and scowls at me in a way I’m coming to appreciate a bit too much. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Honestly, I thought you knew I was here and were just finishing the passage you were reading. And then, when you didn’t look up, I figured whatever you were reading was important.” I shrug. “Is it?”

He marks his page and carefully closes the peeling leather cover of the thick tome. He turns it around for me to examine. It’s old, the gilding long since worn off, but the inverted septagram on the cover is unmistakable. “Old Baphomet lore. I’m still finding a counter hex to deal with the Ever Ember—without much luck.” He drags a hand through his hair and then looks down at his forearm where the ember pulses just beneath his skin, a dark, malevolent tattoo.

“I never thanked you for saving my life,” I say quietly.

He’s oddly abashed by my soft gratitude and stares down at the book between us. “No thanks needed.”

“Then thank you for saving Marcus and Cassian.”

He frowns, mouth a thin line, then looks up, fire in his ice blue eyes. “I would do it again. In a heartbeat. For you.”

It’s not quite a declaration of love, but something of its kind has already passed between us. When magic flowed between us as he unwound the sigils locking my magic away, the barriers between our minds fell away. Never mind that mages can’t read minds. Never mind that it wasn’t even the first time I inadvertently did the impossible—and that I’ve done it a dozen times since.

I will never forget how tenderly he held me in both his arms and in his regard.

He clears his throat awkwardly.

“Can I help with the research?” I ask, trying to fill the void left by all the words that go unsaid between us.

“Do you read Latin?” The words lack the derision I’m so used to hearing in class. Rather, he’s hopeful, but I can only shake my head.

“I’m afraid I don’t. Just French and some Mandarin.”

“A shame. If you’re interested in advanced spell work or reading certain historical texts, I’d recommend it as an elective next year. Unless...” He jumps up from his chair like a live wire and starts digging through stacks of books. “I taught myself from a textbook—a teacher’s edition, so it was full of quizzes and answers. I’m sure you’d be more than up to the task. I know it’s here somewhere...”

Of course, this absolute madman taught himself Latin. Of course, I will rise to his challenge and try to do the very same. Once he finds the textbook, that is. Until he does, I make myself useful and start trying to sort out the least organized of his carefully curated chaos.

I gather up mugs and glasses while he goes from stack to stack, and when I return from dropping them off in the bus bin near Ciel, he has the gall to look annoyed.

“I hope those were *accidental* science experiments you were conducting. Saints, the mold in one of those mugs was practically sentient,” I say archly.

“Brat,” he mutters, but he’s smirking and there’s heat in that one word. Delicious heat, full of promise, that makes my heart flutter in my chest. I quickly accept the old textbook from him and start flipping through it. It’s positively covered in blue ink, scrawled notes in every margin. “Ignore the annotations I made. Actually, don’t. They’re insightful.”

Naturally.

“It’s burdensome reading, what I’m working on,” he says quietly, dropping into his chair. He carefully wraps the book in oilcloth. “I shouldn’t share that burden with you but I’m quickly reaching the point of desperation. Professor Cadigan—you’ll have him for Intermediate Casting next year—and I are finding nothing but more questions as we research.”

There’s something more he’s not saying, a hesitant catch in his voice that I’d never expect from the proud alpha.

“What is it?” I press.

“There’s been a new development concerning the Ever Ember hex,” he sighs. “As your professor, I shouldn’t be telling you this. It was told to me in confidence, but the students it concerns have taken an unnatural and marked interest in you.” He scrubs at his jaw and shakes his head. “Doc treated another rash of alphas for the Ever Ember. She doesn’t think it was used as a weapon against them—and I agree.”

I already know, but I ask anyway. “Who?”

“Andrew Radcliff, Jaime Brentwood, Kelvin Montrose, and a few others. Were they any other alphas, alphas who weren’t so interested in you, I would have kept this confidential, but if—”

“They were initiations. They marked themselves. Just like the Legion of Baphomet used to do.” My throat burns and each word stings as I remember the discussion we had before midterms: how warrior alphas took the Mark to become more powerful, more savage and ruthless.

“I’m afraid so. I’ve taken to calling it the Mark of Baphomet for want of anything more precise. My research has been... frustratingly inconclusive thus far. The Ever Ember hex itself hadn’t been seen for hundreds of years until the Soldiers of Saint Aldous started using it as a weapon.” He flexes his forearm and rubs at the spot where the Ever Ember sunk dark magic into his flesh. What the deadly hex left behind in him, Cassian and Marcus. The ember of dark magic still tortures Marcus’ dreams, drives instinct into a dangerous frenzy of alpha instincts.

Saints, there's so much we don't know about the Ever Ember. Or is it now the Mark of Baphomet? If I'd had any doubts about Rad being a member of the Soldiers of Saint Aldous, they'd be obliterated by now. But I never doubted—not once I caught his scent in the dining hall, cloying and rotting anise and orange. The same scent of the masked—now marked—alpha who threatened me that day.

I curl into myself, shoulders hunching around my ears. “Radcliffe was there that day. On the quad. He was the alpha who held the scribe to my neck.”

“I know,” he says quietly. “But I haven't been able to prove it yet. It kills me that he's allowed to walk freely after what he did to you.”

“And now that he's marked, he's even more dangerous.”

“That's my fear, yes.”

“Do you truly think the answer is in one of these books?” I gesture half-heartedly around his office.

“It has to be *somewhere*. The Legion was far too arrogant not to have written it down. Now, the records could have been destroyed, but... but I have to believe we'll find an answer somewhere. I shouldn't appreciate your help as much as I do, but there are so few we can trust with this information. If it got out, there would be pandemonium.”

“I'll start my Latin studies tonight,” I promise.

He smiles, a sad quirk of his lips. “I know you will. Now, shall we move on to your lessons?”

He brandishes a sheet of paper from the pile on his desk and passes it over. It lists out every Monday until the end of term with a column beside the date for the material we'll cover, and another column detailing the homework for each session.

“I'll let you decide how you'll work in your Latin studies. I'd tell you to let me know if the workload is too great, but I know you'd never admit it. Shall we get down to work?”



I SEE the masked figure the moment we pass through the woods and wards that surround the omega residences on Friday morning. I shiver and blame it on the cold North Atlantic morning, but the way my skin crawls and my shoulders pinch together has nothing at all to do with the frost dusting the campus grounds.

“You okay, girlie?” Alyssa asks.

I shake my head and turn to her, forcing a smile. “I’m just stressed. Big surprise there.”

She rolls her eyes. “Right? Nothing like the threat of being captured or killed to make all the *rest* of this any less stressful. Hey, did I tell you Grace’s pack came into Quill & Clover? I guess they were looking for Luca, but they spoke to Darika for a bit.”

“What did they want with Luca?”

“Information. They’re desperate for it.”

“So they don’t think he did it anymore?” The resentful edge in my voice surprises even me, and I grit my teeth. I’ve been so good at keeping Luca from my thoughts, at staying busy enough to leave myself no time to think about him.

“No, and they were honestly surprised he was still locked up. Darika said they were hoping he’d have some kind of information about who could have taken Grace. No one’s come forward with a ransom yet, despite Pack Cassidy offering millions of dollars to get her back.”

My blood ices in my veins. Expecting the Soldiers of Saint Aldous to issue a ransom for Grace brought me a small sort of comfort, but that no ransom has been demanded suggests something much, much darker.

Something I’m quite sure the figure in the distance watching me, horned head cocked, knows all about.

“Juniper!”

I know that voice from the day in the stand of trees beside the library, the voice of the alpha that cast a shield around me while his closest friend tried to rape me.

*Rad, leave the bitch alone. You wanted to scare her and you have. Her scent is fucking rancid when she's scared.*

I don't think. I draw my scribe and whirl on Jaime Brentwood, pointing the tip of the wand right at his heart.

He backs up quickly, hands raised in surrender. "I just want to talk."

There's nothing that the latest initiate into the Soldiers of Saint Aldous could say that I'd want to hear. The Mark of Baphomet burns in his breast, a testament to his loyalty.

"Get the fuck away from me," I warn, my voice low.

"It's not what you think."

Saints, I'm sick of hearing that.

Marcus steps in front of me, his scribe held low at his side, magic whirling around the tip. "Back off, Brentwood. I won't tell you twice."

Jaime tries to look around Marcus to meet my eyes, but Marcus refuses him. Marcus wraps an arm around my shoulder, keeping his body between me and the senior alpha and leads me away, toward Restorative Magic.

In the distance, the masked figure stares for a minute and I swear I can feel its rage for just a second before it turns away.



WORD TRAVELS FAST.

Cassian finds me just as Alyssa and I are leaving Restorative Magic. He grabs me around the arm and pulls me down the hall and into an empty classroom, locking the door behind us with a complex spell. He's a tempest of rage and alpha dominance and I flinch away from him.



“What were you thinking?” he snarls, looming over me, forcing me to take a seat behind one of the worktables. His scent rises in the air, made sharper by his fury, and every instinct tells me to fall on my knees in front of him, to make myself small and bare my neck to this alpha. “You drew your scribe on Jaime fucking Brentwood? Are you *completely* absent your senses?”

I recoil, reaching for my scribe. Saints, I’ve never seen him so full of fury, every alpha instinct so close to the surface.

I’ve never been *scared* of him before, but now my scent sours with my fear. Still, I force myself to glare up at him.

“I wasn’t thinking,” I grind out. “I acted on instinct to *defend* myself.”

“He’s fucking *marked*, Juniper! Do you have any idea what that means?”

I stare at him, the thunder in my gaze enough to match his. “Do *you*? Because I think it fucking means what I’ve known for weeks. They’re Soldiers. All three of them.”

“And dangerous!”

I surge to my feet, rising to my full height. I still have to crane my head to scowl up at him. “You don’t get to tell me how dangerous they are. You have no idea what they’ve done to me!”

“I have every idea!” he roars. His chest heaves and he bares his teeth to me, a warning. “And I have every fucking idea what they *could* do to you. What they *will* do to you.”

“If you really knew what they’d done, you wouldn’t be scolding me like an errant child right now!” I snap, voice rising. My magic surges toward my fingertips, into my scribe, answering the high-tide call of my emotions.

Saints, Cassian is *terrified*. His dread hits me like a stormy sea, wave after wave crashing into me.

I flinch away, staring up at him, as the fight drains out of me. I turn away, pressing my lips together, trying to find my composure once more. Finally, I draw in a ragged breath. “I

have *every* right to defend myself. And if I hadn't, Marcus would have been well within his rights to do whatever was necessary to protect me."

I glance at my honor guard through the glass pane in the door and give him a small shake of my head, letting him know I'm in no danger.

"They will *destroy* you, Juniper! Are you really so naive that you don't see how this works? You mouth off to one of them, you draw your scribe on another... just what do you think is going to happen to you?" he demands.

Saints, how does he even know that I chewed out Kelvin Montrose just like he's chewing me out now? And how fucking *dare* he? I bristle. "I know exactly what happens to me if I don't stand up to them: they get what they want. They get me, meek and biddable. A fucking pet, but I would rather *die* than submit to them!"

"You think they wouldn't kill you? An omega has gone *missing*, for fuck's sake! And you draw your scribe on one of the alphas who may have made it happen? Fuck, I thought you were smarter than that." His nostrils flare, but he turns away sharply. "I always gave you *far* too much credit. Saints, what did you even intend to do? How did you plan to protect yourself as you seem so hellbent on doing? I sure fucking hope it was more than one of your pitiful shield spells."

Marcus finally breaks through Cassian's lock and the door crashes open. I raise my hand to my honor guard because if Cassian's rage scared me, Marcus' really *should*. I've seen my honor guard worked up like this only once before—and he held Ian to the wall by his neck that time.

"You're my peer advisor, Cassian. Not my father. Not my alpha. Saints, you're not even my *friend*. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"I'll have you put on academic probation so fucking quickly your head will spin," he growls.

I narrow my eyes. "I'd like to see you try. Now get the fuck out of my way."

“This conversation isn’t over,” he threatens.

I look up with him, letting my arrogant heiress smirk grace my lips. “It is for now, *alpha*.”

His smoke-and-whiskey eyes crackle with anger as I shove past him. A pathetic, naive omega, dismissing him like he’s nothing to me.

If only my bravado wasn’t betrayed by the way my heart races in my ears, my pulse hammering in my throat as I slam the door behind me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 6



The moment we leave the building, the skin at the back of my neck pebbles with goose bumps. I cringe, ducking my head, but I can't avoid the weight of the distant figure's stare. Is it a mirage? A real person my mind has transposed a mask onto the face of?

"Are you okay?" Marcus asks gruffly, his alpha riding him hard. He scrubs at his stubbled jaw and shakes his head, trying to find his composure, just as I did in the classroom Cassian pulled me into.

I sigh. I'm so far from okay it isn't funny. Do I ache because of Cassian's sudden cruelty in the face of how kind he was during most of our time together in the practice rooms—not exactly the boy he was but the man I always thought he'd become? "I'm all right. Cassian will bluster and shout at me, but he won't hurt me."

"Not intentionally, maybe."

"There are other alphas I'm far more afraid of," I say quietly.

Because Cassian was right. Andrew Radcliffe will destroy me.



I ARRIVE to Peer Advising early that day and I don't know if it's to build a head of steam to continue my battle of wits with Cassian or to avoid drawing his ire further.

But Cassian isn't the alpha who struts into the study room. Cassian doesn't smell like anise and oranges, a cloying scent that draws bile up my throat, burning until I cough. For the second time today, an alpha puts a locked door between me and my honor guard.

Rad looks uninterestedly at Marcus through the window in the door and then casts a silencing spell, the banging knocks and Marcus' growled demands immediately going quiet.

"You can't be here," I tell the senior alpha. "I have my Peer Advising soon."

"Oh, I know, beloved. There's never a time when I don't know where you are or where you're meant to be."

I bristle, sitting up taller in my seat. "What do you want, Rad?"

"To talk to you, dearest." He sneers the last word, his gaze traveling from where my neck meets my shoulder down to the two open buttons on my blouse, the pale skin beneath. He unhurriedly takes the seat across from me. "You're a hard omega to get alone. But not for long."

I grip my knee so tightly I tear runs in my tights. Saints above, what does he mean by 'not for long'? "Must be that lockdown on all omegas that's going on."

"Ah, yes. I don't suppose you've heard. They found that hood rat alpha you're so fond of innocent."

I can't help the relief that washes through me—even though the mage inspectors only found him innocent of taking Grace Cassidy. They might not even know about the mask. "He's not my alpha," I say automatically. "I have no alpha and will have no alpha until my father bids out my mating contracts."

Rad fixes me with a level stare. "I'm glad you've seen sense. He was never good enough for you."

Ire rises, hot and bitter, in my throat. I want to tell him that Luca is a better alpha than he'll ever be, but is he? Is the sweet sophomore who swore he'd burn the world to the ground for me really any better than Andrew Radcliffe? Saints, they

might even know each other. They could be laughing at me behind my back.

He steeples his fingers and looks at me, cold and assessing. “I’m willing to overlook your past transgressions, even your lost purity, but you should know that I won’t always be so gracious.”

“I-I beg your pardon?” I stammer.

“When I’m your alpha,” he explains patiently, as though talking to a child. “The minute I mark you with my bite, I’ll expect you to be on your *best* behavior.”

My stomach churns. He’s insane. He has to be. He will *never* be my alpha.

“Of course, I’ll discipline you if I have to. But you’re clever enough. You’ll learn to behave quickly.”

“I-I’m not promised to any alphas at this time. My father isn’t bidding out my contracts until I’ve graduated.”

“I’m a patient alpha. But I told you once: I always get what I want. And what I want, what I *will* possess, is you. You have my word. You will be mine.”

“Why me?”

He shrugs and stands, then takes my chin in his hand, first tilting my head up so I meet his eyes. My skin crawls at his touch and his scent fills my lungs, making my nose burn and gut churn. He turns my chin until my neck is bared to him and I freeze, the perfect prey to his predator.

Terror courses through me, souring my scent, but that only makes the alpha across from me smile, a lurid baring of his teeth that makes me try to cower away from him—but he holds me too tightly, tightly enough that I know I’ll bruise.

His scent spikes, bitter anise, rotting citrus, when he takes in my panic, and then his thoughts bombard me: a chaotic tangle. A prophecy, a traitor, a hand over an omega’s mouth, a scribe at her throat.

But I’m not the omega in his loathsome hold this time.

It's Trinity Wells, the omega junior who disdained me in one breath and came to my defense in the next. The junior omega so like me in her rich family's plans for her: a pawn they can mate off to influential alphas.

"My bite will look so beautiful on your neck."

The words snap me back to reality, banishing all but faint, whispered echoes of his thoughts from my mind. I don't say anything. I don't even move until he draws his hand away, until his overpowering scent lessens.

I tremble when the door clicks shut behind him, take desperate gasping breaths, but it's like all the air has been sucked from the room.

Marcus wastes no time on Rad. He's by my side in an instant, dragging me down from the chair and into his arms, helping me move my wooden body until I'm curled up against him, dragging deep breaths of his winter wind and pine scent into my lungs.

"If one more alpha puts a locked door between us, I'm cuffing you to me," Marcus grumbles. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head and flinch when the door opens again.

Cassian's scent spikes in my nose, sharp with anger. I meet his eyes over Marcus' shoulder, see his nostrils flare as he breathes in Rad's sickening scent.

"He just wanted to scare me," I say, but my voice is weak and thready.

He stares down at me, something in his pinched expression I can't quite discern. "You should be scared. Juniper, you should be fucking terrified."

"What is it?"

"What isn't it? Go back to your cottage. We'll pick back up next Friday."

There's something hidden behind his narrowed eyes and the stern set of his mouth, something I only catch through the smallest cracks: the faint tremble of his lower lip, the shine in his eyes.

Something he isn't telling me.



“JUNIPER!”

That one word is broken, desperate. And still, somehow, impossibly dear to me.

Luca.

My alpha who wasn't. The alpha I fell in love with, who only ever lied to me. I can't face him—not when terror still has me jumping at shadows, wrung out but wary. I turn from him, putting my back to him, and start toward the omega residences. I have to stay ahead of him, can't catch his scent on the crisp November air. Can't give him any chance to break me.

But he follows.

“You have to let me explain. Princess, please!”

Tears sting in my eyes and chill against my cheeks, but I don't turn. I keep making my resolute way toward the omega residences, desperate to be within the safety of the wards, free to crumble, to break down and succumb to the fear that pinches my shoulders together.

I don't have to let him do anything.

“Juniper!”

“Leave her alone,” Marcus growls. “For the love of the saints, leave her alone. Not today. Not now.”

“Wh-what? Princess, what's happened?”

A hiccupped sob escapes me because, fuck, he sounds so concerned.

Marcus' scent spikes and I don't have to turn to feel the alpha dominance radiating off of him, but it's when Luca's scent spikes that I finally look back at the two alphas—because that's what they are in this instant: all alpha, all brutal power. Strength and destruction. Dominance and brutality.



Juicy cherries and heady red wine wash over me, sharp with Luca's dominance as they face off, but when Luca meets my eyes, his pale green to my pale blue, he sags, all the power rushing out of him. He crumples, just as I yearn to. He looks my way, as broken as I feel, and the only thing he says before turning away is: "Thank you for talking to the mage inspector. It was more than I deserve."



I DON'T STRAY FAR from Marcus the rest of the day. Fear bristles beneath my skin and I can't get Rad's dark promise out of my head. I tell Marcus as much as I can bear to repeat and he holds me tight when my voice breaks, when I'm overtaken by desperate, wracking sobs.

"I will *never* let him hurt you," Marcus swears. "He never should have gotten past me. He hexed me, a confounding spell of some kind. By the time I shook it off... I'm so very sorry, Juniper. You shouldn't have to spend a single second in his presence, let alone suffer his touch."

I clutch the soft cotton of Marcus' waffle-weave Henley in my fists, steal every selfish ounce of comfort I can from him as he strokes my back, as I cry until I have no tears or strength left. I don't know when I fall asleep, but when I wake up, I'm alone on the couch, a blanket tucked around me. I startle, sitting up quickly, seeking out my honor guard in the dark.

"I'm here," he says quietly from the armchair near the fireplace.

Our gazes meet in the low magical book light he's conjured, my exhaustion mirrored on his gaunt face. I want, more than anything, to crawl into his lap, into his protective embrace, but I don't. I should excuse myself to my nest, but I can't bring myself to.

I can't bear the thought of being alone.

"I can make you a sleeping draught if you're having trouble sleeping?"

I shake my head. “Can I... can I have your sweater?”

Something crosses his face and in the warm, dim light, I could almost mistake it for pride. He grabs the worn Fisherman sweater from off the back of one of the chairs in the kitchenette and helps me into it. His scent weaves through every fiber of the soft wool and I let it envelop me.

“Would you read to me until I fall asleep?” I nod to the book held open to his current page on his lap.

He stares down at the worn cover of the paperback for a moment and I’m just about to take back my request, to make my apologies and scurry up to my nest, when he looks up, a smile shining with fondness on his handsome face.

“We can’t start from the middle of the series. Let me find the first book, all right?”

“Yes, please.” My voice is small in the darkness of our little cottage, the words, my heart bared, just for him, even if his can never be for me.



MARCUS DIPS out of the cottage only long enough to grab us breakfast the next morning and we stay close, never straying from our ends of the sofa as I stare, unfocused, at my History reading.

A sharp, brisk knock sounds at the door sometime in the early afternoon and when I go to stand, Marcus shoots me a reprimanding frown. I let him look through the peephole and when he cocks his head, I drift over.

“It’s Trinity. She’s alone.”

Trinity.

Saints, after Rad all but promised me he’d mate me, I hadn’t given her appearance in my strange vision any more thought, too lost in the storm of my own fear.

But what could Rad possibly want with her?

I nod and Marcus steps back enough for me to open the door.

Trinity takes me in just as I take her in, her eyes roving over the oversized cable-knit sweater I'm still wearing. She glances at Marcus and arches a dark brow, but her usual haughtiness isn't in it. She stood on my doorstep like this just months ago, every inch the arrogant omega princess as she handed over my packet of course information. The months haven't been kind to her. Where she was once willowy, she's gaunt now, exhaustion plain on her pretty features. Dark bags smudge beneath her eyes and her hair lies limp and dull around her thin face.

"I need to talk to you," she says, as haughty as ever. "At the omega lodge."

"Out of the question," Marcus snarls.

Trinity shrugs an elegant shoulder, but there's an undercurrent of fear rippling off her. The shrug? It's the action of a cornered omega trying not to show she's afraid.

"Understandable, but non-negotiable. We'll keep the door open. You'll have eyes on Juniper the entire time. You know neither of us would let another omega into our private spaces, and I'm not having this conversation out in the cold."

Marcus finally relents and I jam my feet into my rain boots and tug on a coat, following the junior out into the dreary afternoon.

The moment after she's shucked off her immaculately white puffer coat, Trinity starts bustling around the kitchen, filling a kettle with water and digging around in the cupboards for a tin of tea.

"We need to talk about Jaime Brentwood."

The back of my neck pricks. "The hell we do."

She lets out an exasperated sigh and turns to stare me down. "He's not who you think he is. All of this... it's not what you think."

"Now, I'm *really* getting sick of hearing that," I mutter.

She tugs the collar of her oversized sweatshirt to the side, revealing the unmistakable silvery double-crescent scars of a mating bite.

“He’s my mate, Juniper.”

“I don’t give a shit whose mate he is. He helped Andrew Radcliffe try to *rape* me.”

“He would have intervened if it had gone any further.”

“Oh, he would have? What a fucking *hero* you have a for a mate.” I shake my head and shove the stool I’m perched on back from the counter. “You told me to steer clear of your alphas when I moved in... I can assure you, *that* won’t be a problem.”

“Oh, sit down. You’re being purposefully obtuse and it’s unbecoming. Jaime infiltrated Rad’s inner circle their freshman year at the behest of his father and mine. Since then, he’s earned Rad’s complete trust, but he’s had to do some regrettable things to maintain that trust. And he does regret them, Juniper. Especially his hand in what Rad tried to do to you. But he risks himself every day, more so now that we’re mated. Rad doesn’t know about me and Jaime. If he knew...”

Saints, is that why she’s afraid? Is that why I saw Rad with his hand over her mouth, his scribe at the pale column of her throat?

“Let’s just say I’m counting on you to keep my confidence in this matter.”

I thunk back down on the stool, propping my elbows on the counter. “I mean, sure, confidence kept, but I don’t know why you’re telling me any of this.”

She drops a tea bag into each of two mugs and fills them with boiling water. “Context only. I wanted you to understand where the information I’m about to tell you is coming from. A source I trust.” Her eyes flick to the open door of the omega lodge and then back to me.

I frown, dropping my chin down in my hands, but nod at her to continue.

She sighs and hops up on the counter across from me as the tea steeps. “It’s about Rad. There’s no easy way to say this and his fathers buried it *very* effectively. Our family fixer could honestly learn a thing or two...” She taps the silver ring on her thumb against the counter. “Look, I’m telling you this as a friend and at great personal risk. Stay as far away from Andrew Radcliffe as possible. Never let him get you alone.”

I let out a ragged breath. “He did yesterday. He’s... he’s unhinged. He thinks we’re going to be mated.”

Trinity shudders. “Juniper, you have to get out of his sights. He killed an omega his freshman year.”

The stool sways beneath me—or is that the world around me spinning? “Wh-what?”

Trinity sighs. “Look, it was covered up. Ruled a suicide. I don’t know if he planned to murder her or lost his temper, but the body was practically beyond recognition when it washed ashore. There was an investigation, but they weren’t able to trace anything back to him except for one thing: he coveted Heather.”

Just like he covets me. Just like no accusation sticks to him now, the golden boy of Fairhaven Academy, a future titan of industry, an alpha above all others. Saints, I feel fucking sick.

“And I suppose she didn’t return his feelings?” I ask, my voice faint.

Trinity smiles tightly. “She didn’t have half the spine you seem to, but she stood up to him.”

My head swims and I shove my hands into my hair, dragging steadying breaths into my lungs. “And Jaime told you this?”

Trinity nods. “It was before I came to Fairhaven and I swear, Juniper, don’t bother going looking. You won’t find anything.” She looks toward the door where Marcus paces and chews her lower lip between her teeth. “Rad put Heather’s honor guard in the hospital. He was in a coma for weeks before he passed.”

I steal a look at Marcus and squeeze my eyes shut. “Jaime knows all of this about Rad—about everything he’s done—and he still hasn’t gotten him put away in prison yet?”

Trinity scowls. “You don’t think he’s tried?”

“He’s a Soldier of Saint Aldous!”

“And more dangerous than ever. Untouchable, unpredictable, and dangerous. Stay away from him, Juniper. If I thought it’d do any good, I’d tell you to drop out.” She frowns and considers me for a moment. “As dangerous as it may be, I’m glad you stayed.”

She snatches her mug of tea up off the counter, nods to me, and disappears out of the omega lodge, into the drizzly day, leaving behind a trace of her fear-tinged scent and a hundred more questions than I had before.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 7



“*H*ow much did you hear?” I ask Marcus as I pull the double doors of the omega lodge shut behind me.

“All of it.” He shakes his head. “Juniper, this is even worse than I thought. It’s not safe for you here.”

“It’s not safe for me anywhere else either,” I say, my throat burning, thick with the threat of tears.

“There are sanctuaries...”

“I’d never make it out of the country alive. You know my father’s reach. His power. The lengths he’s willing to go to. Fuck, the lengths he’s already gone to.” I hesitate as we step out into the mist, wishing Marcus could be my alpha. That I could let my instincts take over, let them propel me into his arms where I could be protected. My designation has never been without its challenges, but not this many, not like the ones I’m facing right now. One of the most dangerous alphas I’ve ever crossed covets me, scares me so much I consider running back to an alpha who scares me even more: my father.

All because I’m an omega.

Why can’t I be the omega who whines and is rescued by a big, strong alpha? Who’s soothed by a scent and rumbling purr? Fuck, the only alpha I’ve ever heard purr is the one who just broke my heart and betrayed my trust. He’s a danger to me, but that I consider picking up my phone and texting him is even more treacherous.

Dangerous alphas all around, and the only one I can trust to protect me, the one my inner omega instincts are so irrevocably drawn to, is the one who will never want me.



DESPITE TRINITY'S warnings that I wouldn't find anything, I do search for more information on what happened to Heather. I find nothing but lies, lies about how the freshman omega with such a promising future succumbed to the weakness of will our designation so often faces. That tragedy struck Fairhaven Academy. How Heather would be missed.

But she's been forgotten. An omega meeting a tragic, but not unexpected, end, a few articles in the Fairhaven Herald, an obituary that makes me weep.

Nothing about the alpha that terrorized her. Nothing about the inconclusive investigation that finally ruled her death a suicide.

I can't believe that Pack Radcliffe was able to bury the story completely. Saints, there has to be *something* out there. And if there is, I know just the magical hacker to find it.

<<*Can I bribe you with pizza?*>> I ask Simon.

His response is practically immediate. <<*When it's you and it's pizza? Literally always, kit-kat.*>>

I order as Marcus and I set off across campus, and we beat the pizza there by a few minutes.

Simon meets us outside the doors, sweeping me off my feet in a hug. "You okay, Junes?"

I shrug into his embrace and give him a long squeeze. "Not really?" Saints, I wish I could stay like this forever, his arms wrapped around me. But we're not alone and anyone could see us. Anything more than a friendly hug is out of the question.

When we finally part, he passes me a new candy with a crooked smile. "Cope with me? These are *not* better than Coffee Crisp, but they're just as good. In a different way."



I turn the small hard candy over in my hand, reading the label. “Kopiko Coffee Candy?”

“Yeah, coffee *and* candy. Two of your favorites.”

I unwrap it and pop it in my mouth and immediately decide I adore it—and Simon Monroe for knowing me so well. “Given to me by my third.” I bump him lightly with my shoulder, the backs of our hands brushing.

In the warm light of the lamps outside the residence hall, I catch the light blush that blooms beneath his smattering of freckles.

“What’d you need help with?”

“Looking into something pretty serious,” I say and blow out a ragged breath. I look out across the gardens in front of the dorm, catching a shadow of a figure in the distance, just at the tree line. Long, curved black leather horns catch the pale moonlight. Simon follows my gaze and frowns. Does he not see the figure in the distance? Saints, am I losing my mind? I shake my head to clear it. “I’ll tell you when we get inside.”



WHEN WE GET up to his dorm room, there’s a brand new blanket fort and a fresh trace of sea salt and sunshine in the air. Cassian’s words from our Peer Advising session echo in my mind.

*You should be scared. Juniper, you should be fucking terrified.*

I am. More than ever after Trinity’s admission.

After a questioning look at Simon and his nod, I pull Marcus into Simon’s room and shut the door behind us. We sit in a small circle on the soft floor of the nest Simon’s made me, the pizza between me and Simon and a salad balanced on Marcus’ knee.

I shred a paper napkin between my fingers as I try to find the words. I settle on the most direct. “I’m in danger.”

Simon pauses and sets his slice back down. “Your father?”

I grimace. “Him too. But in this case, I learned something about Andrew Radcliffe today. I promised I wouldn’t say who told me but suffice it to say: I believe them.” I sigh and look down, fiddling with the scraps of the napkin. “Rad killed an omega his freshman year. I don’t know if he set out to or if it was an argument that grew violent, but she died. Honestly, I don’t know if *anyone* but Rad knows what really happened. And it all got buried.”

Simon shoves his glasses up and studies me for a moment, hazel eyes soft. “Are you sure you want to go digging into this, kit-kat? There’s no way anything we find will bring you comfort. Either way, he killed her. Either way, he’s dangerous.”

“He coveted her.”

Simon cringes at the word.

“And I think he’s starting to feel the same toward me.”

“Starting to?” Marcus asks, arching a brow. “I’m with Simon on this one. We already know he’s an untouchable, abusive piece of shit. What do you gain from this?”

“I just... I need to know what I’m up against.”

Simon shakes his head and sighs. “I don’t like this, Junes. But for you...” He shoves his pizza aside and drags his laptop onto his lap. “So, when he was a freshman?”

I nod. “The omega’s name was Heather Lindstrom. I found her obituary, but not much else. The authorities declared it a suicide.”

“Wonder how much money traded hands for *that* to happen,” Simon mutters, tapping a few keys. The screen lights his face, reflecting in his glasses. “Or what Pack Radcliffe threatened...” He scrubs his hands through his hair, tugging at the ends. “I hate this. All of it. And whatever we fucking find, we’re figuring out a way to protect you better.” He slants a quick glance at Marcus. “No offense intended, man.”

Marcus sits back, resting his weight on his hands. “None taken. I have no excuse or explanation for my first lapse in duties, as to him cornering Juniper yesterday... he hexed me. In public. I didn’t even see him coming.”

“He cornered you yesterday?” Simon growls, sounding more like an alpha than the beta he is. “And he fucking *hexed* you?”

“Before Cassian arrived for Peer Advising, yeah.” I pause and look from Simon to Marcus. “I’m... I’m really scared. He acted like we were going to be mates, that it was a done deal. He said, ‘My bite will look so beautiful on your neck.’”

“Fuck,” Simon mutters. “Fuck! How is a monster like him allowed to just walk free? To keep doing the same shit, but now to a different omega? I don’t fucking get it. Any other alpha would at least be on trial. A beta? Fuck, throw him in prison and throw away the key. I mean, as it *should* be. But... but for him to get away with all this? I just. I just fucking hate it.”

“Me too,” I whisper. “I can’t be one more thing he gets away with.”

The reflection of his laptop screen flickers in his glasses and a picture appears. All the color floods from Simon’s face and his jaw goes slack. He slams his laptop shut and shoves it away. “No. Fucking *no*. You’re not seeing that.”

“I think I should be able to decide that for myself.”

“Then I think you can go look it up your own damn self,” Simon snaps.

I can’t help the startled whine that escapes me.

Simon swears and then pulls me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Junes. Fuck, I shouldn’t have snapped at you, but... but I wish *I* hadn’t seen that.”

I go limp in his arms and saints, he’s so warm and I fit so perfectly against him. “You don’t need to treat me like a child.”

He holds me closer, tucking my head beneath his chin. “I’m not. I’m treating you like someone I l- like someone I care about.”

Marcus gestures for the laptop. “May I? I need to see what lengths he’ll go to.”

“I don’t think you do,” Simon grumbles, but lets me go only long enough to hand the laptop over.

“Simon is right, sweet-tart. You really shouldn’t see this. No one should,” Marcus says quietly, before carefully closing the laptop and setting it aside. “I’m not any kind of expert but that was a crime of passion. He was in a rage.”

I swallow hard. “Did he... did he violate her?”

“The report suggests it was a possibility.”

I look up at my honor guard and nod my understanding, but inside, I’m hollow. “I need to get stronger,” I say, my voice strained. “Cassian said my shield spells would never stand up against a real hex.”

“Then we work on them. And maybe also punch Cassian in the junk.”

I let out a raw huff of a laugh. “Do you happen to know Bitsy’s magic dick-shrinking spell?”

“I don’t, but for you, I’d learn it. Saints, what an asshole. He knows you’ve been working your ass off. But if you think you need to do this, then we hit the training rooms every tutoring session and any other time you want. Hell, we can go now if you really want to.”

I shake my head against his chest. “I kinda want to eat my feelings and watch a movie?”

He presses a kiss to my forehead and my heart skips a beat. “Then that’s what we do, kit-kat. Whatever you need. Always, Junes.”



MARCUS and I meet Simon at Saint Aldric's Hall early Sunday morning, and together, we work through my shielding spells until we're all breathless, covered in sweat, and I'm able to split my intention between two shields, moving them autonomously from each other as Marcus and Simon circle me, pelting me with spells that are mostly harmless. My workout top is probably ruined by the ink Simon got me with, but I feel... I feel *good* about my magic.

"So, Cassian's a fucking liar," Simon mutters when we finally break for the night, sweat cooling on our skin as we step out into the chill November evening. "Your shields are pretty damn good."

"And only getting better," Marcus adds. "You're punching way above your weight, sweet-tart."

I wish I didn't glow at being praised by an alpha like a flighty omega, but I do. Saints, Marcus' gruff words warm me from my head to my toes.

"Next Peer Advising session, hex him straight in the balls. See how good his shields are."

"Simon, he threatened to get me put on academic probation for getting too mouthy."

"I *like* you mouthy."

Saints, how can Simon make me feel champagne-drunk, warm and bubbly, with just a few words? I shrug him off. "Anyway, no ball hexing. I spent too long in academic peril to take that threat lightly."

Simon twiddles his scribe between his fingers thoughtfully. "He can't put *me* on academic probation..."

A laugh bubbles out of me and Simon slings a long arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. He's no alpha, but Saints above, I'm falling just the same.

## CHAPTER 8



I arrive to my lesson with Ian promptly at seven, a coffee in each hand, and when he snaps his book shut instantly, I pass his over.

“To add to your collection.”

He shakes his head and rolls his eyes, but I can tell he’s fighting a smile. He takes a long swig of the cold brew and then pauses, glass still at his lips.

He sets it down on his desk with a thunk. “*You* drew your scribe on Jaime Brentwood!”

I cringe. “Are you going to lecture me?”

“Of course, I’m not going to lecture you! You were brave and quick on your feet. Your first thought was to defend yourself and you acted on it fast enough to make him pause. Saints, if anything, I’m *proud* of you.”

Oh. I feel the blood rush to my cheeks and down my neck, pinking my pale skin.

There I go, glowing at an alpha’s praise again. Ian thinks I’m brave. He’s *proud* of me.

His blue eyes blaze, his gaze ardent and open, taking me in as if seeing me in a way he’s never seen me before. “You did well, but you’ll only continue to do well if you can put a spell behind the threat.” He stands up quickly and goes to a stack of books, hauling them up into his long arms. “So, you’re learning how to cast a stunning spell tonight.” He pauses, looking at me over the tower of books in his arms. “I’ve

always thought it was a shame that omegas can't learn combat magic, even for self-defense. I can't teach you proper combat magic without breaking all kinds of laws, but I'll do what I can. And if a textbook you really shouldn't be reading just happens to fall into your book bag, well, accidents happen. Acceptable?"

I grin, ear to ear, for what feels like the first time in weeks. "More than. So, where does this stack of chaos go?"

He sends me a sharp look, but I don't miss the smirk he tries to hide. "It's not chaos, you menace."

"Sorry, professor. It's a very *elaborate* filing system."

He laughs and the sound lifts all the weight, the burdens, and the worries from my shoulders, if only for an instant. "Shred Jaime Brentwood with your wit next time. It'll be just as devastating as any spell I could teach you."

And oh, how I glow at that as we move books to the side, clearing space to practice stunning spells.

We've utterly destroyed whatever system he had for his personal library in minutes, and I stand back to survey the damage we've done to his office.

"Thank you," I sigh. "I wish it were only Jaime Brentwood I had to defend myself against."

His scent spikes and when I turn, his eyes shine with protective fervor. "Radcliffe is giving you a hard time again."

I nod. "It's not just that. I heard... I heard what he did. His freshman year."

He goes stock still and ghostly pale. "Who told you?"

"Someone I trust. Is it... is it true?"

He sets a book down and then sits heavily against the edge of his desk. "I wasn't a teacher then, so I wasn't privy to all the details. All I know is that it was gruesome. As Fairhaven's chief healer at the time, Daniel Huong was invited to examine the body and he wouldn't let Mai anywhere near it. He has a strong constitution—saints, the strongest of anyone I know—and it shook him to the core."

I'm suddenly grateful for Simon slamming the laptop shut now. "Her death wasn't a suicide."

He shakes his head. "No, I didn't think so then and I'm sure of it now."

"And he got away with it. Like he gets away with everything else. Saints, he hexed Marcus and locked him out of the study room I have my Peer Advising in, just so he could get me alone."

"I'm sorry, he *fucking what?*" He rises to his feet, body rigid with anger. Alpha power radiates through his form and my first thought shouldn't be how *good* he looks when his alpha instincts ride him like this, but it is. Because every last instinct he's feeling right now is telling him to protect *me*. And every last instinct of mine can't get enough of it.

"He's crazy. He thinks we're going to be mated."

"Did he touch you?" Ian grinds out, breathing hard, alpha ferocity and a spark of grim calculation in his bright eyes.

I hesitate and then nod, turning so he can see the fingerprint bruises showing through my faded makeup. I don't dare tell him what Rad said about putting a bite on my neck. Instead, I brush the tips of my fingers against the back of his hand, acting on pure instinct, an omega soothing a violent alpha, bringing him back down to earth.

He grasps my hand and holds it in his, draws my wrist up to his nose and breathes in my scent, and it takes every last ounce of my strength to stay standing as my knees go weak. His gaze clears, the hard lines of ferocity fall away, and he slumps back against his desk.

"I'm recovered," he says raggedly, gently releasing my hand. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't be so ruled by my instincts around you. It's wholly inappropriate but..."

"They're just instincts," I say quickly. "Can't be helped. Alpha and omega biology." Just like I once told Luca when he claimed me with a single word in Quill & Clover, when he uttered out a possessive *Mine* when he set eyes on me across the bookstore.



“Not just instincts,” he swears in a low growl, not as recovered as he claimed. Bergamot, as bright as sunshine, and spicy cedar spike between us, mingling with the hint of my perfume as my body answers the call with sweet, honeyed vanilla and jasmine. “Fuck, I’m sorry. I—”

“I’m not. Sorry, that is.” Saints, if we cross this line...

“Stunning spells,” he says tightly, taking a big step away from me, taking his intoxicating scent with him.

I gasp in a desperate breath, unsure if I’m trying to banish his scent from my nose or drag more of it into my lungs.

He doesn’t look at me as he digs around in his desk drawer, finally withdrawing a fresh box of chalk. He crosses to a blackboard on one wall and carelessly scrubs it clean with the cuff of his sleeve before drawing out two sigils. “Do you know these?”

“Sisteire and tardeire?”

He nods. “Of course, you knew them already. One stops and one slows. Both can be powerful defensive spells.” His shoulders heave with a heavy sigh and he looks at me over one shoulder, all the power and dominance drained from his face, leaving it slack. Tired. “And I wish you didn’t need to know either. Like most sigils, their strength, duration, size of target, and target can be augmented by the other sigils you pair with them. Augeire will do what?”

“Increase the strength.”

He nods. “Corporeus and mentalis?”

I frown. All of the sigils we’ve covered thus far have been based in actions, but I know enough of languages—and have made enough Latin vocabulary flashcards by this point—to have a rough idea of what the sigils will do. “One affects the body, the other the mind?”

“Very good.”

“So, Rad’s confounding hex would have contained the mentalis sigil?”

His lips curl in a snarl, but he nods tightly as he sketches out two more sigils: one that looks like a capital T and one that appears to be its inverse. “For early mages, corporeus, or body, was rooted in the earth, here.” He circles the bottom of the T. “And mentalis, or the mind, in the heavens or divine, hence it points upward.”

“So I can stop or slow the body or mind in my stunning spell? How do I know which sigils to use and in which combination?”

Ian leans against the board, no doubt smudging chalk onto the back of his shirt. “If your opponent was cunning, what would you do?”

“Slow their body.”

He frowns. “Your reasoning?”

“Even with slower mental faculties, they’d still be powerful if they’re that cunning. A slowed body would stumble. It would distract them enough to break their focus. At least, that’s how it would work for me.”

“And a violent alpha, driven by his instincts?”

“The same. And then a powerful bodily stun. If he’s operating on instinct, slowing his mental faculties wouldn’t accomplish much. If I stopped an alpha trying to attack me dead in his tracks, the inertia might very well carry him right into me. But if I slowed him first, I could gain some distance and then stun. Does that make sense?”

His lips quirk upward in a faint smile. “What do you think? Does it?”

I purse my lips and then finally nod. “It does. As an omega, my best bet will always be to weaken anyone attacking me just long enough to escape, put up a shield, and find someone I trust.”

“Your instincts are sound. Shall we begin casting then? We’ll start with the combinations we just discussed and then add in an additional sigil to amplify the power of your spells.” He shoves away from the board and snatches his scribe off the

chalk tray. I watch, curious, as he casts what appears to be a warding charm over the blackboard.

At my arched brow, he whirls and casts a stunning spell so quickly, his golden scribe is practically a blur. It strikes the warding and the spell protecting the board absorbs the stunning spell, leaving only a trace of shimmering magic where it struck.

“Were you paying attention, Miss Rose?” he asks archly.

“Of course,” I scoff.

“Then you caught the posture and footing? You want to put the strength of your body, your own inertia and power, behind these spells. The right movements will focus your intention and make your spell more effective. So, you’re certain you saw what I did?” he challenges.

The bastard, I think, without the venom I used to feel toward him. He cast the spell so quickly, I didn’t have time to register what he was doing until it was done.

He shakes his head. “I’ll slow it down for you. Pay attention. I won’t dismiss you for the night until you’re casting each of the four main stunning spells. *I* don’t have an early morning class. Do you?”

Saints, but I love the challenge in his voice. A challenge I can’t resist. And yet, I’d fail if it meant working on spells with my imperious professor late into the night.

“Dominant foot forward. You want to power into the spell, directing it with your body just as much as you do with your scribe. Casting elbow back, you want to thrust your hand forward and propel the spell toward your opponent using both the strength of your body and the strength of your mind and magic.”

He steps aside and waves me forward. “Sisteire corporeus,” he says, and I flick my scribe through the shapes of the sigils as I take my place before the blackboard, tracing them a few more times before I take a deep breath, step back on my left foot, tuck my elbow back, and call my magic.

I cast and my spell goes wild, striking the corner of the blackboard and the stone behind it.

“Dynamic casting is about focus and follow-through. Envision where you want the spell to strike. Your body will follow.”

I nod, determined, and try again, and again. Saints, but it shouldn't be *this* hard.

“All the casting you've learned so far has been very static,” he says quietly, walking over to me. “I would guess the only casting you've done that's this active is the shield work you've been doing.”

“You heard about that?”

“I walked by your practice room the other day on my way to one of the laboratories in the basement of Saint Aldric's. Your progress is impressive. Think of this spellwork as the same.” He strides over until he's at my side. “May I?”

My breath catches in my throat, and I try to shove down the thrill that courses through me, making my blood sing in my veins, a resounding *yes*. I force a nod and he steps behind me, setting a hand on my left hip, guiding me backward until my weight is on my back foot.

We both realize his mistake immediately. The impersonal touch brings us closer together, lets me catch his scent, the heat of his body behind mine. His fingertips brush the crook of my elbow and I shiver, wishing his touch would stray, wishing his hand at my hip would tighten, pull me back against his hard body and my perfume scents the air, heady and sweet.

Irresistible to the alpha behind me. I turn and catch the flare of his nostrils, the way his pupils are blown so wide they blot out the blue.

His hand does stray, down to mine. He takes it in his, whirls me around until we're toe to toe, forcing me to crane my head up to look at him, and oh, *saints*, I could just pop up on my toes. My breasts, already aching at their tips, would brush against all that indomitable alpha strength, our lips would brush...

He turns away sharply, just as his scent fills the air, potent and intoxicating, but neither of us step away. Not just yet. There's something electric between us, something both instinctual and more than just instincts.

Something inevitable.

"Fuck, the things you do to me," he groans, finally stepping back. He runs a hand through his hair and swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

I clench my hand around my scribe until my knuckles go white and my nails cut crescents into my palms. "Maybe this was a bad idea. These lessons."

He goes to his desk, rifling around through a stack of papers, but I see it for what it is: a way to distract himself from the same need that throbs inside of me. "I'll endeavor to conduct myself more professionally," he says tightly. "And refrain causing you any more discomfort."

"Is that how you think I feel? Discomforted? Saints, the only discomfort I'm feeling is from how badly I don't want you to refrain." The words leave me, dangerous but true, before I even consider the consequences.

He clears his throat and runs a hand through his hair. "I *must* refrain. I'm your professor. I'll find a way to... temper my reactions to you. Your education is far more important than either of our comfort, especially given recent developments. Shall we resume our lesson?"

We *do* end up working late into the night—not because I'm struggling to cast. Far from it. I pick up the spells after watching him demonstrate the fluid motions a few more times, and once I start casting, once I start altering my footing based on his instructions, I cast with strength and precision. We move on to three-sigil spells, and I perform spell after spell until finally, around midnight, Marcus knocks lightly at the door.

Ian checks his watch for the first time all evening and smiles a crooked, boyish sort of smile that melts me to my

very toes. “I didn’t intend for us to truly work this late—even if you were still struggling—but here we are.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “For everything. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to cast and, well, I don’t have to tell you what you’ve given me. But I’m grateful. Endlessly. I just... I need you to know that.”

He meets my gaze, and his smile softens. “I do know. Now, go. Get home safely and get some rest. Actual rest, not going through your stack of color-coded vocabulary flashcards.”

“I don’t have flashcards,” I say too quickly. “They’re not color coded.” I grimace, but it fights a silly smile. “Nouns are blue. I don’t make the rules.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Actual rest, Juniper,” he tells me sternly.

I all but float out of his office.



I SHOULD FEEL SCARED, and I should feel worn to the bone, but after casting with Ian late into the night, after practicing my shields with Simon and Marcus just as late, I feel strong. Saints, for once in my life, I feel like I have some kind of power.

With my growing skill and dedication, I almost feel safe.

I always wanted a life of my choosing, and while I wouldn’t choose Andrew Radcliffe’s attentions, while I’d never wish what happened to Heather and Grace on any omega, I finally have things in my life that I chose for myself.

I have my magic. I have my friends and my seat at our usual table in the dining hall, Simon on one side and Marcus on my other. I have my beta tutor and the fondness between us that warms me on even the coldest autumn days. And Marcus, saints, but I appreciate our closeness more than ever.

And I'm crushing hard on an alpha I thought I hated. I have his boyish smile stuck in my head, his growled words. *"Fuck, the things you do to me."*

Slowly, day by day, my heart starts to mend. I don't forget Luca or his betrayal, but the raw sting has lessened to a mournful ache.

It's imperfect and messy, but it's the closest thing to a life of my own choosing I've ever had.

Until it all comes crashing down that Wednesday evening.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 9



“Where’s Trinity?” Bitsy asks, shoving another chair into the semi-circle.

“She wasn’t in Botany,” Ellie says quietly.

“That’s not like her at all,” Bridget says, looking to the empty chair where Trinity typically sits.

“Heat?” Alyssa offers.

Bitsy flips through something on her phone and shakes her head. “She’d be almost six weeks early.”

Alyssa whips her head around. “Do you have all of our heats on your phone?”

“Everyone but yours, yeah. I’m guessing yours will hit before the end of term.”

“Early January,” Alyssa grumbles. “Why do you even know all of this?”

“Oh, so I know when it’s not my fault if you all snap at me. It’s saved my friendship with Ellie at least twice.”

The taller of the two sophomore omegas rolls her hazel eyes. “I mean, you’re not wrong. But Trinity’s not due?”

Bitsy clicks her phone shut and shakes her head.

“Anyone seen Nick?”

“Not since yesterday,” Bridget says quietly. “He went to the gym with Shane, like they do every Tuesday night.”



I don't know Trinity and Bridget's honor guards by more than name and face, but I do know the honor guards have banded together somewhat. That Wednesday, during Omega Seminar, is poker night and that a few of them work out together when we're otherwise safely occupied.

"He's been like her shadow the past few days," Alyssa says quietly.

"I mean, all of the guys have been a little more careful lately," Ellie says. "Since Grace went missing."

Bitsy shakes her head. "Nah, this was something new."

Something like Trinity revealing a violent, destructive and unpredictable alpha's darkest secret. Something like his hand covering her mouth, his scribe at her neck, bidding her to come quietly.

I shouldn't jump to conclusions. The junior omega could just be fighting off a cold, resting in her nest after a visit to Doc. What I saw from Rad could have been nothing more than a dark fantasy. But I know better, and so does Trinity. She knew she was taking a risk in telling me what she did.

But he *couldn't* know she told me. We were safe inside the omega residence wards, Marcus watching over us the entire time, and I've only told two others, both of whom I'm certain kept my confidence. I was careful not to tie what I'd learned back to her.

Leigh sets her bag down and looks over to Trinity's empty seat and rolls her eyes. "I do hope you all realize that none of you are above my teachings. Even Miss Wells is only ever here because she has to be." She looks around the room, determined to share her miserable mood with all of us—as though we weren't all scared and depressed enough already. "You all think you'll be the omega that lives her own life, not bound by the responsibilities of a pack or that *your* pack will be different." She sighs. "I wish you'd learn this lesson from me. From someone who actually cares about you. But some of you are determined to make your own way. And you'll learn the truth the hard way. No alpha wants an omega who's

different. They want a biddable omega to breed and keep their homes.”

Saints, it’s worse than her usual warnings.

“That’s bullshit,” Bitsy snarls. “We’re all so much better than that. Especially Trinity.”

Leigh stares levelly at Bitsy. “I know it’s bullshit, Miss Jordan. And that is the lesson. Take it to heart.”



ON THURSDAY MORNING, I walk out of the omega residences into utter chaos.

“What on earth is going on?” Alyssa asks. “And where’s Darika? She... she always walks me to class.”

Shouts ring out from the distant quad as we make our way down the walking path toward it.

My shoulders pinch, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. I already know what we’ll find out when we reach the quad.

Trinity Wells is missing.

I sprint forward, Marcus right on my heels, and head right into the chaos, nearly careening straight into Darika, who shoves past me and pulls Alyssa into her arms, tucking the petite omega beneath her chin. “Back to the cottage, Lys. Now.”

Alyssa startles and looks up at her alpha, clearly not used to hearing the bark of a command in her voice. “What’s happened?”

“An omega is missing. Campus is going into lockdown again.”

Saints alive.

I scan the chaos, hoping to make sense of any of it, but all I see is Jaime Brentwood, his eyes red from tears, his clothes rumpled.

I draw out my scribe but it's wholly unnecessary. He falls on his knees before me, hands clasped in supplication. "Please tell me you've seen her. Please, Juniper, I'm fucking begging. Tell me you know something?"

Satisfaction whispers through my mind and I jerk my head up. I know the tenor of those thoughts, have heard them in my own head too many times before.

Rad.

I search the quad, but I don't see him. All I see is the figure that seems to follow me wherever I go. The masked figure's horned head tilts and wave after wave of sick satisfaction crashes into me.

So it is Rad my unconscious mind seems to torment me with.

"Girlie, what the hell are you looking at? We have to get back."

She truly doesn't see him?

"Fuck off, Brentwood," Darika threatens in a low voice. "Come near my girl and I'll hex your balls off."

I silence Darika with a jerky shake of my head, staring down at Jaime Brentwood. At my feet, he clutches his chest with a hiss and lets out a howl of anguish that will haunt my dreams for weeks to come.

But above that howl, echoing in my head, sick delight in the words, is Andrew Radcliffe.

*Traitors must suffer.*



THE ANSWERS JAIME SO desperately sought at my feet are slow to come, even slower to trickle back to the omega residences. The five of us left huddle in the omega lodge, our honor guards all at the door, talking in low voices.

“You don’t think she’s... she’s dead, do you?” Alyssa ventures, slumping against the counter.

I shake my head. “Saints, I hope not.”

Alyssa considers this for a moment. “What was up with Jaime Brentwood the other day? I thought for sure he was going to hex you, but instead...”

“They’re mates,” Bridget says quietly. “Trinity and Jaime.”

“No way she’d mate that prick,” Bitsy protests. “He’s part of Rad’s gang!”

“Jaime’s not... he’s not who he appears to be,” I hedge. “Not at all. But Andrew Radcliffe, well, he’s worse.”

“Trinity told you, then?” Bridget asks, her voice hushed.

“You knew Heather,” I realize.

“We were... we were the best of friends.”

“Oh, saints, Bridget. I’m so sorry.”

“Who’s Heather?” Ellie asks, drifting around the kitchen behind Alyssa, picking up pots and pans as the other omega finishes using them, each trying to stay busy in their own way.

“We were in the same freshman class,” Bridget says quietly. “Rad took a liking to her—more than that, really. He was obsessed with her. And... and she ended up dead because of it. The news claimed it was a suicide but...”

“But Pack Radcliffe lined some pockets or threatened some mage inspectors,” I finish. “Jaime managed to get close enough to Rad to learn some of his secrets and tried to tell me this one. When I pulled my scribe on him, I guess he thought I’d be more receptive if Trinity told me. So, she showed me her mating bite and she explained...”

“Because she thinks you’re next,” Ellie realizes, setting a pot down with a heavy clang.

“Leigh was right.” Bitsy stops pacing and throws herself down onto the stool beside mine. “Everything is fucking bullshit.”

Everything *is* fucking bullshit.

And I know, without even a sliver of doubt, that it's all going to get so much worse.



I'M SUMMONED to the headmaster's office early Saturday morning, escorted by both Marcus and Ian.

My Casting professor looks even more haggard than he usually does by the time our evening lessons roll around.

He scrubs at his face and the shadow of dark stubble around his jaw. "Professor Cadigan and I were checking the wards around the omega residences late into the night." He slants a look in my direction. "What have you heard?"

"Trinity is missing," I say, dully.

And it could be all my fault. If Rad did take her, he as good as told me he planned to. Moreover, Trinity told me about what Rad did out of concern for me.

"The mage inspectors think she went missing from within the omega residences."

"That's impossible."

"It should be," Ian agrees. "Unless her honor guard was in on her disappearance."

"You don't think he was."

Ian shakes his head. "I think you and I both have our suspicions."

Do I dare tell him what happened after I found out Trinity was missing? When Jaime fell to his knees before me to beg me for answers? And do I dare tell him that I may have seen it happen days before it did? It's impossible magic, but if anyone would believe me, certainly he would. If only I believed in myself enough, believed that the things I see and hear aren't some delusions stemming from the trauma I've experienced at Rad's hands.

In the end, I don't get the chance.

"A mage inspector wants to take your statement," he says.

"It's not Mattis, is it?"

"You've dealt with him before then."

"More than I'd like. I don't know why he's bothering with me. He isn't going to believe a single word I say."

"Juniper, you were one of the last people to see Trinity before she disappeared."

Fuck. All the air is sucked from my lungs and my knees knock together, suddenly feeling like they're made of water. "That was... that was Saturday!"

"She missed all of her classes Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The investigation began after that."

I sway and Marcus quickly loops an arm around my waist, catching me before I stumble. "Saints, anything could have happened to her by now!" And it could all be my fault. My fault for not speaking up. For not fighting harder to bring Rad down.

"I don't like this," Marcus mutters. "Omegas are going missing from campus and from town. There's an alpha on campus acting with impunity and Juniper's at risk."

"I don't like it either," Ian sighs. "Campuses around the country are turning their omega students away for less. I'm afraid... I'm afraid Fairhaven Academy may be forced to capitulate."

"And then what becomes of me?" I ask, my voice barely louder than the rustling whisper of fallen leaves skittering down the stone paths that crisscross the quad.

It's a question I already know the answer to: I end up with a necklace of bites around my neck, mated and forever bound to alphas like Andrew Radcliffe.



MATTIS HAS ONCE AGAIN COMMANDEERED the headmaster's office for his interviews, and he sneers when I step through the door, already looking bored. Already itching for a fight, hoping I'll be the mouthy omega he so loathes.

I take my seat and cross my legs primly. "You requested my presence, Mr. Mattis?" I still won't give him the honor of calling him by his title of Senior Mage Inspector, not when he seems to have so little regard for the truth or the law he's meant to uphold.

"Are you aware you were one of the last people on campus to see Trinity Wells before she disappeared?"

"Professor Reinhardt told me while escorting me here, yes."

"And what do you have to say about that?"

I give him the fight he so desperately wants. "Why wasn't this investigation started sooner? Was she reported missing before Thursday morning? How many reports did the Bureau disregard before you bothered to investigate?"

The mage inspector begins to rise from his chair, alpha dominance pouring off of him, but I don't look away. I look up into his eyes, my own hard with malice.

"Omegas disappear all the time—and it's usually with whatever alpha they're fucking," he growls out.

Saints above, I didn't expect him to be so honest, so open in his distaste. "Then why bother investigating at all, Mr. Mattis?"

Another question I know the answer to: the wealth and influence of Pack Wells is far reaching.

"You saw Miss Wells on Saturday, and you were one of the last to see her or her honor guard."

"I didn't see Nick. Only Trinity."

"Just where was her honor guard?"

I gape at him. "How should I know? He wasn't with her, but that isn't uncommon within the wards of the omega

residences.”

He rolls his eyes. “Because you’re all too proud to take precautions.”

The bastard, once again accusing me—accusing Trinity—of not taking the precautions we’ve been taking since our designations revealed. “The wards are meant to keep out anyone besides a small list of approved individuals. If you’re looking for more information, mage inspector, I suggest you start there.”

“Why did you and Miss Wells meet on Saturday?”

I huff out a laugh. “Do you want the truth or a pretty lie, Mr. Mattis? Trinity asked me to come to the omega lodge. She wanted to warn me about the very alpha that tried to *rape me* a few weeks ago.”

He flinches at the word the way alphas tend to, and it only incenses me more.

“She told me about some of Mr. Radcliffe’s past transgressions. I won’t bore you with the details.”

“Lying bitch,” he mutters.

Marcus leans forward, a low growl rising in his throat, but I set a hand on his knee.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re a vindictive, spiteful omega, aren’t you? Dead set on ruining a decent alpha’s reputation. What else are you going to accuse that poor boy of?”

That poor boy? Saints above. There’s no winning here, not when Mattis will always resolutely side with Radcliffe. “I’m sure you know all about the investigation into Heather Lindstrom’s murder?”

The mage inspector surges to his feet, anger snapping in his blue eyes. “Watch yourself, omega. Miss Lindstrom’s death was ruled a suicide.”

I roll my eyes. “Shocking. Or perhaps not, considering you were probably the ineffectual limp dick coward investigating



her death before Pack Radcliffe paid you off.” I rise to my feet gracefully and toss my hair over my shoulder, letting myself look every bit the bored, haughty omega heiress he so despises. “You seem intent on remaining oblivious to the truth, whether through ignorance, fear, or handsome payouts. That being the case, I have no further business with the Bureau. Good day, Mr. Mattis.”

He sputters behind me and then races ahead of me, slamming the door shut the moment I pull it open.

Alpha dominance ripples through his tall, strong form, but I look up at him as though I hardly notice. He exerts his dominance, and it presses against me, pressuring me to cower and bare my neck.

Fuck that.

“Pack Radcliffe isn’t the only powerful pack, mage inspector. You would do well to remember that.”

“And you *will* be put in your place, omega. *You* would do well to remember that.”

“You’re probably right,” I say, acting as unaffected as I can. “But not by you.”

I get the last word, but his threat stays with me all day and throughout a restless night of torturous dreams.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 10



The lockdown lifts the next day and I take the opportunity to head to the training rooms to practice with Simon. After being confined to the omega residences for days, stepping out into the frost-gilded campus, fat, fluffy flakes of snow whirling on the faint breeze, is almost enough to make me forget the hell of the past week.

That Trinity is missing and it's my fault.

A branch snaps in the small copse of trees that trails along the walking path from the omega residences to the quad and I whirl, drawing my scribe, only a beat behind Marcus as he draws his.

“Juniper! Thank the saints.”

My heart stutters in my chest and I lower my scribe. “Luca, what are you doing here?”

It had taken weeks, but finally, *finally*, the thought of him wasn't like briars around my heart. I won't let him back in now, not when I'm finally starting to heal from his betrayal. Not when it would be so easy to let him gather me into his arms, to wind myself around him, to be comforted by cheeky smiles and the rough calluses on his fingertips, gentle against my skin. I can't. Not after his lies.

Marcus lets out a low growl as the other alpha approach and Luca stops, raising his hands in surrender and lingering back a few paces from the walkway. “You're okay.” He squeezes his pale green eyes shut. “I had to see for myself.”

“No thanks to you and not that it’s any of your fucking business after... after—” No, I won’t relive the moment my fingers closed around molded leather. Not for the alpha who lied to me. I turn back toward the quad and stalk away.

He follows at a distance. “Please, princess. Can’t we talk?”

Saints, just a few words could change everything. An explanation for the mask, for the lies. *The mask was planted in my trunk.* That’s all it’d take for me to be back in his arms, in his bed. If only they were true. But somehow, deep down, I know they wouldn’t be. Just more hollow words, more cutting lies. I turn on him, hoping and praying. Already knowing his answer.

“Tell me one thing. Was it yours?”

“Yes,” he utters, head hung. “But it’s—”

My heart breaks all over again, all the mending cracks tearing back open, reducing my tenderest parts to shards. “Then there’s nothing you can say that will change things.”

The crunch of his footsteps on the frosted grass ceases, and just like that, he lets me walk away.



<<COFFEE FIRST?>>

Simon’s text pings through to my phone the moment I reach the quad, so Marcus and I make for the library. In truth, I’m shaken from seeing Luca and don’t feel like diving into spellwork just yet. I rub at my teary eyes with gloved fists and take the stairs down to the basement, Marcus at my heels.

Simon triumphantly holds up a cookies-and-cream frappe, three Pepero sticks of the same flavor and far too many milk chocolate curls adorning it. “Look what I bribed Ellie into making! Whoa, hey. That’s not the face of someone about to down an Oreo masterpiece. What’s going on, kit-kat?”

I give Ellie a quick wave and then hop up onto one of the stools at the closest café table.

“Bumped into Luca,” I sigh. “After everything... I just didn’t have it in me to face him. He wants to talk.”

“You could let him?” Simon takes the stool next to mine while Marcus takes my other side.

“How would I know if any of it was true, though?”

“You’d know,” Simon assures me.

“Simon, he lied to me for *months* and I had no idea.” No idea other than the mask I saw in place of his motorcycle helmet when we reached Saint Guinnette’s Cove and he turned back to me.

“I just don’t get it,” Simon admits. “I thought you two were solid.”

“So did I,” I say quietly, fiddling with the paper straw in my drink. “And I’m just... I’m exhausted.”

“Why don’t you go back to your cottage and get some rest then?”

“I need to be anywhere but the omega residences for a little while.”

“Well, we don’t have to head to the practice rooms today. You need a break from studying and working so hard. Kinda seems like you could use some actual fun.”

“Flashcards are fun,” I yawn.

“Yeah? Well, I’m about to knock your flashcards right off. I’ve just had a *brilliant* idea. Hey, Belly!”

“Ugh, Simon,” Ellie grouses from behind the bar and sticks her tongue out at him. “You promised you wouldn’t call me that at school.”

“I lied. What time do you get off work?”

“Noon, why?”

“Okay, after lunch, we’re meeting on the quad. Drag Bitsy away from whatever trouble she’s getting into. Find Alyssa and Darika. We’re doing a scavenger hunt.” He looks at her sternly. “Honor guards required. Sorry not sorry, Jace.”

Jace looks up from his phone and sends Simon an exasperated shake of his head.

Simon, cheeky as can be, only shrugs and winks at him.

He bodily turns my stool to face him, and I let out a surprised laugh. “Okay, today is all about doing a Fairhaven tradition. One normally done in the spring, but fuck it. You go finish the sugary monstrosity I made Ellie make you and take a nap. Meet back in front of the library at 1PM, sharp.”

He pops off his stool, takes my hand and pulls me off of mine, gives me a quick twirl and a kiss on the cheek, and then spins me back into Marcus’ arms. “Don’t be late and come ready to play to win. Because you and I are teaming up and we’re going to *smoke* them.”



“HE’S FOND OF YOU, you know.”

I look up at Marcus as we make our way back to the library later that day. “Simon?” I shrug. “Sometimes I think so. Like when we’d dance.... there were a few times when I thought for sure he’d kiss me. But other times, I’m not so sure.”

“I’m fairly certain he wouldn’t plan a scavenger hunt to cheer up just anyone, sweet-tart.”

My cheeks go pink. “He would. That’s just the kind of guy he is.” I kick at some leaves as they whirl down the path.

“And I think you’re pretty fond of him, too.”

“I am. But I don’t... after Luca...”

“You found something in his dorm. You asked him if it was his. Juniper, what was it?”

I know what happens if I tell Marcus about the mask. My honor guard will go straight to the headmaster or the authorities, and Luca will wind up back in jail—for good. Still, I don’t want to lie to my honor guard.

“I’d rather not get into it,” I sigh. “Just... something that made me realize he’s not who he said he is.”

“Do you think there could be a reasonable explanation?”

Saints, how I’ve hoped. “No, I don’t. None that I can think of. And even if there were, he still lied to me. There’s no coming back from that.”

The words leave my lips and the finality of them strikes me, worse than any *agonia* spell, right in the heart. Hot tears spill down my cheeks and I rush to scrub them away as we approach the library.

But Simon sees them. He crosses to me in three long steps and bows his head until it nearly touches mine, cups my chin in one hand and with the other, brushes my tears away with the utmost tenderness. “No tears, kit-kat. Not today. I mean, unless they’ll help. If it’s what you need, scavenger hunt be damned. Bitsy, Ellie, Alyssa, and Darika can pound sand.”

“No, I want to do it,” I protest, my voice watery. “I don’t mean to be so weepy. It’s just...”

“It’s a lot. But you’re allowed to forget about it, if only for a few hours. Okay?”

I sniffle and then nod, letting Simon draw me to the sweeping library stairs.

Simon explains the scavenger hunt, a gleam in his hazel eyes. “Three teams, keep your honor guards close because the world is full of fuckery. First runner up raids the kitchens for ice cream. Second runner up buys the pizza. The winning team basks in the glory of being the greatest scavenger hunters ever.” He passes out small envelopes to me, Alyssa, and Ellie—the team captains, as he calls us. I recognize the prep-school cursive on the envelope as Cassian’s with only a glance and frown down at it.

“To keep things fair,” Simon continues. “I got someone else to draw the tasks and write them down for each of us. Each team has until we’re ready for pizza to finish all eight. Record the evidence with a photo or video. Points for style.”

Simon sends up a shower of silver sparks and the games begin. He doesn't say who's going to judge how well or how stylishly we do it, but I realize, as we crack open the envelopes, that it doesn't matter at all.

I pull out the stack of colored index cards—basically flashcards—and thumb through them, Simon looking over my shoulder and snickering as he reads them. “Okay, ‘most scandalous drawing in a library book’? That one is too easy. That’ll be Bitsy’s first stop and she’ll leave a huge mess behind. It’ll be just like finding a smutty needle in a haystack of smutty needles. Oooh, ‘why I’d deserve detention’ is easy too. Want to go steal a shit ton of blankets and duvets from the laundry? I do it all the time for blanket forts.”

We sprint toward the dorms, Marcus following us at a leisurely jog, and Simon easily jimmys the lock on the door to the laundry room with his student ID card. The door swings open and I’m hit with a wall of warmth and neutral, clean-smelling detergent. The urge to dive straight into the stacks of folded duvets is almost overwhelming.

“Most epic nest ever, right? Well, come on. Grab a few. We’re definitely making a victory fort in the rec room later.”

I peek out the door and then back at the shelves full of clean linens. “No one’s gonna mind?”

“No one will ever know, as long as we throw them in the dirty laundry when we’re done with our fort.”

I dart forward, feeling oddly mischievous, and grab a stack of duvets, immediately sinking my face into them. When I look up, Simon flashes me a grin from behind his phone and I realize he’s been recording me the whole time. And I laugh. I laugh because we’re stealing linens to make a blanket fort like a bunch of dumb kids, because he caught me nuzzling into the soft duvets like they were nesting materials. Because I don’t feel at all ashamed. Not around Simon.

We leave the blankets in the rec room under a shielding spell and immediately set off to do the next challenge.

“Best part of the season we’re in,” I read off an orange index card. “Oh! Stepping on the crunchiest leaves! I haven’t done that since I was a kid.”

We race around the quad, looking for the biggest, driest oak and maple leaves we can find.

“Sweet-tart,” Marcus calls. “This one’s all yours.”

“Sweet-tart”? That’s fucking *adorable*. Go, go. Step on the crunchy leaf, sweet-tart. Kit-kat.”

In the end, we crush it together, Marcus filming the two of us as we laugh so loud you can’t hear the crunch of the leaf at all.

“Is it wrong to be laughing right now?” I ask, my voice raw, as we make our way back to the residence halls for the next task.

“It’s not wrong,” Simon swears. “It’s necessary.”

“Two omegas have gone missing.”

“And so, we search for them—or those drastically more qualified than either of us search for them. And we worry and we mourn, but kit-kat, if we don’t go on living... Look, I don’t know. If there’s no joy, then it’s all darkness. All despair. And if it’s all despair, what does any of it matter? So... so no. It’s not wrong to laugh.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart,” he swears.

I take his gloved hand in mine, lean into him just enough to bump shoulders with him, and smile up at him. “Then thank you. For giving me a reason to laugh.”

In the spirit of trying something new, Simon grabs his skateboard from the dorms, and I pretend I don’t see black horns in the distance while flicking through the pictures we’ve already taken.

He emerges, board in hand, casts a slowing spell on it, and helps me step up onto it.



I wobble and his hands go around my waist, and saints, standing on the skateboard makes me just tall enough that I could lean forward and press my lips to his. His breath catches and his gaze darts to my lips and then back up to my eyes and... and I fall, ass-first right off the skateboard and into the frost-damp grass. He helps me up, but the moment is gone. I gamely try skateboarding one more time for the video, wheeling my arms and letting out little yelps as I scoot just a few feet on the slow-moving board. Simon and Marcus, meanwhile, laugh their asses off at me.

“You do better then,” I tell Marcus, and roll the skateboard his way.

He does *something* with his feet, flipping the board in the air and landing on it with perfect grace. He putters around on the spelled board, and I scowl at him.

“Okay, um, ‘something no one else knows about.’ Man, that one’s kind of tough.”

“It’s not,” I say quietly, and lead the way across campus to the crumbling ruins of the old temple, buried deep in the campus woods.

“Luca and I came here once,” I murmur, carefully stepping over the cracked stone threshold, taking care not to slip on the moss as I venture inside. Even hundreds of years later, the temple is suffused with magic, every stone, every mote of dust, every shoot of grass springing up through the foundations. Old windchimes someone hung outside the temple tinkle lightly in the autumn breeze.

I beckon and Simon stoops under the broken door frame to follow me.

“Whoa. I had no idea this place was out here.”

“Yeah. It was built before the academy was—one of the earliest parts of Marmora’s settlement. It’s pretty cool, right?” I cast a magic light to banish some of the gloom of the damp temple and carefully trace it over the cracked stone ceiling until I find it—the crystal prism that sends the light of my magic glittering in tiny rainbows around the small temple.

They catch in Simon's glasses and when I turn, the awe on his face is enough to make my heart thump hard in my chest.

But it's me he's looking at, the way the prismatic rainbows catch in my white-blond hair and fall across my face. He steps close and I'm glad Marcus stayed outside because I'm sure—so absolutely sure—that this is when Simon Monroe will finally kiss me.

He drops his head to mine, just as he did before, but it's a promise he gives me, not a kiss.

“Juniper, I swear to all the saints, I will always be here for you, and I will always, endlessly try to give you reasons to smile. To laugh. No matter what. Forever and always.”

I shut my eyes tightly against the prick of tears and nod fervently. For the second time today, he brushes away my tears. His touch, featherlight and so tender against my skin, is as much a promise as his words, an unspoken admission that he knows that everything will get worse before it gets better. Knows I'll need him. He presses the sweetest kiss to my forehead, lips lingering against my skin, and I break, falling into his arms, into a tight embrace that doesn't make me smile or laugh: it gives me strength.

We stay like that until Marcus pops his head into the temple to check on us, and as we're making our quiet way back through the woods, we decide to take the loss on the challenge to “make a promise”—because what just happened is between us and only us.

We make quick work of the rest of the challenges. Simon was right and we easily find the most scandalous drawing in a library book Bitsy left open right in one of the aisles. Simon cocks his head, staring down at the tangle of limbs and bodies rendered in fine lines of ink. “Shit, *this* is what packs get up to?”

I peek over his shoulder and feel my cheeks color as I snap a quick picture for proof that we completed the challenge. At least, that's what I tell myself. “Well, the good ones, at least.” Saints, do I even dare hope to have a pack like the one

pictured? If nothing else, I know what images will feature in my next heat delirium.

And who.

When we “do a good deed” and cart all of Ian’s library holds down to his office, he considers me for a moment, eyes softening when he sees my beaming smile. And that smile only grows when he hands me two volumes, protected in oilcloth. “For your studies.”

Not even Simon’s teasing that I’ve got a crush can bring me down as I dance up the stairs, my nose already in one of the books.

He shakes his head when we get to the doors of the library, carefully rewraps the volume, and slides both into his backpack to protect them from the weather.

“And I thought your propensity for flash cards was bad, you giant nerd.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Pot, kettle.”

He laughs, bright and boyish, and swings me around in a hug that makes me giggle.

Because Simon will forever and always try to make me smile. And when I fall, I know he’ll catch me.

For the final challenge’s dare, Simon dares me to cartwheel all the way across the quad, and when I do and stumble, dizzy and laughing, into his arms, I feel hope for the first time in weeks.

Hope and lightness and love.



OVER PIZZA, which Simon graciously buys, we watch all of our clips in the most epic blanket fort ever.

The moment Alyssa saw it, she dove straight into it, immediately cuddling down into the blankets. “I’m not built for the cold! I’m from SoCal!” she complained.

I curl up beside her and am not at all surprised but deeply, deeply gladdened when Simon drops down next to me and cuddles up against my side. “I’m a beta. There’s a cuddle pile. I can’t resist. Betas are touchy.”

Fine with me.

We watch the clips and I laugh more than I have in months. Because Darika definitely mooned the headmaster, who actually got a good laugh out of it too and warned her not to get frostbite on her bottom. And Ellie and Bitsy stuck googly eyes on all the statues they could manage around campus. It makes stealing a few blankets for a blanket fort look like child’s play. Did Bitsy also contort herself into many of the positions she found in the library books? With commentary.

“You guys are too cute,” Alyssa whispers, and I’m glad the low light in the fort hides my blush.

We are, in fact, the only team that didn’t show our bare asses at any point.

“Simon, for the love of the saints, cover your eyes,” Ellie begs as a video pops up on the screen of the sophomore omega being dared to streak through the library. “Thank goodness no one was cramming for finals yet,” she groans as the clip rolls, showing a very naked Ellie dashing through the mostly-empty library.

“You’re looking quite good, Bestest Bells,” Bitsy notes. “Still doing Pilates?”

“I’m going to Pilates you in your stupid face,” Ellie mutters.

Bitsy cackles.

“That was beyond reckless,” Ellie’s honor guard mutters from the back of the fort.

Bitsy rolls over so she can face him. “That’s the point. A big ‘fuck you’ to the assholes who are snatching omegas and trying to scare the rest of us. They wanna capture me? They’ll be so fucking sorry.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Connor mutters.

“You love me, Connor. Don’t pretend you don’t. I’m the funnest client you’ll ever have.”

“If you don’t force me into early retirement,” he mutters.

“Bro, we’ll be in the home for retired honor guards together.”

“That doesn’t exist, right?” Alyssa ventures.

“After all the trouble you girls give us, it damn well should,” Jace mutters.

“Oh, whoa! That temple is super cool.”

“It looked like we’re not the only ones who thought so. Someone had definitely been there lately. So, I guess it’s not ‘something no one else knows about.’”

“Still fucking cool,” Bitsy declares. “How on earth did you find out about it?”

“Luca,” I mumble.

“Man, fuck that guy,” Bitsy mutters.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because he broke your heart, and us omega girls stick together. So, fuck him and not in the fun way. Want me to shrink his dick for you? I’ve made adjustments to the spell, and let’s just say... it lasts longer and not in the way guys like to claim they can last.”

“Oh, I need you to teach me how to do that so I can vanquish another of Juniper’s foes,” Simon says, reaching over me to grab another slice of pizza, the back of his hand brushing over my legs just above the knees.

It takes reciting every fifth-order sigil I know backwards and forwards to distract me enough that I don’t perfume. Saints, perfuming for Ellie’s brother right in front of her? The mortification alone throws cold water on the butterflies in my belly.

“You teach me how to skateboard and we’ve got a deal,” Bitsy says.

Possessiveness flashes through me, not wanting the beta at my side to touch another omega the way he touched me as I wobbled on the skateboard. Alyssa gives me a nudge and a knowing look. I give her a little shrug, but she gets it.

“This was great, Simon,” Ellie says with a yawn. “Thank you for putting it together.”

Simon reaches for my hand in the mess of blankets and strokes his thumb across the back of it. “It was completely worth it.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 11



I feel as light as a feather, like one of the snowflakes dancing on the wind, as Marcus and I make our way back to the omega residences, but it doesn't last into the next day.

The moment I step out of my cottage, I catch the faintest hint of spice in the crisp wintry air. I tell myself it's just Darika's scent: spiced tea and candied orange peels, but my gut roils at the unmistakable undercurrent of anise.

My mind has to be playing tricks on me. There's no way Rad's been within the wards of the omega residences—it's an impossibility. After he attacked me, Mai ran through the list of all the guests other omegas have requested to have access to the residences—and he's not on the list. Nor will he ever be.

The headmaster couldn't expel him, but Mai wouldn't tolerate letting my would-be rapist anywhere near us omegas, saints bless her.

Alyssa bounds up to us and passes me a spice cookie, still warm from the oven. "I was trying a new recipe this morning. You have to tell me if you like it. I need to go into Christmas cookie baking mode as soon as possible and I want to nail this one first."

Anise, clove, cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. The scent I caught on the chill winter wind wasn't an alpha scent at all, but Alyssa's early-morning baking.

I won't turn down cookies for breakfast, but Alyssa's spice cookies could do with a bit less anise. I shrug. "I'm

particularly sensitive to anise after... after Rad.”

“Ugh gross. Out it goes. Cardamom will have a brighter flavor anyway.”

Bitsy and Ellie catch up with us, both out of breath.

“Okay, how dare you not share your cookies!”

Alyssa rolls her eyes and hands over warm cookies wrapped up in paper towels to both of them. Bitsy punches the air and skips ahead of us.

“Oh saints, Lys. This tastes JUST like Yule! Yule in a cookie. I could kiss you.”

Darika jogs up to us from the other side of the wards and tugs Alyssa into a one-armed hug. “Please don’t, Bits. I’d hate to break up the band over a smooch, but don’t test me.”

Alyssa rolls her eyes again. “Down, alpha.”

“Oh, hey, speaking of the band,” Ellie says, looking up from her phone. “I got an email yesterday. We’re playing Night of the Fallen! It’s going to be such a blast. Are we doing group costumes? I kind of think we should do group costumes.”

Just weeks after the new year, Night of the Fallen isn’t as big of a deal as the Feast of Marmora is at Fairhaven, but it’s right up there with All Saints’ Eve: a night of revelry spent in tribute to the saints who gave their lives for the good of magekind and non-magical humans alike. Dressing up as your patron saint is practically mandatory.

“That’s great, but can we handle one holiday at a time? Bits, Elle, what do you think of the spice cookies? I’m probably ditching the anise in favor of cardamom, but that should just make them better.”

“Ten out of ten,” Bitsy says around a mouth of spice cookie. “You going all out for Yule then?”

“You’re *all* going home with at least three dozen cookies to share with your families. Help me ice them?”



“I’ve never made Yule cookies before, actually.” On rare occasions, a few Yule cookies from New York City’s finest bakeries would show up in pink boxes, but we certainly never made cookies as a family, even when my mom was still around.

“That’s tantamount to sacrilege. Your penance is icing a dozen cookies and sifting all the flour I ask you to,” Alyssa says brightly.

Honestly, nothing in the world sounds better.

“Besides, no offense, but even you couldn’t fuck up icing.”

We’re laughing when we finally hit the quad and it shouldn’t feel as indulgent as it does, but after so many dark days behind us and even more ahead of us, it feels like a rare treat.

Until I catch horns out of the corner of my eye. The horned figure tracks us as we make our way down the quad, following from a distance, but keeping pace until we finally step into Saint Briac’s Hall for our first class.

“Junie, you look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Alyssa whispers as we take our seats in Introduction to Casting.

But ghosts aren’t real, and while no one else seems to see the figure, I know in my gut that he’s dangerously real.



“YOU KNOW you don’t have to bring me coffee. There’s no point in sucking up. I told you you wouldn’t get any extra credit, despite the extra work,” Ian says as I set his coffee down on his desk. In truth, trying to guess his coffee order has become something of a game I haven’t admitted to him that I’m playing.

“I wasn’t aware I needed the extra credit, professor,” I say archly.

He grins ruefully and shakes his head. “Help me through some of the books you brought down yesterday before we get

into spellwork? You can tackle the English and French while I handle the Latin and Greek.”

“What are we looking for?” I ask, dragging the library cart over and pulling out the first two volumes, one in French and one in Latin.

“Any reference to the ember, to Baphomet, the Mark. I’ll take Saint Aldous ramblings at this point.”

“The Mark isn’t that old, though, is it? Wouldn’t it stand to reason that it’d be written in English or French, based on when the Mark was first cast?”

“Ah, it would stand to reason if not for one thing: these alphas were elitist assholes. They thought magic belonged to the elite few—those educated in…” he prompts.

“Ancient languages.”

“Precisely. You, for instance. If we pretend for a moment that you’d revealed as an alpha, you would have been among those they thought magic belonged to. You come from a pure bloodline, with a family pedigree that not one of Saint Aldous’ followers would have turned their nose up at. But I didn’t come from such a family. It’s possible I would have been allowed to learn magic based on prowess alone, but not due to my lineage.”

“I’m sorry I threw your pack in your face earlier this term,” I murmur.

“You had every reason to. I was goading you. And, anyway, I’m not ashamed of where I come from, nor the family I still have after my mother left with most of her pack.”

I look up from the index I was browsing. “Your dad?”

“He’s not my biological parent, but he’s my dad in every way that matters so much more. He’s one of the best men I know and gave me a good upbringing, and I wouldn’t trade that for the prestige of an elite pack.”

I smile faintly. “I’m glad you have that.”

“I wish you did. Saints, Juniper, I dread the thought of you returning home for the holidays, to be back in the care of your

father.”

I still and finally manage to force a nod. It’s something I’ve been trying not to think too hard about. I’m grateful that a good chunk of my Yule break will be taken up by PR opportunities and photo shoots of the Rose family doing charitable work, a heat I can claim lasts longer than it does so I can stay holed up in my room, and holiday celebrations where there will be far too many people around for my father to try anything. “I’m frightened. And... and I’m sick of being frightened.”

“The disappearances have scared you.”

“A little, but... but before my magic unlocked, I was seeing things. Baphomet masks like the Soldiers wear. I’d see them on students and staff—and I still see them—but ever since the day after All Saints’ Day, I’ve been seeing something else. A figure, always in the distance, tracking me. Wearing the same mask. At first, I thought it was just some sort of trauma response. That’s what Doc thought the masks were, but I’m not so sure.”

“Has anyone else seen this figure?”

I hang my head and shake it. “No. Alyssa even asked if I’d seen a ghost. But whatever this... this apparition is, it *feels* real.”

He frowns. “Then I believe it is.”

“That’s it? You believe me? I see things no one else does.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re not there. It just means others aren’t perceiving them. Invisibility and concealment spells are strictly forbidden on campus, but at a time when omegas are being taken, I’m inclined to believe rules are being broken,” he says, his voice dry. “Or there’s something your subconscious wants you to know, like the memories that surfaced when you tried to call your magic.”

“I always thought that was because of the lock.”

“Juniper, I don’t know if anyone will ever be able to truly say why you experienced what you did when your magic was locked, but you’re an incredibly special young woman. I

suspect, on some level, your magic—and your instincts—reflect that.”

The compliment is delivered so matter-of-factly that it doesn't even register immediately, but when it does, I duck down to the book I'm meant to be reading.

“You'll tell me if this keeps happening or if you feel there's a threat to your safety. Promise me.”

I nod noncommittally.

“Juniper,” he rebukes, his voice stern.

“Okay, okay. I promise. Are you going to make me pinky swear on it?”

He fixes me with a level look. “If I thought it would help, I would in a heartbeat.” He sits back in his chair and shoves the book away. “Are you sure you're up for this tonight? Would you rather work on your spellwork?”

“Can I take a few with me?”

“If you wish. If you don't find anything of note in them, feel free to return them to the library check-in.”

“You don't want to double check them?”

“Do you doubt your scholarship, Miss Rose? Because I don't. I'm certain you'll bring anything of interest to my attention. Now, would you prefer to work on stunning or shields tonight?”

We start with stunning spells, but I can barely focus. I cast stunning spell after stunning spell, from the most complex Ian has taught me down to the simplest, and none of them land to his satisfaction—or mine. When I finally relent and let us move on to shields, my attention is just as fractured.

For the first time, the horned figure did more than watch: it followed me, trailing me slowly up the path toward campus. Is it Rad? Following me to scare me? Keeping tabs on me to ensure I'm behaving as he expects his future mate to? Nausea rises in my throat, my shield fails me, and sparks hit the back of my hand.

I let out a hiss of pain and Ian instantly rushes to my side, taking my hand in his.

“Saints, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t actually trying to hit you. I thought—”

“It’s my fault. I was distracted. Doing the poorest casting I’ve done in weeks.” I flex my fingers in his grasp and the small burn stings.

“Let me heal this?” He’s close enough that he only has to whisper the words, and I swallow hard but nod, letting his scent wrap around me, lull me.

He casts a quick healing spell over the burn but doesn’t release my hand once the wound has vanished. He looks down into my eyes and for the first time since he unlocked my magic, I see him as he is, his guard down. Not just his alpha rising to the surface, but everything that makes the man in front of me who he is. There’s raw, desperate fear in his blazing blue eyes and I want so desperately to look away. But if he can show me his fear, then I can show him mine.

“I think it’s Rad following me,” I whisper, my voice rough with the tears I fight to hold back. “I thought it was someone else at first but Rad... he told me he knows where I am at all times. How... how could he?”

“He’s trying to scare you, Juniper.” Ian’s voice is just as quiet as mine.

“He’s succeeding. I’m terrified.”

“My darling,” he sighs, and that one word is the sweetest balm to all the ragged wounds within me. He touches his forehead to mine, holding both of my hands in his, drawing me close enough for our toes to touch. “I will *never* let you come to harm. Do you understand?”

“Say it again?” I beg, wishing I could curl into his arms, wrap myself up in his scent, cedar and citrus and everything I need right now.

“I will never let you come to harm?”

“The other.”

“My darling?” He releases my hands and pulls me into his arms and the tension floods out of me. “Never, my darling. I will *never* let anything happen to you.”

He strokes my hair away from my face, trails the backs of his knuckles down my cheek, and I lean up into the touch, my eyes fluttering shut.

“Thank you.” I fist my hands in his shirt, breathing him in. I know we only get this: a stolen moment of comfort we’ll never speak of. Just this, but it’s enough to vanquish my demons, if only for now.



WITH THE END of term just under two weeks away, our Omega Seminar is a somber affair.

“Still no ransom?” Ellie whispers as Leigh passes out a stack of handouts.

Bridget shakes her head. “No. Nothing.”

Leigh shoots us a severe look. “You’re both being dramatic. With no ransom demanded, it’s likely that Trinity simply ran away to be with a lover. It happens all the time and I suspect Trinity had more than her share of alphas. Omegas like her usually do.”

“You absolute bitch,” Bridget fumes, jumping up from her seat.

“Oh shit,” Bitsy muttered. “Leigh fucked up...”

“No one demanded a ransom for Grace either, though her pack would pay *anything* for her safe return. Grace didn’t run off with a lover. She loves her pack, and they fucking adore her. And she was *taken*. Just like Trinity. You lecture us about being good omegas and getting good packs so we can be safe, but you know what? It’s all fucking *bullshit* and you’re just another pathetic omega with no control over her life trying to make the rest of us feel like shit. You think you’re doing us any favors, teaching us to be good little house omegas? Well,

fuck you. You're part of the problem and I'm sick and fucking tired of it."

Bridget grabs her bag, jerkily shoulders into her coat, and stomps out of the room, slamming the door to the omega lodge behind her.

"You know I'm with Bridget," Bitsy says, staring our Omega Seminar instructor down.

One by one, the other omegas stand and leave the room until I'm the only one who remains.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," she says, watching the door slam shut behind Alyssa.

"So do I," I tell her, and I, too, leave the omega lodge.

We gather in front of Trinity's cottage, stamping our feet and rubbing our hands to ward off the cold.

"Trinity would never..." Bridget begins, but we all know. Trinity didn't run off with an alpha because the alpha she loves is right here at Fairhaven, mourning her.

My phone chimes from my pocket and I ignore it. It chimes twice more and then rings and I finally draw it out, seeing Simon's name on the screen.

His words come out in a rush when I pick up the phone. "I know you're in class, but my script mining the Fairhaven PD came back with an alert. Nick's body just washed up on the western shore."

I'm stunned silent, unable to speak until he says my name again, and then again.

"Oh saints," I whisper. "Oh no." I turn to my fellow omegas, and they see the fear, the despair, in my slack jaw and wide eyes.

"Trinity's honor guard was found dead."

## CHAPTER 12



Speculation rolls across the campus like fog when the news of Nick's death breaks, but one thing is clear as a somber quiet settles over Fairhaven Academy: Trinity Wells probably won't be coming back, not to the academy, not to her family, not to her inconsolable alpha.

Orange and anise washes over me as Andrew Radcliffe cuts by me on the path, bodily bumping into me and making me stumble. He nods to the quad where a desperate Jaime is handing out flyers and begging anyone who will listen for any information related to Trinity's disappearance.

He says just three words to me before carrying on toward his morning classes: "Traitors must suffer."



THE MOOD IS ESPECIALLY SUBDUED in our Restorative Magic class. Doctor Mai Huong, commonly just 'Doc' around campus is Fairhaven Academy's chief healer and the lead instructor in our class on the healing arts. One of her alphas, Daniel, helps her teach the class, but they're never more than friendly toward each other in the classroom. Until today.

The young omega healer is tucked into his arms when Alyssa and I arrive, and only steps out of them when she finally calls our class to order.

"Typically, at this point in the term, we would be reviewing tinctures and healing potions leading up to your



final exam, but I'm afraid we have more important material to cover. In lieu of reviewing during our class time, I would be happy to work with you independently or arrange group study sessions for you."

She strides to the magical model hanging at the front of our classroom. "The material we'll be covering until finals is, perhaps, the most important you'll learn in any class on restorative magic: triage and emergency medicine." She looks around the classroom and smiles at a few students. "I know a few of you have been inspired to continue your studies in the healing arts. Most of you, however, won't learn much healing beyond what you learn in my classroom. In that case, the single most important thing you can do with healing magic is stabilize someone with a critical injury until a more experienced healer can tend to their care."

She darts a look to Daniel, then to me and Alyssa. "For many of us, the world is becoming a more dangerous place. A more frightening place. In such a world, the ability to stabilize a classmate, a loved one, or even a stranger critically injured through means magical or otherwise, could mean saving lives. In the direst of situations, it could even be your own life."

Her gaze flits down to the open textbook on her lectern and then back up to our class. "I sincerely hope you'll never have to use what I'm about to teach you, but even I'm no longer that optimistic. Let's begin."



CASSIAN ARRIVES to our Peer Advising session even earlier than I do, and when I do arrive, he's agitated, stalking around the small study room, shoving his hands through his dark curls.

"You walked out of Omega Seminar on Wednesday night."

"Only after everyone else had."

"I didn't take you for someone who'd blindly follow their peers like that."

I arch an eyebrow but take my seat. “Mrs. Parsons made some deeply inappropriate accusations about Trinity. Trinity is *missing*, not off fucking some alpha her daddy didn’t approve of. If Trinity had simply run away with a lover, her honor guard wouldn’t be dead right now. Besides, most omegas planning on running away with their mates don’t leave their mate behind.”

Cassian stops pacing suddenly. “She’s mated to Jaime, then? I had suspected a betrothal, but not that they were already mated. Saints, no wonder he’s... he’s... It’s a feeling I understand too well.”

I bristle. Years ago, as I debuted into society as a newly revealed omega, I dashed into Cassian’s arms at my debutante ball, only to be told he had chosen another. This other, some omega I’ve never met, haven’t ever seen him with... he’s had cause to be that worried about her? Saints, I *hate* Cassian Leclerc, so why do I feel so sickeningly, violently *jealous* of this nameless, faceless omega?

“Your classmate is going to petition to be excused from Omega Seminar and I believe the administration will approve her request.” Cassian is quiet for a moment and resumes pacing. “Your admission at Fairhaven is tenuous—not just yours but all omega students. Recent events have allowed the Soldiers of Saint Aldous to apply even greater pressure to the Council of Nine. After August’s decree, Fairhaven took a bold stand against the decree and honored the admissions of its omega students. I can’t say the administration will continue to do so.”

“But Headmaster Langford—”

“Has been overruled by the board before.”

I purse my lips and duck my head, knowing such a time far too intimately. “I know. He expelled Andrew Radcliffe and look how that turned out.” I slump in my seat, dropping any pretense of acting like a proper omega around Cassian. “He’s still here, following me. Threatening me. Telling me we’ll be mated.”

Cassian stops abruptly, his scent spiking, flooding the small study room until it smells like a perfect day at the beach: sea salt and summer sunshine, made sharper by the rage pouring off of him. “He’s been following you? Fucking saints, he threatened you and suggested you would *ever* be his mate? Never. You will *never* be mated to a thug like Radcliffe.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” I say quietly. Once, years ago, my naive heart had hoped Cassian would be one of my alphas, that he would be the one to protect me from the evils of the world.

He chose someone else.

But it’s me he drops to his knees in front of, one hand on either arm of my chair. It’s my eyes he looks up into, fear in his own smoke-and-whiskey depths. It’s me he begs.

“You have to leave Fairhaven, Juniper. Please. You must reconsider. I know what your education means to you, but none of it will matter if you wind up dead—or worse, mated to that sadistic piece of shit. Please, Junes. *Please.*”

His voice is rough, as though he’s barely holding back the same tears that run down my cheeks.

I blink them away but still they fall—and so do I. I shove my chair back and drop to my knees before my sweet summer love, the boy who broke my heart, the man who begs me to do what I must to be safe.

“I can’t, Cass. I’m safer here than I am at home. My father —” I shake my head and grit my teeth, closing my eyes tightly.

“I can’t bear the thought of you being back under that bastard’s roof,” he swears.

“I have to. I have to pretend I don’t know what he did to me. I have to do whatever it takes to stay here. Fairhaven may be a pit of vipers and I know I’m not safe. Saints do I ever know it. But at least there are *some* people I can trust here.”

And with as vulnerable as I’ve been in front of my teenage love, I hope to every saint I can name that he’s one of them.



THE WORLD BURNS around our secluded academy campus. Another mated omega goes missing, this time in Chicago. No ransom comes. We hear nothing about Grace or Trinity. There are only the anguished howls of their loved ones, fading into the void.

Finals are approaching and there's nothing to do but study. Leigh steps down for the rest of the term, though we won't escape our written exam for the course.

Most often, we all gather in the basement of the library, a chaotic mess of books, notes and coffee cups spread out on the café tables as we quiz each other and review our notes.

Bitsy, Ellie, and Darika work through stacks of advanced transmutation circles, drawing them until their hands ache, while Alyssa and I review every single scientific property of magic we've been taught by Professor Hayes. Ellie tells us we'll ace Dr. Spencer's final, no sweat, though Alyssa still frets over her history notes.

And Simon? Simon somehow holds us all together. In between his own studies, he grabs coffee refills and pastries, and when no one is looking, he slips me mini Milka bars, sweet and silly little notes, and stills from our scavenger hunt videos. I stick the photos to the pinboard over my nest and spend more time looking at them than I probably should.

But it's official: I'm falling well and truly in love with Simon Monroe.



I ARRIVE at Ciel before the rest of our study group and step up to the bar where Ellie is washing glasses to order s'mores frappes for me and Simon. The sophomore omega dries her hands, makes the two frappes and a third for herself.

She hesitates, looks around the empty café and then slips her apron off over her head.

“Can we talk, Junie?”

“Of course. Oh, saints, are you okay? Is something wrong?”

She shakes her head and takes one of the tall stools as I take the other. “I just... fuck, this is hard. I wanted to talk to you about Simon.”

“Is *he* okay?”

She rolls her eyes. “His dorky ass is fine. I just want it to stay that way. Look, I’ve noticed the two of you getting close and even though he swears worrying is his job, I can’t help it. He’s in love with you, Junie. You make him so happy. Shit, I haven’t seen him this happy ever. But if you lead him on and then break his heart, you’ll destroy him.”

All those almost kisses, those lingering touches... Simon’s in love with me? A blush splashes across my cheeks, a glowing warmth fanning through me, pulling out the brightest smile I’ve smiled in weeks. “He is? I mean, I wouldn’t. Break his heart, that is. I, um, I’m falling pretty hard for him too.”

“But you can’t have a future with him. He’ll never be part of your pack. Your father would *never* let you mate a beta.”

I fiddle with my straw and then look up into the other omega’s eyes—hazel, like her brother’s, flecked with gold, where his are studded with flashes of mossy green. “I know. I’ve learned a lot about myself and my father since coming to Fairhaven. Your brother was actually one of the first people I told about what my father did to me. He was there for me in a way no one ever has been before. I don’t... I don’t want the pack my father wants for me. Simon knows that.”

“But omegas don’t always get to choose,” Ellie finishes glumly.

“No, we don’t.”

“Please be good to him then? For as long as you can? Shit hasn’t been easy for us—for him especially, not before our

father went to prison and definitely not afterward. He saved me, Junie, and I love him more than anything. I just want him to be happy.”

“So do I,” I murmur, as the beta in question comes bounding down the stairs. He sweeps Ellie into a huge hug and then does the same to me, spinning me around until I’m dizzy.

Dizzy enough to fall, but truthfully, I fell months ago when he dashed into our study room for our very first tutoring session.



SIMON DECLARES a ban on studying the Sunday before finals, claiming we’d already worked our asses off and declaring us more than ready to face our exams—my very first finals at Fairhaven.

In truth, I feel prepared. With Ian and Simon’s help, I’m casting at a higher level than my peers, and I’m well into next term’s readings in all of my classes, save for Omega Seminar. So, when Simon suggests the two of us have a pizza and movie night? I’m happy for the break—and to finally be alone with him after our week of group study sessions.

“You’re on fort duty,” he says as he calls to place our usual order.

I may nest as well as most omegas, but forts are a bit beyond my capabilities. For one, I’m not even close to tall enough to hang sheets from the post at the foot of his bed. He comes up behind me, sets a hand at my waist to steady me as I try to reach the top of the post, and takes the sheet from me. His hand lingers, just long enough to embolden me. I turn until he boxes me in against the post, one arm over my head, the other still at my waist. Saints, he’s so close. My breath catches and I lean forward.

His throat works as he swallows hard, and he drops the sheet, drops his eyes to my lips, parts his own... and I press up on my toes and I kiss him. His hold on me tightens and he draws me close until nothing but our clothing separates us. His

lips move against mine for one blissful instant, the tip of his tongue meeting mine in a tentative dance.

And then he draws back, regret in his green-flecked hazel eyes. “I can’t, kit-kat. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter, trying to back up but bumping into the foot of the bed. “I, um, I misread that situation...”

He looks away and his voice is strained when he finally speaks. “You didn’t misread it. But it’s... complicated. I have a lot of shit I need to figure out and... and you’re one of the best things that’s ever happened to me, but I need time. Time to not fuck this up. Time to not ruin our friendship. You mean the world to me, Junes.”

“Oh.”

It’s not a rejection, not truly, and yet it stings just as sharply.

But if my time at Fairhaven has taught me anything, it’s how to hide my hurt, those broken parts inside myself, with a smile, brittle though it may be.

I look away quickly. “Yeah, um, I get it. Totally. No worries. Let’s get this fort made and the movie started?”

All I have to do is hide, just for a few more hours, until I can fall apart, alone in my nest, reliving his sweet kiss and his even sweeter rejection.

## CHAPTER 13



I let myself mourn Simon for one night and one night only. Things remain strained between us, but I tell myself it's just that we're both so busy with finals, even if I can't bring myself to believe it.

Just like I was at midterms, I'm the first to finish the written part of my Introduction to Casting exam when I place it on Ian's desk.

"You don't want to review your answers?" he asks me, just like he did at midterms.

"Do I ever?" I mutter.

He looks up at me with a smirk and an amused shake of his head. "For that cheekiness, you're going to be the last student I test for the practical exam." He nods to the hall. "See you in two hours."



I'VE SPENT hours preparing for Ian's practical exam and cast every single spell with all the precision and control I've been developing since claiming my magic at midterms. When I've cast the very last spell of the exam, he looks up at me, that smirk dancing on his lips.

"Your performance is satisfactory."

I shoot him a sour look and his smirk softens into a smile so fond, so sweet, it takes my breath away.



“But your progress is amazing. You should be proud of yourself. I know *I’m* proud of what you’ve accomplished.”

And if I said that doesn’t just make me float right out of the classroom and through the rest of my finals, well, I’d be lying.



THE MOMENT we finish our Restorative Magic final, Alyssa drags me bodily back to the omega lodge, chattering all the while about the Yule baking we’re about to do. In truth, it seems that Alyssa’s already been baking for days. She pulls bundle after bundle of plastic-wrapped spice cookie dough from the refrigerator and sets me to rolling the dough into balls and the balls into cinnamon sugar.

When those are cooling, she directs me in front of the stand mixer and slaps a recipe down in front of me. “Sugar cookies. Not even you could fuck these up, girlie, I promise.”

How wrong she is.

Unlike Alyssa’s cut-out cookies, which bake up into perfectly golden, sweet and chewy little ornaments, Yule trees, and candy canes, my sugar cookies are hard and floury, brittle and crumbly.

“Maybe icing will fix them?”

“Cake pops will fix them!” Alyssa declares, already mixing up another batch of icing to mix into the crumbled mess of my cookies. “Okay, you can ice a few. I made the icing. It’s the perfect consistency for outlining and you can even flood with it in a pinch. It’s just like drawing.”

“Flooding?”

“Oh, sweet saints. All right, come here.”

She patiently shows me how to pipe stripes of icing onto the ornament cookies and drag a toothpick through the still-wet icing to swirl the colors together.

And while Alyssa bakes up a storm around me, I finish icing dozens of definitely passable sugar cookies.

I pull another dozen candy cane-shaped cookies toward me, ice them and then crumble bits of mint chocolate Kit-Kats over top—for Simon, as a sort of olive branch.

For Ian, I carefully pipe sigils onto ornament cookies, painstakingly making each curve, arc and angle of the sigils we covered during our Monday night lessons. And, okay, so they're a little bit wobbly, but it's still a nice gesture, right?

Bitsy and Ellie crash our bake-a-thon early Thursday evening and together we roll tray after tray of crinkle cookies and snickerdoodles in powdered sugar.

I scrub dried frosting off my nose, wondering how on earth it got there. "So, this is a normal Yule thing for you?"

"Um, yeah. I honestly can't believe it's not for you. Your family depresses the shit out of me, girlie. My family's Yule is about food and laughter and loving the shit out of each other, no matter what. And your family's is..."

"All about PR opportunities under the guise of charitable giving, fancy food we have no part in making, and impersonal gifts we all shut away in drawers to never look at again."

"That's like... an anti-holiday. Remind me to never come to your family's Yule celebrations. Well, we're all celebrating when we get back," the other freshman decides, tapping her cheek thoughtfully. "Presents all around, handmade only. I'll do the cooking, naturally, and we're drinking spiked cocoa until we're stupid."

I wrap her in a goofy hug, covering her in the flour I covered myself in through a torturous afternoon of baking. "You are too good to us, Lys. I'll count down the days while opening a new tennis bracelet from my sister."

"Why do you need a tennis bracelet?" she grumbles. "You don't even *play* tennis."

Bitsy chuckles. "Oh, sweetie. It's not about the tennis. See you and yours at the soup kitchen on the Lower East Side, Junie? Pack Jordan got a ton of bad PR this year—no idea

where it came from, definitely not me and my antics—so we have to pretend volunteer our asses off.”

Alyssa groans, but then sobers.

“I know it’s not much, but I thought I’d send some Yule cookies to Trinity and Nick’s families,” Alyssa says, dropping onto the stool beside me.

“I’m making a generous donation of my father’s money to the Wells Foundation,” Bitsy says around a mouthful of crinkle cookie.

“I can pitch in some of my stipend from working in the infirmary,” Alyssa offers.

“Nah, girl, save your hard-earned cash. Spending my father’s money is the only thing I do that he actually approves of. Let me handle this one. It’s weird... it’s not like Trinity ever did anything like this with us. No baking or Yule celebrations. Mostly she kept to herself. But it really feels weird without her here.”

“Like her absence is bigger than her presence ever was,” I muse.

Bitsy slumps against the counter. “That’s what those fuckers want. They want us to feel it. Fear is the greatest weapon they have.

I don’t mention the ember that burns in the chests of my honor guard, the professor who has me so ensnared, and my teenage love. The Mark that now adorns alphas that stalk our very campus.

Because Bitsy is right: their war is one of fear.

And the only way to fight a war like that is with hope.



I GET A DOSE OF HOPE—AND pure girlish glee—the moment I see the paper-wrapped parcel on the doorstep to my cottage. I hoist it into my arms and push the door open with my hip, calling out a hello to Marcus.

My honor guard steps out of his room, toweling off his damp hair. I must have caught him getting out of the shower after hitting the gym while I was sneaking fingerfuls of icing and cookie dough straight out of the mixing bowls.

“What have you got there?”

I set down the package, the brown paper crinkling as I unwrap it carefully. “Books! And a note about... oh, it’s from Ian. The books are about transient sigils and—” I let out a laugh. “I owe him an essay the first week of spring term.

“You’re giddy over... homework?”

I shoot him a waspish glare. “I found transient sigils in some of the research I was helping him with. I was curious. Marcus, this is practically the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received.”

Marcus studies me for a moment. “Well, I’m glad you’re excited, at least. What else have you got?”

I set down the stack of books and pull the tins of cookies out of the tote I had slung over my shoulder.

“One for the Haley family, one for Simon, one for the Roses, which I’ll hide in my bedroom and share with no one and one for...” I purse my lips and duck away, a flush creeping into my cheeks. “One for Ian. For helping me with the extra lessons this term.”

“So, delivering a few cookies, Peer Advising, packing up, and we’ll hit the road early tomorrow morning?”

“You forgot the emergency online shopping I have to do for Yule gifts tonight,” I groan. “What do you get for the brother who has everything and likes nothing?”

“A... tie?”

“Just like every other year then.”

“I’m sure he’ll pretend to appreciate it.” The faintest smirk tips up the corners of Marcus’ full mouth and my heart skips a beat.

“Well, you won’t have to pretend to appreciate the cookies. All I did was decorate them. I hope they bring your mom some cheer. I really did try to make them festive.”

“That’s kind of you, thank you. Off to the dorms then? We can hit Professor Reinhardt’s office before your Peer Advising lesson. Last one of the term. I bet you’re glad of that.”

I sag against the kitchen counter, frowning. “I don’t know where I stand with Cassian. Sometimes, I think... I think he might still love me.”

“Sweet-tart, his love isn’t worth a damn if he won’t let you know where you stand with him. If you have any question about his feelings for you, then he doesn’t deserve you. Your love, your friendship, even your consideration.”

“That’s... that’s surprisingly wise.”

“It was a hard lesson for my sister to learn.”

“You never talk about her, Marcus.”

“One day, I will. You about ready?”

I scratch at my icing-covered arms. “Give me five?” I examine my arms and my tee shirt with a frown. “Saints, I hate cooking and baking anything more than tea and instant noodles.”

“Tea doesn’t count.”

“Oh, come on. Give me the noodles at least?”

“Fine, as a Yule gift. Now go get ready.”



WE STOP by the residence hall first, but Simon isn’t in his dorm—or if he is, he isn’t answering.

When I stop by his office, I find Ian grading a stack of exams, but he sets them aside at my knock.

“I hope you’re not here to pester me about your grade.”

“I don’t pester,” I protest. “Besides, I know I aced your final.”

He rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling a crooked smile that makes my belly flutter.

“I just wanted to say thank you.”

He arches a brow. “For?”

“Professor, you gave me a *present*.”

He shoots me a sour frown, but the smile doesn’t fade from his bright blue eyes. “I gave you homework, you menace.”

Oh, the heat in those words. “Well, thank you. For the homework.”

I brandish the tin of cookies and push them across his desk. “As a thank you for the extra lessons. Don’t worry—I hear my reputation precedes me—all I did was ice them.”

He cracks the lid off the tin and stares down at the cookies in consternation. I know my icing job wasn’t perfect, but saints, it wasn’t that bad and...

Oh.

Oh, holy fucking saints above.

The top cookie in the tin isn’t one of my sigil-decorated ornaments. It’s a horrible blob of a cookie that a certain other omega heiress with more talent with a pastry bag than I have iced.

And it’s a very, ahem, proud dick. With a very bulbous and red knot.

“That’s not mine!”

I snatch the cookie from the tin, and shove it in my mouth, trying desperately to destroy the evidence.

But it isn’t one of Alyssa’s perfect sugar cookies. It’s one of mine. I chew. And I chew, my face getting redder and redder. I finally swallow down the dry, floury lump with a wince and look up at Ian, beseeching every saint in the world

for the ground to open and swallow me up whole. “That wasn’t mine,” I say again. “I made the ones with the sigils.”

He cocks his head as he stares down at the cookies and I wonder what *else* Bitsy could have snuck in the tin when I wasn’t looking. “Oh. Is that what those are? At any rate, I knew that... other one wasn’t yours. Your line work is noticeably more... unrestrained. The other one was very smoothly iced... except for the, ahem, bits at the... tip.”

Now Ian looks for all the world like he’s wishing the ground to open up for him too, and I laugh. I laugh like I haven’t laughed all week.

And then he’s laughing too and the look we share—our guards down, joy rushing through us like champagne bubbles—is the best Yule gift I never thought to ask for.



I FIND the offending cookie decorator innocently perched on a stool in Ciel’s seating area.

“Soooo, what did Professor Panty-Melter think of my cookie?” Bitsy asks, all innocence.

My hackles go up at the nickname she uses so casually because, despite every reason I *shouldn’t*, I think of Ian as *mine*. “I panicked and shoved the whole thing in my mouth right in front of him.”

Bitsy cackles.

“Only to find out that you iced one of my horrible reject cookies. It was inedible. And he knew it wasn’t mine because the icing job didn’t totally suck.”

“Bet he enjoyed watching you suck that dick cookie down, though. Knot and all,” she snickers.

“Bits, he gave me homework.”

“That’s practically foreplay for you nerds. Bet you’re banging by Beltane!”

“Oh Saints, Bitsy. He’s a *professor*.”

“Doesn’t stop you from slicking for him. Anyway, Ellie and I have a bet going. She thinks it’ll be by the Feast of Marmora next year. I’ve got \$50 riding on this, so let me know.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## CHAPTER 14



*B*ity's antics make me late for Peer Advising, and I shouldn't have expected Cassian to be any more lenient since it's our last session.

"You're irresponsible!" he fumes, slamming his fists down on the table between us.

"I got held up after visiting Professor Reinhardt's office. I wanted to thank him for the extra lessons."

"Your whereabouts must *always* be accounted for," he growls.

"Marcus was with me," he protests.

"That isn't enough, Juniper. Not anymore. Don't you see? I told you you had a timetable for a reason. You're expected to adhere to it."

"Stop treating me like a misbehaving child, Cassian," I utter, my voice low. A warning.

"Then stop acting like one!"

He lectures me at length, voice hard, until he catches a too-familiar face peering into the study room.

"About time. Luca is here to talk to you. And you're going to listen to everything he has to say."

I shove back from the table, the wooden legs of my chair scraping across the wooden floor, and turn on Cassian, scowling.

“No,” I tell him. “You don’t get to do shit like this. My personal life is none of your business.”

“Sit, Juniper,” he demands, infusing the words with alpha command.

I resist, staring up at him impudently, but I can feel his dominance washing over me, can feel how much my mind and body want to give into his command, want to appease the imposing alpha. And yet, part of me feels like I could shake off the command. Which is... which is unheard of. Omegas don’t resist alpha commands. But then, omegas don’t have magic as strong as mine, magic so strong their fathers lock it out of fear.

In the end, I don’t resist. I glare and then turn away, taking my seat again so I can hide the way my face falls when I see him.

Luca.

The alpha who made me a nest and purred while holding me in his arms, who lied to me for months. I’ve dreaded this moment as much as I’ve yearned for it.

He’s leaner than before, the consequence of skipping meals in favor of cigarettes and coffee, the consequence of carrying a heavy burden. He looks beaten down, and that’s a feeling I understand all too well. Every harsh word I had on the tip of my tongue turns to ash in my mouth as I take him in.

His ripe-cherries-and-red-wine scent floods the room, my senses, too familiar and too much. Too tempting. Saints, how I’ve missed him despite his lies, his betrayal.

“You don’t have to, Juniper—” Luca begins, his voice scratchy. He slouches against the far wall of the study room, trying to make himself small, non-threatening.

“Talk to her,” Cassian demands.

I look over my shoulder and find Cassian leaning against the door behind me, arms folded across his chest, his expression thunderous.

“Then leave,” I tell him. Saints, how did I ever love this alpha? “This is none of your fucking business, Cassian.”

“You’re my fucking business,” he snarls, then waves at Luca.

I’ve only just started reeling from that declaration when Luca starts to speak in a voice rough from disuse.

“What I’m about to say, prin—Juniper, it doesn’t have to change things. You want nothing to do with me and I understand that. Believe me.” He sighs and glances up at me, but there’s no hope in his sea-green eyes. “But all of this... it’s not what you think.”

Is nothing what I think anymore? It’s the same refrain he tried to make me believe when he caught me outside St. Briac’s Hall, the words I’ve been foolishly hoping were true since the first time he said them. Stupid, naive omega, ready to forgive the alpha who destroyed me.

“Tell me one thing. Tell me you weren’t among the alphas that attacked me on move-in day.” Please, I beg the saints, let him not have been with Rad the day an omega trap shredded scars into my skin—scars he would later kiss—the day a vile alpha held a scribe to my throat and promised the end of all omegas.

He looks up sharply and I see his face clearly for the first time. Gaunt. Pale. His eyes are wide, and he anxiously scrubs a hand through his blond hair. “I wasn’t. I swear. I would never—could never—hurt you.”

Relief is like a riptide, pulling me under, dragging me down faster the more I struggle. The more I fight, the faster I drown, but still I fight. Because he *did* hurt me. He made me love him and then he betrayed me. “Then what? Why do you have that mask?” Fuck, can he hear the tears in my voice? The way my throat burns with them?

“I’ve been meeting with the Soldiers of Saint Aldous in secret, that much is true and I won’t deny it, but Juniper... I’ve been spying on them.”

My heart kicks in my chest, coming to life after being broken for so very long. “Wh-what? How?”

He looks away, rubbing at his stubbled jaw. “Everything is anonymous, scents hidden behind magic and identities hidden behind masks. Outside the meetings, they communicate through encrypted apps and burner phones.” He slouches a bit lower, his frown sinking creases into his forehead. “No names, no faces. If you have a mask, it’s not hard to pass.”

“Why?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “My guess is that they don’t trust each other enough to reveal who they are. They could be brought down too easily if someone knew who they were and ratted them out. But that goes both ways. It’s allowed me to sneak into their meetings...” He looks back up at me and swallows hard, his throat moving. “You must believe me. I never had any intention of putting that fucking mask back on. Not until you told me you were the one they attacked. I was... I was senseless with rage after that. Dangerous and destructive. And then I remembered the mask. I’ve told you before, Juniper. I can’t protect you the way other alphas can. I don’t have money or influence. No power. But this... I could do this. I could sneak around in the shadows and try to find out what they were planning. If I found out about an attack, I could warn you. Warn Marcus, the headmaster, shit. I don’t know.”

I drop my head into my hands, eyes stinging. All this time, I’ve believed the worst, but he only put the mask on for me? He put himself in danger, associated with the vilest of alphas... all for *me*. “Why did you have the mask in the first place?” I ask quietly.

He ducks his head and doesn’t speak for a moment. When he finally does, his voice is tight, strained. “My release from prison and my admission to Fairhaven were secured by an anonymous benefactor. The day I was released, I was picked up in a dark car and told what I’d have to do if I didn’t want to go back to prison.” He closes his eyes tightly and shakes his head. “He told me all I had to do was wear a mask and scare some people during the big All Saints’ Day parade in New

York. I wouldn't have to hurt anyone. Just scare them. Smash a few windows."

I remember that parade, the terror it struck in my heart as I watched it from above, safely tucked away in my father's office at the headquarters of Rose Pharmaceuticals. Away from the chaos, the screaming, and the stampeding. Hundreds of people in masks wreaked havoc, instilled fear in the hearts of omegas around the world. But I was safe, protected by a rich powerful alpha, just as I have always been. Just as I always will be if my father gets his way.

"You kept the mask." Saints, how I wish he had burned it back then.

"I kept it to remind myself what the cost of my freedom was. To know that I got a second chance I didn't deserve because I pretended to be one of *them*. I never would have put it back on. Not until I thought I could use it to help keep you safe."

I squeeze my eyes shut and force a nod. A hot knot of tears chokes me, and I can barely force my next question out around it. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

He glances up over my shoulder at Cassian and all the agony crashing through me turns to rage.

"Tell me," I press.

"I wanted to. Saints know I nearly told you a hundred times. But there was a chance I'd lose you after midterms. Everything... everything we had, could have been just a fond memory for you. Cassian didn't want me to break your heart if you weren't going to get to stay at Fairhaven."

I stare resolutely ahead, because if I turn around, I'm going to hurtle myself out of my chair and try to claw Cassian's stupid, smug eyes out.

"He doesn't get to decide what happens between us," I grind out.

Luca draws two small, folded booklets from his back pocket and sets them on the table in front of me. "He did when he was the one that could get us out of the country if you

couldn't call your magic. Look, Cassian knows shit. I don't know how and if you want to know, that's between you and him. But he knew what I was doing. And he knew I was doing it to keep you safe. He had already been making plans to get you out of the country, but when we discovered your father had locked your magic... I went straight to Cassian. Because he could do what I couldn't. He could get you to a sovereign sanctuary state like Guyana or New Zealand, where the deportation of omegas is prohibited."

I pick up the two passports with shaking hands and flip the first one open. I stare down at my own face beneath a new name. A whole new identity. I open the other and my breath stalls in my chest. Just the two passports. One for me and one for Luca.

"These are for a mated couple. We're not—"

"I would have mated you, if you'd consented."

"To save me and get me out of the country?" There's an ugly sharpness to my voice that I immediately regret, but Luca only shakes his head sadly.

"No, Junie. Saints save me because I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I would have mated you in an instant if you'd ever asked. And I would now. I love you and... and you're it for me. But that wasn't ever going to be enough. If we were going to escape, we needed papers. Funds. Flights. Cassian could do that for you. And I would have been the lucky bastard who got to have a life with you. It wouldn't have been an easy life, not the kind of life you deserve, but it would have been ours, and I would have done everything in my power to make you happy."

I grit my jaw even as tears slip down my cheeks, hot against my skin. "It would have been enough for me." I let out a shaky breath and realize with a sharp squeeze of my heart that Luca just told me he loved me for the very first time.

I want to shove my chair back so fast it clatters to the ground, round the table, and throw myself into his arms. I want to be who we used to be together, but too much has changed. Too much I can't even properly take in at once. "I

need time to think. I don't... I don't know if..." I press my lips together to stop them from trembling.

"I'm not asking anything of you, Juniper. Not even your forgiveness. I told you this doesn't have to change things and I meant it."

"Can we... can we talk after Yule break? Please?" My voice cracks on a broken sob, but I need there to be something more. Anything. As long as this isn't the end.

"Anything, Juniper," he says, looking at me through eyes shining with tears. "Always."

"Don't hurt him when you want to hurt me. Don't string him along," Cassian says, his voice hard.

I do shove my chair back now, snatch my bag up off the floor, take one last look at the alpha who would have made a life with me, and turn on the alpha who wouldn't. Saints, my hand itches and I want to slap the smug expression off Cassian's face.

But he would have saved me, would have given me a life with the alpha I love. "You're not my fucking alpha, Cassian, nor will you ever be. So stop trying to control my life. If I wanted an alpha to push me around, I'd marry whatever assholes my father wants me to. Not you. *Never* you."

I shove past him, throw the door to the study room open and storm out, my breath a weak, brittle thing in my lungs.

I dash down the stairs, desperate to feel the bitter sting of icy winter air against my heated skin, feeling like I'm about to erupt, and I do: in sobs that wrack my body, make me shake and shiver in Marcus' arms as he keeps me from tumbling into the free fall of hope and despair that tries to claim me.

## CHAPTER 15



The ride back to Greenwich is even more somber than the first leg of my journey to Fairhaven in late August, the day just as gray. Today, though, the clouds that cling close to the winding road are laden with snow, not rain. Perfect for a picturesque Yule.

Marcus fiddles with the radio until a pop station plays and I look over at him with a faint frown. I won't admit it out loud because the feelings I have for my honor guard are already inappropriate enough, but I can't imagine passing the next three weeks without him. His presence has become so intertwined into my daily life, his strength something I so often borrow, that I scarcely know how I'll survive these weeks without him.

Especially under my father's roof.

"You'll call me if you need me?"

"I will, but I won't. You deserve some time off with your family."

Marcus shrugs noncommittally. "After the whole term together, driving you home feels wrong."

My stomach flips and I duck, looking at my phone to hide my smile. "So, I'm not sending you to the home for retired honor guards early?"

"Didn't say that," he mutters.

"You thought I'd be the good kind of trouble."



“*You* are. Everything around you, on the other hand...” He sighs, drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel. “I hate that you’ll be under your father’s roof again.”

“You’re the third person to say that. So, what do you say? The toy drum, the toy xylophone, or the toy piano for Aspen’s little ones?”

Marcus cuts a glance at me before turning back to the road. “First of all, stop trying to change the subject. Second of all, wow, you *really* don’t like your brother, do you?”

I smirk to myself. “I’ll be okay, Marcus. I promise. And if I ever feel otherwise, even for a minute, I’ll call you. And I don’t hate my brother! How could you say that?” I tease. “It’s just, I absolutely adore his little munchkins. And Rose children have always started learning music at a young age... Oh, there’s a set of all three! The triplets will be like a very tiny, very loud little band. Sorry not sorry in the least, brother dearest...” I mutter as I tap the button to add the bundle to my cart. After I check out, I finally toss my phone into my bag, finished with my last-minute shopping at last.

“Oh saints, you’re the vodka aunt.”

I snicker. “If that was something I could be while also being a Rose omega, being the vodka auntie would be my dream. Instead, I’ll get to hear over and over from Claire how she can’t wait for me to experience the miracle of childbirth.”

“Aspen’s mate?”

“The perfect omega my father wishes I would be. Nothing against her. She’s sweet as can be, and genuine too. But she’s only a year older than I am and I just know she’s going to try and talk me into dropping out of Fairhaven. If she gets in my father’s ear...”

“If your father even thinks of withdrawing you from Fairhaven, I’m calling Cassian and putting you on a plane to New Zealand.”

“You heard.”

“I heard.”

“You’re not going to make me talk about Luca?”

“I’m ticked you kept something so big from me and risked yourself again, but no. Not until you’re ready.”

I lean across the center console and rest my head on his shoulder, hugging him around the middle as best I can in the front seat of the town car. “Thank you, Marcus. For everything.”



WE DRESS in our most understated designer clothes, donning our most demure diamonds and our least ostentatious five-thousand-dollar shoes, all to stand in a line in front of people with only pennies to their name, handing out cold sandwiches and bowls of thin soup, while news teams and paparazzi alike light up the room like the Times Square Yule tree.

The hypocrisy is astounding.

I pass Hawthorn to grab a new stack of bowls even though I’m supposed to ask an employee of the food bank to do that for me—so as not to ruin any photo opportunities. “Saints, how come I never saw how hypocritical this all was before?”

He shoots me a suppressive glare and returns to handing out hot cups of weak coffee, a fake smile plastered to his face.

Sickening. The hypocrisy isn’t just astounding, it’s sickening.

No, that burning fever beneath the color of my black velvet coat isn’t sickness. I glare down at my black heels, my head pounding. My heat. A day earlier than expected.

“Ma’am?”

I look up sharply to see a diminutive omega standing before me, wide eyes expectant. Her clothes are ragged, her winter coat barely more than filthy tatters, and her shoes have been patched with tape, but her eyes are bright and her smile brilliant.

I shake off the fugue flooding through me and force a tight smile as I fill her bowl. “Are you here with your pack?”

She nods to three alphas and two betas, a mix of men and women, and smiles fondly as she looks from one to the next. “I never go anywhere without them. They’re my everything.”

I serve her a bowl of soup and wish her a good Yule as her pack filters in behind her. Saints, there’s so much love among them that it hits me like a blow. They have nothing but each other and, for them, it’s enough. Just like whatever small, quiet life I could have had with Luca in a sanctuary state would have been enough for me. My insides cramp hard, every instinct in me shouting at me to find my own pack, my own love.

“Sad, isn’t it?” Tom asks.

I look up at my alpha brother-in-law, though doing so makes my head swim. “What is?”

“Stasia, the omega you just served, came from a good family. Her father would have made advantageous matches for her, but she picked her own pack. And now look at them.”

They look *happy*. Saints, is that what pack life could be? Happiness at the cost of all else? Love so overpowering it’s worth not having a roof over your head?

I sway in my stilettos and grab onto the edge of the table as my insides squeeze, fever racking through me.

Tom wrinkles his nose, but I see how his pupils narrow. How his nostrils flare and his eyes go dark.

Fuck, my impending heat has me perfuming. Willow grabs my arm tightly and drags me away, flashing the press a perfect smile.

“You just had to make this all about you, didn’t you? You said your heat wasn’t due until tomorrow!” she hisses. “And now you’re perfuming in front of my husband?”

Husband, not mate, because two alphas can’t mate like an alpha and omega can—and there was no omega mate to be had for my alpha sister. Male omegas are so rare as to be

nonexistent, considered abominations by alphas like my father. They rarely make it past the end of the year of their reveal as an omega. So, like a lowly beta, my sister is married, not mated.

And her husband, a hot-blooded alpha just like she is, could be the happiest husband on the planet, but his head still turns at a lush omega's scent.

"Accident," I manage, my mouth and throat suddenly dry from the fever.

Willow snatches a bottle of water from the back room at the food bank and shoves it into my hands.

"I can't even spend the evening with my family now because of you."

"I'm your family too," I whine, my heat crashing over me, stealing all reason, leaving behind only instinct and emotion.

"How I wish you weren't," she mutters, as she bustles me into her sleek sports car and peels off into the night.



I LINGER AT THE PRECIPICE, not falling into my full heat for hours, longing for the quiet safety of my nest back at Fairhaven. For my little cottage and the protection and care of my honor guard, not the sour-tempered beta nurse who applies spelled patches of painkillers and fever reducers to my skin by the dozen. Saints, I miss Marcus' gentle touch, his calming presence, his soothing scent.

Safe. I don't feel *safe* here as loud voices carry to my suite, to the nest I can't get just right even though I brought all my favorite nesting materials back to Rose Manor with me, even though the nesting materials still smell like my real home—the little cottage I share with Marcus.

I don't fall deep into my heat until the next morning when exhaustion finally breaks me.

*Pack*, my instincts whisper to me. *Go find your pack*. The pack I can never have. The honor guard who will never want me, who can't. The professor who says he can't, the beta who says he won't. The alpha who said he would mate me in a heartbeat, who loves me.

I don't dream of their bodies, lust after their knots. I dream of their bites, their bonds. Saints, I can't even bond with Simon, but I dream of him regardless, pulled under by the haze of my heat.

I toss and turn for what feels like an eternity, pain ripping through my body like wildfire, every nerve ending alight.

Voices and footsteps echo down the marble hallways of Rose Manor, dragging me from what fitful sleep I manage.

The nurse comes by every few hours to force water and bites of a protein bar down my throat, to stick more spells to my skin. I try to count the days of my heat by her appearances, but the hours and days all blur together in the dark of my nest, in the haze of my heat.

*Pack*, it whispers.

And I long for it, with all my heart.

As I tangle in the sheets, I hope and wish and pray for it.

For a pack.



WE'RE FORCED to celebrate late because of my heat, and our festivities are elegant and understated in a way that only the extremely wealthy can achieve.

Just as any Rose gathering should be.

Soft laughter drifts into the hall from the dining room but ceases the moment I take my seat at the table.

There is no chaos at Rose family Yule celebrations. We speak in low voices over dinner, as quiet piano music plays from the great hall. Even Aspen's triplets, turning four in a few

months, are quiet and subdued as course after course of exquisite food is set before us.

I'd trade every gourmet dish for a cup of instant noodles in my cottage, a plate of cookies shared with the other omegas in the omega lodge, or a pizza-with-everything in one of Simon's blanket forts. Anything where the quiet—when there even is any—isn't quite so stifling. I'd trade the elegant hunter green lace dress for leggings and fuzzy socks in a heartbeat, for Marcus' thick, cabled Fisherman sweater or, I realize with a pang, one of Luca's flannels.

Saints, how had I never noticed just how tense these dinners were before? I feel like I'm walking through a minefield as I try to navigate the subdued conversations happening around me.

Hawthorn, the one ally I thought I had amongst my backstabbing family, will scarcely say more than a word to me. But he'll gladly talk to Aspen and Willow. "Despite setbacks, I believe my division is on track for an excellent quarter, if we lean into current research regarding—"

"Now, now," my father says, smiling what he must intend to be a jovial, fatherly smile. It doesn't reach his eyes, pale blue like mine—which glint instead of twinkle. "Yule isn't the time to talk business. Let us simply enjoy each other's company in the few days we have together."

After the Rose New Year's Gala, my father and brothers will return to work, to their Manhattan penthouses, leaving me alone with Willow and a small household staff for the rest of break.

Claire leans toward me, covering the ears of the nearest triplet with her hands. "Did you know the omega that went missing at Fairhaven?"

My father and Aspen shoot her identical suppressive looks, but she ignores them, or perhaps doesn't notice them at all. "I know Trinity Wells, the student that went missing," I clarify, "but not the omega who went missing from the city of Fairhaven."

“You and Trinity are not unlike,” Aspen observes, coolly. “The only omega daughters in influential families. If an omega like her can be taken, I’m sure you must feel unsafe.”

I look down then up at my father through my lashes. “I do, sometimes, but I want to do the brave thing and stay, like Father said. My honor guard never lets me out of his sight, and he’s quite capable. I feel safer with him nearby.”

“I heard you were attacked,” Hawthorn says, his voice sharp—and not out of concern. Saints, the younger of my two brothers has never been this cold to me before, this uncaring and cruel.

“A misunderstanding,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Let us not talk about attacks with the little ones present,” Claire pleads, reaching for Aspen’s hand, taking comfort in his touch.

“Indeed,” my father says. “Suffice it to say, Hawthorn, Aspen, your younger sister is being very brave, and I’m exceedingly proud of her. Especially since I just received her grades.”

I startle and look up. “Oh, I hadn’t checked my email yet today. I trust they’re acceptable, Father?”

“More than.” He levels a stern stare at Hawthorn. “I would have liked to see your brother be as devoted to his studies as you are.”

“Anything to make you proud,” I lie, pasting on my sweetest, most obedient smile, my insides churning all the while.



BY THE TIME we’ve moved into the front salon and gathered around the stately Yule tree to open gifts, fatigue has sunken deep into my bones, the result of too many days spent thrashing in my nest and too few nights sleeping as my heat tormented me.

Still, though I feel snappish, I put on the perfect omega act I've spent two years perfecting. I'm gracious when I receive impersonal gifts from my brothers: a book on comportment for omegas mated to large packs from Hawthorn and a golden pen engraved with my name from Aspen. I even manage to smile—and catch Willow doing the same—when we open nearly identical pairs of diamond solitaire earrings from each other. Impersonal and elegant, just as it always has been in our family. But when I see the trousseau chest half hidden behind the tree, a blood-red bow wrapped around it, my stomach sinks.

“Fine china and linens,” my father explains. “To take with you when you're mated.”

“But that's years away, still,” I say weakly.

“And you will be prepared to do me proud, daughter,” he says, a dangerous edge to his voice.

Little Candace lets out a bright, cheery shriek, the loudest thing anyone of us has heard all day, and immediately bangs her little hands on the keys of the piano. “Oh, thank you, Auntie June!”

If only looks could kill, my eldest brother would be appropriately and publicly mourning my death, standing somber before the press as he talks about the great loss of his dearest sister.

Harper finds the xylophone, and out of the corner of my eye, I just catch Hawthorn's smirk.

When the racket becomes too much, I excuse myself, claiming a headache as I recover from my heat, and leave them all to the noise of exuberant children, enjoying their Yule.

As it should be.

I dive straight into the books Ian gave me, desperate for the comfort I won't find in my family, even as we celebrate one of magekind's most important holidays, and a note slips out of the first book when I open it.

I frown when I turn it over. It says just two words.



*Trust Hawthorn.*

And then, as soon as I've read it, the words disappear, replaced with requirements for the essay Ian has tasked me with.

I try to read the first few pages of the top book on the stack, but quickly realize I'm in no mood to parse through the dense text. I flip the book shut and stretch, knocking my knuckles against the book Hawthorn got me for Yule, ready to chuck it out of my nest.

Only to realize the cover is an illusion.

That the book on comportment for omegas is actually the biography of an omega saint: Saint Rosamund, the Black Rose.

And that, that's something I can get right into.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 16



Hawthorn resists every attempt I make to draw him into conversation over the next few days.

So unlike the brother who called me up and encouraged me to engage in every silly euphemism for sex he could think of while I groaned and squirmed in the backseat of one of my father's town cars as Marcus drove me to Fairhaven.

So unlike the brother who texted me a string of crude emojis after I told him not to ruin my next "study session" by calling again and again if I don't pick up the first time.

So when Hawthorn texts the phone no one else in the family has the number to, telling me to meet him in the game room for a few rounds of billiards—which my father would hate—I'm more than a bit confused. Still, I roll out of my nest where I'd been idly scrolling through everything I'd missed in the group chat I share with Alyssa, Ellie and Bitsy, throw on something more presentable than pajamas, and make my way to the game room, padding softly down the quiet, carpeted halls.

It's almost too quiet in the manor—until I reach my father's study and hear the voices leaking through the door. Turning, I see a shimmer in the old-fashioned keyhole. A spell?

"—can't believe you locked her magic like she's some deranged criminal—" I hear Hawthorn say. "She's your fucking daughter!"

I crouch beside the keyhole and press my ear to it, only to hear my father's stern rejoinder. It must be a spell, but who on earth would cast such a spell on my father's door? Who would *want* me to hear such a conversation? Unless it's a warding gone wrong. "Don't you dare raise your voice to me or question my decisions, boy. Your sister is a far greater danger than you know. How in the devil's name did her magic get unlocked? Have your sources at Fairhaven found anything out?"

I freeze, my stomach lurching. His sources? Saints above, I told Hawthorn exactly how my magic was unlocked, that Professor Reinhardt came upon me and undid the complex spellwork my father put in place to hold back my magic. And he was *appalled* when I told him. But his sources? Has my brother been spying on me?

His voice is dry, almost bored, when he responds. "I haven't heard anything. Certainly, there are talented enough mages at Fairhaven who could have figured it out, but as to who performed the unlocking? I don't know."

"I suppose how her magic was unlocked is of little consequence now. I knew I shouldn't have sent her to the damnable school," my father says, and I hear the soft footfalls of his pacing in the carpeted study.

Willow speaks for the first time. "Well, you had to get her out from underfoot somehow. She knew too much. How I don't know, but all of our plans were in jeopardy because of her. I still say you should have shipped her off to a finishing school for omegas as soon as her designation revealed and been done with it."

"She's strong," Hawthorn sighs. "Too strong for a lowly omega. She shamed you on her assessment, Aspen."

"Has she shown an affinity?" Willow asks, and I can imagine her as she sits, poised and elegant, in one of the leather chairs beside the fire, one lean leg crossed over the other, one nude patent leather-clad toe tapping.

"Pitiful little Juniper?" Aspen scoffs. "You believe *she* could possibly have an affinity?"

“Pitiful? Perhaps,” my father muses. “She is weak of character, for certain, but her magic is another thing entirely.”

I swallow hard. I knew my father didn’t really think of me as brave, but to hear him call me weak strikes me like a dagger of ice to the belly. But an affinity? I’ve never heard of such a thing, magical or otherwise.

“Affinities are cropping up in Rose laboratories around the globe. With her innate power, she could have one of the strongest affinities history has ever seen. I suspect some form of telepathy.”

“Telepathy? You’re joking,” Aspen sneers.

“You still don’t believe she read you when you struck her two summers ago,” Hawthorn realizes.

Struck me? Aspen’s never struck me before... unless that’s one more memory stolen from me when my father locked away my magic.

“That was a fluke, surely!” Aspen insists. “Or she found out about the container through some other means.”

“However she found out, she nearly cost us everything. She’ll be our downfall if she ever remembers,” Willow says quietly.

“Then let her have a tragic accident like that Lindstrom omega did,” Hawthorn sneers, and my heart stutters to a halt in my chest at the cold, surgical cruelty in his voice.

“If it comes down to it, it can be arranged,” my father says, waving off my brother’s concerns. “It’d be a dreadful time to have the press digging into the family though. The timeline for our work with Radcliffe Industries leaves us no time for disruptions. Nor for trouble like your sister could cause if she does indeed have an affinity. There is far too much at stake for us.”

Saints, it’s too much. My mind reels, my thoughts racing as I try to commit their conversation to memory.

“She hasn’t mentioned anything to me that would suggest an affinity,” Hawthorn says. “Nor have any of my contacts at

Fairhaven.”

“Her honor guard hasn’t said anything either,” my father says. “Though I suspect she’s won his loyalty. He may be immune to her, but omegas are still manipulative, spiteful creatures. She may not even know she’s doing it, but I’m certain she’s manipulated the poor alpha.”

“Juniper doesn’t have a cruel bone in her body,” Aspen sneers. “She’s weak, like father said.”

“Cruelty isn’t strength,” Willow says venomously. “But she needn’t be cruel to be manipulative. She’s an omega. It’s what they *do*. You saw Mother do the very same, and you loved her long after she left us.”

They’re silent for a moment before Hawthorn raises a new subject. “But you trust her honor guard?”

“He’s a pawn. His actions are of no consequence, but his presence demonstrates our familial commitment to her education. He performs well enough.”

“Well enough? She was assaulted!”

There’s a fervor in Hawthorn’s voice, an anger on my behalf that’s been missing this whole time. For the first time, he almost sounds like the brother I know and love. Almost.

“As I said, well enough. She lives, more or less unharmed. That is sufficient,” my father says.

“She probably invited it,” Aspen sneers.

“I suspect as much,” my father agrees. “Foul omega that she is. But she won’t be a concern of ours much longer.”

I can bear no more of their conversation. I flee from the door to my father’s study, taking care to keep my footfalls silent as I rush to my suite. I lock the door behind me, dash into the bathroom and lock that door as well, and as soon as the bolt clicks in the lock, I throw myself before the toilet and vomit up breakfast.

I weep as I heave. As I clean myself up. As I scribble down every single damning detail I can remember of their

conversation. It isn't hard. Every cruel word is etched on my heart.



I SPEND New Year's Eve coordinating with the contractors we've hired to decorate the manor in glittering golds and shimmering silvers, in heavy white blooms bursting with fragrance. Playing the good little omega who will one day do the same for her influential pack.

My father catches me as I'm working with a beta woman on fixing a floral arrangement in the entry hall and I brush my hands off before turning to him, plastering my mask back in place.

"We'll be entertaining some special guests this evening. I expect you to be an exemplary hostess. The young Radcliffe alpha you go to school with will be here, and I'm in the midst of making a business arrangement with one of his fathers. I do hope you'll be welcoming to him. But don't let him take liberties, as I'm certain he'll try to do. He'll ask for a kiss at midnight. Give him your cheek."

My skin crawls at the thought of Rad touching me again, like he did in the stand of trees beside the library, like he did while admiring the spot on my throat where he'd leave his bite in the study room before my Peer Advising session. Bile rises in my throat, scorching and bitter. "Yes, father, of course," I lie. "I'll do whatever you ask."

He claps a hand on my shoulder in a way that's more domineering than fatherly. "As well you should."



AS SOON AS I've dealt with the caterers, I escape to my room, claiming I need to rest before the long night of festivities ahead. But I pace instead, staring down at my phone.

Marcus told me to call if I was in any danger, and I am—of that I have no doubt—but I’ll be safe for the night, save for a few lingering touches from an alpha I loathe, a pinch on the bottom, words that’ll land like blows where I am weakest.

*She is weak of character.*

And I am. I’m faced with more than I can handle, and I want to turn to someone. To Marcus or Ian. To Simon, who I’ve barely spoken to since our disastrous kiss.

To Luca.

In the end, it’s finally Luca’s number I punch into my phone, unblocking it for the first time in weeks. I hide myself away in the bathroom, curling down low in the cold, empty porcelain tub, and hit the call button.

He answers on the third ring and the way he says my name is a balm so sweet it brings tears to my eyes.

“Juniper,” he breathes, as though I’m the answer to all of the prayers he never even thought to pray.

When I hiccup out a short, sharp sob, his own voice breaks. “Juniper, what is it?”

It’s everything. Too much crowding around in my brain, and through my tears, I tell him all of it. From Rad’s dire warning to my father’s, to everything I heard as I listened outside the door to his study.

He listens so quietly I have to check if the call has dropped and when he finally speaks, it brings fresh tears to my eyes. “We have to get you out of there, princess.”

How does my heart soar at that one word while it sinks, while it plummets lower than I thought possible?

“I can’t,” I manage. “But I just... I couldn’t keep it all in. There’s no one here I trust.”

“Not even Hawthorn?”

I shed a few more bitter tears. “He’s been acting strangely. I thought he had my back, that he wasn’t like them, but after

everything he's said... after the way he's treated me all break, Luca, I just... I don't know. I feel so very alone right now."

"I hate this," he growls. "I hate that your own fucking family makes you feel like that. I hate that there isn't a single fucking thing I can do about it."

"Just... just talk to me? Distract me? What did you end up doing for Yule?"

He huffs out a laugh. "I thought I'd end up spending it alone, but Cassian made me come clean to Darika and she hauled my sorry ass to her family's for Yule. And you'll never believe—"

He pauses.

"I'll never believe what?" I press.

"I... can't tell you."

That same sharp stab of betrayal pricks at my heart. "More secrets?"

"It's not *my* secret, princess. It's Alyssa and Darika's and I promised I wouldn't tell you. Alyssa made me swear."

"Oh saints, are they going to get mated?"

"Junie, I swore."

"They are!"

"They did," he finally mutters, but I can hear the smile in his voice and it's like the first ray of spring sunshine after the longest winter. "But act surprised when Alyssa tells you, all right?"

"I will," I promise. Saints above, there's still goodness in this world after all. My best friend has found her mate. "That made my day. Everything is horrible here, but just that and... and hearing your voice." My own voice cracks. "I've missed you."

He lets out a ragged breath and his voice is choked with tears when he says, "I've missed you too."

"We'll talk after Yule?"



“Anything. Juniper, there’s nothing in the world within my power that I wouldn’t do for you.”

“I know,” I murmur, as one by one, the cracks in my heart begin to mend.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 17



Our New Year's Galas have always been a sight to behold, an invitation coveted by those in power in mage society. Alphas and their packs come from around the world to mingle in our manor, to drink from our wine cellar and my father's scotch collection. To talk business.

And just like I have every year before, I play the obliging omega hostess. I speak softly, smile wanly, and I bare my neck to all the powerful alphas that step through my father's door. I make eye contact only with other omegas as I circulate throughout the ballroom, murmuring pleasantries, asking after mates and children, clasping hands with the other omegas but never lingering long.

And to think, I used to think I enjoyed these events. I used to take pride in my ability to make meaningless small talk with my father's guests. I used to take pride in being the perfect omega: vapid but charming.

I'm assaulted by a potent bouquet of alpha scents as I mingle, but under all of them is the unmistakable spicy tang of anise and orange. I clench my teeth against my nausea, pretend to sip from my champagne to hold the glass beneath my nose to block the scent.

But Andrew Radcliffe is nowhere to be seen.

The string quartet starts playing around an hour before the new year, just as the last of our guests arrive, and the chatter turns to a dull roar. Dancers take to the floor to see and be seen. Only at a Rose gala are the hours before midnight of

greater import than passing into the new year. Deals are made over canapés and priceless scotch, while daughters like me are paraded in front of eligible alphas.

Eligible alphas like Rad, who I smell but still don't see.

This, this is the life I could have with the kind of alphas my father intends to mate me off to: a life of parties and designer clothes, of fancy champagne and gourmet food, of power and prestige. Of subservience. Of submission.

It's so far from the life I've imagined for myself in my sweetest daydreams.

A long caress traces up my bare arm as Andrew Radcliffe leans in to whisper in my ear. "I like you so much better *leashed*."

Leashed by my father's attention, his eyes on me as I represent our family in this pool of sharks.

I bristle but tilt my head, showing him my neck. "Mr. Radcliffe. How very nice to see you."

"Dance with me, witch." He says the slur just loud enough for me to hear, just quiet enough that none of the other alphas around us hear it.

My father's eyes are on me, so I force a nod, letting Rad take my hand, draw me to the dance floor. His hand slips from my waist to my hip, his thick fingers digging into my flesh so hard I wince.

I press my lips together as firmly as I can without drawing his notice, trying to bite back the nausea rising in my throat as his scent wraps around me. I know I won't escape it tonight, that it'll cling to my dress, my hair, that I'll smell it wherever I go until I scrub every last bit of it from my skin.

Like I have twice before. Like I did in a bath before Luca drew me out to watch the stars fall. Like Marcus helped me do after the alpha clutching my waist tried to rape me.

"Your behavior is much improved," he says, his voice smooth. "You *do* listen. Good, very good."

His hand slips lower and a whimper escapes me.

His thoughts assault me. *How far can I take this here? She squirms so beautifully...*

He traces a long touch up my neck and then tips my chin up, trying to force me to meet his eyes, but I turn away and show him my neck, just as I'm expected to. Just as he wants me to.

"Your behavior pleases me, omega."

He truly does sound pleased—and the thought that I've done a saints-damned thing to please him makes me want to retch on his expensive Italian leather shoes. Vile alpha.

"Be this biddable and I won't have to punish you too severely," he says, low in my ear, his lips brushing against my skin.

I go stiff and satisfaction pours off of him at my discomfort.

"Because I'd much rather mate you than do what I did to Heather Lindstrom, sweetest."

His hand tightens around mine and his thoughts fill my head, all of them unwelcome. He thinks of how much more he'd rather take my wrist, pin me down. He thinks of how much more biddable I'll be when I'm his mate. How he'll make it so. *Dominate, degrade, defile.*

He gets what he wants, the vile alpha whose fingers dig into my hip. I cower and shrink. I make myself small. I look for any means of escape I can find. I look for any ally in the crush of family and family friends and find no one.

"May I cut in?"

My shoulders pinch at my older brother's voice but Rad gallantly bows out, passing my hand off to Aspen like it's a treasure he's won.

"Brother," I greet, wariness seeping into my voice.

"Can't you behave appropriately for a single fucking night?" he seethes, sharp blue eyes narrowed.

Strange, Rad found my behavior much improved. I let out a low whimper when he squeezes my hand so tightly my bones grind together.

“You’re hurting me,” I whine, because I know it’s what he wants to hear. Because if he hears what he wants, maybe, just maybe, he’ll relent.

“We are trying to forge an alliance with Pack Radcliffe and you can’t even bother to properly entertain their golden heir? Saints above, sister, he stands to inherit everything. The power that alpha will wield, and he had to practically *drag* you around the dance floor.”

“He frightens me, Aspen,” I whisper, because like Rad, Aspen likes me afraid. He likes me small. Small when my honor guard likes me troublesome.

*I get the feeling that you’re going to be a heap of trouble, Juniper, but the very best kind of trouble.*

“Good,” my brother growls, tracking the other alpha around the ballroom. But there’s more than just my wanting behavior that has my brother so agitated. He steals glances at me and there’s *fear* in his eyes, eyes so like mine. It’s like looking into a mirror of my own terror, but what does Aspen have to be afraid of?

Something to do with the business Rose Pharmaceuticals is presently engaged in?

For the first time I can remember, I hear my brother’s voice in my mind, saying just a number, over and over on repeat. A number he is so deeply afraid of.

CHEI-8736153.

“I’ll do better,” I whisper, repeating the number over and over until it’s forged into my memory, forever emblazoned in my mind like sparks dancing from my yellow nail-polished fingertips, like butterflies made of light taking flight beneath the pier at Rose Beach, like shooting star wishes whispered in the night to the alpha I loved.

Love.

Aspen shoves me back into Radcliffe's arms just in time for the countdown to the new year, growling out a warning in a low voice. "This is so much bigger than one pathetic omega, so much bigger than your pitiful existence, so do as you're told. Don't give him your cheek. Act like you will then give him your lips. Do it, Juniper. You won't like the consequences if you disobey."

Rad's arm is tight around my waist, fingers skimming down my hips through my velvet dress. When the clock finally strikes midnight, he looks me in the eyes, but all I see is an all too familiar mask.

"I'm starting this year as I intend to end it," he swears, his lips at the shell of my ear, my jaw. "By this time next year, you *will* be my mate, witch. Mine to do with as I feel necessary. As I please."

*Dominate, degrade, defile.*

He brushes his lips across mine in what could almost be a sweet kiss if not for the alpha kissing me and the promise he seals with it.



OUR GUESTS STAY about an hour beyond the turn of the year, and I avoid my family and Rad for the rest of the party, circulating, smiling brightly.

It's Claire that finally finds me as I'm instructing the caterers to begin turning down their service.

"You and the young Mr. Radcliffe certainly make a handsome couple! I can't wait until you're mated. How lovely a couple you'll be."

"I'll have a pack, Claire. Not a single mate. I'm too potent for a single alpha."

"So you think, dear sister. So am I, but omegas of a certain status—like us—are often doomed to suffer with only a single mate. Alphas like Aspen and Andrew don't like to share, you know."

“It isn’t a sound fiscal decision. My father would never consent to mate me to a single alpha when he could secure three more contracts on my behalf.”

Claire smiles dreamily, but there’s an undercurrent of fear, of fatigue, souring her sweet omega scent. “Ah, but haven’t you seen how he looks at you? He’ll pay handsomely for the privilege of mating you. You’ll see.”

As she turns to leave, she offers me a wan, weak smile. “As is below, so is above, sister dearest.”



I FINALLY MAKE it back to my room just before two, shower off Rad’s repulsive scent then tug on leggings and a Fairhaven sweatshirt, but I’m too anxious to sleep. Rad’s promises, Claire’s oddly prescient platitudes, and Aspen’s warnings all whip around in my mind like wild winds, the roar of them enough to deafen me.

Which might be why my phone rings four times before I breathlessly answer it.

“Come stargaze with me?”

Just hearing his voice melts away some of the ragged tension curled tight like a spring between my shoulders. “Luca? It’s two in the morning and I’m in Greenwich.”

“So am I. Can you sneak out?”

“I... I’ve never snuck out before,” I whisper.

“I’m parked down the road, out beyond the carriage house, but if it’s too dangerous, don’t you dare try. But if you want and—”

I’m already out of my nest. “I’ll text you in a second and see you in a few minutes,” I promise before ending the call.

I make my quiet way down the hall to the cloakroom and step into my fur-lined boots, then finally slip my parka down off its cedar hanger.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” Hawthorn demands.

I startle, immediately trying to find an excuse, until I remember Ian’s note. *Trust Hawthorn*. “A friend’s passing by and wanted to wish me a happy new year. I’m just ducking out for a few minutes.”

“A friend? In the middle of the night? Must be that study buddy you’ve been spending so much time with.” He waggles his eyebrows, once more the Hawthorn I’ve loved and trusted for years. “You’re in luck. With all the caterers and vendors coming and going, Father hasn’t reset the wards yet. You’ve got until morning, but don’t push your luck. Head out the back and cut across the gardens by the carriage house. No magic, no cameras. You can sneak out down the service road. Have your dick appointment meet you there, just past the gate.”

“My—!” Color floods my cheeks.

Hawthorn extends his fist and I weakly bump knuckles with him. I tap out a quick text to Luca about where to meet me and then shove my phone into the pocket of my leggings.

“Hey, Junebear?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not what they say you are—in private or to your face. Well, you’re freaky powerful, but the rest of it is bullshit. They’ve got you all wrong.”

“They’ve got you wrong too, Hawth.”

He quirks a brow and grins. “That is exactly the point.”

I pause for a moment, relief washing through me. I haven’t lost my brother to the rest of my family after all. “Hey, Hawthorn? What’s... what’s an affinity?”

My phone chimes in my pocket and Hawthorn shakes his head. “Not here, not now. Go and forget about Rose bullshit for a night. Get that good dick and we’ll talk soon, all right?”

I bounce forward and wrap him in a tight hug and I sneak out just the way he told me to. The moment I leave the manor grounds, it’s like all my worries wash away, if only for now.



Luca's leaning against the side of a parked pick-up truck at the end of the service road behind the manor, looking like sin and salvation, and saints above, does he make me want both.

I can't help it. I run into his arms, and he catches me with a surprised and amused "oof!"

"You came all this way for me?" I look up at him, into those sea-green eyes that have always mesmerized me. I move to step back because, despite the fact that he's here, despite the fact that just his voice banishes some of my darkest thoughts, we haven't talked yet, but he doesn't let me go.

"Not yet," he says in a strained growl, nuzzling his scent into my skin. "My instincts are going wild, and I need... please, I need a moment."

Of me, in his arms, just like this.

I snuggle into him, into the soft flannel beneath his leather coat, drawing his scent into my lungs, letting it wash over me until I'm nearly drunk on red wine and cherries.

Right. *This* is right. I stumbled back to him, and he is *mine*. We have to talk, and we have so much to work through, but we will.

He finally releases me, and I feel the loss of him immediately, missing his warmth, the long, lean planes of his body against mine. He smiles as I try to slip back into his arms and it's like the sunrise after Yule's longest night. Bright and brilliant and full of hope.

"Come away with me? Just for a few hours?"

"You'll have me home before my carriage turns back into a pumpkin?" I tease, lacing my fingers with his.

"My princess," he growls.

"My alpha."

"Please, don't say that if you don't mean it."

"I mean it," I whisper.

I watch him fight with his instincts, with the need to have me back in his arms, watch as raw, naked need softens to what

I now know means love. What has always meant love.

The wonder in his eyes, his slackened jaw that parts his lips, the softness of him, it's always been love.

“Will you come stargaze with me?”

“I would love to. I just have to be back by six so I can sneak in before anyone wakes up.”

He opens the passenger door of the pick-up for me and helps me up onto the bench seat. “Let's not waste a single minute then.”

I sink my fingers into something soft and silky on the leather seat and recognize the blanket he bought me so I could nest in his room. He hops in the other side and meets my eyes across the cab of the pick-up.

“You were so upset when we spoke, I thought you'd want something familiar. A comfort from home.”

From my *real* home, not the house I grew up in.

“I washed it and tried to de-scent it so you wouldn't have to smell my scent, but it's been in the pick-up, so...”

“I want it scented like you.”

The relief on his face, the pride and possession in his eyes, is enough to send me across the seat to curl up against his side. He tugs the blanket up around me and then pulls out onto the main thoroughfare. As soon as we hit the highway, he lets me go just long enough to grab for the spelled thermos that rolled under the seat.

“Whole milk double-chocolate hot cocoa. Well, hopefully the spell kept it hot. It brought you some comfort before, so I asked Alyssa to make it up for you, and I thought... well, anyway, there's leftover Yule cookies in here somewhere too.”

I hug him tightly around the middle. How did I ever believe this alpha could betray me? Why did I let my hurt blind me for so long? I lost so much time telling myself that there was no good explanation for him having the Baphomet mask, only for the explanation to be *me*.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

“*You’re* sorry? Why?”

I snuggle closer to him and squeeze his hand. “I should have trusted you. I should have heard you out. But I was... I was...”

“You were scared. Saints, of course you were scared. After what those bastards have done to you, I can’t fault you for that. You felt betrayed. I didn’t understand it at first because I would never betray you. But you probably thought your father would never betray you either, and look what he did.”

“It’s worse than I thought,” I admit in a low tone.

The hand not holding mine tightens on the leather-wrapped steering wheel and his scent spikes, all of his protective alpha instincts rushing to the surface. “I’m sorry, my instincts are all over the place tonight. I want to burn the world to the ground for you. I want to hold you and never let you go. I want to see you fucking *shine*. And it’s wreaking havoc on my instincts. I promise I’ll get them under control.”

“Don’t,” I tell him. “Not for my sake. I’m not afraid of you. Not anymore. And I... I *like* it when you alpha out because of me.”

“Princess, you’re killing me. Can you not say things like that, at least until we make it to Pawling?”

I smile to myself and curl into his side, pulling my blanket tighter around my shoulders. “What’s in Pawling?”

“A nice little lake that should be frozen at least a foot down by now. Perfect for ice skating before we drink cocoa and watch the Quadrantids shower.”

“Oh! I haven’t been ice skating in years!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you if you start to fall.”

He’s talking about ice skating, but I know he means so much more too.

“Um, I’m going to smoke you. I did competitive figure skating for years.”

“I’d like to see you try. I’m from Nova Scotia. I learned to skate before I learned to walk.”

“Oh, you’ll see me try. As I’m skating circles around you.”

He unlaces his fingers from mine and slings an arm around me, hugging me close. “Saints, I’ve missed you, princess.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 18



*W*e pull off near the dark lake and he digs a pair of skates out of the bed of the pick-up. “Darika got these for Alyssa who said, and I quote, ‘There’s no fucking way, you knife-footed ice gremlin!’ so they may still be a bit stiff, but she said you’re about the same size. And that you can have them because the only way she likes ice is when it’s ice cream.”

I laugh, joy bubbling through me until I can’t stop smiling. “They’re really mated?”

“They really are, and I *really* didn’t tell you. She wanted to surprise you girls when we all got back from break.”

I pull them on and then tug skate guards on over the blades. “Be my date to the mating bash I’m going to throw her?”

“It would be my absolute honor, princess.”

He helps me down from the pick-up and I make my careful way down the pebbled drive to the shore by the glow of his headlights, only wobbling a little. True to his word, the lake is frozen solid, and a green flag flies from a pole on the shore indicating it’s safe to skate. Probably not in the middle of the night, but I can think of no better time. Not when I’m with the alpha who casts a few small glowing orbs of light to follow us around and then takes to the frozen lake like he was born for it.

I remove my skate guards at the ice’s edge and then slide onto it, skating a few feet to find my balance in the new skates.

They're as stiff as Luca said they'd be, but I catch up with him in no time, looping around him in an elegant figure eight.

I slip my hand into his and we skate together in perfect sync. "Can we do this again when we get back to campus? There has to be some place on Deer Island where we can skate."

"If omegas aren't still locked down, I'll take you up to the lake any time you want."

"Oh! Big Meadow Lake! It was on your list."

"You kept it?"

"I tore it to pieces," I say. "And then immediately put it back together again in a panic."

"I'm so sorry, Juniper. Truly. For everything. I'll do whatever it takes to earn your forgiveness."

"I want to do everything on your list," I say, letting go of his hand and slowly skating backwards away from him, watching him watch me.

"We'll do it all twice over," he swears. "What else?"

"Be with me for my next heat, even if you can't knot me yet?"

"You don't even have to ask."

"Endless supply of Luca-scented flannels?"

He laughs and skates in a loop around me, grabbing my hand back. "Done. You look better in them than I do anyway. Downright sinful. What else, beautiful?"

"Stay by my side during what's to come? It's... it's going to be a lot."

"Always. I'll *always* be by your side if you'll let me."

There are darker days to come. Affinities, dark plots, and treacherous alphas. Soldiers of Saint Aldous on campus, kidnappings and far, far worse. Secrets have festered within Fairhaven for far too long, but I don't voice all of those worries now.

For now, I let Luca's solemn promise warm my heart.

For now, I skate by his side under a starry sky, the glow of his magic lighting my smile and his.



WE SPLIT the cocoa while watching meteors shoot across the sky in a make-shift nest in the bed of his pick-up, kept warm by magic, every blanket he could find, and each other. I don't hesitate to crawl into his arms, though he still tenses when I do, but once I settle, once I nuzzle at his jaw and then rest my head on his shoulder, he purrs.

He holds me close, the rumble in his chest stronger than I've ever heard it before.

Saints, to hear this alpha purr for me again, to feel the reverberations through his body, it's the sweetest ecstasy.

Slowly, he draws the rest of my worries from me, and I tell him about Rad, how the alpha cornered me before Peer Advising, how just tonight, he swore we'd be mated within the year. How I think he's the one that's been following me around campus. How he killed an omega years ago and I fear he could do the same to me.

Luca's purr deepens, but he growls too, his whole body going tense. I curl closer, nuzzling into his skin, marking him with my scent just as he marked me with his when I raced into his arms. "No good alpha thinks the things I do, Juniper. I'm so fucking ashamed. The things I would do to that piece of shit..."

The smallest thrill goes through me at the protective promise in his voice, and for the first time in over a month, I perfume for my alpha.

He turns on me, his eyes wide as he breathes me in. His chest rises and falls with his breath and finally, his eyes fall shut. He pulls me closer, nuzzles down my jaw, up the column of my throat and drinks in my scent until he calms.

“Luca, I like you protective. I like knowing that there’s someone out there who would do to that fucking bastard what I can’t. But you mustn’t. He’s already targeting you to get to me. To hurt me. I think he’s the one who set you up for Grace’s kidnapping.”

“I had absolutely nothing to do with that.”

“The mage inspector’s report claimed you coveted her.” Even though I know in my heart that he didn’t covet Grace Cassidy, there’s still an edge to my voice I hate.

“Never. I saw her at Quill & Clover from time to time and helped her pick out a few books to give to her pack as gifts, then spoke to her briefly when she came to the garage with her pack to pick up one of their cars, but nothing more. Never anything more. Juniper, I said it before, and I’ll say it again a million more times: you’re it for me.”

I cuddle closer and sigh. “I should have never doubted you. I’m just so scared right now. My father, he... he insinuated that he might need to get rid of me if I got in the way of his plans.”

“What plans?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“But he plans to hurt you?”

“If he has to.”

“Saints, Juniper. Why are we even still in the country? We could flee. I can call Cassian and he can charter a flight. We could be on our way to New Zealand in hours.”

It’s a perfect, beautiful dream. A small, quiet life with this alpha I love so desperately. No more galas and politics, no more baring my neck to alphas who will never deserve my attention, let alone my submission.

I could be *free*.

I shut my eyes tightly as a few hot tears bead along my lower lashes. “I can’t. My family is up to something, and I think it’s hurting omegas. I knew what it was once, and I



think... I think I could be the key to unraveling it all. To bringing my father down.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll bring him to his fucking knees. Hey, make a wish?” He nods to a meteor shooting across the sky, and though I could wish for freedom, for safety from the demons at my door, I shake my head.

“I don’t have to wish for anything. My wish is coming true right now.”



HAWTHORN LOOKS up from the business magazine he’s flipping through. “Good dick date?”

I roll my eyes as I drop down into the leather chair across from him. “It wasn’t like that. Where is everyone?”

“Our father took the others to lunch, leaving us to fend for ourselves.”

“We have enough leftovers to feed an army. Want to raid the fridge?”

“Best idea you’ve ever had. I need a fucking cup of coffee, too. My head is pounding.”

“Hungover? Hawthorn, get your shit together, jeez.”

“Hey, it’s either be miserable during a Rose gala or be miserable the day after. I prefer to pick my own misery.”

I shake my head in amusement as I put a pod in the espresso machine.

He looks around the kitchen and then utters a soft spell, tracing a few sigils with his scribe. He scans the corners of the kitchen and then leans heavily against the island’s counter. “Half the rooms in this house are bugged or have hidden cameras in them, so be careful.”

“Fuck, really?”

“Your suite’s safe. So’s the kitchen. The game room’s okay, and I couldn’t try that spell in Father’s office, but the

front salon? The great hall? My rooms? Watch what you say.”

“You meant for me to overhear your conversation with Father the other day, didn’t you?”

“So it worked,” he says, glumly. “It’s what I intended, but I hate that you had to hear it. What did you end up hearing?”

“Father asking you about who unlocked my magic, for one. But you *know* Professor Reinhardt did it.”

“I knew it even before you told me.” Hawthorn tells me, shooing me away from the espresso machine and taking over for me.

“He told you?”

“Of course, he told me. He’s my best friend and you’re my little sister. I told him to watch out for you.”

“I didn’t realize the two of you were friends, but that doesn’t explain why he was such a prick to me half the term.”

Hawthorn shakes with laughter. “So, he was... Ian. Why am I not remotely surprised? We’ve been friends since we attended Fairhaven together. You can trust him. He’s the best alpha I know. When he’s not being an absolute dickhead.”

“You know, he told me I could trust you too.”

Hawthorn sighs. “Sorry for how I acted when the rest of the family was around. Fuck, it’s like they’re finally letting me into their inner circle, but only if I turn my back on you—or seem to.”

“Why do you even *want* to be in their inner circle?”

“That’s not obvious? To bring them down.”

“Do you know what this whole big plot is?”

“Only bits and pieces. They’re only just starting to trust me.” He passes me a cappuccino and then nods toward the hall. “Come with me for a minute?”

Confused, I follow Hawthorn toward the back of the house where our mother’s old conservatory still stands. He jiggles the knob, casts a quick spell, shoves the creaking door open.

“You can’t go in there, Hawthorn. It’s dangerous!”

“And why do you think that is?” he asks, stepping farther into the room. He holds up his hand and sparks flicker across his skin.

“You know some contractors we had in had an accident when they were working on fortifying the foundations.”

“Do you always believe what Father tells you? Come in, Juniper. You’ll be safe in here. After all... your magic is what caused this destruction. The most skilled mages haven’t been able to cleanse this space of your magic, even years later.”

Mine? Impossible.

*But is it?* a small voice at the back of my mind asks. My magic frightened my father so much he locked it. I step tentatively over the threshold and into the room, and it’s like walking into my very own soul. My magic welcomes me, dances along my skin.

“What did I do?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. I mean, clearly you torched this place. I just don’t know why.”

I drift farther into the room, touching sooty stone tables, stepping carefully over broken shards of pottery. The smell of smoke still hangs in the air, all these years later, but as I drag the acrid scent into my lungs, the world around me shifts.

The conservatory is engulfed in flames. Not now. Then? When I was younger? I look down at my hands, expecting to see the yellow nail polish I favored when I was sixteen. Instead, I see a bite.

Saints, a *mating* bite, right at the fleshy heel of my palm, right below the omega trap’s scars Luca once kissed.

The world around me spins, burns, blazes, heat rippling across my skin, and when I look back down, I am sixteen again, chipped yellow nail polish on my nails, a fearful refrain echoing in my mind.

*They’re coming for you. They’re coming for you.*

I sway on my feet and the world spins once more, back to what I can only assume is the future, and I watch, immobile, as the conservatory and the manor beyond burn to ash around me.

“I’m going to burn this place to the fucking ground,” I say, my knees giving out.

“Atta girl,” Hawthorn says, catching me as I fall.

As unconsciousness claims me.



I DON’T GET another chance to talk to Hawthorn. The rest of our family has returned from their lunch by the time I wake from my fainting spell. I make excuses about drinking too much champagne and retire to my room early.

I lay in my nest staring up at the gauzy canopy, still feeling traces of magic skating over my skin. My magic. The very magic that destroyed our conservatory.

The very magic that I’ll use to burn this whole manor to the ground one day.

One day with a bite on my wrist. *Luca’s*? I wonder. Saints, I hope it’s his and not Rad’s. But no, Rad would bite my neck like a proper alpha. Nausea stirs in my belly and the memory of smoke sticks in my nose, like I’m trapped between the past and the future.

Someone was coming for me two years ago when I destroyed my mother’s conservatory. My father? To take me to lock my magic? It must have been. The timeline fits and my memory of the time is just hazy enough for me not to trust it.

There are two things mages absolutely cannot do: they cannot see the future and they cannot read minds. Is this what an affinity is?

I itch to ask Hawthorn, but my sister and brothers return to New York City the next day, leaving me alone in the house with my father, a skeleton staff, and a full squad of beta bodyguards for my personal protection.

I rarely see my father. He doesn't come home every night—often staying in his downtown condo, I'm sure—but even when he does, I don't see him. I know of his presence in the house only by what he leaves behind: his sandalwood and yew scent, fresh scuffs in the carpet outside his study.

I yearn to hear the crunch of town car tires on the driveway, for Marcus to return from California to take me back to Fairhaven. I long for our little cottage, to hear Marcus' padding around the lower level in his sock feet as I work on my homework.

There is nothing in Rose Manor that makes me feel at home any longer. My home is at Fairhaven.

I pass the rest of the break in solitude. I pick back up the knitting needles I had so enjoyed when I was younger, knitting up scarves for Luca, Simon, and Marcus and silly hats for Alyssa, Bitsy, and Ellie. When I'm not knitting, I'm reading the books Ian gave me and working on my essay, and before bed every night, I flip through the Saint Rosamund biography Hawthorn got me.

It's peaceful, yet lonely. And I'm forever waiting for the peace to be shattered, for my world to fall down around me.

I don't stray near the conservatory again, though I think about what I saw there constantly, what Hawthorn told me.

There's so much I don't understand, what this affinity they fear I have is—certainly it's something other than my impossible magic or my magic wouldn't *be* impossible. Whatever is happening with my magic, with the thoughts and emotions I pick up, the things I see, they'd be an affinity—not something no mage has ever been capable of.

Then again, I still don't know what an affinity is and I'm too leery of my father spying on my internet usage to look it up, even on my phone, even with the layers of encryption Simon built into my phone.

What did I know back when I was sixteen, when my magic and designation were fresh? What could have been so bad that

my father nearly killed me to bury it—and would still see me dead before it was revealed?

What is my family doing at Rose Pharmaceuticals and how can I stop them?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 19



When Marcus picks me up, I greet him politely though I want to throw my arms around him. I want to hop into the front seat and fiddle with the radio like I did on the way back to Rose Manor. I want to leave these past few weeks behind and finally return home.

And Marcus is such a huge part of that.

But Hawthorn's warnings of bugs and cameras haunt me, so I take a demure seat in the back after Marcus takes my bag. When we're finally miles away from Rose Manor, making our way north on the highway, I clamber into the front seat, much to Marcus' dismay.

"You know I could have pulled over so you could do that, right?"

"Fine then, pull over."

"What for?"

I roll my eyes. "Just do it, would you?"

When he finally does, I lean across the front seat and give him the biggest hug I can manage. "For that. I missed you, you know? Home doesn't... it doesn't feel like home anymore. Not like our cottage does. I can't wait to get back to school."

"We have to make one stop along the way," Marcus says solemnly, and it doesn't dawn on me until we're pulling into a familiar gas station, a neon-pink omega sign blazing against the dreary, snow-laden sky, that the stop we have to make is for snacks.

Marcus pulls out a bill, but I wave him off. “My father got me a shitty present for Christmas. He’s buying our snacks.”

And he buys a *lot* of them. And our coffees, black for Marcus and a white chocolate latte for me, straight out of the machine in the gas station.

I’m halfway through a bag of peanut butter M&Ms when I finally turn down the radio and tell Marcus everything I overheard my father and siblings talking about in his study. “They talked about... about my attack. And I want you to know that I don’t think you failed in your duty to protect me that day.”

Marcus grits his teeth and keeps his focus on the road in front of us. “I did, Juniper. If I hadn’t hung back to take that call, Radcliffe wouldn’t have gotten close enough to touch you.”

I blow on my latte and take a sip. “You wouldn’t have taken that call if it hadn’t been important.”

“When I’m working, there is nothing more important than your safety. I was distracted that day and I will regret that for the rest of my life. You were hurt because of me.”

“I was hurt because Andrew Radcliffe is a piece of shit. Not because you got a call from your mother’s oncologist. Which we *still* haven’t talked about, thank you very much. Is she... is she okay?”

“She’s sick and she’s getting worse.” His voice is tense, not his usual stony stoicism, but something more raw, wounded.

“Marcus, I had no idea... you should be with her, not with me.”

Marcus swallows hard, his throat working. “She doesn’t want me around. Honestly, I don’t think she can even stand the sight of me.”

“Why... why would you say that?” As his silence stretches on, my gut roils. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t pry. I know you haven’t wanted to talk about it.”



“No, you should know.” He grips the steering wheel so hard his knuckles go white. “You *need* to know. Before I trained to become an honor guard, I failed to protect my sister. Emily was an omega, a year younger than I was. We were at St. Honora’s Academy together, both on scholarships. But my family couldn’t afford an honor guard for Em. I was meant to protect her. And I failed her. She was assaulted... raped—” His voice goes thin when he says the word. “The alpha who raped her was already contracted to mate with another omega at the academy and when that omega found out about Em’s attack, she blamed her for it, not her future mate. Em was shunned, ridiculed, practically tortured by the other students. I knew she was suffering, but she hid so much of her pain from me. Until she couldn’t bear to any longer.”

“Marcus, what happened?” My voice is hollow, a whisper in a bottle.

“She hung herself.”

I can’t help the low, aching whine that escapes me, the way my heart breaks for him. “I’m so sorry, but, Marcus, what happened to your sister wasn’t your fault.”

“I failed to protect Emily and I’ve failed you, too. I can’t make that mistake again.”

“You could never fail me,” I say quietly. “I trust you more than almost anyone. As my honor guard and as my friend.” His shoulders jerk and his eyes are glassy. I reach over and take his free hand in both of mine. He lets me, and for the barest second, it shakes as he fights back his tears.



THINGS CHANGE between us after that, as though our quiet words tore down a wall between us. We pick our way toward each other through the rubble, finding each other in the destruction. Marcus protects me still, is never remiss in his duties, but that small “something more” that hung between us in the fall grows after the quiet admissions we made as he drove us north, back to Fairhaven. Back *home*.

Affection blooms between us, more intimate than a friendship, but it's innocent.

There will never be romance between me and Marcus, as deeply as we care for each other. Still, it doesn't stop me from wishing, from dreaming, that Marcus Haley wasn't immune to my scent.

Because I am certainly not immune to *his*.

He surprises me with a Fisherman sweater of my own, almost an exact match to his, and his scent already clings to it. I don it immediately because Marcus is home, winter wind and towering pines, a scent as familiar to me now as my own.

Just as his scent is woven through every fiber of the sweater, mine weaves through the wool scarf I laughingly drape around his neck. Knit up out of a heathered gray-green yarn in patterns and twists to match his sweater, I find myself inordinately pleased to see him wear it.

And just as pleased when he picks up the e-reader I've stuffed with new (and old) books for him to read so he doesn't lose any of the paperback books most precious to him around campus. Even more pleased when he reads to me, the warm glow of the screen lighting his handsome face, late into the night over cups and cups of tea.



I'M DOWNING my first Ciel white mocha of the year, while putting the finishing touches on my essay on transient sigils, when I get the notification from our newly-titled "Omega Girl Gang" group chat, declaring today to be our Girl Gang Yule party. Marcus and I linger at Ciel for a while, and I tell myself I'm *not* hoping Ian will drop by his office while we're here.

He shouldn't. The overworked madman absolutely deserves a day away from his chaotic office, but that doesn't stop me from hoping to see him.

He does drop by, looking harried, juggling a stack of tomes and carrying a battered briefcase. He's reading something on

his phone, but I know he catches my scent the moment he stops suddenly, nearly running straight into a café table.

“You’re back safely,” he breathes, his blue eyes bright. He jostles the books he has tucked under one arm and sets them down. “Do you have a minute?”

He looks up to where Ellie is behind the bar at Ciel.

“Usual, professor?”

“Please and thank you, Miss Monroe.”

She fixes me with a pointed look. “I’ll bring it by in a moment.”

Marcus scoops the stack of books up off the table and the three of us make our way to Ian’s office. He unlocks the door with a physical key and then a series of sigils he casts so quickly I miss most of them. He toes the door open and shows me in, leaving the door open.

Marcus sets the books down on the only clear surface he can find and then nods to the door and brandishes his e-reader.

Ian’s scent is heavy in his office, citrusy bergamot and cedar, and I let it envelop me as I drift into his office.

“You wanted to talk about something?”

“Come, sit.” He picks up a book from one of his carefully sorted stacks and flips it open on his desk as he sits.

I join him, peering down at the book, only able to pick out a few of the Latin words, but recognizing the numerals easily. “A date register? Of what?”

“Deaths and interments from the 1500s, kept by the Church back when the Church had more power.” He traces his finger down one of the columns and it’s then I notice the small annotations.

Marked alongside the designations of the dead are small inverted septagrams.

I gasp. “They were marked?”

“I think so. But this predates the Legion of Baphomet by hundreds of years, which means...”

“The Mark was used before then!” I sit down heavily. “But by whom?”

He shakes his head. “That’s what I’m not sure of. The same ilk that raised up a long-dead saint.”

“Saint Aldous?”

“Saint Baphomet. The Demon Baphomet was no demon at all. He was a saint over a millennia ago.”

“But what about his... his *face*?”

“Juniper!” he scolds. “I know you pay better attention than that in Sienna’s class. Who writes our history?”

I cover my mouth with a hand. “The victors.”

“In this case, I suspect it was the Church who demonized Baphomet, but it’s only that at this point: a suspicion.”

“But now we might know where to look, right?” I stare down at the open book before me and frown, seeing the seven-pointed star in another column. “Betas were marked?”

Ian clears his throat and shakes his head. “Killed by the Ever Ember is my best guess. You may not have the Latin vocabulary to understand this yet, but that column is the cause of death.”

“Does... does that mean it’s killing you, too?”

“I don’t believe so. I think the Ever Ember hex is shaped by intention more than most spells I’ve studied: in some cases a weapon, in others a rite of initiation. I imagine whoever was using the ember realized it was an expedient way to deal with their beta enemies. Their physiology must make them more susceptible to fatal cases, though you’ll see it’s not impossible to kill an alpha with the ember.” He points to an entry in the ledger.

“Marcus and Cassian would have died, if not for you. The ember was burning through—”

“Ah, Miss Monroe.” Ian shoots me a quick suppressive glance. “You have my thanks.” He fishes his wallet out and passes her a five-dollar bill. “Could you close the door on your way out, please? Miss Rose and I are discussing a personal matter.”

Ellie pockets the tip, shoots me a weighty look, mutters something about Beltane and then leaves, closing the door behind her.

“A white chocolate mocha? That’s your usual?”

“I’m surprised you hadn’t guessed already. It’s what you get most often. I thought for sure you’d have just picked up two one night.”

“You knew what I was doing?”

His lips curl in a small smile and he shrugs.

Saints above, my heart shouldn’t swell the way it does right now.

“Anyway, I think the ember is stable for the three of us, for want of a better word. For now, at least. It’s a guess, and I hate having more guesses than certainties. But you’re right: we have a place to start. And a lot of ledgers to sort through. I’m going to write you a list of vocabulary to prioritize. Get it on your flashcards as soon as possible.”

“Everyone needs to stop knocking my flashcards,” I mutter.

“I’m not ‘knocking’ your flashcards.” He pulls the center drawer of his desk open, and I’m treated to the sight of hundreds of white index cards, all bound together in rubber bands, covered in his small, spidery print. “Just your color coding.”

Bastard.

Bastard I’m crushing harder on by the day, especially as I find out he has a sweet tooth just like mine and a proclivity for index cards.



“So-o,” Ellie says as I try to sneak out of Café Ciel without her noticing. “What were you and the good professor discussing?”

“Oh, I’m just helping him with some research in addition to the extra lessons he’s giving me to help me get caught up.”

Ellie rolls her hazel eyes. “You’re beyond caught up, Junie.” Her smirk dips into a frown. “Though I guess you need to be with all the shit you’re facing. Hey, ready for Yule? I’m out of here in fifteen minutes and thought we could walk back together.”

“Only if you make me one of the usual,” I say, smirking right back at her.

“You already had one!”

“I am addicted, and I will tip you.”

“Swear to the saints, if I hit the sweets like you and my brother do, no amount of Pilates would keep this all tight. All right, fine. Rot your teeth out if you wish.”



“So, I hate to do this to you again,” Ellie says, “but that drink was a bribe because we need to talk about my brother again.”

Oh saints.

“Ellie, he rejected me.”

“Yeah, the thing we need to talk about is how he’s an idiot who puts literally everyone before himself, all the time. He’s done it with me my whole life. Always watching out for me, especially when he should have been watching out for himself.”

“He’s a good brother.”

“He is. And he’s got literal rocks for brains. Look, I was going to let him tell you all this, but it’s just as much my story as his. You know Simon’s only my half-brother, right? I mean, I have an omega mom and had an alpha dad. Simon’s mom’s a beta woman who never wanted a child. My mom raised Simon like he was her own, and even though he’s ‘just’ my half-brother, he’s been the best brother I could ever imagine. Simon basically kept me from ending up a ward of the state or packed up before I even graduated high school.” She ducks her head, watching her boots slip through the slush on the sidewalk. “My dad was my legal guardian, even during his time in prison. We applied to transfer guardianship to my mother, but she’s an omega and our application was denied. When my father died in prison, I would have become a ward of the state. You have to understand, I had my acceptance to Fairhaven and a scholarship waiting for me at that point. Our dad, he wasn’t a good man, and I don’t think either of us mourned him, but I stood to lose so much. Simon and I had all these dreams of being at Fairhaven together—and he had dreams for me.”

“Oh saints, Ellie. I had no idea.”

“Not many do. You, Bitsy, Simon, my honor guard, and a few others know the truth, but it isn’t something we tell many people.”

“But you ended up here.”

“That’s all on Simon. My family wouldn’t have been able to afford an honor guard for me and he nearly dropped out to work so he could support me. Can you imagine what a waste that would have been? He’s a freaking genius, Junie. But he wanted more for me than just getting packed up and knocked up. And I got it. I owe it all to him. I’m protected from the state, and I’m protected by Jace here at Fairhaven. All because Simon made sacrifices. And I know he’ll do the same for you.”

“I would never ask—”

“You wouldn’t have to.”

I sigh. “Yeah, you’re right. I just... Ellie, I don’t get it. Is he doing this for you? Who’s he trying to protect?”

“You, Juniper. He’s trying to protect *you*. From himself. He doesn’t want to disappoint you or break your heart. It’d kill him to hurt you.”

“He could never hurt me, Elles. What is he even thinking? That’s so... that’s so dumb!”

“It is,” she grants. “Genius though he may be, my brother has rocks for brains. If he can get out of his own way and if you *can* be with him, you’d both be so damn happy. And I want that for you. Saints above, you know I adore the shit out of you both. And you’re *stupidly* cute together. But hurt my brother, Junie? I’m swinging first, worrying later.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



## CHAPTER 20



Ellie and I reach a new understanding, find our footing with each other again. Now if I could only do the same with her brother, I muse as I grab the presents from my cottage.

Bitsy and Alyssa have completely transformed the omega lodge. Long pine garlands hang along the walls and drape from the ceiling, dripping with colorful twinkling lights.

A tall Yule tree sits at its center, filling the space with the bright, spicy scent of pine, and there are boxes upon boxes of ornaments and glittering garlands waiting for us to deck the tree with.

“Bet your weirdo family hires fancy-pants professional Yule tree decorators,” Alyssa says with a roll of her eyes. “And you’ve never gotten to decorate a Yule tree before. So that’s the first thing we’re going to do.”

“Not since my mother left, at least. I can’t wait.”

“What else have you got planned?” Ellie asks, entering the lodge, laden down with wrapped boxes.

“Lots and lots of Yule snacks and opening presents, duh.”

Bitsy pops her head out of the kitchen, brandishing a bottle of cherry brandy. “And spiked cocoa! Let’s get this bash started!”



“SO, I HAVE AN ANNOUNCEMENT,” Alyssa says, and we gather around her. She hangs a shimmering bauble on the tree and then turns around to us, sweeping her soft, frizzy curls back from her neck, revealing the healing double crescents of a mating bite.

Ellie, Bitsy, and I squeal, but Alyssa rounds on me. “That little shit told you, didn’t he? After I explicitly told him not to!”

“Whoa, whoa, what little shit?” Bitsy asks.

“Um... Luca.”

Bitsy turns to me, her mouth falling open. “Wait. ‘Fuck that guy’ Luca who we all agreed to hate because he broke Junie’s heart? Did *everyone* have a more eventful break than I did?”

I flop down on the sofa and hold out my mug for a top-off of brandy. Bitsy happily obliges, though she snaps her fingers. “That’s the face of an omega with details.” She squints at me, stroking her chin with her first finger and thumb. “And maybe a freshly-fucked omega?”

“Oh saints, Bits! Just details. Jeez. We *just* got back together on New Year’s.”

“And yet, not freshly fucked?”

I roll my eyes. “Not freshly fucked.”

“Then what on earth are you doing *here* with us? Why aren’t you getting dick?”

“Chicks before dicks?” I offer weakly. “Also, he’s working today. But tonight...”

Bitsy cackles and claps with glee. “So, how’d you sort your shit out? The lies and betrayal and all that?”

I pull the other omega down beside me and we clink mugs.

“Darika already knows this, so I’m guessing Alyssa does too, so I think it’s safe to tell both of you, but keep it quiet, alright?”

“Oh saints, I am dying of suspense. What does Alyssa know?”

“Luca has been spying on the Soldiers of Saint Aldous.”

Bitsy stares blankly at me. “Say that again, because I’m pretty sure you just said your former ex-alpha is spying on the Soldiers of Saint Aldous.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I... didn’t exactly find out in the best way. In fact, on All Saints’ Day, we were in his dorm, and I went to grab a tee shirt. Instead, I found a Baphomet mask.”

Ellie comes sit on my other side as Alyssa smugly continues to decorate the tree for us. “Holy shit. Just out of the blue?”

“Basically, yeah. And I freaked out. I ran all the way back to my cottage and... and that was it for us. He was taken in by the police the very next day.”

“But he had nothing to do with the Grace thing, right?” Bitsy asks.

“Not a thing. He just saw her at Quill & Clover. I don’t know who took Grace, but I think Rad set Luca up to take the fall—to get to me.”

“Fuck that guy,” Bitsy mutters.

“For real,” Ellie agrees. “Bits, if I weren’t so freaking scared of him, I’d have you hex his dick smaller.”

“Even I’m not that crazy.”

“Okay, but how did you find out he was spying?”

“Cassian made me hear him out.”

“Your asshole ex? What’s that about?”

I shake my head. “I have no idea. But he knew and told Luca not to tell me in case I was just going to get kicked out of Fairhaven after midterms anyway.”

“Permission to dick shrink?”

“Granted,” Ellie and I say at the same time.

I shrug my shoulders and chew my lower lip. “I don’t get Cassian. He dumped me and now he’s doing all this shit behind my back. He said I’m his ‘business’—whatever that means.”

“Yeah, Cassian of the soon-to-be tiny dick still carries a torch for you. And for seven to ten business days, it’s going to be a *very* little torch. What kind of underhanded bullshit is that? He’s not your alpha!”

“That’s what I told him.”

“Okay, so... Fuck Cassian, not in the fun way, and fuck Luca, yes in the fun way?”

I laugh. “Basically? I broke down and called him after some family bullshit. Then I had a really shitty New Year’s Eve starring one Andrew Radcliffe at our gala—” Alyssa snorts at the word ‘gala’ “—and suddenly... he was there. In Greenwich, ready to take me ice skating and stargazing.”

“Ice gremlins,” Alyssa mutters. “By the way, aside from two dozen of my best brownies, those skates are your Yule present.”

“That’s really romantic, actually,” Ellie sighs. “Not the ice gremlins part. But ice-skating and stargazing? Damn. He has way more game than I thought he did.”

“He has *so* much game,” I groan. “He brought me my favorite nesting blanket, Alyssa’s cocoa, and had this all planned out. I don’t even know how to keep up, honestly.”

“Well, you’ve got that pretty little lace corset and I’m sure you’ve got some tiny undies... use your imagination.”

I roll my eyes. “Anyway, that’s all, I guess. Oh. Um, he purred for me. A lot.”

“Gah! That’s the most romantic part,” Ellie swoons. “You know that means you’re meant to be, right?”

I can’t help my small smile. “I know. I’m a very lucky omega.”

Bitsy claps her hands to get our attention. “And due to get lucky in about an hour, so let’s do Yule presents because Luca

gets off soon and then they *both* get off. A lot. Damn, I bet his dick game is insane, too.”

I glare at Bitsy, a flare of possession darkening my features and sharpening my sweet scent.

Bitsy just laughs. “Down, girl. I’m not touching your alpha. Okay, don’t scowl at me, but for Yule, I wrote you a song, and it’s called ‘Foreplay for Nerds.’ You can guess who I wrote it about...”

Ellie drags out her guitar with a guilty smirk. “You really do have the most interesting love life of any of us, even if it does involve my brother, which yay, but also ew, and this song is definitely about Mr. White Chocolate Mocha, not Simon. Anyway! And a one, a two...”

By the time they’re finished, I’m rolling with laughter while blushing redder than I’ve ever blushed before—and it’s the best Yule I’ve ever had.

We exchange gifts until only mine remain. “Okay, you said handmade, and I actually made these, so I’m sorry if they’re silly or they suck.”

Alyssa snatches hers up and rips the paper off before Bitsy can even grab the box with her name on it and lets out a little shriek of joy before pulling on the hooded scarf I knit for her. She shoves her phone into my hands. “Take a picture. I *have* to show Darika. She’s going to lose her mind at how damn cute this is.”

She wraps the scarf around her neck and tweaks the little teddy bear ears on the hood with a giggle, then throws up a peace sign just as I snap her picture.

Ellie grabs for her box and dons her fox hat immediately, the rusty orange wool a perfect match for her red hair. “Oh saints, you didn’t make one of these for Simon, did you?”

“I... um, no? Should I have?”

“Oh, he’s going to be so fucking jealous.”

“I thought he’d think it was too silly.”

“Junie, I swear. My brother will be *begging* for one.”

“I do love it when they beg,” Bitsy says offhandedly before ripping the paper off her box. Her mouth drops open and I swear I catch a sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Punk rock unicorn?” she says, awe in her voice.

“What else would I make for you, Bits?”

She dons it and does an experimental head bang, giggling in pure glee when the multi-colored yarn mane shakes. “Junie, this is, no lie, the best thing anyone’s ever made me. And I adore you, and you better have one too, because I’m making Connor take a million pictures of us. Omega Girl Gang with *hats*.”

I hop up off the sofa and go over my coat and dig out the bunched up black cat hood, donning it and giving them a wink.

“Pictures! So many pictures,” Bitsy demands, and out we shuffle into the snow, just four omegas having the best Yule ever together.



LUCA IS WAITING for me at our bridge, a boyish smile on his face. It’s the first time I’ve been by the bridge since All Saints’ Day when we crossed back over it after our last motorcycle ride of the year. The creek burbles over stones, each bank covered in picture-perfect white snow. Small animal tracks cross through the blanket of white, racing around the bridge. The boughs of the trees above are covered in a light coating of snow, glittering above the bridge.

I dash toward him and my boots skid on the icy bridge, taking me right into his arms. He holds me tightly, burying his nose in my hair, drinking me in just as I drag his scent into my greedy lungs.

“I have a Yule present for you,” he says against the shell of my ear, the brush of his lips making me shiver.

“But you already took me skating and stargazing!” I protest.

He laughs and releases me, slides his hands down my arms until he can take my hands in his. “That was a date. This is a present. I started making it, saints, a week into the term?”

“You made me something?” Awe softens my voice and I pull a small, wrapped package out of my bag. “I made you something too.”

“It’s back in my dorm if... if that’s all right? I can understand if you’re not comfortable going back there, or if you don’t feel ready yet.”

“I’m ready,” I say quietly. “But I want to see it. The mask. I don’t want to be afraid of it anymore.”

“Presents first?”

I grin. “Presents first.”



I JOIN Marcus at the bench tucked back in the woods and we make our way through the omega residences.

“Thank you for supporting me in this, even after he lied to me.”

“He’s a good alpha, sweet-tart. And I won’t lie and say I wouldn’t do the same if given the opportunity. Not all of us have the means of getting you papers or getting you out of the country like Cassian does. So, we protect you how we can.”

I pull him into a hug. “At least your future clients won’t be such a challenge.”

“You know you’re more than a client to me, Junie.”

More than a client, more than a friend, and forever less than a mate.

“I do know,” I whisper. “Thank you for protecting me, Marcus.”



LUCA LEADS me into his room, and my nest is just as beautifully made up as it was the second time I joined him back here. Candles glow from atop every flat surface, warm light flickering around the room. He takes my hand and draws me forward, sitting me down on the edge of the bed, then plucks a small box up off his desk. “This was my capstone project in Transmogrification. I... I spent most of fall term designing it and then making it for you.”

He pushes the box into my hands, ducking his head, a blush fanning across his high cheekbones.

I pull apart the bow and tear off the rose gold wrapping paper and then open the velvet jewelry box.

Inside the box is a dainty silver ring, shaped by magic into an intricate tiara. A tiara for a princess.

Tears spring to my eyes. Aside from brownies and a bawdy song, no one’s ever made anything for me before. I carefully take the ring out of the box and turn it over in my hands, my tears now running down my cheeks. “You made this? It’s so beautiful, Luca. How?”

He shrugs, abashed. “Transmogrification is basically just advanced transmutation circles, manipulating materials like metal. So, magic, metal, and a lot of failed attempts before I got it right. May I?”

I give him the ring and then my hand and he slides the ring onto my left ring finger. It’s so like the way betas get engaged that a fresh wave of tears wells in the corners of my eyes.

“My present is so stupid compared to this,” I mutter, admiring the ring and the alpha who made it for me. “I’m tempted to try to distract you by taking my clothes off. Would it work?”

“Princess, we don’t have to hop right back in bed. We can take all the time you want.”

“We already have,” I say, and I mean it. I have no hesitation when it comes to being with Luca again.

“Presents first,” he teases.



I blush and pass him the paper-wrapped package. “I’m warning you. It’s silly.”

He tears the paper away and stares down at the scrapbook I made him. It’s a small album, made of up envelopes and pockets, with room to glue in photos and write about our adventures as we take them, a location from his list topping every spread. He flips through it slowly, looking, for all the world, like I’ve given him a gift as precious as the one he just gave me.

“There are more places than what was on my list.”

“I added a few things on the mainland I thought we could visit. I mean, if you want to. I even got us a pair of ferry tickets and we can use them whenever we want.”

He flips to the little envelope I’ve enclosed the tickets in and smiles a small, musing smile. “This isn’t a silly present at all, Juniper. It’s everything I want, and practically everything I wished for when we caught the meteor shower on New Year’s.”

“I’m what you wished for?”

He frowns. “You sound surprised.”

“I’m just... Me? Really? I’m your wish?”

“You, Juniper. All I want in this life, all I wished for, is to see the world with you. If you were safe and we were checking things off our list... I’d have everything I want.”

I throw myself into his arms. “Saints, I’m so sorry I doubted you.”

“You were right to. I *was* keeping something from you, and it was... it was eating me alive the whole time. I wanted to tell you, but Cassian, he found the leverage over me he needed to make me fall in line.”

“Me.”

“You. He knew I’d do anything to keep you safe, to make you happy.”

“Are you still spying?”

“I’ve attended a few more meetings.”

“Would you stop if I asked you to?”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Do you want me to?”

“I do. It’s not safe. If you get caught...”

“I’d go to prison and never see you again,” my alpha says solemnly. “I’ll stop.”

“Thank you, Luca.”

“You sure you want to see the mask?”

I swallow hard and nod. Though the gruesome bestial mask appears in my darkest nightmares, it’s only that: a mask. Molded black leather, a silver painted septagram on the forehead, long twisted horns curling toward the heavens.

He kneels before his chest and pushes the lid open. He digs through a few tee shirts, tossing me one, and then pulls out the mask by one of the horns. He hands it to me slowly and I turn it over and over in my hands, examining it from every angle. And... there’s nothing special about it. It’s a well-made and horrific mask, a depiction of a horrifying figure—who may not have been so horrifying after all.

I finally hand it back to Luca and then crook my finger, beckoning him to join me on the bed.

He buries the mask again, kicks off his shoes, and slides in beside me, immediately pulling me into his arms, tucking my head beneath his chin. I breathe in red wine and cherries and sigh against his skin. “I wish we could stay like this all night.”

“Not sure Marcus would be thrilled about that.” He envelops me in his arms, stroking my back, my hair, down my arm. His fingers trace the curve of my hip, along the scars at the inside of my wrist and I remember, with shocking clarity, the vision I had: the bite on my hand, just below those scars, as the world around me burned.

“Will you come back to my cottage and stay the night at some point? I... I planned on asking Doc to add you to the guest list so you could come within the omega residence wards when she resets them for the term.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead. “I would love to.”

Sudden anxiousness sours my scent, and he leans back, eyes narrowed in concern. “What is it?”

“I... I was also going to ask Doc to let Simon come within the wards. If he’ll have me.”

“He’s not being straight with you about it?”

“Ellie says he’s got rocks for brains.”

“He has brains for brains, and then some more brains. Seriously, he’s the smartest person I know besides you.”

“I... I really like him,” I say.

“Why does that upset you so much?”

“I mean, here I am with you, but I’m crushing on other men, too.”

“Well, yeah. I think that kind of comes with the territory. You’re meant for a pack, Junie, and not just a pack of two. Not just us. You know I’d never begrudge you anything that would make you happy.”

“Does it hurt you? The feelings I have for others?”

“Why would it? Do they change your feelings about me?”

“Not at all. I love you—” The words come from some deep, instinctual part of me, unbidden, but true.

His eyes flutter shut, blond lashes spiky against his cheeks and I almost take the words back until he opens his eyes and I see all the love in his gaze. “I love you, Juniper.”

I whine, my perfume flooding the room. “Say it again?”

“I love you,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my lips.

“I love you,” he says again, kissing down my jaw to my throat.

“I love you,” he promises, nuzzling his scent into my skin.

We tangle together, and he tells me a thousand more times as we strip each other bare, as we kiss and touch. As we join and find our ecstasy together. And when we curl close, skin to

skin, the room around us smelling like us—like pack—he tells me again.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 21



“*J* get it,” Simon says with a put-upon sigh. “You just don’t think I’m as foxy as my sister.”

I roll my eyes as Simon leads me and Luca back to his room, but in truth, I’m glad we’ve found our way back to the friendship we had before our disastrous kiss. I still pine for him—and probably always will—but just seeing his mischievous smile lights up the dark corners of my heart. If I can’t have Simon Monroe as a lover, I will cherish him as a friend. “I thought you’d think it was silly and childish.”

“It is silly and childish, and I want ten. And also, never take your black cat hat off, because you’re fucking adorable, and I can hardly stand it.”

I laugh and Simon takes my hand, pulling me up the stairs. Luca, shooting me a pointed look, grins and follows.

“So, Luc was telling me your Yule really sucked and his kinda sucked, so...” He throws open the door and I’m greeted with the most festive blanket fort I’ve ever seen. Colorful twinkle lights glitter from within the sheets and blankets, while deep red bows curl down from the posts of the bed. Colorful paper chain garlands loop from post to post and a hundred paper snowflakes float above our heads. Pine scents the room, and beneath it all, the scent of...

“Oh! You made mulled cider?”

“It’s wassail, you absolute, unapologetic heathen.”

I laugh as the three of us pile into the fort. “Simon, this is completely amazing. Easily the best Yule fort ever.”

He shrugs, but a blush floods his cheeks behind his freckles. “Ellie didn’t get enough special Christmases as a kid, so... so I did what I could.”

Of course he did, because Simon is one of the best men I know.

“I hope Ellie told you how important Yule stockings are in the Monroe family. Well, between the two of us and Mom, at least.”

“Ah, no. She was too busy berating me for not making you a hat.”

“I have the best little sister. I’m so jealous, Junes. I need one.”

I laugh. “Fine, fine. I’ll make you one!”

My beta best friend unhooks two felt Yule stockings from the posts of his bed and hands one to me and one to Luca.

“Bro, you didn’t have to.”

Simon shoots Luca a look that’s all exasperated beta. “You get presents. Deal with it. And stocking presents are silly. So really. Just deal with it.”

My stocking is stuffed to the brim with candy, including every flavor of Kit-Kat I can imagine, and then even more, colorful pens and flashcards in a dozen colors, fuzzy socks, and in the stocking’s toe, there’s a foil-wrapped chocolate orange.

“Holy shit, did you bespell these spark plugs? That’s so fucking cool!”

Luca geeks out over what must be spark plugs with boyish abandon and for the first time in nearly two months, he looks like the alpha I fell in love with again. The darkness under his eyes is gone and his face is no longer gaunt and drawn. His smile is so easy, so beautiful, that I can’t help but lean forward and capture his lips with my own.

“Okay, so, now I’m starting to think that Luc’s spark plugs were the nerdiest present I made this Yule, but...” Simon

brandishes a small package, the shape of which I realize almost immediately.

“My favorite highlighters?” I tear the paper away, revealing a five-pack of highlighters, just as I suspected.

“Oh, kit-kat. You have *no* idea the magic I’ve done to these babies.” He flips his tablet open and sets it in my lap, then opens a book, taps the corners of the page with the yellow highlighter and then tracks the highlighter over some text in the book, making me cringe. Except there’s no ink in the highlighter at all.

The text transfers flawlessly to the tablet’s screen, highlighted in yellow. He traces over the ISBN of the book and a citation immediately appears on the screen. Then he double taps the annotation, and it appears on a virtual index card. Another three taps and I hear a small printer whirring over on his desk. With the smuggest grin ever, he reaches back and snatches a yellow index card out of the printer, marked with the bit of text he highlighted, followed by a perfectly formatted Étienne Modern style citation.

My jaw drops open and for a moment, I’m speechless.

“Pretty sure you just made all of her nerdy wet dreams come true.” Luca winks at Simon and sticks his fist out to bump knuckles with him.

“It’s color coded,” I say, dumbly.

“Of course it’s color coded,” Simon scoffs, tapping Luca’s knuckles with his own.

“That’s some damn impressive magic, man,” Luca says.

“Says the Transmogrification genius.”

Saints above, my men are so damn talented.

And I made them both silly scrapbooks.

“Okay, now I don’t want to give you your present,” I say, sulkily.

“Well, no present can top the fox hat you owe me, so don’t feel too bad,” Simon teases as I hand over the small package.

I cringe as he opens the small present and cocks his head, studying the cover where “Simon & Juniper’s Candy Tasting Adventures” appears in a swirly, glittery font. He slowly flips through the pages, some of them pockets and envelopes just like Luca’s scrapbook—where we can tuck in wrappers of our favorites. Each spread has a page for each of us to rate and describe all the amazing candies Simon uncovers for us to try together and... and... it’s *silly*.

But apparently not so silly because Simon leans forward, cups my cheeks and kisses me, a slow, lingering kiss that sends heat rushing through me.

“It’s perfect,” he promises, our lips brushing.

A low whine escapes me at the sensual contact, because that’s what it is: intimate and sensual. My perfume of honeyed vanilla and night-blooming jasmine scents the air and Simon draws back sharply.

“What did I do wrong?” he asks quickly, eyes searching mine frantically.

Luca chuckles, sitting back among the pillows and blankets. “Nothing, man. You did everything right. *That* intoxicating scent is her perfume.”

Simon strokes my cheek, eyes wide with awe. “I made you do that? By kissing you?”

“Simon,” I groan. “You’ve nearly made me do it a hundred times. All those almost-kisses...”

“No more almost,” he swears, and captures my mouth in a kiss that lights me up like the colorful Yule lights twinkling above us. I whine into his kiss until his lips part and his tongue meets mine, tentative at first and then teasing.

Oh holy fucking saints. Simon doesn’t kiss like an alpha because he’s *not* an alpha. His kisses aren’t intended to dominate, to overwhelm. His kiss is the sweetest seduction, and I can’t get enough. Each dance of his tongue against mine is a tantalizing tease that winds need tight in my belly, makes my core clench.



I whimper, desperate for his touch, needing to feel his hands on my body, his fingertips skating over my skin, knowing we're moving too fast, knowing this is all just right after all those almos.

But then he passes me into Luca's arms and Luca kisses me, full of alpha possession and dominance and I mewl, being passed between them making my sex throb.

"She's so fucking responsive," Simon groans, and then he's behind me, his hand cupping the underside of my breast, guided by Luca's.

Simon hisses in satisfaction as he weighs my breast in his palm. His thumb strokes over my tight nipple through my clothes and I throw my head back, breaking my kiss with Luca only for Simon's lips to chase mine.

Luca palms my other breast and I let out a low, needy whine, my perfume spiking in the air around us.

"You like us touching you together like this, princess?" Luca growls, his lips at my jaw.

Simon kisses down my neck and I squirm.

"Well, do you, beautiful?" he asks, closing the space between us so I can feel his hardness against the curve of my ass.

"Yes!" I pant, grinding back against Simon.

Simon groans. "I want to see you."

Luca meets my eyes, his own dark with desire, and arches a single blond brow before his clever fingers drop to the buttons of my blouse. Simon watches us with an intensity that makes my sex throb. His gaze follows Luca's fingers, taking in every inch of skin my alpha bares to him.

Luca steals a kiss, his tongue brushing against mine, the flick of the cool metal of his tongue stud winding me up. I whine and he drags the blouse down my arms until he can pull it off. He turns me in his arms and drops a kiss where my neck meets my shoulder and I whine for him, my perfume flooding our makeshift nest. He cups my breasts through the thin silk

and lace of my bra, thumbing over my nipples until I'm crying out.

Simon drinks me in, his lips parted, and when Luca unhooks my bra and slides it down my arms, baring me to Simon's scrutiny, his hazel eyes go dark, his pupils blowing wide. "Can I touch?"

"Please," I breathe.

He kneels in front of me, hands hovering over my waist uncertainly until I lean into him, into his touch. His hands are sinfully warm against my skin, his fingertips calloused just enough to be a bit rough.

I let out a breathy sigh and oh so achingly slowly, Simon trails his touch from my waist up to my bare breasts. He strokes the undersides with his thumb, biting off a moan of appreciation.

He thumbs over my nipples, and I moan, pressing into his touch, into the pleasure and hint of pain as he rolls my stiff nipples between his fingers.

"Kiss me?"

"Always," he swears, meeting my kiss, my lips, my tongue, with his own. He nibbles at my lower lip, and I whimper as I feel my slick flow.

Luca nuzzles my neck and drags my scent into his lungs, hand dropping to the zipper of my skirt. "Yes?"

"Yes!" I all but beg. My alpha chuckles, undoing the zip and then helping me out of my skirt, leaving me in just tights and panties. Luca strokes me through the thin layers of fabric until both my panties and tights are soaked with my slick.

My cunt pulses for them, desperate for more than these teasing touches.

"Make her come. I want to watch," Simon says. It's practically an order, but Luca just chuckles and eases my tights and panties down over my hips. He lies me down in the soft nest and drags the fabric down my legs so slowly I ache

with need. He trails kisses down the insides of my thighs, first one and then the other, as he undresses me.

“Fuck,” Simon pants, pressing the heel of his hand against his hardness through his slacks. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Juniper.”

“I want to see you too,” I plead.

“Tonight is all about you, Junes. Tonight, I want to watch.”

“And touch?” I plead.

He grins and turns to Luca. “Show me how it’s done, alpha.”

I moan at his words and Luca wastes no time, sliding one finger through my folds, slow and deliberate. I shiver and chase his touch, rocking my hips up. He kneels over me, a blond god, staring down at me intently.

His thumb finds my clit and he traces a slow circle over it.

I whine and he thrusts two fingers into my cunt, stretching me so perfectly.

“Little help?” Luca challenges, shooting Simon a grin.

Simon swallows hard, his throat working, and then comes to lie down at my side. He cups my breast, thumbing my nipple, his eyes never leaving mine. And it’s so intimate, like I’m bared to him in more than just body. Like he’s looking into my soul, the whole of who I am. Love shines from his hazel eyes, his gaze soft as he watches pleasure flash across my face as Luca strokes me.

I take his hand in mind and guide it between my thighs, letting out a sharp cry when I feel his finger slick through my folds, when he finds my clit and circles it, just as Luca had.

“Fuck,” Simon groans. “You feel amazing.”

Luca pumps his fingers into me, a teasing rhythm that has me rocking up into his touch with every thrust.

“Together?” Simon asks Luca and I don’t catch his meaning until Luca’s thumb finds my clit again. They stroke on either side of it, alternating touches that send desire

spiraling through me. Every stroke of their fingers against my clit is a spark of electric ecstasy and when Simon says, “I want to see you come, beautiful,” his eyes never leaving mine, I fly apart at their touch, pleasure pounding through me. My cunt squeezes around Luca’s fingers as he fucks me with them through my orgasm, until the last flutter of my sex.

Until I’m spent and smiling like a fool.

Until I’m laughing with joy at how *good* they made me feel. At the bliss of having Simon finally, *finally* touch me how I’ve wanted him to for months.

Simon rolls me toward him and pulls me into a kiss that sends aftershocks rippling through me. He nuzzles my nose with his, and drops light kisses across my cheeks, the bridge of my nose, as if he can’t stop kissing and touching me for even a minute.

My beautiful, sweet, sexy beta.

Who has no idea what he’s getting into.

“I’m all in. I’m sorry it took so much time for me to figure it out.”

I should be thrilled—I’ve wanted this beta since the first time I laid eyes on him, and yet, my heart squeezes, a tight pang in my chest.

“Junes? What’s wrong?”

“All in could be dangerous,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “Saints, Rad may have set up Luca to take the fall for a crime he didn’t commit, just to hurt me. I don’t want the same to happen to you, especially since I’m pretty sure regularly hacking the Fairhaven PD isn’t exactly lawful.”

“I cover my tracks, kit-kat. Don’t worry about that.”

“He’ll do anything to have me. To hurt me.” Rad’s words echo in my mind

*I’d much rather mate you than do what I did to Heather Lindstrom, sweetest.*

I'm quiet for a moment. Tangled together with the both of them in a blanket fort nest, every beat of my heart tells me what I don't dare believe: these men are my pack, bonds or no bonds. I can trust them. And yet, I thought I could trust my family, but the moment my impossible magic made itself known, my father nearly killed me to rid me of it. A fact the two men enveloping me with their warm bodies know better than most.

"I... there's something wrong with my magic," I start slowly. "I hear things I shouldn't. Thoughts and emotions. Visions sometimes. Just flashes and I can't control it. It started with the masks, but since then, I've been catching more and more. I don't try to. At... at my family's New Year's gala, I heard Rad say 'She squirms so beautifully.'"

"Saints above, I'm sorry you had to hear something so vile." Simon laces his fingers with mine and rests his chin on my shoulder.

"You believe me?"

Luca presses the sweetest kiss to my forehead. My alpha, who I should have learned by now never to doubt. "Why wouldn't we?"

"It's impossible."

"Improbable at best," Simon scoffs. "Mages have all kinds of skills and you're one of the strongest mages on record. It stands to reason you'd have abilities the rest of us do not. So, what else have you heard?"

I look up into Luca's pale eyes through lashes clumped together by my tears. "When Luca was taken by the police, I felt his fear and I heard... I heard my name."

My alpha strokes my cheek with the backs of his fingers and wipes my tears away with the gentlest touch. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

I lean forward and capture his lips in a kiss that I hope says everything I can't put into words: how part of me feared that too, how relief so potent it makes me breathless courses through me now.

“What else?”

“My family were talking about me. My brother Hawthorn set me up to overhear and from what I heard, I think all of this was happening to me back when I was sixteen, too. Hawthorn said I read my brother Aspen two years ago. I don’t remember what it was about, only that whatever I learned put their plans at risk. They’re afraid I might do it again now.”

And if I do, my family will rid themselves of me in whatever way they must.

“It happened again on New Year’s Eve, when I was dancing with Rad, and my brother cut in. Saints, he was furious with me, and I was frightened. But so was he. He kept thinking about this code. It seemed like random letters and numbers, but he was terrified.

“Got the code on you? Maybe I can do some digging and find out what it could be about.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful?”

Simon presses a kiss to my bare shoulder. “If it’s as dire as your brother thinks it is, I imagine the world needs to know about it. At the very least, if *we* know about it, we’ll be a step ahead. We’ll be able to keep you safe this time.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “Both of you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

And I pray to the saints that I never have to find out.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 22



Spring term looms, somehow more significant than before. If I'm to protect myself, I must excel as a mage. If I'm to bring down my father, I'll need to learn everything I can. And if it comes down to keeping the men I want to one day call my pack safe, saints, I'll work myself to the bone in pursuit of the skills I'll need.

But there's one ray of hope that shines like a beacon just before term starts.

I share my first Saturday with Luca in months, and we check one thing off our list and add a few photographs to our scrapbook, which he insists on being the one to write in.



THAT SATURDAY, I wake to a text that practically has me dancing from my nest to the shower, into a pair of fleece-lined leggings and an oversized sweater.

*<<It's Saturday, princess. Time for you to see the lighthouse at Storm Harbor.>>*

Oh, how I've missed our Saturdays together and oh how I look forward to completing one of the pages in the silly little scrapbook I made for him.

*<<You bring your skates and I'll bring a thermos full of coffee from Ciel?>>* my alpha asks, and I send him back a message full of heart-eye emojis.

I skip down the stairs and do a little spin at the bottom, floating because Simon Monroe wants me like I want him, dancing because I have the best alpha in the world back in my life.

“You’re cheery this morning. I take it it’s date day for you and Luca?”

“Do you mind? He wants to take me up the coast to the lighthouse and then ice skating.”

Marcus favors me with a wry smile. “Don’t forget your cat hat. It’s cold out there today.”



LUCA’S WAITING in the parking lot across the bridge from the omega residences, leaning against his pick-up and looking more like sin than saint this time. He goes to take my skates from me, but pulls me close instead, kissing me and making my toes curl in my boots.

I stand up on my tiptoes, loop my arms around his neck and return his kiss until he nudges me and nods over my shoulder at Marcus. I blush and let Luca drop my skates in the bed of the pick-up then help me up onto the bench seat.

“Storm Harbor?” Marcus calls as he opens the door to the town car he’ll follow us in.

“You got it, man. I was going to take the highway up the west coast.”

“If you lose me, wait until I’ve got eyes on you again. Deal?”

“Of course. You have my word. I’ll keep her safe.”

And I do feel safe as I slide across the seat and up against him, drinking a white chocolate mocha from the bespelled thermos he never seems to be without when he sees me lately. We pull out of the parking lot and hit the highway in minutes. He breathes me in and wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close as he takes the winding road at a sedate pace.



“Love you, princess.”

“Love you, my alpha,” I sigh, nuzzling against him. “And I can’t wait to see the lighthouse. Thank you for taking me.”

“I can’t wait for you to see it, either. It’s a clear day. From the observation deck up top, you’ll be able to see for miles.”

“We get to go up into it?”

“Not to the very top. That’s maintained by the Coast Guard since the lighthouse is still in service, but there’s a small observation deck just below it, and we can definitely head up there.”

It’s just the sort of adventure I need, with just the sort of alpha I most want by my side to experience it with.



HE HELPS me down from the pick-up after we’ve parked and hugs me tight as I slide down his body from the high bench seat. I smirk up at him when my toes touch the gravel of the lot, and he gives my ass a teasing squeeze. “Don’t wind me up, princess, or we’ll be spending date day back in my room.”

“We’ll have to warm up after skating,” I point out, grinning, slipping out of his arms and heading toward the lighthouse.

The tower is attached to a small lighthouse keepers’ residence that’s been turned into a small museum, and he lets me wander the small space, going from glass display case to glass display case. I snap pictures as I go, determined to dig into everything I see and read the moment I set foot back in Saint Guinnette’s library once more. A portrait of the saint hangs in the residence’s sitting room and I drift toward it.

She’s pretty in the way that omegas so often are, small and soft. A true beauty. Mischievous blue eyes glitter from a beautiful face, framed by a cascade of wild dark brown curls. Her hands are crossed in her lap, and she would look demure if not for the sparkle in her eyes and her upturned lips.

“Can’t say why,” Luca teases, “but she kind of reminds me of you.”

I laugh and let him guide me up the narrow, winding stairs that spiral up the tower itself, nearly dizzy by the time we stumble out onto the small observation deck. There’s barely room for the two of us but there’s a tower viewer, and Luca grins as he drops a few coins into it for me to look through.

And he’s right. It’s such a clear day, a bright blue sky above us, that we can see for miles—even without the viewer mounted on the steel catwalk. I stare out across the endless Atlantic, watching the white crests of waves dance across its slate-blue surface. Luca helps me pivot the viewer and since we’re so close to the island’s tip, I can see all the way across the Bay of Fundy to the mainland, to the tall pine forests that Marcus and I drove through just days ago on our return to Fairhaven. The ferry crosses the bay, white foam rippling out behind it. Yet everything is so distant—so far away compared to the heat of Luca’s body at my side.

I draw him closer until he’s wrapped around me as I gaze out at the world beyond Deer Island and, saints, it’s so big. Vast and open. Full of opportunity. It makes our own lives feel so small and yet so grand: small because the world around us is so very big, grand because we get to live in this world of crashing waves, pine forests, and endless blue skies.

I sigh and Luca gets it, squeezing me around the middle. “This is just the beginning, princess. I promise you.”



I STOP on my way to my first lesson with Ian of the term and grab our usuals from Ciel, but pause when I knock on the open door and see that Ian’s not alone.

An alpha mage, silver threaded through his mahogany-brown hair, is pacing opposite Ian but pauses when he sees me lower my hand after knocking.

I peek at my watch and start to duck back out of the room. “My apologies. I must be a bit early.”

Ian rolls his eyes and waves me in. “You know you’re right on time, as always. Come in, come in. Professor Cadigan and I were just discussing the Mark of Baphomet and how the spell to cast the hex may have changed over time.”

The older man looks over his shoulder at me, skepticism sinking frown lines into his otherwise handsome face. I catch traces of woodsmoke and damp earth, but his scent is dulled, the scent of a mated alpha.

“Ian, you shouldn’t be so open about your research in front of the girl.”

Ian quirks a dark brow. “The ‘girl’ has been helping me with research for weeks. She’s the one who determined the Mark was used prior to the Legion of Baphomet’s use of it.”

I make myself small when Professor Cadigan turns on me again. “Professor Reinhardt gives me too much credit. He practically led me to the conclusion.”

“Hardly. Miss Rose’s appetite for scholarship and her capacity for reading between the lines in historical texts are to be commended. She’s quite unlike her older brothers and sister in that regard, Sean.”

Professor Cadigan’s expression softens, somewhat, but there’s an acrid tinge to his muted scent that belies the affable words that follow. “A blessing. One of your brothers gave me most of my gray hairs. Well, I’ll leave you two to your lesson. Ian, do keep me apprised of any further developments you and Miss Rose come across.”

The alpha professor strides from the room, giving me one more considering look as he pulls the door shut.

Ian flips through a new tome as I take my seat across from him.

“How many times do we think the Mark has reemerged?” I muse, looking through my notes.

My alpha professor rifles through a stack of his own notes and traces his index finger down the column of a chart, shaking his head. Ian snaps the folder shut and disappears

from his office without a word. I stare after him, eventually poking my head out of his office, but he's gone.

When he doesn't return after a few minutes, I start digging in historical registers, trying to track the Mark through history. My Latin has improved, and I'm gratified at how much more I'm able to make sense of, but if there is a discernible pattern to the Mark's reemergence, I don't have enough information yet to uncover it.

Finally, I shove the book away, just as Ian comes storming into the room with all the dark energy of a thunder cloud.

He rages like a storm. "I've been so fucking blind! We all have. Saints, it's not just the Mark that's reemerging! You're dismissed, Miss Rose. I have work to do."

I startle, my scent bitter with shock.

He softens, but his eyes still crack like lightning, bright and dangerous. "I very much hope I'm wrong. Please, I'd like to speak to Mr. Haley. Would you get him?"

I slowly close the ledger I'd been working through and set it back on the cart before retrieving Marcus from the café.

"Something's happened," I say. "Something that has him very upset. He wanted to see you."

Ian is tugging at his dark hair, his expression thunderous, when we come back into the room. "Haley," he barks, alpha command slipping into his voice. "Do not let your charge out of your sight unless you're within the residence wards. Not even for a moment."

"Professor," I say, a soft whine to my voice. "What is it?"

His eyes, when they meet mine, are sharp, but sorrowful. "I hope to the fucking saints, I'm wrong, but if I'm not... just promise me you'll be safe."



RAD FALLS into step beside me as I'm climbing the stairs to Saint Guinnette's library on my way to Peer Advising, his

hand going to the back of my neck, squeezing until I'm sure I'll bruise.

I send Marcus a quick shake of my head, because I can handle Andrew Radcliffe if all we're doing is talking. Even if his hand at my neck makes me want to vomit.

I duck my head and look up at the alpha through my lashes and for the first time, I smile upon seeing him. Because Andrew Radcliffe got the absolute *piss* beaten out of him sometime after the New Year and before the start of term. He's covered in bruises, just like the ones he's leaving on my delicate skin as he glares down at me. His brow is split, held together by magical tape, and his right eye is still swollen. His face is a mottled mess of black, blue, purple, and green, surrounded by sickly yellow where more bruises have already healed.

I hide my smile by turning away. "What is it, Rad?" I don't try to soften my words, not when my father and eldest brother aren't here to reprimand me.

"I don't think my beloved has been behaving as she should," he sneers. "I told you I would be lenient, but I'm running out of patience."

I pull away from him just as we enter the library, turning toward him so he can't grab the back of my neck again. "My affairs are, as of yet, none of your business. Please don't approach me again unless you've spoken with my father and received his blessing. I am also running out of patience. If you put your hands on me without my express permission one more time, my honor guard will be forced to take action against you."

He scowls at me and grabs my chin so hard I yelp and turns my head so my neck is exposed. "You'll show me the respect I deserve, omega whore. Whenever you see me, you'll show me exactly where you'll wear my bite."

"Mr. Radcliffe," Marcus rumbles, stepping between me and Rad so Rad is forced to release me. "Please step away from my client. Her father won't take kindly to his property being damaged."

I freeze behind Marcus, my honor guard's words turning my stomach to lead. He delivers them with such nonchalance that I almost believe him, but no—Marcus is playing the same game I am and doing an admirable job.

“Her father won't care once my bite's on her neck. He barely cares now.”

“Until such time, I am legally and contractually allowed to beat the shit out of you if you touch her again. But it looks like someone's already done my work for me. Please pass their details along to me. I owe them a thank-you card.”

Rad whirls away with a snarl and stalks out of the library, slamming the door shut behind him.

I whimper and Marcus immediately wraps an arm around my shoulder, leading me slowly to the study rooms. He sits me down and kneels beside me, and gingerly tilts my chin up. He flinches and shakes his head. “You're already starting to bruise. That fucking bastard.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For standing up for me.”

Marcus takes my hands in his and bows his head. “I hate that I had to say what I did. That I had to lower myself to speaking his language.”

I catch the scent of sea salt and look up to find Cassian in the doorway, watching me and Marcus with an ache so sharp on his face that it steals my breath. He hides it when my eyes flick up to his, glaring at me until I squirm in my seat.

“Out, Haley,” he spits out, alpha dominance rippling off him.

Marcus lets out a low growl, his own alpha power roaring to the surface. “Lay a hand on her and you'll lose it.”

But Cassian doesn't have to touch me to hurt me—he never has. His words, his actions, have always been enough to draw me to him, and to crush me. “It's okay, Marcus. I'm sure Cassian will behave as an alpha of his station should, especially to his advisee.”

Marcus sends Cassian a murderous look, his winter-wind and pine scent spiking, until winter and summer clash as their scents fill the small room. My honor guard finally stalks out of the room, closing the door but for a crack behind him.

Cassian snarls and shoves the door shut before rounding on me. “Radcliffe touched you again.”

“I’m handling it,” I say quietly.

“This is you handling it?” he demands. “You’re fucking bruised!” He scrubs at his jaw, pacing, his long strides eating up the length of the study room. “Enough of this. You’re not to go anywhere without at least two trusted alphas with you. Haley isn’t enough any longer.”

“Marcus handled the situation exactly how I wanted him to,” I grind out.

“And look how that turned out! You were shaking like a leaf when I walked in. Fuck, Rad is *destroying* you, Juniper.”

“I’m stronger than you think,” I protest, though my voice is weak.

“Not strong enough. Not against him. Two alphas, at all times.” He pours his alpha command into his words, and I feel his power, his dominance crackling over my skin, willing me to obey.

“Stop interfering in my life, Cassian. You’re not my alpha.” He may not be, but he’s doing what the alphas closest to me won’t, trying to find new ways to keep me safe. But why?

“You’ll do as I say if I have to command you every single day. Fuck, you’ll do as I say if I have to personally escort you to every single class and study session. You will be safe, saints help me,” he fumes, fire in his smoke-and-whiskey eyes.

I bristle at his arrogance. “Why are you trying so hard to protect me when you despise me? To fulfill some bullshit alpha savior complex you have? You can’t stand the thought that some poor, weak omega doesn’t want your help. Fuck, you don’t give a shit about *me*.”

His eyes flash but his shoulders sag just an inch. “Despise you? I wanted to mate you!”

“Mate me? You broke my heart into a million fucking pieces!” I shout back.

“I broke *your* heart? I asked your father for his blessing to court you, only to find out that you’d been leading me on the whole time. That I was just some stupid alpha you led around by the nose. Fuck, Juniper, I loved you. And you despised me.”

All the fight drains out of me. “You... you asked my father for his blessing? To court me?”

Cassian turns away, a wounded expression darkening his face. “At the end of the summer, before your designation even revealed. That you’d be an omega was practically a foregone conclusion, that you’d have mating contracts your father would bid out... it’s a barbaric practice, but so help me, Juniper, I would have done it for *you*.”

He would have, but then he gave his bite to someone else. To some other omega, only months after our summer romance. “I never despised you,” I whisper, my voice hoarse and hollow.

“He said—”

“My father lies.” I know that now, that my father will lie, manipulate, and do whatever must be done to get his way. That he’d kill me to keep his plans from going afoul.

Cassian deflates, his shoulders dropping, and he slowly nods his head.

“That’s why you were so cruel when I arrived at Fairhaven,” I realize.

“I wanted you to suffer. I wanted to hurt you as badly as you’d hurt me. I wanted to start a life with you, Juniper. A pack. And—”

“And you never asked me.”

“I texted. You told me to leave you the hell alone. I called and you didn’t pick up. I wrote you emails. Letters. I tried



everything.”

“Wh-what?” I heard nothing from Cassian after our summer together. I heard nothing from him, and when he heard nothing from me, he turned to another. He found solace in the omega who won his heart.

“You never received any of them, did you?”

“No. Not a word. I tried texting you too, but I *never* said to leave me alone.” I swallow hard. My father. My fucking father ruined any chance of happiness I had with the alpha before me. The alpha who looks so broken and lost as the pieces all fall into place.

“He blocked my number and intercepted all of your messages.”

I let out a shuddering sigh. “So it would seem.”

Cassian turns away, running a hand through his hair. He swallows hard, his throat working, and I duck my head, staring at my shaking hands in my lap.

Saints, I could have had a future with this alpha, the very first boy I loved. My first kiss. My alpha prince.

He shakes his head and sighs. “We can’t change the past. We’re different people than we were then.”

And he chose someone else.

“My offer to get you out of the country still stands—and will always stand. Whatever you need, Juniper. I would do anything for you.”

So says the alpha who loves another.

“Anything but choose me,” I murmur as I stand and slip from the study room.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 23



I don't mourn Cassian Leclerc and the future we could have had together, because I don't let myself. I distract myself with classwork, with research, burying any feelings with distractions.

I move on, just like Cassian did.

Simon may no longer be my tutor, but we still spend every Tuesday and Thursday together, now in a much bigger group study room, or taking up half the tables at Ciel. The other omega girls join us, along with Luca and Darika, and we goof off as much as we study.

We grow closer as friends, but closer as lovers, too. He'll mention a book one of us needs for an assignment and lead me off into the stacks in the library, back me up against the bookshelves in the library and kiss me until I'm breathless. He'll lure me away from our little group's air hockey tournaments in the residence hall's rec center, pull me upstairs into the blanket fort nest he now always leaves in place for me, and roll me onto my back, wedge his knee between my thighs and kiss and touch me until I'm panting for him.

We take our time—and sometimes too much of it. We'll wander back into the rec room, clothes ruffled and hair mussed, and pretend we were just looking at one of Simon's latest tech inventions.

No one believes us.

“You guys are so bad at being sneaky,” Bitsy mutters as we watch the Monroe siblings play air hockey and trash talk each

other like only a brother and sister can. “Literally no one thinks you’re looking for books or at inventions or whatever silly excuses you come up with. But you two are cute as fuck, I’ll give you that.”

“There’s just something about the Monroe siblings, isn’t there?” I murmur pointedly.

Bitsy’s lips curve up in a smirk. “Guess I’m not great at being sneaky either.”

“Nah, but omegas are observant. Especially Alyssa. Not so much Ellie, apparently.”

“Don’t tell her? Her friendship is too precious to me.”

“Not my secret to tell,” I promise.

“Speaking of Alyssa, are we throwing them a mating bash or are we throwing them a mating bash?”

I let Bitsy drop the subject, let her pull Alyssa into a conversation that I quickly take the lead on. Because party planning? That’s one omega skill I absolutely excel at.



“OKAY, HEAR ME OUT,” Luca says, squinting at the Transmogrification project he’s working on. “Alyssa and Darika are literally obsessed with this dumpling food truck that posts up outside Quill & Clover sometimes. Plump’s got the best of, like, every dumpling ever. Alyssa’s partial to the empanadas—though she says they’re not quite as good as her mom’s—and samosas, and Darika downs their bao in a way that verges on indecent.”

Simon stops tapping away at the keys of his laptop—still searching for that errant code I found. “Luc’s right. And Plump is delicious. You’ll get major brownie points with Alyssa if you can book them. And hopefully brownie points will turn into actual brownies.”

I scribble a few notes in my notebook and then set it aside. “Perfect. I’ll call tomorrow.”

I sigh and set my notebook aside, rolling onto my belly and looking up at Simon and Luca, remembering what happened the last time we were in this nest together. My cheeks color and I duck my head, but not before Simon catches me.

He closes his laptop with slow, deliberate movements. “You, kit-kat, are meant to be planning a mating celebration.” He looks me over, a slow, lazy grin curving his lips. “Get naked,” he tells me, in a voice that’s more alpha than beta.

My perfume floods the air with honeyed vanilla.

Simon considers my response with a faint smirk. “You like being told what to do?”

“By you,” I admit. Because, unlike an alpha, Simon can’t force me. He can’t command me the way an alpha can. But that stern voice that brooks absolutely no argument? He can tell me what to do all day long in that voice.

I jump out of the nest, shove my notebook into my bag, and dive back in among the pillows and blankets, getting caught in my own sweater as I try to yank it over my head as fast as possible.

“All of it, beautiful,” Simon says, his hazel eyes locked on mine, not the curves of my breasts, as I unbutton my blouse. “Joining us, Luc?”

At my needy mewl, Luca chuckles and drops down onto the mattress on the floor, crawling toward me and stealing a quick kiss. “Gonna show Simon how to make you scream, princess.”

I whine and unclasp my bra, the lace dragging against my hard, sensitive nipples, making my slick flow. The moment I’ve shed my tights and panties, Simon pulls me onto his lap and into a kiss that makes my toes curl. He grabs my bare thighs beneath the skirt of my uniform as he kisses me and pulls me close until I can feel his length behind his zipper.

I grind against him, sparks of pleasure lighting me up at the friction. “Want you,” I whisper against his lips.

“Soon, beautiful. I promise.” He kisses me sweetly, then sweeps his fingers between the lips of my sex and I moan, rocking into his touch as he finds my clit.

He slips one finger into my soaked cunt, and I whine, needing more of him.

Luca draws my hair aside and presses a kiss to the pulse point in my neck before holding up his hand for Simon.

“Crook your fingers like this and your knuckles will hit her estrus gland. You’ll drive her wild.”

Simon does as Luca demonstrates, thrusting his fingers into my cunt, his knuckles stroking against my back wall. Pleasure curls tight in my belly and I buck against his fingers.

“Ride,” he orders, his thumb finding my clit.

I whine and do as he says, moving my hips until he’s hitting every perfect spot, until ecstasy spirals inside me, curling tight in my belly. He watches me intently, his eyes never leaving mine as I move against his hand. I fuck his fingers with abandon, chasing my peak as he rubs circles around my clit with his thumb.

“Going to come for us, Junes?” he asks, nuzzling the sensitive skin of my neck just below my ear and I clench hard around his fingers.

When Luca rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, I come apart with a throaty moan.

“She’s good for another,” Luca says lightly, undoing the zipper of my skirt and helping Simon ease it down over my hips.

When I’m fully bared to them, Simon stares, a slow perusal of my body. “Beautiful,” he breathes, leaning forward to capture my lips in a kiss. I open to him, feel the teasing slide of his tongue against mine, forever winding me up. He strokes over my clit slowly, gentle touches that keep desire simmering inside of me. “Saints, if you only knew how often I thought about backing you up against the stacks in the library, pulling your tights aside just enough so I could touch you. You’d have to be so quiet, kit-kat.”

“Impossible,” Luca snorts. “Besides, you’d drive half the library fucking wild with the scent of her slick. Every alpha on campus would want a taste...”

Simon’s hazel eyes darken, and he drops a trail of kisses down my jaw until he can suck at the hollow of my throat, tongue teasing against my skin until I buck hard against his fingers. Saints, what this beta does to me, how every pass of his lips, his tongue, ignites a blaze beneath my skin.

“Or find a hidden corner, drop to my knees in front of you, so I could taste you, tease you until you were whimpering, begging to come...”

“Please!” I breathe.

Simon chuckles against my skin and nuzzles me. “Is that what you want, Junes?”

I want everything from this bossy beta. His mouth, his fingers, his cock. We move slowly and I’m dizzy with impatient need for him. Every inch of freckled skin beneath my fingertips as we explore each other. Yet he holds himself back, never letting me touch him. I get only what he gives me, never any more.

“Please, Simon,” I beg.

Luca pulls me from Simon’s lap until I’m half in his and spreads my thighs for my beta lover. Fuck, I’m so obscenely open, so on display, but Simon drinks me in, eyes roving down my body.

“Saints, I love the way you glisten when you’re wet,” he groans, lazily tracing his fingers through my folds. He drops to his stomach in front of me, stroking down the inside of my thigh until he reaches my knee, then hitches my knee over his shoulder. When he looks up at me from between my thighs, he’s all awe, softer than an alpha’s possession but no less dear to me.

For just a moment, he’s shy. “I’ve never done this with—”

“With an omega? Don’t worry, bro. She’ll tell you what she likes, and you’ve been a damn quick study so far.” Luca tweaks my nipples and I arch up into his touch, wanting his

mouth on my nipples, on my neck, my lips. I whine, but Luca knows. He knows exactly what I want. I want the ball of his piercing against my breasts, my tongue.

Simon thrusts two fingers back inside me, spreading my folds open with his thumb. He dips his head between my thighs, dropping soft kisses on my mound, the insides of my thighs. I squirm as he teases and he laughs, his breath hot against my skin. He thumbs over my clit, and I arch up with a cry.

“Juniper, I’ll give you everything you want, whatever you need, but I’m going to take my time.”

I groan, the feather-light touches of his lips against my skin making me squirm.

He drags his fingers out of my cunt and thrusts them back in just as slowly, his knuckles working against my back wall until I’m writhing so much Simon makes Luca hold me still with one pointed look. Luca bands his arm across my middle, hand stilling my hips.

“Too much?” Simon asks, his expression sweet once more.

Until I tell him, “No, it’s perfect.”

That blaze returns to his eyes, the golden promise of more pleasure than I can stand. “Good girl,” he murmurs, and dives between my folds, his tongue finding my clit. I fight against Luca’s hold to arch up, to chase Simon’s tongue as he draws back, as he teases, kissing along my folds. He rocks his knuckles against my estrus gland and pleasure builds, white hot inside me, but he takes his time.

He explores, laving his tongue over my clit, first lightly and then with enough pressure to make me buck and writhe as much as Luca’s hold will allow.

Luca laughs softly. “Told you not to worry.” He traces the backs of the fingers on his free hand over my cheek and I turn into the touch. Saints, I want so much more of them both, but Luca seems content to let Simon set our pace—and Simon seems more than intent on teasing.

He sucks my clit between his lips, tracing idle swirls over the sensitive bud with the tip of his tongue, never touching me the same way twice. He flattens his tongue against my clit just as he rocks his knuckles inside my slick cunt, and I cry out.

“Please, please, please, Simon!”

He nuzzles against my mound and lashes his tongue against my clit, winding me up so quickly I can’t even catch my breath. And then he draws back.

I groan at the loss of contact, but Simon smirks up at me. “I think you need a distraction, kit-kat. Suck Luca off while I lick you.”

A zap of pleasure arcs all the way up my spine from my needy sex and when Luca releases me to undo his zip, I quickly twist so I can take him into my mouth.

I moan at the salty taste of him, the weight of his thick length on my tongue, the cool slide of his piercings between my lips. I hum out a moan around Luca’s hardness, and Simon was right. It’s just enough of a distraction to quell the sharp, impatient need that had me writhing against his mouth.

Simon licks me slowly, deliberately, each pass of his tongue sending pleasure jolting through me and I... I float, strung out on a level of pleasure I’ve never felt before as he takes his time. He doesn’t rush to make me come—not this time—instead focusing on drawing out my pleasure as long as he can.

And I love it.

Luca strokes my hair back from my face, lazily thrusting between my lips as much as our position will allow. I could suck him so much better from my hands and knees, but I know this is all part of Simon’s plan. His game to make me soar.

He does. He takes me higher, to the precipice of pleasure and leaves me there, strung out on pure desire, every nerve in my body burning for him.

Simon watches me intently, focused on how I take Luca into my mouth. Alternating every stroke of Luca between my lips with his fingers thrusting deep into my cunt. I whine as I



approach my peak, as Luca's knot swells at the base of his cock, thick and red. I shift just enough so I can squeeze it in my fist, wishing I had the leverage to take him in both of my hands.

Simon sucks my clit into his mouth and flicks his tongue against the sensitive bead and I soar. I scream and I thrash, and Simon chases every cry, not letting me come down until Luca bursts down my throat with a growl. I nuzzle my alpha, nosing the spot where his hip hinges, where his scent is potent, powerful and intoxicating, but then I look up.

Simon wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and I fly into his arms, clinging to him, finding his lips with my own, tasting myself on his tongue. I whimper, rubbing against him. "I want to make you come, too," I whisper.

"Soon, beautiful. I'm not in any rush. Now c'mere." He pulls me back into the softness of the makeshift nest, cuddling me close, stroking my bare back until every muscle in my body relaxes, until I lie, spent and beyond satisfied, in his arms. But as I still beside him, emotion trickles from him like water from a leaking faucet.

Doubt.

Doubt I try to push aside as Luca shifts up behind me, kisses my shoulder, and holds me just as close. I brush my lips against Simon's in a chaste kiss. "Will you at least come back to my cottage so we can cuddle pile all night? It doesn't have to be tonight, but maybe for... for my birthday?"

"That's coming up, is it?" he teases. "Did you want a Coffee Crisp cake or a Strawberry Kit-Kat cake?"

It's not an answer. Not really.

"Just want you," I say around a yawn. "Okay, and the Strawberry Kit-Kat cake, I guess."

He laughs, his body shaking, and for just a moment, I can pretend I have his whole heart.

But it's when I go back to my cottage with Luca, Marcus following behind us, that I realize what's truly going on. Simon's holding back. He's not all-in like he said he was.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 24



I get a text from Cassian as I'm walking to History of Magic that afternoon and squint down at my phone, not even realizing he had the number. But of course he does. Cassian, somehow, knows just about everything.

I stare down at the message, my heart kicking in my chest.

"Who is it?" Luca asks, protective alpha energy rising to the surface.

"It's... Cassian. And he wants to talk tonight."

"Cassian wants to talk to you tonight, on the Feast of Saint Valentine?"

I frown. "So it seems."

"What do you want, princess?"

What do I want with Cassian Leclerc, the only alpha to ever ask for my father's blessing? I already know there can be no future for us, not with him mated to another omega. Still, that seems less and less true by the day. Whoever she is, she isn't a Fairhaven student, but perhaps she lives in the city of Fairhaven like Grace Cassidy used to. But he never talks about her. Saints, if I had a mate, I'd never be able to *stop* talking about them. I'm already a babbling mess about Luca and Simon, and Luca has yet to give me his mating bite. Simon I'll never be able to mate. Only an alpha can bestow a mating bite.

Yet why would Cassian lie about such a thing?

"We destroyed each other," I say quietly. "With a few choice words from my father, we... we broke each other to

pieces.”

“Maybe it’s not about your relationship, but something else? I hate to say it, but that alpha is involved in every aspect of your life.”

I shoot him a sour look but type out a quick message to Cassian. <<*Tonight’s Darika and Alyssa’s mating celebration. We’re wrapping up around midnight.*>>

Another message pings through from my teenage love. <<*Meet beneath the bell tower at midnight then?*>>

Saints alive, one of the most romantic spots on the whole of Fairhaven’s campus and Cassian wants to meet me there at midnight on the Feast of Saint Valentine? Surely he knows the myth of the bell tower just as well as every other Fairhaven student. A kiss beneath the bell tower is a promise of forever.

Sure, it’s just a silly superstition, but...

“At the base of the bell tower tonight at midnight?” I shoot Luca a pointed look and he relents with a grin.

“Yeah, sorry. He definitely wants to talk about your relationship. What will you tell him?”

I kick at the slushy snow along the walkway. “What do you think I should tell him?”

Luca frowns. “I think only you can answer that for yourself, princess. Is there anything he could do to win you back?”

“Luca, he’s mated. And mating bonds are only broken in death. He can’t win me back.”

“Then tell him just that.”

I nod, but frown and type out a quick message to Cassian. <<*Midnight it is. See you then.*>>



I HAVE a mating celebration to take my mind off of Cassian’s texts, and as soon as we’re dismissed from History of Magic, I

head to the small green space at the base of the hill the bell tower stands on top of. It's a pretty little spot, already being made prettier by fresh flowers and string lights. Ian, Mai, and Daniel Huong supervise, our chaperones for the night. When I told Ian I was planning the celebration, he insisted on providing extra protection for the omegas in attendance. And when Mai found out that one of her favorite students was having a mating celebration, she demanded a gift registry.

I set my bag down and begin unfolding white linen tablecloths to cover the café tables Ellie helped us borrow from Ciel. Simon hangs floating lights above our make-shift dance floor—because if I know one thing about Alyssa, it's that she'll want the best food at her wedding. And if I know two things, it's that she'll want to dance the night away in her alpha's arms and with her best friends.

I cast the warming shield I've been practicing for weeks, pretending I don't notice the way Ian watches me, then scatter white rose petals around a small altar where Alyssa and Darika will light unity candles, a tradition in both of their families.

The dumpling truck arrives just before the happy couple do and Luca thumps the beta man running the truck on the back and sneaks us both the first bao of the night. “Want to see the only balls Darika will ever have in her mouth?” he asks with a smirk.

“I heard that! And no food until after vows,” the alpha chides. She's as debonair as can be in and slacks and a gray vest, a cream blouse with translucent lantern sleeves beneath it.

“It's my set-up fee,” Luca teases her, holding out the round dumpling for me on a pair of chopsticks. I take a bite and it's all I need to know we definitely made the right choice in party food. “Looking good by the way, Momo.”

Darika gamely flips Luca off at the nickname.

Alyssa looks around the little space in wonder, shedding her coat as she steps beneath the heating charms, spinning around under the magical twinkle lights.

She's resplendent in an off the shoulder pale pink gown that shows off her healed mating bite and hugs her curves, setting off the warm brown of her skin. It swishes around her ankles as she bounds over to me to wrap me in a tight hug. "This is perfect, Junie. Thank you so much."

"Don't cry, Lys. You'll smudge your mascara."

"Not with all the spells I put on it to keep it in place. But seriously, thank you."

"Just you wait," I tell her, as the surprise of the evening arrives just in time.

"Mom? Dad?" Alyssa shrieks, launching herself into the arms of a petite Hispanic woman, who laughs as she catches her daughter.

"You flew the O'Neills out?" Simon asks, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist, setting his chin on my shoulder. "You just got all the brownie points in the world."

"Alyssa spent the holidays with the Modhis, so she didn't get to see her family. It didn't seem fair for them to miss this. And I get *excellent* miles on my credit card."

"And you're a good friend," he says.

"And I wish I had the kind of parents I'd want to be there if I ever get a party like this," I murmur.

"You want one, you'll have one. Saints above, Juniper, even if your father mates you off to a bunch of jackasses, we're having one hell of a last hurrah."

"I can't let him do that. I don't want... I don't want what he wants for me."

"I know, kit-kat. I know. Now come on, let's get the rest of the chairs set up for the ceremony." He drops a sweet kiss on my cheek, grabs my hand and gives me a spin, the skirt of the dress I wore on New Year's Eve twirling around me. "Actually, not just yet."

He turns his finger in a circle and I give him another spin, laughing. "Radiant, Junes." He pulls me in for a kiss, dips me

backwards until I'm giggling and then spins me once more.

And like always, he catches me when I stumble.



ALYSSA and I both sob through her vows and no amount of spells keeps either of our mascaras in place. Darika, for her part, can't take her eyes off Alyssa long enough to read off the little card in her shaking hands and fumbles her way through her vows, which only makes Alyssa's tears fall faster.

It's the most joyous occasion I've ever been a part of, so unlike the society wedding between Willow and Tom or Claire and Aspen's elegant and well-attended mating ceremony. And it's *fun*.

Ellie's our DJ for the night and the moment the vows have been said, she starts up the music. Darika and Alyssa share their first dance, swaying beneath the moonlight and magical lights above.

"They look so happy," Luca whispers in my ear. "And you did that. You gave them this party."

In truth, I can't take my eyes off them. "It's just a party. They'd be just as happy without it."

"Still, they'll remember this forever."

"I hope so," I say with a smile, not knowing if I'll ever see either of them again after I leave Fairhaven. If my father gets his way, I'll only see my closest friends and the alpha and beta I love at alumni balls. My only friends will be the other omegas in my affluent social circle, and there will be no love between me and the alphas he chooses for me.

"I know what you're thinking. I know what that frown means, and Juniper, we have years," Luca promises.

I find his hand and slip mine into it. "I want forever."

"You'd make me the happiest alpha in existence."

"After I bring my father down, we're running away."

“After we bring your father down, we won’t have to.”

I swipe at my eyes, smudging my mascara even further. “Dance with me, my alpha?”

He winks and grins and my heart overflows, warmth rushing through my veins. “I thought you’d never ask, princess.”

Simon joins us after a song and a few dumplings and we dance just like we did on All Saints’ Eve, me between the both of them. Their hands roam my body, their lips find my jaw, my throat, and we dance like the rest of the party isn’t watching, like our chaperones for the night aren’t watching. For one perfect, blissful playlist, there’s no one else in the world but the three of us.

My little not-quite-pack.

Finally, Alyssa, Bitsy, and Ellie steal me away from them for a dance and, laughing, I follow, throwing my hands up in the air, twirling beneath the twinkle lights.



SIMON CATCHES me glancing up at the bell tower as we’re folding the chairs back up.

“Meeting someone beneath the bell tower tonight?”

“Cassian,” I admit. “He said he wanted to talk.”

Simon starts, lips parted. “Tonight?”

I fidget with the cuff of my dress and nod. “Tonight at midnight.”

“Well, what are you waiting for then? Luc and I can finish cleaning up. I’ll make Ellie and Bitsy help.”

“Are you sure?”

I’m not just asking if he’s sure they can handle the cleanup. I’m asking if he’s sure he won’t mind me talking to the first boy I ever loved beneath the bell tower on the Feast of Saint Valentine.



He pulls me in for a tender kiss and then twirls me away. “Go get ‘im, kit-kat. Or give Bits or me a shout and we’ll hex his dick tiny for you.”

“My knight in shining armor,” I laugh, before tugging on my coat and stepping out of the warming wards around our little party space. I take the winding path up the hill, sensing Marcus at my heels. Always watching out for me.

I’m beneath the bell tower by 11:55.

Anticipation buzzes through me. I didn’t let myself mourn Cassian and I haven’t admitted, even to myself, that I hoped there would be an explanation, just like there was with Luca. That once again, an alpha I loved would tell me the impossible and I’d end up in their arms.

I know when he’s not there as the clock tolls midnight that he isn’t coming.

I finally clear snow off the bench at the base of the bell tower when it tolls the quarter hour and drop down onto it. I allow myself only the fifteen minutes between the tolling of the bells to cry for Cassian Leclerc, for my own foolish fantasies, and for the future I’d only just started daring to dream of again.

At half past twelve, Marcus steps out of the shadows and sits down beside me.

“I’m all right,” I lie.

I’m not and my honor guard knows it, but the longer he sits beside me beneath the bell tower, the angrier I get. Cassian could have showed up. If he were an alpha with any honor, he would have. Shit, he could have at least texted me. But he didn’t.

“Fuck him,” I finally mutter. “He’s an asshole and I’m a fool for thinking... for thinking...”

“Hang on to the anger. He’s not worth your tears, sweet-tart.”

“I just want to *hit* something,” I mutter.

Which is exactly how I end up standing in front of a punching bag in a pair of sweats borrowed from the gymnasium's lost and found.

Marcus demonstrates how to properly throw a punch and I mimic the motions.

"Wrist straight and close your fist," he says, coming over and taking my hand in his, straightening my wrist. "Follow through with your punch."

I give the bag an experimental jab and then shake my hand out. "Ow."

"Keep your fist closed," my honor guard instructs, and I do. I pummel the punching bag until my knuckles sting, until I'm breathing hard and my hair frizzes around my temples.

I strike, harder with each swing of my first, until all that pain becomes anger, until I work every last bit of the anger from my body.

And when I tell Marcus I want to come back and do this again, he gives me one of his rare smiles, his cheek dimpling.

"Any night or early morning you want, sweet-tart. Best if we come when no other alphas are around."

"I know I still can't punch for shit, and I'll never be able to do any actual harm, but it does make me feel better. Stronger."

"You want to feel stronger?" he asks. "Beyond the spellwork you've been practicing?"

"I need to be," I say quietly.

"Then we start training. You're small and you'll always be smaller and weaker than your attackers. But you're smart and quick. I'll get you throwing alphas on their backs by summer break."

I don't believe him, but I laugh all the same.

"Thanks, Marcus," I tell him. "For always being there for me."

## CHAPTER 25



I get a package from Hawthorn later that week, just in time for the Night of the Fallen feast and masquerade and when I open the box, my jaw drops open.

A mask of glittering magic and rhinestones sparkles from the black velvet of the box's interior. And I know this mask, the markings around the eyes that reveal who the mask is: Saint Rosamund, the Black Rose, scourge of alphakind during the Witch Trials.

The omega who built an army and led it to war. The omega who brought peace and progress to the colonies.

I put the mask on and the image of me in the mirror steals my breath. Because hiding behind the face of a long-dead saint, I feel *brave*.

And it is a courageous choice, a bold declaration that I will fight before I'll lie down to be trod upon.

I dive back into the biography of Saint Rosamund Hawthorn got me for Yule and immediately get to work designing the rest of my costume. If something happens and this is the only Fallen I get, I'm going to do it properly.

And I'm going to *shine*.



NIGHT of the Fallen comes on a clear, late-January night. I plait my hair into an elaborate crown of braids and curls,

standing before my mirror in the lace corset I used to blow Luca's mind at the Feast of Marmora, a blouse with sleeves that balloon out to my elbows and fit tightly to my wrist, and the biggest ruffled and black petticoats I could find. I know from my reading that Saint Rosamund split her skirts and tied them up and away from her feet so she could fight, so I've bound the skirt up over one knee with a skinny black belt, revealing the kitten-heel knee-high boots and leather leggings I've added to make the costume my own. I do a little spin in the mirror.

The costume is all black and the effect is... staggering. I rub kohl eyeliner into a smokey eye with the tip of my finger, and then take a deep breath before taking the mask from its velvet box. I hold it by the corners, the glittering straps falling down behind it. A simple spell will activate it, will infuse it with my magic, molding it to my features for the night. It will glow in the night like a beacon.

Like the very courage that guided Fairhaven's founders through the storm.

I can do this. I can be just as courageous. I can face down what's to come with bravery in my heart.

I tie the mask on and then cast the spell, tapping my scribe to the mask. It illuminates, like a diamond catching midday sunlight, weaving magic through my plaited hair until I shine, a beacon in black.

I already know that Luca and Simon will lose their minds over the costume, but I'm just as surprised, joy singing in my veins.

I wear the mask of a warrior and I swear on the saints, I will fight against terror, just like she did.

I will go to fucking war to stop my father's plans.

And I will raise an army to defeat the Soldiers of Saint Aldous.



I CHECK my mask one more time and then step out onto the landing, looking for Marcus in the room below, but I don't have to look far. He's frozen, staring up at me, his mouth open, his jaw slack.

Does his scent spike or is our little cottage so suffused with our scents that I imagine it? Do his gray-green eyes darken as he takes me in?

"Is it too much? I think Hawthorn spent a fortune on the mask and—"

"It's perfect, sweet-tart. You look... you look amazing. But you're missing something."

He conjures a glittering black rose of pure magic and when he meets me at the base of the stairs, he tucks it into my hair, brushing a strand of it behind my ear.

For a moment, we're still, not even breathing, and then Marcus nods to the stairs. "Go see if I got it right," he says, his voice tight and strained.

I clatter up the stairs in my boots and gasp when I see the black of the rose against the shining white-blond of my bespelled locks. And I cannot *wait* for my men to see me dressed like this.

Saints, I can't wait for the world to see me like this.



I SEE Luca and Simon before they see me and can't help my beaming smile because they're costumed just as they should be, as the intrepid explorer Saint Marco and the genius inventor Saint Nikola. They're wickedly handsome together, dashing and debonair behind their glowing masks, and for a moment, I just watch them. The alpha and beta who have my heart.

I know the instant Luca sees me because his scent spikes so hard I catch it on the chill breeze, intoxicating wine and juicy cherries.

He closes the distance between us in just a few long steps, pulling me into a kiss that makes my toes curl in my boots, that makes me want to forego the whole of the party to drag him back to my nest and...

“My Black Rose,” he growls. “We are going to have *so* much fun tonight.”

Simon joins us, making me do a quick spin before kissing me, a teasing brush of his tongue against mine that makes me whine, makes me want *more*.

Alyssa bounds up behind us, the spitting image of a much curvier Saint Florence as she holds a lamp aloft. “Mind if I walk with you? Darika’s on drums tonight and I can’t wait to dance my face off!”

I link arms with her, leading her toward the quad, casting my dashing gentlemen a sly wink over my shoulder.

“We’re going to dance until we drop,” I promise Alyssa.



BITS AND PIECES is playing the feast night party from a stage set up on one end of the quad, Bitsy going absolutely wild behind her keyboard, singing into the same mic as Ellie whenever she’s away from the keys. Their joyous, raucous pop punk is perfect to celebrate the lives of the fallen saints. Students gather near the stage to dance, or around bonfires, already tangled into each other’s arms as they drink and dance.

Alyssa and I grab a few ciders and clink them together before taking long drinks from the cool bottles. Alyssa bounds off toward the stage and I laugh as she gets a front row seat to her alpha pounding away on a drum kit.

Marcus comes up beside me and I nod to the other omega. “Watch out for her tonight?”

He eyes the half-empty bottle of cider in my hand. “I will if you promise to take it a little easy tonight.”

I offer him my pinky in a pinky swear and then I'm being tugged toward a bonfire by my handsome explorer. There's a thrilling anonymity behind our masks and with the bonfire between us and the rest of the party, it feels like we've snuck away. Simon comes up behind me and I'm caught between them, between Luca's alpha power and Simon's lean strength. We dance with abandon, shouting our reverence to the saints up into the night sky.

I grind between them until I'm flying just as high as our shouts and that's when the first flash comes.

Burning. Acrid anise.

I shake it off and let the feeling of Luca's lips at my neck distract me until another flash strikes me like a punch to the gut. Demonic masks, horned silhouettes, and burning, the quad alight with septagrams.

I go rigid in their arms, looking around the quad, desperate to see nothing but our fellow partygoers.

Simon draws back, his hand at my waist. "What is it, Juniper?"

"I... I'm seeing masks again," I whisper.

Luca looks out across the quad and alpha power rips through him as he puts his body between me and the rest of the feast. "Not just you, princess. I see them too."

The quad explodes into chaos, bonfires breaking free from their magical wardings, tearing across the winter-dry grass in intersecting lines, septagram after septagram branded into the quad, dark purple-black magic tinging the flames. Soldiers of Saint Aldous, in all black, their gruesome, demonic masks shining luridly in the light of the fire, storm the quad.

"Alyssa!" I shout, breaking free from Luca and grabbing my scribe.

A Soldier cuts in front of me and I don't hesitate for even a split second. I whip my scribe through the air in a spell I've practiced hundreds of times now: *sisteire corporeus augeire*. The strongest stunning spell I can cast. The Soldier freezes on

the spot and I duck around him, racing toward the stage, just as Marcus races toward me.

I get a vision, just a flash, of Alyssa caught in the thorns of an omega trap, of the stage burning behind her, and I weave through Fairhaven students.

Chaos and satisfaction, delight at the destruction, ripple across the quad and I know their source, the tenor of these thoughts: Andrew Radcliffe.

The arms of a Soldier go around Bridget and she kicks and fights in his arms until her honor guard stuns the Soldier.

“They’re trying to take omegas!” Bitsy shouts into the mic. “Protect your friends.” She grabs Ellie and they bound to the edge of the stage, Darika already lost in the mayhem.

Marcus grabs me and I fight against him, but it’s like fighting pure steel. “No, Juniper!”

“They’re going to take Alyssa!”

“I have to get you to safety.” He chucks me over his shoulder, and I kick at him, pummeling his back with my fists.

“Let me go! I need to get to Alyssa.”

He doesn’t listen. He powers forward, back to the safety of the omega residences, but I manage to fire off one more stunning spell, just as the thorns of an omega trap start to bloom, purple-black, from the earth at Alyssa’s feet. The trap shrivels as its caster drops to the ground. Another Soldier grabs for her and she fights like she’s got nothing to lose.

And then I lose sight of her. Spells and hexes fly through the air, lighting up campus like fireworks as students battle Soldiers.

I scream at Marcus that we have to go back, to get her away from the Soldiers, but before I know it, he’s setting me down inside the wards of the omega residences. I bolt forward, but he barks out an alpha command.

“Do not fucking *move*, Juniper,” he orders in a command I shouldn’t be able to disobey, but even I feel the command cracking under the force of my fight, of my resistance.



“How fucking dare you! My best friend is still out there.” The command presses down on me, bowing my shoulders, but I take one lurching step forward and then another.

I disobey.

“Please, Juniper. Stay. I can’t go out and find Alyssa if I’m worried about you. Stay where it’s safe, for saints’ sake.”

He dashes back out into the fray, just as Ian skids into the residences, hexes sizzling against the wards behind him.

I’m in his arms in an instant.

His alpha instincts ride him hard, and he breathes me in, great shuddering breaths that rack through his body until he finally calms. “You’re safe. Thank the saints.”

“Help me, please,” I beg.

He nods, resolute, and we dash toward the omega lodge, my boots crunching on the gravel.

“Can you open the wards of the lodge to admit betas and honor guards? We need to set up a place to receive the wounded. The infirmary is going to be overflowing by the time this is all...” I let out a shaky breath. “By the time this is all over.”

Ian flicks his scribe and the wards around the lodge shimmer before admitting him.

Bitsy and Bridget limp in behind us, supporting a battered Ellie between them. Their honor guards follow until Bitsy snaps at them to go help people who actually need it.

“Any omega who is frightened, go back to your cottage and lock your door. Stay where it’s safe. We’re opening the residence wards so Juniper can set up a triage. Miss McNamara, I hope you’ll help her?”

Bridget swallows hard but nods. “Yes, sir.”

Simon comes skidding into the omega lodge, looking around at the once-forbidden space for the first time. He pulls Ellie into his arms, despite her pained wince. “Oh thank fuck you’re both safe.”

“Go.” I tell Ian. “Bring injured beta students back so we can help them. And please, please try to find Alyssa.”

He nods, not questioning me, and sprints back out of the lodge, golden scribe raised.

“Bridget, empty Doc’s office of supplies. Anything you can find.”

The senior omega helps Ellie over to the long stainless-steel counter in the kitchen and with Bitsy’s help, hoists her up onto it. But I can already see that Ellie’s arm hangs at an odd angle, broken. Pain contorts her features, and she swoons until Bitsy makes her lie down.

The first wave of beta students is escorted into the omega lodge and Simon sits them down in the main room.

“We’ve got a concussion!” he calls out to me. “And broken ribs.”

“Is the student with the broken ribs breathing all right? If so, bespell for pain relief. Bridget, can you set Ellie’s arm or at least stabilize her until Doc can look at her?”

It takes everything I’ve learned in Restorative Magic and a shocking amount of the stabilizing magic Doc taught us at the end of last term before the chaos in the omega lodge finally fades to a dull roar.

Simon, Bridget, and I attended to nearly thirty students, and if that’s what we saw at our makeshift triage, I shudder to think what Doc is facing in the main infirmary.

It’s past midnight when Marcus limps into the omega lodge.

“Alyssa’s safe. She has a broken arm but tended to it herself and is now doing what I imagine you’ve been doing all night.”

I go to him and sink into his arms, breathing in pine and winter wind.

And smoke and ash.

“Is it over?”

I feel rather than see his nod. “For now. The Soldiers wreaked havoc and hurt a lot of students, but they weren’t able to take a single omega student. I think they’ve all been chased off.”

I collapse onto one of the stools at the kitchen counter, rubbing at my temples. “You need medical attention.”

“I’ve got a pretty bad sprain. I need your best strength sigil and a few pain-relieving spells. I told the headmaster I’d take the first watch over the omega residences until campus has been cleared and the academy-wide wards strengthened. He’s not taking any risks.”

I immediately start the espresso machine and then have him hop up on the counter. I feel around his swollen ankle, and he hisses in pain. “You shouldn’t be walking on this.”

“You can lecture me all day tomorrow after we both sleep past noon.”

I look up at him and force a small smile. “You, sleep past six? Never.”

I cast the simple strength sigil on my honor guard—the very first sigil I failed to cast when coming to Fairhaven—and then apply pain relieving spells to his ankle.

Marcus flexes his ankle and grimaces.

“Sorry, if you want to walk on it at all, I can’t numb you up much more.”

He shakes his head. “I know. And you’ve done an admirable job of it.” He looks around the omega lodge and then smiles down at me. “A truly admirable job by the look of it.”

I blush behind the mask I forgot I was still wearing, rip it off, and then turn to the espresso maker and quickly heat some water for an Americano—the closest thing to a plain black coffee I can manage in the omega lodge’s kitchen. “Everyone here would have survived without my attention.”

Marcus takes the thermos from me when his coffee is finished and squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t diminish what

you've done here, sweet-tart. You were brilliant.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 26



Jan slumps back into the omega lodge sometime after one, just as I'm making sweet, milky tea for anyone awake who wants it. Simon is asleep, leaning up against the couch Ellie is curled up on, her arm in a sling laying across her chest.

"You're safe," I breathe, just as he had when he set eyes on me.

He shakes his head as if I'm talking nonsense, but I see the way he grimaces when he drops down into one of the bar stools.

"You're not going to let me heal you, are you?"

"I can heal myself if I need it."

"Because you're not entirely tapped out after the firefight and setting roughly a million wards," I mutter.

"I'm fine," he assures me. "Or I will be with some rest. And maybe a cup of tea?"

I smirk but set a mug down in front of him before pouring one for myself. I drop down into the stool beside him, scrubbing at my eyes, smearing the kohl liner.

And yet my imperious professor still looks at me like I'm the most beautiful, most precious thing he's ever seen.

I duck away from his intense gaze and twirl my spoon through my cup of milky tea. "I want to learn combat magic. I want to learn to escape an omega trap. I wasn't trapped this time, but Alyssa nearly was."

“You want me to cast a spell that was banned hundreds of years ago on you, causing you no small amount of pain, so you can learn to break out of it?”

“It may be banned, but that hasn’t stopped the Soldiers. I refuse to be at an alpha’s mercy like that again. I refuse to be *trapped*.”

Ian sighs, his shoulders heaving. “I hate this. The thought of hurting you. But you’re right. I’ll talk to the headmaster about it tomorrow.”

“And I want to learn to fight back,” I tell him, voice firm. “If you won’t teach me, I’ll find someone who will.”

It’s so like the threat I posed to him to command me to call my magic last term, but this time, he merely smiles a bit and nods. “I’ll teach you.” He glances around the triage space before his eyes return to me. He takes me in, from the mess of my hair to my smudged makeup, and a costume that now looks utterly ridiculous. “You were Saint Rosamund tonight, weren’t you? You did her proud, Juniper.” He looks at me as if truly seeing me for the first time, his expression open and raw. “If the saints truly do walk among us on Night of the Fallen and give us mere mortals their blessings, you’d have hers.”

I force myself to look into his bright blue eyes, to hear what he says. It’s the greatest of compliments, but all I hear is the tenderness in his words. I slump against him, my head on his shoulder, and for tonight, tucked away in the kitchen, out of sight as we are, he lets me. He lets our fingers tangle together, not quite intertwined, but even that simple touch is electric.

“Rad was there tonight, behind a mask. He hurt Fairhaven students, and nothing will be done about it. He’s untouchable,” I sigh. “The board won’t let the headmaster expel him and the mage inspectors won’t arrest him for... for what he did to me and everything else he’s done.”

“Not wholly untouchable,” he says, and I look up sharply.

The fire that burns in his eyes isn’t the ire of a professor concerned about a student, but something more. It makes him

look younger, like the powerful alpha he is.

“You were the one...” Intense, scholarly Ian Reinhardt beat my attacker black, blue, and bloody. I should recoil at the violence, but after being forced to twirl about Rose Manor in Andrew Radcliffe’s arms, I find myself perversely glad that the smudges of purple-green bruises he wore back to campus were left on him by the man beside me. “Why would you do such a thing? You could lose your job over something like that!”

Ian flushes and ducks away, pulling me back against his shoulder. “He took the light from your eyes. I did the same to him, if only for a few weeks.”

“Do you remember when you unlocked my magic, how it was almost like we were linked? Just for a moment, I knew your thoughts, what you were feeling...” Protective, tender, possessive. *My darling.*

His pale cheeks color, but he doesn’t look away, intensity blazing in his eyes.

“It’s... it’s not the first time that’s happened to me. It happened to me with Andrew Radcliffe that... that day. When he touched me and tried to—” I shake my head, swallowing around the rising bile in my throat. “When he touched me, I linked with him somehow. I caught... glimpses, I guess you could say, and I have ever since.”

Ian lets out a low growl, but nods tightly for me to continue.

“I catch heightened emotions. His anger, his satisfaction. His... his appetites. He was there tonight. All that pain and chaos and destruction, he reveled in it.”

“And you could feel it.”

“Like I was reading his mind. And I got these... flashes. I saw Alyssa in an omega trap before one had even been cast. I saw fire before the Soldiers broke onto the quad.”

Ian’s dark brows crash together as he frowns.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I continue quickly, “because all of my research says the same: reading minds, seeing the glimpses I do... it’s impossible. Magic no mage possesses.”

I shrug. “I don’t know what’s happening to me. I can’t control it, not when it happens or who it happens with. Maybe it has to do with how my magic was locked. Like whatever happened to Rad when he attacked me was some kind of defense mechanism.”

“He said he felt like your magic was stabbing him behind the eyes.”

“A fate far too kind for him,” I sigh. “He tried to press charges against me. For using illegal magic. But my magic was locked then, something that was well documented. I suppose I have you to thank for that,” I say, a faint teasing note in my voice. “Regardless, whatever I did isn’t something mages can do. There’s only Rad’s word that I hurt him.”

“Have you seen Doc about the things you see? About what’s happening to you?”

I shake my head. “Not since before you unlocked my magic. You have to understand... I thought I was losing my mind. Part of me still does. What’s she going to tell me, anyway? That I have unresolved trauma and impossible magic?”

“Or an affinity.”

“An affinity?” My breath sears inside my lungs, the word a brand against my tender flesh. An affinity. The very thing I’ve been scouring the internet and Fairhaven’s library for all term.

“I thought they were fairy stories, myths,” Ian sighs. “But Sienna believes in them—Mai as well.”

“And my father. I... I heard him talking to my brothers and sisters about affinities over break. More and more omegas are showing them in his labs. He was asking Hawthorn if I’d shown any indication that—”

He stands abruptly and yanks his coat on. “I need to talk to Sienna and Mai. Tonight.”



“Tonight? Surely my magic isn’t cause for concern when so many are injured.”

Ian wakes a sleeping Bridget with a barked order, putting my triage in her care.

“I’m fine. I’m wide awake still. I can handle everyone here for the night.”

“I need you back in your cottage, preferably under Haley’s care.”

“He’s on first watch.”

“I’ll find someone to take it. Your safety is infinitely more important.” There’s an edge to his voice, an anxious hardness, a snap of worry.

I nod. “I’ll go back to my cottage.”

“I need to know you’re safe. Come with me.”

I follow him from the omega lodge, my boots crunching gravel as dawn slowly spills over the far horizon. Ian gives a shout for Marcus, who comes sprinting toward us. When my honor guard sees me unharmed, he sweeps me into a hug that leaves me breathless.

“Don’t scare me like that,” Marcus grouses.

Ian studies him for a moment as the three of us walk back to my cottage. “It wasn’t my intention. Juniper, I’m afraid I have to agree with Cassian. Two alphas you trust, with you at all times.”

I start, my temper flaring at the audacity of the alpha who broke my heart. How dare he talk to my professors about me outside his role as my peer advisor?

But no. Cassian, who wouldn’t meet me at the bell tower, who swore he loved me and wanted to talk, who asked for my father’s blessing and then practically destroyed me, is going to do what he wants.

Marcus sweeps through our little cottage and finally nods an all-clear to Ian. Saints, there are only three people allowed in my cottage besides me—Marcus, Luca, and Simon—and

only three professors who can change the wards. My cottage is safe. Safer than anywhere on campus.

“A precaution,” Ian assures me. He rakes a hand through his hair, staring down at me, a thousand things unsaid running through his bright blue eyes. “If you have an affinity... saints, Juniper. I hope you don’t.”

He gathers me into his arms, his scent spiking, protective alpha energy radiating off of him. When he releases me, he presses a kiss to my forehead.

“My darling, I hope you don’t.”



MARCUS HANDS me my phone when I step into the cottage, and then locks the door behind me.

“You must have dropped it in all the chaos,” he says. “Luca’s been blowing your phone up, but I don’t have your passcode, so I couldn’t answer it.”

I scroll through the list of missed calls and immediately delete the five voicemails Luca left, already knowing the desperation I’ll hear, the defeat and the pain.

I fire him off a quick text. <<*I’m okay. Safe within the wards.*>>

<<*Bridge. First light. I need to see you.*>>

Not a question, but a desperate demand.

“Ian sealed the wards against alphas when he left. Honor guards, Ian, and Professor Cadigan are the only alphas allowed within the wards until we can assure the threat has passed.”

“Can we...?”

Marcus shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I’ll need eyes on you the whole time. Perhaps I’ve been too lenient before. I trust Luca, but anyone could come upon the two of you on the bridge. It’s not a safe enough place for you to meet. Not any longer. Promise you’ll stay close to the wards.”

I nod, swallowing around the lump in my throat.

Marcus looks out the small curtains over the window in the kitchenette and nods. “We should go. I’m sure he’s out of his mind with worry. I know I would be.”

I’m left to consider that as we make our way through the omega residences toward the small, forested footpath that leads to the edge of the wards and the small creek that hems in the residences.

When Luca sees me, he stalks toward the wards, so close their magic crackles against his skin. His eyes are wide and wild, the green of the sea before a storm. His shoulders are hunched, and I know his alpha instincts drive him. The need to protect.

At Marcus’ nod, I race through the wards and into Luca’s arms, just as I did when I met him behind Rose Manor, needing to feel him, to know he’s real.

He wraps his arms around me, almost too tight, but when his purr roars into the quiet morning, I still, settling in his arms.

Knowing he needs this.

To trace his hands over every inch of my body and feel for himself that I’m uninjured, even though his lower lip is split, even though the shadows of bruises cover his face, and singe marks cover his tattooed hands.

“Please see Doc,” I beg. “For me.”

“Others need her attention more than I do.”

“Please, Luca.”

He nods into my shoulder, pressing his nose into my neck, breathing in my scent. “I will. For you. Fuck, I’m so relieved that I’d do just about anything you asked.”

“Then hold me a bit longer?”

“Oh, princess. You never have to ask for that.”

“I hate that you can’t come into the wards.”

“It’s a wise precaution.”

“Don’t care,” I mutter, nuzzling into his chest.

His purr deepens, rumbling through me, until all the anxious energy that was coiled inside me, tight like a spring, slowly ebbs away.

I had always thought he purred when he felt relief, when I was back in his arms and safe, but as my limbs go heavy, as my mind stills, I realize he purrs for me. To bring me comfort.

“Love you,” I murmur.

He eases back just enough to capture my lips. “I love you, too.”

His purr stops suddenly, and I feel him go tense. “I have to ask you something, Juniper.”

I step back until I can look up into his eyes. “What is it?”

His throat works and he looks past me to my honor guard. “Cassian called me right before you met me here. Fairhaven wasn’t the only campus that was attacked. He called it a ‘coordinated campaign of terror’ and... and If I had known what they were planning, we could have been more prepared. I want to put the mask back on. I want to spy on the Soldiers again.”

I duck my head but nod. Because this is no longer just about me. This is about my best friend. About every omega on this campus and others. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

He drops his forehead to meet mine, nuzzling his scent into my skin. “Always, princess. But I have to do this. It’s the only way I can protect you and I *have* to. I’ll go insane if I don’t do something.”

“I understand. I don’t like it. Saints know that. But I understand. Could you... could you promise me something else?”

“Anything.”

“You’ll tell me everything you learn. Everything you feed back to Cassian about the meetings and the Soldiers. Know

that I'll tell Simon and Ian." I sigh, wishing I could snuggle back into his arms, but knowing I need at least some distance before I say what I need to say. "We need to be coordinated if we're going to bring these bastards down."

He smiles sadly. "My Black Rose. We will. I promise you we will."

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 27



I catch a few hours of sleep before Marcus gently shakes me awake.

“Reinhardt’s here.”

I squint at the clock on my phone and nod, only half awake.

“He wants you to meet with Mai and Sienna and he’s here to escort you. Juniper, what’s going on? He said something about an affinity to you last night. What did he mean?”

“My wonky magic,” I croak, my voice strained from the smoke and shouting of the night before. “I caught flashes last night and finally told Ian. It’s... apparently, it’s a big deal.”

He kneels beside my nest and all I want to do is steal his sweater and crawl into his arms, to take all the comfort I need from him until I feel safe once more. “I don’t like this.”

“Too much excitement for you? I’m sure Connor can save you a rocking chair at the home for retired honor guards,” I tease, but we both know my heart isn’t in it.

“Why did it have to be you?”

“Because we were a scent mismatch. Because you’re immune to me,” I yawn.

“Not what I meant, sweet-tart. You deserve so much more than all this bullshit. Than your father and Rad. You shouldn’t have to be the one with the wonky magic too.”

I look up into his gray-green eyes. “It had to be me because I will fight, tooth and nail, to make things right. I’m sorry that also means that I’ll chase after my friends during a firefight. That I’ll always be at risk, often through my own actions.”

Marcus sighs, but his smile is wry. “Sweet-tart, I can pick you up, throw you over my shoulder, and haul you off whenever I need to. But saints, we need to work on your punching, because you didn’t leave so much as a bruise on me.”

I pretend to act offended, but even I can’t help my smile.

“Let’s not leave Reinhardt waiting at the door too long. I’ll buy you a few minutes to get cleaned up.”

I lean forward and hug him tightly.

Because if the saints walked among us last night, if they bestowed their blessings upon us mere mortals, Marcus would have their blessing too.



SMOKE STILL RISES from the ground as we cross the quad, but it’s not smoke in the air that makes me tear up. Saints above, the campus looks like a war zone. Septagrams are etched into the ground, purple-black magic crackling through them as the brands sink lower into the earth, just like the Ever Ember sank through the flesh of my honor guard, my stern professor, and my teenage love.

The earth is cleaved, great gashes carved into the ground, scorched from the dark magic cast by the Soldiers of Saint Aldous, by the ensuing magic as Fairhaven fought back. Downed branches block the walkways through the quad, the wood of some of Fairhaven’s oldest oaks, blackened by hexes that missed their marks.

Better the trees than the students and the professors, who, even after working the night through, are trying to heal the wounds that tear through our campus, to stop the bleeding.

“Ian, what are you doing out with this student?”

Professor Cadigan pockets his scribe and walks over to us, clapping Ian on the back by way of greeting.

Ian slants a quick look at me and quirks a faint smile. “Miss Rose set up a triage area in the omega lodge last night. Doc has asked for her report. We’re headed toward the infirmary.”

Curious. Cadigan is a close friend of Ian’s, the mentor he looks up to and sings the praises of. The older professor knows all about our research, and yet Ian doesn’t mention my strange magic to him. Is my affinity that dangerous or does Ian not trust him?

“And she needed you to escort her?”

“A favor to Mai.”

“We need you eradicating dark magic from the grounds.”

Ian quirks a brow. “And you’ll have me after Mai’s done with me. If you’ll excuse us, I’ll report back as soon as I can.”

I frown up at my professor as we continue on, but he shoots me a suppressive frown and shakes his head just enough for me to catch it.



IF THE CAMPUS drew tears to my eyes, the infirmary is what makes those tears fall.

Every last bed is full.

Students and professors of all designations fill the beds and every available chair. A few students are even sleeping on cots set up between the beds.

But it’s Alyssa who draws a ragged sob from me.

My best friend is curled up on a cot outside Doc’s office, her arm in a thick cast, her head on her alpha’s lap. Darika watches the infirmary with murder in her dark gaze as if daring anyone to wake her sleeping omega.



But Alyssa does stir at my sob and lurches up. “Junie!”

Despite Darika’s squawk of protest, Alyssa hobbles over to me and hugs me as tightly as she can with one arm. “Oh, thank the saints. It’s good to see you in one piece.”

“I’m fine,” I promise, looking down at her, at the bruises on her pretty face, the singe marks on her good hand. She wears exhaustion like a mantle, her shoulders rounded with it. Fatigue streaks dark bags beneath her eyes and she wobbles as if a stiff enough breeze would blow her over.

“Go back to your alpha,” I tell her in a soft voice. “Get some rest. I’ll try to visit later if I’m allowed.”

“Pft, I think you’re allowed just about anywhere you want to go at this point. I heard what you did last night.”

I smile faintly. “I only did what you did—and you did it all with a broken arm.”

“Compound fracture, even,” she says, hoisting up her cast for my inspection.

“Bitsy’s going to draw dicks all over that.”

Alyssa beams despite her exhaustion. “I can’t wait, actually. At least Bitsy drawing dicks on stuff feels normal. Unlike all of this.” She looks out over the full beds with a sigh.

“No,” Darika growls. “You sit your sweet ass back down. No more rounds. Let Doc do it.”

Doc, looking like she’s running on pure will alone, makes her way from bed to bed, checking vitals.

Alyssa rolls her eyes. “You here for Doc, Junie?”

“Yeah, she wanted to talk to me, so I got the full escort,” I say, nodding to Ian who’s talking with Dr. Spencer in Mai’s office, his eyes never leaving me.

“Ah, Juniper. Good to see you. Alyssa, get your butt back in bed and listen to your alpha,” Doc chides. “You’ve done more than enough. There are students here who owe you their lives. So get some rest, would you?”

Alyssa glows at the praise and nods sheepishly.

“My office, please, Juniper. Mr. Haley, you’re welcome to join us if Juniper says you are.”

“He is,” I say quickly. There are few people I truly trust and while Marcus and I approach the world differently, I trust him with my life.

We file into Doc’s office, and she draws the blinds before casting a spell of silence so our conversation won’t be overheard. It’s a tight fit with the five of us and I’m so close to where Ian’s sitting that he can reach out and brush the back of my hand with his fingertips.

A shiver slips through me.

“Saints, you look tired,” Dr. Spencer observes.

“Just what every young woman wants to hear,” I mutter.

“Still got your spark, though. So, Ian tells me you believe you have an affinity.” There’s a hardness to her voice I didn’t expect, a scrutiny that makes me squirm.

“I don’t know *what* to believe,” I hedge. “I still don’t even know what an affinity *is*, but I know my magic is wonky, and I overheard my father talking about affinities over the break. He asked my brother if I’d shown any signs of one.”

Dr. Spencer studies me over the rims of her glasses and presses her lips together. “Affinities are powerful magical abilities. Only omegas have ever been found to have them and each affinity is unique to the omega who possesses it. I should warn you, though, historical records of affinities are just as rare as affinities themselves, and what has been written has mostly been destroyed. In the past, alphas have sought to control omegas with affinities, to leverage their rare powers. If you do, in fact, have an affinity, you must never let your father know. I shudder to think what a man like Redwood Rose would do with an affinitied omega.”

“My father is involved in... in something to do with affinities. I’m not sure what yet. But he mentioned that omegas have been showing affinities in Rose laboratories around the world.”

“In *laboratories*?” Mai snaps. “Hawthorn didn’t tell me that. I’m going to absolutely break my oath to do no harm on his ass...”

I startle, staring at the young omega doctor with wide eyes.

“My father said laboratories,” I confirm. “It’s not a comforting thought. I don’t know if they’re doing anything to the omegas to get affinities to emerge... saints, I’ve just now learned what an affinity even *is*. All I know is, I was telling Professor Reinhardt about some weird things that were happening with my magic and he mentioned the possibility of me having an affinity.”

Dr. Spencer perches on the edge of Mai’s desk. “Tell me about your strange magic. I know you’re a strong mage, that your magic was locked, but what else?”

I take a deep breath, cowering beneath the weight of their attention. “I see things. And hear things. At first, I was just seeing Baphomet masks transposed over the faces of students around campus. Then I started picking up feelings from those around me.”

“Could be your omega instincts,” Dr. Spencer says.

“This was more than just instincts. And became more than just feelings. I started catching words. It all came to a head when Andrew Radcliffe assaulted me. I could hear all of his thoughts and... and I don’t wish to repeat them. They were vile.”

“That son of a bitch should have been expelled,” Mai mutters.

Dr. Spencer sighs. “He’s untouchable.”

“Not wholly,” I murmur as Ian’s fingers brush against mine, stealing my breath. “I believe I hurt him with my magic somehow. When we were linked, he fell to the ground, clutching his head. It happened again during an argument with my peer advisor last term. I really didn’t understand it then, but I think it’s connected. I heard thoughts from Rad and my brother during our annual New Year’s gala. When Luca was arrested, I caught his thoughts, too.”

“Tell them the rest,” Ian says quietly. “What you told me.”

I let out a heavy, shuddering breath. “I believe I’ve seen the near future three times now. I saw the septagrams burning before the Soldiers attacked last night, and I saw Alyssa in an omega trap before the hex had even been cast.” I purse my lips and squeeze my eyes shut. “And I saw Trinity with a scribe to her throat. It was the first of these visions and I didn’t understand it. I didn’t know she’d be taken.”

Now Ian closes his eyes tightly, rubbing at them with his thumb and forefinger.

“Show her, Mai.”

Mai goes to protest but Ian shakes his head.

“She needs to see it.”

Mai unlocks her phone and opens a picture before sliding her phone across the desk to me, and I nearly lose the protein bar Marcus made me force down on the walk over. It’s a photo of Trinity, scribe to her throat, just as I’d seen in my vision.

“Where did you get that?”

“They were left all over campus last night with the Soldiers’ demands,” Dr. Spencer says gravely. “The safe release of Trinity if Fairhaven expels all of its omega students. Their demands were quite clear.”

“Fairhaven isn’t going to capitulate,” Ian says quickly, brushing the tips of his fingers against my clenched fist between our two chairs.

Dr. Spencer studies me for a moment. “And we certainly can’t now. If we have a student blessed—or perhaps cursed—with an affinity, I’m afraid we have to prioritize that student’s life over that of another omega.”

“Wh-what? You can’t do that to her!”

“I’m afraid, Miss Rose, that we have no choice. Fairhaven will not bend to their demands. You must be protected, even at the expense of Trinity’s life.”

“Juniper,” Ian says, his expression fraught when he meets my eyes. “If Fairhaven expels its omega students, your father will mate you off in a heartbeat. We can’t protect you if that happens.”

Panic rises in my gut and my hands shake. My words come in a desperate rush. “You can’t protect me when I’m not here, though. No one can protect me over breaks. I’ll be with my family all summer and saints only know what they’re capable of. My father said—he said they’d deal with me if they had to. And Rad said he’d rather mate me than do what he did to Heather Lindstrom.”

“I’ll speak with Hawthorn,” Mai says softly. “Juniper’s right. We can only protect her while she’s on campus. But, Sienna, you’re correct too. Trinity doesn’t have an affinity that we know of. It’s very possible that Juniper does.”

Dr. Spencer narrows her eyes at me. “Can you prove it to us?”

Is what I’ve told them, every horrible thing I’ve heard and seen, not proof enough? Is it not enough that I saw a scribe at Trinity’s neck, months before the picture showed up? Saints, is it even possible for me to call the affinity the way I call my magic?

“Don’t push her, Sienna,” Ian says, a hard edge to his voice.

“Don’t coddle her, Ian.”

Ian once swore never to coddle me, yet here he is, trying to protect me from Dr. Spencer’s scrutiny.

“I’ve never done it at will before. I didn’t even know what to call it until now—if it is, in fact, an affinity.”

“I don’t see what else it could be,” Mai muses. “Sienna, any history of similar affinities that you know of?”

The historian frowns, considering Mai’s question. “I’ll have to do some more research. Finding even the barest mention of omegas with special magic has always been a challenge, and if an omega’s had an affinity like Juniper’s before, we don’t know what they may have called it.”

“It’s more than pre-cognition and more than telepathy. It’s more like... like extra-cognition,” Mai decides.

“I wish we had more than whispers and myths. A place to start in training you with your abilities,” Dr. Spencer sighs. “Of course, your abilities are of an extremely sensitive nature. If you truly can read minds, few will want to risk having their own minds read.”

“I’ll do it,” Ian says quietly.

My heart squeezes in my chest. Saints, this man, the professor I was once so sure hated me, would trust me with his greatest secrets?

“Miss Rose and I already have a standing Monday evening lesson where we’ve been working on research and more advanced casting. We’ll begin prioritizing affinity work—at least to determine if this is something she can control. It could be a passive ability.”

“We shall see,” Dr. Spencer says.

“Sienna, while I have your attention. Would you speak with Martin on my behalf? Miss Rose has made me aware of her desire to learn how to escape from omega traps, a requisite of which would be casting said traps.”

“No omega’s ever escaped from an omega trap on their own,” Dr. Spencer protests. “It would be a painful and ultimately fruitless endeavor.”

“If anyone could cast such magic, I believe it would be Juniper.”

My heart soars at the praise, at his belief in me. Saints, he believes in me more than I believe in myself. “I would still like to try, with the headmaster’s approval.”

“And my participation,” Mai cuts in. “You’re not trying such harmful magic without a healer present.”

I nod my understanding.

“Well,” Dr. Spencer says. “It sounds like you’ll be rather busy, but if you have the time, I believe you could be an asset in my historical research. The very research that could reveal

more about your ‘strange’ magic. Join me at the headmaster’s mansion Thursday after your classes?”

“Um, yes ma’am. Of course.”

“Ma’am? No, dear. If you’re to be my research partner, you must call me Sienna.” She studies me for a moment. “How strange it is to be so gladdened to live in an age where omegas are developing affinities once more, yet so saddened that it had to be you. Your path ahead is a difficult one, Juniper. Ready yourself.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 28



*A*s a bitter February cold snap settles over the campus, a new sort of normal emerges.

At least, as normal as life at the academy can be during the times we live in.

Normal in the age of masked soldiers and affinities.

Normal now is Luca meeting me at the wards every morning and walking me to class, Marcus on my other side. It's Simon sneaking Kit-Kats into my bag when we pass in the hall.

It's Alyssa, steaming mad and stomping about the infirmary because Doc won't let her return to classes yet when they resume the Monday after Night of the Fallen.

"My brain isn't broken!" the diminutive omega protests when I bring her a brown-sugar frappe from Ciel. "Just my arm."

"Your note-taking and casting arm," Doc reminds her from the bedside of a bruised, battered alpha girl. The healer sets down a chart with a clatter. "Does no one understand the concept of rest?"

"I mean this kindly, Doc, but you're a hypocrite. You haven't slept in days. At least let Mr. Huong relieve you so you can catch a few hours of sleep," Alyssa yawns, dropping back down onto her cot beside a sleeping Darika. Alyssa brushes the alpha's short, messy curls away from her face. "This one could sleep through the end of the world."



“Only when you’re safe in my arms,” Darika mutters, cracking an eye open. “So get back here.”

Normal. Perfectly, chaotically normal.



I HAVE my first affinity training with Ian that night, and it preoccupies me the whole day until I’ve made myself sick with worry. He believes in me so fucking much, but what if I really do just have strange magic and I’m not special? What if I don’t have an affinity like he, Mai and a somewhat hesitant Sienna, believe?

And even if I have an affinity, what if I can’t call it like I wasn’t able to call my magic for half of fall term? That had a reasonable, if utterly unbelievable, explanation, at least.

But to have this rare magic... to be cursed with such awesome power... I can understand why Ian wishes it wasn’t me.

I play at being strong, at having the courage Fairhaven so champions, but who am I to take on my father? The Soldiers?

Who am I to have an affinity?



“DIG DEEP WITHIN YOURSELF,” Ian instructs, his voice soft. “Clear your mind and find the thread of your magic. Let your intuition guide you.”

I let out a ragged exhale, already knowing what I must do. I do have to dig deep, deep into all the painful words my family have slung at me, into a pool of trauma so vast, I fear I’ll drown.

Because every single time I’ve performed any kind of extra-cognition, I’ve been in a heightened emotional state: struggling to free myself from Rad when he attacked me, overcome when Ian unlocked my magic, joyously dancing in

the arms of my alpha and beta before our world turned upside down.

I close my eyes and I sink, praying to the saints that I won't drown.

*You believe she could possibly have an affinity? Pitiful little Juniper?*

*Useless girl.*

*Foul omega that she is. But she won't be a concern of ours much longer.*

*I won't let some stupid little omega cunt like you ruin everything I've worked for.*

*Let her have a tragic accident like that Lindstrom omega did.*

"Stop," Ian demands. "Juniper, stop!"

I open my eyes, my lashes drenched from the silent tears that spill down my cheeks. He sets his hands on my shoulders, making me look up into his soft blue eyes, and a hiccupping sob escapes me.

"What happened?" he asks, and while his words are gentle, alpha energy pours off of him, instincts calling on him to protect me, to comfort me. To take me into his arms and chase my pain away.

"I dug deep. I've only ever done this when I've been emotional."

"And so you hurt yourself?"

Saints above, there's such *love* in his gaze, so much tenderness in the way his eyes shine with unshed tears. So much that I nearly miss the flicker that belies it all, the alpha instinct that makes this alpha soft, just for me: blind, protective rage.

It's just a flicker, the barest glimmer, absent on his face but not in his thoughts.



I'M WORN to the point of tears by the time I step out into the library's basement, fatigue settling into my bones. I'm exhausted and shaken, from my lesson, from the chaos of Night of the Fallen.

So seeing Simon sitting at the same café table as Marcus, a steaming hot chocolate ready for me, is what finally breaks me.

Tears cascade down my cheeks and my sweet beta gathers me into his arms, tucking me beneath his chin until my sobbing stops.

When I ask him to come back to my nest this time, he doesn't hesitate.



SIMON DUTIFULLY HANDS me blankets and pillows as I rebuild my nest, and slowly, slowly, my sobs quiet. My tears dry on my cheeks and my sniffles stop.

I'm left wrung out and numb, but Simon fills the void inside me with sweetness. He bundles me into arms beneath the warm glow of my nest's twinkle lights and reads to me out of the Saint Rosamund biography on my nightstand while I drink the best cocoa Ellie's ever made. It's not quite as good as Alyssa's, a bit tepid after our walk back to the omega residences, but Simon more than makes up for it, filling me with sweetness and warmth.

"I hate that this is what it takes," Simon mutters as he tucks a blanket around us.

I nuzzle into his chest. "We don't know that it's what it takes, just that it's what it took those other times. I need to learn all I can—and then I need to master this. It could mean... saints, it could mean everything."

“It could,” he mutters. “I finally got a ping on that code you gleaned from your brother.”

I sit up just enough to look down into his hazel eyes, a golden brown under the soft glow of the twinkle lights. “What is it?”

“It’s the serial number for a container on a container ship. It’s clearly some kind of shipment, but I haven’t been able to uncover a manifest yet. At least I know where to look now, though.”

“Aspen mentioned a container,” I say around a yawn. “Something shipped by Rose Pharmaceuticals, maybe?”

“Not as far as I can tell—at least, not under that name.”

“That’s damning.”

“Exactly what I thought. But I won’t stop looking, not until I’ve found out what your family is hiding.”

“I know you won’t,” I murmur, exhaustion finally claiming me. I let myself fall asleep in Simon’s arms as he rubs my back and whispers sweetness in my ear.



I WAKE the next morning to an empty nest and the absolute chaos of Simon trying to make me a pour-over coffee down in the kitchenette. I come up behind him, hug him around the middle, nuzzling into his shoulder, and switch off the electric kettle.

“Ciel’s my treat this morning.”

“You’re my treat this morning,” he says, turning and taking me into his arms.

“Sappy,” I tease, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“For you, kit-kat.” He drops a quick kiss on my forehead and oh, I could get used to this. To waking up with this beta padding around my cottage, trying and failing to make me my

morning coffee, to the wild disarray of his rust-red curls and the sleepy smile I know is just for me.

“Mind if we split soon? I need to run back to the residence hall, grab a quick shower and a change of clothes.”

I nod against his chest, breathing in his clean, beta scent. Not as alluring as an alpha’s, but a comfort in its own right because this beta, oh how I hope he’ll be mine.

I get ready quickly, trying to ignore the frisson of anxiety I’m picking up from Simon, how his thoughts are full of dread when he tells me, “Hey, kit-kat? There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you...”

But it’s not his words that send my sweet morning crashing to the ground.

On my doorstep sits a dozen roses, drenched in red. Anise scents the air and I immediately recoil back into my cottage as Marcus drops into a crouch beside the flowers. He investigates them with the tip of his scribe.

“It’s blood,” he mutters, shaking his head. “And there’s a note.” He extricates it from the bouquet and turns the card over.

“‘An early birthday gift for my beloved,’ it says.”

I stumble to the armchair and fall into it, my head spinning.

Rad. Rad left roses on my doorstep.

No alphas besides honor guards are allowed within the wards, and yet an alpha scent I know all too well clings to the misty morning air around my cottage.

“They could be hexed,” Marcus warns as Simon crouches beside the bouquet. “Sweet-tart, sit tight. I’m calling Reinhardt.”



THE ROSES AREN'T HEXED, but the blood is real. And human. Omega.

I race to the sink, stumbling blindly, and retch, bile burning up my throat as I lose what little I have in my stomach.

Simon is immediately there with a glass of water and a cool cloth for my face. He helps me back to the armchair once my stomach has settled and tugs Marcus' offered sweater on over my head.

"I'm excusing you from classes today," Ian growls, gingerly gathering up the roses in a trash bag.

"No," I say, my own voice surprising me.

"No?" he echoes, aghast.

"I'm going to class. He wins if I don't. He wants me afraid. He wants me to spend the entire day wondering how he... how he could get within the wards. Whose blood it is. Make no mistake, I *will* spend the day wondering. But I can't let him see me weakened. It's what he wants, and I refuse to give it to him."

Ian lets out a frustrated growl of a sigh and finally nods. "Class will start thirty minutes late this morning. I have to take these to the headmaster and explain what's happened."

"There's nothing he can do about it."

"No," Ian agrees. "But he needs to know. And I need to investigate the warding. No alphas besides honor guards, Professor Cadigan, and I should be permitted within the warding. Something is deeply, deeply amiss."

"I... I don't think it's the first time he's been inside the wards."

"What?" Ian demands, alpha energy rippling off him. Power surges through his body, ready to defend. Ready to destroy.

"I thought I was imagining it. It happened a bit before Yule. I told myself it was just Darika's scent I was catching, or the scent of Alyssa's spice cookies but... but I think it was *his*."

“Two alphas at all times,” Ian growls.

“And you’re not allowed outside this cottage unescorted, even if you’re staying within the residence wards,” Marcus bites out, his own alpha instincts riding him. Saints, they both seem so *big*, so powerful, with their instincts so close to the surface. With every one of those instincts telling them to protect me.

I duck my head but nod my understanding.

If Rad can get this close, I don’t *want* to be caught alone outside the safety of my cottage.

“We’re putting another deadbolt on your door,” Ian mutters.

If only any of us thought that would be enough.



THERE’S a particular peace that can only be found in the pages of an old book, curled up in an armchair before a roaring fire, which is where I find myself that Thursday evening. It’s my first night working through affinity research with Sienna and just being surrounded by the old books, nothing expected of me but to read and learn, is a much-needed comfort after Rad’s gruesome gift.

“Most historians say Saint Marmora was the storm mage, but some scholars, myself included, believe it was actually his omega mate, Guinnette,” Sienna says.

“You think her storm magic was an affinity!” When Luca had mentioned it before when we rode his motorcycle up the coast of Deer Island, I’d assumed Guinnette being a storm mage was only a myth.

She favors me with a sage nod.

“That’s why it’s called Guinnette’s Cove?”

“That’s my belief, yes. You must realize, Pack Marmora didn’t name anything but their settlement. It was the following

generation that mapped the whole of the island and put names to all the landmarks we know today.”

“They were a pack? Not just mates?”

“Oh yes. Marmora, Briac, Aldric, and Guinnette were a pack. Like you, Guinnette was a potent omega. Historians often thought it took larger packs to control omegas like Guinnette. For Pack Marmora, if Guinnette’s diaries are to be believed, it was never about control. Their pack bonds were deep, and they mated her to free her. To unleash her and her power on the world, because they loved her.”

I gaze into the fire. “It sounds like a fairytale.”

“Doesn’t it? Their pack must have been quite strong. Mages are almost always strongest in packs. It hasn’t been studied nearly enough in my opinion, but some believe a mage’s power is amplified through the mating process. It’s a treacherous gambit, though. Perhaps you’ll find a pack who wants to free you, to unleash you and your power on the world. Or, perhaps your power will be a draw to the wrong types of mages,” she said pointedly.

I flick my eyes over to her. “Like Andrew Radcliffe. Would he be strengthened by my power if he were to mate me?”

“Undoubtedly. A troubling thought, isn’t it?”

“Deeply,” I murmur.

Sienna keeps me late into the night and I help her catalog three wooden crates full of rare texts: diaries of omega mages.

“You might think of a diary as a sort of history. When our stories are overlooked, when the histories that *were* captured get destroyed, we can turn to these personal histories to paint a better picture of the times.”

“Our stories?”

She smiles sadly. “You hadn’t heard? I’m an omega, or I was. I wanted to pursue my PhD in a time when omegas weren’t welcome in doctoral programs. There was an experimental treatment that promised to turn me into a beta—



to remove my omega characteristics. It was actually a Rose Pharmaceuticals treatment, most likely from your grandfather's time at the company's helm. It went wrong, as clinical trials sometimes do, but it was enough of a change for me to legally appeal to have my designation changed, and enough to get me into a PhD program overseas, where I met Martin."

She stares into the open crate she's working through. "I don't regret it, but I regret that I thought it was my only option. The treatment never made it to the market, not surprisingly. But I think, perhaps, Rose Pharmaceuticals is involved in many such treatments."

I look down at the diary I was browsing through. "I don't think the serum my father used to lock my magic was ever intended to make it to the market, but I don't for a second believe that it won't be used again."

I don't know Sienna enough to trust her with the truth of my father's business, not when all I have is speculation.

Not when I still don't know what my father's dastardly end goal might be.



"TURN ALL THAT PAIN INTO ANGER," Ian says quietly, as stand across from him, trying to call my affinity for the second time.

I close my eyes and draw in a deep breath. I drowned in my sadness, but holding onto my fury, onto every injustice committed against my kind, I soar. Power whips out of me like a geyser until my mind links with Ian's and his thoughts flow through our connection back to me.

Pride. Admiration. Joy.

Love.

My magic slips from my mental grasp at the force of his feelings for me, loose and wild. Ian crashes to his knees with a snarl of pain, grabbing his head between his hands.

“Fuck,” he gasps.

I call my magic back, imagining cutting the magical links that connect us and he looks up at me through squinted eyes.

“Saints,” he says, his voice ragged from the pain. “You have no idea how brilliant you are.”

It’s the last thing I hear before I sway on my feet, darkness crowding into my vision, numbness prickling at my fingertips. I fall, slipping into a sea of black, and feel, just as it claims me, his strong arms around me.

I come to on the sagging sofa in his office, his thigh pressed into my hip as he sits beside me. My head swims, but the comforting weight of him beside me is grounding, drawing me slowly back to reality. His scent is sharp with worry, cedar and bergamot spicier and more tart than normal.

He takes my hand in his and sets his fingers to my pulse point just as my eyes flutter open. I try to sit, but my world tilts sideways.

“Take your time.” he murmurs, his voice strained. With fear, I realize. Fear that I’d overexerted myself, that I’d done myself harm. I curl my fingers against his, and saints, he’s so warm, so fond and tender as emotions slip through the weak bond between us.

“My brave, brilliant darling,” he sighs.

Saints, is this what a mating bond will feel like? A flow of emotions between alpha and omega?

I sit up slowly, bringing us so achingly close. His eyes dip to my lips and I feel his need crash into me, a tidal wave of desire and adoration. I stare up into his blue eyes, wishing I could make him feel the way I do.

At his sharp intake of breath, I realize I have.

“You feel that?”

“I do.” He brushes his nose against mine and then tucks a lock of hair back from my face, his touch lingering on my cheek. “But I can’t. Juniper, *we* can’t. It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“I don’t care,” I whisper. “This is... we’re...”

“Inevitable,” he says, his voice hoarse, strained with need. It’s like he snatched the word from my mind, like the desire and need and love. “I can’t be your alpha, Juniper. Not while I’m your professor. But that doesn’t change how I feel about you.” He swallows hard and presses a fervent kiss to my forehead.

I can’t help my whimper as my dream of this alpha’s love comes crashing down around me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 29



On the morning of my nineteenth birthday, I wake to a packet staked to my door by a silver scribe with a sapphire handle.

Trinity's.

"Don't touch it," Marcus growls, but I've already yanked the manilla envelope down from the door. *Happiest of birthdays, beloved* is scrawled across the envelope in thick black marker.

I pull the door shut behind us and drift numbly over to the sofa, my hands trembling as I grip the heavy envelope, my knuckles white. I unwind the string closure and carefully open the envelope.

I already know what it'll contain.

I spread the photographs out on the coffee table, nearly two dozen pictures of Trinity Wells, beaten and bloody, her emaciated body covered in bite scars and purple-black bruises. A scribe to her throat, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. Her eye red with burst blood vessels, the flesh around it blackened and bruised.

More bite scars. Saints, she's covered in them.

"Saints, are all of those marks from mating bites?" Marcus rumbles, rubbing at his jaw. "They tortured her with them. There have to be at least a dozen!"

My stomach heaves and I squeeze my eyes shut against the barrage of images, but they're seared into my mind now.

I hear Marcus shove them back into the envelope and finally open my eyes again when the shuffling has stopped.

“You need to take these to Reinhardt or the headmaster.”

“Marcus, this is all my fault! Fairhaven would expel the other omega students to save her if not for me. I saw what he would do to her and... and...”

“And you can’t make sense of the actions of a madman.”

“He’s not crazy. All of this is... it’s too cold. Too calculated.”

Marcus winds the string tie of the envelope shut and tucks the envelope into his bag. “Call Luca or Cassian to escort you. We’re taking these to the headmaster.”

I shakily pull my phone out to see a text from an unknown number flash across the screen.

<<*Did you like your present, my future mate?*>>

I shove the phone into his hands, and he grips it so tightly I fear the screen will crack.

“That son of a bitch.”

Instead of passing me back the phone, Marcus punches in Cassian’s number.

“Omega residences, now. We need to see the headmaster immediately.”

Marcus jabs the button to end the call and sets my phone on the table between us before sitting down beside me.

“He staked them to my fucking door,” I choke out, my voice hoarse.

“I know, sweet-tart,” he says, rubbing slow circles on my back.

“And nothing will come of it.”

“No,” he agrees. “But the wards *must* be fixed. I’ll make Reinhardt see to it.”

“He will,” I whisper, trying to remember what Ian’s adoration feels like.

But all I can feel is terror.

The omega residences have always been safe. Always.

But three times now, Andrew Radcliffe has crossed the wards. Three times now, he's sent a message impossible to misunderstand: you'll be mine through any means necessary.

He wants to scare me? He has. I'm properly terrified.

Marcus carefully wraps Trinity's scribe in a kitchen towel and sets it in his bag beside the packet of photos, and my first, harrowing thought is that her family should have it back. Marcus treats it like evidence, but it's a case that will never be investigated, let alone solved. A case whose outcome doesn't matter.



CASSIAN MEETS us just outside the wards with a hard stare. Marcus wordlessly passes the envelope to the other alpha and Cassian flips through the photographs with a detachment I wish I could feel.

But Cassian will never know what it feels like to see a fellow omega bloodied, tortured.

“That could have been me,” I whisper, my voice cracking.

He looks up sharply. “Do you think I don't know that? Do you think that isn't my first thought when I wake and what keeps me up half the night? The headmaster needs to know about this. Haley, you made the right call.”

We make our somber way to All Saints' Hall, but we're not alone. I feel *his* attention on me, making the hairs at the nape of my neck stand on end. I huddle deeper into my winter coat, letting the hood engulf my head until all I can see is the path before us. I don't dare look up. But that doesn't stop the current of his thoughts from reaching me.

And Andrew Radcliffe is deeply, darkly satisfied by my terror, by the way I make myself small—just as I should as an omega.

“Are you seeing him now?” Cassian demands in a harsh undertone.

“Feeling,” I murmur.

“That son of a fucking bitch,” he grits out.

“Why me? What did I ever do to draw his attention? Was I too outspoken or too weak?”

“You mustn’t think like that, sweet-tart,” Marcus rumbles. “You’ll drive yourself senseless.”

Cassian snarls out a growl. “I’m putting you on a plane tonight. Enough is enough.”

I look up at him so sharply it makes my head ache. “That’s no longer an option,” I whisper. “There’s... there’s more going on now. I’ll tell you when we reach the headmaster’s office.”

“There is nothing that could change my mind. Juniper, he’ll kill you—or worse, mate you.”

I shiver at the thought.

“Hear her out,” Marcus says quietly.

We reach the headmaster’s office, and he immediately ends his phone call and ushers us into the room.

He shakes his head sadly, ginger mustache twitching. “Pack Wells, asking if I had any more information on Trinity. It’s a saints-damned shame...”

I shoot him a hard look. “You should have taken the trade. Trinity’s life is worth it.”

“And yours isn’t?” Marcus growls.

“What trade?” Cassian grits out, his voice tight. His whole body is tense, the muscles in his shoulders twitching with alpha energy.

I stare down the headmaster but speak to Cassian. “If Fairhaven expelled its omega students, the Soldiers said they would return Trinity alive. They made their demands during the chaos of Fallen. But the administration won’t make the trade because of me.” I look over my shoulder at Cassian.

“Because I have a special form of magic and need to be protected at all costs.”

“What magic?”

“An affinity we’re calling extra-cognition.”

“If you truly do have an affinity, Headmaster Langford is right not to have taken the trade. Your life is infinitely more important than Trinity’s.”

“Who are you to decide that?”

He stares at me, alpha challenge in his eyes. “Someone part of something far bigger than you know or would understand.”

I’m just about to mouth off, to tear into this alpha who thinks he can make decisions about my life when Marcus cuts in, his voice deceptively calm.

“Juniper is in danger.” He tosses the packet down on the headmaster’s desk. “You’ve seen one of these images. I don’t know if you’ve seen the rest. And I imagine you might recognize this.” He carefully unrolls Trinity’s scribe and sets it down on top of the packet.

“That belongs to Miss Wells!”

“It was driven into the door of Miss Rose’s cottage through the packet beneath it. We found it this morning. Something must be done about Andrew Radcliffe. He’s a clear and present danger to my client.”

“My hands are tied. I expelled him. I had him investigated by the Fairhaven police department. The board has overruled me in all academic matters and the police refused to prosecute.” His eyes flick to me, pity written plain on his ruddy face. “Miss Rose, your own father is a member of the board and voted to overturn his expulsion.”

I sit before I fall, dropping into the chair, a hand going over my mouth. “He-he what? After Rad tried to...” Saints, I feel faint. Sick and dizzy.

*I will fucking end him.* Cassian’s thoughts whip through my mind, a lethal calmness belying the violence he wants to



wreak on Andrew Radcliffe. And beneath that deadly calm, he roils like a storm-swept ocean, waves of desperate concern crashing against a love so tender it brings tears to my eyes.

I shake my head, trying to sever our connection, sick at the thought of intruding on my past love's private thoughts. But those thoughts... they're all about *me*.



LUCA IS FINALLY PERMITTED BACK inside the wards that night and he holds me while I sob, while I mourn everything that could have been: our quiet life together in another country, a life of my choosing away from my family's machinations.

Trinity's safe return.

"I don't want this," I weep. "This affinity. I don't want to be some special omega with powers that haven't been seen in centuries."

He wipes the tears from my cheeks with his calloused thumbs. "I knew you were special the first time I ever laid eyes on you, princess. And you prove it to me every day. Unlike you, I can't predict the future, but I do know one thing for certain. You won't be alone. Wherever your affinity takes you, wherever the war you want to wage on your father takes you, I'll be by your side. Whatever you need from me, advice, support, or just a shoulder to cry on, you'll have it. Always. Provided I'm not locked out of the wards again."

"The wards don't matter much if Rad can get in and out of them at will," I mutter, turning over in his arms to stare up at the twinkle lights over my nest.

"I really want to smash his face in," Luca mutters and that's what finally dries my tears. My alpha, who thinks he's too brutal, too unrestrained, wanting to smash in the face of my tormenter.

"I don't know if I can do this, Luca. Wield this rare, powerful magic."

“Juniper, the only person whose opinion is worth a damn is... you. Be who your heart tells you you’re meant to be.” He taps at the center of my chest right above where my heart beats out a steady rhythm. “Your own approval is the only one that matters.”

“I’m not strong enough to face down Rad or my father,” I protest.

“Do you *want* to face them down?”

Do I? “I... I want to stop my father and the Soldiers from hurting innocent omegas.”

“Then do that.”

“But I’m nowhere near ready.”

“Then train, princess, and learn and grow. We’re all works in progress—even a genius mage like yourself. Even a hunk of pure male beauty like me.”

“You’re a pretty wise hunk of pure male beauty,” I admit.

“And you’re stuck with me and all my sage advice. We train, we learn, and we grow. Together.”



“THESE WERE NAILED TO YOUR DOOR?” Ian demands, holding up the manilla folder.

“With Trinity’s scribe,” I say, dully. I’ve barely slept since I found the photos.

“You didn’t study them closely, I take it.”

I shake my head. “Rad sent me them as a present. To scare me. To terrorize me. Saints, in his twisted mind, maybe he truly does think he’s courting me.”

Ian lets out a low growl and I touch his hand absently, an omega calming a raging alpha. He stills beneath my touch, his ragged breathing calming.

“But no,” I say. “I didn’t study them. Should I have?”

“An impossible question to answer. I wouldn’t want you looking at them at all, but Rad may have shown us more than he intended to.”

Ian flips a single photo over, the image showing Trinity’s neck where once, before she disappeared, there was a mating bite. But Jaime’s bite is gone, replaced by an ember, purple-black where it burns within her skin, surrounded by the bite of another alpha.

“Her mating bite from Jaime is gone!”

Oh, Saints. I can’t imagine the agony Trinity and Jaime must both be feeling. There is no torture greater than the severing of a mating bond—usually something that only happens through the death of the alpha or omega. But the Soldiers, they burned the sacred mark of love from Trinity’s neck, destroying their mating bond.

Ian startles. “That’s where her bite was?”

I shake my head and hold up a hand for silence, trying to puzzle through it, but saints, I’m missing something... I hold out my hand for the photos and flip through them as quickly as I can, slapping one down in front of Ian.

“These bear traces of the same dark magic. When I first saw them, I thought they were bruises, but they’re not. They’re embers—or something like them. Brands? I don’t know. But I think the mark on her neck with the ember is a... a fresh version of the bites that cover her body.”

“You think they’re using the ember with mating bites?”

“I think... I think they’re burning mating bites away with the ember.”

Ian sits back in his chair, blinking at me, his mouth agape. “There’s never been a way to destroy a mating bite before—nothing less than the death of the giver of the bite. But the ember...”

“The ember is magic we know far too little about,” I mutter, raking a hand through my hair.

Ian lets out a shuddering breath. “If they’ve truly removed her mating bite, and mated her over and over, removing each bite with an ember, saints... it’s a miracle she’s still alive. If she is.”

“She is,” I mutter, guilt plunging deep in my belly. “Because Rad hasn’t finished tormenting me with her yet.”

“Knock knock,” Mai says from the cracked door to Ian’s office. “I hear some utter madwoman wants to be hexed into a nasty, thorny omega trap. Whoa! What on earth are those?”

Ian frowns in resignation and passes the photos over to Mai. “I’m surprised Langford hasn’t shown these to you already. Juniper received these from Andrew Radcliffe, stuck to her cottage door with Trinity’s scribe.”

Mai shakes, but not with fear. No, the diminutive omega healer is *furious*. “Those fucking *monsters*! Oh, dear Trinity, what have they done to you...”

“We think they burned away her mating bite from Jaime with the ember, if that’s even possible. It’s our best guess at this point.” Ian slams his fist down on the desk, making me and Mai jump. “I hate not having *answers*.” He looks at us both, suddenly sheepish, black hair sweeping in front of his downcast blue eyes. “Sorry.”

“I have to bring him down,” I realize, all hope sinking like a stone in my gut. “The disappearing omegas, the acts of terror by the Soldiers, saints, maybe even my father’s business, he’s involved in all of it.”

“Why does it have to be you?” Mai demands, scorn in her voice.

“Because all other channels have failed. He can’t be expelled, and he can’t be prosecuted. For whatever reason, he’s taken an interest in me.” A dark thought steals my breath. “My-my affinity. Could he know about it?”

A muscle in Ian’s jaw ticks. “We can’t rule that out. His reach is great, and so is that of the Soldiers. There has to be a bigger plan here, more than just terrorizing academies...”

“There is,” I murmur. “I don’t know what it is yet, but I intend to find out. Whatever’s going on, Andrew Radcliffe is the first domino, and I intend to topple him.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 30



Ian hesitates, golden scribe held before him. “I hate this,” he mutters. “I hate even casting a hex so wretched, and to cast it on you...”

“I have to learn,” I say, clenching my hands into fists, bracing myself for the ripping thorns. I’ve worn leggings and an old sweatshirt to his office for this express purpose—clothes I don’t mind seeing shredded by the dark purple-black thorns of the hex’s trap.

He meets my eyes, apology in his, and speaks the words of power associated with the hex, flicking his scribe through the seven sigils that make up the trap. He slashes the slim metal wand toward, me and I flinch, squeezing my eyes shut.

Magical vines whip up from the floor, lashing around my wrists and thighs, dragging me down to the floor. My knees crack against stone, and I belatedly grunt out, “Kneepads. Next time, fucking kneepads.”

I fight the thorns, struggling against the vines, but the briars only dig deeper, dark magic slicing through my skin. Blood trails down my wrist into the hand gripped tightly around my scribe, and when I try to move my scribe through the first sigil of a nullification spell, I drop it. It rolls away, slick with my blood, and I flounder for it, but it’s too distant.

“Release me, please,” I murmur. “I can’t do this without my scribe.”

Ian performs the nullification spell, and the thorns burn away, sloughing off and vanishing.

Mai rushes forward, dabbing at my cuts with gauze damp with antiseptic, but I brush her off.

“There’s no point cleaning my wounds until we’re finished or I’m bleeding out.” I turn to Ian. “Again?”

He flicks two cushioning spells toward my knees, and I nod my gratitude, my eyes meeting his.

Saints, it’s written plainly on his face, in the way his eyes track the rivulets of blood tracing down my wrists, that he hates every minute of this.

He graces me with a sad smile. “Don’t flinch this time. And don’t struggle. Your first impulse will always be to flinch and then fight, but the harder you fight, the tighter the trap closes around you.”

I nod and brace myself, but the moment the sigils fly from his scribe, I do just as he told me not to: I flinch. And when the vines close around me and drag me to my knees, I thrash and I fight, every struggling motion driving the wicked thorns deeper into my skin, the vines coiling around me tighter and tighter. Sharp pain sears through me, but I hold onto my scribe, even as blood flows into my fist, as the thorns carve into my skin. I try to trace through the arcs and angles of the nullification spell, but thorns creep down my fingers until I can’t move my scribe at all.

I shake my head and Ian releases me.

I wipe the blood off on my leggings. “Again.”

We practice until I’ve finally cast the nullification spell correctly. The trap doesn’t release me. When Ian does, I let Mai tend to my wounds.

“They’re not meant to be escaped,” Ian says quietly, coming to stand beside us. His scent is too sharp, the citrus notes too bright, and tense energy radiates off of him.

The energy of an alpha watching an omega who’s dear to him suffer.

A desperate knock hammers at the door and Mai goes to it, frowning when she opens it and Simon bursts into the room.

His eyes track over the bloodied gauze and the bandages on my wrist and if he were an alpha, he'd be growling, his hackles up.

“Mr. Monroe, what is it?”

He ignores Ian entirely. His voice is breathless with despair when he tells me, “I found the container.”



WE HUDDLE around Simon's laptop as I quickly explain to Mai and Ian what I gleaned from Aspen.

There's pride in Mai's voice when she says, “I knew your affinity would be powerful.”

“And dangerous,” Ian mutters.

“There was another container, back before my father locked my magic. I *think* I read Aspen then, too. I uncovered the information but... but my father took my memories and magic before I could act on it. At least, that's what I've been able to piece together. Willow said I could be their downfall if I remembered.”

“And they said they'd deal with you if they had to,” Ian growls.

I reach across the desk and stroke my fingers against the inside of his wrist, an aimless, automatic action that isn't missed by Simon, who looks away, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“Your family is so fu—freaking screwed up,” Simon says, color flushing across his cheeks beneath his freckles.

He's not wrong. I nod to the laptop. “Well?”

“The container was dispatched from a facility somewhere in China, through Beijing.” He traces the route on the screen of his laptop.” It was meant to arrive in San Francisco within days. It took months.

“That's not that uncommon, is it? Shipments get delayed all the time. My father has bemoaned getting drugs to market



belatedly because of shipping issues dozens of times.”

“It’s not uncommon,” Simon hedges. “And often isn’t an issue aside from product delays, but the contents of this container were... were omegas. Dead omegas.”

Realization strikes me like a punch to the sternum, stealing my breath. “Wh-what?”

“Test subjects, most likely,” Mai says gravely. “My father helped drive any companies who did illegal human trials out of Vietnam, but these trials—and trafficking omegas to participate in them—remain rampant in countries with less stringent omega rights laws. Governmental officials turn the other way, dock masters sign off on shipments if their pockets are lined.”

*Your daughter is our first human trial.*

My heart races, hammering out a staccato beat in my chest, and I can’t seem to draw enough oxygen into my lungs. My vision shrinks, the edges fuzzing until all I see is my own shaking hands and saints—am I dying? I can’t hear the others over the blood rushing in my ears. My world careens off kilter, spinning so fast I fear I’ll fly off—

—and then I’m in Simon’s lap, my head tucked beneath his chin, my breathing slowing to match his.

My world settles after a few moments, and I look up at Ian, Mai, and Marcus, feeling my cheeks heat.

“First panic attack?” Simon asks softly.

I nod against him as frustrated, furious, fatigued tears course down my cheeks. “I was one of my father’s human trials. If he’ll conduct deadly experiments on his own daughter, saints, what would he do to omegas whose own government is helping traffic them?”

I go perfectly still in his arms and look up at Ian through my tears. “Affinities are popping up in Rose laboratories all around the world,” I say, echoing the numb words I uttered when telling Ian, Mai and Sienna about my wonky magic. I already know that any omega with an affinity would go to the greatest lengths to keep her abilities secret, to keep them from

alphas who might wish to control her. So what is my family doing to reveal these rare abilities?

I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn't stop my tears.

"Come on," Marcus says softly. "Let's get you home." He turns to Ian. "I don't think Miss Rose is up to the rest of her lesson tonight."

My professor meets my eyes, a thousand thoughts left unsaid, looking for all the world like all he wants to do is reach out and take me in his arms. Like he would give anything to protect me, comfort me. But all he does is nod solemnly. "If you feel unable to attend your classes tomorrow, I'll excuse you to Professor Hayes and Sienna. Get some rest."

Simon helps me to my feet and collects my bag as Marcus wraps an arm around my waist, letting me lean on him and draw comfort from his stoic strength.

As soon as we're making our way up the stairs from the library's basement, Marcus looks over my head to Simon. "I'll... I'll stay with her until Luca's off his shift tonight."

He says it reluctantly. As if it's a punishment. As if he's on his way to the gallows. Saints, I don't want him in my nest if he's only going to slide in beside me and take me in his arms until my alpha can.

But I'm raw and numb all at once again, and I don't refuse.

His thoughts are conflicted, a brewing storm of love and agony, and I burrow beneath my blankets as though that'll silence the link between us, the rumbles of shame that roll through his thoughts like thunder.

He slips away sometime in the night, and I wake in Luca's arms. I tell myself that it's enough, that the alpha sleeping beside me is enough.

But I can't help but ask myself why *I'm* not enough for the beta I fell so irrevocably in love with, why his thoughts about me are a battle between hope and despair.

## CHAPTER 31



*M*y spring heat hits hard, fast, and a full week early. Marcus makes my excuses to my professors and prepares for half a week of playing nurse to me, but I have something I didn't have for my last two heats: I have my alpha at my side.

The moment the fever, cramps, and agitation set in, Luca is with me, helping me rearrange my nest, passing me blankets, pillows, and spare flannel shirts as I lay down each piece.

He comes up behind me and I lean back into his embrace, tilt my head up into his touch as he nuzzles me. I drag his scent into my nose, letting the red wine and cherries intoxicate me, drive me deeper beneath the haze of my heat. Because this time I will not suffer: I'll have the love of my alpha to see me through these difficult days.

"It's a beautiful nest, Juniper. May I come in?"

Despite the pain, despite the fog settling in, dulling my thoughts, I beam. "Yes, please."

I draw him into my nest, and he holds me through wave after wave of cramps as I sink into the oblivion of my heat.

My need spikes and, with it, my scent.

Luca groans. "Fuck, princess. Your scent is stronger during your heat, impossible to resist."

"Then don't resist, my alpha. Make love to me?"

We shed our clothes and my fever sends chills shaking through me, making me shiver. He covers my body with his,

lending me his perfect heat. Saints, the weight of him, the hard planes of his body pressing into every soft place of mine is an ecstasy unlike anything I've ever felt before.

He pours every ounce of his love and desire into his kiss. His lips move against mine, a tease that makes me whine until he opens his mouth to me, until I feel his tongue slide against mine, the cool metal of his tongue stud a stab of bright, intoxicating pleasure against the fire that burns inside of me.

I groan and I grind against him, soft against hard, heat against heat.

“Need to feel you,” I beg. “All of you.”

“I can't knot you, Juniper. If I lose control and go into rut... you have no idea how close I come to losing it every single time we make love. I can't hurt you. It would kill me.”

“Luca, I'm *made* to withstand a rut. You won't hurt me.”

“Please, Juniper. I can't.”

I swallow my tears and nod, needing more of him than he can give me.

Saints, I *ache* for a knot, something I've never had before but need on an instinctual level. I may find pleasure without it, but I'll never find satisfaction. I will suffer, just as I have in all my previous heats.

We make love for what feels like hours, and when my fever spikes, when my heat pulls me under, we fuck, hard and fast. We lose a day to each other, to the pain and passion of my desires.

“I need more,” I croak, hot tears streaking down my cheeks. “I don't want more but I need it.”

He shushes me and comforts me, all the while dialing Simon, who comes immediately.

I reach for him when he appears at the top of the stairs and he falls into bed with me, tangling with me immediately. The weight of him between my thighs has me keening and I tilt my head back, begging for his kiss.

He kisses me with all the passion he's been holding back and when we pause to strip him bare, he gazes down at me with such fondness that I nearly snap out of the haze of my heat.

Nearly.

"I'm here for you, kit-kat. I've got you," he promises, stripping his shirt off over his head and saints, I wish my mind wasn't so addled, wish I could properly appreciate his lean physique, the faint dusting of red hair on his chest, trailing down into his jeans. I whine and he kicks them off, bare when he settles back between my thighs.

He kisses and nuzzles me, like he can't get enough of me, and I touch him, greedy and eager, my fingers skating over the cords of muscle on his back, his firm buttocks, his lean strong thighs.

"Need you, Simon," I whimper. "Just like this."

He meets my eyes as he enters me and the stretch of him is a blissful, perfect burn. I whine and rock up against him, and this time he doesn't tease. He drives into me to the hilt, something I can't do with Luca. He braces himself on one hand and leans back and when he surges into me, his hips thrust against my oversensitive clit.

I see stars and I shout my pleasure up to them.

Simon whispers words of praise as he worships me with slow, hard strokes of his cock into my swollen cunt. He doesn't hit my back wall the way an alpha would, but the pressure and friction against my clit is enough to make me boil over. He leans back on his haunches and thumbs my clit as my climax crashes through me, not letting me come down. He drives me higher, stroking me in small, tight circles that wind my pleasure up, fast and sharp. I crash again and again as he fucks and touches me through orgasm after orgasm, and for just the space of a breath, I don't feel the overpowering need for a knot.

He finishes inside me with a groan and then turns me until I'm nestled on top of him, his cock still inside me.

But my desire isn't sated for long and when I rock on top of him once more, when Luca strokes me as I ride my beta lover, as I come apart in their arms, it still isn't enough.

I weep.

I cry out for Ian.

And he comes.



I HEAR his knock at my cottage door, hear Marcus' low growl of warning.

"I won't hurt her," Ian swears. "I could never."

"Explain all those nights she spent crying over shit you said to her last term, then."

"You know I did it to keep her safe."

"It doesn't change the fact that you did it. That she wept over your words."

"I'll never be able to atone for the things I said to her, but at least let me see her. Let me help her."

And then he's at the foot of my nest, staring down at me, mouth agape, the blue of his eyes swallowed up by the black of his pupils. His scent spikes, the bright bergamot and cedar I so love.

"Fuck," he says, a strangled sound.

"Please," I beg.

"May I come into your nest, omega?"

"Yes. Need you."

We don't refrain. Not this time.

He's bare in an instant, all long, lean muscle, quiet strength he hid behind button-up shirts and professional slacks, beneath that dark raincoat of his that's always thrown over a chair somewhere. He rakes his dark hair out of his eyes, and I stare.

Because Ian Reinhardt is perfect down to the smallest detail. And the *not* smallest detail. Saints, my mouth waters for the weight of his cock against my tongue and my sex aches for the sweet stretch of his thick length. He kneels between my thighs, and I push up on my elbows to meet him.

For a moment, we don't touch. We don't kiss. He breathes in my scent, my perfume of honeyed vanilla and jasmine, and I drink him in, the spice of cedar and the sweet-sharp tang of bergamot.

Omega and alpha, just as nature intended.

He cups my cheek in his hand and lowers his lips to mine and it's just before he kisses me that I notice he's shaking. His kiss is hesitant, a quick brush of the lips, but when I chase his kiss, when I lace my fingers behind his neck and pull him down into my soft nest, all hesitation is gone.

He plunges his tongue into my mouth, strokes it against mine until I'm whining. He kisses me like we've kissed a thousand times before, like he knows just how to make me moan.

And after I moan, he makes me scream.

He drives his thigh between mine, kissing me, teasing my nipples into taut peaks as I rock against him, covering him in my scent, my slick.

"Fuck," he grunts. "You're exquisite. Perfect."

"Yours," I breathe as I come apart.

He thrusts two fingers into my spasming cunt, dragging his knuckles against my estrus gland, against the spot where I most need his knot. He stretches me with deep plunges of his fingers and when he adds a third, I come off the soft mattress of my nest, screaming from the ecstasy of his touch.

"Need you," I pant. "Please, alpha."

He lets out a low growl of appreciation and lines himself up with my entrance and slowly, he pushes inside of me.

And oh, the stretch is so sweet. I throw my head back, writhing against him as he drives deeper, inch by torturous,

exquisite inch. When he's fully seated inside me, his knot just starting to swell at my entrance, he lets out a shuddering sigh and stares down into my eyes.

He ducks his head low enough to capture my lips in a kiss, nuzzles my nose with his, and then draws out just as slowly as he entered me. When only the crown of his cock remains inside me, he thrusts into me, a hard deliberate stroke that has me keening, that has me wrapping my legs around his slim hips and thrusting my hips up to meet each slick slide of his cock into my sex.

We move together like we were made to.

Like we were inevitable.

He takes me to the peak of my pleasure with long, slow strokes, driving deliberately into my cunt in a way that makes me scream, that makes me senseless. His knot stretches my opening with each thrust but it's not enough.

"Need your knot, alpha," I beg.

"Need you slicker, my darling," he says, but he's grinning when he thumbs my clit, tracing circles over the bud as the snap of his hips quickens, as he drives me higher and higher. I come apart with a throaty moan, pulling him over the precipice with me. He thrusts twice, three times, and peaks, hot, thick cum coating my insides, mixing with my slick.

"Ready for me, love?" he pants, his voice strained, needing to be clasped within me just as much as I need him.

At my desperate nod, he eases forward, stretching me until I think for certain his knot won't fit. I wince and then... then it's done, and his knot is locked inside me.

And it's too much. The pressure, the fullness, all too great to bear.

"Shh, I've got you." He steals a sweet kiss before his thumb finds my clit and his other hand my aching breast. He massages my clit until there's nothing left but pure, white-hot pleasure, until we fit like we're made to. He rolls us until I'm straddling him and draws his hands down my body until they rest on my thighs.



“Rock, omega,” he says, and I whimper, slick flooding from me at the soft-spoken demand. Not an alpha command I would be compelled to obey, but an order between lovers that makes me moan.

Fuck, the stretch of him is perfect, and when I rock against him, his knot grinds against my estrus gland, his pelvis against my clit. I cry out, an endless string of nonsense pleas as I move, as I find my pleasure over and over until finally, I find my satisfaction.

He cuddles me close, and we breathe each other in, our chests heaving, dizzy with our pleasure. And saints, in this moment, I want his bite. I want his vow.

I want his love.

And as he strokes my hair, as he presses kisses to my forehead, my nose, each of my cheeks and then my lips, I realize I have his love. All of it. We stay like that, locked together by more than just his knot, and this, this was what I needed.

What I yearned for.



“YOU CAN DO THIS,” Ian tells Luca. “And if you go into rut, Simon or I will stun the shit out of you.”

I squawk out an indignant protest as Luca thrusts inside me. If they stun him while he’s knotted inside me, I’ll... do absolutely nothing because I’ll have the deadweight of an alpha on me and his cock knotted inside of me.

I let out a desperate mewl, so ready to take my alpha’s knot, so ready to feel those amazing piercings grinding inside me when he’s knotted me.

Ian reaches down and thumbs my clit and just his touch as Luca drives into me is enough to send me over the edge once more.

Saints above, how many times can one omega orgasm during a heat?

My men are more than determined to find out.

Luca swallows hard and stares down into my eyes. I see the fear in his, in those pale green tide-pool depths, but I banish his fears with a kiss.

He strokes my face, kisses me, drops his forehead to mine. "I love you, Juniper. More than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone."

"I love you, Luca."

He thrusts and his knot slides home, locking inside me, lighting me up as those piercings rub against my sensitive back wall. He lets out a sharp hiss and rocks into me once, twice, before coming apart, shaking in my arms.

And I want this alpha forever. I want the mating bite he once promised he'd mark me with in an instant if I ever asked.

I ask. I *beg*, all reason lost to the haze of my heat, he brushes a gentle kiss across my lips.

But he knows. He knows that we can't mate like this, on a whim. That our bond will only endanger me more.

He doesn't bite me. Doesn't bond with me like I beg him to.

He murmurs the sweetest praise, his oaths of love, his promises of forever.

And then he moves.

Achingly slow, he works his knot inside me, staring down at me in utter amazement, making me mewl.

I squeeze around his length, his thick knot, and he moves, driving that knot deeper into my aching cunt as I flutter around him. We make love like that, knotted together, until I come apart with a desperate cry. He kisses me everywhere he can, strokes my face, clings to me as we both settle.

Finally, I'm where I belong.

I smile at that, as the haze of pleasure lulls me in my alpha's arms.

I found belonging in his arms on the Feast of Marmora and I find it there again, body to body, skin to skin.

Soul to soul.



I GET a brief break from the oppressive haze of my heat and glance around at my sleeping men, letting out a sigh.

Tears spring to my eyes and I realize the feeling: overwhelm.

I tiptoe from my nest and into the bathroom, turning the taps on hot and filling the tub, hoping the hot water will chase away my aches. I slip into it as soon as the tub fills and sigh, dropping my head back against the porcelain, letting my mind drift as the water soothes me.

Emotion swells inside me, my heart squeezing. Tears slip down my cheeks, but I'm not sad—far from it. I'm happier than I thought I possibly could be.

My heat has been a revelation of love and intimacy and trust. All the things I never thought would come to pass have: I have Simon's love, all of Luca, all of Ian. And it's the sweetest feeling in the world, so sweet it makes my heart ache.

"There you are," Ian says softly from the cracked door to the bathroom. "Just wanted to make sure you hadn't drowned."

"I'm in heat, not inept," I mutter, but I crane my head to meet his soft gaze. There's a softness to him when he's like this, his glasses lost somewhere in my nest, bare and just a bit bashful. "Join me?"

"I don't want to intrude."

"Please?"

He nods toward the front of the tub. "Scoot forward, then."

He slides in behind me and then pulls me close. I curl against him, inhaling his scent.

“Your scent always grounds me. Even in the haze of my heat.”

“It doesn’t make you absolutely wild with desire?”

“That’s what the rest of you is for.”

He laughs and it’s the most beautiful of sounds, rich and deep. Unrestrained.

I nuzzle into him, sighing. “Everyone else still asleep?”

“I think they’ll sleep as long as you’ll let them. Knotting for the first time is intense.”

“It is.”

“I had no idea it would be so... so...”

I look up sharply. “That was your first time? Ian! You should have saved it for someone special.”

He stares down at me and I immediately regret my words because his eyes are so full of love, of adoration. “I did.”

“I did, too.”

He tucks me back against his hard body, letting the water soothe us both. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

I yawn. “I mean, this is nice and all for now, but there’s something more I’ll want in a bit.”

“Brat,” he says, with so much affection it steals my breath. “You know what I mean.”

“This is exactly what I want but... but where do we go from here?”

“I-I don’t know,” he admits. “We can talk about it after your heat.”

I nod against his chest and draw in a lungful of his scent. I don’t tell him how easily I could get used to this. How there’s a bliss I feel in his arms that I’ve never felt anywhere else.

But he’s my professor.

And we'll talk after my heat.

We bathe together until the water cools, realizing we both forgot our scribes somewhere in my nest and can't heat the water back up. I grumble and he smiles, bright and boyish.

"Needy omega."

"Am not," I pout, then laugh. "Okay, I am a little."

"A lot. But it means I get to take care of you." He steps out of the tub before me and pulls two towels down off the small shelf of linens, wrapping one low around his hips and holding one out for me. I step out of the tub, and he bundles me into it, drying me with gentle touches that do nothing to cool my heat like the bath did.

"Come back to bed, my darling," he says when we're both dry, and draws me back to my nest.

He spoons me, arm slung low over my hips, and I let myself be lulled to sleep, just so I can experience waking up in Ian's arms.



"ON YOUR KNEES, OMEGA," Simon orders and I scramble to obey, just as Ian starts to protest.

Luca silences him with a shake of his head and a nod toward my slick-coated thighs.

Ian needs no further convincing. He drives into me, and I moan, parting my lips to take Simon into my mouth.

Each alternate stroke, Ian in my pussy and Simon in my mouth, is ecstasy and oh, the way they share me between them is so fucking *perfect* that I... burst into tears.

"Shit," Simon mutters, drawing out of my mouth with an audible pop. "What's wrong, beautiful?"

"You have to share me," I sob. "It isn't fair because I wouldn't share you with another omega, but I make you share me. I manipulate you."

Ian slides out of me and slick slips down my thigh, but that only makes me cry harder because there is no bliss greater than being shared by these men. None at all.

Selfish omega. Spiteful, manipulative creature.

Simon drags me into his lap, his arms going around me. “Oh, beautiful, please don’t cry. Not about that.” He kisses away the tears from my reddened cheeks, light little brushes of his lips that have me smiling despite my tears, have me laughing because they tickle.

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Ian says dryly, “we quite *enjoy* sharing you.”

“And have since the first time,” Luca says, taking my hands in his, kissing my knuckles. “Do you need a reminder of how Simon and I touched you, princess? Do you want Ian’s cock in your mouth so you can feel just what sharing you does to us?”

“Yes,” I say in a small voice, a blush rising in my cheeks.

“On your knees, omega,” Simon says again, smirking, and this time, as they take me together, as I beg to be fucked, I let them share me without guilt. Without shame.



I WAKE THE NEXT DAY, wrapped in warmth not from the fever of my heat but from the alphas and beta wrapped around me. I’m not exhausted or sore like I usually am after my heat, but I do feel very, very well used. I smile to myself, as content as any omega could ever be. I draw in a deep breath: vanilla and honey, wine and cherries, citrus and cedar, soap and sweat. It’s so blissfully, perfectly *pack* that I’m sure I must be dreaming.

And then I get poked in the side by a sharp elbow and cold toes brush my calf.

I let out a little shriek at the cold and jolt upright, Ian’s arm falling away from where it was slung low over my hips.

“Sorry. I run cold,” Simon yawns, stretching his arms over his head and then rolling his shoulders.

And that’s when I see it.

Two silver scars on Simon’s shoulder. The telltale double crescents of a mating bite.

My dreams of my perfect little pack come crashing down.

“You’re mated,” I breathe, eyes wide. But I don’t see him, only the bite on his shoulder. Oh, saints. I’m the other woman.” My heart races, drumming in my ears so fast the beats blur together, a frantic tattoo as I desperately try to get enough air into my lungs. My fingers go numb and then my toes. My head swims and panic blazes through me. “You’re betraying your alpha with me.”

“Junes, you’re having a panic attack,” Simon says softly, shifting to take me into his arms as he did in Ian’s office. I scramble away from him and tuck myself into the safety of Luca’s embrace.

“This is why you never wanted to... why you’d always shy away when we’d get close. This is why you didn’t want to be with me.”

“It’s not like that, kit-kat. I’ve wanted to be with you since the moment I met you, but things were... things were complicated with my alpha.”

“Then how is it?”

“Breathe, princess,” Luca murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Just breathe.”

I shake in his arms, but I can’t tear my eyes off Simon’s mating bite.

“You’re not the other woman, Juniper. You’re the *only* woman. For me and my alpha.”

“Who’s your alpha, Simon?” I ask, each word cutting into me, burning in my throat.

“Cassian. Cassian Leclerc is my alpha.”

## CHAPTER 32



Luca passes me into Ian's arms and sees Simon out. I watch but feel like I'm watching a film. Like I'm only an observer.

Raw and numb.

The other alpha holds me tightly, whispering soothing nonsense in my ear, stroking my back, brushing the tears away from my cheeks.

I scramble out of his arms, suddenly feeling too exposed.

Naked and foolish.

Saints, these men have seen me at my most vulnerable, when I've been helpless under the haze of my heat.

And in their own ways, they've all lied to me.

I tug on a tee shirt and dig through my drawers for a clean pair of panties, but I stumble trying to pull them on.

Ian's at my side in an instant, steadying me, but I pull away. I can't bear to be touched, to be seen like I am now: a mess.

A wreck.

Naive, foolish omega that I am.

I finally turn back to him once I've pulled leggings on to see him tugging on his slacks.

Saints, what do you even say to the alpha who denied and resisted you until you needed him most? When something



beautiful passed between you, tangled together in the mess of your nest at the peak of your heat?

“I’m sorry,” he says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

And all I can think to say is, “Me too.”



LUCA DOESN'T WANT to leave me, but I beg for time alone and he finally relents, leaving me in my cottage with my honor guard and a pain too great to comprehend.

Marcus gives me my space and I lay on my back in my nest, the smell of pack and sex so strong it makes me want to weep. I curl into the duvet, breathing in Luca's scent, nuzzle into the pillow that carries Ian bergamot and cedar. They're comforts, but the greater comfort is that Simon had no scent to leave behind, at least nothing strong enough that it isn't lost in scents and sex and slick.

No wonder I would catch all too familiar traces of sea-salt and summer sunshine in his dorm room. No wonder Simon called me something only Cassian ever called me.

Cassian.

I don't know whether it hurts more or less to know that my young love is Simon's alpha, that somehow both Cassian and I found our way to him. That we've kissed the same lips.

Cassian and I may have nothing in common but a past and a lover, but I don't fault him for choosing someone else any longer. Because the moment I met him, I chose Simon Monroe too.

No, my heart doesn't break for Cassian. It barely considers him.

It breaks because, once again, someone I love lied to me.

Is there any coming back from this?

Saints, Simon said I was the only woman—for him *and* his alpha.

I could blame Simon for letting me fall, could lay all of this at his feet, but in truth, I'm the one that loved him still, looked past every single time he pulled away.

Every time it was too complicated to love me and his alpha.



I SKIP Friday's classes and hide in my nest like the coward I am, not brave enough to face the problems I've made for myself.

When I do return to classes on Monday, I start the day on the wrong foot, oversleeping my alarm after tossing and turning half the night. I'm just about to dash out the door when I hear the thunk of something landing on my doorstep. Marcus lets out a warning growl, but by the time he gets to the peephole, there's no one there.

And by the time he opens the door, all that lingers is the scent of anise and orange. A long, wide box sits on my doorstep, tied up with a silk ribbon.

A dress box. When Marcus stoops to examine it, a card flutters out from beneath the ribbon and he snatches it up, examining it carefully before reluctantly handing it to me.

The note is typed in a flowery script on a single thick card.

*Wear this to the Lunar Ball if you want to see her alive again.*

I don't have to guess who he means.

So, Trinity lives, even after the beatings, after the torture of being mated to repulsive alphas, those mating bites burned away by dark embers.

"It's only a dress," I say softly. I stoop beside Marcus and tug the ribbon loose, then slowly lift the lid from the box, revealing layers of shimmering pearl tissue paper.

"I'd feel better if you'd let me," Marcus rumbles, and I nod.

He pulls the tissue from the box, sheet by glimmering sheet, until a beautiful, glittering gown the color of spring irises, covered from top to bottom in thousands of shimmering crystals, is revealed. He prods around in the box with his scribe and finally declares the dress free of hexes or anything untoward.

I pick up the box, shocked at its weight, and bring it inside, setting it down on the coffee table. When I lift the dress up, I realize why Rad sent it to me, why he picked this dress out of thousands.

The dress is collared.

All the crystal-encrusted silk chiffon falls from a collar made of heavy, cushion-cut amethysts, each as big as my thumbnail. Saints, the dress must have cost a fortune and it would be beautiful if not for everything it will represent when I'm forced to wear it in front of my peers and professors.

Ownership. Compliance.

The collar that will sit at the hollow of my throat, though it may be beautiful, will broadcast the one inescapable truth about my life: it isn't my own.

The fine fabric, heavy with the weight of the crystals adorning it, will cling to my every curve, leaving most of my shoulders and back bare. Showing that I'm unbitten, unmated, but owned nevertheless.

"You're not wearing that," Marcus growls, but goes terrifyingly still and silent when I hand him the card.

"I have no choice."

And perhaps I never have.



I EXPECT that Ian won't be able to look at me during Introduction to Casting, but as he introduces the newest set of sigils we're to cover, it seems he can look at no one but me.

His eyes are on me, wary, as I scribble down notes in my notebook. As he circles the room, watching as we cast the sigils for the first time. He looks ceaselessly, but says nothing.



IT ISN'T until I meet him for our private lesson that evening that he says more than a few words to me.

“We should work on your affinity training tonight,” he says with a grimace, and I don't need an affinity to know his thoughts: regret.

I do what I did the first term at Fairhaven. I pretend to call my magic—this time my affinity—with all my strength and intention, but I do no more than pretend. Then it was to hide the devastating toll calling my magic took—the crippling headaches, the bloody noses, the lightheadedness as memories I didn't understand invaded my mind.

But now I pretend so I don't hear his thoughts. So I don't have to feel his regret wash over me.

So I don't drown in it.

Mai arrives halfway through our session, and we thankfully switch to that somehow hurts less: being ripped open by the thorns of an omega trap.

Ian stands across from me, scribe in hand, and mutters the words of power for the omega trap hex, tracing out the sigils with deadly precision.

The vines shoot up around me, thorns of dark magic piercing my skin. My blood flows freely, pain lighting up my nerves, but it's so much better than feeling numb and scared.

I can't control this pain, not like I could when I punched the stone wall in my shower until my knuckles bled, but I can control my reaction to it.

I can breathe through it, close my eyes and find my center. I can will myself not to struggle, which will only wind the vines tighter, dig the thorns deeper.

This time, I don't lose my grasp on my scribe. This time, I'm able to cast the nullification spell necessary to break the trap.

Only, the trap doesn't break.

Ian startles. "Cast it again."

I trace through the sigils, thorns digging into my skin, but the trap holds.

"Omega traps were never meant to be escaped by those they trapped," Mai says softly. "Ian, nullify the hex. Now."

"Not yet," I grit out, swallowing down the cry of pain clawing up my throat. "I want to try something else."

I trace the inverses of the seven sigils Ian cast to set the trap, but with each sigil I cast, the thorns wind tighter and my blood flows faster. I've just cast the fourth sigil when the vine wraps so tightly around my wrist that my bones grind together.

"Enough," Ian growls, quickly casting the nullifying spell.

I drop my scribe and cradle my sore wrist to my chest, bloodying my blouse.

"Let me heal you, dear girl," Mai murmurs, kneeling on the bloodied floor beside me.

I give myself over to her care and by the time she leaves for the night, I'm bound up in enchanted bandages, just like I was after my first day at Fairhaven.

I'm just picking up my bag when Ian finally finds the words he's been meaning to say all night.

"What happened last week... it can't happen again."

Saints, knowing the blow was coming didn't lessen it in the least, and I wish I was still numb. I wish every nerve in my body didn't light with pain at his words.

"Why?"

"Juniper, I'm your professor! It's inappropriate. Just because you're an omega and I'm an alpha and our instincts \_\_\_"

“You said it was more than just instincts.”

“It was. It is.”

“Then be with me. It doesn’t have to be complicated unless we make it complicated. Saints, Ian, you know how I feel about you, and I know how you feel about me.”

“How we feel doesn’t matter!” he says, his voice louder, sharper.

“Then what does?” I challenge, going toe to toe with him, staring up into his blue eyes, my own blazing.

“My ability to protect you,” he growls, turning away sharply.

“If you want to protect me, then be my alpha.”

“I can’t,” he grits out. “Not when I’m your professor and... and fuck, you don’t realize how badly I need this job to be able to do that.”

“I never asked for your protection,” I say, my throat burning with tears. “All I ever wanted was you.”

He scowls, expression thunderous. “Then you don’t know how badly you need to be protected. You’re in danger, Juniper. Every fucking day you’re here. And I won’t compromise your safety. Not ever. Do you understand?”

I screw my lips shut tight and force a nod as I pack up my bag. “I understand, *professor*.” I spit out the last word, glare daggers, turn on my heel, and stalk from his office, my heart shattering in my chest.



LEIGH SURVEYS US WARILY. “For some of you, this is your first Lunar Ball, but that is no excuse for inappropriate behavior.”

“Well, I’m not going, so it’s only Junie’s first time.”

“Now Junebug,” Bitsy says gravely. “The first time can be hard, even if you know what to expect when it comes to—”

“Miss Jordan,” Leigh sighs. “Can we get through one class session without you bringing up alpha anatomy?”

“But Leigh,” Bitsy says sweetly. “Bringing it *up* is what I’m best at.”

Ellie groans and Alyssa rolls her eyes, but shocking us all, Leigh merely shoots her an exasperated look.

“Something I hope your father never finds out about. Now, you will all be expected to be on your best behavior at the ball. For many of you, there may be advantageous matches to be made or suitors to impress. If nothing else, it is a chance to demonstrate your poise and bearing and be a credit to your upbringing.

To be a credit to the Rose name would mean being someone I never want to be, someone with no regard for the lives of others, especially omegas. No, I don’t hope to do any credit to my upbringing.

I’ve spent too long unlearning all those wretched lessons.

But I will have to pretend to be that omega, that perfect porcelain doll daughter, if only for the night. I’ll have to simper and bare my neck, duck my head so I don’t meet the eyes of the alphas my father has deemed my betters. I’ve been pretending for years. It’s a delicate act, but one I’ve mastered. I hide my fear until I need to show it to appease an alpha with too short of a temper, cover my disgust until I can excuse myself and retch in the ladies’ room.

“For some of you,” she says, her eyes landing on me, “your attendance at Fairhaven is subject to your behavior here, and you have been behaving in a way your families would not consider fitting for omegas of your status. This is your chance to rededicate yourself to the paths your families have laid out for you.”

The path of flinching and meekness, the path of sorrow and loneliness. The path of chastity. I have long since strayed and I have no intention of returning to the path my father set out for me.

But for one night, I can pretend.

Because it won't just be my father who will be watching.  
And I must do what I can to keep Trinity Wells alive.



“I WOULD LIKE to apply for an assistantship for my sophomore year,” I say firmly.

“Junes, can't we talk about this?” Cassian looks up at me through those soulful, smoke and whiskey eyes that so ensnared me when I was younger.

“I would prefer we stick to academic topics,” I bite out, taking my seat and folding my hands in my lap. I can't yet bear to hear about how much Cassian loves the beta who won my heart, how they found the perfect mates in each other, when I had foolishly thought I had found the same in both of them. “I believe each of the professors I've had this term would gladly take me on as a research or teaching assistant next autumn and I would like to explore my opportunities, with your help, of course.”

“Simon feels terrible, and I do too. You have to understand \_\_\_”

I clear my throat sharply. “About the assistantship?”

Cassian sighs heavily, but finally nods, letting the subject drop. “You'll only be a sophomore. Most Fairhaven students don't take assistantships until their junior or senior years. It's not impossible, but it's rare for sophomores to receive those positions. You'll be competing with more experienced students, students who have had at least a year more training in magic than you have.”

“I believe I have proven that I'm willing to work hard, that I'm a capable mage with an appetite for learning.”

Cassian sighs. “I'll look into it and see if any of your professors would consider your application, but I can't promise anything.”



“I appreciate you looking into it. My preference would be a research or teaching assistantship. While I’ve learned a lot from Doctor Huong and appreciate her teachings greatly, I don’t wish to pursue the healing arts.”

I once wished to follow in my older siblings’ footsteps, to be deemed worthy enough for a job at Rose Pharmaceuticals, but I’ve long since realized that my family has no real interest in the healing arts.

If they did, my brother wouldn’t be worrying about the controversy a container of dead omegas could bring down on the company.

And I won’t learn anything more about what befell them if I don’t talk to Simon.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 33



“*A*s we celebrate the coming of spring, we also celebrate the waxing of the moon and the only true constant in the universe: change. You wouldn’t know it,” Headmaster Langford says, addressing the Lunar Ball attendees, “but spring has sprung here on Deer Island. Please, disregard the snow that blankets our campus on this first full moon of spring. For those of you who have not been with us long or perhaps have not been with us for quite some time, I assure you that snow on the Feast of Lunaria is practically a tradition.”

A few of the gathered alumni laugh politely and I peer around the ballroom. It’s resplendent, utterly transformed, an illusion of the full moon cast on the whole of the ceiling. The expansive room would be dark beneath the illusion of the night sky if not for the hundreds of warm, magical lights that float about the heads of the attendees. Students, alumni, and their packs fill the lavish space, everyone dressed in their finest, but I’m the only omega, mated or not, to be collared.

The settings of the amethysts scratch at my neck, breaking skin, dragged down by the weight of the dress. I haven’t been able to eat in two days to make it fit, leaving me lightheaded and irritable—or perhaps it’s the company making me want to run from the ballroom and never look back.

Claire hangs on Aspen’s arm, smiling blithely.

As if Packs Wells and Cassidy aren’t listening, brokenhearted, to Headmaster Langford talk about change.

Pack Cassidy wear red bands around their biceps, as deep and vibrant as blood against their jet-black tuxedo jackets.

“As we celebrate the change this time of the year brings, we also celebrate the bittersweet passing of our senior class out of Fairhaven’s doors and into the world where I am certain they will all make their marks. In their time at Fairhaven, they have learned more than just magic. Now, wiser, more courageous and more compassionate, they begin their lives.”

Or had their lives stolen from them, I think.

“Many will continue into successful careers, helming family businesses, driving innovation at companies around the world, fighting injustice and helping those less fortunate in charitable and governmental roles. This year’s senior class is bright, and they are strong of character, two things that are more necessary in this age than ever before.

“Our world is in upheaval. We carry terror in our hearts, trepidation as we go about our lives. We mourn those we have lost and worry that we will lose those we love.”

I catch Cassian looking my way and quickly dip my head, pretending I don’t see him. Pretending I don’t see that he isn’t anywhere near Simon at all. Simon stands with Ellie and her mother, looking more dapper than I thought possible, in a navy tuxedo and a Fairhaven burgundy bowtie. His messy curls are gelled into a semblance of order, but I just want to run my hands through his hair and muss it up again. I look away before he can catch my perusal of him, before *others* can catch my perusal of him.

Cassian stands with his pack, his four alpha fathers and omega mother. She’s a slight, frail woman who leans heavily on her son to stay standing, but Cassian is shockingly sweet to her, murmuring little comments that make her hide giggles behind her hand. Though his tuxedo is black, he wears the same burgundy bow tie Simon does. It’s a small thing that perhaps only I notice, but I’ve never seen them even in the same room together before—and now I need to.

I need to see if Simon makes Cassian laugh like he does me, if Cassian is as tender with Simon as he once was with me

when we were together.

They're handsome apart and would no doubt be even more so together, but it's Ian that catches my eye as he walks in late, trying to sneak in quietly. My mouth goes painfully dry, and I take a quick sip of my champagne, coughing when the bubbles burn at the back of my throat.

But saints above. Ian Reinhardt is a vision, a magazine cover model. He didn't bother with gel and his hair is messy in the rakish way I've always appreciated. His tuxedo fits him like a glove, and all I want to do is unbutton the jacket, slide my hands up his abs, over his strong chest and shoulders. Saints, dressed like he is, that man looks like he's made for sinning.

And I know the truth.

He definitely is.

But he won't be sinning with me again, won't touch me like he did while we were tangled together in my nest, like he couldn't get enough of me, would never get enough of me.

Willow gives me a quick jab in the side and shoots me a reproachful glare and I quickly look back at the toes of my iris-purple heels. They're beautiful, like the dress, and just as impractical. It takes every ounce of will I have not to teeter on the slender stilettos and I know I'll ache when I finally kick them off at the end of the night.

My hair is sprayed and pinned to perfection, elegant and so unlike the wild plait I wore as Saint Rosamund. How different I feel tonight than I did then. Behind her mask, I felt strong and powerful. Brave. Like a fighter.

I feel anything but tonight.

I was forced to get ready with Willow and Claire, an omega stylist buzzing around us, annoying Willow to no end. She couldn't stop going on about Claire's beauty, but she pinched at the small swell of my tummy just below my belly button as she pulled my dress on over my head. I'm utterly bare beneath it but for silicone nipple covers—and I had to fight her for those.

“Just think of all those unmated alphas in the room,” I whined. “They can’t see me so immodest. It would be chaos.”

It worked. I got the small silicone circles and nothing else beside the gown and shoes. The gown clings to my backside in a way that verges on indecent, hugs my every curve in a way that makes me want to rip it off and dash it on the ground, stomp on it in my stilettos. I feel more naked in it than I would out of it, more bared to those around me.

More vulnerable.

Just how Rad wants me.

His stare, which always returns to me, is one of savage hunger, one of depravity, and on any other alpha, my father would protest it.

Instead, he leans in to whisper to me while the headmaster continues his speech. “I do hope you’ve been obliging to Andrew Radcliffe, Juniper. His pack has offered us an incredibly lucrative contract and I may need you to play nice with him. To grease a few wheels.”

“Yes, Father,” I murmur, not looking up into his pale blue eyes.

The collar digs when I dip my head, when I duck my eyes away from my betters.

Exactly as Rad intended.

Everything he contrived of was designed to make me suffer, and suffer I do. My only saving grace is that Rad is among the seniors who will graduate and leave Fairhaven in just over a month. That Rad will disappear to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where his father’s defense firm is located. That he won’t be able to torment me any longer.

I happily sit out the first few dances once the festivities have begun but can’t beg off the third. Aspen demands my hand and all but yanks me onto the dance floor.

“What the devil are you wearing? You know what a collar means!”

“It means I’m owned.”

“Where did you get it? Did Father approve of it?”

“It was a gift, Aspen. From Andrew.” I cut a quick glance over to the alpha in question, catching his leering stare. “I know my friendship with him is important to you and Father and did not think I had a choice in the matter.” Saints, I want to drive my sharp heel into Aspen’s instep, to rip that smug smirk of satisfaction off his arrogant face.

“Good, you’re learning. I knew you would, given enough time and incentive.”

Incentive? A chill slips down my bare back, but Aspen doesn’t let me interrupt.

“You will do whatever that alpha says. If he wants you to spread your legs for him, you will. Father will tell you to play coy, but he’s of a more traditional generation. He told you he might need you to grease some wheels for us? You’ll do it on your back.”

I startle, going rigid in Aspen’s arms as he whirls me around the dance floor. I stare fixedly at the button on his tuxedo jacket, biting the inside of my cheek until I taste blood.

*Project Halcyon will succeed.*

Aspen’s thoughts slip so seamlessly into my mind, but I don’t react. I don’t let on that I’m anything but uncomfortable from the tight grip of his hand around mine.

“A partnership between Radcliffe Industries and Rose Pharmaceuticals will change the very world we live in, dear sister. We’ll bring about a new age.”

*And destroy anyone who gets in our way.*

I let his words catch in my mind, let unease roil in my gut and I reach out with my affinity—only for a familiar voice to interrupt my thoughts.

“May I cut in, Mr. Rose?” Cassian asks, saving me from my cruel brother. “Miss Rose has been my advisee this term.”

“No impropriety,” Aspen hisses, as if I’d ever step out of line with so much scrutiny on me.

“I hate this,” Cassian growls, his scent spiking between us —sea salt and summer sea air, soaked in golden sunlight. “Who made you wear this?”

“Rad,” I murmur, just loud enough to hear. “On threat of Trinity’s life.”

“I will destroy him.”

“You can’t. He won’t hurt you directly, but he’ll find ways to make you suffer. He’ll go after Simon.”

“He’s already going after you,” Cassian says, ferocity making his voice shake.

“You can’t let him anywhere near Simon, please. Cass, I need you to keep him safe.”

Cassian glances at Simon who’s whisking a laughing Ellie around the ballroom. “I do. In my own way. And I would protect you too, if you’d let me.”

Ian’s words echo in my mind.

*You don’t know how badly you need to be protected. You’re in danger, Juniper. Every fucking day you’re here.*

I color and keep my head ducked like an appropriate omega would. “You’d protect me even if I didn’t let you. Even if I didn’t know you were doing it. And you have. Am I wrong?”

“Saints know I’ve tried, Junes. Saints know I’ve lain awake, tortured with worry over you.”

“You never said.”

“You never wanted me to.”

I risk a glance up into his dark eyes, the way they crinkle at the corners, his brow furrowed in a frown.

The song comes to an end and, with it, our conversation. He escorts me back to my father, his head held high. When we reach my father, Cassian greets him cordially.

“Mr. Rose, a pleasure. Miss Rose, thank you for consenting to a dance. Good evening.”

My father watches him go, before returning his attention to Professors Hayes and Teague.

“Your daughter is quite the academic, Mr. Rose. She’d be a talented scholar,” Professor Hayes says, and I cut a quick look and smile of thanks his way.

My father just chuckles. “That’s up to her future alphas to decide. If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen. I haven’t seen my daughter since the Yule break and I’d very much like to catch up with her.”

I offer my professors a wan smile and let my father draw me away from them.

“At least you’re not remiss in your studies,” my father mutters. “But that Leclerc boy, I don’t want you consorting with him.”

“He’s my peer advisor, Father, nothing more. All freshmen have them.”

My father watches Cassian as he crosses the dance floor back to his mother.

I take the chance to reach out with my affinity, trying to glean even the smallest scrap from my father, but it’s as if he’s a void. I get nothing from him. Not even the undercurrent of emotion an omega’s empathy typically allows us to pick up on from an alpha’s posture, his scent, his demeanor.

I wince and rub my temples.

“Are you unwell?”

“Only a headache. I studied too late last night knowing I wouldn’t have much time to study today. I’m determined to do you proud.”

“You’ll make me proud by dancing with the Radcliffe boy. Here he comes now. Best behavior, daughter.”

The ‘or else’, as always, goes unspoken.

I accept Rad’s hand and let him escort me back to the dance floor, trying to repress the shudder attempting to rack through me, my instincts responding to the clear threat he



represents. Stay strong, if only for this night. I have to. Even as anise and citrus choke me, his foul scent sharp, rising above the chaos of scents in the ballroom. It takes everything in me to pretend he doesn't sicken me.

But as I let him set his hand on my waist, his thoughts blare into my mind.

He stares at the collar, and I see it through his eyes, how delicate my throat looks, how he could crush my windpipe with no effort at all.

How he wants to make me as black and blue as *that professor you spread your legs for did to me, omega whore*.

I force myself not to react though my heart cries out for Ian, wishing I could warn him.

"You are a vision tonight, beloved," he says in an undertone, but as he gazes at me, I know what he envisions: me, in this dress, beaten and bloodied. He dreams of grabbing my hair and forcing me to my hands and knees, of using his command to make me present my sex to him, just as he tried to do when he assaulted me in the small stand of trees beside the library.

"I have a courting present for you," he says, a whisper in my ear. His lips brush my skin and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to suppress my shudder. "You miss your friend Trinity, don't you?"

That's when the ballroom fills with smoke and all unholy hell breaks loose.



"WHERE ARE MY MANNERS?" Rad murmurs as the smoke clears. "I haven't introduced you to Grace. I think you'd like her. Or you would have."

The last traces of smoke vanish, and I gasp.

Dozens of Soldiers have infiltrated the ballroom and hold students, alumni, and teachers at scribe-point.

“You will pay for this,” Headmaster Langford grits out. A masked figure presses his scribe against the headmaster’s pulse point, but no one pays them any attention.

Because standing at the very center of the ballroom is Grace Cassidy, gagged, bound, and shrieking. I recognize the older omega only from photographs in news articles and in her old Fairhaven yearbook photo, and while I’ve known Trinity for nearly a year and I’ve seen what they’ve done to her, I barely recognize her.

Her dark hair is matted, her face a mess of blood and bruises. She’s lost so much weight, her cheeks are ax-edge sharp, her shoulders bony beneath a tattered old Fairhaven sweatshirt.

“She didn’t dress for the occasion. How embarrassing,” Rad says in my ear. He sighs heavily and sets a hand over his heart. “Tragic what happens to omegas who don’t obey, isn’t it?”

“What have you done to her?”

The omega’s eyes, blood-red from whatever they’ve done to her, glow a sickly purple-black, the color of the Soldiers’ dark magic.

The color of the ember. It pulses at the bite in her neck—not Jaime’s but another’s. Rad’s?

“Grace!” an alpha with a red band around his bicep calls out, breaking free of the Soldier holding him at scribe point, dashing toward his captive omega. He makes it three steps before he’s struck down.

Dead.

The guests around the ballroom shuffle, soft cries and whispers spreading around the ballroom like wildfire.

At the edge of the crowd, Jaime Brentwood weeps, a broken alpha, destroyed by the severed mating bond between him and the love of his life. All the love that once flowed through their bond... gone. But Trinity’s been gone to him since the Soldiers first took her, dragging her far beyond the reach of her mating bond before they burned Jaime’s bite from

her body. He goes for his scribe, but he's too late. Two Soldiers bind his wrists with a hex and shove him to his knees.

And my own father? His gaze is calculating beneath a veneer of fear I see straight through.

“You'll never get away with this!” Professor Cadigan shouts, but he's stilled by a scribe at his throat and a growled warning from the Soldier beside him.

Rad looks me in the eyes and I'm ready to fall to my knees in front of him, to beg for Trinity's life.

Until Trinity draws a gun from behind her back.

Rad brushes a curl away from my face, still facing me, his back to the spectacle in the center of the ballroom. “I'll protect you, beloved.” He shields me, but still provides me with a perfect view of the tableau before me.

Trinity's arm shakes as she raises the gun, and she whips her head back and forth, trembling and sobbing. Her words are lost to her garbled cries, but she begs, not for her life, but for Grace's.

He takes my hand in one of his and I don't fight him, even as he presses it between his, as he sets his hand over his heart.

No. Not his heart.

His Mark.

The Mark ignites with heat beneath the silk of his tux, beneath our joined hands.

There's pity in his eyes—for me—when he orders Trinity to kill Grace.

“No!” I shout.

Trinity looks past Rad to me, a plea in her eyes.

Saints, he's controlling her through the bond.

“Blood magic,” Rad tsks. “The most powerful magic there is. She'll do anything I tell her to.”

More powerful than an affinity?

I reach out to Trinity with my mind and connect with her easily—both of our emotions are running high.

Her mind is chaos, her thoughts desperate. She doesn't want to kill Grace. She's trying her hardest to resist, just as she resisted their bites, their blood magic, but she's tired. She's so very, very tired.

All she wants is peace.

*Save me*, she cries out to me.

Saints, in all my affinity lessons, I've never trained for this. I brace myself, standing my ground, and I draw on all of my power, find the font of it inside me, and I let my intention and affinity flow through my connection with Trinity. My awareness slips down our connection until I'm mired in Trinity's mind, in her thoughts. I see the world from both my eyes and hers—the sight before her clouded red with blood.

A desperate, shrieking Grace, beseeching her pack to save her. Begging them not to. Begging them to live.

Begging Trinity not to shoot her.

I watch Trinity stare down her shaking arms at the gun in her trembling hands. She fights to lower the gun, to drop it back to her side, but it's like her limbs aren't her own.

She screams in her mind because she can't move her mouth, can't make her throat work.

She knows Rad will stop her heart. She wants him to. But he won't. Not before his will is done.

Powerful magic roars against mine, Rad's will, his bonded blood magic roaring in Trinity's mind, striking me down.

I gasp at the exertion of his power, at the strength of it.

Saints, maybe blood magic *is* stronger than an affinity.

I think of the omegas who went before me who wielded affinities like I do. Were they cowed by a powerful alphas wielding forbidden magic?

No, they would have fought, to the death if necessary.

Trinity's pleas fill my ears, but my attention falters as Rad laughs, soft and dark in my ear.

Of course.

I need to draw his attention away from Trinity, break the control he has over her. I need to gain the upper hand in any way possible.

I draw my foot up and drive my stiletto-clad heel onto Rad's instep with all my might.

He falters, just long enough for Trinity to fight back.

Just long enough for me to slip into her mind and push him from it.

She looks up at me, her eyes no longer bloody, but clear. A baleful blue.

She's free.

Trinity squeezes her eyes shut, whispers out a thanks I hear through the link between us, turns the gun on herself, and pulls the trigger.

Her last thoughts are of Jaime, how she loves him, and peace. The dark, quiet peace that awaits her.

My magic snaps back into me so quickly I stumble.

Chaos erupts in the ballroom, but I'm numb to it. I'm numb to everything but Trinity's final wish for peace.

Rad laughs, despite the way tears of pain spill down his reddened cheeks, and I know now that he's sick. More deranged than I ever thought possible.

"You'll behave now, won't you?" he croons, just as strong arms go around me, dragging me from the fray.

"Get her out of here!" Hawthorn tells Ian, and suddenly I'm in the alpha's arms as he sprints from the ballroom, hexes firing behind us. One singes the back of his tux jacket, and he lets out a hiss of pain, but he doesn't relent. He sprints all the way back to my cottage, holding me tight.

He doesn't stop until he sets me down and locks the door behind us, warding it with spell after spell and shoving one of the kitchen chairs under the knob for good measure.

I sway on my feet, echoes of chaos and pain and freedom swirling through my head.

I freed her.

But it wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

I couldn't save Trinity Wells.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 34



I kick off my heels and stagger up the stairs, fall before the toilet and lose every single sip of champagne I swallowed. It burns up my throat and I cough until I cry, cry until I retch again.

Then Ian's at my side, bergamot blotting out the scent of blood I can't get out of my nose, the bitterness of the bile I've just thrown up. He strokes my back until I quiet and I fall into him, weeping when he takes me into his arms and rocks me softly.

"Oh, my darling," he sighs.

"Rad was using blood magic."

"Saints, that's... blood magic hasn't been used in hundreds of years."

"The Soldiers are controlling omegas with it," I say dully. "Through mating bonds. Rad was controlling everything Trinity did. I only... I only caught glimpses from him but the chaos in Trinity's mind, the pain. It was unlike anything I've ever felt."

"The ember must connect them," he realizes with a shudder. "Fuck, I've been so blind. But, my darling, you were so brave."

"I couldn't save Trinity. I broke Rad's control but... but..." I shake my head and nuzzle into his shirt, dragging soothing, spicy cedar into my lungs.

“You did that?” he breathes and every other emotion but his pride, his adoration, falls away. I let it lull me, let it wear down the sharp edges of my panic, my pain.

I nod against him. “I was in her mind, fighting against Rad’s magic. I broke his concentration just long enough to overpower him. To free Trinity. But she... she...”

I hiccup around a racking sob and then wail.

Because Trinity Wells killed herself and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.

He holds me until I quiet once more, then helps me to my nest. He strips me of the foul, collared dress, disgust in his eyes.

“He made you wear this, didn’t he?”

I nod dully. “Under threat of Trinity’s death.”

“I wanted to rip it off you the moment I saw it,” he growls. “The thought that any alpha would dare *collar* you...” Alpha power crackles through him, making his broad shoulders seem even broader, making him seem bigger, more powerful.

He helps me dress in a tee shirt and soft cotton shorts and then I’m in his arms. He bundles me into my nest, holding me as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear in a puff of smoke.

“Will you stay with me until Marcus gets back?” I ask, my voice small.

He holds me tighter, alpha instincts riding him hard. Protectiveness courses off him along with fear, pride, love. His purr roars to life and I feel his shock as much as I see it in his wide blue eyes.

“I’ve never...”

I nuzzle into his chest where his purr is the loudest, feeling the reverberations of it through my whole body. Saints, it’s like a drug, sending a calm numbness through every inch of my body.

Never mind that Ian said he couldn’t be my alpha; his purr is a claim of its own. It draws me out of my head, away from



the sharp shards of panic and the dark morass of guilt that threatens to drown me. His purr washes it all away—for now.

“You may have trouble getting rid of me,” he admits. “I don’t think I could let go of you now, even if I wanted to.”

I curl closer. “You were hexed. I can look at it for you, bespell you to relieve some of the pain.”

“It smarts a bit, but I’ll be fine. It barely caught me.”

“It was chaos in there,” I murmur. “After... after Trinity shot herself. Saints, what does Radcliffe even have to gain from what happened tonight?”

Ian tucks my head beneath his chin. “That was a warning. A showing of what the Soldiers are capable of. Of what’s to come.”

“They want to crush omegas beneath their heels. Make us slaves and breeders once more.”

“That’s my fear.”

“And Rad wants to start with me.” I go still in Ian’s arms, though the predator who would hurt me, who would hunt me, is nowhere nearby. “He could control me, my affinity... With that he could... he could...”

I struggle out of Ian’s arms and stumble toward the bathroom, retching bile into the toilet once more. I curl against the wall beside it, silent sobs of despair racking through me.

Ian crouches down in front of me, a cool, wet cloth in his hands. He dabs at my flushed skin, wipes away the tear-smudged makeup around my eyes, every stroke of the washcloth followed by a stroke of his fingers, his touch achingly gentle. Tender.

He doesn’t say anything, and he doesn’t have to.

He tosses the cloth into the sink, scoops me up into his arms, and takes me back to my nest where he wraps us in the softest blankets and holds me close.

“Use your affinity right now. On me,” he tells me.

My brows furrow, but I reach out with my magic, letting my intention guide my affinity until a link snaps into place between us, until his thoughts and emotions flood into me.

Until *love* floods into me. The love of this brilliant man, who swore he couldn't be my alpha, even though he knows we're inevitable.

Saints above, I weep again, but this time it's because I have the love and devotion, the care and protection, of Ian Reinhardt.



A POUNDING sounds at the door sometime after midnight and I hear Marcus' calling for me.

"Marcus is home from his night off."

"I'm not leaving," he vows.

"I'm not asking you to. But I'd like you to let Marcus in before he rips the door off its hinges." I shift in Ian's arms, his purr finally quieting, and he lets me up, following me to the stairs and down the landing. He shields me with his body as he approaches the door and drags the chair away from beneath the knob. He peers through the peephole and then finally undoes the deadbolt and locking spell.

As soon as the door swings open, Marcus crosses to me in a few long strides, dragging me into his arms and pulling me off my feet. Alpha protectiveness pours off of him, along with a chaos of emotion I've never seen or felt in my stoic honor guard before. Saints, his instincts have him wound up just as tightly as Ian was. He scoops me up and settles on the couch with me in his arms, glaring at Ian.

"Tell me what happened," he barks at Ian.

"Juniper is safe. Don't make her relive it," Ian says with a frown.

"It's okay," I tell him. "He needs to know, and I can... I can manage." Ian tracks my gaze and brings Marcus' sweater

over to me, but lets Marcus help me into it when my honor guard shoots him a warning glare.

“Will you make some tea?”

He gives my hand a squeeze, not daring to get any closer to Marcus. Still, Marcus growls.

“He saved me, Marcus,” I tell my honor guard, taking his hand in both of mine. “Ian got me out of the ballroom when the hexes started to fly.” I nod to the singed back of Ian’s tuxedo jacket just as he strips it off and tosses it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. The other alpha has his back to us, giving us some semblance of privacy as we talk, though I know from his tense posture that he hangs on my every word, that his heightened senses miss nothing. “He took a hex that was meant for me.”

“Tell me?” Marcus’ voice is a helpless, broken thing, filled with shame and regret. “Fuck, I should have been there. I should have—”

“*I* should have been safe surrounded by so many people. I wasn’t. Not until Ian made sure I was after... after...” I let out a shudder sigh. “After Trinity killed herself.”

I recount the night, sparing no detail, telling the two alphas everything Rad told me, everything he thought. Marcus growls, a low, unending sound that deepens when I tell him that Rad called Trinity a courting present.

“I’ll kill him myself,” he swears.

“Get in line,” Ian mutters, handing me a steaming mug of milky tea. “Haley, tea?”

At Marcus’ low growl, Ian shrugs and sets it on the table, dropping into the armchair across from the couch, a mug in his own hands.

I recount the internal struggle in Trinity’s mind, the malevolent power of the blood magic, as much for Ian as for Marcus. When I finish, ending with the firefight and Rad’s crooning question, asking if I’ll behave, Marcus tightens his hold around me. Slowly, the alpha energy drains from him, and my sweet, stoic honor guard returns.

“She died free because of you, Juniper. You gave her that gift.”

“I could have stopped her.”

“How?” Marcus asks.

I... I don't know. “I could have done *something*.”

“Her mind was made up, Juniper,” Ian says softly. “After what she must have suffered, I'm sure all she wanted was to be at peace. And she got to do that without Grace's death on her conscience. All because of you.”

I nestle into Marcus and finally nod, though tears slip down my cheeks.

Another knock sounds at the door and both alphas let out low growls, their instincts roaring back at the potential threat.

Ian sets his tea aside and goes to the door, looking through the peephole. “It's Professor Cadigan. I'm sure he's just checking on all the omega students. I'll speak with him.”

He slips out the door and they talk in low voices, but I hear them anyway.

My affinity? Am I gleaning the conversation from Ian, Professor Cadigan, or Marcus—hearing it with his superior senses?

“She's home safely.”

“She is.”

The older professor sighs. “I worry about your... dedication to this particular omega, Ian. That you may be acting outside the bounds of propriety that exist between students and their professors—and for good reason. You must realize you're in a position of power and she is not. It's wholly inappropriate and if you were to—”

“We haven't,” Ian lies. “Nothing untoward has happened between us. I give her extra lessons because she asked me to. She helps me with my research because she's clever and took an interest.”

“You vanished from the ball with her pretty quickly. We could have used you in the fight.”

“I got her out at Hawthorn’s request,” Ian hedges. “And I stayed because her honor guard had the night off. We ran from a fucking firefight, Alan. With the Soldiers on campus, with the issues we’ve had with our wards, I did my duty. I stayed with her until Haley returned.”

“I worry about you, Ian. That’s all. If you were to stray beyond the bounds of propriety, you’d lose your job, and you’ve worked too hard to risk everything for one omega.”

Marcus growls and picks me up off the sofa. “You’ve heard enough, sweet-tart. Time for bed.”

I go to protest, but Marcus’ tone brooks no argument, his alpha riding him too hard for me to push back on him. I nod, clasp my hands around the cup of tea, snatch Ian’s tuxedo jacket off the chair, and head up to my nest.

I wrap myself in Ian’s jacket over Marcus’ sweater, letting their combined scents wrap around me. I pray to the saints for sleep, but the only thing that finally allows it to come is pretending that these two alphas I love are my pack.

## CHAPTER 35



With my world falling apart around me, I can't waste any time. I text Simon the very next morning, asking if we can talk.

His response is immediate. <<*Always, kit-kat. No matter what.*>>

We set a time later in the week, hoping campus will have emerged from lockdown by then.

I've just stepped out of the shower when Marcus calls upstairs to me.

"We've been summoned for questioning."

Fuck.

As if the last twenty-four hours haven't been bad enough, I now have to appear before Mage Inspector Mattis again, limp-dick coward that he is. Bought and paid for by Pack Radcliffe.

I'll have to flay myself open for the uninterested mage inspector once again, relive the horror of the night before, all for him to ignore me. For him to disparage me.

It's a farce and one I have no patience for.

Not anymore.



HAWTHORN'S WAITING JUST outside the wards for me and Marcus and immediately pulls me into a tight hug. "Thank the

fucking saints, Junibear. I'm so glad you're all right."

I'm not. Not really. But when has that ever mattered?

"Was anyone else hurt?" I ask, already knowing the answer. Knowing that there's no way Fairhaven escaped unscathed amidst the carnage of the Lunar Ball.

"One of Trinity's fathers is in critical condition," Hawthorn says quietly. "But three Soldiers are dead because of him. He fought bravely, but Mai isn't sure yet if he'll live. He's being transferred to a hospital on the mainland as we speak."

Saints, what that pack has been through. My heart breaks for them. For the justice they'll never receive. For the daughter they'll have to bury.

Just another dead omega.

We climb the steps up to the headmaster's manor in silence, and I steel myself. I'll need every last scrap of strength I have left to make it through my conversation with Mattis.

Only, when I'm shown into the manor's study, it isn't Mattis sitting behind Headmaster Langford's desk at all, but an alpha who looks to be in his late twenties. He's a handsome alpha—and looks like he knows it—with honey-blond hair and eyes the color of amber, tall and lean, though not quite so much as Ian is.

He offers his hand but it's then that I catch the other alpha in the room.

My father.

I don't accept the mage inspector's hand. Instead, I bare my neck to him, looking away as tears sting my eyes.

"There's my brave daughter," my father says, but the warmth in his voice doesn't match the cold calculation in his blue eyes. "I'm so glad to see you well, Juniper. Dreadful business, all of it."

I nod numbly. Dreadful business? Two people are dead, and another may not survive. Saints, the suffering of their packs is unimaginable.

“Royal Detective Inspector Graeme Miller.”

I startle at the inspector’s accent—he’s British, not American or Canadian. What’s a Royal Detective Inspector doing all the way overseas in Fairhaven? The young detective looks especially harried, like he hasn’t slept.

Did he come all the way from London just last night, as soon as news of the tragedy spread beyond Fairhaven’s walls? Or has he been overseas longer than that?

“Miss Rose, you have my thanks. You were among those closest to the victim when she shot herself.”

“A victim? That girl nearly shot another omega!” my father protests, voice hard. He says it so easily, like he’s been preparing for just this moment all night long.

“Under duress,” I say quietly.

My father sets his hand on my knee, squeezing hard enough that the tips of his fingers dig into my skin, but he’s cordial when he speaks to the detective inspector. “My daughter must be mistaken. You know omegas are often confused during times of great trauma, and I’m certain my daughter is deeply traumatized after last night’s display of depravity.”

I know my father well enough to know the order that weaves through those words. I’m to lie to the inspector.

The detective inspector studies me for a moment. “You were dancing with one Andrew Radcliffe at the Lunar Ball last night. What’s your relationship with Mr. Radcliffe?”

I duck my head because I can’t force a girlish blush. “He’s somewhat of a suitor. He protected me during the attack. I’m very lucky to have been dancing with him at the time. I was so very frightened.”

“I see,” the detective inspector says, flipping through a few pages of notes and jotting something down. “I understand you’ve spoken to local law enforcement—” he says the words with disdain “—about him before. Has he bothered you previously?”



I swallow hard. My father is asking me to lie about the alpha who tried to rape me. He gives my knee a painful squeeze and I just barely bite back my whimper.

“A misunderstanding,” I demure.

“And your accusation that he was behind Trinity Wells’ disappearance?”

My father clears his throat sharply. “Hysterics, no doubt, Detective Inspector. Omegas are such impressionable creatures.”

But the detective inspector doesn’t seem to think so.

“Another misunderstanding,” I lie. “It’s evident to me now that the Soldiers of Saint Aldous took her, and Miss Cassidy as well.”

“And you don’t believe there’s any tie between Mr. Radcliffe and the Soldiers?”

My father’s sandalwood and yew scent spikes between us. A warning.

Saints, I want to scream at the top of my lungs that Andrew Radcliffe is a Soldier, that he has been since the first time he held a scribe to my throat. That he’s marked with an evil, ancient hex and controlling omegas with blood magic.

I don’t. I act like the omega heiress my father expects me to be. “I certainly wouldn’t know anything about that. But he’s an upstanding alpha. Ask anyone around campus. He’s the captain of our lacrosse team and so well liked. I don’t see how he could possibly be tied to such a vile organization. But again, I’m in no position to be privy to such matters. What would an omega know about things like that?”

*More than she’s letting on.* The detective inspector’s voice whispers in my mind as my father squeezes my knee so hard, I whimper.

“Are you all right, Miss Rose?”

“You must excuse me. I am deeply troubled by last night’s events. It all happened so fast, and I can scarcely separate what

happened from the nightmares that terrorized me last night. I'm afraid I'll be no help to you, Detective Inspector."

*Saints, how will I put this bastard away if my eyewitness won't tell me the truth?*

I look up sharply but show the detective inspector my neck when my father shoots me a look of warning.

"May I please be excused?"

The detective inspector sighs. "Please, at least take my card. In case you think of anything else."

He slides it across the desk toward me, but I don't take it. Instead, I desperately try to memorize his phone number.

"I'm quite sure I won't," I tell him.

My father sees me out and hisses his displeasure at me as soon as we're out of earshot. "You've spoken to the police about the Radcliffe boy? Are you absent your senses? You jeopardize everything I've worked toward."

I duck my head. "This was before I knew of the alliance you were seeking to forge between our families. I've been on better behavior since then. But Father, he tried to rape me. I was so frightened, and I promised you I'd stay pure..."

He grunts out an acceptance of my lie. "Return to your cottage. I'll summon you if I need to speak with you before your siblings and I return home. And remember, daughter, you are here at Fairhaven only as long as you deserve to be."

As long as I follow his stipulations.

As long as I let him use me as a pawn in his diabolical games.

As soon as Marcus and I cross the threshold of the omega resident wards, I punch the detective inspector's phone number into my cell.

*<<I need to speak to you. Not on campus. I have information on Radcliffe. I'll text you an address.>>*

I call Luca directly afterward and he picks up on the second ring.

“Saints above, princess,” he growls. “I’ve been so fucking worried.”

“I’m sorry. I would have called sooner. Last night was... it was a lot, and I was summoned in front of a royal detective inspector first thing this morning. I’ll tell you about all of it when I see you. But I need a favor.”

“Name it,” he swears, the relief in his voice so great it chokes me up.

“I know Quill & Clover is closed today, but do you have keys? I need somewhere safe and private to meet with a detective inspector. And I need a ride my father can’t trace.”

I don’t dare suggest Marcus take me into town in my father’s town car. Knowing what I know now about cameras and listening devices, I’m sure the car must have some sort of tracker. Saints, I’ve been so stupid and irresponsible...

“Done. Name the time.”

I end the call to find a response to my text.

<<*I await your instructions.*>>



LUCA TAKES me into his arms the moment I step across the wards on the bridge. He buries his nose in my hair, his scent spiking as he feels down my arms, down my back, finding me uninjured. “Thank the saints,” he breathes. “I was so fucking worried. Princess, what’s going on? What’s all this about a detective inspector??”

“He’s a royal detective inspector. He questioned me this morning—about last night—but my father was there. I had to lie to the detective but... but I think he can be trusted. I just can’t meet with him on campus. Not while my father is in town.”

It’s a risk to disappear from my cottage when my father is still in Fairhaven, but if this detective truly is dedicated to

bringing down Radcliffe and the Soldiers of Saint Aldous, I have to see him.

But I'm glad for the ride into town, sandwiched between Luca and Marcus on the pickup's bench seat, my side pressed against my alphas. He wraps one arm around me, the low rumble of his purr soothing my newest wave of nerves.

Saints, I hope I'm not making a huge mistake.

The drive and the comfort I find in Luca's arms is all too short. Before long, we're in the alleyway behind Quill & Clover. Marcus scans the empty alley before nodding and helping me down from the pickup's cab.

Luca unlocks and opens the back door for us and flicks on the lights.

"So, tell me about this detective inspector. What's special about him? Did you use your mind magic on him?"

"A little," I admit. "It wasn't intentional. Thank you for coming. I hope you won't get in trouble for this?"

He shakes off my concern with a wave. "I'll say I came in to stock some shelves. But you're okay? Truly?"

"I'm okay. And I'm sorry I didn't text last night. It was..."

He sets a tattooed finger to my lips. "Save it for the detective inspector. I know reliving it again will be painful. Don't do it twice on my account."

I nod against him and let his touch banish some of my worries.

That is, until the detective inspector's knock at the back door to the bookshop.

When Luca shows him in, he looks first to Marcus and then to me. When he sees me, the barest ghost of a smile crosses his lips.

"I was hoping it would be you. Thank you for getting in touch, Miss Rose."

When he offers his hand this time, I shake it. "Thank you for coming. This is Marcus, my honor guard, and Luca, who

was kind enough to offer us this space to meet. With my father still in town, I didn't think it was safe to meet on campus. Not if you want the truth."

"That's my aim, yes."

I frown, taking a seat on one of the wooden crates of books. "If only that were true for all inspectors."

"Yes, your local law enforcement *has* been rather remiss in dealing with the threat the Soldiers of Saint Aldous pose." He draws out a notepad. "I would typically record our meeting on my phone, but for your privacy, I won't."

He holds out his phone for my inspection and then stands with his arms out. "Have your honor guard search me if you wish. The safety of my sources is of utmost importance to me."

I cock my head and study the alpha for a moment. I had guessed him to be in his late twenties, but now, seeing him without the weight of my father's attention bowing my head, I see that he's younger—twenty-six or twenty-seven at the latest. His expression is open, trustworthy.

I cut a quick look at Luca and reach out with my affinity, getting nothing but an alert sort of curiosity off the detective inspector.

"I don't think that will be necessary."

He nods in deference and takes a seat on a crate across from me. "Please, start wherever you wish."

I draw in a deep breath. "I was attacked by the Soldiers of Saint Aldous the day I moved into Fairhaven Academy to start my freshman year. I was caught in an omega trap, and they used a hex known as the Ever Ember hex. We've since found it's used as more than just a weapon, that it originated as the Mark of Baphomet."

He looks up sharply. "How did you find that out?"

I look to Marcus who gives me a quick nod and undoes the few buttons on his Henley, revealing the ember over his heart.

“A lot of research. Marcus, a Fairhaven professor, and a Fairhaven student each have an ember. We found out that a few other students were ‘treated’ for marks, but I believe they were trying to intimidate our head healer, Doctor Mai Huong. An omega. Based on the students who were marked, we now believe it’s being used as a form of initiation into the Soldiers of Saint Aldous.”

“Do you know who those students were?”

“I know three of them. Andrew Radcliffe, Jaime Brentwood, and Kelvin Montrose.”

“Have you had any run-ins with these students?”

I press my lips together and nod. “Radcliffe was among the Soldiers that attacked campus when I was moving in.”

“How do you know it was him? I imagine they were wearing masks as they typically do.”

My shoulders tense. “His scent.”

“That wouldn’t hold up in court, but it’s good enough for me. Please, continue.”

I walk him through the attack, through Rad’s continued attention and Kelvin’s threats. I tell him of Rad’s attempted assault in as much detail as I can bear. I describe what I learned from Jaime and Trinity about Heather Lindstrom, what threats Rad has made to my person in his macabre courting attempts. I tell him of the dance the night before, sticking to what Rad said to me.

I don’t reveal my affinity to the detective inspector, don’t tell him that I had anything to do with Trinity’s change of heart.

Or her suicide.

“My family is looking to forge a business relationship—an alliance of sorts—with Pack Radcliffe and Radcliffe Industries,” I finally say. “I don’t know what my father knows about Andrew Radcliffe, but he has encouraged me to be... friendly with him. A heavy-handed investigation could be

detrimental to that business relationship, hence why I think my father made me lie to you.”

Saints, I wish I knew if I could truly trust this alpha. I’ve probably already said too much if I can’t, but every sense I get from him—both instinctually and from my affinity—tells me he’s trustworthy. Good and honest. Still, I don’t tell him about my locked magic, about the shipping container, or the yet-unknown Project Halcyon.

He taps his pen against the notepad, agitated. “Radcliffe has harassed you this much and nothing has been done about it?”

“Headmaster Langford attempted to expel him. The board overruled him. One of Fairhaven’s senior mage inspectors has questioned me a few times in regards to Radcliffe. He thinks I’m a spiteful, manipulative omega. I think Pack Radcliffe lines his pockets.”

“That’s quite the accusation.”

“Ask for any files on Radcliffe. There won’t be any.”

“I didn’t say that I don’t believe you, Miss Rose. But I don’t think I’ll have the help of local law enforcement as I look into this, which will make this all much more challenging. But I’ve been investigating the Soldiers of Saint Aldous for too long to be dissuaded. Was there anything else?”

I bite my lower lip and finally admit that I think Rad has been following me. “I don’t have proof, but I’ve caught his scent where he shouldn’t be allowed—within the wards of the omega residences at Fairhaven. He... he seems to have an unnatural knowledge of my comings and goings.”

Now he studies me, amber eyes crinkling. “You’re a brave young woman, Miss Rose. I don’t know if I’ll be able to be of service regarding Radcliffe’s personal interest in you—at least not without the support of local law enforcement, which, if you’re correct, we won’t receive. But you have my contact information. If I can be of any assistance, don’t hesitate to use it. Please, if there are any further developments, with the Soldiers or personally with Mr. Radcliffe, get in touch.”

When the Detective Inspector has gone, I fill Luca in on the rest, tears slipping down my cheeks as I describe what happened with Trinity, how I fought with my affinity and ultimately triumphed over Rad's blood magic—only for Trinity to take her own life.

Luca holds me there on the floor of Quill & Clover's stockroom, until Marcus' phone rings.

“Haley,” he answers, then cuts a wide-eyed look my way and mouths two damning words, “Your father.”

“Miss Rose is in her nest,” my honor guard lies. “She must be taking a nap and have missed your call.”

Fuck. I've only been carrying my burner phone lately—the one my father can't track or trace.

“Yes, I'll ensure she's ready and at the academy's front gates by then. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

He hangs up and I think the worst. “He's taking me home?”

Marcus shakes his head. “Dinner with your family, which sounds bad enough. But we're cutting this too close. We need to get back to the cottage.”



DINNER with my family is a tense affair. We're in a private dining room at one of Fairhaven's most upscale restaurants. Our server has assured us that we'll have the utmost privacy, and that we won't be bothered by waitstaff until we summon them.

That gives my father the perfect opportunity to lay into me for the small scrap of truth I told the detective inspector in my first meeting with him.

I bow my head and keep my voice soft, obsequious. “My apologies, Father. I didn't think saying that Trinity acted under duress would be problematic.”



“That’s the problem, daughter. You never think. Your friend was clearly very troubled. Under duress? In what manner?” He shakes his head. “And then there’s the issue of Radcliffe. He says you injured him?”

I rather hope I broke his fucking foot. “Oh, did I hurt him terribly? I was so frightened by that horrific spectacle that I must have jumped.”

My father exhales a low growl and I bare my neck, hoping for, but not expecting, him to believe my lie. “You’ll do better, Juniper. Or you’ll be removed from Fairhaven Academy. There’s already enough pressure for the academy to expel its omega students. You remain there only because I wish to show the world that the Rose family aren’t cowards, that we will not be cowed by vigilantes and terrorists.”

Won’t we?

Even now, my mind reels at just what my father could be working on with Radcliffe Industries.

At what Project Halcyon might be.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 36



I'm woken by a text from an unknown number early the next morning. No text accompanies the photograph, but none is needed. A manilla envelope sits just outside my cottage door, words I can't quite make out scrawled across it in black marker.

Rad.

I hear the shower start down in Marcus' quarters and sneak down the stairs and look out the peephole. There's no one there, but I didn't expect there to be. I get exactly what I expect: the lingering scent of anise and oranges on the spring breeze and a warning across the front of the envelope.

*You will never topple this domino. You will not bring me down.*

I swallow hard and grab the envelope, shut the door and lock it behind me, and dash up to my nest.

I hold the envelope in my shaking hands for a long, tense moment before I rip it open and... and saints, I wish I hadn't opened it at all.

It's stuffed with dozens of photos, each with a message written across the back in that same black marker.

A photo of me kissing Luca in the rain at the Feast of Marmora. *Behavior unbecoming of your status.*

Luca standing between my legs on our bridge, tattooed hands wrapped around my thighs. *You were supposed to remain pure for me.*

Jaime Brentwood kneeling at my feet, anguish on his face. *Traitors must be punished.*

Simon almost kissing me in the old temple ruins. *You will not consort with bastard betas.*

Me, in my nest, Luca between my thighs through the distorted glass of my window. *You will be brought to heel.*

Me, stealing into Quill & Clover just yesterday. *I'll hurt the ones you love, if that's what it takes.*

Graeme Miller, slipping into Quill & Clover behind me. *I told you to obey.*

Me and Marcus, ducking back into my cottage after sneaking out. *Tell no one.*

Like it always has with my father, so it goes with Andrew Radcliffe.

The “or else” goes unspoken, unwritten.

A text message pings through on my phone, another photograph of me through the window, in my nest, holding the envelope in my shaking hands.

I dash to the window and draw the shade.

Saints, of all places, I should be safe in my own nest on the cottage's second story, behind the most powerful wards on campus.

Another text follows. <<*Will you obey, beloved?*>>

I shove the photographs back into the envelope and bury them beneath the mattress of my nest. I pace the length of my room, my phone in my hands.

I tap out a shaky <<*Yes.*>> and hit send, my world crashing down around me.



I DON'T TELL Marcus about the packet of photos Rad left on our doorstep. I delete all of Rad's messages off my phone, and

I go about my day as I must: as though nothing has changed.

But everything has.

Like Cassian knew what leverage to apply to get Luca to do what he wanted, Rad knows what leverage to apply to me. He'll hurt Luca. He'll hurt Simon. Even Marcus.

And it will destroy me.

So I tell no one. Not Marcus when we walk out of the cottage together, not Luca when he meets us at the edge of the omega residences.

I don't tell Ian when we meet for our evening lesson.

"You've grown so much stronger in your affinity," he notes, as I set our two coffees down. "I recognize that I haven't taught you much—that you've learned it all on your own, but I don't think you require my assistance any longer. In fact, I believe we should discontinue these additional lessons. You're already well ahead of your peers."

I nearly knock my coffee over in surprise. "There were other lessons on the curriculum you came up with. You said you'd help me learn to escape omega traps. What... what changed?"

He looks up at me, but doesn't meet my eyes, his own downcast. Even his scent is subdued, and it doesn't take long for me to realize why.

"Don't say it," I manage, a knot burning in my throat. "I thought things changed after the Feast of Lunaria. You... Ian, you *purred* for me. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"It means everything to me," he says quietly, resigned. "But Professor Cadigan is right. My behavior toward you has been... unseemly. I am taking advantage of my position and \_\_\_"

My own emotions rise and that's when I feel his. Not regret. Not even love.

Ian Reinhardt is terrified. Fear sits like ice in his belly. It drowns out every other instinct, every other thought.

“I never took you for a coward,” I manage, loss hollowing me out, leaving me raw once more.

He only sighs at that. He doesn’t fight me. He doesn’t argue. “Then you don’t know me half as well as you think you do.”

“I suppose I don’t.”

I’m at the door when he speaks again. “Submit a formal application for the assistantship to help me with my research. It will be... painful at first. I have been unscrupulous in my treatment of you, but I will refrain. You deserve the opportunities the role could open up for you.”

“I don’t know if I even want it anymore.” Saints, I refuse to cry in front of this alpha. Not again. Not this time.

“You’re too smart to let your emotions get in the way of your ambitions, your studies.”

I meet his solemn blue eyes. “If that’s what you think, then *you* don’t know *me* half as well as you think you do. Good night. Professor.”



I WITHDRAW AFTER THAT.

I pull away from everyone that Rad could hurt. From Luca, from Alyssa. I withdraw from the world into the sullied safety of my little cottage, and there, I withdraw from Marcus.

But for one meeting with Luca at the bridge, I only leave my cottage for classes and meals—and I skip enough of those to worry Marcus.

I meet Luca at our bridge, and I want to run into his arms. I want to cross the wards and let him hold me, let him kiss me and banish all my fears.

But I can’t.

Even now, Rad could be watching.

Listening.

I keep my head down so Luca won't see my tears. I tell him I need time after the Lunar Ball, but when I'm about to leave, I pass a note through the wards.

Short and to the point.

*Please, for the love of the saints, you have to stop spying. I can't tell you why.*

*Please, Luca.*

*I love you, always.*

I love him, but I walk away from him, back down the path away from our bridge, from the spot where we first watched the stars together. Marcus is silent when I meet him at the bench just off the path, and for once, I don't try to fill the silence.

I let it hang between us. That cracking chasm that I once feared, could just be what saves Marcus Haley's life.

But Marcus Haley has never left well enough alone. Because Marcus Haley still somehow believes the world can be good and just. Because Marcus Haley will do the right thing and report Andrew Radcliffe.

As soon as we're back in the cottage, he corners me before I can escape to my nest once more.

"What's gotten into you?" he demands.

I look up at him dully. "I don't know what you mean."

"Bullshit," he says, but he doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't have to. His accusation stings, but he's not wrong.

"I just want time to myself."

"Something's going on," he says, his voice low, not quite a growl. "If you don't tell me what it is, I can't protect you from it."

I look in his eyes and lie right to his face. "There's nothing wrong," I say. "I'm fine."



BUT NONE of us are truly fine.

Bitsy, Ellie, and I all saw Trinity Wells kill herself.

Our Omega Seminar is somber.

Leigh opens our session with a helpless shake of her head. “Nothing I teach you matters. It won’t save you from an alpha who wants to hurt you. From a world that wants to hurt you. I believed you would be safe in packs. I believed you would be safe if you behaved. And I was wrong.”

Her tears spill, tracking watery brown-black mascara down her cheeks. And then she weeps in earnest, her cries as broken and bitter as we all feel.

It’s Bitsy who takes the empty seat beside her, wrapping our Omega Seminar teacher in a tight hug. She lets Leigh sob until the older omega quiets and then says, “Everything you teach us is valuable, even if we don’t want to learn it. Will you teach us something tonight?”

Leigh looks down at Bitsy through watery eyes. “What is it you want to know, Miss Jordan?”

“Teach us how to make chocolate soufflé?”

“That’ll take all night. And I’m certain some of you aren’t up to the task.”

Bitsy quirks a brow in my direction. “Then some of us can watch and enjoy the fruits of everyone else’s labors. Please, Mrs. Parsons? I think we could all go for your chocolate soufflé right about now.”

“Yes, all right, dear. Let’s get started, then.”



THE KNOCK at the door comes halfway through our session and we all exchange frightened but curious looks. In all of our

sessions, no one's ever knocked at the door before. Like our cottages, the omega lodge has been a safe space just for us omegas.

“Juniper!” Marcus shouts, banging on the door again.

I go to head toward the door, but Leigh puts herself in front of.

She opens the door, her scribe raised, but it's only Marcus on the other side of the door.

A manilla folder in one hand.



LEIGH EXCUSES me and Marcus all but drags me back to our cottage, fury radiating off of him. I don't need an affinity to know what he's found, to know his thoughts.

Saints, I've never seen him like this.

I've never been afraid of him before.

He locks the door to the cottage behind us and I dash up the stairs to find my nest in utter disarray.

Nesting materials have been thrown about, pillows are out of their cases, the duvet out of its cover. The mattress sags against one of the walls.

Marcus isn't the only one who's furious.

“How *dare* you invade my private space! An omega's nest is sacred.”

“You don't get to turn this around on me, Juniper. You hid something from me.”

I shove past him, and he lets me go. I right the mattress, struggling with the large, unwieldy bulk of it, but every time Marcus tries to help, I whirl on him with a glare. He's the one that destroyed the perfect order of my nest. My safe space to retreat to when my enemies are at my door.

“Who did you tell?” I demand, my voice deadly quiet.



“The headmaster and the authorities.”

“You told the fucking police? Do you have *any* idea what he’ll do now, Marcus? Any fucking clue? This is why I didn’t tell you!”

“I can’t protect you if you don’t talk to me. If you keep things from me.”

I finally shove the mattress back into place and grab a clean sheet from my closet, shouldering past my honor guard once more. “You’ve damned me and maybe even yourself. He will find out and he *will* retaliate. Against you, against Luca or Simon. Against me. Saints damn it, I would have *behaved*. Obeyed him until he graduated, moved on, and forgot all about me. But you had to intervene, didn’t you?”

“That alpha will never forget about you, Juniper,” he growls and for the first time ever, he intimidates me enough that I bare my neck, letting out a pathetic whine. “You’ll only be safe from him if he’s behind bars or under the fucking ground!”

I turn on him, tossing one of my pillows aside. “You made sure of that. You didn’t even talk to me before you went to the headmaster. To the police.”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t want me to.”

“And yet you did anyway. I trusted you, yet you never trusted me. It didn’t even occur to you that I might know what I’m doing.” I shake my head. “That I’ve been playing this game of alpha/omega bullshit for years. But Rad will be coming after me now, harder than ever.”

I look up at him and all I feel is disgust.

Because Marcus Haley did exactly what I knew he would in the name of my protection.

He did the right thing in a world where that’s seldom rewarded.

My magic flares inside me, my affinity pulsing through my veins, making me feel electric. Dangerous.

“Get out of my fucking nest,” I order, my voice low.

And with trepidation in his river-rock eyes, he does.



“PROFESSORS REINHARDT, Hayes, and Spencer have all asked you to put forward assistantship applications,” Cassian says, but his dark whisky-quartz eyes search mine. Finally, he sighs. “Juniper, we need to talk. Not about your assistantship.”

“I don’t know how you know about Rad, Cassian, but I don’t want to talk about it. In fact—” I cast my eyes around our study room and press my lips together in a frown “—I can’t.”

“You think he’s listening?”

I look up and meet Cassian’s worried gaze, hope he reads the truth in my eyes. “I think I need to behave. Obey. Please, can we talk about the assistantships?”

Cassian sighs and I can tell he wants to press me, to get me to admit just how afraid I am of Andrew Radcliffe.

But Cassian can’t come to my rescue. No amount of wealth or power will get Andrew Radcliffe to back down. This is something I’ll have to figure out myself.

I’m sick with my fear. It draws cold sweat out along the back of my neck, makes my gut roil with nausea.

Who will Rad hurt to get to me? How will he punish me for meeting with the detective inspector, for Marcus going to the headmaster and law enforcement about the photographs?

“Reinhardt and Spencer are both seeking research assistants. Both are challenging instructors who will hold you to the highest level of excellence. For your ambitions, an assistantship with Reinhardt will probably serve you better, though your research into the ember will, of course, be confidential.” Cassian flexes his shoulder with a wince, and I wonder if his ember keeps him up at night like it sometimes does for Marcus.

If Simon is there to soothe him, hold him through the worst of the pain and fear.

And if I'm there to comfort Marcus, making him tea and reading aloud to him, and Simon is there to soothe Cassian, who's there for Ian?

Selfishly, I want to be the one who's there for him, the sweet omega to his wounded alpha.

I don't want to be his assistant. I want to be his omega, even with how furious I am at him right now.

"Professor Hayes is looking for a teaching assistant. You would be working on grading and support the development of lesson plans. If you have any interest in teaching, I encourage you to apply. Of course, if you were to pursue an assistantship *next* year, Professor Cadigan almost always takes on a teaching assistant. Reinhardt was his TA years ago. It's a prestigious and competitive position that will set you up for future success. All three of the assistantships you're up for this year will position you well for another assistantship your junior year, if you do want to compete for Cadigan's TA position."

I already know I don't. Cadigan has always rubbed me a bit wrong. I know it's the peak of immaturity to dislike a man just because he doesn't think Ian should consort with me, but it's colored me against the older professor all the same.

"If you want to pursue teaching, Hayes' assistantship would be a good place to start."

I remember Professor Hayes' words from the Lunar Ball with a smile. *Your daughter is quite the academic, Mr. Rose. She'd be a talented scholar.*

My father's response that felt like swallowing glass.

*That's up to her future alphas to decide.*

"I'll apply for all three," I say, my voice weak. The perfect frail, obedient omega. "To better my chances."

Cassian nods and I know he senses the discord in my heart, the battle between who I want to be and who I'm made to be.

How very tiny I feel.

That I won't take an assistantship if Rad forbids it, if he threatens the men I love or any one of my friends.

Saints, how did it come to this?

How has Andrew Radcliffe made me so small?

"One more thing," Cassian says. "You're meeting with Simon at Ciel tomorrow?"

I shake my head. "No. Please tell him I won't be able to meet him. I... I no longer have any interest in speaking with him."

"Junes," Cassian protests, his voice broken.

"I have to," I murmur. "Tell him I'm sorry and give him this."

I slide the folded piece of paper across the table to Cassian, my note to Simon shorter than my note to Luca.

*Project Halcyon?*

*I love you.*

*I'm sorry.*



IAN IS WAITING outside the study room when I finish Peer Advising, and grabs me the moment I leave the room, his hand banded around my upper arm, restraining his alpha power just enough not to hurt me.

Marcus growls out a warning, but Ian ignores him as he guides me down the stairs to his basement office.

He goes to yank the door shut, but my honor guard gets his foot in the door before Ian can shut it, uttering a low warning. "Put a locked door in between me and my charge and see what happens."

"I need to speak with her in private, Haley."

“It’s all right, Marcus. Professor Reinhardt will refrain from any *unseemly* behavior,” I say, my voice hard and cold. “Please, close the door and make sure we’re not disturbed. I can assure you, we won’t be long.”

“You have five minutes,” Marcus warns me, “before I break down this door.” He closes the door behind him, and I turn on Ian.

“I thought you were trying to refrain from untoward behavior? Ambushing me and dragging me to your office so we can talk doesn’t feel untoward to you?” I arch a brow.

“Sit down, Juniper,” he growls, a warning in his voice.

I sit but glare up at him. “What is it, Professor?”

“Andrew Radcliffe is fucking *stalking* you and you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” I say lightly. “My private life doesn’t concern you. After all, you’re *not* my alpha. You’ve made it quite clear that you don’t want that kind of relationship with me.”

“You think I don’t fucking want you? Don’t want to protect you, to hold you so tight you’ll never feel unsafe again? To make you laugh until the pinch between your brows vanishes and then catch every laugh with a kiss? I want you in every fucking way imaginable. I want to bite you, to mate you, to be your *pack*. But I can’t have you. Not while you’re my student.”

My heart stutters in my chest, but I can’t back down. I won’t let him see how badly I want everything he just said we can’t have together. “And that, sir, makes you not my alpha. As I said. I’ll have my assistantship application on your desk next Monday. Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

He looms over me, but I stand, going toe to toe with him. Of all the alphas, I will *not* let this one intimidate me. Not when I know he’s so filled with fear.

Not when I know just how much he actually loves me.

I've only just left his office when my phone chimes with a text message from Rad.

<<*I warned you, witch.*>>

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 37



I was all bravado with Ian, but all of that fleeting courage floods from me the moment I return to my cottage to find its door hanging off the hinges, clearly blasted open by some kind of hex. What's left of the wards glimmer faintly in the corners of the doorway.

Marcus lets out a growl and steps in front of me, blocking me from the cottage.

"Saints above," he mutters, punching a number into his phone. "Connor? I need you to sweep Juniper's cottage while I stay with her. I can't let her remain outside alone. The cottage may be unsafe for her to enter. Someone broke through the wards."

Not someone. Andrew Radcliffe.

Connor arrives quickly and lets out a low whistle when he sees the purple-black mark of the hex on my door. "Shit, man. You weren't kidding. Hang tight, Junie. I'll see what's up."

Once Connor has gingerly stepped over the threshold, I finally let out my whimper of fear. It was one thing for Rad to get inside the wards of the omega residences, another for him to take pictures of me through the windows, but it's something entirely else for him to have been in my cottage.

And it couldn't have been anyone else.

"Rad," I mumble. "He did this."

Marcus lets out a wound groan. "Because I got him investigated. Fuck, Juniper. You were right. You were fucking

right, and I brought this down on you. But he can't get away with this any longer."

I go into his arms, nuzzling into the cream wool of his sweater. It's been so long since I've been in his arms, and he tenses before relaxing into my embrace. I shake my head. "This has been a long time coming."

Connor finally gives us the all-clear with a sympathetic grimace. "It's safe. No magic, nothing harmful. But it's destroyed. Be careful. There's glass everywhere."

Marcus still insists on entering our cottage before me, giving it a quick sweep as I take in the damage. The chaos.

All of the framed photos have been thrown from the mantle, the glass broken to shards around the fireplace. My favorite throw is shredded on our couch, the couch's stuffing bursting out from rips in the upholstery.

Mugs have been smashed and my electric kettle destroyed.

It's all just stuff until I see the torn covers of Marcus' favorite detective novels lying around in the devastation. I whimper again, stooping among the pages, trying to collect them back together, but then I hear Marcus' growl from my nest, and dash up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Devastation isn't enough to describe the ruin of my nest.

All of my nesting materials have been ripped, large gashes cut into the mattress. Cotton filling and feathers blanket the floor of my nest like snow, but it's not the nest that makes me cry out in anguish.

It's the smashed pinboard and all of my torn pictures. Pictures of our little omega girl gang getting up to no good, of Simon and me from the scavenger hunt, of Luca from all around campus and Deer Island. All torn to pieces.

Marcus nudges my shoulder and nods to the wall.

I don't know if the message was written in paint or in blood, but it chills me to my very core all the same.

*I told you to obey. I am done being lenient.*





I HAVE NOWHERE to go but into the safety of Luca's arms. His dorm room is the closest thing I have to a nest now, though I hate being under the same roof as Andrew Radcliffe.

But where else would I turn? My most sacred space, the one space in the entire world where I felt the safest, has been violated beyond belief.

Luca gathers me into his arms, and I sob. I weep until I'm hollowed out, until all the pain is purged from my body, and I'm left numb once more. But in that numbness, there's still fear, the paralyzing poison that keeps me bound up in Luca's arms when I should be out there bringing Andrew Radcliffe to his fucking knees.

I'm too much of a coward.

A weak, pathetic omega, stupid and naive.

Leigh was right when she said none of us are special, that we won't be the ones to break free and find packs that cherish us. And Aspen, he was right when he said I'd serve our family on my back. More likely, it'll be on my hands and knees, quivering and presenting my sex to that vile fucking bastard like a good little omega.

Because that's what Rad wants. He wants me dominated and defiled. He wants to hurt me, make me bleed and bruise.

Like Leigh said, I won't be the exception.

Not even with magic as strong as mine.

Not even with an affinity.

I'm just a vessel for alphas to pour their anger into. Hollow and empty.

Barely a person. Little more than a rich pack's plaything.

But Claire was right: alphas like Aspen and Rad don't share. I won't have the pack of my dreams; I won't have a pack at all. I'll have nowhere to find relief from Rad's cruelty.

“I’m scared,” I finally whisper to Luca when my fear overpowers the numbness.

He kisses my forehead, takes my hands in his, and kisses the scars that encircle my wrist, both old and new. He doesn’t tell me everything will be okay, because neither of us could know that—and neither of us believe it.

When long hours have passed, dawn sending streaks of light into the twilight sky, and I’m still anxious and trembling in his arms, Luca leaves me just long enough to pull Marcus into the room and then into the bed on my other side.

For just a few hours, I pretend. I tangle with Luca, Marcus at my back, and I pretend that I’ll get the pack of my dreams. That Marcus isn’t immune to me and can be my alpha just as much as Luca can. That I’ll always be surrounded by wine and winter wind.

That we curl together not out of fear, but out of love.



I WAKE to pounding at Luca’s door. Marcus is up in an instant, scribe raised.

“Juniper! Junes, it’s Simon. He’s gone!” Cassian shouts through the door, and I fling myself out of bed and in front of Marcus, dashing to pull the door open.

Marcus growls at my recklessness but when Cassian crashes into Luca’s dorm room, that’s all forgotten.

Because Cassian is in agony. Chest heaving, he clutches at his head and rasps out just two words.

“Our bond.”

Saints above, Simon is suffering, and Cassian is feeling every agonizing second of it through his mating bond.

My phone rings from the bed and Luca snatches it up. “Unknown number?”

I grab the phone and swipe it open.

Screams pour through the tiny speakers. “Juniper! No!” Simon howls with pain. “Don’t listen to him!”

Rad’s voice cuts in, as calm as if the beta I love wasn’t screaming in the background behind him. “I warned you I was done being lenient, beloved.”

The call cuts off and my world upends.

Cassian lets out a ragged cry and falls to the ground, clutching his heart.

“I heard chimes,” Luca says. “Saints! Rad has him in the old temple!”

I grab my scribe off Luca’s desk, but Marcus grabs me by the shoulder, making me stumble backwards.

He turns me and I look up into his eyes, fire in my own. “Don’t make me stun you,” I beg.

“You’re running straight into danger,” he growls. “You have no idea what you’re running into. He could have dozens of Soldiers waiting for you.”

“It’s just Rad. This is personal. This is about *me*.” Somehow I know that this fight is between me and the alpha alone, that he’s taken Simon to make me behave, just as he threatened to. “You have to let me go to him. If you trust me in nothing else, trust me in this. Go. Get Doc and Ian and meet us at the old temple. Please, Marcus. Please help me save the man I love.”

Marcus searches my eyes and understands what I’ve left unsaid. That this battle against Rad is mine and mine alone—and that not fighting it has broken me. That now I will fight with every ounce of courage and strength I can muster.

For Simon.

“I’m coming with you,” Cassian growls out, though his eyes squeeze shut tight in agony. He clutches his scribe tightly in one hand, knuckles white. Saints, I can’t imagine what he must be feeling, how powerful the bond must be between them.

“Comfort him,” I plead. “Send him your love. And get ready to fight for him.”

“To the death if I have to,” he swears.

And we run.



TRIPPING OVER ROOTS, spring's first leaves throwing dappled sun over the old forest floor, we race through the woods toward the old temple.

Saints, the chimes. I hadn't even heard them. No one but an alpha could have.

And no one but Luca would have recognized them. I squeeze his hand as we run, hand in hand, pushing each other faster and faster.

I whip my head back to see Cassian lagging and I grab his hand, too.

“All of your love, Cass. And all of mine,” I pant out. I don't know how a mating bond really feels, if it's thoughts or emotions or both, how it's different from my affinity, but I have to hope Simon can be comforted through the bond, that Cassian can rescue him from the pain of it, if only for a moment. “Tell him we're coming for him.”

When a scream cuts through the quiet woods, Cassian drops my hand and sprints forward, disappearing into the old stone temple.

Luca and I crash into the temple behind him, only to find him stunned in place. I turn to Luca, ready with a warning at the tip of my tongue, only to find him stunned as well. I grip my scribe tighter and whirl on Rad.

On Simon, who's bound to the temple's altar, an ember burning just above his heart.

“No!” I cry out, dashing forward.

Straight into the purple-black thorns of an omega trap. It drags me down to the stone floor, briars tangling around my wrists, my hips.

I don't even feel them.

Simon thrashes on the altar. "Junes, go! Get out of here!" he grits out, not knowing I'm already trapped.

Helpless.

"What do you want, Rad? I'll do anything! What will it take for you to release him?"

The alpha stands over Simon, manipulating the ember with his scribe, driving it through layers of flesh before drawing it back out. All without any emotion on his face whatsoever.

I can't help my low whine because I know what the ember does. That it could kill Simon at any moment, and forever torture him if he lives.

At my whine, Rad turns and it's then that his eyes light.

It's as I struggle against the omega trap's thorns, trying to free my wrist enough to cast the inverse of the trap's wicked sigils, that a beaming smile splits his face, so close to Baphomet's vicious grin on the Soldiers' wicked masks.

"What it will take, beloved, is my bite on your neck."

My blood ices in my veins, even as it streams from the thorn-prick cuts that wrap around my wrists, even as it makes my fingers slip around my scribe.

It falls to the ground with a metallic chime, just like the chimes that tinkle in the light spring breeze.

And I'm truly trapped. Trapped with no recourse.

"He's lying, Juniper," Simon pants, drawing Rad's attention once more.

"Why must you all misbehave?" He flicks his scribe, and the ember sinks into Simon's chest, burning through his flesh. Simon lets out an agonized scream.

"Much better," Rad murmurs as he stalks toward me.

I rip my wrist against the stinging thorns, tearing my flesh just as Simon's burns. I can think of only one way to escape, and it's a long shot. But if blood magic is as powerful as Rad swears it is...

With shaking, bloodied fingers, I draw the first of the inverse sigils on the temple's floor. I have to keep Rad talking. I have to escape, have to save Simon. Just six more sigils.

"Tell me how I'll behave," I gasp out, tracing the second sigil.

Rad looks over his shoulder at Simon, drawing the ember back out of his chest.

"Tell him you're done."

"I already did." I swipe my blood through the angles of the third sigil.

"Then why was he sleeping outside Anders' room, curled up with his faggot alpha?"

Saints, he was? They were?

"I don't know," I admit, truthfully.

Rad shrugs. "He'll be no issue soon. You'll give up your hood rat alpha toy, too," he says, looking over at Luca, disgust twisting his features.

"Yes," I promise, drawing the fourth sigil. Only three more. "What else?"

"You'll be mine and mine alone."

"Yes, alpha." Five sigils drawn.

"You'll behave exactly as my omega should. Proper. Meek. You will always obey me."

I duck my head, trying to appear penitent as I check my sigils. Saints, let this work. Let blood magic free me from Rad's trap.

"Yes, alpha. I'll obey," I say, even as I draw the sixth sigil.

I don't have to ask him how else he expects me to behave. His thoughts burst out of him, striking me like a whip. He

wants me on my knees. He wants me bloody. He wants my head bowed as I offer myself up to him. He wants me to present the only part of me worth a saint's damned thing.

And then he wants to destroy me.

I fight, thrashing against the thorny vines of the trap, wincing as they bite deeper into my hips. Fuck, I can't let his thoughts distract me.

I force a tremble as he stalks closer, and when he's finally looming over me, I draw the last sigil in my streaming blood, slam my palm down on the ground as hard as I can and shout out the word of power to release the spell.

“Dimittiere!”

The thorns burn away, releasing my hands and hips just in time for me to punch upward with all my might. I connect with his chin, hitting him hard enough—or surprising him enough—to knock him backwards.

He swings at me with a roar, rage pouring off of him.

His punch connects, cracking into my cheek and my head swims with the force, but I'm running on instinct now. I summon all of my magic, every scrap of power I can, and drive my affinity into his mind.

He crumples to the ground with a wail of pain, and I *see* my affinity for the first time, my magic like daggers stabbing into his skull, each piercing stab into his mind, like the thorns of his omega trap dug into my flesh. Tears stream down his reddened cheeks, his face a contortion of pain and fury.

I push my will into him, needing to know his plans. Needing to know how he got through the wards.

It all comes back to Radcliffe Industries.

He followed me using wearable magic tech that let him vanish into thin air, an invisibility spell so powerful, most mages can't detect the magical signature of it. So powerful it's invisible to even the strongest magical warding—like the warding around the omega residences. But he wasn't alone in breaking through the wards. Not the first time. Before he had

the tech, a shadowy figure helped dispel them, helped break open the safest spot on campus to sneak him into it.

“Who?” I demand.

I drive my magic into him, letting my fury loose, but his thoughts shift as he whimpers beneath me.

He’s terrified of me. Of my magic. I truly am the witch he thinks I am, a devil-sent temptress with dark magic beyond his wildest imaginings.

But he will destroy me.

*You’ll be one more dead omega.*

He knows about the shipping container—that it wasn’t the first and won’t be the last.

That Rose Pharmaceuticals will find the right cocktail of chemicals to pump into omegas to make us docile. That the blood magic the Soldiers of Saint Aldous use is just the beginning.

That every omega is a test subject.

Images flash through his mind, warehouses turned into clandestine medical facilities, hundreds of omegas crowded into each.

How they rave and howl and struggle, just as I did when my father tried to lock my magic.

Soon, soon omegas will have no magic, no will.

*No trouble at all.*

“How?” I demand. “How are you doing this? Where is this happening?”

He snaps, thoughts collapsing in his head until images flash by, too fast to be seen. He sinks deep into the pain I’m inflicting, but he struggles, too, as blood pours from his nose.

“I’ll kill you, whore!” he snarls. “Do worse to you than I did to her!”

I recognize Heather’s picture from the obituary, but for the first time I see her as he did. Saints above, she was



unrecognizable when he finished with her, her face destroyed by fists and hexes. Her body broken. But he didn't push her. She teetered along a cliff's edge, waves crashing against the rocks below, and she reached for him.

She begged for her life, clutching a broken arm against her body, a twisted ankle making her footing uneven. Waves roared beneath her while a storm surged above her.

He could feel the spray of the sea on his face, how it cooled his rage into something... Something quieter. Not regret. Not even satisfaction.

Rightness.

At the first flash of lightning overhead, she fell.

Crashed to the rocks just as thunder cracked overhead.

He didn't push her. She fell.

*It was a tragic accident.*

My intention snaps, the last daggers of my magic spearing into him. I sway on my feet, just as Heather swayed, just as Rad staggers to his feet.

“You'll regret this, witch!”

I catch just one final thought before my affinity falters, one refrain that surfaces above his fear.

*Halcyon will not spare you.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 38



I snatch up my scribe, fight my way to my feet and cast the strongest stunning spell I can imagine. My magic fails me, completely spent, nothing left within me to call. Simon lets out a scream and I race to his side. When I turn back to Rad, it's just in time to see him vanish, an invisibility spell closing in around him.

Footsteps clatter into the temple as my fingers fumble around my scribe, trying to undo Simon's bindings. When I can't even manage that, I try to call my magic, to draw up the simplest strength sigil I can: the one Ian cast to save Cassian and Marcus, but no magic comes.

Charged alpha scents fill the air: bergamot and cedar, winter wind and pine and a new scent mixing with them: Earl Grey and rainy afternoons.

As soon as the stunning spell on him has been nullified, Cassian stumbles forward and runs to Simon's side. He turns to Ian, panic in his eyes, but my imperious professor only nods as he goes to Simon, as he painstakingly draws the ember from my beta's flesh into his own.

And then he staggers towards me and I'm in his arms, breathing in the spice of his cedar scent. "You cast a spell to break out of an omega trap with your own fucking blood," he mutters. "I don't know if you're brilliant or insane, but you saved Simon's life."

I look up from Ian's arms and meet Cassian's gaze. There's a sheen of tears in his dark eyes, but relief is clear in his slack

jaw, the way he holds Simon's hands in his as Doc examines the beta.

"Thank you," he mouths, as though this whole thing wasn't my fault.

"I can't... I can't cast," I gasp, and then feel Ian's fingers along my spine, the warmth of his touch through Luca's borrowed tee shirt.

"You're tapped out, my darling. You used everything you had within you, but it'll come back with rest."

I slump against him, feeling empty, yet heavy, my body a weight too great to hold up.

"Radcliffe got away," Royal Detective Inspector Miller mutters and I realize Marcus must have called him. My honor guard, always trying to do the right and just thing. "I followed his trail, but he's clever. I lost it just a few steps into the woods. We could do a searching spell, even get a K-9 unit out here, but I fear it'd already be too late."

"He's using magic tech," I say, not moving from Ian's arms. Not yet. "It renders him invisible and allows him to bypass the warding. He had help entering the wards around the omega residences at least once, but since then, I believe it's been the tech. As if someone programmed the wards to look past it."

"That's a bold claim, Juniper," Ian says quietly, stroking my hair. "Only three mages have access to those warding spells, and two of them are right here with you."

Which only leaves Professor Cadigan.

"It could have been done under duress. Or someone outside Fairhaven was able to crack them." I drop my voice low enough that only he'll hear the rest. "He had help, I just couldn't see who."

Ian nods against me and gives me one last squeeze before finally passing me over to Luca, who drags my scent into his lungs in grateful gasps. "I was useless in that fight, princess, I'm so sorry."

I nuzzle against his chest, letting ripe cherries and red wine wash over me. “You heard the chimes. You knew this place existed. I just hate that he did, too.”

“You’re hurt,” he whispers, his voice hoarse, scent spiking in the small temple. “Saints above, that piece of shit *hit* you.”

“He wanted to do worse. I’m just... I’m just so tired.”

I swoon and my alpha lifts me into his arms, looping one of my arms around his neck. He cradles me close, tattooed hands wrapping around my shoulder and knee, and I feel so small. So precious to him.

“Let’s get them both to the infirmary,” Doc murmurs quietly and Cassian lets out a low growl when Ian and Marcus approach Simon. He accepts help from no one, drawing an unconscious Simon up into his arms, as careful as possible, like our sweet beta might break.



I WAKE in the infirmary’s too-familiar nest sometime in the middle of the night, a clean beta scent and the sweet smell of summer sunshine shot through with traces of salty sea air in my nose.

And just like I did when I awoke after Ian unlocked my magic, I can’t help but think that the alpha and beta beside me smell like pack. I thank Doc for doing us all the kindness of letting us rest and recover together, as there’s no way I’d be anywhere but by Simon’s side when I woke anyway. That we’re all cuddled together in a nest feels far too right, but I’m so relieved to see Simon sleeping beside me that I don’t question it.

“You’re awake,” Cassian rumbles—no, not rumbles. He’s purring for the beta curled between us.

I nod, my throat burning around a knot of emotion so tender it renders me speechless for a moment.

But Cassian doesn’t seem to mind the silence, doesn’t mind letting his deep purr fill the space between us as he holds

the beta closely but carefully to his body.

“How is he?”

“Healing. Reinhardt took his ember back in the temple, but his flesh still needs time to heal.”

“He’ll be okay?”

Cassian swallows hard and nods. “With time.”

“And sleep if you two’d shut the fuck up,” our beta mutters between us, wincing as he shifts in Cassian’s arms so he can meet my gaze.

Tears well in my eyes and I reach out to gently stroke his cheek.

“I’m so sorry,” Cassian and I both say at once.

“Alpha,” Simon says, craning his neck to look in Cassian’s eyes. “Shut up.” He turns back to me, letting out a grimace of pain. “And you, tell me you’re okay.”

“You’re so bossy,” Cassian mutters, but he presses a kiss to Simon’s shoulder and the beta preens with the sweet attention.

“Junes likes it,” Simon yawns, and if he hadn’t nearly been killed, I might have poked him in the ribs for that.

“Just a black eye,” I promise. A black eye that’s practically healed after Doc’s attentions while I slept. “Is the pain terribly bad?”

Simon winces and nods. “Doc gave me the good spells, but I won’t be waltzing out of here in the middle of the night like someone I know did. You could have at least let her know you were okay, you grump.”

Cassian ducks his head, but he can’t help his smile, even as Simon chides him.

“Grumpily guilty as charged.”

Saints, Cassian is so *sweet* with Simon. I thought I was meant to be with Cassian, but I see now that Simon was. And Cassian with Simon. Pain hardened Cassian, but Simon softens it with little jabs of his bony elbows and bossy orders.

When Cassian left the infirmary after his own run-in with the Ever Ember, he wasn't running from me: he was going home, into Simon's arms.

"Shut up, Junes," Simon says.

"I didn't say anything!" I protest.

"You're thinking *very* loudly. Kiss me good night and then nap with me. All right? You need your beauty rest after that shiner Rad gave you."

I laugh for the first time in what feels like ages and lean forward just enough to brush my lips against his. My eyes dart from his to Cassian's, but the alpha only smiles a serene smile, draws a blanket up over the three of us, and cuddles Simon closer.

Simon falls back asleep, but Cassian and I lay awake long after.

"What happens now?"

Cassian meets my gaze in the dark, his eyes catching the moonlight that streams in through the high windows of the nest. "Whatever he wants. Whatever you want."

"Him," I murmur. "I want him."

"You don't care that he's—we're—not... straight?"

Now I want to jab him in the ribs, but the smarting pain in my wrist from the omega trap's thorns and the beta sleeping between us stops me. I wince but shake my head. "Why should I? You make each other happy. I see that now."

"I'm not giving him up."

"I wouldn't respect you if you did. And I wouldn't love him like I do if he didn't fight for you just as hard as I think you'd fight for him."

Cassian nods in the dark. "I'll tell you everything when he's awake to tell me how I'm getting the story all wrong, all right? But until then?"

"Yeah?"

Cassian smiles a wry smile that makes his eyes twinkle in the moonlight. “Get your beauty rest, Junes.”

And I do, falling asleep with a smile on my face.



WE WAKE to an incredibly noisy infirmary, Marcus standing before the nest’s door with his arms crossed. Just like the first time I stayed in the infirmary, he’s shoved one of the narrow hospital beds across the doorway to block anyone from entering.

“He’s my brother, Marcus, and he was fucking *tortured*. Don’t make me hex you, because I will. You’re too noble to hex first. I’m not.”

“Oh my god, Belly,” Simon croaks.

Cassian holds a glass of water to his cracked lips and helps him drink. “Just let her come in so we can get it over with. You know how she gets. Junes and I aren’t the only ones who love you. And we’re the least scary. So, can she come in before she hexes Haley?”

Simon darts a look over at me and my cheeks heat. I’ve known in my heart that I love him for months, but after the secret he kept from me, after everything that’s just happened—we haven’t said the words yet.

“You’re telling me a thousand times once Ellie’s gone,” Simon tells me, my sweet, bossy beta who has so much sunshine in his heart.

“Maybe a hundred,” I tease.

“Kit-kat, I am in the infirmary and very gravely injured. A thousand times.”

I frown at that, because it’s my fault he’s here, that he *is* gravely injured. If Rad hadn’t wanted to hurt me, he never would have taken Simon, never would have hurt him.

“We’re going to talk about that frown of yours, because I know what it means. I’ll even make Cassian be the bad guy, if

that's what it takes to make you understand."

"Literally never has before," Cassian mutters. "Marcus, please let Ellie in."

I ease out of Simon's arms and drop a kiss on his forehead. "I'll be back in a few. Enjoy your time with your sister."

I pass Ellie as I leave and she enters, and she pulls me into a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry, Ellie."

She nods stiffly against me and snuffles before releasing me, holding me at arm's length. "Be sorry it happened, not sorry because you think it's your fault. That sadistic bastard could have targeted any of us. You were the only one brave enough to stand up to him. Now, go. Your men are waiting for you."

At my arched brow, she rolls her eyes. "If you think Professor White Chocolate Mocha has been anywhere but right here for the past twenty-four hours, you're more of a dummy than I thought you were. And duh, Luca's been here. But that goes without saying."

I dash through the infirmary doors and right into Luca's arms. He holds me gingerly, trying to avoid the bandages around my hips, but still manages to swing me around until I'm dizzy and giggling. Saints, I shouldn't laugh, not at a time like this, but we're alive.

I know in my heart that Rad's off licking his wounds, and that, for now, we're safe.

Luca passes me into Ian's arms, just as Ian passed me into Luca's the day before. Like they know that I need each of them. Their scents in my nose, their bodies against mine.

"Irresponsible, brave, beautiful, wonderful, troublesome *menace*," he breathes. "You scared me half to death."

"I'm just scratched up," I promise. My wrists sting where they're wrapped around his neck, but I'm smiling. "I did it," I tell him. "Everything we worked on. The omega trap, my affinity... all of it."



“I doubted the former could be done, but I never doubted you. Never you, Juniper.” He squeezes me tightly and then releases me, abashed. “We... we need to talk soon.”

I flinch, knowing his rejection is coming. That he loves me but can't be with me, but he leans forward, kisses my forehead, my nose, and each of my cheeks, and then hands me my book bag. “I knew you wouldn't want to leave his side. But I also knew you wouldn't want to fall behind. I've spoken with your other professors, and you're excused from lessons while Mr. Monroe is in the infirmary—and as long as you need afterward. Your assignments are in your bag. Take care of yourself, too. Promise?”

A blush burns in my cheeks, but I nod. “I promise.”

He takes my hand and gives it a light squeeze, the smile he graces me with just as soft.

I watch him leave with a wistful smile on my face.

“He's right,” Marcus murmurs. “Have you had anything to eat or drink since Friday?”

Luca pulls me into a hug from behind and presses a kiss to my cheek. “Three of the sugariest drinks Ciel makes and a black coffee for Marcus?”

“And a cinnamon roll?”

“Not what I had in mind,” Marcus says with a roll of his eyes.

“Cinnamon rolls all around it is,” Luca says with a grin, giving me a tight hug before letting me go.

A man clears his throat behind me just as I breathe in rain and milky Earl Grey.

I turn to find the detective inspector watching me as my alpha leaves with no small amount of curiosity.

“Thank you for coming to the temple the other day, detective inspector. Are you here for a statement?”

“Ah, no. I'm actually here to talk to Mr. Leclerc. He's indicated an interest in pressing charges for his mate's attack.

Though I'll need your statement at some point, but please, rest first. If Mr. Leclerc does decide to pursue legal action, I'll need to get paperwork to the courts as soon as possible."

"Is that even your jurisdiction? Saints, I hope it is, since local law enforcement won't do anything about it."

The inspector gives me a secretive smile. "It *is*, in fact, my jurisdiction, not that of the Fairhaven PD. Mr. Radcliffe is an American citizen, and Misters Leclerc and Monroe are Canadian citizens, making it an international matter. I just so happen to be the *only* one here with the jurisdiction. And, apparently, with any kind of spine."

"They'll come after you, too," I tell him. "Rad and his cronies. The Soldiers."

He cracks his knuckles and grins the most dashing grin I've ever seen. "Let them come."

I could really start to like this particular inspector. "I'll see if Cass can spare a few minutes."



CASSIAN MEETS me at the door to the nest, pulling it closed behind him, concern in his dark eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Detective Inspector Miller is here to see you. He mentioned you were going to press charges against Rad."

"It's my right and privilege as Simon's mate. A beta pressing charges against an alpha of Rad's status would be trodden over in the courts."

"But an alpha of *your* status stands a chance."

"Precisely. I want to do this, Junes. And I think Simon and I both need it. But it may require you to make a public testimony. Just know, if you do or don't make a statement, you *will* have my protection. And I will get justice for both you and Simon, through less scrupulous means if necessary." He looks back into the nest where Simon is laughing weakly. "I can't protect you the same way I can protect him, but if

pressing charges against Rad for hurting my mate can get that piece of shit off your back...”

I step forward and into his arms, hugging him tightly around the middle. “Thank you, Cass. Truly. And I’ll make a statement to the Council of Nine themselves if that’s what it takes. I’ll do it in front of the whole of Packs Radcliffe and Rose. I’m done letting fear dictate my actions. I’m done feeling trapped by it. If you need my testimony, you’ll have it.” I nod toward the doors. “Don’t leave him waiting. I believe he actually wants to help.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 39



Ellie excuses herself when I dip back into the nest, giving my shoulder a squeeze as we pass.

I stretch and go to sit in the chair beside the nest, but Simon reaches for me and I'm more than happy to crawl in beside him.

"Missed you," I tell him.

"Missed you too, kit-kat."

"I was going to meet you at Ciel until he threatened me," I whisper. "I thought if I put some distance between us, he wouldn't target you."

"I knew the risks, and I could have walked away because of them. I wasn't in the dark, Junes. I *did* pull away from you, but you know how I said I'm good at fixing everyone's problems but my own?" He takes my hands in his, taking care not to touch my bandaged wrists. "Well, Cassian complicates things. He'd say something to you, and I'd get mad. We'd fight."

"Over me."

"Pft, no. Over his bullshit behavior. He's been an asshole to you since you got to Fairhaven. I don't tolerate his puffed-up alpha bullshit at the best of times, but when it had to do with you? Saints, Junes, you'd come to me *crying* over him. The hurtful shit he said to you... the only reason I didn't hex his balls off over it is because I *knew* he meant well, in his own stupid, twisted way. He'd say something derogatory to you so you'd work harder, so you'd be even more prepared.

And you always did, you know? After he insulted your shields, you came to me, and we practiced. Look, I'm not saying it's not total bullshit. It is. And I give you permission to hex my alpha's dick tiny since I'm clearly not up to using it right now. But Cassian... he's got more alpha instincts than sense sometimes. More good looks, too. Saints, I swear, when it comes to feelings, that alpha's the biggest idiot there is."

I poke Simon in the belly, low, below the bandages that wrap around his torso. "Are you telling me you fell for Cassian because of his dashing good looks?"

He quirks a rust-red brow. "Are you telling me you didn't?"

I laugh. "As much of a jerk as he can be, I'm glad you two have each other."

Simon turns serious, rolling to tangle with me, wincing but ignoring his pain. "I want you too, kit-kat. I can't change that I'm mated to Cassian."

"I don't want you to. I just wish... I wish you'd told me the truth. I wish I hadn't found out you were mated how I did. I... people close to me lying to me is something I really struggle with."

"Oh, Juniper," he says, touching his forehead to mine. "You're right, fuck. I didn't even think of it that way."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told him not to," Cassian says, from the door to the nest.

"Don't hex him," Simon says in a low voice. "He's a controlling, feelings-impaired idiot, but please don't hex him. Not right now, at least."

I roll my eyes but nod toward Simon's other side and Cassian approaches cautiously.

"Get in, idiot," I tell him. "We're talking about our feelings."

Cassian sighs and sits at the edge of the nest, the mattress dipping under his weight. "I'm bad at this, Junes. I treated you like shit because I thought you despised me, because I was

some jilted alpha who wasn't even jilted at all. And I will never forgive myself for that. I don't expect you too, either. When you started falling for Simon, I was... jealous. Because you loved my mate, but not me."

"She hasn't even said it once yet," Simon mutters. "Let alone the one thousand times I require of her. Stop saying it for her. Make her use her big girl words."

"Oh shush," I chide. "You know I love you."

"Say it again?"

I smile. "I love you, I love you, I love you. There, only 996 more to go."

"Love you too, Junes," he says, nuzzling into me.

"Simon's the one you chose over me."

"I didn't choose him *over* you. As far as I knew, I'd never have your love. You weren't someone I *could* choose. And when you weren't, when I was at my lowest, there was this sweet, goofy, incredibly handsome beta who helped tutor my dumb ass because I was struggling in all my classes and was too proud to admit it. Saints, Simon saw straight through me from the first time we met."

"Whatever happens," Simon says quietly, "you two can't try to compete for me. I want you both. Cassian is the one who mated me, and I love him, but that doesn't change how I feel about you, Juniper. That I want you."

"Never," I promise, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. "Cassian?"

He grumbles something into Simon's shoulder and Simon laughs.

"Cassian," I say again, my voice flat.

"I'll *try*."

Simon looks at me thoughtfully. "Cassian and I still have some of our own shit to work out. We've... had our missteps. I thought he mated me out of obligation and, you know, alpha white knight syndrome. I still get insecure about it."

“Whoa, what?” I ask, while Cassian protests, “You know I love you, Simon.”

“And you both know I like to hear you say it.”

Cassian sighs but kisses his shoulder. “I love you. I love you. I love you.” His eyes flick to mine, glittering with a grin, then back to Simon. “I love you.”

Simon snuggles back into him, completely relaxing as he breathes in Cassian’s scent. “Cass and I... we were starting to do better until you arrived at Fairhaven, and he lost literally every single ounce of sense. But I... for the longest time, I thought Cassian only mated me to save Ellie.”

“From becoming a ward of the state,” I say quietly. “Ellie told me a bit about it, how you saved her and kept her safe.”

“She says it’s me, but it was mostly Cassian. His family has the lawyers and resources. She’s legally *our* ward, not just mine. And, honestly, Ellie is no one’s anything. She’s her own person.”

“But she needed someone to let her be her own person.”

“Exactly. As Cassian’s mate, I had this power I didn’t have before. I could help protect her. Cassian pays for Jace’s services.”

“You were going to drop out and work three jobs to do it,” Cassian protests. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

I can see why Simon could think Cassian mated him to save him, to save Ellie and be their white knight, but I can also see just how wrong it is, how love shines out of Cassian whenever he looks at the beta.

I would never deny either of them the love they find in the other. Not ever. They deserve every last ounce of happiness they find in each other’s arms. But I love Simon Monroe too. Just as much as his alpha does. We can never be mated, but I *will* be with him for as long as he’ll have me.

I know it won’t be easy. Saints above, the beta I love is mated to my alpha ex. There’s no way that *can* be easy, but Simon’s worth it.

And I know we'll make it work.



I'M NEVER FAR from Simon's side while he's in the infirmary. Doc fetches some spare clothes from my cottage, and I take one quick trip to downtown Fairhaven with Luca and Marcus to raid their local candy shop—all so Simon and I can start our candy tasting in earnest while we have nothing better to do than nap, cuddle up together, and study.

Cassian will often curl up with us, on Simon's other side, and it's not as weird or awkward as I thought it would be. I get used to the way their breathing settles as they fall asleep, how Simon talks and mutters—and even laughs—in his sleep, how Cassian tosses and turns in his.

After two days of bedrest, Simon demands Cassian fetch his laptop.

“I want to keep looking into Halcyon,” he says in a low voice as Cassian passes him the device. “My search script was just starting to gain traction.”

“Rad said Halcyon wouldn't spare me. Well, he thought it.” I turn to Cassian. “I'm assuming you know all about the affinity thing?”

He doesn't even look abashed. “I do, yes. And don't get upset, Simon wasn't the one to tell me.”

“You just know things,” I mutter. “Or so Luca says. But why? How?”

“When it comes to the two of you, I make it a point to know. To keep you safe—or to try to, at least. Our enemy is even more persistent than I thought he would be.”

“Sorry for using it on you last term. It wasn't intentional. I'm still learning to control it.”

“You mean when it felt like daggers were stabbing me in the eyes?”



“That’s not all it does,” I hedge, looking past Simon to Cassian. “I get thoughts and emotions from people. Sometimes I even get little glimpses of the future. It happened with Trinity’s disappearance, and I wasn’t able to stop it.”

“But you stopped her from killing Grace,” Cassian realizes. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

I duck my head but nod, tears burning in my eyes. I still can’t think of the other omega without crying. “Rad was controlling her with blood magic. I was able to break his hold on her for just long enough for her to... for her to...” I swallow hard, trying to keep my tears from falling, but it’s no use.

“Oh, Junes.”

“All of her thoughts. Everything they did to her. I saw all of it. I *felt* all of it.”

“You freed her.”

“Her family still had to bury her.”

“But Pack Cassidy didn’t have to bury Grace.”

I nod and Simon tucks me against his side. “I had no idea you were getting so strong.”

“Ian thought it was a curse. He wished it wouldn’t be me. It should have been someone stronger, but I got the affinity. And I’m going to use it to bring Rad to his fucking knees, and the Soldiers and my fucking family after that. I swear to the saints, I will make the most of this curse.”

“You have our support in any way you need it,” Cassian swears. “And not just because I want to see that bastard burn for what he’s done to both of you. Money, resources, anything. Name it and we’ll have it.”

I look toward the door of the quiet infirmary, to where I last saw the Royal Detective Inspector. “We’ll need Graeme Miller.”

Cassian nods. “I’ll pay him out of pocket if they try to recall him from duty here.”

“Saints above, Cassian, where are you getting this kind of money?”

He cuts a look at Simon. “Suffice it to say, Simon created an algorithm that helped us make some very lucrative stock purchases. We’ve invested wisely since then. And I have the support of my family.”

“Do they know?” I finally venture. “About the two of you?”

“Are you kidding me? My mother *adores* Simon.”

“Who wouldn’t?” the beta mutters as he types a string of characters into his laptop.

“My family knows. His family knows. Ellie’s honor guard knows, and I suspect Bitsy does as well. We’ve been... discreet. Relationships like ours are frowned upon and I didn’t want an association with Pack Leclerc to draw enemies toward Simon.”

“And I can’t stand the thought of everyone thinking of Cassian as my trophy alpha.”

“You’re the trophy,” Cassian says, rolling his eyes.

“I’ll happily let you two fight over that title. I will *never* be anyone’s trophy.”

“Damn right,” Simon says. He clicks a few times and then his grin crumples into a frown. “Holy shit... Halcyon is... it’s bigger than we could have imagined. An entire conspiracy... It’s going to take me weeks to unwind all of this.” He winces. “But I can tell you now: Rose Pharmaceuticals and Radcliffe Industries are both involved. They’re engineering *something* together. I’ll need more time to fully uncover what it is, if I even can. But whatever it is, it won’t be good.”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh, snuggling down closer to Simon. “I guess we add defeating a global cabal to our list,” I mutter.

Simon strokes my hair away from my eyes. “And we will, kit-kat. I promise you, we will. We’ll fight until your fight is done, wherever it ends.”



CASSIAN AND I leave a sleeping Simon in Ellie and Jace's care and walk out of the infirmary to find late spring in full bloom on Fairhaven's campus. Flowers scent the air, dripping from bushes and lining the garden beds around campus, bursting from pots and urns at the doors to every building.

"Rad wanted to press charges against you," Cassian says softly as we walk across the quad together. "You've used illegal magic against him twice now. He threatened to go live with it, to speak to the media about you. But Miller was able to trap him with the investigation and I've buried him in enough litigation to keep him quiet. Hopefully, he'll graduate next week and that's the last we'll see of him."

"I hope so but don't believe it."

"I'll do what I can to keep him from you and Simon," Cassian vows.

"You're always taking care of him, aren't you?"

"When he lets me," Cassian admits with a rueful smile. "But Juniper, you must understand, I didn't mate him just to take care of him."

"He thought you did."

"And I will keep convincing him otherwise until he believes me."

"Do," I tell him. "He deserves it."

We wind our way around the low hill and before I know it, we're standing beneath the bell tower as cherry blossom petals fall down around us like snow.

"You never came that night. On the Feast of Saint Valentine," I say, looking up at the old stone bell tower.

"I did," he says quietly. "But I saw how happy he was—how happy *you* were—and I couldn't bring myself to destroy that happiness. You may not believe me, but your safety and your happiness matter to me just as much as his do. I may

have fallen in love with Simon, but that doesn't mean I fell out of love with you. I was angry at your rejection, but I was angrier still at myself—because I couldn't bring myself to hate you.”

“You were in love with me back then?” My voice is strained, a knot burning in my throat.

“Desperately, and I never stopped. I didn't think anything could part us, but I didn't count on the cruelty of your father.”

“Neither did I,” I say quietly.

For a few moments, we watch the petals fall, staring out over campus together, not knowing quite what to say. I want to tell him I loved him too, that part of me still does and always will. I want to let out a soft omega whine and for his alpha to respond. I want to see what we could become. Saints, I want to see what the *three* of us could become.

“I have something for you.” He draws his keys out of his pocket and works one of them off the keyring before placing it in my hand.

“Key to your heart?” I shoot him a bemused frown and then study the key. It's an ordinary house key, but it buzzes with magic.

“You already have that,” Cassian murmurs, his dark hair falling in front of his eyes as he ducks to hide a blush. “No, this is a key to the townhouse I just closed on. Simon and I were going to get a place of our own at some point, but in light of recent events, he said he'd feel safer off campus—and he'd feel safer if you weren't on campus either. You don't have to move-in, but when I told Simon I was calling my realtor, he insisted I find somewhere with a nest. Somewhere you could feel safe, somewhere you could go if you ever needed it. The warding and physical security are state of the art, and there's remote underground garage access. But if there's anything you need to make it feel safer, tell me. The only thing I give a damn about anymore is keeping you two safe.”

My heart squeezes tight in my chest and I reach over and uncurl Cassian's fist before twining my fingers with his.

“Thank you, Cass. Truly.”

Cassian sighs and looks out over the campus, but all I see is him. An alpha who burns himself to ash to keep those he loves safe. Who would do anything if it meant our happiness. “What happens between us now?”

He looks up sharply. “What happens between us now is whatever you *want* to happen between us. You want me to throw myself at your feet and beg for forgiveness for what a jackass I’ve been? I’ll do it every day. Twice on Sundays.”

“Once on Sundays will probably suffice,” I tease. “If you make it really good groveling.” I take a deep breath and then tug him closer by the front of his tee shirt. “I don’t want to start over,” I tell him. “But I want to start again.”

Hope flickers in those smoky quartz eyes of his, those eyes I’ve always been able to lose myself in. And then I kiss him. I kiss Cassian Leclerc under the Fairhaven bell tower, knowing it means forever.

Wanting it to mean forever.

And wanting it to mean pack.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 40



Simon, Cassian, and I are given concessions for our finals: open book for the theoretical, extra time for the practical, but we each turn down the offer. We spent so much time studying together in the infirmary that I already know half of what's on *their* finals as well as what to expect on my own. And besides, finals are *normal*, something we're all desperate for.

Our normal study group moves from Ciel to the infirmary, cardboard coffee carriers in their hands, and once bribed with a caramel cold brew, Doc doesn't have the heart to kick anyone out. In her down time, she quizzes Alyssa and I on our Restorative Magic spells and potions relentlessly until I'm sure we'll both ace her final.

It's Ian's final I find myself most worried about—not because of the material, but because I haven't been able to catch him alone for more than a few minutes since we last met outside the infirmary. I've been spending all my time with Simon, and Ian's only come by to check on the ember of dark magic in Simon's chest, left behind from Rad's torture—stable, for now, like his, Cassian's and Marcus'.

I did catch him on a whim. My own research on the ember has come to a halt without the benefit of the books in his office, but I have a shot in the dark idea I *hope* can help the suffering alphas and my sweet beta.

“Could you use something like the spell that locked my magic to lock away the ember? At least until you can figure out how to destroy it?”

He frowns, working his lower lip between his teeth. “If that wasn’t such a compelling idea, I might think you were trying to get me arrested. Tackling illegal magic with more illegal magic, making me cast banned hexes on you...”

“What can I say?” I ask, rolling my eyes. “I have an appetite for danger.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t, but you seem to be a beacon for it. But you’re clever, courageous, and we will *all* fight with you and for you.”

It’s not a declaration of love, or even a proposition to be my alpha, but it leaves me feeling safe for the first time in weeks.



I FEEL EVEN BETTER when I ace his final. He tests me on every last spell we learned in Introduction of Casting, then has me demonstrate all the spells I learned during our private lessons. As the traces of my magic fade from his blackboard, he looks over his grade book and then up at me.

“You amaze me, Miss Rose. In every way imaginable.”

I hesitate as I pack up my bag, looking over my shoulder to find him scribbling away in his grade book, my presence all but forgotten.

At the infirmary, he swore we’d talk and, perhaps naively, I assumed that meant we’d talk about *us*, about the question between us that only seems to push us further and further apart.

When he makes no move to stop me as I leave, I wish him a nice summer, set my assistantship application and essay down on his desk, and let the door close on all my tender-hearted hopes.



I FINALLY RETURN to my cottage at Alyssa's insistence and find the wreckage utterly transformed. Saints, after the attention of the Omega Girl Gang, my cottage practically sparkles. They've mended or replaced everything Rad destroyed. Alyssa even got Darika to mend all of Marcus' paperbacks, for which he thanks the alpha girl in a low voice, blushing a faint pink.

In my nest, every single one of my photos has been put back together with magic. They lie in a stack beside a box of pushpins, ready to go back on the cork board over my nest. I never thought I'd want another omega anywhere near my nest, but my friends have given me such a gift that it doesn't even occur to me to feel territorial or upset.

Under Simon's watchful eye and instruction, Cassian installs a new security system, and Doc applies even stronger wards, showing me and Marcus how to seal them with our essence. Our blood. Luca and Simon both prick their fingers, their blood sizzling on the wards, and at my insistence, Cassian completes the ritual as well.

"If you want to invite anyone else in," Mai says pointedly, "they'll need to complete the same ritual."

I blush, wishing I could pretend I didn't know exactly who she was referring to, but Mai is a clever omega—and one of Ian's closest friends.

Luca slips up behind me and hugs me from behind. "Christen your new nest tonight, princess?"

I groan, mentally naming every transient sigil I know to keep myself from perfuming. He just chuckles in my ear and kisses my pulse point, a lingering kiss that nearly undoes all of my hard-won composure.



AS SUMMER BURSTS into full bloom on campus, Fairhaven Academy's departing senior class celebrates—a palpable buzz in the air as Headmaster Langford delivers the address at their graduation ceremony. The older alpha speaks of their bright



futures, just as he did at the Lunar Ball on the Feast of Lunaria, but the words ring hollow to me.

Some of the graduating class *do* have great futures ahead of them. They'll leave our academy to change the world and do wonderful things.

But one particular senior, sitting in the last row of his class, a golden cord to designate the honor of *magna cum laude* hanging from his shoulders, will move on to a job in his father's defense firm, working on secret, nefarious projects that could bring my entire designation to its knees.

My scent sours at the thought. Andrew Radcliffe is leaving Fairhaven and taking his unwanted attentions toward me with him. I should be happy. Relieved. Instead, my gut churns as, one by one, the graduating class walks across the auditorium stage in their navy blue robes to accept their diplomas.

Deep in my heart, I know I haven't seen the last of the alpha who dogged my steps this past year, who captured my every move on camera. Who threatened and hurt the men I love.

He promised a bite on my neck before the next New Year and I'm not naive enough to hope that graduating will change his mind.

Marcus must pick up the change in my scent, because he sets a hand on my knee. "He'll be all the way in Cambridge soon. Hours away. And even if he does come back, I *will* protect you, Juniper. I swear it. We know the tech he's using to enter the wards. We know how to keep you safer, now..."

We do know he's using magic tech, but we know so little about his plans.

About Project Halcyon.



LUCA STAYS LATE that night and under the guise of making tea, he asks my honor guard if he can take me on one last date

before summer break—and it’s just what I need to wash away the bad taste Rad’s graduation left in my mouth.

We take to the road on the back of his motorcycle, Marcus following dutifully behind us.

There’s something magical about motorcycling through the night, waves crashing on our left as we tear up the island’s western shore. With only the light of the moon overhead and the small circle of light the bike’s headlamp casts, it feels like we’re rocketing through space.

Moonlight glints off the waves, glittering across the water like stars, and we *fly*.

I don’t know where we’re headed until I see long beams cut across the water.

The lighthouse. The iconic lighthouse memorialized in Fairhaven’s crest, emblazoned on our uniforms, cast in iron at the academy’s gates. Long shafts of light shine across the bay, moving in a mesmerizing rhythm as the beacon at the top of the lighthouse turns.

We park and Luca draws a thin picnic blanket—and an accompanying picnic—out of the bike’s top box. Finally, after I’ve ruined two picnics, we’re getting one, not just beneath the stars, but beneath the light of the lighthouse.

I stare out across the ocean when we’ve finished our midnight meal, thinking about everything that’s happened this term. About Trinity who nearly committed a grave crime, about Rad, who did. About Trinity who took her own life and Rad who still stands to get everything he wants—everything except me.

“You’re thinking about Trinity,” Luca says quietly.

I look up at him. “How did you know?”

He shrugs. “You get this far-off look in your eyes whenever you do. It’s like you go somewhere else.”

And I do. Every time I think of Trinity, I’m taken back to the ballroom, into the dark corners of the other omega’s mind.

I may have saved Trinity and I may have saved Simon, but Rad walks free. Rad, who has been allowed to hurt so many people, still has his freedom.

And I would have taken on all that hurt and more if it meant he wouldn't have hurt those I care for.

I sigh. "I didn't know her enough to really miss her, but I do. I wish it didn't have to end how it did."

"She fought until she couldn't fight any longer. She was brave, Juniper. Just like you."

I nod, but I don't know if I believe it. Standing at this precipice, wind whipping around me, I don't feel brave.

Not enough to wage the war I must. I know so little about my father's doings—only inklings of a much bigger picture. I have more questions, fewer answers. Nothing certain but the alphas and beta who have vowed to fight by my side.

"I feel like I'm sailing through the dark," I murmur. "Like there's this lighthouse but I can't see it through the storms."

Luca wraps me in a tight hug, and I soak in his warmth to ward off the late May night's chill. He nuzzles against my cheek. "There will be storms, Juniper, but there will be stars, too. You may feel lost, but you'll always find your way again—and you'll have my help. Before you, princess, all I saw were the storms. And then I met you, my shooting star wish, my guiding light. And I found my way home. To you."

I turn in his arms, eyes full of tears, full of moonlight and starshine. Full of him. I brush my lips against his, a question in my touch, in my gaze, and he answers it by yanking me up off the picnic blanket so fast I can't help but laugh. He shoves the picnic blanket and the remains of our meal into my arms and then swoops me up into his, kissing me while we stumble together toward the parking lot.

That night, we say our goodbyes, not through words, but through touch. Through my fingers fisting in his hair as he sets his mouth to my skin, through those tattooed fingers sinking into me, making me moan. We make love and when I'm bound

to him by his knot, we lay together, connected as an alpha and omega are meant to be, as *we're* meant to be.

I can't bear the thought of a whole summer without him, but he slyly suggests that he'll be there if I ever manage to sneak out, that we'll survive this summer apart.

That "it won't always be like this, my guiding star, my princess, my love."

That though there will be dark nights and storms, there will be lighthouses and moonlight and star shine.



STORMS ROLL in across the bay that night and linger as Luca and I say our goodbyes, as I watch him race back across the bridge, leather jacket held up over his head. The rumble of his motorcycle echoes back to me as he kicks it to life and peels out of the lot toward town.

I pull the hood of my raincoat over my eyes and slosh my way back to my cottage, Marcus at my side.

Saints, but I didn't think saying goodbye would be so hard.

I'm packing up my clothes when a knock sounds at the door. I frown but let Marcus see who it is as I fold another blouse.

"It's Reinhardt," he calls up the stairs and I go completely still. "And he looks like a drowned rat."

I drop the blouse and dash down the stairs, throwing the door open to see a very sodden Ian staring back at me, black hair plastered to his pale skin.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

He holds up my assistantship application, now soaked through with rain. "I've brought you the results of your application."

I lean against the door jamb, the fine mist of rain cooling my cheeks while it drenches him. "You could have emailed,

you know.”

He holds up the application and the essay and rips it in half, right before my eyes. “I don’t want to be your research supervisor.”

Oh. It shouldn’t sting so much—I’m certain I’ll still land one of the other assistantships I applied for—but it does.

“Because I want to be yours. Your alpha.”

Oh. *Oh.*

“Technically, a relationship between any student and any professor is forbidden, and... and I don’t want to have to sneak around with you, but if that’s the only way we can be together and it’s still what you want, then I—”

I step through the wards and pull him into a consuming kiss.

“Yes,” I breathe. “A million times yes. I want you, not as my professor, not as my supervisor. I want you as my alpha.”

A blush floods his cheeks.

“But you didn’t have to tear my essay up. It was a good essay!”

“It was an excellent essay, you overachieving menace. You made an incredibly convincing argument. I don’t know what I’ll do without your help—”

“You’ll still have it. I still want to help with your research, but... but not as your assistant. Do you... do you want to come in?”

He looks up at the pouring rain, grins, shrugs and drags me out into it, making me shriek, before swirling me around as the warm summer rain pelts down around us.

And he kisses me. He kisses me like he’s been waiting to kiss me just like this since my heat.

“Saints, I wish I could do this right. I wish I could court you, take you on proper dates. You deserve the fucking world, Juniper.”

“I don’t need any of that,” I say, as water sluices down my skin, sticking my shirt to my skin. “Just you. All I want is to... is to read books and drink coffee with you and...”

“And?”

“And we should really get you out of those wet clothes,” I say, quirking an eyebrow.

He laughs, that rich, deep laugh I so love, uninhibited and joyous, and he lets me pull him back to the wards at my cottage.

He uses a spell to slice the tip of his finger and we perform the ritual for the blood wards, and the moment he’s in my cottage, I make him let me heal the cut.

He dries us with a quick spell, and we race up to my nest, laughing as we thunder up the stairs.

And I find myself suddenly timid. We’ve only been together during my heat, when I had no inhibitions at all. When he came to me, and I was already bare for him.

He must pick up on my hesitation because he asks me, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“It is. I’m just... kind of nervous?”

He takes my hands and sits me down at the edge of my nest before sitting behind me. “So am I. We don’t have to do this today, Juniper. We can wait as long as you want to.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to wait. I just... we’ve only been together during my heat and heats are... intense. I’m afraid it won’t be the same for you.”

He takes my cheek in his hand, and I keen into his touch, dragging his scent into my lungs. “Then let it be different.” He steals a too-brief kiss, lips sweeping against mine. “Let me take my time and explore every inch of you.”

I let out a low whine.

“Let me kiss you everywhere I’ve dreamt of kissing you, touch you like I’ve wanted to since I knew you’d pull through that first time in the infirmary.”

“You watched over me.”

He bows his head to mine in a nod. “And I always will.” He captures my lips, slips his tongue into my mouth when I part for him, consumes me with strokes of his tongue against mine.

My perfume floods the air with my honey-vanilla scent, and he lets out a low groan that makes desire curl in my belly.

He pulls me into his lap until I’m straddling him, until I can feel his hard length against my core. I moan and rock against him, not breaking our kiss, suddenly not so keen on waiting.

He laughs a dark laugh, filled with sensual promise, as I grind down against him, already whimpering. “Oh no, my darling,” he says. “I told you I was going to take my time.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## CHAPTER 41



He strokes my hair back from my eyes, staring at me in wonder. When I tip my lips up for a kiss, he captures them and kisses me slowly, consuming me with the languid fall of his lips against mine. I whimper into the kiss and squirm in his lap, desperate for the friction of his hardness against my clit, needing to feel him.

He flips us with a growl until I'm on my back on the thick mattress of my nest.

“May I come into your nest, omega?” There's a note of humor in the question—he's already on top of me in my nest, but I loop my arms around his neck and pull him closer.

“You'd better.”

He sets a hand to my breast, thumbing my nipple through my tee shirt and bra until I'm coming off the bed, seeking any touch I can find, needing him between my hips. But he doesn't give me his hips, only a thigh between mine I can grind against, and I mewl, clutching the sheets.

“You're so impatient,” he laughs, stroking up my side beneath my shirt, touch light over my belly, my ribs. He tugs down the lace cup of my bra, freeing my peaked nipple to his touch and he teases me, light strokes, gentle pinches, until I'm rocking against nothing, desperate for his touch, needing to feel him moving inside me.

He ducks his head to steal a kiss. “You are so *very* responsive, my darling.” There's a note of praise in his voice



that makes my core go molten and slick, and I whine, breathing out a little cry.

He studies me intently, a wry smile on his lips. “If I were to slide this skirt down your thighs, how wet would I find your sweet little cunt?”

“Very,” I gasp out as he tweaks my nipple.

He chuckles and draws his hand from beneath my shirt, but I’m not without his touch for long. He grasps my knee and hitches my leg over his hip, then slides his hand up the outside of my thigh, teasing the tips of his fingers along the lace edge of my panties until he’s stroking the inside of my thigh, so close to my drenched sex that I squirm.

He slips my panties to the side and sinks a long, thick finger into me, and I cry out, throwing my head back.

“You feel amazing,” he grits out, pumping his finger into my cunt, making my slick flow for him. “So wet for me.”

“For you,” I swear, canting my hips up into his touch, letting out a sigh of bliss as his finger finds that spot inside me that sends white-hot pleasure shooting through my body.

His touch is all too brief. He leaves me empty, draws his hand from beneath my skirt, sucks his finger into his mouth and lets out a deep groan as he sucks my slick from the digit. “You’re so fucking sweet.”

I grab for the hem of his shirt, and he lets me find the buttons, lets me undo them one by one until I can shove the shirt off his shoulders. A tight undershirt clings to the sculpted planes of his chest, his abs, and I whimper, needing to touch, to taste. I tug his tee shirt free from his slacks and he lets me, helping me pull the shirt off over his head.

He’s just as beautiful as I remember, like an ancient god captured in marble. I run my fingertips down the ladder of his abs, feeling the coarse hair that trails down from his navel into his pants. I look up at him, shoot him a wicked smile, and cup him through the thick merino, squeezing his length through the fabric until his hand closes over mine.

He shows me just how hard to squeeze to make him let out little hisses of breath, and I want so much more of him, his hot length in my palm, skin to skin. I want to work him in my hand until he's dizzy with pleasure, guide him to my entrance, take him to his knot, move my hips against his until we both find our bliss.

He lets out a growl and pulls my tee shirt off. He rocks back on his knees and takes me in, one breast bared to him, the other still encased in pale pink lace.

His scent spikes between us, the spicy cedar and bright bergamot I so love. He pulls me into a frantic kiss, tongue plunging into my mouth, breaking the kiss only to pant out praise. "So beautiful. Exquisite. *Mine.*"

"Yours," I swear.

Saints, I may not be in heat, but he makes me dizzy with need. Makes me want to beg. "Please," I pant.

"Tell me what you want, my darling." There's an edge to his voice, not an alpha command, but an order that makes slick run down my thighs. There are so few alphas who make me feel so safe that I wouldn't second guess a soft-spoken demand like his, and I moan with the realization.

His fingers dance along the inside of my thigh, light teasing touches against the silk of my panties until I'm letting out little begging mewls.

"I want your fingers in my cunt while my clit's in your mouth!" I gasp out.

His answering grin, pleased and lazy, sends slick gushing from my sex. He tips my chin up with a single finger until he can look me in the eye. "Very good, Juniper. Take off your skirt and panties."

I pull them both off with one hasty, clumsy tug, the cool air of my nest hitting my heated sex and making me suck in a breath.

He strokes his thumb between my folds and groans. "Fuck, you're so wet, darling."

“All for you,” I promise in a breathy voice.

He traces a light touch from my clit to my core then sinks two fingers into me.

I let out a moan, watching him as he watches me. He pumps his fingers into me, knuckles brushing my sensitive back wall, each thrust hitting my estrus gland and making me cry out.

He kisses me as he fucks his fingers into me, my lips, my jaw, my neck—licking and sucking until I’m so wound up, I’m rocking against his fingers. He sucks one nipple between his lips, laving his tongue over the peak. Desire curls tight in my belly and he lets out a low chuckle when I all but mewl for him.

“One day, I’m going to make you cum just by sucking on these pretty pink nipples while I fuck you with my fingers,” he promises, and I moan because, saints, I’m already close.

But it’s his mouth against my needy sex I’m most desperate for, and he doesn’t make me wait. He kisses my mound softly then sinks his tongue between my folds, moaning when my taste hits his tongue.

He hitches one of my legs over his shoulder and holds me open, my sex bared to him, every inch of me revealed.

Ian looks at me like I’m the most remarkable thing in all of creation, leaning back to take me in for a moment before setting his lips to my sex, laving his tongue over my clit in long strokes that make me scream.

He picks up the rhythm of his fingers in my cunt, changing the angle until every thrust drags against my back wall while the tips of his fingers tease that spot along my front wall that makes me blind with pleasure.

He sucks my clit between his lips, and I’m gone.

I come with a scream, sinking my hands in his hair, trying to escape his tongue when it becomes too much, but he holds me still, licking and sucking until I fly over my peak again, stretching me with a third finger until I’m letting out sharp little cries, until I crash again.

He lets me down slowly, sweet touches and kisses along the insides of my thighs, my hips, my belly, until finally, I sag back against the mattress of my nest, utterly spent but wanting him still.

“Saints, you’re beautiful when I make you cum,” he praises, and I tug him down to the mattress, roll him onto his back and show him just how much his approving words turn me on. I sink down to the growing flare of his knot with little prelude, letting out a hiss of pleasure as he stretches me even more than his fingers did.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Fuck, just... fuck.”

“You’re normally so erudite,” I tease, rocking slowly.

“Brat, don’t make me put you over my knee.”

*Oh.* My jaw falls open as my cunt clenches tightly around him. I never thought I’d be into a dominant alpha. Simon’s dominance always felt safe, a sexy game, but Ian... he feels just as safe. “Fuck,” I mutter, leaning down to kiss him. “Just... fuck. Let’s do that sometime.”

“My darling, we can do whatever you want, whenever you want. But if you don’t move, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“Yes, you are,” I promise, rocking slowly, bouncing on my knees enough to work him into the same feverish spiral of dizzying need consuming me. He takes my hands in each of his to support me and I move.

I moan with each down thrust, and when his thumb finds my clit, I scream. When I squeeze around him, when I clench tight as I fuck him, he comes with a groan, coating my insides in hot cum, and only then do I ease down on his knot, letting out a low whine of pleasure as it stretches me.

When he’s locked inside me, he flips me onto my back, hips circling in shallow thrusts that rock his knot inside me and make me spasm around his thick length.

“Scream for me when you come, my good little darling,” he whispers in my ear, tweaks one of my nipples, and I do exactly as he says.

He holds me close as we both come down from our pleasure, touching every inch of me he can, whispering sweet praise in my ear.

We fall asleep, still knotted together, soaking in the bliss of being in each other's arms, skin to skin.

I wake to a low growl, to him tossing and turning in my nest beside me, clutching his arm where his ember lies.

"Ian," I say softly. I repeat his name until his eyes flick open, wide and frantic. Tears streak down his cheeks as he blinks away whatever terrorized him, but I can still see his pulse racing in his neck, can hear how fast his heart hammers when I wrap myself around him, my head over his heart.

I hold him, stroking my fingers through his hair, dropping sweet kisses on his forehead, his nose, each of his cheeks, and then finally, his lips. I brush away his tears.

I tell him I love him.

He goes still, all of the terror flooding from him. He lets out a shuddering breath and then meets my gaze, his grimace turning to a small, hopeful smile.

"Say it again, my darling."

"I love you, Ian. Alpha. Mine." I nestle into his arms, nuzzle my nose against his, tangle with him until there's nothing but warmth and softness between us.

He strokes my cheek and kisses me sweetly. "And I love you."

We doze after that, then make love again. I make pour-over coffee in my little kitchenette, and we read together, reading the occasional passage of interest aloud, and truly, it's a perfect bliss I had never expected but now don't know how I could live without.

When dark dreams make him cry out in his sleep, I chase away his demons with sweet kisses, and when his fright subsides, those kisses heat. We turn to each other in the night, find our way to each other in the dim light of my nest, and we love each other until my time runs out.



HE LINGERS, watching me as I pack.

“I hate that you’ll be under your father’s roof all summer long. Promise you’ll keep in touch?”

“Simon souped up the encryption on my phone and gave me a few signal jammer... things. I’ll call when I can and text if I can’t.”

“Every night.”

“Every night,” I promise. “I actually suspect it’ll be a pretty low-key summer. He has Willow working from home to watch over me, so I doubt I’ll see him much. He’s probably moved into his penthouse for the summer at this point. And while Willow can be cruel, while she’ll resent me for taking her away from her husband, I don’t *think* she’ll harm me, unless it’s under my father’s orders.”

“That’s what I worry about, my darling.”

I set a few things in my bag and kiss him. “If I’m worried, I’ll call you and I’ll call Hawthorn. I promise. I won’t keep things from you anymore. If I feel unsafe, I’ll tell you.”

He studies me for a moment and then finally nods, pulling me into a hug. “If you think you’ll be bored, I left a stack of books I think you’ll enjoy at the circulation desk in the library—most from my collection, some from theirs. They’ll let you take them for the summer at my insistence.”

“Professor,” I tease, “you’re giving me homework?”

“It’s a present, you menace,” he says, heat in his voice.

And for too many hot, open-mouthed kisses, my packing is forgotten.



MARCUS and I pick up the stack of books and our final Ciel coffees of the school year before heading out, and the campus, dressed in all its summer finery, is nearly impossible to leave behind.

Saints, I'll miss this place. My friends.

My men.

I'm pensive on the drive back to Rose Manor, more and more homesick for my cottage with every mile.

But it's only a summer. One lonely summer to pass before I'm back where I truly belong.

I've survived so much worse and will survive whatever's to come.



“AH, daughter. Welcome home. Your presence is timely and I'm glad I could catch you before I left. I wanted to speak to you. Meet me in my study once you've settled in.”

My father strides off down the hall and I quickly drop my bag in my room, letting our staff empty the town car. I splash a bit of water on my face and quickly touch up my make-up, put on a fresh blouse, and then take the long way around the manor to his office, stopping before the barred doors to the conservatory.

I stare into the charred space, feel the magical charge leaking from the room as it buzzes along my arms, making the fine hairs stand on end.

I saw the past the last time I was in my mother's old conservatory, but I saw the future too. A mating bite on my hand, between my wrist and my palm, flames surrounding me.

One day, I'll burn this place to the ground, if my vision is to be trusted.

I pray to the saints that it is, that I'll cleanse myself and the world of this treacherous place. That it will be the first of many evils I topple to the fucking ground.

I press two fingers against the heel of my hand, wondering whose bite I'll wear there. Will it be Luca's or Ian's? Saints, could it be Cassian's?

It *won't* be the bite of an alpha of my father's choosing. It won't be Andrew Radcliff's.

I promise myself that as I slip down the hallway to my father's office.

My father looks up from his work at my knock and shows me in.

Anise scents the air and I look around sharply, but we're the only two people in the room.

Saints, I'm jumping at nothing, just from being back in this house.

"You wanted to see me, Father?" I demure just as he expects me to, baring my neck to him as I take a seat across from him.

"Ah, yes. I wanted to let you know that one of your mating contracts has been bid on and I've accepted the solicitation. You're to begin courting your new suitor this summer."

"O-oh," I stammer. "I thought I wasn't to be mated until after I graduated."

He looks up from a contract on his desk. "You won't be. Your suitor has kindly offered to let you finish your studies before you mate."

My heart skips a beat. Could... could Ian or Cassian have bid on one of my contracts? But no, my father never would have accepted their bids.

"Ah," he says. "And here he is now. He was just walking the grounds waiting for you to arrive home. Daughter, I'm pleased to announce you're to begin courting with—"

Cloying orange and anise precede the alpha into my father's study and I sway.

Because the alpha striding into the study needs no introduction.



My father has just accepted a bid on my mating contract.  
From Andrew Radcliffe.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

WANT MORE OF THE  
FAIRHAVEN ACADEMY  
SERIES?

**Juniper's story continues in Omega's Vow.**

Please **[click here to preorder.](#)**



**Want another glimpse into the heat Juniper shared with  
Luca, Simon and Ian?**

**For a sexy, sweet little bonus scene, click the link below to  
sign up for my newsletter. The bonus scene will be  
automatically delivered to your inbox via Bookfunnel when  
you sign up.**

**Get it [here.](#)**

**[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you, wonderful readers! Your enthusiasm and excitement about this series has been a constant source of inspiration and I wouldn't be here without you.

My deepest, heartfelt gratitude to my family and Mr. B for the endless and patient support. This wasn't an easy book for me to write and I couldn't have done it without your love and care.

Thanks to Yve for being there for me throughout the trials and tribulations I went through writing this book, and to Darcy Bennett for helping me keep me from running around with my hair on fire.

Thank you to my fantastic beta readers: Jacci, Danielle, Laura, Miranda and Sarah.

My utmost gratitude to Inessa at Cauldron Press for the gorgeous cover and Chrisandra at Chrisandra's Corrections for the terrific editing and proofreading.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cara Bryant pens paranormal reverse harem romances about real, vulnerable heroines who discover their inner power throughout their journeys of saving the world and falling in love. She loves writing domineering, alpha heroes, “cinnamon roll” heroes, and “grumpy rolls” who are only soft for the heroine. Because Cara writes reverse harem, she never has to pick a favorite hero—and neither do her heroines! Add in a touch of magic and a whole lot of heart and you’ve got the type of stories Cara loves to tell.

Cara has been writing since some kind soul first taught her how to pick up a crayon and write her letters. She definitely believes in happily-ever-afters and true love. She lives in the Midwest with her wonderful husband and two canine writing assistants.

To stay up to date with Cara’s new releases, please:

- Join her [newsletter](#).
- Follow her on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), [BookBub](#), [Facebook](#) or [TikTok](#).
- Join her reader group: [Cara Bryant’s Bookish Babe Brigade](#).

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

ALSO BY CARA BRYANT

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

FAIRHAVEN ACADEMY

Omega's Wish

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)