

THE STARLIGHT GODS



TAINTED ROSE

AVERY PHOENIX

Tainted Rose

THE STARLIGHT GODS

BOOK TWO

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Glossary

- **ROTATION:** *Month*
- **SOLACE:** *First six months of the year (Spring to Summer)*
- **LUNAR:** *Second six months of the year (Fall to Winter)*
- **CYCLE:** *Year*

Realms of the Starlight Gods

*Separate dimension (planet) within the galaxy, created by the
Starlight Gods. Only ways of traveling between realms are
through portal access, transportation ships or magical ability
of teleportation.*

Realm ONE:

*Latelia – Starlight God: **Deathpre** (God of Death)*

Realm TWO:

*Wintalyn – Starlight Goddess: **Kurani** (Goddess of Water)*

Realm THREE:

*Feminara – Starlight God: **Amaterasu** (God of Fire)*

Realm FOUR:

*Phentailia – Starlight God: **Lucifer** (God of Hell)*

Realm FIVE:

*Minato – Starlight God: **Risuki** (God of War)*

Realm SIX:

*Earthala – Starlight God: **Jehovah** (God of
Rebirth/Judgement)*

Realm SEVEN:

*Distala – Starlight God: **Laviathan** (God of Lightning)*

Realm EIGHT:

*Heila – Starlight Goddess: **Nightmare** (Goddess of
Destruction -*Daughter of Death*)*

Realm NINE:

Miolana – Starlight Goddess: **Yuikimiru** (God- dess of Life/Mother Nature)

Realm TEN:

ArchAilennia – Starlight Goddess: **Aphrodite** (Goddess of Prosperity/Beauty)

Knighthood Academy
Rank Placement

(HIGHEST – LOWEST)

PINK:

Highest rank achievement:

Shifter possesses master skills in physical, mental, and magical abilities. Stronger than the average spell castor. The shifter has a longer threshold of strength, allowing them to completely shift and stay in such form for a longer duration without depletion of stamina. Extremely rare rank.

GOLD:

Second highest rank of achievement:

Shifter able to use advance levels of magic, sharp physical abilities such as: expert levels in swordsmanship, archery, and general athletics (including fighting). Shifter can shift fully for a short period of time; once their stamina is depleted, the host and spirit are rendered powerless for a long period of time.

SILVER:

Shifter can use magic and many of their spirit abilities. Shifter can partially shift, able to change certain body parts into their spirit form (host shifting their hand into claws but unable to shift to full bear form).

ORANGE:

Shifter is ranked as average, able to use a certain percentage of magic abilities and spell casting.

BLACK:

Shifter ranked as below average. Only able to use physical and mental strengths. Very little to no magic abilities.

RED:

Lowest shifter rank.

Shifter has no magical capabilities or abilities are dormant in nature. Classified as too weak to be beneficial to the shifter world but enough to not be ranked as an average human. If dormant spirit grows in nature, revealing such capabilities, rank is moved up.

Host – Spirit Directory

MAKOTO HEART:

Roseline – DEMON

Hopefilinia – ANGEL

Lilylusha – PHOENIX

Lexinalla – DRAGON

Midnight – DARK FAIRY

RYDER CARTER:

Stryker – DEMON

DANIEL MOORE:

Azriel – ANGEL

ELIAS KINGSLEY:

EliaseAnne – FAIRY

MARCUS HUNT:

Ryuu – DRAGON

KAI AKIYAMA:

Hinotori – PHOENIX

In The Beginning...

Only the stars provided pinpricks of light throughout the galaxy. Over time, they drifted together and collided, creating ten powerful beings—the Starlight Gods.

The Gods' purpose became to create life and light. Within their galaxy, they created ten separate realms but began by creating life in only one. Cycles passed and their first creations—humans—blossomed and grew.

The Gods were pleased; however, they wanted more. So, they created spirits—angels, demons, fairies, animals, and more—to bond with the human body, and the shifter race was born.

They placed the shifters throughout the other realms. Some realms were home to only a specific species of shifter, while others held an assortment—the shifters learned to coexist with each other in harmony

The Gods created rules: a set for the human race to follow and a set for the shifter race.

One rule was absolute ...

“Thou shall not take upon the role of the Gods. We bless you with our protection. Your purpose is to defend, not destroy. One shall be blessed with the number of spirits we approve of and bestow. No creation shall be granted ultimate power over the species. Defy this law and you shall know nothing but catastrophe and everlasting despair.”

The Starlight Gods reside in the stars, having power and authority upon all beings. They can take any shape or form, whether human, shifter, animal, or familiar. The shifter race

looks to the Starlight Gods for power, strength, stability, and hope.

As long as the shifter believes, the Gods will always be there.

~In Stars We Trust~

I failed...

***I, Ryder Carter, was destined to do great things as the future
Heir of Realm Five Minato.***

With my grand duty to walk along the side of my fellow star
knights, we desperately searched for the woman who would
lead our galaxy to salvation.

We finally found her, in rough shape, but she was alive.

Two rotations was all we needed to watch her blossom into a
beautiful rose — one with delicate petals filled with purity and
life. Our mission was to guide her home, to where she truly
belonged, as our Princess and the woman I'd loved with all my
heart.

But I failed...

My once perfect rose was now damaged by my failures.
Could she ever forgive me, her star knight, who'd sworn to
protect her?

***Will I get a chance to tell her how much she means to me...
to us?***

Only the Starlight Gods can tell what the future holds, but I
pray with every ounce of my being that they bring her back to
us.

Please...bring my Firefly back to me.

~In Stars We Trust~



Prologue

SOLACE ROTATION – VII, CYCLE 5032

I'm cold.

I could only feel how cold it was.

My mind surrounded by darkness.

I didn't like it here.

I wanted to go home.

But, where was home?

More importantly, who was I?

Was I anything or anyone?

Was I apart of the darkness?

My mind faded away.

~ **RYDER** ~

Meditation – the state of mind in which individuals aim for equilibrium and peace.

I needed peace or a moment of absolute silence. Anything to block the multiple sounds, emotions, and torments fighting for entry within me.

I needed to escape – centre myself and understand that this would pass. *I will survive this.*

Yet, my emotions began to crawl into the depths of the darkness, slithering against the barrier that encased my mind.

I knew their intentions: to shatter the mental barricade I created for myself.

All I wanted was a break. A moment to enjoy the blissful silence surrounding me.

With silence, tranquility emerged. I didn't need to concern myself with anyone's feelings or concerns.

I could drop the facade I portrayed every day; the image everyone else saw when I walked down the castle halls.

I was the leader – my purpose had been to inspire and lead my fellow knights towards the undetermined future as we strived to find our goal; our princess...my beloved Rosalina.

Now, she was called Makoto Heart, the woman of my life. I wasn't the only one she'd impacted; her feisty, humorous personality brought a sense of fresh air to my group of knights: my true family.

Within two rotations, she'd inspired us to become better knights.

Not only did I crave to hear her laugh, but to see those gorgeous turquoise jewels glimmering with happiness as her luscious plump red lips smiled brilliantly, but I craved to taste her, to feel her body against mine.

Her warmth soothed me and the pain that cradled my heart. She accepted my flaws and unworthiness – her appointed star knight whose mission was to serve and protect her from harm's way.

Yet, I failed, again. My immature, nine-cycle-old self had ignored the signs back then. It was no different now; my older self unable to see the signs before she was taken from me, once more. *Would I be able to prove myself once again?*

"Ryder."

No, I didn't want to go yet. I needed more time in solitude. The darkness was calming and allowed me to ignore the multiple responsibilities and tasks before me.

I didn't want to face reality, afraid to succumb to my own feelings and heartache.

I wanted my Firefly back.

I wanted to hear her call my name again, to whisper words in my ear as she kissed my neck, cuddling against my bare chest.

I could still imagine the feel of her breasts pressed against me; the thin fabric of her bra unable to hide the feel of her

hardened nipples as she lay on top of me. The way she would bite the side of her lip as her eyes gazed up to smile softly at me.

I craved her in all aspects. Even now with my mind surrounded by darkness, I yearned for my Mako...for our Firefly...I missed her. *Can I not grieve in peace?*

“Ryder...please. I need you, too.”

Stryker– my demon spirit.

I could feel the barrier begin to crack; the glass-like surface breaking as the cracks grew longer and spread across the glass. It was a spider web, spreading to the point where one slight impact would shatter it completely – the emotions taking advantage of its vulnerable state.

Stryker’s feelings were the strongest, such levels of anger and desperation distracting as I tried to function in our current predicament.

I knew he tried to stop his worries and fears from flooding me, just as the others tried to control their emotions from leaking through our knight bond, but he was a part of me and we would have to share this pain together – to mourn the woman we loved.

He had feelings for Rose, Mako’s demon spirit. Their love blossomed way before I began to crush on the little, blue-eyed princess.

Now, he was hurting; unable to stop his emotions from consuming me and tearing at my soul. His reconnection with Rose had restored his emotions for her.

“Ya, I know. Just, one more minute...please.” I begged, my voice cracked.

I couldn’t deal with this pressure, making me regret being a leader to begin with.

What possessed the Starlight gods to think I was worthy enough to lead this diverse group of men?

I didn’t feel worthy or strong enough to lead them and face whatever darkness was foretold. I could barely keep myself

together, unable to stop the events that had transpired two weeks ago.

Yet here I stood, the leader of the star knights, hidden away within my mind, so I wouldn't fall to my own demise.

The hardest part of having a demon spirit was losing control. Darkness wasn't my enemy, it was a part of me.

Together with the darkness, I could accomplish many things, power being one of the lovely benefits. Too bad that power couldn't help me now.

"Patience. Time will tell...we have to go."

I mentally frowned at the tone of his voice, a sound that usually held no emotion was filled with pain and regret.

What was the use of having the power of darkness at my fingertips, if I was unable to defeat the enemy before me? The enemy who stole our Firefly away. The same desolate king who stole my sister from my care. It was his fault that my life had turned out this way, down to this very moment.

Without his selfish greed, I would have been happily serving Heila as a knight during the day, returning to the arms of my lover, the Princess of Prosperity and Good Fortune at night.

I would have experienced over and over again through the cycles, how it would have felt to return to her every night – to her intoxicating, vanilla scent, and have been able to run my hands through her long, brown locks before pressing my lips against her soft ones.

But, such a vision was nothing more than an unfulfilled wish.

During the day, I hid my troubles in the shadows as I forced the fake me to emerge – continuing my duties and training as a knight of Heila as I tried to receive my parent's praise and adoration. But, at night I was left alone to succumb to my internal pain.

Blair Aspen, you think you've won? If only you could fathom what's coming your way. They say light defeats the

darkness, but they don't know the truth. My darkness won't just defeat you...no, it will break you – piece by piece – as I give you a glimpse of what true darkness has to offer. All I need is patience and time. I'm done with being at a standstill. I'll get my revenge, just you wait. For Anya and Mako...I'll destroy you.

With that vow, the spider webbed barrier shattered, the multiple waves of emotion poured in.

I opened my eyes, taking a moment to steady my breathing. I wouldn't let the emotions take control; I was stronger than them.

I looked around the empty bedroom – my bedroom as a child. My happiest moments were spent here, playing and sleeping with the girl I crushed on. Other than that, it had no significance.

I uncrossed my legs before stretching them out. With a deep breath, I sat forward; my feet hit the soft maroon rug below, the texture comforting.

I rose, taking one more second to stretch before striding towards the door. My hand wrapped around the door knob, having every intention to turn the black metal clockwise, but I remained still.

I had to center my mind: closing my eyes, I called upon the other me to take over.

It was time to walk on stage and perform to an audience who knew me as nothing but the son of King Carter, future heir of Minato.

I couldn't show weakness beyond these four walls. A prince must always show strength, even in the times of despair and mourning.

I allowed my heavy eyelids to open, my mind made up. I could feel Stryker brush against my mental walls, feelings of encouragement and determination lingered as his presence came and went. I gripped the knob firmly before turning it to open the door before me.

Time to face reality.



CHAPTER 1

Ryder

*My conscious resurfaced again; the coldness still present
against my essence...*

*It felt like I was floating in nothingness, but I couldn't grasp
what was going on.*

There was a feeling creeping within me.

I'm lonely....

I allowed my body to lean against the black wooden wall, peering at the sunset; it's slow descent helped calm my anxiety.

I continued to fight the current battle I was having with my eyelids, trying my best to keep them open. *When was the last time I slept?*

I sometimes wished I was like Daniel. It didn't matter where he stood or laid, he could sleep without a struggle. I didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse.

In my case, I wish I could close my eyes and not be plagued by the nightmares – my body frozen in place as I watched King Aspen's hands around Makoto's throat, her eyes going dull as her life faded away, or the scene of Midnight covered in blood as she plunged into the lava below.

To think it's been a week and a half since I'd slept longer than five hours. It was only due to Daniel's angel forcing me to sleep that I even got that much.

I seriously hated when he did that. Not because I slept like a log, but because I never saw it coming.

He'd perfected the spell so well that with a quick snap of his finger my eyes would grow weak, and there would be nothing stopping my body from falling into a deep slumber. I sometimes was glad he was my best friend and not my enemy. He'd be a difficult opponent to face.

I continued to allow my mind to wander as I watched the sun disappear beyond the horizon. If only Mako was here to see this. She'd be sitting on the couch back at our house in Knightwood, watching the sunset before dinner.

It became such a habit, myself and the others took turns sitting next to her on the patio as we enjoyed the multi-coloured sky above; waiting for the stars to appear.

I loved holding her in my arms, my hand aimlessly venturing through her long, brown locks as we sat in silence, enjoying the various noises coming from the forest.

The best moments were when I kissed her. I always took a moment to enjoy her taste, surrounded by her addictive, vanilla scent that made me want her more. We'd gotten so used to kissing one another; her hesitation and self-consciousness were no more as she'd press her lips against mine.

I let out a frustrated breath; my hand brushed through my messy black hair, which seriously needed a cut. I needed to shave as well; my usual clean-shaven streak had been broken ever since the practical exam.

If it hadn't been for Matthew placing the incantation on her before we entered Realm One, we would be facing a completely different scenario.

I couldn't possibly imagine how much worse the situation could have become – Makoto and Midnight being stripped of their ability to fight King Aspen due to the loyalty mark, resulting in him taking her back to the facility we spent cycles trying to locate. She'd be an experiment once more and the rest of us would probably be among the stars above.

I didn't have time to deal with the little specs of hair. It didn't matter if she wasn't here to brush her hand against my

chin before kissing me. I had no one to impress. It was as if my purpose in this world had vanished, leaving me with nothing but an empty shell.

I felt a hand press against my shoulder, causing me to jolt out of my daze.

My wide eyes locked onto a pair of gold ones, their usual vibrant appearance was now dulled and weak as they gazed into me.

“Ryder. You seriously need to sleep.” Daniel’s voice was filled with concern as he frowned at my rough appearance.

He didn’t understand my struggle. How could you sleep when your mind was in overdrive, multiple emotions and thoughts barging in whenever they felt like it? You’d think my emotions could be considerate and show me some damn mercy.

“Where’s Marcus and how’s Elias doing?” I questioned, avoiding his suggestion as I pushed myself off the wall to walk towards the brown, side table. I allowed myself to lean against it as I faced my best friend.

His long, blonde locks were tied up into a small ponytail, his gold rimmed glasses relaxed on the top of his head. I had to admit, his overall appearance was disheveled for him.

He never wore anything with a wrinkle, yet his casual white shirt needed a good ironing, and messy, tied-up hair was a clear indication of the internal battle he faced.

He wore dark blue jeans and his white, indoor slippers; even though, I had reminded him on multiple occasions that he could walk barefoot in this section of the castle.

I sought comfort in the small detail, a sign that he too was still hanging on, if barely.

“Marcus is on watch duty and Elias is resting. Karen says the poison is almost out of his system. Thank the Starlight gods he’s a fairy shifter. They’re the only species who could survive such a strong poison. If only he would stay in bed for longer than fifteen minutes, he would heal a lot faster, and don’t get me started on EliaseAnne,” Daniel explained, his

hand removed his glasses from his head before a sigh escaped him. I smirked at the mention of Eli.

Elias had been hit with a lightning spear during our battle. Thankfully, it missed its original target, Mako and Elias' heart, but I guess the King figured a spear wouldn't kill off our princess.

So, Nephilim poison was added to the tip of the spear.

Nephilim poison was an extremely strong, toxic substance. A small dosage would be enough to paralyze someone permanently, let alone kill them if such toxins reached the target's heart.

Elias was simply lucky that fairy shifters could weed poisons out of their blood stream at escalated rates.

Didn't mean he didn't face some struggles.

We had gotten him here in the brink of time for Karen and the other healers to stabilize him. Now that he was able to walk again, he was eager to get out of that medical center.

We all knew he hated anything resembling an experimental ward, medical centers included.

Eli was no different.

Elias could at least tolerate the checkups and procedures, but Eli would do anything to get the hell out of there before someone even laid a finger on her. It wasn't her fault she reacted that way.

If you were once a male spirit, becoming an alternate spirit guinea pig and being accidentally changed into a female, you wouldn't let any person with a medical background touch you...or in Eli's case, be anywhere near you.

I'm thankful to the Starlight gods for summoning Elias and Eli to come to Heila before his father could continue to force the experiments on them.

King Arthur was still investigating the matter, having promised to send a few scouts to assess what King Kingsley was up to. We all feared he was going to become the next Blair Aspen, using Elias as his prodigy.

We all believed what Elias explained had happened and he had the scars to prove it, but we needed enough evidence to prove it to everyone else. That was just another issue we'd have to face.

I heard footsteps entering the room, breaking me away from my thoughts. My tired eyes glanced up to see Marcus' large frame; his sapphire eyes looked exhausted.

I felt Stryker's anxiety brush through me as I gulped. Marcus quickly shook his head, placing a hand firmly on my shoulder.

"Kai's there. I was forced to go take a nap or run or something. I honestly think Karen just doesn't like me growling every five minutes," he confessed, scoffing as his hand returned to his side. He turned his glance to Daniel before giving him a nod in greetings.

I sighed, as I pushed myself from the table.

I felt myself waver before a pair of hands stabilized me. I blinked my eyes, trying to ignore my spinning surroundings.

The dizziness will pass, no big deal.

"Fuck, Ryder. You need to sleep." Daniel swore; his eyes glared at me as Marcus held me up.

"Well, my bad. I wish I could fucking sleep anywhere like you," I snapped back; my sudden frustration oozed into my deep voice.

I felt a wave of sadness hit me, causing me to groan.

"Fuck. Sorry, Daniel. I'm just—" I tried to find an excuse for my actions, but I couldn't.

I seriously couldn't handle this for much longer.

Marcus pulled me into a hug; his hand patted my back as my head rested against his shoulder.

"Ryder. You need to stop this. You're hurting badly. I know out of all of us, you feel our emotions the strongest, but don't forget we can feel yours. We know you're struggling and

it's painful. You always allow us to rely on you, so can't you do the same just this once?" Marcus whispered.

I struggled to find the words as I tried to shut down the clutter of emotions ready to spill out of me, sadness and fear the strongest.

I attempted to fight the stinging in my eyes as I held back the sob that wanted to escape me.

I was the leader. I had to be strong. I couldn't let them see such weaknesses. I had to pretend everything was okay.

I heard another pair of footsteps enter the room. I knew I should get my act together before anyone, besides my best friends, saw me in this state, but I couldn't stop the rollercoaster of emotions that climbed upward inside me, the heavy weight ready to tip over the edge.

Another hand landed onto my shoulder.

"Ryder, let it go. We won't judge you. No one else is here but us. Let us be here for you; the way you're here for us. We know you're hurting the most. We get it," Elias' calm voice whispered as his grip tightened.

His words were enough to trigger the tears I'd been holding back as the sobs broke out.

"I don't want to lose her. I just got her back. After all these cycles, I finally got her back from his clutches and now she's on the verge of death! I failed her as a knight...I didn't even tell her directly that I loved her. If she...if she doesn't make it, she'll never know. She'll never know how loved she was in her short life. It's all my fault. I didn't see the signs that she wasn't replenishing her magic. She didn't even tell me about Midnight. I should have never allowed us to go to that exam. It was clearly a trap, yet I allowed us to go because she wanted us to. I vowed to not put her in danger, but look what happened," I cried, the cascade of emotions crashed through me and leaked into the bond.

I couldn't hold back anymore.

It was killing me.

I heard Elias curse before his arms wrapped around my back, joining the embrace.

I could feel all their regret and sadness. I could even feel Kai's concern from such a distance.

Why did the gods burden me with such a role, yet they couldn't make me strong enough to protect the people I cared about the most?

"Ryder. You need to trust in Makoto and Midnight. They've dealt with a lot of shit. They're stronger than this. She won't succumb to this either, but she needs your moral support. You have to believe the Starlight gods will heal her. Everything happens for a reason. We just have to pray that Mako survives this. We can't give up on her," Elias consoled me.

I nodded, unable to find the words to agree.

I knew he was right. I couldn't give up on our Firefly.

She was our light, and I wouldn't allow the gods to let her dim away.

If all it took was another prayer out of the multiple prayers I'd said in the last two weeks, I would do it. Anything to see her beautiful, turquoise eyes again.

Oh, Starlight gods. Thy beings of power and divinity. I plead for your divine intervention. Please give my love, Makoto Heart, strength, to fight her battle and survive. Revoke the shackles preventing her from awakening. Provide her with strength to open her eyes. You created us to protect and defend the darkness that is brewing, but we need our Queen to guide us along the path to victory. Please...if you can hear my desperate plea; bring her back to me...to us. In stars, we trust."

I allowed my mind to drift, unable to fight the exhaustion that seeped into my bones from all the sleepless nights.

At least the darkness welcomed me with open arms, as my mind faded away; the multiple emotions ceased to exist.



How much time had passed?

Minutes? Hours?

I was unable to determine how long since I'd awakened to the darkness.

But, I felt yet another feeling take form within me; sadness.

The coldness seeped into my soul as the loneliness took hold, causing the sadness to grow.

I have no home to return to.

I wish I could feel warm once more.

I tried to remember something, as the time continued to pass, but I couldn't remember anything.

My mind was nothing but a jumble of mush.

Was my purpose to be one with the darkness?

~DANIEL~

“Shit, Ryder!” Marcus swore as he held Ryder’s limp body in his arms, preventing him from collapsing on the floor.

I rushed over to them as Marcus laid him onto the black floor; Elias assisted to keep his head in alignment. I called forth my angel spirit; his power burned through me as I allowed my eyes to scan Ryder from head to toe.

I sighed, relieved with the results.

“Exhaustion and sleep deprivation. It was only matter of time before his body gave up on him. He hasn’t been sleeping longer than two hours a day for three days straight.” Elias sighed; his hand aimed for the door.

I felt the sudden burst of wind as his hand emitted a soft green light; the heavy metal door closed gently.

I couldn’t sense anyone in this part of the castle, but knowing Elias, he didn’t want to take any chances.

It would be bad for Ryder’s overall image if any of the maids or guards saw him collapsed, on the ground.

We’d just be worrying his mother, not to mention his father would just make him miserable. He had enough on his plate.

“I wish he would rely on us, just like he lets us rely on him. I don’t know how he handles dealing with all our emotions before his own. Not to mention Stryker’s. I bet he’s struggling to not cause any havoc for Ryder’s sake. He’s most likely worried about Rose,” Marcus acknowledged.

The five rays of light that ascended into the sky following our fake death act, was nothing but a decoy; such events part of Midnight’s plan in feigning our deaths, but after the multiple body scans, we couldn’t detect any of her spirits.

It was as if she was an empty vessel, just lying there on life support. It took a week before she was able to breathe on her own; Karen applied oxygen only during the times her saturation was lower than the norm. We had to just wait and see what happened, if she woke up.

Makoto didn’t just push herself to her limit; she surpassed it.

After falling from the edge, she shifted into her dragon; hiding her large body in a cave opening, she had somehow created using her phoenix’s flames.

I honestly had no idea how she was able to use her multiple spirits and still have energy to create the cave opening; let alone, the web she summoned to catch us, as we fell towards the scorching lava.

Once all four of us fell into the net, a glamour sprinkled over the top of us, making us invisible. It was amazing; the tall man with violet eyes couldn't see us as he peered over the edge, only frowning before walking away.

Once Blair Aspen had finally left, Mako's dragon came out, flying towards us. She allowed us to climb onto her large back before bringing us back up to the top of the cliff, just as Matthew and other guards flooded through the portal; Nightmare raced ahead.

We thought everything was going to be okay till Mako shifted back, collapsing to the ground. Nightmare frantically nudged at her lifeless body as Karen emerged on the scene thanks to Kai's assistance.

We went straight into conducting CPR, the series of compressions before mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It took a strenuous ten minutes before we got a weak pulse; Karen stabilized her as we rushed over to Minato's best medical center in the heart of the castle; Ryder's home.

Since then, she'd stopped breathing four times and stayed on life support till her body was strong enough to breathe on its own. Now, she was in a coma, and we truly couldn't figure out when she would wake up.

That, along with the discovery that her spirits weren't present within her, was a problem. Karen stated they could have fallen dormant in an effort to help Mako gain enough energy to breathe and recover, but she wasn't sure.

No one had survived such events before. It was common knowledge, if you surpassed your magic limit, you wouldn't live to tell the tale.

Now, I prayed Mako would be the first.

"Is Ryder okay?"

We glanced at each other before our eyes landed on Ryder. Kai's concerned voice reminded us of his presence within our bond.

"He passed out after having a breakdown. He needs to rest," I explained through our bond.

“He’s afraid of losing the princess. Not to mention having to deal with our levels of anxieties and his family garbage. I’m glad his father left yesterday for a business trip. He needs a break, we all do. I just wish our Princess a speedy recovery.”

I sighed at Kai’s remarks. Our phoenix shifter in the group and fifth star knight. Mako didn’t even get to meet him yet, though I knew she’d shown some interest when told about the origin of his orange stool back at our house in Knightwood.

I prayed she’d get to meet him. Then he would see how utterly amazing she is. He had met her in the worse case scenario, seeing her lifeless pale body, her usual red lips a sickly blue, as we fought to get her to breathe.

“I’ll pray, too. He won’t be able to handle it if...none of us will.”

I couldn’t attempt to finish the statement. I wouldn’t dare speak of it. I knew the power of the mind and I wouldn’t jinx our princess. I hadn’t even gotten to show her my love.

I vowed I would make more time for her and train harder. I wouldn’t waste the hours of the day sleeping, when those same hours could be spent making her smile. Life was sacred, and I had to take advantage of the time we had.

“I’ll take Ryder back to his room. Elias, why are you here? Karen’s going to kill you if she finds you’re out of your room,” Marcus pointed out.

“I hate being in there...you know that. I don’t care if Karen scolds me, I can’t sleep there,” Elias confessed; his voice sounded vulnerable.

“Fine. Come help me. You think you have enough strength to glamour us, just in case anyone comes by?” Marcus questioned.

“Yup. I can. Um, can I stay with you then? I don’t want to be alone right now,” Elias admitted.

I stood up and walked to his side, placing my hand supportively on his shoulder. I knew he dealt with his own demons thanks to that medical center. I told Karen it was a bad idea, that he could be treated in another room in the castle, but

all the major equipment was in there and she wanted to make sure Elias wouldn't die in his sleep thanks to the poison flowing through his veins. Now that it was almost diminished from his system, we weren't too concerned.

"Of course. You don't mind my snoring so it's fine," Marcus replied.

"It's cause you sound like a fucking Mustang starting up," Kai commented.

"It's not that bad," Marcus argued.

"It's pretty bad. I'm surprised Elias or Mako can sleep in the same room as you," I complained.

"I'm used to it," Elias voiced as I watched him shrug.

"Whatever. C'mon, let's get Ryder to bed. Kai, if anything happens, wake us all up immediately," Marcus ordered.

"Will do," Kai agreed before his mind left our bond.

I assisted Marcus and Elias in holding Ryder, his arms perched on their necks as they supported his body weight. I could still see the exhaustion in his face; his cheeks still flushed; though, the tears that had run down them had dried.

I said my goodbyes, reassuring them I would get some rest, but I needed to check on her one more time. I made my way back to the medical center, walking through the quiet halls.

Now that it was evening, most of the medical staff was gone, leaving only a few for the night shift. Karen was on call and rested in one of the rooms closest to where Mako was being treated, just in case anything happened.

My legs came to a stop, facing the transparent door, spelled to make the room appear empty, hiding the true contents within its protective walls.

I pressed my left hand against it, the gold Celtic knot work caught my eyes. I took a moment to compose myself as I felt the various emotions flow through me – sadness, anxiety, anger. Yet, the strongest emotion was regret.

Ryder had tried to reassure me that this wasn't my fault. Yet, no words could console me. I couldn't get to Mako and Elias fast enough, that was the reason why we were in this predicament. I wasn't strong enough to shift fully and release my angel's wings like other advanced angel shifters.

If only I had gotten there faster. She wouldn't be on the verge of death.

"She isn't going to die Daniel. It's not her time. We need to have faith in her. The gods wouldn't allow her star to fade away. Believe in them and they will do their work."

I took a deep breath, smiling at the gentle, melodic voice that entered my mind, in an effort to comfort me.

"Thank you, Azriel."

My angel spirit, Azriel, always consoled me, when I attempted to wallow in misery. The boys knew both sides of me; the good me and the darker me. They simply didn't know the extent of the darkness residing in me. Only Azriel truly knew and understood that part of me I hid in the shadows.

They didn't call me a Sinister Angel for no reason.

I allowed my magic to seep through my hand and into the door; the magic circle glowed a light orange before the door slid open. I walked in, allowed the door to close behind me, before a pair of amber eyes met my gaze.

"You should be sleeping," Kai acknowledged; his hand stopped in place, hovering above his sketchbook.

I smirked before walking towards the large, white bed; the multiple, soft sheets cradled our Princess as she slept.

I couldn't stop my eyes from lingering on her peaceful face.

"I'll give you five minutes. You need rest like the others. You all look like shit," Kai stressed, putting his sketchbook on the side table before making his way to the exit. He gently patted my shoulder before leaving. I whispered my thanks before making my way to the chair next to her bed.

I sat down at the edge of the seat, noticing the unfinished sketch on the side table; Mako's sleeping image sketched out in multiple colours, as silhouettes surrounded her bed, each figure a different colour.

I knew it was us, by the colours. Five figures surrounded our queen. I forgot how talented Kai was, especially in regard to art. It's what he did to relax from thinking too much, a good coping mechanism and use of his talents.

I reached out to hold her hand, pressing my lips against her cool skin. I hated how cold she was. I wanted to feel her warm embraces after our hair sessions. She loved when I helped her with her hair in the morning; her eyes glittered with eagerness as to what I'd do. That was one of my motivations to get up in the morning, though I still managed to skip breakfast. I would work on that.

"Makoto...stay with us, please. Don't leave us. We have so much to show you. So much to tell you. Be strong," I whispered, tightening my grasp as I closed my eyes.

I just had to be strong for the both of us. I allowed myself to relax as I held her hand, the sounds of the humidifier and vitals monitor on the opposite side of the bed filled the silence.

I will get stronger. I'll surpass all of the healers here. I'll aim for the top, so I can mend all her wounds and keep my friend's safe. When the darkness tries to overtake us...I'll be ready.

I opened my eyes to continue watching our princess as I finished my silent vow, waiting for Kai to return.

Once I left here, I would go straight to the training room.

It was time for me to work towards my goal.

I'd slept enough.

CHAPTER 2



Marcus

***“Makoto...stay with...please...don’t ...so much to show...
stay strong.”***

*I tried to pick up the broken sentence, my hearing wavered in
and out.*

*I felt weak and tired; the depressing continuation of floating
made me want to return to slumber.*

*My conscious faded yet again, unable to ignore the pull into
the abyss.*

“M *arcus.”*

*I turned my head to face the blue-eyed brunette
calling me from afar, surrounded in a field of sunflowers.*

*As beautiful as the yellow flowers were, they didn’t
compare to the woman a few feet away – my Princess who I’d
come to love.*

“Makoto.”

*I made my way towards her, wanting to pull her into my
arms and lavish in her sweet taste.*

*Her vanilla scent was addicting, and I loved how it
lingered on my clothes.*

*I wanted to hold her hand, as we made our way back to the
castle. She was home in Heila, and I wanted to enjoy every
moment I could by her side.*

*I continued walking – my long strides should have helped
me reach her faster.*

Yet, my mind became confused as to why I wasn't getting closer. No, I was getting farther away.

"Mako?" I called out to her.

She tilted her head in confusion before her eyes grew wide – something plunged into her chest.

I didn't register the scream that left my mouth as I charged forward, watching as the tip of the blade dug deeper; blood seeped into the white shirt – into the cotton fabric.

She trembled in her spot – her eyes wide with fear.

"Marcus? I...I don't want to die," she whispered. Her voice trembled as tears pooled in her eyes.

I cursed, running as fast as I could, yet she was still so far away.

"Firefly, you won't die! I'll save you. Hold on," I begged. I was so desperate to get to her. Why couldn't I reach her?

The blade pulled out, the blood flowed freely as it stained her shorts and legs, oozing onto the soil beneath her.

The clouds began to darken while the sunflowers, once filled with life, withered away to nothing but ash.

I reached out to her, before my foot got caught in the dead, grey soil, causing me to fall.

I kicked myself back up, the urgency to get to Makoto was far more important than the burning pain in my lungs – the fear of losing her to death tore at my heart.

"Makoto! Makoto!"

I watched her eyes began to dull; her knees dropped to the ground.

She gave me a weak smile; blood dripped down her mouth till the remaining specs of life in those turquoise eyes faded; her body fell forward into the ground as blood pooled around her.

"No! Makoto! No, no, no! MAKOTO!"

I woke up with a jolt — my eyes snapped open as I lunged forward.

I scanned my surroundings as I felt the sweat drip down my face; my breathing frantic and quick, as I attempted to catch my breath. My eyes landed on the sleeping figure on the other half of the king size bed.

I sighed in relief, glad I didn't wake Elias due to my sudden movement. He wasn't a deep sleeper compared to Daniel, but he'd been so drained the last couple of days. His body worked on repelling the remaining remnants of the poison Blair Aspen inflicted on that bloody lightning spear.

We were all thankful for Elias' fast action and sacrifice, though I hated the fact he struggled with his own demons. What happened to him and Eli still lingered in his bones, even after sixteen cycles. I didn't blame him; I was dealing with my own demons — the nightmares resurfaced in the past two weeks after two months of being nightmare free.

The arrival of Mako in our lives had done something to calm me and keep the nightmares away, but now they were back with revenge.

I noticed something move under the sheet at the end of the bed. I frowned, raising my eyebrow at the movement, before my lips formed a smirk and a white, fluffy tail appeared from under the blanket, followed by two more tails.

"Nightmare?" I questioned gently; my voice low enough to not wake up the sleeping fairy shifter next to me. Her furry, white head popped out from under the blanket, turning to face me.

"Mew?" She blinked a few times, her mismatched eyes stared at me before making her way towards me.

She climbed onto my lap, purring as she rubbed her head against my stomach. I struggled to hold back the laughter that wanted to escape; her soft fur tickled me.

"Hey, no more of that. I'll wake up Elias if I laugh." I picked her up with my right hand, placing her on my shoulder before swinging the blanket off me. I took another glance at

the sleeping Elias; his body wrapped in his portion of my blue blanket. His body stirred, pulling the blanket before nestling back in place. I shook my head in amusement.

After all these cycles, he still continued to be a blanket hog. I wondered if he and Mako fought for the blanket when they slept. Knowing Elias, he'd just cuddle with her and cocoon them in his massive green blanket. Yup, he'd have no problem sharing with our Firefly.

I took a moment to stretch my sore muscles. I hadn't been working out lately, and my body ached because of it. It had become so use to the multiple stretches and active movements that it now rejected my sudden lack of movement.

I spent more time sitting next to Mako's bed or resting in our designated room than training. I didn't have the motivation to workout, fearing something bad would occur if I set foot outside the castle walls. I wanted to be here if anything happened. It was the only thing that kept me from shifting.

I would pat my dragon on its scaly back if I could for being so cooperative these past few days. I knew he struggled with the same fears I dealt with, but he tried to stay calm, so we would be allowed to stay close by. We both came to the conclusion that losing control would only put Mako and anyone else in the castle at risk. If it came down to the point we felt like we'd lose control, we'd leave and fly somewhere that would be safe to shift.

I walked towards the drawer. I opened it, grabbed a pair of black sweat pants and a grey fitted top; slipping them on quietly.

Nightmare nestled against my neck; her tails secure around my neck, keeping her steady on my shoulder. The small, white ball of fur had rotated amongst us during the night, offering us some comfort with her company.

During the days, she would rest next to Mako; her grey markings glowed a soft blue or yellow every so often.

We figured out blue meant she was sad; her soft whimpers pulled at our heart strings. It usually occurred when Mako's

breathing lowered, which prompted Karen to apply the oxygen and assist her body from working too hard.

The light-yellow glow, apparently some type of healing spell, or that's what Karen and Daniel both agreed upon. The small familiar would do it three times a day; its effects usually helped Mako breathe on her own. We all loved her for her immense devotion to Makoto and Midnight. She'd done her portion in fighting off King Aspen. Even though, she was exhausted from the energy loss after the weapon modification, she still summoned Matthew and the others.

It was thanks to her, we were able to revive and stabilize Makoto as well as Elias. He had waited until Karen assured us Mako would survive the transfer back through the portal before losing consciousness.

I could still see the relief in his emerald eyes before they closed; his body fell forward. I never lunged so fast before; his body temperature felt like he was burning up from the inside out as he struggled to breathe. We had to rush them through the portal before Kai helped teleport Mako, Elias, Daniel and Karen to the medical center.

Kai's teleportation gift was a blessing in times like these. He'd not only teleported Karen into Realm One with ease but was able to bring all four of them to the medical center for treatment. He had informed us later on that he'd arrived at Minato by teleporting there an hour before our exam, reaching Knightwood a few minutes after we'd made our way to the portal entrance.

It was extremely draining on the average shifter to use their powers that frequently, yet he was still able to stick around and ensure everything went smoothly, before he finally rested. He was definitely the strongest in our group, though Ryder and Elias weren't too far behind.

I was stronger in physical combat than in magic casting, but Elias with Eli made him a double threat, and Ryder's dark flames were a rare trait few demon shifters possessed.

I didn't even know if Mako's demon, Rose, could call upon those demonic flames.

“Mew Mew.”

I smiled as my hand unconsciously petted the familiar.

“You want to go check on our Princess?” I asked softly.

“Mew!” she replied; her tails unlatched from my neck to wave frantically side to side.

I chuckled quietly at her excitement. She was probably worried sick.

“Okay, let’s go,” I whispered as I pulled my shirt on; Nighty jumped down to the floor, waiting for me to finish before she climbed up and back onto my shoulder.

I tiptoed out of the room before closing the door gently.

It didn’t take me long to reach the medical center. It was on the other side of the gigantic castle the King and Queen resided in. I pressed my hand against the transparent door; the magic circle lit up before sliding open, allowing me entry.

Once closed, I made my way to the side of the bed, the chair neatly placed along the wall. I knew Karen was probably awake, watching Mako’s vitals through her device in her office. She had probably forced Kai to go rest up, by reassuring the phoenix shifter she’d awaken him if necessary.

Kai was just as stubborn as Ryder, both of them willing to push themselves till their bodies begged for rest. The number of times we scolded them during our younger training days was ridiculous.

They simply went on the motto, ‘*Sleep is for the weak*’ and kept striving forward to excel in their skills and abilities.

I pulled up the chair, placing it next to the bed. I allowed my body to relax as Nightmare jumped off my shoulder and onto the bed. She made her way to Mako’s neck, cuddling against Mako as her tails lay softly against Mako’s chest. Her grey markings soared to life; the soft, yellow glow made another appearance as she purred quietly.

I smiled; my hand reached out to cradle hers. I noticed her hand felt slightly warmer than the last time I held her.

Was she healing?

“Mako, Firefly? Won’t you open your eyes? I miss you,” I confessed, allowing myself to lean over and kiss her gently on the lips. I wished she could hear me or feel my acts of affection.

My heart begged for her lively conversations and humorous remarks.

“Keep fighting sweet Firefly. We have to venture to Realm Six for your gift, remember?” I whispered in her ear.

I knew she wouldn’t reply, but I hoped my message went through to her. I prayed she wouldn’t give up.

All hell would break loose if she didn’t overcome this ordeal, starting with my rampage. I knew what my dragon was capable of...but I was less afraid of his outbreak.

Ryder on the other hand...or even Elias. No, Daniel was the worst out of all of us. Nothing would end well if he allowed himself to let loose. We knew what he could do, but it took a great deal to push him to the edge and no one wanted him to reach there. His actions could very easily affect ours and that was something no one – not even the gods themselves – would want to happen.

I grasped her hand tightly and decided to stay with her until one of the others came to take over. I felt less restless when

I knew one of us was with her.

She needed as much moral support as possible to win whatever battle she faced within.

I’d do anything to assist her in becoming victorious.

CHAPTER 3

Elias

“Mako, Firefly? Won’t you open your eyes? I miss you.”
“Keep fighting sweet Firefly. We have to venture to Realm
Six for your gift, remember?”

I allowed my mind to listen, the voice still so far out of reach.

Mako? Who was that? Was that me?

I wished someone could hear my questions as I continued to be
one with the darkness.

I wished for company; my soul ached to get rid of such
loneliness.

Midnight.

The name popped out in my brain. I remembered her now; my
other half.

Is this where she stayed when I was alive?

I could feel the sadness only grow; my heart ached for the
other half of me.

I miss you Midnight.

Why won’t you come and keep me company?

I’m all alone...

~ **E** *LIAS*~

“She probably hates me.”

I allowed my heavy eyelids to open; Eli's agonizing voice stirred me awake. I peeked out of the blanket made cocoon I created to look over my shoulder.

I frowned at the empty wrinkled side of the bed; my dragon shifter partner in crime, absent. I glanced at the electronic clock on the side of the bed; the miniature, electric blue guitar hosted on top of the rectangle contraption displayed 4:15 AM in light blue.

It shouldn't surprise me that Marcus was already awake, probably at Mako's side, instead of his usual training activities.

I knew he was way too stressed to work out, let alone carry out his regular activities. His body showed signs of his absence from training, looking slimmer each day. We'd all lost weight from the lack of sleep and eating.

If it wasn't for Matthew forcing us to eat, whenever he came down from Knightwood every evening, I bet we wouldn't eat at all. Regardless of the food he brought, it all tasted the same.

My meals were better when Mako was present. I loved that she'd idolized my cooking, begging me to teach her my ways once exams were over. I still couldn't get the image of her wearing my apron that fateful day, her curves pushed the "heavenly baked" fabric to the test.

The way it covered her, gave off the image of her being naked, allowing my imagination to presume the apron was the only clothing preventing me from viewing her glorious figure.

I was glad I wasn't wearing grey sweat pants, because I knew for sure my hardness would have been apparent as my eyes roamed over her body. I would never have imagined being in love with a girl who would even want to cook for me.

With all the girls at Knightwood, begging for a rich man to come sweep them off their feet, I had little to no hope that my future lover would attempt to learn how to cook.

Yet, Mako appeared. She was isolated from the world for sixteen cycles with not much cooking knowledge, but she

woke up and cooked for all of us.

All the female shifters at Knightwood should stop and take notes. They would learn a few things.

I let out a sigh as I sat up, my body protested my movements. I still felt like I got tackled by those bloody bear shifters and left on the side of the road. As much as I wanted to sit here and mope, I needed to calm the feeling of sadness flooding my hazy mind.

“Eli, please. Mako doesn’t hate you.” I allowed my body to lay back into the soft mattress, unable to sit upright any longer. I’d slept a solid six hours, yet I still felt like I’d just closed my eyes moments ago.

“Of course, she hates me. I didn’t tell her. I should have. She’s my best friend Elias. I’ve never had...I’ve never been friends with a female shifter like her. You know how the other females are at Knightwood. Intolerable, selfish, gossip girls who would sell their bodies with the snap of their fingers for popularity and fame. Mako isn’t like that. She’s so different and unique...I love that about her. Yet, I couldn’t even be honest with her. How about if she doesn’t—” Eli began before I cut her off.

“She’s going to live EliaseAnne. She isn’t going to leave us. She can’t...Mako is stronger than this. So is Midnight. They won’t succumb to this. The Starlight gods wouldn’t take her away from us. We just have to have faith...okay?”

I couldn’t stop the pain from flowing into my mind at my declaration. I couldn’t even think of Mako not being by our side now that we experienced the liveliest two months in her presence. She was the fresh air we all needed.

“Okay...sorry,” she apologized softly.

I closed my eyes as I laid my arm across my face. *Fuck, I don’t want to be alone right now.*

Ever since waking up to the chemical rich, hospital smelling, medical center, my anxiety and fear of being alone in a room came back in full force. I didn’t want to bother the

others; all of them dealt with their own problems in our current situation, but I was scared shitless.

Switching to EliaseAnne only heightened my fears – her reactions to being in this environment for too long were far more physical.

She couldn't last longer than fifteen minutes till her breathing would elevate; her anxiety increased as her hands shook. It wouldn't be long till she went into panic mode and that was draining for both of us.

Marcus truly understood what I was going through. I couldn't help but remember all the times during our younger cycles where he'd leave his door unlocked, knowing I'd barge into his bed an hour after bed time. He didn't mind in the least, always leaving a spare blanket at the edge of the bed.

Now that my issues had resurfaced, he didn't mind me sharing his bed. I was blessed to have him as my best friend, along with the other three knights.

We all didn't understand or know what the Starlight gods had in store for us, but I knew we all were thankful for each other's presence. We all contributed in some way in our little group dynamic. Mako fit perfectly within our circle – the leader of our pack.

"You want to go see her?" I asked softly.

I hated entering that sterile environment, its purpose to simply induce nightmares and unwanted memories, but if it was for Mako, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Yes...are you sure though? I hate that place, but I miss her," Eli questioned; her soft admission made my heart ache.

I couldn't handle Eli being sad. We'd gone through so much shit in the past, especially with our family. I wanted her to be happy and enjoy life now that we were out of my father's clutches, but some days were harder than others. I'd do anything to please her and help us enjoy the new life we were privileged in receiving, thanks to the gods.

"It's fine. Why don't we give Marcus a few more moments with her and then we'll go see her?" I suggested.

I figured Marcus probably hadn't awakened much earlier than me, so I wanted him to have a bit more time.

"Elias, you okay?"

I couldn't stop the smile that formed on my face as the low, alto voice entered our knight bond.

Speak of the devil.

"Ya, I'm fine. Um..." I struggled for words as I held my tongue.

I didn't want to intrude on his alone time with Makoto. We all took turns watching her, each of us needed a moment to pray and allow the sound of the pulse monitor to soothe our anxieties.

"Come here." I sighed in relief at his approval. He understood me and Eli well, just as Daniel understood Ryder.

"You both better promise to sleep later or I'll ban you from seeing the Princess." Kai's voice entered my mind.

I felt myself shoot up, swinging my legs to land on the ground before rushing over to the lower drawer, pulling it open to retrieve my set of spare clothes. I always had a few sets of clothes in Marcus' room for when I randomly slept over.

"Yes, Sir Kai. We'll make sure to rest cause none of us want to lose our visitation rights," Marcus acknowledged.

"How's Daniel?" I questioned.

"Sleeping like a log after working his ass off in the training centre, again. He's pushing himself. I'm worried," Kai admitted.

"It's a good stress reliever right now. Maybe if it gets to a point where it's taking a negative toll on his body, we'll talk to him. But, for now, let's leave him alone," Marcus suggested.

I shook my head as I slipped my dark grey sweat pants on before pulling the dark, mustard coloured shirt over my head. I took a moment to calm myself, feeling afraid of leaving the

secure walls to walk through the empty castle towards the ward.

“Mewwwwwwww.”

I turned my head to the sound; my eyes landed on the ball of white fur sitting in front of the door; her multiple tails wagged from side to side as she sat patiently.

“Sometimes I question if what Mako said about you is true. You being a Starlight god and all.” I whispered more to myself than to the foxshier familiar at the doorway, unable to stop the smirk that formed on my lips.

I could already feel a wave of calm go through me as my mind recognized I wouldn’t be walking through those dark halls alone. Having a companion is nice, especially if she is a Starlight god.

“Mew Mewwww.” She jumped in place before tilting her head to the side. She clearly was asking me what was taking me so long.

“Ya, I’m coming,” I replied to the impatient familiar, making my way to the doorway.

“Let’s go see our princess, shall we?”

* * *

I sat next to Mako’s bed — Marcus had left to go for a run.

He said he wanted me to have a bit of alone time before Kai forced us to leave.

I sometimes despised that phoenix shifter.

I don’t know where he got all his energy from. He was like Ryder, except he could literally function on two hours of sleep every day for an entire cycle and not lose his shit. He always had to make sure the group got enough rest.

I turned my attention to our sleeping beauty; my hand in hers. I stood up, leaning over to kiss her lips gently, before pressing my forehead against hers.

She became warmer each day; her breathing became stronger. I just wanted her to open her eyes, so I could get a glimpse of those turquoise irises that projected kindness and love.

“Mako babe, I beg you. Don’t let the darkness win. You’re strong, both you and Midnight can fight this. Come back to us, won’t you? I’ll make your favourite blueberry pancakes,” I whispered.

I could feel Eli brush against my mind; her sorrow made it even harder to stay composed. Nightmare raised her head; her small, furry body snuggled against Mako’s neck. She stared at me quietly. I smiled, petting her head gently before sitting back down.

I had to be strong for her. By the Starlight gods, she will make it...

CHAPTER 4

Ryder

*“Mako babe, I beg you. Don’t let the darkness win.
You’re strong, both you and Midnight can fight this.
Come back to us, won’t you?.*

I’ll make your favourite blueberry pancakes.”

*I wanted to scream, but I had no voice.
Why were these voices asking me to do something I wasn’t
capable of?*

The darkness was winning.

Winning what?

If this was a fight, I surely was losing.

I had no weapon to defend myself.

Where were my spirits?

I missed their voices.

I don’t want to fight this battle any longer.

I’m tired of being alone.

I’m scared I’ll never find my way back home.

Help me.

“H e’s a pain in the ass, that’s what he is.”

*I rolled my eyes as I turned the corner, the
medical center in sight.*

I had passed out after my mini breakdown in front of the guys, the multiple emotions plus the lack of sleep finally took its toll on me. I guess I was happy I fainted in front of them and not in the hall or anywhere near the maids and guards.

That would have been more of a pain in the ass.

I'd slept for a solid twenty hours, before I was stirred awake by Marcus' snoring. I still couldn't understand how anyone could sleep next to him without a sound bubble spell around them.

I seriously commended Elias' and Mako's perseverance.

Apparently, Matthew had watched me till an hour before, Marcus took his place, so he could get some rest. I was thankful to have gotten some much-needed rest, but it didn't help get rid of the anxiety I had. Mako was still in a coma.

Now, I headed back to stay by her side for as long as Kai would let me.

I swear to Starlight, he was so stubborn, reminded me of our Firefly.

I walked into the medical room, nodding my head to the blonde nurse that was making her way out, her stethoscope around her neck as she carried a clipboard in hand. She probably came to check Mako's vitals for rounds.

It was seven in the evening, the usual time for the night shift to switch over and do their final rounds for the night.

The medical team was personally chosen by Karen herself – knights of higher rank who'd she entrusted with the secret that Makoto was Rosalina, Princess of Heila. They swore to not tell a soul and secured that section of the medical centre for our group only.

I noticed Eli sat in our designated spot; her hands fiddled with a needle and thread.

"What are you making?" I questioned, bending down to press my lips gently on Mako's head, greeting her softly, before making my way to the curly blonde who worked on some crafting, multiple coloured beads on the side table.

“I’m making Mako a friendship bracelet. I bet she never got one when she was young, so I’ll make her an adult one. See, isn’t it pretty?” EliaseAnne raised her hands to reveal the dangling string filled with multi-coloured beads.

I noticed the pink stone-like cubes with letter engraving – the letters spelled out MAKOTO. The surrounding beads varied in colour, some of them being connected to one another while others held different charms – a carton of milk being one of them.

I smiled, an image of Mako’s gleeful smile as she jumped in place over the small bracelet warmed my heart.

“She’s going to love it,” I complimented.

Eli gave me a weak smile before standing up, placing the unfinished bracelet onto the side table.

“I’m gonna get some fresh air. I think I’ve reached my threshold and need to walk around. I’ll be back in a little while.” She grasped Mako’s hand, raised it up to kiss the back of her palm, before making her way out the room.

I was really proud of her for lasting so long. Kai had informed me she had been quietly sitting at Mako’s side for six hours, covering him and the others as they went to give Matthew and the headmaster an update.

Matthew said the headmaster looked like he’d lose his shit.

He was frightened.

If news got back to Heila of what had occurred at his school exam, a place which was ranked as safe; I bet King Arthur wouldn’t even hesitate in cutting off all funding. It was thanks to Realm Eight, that Knightwood was progressing as it was. I don’t think the King or Queen would like to find out their daughter, who had just been rescued, almost fell back into her kidnapper’s hands.

I allowed myself to sit in the white, wooden chair; my hand automatically reached out to hold hers as I watched her chest rise and fall. Her complexion had returned to its normal, pale-like shade, her red lips soft and smooth.

Eli wouldn't let anyone touch her when it came to personal care, making sure to bathe her, and comb out any knots or tangles from her ever-growing brown hair.

The only thing Eli allowed us to do was apply lip balm on her lips, so they wouldn't be dry and cracked.

Apparently, we kiss her too often, so it was now a part of our responsibilities to make sure her lips were in kissing condition. I guess she did have a point.

I felt Stryker nudge into my mind. It felt nice to have his company, his emotions more reserved today.

"How are you feeling?" he questioned; his voice filled with concern.

"Relax, I'm fine, seriously. All of you worry too much." It felt weird for my demon to show so much emotion.

I knew he cared dearly for me, but he wasn't the type to show it. I guess it takes me passing out to get some love and compassion.

"You slept too long," he commented.

"Blame Daniel. I bet my spirit, he probably snuck in and sprinkled some of that sleep magic to make sure I didn't wake up till my body was ready." I frowned as I allowed my other hand to flow through my hair. I had taken one glance at the mirror before leaving my sleeping quarters and I wasn't impressed. I seriously needed to shave. I didn't want to grow a beard. It simply didn't suit me.

"Don't bet me on anything....you're probably right though. Azriel is a sneaky asshole."

I laughed at his comment.

"Please, you guys are best buddies. If only you two would get past your differences and share your opinions like civil spirits, you wouldn't be at each other's throats."

Myself and Daniel loved hearing about how our spirits hated each other during training sessions when we were younger. It was literally a battle between cats and dogs, as the people from Earthala like to say.

I get they were opposites, darkness versus light, but we both knew they could get along if they truly wanted to.

But nope, that would apparently be categorized as a sin if Azriel accepted Stryker and tried to be nice to him. From Stryker's point of view, he didn't give a shit. Regardless of their differences, I knew they had good intentions for one another. If it came down to one of them being in a sticky situation, the other wouldn't hesitate to help out.

"Ryder...any word on Rose and the others?" he asked quietly; his voice sounded hesitant.

I knew he was worried sick about Rose.

Spirits didn't believe in the social morals of meeting and learning about an individual before pursuing companionship. If they felt a connection then they pursued it, not allowing morals to hinder them.

"No. I checked with the nurses and Karen. No changes. They completed multiple brain scans, but they can't detect anything. Nothing significant is present. Her magic is recovering at a slow pace, and it's getting stronger every hour. It shouldn't be long till it is at a stable state. Karen thinks once that happens, she'll wake up, and we'll have a better idea of what's going on. Hopefully, that light show was part of the plan," I explained as I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply.

During the battle with King Aspen, Mako had somehow created rays of light in resemblance to our spirits. While her dragon hid in the cave, five rays of light were released from her.

We all assumed it was just a trick, especially since she was still in her dragon form, Lexi still present. But now, it'd been two weeks with not even one sign of spirit activity; we didn't know for sure.

If Mako woke up with no spirits...I don't think she would be able to handle such a reality, even with us in her life.

Her spirits were a part of her and had assisted in her surviving that hellhole. I couldn't even imagine Stryker not

being there for me during all the hardships I've dealt with and still deal with today.

Only time would determine whether her spirits had truly ascended or if they hid within Mako, so she could heal as Karen mentioned.

My mind remained silent for a few minutes, while the uncertainty of Rose and the others being alive sank in. If what I said really hurt Stryker, he was doing a bloody good job of not showing it, not an ounce of emotion came from his presence.

"Would you like a moment?" I realized after two weeks, I hadn't allowed him a moment to be with Mako.

Just because he loved Rose, didn't mean he didn't care about Makoto. I could feel the admiration he had for her. I simply assumed he hadn't felt comfortable in showing his compassionate side yet. He'd only just revealed himself to Mako weeks ago during the locker room incident.

I guessed he was going to pop up more after the exams were over.

"I won't be long. Thanks, Ryder."

I nodded in acknowledgment as I allowed my body to relax; my conscious drifted into the darkness as he took over.

I didn't want to linger and listen in.

He deserved the same privacy he'd given me these last couple of weeks.

~STRYKER~

I allowed my eyes to open, their gaze landed on the sleeping beauty before me.

My chest ached in irony as I tightened my hand around hers; the warmth of her grasp helped to level my raging anger.

She didn't deserve this. None of her spirits deserved watching their host go through such agony all these cycles.

Even the discovery of her split personality, Midnight.

I couldn't harbor words to describe how sorrowful I was for her existence. Ryder hadn't shared much detail regarding her summoning, due to the exam being the following day, but from the little information I gathered, it was clear Midnight had been forced into creation.

To be brought into this universe as a host's coping mechanism, before being forced to fight in order to survive each summoning was cruel. No one deserved that, regardless of spirit, host or split personality.

I pulled her hand to my lips and pressed them against the back of her hand firmly. I had to give Eli credit for taking care of our princess. Even now, she still smelled like vanilla; the scent soothed me.

"Roseline...my beautiful Rose. Why have you left me alone? This isn't like you. You're too bloody stubborn to give up and abandon me. Won't you come back? You promised we'd catch up. Please...don't hurt this broken soul. I love you."

I couldn't recognize my own voice, the low, barely audible sound held so much heart break. Was this how it felt? Did I truly feel heartbroken?

Rose didn't leave me; she didn't break up with me. She was just sleeping...yes, just taking a long, relaxing rest after using so much energy to protect her host.

The others were also copying her lead. She'd probably forced them to rest up after such a tedious battle. I didn't care if I stayed in denial. I would never accept that they were gone – that she was gone.

I knew how strong they were. They wouldn't leave Mako behind.

Rose would never leave me willingly. I wish I could show her how much I love her...how much I've missed our nightly star gazing picnics or the sound of her voice as she explained

how adorable Mako was, usually getting side tracked throughout the story. It was a pain at times, but I enjoyed listening to her stories and thoughts.

I missed her voice, her laugh, her smile...I missed my Rose.

“Come back to me,” I whispered, allowing my mind to fade into the darkness.

“Roseline... my beautiful Rose. Why have you left me alone? This isn't like you. You're too bloody stubborn to give up and abandon me. Won't you come back? You promised we'd catch up. Please...don't hurt this broken soul. I love you.”

I felt sorry for this person.

*His voice barely had any emotion, yet he sounded sad...
depressed like me.*

~RYDER~

I opened my eyes, allowing my vision to blur as the dizziness took over. Switching with my spirit was never easy. I bet the others felt the same. I don't possibly know how King Aspen was able to make a serum to fight off the weakness between shifts, but I sometimes wished we'd have something to help with nausea and dizziness that came with such switching.

I could sense Eli coming back; her aura triggered my senses of her approaching arrival. I took one more glance at my Princess.

“Makoto keep fighting. We're right here. Just keep swimming.”

I took one last deep breath to compose myself, bringing back my usual self. I didn't know who would be entering during the night, but I'd rather keep my usual facade going. I could only let my guard down back at Knightwood. At least no one could enter our territory without our permission.

Just keep swimming, our Starlight Firefly.

“Makoto keep fighting. We’re right here. Just keep swimming.”

*This voice sounded familiar; the pain reflected in each word
stung my essence.*

If I had a heart, I bet it would bleed from such heartache.

I should keep swimming...I knew that meant something.

Did the voice want me to keep fighting?

Just keep swimming...maybe...I will.

CHAPTER 5

EliaseAnne

I watched the fireflies as they danced to the tunes of the night; such display always soothed my soul.

I knew as a fairy spirit, nature was our element of choice, but I still felt Mother Starlight always wanted me to be aware that she'd comfort me when I needed it the most.

Today was no different.

I sat comfortably in a tall oak tree, multiple vines beneath me. Their soft texture made me feel relaxed as I leaned back into their secured hold. The numerous wildlife always came by to say hello; from the chipmunks to owls, they always took a few minutes to sit with me, doing their share in comforting me.

I closed my eyes as I allowed my head to fall back against the bark. Elias was knocked out, unable to stay conscious for very long. This poison was seriously getting on my nerves.

Elias hated staying in bed all day, especially in that sterile, saline smelling environment. I supported his dislikes, but I agreed with the others, he needed to rest. I hated seeing him so weak. It simply triggered unwanted memories and feelings.

Every time I closed my eyes, I could see us strapped against that medical table. The razor-sharp blade and other medical equipment lay neatly on the sterile sheet. It didn't matter how hard we tried to escape the metal shackles that bound us – we were trapped.

That woman with the red hair, walking in with a maleficent smile on her face, before she pulled up her medical

mask; her gloved hands ready to begin the series of painful experiments that followed. I could feel everything that Elias felt, even when he tried to nudge me out of his mind – to push me away so I wouldn't experience the torture that went on for hours.

Before I allowed my mind to wander into my dark past, Nightmare jumped into my lap; her triple white tails waved wildly.

“MEW MEW MEW MEW!” She jumped in place eagerly, causing me to raise an eyebrow at her sudden excitement.

“What does the Goddess of Destruction need from moi?” I questioned softly, nodding my head slightly to the god before me. I knew the boys didn't believe Mako's speculations. I didn't blame them; they couldn't see the same vision I saw. Even Elias, being my host, didn't see the outpouring of power that flowed through her little body: the massive shimmers of black and pink floated around her like a barrier protecting its treasure.

She turned around, running down my long legs, visible due to the white shorts I wore. She hopped onto the branch opposite of me before her body began to shimmer.

I smoothly rose to my feet, the vines that once cushioned my sitting area morphing below. They intertwined with each other, creating a small platform for me to stand upon. I silently thanked them; they knew I would have to kneel shortly.

The shimmering light dimmed, revealing a tall, curvy figure before me. A wave of power hit me, causing me to waver. I had to take a couple of breaths as I allowed my body to adapt to the suffocating flow of power surrounding me. I knelt on one knee; my left hand rose to my chest as I bowed my head in obedience.

“It's an honour, Goddess of Destruction and daughter of Deathpre. I can only thank the stars above for allowing me to witness your gracefulness. I'm beyond blessed.” I allowed my emotion of gratitude and praise to flow through my high-pitched voice; my mind still wrapped around the fact that I was now in the presence of a Starlight God: my creator.

If I had to use words to describe how utterly beautiful she was, I'd have to create a whole new dictionary. No earthly words could label how pure, majestic and powerful Nightmare was.

She was six-five; her strawberry pink curls flowed gloriously around her, floating lightly as if the winds were constantly lifting the pink strands in place. Her complexion was pale, similar to Mako's; her rosy pink cheeks stood out as did her baby pink lips.

Her curvy body was covered in a sparkling black dress that flowed elegantly down her frame and draped behind her in perfection. I noticed the smaller size scythe relaxing against her back, the scythe similar to Mako's modification weapon she had used during her exam – the same black chain with the dangling metal shaped rose, wrapped around her arms as she held the medium size scythe securely. The most stunning aspect of the goddess before me was her enchanting eyes.

“Rise Elyion, fairy spirit of Elias Kingsley. I'm pleased with your respect for me in all forms. For this conversation, feel free to relax and speak to me as normal,” she ordered; a smile formed on those smooth cupid-bow lips.

I had assumed from her familiar appearance; her mismatched eyes would stay as turquoise blue and grey. Now that I was getting a glimpse, her turquoise eye remained, but her once grey eye was a bright pink. I could see a small, magic circle within her iris, rotating around as her magic flowed through it. Those mismatched orbs held immense power that could move mountains with a simple thought.

I rose to my feet; my hands fell to my sides as I gulped.

Wouldn't it be rude to talk so casually to a god? Ugh, where's smarty pants Elias when I need him?

She chuckled; the melodic sound flowed through the wind as the trees shivered in happiness; the wind breezed by us as the forest praised the sound of a god. I couldn't help myself from shivering as my heart melted in happiness. Who knew such a sound could melt away your troubles and fears.

“Elias needs to rest. He should not let such past doings prevent him from prospering. You can’t face the unknown without being prepared. That starts with your body, the vessel of power and might,” she acknowledged.

“Thank you, my Creator. I will inform him of your message once he awakens.” I thanked her, bowing deeply. I forgot she was a god, she could obviously hear my thoughts.

“Elyion...I’m proud you’ve adapted well. I’m unable to interfere with the stars above, but realize myself, Aphroditee, Yuikimiru, and Jehovah knows of Edmund’s wrongdoings against you and Elias. We’ve heard your prayers. I just want you to know, judgment works in mysterious ways, but will always be served in the name of righteousness.”

My hands clenched into a fist, fighting the tears that threatened to escape my eyes as I swallowed hard, praying I wouldn’t break down from her declaration.

They listened...they heard my pleas...I’d one day get justice for my current situation. I wasn’t wrong.

“Elyion, never question your birth. The stars created you as you were. Jehovah himself is not pleased with your predicament, but you have great purpose in this life, regardless of gender. We listen and such tampering with our absolute law is unforgiving. The stars will reveal their plans when the time is right. Trust me when I say this, I will personally deliver justice on your behalf. Mark my words, Elyion. As a child of Yuikimiru, Goddess of Life, she sends her gratitude and vows to participate in the judgment that will occur very soon. Continue being patient and devoted to the duty that lies before you. Let us ease your burdens and fight such battles in the stars above,” she concluded.

The simple thought of being approved by a god for the feelings developing within me only made me cry harder.

With her last words I nodded, the tears rolled down my cheeks as a sob escaped me.

If the gods accepted me...this version of me, would Mako accept me, one day?

“Makoto...is my beloved child. You should have more hope in her, Elyion. She is special in many aspects and views the vast world surrounding us differently than the average shifter or human. Her mind is like a fresh new page, the pen of life readying itself to write multiple tales. She is very open-minded – her ability to accept many aspects of life due to her vast levels of curiosity is one unique aspect of hers. Do not crucify such hopes and dreams over such primitive morals. Love has no bounds amongst shifters. Allow the stars to guide your heart, just as you allow them to guide you on your path to Starlight,” she advised.

I nodded as I continued to cry.

I never dreamed of this moment, to be graced by a god’s presence, and my internal struggles being recognized. They accepted the fact I was female even though they had created me as a male, and now, I was promised justice to the man who put me in such circumstances. I was beyond blessed.

I felt something brush against my cheek, before flowing down to my chin, lifting my head up to face those powerful mismatched eyes up close. I froze in place as my body broke out in shivers, unable to grasp the moment unfolding before me; a Starlight god lifted my head; her body inches away from mine.

“Elyion...or should I say EliaseAnne. I need your assistance. My sweet princess needs a little help in conquering the darkness she faces within herself. Can I ask for your help...for Makoto’s sake?” she requested.

I could see the sadness in her eyes, such sadness you would see in a mother who feared for her child’s well-being. “Anything, especially for Makoto.” I stated firmly, hoping my eyes showed my determination as the last set of tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Thank you, our child. This is what I request from you.”

* * *

“EliaseAnne , are you sure this will work? I don’t see how you singing to her is going to do anything,” Ryder stressed, leaning against the wall next to the window.

It was now close to twelve in the morning and I was sitting next to Mako, her hand in mine as I explained to Ryder what Nightmare had asked me to do.

“It will do something. I just know it. I’ll do anything to see her smile again Ryder. I want my best friend back...I miss her,” I confessed, ignoring the lump in my throat.

He sighed, walking towards me. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Me too, Eli. I miss her, too. If you think that singing this song will work...I know that song was one of her favourites when she was younger. Maybe it will trigger something. Singing doesn’t hurt anyone, go ahead,” he concluded, smiling softly at me.

I returned his smile with my own, before turning to face the sleeping girl before me.

If this could help her fight whatever internal battle she faced, I would sing all night long.

I calmed my frantic heart as I took a few deep breaths, allowing my fairy magic to flow through me. I only needed a small amount to flow through my voice.

I prayed to Starlight it would be enough to clear Mako’s path within the darkness – enough to bring her back to me...to all of us.

She belonged here with us, not in the shadows of death.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know dear; how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

I allowed the magic to flow freely with the words, my intentions clear as the sun’s purpose to light the sky during the day.

I would be Mako’s light in the darkness; I would bring her home.

***“EliaseAnne, are you sure this will work?
I don’t see how you singing to her is going to do anything.”
“It will do something. I just know it. I’ll do anything to see
her smile again Ryder.***

I want my best friend back...I miss her.”

*Ryder. Eli? They sound so caring; I wish they could hear me,
too. I miss you, too.*

Would you rid the loneliness that plagues my shattered soul?

I want to go home.

***“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me
happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know dear; how
much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”***

A soft voice sang.

That song.

I remembered it from somewhere; the voice is different though.

The sunshine will guide you home.

Do I search for the light?

I have to fight for the light. I was tired of the darkness.

I wanted my friends and spirits back.

I wanted to feel Midnight’s presence again.

I wanted to live again.

I needed to retrieve my identity.

I would fight and conquer.

*I pushed against the confusion that invaded my mind, pushing
through the thick fogginess.*

It was a fight for what I wanted.

I wanted to be free of this darkness.

I knew what it meant to achieve freedom.

I craved for it yet again.

I would reach the light and emerge victorious.

I could see a speck of light.

*I could feel my body forming, arms reached out towards the
light, as if the thick, black sludge that held me captive melted
away, chunk by chunk, I struggled to succeed.*

*I felt the last chunk of sludge melt away, releasing me from my
internal solitude.*

I wasted no time, sprinting towards the light.

*Ryder, Daniel, Elias, Marcus, EliaseAnne, my spirits and
Midnight!*

I'm coming!

Wait for me.

I'm finally free.

CHAPTER 6



Makoto

I fought to open my heavy eyelids, my body felt weak and stiff. I squinted, the bright light harsh against my eyes.

Yet, I could feel the joy overflow inside me as I enjoyed the light's appearance in my life. It was so beautiful, appreciating its essence after the endless amount of darkness that plagued me.

I turned my head to the side; my eyes settled on the sleeping shifter next to me. Ryder's body felt warm and inviting; his breathing was slow as I watched his chest rise and fall.

I turned my body slightly to face his, pressing myself against him; his warmth soothed me. I craved for such warmth for so long, I didn't know how I should feel, now that I finally acquired it. He stirred slightly; his hand landed softly on my waist, pulling me closer.

"*Mako*," he mumbled, his breathing returned to normal as he fell back asleep.

I smiled against his body as I enjoyed his presence. I wasn't lonely anymore; I finally had someone who loved me. I wasn't alone anymore; the light had given me salvation.

I didn't fight when the darkness attempted to claim me this time. I wasn't afraid of not waking up. I had won that battle already. I just needed to rest; my body still exhausted.

"Makoto? Sweetheart, can you hear me?" Ryder called out.

I swear my eyes were only closed for a few seconds. I opened them; Ryder stared down at me, relief swarmed across

his face as he blinked a few times; his eyes became glossy. I didn't think I could handle seeing Ryder cry.

My mind still recovered from whatever I'd just experienced. I didn't think I could comfort him as I should. I wanted to say something funny, anything to lighten the mood, but my mind was blank. I stretched my arms out as my eyes began to blur.

"Hug?" I whispered; my voice emitted only a glimpse of the amount of desperation I had experienced as I held back a sob. I wasn't ready to return to my clumsy, dramatic self. I just needed to feel loved.

His body crashed into mine; his arms wrapped around me, squeezing me against his body. I needed to feel him; I craved his warmth and melted into his embrace. I allowed the tears that pooled in my eyes, to fall, exhausted from fighting my internal battle.

I had accepted the fact I was going to die, never able to see Ryder and the others again. Now that I was alive, being held in the arms of a man I cared dearly about, I wished I had fought even harder. I made him, and the others worry; and it pained my heart.

"Everything's okay Mako. Don't cry," he consoled me, cradling me in his arms. We laid there for a long time; my cries dimmed down to small whimpers. Once I was ready to speak, I told him about my experience with the darkness.

"It was as if I didn't exist. I was a part of some void where I had no body or voice. I tried so hard, but it kept consuming me, as if to swallow me over and over again. I – I felt so alone Ryder. It wasn't like when I was at the facility and didn't have any friends. I was truly alone, and I had no idea who I was. Not being able to identify myself, with no one to talk to, as I faded in and out. My spirits were gone; I couldn't even sense Midnight. It was just me floating in the land of darkness, and it was cold. I could hear you guys. I heard Daniel, Marcus and Elias talking to me, but I didn't know it was them at the time. Your voice and I think Stryker? I knew it was your voice, but I

couldn't remember who you were. I heard Eli's singing...it was a song my mom would sing to me," I confessed.

Ryder remained silent for a moment; the arm that cradled my head turned my body to face him as he continued to aimlessly play with my hair. He listened intently to my confession, allowing me to take my time as I paused to calm myself, while I relived the experience out loud. He comforted me, pressing himself against me and encouraging me softly. He had to remind me that I was alive and not dreaming.

"You remember Catherine. Do you remember everything?" he asked me, his left hand left its hold on my waist as he wiped the tear that rolled down my cheek. I smiled softly at his affection.

"Not everything. Just her singing when we were walking in the garden. She told me that the light would always guide me home; its guidance would lead me to salvation. When I heard Eli's singing, I finally remembered. That's when I started to peel the sludge away, finally able to free myself and run towards the light," I explained.

He nodded.

We took another moment to relax in each other's embrace. I never thought I'd miss him so much. Now that he was here, I was so happy to be with him. I began to worry about the others, especially Elias. Ryder must have noticed me biting my lip, a usual sign of uneasiness; his thumb gently brushed along my bottom lip, cueing me to lift my teeth.

"They're all fine. Elias is getting treatment for the lingering poison from the arrow. Aspen apparently coated the edge; the poison probably his insurance if the arrow didn't do enough damage. Lucky for Elias, fairies can survive any type of poison. He was still affected, but it didn't kill him. Daniel is resting, and Marcus is out on a run to keep his own anxiety down," Ryder explained.

I sighed in relief; my tense body relaxed into his arms.
Everyone is okay...but how?

“Midnight saved us.” Ryder replied to my spoken thoughts.

“Midnight! What happened when I passed out?” I questioned. I searched within myself for her presence; my consciousness wavered slightly, before I noticed her flickering, burning essence deep within me. I sighed in relief at my discovery.

“Midnight had healed Elias by the time we reached you guys. She told us she had a plan and we had to trust her. We agreed before Aspen decided to blast us with waves of wind. Marcus and Elias ended up slipping, the wind carrying them to the edge. Daniel and I tried to pull them back up, but the wind was too strong. Then he conjured an orb of energy. It hit the ground in front of us, causing us to fall. I thought we were goners, but we fell into a net made up of white strings before a magic circle awakened, concealing our energies. Our markings suddenly began to glow, we had no idea what was going on, but in a flash, bursts of light expelled from us, heading straight into the sky and fading away. It was a diversion to make it seem as if we’d truly died. Then we saw your body dropping towards us before you started to shift. In a flash, you were in dragon form; I’m assuming Lexi took over. You glided right above the lava, hiding in a blind spot. We waited until we felt the air shift, it was then that Matthew and Karen came to the rescue. Lexi helped us, by flying us back up the cliff and then you shifted back. That was two and a half weeks ago,” he finished.

I stared at him, absorbing all the delivered information slowly. *Midnight saved them. She defied the Owner, to save the boys. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Midnight.* I could feel a light pulse of energy course through me, as if Midnight herself was acknowledging my gratitude.

“Two weeks huh? I guess we failed the exam,” I pondered to myself.

“We passed. Professor Sepherant was none other than the Jeffrey person you mentioned. By the time Matthew received the information from his resources, we’d already entered the exam. Now, he is nowhere to be found, sending an untraceable

resignation letter. The headmaster is facing some major backlash; the details of the event were forwarded straight to Heila. They're sending someone back to escort all of us home. We got that information three days ago, so it shouldn't be long," he admitted.

"So, we got to keep playing student..." I sighed, yawning lightly. I could feel the exhaustion slowly crept into my body.

"Well, we've been granted time off, seeing as we're still technically students here and its summer break. Till Karen gives the approval for you to use magic, we have to stick with our alibi. You pushed your body beyond your magic threshold which puts you at risk," he ordered.

I frowned at him.

"What about my spirits?" I questioned quietly, realizing how quiet it had been in my mind.

Did I drain them to the point of them ascending to the gods? I shouldn't have pushed them to such limits. Did they truly leave me?

Before I could continue, I felt the four spirits crowd my head at once, causing me to flinch.

"You can't get rid of us that easily," Rose mumbled.

"Aww, she missed us," Lexi cooed.

"Mako, you're okay! I missed you. Ignore those two." Hope beamed happily.

"Welcome back Makoto. We're proud of you for not giving up. We love you," Lily confessed, softly.

Though their voices varied from relieved to joy, I could sense their exhaustion. Ryder smiled at me.

"I guess they answered that question," he confirmed, smirking.

I nodded, allowing my head to rest against his chest. I felt tired, wanting to rest, but afraid to lose more time with Ryder.

His hand stroked my cheek; my eyes opened to stare at him. His eyes lingered on my lips, before he leaned forward,

kissing me softly.

This kiss felt different. We weren't eager to deepen it or rub our hands along each other. We stayed very still; Ryder leaned above me as I relaxed against the bed. The kiss was light, small kisses pressed against my lips as we held one another. I could sense his hesitation, treating me like a fragile object – the slightest slip prompting me to fall to the ground, shattering into pieces.

His body felt tense with worry, probably still concerned about my well-being, but as we continued kissing one another, holding each other to secure our combined warmth, his body relaxed. When we finally pulled away, he kissed my forehead before facing me.

“Makoto, you know what this means?” he questioned, his face lit up with happiness and determination. I frowned at his question, tilting my head.

“I don't know...we get an overdue vacation,” I mumbled.

“No Firefly, though we do need a long ass vacation after the shit we just went through,” he admitted, chuckling lightly.

My heart felt slightly warmer as I listened to his laugh.

He smiled wickedly, before continuing. “We're ghosts, Mako. Blair Aspen thinks we're dead, all of us. It's the perfect opportunity for us to return to Heila undetected and without risking your safety. Everything falls into place.”

I felt my spirits all rejoice, allowing myself to enjoy the overwhelming happiness that wanted to explode. We we're the first to walk away from King Aspen's clutches, underhandedly surviving his plans to destroy us. As the word ghost lingered in my mind, I couldn't ignore the temptation any longer.

“Casper the friendly ghost, the friendliest ghost you know!” I began to sing, giggling at Ryder's expression as he sighed.

“Babe, you always know how to ruin a moment. I'm banning you from chilling in Marcus' room. All he's doing is converting you into a shifter of Earthala.” He groaned, turning himself in a quick movement; his hands pinned me to the bed

as he loomed over me, cutting my giggle fit short as my body clenched in desire. I could see the passion and underlying motive in his hooded Tyrian eyes, awakening my sudden cravings for him.

“Makoto?” He whispered; his voice low and husky as he leaned forward. His lips brushed against mine.

“Yes Ryder?” I whispered back, biting my lip to hold back from pressing my lips against his. The corner of his lips curled, a captivating smile forming on those luscious lips I craved for as he pressed his forehead against mine.

“I love you,” he confessed, kissing me lightly on the lips. I smiled against his lips, allowing my hands to wrap around his neck, pressing myself against him.

“I love you too, Ryder Carter,” I whispered, kissing him back.

I didn’t know what the stars had in store for myself and my star knights, but the unknown didn’t scare me anymore. All I needed to do was follow the path towards the light, with my loved ones by my side.

No matter what hardships we’d be forced to face, the light would guide us home. Thank you, dear Starlight gods, for the people in my life. Thank you for never giving up on me...on all of me. I am yours to use to fight such darkness...to prevent anyone else from enduring such tragedy and despair. Help me, so I can bring salvation to all those trapped in the dark.

In stars, we trust.

* * *

“Can we go back home?” I whispered against Ryder’s chest.

I was currently cradled against his chest under the white blankets. It was three in the morning, and I was attempting to keep myself awake. Ryder had tried waking up the boys, but they seemed to be deep in sleep.

He didn't want to scare them awake, concerned they would jump to the conclusion something was wrong with me, but I was anxious to see them, to feel their warmth.

I still struggled to rid myself of the memories that followed me when I attempted to close my eyes.

I felt like a tainted rose – a flower once pure and white.

Now, I was darkened by the evil that held me captive. The evil I successfully escaped only to meet face to face in a ruthless battle of life and death. Blair Aspen had taken so much from me in all my cycles.

I thought I had come to terms with having to endure the events he had put me through. Constantly pushing myself, pushing me past what I thought was my limit. I had watched so many other shifters die because of being pushed that far. I guess I should be grateful to still be alive and breathing.

“Do you want to go back there? Would you feel more comfortable? I'll make sure it's just our group until you're strong enough to deal with the other students. Just in case anyone thinks it's a bright idea to try and challenge you,” Ryder suggested.

I pressed myself against him as I tightened my grip around his waist.

“I'd teach them a good lesson if they even attempted to challenge you.”

I smiled against Ryder's skin at Rose's statement. *I've missed your sassy self.*

“I know. We missed you dearly, Makoto.”

I could sense the sincerity in her voice, the sound so far away from her usual toneless voice.

“Ya. If it's just us...can we go back? I don't like medical centers,” I whispered.

The white walls reminded me of that perfect white suit, those piercing red eyes stared at me with rage. I shivered at the thought. Ryder tightened his grip around me; his lips pressed against my forehead.

“It’s okay Mako. You’re safe in my arms, my love. We’ll get everything set and we can head back to our little home in Knightwood. Okay?” he soothed. His lips brushed my skin as he spoke.

“It’s not little and okay. Just don’t leave me, okay?” I just needed to be with him for a while longer.

“I’ll hold you in my arms the whole way if I must, my princess,” he declared.

I lifted my head to stare up at him.

He looked so different, especially with his recent unshaven, medium length beard. I could see the dark circles under his eyes, those usual vivid Tyrian eyes I loved were losing their light.

Hmm...he looks like he just survived two weeks of living on an island with only the primary essentials of food and water.

A genuine smile formed on his lips, before he lowered his head to kiss me gently. He was still hesitant in his kisses, not allowing his lips to linger longer than five seconds. I didn’t care if I almost died; I wanted more of him – to taste more of him.

“I feel like I was left on an island with only the fear of losing my true love that was miles away,” he admitted. The pain still lingered in his voice, but he looked amused at my outspoken thoughts.

“Sorry,” I whispered pressing my lips against his neck; my action of affection rewarded me with a deep moan.

“I’ve missed your kisses,” he whispered, allowing me to continue kissing his warm rose scented flesh.

“I’ve missed you, too,” I replied, returning my gaze up at him.

I unhooked my left hand, my other buried beneath him as we continued to lay side to side in an embrace, to caress his beard, the hair feeling smooth given its rough appearance.

“You don’t like it?” he questioned with an amused smirk on his lips.

“I never said that.” I continued to rub my thumb against the fine hairs.

“You don’t need to with your facial expression.”

“Hmm...well, if I have to be honest...you do need a trim,” I admitted.

“A trim or a shave, sweetheart?”

“A trim...that rids of all this hair hindering me from feeling your smooth skin,” I mused.

He chuckled as he closed his eyes to shake his head.

“Whatever you like, Firefly.”

I allowed my free hand to push gently against his chest, pushing him down to his back as I moved my body to lie on top of him, sitting up slightly while my hand glided through my long, flowing locks of hair.

I seriously needed to trim it – the length reached my lower back. I’d let Daniel work his magic on it when we got back home.

“Ryder,” I whispered, my voice low and filled with need.

His eyes roamed over my body, which thanks to Ryder’s assistance was covered in one of his white thin t-shirts. Its purpose to cover my body was fulfilled, but the thin fabric didn’t stop my neon pink bra from showing through, my lower half pressed against his.

I bit my lip, my eyes stuck on his lips, wanting more than those fragile kisses.

“Mako...you should be resting,” he encouraged, but the way his eyes locked on mine, before centering on my bitten lip told me otherwise. His hardness below me wasn’t supporting his claim either.

“Kiss me Ryder...properly. Kiss me like this would be our last moment together...please?” I whispered, begging for his affection. I needed to know if he still truly cared about me, even if I was tainted by the darkness.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if contemplating on what he should do. Before my heart sank with disappointment, his arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me down to him, smashing his lips against mine, greedily.

I moaned as we kissed, my hand pressed against his chest as he held me in place; his free hand flowed through my hair before steadying my head as his lips continued to ravage mine.

I didn't hesitate as I allowed my tongue to brush along his lower lip, asking permission to enter. He groaned before he allowed my tongue to slip in; his groin pushed between my legs. Electricity rushed through me as my throbbing clit rubbed against his hardness.

If it wasn't for the fact I felt utterly exhausted or the wave of dizziness that hit me as we continued to kiss, I wouldn't want this to stop.

Ryder rolled us over in one quick movement, allowing my body to relax in the sheets beneath me as he hovered over me; his face only inches away as we both attempted to calm our breathing.

My mind wanted to continue, but my body protested. He pressed a final kiss firmly against my lips, before lowering himself and taking a moment to suck at my neck; his intentions of leaving a mark of our make-out session for the world to see.

"Mako, I'm only stopping because you need rest, not because I don't want this. I've craved this body since that night I woke up to you in my arms. So, don't you dare think you're not worth my love. You are everything to me. I just need you to heal and become stronger. Then, I'll ravish you. Understood?" he confessed, lifting up to stare into my eyes as he made his conviction.

"Okay. Thank you, Ryder...for loving me...all of me," I whispered, allowing my hands to wrap around his neck, bringing him down for another kiss.

"I'll always love you Makoto. No matter what happens, you'll always be mine to love and cherish."

CHAPTER 7



“**M**ona is going to kick ass! I swear she went through so much shit, yet she’s still strong. See, she deserves to be a princess. She puts those useless fairy-tales to shame! Kaden’s my favourite, though.”

I was sitting in Ryder’s bed, reading from some device Marcus brought with him from Earthala. He had gone for a quick visit to meet up with his friend Junho, who was part of a criminal investigation organization.

He had informed Junho about my forced bed rest and how I was bored out of my mind, so his girlfriend, Scarlet, suggested he get me some books. Seeing as I’m a fast reader, she insisted on this contraption.

Apparently, it could hold thousands of books and if I wanted more Marcus didn’t need to travel all the way to Earthala to get me them. All he had to do was use this thing called the Internet, and he could buy whatever he thought I’d like.

I was now reading this book called *A Demon’s Blade* and was devoted to finishing it before Ryder came to bother me for the twentieth time.

“Nick is better,” Rose declared.

“I like Kaden, he’s hot,” Hope pointed out.

“No, Mason! He loves animals!” Lily combated.

“So y’all are going to ignore Callan here?” I retorted as I pressed the screen to move to the next page, continuing the epic scene developing in my imagination as I read.

“*Um, Adam...hello?*” Lexi suggested, her voice gave me the impression; she rolled her eyes at our struggle in choosing our favourite guy.

I was so caught up in the story that I wasn’t paying attention to the sound of footsteps.

“I think Ryder’s the best.” The low, husky voice whispered in my ear; the sound induced shivers down my spine as I whipped my head to see him smirking.

“Dammit, Ryder!!! Don’t use your sexy voice on me,” I complained, pushing at his chest, which had no effect on him. *Curse him.*

He moved to sit on the side of the bed, taking the reader off the blanket where I had dropped it to view the page I had reached.

“Didn’t you just start this?” He pointed at the percentage at the bottom of the screen, the numbering reading 90% in bold font.

“Yes, but it’s brilliant!!! Now, give it back, so I can finish! Don’t distract me!” I reached out for the device, but he held it up, making it too far for my short arms to reach. I glared at him.

“Ryder! Give it! I’ll have you know, I claimed it! My name is on the back of the pink case!” I insisted, continuing my attempt to take back the device.

“There’s something else more important that you’ve claimed,” he informed me, his face stern.

I froze at his changed expression, my body inches away from his; my hand still raised up in the air.

“What’s more important than my re– mhm.” I began to protest, but his soft lips cut me short.

I stared into his bright purple eyes that had regained their captivating glory, before closing my eyes as he deepened the kiss. I allowed my body to relax, lowering myself from my outstretched position to kneeling on the bed; Ryder’s body faced mine as we continued to kiss.

His hand wrapped itself in my long, brown locks, pulling my head back for better access to my neck as he made his way down to my collar bone. I let out a moan as he reached the sensitive spot on my neck, taking his sweet time to nibble and suck on my feverish skin.

“You’ve claimed me Mako baby. I’m at your disposal.” He hummed against my skin as he continued to ravish me with kisses.

“I’m not claiming you until you shave.” I whispered playfully before kissing him lightly on his scruffy chin.

Ryder hadn’t left my side since we returned to our cozy home in Knightwood.

Whenever we had the chance, we would have our mini make-out sessions.

I could never get tired of Ryder’s intoxicating smell, let alone the taste of him. I shooed him away multiple times, so the others could attempt to get at least five minutes alone with me. I didn’t mind him being greedy, but he had to learn to share.

Right now, however, I wanted only him. He dropped the e-reader to the unoccupied half of the queen size bed, rotating his body as he pushed me to lay back. He hovered above me, lowering himself so he could continue kissing me; his arms supported his weight on both sides. *I hope we can do more than just kissing. I want to feel more of him.*

My hands roamed across his chest, reached the waist band of his low black pants, rose up beneath his maroon t-shirt, and pulled the fabric up to reveal his abs. Before I could remove his shirt, a knock came from the door.

“It’s called bed rest for a reason. Lying in bed and making out doesn’t count,” Rose mumbled.

UGHHHHH!!! Oh, Starlight’s why?

His lips lingered against mine for a full minute before he released them, leaving me panting.

“Elias. If you don’t have a good reason to be here –” Ryder began, slowly turning his head to stare at the fairy shifter who leaned against the doorway.

They stared at one another for a moment before Ryder let out a frustrated groan.

“Fine. You’ve been spared,” he concluded, sighing before getting off the bed; his hand ruffled his black locks. I raised my eyebrow at him, sitting up as I stared at his annoyed facial expression.

I guessed, I wasn’t the only one frustrated with all the interruptions lately.

Ryder and Elias were involved in a manly war against one another – their ultimate goal to interrupt the other from getting past the kissing stage.

My body did not enjoy this game at all. I craved far more than just kisses; the throbbing had become visibly noticeable down under, needing attention and aching for release.

Just because I was a virgin, didn’t mean I was naïve to anything about sex. I just wondered when I’d get my chance to explore the unknown territory. It did frighten me just a smidge, but now that I knew I’d lose my purity to one of my loyal, sexy, star knights, the idea sounded pretty inviting.

Elias glanced my way.

“Karen said you can go for walks now, but don’t push yourself and absolutely no magic usage. Your body is still recovering, and we don’t want you fainting again,” Elias stressed; his voice stern and commanding.

Oh right, the fainting problem.

Since waking up three days ago, I’d been experiencing faint spells – the guys over exaggerated the ordeal; I had only fainted twice.

I could be fully invested in a conversation and then black out without a warning.

When I regained consciousness, the guys would inform me that Midnight, my split personality, made an appearance. So

far it had occurred twice; thankfully, both times I was sitting down. Now that I was approved to move around, their concern was more evident.

“Yup. No magic casting. Got it,” I acknowledged, pulling the blanket off my feet; I swung my legs out and stood up to stretch.

I wore grey shorts and a crop top, needing to wear something light thanks to the immense summer heat.

I noticed Elias’ eyes glanced at my markings, the multiple swirls and rose blossoms slathered my legs from where my shorts ended to my ankles; the multiple thorn vines wrapped around in a delicate manner.

I felt my heart skip a beat as I felt a wave of guilt hit me; my eyes landed on his chest – the same place where he got hit by the lightning spear. Even though I had spent time with the others since waking up, Elias had been the least.

I wanted it to be less awkward between us, but the sheer fear of him getting hurt again continued to haunt me.

He must have noticed my stare because he walked towards me.

“Mak–“

“Now that I’m off bed rest, I’m going to go out for a walk! Don’t worry I’ll get Marcus to come along!” I reassured them as I headed to the drawer and grabbed a set of clothes, before making my way to the door.

I felt something grasp my hand, stopping me mid stride. I turned to see Elias’ emerald eyes; the green jewels showed me a glimpse of pain.

I felt my heart drop as I contemplated on what to do.

I couldn’t face him...or Eli right now.

I didn’t have the courage or emotional strength to deal with them at this moment.

He must have seen the fear and guilt in my facial expression because he let go, glancing down to the floor.

“Just, be careful,” he whispered.

I turned my eyes to glance at Ryder; who had watched the situation by the side of the bed.

He gave me a weak smile, but urged me to leave with his hand.

He knew I wasn't ready just yet.

“I will.” I wanted to leave it like that, to turn around and walk away, but my legs wouldn't budge.

I sighed before leaning forward, pressing a gentle kiss on his smooth lips.

His eyes widened at my actions, but slowly closed as he returned my kiss. I pulled away and gave him a small smile before giving a small wave to them both and heading out the door.

“Mako...”

Rose's voice was hesitant as I walked into the bathroom, closing it behind me as I pressed my back against the black smooth wood.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I tried to take deep breathes.

I can't Rose...not yet.

I didn't know how to feel about Elias and EliaseAnne.

Not only did I have to witness him – them – dying in my arms because I couldn't dodge that lightning spear, but to then find out one of the men I cared about and female best friend were the same person.

I couldn't determine whether I was angry for the deceitful act or relieved to finally know the truth. It's not like I was completely oblivious to the possibility, but in this short life I'd lived and the multiple books I've read, not once had I heard of a male host having a female spirit.

It was unheard of.

So why was EliaseAnne connected to Elias?

I shook my head as I let out a frustrated huff, and turned the tap on. I splash my face with cold water.

I'll deal with that later.

I changed into the set of clothes I randomly chose; black shorts and a gold top, the words *Fairy Queen* plastered on front. I glared at the piece of fabric.

I swear this is karma at its best.

I let out another huff, forcing myself to pull over the crop top

I took a few minutes to brush my hair out, before tying it up into a ponytail.

I seriously need to trim my hair...I wonder if Midnight likes it this long?

Since my near-death experience, it seemed easier to communicate with Midnight. It wasn't like talking back and forth the way I did with my spirits. But there were certain times when I thought about her and wished for her opinion, I'd feel a weird sensation go through me.

After some trial and error, I'd figured out what feeling meant yes and what meant no. I didn't know what this new development happening between us meant, but it didn't worry me.

It would be nice if Midnight and I could communicate with no barriers.

The *YES* sensation flowed through me, causing me to smile in happiness.

I could never thank Midnight enough for saving the guys from King Aspen. I would have never been able to develop such a flawless plan in the situation she was in.

I knew she had feelings for Elias, so I could only imagine the amount of fear she had felt awaking to his pale, weak expression; his body surrounded by blood, and the chaos happening around her.

I applied the red gloss that Marcus had picked up, courtesy of Scarlet and looked at the mirror.

My turquoise eyes were vibrant as usual, my pale complexion back to its original shade, my cheeks slightly flushed from my little make-out session with Ryder and my glossy red lips.

I looked much better. I didn't even want to imagine how bad I looked during those horrendous two weeks of darkness. Just the thought of the dark essence consuming my body, had me shivering as I tried to control my heart rate from escalating.

I need to move...need to just get air and sunlight. The sunshine will rid of the darkness.

I walked out of the washroom and slipped on my neon pink runners, heading straight out the front door. Once the door closed behind me, I turned to face the wondrous scenery before me, inhaling deeply.

The sun's rays felt magnificent against my skin, warming up my soul. I brushed away the negative feelings that lurked in my mind, trying to remind me of my past struggle and enjoyed the blissfulness before me, Mother Starlight's gift to all shifters.

"Makoto?"

I opened my eyes slowly, turning my head to the alto voice that called me.

My eyes landed on my dragon shifter, Marcus.

He wore a pair of black shorts; his caramel, brown hair tied up in one of those sexy man buns. His chiseled chest was on full display, the definition in his six-pack enough to make my insides flip with desire. Not to mention that bloody V line, the lower abdominal muscles making an appearance before disappearing into those black silky shorts.

Curse them.

Marcus' prominent markings were plastered across his chest; the majority of the various swirls and knot work located

on his right side. The thick and thin lines flowed around his shoulder and encircled his upper right arm.

If you weren't aware of what markings were, you'd assume he got a massive tribal tattoo on his chest, spreading out onto his shoulder and ended at a half sleeve. The characteristic I loved the most was his mesmerizing sapphire eyes; the radiant, blue spheres stared at me, worry lines forming on his face.

"Aren't you on bed rest?" he questioned, walking towards me.

"Karen said I'm allowed to walk around. Still on magic probation though, so no training for now. I miss our morning runs." I admitted, allowing my voice to fade as the last words slipped out.

He reached my side, his hand rose up to brush the side of my face before leaning forward.

His lips pressed lightly against mine; his other hand wrapped itself around my waist and pulled me against him, gently. I melted into his embrace, pressing my glossy lips against his, returning the kiss as we stood in the warmth of the sun.

After a minute he pulled away, smiling down at me.

"Cherry flavoured lip gloss. I got to thank Scarlet for the recommendation," he whispered, licking his lips.

"When we go down to Earthala, will I get to meet her?" I asked. I didn't know who this Scarlet was, but she sounded super nice. I wondered if she was like Eli.

He smiled; his hand left my cheek to wrap around my waist, securing me in his arms.

"Yes, if you'd like. They're closing up some case, so when we do go down there, they should have a week or two off. We'll go on lots of adventures," he explained, smiling.

"All of us?" I asked. I wanted to confirm if all of us would be traveling down there in celebration of my perfect score with the written exams.

I'd also scored perfect on my 1v1 battle and we'd been given five stars for our performance with the infiltrated practical exam, so I was officially the top student in Knightwood ranking, Elias/Eli and Ryder being tied in second place.

Daniel had moved up to third place and Marcus was now fourth. We did excellent for a bunch of shifters pretending to be students.

"Yup, all of us will go down there. It's been awhile since we've had a mini vacation amongst ourselves. With you in tow, it's going to be entertaining," he mused, grinning.

I rolled my eyes.

"You know you love my company. Hmph," I countered, feigning annoyance. He pressed his forehead against mine.

"Yes, Firefly. We do love your company," he whispered.

I lifted up onto my tiptoes to kiss him softly. I could still see the relief on his face when I woke up the night we returned to our home in Knightwood. His hand returned to his side before he reached out and grasped my small hand into his.

"Shall we go for a walk?" I whispered, squeezing his hand and enjoying his warmth.

"I'd be honoured to walk with you, Princess," he replied, tugging me forward.

* * *

"Are you sure you'll be able to get back?"

I looked up at my dragon star knight, the back of my head pressed against his chest. We sat down in a meadow, watching the clouds go by, the sun high in the sky. The sound of the nearby stream caressed my ears as I listened to the surrounding wildlife roaming the forest.

I sat in between Marcus' legs; his arms around my waist as I relaxed in his embrace. Nightmare had joined us before we entered the forest; her white, furry body sitting at the entrance

path we always took during our morning routines; her tails waved gently from side to side.

She'd been by my side the majority of my recovery, only leaving recently to get some fresh air while I read comfortably in Ryder's room. Now she chased butterflies while I enjoyed Marcus' company.

We'd spent so much time sitting in silence, simply enjoying the scenery before us that Marcus had forgot about his apparent meeting with Ryder and Matthew. His body jolted, Ryder probably reminding him of their appointment through their star knight bond.

I could imagine Ryder rolling his eyes and Matthew's stern look as they stood in the professor's office, waiting for Marcus to show up.

"I'll be just fine. Nightmare will keep me company. I won't faint, I promise," I vowed.

He shook his head in disapproval.

"Uh huh. This is coming from the girl who can't even sense when she's going to pass out. Do I need to remind you of your two faint sessions in the last two days? Your statement totally reassures my worried soul," he commented, sighing.

"Ugh, that's different! I totally know when it's going to happen!" I argued, not wanting to admit how true his words were.

"Would you accept a first-class ticket to hell if you're wrong?" he questioned, smirking devilishly. I groaned, glancing away. Thanks to my frequent outspoken declarations, he'd picked up on that.

Curse this sexy dragon.

"Why thank you, Starlight princess. I feel honoured to be called sexy by you. Though, you have to stop cursing me and the others. We won't live long enough to bring you home to your pretty castle," he joked, placing a kiss against my neck, directly on my sensitive spot.

My back arched at the feel of his cool, moist lips, a moan escaped my lips as he continued.

After ten seconds, he let out a frustrated groan before pulling away.

“Stupid mental communication...always interrupting me,” he grumbled, his frustration making me laugh.

“You love it, don’t lie! It’s useful, seriously,” I mused.

“Nope, not useful at all. Stryker can scare the living shit out of anyone when he makes an appearance, Azriel just enters to piss off Stryker and oh Starlight, I don’t even want to talk about Elyion,” he rambled, shuffling backward to stand up and brushing off the grass sticking to his round, firm butt. Before my mind was able to ponder on what he just said, I took a moment to appreciate the shape of his butt, ignoring the need reach out and feel how hard it was.

I’d love to squeeze those buns.

“My buns are yours to claim,” he whispered. I felt the heat rush to my cheeks as I blushed. *Mako – 5, Outspoken thoughts – 54.*

“Go away, you’re distracting,” I ordered; my hands crossed across my chest.

Wait, who’s Azriel and Elyion?

“Don’t give me that look Firefly. C’mon.” He outstretched his hand to me. I glared at it for a moment before giving in, placing my hand in his as he helped me up. I was ready to question him on his previous statement when he smiled wickedly at me, pulling me forward before slapping my butt.

“HEY!” I shrieked as he laughed.

“Your buns are mine now, Firefly. I get first dibs, okay,” he said turning around to walk away.

Oh, not so fast.

I step forward, slapping his ass. He froze; his head slowly turned over his shoulder to stare at me wide eyed, his cheeks growing red.

“You can’t go claiming my butt before I claim yours. Your dragon buns are mine! I’ve claimed them. No one else can have them,” I declared. I could hear Lexi giggling in the back of my mind.

“Hmm, I don’t think Marcus is the only one who liked your declaration,” Lexi stated.

What do you mean?

I noticed Marcus’ eyes flicker from his usual sapphire eyes to a red-orange colour, finally settling onto the sunset mixed red. I froze, realizing Marcus’ dragon was now in control. I’d never met him before. He turned around, taking one step before he was face to face with me, his gaze locked on mine.

His hand went under my chin, lifting my head up.

“Be careful what you claim sweet Firefly. I agree with Marcus though; we get first dibs on that perky ass of yours,” he seduced.

My body grew hot as desire flowed through me.

He gave me a quick kiss; his hand landed on my left butt cheek, squeezing it gently before stepping back, a smirk on his lips.

“Tell Lexi to come out and play sometime. I didn’t get to say this during that annoying, worry inducing exam, but her dragon form is hot. Anyways, see you.” He winked before turning around, walking towards the forest without looking back.

I stood there in shock as I watched his figure disappear within the thick layer of trees, blinking a few times to determine whether this was a figment of my imagination or whatever just unfolded was truly real.

“He did not just do that,” I exclaimed.

“Give me just ten minutes in a room with him. I can already picture the different positions we coul—” Lexi began, her voice filled with seduction before I cut her off.

“UGH, Enough! Nope. Don’t need to hear it. Don’t you dare give me a glimpse of what you’re picturing,” I protested,

brushing my hand through my hair to distract myself as an image of Marcus in his low ride sweat pants and bare, marking-filled chest lingered in my head.

Settle down hormones! You get to see Ryder's naked, top half, too. Don't need to get all greedy now.

I turned towards the forest, ready to make my way back when I felt a wave of dizziness hit me.

I let out a groan, waiting for the spinning sensation to stop.

Nope, I'm not going to faint. Totally not go—

My body leaned back as my consciousness began to drift. My body crashed into something soft, arms wrapped around me. I sighed in relief as I allowed my once tense body to relax in the embrace.

Mint surrounded me; the fresh, clean scent welcoming.

“I swear; I can't keep my eyes off you, Mako.”

EliaseAnne's voice sounded far away, but her high pitch voice was soft and comforting in the darkness that continued to cloud my mind.

Eli. Even though I tried to avoid talking to Elias, they both continued to keep an eye on me.

That was the last thought I had before I submitted to the darkness.

CHAPTER 8



Midnight

I opened my eyes; the bright light blinded my vision. I took a deep breath, the scent of mint surrounded me as my eyes adjusted to the warm rays of sunlight above; a shadow leaned over to stare down at me.

I was greeted with wide emerald eyes; the shiny jewels sparkled from the sunshine as they bore into mine.

Bountiful blonde, loose curls fell forward as the shifter continued to stare down at me.

Her skin was flawless; her light porcelain complexion only contributed in making her eyes look spectacular. Her cheeks had a hint of pink to match her soft, smooth, pink lips.

“Midnight?” Her high-pitched voice sent a light tingle flowing through me; the effect occurred when I’d awoken to Elias’ calm voice.

This must be EliaseAnne.

“EliaseAnne?” I questioned, tilting my head, lying on the fairy shifter’s lap. She smiled, the expression made me feel like I’d done something good for knowing who she was.

I sat up, Eli leaning back so I didn’t head butt her. I smiled at the peaceful scene that greeted me. Ever since the night of the 1v1 exam, the same night I met Elias’ for the first time, I’d taken a love for Mother Starlight’s immense beauty.

Both times I’d been summoned because of this ‘*fainting spell*’ problem Mako and I were dealing with, since the group practical exam. I don’t think it bothered either of us. The

concern was there were never any warning signs that came along with our switching issue.

It had been quiet and peaceful since our discharge from the medical centre, so I didn't worry about such matters.

Being awakened due to a simple fainting spell was better than waking up midst of a blood bath of shifters, with the intentions of murdering you on sight.

Now that I had a glimpse of the vast trees, the running stream a few feet from me, and the sun shining in the sky, I didn't know what else to do.

I crossed my legs, allowing my hands to relax in the open space, pressing them into the soft grass – the smooth dirt sank inward, surrounding my fingers. The sensation was new and different, catching my attention as I began to analyze the dark brown soil. I enjoyed watching nature, but feeling it in my grasp was a feeling too great to express in words. I held a great appreciation for these moments.

“It feels nice and welcoming, doesn't it?”

I turned to face Eli, who was staring at me with interest. I blushed, realizing how caught up I was in Starlight's gift of life that I'd completely forgotten about Eli's presence.

“Yes, ” I replied, looking away.

It feels weird talking to people other than Mako.

“You need to work on your social skills, Midnight. Mako's progressed a bit. She still can't differentiate between her thoughts and speech, but I guess progress is progress, no matter how small,” Rose encouraged.

I frowned, twiddling my fingers as I attempted to think of something to talk about.

“You don't need to be so nervous Midnight. Just act normal,” Eli pointed out, staying in place.

“I don't know how,” I admitted, lifting my eyes to stare at her as I continued to frown. Besides from Mako and our spirits, I had no one else to talk to after all these cycles. I had

probably said five words within a cycle to the Owner; his focus more on my performance than striking a conversation.

“Well, is there anything you’re curious about?” Eli asked.

I took a moment to ponder on her question; my eyes lowered on the specific spot on her chest – the spot where the lightning spear struck them.

There were many things I was curious about, but the picture of Elias lying beneath me with a hole in his chest was all I could seem to focus on. I could still picture his body beneath me as he bled across the dark grey dirt; my hands drenched in his blood.

“Sorry.” I apologized, feeling sad.

I grasped my left hand, attempting to hide the tremble that began to surface.

Mako had left a bunch of notes with Ryder, informing him to share them with me if I happened to appear, which occurred the following night during dinner.

Mako had explained in her notes that Elias and Eli were the same person, Elias being the host and Eli being his fairy spirit. Now, she was unsure how to face them.

“Midnight, don’t apologize. It’s thanks to you we didn’t die. I should be thanking you for saving Elias. Thank you,” she acknowledged, bowing down to the ground.

My face grew hot; my cheeks red with embarrassment. No one outside of Mako had ever praised or thanked me for doing something positive. To be experiencing such act of appreciation only made me feel awkward.

“Sure...you’re welcome? Is that how you say it?” I questioned, trying to remember the lessons Rose had taught me back when I was learning how to speak just in case such an opportunity emerged.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Eli approved, sitting up before standing.

I looked up at her tall figure, allowing my eyes to roam her body from head to toe.

Eli had an attractive body to match her beautiful facial features; her height only complimented her exquisite curves. From the way the wind carried her long, blonde curls to the sun's rays that splashed against her delicate skin, made her look dazzling before me.

I felt my heart rate accelerate as I continued to stare at her, unable to determine why I suddenly felt attracted to her.

Aren't we supposed to not like girls?

"Those are shifter and human morals for you. Spirits, on the other hand, don't concern themselves with such fine details," Lexi clarified, sounding unconcerned.

"It doesn't say anywhere in the Starlight law that shifters had to mate with the opposite sex," Lily pointed out.

"Love is love," Hope approved, sounding pleased with her declaration.

I looked within myself, the feelings of attraction still strong and present. Did Makoto feel attracted to EliaseAnne and was just ignoring it? If she did like Eli, was she purposely not telling her because of her morals or did she not know?

But I'm not a spirit...I'm just the other half of Mako. Where does that leave me? Do I have to follow morals?

"What are you talking about? What are you asking about that regards morals?" Eli questioned.

I grimaced, realizing I'd exposed some of my thoughts to the topic of interest. I sighed, rising to my feet to face the overly attractive, tingle inducing, fairy shifter.

I'll just inquire.

"Is it incorrect to love the same sex?" I inquired.

My voice held no emotion as I sought for an answer that would be enough for my frantic beating heart.

It had been cycles since I felt such emotions – the mere possibility of feeling any compassion or attractiveness being sealed within myself for multiple reasons.

At the facility, such emotions only lead to heartbreak and unbearable misery. I assumed I'd never need to feel attracted to anyone ever again. But I wasn't sure now that I was in this situation with EliaseAnne and it was confusing.

More importantly, I was afraid to open such a box sealed within me. I knew EliaseAnne wasn't a threat, but I couldn't ignore my past; my heart struggled to determine whether to unlock that box within me and experience love once more.

Eli simply stood there, speechless, her eyes wide. I held my ground; my curiosity outweighed the feeling of apprehensiveness that began to crawl into my mind. As the silence continued, I started to feel disappointed.

Maybe asking was a bad idea. I don't think I'm good at using social skills.

"It's not that. I...just didn't expect you to ask that question. As a spirit myself, to answer your question in that perspective, no it's not incorrect to love the same sex. In terms of my own morals...I'm different," she explained, frowning as she avoided my gaze.

Different?

"But you're a girl and a spirit. Doesn't that mean you don't care in dating a female shifter?" I couldn't seem to understand her reasoning.

"It's complicated," she replied. I could see a shift in those green eyes...it was a look I had seen in many shifter's eyes when they're being backed into a corner. Feeling trapped.

"Why?" I retorted, not satisfied with her answer.

"Midnight," she said sternly. I could see a hint of Elias in her expression as she continued to frown at my analysis attempt.

"If Mako liked you, does that mean you wouldn't date her because she's a girl?" The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them, a weird sensation filled me. It was the same feeling I experienced when I was thrown into the pit to face multiple shifters – dread.

I frowned, wondering if the sensation was induced by Mako's subconscious. She'd written down how she sometimes could feel me, similar to how she'd felt her spirit's emotions. The only difference was we couldn't speak to one another, nor could we feel each other's feelings all the time.

Was Mako feeling frightful with the possibility of EliaseAnne not liking her in that way?

EliaseAnne didn't respond; her expression alternated between confusion and sadness.

I frowned at her outstanding silence; the fear of her rejection grew greater than any fear I had experienced at the facility. I didn't know where I stood with her, and that feeling made me feel uncomfortable and awkward standing before her.

I'd just met her for the first time, but Elias on the other hand...I knew I liked him.

"Nevermind. Forget I asked. I'm going home. Bye EliBear."

I turned around, not able to face the fairy shifter as I felt my eyes sting. I was puzzled at my sudden immense emotions of sadness and rejection. I'd locked my feelings away long ago, yet within this short time it was as if I'd never done such a selfish act.

Was it Makoto's feelings I was harbouring right now? Or my own?

If she didn't like me that way...only wanting to be friends, then I didn't want to hear it from her now.

I glanced at the friendship bracelet on my wrist – *MAKOTO – ELI – MIDNIGHT* displayed around the bracelet in nice stone like blocks, the letters engraved into the material. Our names were separated by bears, making me want to call Eli by her new nickname.

I walked forward, placing my hand over my mouth to yawn as a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

I didn't hear footsteps follow me as I entered the forest, which only made the sensation within me deepen – leaving me

feeling numb.

Doesn't Eli like us? Like that?

Something tugged at my hand, causing me to shriek, I was ready to summon my magic when I was pulled into an embrace, the mint leaf scent mixed with the familiar cherry blossom shampoo fragrance I knew from Mako's memories was owned by one person.

"EliBear?" I whispered, struggling to keep my composure.

"I swear to Starlight, don't make that expression...the same one Mako makes when you come to a conclusion without reasoning." She whispered in my ear as she tightened her embrace, causing me to blush.

"I did ask for a reason. You gave me no response. Of course, I assume..." I trailed off, not wanting to finish. I let out another yawn; my eyes became heavy as my mind began to fade.

"EliBear...can you tell me the reason next time I see you." I questioned, fighting the darkness that attempted to devour me.

She was silent for a moment, before pulling back to look at me. She must have noticed my struggle to stay awake as my body wobbled; her embrace only tightened around me to keep me up straight.

"Yes," she answered as she gave me a nod.

I gave a weak smile; my eyes closed as I gave into the darkness' numerous attempts.

"I like you Midnight...till next time."

* * *

~MAKO~

I jolted awake, sitting straight up.

SHIT, SHIT, SHITTY SHIT, SHIT. What just happened...no that was a dream, that couldn't have just happened.

I was shocked at a number of things as my mind frantically tried to solve all of them at once. I decided to narrow it down to three main concerns: A. I'd fainted even though I promised Marcus and Elias I wouldn't. B. I'd heard a majority of Midnight's conversation that occurred, and C. Eli likes Midnight?

Does that mean...

"Makoto? What's wrong?"

I whipped my head to my left, a pair of emerald eyes locked on to me, worry etched on Elias' face as he stared at me, frowning at my delirious display.

"What?" I questioned back.

"Why do you look like you just saw a ghost? You woke up and started swearing," he questioned, raising an eyebrow at me.

I blinked at him; the feeling of guilt returned at full force. It must have shown on my face, because he reached out and grabbed my hand, hindering me from attempting to escape.

"Makoto...stop running away from me," he cautioned; the seriousness in his words made me freeze.

I opened my mouth, attempting to find the words – anything to express how sorry I was for what had happened during the exams.

I should have known better, knowing the Owner for sixteen cycles; long enough to know his underhanded tactics.

Instead of words, a tear rolled down my cheek, followed by another. Within seconds, the tears flowed uncontrollably as I stared at him, unable to hide my feelings of distress any longer.

"Elias..." I cried, the sobs escaped me as I kneeled there in the cushion like grass, surrounded by the hollow trees.

I could feel the darkness that had claimed me during my weeks of unconsciousness; the tendrils of agonizing cold and loneliness took over.

It was as if it didn't want to leave my soul, wrapping its icy fingers around me – always reminding me that I am nothing but a tainted rose that would never achieve its once perfect image.

Guilt weighed me – like a heavy burden placed upon my shoulders for me to bear alone.

I still feared the Owner would return once more; unable to anticipate what his next actions were and who'd be his next victim.

I didn't want to be plagued by such feelings any longer; needing to stand on my own feet instead of being babied. But, I struggled to get past this.

He swore under his breath, crawling toward me and pulling me into his arms.

"Mako babe, stop. It's okay, I'm fine," he urged as he cradled me in his arms, rocking back and forth.

"It's my fault. It's always my fault. Everyone who comes close to me dies or gets hurt. Why would you want to be around someone like me? Someone as tainted as me? How am I supposed to lead you away from the darkness when it's within me? I don't deserve such status. What if you had died Elias? You and Eli and you didn't even tell me!" I cried through sobs as I pulled away to pound against his chest with my fist.

I'd trusted him with my secret of Midnight, yet he couldn't even trust me with his?

"Mako it's not like that! I was going to tell you, but with the exams and you already dealing with so much...I didn't want to burden you. I wanted you to be focused on the tasks that were already in front of you; you didn't need another distraction," he argued.

His hands grasped my wrists, preventing me from continuing my hammering against his broad chest.

“Burden me! This doesn’t have anything to do with that! I want you to TRUST ME! You guys carry my baggage every day, yet I can’t be told that my best friend is your spirit! You know how embarrassing it is? How hurt I feel that every day you lied to my face! The others didn’t tell me either! ALL of you were okay with lying to me and keeping such an important secret from me because you thought it would be a BURDEN!” I yelled.

I pulled my wrists out of his grasp, standing on my wobbly feet, turning to walk away.

“Makoto!” He yelled after me, his footsteps rushing towards me.

I clenched my fist as power grew within me; my anger and rage contributed to its growth. It pulsed within my body wanting an escape, to be free to wreak havoc.

“Stay away from me!” I ordered, walking even faster.

The breeze around us picked up as I felt the power seep from within. It began to lash around me as the leaves circled me, making me stop in my tracks. I turned and stood before him in the eye of a cyclone. The emotions poured out of me like water from a faucet, yet there was no way to turn it off. I couldn’t keep it trapped inside of me any longer.

The anger and fear cut through me with precision and more than anything; I just wanted, needed, to know where I stood in this new life.

If they couldn’t trust me with something so important, what would happen in the future?

“Mako! Stop! Karen said no magic!” he roared.

I ignored him, my breathing became rapid and my heart raced. Just leave me alone...just let the darkness take me. At least I’d know I’m alone.

The wind stream of air created a barrier around me. I heard pounding against the barricade I created as I crouched down to my knees; my hands pressed against my ears as I began to hyperventilate.

I'm not good enough; I don't deserve to be here. There must be a mistake. Yes, I'm a mistake...I should have just disappeared with the darkness, I should have faded away. Disappear...yes; melt away from everything...no one would care. No one would notice. I'm nobody.

I tried to continue accepting my fate, when warm hands slid against my cheeks.

I opened my tear-filled eyes, my frantic exhales continued as I stared at Eli, only she was different.

Her hair glowed, floating gently in the air, the high-speed winds that encased us having no effect on its dazzling appearance. Her eyes shone a lime green, as emerald coloured markings began to surface along the left side of her face, trailing down her neck. The most eye-catching feature was her large, translucent, multi-coloured wings that glittered to life.

I stared at her with wide eyes; her expression softened. I could see her eyes water as she swallowed. She pressed her forehead against mine before she began speaking, her soft-spoken voice triggered goosebumps.

“Makoto. I'm sorry. I should have told you. It's okay for you to be mad. I deserve it...we all deserve it. You have every right to feel disappointed in us. We were appointed to you as your Star Knights and had every intention to be truthful to you. We all just assumed it would be best not to tell you because we didn't believe you would be able to handle it when you were already trying so hard to adjust to everything around you. I speak for the others, as well as Elias. We're sorry. We should have trusted you, our princess, and had more faith in you. If you don't want to see me again, simply say the words and I'll disappear.”

I allowed her words to sink into my frazzled brain, the immense anger raging within me dissipated; the wind barrier around us faded away as the air shifted back to a breeze and then slowed down to a stop. The multiple leaves gathered in the aftermath, fell around us.

A world...without Eli?

I frowned; a new set of tears formed in my eyes at the simple thought of my best friend leaving me. I felt the weird sensation, sadness flooded my mind. Midnight didn't approve of this either.

"Don't go..." I whispered, biting my lip.

She smiled, a tear rolled down her cheek.

"You don't need to forgive us now. But know you aren't a mistake Makoto Heart. You are our light, our sweet Firefly with a heart of gold. You helped us find the path of light when we were surrounded by darkness. The emptiness we all once felt, the void that lingered within us as days passed, unable to live out our roles as your knights are now filled. Please, don't ever think of yourself as nothing. We need you...I need you."

I nodded, unable to argue with anything she had said. I didn't know what was going on with me, but I just wanted everything to be normal between us again, to be able to face her without feeling so negative.

She hugged me; my body relaxed as I felt the remaining feelings of anxiety and anger release, leaving behind a wave of exhaustion to take its place. I moaned as I tried to fight the spinning sensation that attacked my senses.

I needed to at least say this.

"I'm sorry...EliaseAnne. I forgive you," I whispered against her chest.

My conscious faded away; my body unable to fight the weakness and ongoing dizziness that assaulted my mind.

CHAPTER 9

“**F**uck, is she okay?”

I walked out of the forest, Daniel running towards me.

I noticed Kai's ginger hair as he emerged from the gate, frowning as his eyes landed on the sleeping princess in my arms.

“She's okay.” I reassured the angel shifter as I reached him.

His eyes glowed; the golden light emerged to life as his eyes scanned her from head to toe.

He sighed in relief but was still frowning when his eyes returned to normal.

“What happened? And why do I sense magic radiating off her?” Daniel demanded, not impressed with his discovery.

I sighed, ignoring him as I started walking again, heading towards Kai, who was holding the gate. I nodded to him thanks before making my way to the door.

I called upon the wind element, summoning its soft waves to push gently against the door as I said an incantation, the door unlocking without any struggle.

It opened slowly, allowing me to walk into the house. I headed for the black, three-seater, suede sofa and lowered Makoto into the soft cushions. She didn't even stir; her body sank into the material as she continued to breathe softly.

Kai walked to my side, taking a moment to assess Mako; his hand brushed away the strands of brown hair lingering on her oval face. His eye emitted a soft amber glow, and my body grew tense.

Kai's phoenix didn't make many appearances for multiple reasons; his inability to control his temper being the primary one. When you looked at Kai's usual calm nature, you would never guess his spirit to be the complete opposite of him.

Kai was cool and collective, his phoenix – wild and in desperate need of anger management classes. It was easy to relate to him when we were younger; both of us dealt with our anger issues together. He wasn't as comforting as Marcus, but it was fun to release our anger in the form of training during our childhood and teen cycles.

"She broke down and used magic." He stated the words as fact instead of a question. I needed a moment to collect myself, trying not to snap at my fellow knights for stating the facts; the fear of their scrutinizing stares and remarks, fell upon my shoulders.

"Fuck, I don't know what happened when she was in a coma, but it had a big effect on her emotionally. She blames herself for the scar on my chest and doesn't want to forgive herself for putting us all in danger. She got mad that I didn't tell her about Eli, that none of us told her. We basically didn't trust her, and that simple thought hurt her. She got angry and her magic reacted to her immense desire to shield herself. She summoned a wind funnel, hiding within it to protect herself from everything. Eli shifted to her fairy form to calm her down and apologized. She accepted it and fainted out of exhaustion." I gave them the cliff notes version...it was all they needed. They didn't need to know about the guilt I felt now staring at her, or the way Eli had died a little on the inside at the thought that she could never love or have Mako and Midnight the way I could.

I walked to the opposite sofa; my body dropped into its soft cushions. I allowed my hands to flow through my ash blonde locks in frustration. It was hard enough having the ability to feel her emotions, the wrath of the twister of

emotions hit me like falling bricks upon touching her, partnered up with Eli's internal thoughts and emotions, was pushing me to a breaking point.

I felt a hand drop on my shoulder, a wave of calm flowed through me. I opened my eyes, glancing up to see Marcus staring down at me; his sapphire eyes glowed softly as the markings on his exposed chest glowed. I smiled, thankful for his calming ability. You would never expect a dragon shifter to have such a talent. Ryder and Daniel walked up to stand next to Kai.

"We just finished talking with Matthew. You can explain in detail what happened in a moment, but we're going to need your help," Marcus confessed; his voice stern and serious. I didn't like the sound of his voice. When Marcus' expressed seriousness, it only emphasized that something was wrong.

I sat patiently, waiting for him to continue as I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

"Mako's faint spells...they aren't simply because of her body attempting to recover from surpassing her magic limit," he proposed.

Kai and Daniel both turned to glance at the dragon shifter, confusion morphed onto their faces. Ryder made his way to the bookshelf, leaning against it. *Oh no, bad sign.*

"If it's not that, why does she keep switching in and out?" Daniel questioned.

Ryder crossed his arms with a stern look in his darkened eyes.

Marcus turned himself to face all of us. "Midnight isn't a split personality. She's a spirit."

CHAPTER 10



“I swear to Starlight, I hate that greedy, self-centered headmaster. I’ve never seen someone so consumed by the change in his pocket. How can King Arthur deal with him?”

Marcus and I had just finished our meeting with the Headmaster. Thanks to him, I was currently on campus instead of being by Mako’s side like I promised.

He requested an update on Mako’s condition, aka, *‘tell me if the big fat direct deposit that goes into my account every rotation is going to get cut thanks to my pathetic protection capabilities.’*

Nope, he had to hear it from me, the leader of our group, as Matthew’s daily check-ins with him didn’t mean shit.

“Honestly, I can’t wait for us to leave this place and go back to Heila. We get treated with respect and dignity. Not over here where these professors think they’re better than us. You do realize the headmaster only speaks so kindly to you cause he’s sucking up, right? You should see the way he talks to me and the others. We’d be lucky for him to rotate in his chair to face us,” Marcus complained; his hand reached up to remove the hair tie holding up the neat man bun; the caramel strands of hair scattered down his back.

His hair was even longer than when we first found Mako, going past its usual mid bicep length to surpassing his elbow.

With everything that had been going on the last two weeks with Mako being in a coma, we all needed a good clean up and

I'd spent a few hours prior to this useless meeting, cleaning up my appearance.

It was worth the look on Mako's face when she saw me.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my lips as Mako's vibrant turquoise eyes lifted up from the new e-reader Marcus bought her, taking a moment to stare at my clean-shaven face and quick haircut. She practically threw the e-reader to the side, stretching her arms out.

"Come here sexy," she purred, and her eyes softened as she smiled seductively. I didn't know my legs could move as fast as they did. Within a second, I was in her arms, kissing her as those soft fingertips caressed my smooth skin.

"You like it now?" I asked, wanting to hear her approval once more.

She pulled back, staring into my eyes for a moment. "I approve. Muuuucchh better than before. You looked like a cave man," she admitted happily; her hand gliding through my new hairdo.

"A caveman, really? How about Marcus? His hair has grown longer, and he has a beard too." I couldn't help but point out Marcus' new look. His long, brown locks didn't change too much of his appearance, but the newly grown beard made a dramatic difference. I thought his popularity would have calmed down with the female shifters, but it only escalated.

Whenever he returned from Knightwood after giving the headmaster a report, he'd have a frustrated look on his face, a bunch of confession letters and gifts in his hands. With a loud groan, he'd walk straight to the garbage bin, throwing them all out with not even a pinch of remorse. Our poor dragon knight and his attractiveness.

Mako tilted her head to the side; her plump lips pressed together as she took a moment to think about my protest.

"Marcus looks hot with or without hair," she replied.

"I don't look hot with a beard?" I replied, frowning on purpose.

Her eyes widened before; she pressed her hands gently against my cheeks. "Hmm, not like you aren't attractive...it's just...uh...well...it doesn't suit you," she replied honestly, avoiding my stare.

I laughed at her embarrassment. "Mako, I love your honesty. Don't feel shy to tell me if I look like shit," I whispered.

"Okay. Well, if we're going to be honest then yes, you looked horrible." She laughed as I shook my head.

My hands slid down to her stomach.

She froze; her jaw dropped as her eyes went wide. "Don't. You. Dare," she warned.

I grinned before I began my tickle raid. She shrieked; laughter escaped her as she tried to wiggle away from me in the queen-size bed, which felt small with both of us in it.

"Stop! I surrender. You're hotter than the sun, hehe, Ryder!" she begged, tears of joy formed in her eyes.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into an embrace. "That sounds better. It's about time you admit I am the hotter one. The sun can't even stop my sex appeal," I boasted.

"Don't get cocky. Or the sun may get jealous and burn you." She relaxed in my embrace, reaching out to retrieve her e-reader.

"Hmm, if that's what you want Princess. The sun should be jealous; I get to hold the universe in my arms while he only gets the sky above. I think I have the better bargain." I whispered against her flesh before pressing my lips against the sensitive spot on her neck.

She moaned; her back arched slightly as she tilted her head. "When were...you such a romantic? Mhm...stop distracting," she commanded, but her body froze in place as I continued kissing her.

“Always have been, but I stay true to my statement. The others would agree,” I whispered, tightening my arms around her as I rested my head on her shoulder. Her smell intoxicating.

Even now, her vanilla scent still lingered on my clothes; the scent gave me enough patience to deal with the amount of time wasted with the headmaster.

“Who’s with Mako?” I questioned as we stepped out of the building; the fresh warm air flowed past us as the sun’s bright rays attacked my vision; I lifted my hand to block it out.

“I left her beside the pond. Eli is keeping an eye on her. I don’t think Elias is ready to confront her yet,” Marcus confessed.

I sighed. I couldn’t agree more.

It had already been four days, yet the tension between those two hadn’t changed a bit.

When Mako woke up, we all had our moment to hug and kiss her, thanking the Starlight gods she was finally awake and slowly recovering. Elias’ reunion with her was the shortest.

I could feel the multiple emotions going through him as he walked out of her room, frustration written all over his face. I could only imagine how EliaseAnne was feeling. I figured Mako was angry at all of us for keeping the fact that Eli was Elias’ spirit, a secret. I hadn’t even thought to tell her, thinking that Elias would reveal it to her after exams.

Now that she was awake, her sudden change of mood when Elias entered the room, proved us wrong. It didn’t take a person like myself or Daniel, to sense her emotions with our gifts. She was an open book; her face revealed her disappointment and anger.

Even when Mako abruptly decided to go for a walk, her body desperately needed to leave the room. Elias reached out and stopped her; I could see the hurt in her eyes. I knew her well enough at this point to know she wanted space. She’d

need time to process everything before listening to their reasons. It was just hard to watch and difficult to ignore the feeling of rejection that slipped through our knight bond.

Myself and Daniel struggled with the multiple emotions lately. My ability or “gift” to feel emotions was the strongest within our bond, versus Daniel’s ability to feel and manipulate one’s emotions at a distance.

With the current situation and our own emotions to deal with, it was a lot of stress to carry and the overstimulation of emotions was getting to us. I was glad that Mako was okay, reducing that particular problem by sixty percent.

“He’s going to have to do it sooner or later. She deserves an apology from both of them. He should get it over with before Mako get—” I wasn’t able to complete my sentence as a wave of worry hit my senses, prompting me to stop in my tracks.

A groan escaped me as I closed my eyes; my heart soared to life as it crashed against my chest.

“Fuck, Ryder you okay?” Marcus questioned; his hands pressed on my shoulders, stabilizing me.

Shit, I need to sit.

As if reading my mind, Marcus tugged me forward, pulling me into the nearest building. Thankfully, this side of the school was quiet throughout the day, giving us an opportunity to be unseen by the multiple students dying to get a glimpse or picture of us.

I managed to make it into the empty class room, the door shut before I leaned against the cold cement wall, trying to catch my breath.

“What the fuck was that? Whoever owns those feelings better dampen them down. Ryder can’t handle it.” Marcus roared through our bond; his anger enough to make me feel even shittier.

“Marcus...not helping,” I complained through our bond, letting out a groan.

I centered my mind, attempted to visualize our bond in our mind. I was in the centre, surrounded by the others. I could imagine their bodies in their designated colours; *blue, gold, green, orange*.

A line from each of them stretched out to me, connecting me to them.

I noticed the green line flickered, the usual straight-line wobbled as it began to change into a dark purple colour; the combined mixture looked a sickly green.

“Elias? What’s wrong?” I questioned.

Marcus put my arm over his shoulder, assisting me to the desk. I sat in relief, glad that I could be off my feet.

“Can’t talk right—” he began, but trailed off.

I noticed his colour flickered, descending from sickly green to a bright pink.

EliaseAnne...shit, that’s probably not good.

Eli never took over unless she got permission from Elias. The only other reason she would take over is in a protective manner.

“Eli?” Marcus called out, which was greeted by complete silence. I sighed, as their emotions stabilized, giving me a moment of calm.

“I’ll explain later. I need to calm Mako down.” Her usual high, mellow voice was filled with seriousness before she pulled out of the bond.

I had enough energy to open my eyes, lifting them to stare at Marcus who was frowning.

“That doesn’t sound good. You okay? You’re as pale as Mako’s usual complexion,” Marcus pointed out, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m fine. Let’s make our way back,” I encouraged, pushing myself off the desk. Before we could head out the room, the door slid open, a pair of orange eyes, framed by black rimmed glasses, locked onto ours.

“I knew I saw you two,” Matthew acknowledged, closing the door behind him before walking towards us.

He took one glance at me and frowned.

“You’re as pale as a sheet,” he commented.

“Elias. My best guess is he confronted Mako and it didn’t go too well. Eli took over before she pulled herself out of the bond. We’re heading back now,” I explained, trying to compose myself.

I still felt unstable on my feet.

Matthew walked towards me, his hand landed on my shoulder, urging me to sit down. I stared at him, frowning in defiance. He raised one of his eyebrows as we continued our staring match. I let out a huff before sitting back down.

“Give yourself a few more minutes. We can’t have you passing out on campus. It would be bad for your image. If your assumption is correct, Kai and Daniel should be somewhere near the house and can assist in de-escalating the situation. They will summon you if they need anything,” Matthew reassured me.

I looked up at the first commander of Heila, a hint of his authoritative nature came through his voice. Not like his powerful aura didn’t make you shiver with concern. He did a fair job hiding it during classes and walking through the halls, but when with us, he couldn’t help but leak small bits of his energy, reminding us of where we stood in our group.

I may have been the leader of our expedition, but he was still our leader and teacher back at Heila, deserving much respect and praise with his position alone.

“While you rest up, I have some news.” He walked towards one of the desks, pulling out a chair and dragging it to place beside the table I was resting on.

He sat down, leaning back as he lifted his right leg to relax on his left. He pulled his black rimmed glasses off his face; his hand roamed through his hair as he sighed.

Marcus and I shared a look. This didn't look like good news.

"Remember when I told you that I was going to contact a good friend of mine? Well, I explained Mako's situation to her, especially with the discovery of Midnight," Matthew began.

We both nodded, urging him to continue his explanation.

"Winterlya is making her way over here as soon as possible. She should be here within a few days," he admitted.

His stern face emphasized the sudden development.

"Winterlya? Please don't tell me it's that tall, repulsive woman with the annoying aura." Stryker's annoyed voice filled my mind.

I smirked at his comment.

Winterlya was one of the strongest necromancers in all of Heila. Not only did she know practically every spell, she knew about almost every spirit species, traveling across the realms to acquire knowledge and learn from each dimension. She had even gone to Realm One before it perished. She was our teacher throughout our teen cycles, assisting us in learning how to perfect our strengths and abilities.

"Why is she rushing over here? Is something wrong with Mako's health?" Marcus inquired, unable to hide the worry in his voice.

I was concerned, too. Sure, if she was simply taking her sweet time to get here then I wouldn't be bothered, but speedy to Winterlya meant four days flat and that was only because she hated using the portal.

"Mako's faint spells...they're a problem. Mako shouldn't be fainting and switching to Midnight like she has been the last three days. Winter and Karen both agree that something was triggered mentally when Mako surpassed her magic limit. They both believe if we don't do something, the fainting spells are only going to get worse," Matthew explained.

I clenched my hands, trying to calm myself. Thanks to King Aspen, Mako's mental stability was unstable. I was

concerned about her and Midnight. What could happen if the problem wasn't fixed?

"How is she going to fix it? Is she going to place a spell on her or something?" Marcus inquired, both of his fists clenched as he gritted his teeth. He was more than a little upset by the news; his emotions of anger flowed through me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to ride the feeling out, not wanting to show how affected I was by it. With Elias' previous emotional tornado, my ability was in a hypersensitive state.

Marcus must have noticed my struggle, taking a large breath, before sighing; his hands spread out as he wiggled them.

"Sorry, Ryder," he apologized.

I smiled weakly, nodding in acknowledgment.

"Winter has a theory. After explaining it to myself and Karen, I think she potentially may be right about her hypothesis," Matthew acknowledged, his face grew grim.

"What's this theory?" I questioned.

I needed to know if Mako's life was in danger or if it was something that could be fixed.

"When Nightmare professed Mako's future, she stated that Mako would carry four spirits, correct?" he questioned. We both nodded. All of Heila knew about the prophecy, the Princess of Heila who would carry four spirits and save the galaxy from darkness, alongside her star knights.

"Mako has explained she has four spirits – *Roseline, Hopefilinia, Lilylusha, and Lexinalla*. We simply assumed she had fulfilled her requirement, her part of the prophecy in that department. Winter, however, begs to differ," Matthew concurred. He stood up then paced around the room as he continued on.

"As we're all aware, Mako dealt with some major problems at the facility; one situation, in particular, was how she acquired her third spirit, Lily. When her best friend was

murdered, she released her spirit before her death. Instead of her spirit ascending to Starlight as written in various scriptures, she entered Mako. I can only assume the Starlight gods had allowed such events to occur. However, Winter believes Lily isn't Mako's fourth spirit in relation to the prophecy," he concluded, stopping in his tracks to face us.

I blinked a few times, the words seeped into my brain as I absorbed everything he'd just explained. *He doesn't actually believe...*

"If Lily isn't her designated spirit, then Mako's going to get one more? But the prophecy stated she would obtain four spirits by adulthood. Mako's twenty-two cycles, she couldn't possibly receive one more spirit. Plus, we all know how difficult it is for the brain to carry that many spirits. She already talks out loud as a coping mechanism; I can only imagine what a fifth spirit will do to her," Marcus lectured; his arms returned to cross over his chest as he continued to control his emotions, being wary of my current state.

"That's the thing...Mako already has five."

Silence.

"WHAT!" Marcus and I yelled.

I glanced at Marcus, seeing his body shiver in anger.

"So, *I guess what Rose had said was true...*" Stryker announced.

True? What the fuck is true? What did Rose say? Stryker, this is kinda a BIG FUCKING DEAL!

"*Hmph, no point crying over spilled milk...well, except if you're Mako...but whatever. Can't worry about something when you don't have enough information,*" he retorted, leaving my mind.

I huffed, rolling my eyes. Matthew and Marcus glanced my way.

"Stryker has decided to inform me that Rose mentioned something regarding Mako's spirit problem," I muttered.

“Don’t tell me that...Midnight—” Marcus began, but trailed off. It was as if the idea was too fantastical to believe.

“Winter believes Midnight is supposedly Mako’s fourth spirit. But, she needs to see it herself. Midnight doesn’t show ANY signs of being a spirit. She’s powerful yes, but that has been due to vigorous training. All spirits when shifting have a distinct characteristic that gives away their spirit’s species. Midnight has yet to show such an appearance,” Matthew revealed.

Marcus’ eyes landed on Matthew before he responded. “Therefore, this can go two ways; Winterlya comes over and finds out her hypothesis is invalid, OR she confirms that Midnight is Mako’s fourth spirit, thus resulting in Mako having a grand total of five. Anything else?”

“There is one more thing,” Matthew confessed.

Marcus groaned; his hand on his face. I bet he’d love to trash something with how rigid he looked.

“What is it, Matthew?” What else could possibly be wrong with our Firefly?

“We’re gonna need Elyion.”

“You mean EliaseAnne,” I argued.

“Nope, I mean Elyion.”

* * *

Marcus opened the door, holding it open for me to enter when we were greeted by three loud shifters.

“She broke down and used magic,” Kai stated.

There was a moment of silence between them.

I surveyed the room; my eyes landed on a sleeping Makoto, laying on the sofa.

I held the growl that wanted to escape, Stryker’s anger hitting me hard.

I think having one unconscious person in the room is plenty. Don't contribute to the already, troublesome situation.

Stryker pulled back; his anger eased off my mind. *Fuck, I need a nap after this.*

“Fuck, I don’t know what happened when she was in a coma, but it had a big effect on her emotionally. She blames herself for the scar on my chest and doesn’t want to forgive herself for putting us all in danger. She got mad that I didn’t tell her about Eli, that none of us told her. We basically didn’t trust her, and that simple thought hurt her. She got angry and her magic reacted to her immense desire to shield herself. She summoned a wind funnel, hiding within it to protect herself from everything. Eli shifted to her fairy form to calm her down and apologized. She accepted it and fainted, out of exhaustion.”

I braced myself for the wave of emotions that would hit me, but Marcus moved forward, walking straight to Elias. He placed his hand on his shoulder, causing Elias to lift his head from his hands, meeting his gaze.

“We just finished talking with Matthew. You can explain in detail what happened in a moment, but we’re going to need your help,” Marcus announced, catching the other two shifter’s attention.

Elias sat quietly, waiting for Marcus to continue.

“Mako’s faint spells – they aren’t simply because of her body attempting to recover from surpassing her magic limit,” he proposed.

Kai and Daniel both turned to glance his way, confusion morphed onto their faces. I made my way to the black bookshelf, allowing my body to lean against it for support, exhaustion pulled at my consciousness.

Just a few more minutes and I’ll be able to rest.

I felt the tension grow as the silence continued.

“*You leaning here doesn’t make them feel any better. Just so you know,*” Stryker mused before taking his leave.

I didn't bother replying to him. I merely needed something to support my heavy limbs while we went through this conversation. I wasn't upset at any of them, especially Elias. I could guarantee he probably felt opposite, but the darker side of me didn't care.

"If it's not that, why does she keep switching in and out?" Daniel questioned.

Marcus turned himself to face all of us. I crossed my arms to rest on my chest and gave a stern look as my eyes narrowed, power oozed out of them by accident. The revelation we just learned was enough to make me want to rage out in Mako's and Midnight's defense.

Hadn't they suffered enough?

"Midnight isn't a split personality: she's a spirit," Marcus announced; his words lingered in the air as we stood there in silence.

Fuck it, I can't deal with this right now.

Of course, I was intrigued to find out that Midnight was a spirit, but that only escalated my worries – the possibility of Makoto's mental health suffering tremendously as literature predicted. I also worried as to whether Midnight was a gift from the gods or a creation of Aspen's in an act of revenge.

I pushed myself off the bookshelf, making my way to Mako. I took a moment to stare at her peaceful expression, her paler complexion worrying me. Sleep would do her good.

Would do us good, too.

"I need a nap and can't stand any more emotions for today. I'm gonna go crash. You can go wild once I fall asleep," I grumbled, starting my stride again before I stopped.

"Oh, and I'm taking Mako," I stated.

I waited for them to voice out their dissatisfaction with my actions, but was greeted with complete silence.

I had her in my arms in one smooth swoop, before I made my way to my room.

Once I walked into my paradise, I used my foot to close the door behind me, using a bit too much force, resulting in a loud BAM.

Oops

Nightmare was relaxed on the bed; her tails waved back and forth. Her little head lifted up; her mismatch eyes stared at us.

I nodded to her, not having enough energy or patience to smile.

I just wanted to close my eyes and allow sleep to whisk me away from this burden. I sometimes questioned why the Starlight gods thought feeling other people's emotions was a good thing? How was that possibly beneficial?

The only thing it seemed to do was drive the user insane.

I'd lost count of how many times I'd broken down from the overload of emotions I experienced from the others, before my own chaotic mess of feelings within me.

I approached the bed, Nightmare jumped up and picked up the e-reader in her mouth, before jumping off the bed.

I gave my thanks, laying Mako down on the farthest side of the bed. She let out a soft moan before her body relaxed. I smiled, kissing her forehead.

I've fallen so hard for our Princess.

I pulled off the black golf shirt I wore and threw it straight into the laundry bin on the other side, the ball of fabric hit the rim and fell straight into it. I walked towards the drawer, pulled at the top one, multiple pink and white attire greeted me. I smirked, grabbing a dark, magenta shirt.

I made my way back to Makoto, taking a moment to admire her sleeping figure. I noticed the *Fairy Queen* crop top she wore.

"I can guarantee Elias snuck that into her wardrobe," Stryker suggested.

I nodded.

I don't know when it became a habit, but Elias and Eli loved to sneak stuff into our wardrobes, usually putting a glamour spell on the piece of clothing so that the hidden words wouldn't reveal themselves unless in the sunlight. I guess this time around, he just slipped it into her designated drawer.

Knowing Mako, she would wear anything we bought for her, such actions being rewarded with her bright, wide smile as she held the piece of clothing like it was a glass of milk.

I took my time changing her; my eyes attempted to not linger on her exquisite body for too long. It was hard to not get distracted. Her body was perfect, from those amazing curves to the intricate markings across her body.

Within two minutes, she wore the oversized maroon shirt, long enough to cover her round butt. I slipped off my pants, threw them into the laundry bin and slipped between the sheets. I usually slept with shorts when I was with Mako, but I didn't care at this point. I'd probably wake up in three hours tops.

My hand fell across her waist as I pulled her into a side embrace, wary not to move her too much in the chance of waking her. She rotated in my embrace; her hand slipped to my waist as she relaxed.

"Mine," she declared in her sleep.

I kissed her on the cheek, before closing my eyes. I took a moment to enjoy Mako's vanilla scent, the soft, blissful aroma soothed my tense body as I relaxed in bed.

My mind began to drift, as I felt the darkness tug at my consciousness.

Yes Makoto, I'm yours.

I allowed the darkness to take me away.

CHAPTER 11



Daniel

~DANIEL~

“*I haven't seen him lose his cool like that since our younger days...you guys have been straining him these last two weeks.*”

I could remember the times when we were younger, and we'd have our disagreements.

We, as in Azriel and Stryker, would argue every single time they took over, leaving us both exhausted and annoyed.

I sunk down into the black sofa, giving myself a moment to relax. Marcus made his way to sit beside Elias, while Kai went to the kitchen.

Didn't take him long to return with our usual drinks – two mugs of hot green tea, a glass of juice and a carton of chocolate milk.

I smiled at the miniature carton of milk. Mako would love Kai within five seconds of finding out that he also drank milk. I seriously had to find out why she was so obsessed with the white liquid.

“Do you think Midnight's a spirit and not her split personality?” Elias questioned.

“To be honest, anything can be possible when it comes to Makoto. It just comes down to whether having five spirits is going to be detrimental to her mental health,” Kai pointed out.

“We could try and attempt to figure out what the possibilities are, but there wouldn't be any point. If Winter's hypothesis is right, she'd be the first shifter ever to carry five spirits,” Marcus noted.

“Meaning she'll also become a target,” I whispered.

“Whatever happens we have to start protecting her properly. The exam incident was uncalled for, but from now on we should keep a very close eye. At least, we'll be leaving for Heila very shortly,” Kai concluded.

We all sat in silence as we took our time enjoying our drinks.

I pulled off my glasses, setting them down on the coffee table. I was already exhausted and knew they wouldn't do any justice in helping me see better.

I had to be the odd angel of the bunch with bad vision. Karen kept saying it was because my power generally hosted itself within my eyes, such large amounts of energy affected my eye sight, but I think there was more involved.

I personally think it's due to all the swearing I do.

Angel spirits didn't use such slang, their hosts usually copied the spirits likes and dislikes, except for me that is.

I think I did it out of rebellion more than actually having the need to use such foul language. As long as it pissed my parents off, I'd swear all day long. I could already remember the multiple times my older brother would come home to me in the corner of shame for my bad behavior.

He'd merely shake his head with a large smile, asking me if I went on another swearing fit again. I wondered how he was doing down on Earthala? I guess at this point, anywhere was better than being stuck in that kingdom.

"You should check on the little one once in a while. She probably misses both of you. Especially with that witch," Azriel noted, compassion rolled off his low voice.

Freila will be just fine. She's the good child. You know how parents are. The last child always gets spoiled and never beaten. She'll probably grow up to be their perfect angel. Maybe they'll give her the throne instead of me or Michael. We'd just wreck everything.

"She'd like Mako," he acknowledged quietly, before leaving my mind.

I continued to stare at the steam that rose up from my green tea; the small waves of smoke distracted me from my multiple worries.

He was right. Freila would adore Mako. Probably ruin her perfect behavior streak in three seconds flat, but it would be the fresh air she needed to realize how suffocating our dad and our step-mom were. *I miss mom...*

“Daniel?”

I glanced up at the others, all of them staring at me with grieving expressions. I know my emotions were working on our knight bond – leaking through to everyone else.

They knew how close I was to her. Michael took her death just as hard. Maybe that’s why we left ArchAilennia so quickly. It was thanks to Michael bringing me to Heila that I got to meet the others, finding out about my new purpose. The perfect distraction. Anything to stop the constant ache and regret. *It was my fault.*

“Daniel. Stop,” Kai whispered, turning to walk towards me. He ruffled my hair, a gesture that still pissed me off. I knew he was doing it on purpose, because I hated when he messed up my hair.

“I’m fine, leave my hair alone. You don’t wash your hands. I can only imagine the germs on them,” I huffed, slapping away his hand irritated.

He laughed, before sitting next to me; his arms lifted to rest on the top of the sofa as his left leg relaxed across his right. His smile dimmed as a serious expression took over.

“Ryder asleep?”

We glanced at one another, concentrating to feel the demon shifter. Ryder was the easiest to sense in our bond, being the leader of our group strengthened his connections with us. It was beneficial for us, but for times like these, it was a pain in his ass and we all felt guilty frustrating him.

“That’s pretty much the second time he’s lost his cool. Of course, the first time doesn’t necessarily count since we all felt like shit,” Marcus confessed.

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have panicked like that. I just thought I was gonna lose her after these agonizing two weeks, not knowing if she was going to make it. With that, and Eli

being so worried and the stupid medical treatments, I just couldn't see her walk away. She deserves to be angry with us," Elias explained, sighing as he placed his head into his hands. Kai got up from his seat before facing us.

"It's YOUR guys fault for not telling her. You seriously think she wasn't going to put the pieces together? I may not know Mako like you all, but from what you've described the last two and a half months, she's very perceptive of what goes on around her, whether it's intentional or not. Even if she hadn't noticed, none of you decided to tell her, because you assumed she couldn't handle it instead of giving her a chance. She was stuck in the facility for sixteen cycles and was able to accept the fact she was a stolen princess from some far away realm she had NO clue of, but you couldn't be honest and inform her that Elyion was Elias? You didn't even need to give her the whole backstory. All she's asking for is trust. She told you about Midnight, am I correct Elias?" He ranted before his attention turned to Elias. He lifted his head before nodding with a frown on his face.

"That's exactly why she's pissed and has every damn right to be. Imagine finding out your life was a lie, being forced to live in a tortuous environment with no memory of your past, assuming you were taken into the arms of a saint, only to find out he's the devil. I don't even want to imagine what our Princess went through there, and now that she's finally set free, thanks to you guys, her saviors and star knights, she has to learn to trust again. But you guys blew it with not telling her that small detail, even though you saw how close she is with Elyion," he continued to scold us.

We sat there in silence, unable to find the words to argue against his claims. Everything he had just stated was true and we deserved it. We'd been so caught up in our concerns and joy of having Mako in our lives that we hadn't been considerate, to say the least.

"We should have known better. I know what it's like to come out and see how big the world is after cycles of confinement. She deserves an apology from all of us," Marcus whispered.

“I agree. We need to trust her and be open. Sure, it may hurt her at times or be something she may not want to hear, but at least we’re being straight forward. She’s our Princess after all and deserves our respect; that starts with honesty,” I lectured.

I knew; I struggled with being honest with my feelings and concerns, but maybe I’d try to connect more with Mako and the others. I just wondered if Midnight would be a problem.

Elias nodded.

“I’ll apologize when she wakes up,” he confirmed.

We all nodded in agreement.

“You should also apologize to Ryder. You almost knocked him out while we were in the middle of campus. Matthew practically forced him to sit down,” Marcus noted.

“He needs to sleep it off. Daniel, can you make sure you check on him in two hours? Maybe less than that. Now that Mako’s recovering, he should sleep a bit longer, but I’d rather play cautiously than deal with the cranky him,” Kai confessed.

“Yup, Azriel loves giving them an extra dose of sleep just to annoy Stryker,” I admitted, scoffing.

“Tell Azriel he’s gonna get all our asses in trouble with his continuous quarrel with Stryker. Can’t they admit they’re best friends already? You and Ryder get along, can’t they put aside their differences and do the same? Just because you guys have complete opposite gifts doesn’t mean you have to war with one another. It’s been what, twelve cycles?” Marcus complained shaking his head.

“You have to admit, it’s amusing to see Ryder storm in here after sleeping for eight to ten hours.” Elias chuckled. It was nice to him smile after all that occurred.

“Remember the time Azriel used a ton of his voodoo sleeping dust and Ryder was knocked out for the whole day. I swear Karen lost her shit.” Kai laughed, the others followed.

“Don’t remind me of that. I had to wear that stupid, magic sealing bracelet for TWO weeks! I bet Stryker got a laugh out

of that. Not to mention he made sure to knock me into the fucking pool during training as pay back! PAY-FUCKING-BACK! I would have drowned if Ryder hadn't resurfaced and grabbed my ass out of there!" I snarled.

The day I learned how to swim would be the end of the galaxy. I could handle water, as long as it was up to my chest. Anything higher than that would probably kill me. Michael was just the same. We still believed we were probably gonna have to deal with the weakness sooner or later, or we'd be in big trouble if we actually had to face a situation that required a heap load of water.

I wondered if Mako knew how to swim?

"Hey, why don't we throw a pool party?" Kai suggested, his eyes sparkled with excitement. I frowned, raising my eyebrow at him.

"Did you not hear what I just said?" I questioned.

"A pool party would be fun. Matthew can help us fill the pool with fresh water and I can pass by Earthala and try to find a unicorn float. Can you imagine Mako's face when she sees it?" Marcus offered.

"Hello? Anyone care about the non-swimmer here?" I mentioned.

"Has Mako ever swam before? I wouldn't mind giving her lessons. It could come in handy one day. I think Eli would have fun teaching her, too. Be a good way for them to bond again," Elias voiced out as he stood up; his usual self-confidence returned.

"You never offered me swimming lessons." I continued my protest.

"Because you won't even go near water unless forced by Karen or Matthew. And you can sit on the side of the pool, or even put your legs in," Elias suggested as he grinned.

I groaned, glaring at him.

"OH! I know! I'll get him those floaty things for kids! What are they called? Damn, I'm gonna ask Junho when I get

there. He'll be able to get me the perfect size for you. Your older brother is a tad taller than you, right? You guys are the same body build though, so it's all good. I'll tell Junho to use him as an example," Marcus commented, brushing off my concern.

"I'm not wearing those stupid floaty things for kids," I argued.

"But if you do, you'd get to swim with Mako." He argued back, smirking at me.

I glared back, unable to argue with that statement.

Fuck, I'd love to have some quality time with her.

"Hey, Mako doesn't have a bathing suit then," Kai pointed out.

We all turned to glance at him, realizing he was right.

"Mako in a bathing suit," Elias whispered.

"With her markings on display," Marcus noted.

"I call first dibs," Kai announced.

We all whipped our heads to stare at him.

"Oh, hell to the Starlight's no!" Marcus argued.

"She doesn't even know you, yet," Elias added.

"Yes, but she will and the last time I checked, you owe me five more favors, Marcus, and you four, Elias," he reminded, a pleasurable smile formed on his lips as his amber eyes glowed slightly.

They both groaned, sitting back down in their seats in a huff.

"Fuck you, Kai. It's times like this I wish you were in Heila still," Elias mumbled.

"I know right. Stupid favors. What possessed us to promise him favors?" Marcus questioned to Elias, ignoring our presence completely.

One thing we learned in our youth – every favor would have to be returned when it came to Kai. To bad we'd

collected plenty; enough to let him get whatever he wanted when the opportunity arrived amongst us. He wants first dibs on something, he'd most certainly get it.

Kai turned my way, raising an eyebrow at me. I lifted my hands in surrender.

"I wasn't even going to fight for it. Don't need to remind me of the ten favors I owe you," I admitted.

He smiled wickedly, pleased with the outcome.

"Then it's settled."

"How about Ryder?" I asked. There was a moment of silence.

"Fine, he gets first dibs, but I get seconds. Not for the fact, he doesn't owe me, but Stryker would kick my ass and I hate dark flames. They're hotter than my phoenix fire. No one got time for that." He gestured; his hand rubbed his bare arms, the orange, short sleeve shirt he wore, unable to hide the multiple goosebumps forming.

"If your bad ass self is afraid, imagine us. Nope, not dealing with it. I think Azriel only messes with Stryker because our gifts counter each other. We can't really win or lose. But the moment he brings in dark flames, I'm out," I revealed, shaking my head at the thought.

No one in their right mind would be stupid enough to challenge someone with enough dark magic to summon those deadly flames.

It took Ryder cycles to summon them, let alone use them as a weapon. They only truly came to his aid without any struggle when he was fucking pissed.

"But seriously...Mako's gonna look fucking hot in a bathing suit," Marcus mused, quietly.

"Get her a nice swim suit from one of those expensive stores," Kai urged.

"Get her a pink bikini," Elias ordered, staring directly at the dragon.

We took a moment to ponder it, more than one of us imagined her curvy body sporting the two-piece.

“Neon pink or a tropical type one. It just has to have pink in it. Just not that shitty, ugly pink. The neon pink looks way better on her,” I admitted. My hand rose to stroke my chin as I wondered what else was needed.

“Get her a nice pair of pink sandals, too. With diamonds in the middle,” Kai requested.

“Real diamonds?” I asked.

“Do they even add real diamonds to sandals?” Elias inquired.

“Shit, I don’t know. Doesn’t that Victoria store all the girls talk about have it?” Marcus questioned, confused.

“How should I know, you go to Earthala more than me,” Kai acknowledged.

“Fuck. Elias. Tell Eli she’s coming with me. I doubt Scarlet will have free time and I’m not fucking this up,” Marcus ordered.

An idea entered my mind, a smile formed on my lips as I looked at the others. They all turned to me, noticing my change in mood.

“What?” They all said in unison.

“I have the perfect idea of what to get her. But knowing Mako, we have to make sure it’s water proof and pink,” I whispered.

With this, she’d always be connected to us.

CHAPTER 12

Stryker

I opened my heavy eye lids, immediately cursing at the exhaustion still tugging at my mind, let alone my actual body.

I'm going to fucking murder Azriel the next time I see him.

Yes, I considered the sinister angel a best friend, but that sleep-inducing dust was a fucking drug! Why did the Starlight gods think that was a good gift to give him out of the all the angel spirits in ArchAilennia?

I had some questions for them.

I was ready to move, but realized the arms wrapped around my waist. I glanced down to Mako curled up against me, her breathing slow as long, brown locks were scattered across her bare back.

One leg was relaxed on mine, her right arm laid across my stomach, her other lodged beneath me. I had no idea if she subconsciously snuggled against me or woke up in the middle of the night.

If it wasn't for Azriel's voodoo, sand man dust, I or Ryder would have woken up with her movement. Curse him. I'll get my payback, mark my words, Azriel.

He was well aware of demon spirits holding grudges. I may not get my revenge today or tomorrow, but I'd get my revenge.

Mako stirred, mumbled something incoherent before pushing against me, such actions having absolutely no effect

as my body stayed in place. She continued mumbling, before she opened her eyes, glancing up at me in confusion.

“Mako?” I whispered, staring at her drowsy expression, her usual turquoise eyes now dark blue.

“Oh. Midnight?” I asked again.

She tilted her head, blinking as if I was a stranger.

“Demon Ryder,” she pointed out, her voice low, indicating she was half asleep.

“Stryker,” I replied.

She stared at me, her blank expression gave me the impression she didn’t care about introductions. She stared down at her arm which was still under me.

I shuffled to the edge of the bed, letting her arm free. She stared at it for a moment, before returning her gaze to me.

“My arm,” she stated.

“Yes, it’s your arm,” I replied.

“But, you had it,” she argued.

“What? It was just underneath me,” I protested, confused at her accusation.

“I’m watching you,” she whispered; her eyes narrowed on me.

“Midnight, I’m not gonna steal your arm.” I sighed.

“Lies,” she argued.

“Are we actually having this conversation?”

“I know where you live,” she confirmed.

“...”

“...”

“Midnight, go back to sleep,” I encouraged. Ryder was better at dealing with such interesting situations. He thought it was cute.

“I’m sleepy. Goodnight.” She rolled to her side, falling asleep within seconds.

I didn’t know whether to be surprised or bewildered. No wonder Elias told the others she was incoherent when she exhausted herself. I sighed, pulling at the blanket and covering her. I was about to turn on my side to sleep when she stirred again.

I waited for her to settle, but she rolled over, her eyes opened – royal purple orbs greeted me. I smiled as joy blossomed within me.

“Rose,” I whispered, unable to hide the happiness in my voice. It took her a moment before she smiled seductively at me; sleep still in her eyes as she yawned.

“Hmm. Morning Stryker. I wondered when I’d get alone time with you.” She whispered back.

I lifted the blanket, encouraging her to cuddle next to me.

She smiled, shuffling into my embrace; her warm body lay against me as I wrapped us with the oversized maroon blanket.

I pressed my lips gently against hers, attempting to appear confident on the outside as I ignored the nervous butterflies that fluttered in my stomach. It had been cycles since I’d had a true alone moment with Roseline.

I remembered our final evening together, sitting in the castle garden as we stared at the multiple stars in the sky. Even for our ages, we weren’t shy to show our affection for one another. Making sure to hold hands whenever we were together.

No words were needed to enjoy one another’s company. Just the warmth of her hand was enough to enjoy Mother Starlight’s gift to us, giving us a chance at life within our hosts. We’d been blessed to be royals and we never took such blessings for granted. Not to mention our hosts being so cooperative.

Ryder never showed any mind with me having my time with Rose. Mako and Hope were both cooperative, usually

falling asleep right before our nightly hangouts, giving Rose privacy and peace of mind.

I was happy to be able to hold her in my arms; her vanilla aroma surrounded me, the smell easing my tense muscles as I relaxed. Ryder knew how much I struggled with the idea of Mako not making it after the exam incident. Even with her recovering, I'd heard nothing from any of her spirits, especially Rose who was the most outspoken. To finally be able to communicate with her again made me beyond relieved.

"I've missed you, baby," I whispered against her lips as I pulled away, unable to break eye contact with those magnetizing eyes.

"I'm sorry I worried you," she apologized, kissing my neck. I closed my eyes, trying to hold back the moan that wanted to escape. One thing that attracted me the most about Rose was her undeniable confidence. She never hesitated to demonstrate her compassion and love for someone.

When she'd kissed me on the cheek during the locker room incident, I was filled with such joy, the emotion was forgotten to my senses after cycles of regret and disappointment.

She pulled back after a minute; her eyes returned to look up at mine.

"You look exhausted. Did Daniel use his mojo, juju dust on you?" she questioned.

"How do you know about that?" I questioned back.

She smirked, her mischievous smile lit her face as her purple eyes glowed lightly.

"Magiccccc," she slurred.

I laughed.

"Baby, don't try to fool me. It never works." I tightened my grip around her waist.

"Oh really?" she challenged, pressing her body against me as she bit her lip.

My body responded immediately; my cock grew hard from the bold move. Her voice enough to turn me on.

She leaned upward to kiss me; her lips dominated mine as I pressed against her. I wanted her to know what she was doing to me; how much her confidence affected my lust for her. We kissed for what seemed to be hours, unable to pull away from each other until our bodies required oxygen. The deep kiss left us breathless as we pulled back, panting.

“I’d love to do more than just kiss you love, but I think we should let Ryder and Mako have that first moment. Don’t you?” She purred.

“I guess we should be courteous and let them. If only they would get some actual alone time,” I confessed.

I knew if it wasn’t for the fact our hosts hadn’t gotten the chance to be intimate thanks to all the events that had happened, I believed they would have done more than just making out in the campus classrooms.

“They will. I don’t think either of them can continue doing their long make-out sessions without tugging at each other’s clothes.” Rose’s amused voice made me smile in delight.

I couldn’t help but widen my grin as I remember Ryder’s meditation attempt with Mako. I told him it wouldn’t last ten minutes with her in the room, and I was right, lasting four minutes and ten seconds before he had Mako pinned down on the floor, kissing one another like it was the last day in Starlight history.

That fairy boy, of course, had to interrupt, as usual. I’d need to find a way to rid him of his sly tactics.

“Will we get more alone time?” I whispered.

She smirked; her hand left my waist to glide through my messy hair before she kissed me from my cheek to my chest, leaving a trail of kisses. “Of course,” she confirmed before sucking at my flesh, surely leaving a fresh hickey on the base of my neck.

Her breath was warm against my skin and sent chills racing down my arms. I felt her tongue curl along my neck and

I couldn't stop the deep moan that left my lips.

"You like teasing," I acknowledged.

"I'm a demon, it's in my nature. As a bonus, I like seeing your reaction," she admitted.

Her head laid on my chest as we relaxed in the silence of the pitch-black room. My fingers had a mind of their own, unconsciously twirling in her long, brown locks as I closed my eyes, my head rested against the headboard.

"Did you tell Ryder about the Mako-Midnight situation?" Rose questioned. She sounded half asleep, her toneless voice returned.

"I didn't, but he has found out," I revealed. I lift my head to look down at her as she lifted her head to frown at me.

"How mad was he?" she inquired.

"Almost snapped at the others. I know it's not his true intentions, but between Elias' little scare freaking him out and the other's emotions slammed into him, he's just about fed up. He doesn't like to admit it but, having the ability to feel other's emotions is a hard burden to carry. He must deal with being connected to his team through this bond, feeling their emotions constantly. He can sometimes pull himself out of it and disconnect for a while, but there's no off switch; 24/7 in the back of his mind he knows exactly what's happening to the others. They do try to lessen the burden and control their emotions, but situations like today show how connected he is to them and how much of a struggle he faces controlling his emotions," I explained, feeling sorry for my host.

I hadn't been very considerate either these past two weeks, unable to control my own worries and concerns. It had only been a matter of time till he broke down, which he did. The only time he had shed tears was Anya's death anniversary. *That's coming up soon.*

I felt a hand brush against my cheek. I hadn't realized I'd zoned out, too focused on worrying about Ryder than the beautiful woman lying against me.

"When is it?"

“When is what babe?” I questioned.

“Anya’s birthday. It was always close to this time of the cycle, correct?” she asked.

“How did you know what I was thinking about?” I questioned back.

“You zone out when something is really bothering you. Seeing as I’m right here, the only two individuals who you care about are your mother and Anya. I know your mother is fine, so that leaves Anya,” she narrowed down, laying her head back against my chest as her finger drew a circle on the unoccupied spot on my chest.

“You read me too well,” I whispered.

“Someone has to. You’re hard to figure out, but I like mysteries,” she confessed.

“Rose.”

“Hmm?”

“Will Mako and Midnight be okay?”

I needed some type of confirmation that they wouldn’t perish from this new predicament.

I knew Mako was strong, Midnight a reflection of her strength, but I knew what happened to shifters with multiple spirits. Throughout the cycles of our training, we’d seen shifters succumb to such circumstances.

It still amazed me that Rose and the other spirits cooperated with one another with such little space. I couldn’t imagine sharing my section in Ryder’s mind with anyone else.

“I’m worried. I don’t question either of their strengths, but if Midnight truly is a spirit...I’m worried her spirit nature won’t be compatible with us. Midnight as a personality is fine and cooperative. However, if her spirit’s nature unlocks, such a powerful influence may not be in our favor. Of the four of us, Lexi is the strongest, but Midnight’s power alone in the physical aspect is unheard of. It frightens even me,” Rose acknowledged.

“You have a feeling what spirit she is?” I rubbed her head lightly, wanting to look at her expression. She lifted her head to face me; her royal purple eyes darkened. It was only for a split second, but I saw the fear in them.

“Yes...but I pray to Starlight she’s not what I’m assuming or Mako’s mental state is at risk.” She bit her lip as she glanced away. I frowned. Rose rarely showed her unease. This situation may turn ugly if not handled with delicacy.

I reached out to cradle her cheek, turning her head to face me.

“We’ll figure it out. I’ll be here if you need me,” I consoled.

She nodded, giving me a weak smile before she yawned.

“You should rest up,” I encouraged

“Stryker?”

I smiled, kissing her lightly on her lips. I loved the way my name rolled off her tongue, sending waves of desire through me. “Yes, Rose.”

“You’ll talk to me if anything is bothering you, right?”

I didn’t like the worry in her eyes. “This isn’t like you, Roseline. You don’t need to worry,” I replied.

“Stryker.”

I sighed, but smiled. “I promise to inform you when something is troubling my soul. As long as you go back to your usual self. This side of you makes me uneasy.” I muttered the last part, feeling my cheeks burn.

I didn’t want to admit how satisfying it was to know she worried about me, just the same way I worried about her well-being. As spirits, we were outspoken and open in many aspects, but we still struggled with admitting how we felt with one another at times.

“Okay Strykey, I’ll return back to my voluptuous self, so you can enjoy listening to me explain our inner monologue with Lexi.” She purred with a mischievous smile.

I groaned.

“No, I don’t want to hear about your long, dirty talks with Lexi. I swear, dragons with their play time. I’m surprised she hasn’t taken control and jumped Ryu yet, and don’t call me Strykey. That was hella annoying when you guys were younger,” I pointed out, scrunching my face in disgust. I seriously hated that nickname.

“Oh, I bet she would if she had the chance,” Rose replied with a laugh.

“I...I love you, Rose. Just wanted you to know,” I admitted, my voice barely a whisper.

“I know. I love you too, Stryker.” She leaned upward, giving me one final kiss before pulling away.

She snuggled against me as I repositioned myself in the bed, my head relaxed on the pillow, Rose cradled in my arms.

It didn’t take long for her breathing to lower to a steady pace, her deep inhales and exhales indicated her unconsciousness. I pressed my lips against her forehead before closing my eyes.

Whatever happens, I’d make sure to be there for her.

CHAPTER 13



I stirred awake; my stomach felt rather empty. I always promised Karen to eat more frequently and always failed miserably. I'm surprised I hadn't lost a ton of weight. I was glad I still had my curves.

Maybe my addiction to milk was helping keep them intact.

Didn't humans say it helped grow your boobs?

Hmm, unsolved mysteries. I'll ask Marcus.

I closed my eyes; my emotional outrage flashed behind my lids, EliaseAnne's beautiful image lingered.

I'd never seen a fairy shifter in their full glory. They were such a rare race. Even in their own designated realm, their numbers were limited, many of them hidden amongst their lands from other species who had ill intentions.

Since starting my studies with Matthew, I had read that other shifters hunted fairies for multiple reasons: their ability to glamour and change anyone's appearance to their choosing being their main quest to acquire. I'd also read about dark fairies.

Before the Aspen war, dark fairies were part of the fairy race. They were already low in numbers: one dark fairy for every ten thousand fairy births. They had been protected by their kind due to their rarity and immense power.

However, their species was hunted by Aspen's rogues and followers with the intention of experimenting and using them to give them a higher advantage for the upcoming war. The

book stated that their species were either hidden in their lands apart from everyone or they had truly gone extinct.

It made me realize how my Owner, Blair Aspen's conquest for revenge, had jeopardized many lives and the galaxy itself.

I opened my eyes, a bare chest greeted me. I raised my eyebrow, noticing the absence of chest markings. My eyes trailed upward, landing on the intricate markings located on his shoulder blades. I took a deep breath.

Lavender...Daniel?

I heard a low moan as Daniel turned slightly, the arm around my waist pulled me against him. I love the way my body curved into his. The warmth and smell of lavender was enough to almost lull me back to sleep...almost.

"Five more minutes," he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

I couldn't tell whether he was half asleep or talking to himself.

I continued to reflect back on my actions with Eli and Elias. I shouldn't have reacted like that. In a way, I didn't regret telling them off. They had kept such a vital secret from me, the information I had every right to know about. I shouldn't have stormed off like that. I guess it was too late now to regret when it already happened.

I wondered if they were mad at me. Would the boys not like me anymore?

"We aren't mad at you and we still love the shit out of you, so the answer is no."

I opened my eyes, glancing up to see the pair of gold, drowsy eyes looking down at me.

"Um...you weren't supposed to hear that," I declared shyly.

"I know," he replied, a devilish smirk formed on his lips.

He lowered his head, those soft lips pressed against mine. I took a moment to enjoy the soft tenderness of his lips before

he deepened the kiss; his arm around me pulled me against him as his other hand gripped my hair, steadying my head as he devoured my mouth.

There was a wickedness in the way he kissed me. It was a feeling I never felt with the others and sometimes, I questioned whether it was my own feeling or his?

I moaned against his lips; my body responded to his possessiveness. His hand released my hair and caressed down my arm and across my stomach. The motion sent shocks of electricity through me and my body arched in response, pushing itself into him – needing to be closer.

Out of all the boys, Daniel had received the least amount of love from me and it bothered me. I needed him to know I loved him just like the others.

I unhinged myself, placing my hands against his chest as I pushed him lightly into the gold satin sheets below.

I crawled over him, positioning myself to sit on top of him, straddling his waist as his hands found mine. Our lips continued their rhythmic motions. Our tongues sought the other. With each stroke my body grew warmer and warmer.

I pulled away, wanting to take a moment to scan his bare chest; his shoulder blade markings caught my interest.

The thick, interlocking lines reminded me of a spread-out wing, one side starting as a thin line and moving outward and upward as it broke out into multiple, diverse lines and swirls.

My fingers lightly traced over the design, and I could feel his body shiver beneath me as his eyes grew heavy.

“I got it when I was eight cycles old.” He admitted; his hand stopped mine from continuing the action; interlocking. He glanced up to at me.

“Was it just random?” I asked. I knew markings appeared on our bodies in a few ways, sixty percent appeared at birth. He could have also received them through training.

“Kind of,” he replied, his eyes looked lost, sadness flashed through his expression.

I leaned down to kiss him. I didn't like such an expression on his face. It didn't suit his perfect skin and brilliant eyes.

"Sorry. Does it bring back bad memories?" I frowned at him, not wanting to trigger anything negative from his past. A part of me was curious, but I wanted him to tell me freely and not feel pushed.

"Ya. I don't like talking about it," he expressed, glancing away.

"Okay. We can talk about something else," I suggested. I struggled to make a connection with Daniel. I wanted him to trust me, but it seemed whenever we took a step forward, something would bring us back.

"Mako. Don't give me that look." He pulled me into a hug. I didn't know what expression I was giving him, but I knew I felt sad at his reluctance to trust me. I didn't need him to tell me now, but I craved the reassurance he'd think of me when he did need someone to talk to.

"I struggle...with sharing. It's not only to you, the others, too. I just can't seem to rely on others. I'm afraid to. I'd rather heal and be the listener than share my insecurities and thoughts. It's always been that way, but when you look at me like that—" He trailed off, tightening his hold around me.

I could sense his hesitation; it reminded me of Midnight and her hesitation to reveal why she disliked Daniel. I was in such a difficult position; unable to choose whose side to stand on.

I wanted to know more about Daniel, but would I have to exchange Midnight's past to get him to open up? And was that exchange worth Midnight's distrust?

We both experienced what Daniel was experiencing, and could both agree that it would take some time, something we'd have to respect.

My arms tightened around him, wanting to feel his closeness. His confession was enough to calm my anxiety regarding us, but I knew deep down it wouldn't satisfy it. I felt a weird sensation flow through me – caution. I felt confused,

not understanding why I suddenly felt cautious of Daniel.
Midnight?

I felt a tingle like sensation flow into my mind, but no words were spoken.

“She probably wants to remind you of her dislike of him.”
Hope’s melodic voice echoed against the walls of my mind; the soothing sound calmed me down immediately.

I’ve missed you Hope.

“And I’ve missed you Makoto. Please take it easy. Your body’s struggling to regain its magic levels, especially after your outburst. I just don’t want you becoming ill again.”

I closed my eyes, sending comforting waves of emotion through my mind. My spirits had been very vigilant the last couple of days, barely entering my mind; they had only entered to greet me, when I woke up and to wish me goodnight before bed.

Rose occasionally checked in, but even she was very cautious as to how long she lingered, before fading to her designated spot. I had to admit, a part of me missed their constant bickering. I’d probably regret such a confession later on.

Thank you, Hope, for caring. I’ll be careful, I promise... love you.

“And we love you, too. Tell Daniel and his angel I say hi.”
She bid farewell, leaving my mind, the quietness that followed made me apprehensive and afraid. When would this loneliness stop taunting me?

“Makoto.”

I glanced up, my eyes wide from the sudden calling of my name.

Daniel frowned; his displeased expression confused me.

“How long have you been feeling this way?” he questioned.

“I don’t know what you’re referring to,” I whispered, glancing away, unable to look him in the eye.

“Makoto,” he repeated; his voice stern. It was quite apparent he wasn’t going to let this go.

“Ever since I woke up from being in that coma or whatever it’s called. I haven’t been able to rid myself of this agonizing feeling of loneliness. I don’t know, maybe it’s because my spirits aren’t as present in my mind as they were before or the fact I’d been stuck indoors till yesterday. Then I argued with Elias and fucked that up pretty bad. The feeling just keeps coming back, and I can’t ignore it. I want it gone. I hate feeling alone...I don’t want to be alone again in that darkness...it was so cold.” I swallowed, squeezing my eyes shut.

I’d only been able to tell Ryder in detail of the darkness I had experienced during those agonizing two weeks, unable to explain without breaking down into tears. I doubt anyone could understand the extent of my fear or the bone gripping chill that surged through me with the thoughts of the cold darkness that consumed me for hours.

“Mako. It’s okay.” He sat up, still holding me in his arms before repositioning me into his lap as I began to cry.

“I hate this. I haven’t felt like this since Lily’s death, feeling so fucking worthless and I don’t understand why. I’m free now! I have you guys around me to comfort me and my spirits. Even Midnight’s frequent appearances should help me, yet I still feel so empty and alone.

“I never broke down when they use to beat me constantly in the facility or locked me in the freezing dungeons for Starlight knows how long. I watched the shifters who I once called family die every day, some by our blood-soaked hands and I never felt like I do now. I reached my limit trying to save the people I care about and I can’t beat this stupid emotion! I want it gone!”

I felt so angry at being so weak and vulnerable. I didn’t want to feel this way anymore. I wanted to focus on enjoying my newly obtained freedom with the people I loved. Not

reminded by the experience that tormented my mind the last five days, tugging at my conscious in a desperate effort to take control once more.

“Makoto. Calm down,” Daniel whispered, his voice laced with worry.

“Daniel. You don’t get it! It won’t stop. It won’t leave me alone! Every time I close my eyes I’m reminded of that darkness. I’m forgotten, nothing but a mere memory with no way out and no voice to speak. I’m forced to sleep because I have to recover, but the moment my eyes close, it’s just another endless battle. I know I’ll get over it; maybe...I just can’t handle it right now. I just want to know why I feel this way. Am I sick? Is this a part of me having four spirits? Can’t anyone give me a fucking explanation as to why I can’t get rid of this?” I argued, glaring at him with tear-filled eyes.

We stared at each other for a long moment, before he reached out and tightened his hold around me, pulling me against his chest while his hand soothingly stroked my head.

I continued my frustrated cry, until I had no more tears left. I bet he thought I was a failure.

Maybe they thought I was pathetic and weak, after once displaying such power and strength.

“Makoto, you’re not pathetic or weak. Everyone deals with some type of crisis in life, sometimes multiple times throughout their cycles. We don’t love you any less for showing such vulnerabilities. It’s not wrong or frowned upon. I’m sorry we were dishonest with you and we’ll get through this together, okay?” Daniel soothed; his voice took on it’s singing like sound as it traveled through the room.

“I just want to go back to how it was before the exam,” I whispered.

“Mako...we’ll work with Karen and Matthew in figuring out why you’re feeling like this. We can stop it temporarily... but...I want your permission on this. It’s not gonna rid you of it permanently. It’s a simple quick fix till we pin point exactly

why it's happening and how to solve it. Are you okay with that?" he proposed.

I lifted my head to nod repeatedly. I wanted this dreadful feeling gone, even if it's temporary.

Daniel's hand pressed firmly on my tear stained cheek, steadying my head to look him straight in the eye. "Makoto. Seriously give a minute to think about it. If we don't find the solution for it, we may have to continue reapplying the spell until we reach Heila. I don't know if it's going to make it worse. Do you still want to do this?" he emphasized, his eyes filled with concern.

"I need it gone Daniel...I – I'd rather have nightmares than face such trepidation every time I close my eyes or sit alone. I don't want to be rendered helpless anymore. Even if it's temporary or I have to wait till we reach Heila to get answers it's a risk I'll take. It's better than carrying this burden every day and night. Please?" I begged, hoping he saw and heard my desperation.

He nodded before his eyes lit up, the golden light more powerful than normal.

A strong wave of anger went through me. I closed my eyes for a moment, toning the emotion that claimed me. *Midnight... please. I get it, but I need this. Please.*

The sensation calmed, a wave of regret followed before disappearing altogether. I understood her rage. Witnessing her experience and heart break those cycles ago, but I couldn't deal with that now. Not with this problem before me.

I let out a sigh of relief before opening my eyes again to glance up at Daniel; his eyes closed as the markings on his shoulder blades began to glow.

Once this is finished – once he's done, I would no longer fear the wisps of darkness attempting to drag me down into the void of loneliness and depression.

"Dear Starlight, listen to Thy plea. Dissolve the lingering emotions of loneliness from our Princess' soul. Lock it in a safe within, the key in my disposal, as I guard such forsaken

feelings from doing harm to our Makoto anymore. Allow the chains to prevent its escape as we search for the answers to its blossoming. I apply this spell on thee, my love, to return you to your unrestricted self. Be free."

I felt my body grow warm as my eyes became heavy, the arms held me steady as I fell back into Daniel's warmth.

I felt my consciousness waver; the darkness crept into my mind, but instead of the anticipated cold, it was warm and loving. I smiled, feeling a tear fall as I allowed my body to relax before my consciousness started to drift away.

Even if it's temporary, I'll be free to focus on other things...to enjoy my time with my knights. All I need is time to heal...then I'll be ready for you. You may have won for now Darkness, but I won't let you win this war. In Starlight's name, I'll get my revenge. In stars, we trust.

CHAPTER 14

I pulled away from the small gap in the door, a sigh of relief escaped me as the distress-filled feeling oozing off Daniel through the knight bond faded.

I'd been in the living room when his sheer panic leaked through, prompting me to check on him and Makoto. As much as I wanted to interfere – to be the one to comfort my beloved and ease her pain, I knew Daniel and Mako needed a moment.

I'd sensed Daniel's wariness for some time now, but struggled to get a moment to pull him aside and have a talk with him. I knew he wouldn't approach anyone about his problems or internal struggles. You had to force it out of him, before he put himself first and confessed all his troubles.

If things didn't resolve after Anya's anniversary, I'd have to intervene. I didn't want things to get out of hand.

I took one last glance through the small gap in the door; my eyes landed on the sleeping figure tucked in Daniel's bed, the gold satin sheets nestled against her. Nighty was curled up in a little ball at the end of the bed, one of her tails lazily waved back and forth. She opened one eye, her turquoise orb stared at me. Her eye closed before she nestled into her fur.

I closed the door; the light click gave me the courage to let out the breath I held. Fuck, this is getting out of hand. We need to figure out what's going on and soon. I don't think Makoto can take any more craziness for a while.

"She needs a break. Even before the exam, she had some type of distraction – the useless classes and interactions with those shifters helped her not diddle-daddle on her worries or

anxieties. The problem is, since waking up she's either been going under multiple scans or forced to rest. I know she doesn't hesitate to share her concerns with you, but she doesn't reveal everything. She simply buries it and hopes it will go away or solve itself. It just continued to build and build, adding the fact she was on strict bed rest and that book contraption the only distraction she had. When you and the others aren't available she simply spirals down into her thoughts," Stryker voiced out, irritation lacing his voice.

I knew he wasn't upset with me but at the current reality; Mako having to deal with all these stressors which affected her spirits, including Rose. He was probably concerned about her well-being with the new development regarding Midnight being a spirit.

Should I have stayed with her longer? Or not left her side when she shooed me away?

"It wouldn't have mattered Ryder. Whatever this is she's dealing with is an internal thing. Even with us sitting by her side the first few days, only giving her privacy when she requested it, doesn't stop the clockwork happening in her mind. There's nothing you could have done. Maybe with Winterlya's help, we can figure out the missing puzzle piece," Stryker reassured before leaving my mind. He always liked stating what was on his mind and leaving, not caring if I agreed or not. How demon-like of him.

"How's our Princess?"

I opened my eyes, turning to face Kai who was relaxed against the wall, a sketchbook in hand.

"You were awake, weren't you? Sorry about that," I apologized.

Makoto had given me a glimpse of how she was dealing with this so-called darkness as she termed it. I'd disclosed her worries with Matthew and Kai, hoping we'd find out what was going on. I didn't think it would escalate to her dealing with it constantly and breaking down. Stryker was right. She needs a serious distraction, or she'll break. Then it may not be as easy as casting a spell to fix it.

“Yup. It’s the darkness thing we discussed, right?” He asked for clarification as he pushed himself off the wall, heading towards the living room.

I followed, not wanting to talk about it in chance one of the guys were still awake and made their way down the hall.

There’s no need to stress them out when we didn’t know how severe Mako’s situation was.

We pulled out our designated stools, rearranging so we’d face one another as we sat at the kitchen island.

“Yeah. There has to be a reason for it. She never complained about feeling alone until she woke up from her coma. It’s serious, Kai. You can literally see the fear in her eyes,” I confessed, ruffling my hair in frustration. I just wanted to rid her of any struggles, so she could live the life she had never gotten the chance to enjoy.

“There probably is. Winterlya should be here in three or four days if her travels go as planned, so let’s wait and see,” Kai agreed, the mechanical pencil spun between his fingers; the swirled markings on his fingers caught my attention.

We sat in silence, lost in our own thoughts before I remembered my behavior from before.

“I’m sorry for earlier. I shouldn’t have snapped at you guys. I should have known better,” I apologized, bowing my head slightly to him. He shook his head, the spinning pencil came to a forced stop.

“I get it, we all do. You do a fine job with your ability. If it was any of us, we’d probably go on a rampage or go crazy. You have every right to get mad once in a while. This whole situation is frustrating. We don’t know where we stand and can’t go back to Heila until we’re one-hundred percent sure Mako will be okay. I could potentially teleport her there, but it would take a vast amount of energy from me. I’d also rather have two more knights coming with, to secure her safety. Daniel would probably be a must,” Kai acknowledged, spinning his pencil once more as he rested his head in his right hand.

I nodded in agreement. Daniel had to be a mandatory asset if they were going to teleport back. I'd probably let Elias go in the event Midnight made an appearance while we took the longer route back.

"Daniel used his ability on Makoto."

"As in..." Kai trailed off, looking upset.

"Not like that. He temporarily locked away the loneliness she's been struggling with. You know he'd never manipulate her emotions. She cares about him. It's just the issue with Midnight that's probably adding unnecessary friction between them," I explained.

"Why does she hate him? Elias told me about it," Kai asked. He'd been purposely avoiding Mako, wanting to wait till she was stable, before he introduced himself formally.

"I don't know. I've asked Mako about it, but she didn't linger on the topic for long."

"What did she say?" He tilted his head, curiosity flooded his face.

"She simply explained it was part of her teen cycles and something happened between Midnight and another shifter in the facility. I guess they had some type of relationship or feelings for one another. Mako stated – *you can't always mend a broken heart.*"

"They probably were forced to fight against one another... Midnight clearly being victorious," Kai proposed.

I clenched my hands in anger at King Aspen's tactics. I couldn't begin to imagine how many shifters had perished thanks to his experiments.

"Maybe. Whatever the case may be, it contributes to Midnight's disgust for angels. Until then, I think we should let Elias or Eli handle it. I know they haven't made up yet, but he's our best bet in this whole situation," I concurred, praying to the Starlight gods that they would be able to get over this hurdle. When trust is broken it was hard to regain. They all had to start from square one.

“They’ll mend it. I don’t need my gift to predict that. You noticed the way Elyion’s been glancing at Midnight,” Kai pointed out.

“That’s...going to be another matter I’m gonna have to deal with.” I closed my eyes, putting my head down in my hands.

Fuck, I need a break from this emotions roller coaster. We all need a fucking break.

“Did she tell Mako about how she erased her memory regarding Jeffrey?” Kai questioned.

“I told her.”

“You...when?” He stared at me with a confused expression.

“When she first woke up. I didn’t want to keep it a secret. It was done for her own good, but I did apologize on Eli’s behalf.”

“And she didn’t show any reaction to it.”

“She shrugged her shoulders and told me not to do something like that again without her knowledge.”

“Or else?” Kai raised his eyebrow.

“She’ll cut our penis’ off while we’re sleeping,” I stated with a blank face.

“Diabolical.” He blinked in shock.

Didn’t blame him. I wanted my penis intact, thank you very much.

Note to self – don’t piss off girlfriend.

“I and the others are thinking, we should surprise Makoto,” Kai announced.

“What do you guys suggest?” I inquired. Anything that would get her chirpy, feisty self back would do her some good. She needed some positive outlook in life, especially with the fresh application of the spell.

“Pool party.”

I muffled a laugh; my hand pressed against my mouth to stifle the loud sound that escaped me.

“You’re kidding, right? Daniel absolutely HATES water. If he wasn’t required to bathe or drink it, he’d avoid it all together. He won’t agree to it.”

“We told him he’ll get to swim with Mako.”

“You guys are savages.”

“It convinced him though. Marcus is gonna take Elyion with him to Earthala. They’ll probably leave in two or three hours.” I glanced at the clock onto the wall above the book case, the gold dial reading 2:30 AM.

“I still don’t understand why you don’t call her EliaseAnne or Eli. She hates when you call her by that name. Just forces her to remember the past.”

We all knew about EliaseAnne’s situation. We didn’t need her getting pissed and snapping at us. All it did was make us anxious as to what she would break in the house. Not to mention it made Elias cranky as hell, and no one wanted to risk dinner. If he got too upset, he would literally say, *‘fuck it’* and retire to his room.

He was the best at cooking, Kai being next in line. I, on the other hand, would be best at burning the house down.

“Oops.” He shrugged.

“You totally do it on purpose.”

“Maybe.”

“Remind me not to piss you off.”

“You wouldn’t. Even if you did, I’m not dealing with Stryker,” Kai mumbled.

“Are you still mad about me burning your tail?” I smirked at the memory.

“Of course not. I’m not mad after it took six fucking rotations to grow back. Not at all, I forgave you already,” he coaxed.

“He should blame his little friend,” Stryker mused.

“I sometimes question how we’re all friends and haven’t killed each other yet.”

“The Starlight gods work in mysterious ways.” Kai chuckled, returning to his sketch – the detailed image of Makoto resting in my arms, Nightmare cuddled at our feet.

“How do you draw such a detailed image in such a short amount of time? I didn’t even sense you standing there?”

“All I need to do is see the scene once. That’s enough for me to draw it out when I’m ready to.”

“Photographic memory. I’ll find something you’re bad at, eventually.”

“Goodluck. By the way, Marcus is going to get Mako a bikini.”

I sat there for a moment, envisioning Mako wearing the two-piece. *Sexy.*

“Pink?”

“Yup.”

“Neon pink, not that shitty, ugly pink that reminds me of that nasty liquid Marcus brings from Earthala to help with his indigestion.

“Pepto Bismol?”

“Ya, that shit.”

“We decided neon pink.”

“Good, it suits her...or floral,” I admitted, imagining the options; my body strummed with attraction. I continued. “It’s only us seeing her in it right?”

“Yup, we’re going to set the pool up when Marcus and Elyion get back.”

“Eli,” I corrected.

“Meh.” He shrugged again.

“Anything else?” I asked, yawning. *I need a nap.*

“Daniel suggested we get something for Mako that can make her feel more connected to all of us.”

“What’s that?”

“Whatever you want. He suggested we all should get her something.”

“Guess we got some work to do.”

CHAPTER 15



Makoto

“**Y**ou didn’t love me?”

I stood there, unable to move as my heart shattered into millions of pieces. I stared into his gold eyes... the eyes of the man who manipulated me into loving him.

“Midnight. I—”

He couldn’t finish. I knew he couldn’t lie. I felt something roll down my cheek. For rotations, I believed him each time he told me he loved me. The first time I saw him was in the middle of the arena.

Everything I learned, everything, I knew – told me to destroy him. I tried, we both tried to defeat each other, but he was a worthy adversary.

Now, I stood across from him once more. I blinked, beads of water rolled down my flush cheeks, falling onto the arena floor. I couldn’t breathe, such a task rewarded me with a reminder that I’d been betrayed; lied to, over and over again as I continued to live in this forsaken world.

“I didn’t mean to...I mean, I did love you at one point. It’s just...there wasn’t anyone else who could survive and I just—”

“I was just a tool to you? You didn’t love me. You simply choose to love me because I was the only option available. Only option who’d survive.” He used me the way the Owner used Mako, just another tool.

“Mid—”

“You knew how apprehensive I was! How hard it was for me to trust anyone here. So, you used your gift on me? To

make me love you? ANSWER ME!"

"I – you're correct," he admitted; his head hung as he gritted his teeth. Archangels were known for their ability to manipulate feelings. All they had to do was wish for you to feel one way and you would. There was no resistance against them...usually.

"I hate you," I announced; my emotions drained from me. He couldn't manipulate what was no longer there. Now, I would show him how it feels to be broken.

He lifted his head; his own tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I hate you...no. I hate all Archangels with your special gift!! No, no, no. I hate the angel fucking race! Hope isn't like you! Even if she was an Archangel she'd NEVER use her gift to manipulate people like you! Are you satisfied? Do my TEARS give you pleasure and happiness! The Owner was right. He's always right...all people do is hurt and abandon you." I laughed; my body trembled.

"Midnight, let's work this out. Don't do this!" he yelled.

"It wasn't me. It was the Owner. He threatened me...told me if I didn't do this, he would kill me. Please, you have to believe me. I'm sorry." His pleas fell upon deaf ears. The time for the truth and apologies had passed.

I lifted my head up to the sky; the last set of tears rolled down my cheeks as I shut off my emotions. I didn't need them. All they did was allow heart break.

Only Mako and her spirits would know the real me. No longer would I allow anyone to see my true self. I'd never unlock these emotions again. I imagined the small chest within the darkness; my feelings placed gently in its golden walls as it closed shut, the key secured the lock.

My head lowered; my eyes landed on the shifter I once knew. The shifter I once loved and cared for.

But, no more.

I had nothing for him. He was nothing more than an enemy. He may have been able to keep up with me the first

time we had met in this arena, but he wouldn't be able to keep up with me now.

"Why don't we get this over with?" I encouraged; my voice toneless as I stared at him, expressionless.

He could see the coldness in my dark blue eyes. He knew his time was up, knew that he would soon see his end. He should have allowed the Owner to kill him, I was sure it would have been a swifter punishment than what he was about to receive from me.

There was no second thought as he charged towards me. In one swift motion, I pushed my right arm forward and pulled it back. His beating heart now in my hand.

I watched the shock register on his face as his eyes lowered to stare at the hole, gaping in his chest. I had thought to give him a long death, but he wasn't worth any more of my time.

He had broken my heart, so I took his.

I jolted forward; my heavy eye lids scanned the dark room. My long, brown locks fell forward as I pulled my knees to my chest, resting my head.

Just a memory. Was that what happened to you Midnight?

It took a few rotations before Midnight had discussed the matter regarding the Archangel.

Archangel's weren't just ordinary angel spirits. Some literature explains them as the holiest beings of all Starlight. They foretold that special spirits would one day be called by the God of Realm Six, Jehovah to help shed light to the humans who believed and bringers of wrath on those who cared about such prophecies as Revelations in the bible.

I didn't understand the full scope of such scriptures, but I knew it did remind me of our Starlight gods and their rules that governed our actions.

Needless to say, Archangels were rare and had the gift of manipulation – specifically one's emotions. They could make

you happy, sad, heart broken or suicidal. If they didn't have control over their own emotions, such alterations could affect those near them.

One of the shifters at the facility was an Archangel, a strong one at that. He was the first to last with Midnight in the arena, surviving long enough for the Owner to take a liking to him. He wasn't the only one.

Midnight had come to enjoy not being the only one to survive the cruel trials the Owner put us through daily. She had begun to like him, getting moments to talk amongst themselves which was different from the daily killing.

But such hopes were shattered; the Owner set them up to face one another as he revealed the angel's true intentions of manipulating her for his own desire to live.

I was surprised after all these cycles, it still pained her. Yesterday was an example of such heart ache. It made me wonder if she could come to fully love someone without the fear of them lying.

"I like you Midnight...till next time."

I sighed at the memory of Eli's words, my mind still fuzzy with sleep. *I need to move.*

"Mew mew, mew, mew, mew."

I lifted my head; Nightmare sat patiently at the tips of my feet; her mismatched eyes blinked up at me as her tails wagged quickly.

"Nighty. Did I worry you?" I questioned. She pounced on my feet that poked out of the thick maroon blanket, before climbing the heap of material up my legs. I lifted my head and waited for her to reach the top of my knees before I reached out to pet her head.

She began to purr, her multiple tails curled around her little frame as she closed her eyes in delight.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. Daniel did this spell thing so the evil, dark emotion would go away. It’s only temporary, but maybe we’ll figure out what’s going on,” I explained.

I took her into my arms, taking a few moments to embrace her small frame.

“You were always my protector, weren’t you?” I whispered.

She nudged her head against my cheek, comforting me. To think I’d forgotten about her after all these cycles. I didn’t even remember who she was when I’d received her. It was more than just fate that day when I went to choose my familiar. I guess this is what destiny had planned for me.

“I need to go apologize to Eli and Elias...I guess to all of them. Wanna come with me for moral support. You can always go into scythe form and force them to forgive me,” I persuaded the little familiar.

She jumped, taking her rightful position on my shoulder; her tails wrapped around my neck. I laughed.

“Guess that’s a yes. Either they accept my apology, or they’ll feel my wrath,” I joked, getting out of bed. I grabbed a fresh set of clothes before quietly walking to the washroom. It was still early in the morning and I didn’t want to wake anyone.

Daniel was probably sleeping thanks to last night’s spell, Ryder probably meditating. Marcus would still be training at this time, and Elias could either be sleeping or making breakfast.

I prayed to the gods he was fixing something up, because I felt like I’d faint from being so famished. I noticed as I dried myself after the long, steamy hot shower, that my new clothes were loose. I’d have to ask Eli to tighten the waist band.

I liked all the clothes Marcus bought me and wanted to put them to good use, even if they were loose. I left my hair loose, hoping Daniel would style it for me. Plus, Ryder seemed to love when I left it down.

I was happy the darkness was gone for now. I could focus on fixing things with the boys, removing the tension that was going on, especially with Daniel. I knew I'd be able to fix the problem with Elias and Eli. I wasn't mad anymore, having said what had been piled in my head for days after waking up.

I didn't want to admit it then, but I truly missed my best friend. I didn't know what was going on between Midnight and Eli, or us in general, but I knew I always wanted to be friends regardless of the future outcomes.

I walked aimlessly down the hall, my eyes still heavy with sleep. *Maybe I should have slept longer.*

Maybe that would have stopped me from walking right into a wall. I cursed, rubbing at my forehead. Nighty snuggled next to my cheek, trying to lick my forehead but missing; her tongue licked my nose.

"Mako? Are you sleep walking again?" Ryder's voice made me relax as I rubbed at my eyes.

"Ryder, why did you guys put a wall in the middle of the hall? It's blocking me from food," I whined.

"There's our Firefly," Marcus praised, chuckling.

"I can't believe she actually called Kai a wall," Daniel mused, his voice sounded thick with sleep.

"Kai?" I asked, opening my eyes just as the apparent wall, turned around, brilliant amber eyes locking on me. I gawked at the sight; my heart raced at the new shifter before me.

He was six feet for sure, maybe only an inch away from Marcus' height.

His wind-blown, coiffed hair was a stunning orange.

Holy Starlight, a GINGER!! Like those hot guys in the fashion magazines.

He smiled, his perfectly straight, white teeth making an appearance, only adding to his forbidden sexiness. I wonder if Adam in the bible was this good looking. Maybe that's why that Eve shifter went and took that apple.

“Princess, that’s not how it went in the bible, but I’m pleased with your admission of liking my ginger hair,” he approved; his calm voice enough to soothe any shifter.

Oh Starlight, please tell me he’s part of my crew of star knights or heavens help my soul. This must be another test. Yes, a test to see if I’ll fall for his handsome features and seductive voice. Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil.

Multiple waves of laughter blared from the corner of the room; my eyes landed on Ryder, Marcus, and Daniel who were sitting on the couches. Marcus was bent over, gripping his stomach while Ryder was shaking his head. Daniel removed his glasses to wipe the tears from his eyes.

“I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

“Mew!” Nighty confirmed, fluffing her fur, before she jumped off my shoulder, running off somewhere in the living room.

I slapped my face and groaned.

At least, I don’t have the others mocking me.

“Attention, Attention. Read all about it. Mako embarrasses herself in front of the handsome shifter,” Rose announced.

“He’s a ginger, too!” Hope sang happily.

“He’s smoking hot...if you know what I mean,” Lily whispered, her voice filled with affection.

“You thought we wouldn’t come out after you embarrassed yourself three times. In your dreams Makoto. Good Morning.” Lexi laughed.

Yes, this is punishment. I need to question the Starlight gods one day.

“Well, I hope that one day is a very long time from now. I want to be able to have some time with the Princess before then.” He smirked before bowing deeply towards me.

“Kai Akiyama. Future heir of Realm Four, Phentailia. It’s an honour to finally meet you. I’ve heard many positive things from the others, one being your little talking out loud

situation,” he introduced, rising to face my open mouth, blushed expression.

“Mako and no more bowing!” I ordered, pointing at him. He raised his eyebrow at me in amusement.

“You don’t like when people bow?” he questioned.

“It’s unnecessary,” I countered.

“Wait till you get to—” he began before I groaned.

“I shall ban it! Dammit, where’s Elias! He said I could ban it!” I began to search for the blonde, frowning at his missing presence.

A pair of arms wrapped around my waist, the smell of mint made me smile as I looked up to the green-eyed boy.

“Look who’s so hyper this morning. I guess you’re excited to finally meet Kai? Or are you happy to see me?” He gave me a lazy smile, his blonde hair, ruffled messily. He must have just woken up.

“Can’t I choose both...wait I mean. Hmmm, is there a third option?” I inquired, not wanting to admit to either option even though I’d just done so.

“Third option. Hmm.” He thought for a moment before he placed his hands on my arms, rotating me to face him. He then embraced me in a tight hug.

“Sorry, Makoto for not telling you about Eli. Do you forgive your fairy, star knight? I’ll make you blueberry pancakes,” he apologized before offering to create my favourite dish.

“You would have made blueberry pancakes anyways,” I noted, my voice muffled in his black t-shirt.

“I can add a triple chocolate sundae to the deal,” he whispered.

“Hmm.”

“With cherries, chocolate syrup and whip cream,” he continued.

“Tempting.”

“I’ll kiss you,” he whispered into my ear.

I smiled up at him. “Deal!” I laughed before he leaned down and kissed me.

“He could have just offered to kiss her in the first place,” Marcus mumbled.

“Smooth. Daniel, you should take notes,” Ryder suggested.

“I don’t have that level of charm,” Daniel whispered back.

I pulled away to laugh. “I can hear all of you,” I reminded, looking over my shoulder.

They all blushed, shrugging it off like it was nothing; their expressions gave it away.

“Now that the Princess is up, we should celebrate with some breakfast. I don’t need to predict the fact that Mako here is starving to point of fainting,” Kai pointed out.

“Huh, how’d you know I was hungry?” I questioned, pulling out of Elias’ embrace to face him again.

“Wait for it,” he stated.

I raised my eyebrow at him. “I’m not going to faint—” I began before my body wobbled, losing all feeling as I fell forward.

“SHIT!” They all swore.

~MIDNIGHT~

I opened my eyes, noticed the floor a few inches away from me as an arm held me from my apparent fall.

I blinked before lifting my head.

“A pleasure to meet you Midnight.”

A red head greeted me.

My eyes went wide as I felt my mouth drop in awe.

“Orange hair...pretty,” I whispered, unable to tear my eyes away from such shiny strands.

“Makoto said something similar. You think you can stand?” he questioned.

I frowned, attempting to stand up straight but felt the world spin.

“Dizzy?” I questioned, my hands gripped his arm for dear life.

No falling to my demise like Mako.

I felt another pair of arms wrap around me before I was lifted into the air. I held the shriek that tried to escape my lips as my body floated to the lined-up row of stools, a foot tugged at the pink stool and placing me gently on it.

I turned my head to see Elias’ worried expression, the sight of his vibrant green eyes made me smile.

“Elias!” I greeted; my voice expressed the sudden joy in me.

“Hey, Midnight,” he replied, before leaning forward and kissing me.

I blinked as he pulled away just as quickly, a proud smirk on his face.

He leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

“That was from Eli this time,” he admitted before turning away towards the stove, grabbing an apron off the hook and placing it on his neck, before he tied the string behind his back.

I blushed, unable to hide my embarrassment.

I fidgeted in my seat.

Eli...I shouldn’t...

“Midnight. They aren’t like Samuel. Give them a chance.”

I felt goosebumps at the mention of the Archangel’s name.

Then I tilted my head.

Wait a minute...

"Mako?"

"What?" she questioned.

Her voice projected her confusion and annoyance.

"What do you mean what? You're TALKING TO ME," I argued.

"Huh?" she asked, surprised.

"Midnight? What's wrong? Your face is pale," Kai's worried voice questioned as his figure appeared opposite of the kitchen island.

"Makoto's talking in my head." I brushed him off, attempting to return to the conversation before a yawn escaped me; my head felt heavy.

"Ryder. Hold onto Midnight," Kai ordered.

I was about to answer when dark spots formed in my line of vision, my conscious wavered before plummeting into darkness.

~MAKOTO~

"HOLY STARLIGHT!"

I opened my eyes, five pairs of eyes landed on me as I blinked away the haze.

"Firefly, jeez. You scared us," Marcus confessed, relief formed on his face as he ruffled his long, brown hair. They frowned at me which made me confused.

"Oh. My bad. Why are you guys looking at me like that?"

"Your eyes are mismatched Mako," Elias pointed out, his usual voice betrayed him, the concern oozed off his words.

"Huh?" I asked, tilting my head.

Kai moved forward, pulling out a bright pink mirror in the shape of a pink rose. He opened it up, facing it at me. I wanted to question why he had a pink mirror, but the image that greeted me was different.

My eyes widened as I stared at my reflection. My usual turquoise eyes were now mismatched; my right remained its turquoise colour, but my left eye was now a midnight blue.

“Um...am I sick?” I questioned, my voice low as I gulped.

Daniel’s eyes glowed as they roamed my body; his concentrated expression made me more anxious.

“It’s...hard to explain. Mako, why did you just yell when you woke up?” he questioned.

“Uh...I hmm. Oh! MIDNIGHT! I heard her. I think I heard. My memory is kinda fuzzy,” I admitted, trying to remember what she’d said.

“It was only a minute ago and you forget. Makoto.”

“FUCK! Midnight!!!!” I cursed, shooting off my stool, the world spinning again.

Arms stabilized me before I fell backward.

I looked up to see Kai’s amber eyes as he sighed.

“You seriously need to eat or Karen’s going to ban us from being near you till we sign a contract, ensuring we feed you... and you’ve lost weight,” he insisted before blankly pointing out that small fact as he helped me sit back on the stool.

I was greeted by the smell of Pumpkin spice; the soft scent made me smile sweetly at him.

“You smell good,” I whispered.

“You get distracted easily,” he replied.

“I do not,” I argued, frowning.

“Your eyes are back to normal again,” he noted, shaking his head at me.

“Oh, RIGHT! I just heard Midnight in my head! Uh...shit. I can’t remember again,” I complained.

My shoulders sank in disappointment.

Kai rubbed my back soothingly.

“Don’t get so disappointed. Matthew’s friend will be here in a few days to help figure out what’s going on with you and Midnight,” he explained, his soft, calming voice helped relieve the anxiety at my current predicament.

“Are you sure I’m not just crazy?” I suggested. I did have four spirits, so it was a matter of time till I showed signs of losing it.

Maybe the whole magic limit thing triggered the progression of my insanity.

“Mako, you’re not insane or crazy. We have a few guesses, but let’s wait till Winterlya gets here, okay?” Ryder encouraged, making his way over to my stool and placing a kiss on my forehead.

Winterlya hmmm.

“Okay. Can we eat now? Or I can call Karen to—”

“NO!” They all protested before Elias rushed over to the stove.

“Five minutes,” he promised as he turned the stove on; Marcus and Daniel helped him get the ingredients out of the fridge.

I looked up at Kai who had a wicked smile on his face. “You guys are afraid of Karen aren’t you and how did you catch me so fast? You were standing on the opposite side.” I narrowed my eyes at the ginger haired shifter.

“It’s my specialty,” he replied; his hands left my arms as he made his way to the fridge.

Speciality as in what?

I was ready to question him when he opened the fridge and pulled out a brown and white carton. He grabbed two glasses, making it back to the island. I stared at him in horror as he poured the contents into the glass.

“Mako, why do you look like Kai’s about to drink a shifter’s blood or something?” Ryder questioned, noticing my disgust.

I lifted my head to face him.

“He’s drinking expired milk,” I pointed out as my outstretched finger landed on the two glasses filled with the brown dairy liquid. Everything edible had an expiration date to my knowledge, always turning brown as it decayed.

Milk was no different...right?

Multiple snickers could be heard from the others, as their shoulders shook. *Or not?*

“Baby that’s not expired milk. It’s chocolate milk,” Ryder acknowledged, doing his best to hold back his laughter.

The huge grin on his face caused me to roll my eyes.

“There’s no such thing. Don’t lie,” I argued, crossing my arms over my chest to glare at him.

“Mako, I’m not lying. It’s chocolate flavoured milk,” he reassured me.

My eyes turned back to the brown, liquid filled glass. I looked at Kai.

“Is it safe to drink? Will I die? If so, your previous comment would be invalid.” I reminded him of his earlier statement. I’d probably have a word with the Starlight gods about expired milk and how it led to my early death.

He picked the glass up, taking a giant gulp of it before placing it back down on the table, a brown line around his lips. He licked it off and smiled.

I wanted to lick it off.

“See? Haven’t died yet,” he revealed.

I reached out for the glass, inspecting it with my eyes before sniffing it, the smell similar to the white milk I usually drank. Only difference was it did have a hint of a chocolate smell to it.

“If I die...my ghost will come and haunt all of you for the rest of your lives,” I threatened, power flowed through my words as I took a slow glance around the room.

They all froze before Elias cursed, quickly flipping the pancake.

“Just try it, Mako,” Kai insisted. He was the first one to recover from my threat.

I took a final glance at the liquid before I put the glass to my lips, taking a generous sip. I sat there for a moment, as the liquid swished in my mouth before swallowing.

Happiness flowed through me as I looked down at the liquid, grinning from ear to ear.

“Where have you been all my life?” I cooed before gulping the rest down.

The others sighed in relief.

I finished the glass, reaching out for Kai’s.

“Mako?” he cautioned.

“But...” I looked up at him, blinking my wide eyes.

He blushed before looking away.

“Fine. You can have it, Princess,” he mumbled.

I squealed, grabbing the glass. I was ready to drink it when my body felt warm and tingly.

“You’re mine now,” I declared staring at Kai.

He looked back in confusion. “You mean the chocolate milk?”

“No, I mean you Kai Akiyama. You’re mine. I claim you, too,” I commanded before the mark on my hand blared to life; his left hand which was relaxed on the table began to glow a mellow orange, similar to a flame.

His eyes glazed over as he opened his mouth.

“Our Princess, future Queen of all the realms. We offer you our protection. As your knights, we come to your aid, protecting and loving you as we strive together to bring peace

upon thy lands. You shall be our light as we follow you across the galaxy. Bestow us with your power, as we bring evil to justice. Guide us away from the darkness that plagues our galaxy, for the greater good of all Starlight."

I continued, unable to stop the words that needed to escape.

"My lovely Star Knight. Oh strong, kind and forgiving. May the Starlight gods grant you strength for the journey before us. Vanquish such fears, leave hopelessness behind, and replace calamity with feelings of hope. Be strong, my dear Star Knights, for we shall conquer all who oppose our forward march towards salvation. I, your Princess, shall stand not behind, but with you, as we protect our lands, restore thy peace and unite all shifters alike."

My left arm stretched out as my hand lifted like a stop sign before the words flowed out.

"I entrust this duty upon thee, to protect and serve me, as long as I see fit. May the Starlight gods bless our bonding, for everlasting love and trust. I proclaim, the gods as my witness." I finished, a gentle light formed in my hand.

An orange-red light that reminded me of a phoenix's flames brightened as it surrounded his hand; the Celtic marking took form. I glanced at my own markings, the once black line that spun around to the centre of the flourishing blossom lit up, an orange colour replacing it. Now, I had five different colour strings twisting to meet at the centre. Only one line remained black.

"In stars, we trust."

He whispered, blinking out of the trance.

Ryder pulled me into an embrace as I leaned to the side, my body felt weak as I sighed.

"Easy now." He lifted me up, carrying me to the sofa.

"Rest for a bit, while Elias finishes breakfast. We can't delay you from eating any longer. You can take a nap after 'kay?" he assured me as he laid me in the soft cushions, my eyes heavy.

“So, a five-minute nap...” I slurred.

“I’ll make it ten,” he joked.

I felt another hand brush against my forehead, my eyes opening to see Kai.

“Rest up Princess and thank you,” he whispered, the sincerity in his voice relaxing my mind before it drifted far away.

Five down...one more to go.

CHAPTER 16



Kai

~KAI~

I twirled the mechanical pencil between my fingers, allowing my right leg to slide to the floor before I repositioned myself. I lifted my left leg to rest on my right, placing the sketch book to rest on my human made desk.

I stared at the sketch, the unfinished drawing of the beautiful woman sleeping before me. I turned my attention to the spinning pencil, stopping it with the pinch of my fingers.

I frowned and realized that no matter how much detail I input into this sheet of paper, it would never be able to portray how magnificently beautiful Makoto was.

I never knew anyone who could be able to look so peaceful and serene while sleeping. I glanced at the time; twenty minutes had flown by without any of us realizing it.

I'd heard so much about the sleep walking, milk addicted female. Ryder had the strongest connection through our knight bond and always kept me posted on their development with our Princess and how she coped.

Now that I'd met her face to face and watched her sleeping, peaceful figure, I now understood why the others fell in love with her as quickly as they did. She was a breath of fresh air – her vibrant personality matched her beauty, and her brain was a rarity among female shifters.

I'd had my share of encounters with females – both human and shifter alike. None of them compared to Makoto. She'd surpassed my expectations and made me wonder if I'd be privileged to be more than her star knight like the others.

I wanted so badly to introduce myself sooner – to make her aware of my presence instead of hiding in the shadows and only appearing when she was in deep sleep. But, I didn't want to overwhelm her; wanted her to recover and be in a familiar, calming environment before I showed myself.

I never expected her walking into me would have led to me officially receiving her anointing as her star knight.

I lifted my left hand up, taking another moment to admire the new marking on the back of my hand. The design alone was magnificent – the swirls and variation of thick and thin lines aiming for the centre in an Ombre transition of orange to red. The two-toned colour represented myself and my phoenix well, making us overjoyed with happiness and excitement to be accepted.

Makoto rested on the three-seater sofa, Ryder sat on the floor next to the sofa as he read a book. It was nice to see him be able to show such compassion to his long, lost crush.

Being able to see his relationship with Mako made me happy. Ryder always attempted to keep his image and not show an ounce of emotion. Now he openly kissed the woman he loved without a care in the galaxy.

It was like reading a book – watching two shifters who loved one another dearly, but unable to reach each other; finally overcome the barriers and being reunited.

I could feel our shared happiness through our knight bond, myself and the others glad to see Ryder back to his normal self. I knew it wouldn't be long till he'd be super busy, always scurrying around the realm to help with the preparations in mourning his deceased sister, Anya.

I bet more than one of us was grateful about the King's absence. All he did was add pressure on Ryder, either trying to force him into some type of arranged marriage for his personal benefit or simply taunting him.

Since Anya's kidnapping and death, all the burden and responsibilities had been placed on Ryder, the future heir of Minato. We all witnessed his ongoing struggle, the mask he placed on when he left our safe home; he focused on maintaining his image as a leader who was respected by many. He could never show signs of weakness or it was considered the demonstration of a weak King, as his father would imply.

I just hoped he didn't return till the day of Anya's celebration of life. Once that happened, maybe Mako would be fit enough to go to Heila. I'd love for us to avoid any drama with his family; though, I knew Mako would love Ryder's mother, the Queen. She'd love Mako's feistiness. I personally thought she'd enjoy her inner-outer monologues.

Daniel slept at the kitchen island; Marcus walked by as he placed a woolen blanket over him. He was in workout gear which indicated he was going to go for a run.

Elias sat next to me; his eyes closed as he relaxed, his calm facial features alternated from time to time. He most likely was talking to Elyion.

I made a mental note to annoy Eli by using her given name. She absolutely hated it. I didn't even understand why I kept calling her that, doing the evil deed since we were gathered together that faithful day, but the habit continued till now.

I enjoyed seeing her get flustered before trying to break the closest piece of furniture around her. I lost count of how many glasses she'd shattered. I sometimes wondered who had it worse when it comes to anger management – Elias or Elyion.

I didn't blame them for their short temper. Anyone who had dealt with a past like theirs would NOT be as forgiving and kind-hearted as they were. I don't think any of us would have turned out like they did.

"Shouldn't we wake Makoto up?" I suggested. Ryder looked up from his book, before shifting to face Makoto.

"Mako?" He reached out and gently nudged her.

She didn't even stir, her breathing stayed at its normal, slow pace as she continued to sleep peacefully.

"The knight bond exhausted her," Marcus noted, walking up to our sleeping beauty; his fingertips moved the strand of hair that was misplaced and hung in her face.

"She's not the only one who's exhausted," Elias noted, not even opening his eyes. We knew he was referring to Daniel who was knocked out at the island.

Poor guy trained a lot lately, sneaking off in the middle of the night to the training centre at Knightwood to practice.

I doubt the others had noticed the difference, assuming he was sleeping as usual. I commended him for his hard work. I knew he was doing all this training on Mako's behalf. After what happened in Latelia, I knew he wanted to be stronger for whatever was coming our way.

Both myself and Daniel could predict the future; a gift known as foresight, but it had its limitations. Daniel could see only glimpses of events that were moments from happening; triggered by the mentioning of a word or by touch of objects.

I, on the other hand, had a stronger foresight calibre – the ability to predict the future a few days or weeks ahead. It was usually triggered through the mentioning of an individual or event. The memory of the vision lingered for a day or two and faded completely if I didn't draw it out.

The strongest level was touch, which left the individual in a trance-like state till the vision was complete and faded within minutes, but it provided the most detailed imagery of the future. I was personally glad I was middle ground. I couldn't imagine living a life with such a strong, sensitive gift.

"She fainted the first time, right?" I questioned.

"Yeah. But, it was kind of our fault for shocking her. We kinda bombarded her with a lot of info, told her she was a Princess of an entirely different realm and stated the oath," Elias replied, rising to his feet before stretching. He looked tired.

"We have to wake her up though, before Karen gets here."

They all froze; their eyes landed on me.

"How long?" Ryder asked, unease dripping off his voice.

"Please tell me I have enough time to hop over the wall?" Elias inquired, a shiver clearly ran through him as he fidgeted in place.

"Do I have to fly off the balcony like last time?" Marcus questioned; his body rotated to the hall in case he needed to

sprint.

I grunted, placed the sketch book and pencil on the arm rest before rising to my feet. I took a moment to close my eyes, feeling the warmth of power trickled to my fingers; my markings probably glowed from the initiation of power.

“Two hours, twenty-five minutes and that all depends if Matthew goes to see her, which is a ninety percent possibility. They’re gonna go out for lunch before heading back here after,” I announced before opening my eyes, my power dissipated.

They all sighed with relief.

“Can’t we let her sleep a bit longer? I doubt she’s strong enough to even sleep walk right now, let alone attempt to pick up a fork and aim for her mouth. You know how incoherent she is when she’s half asleep.” Marcus glanced at Makoto again who hadn’t budged.

“You have a point,” Elias agreed.

“I’ll wake her up in an hour and a half. By then you’ll probably be done with your running session Marcus, and Elyion will probably be back here,” I explained.

Marcus and Elias glanced at each other before they both looked my way in confusion.

“You didn’t use your gift this time?” Ryder acknowledged; his eyes on his book as he turned the page. He knew I barely needed any energy to see such predictable events.

“Don’t have to. I know you two don’t want to cross paths with Karen. Anything to avoid being lectured for three hours.” I shrugged, revealing my prediction.

“You’ve never gotten lectured by her!” Marcus complained; his body shivered as he rubbed at his arms.

“He doesn’t understand our pain and suffering. He knows exactly when she’s coming so he just bails. I bet you teleport the moment you sense her,” Elias accused.

I smirked before I shrugged again. “Not my fault you can’t teleport. Let Elyion bail you out,” I encouraged.

“You know we can’t switch without a spare set of clothes,” he argued, grunting.

I could see the flicker of green in his eyes, glowing on and off. I bet Eli was furious.

“Then carry a bag with clothes in it. Elyion practically lives in shorts and pretty tank tops. That isn’t heavy to carry about.” I presented the idea, knowing Elyion hated carrying around anything bigger than a miniature sized purse; the small piece of leather not even big enough to fit Mako’s familiar, Nightmare, who was fucking small.

His eyes glowed green as he glared at me. “You’re testing my patience, aren’t you?” His voice was higher than his norm.

Elyion would have to switch completely with Elias in order for her usual high pitch voice to return.

“Maybe,” I admitted.

His eyes returned to normal, Elias shook his head as he sighed.

“I’m going for a walk before you two start arguing. I don’t want to wake up Mako. I’ll see you guys later.” Elias nodded to the others and he walked up to Mako, kissing her lightly on the forehead before walking to the door. He slipped on his black runners and headed out the door.

“I’ll be back later, aka I won’t come within twenty feet of the property unless you tell me Makoto’s eaten,” Marcus insisted. He waved goodbye, leaned down and kissed Mako on the cheek, whispering *see you in a bit, Firefly*. He grabbed his gym bag from behind the door and left.

“I’ll take Daniel to his room.” Ryder announced, closing the book in his hands as he stood up. He leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips before smiling down at her, the compassionate expression on his face showed how much Mako meant to him.

He made his way to Daniel. He pulled off the blanket, before he put Daniel’s arm over his shoulder. I made my way to the other side and lifted his other arm over my shoulder.

“I can do it you know.” Ryder reminded.

I smirked.

“Two is better than one. It’ll be faster.” We lifted him up, making our way to the hall with ease.

“What about Mako?” Ryder asked.

“Nightmare will be here in five seconds,” I answered.

Within five seconds, light taps could be heard. We both glanced over our shoulders, the bundle of white fur coming in sight from the door.

“MEW.” The familiar announced, standing in the middle of the room. She glanced at us, her mismatched eyes blinking a few times before walking to the couch. She jumped onto the edge, making her way to Mako’s shoulder. She walked in a circle a few times before sitting, her tails wrapped around her as her head snuggled between Mako’s neck and shoulder.

“See? She’s fine,” I reassured him.

He shook his head. “Honestly, doesn’t the predicting thing get to you?” he questioned as we made our way to the stairs.

“Sometimes,” I admitted.

If you could see the person you love die, regardless of the multiple possibilities, you’d never want a gift like mine.

Only a person who’d lived with such a gift would truly understand the unbearable heartbreak it could bare. Many shifters would have applauded me for having such a gift, envious of my ability to foretell or forewarn, but they didn’t understand the consequences it came with; the underlying fear you endured when the future revealed something you had no control in preventing.

“Sorry,” Ryder apologized.

My feelings of sadness must have leaked into the knight bond.

“Hmm...so this is how it feels when I predict shit.” I chuckled, shaking the negative thoughts away. I didn’t know how Ryder could handle feeling all our crazy emotions 24/7.

“You know—” he began, but I cut him off.

“If I ever need to talk about it, I’ll make sure you’re the first one on my confessions list,” I finished.

He smiled. “Better. Or else,” he threatened.

I gulped. “Leave my tail out of this,” I muttered.

“Hmph, no guarantee. Depends if I lose my shit or not,” he continued displaying his *just try me*, smirk.

Diabolical...

CHAPTER 17

Makoto

“Makoto? You have to get up.”

I turned, curling into the warm cushions. I smelled multiple scents – *roses, lavender, mint, Pine...oh pumpkin spice, yum.*

The thought alone of the rich, sweet smell made my stomach roar in protest as it reminded me of how hungry I was. I mumbled something before I relaxed, wanting to go back to sleep. *Oh, that was Kai calling me. Hmm.*

“Makoto.”

“No. I’m not hungry,” I lied, wanting to stay in the multiple scent heaven that surrounded me.

“Princess.”

“But I want to sleep,” I whined, tightening my eyes.

I felt a hand brush against my back, the touch sent tingles down my spine.

“Mako. I need you to eat,” he whispered in my ear, his low, seductive voice enough to convince me to do anything he wanted. I lifted my head, turning it in an awkward position to stare at the amber eyed shifter – my fifth star knight.

“Can I sleep after?” I questioned, needing to know for sure if I’d get to return to the realm of sleep.

“Yes. You can sleep after, though I can guarantee you’ll want to stay awake for just a bit.” He smiled, that sinful gesture enough to send excitement down to my core.

Hormones, settle down! I swear this is an act of revenge. Aren't four sexy shifters enough?

"You have to admit, he's hot in all areas. Even the ones you can't see through those sexy fitted clothes." Lily flowed through my mind; her voice proved how impressed she was with the muscular, hot stuff in front of us.

OR you're just smitten, like the other three love struck fools.

"From the girl falling in love with the stranger she met an hour and a half ago before passing out multiple times and finishing your knightly starlight bond. Hmmm," Rose coaxed, her toneless voice returned.

Go away. Your opinion doesn't count in this situation.

"You're just mad because I'm right," she argued before leaving.

Whatever.

I sat up slowly; my body protested my actions. I tried to get up, but Kai stopped me; his hands landed on my shoulders as he shook his head.

"Sit. I'll get your food," he encouraged, rising to his full height as he made his way to the kitchen. I smiled, relieved to be able to sit here instead of walking to the kitchen island that looked so far.

"MEW."

I jumped at the sudden sound; my head darted to the ball of fur next to me. Nightmare's tails waved back and forth as she clawed at the cushion, wanting my attention.

"Nighty! Hello. Are you starving, too? I'll save you some of my bacon," I whispered, lifting her in my arms. She purred, cuddling against me. I took a moment to pet her before I placed her in my lap, noticing Kai walking toward me; a plate filled with blueberry pancakes, bacon, boiled eggs and a glass filled with white milk.

I took a deep breath, the sweet heavenly smell made me want to devour the food in one sweep.

He placed the glass of milk on the table and sat next to me on the couch as he held my plate. I reached out to grab the plate from him, when he pulled it away. I gasped in sadness, looking up to him in horror.

“The princess is tired. Which usually means you can potentially stab yourself with the fork, or so I’ve been told. Therefore, as your new knight, I think it’s my responsibility to feed you.” The soothing flow of words made me swell with excitement, in more ways than one.

“I’d bet you’d love to suck on that—” Lexi began before I cut her off.

Nope! We just met. Geez, let me know him for twenty-four hours for Starlight’s sake. Stop encouraging Lily, too.

“I didn’t even say anything,” Lily defended herself. I rolled my eyes.

You don’t have to say anything for me to feel the utter excitement in my mind coming from your corner. And it’s NOT my hormones this time.

“Not my fault he’s an attractive, phoenix shifter with gorgeous eyes, a voice that belongs to an angel and smells so addicting. I wouldn’t hesitate to—” Lily explained before I silenced her, shooing them out of my mind.

Enough of, “Kai’s delicious, addicting scent and seductive voice that can turn any female shifter or spirit on, sending her to the land of pleasure without a touch” for today.

“Mew?” Nighty looked at me, her head tilting to the side in confusion.

“What?” I asked her, frowning.

“I didn’t know my smell and voice could do that to anyone. Good to know. Maybe I can convince you to eat your food while it’s warm. Ma. Ko. To,” Kai whispered, his lips right against my ear.

I felt the blood rush to my head, making me dizzy.

His hand pressed against my back and stopped me from falling back as I blinked.

“You’re...such a tease,” I whispered.

I knew my face was red from top to bottom, replacing my usual pale complexion.

The contrast between his dark, fiery red hair, bright amber eyes, and creamy complexion mixed with his strong, angular jaw line and deep, seductive voice was enough to have me obeying any command he issued.

“Teasing you is fun, Princess. But, I’ll stop for now. I seriously need you to eat. I don’t like you fainting every five minutes,” he admitted, picking up the plate from the table.

I didn’t remember when he placed it back on there, but as I watched the food get closer, I didn’t care.

I licked my lips, ready to devour the food Elias created.

He held the fork in his hand, the silver metal twirled a few times, catching my attention.

“How do you do that?” I questioned, looking closer as it spins with no effort between his index and middle finger.

“I’ll show you after you eat,” he replied, the fork stopped as he faced it down to cut a piece of the warm pancake. He stabbed at the piece and spun it in a generous amount of the maple syrup that pooled at one side of the plate before he raised it towards my lips.

I opened wide, anticipating the sweet goodness. I closed my mouth around the cool metal fork, the warm, fluffy texture of the pancake filled my mouth as the sweetness of the syrup and blueberries made me moan.

I love blueberry pancakes.

I felt the drizzle of syrup escape from the corner of my lip and begin a slow, a steady pace to my chin, but it was short lived, as the tip of Kai’s thumb stopped it. Gently wiping it away, he slowly brought the gathered drop on his thumb to his creamy, pink lips. I watched as his tongue flicked out and removed the syrup from his finger, and for the first time in my life, I was jealous of a thumb. I wanted to know how it would feel to have his tongue caress my skin that way.

My eyes found his as he flushed; his eyes flickered as he blinked at me.

I began to blush as his glowing, amber eyes roamed my body once, before returning to normal.

“Oh...I guess you’re not the only one being turned on.” Lexi purred.

I gulped, unable to pull my eyes away from him, his lips catching my attention as I glanced at them. *Fuck, I’m so screwed.*

The door opened, causing us to both flinch, before our eyes landed on the tall, blonde followed by the tall, silver haired man: Karen and Matthew.

“Oh, thank the Starlight gods, you guys are feeding her. Hello Makoto, you look horrible this afternoon,” Karen greeted before glaring daggers at Kai who merely shrugged. Karen could always be trusted to tell me the truth...even if it meant insulting me.

“We had another fainting spell episode prior to this,” Kai explained, lifting his hand up to reveal the new knight bond.

Matthew walked to Karen’s side, both of their eyes widened in awe.

“And after that, she could barely keep her eyes open, so she napped again. She just woke up and only had a bite of her pancakes,” he continued.

Karen looked at me, raising an eyebrow. I quickly sat up, turning back to Kai.

“Feed me please. AHHH.” I opened my mouth.

He chuckled, but cut another piece of the delicious fluffiness, before placing it in my mouth.

I smiled, taking my time to savour the taste.

“I’ve never seen anyone look so happy over food,” Matthew pointed out, his hands in his black, dress pants. I looked between the two of them.

He wore a simple, white dress top, black tie, dress pants, and black running shoes, which were the only non-professional attire in his whole outfit.

Karen wore a black and white dress that reached just above her knees, her black heels outlined with a white crisscross pattern. Her usual down, curly hairstyle was tightly tied back into a neat bun, not a strand out of place. Her black rimmed glasses relaxed on the bridge of her nose, dimming her usual brilliant emerald eyes by a pinch, versus Matthew's which relaxed on top of his silver hair, his amber eyes bright.

"Did you two go on a date?" I questioned before biting on the strip of bacon Kai presented to me.

I noticed Karen blush as she looked away and Matthew grinned.

"We had a meeting," Matthew answered.

"Which lead to a date?" I pressed on before my attention returned to my bacon.

I looked down at Nightmare who stared anxiously at the bacon pierced on the fork Kai was holding. I nudged him, my eyes returned to Nighty. He nodded, giving a piece to my familiar who began nibbling on it.

"Why are you so curious?" Matthew asked, his smile widened. I chewed on my bacon, swallowing before continuing.

"Because you look good together," I blankly stated; my attention caught up at the remaining strips of bacon.

Karen face had begun to turn red as she fidgeted in place, Matthew pulled his glasses off, looking very intrigued at his usual pair, ignoring my statement.

"Only you can say that so easily," Kai complimented.

"But, it's true? They like each other, don't they? Karen stares at him when he passes down the halls, while Matthew peeks through the window when she's not looking and has this big smile on his face. Oh, and one time—" I began to explain to Kai before he pressed his hand lightly on my mouth.

“I think you’ve proved your point, Princess.” His eyes landed on the couple.

I glanced back at them, noticing their flushed expressions as they glanced away.

“Oops. Was I not supposed to say that?”

“Yes, Mako. But, between you and me, they did go on a date and usually when you go on a date you—”

“Enough! We just came to check on you! Mako, make sure you take these pills three times a day starting tomorrow. It will help restore your iron and other levels. And Kai! If I come back here in three days and Mako loses any more weight, so help me Starlight. I’ll lecture ALL of you boys for five hours straight. You KNOW I can,” she threatened.

The smile on his face fell as he stared at her. I could already see the fear in his eyes.

“Yes Ma’am.” He nodded his head, gulping; his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

“We’ll take our leave. Rest up Makoto. I’ll see you later Kai.” Matthew waved, confidently reached out and held Karen’s hand before leading her to the door. Karen’s face was beet red by the time they left, making me smile.

“Karen’s scary when she’s mad,” Hope whispered.

“Never anger a fairy. Totally dangerous,” Lily added.

“Lethal for sure,” Rose agreed.

“A phoenix and fairy spirit. Not bad at all,” Lexi approved.

I didn’t bother to reply, staring at the last piece of bacon. Kai must have noticed my stare, stabbing it and feeding it to me. I took my time to enjoy the oil filled, crispy strip of pork before I glanced at the glass on the table, frowning.

“You want your milk now?” Kai asked, reaching out to grab it as he placed the empty plate on the table.

“I want chocolate milk,” I whispered.

He laughed, the vibrant, new sound made my heart soar as my ears yearned to hear the sound again.

“Coming right up Princess.”

* * *

I fell back asleep for another hour before waking up, thanks to drinking a glass of my new addiction.

Why hadn't I discovered chocolate milk earlier? I would have broken out of my cell back at the facility every night, just to enjoy the chocolate sensation.

Kai sat next to me on the sofa as we talked about little things. He informed me that he had arrived in Minato just after our battle on Latelia.

“What is Heila like? Does it look like Minato?” I questioned.

“Nothing like Minato. Heila is far more grand and pure. Even the way the air smells and the flowers blossom through the seasons demonstrates how well the realm is taken care of. Your parent's love nature and such likes influenced their kingdom. The shifters of Heila work together to keep the realm clean and growing. That's one of the reasons why Heila's so popular,” Kai explained.

I nodded, trying to imagine his description in my mind. If Minato was nothing compared to Heila, I was in for a sight. I frowned, the mention of my parents made me nervous.

“What's wrong Mako?” Kai questioned.

“I'm afraid my family won't like me. It's been cycles...” I confessed.

“Mako, they'll love you. Trust me. You're an exact copy of your mom so the Kingdom will embrace you. Once they get to experience your feisty personality, they'll all fight to get a chance to meet you.” Kai laughed.

I poked him in the side. “I'm not feisty. I'm unique.”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you say princess.” He chuckled, bracing himself for another poke. I relaxed, wanting to discuss other things.

I questioned him as to why I had only met him now instead of earlier, like in the medical centre.

“I didn’t want to stress you out. You just woke up and had to deal with a lot during the exam and being checked on non-stop. Adding a fifth person into the wave of shifters would have been too much,” he summarized.

“That makes sense.” I yawned. My head began to fall forward before jerking up.

His arm wrapped around my shoulder, pulling me into a side embrace.

I relaxed, enjoying his scent.

“Get some rest. We have a surprise for you,” he encouraged.

I lifted my head up to stare at him with wide eyes.

“A surprise! What is it! Tell me,” I begged, thrilled to be getting some type of surprise from them.

“If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise, Princess,” he reminded me.

“But I want to know,” I argued, frowning.

“Go to sleep. When you wake up, then you can see,” he reassured.

“Fine...as long as there’s chocolate milk.”

“I’ll make sure Ryder gets some,” he promised.

He began to hum lightly, the tune as calm as his voice. It didn’t take long before I fell asleep, not waking up till the next day.

I must have felt better, because I’d apparently went from Marcus’ room to Elias’. Too bad he wasn’t in bed. I took the pills Karen instructed me to take before heading to the bathroom.

I took a relaxing bath, while I nibbled on this thing called beef jerky. Matthew instructed Kai to litter the house with snacks, yes, that included the bathroom. The packaging looked intriguing, so I decided to try them out while I waited for the bath to fill. Now, the almost empty package was in my hand, another salty, savory strip of jerky entering my mouth, sending out bursts of flavor across my tongue as I sat in the bubble bath.

It gave me some time to myself. My mind attempted to grasp all the events that had taken place in less than three rotations.

The dark feeling was still shut down, not making its entrance into my mind or dreams. My nightmares hadn't come to assault me either. I finally had a sense of peace. Now, I was excited to find out what this surprise was.

After I listened to Rose nag me for ten minutes, I reluctantly left the bath and slipped into white, jean shorts and an oversized green shirt I "borrowed" from Elias. My mission in collecting things from the boys was still ongoing.

I'd successfully acquired multiple clothes from Ryder, including his favourite maroon sweater he liked to wear in the fall and winter. I simply needed to blink my eyes a few times before he blushed, giving in to my request. Both Rose and I liked to smell the lingering rose and cinnamon scent when we missed our demon boy, though he'd made it his mission to either stick by my side or check in every hour.

I had collected a few of Marcus' workout towels I'd borrowed to "use" but, hid away in my locker. I'd finally gotten the chance to retrieve them all before the exam, placing them neatly in his souvenir section of my drawer. I wondered if he'd noticed yet.

Elias allowed me to take some of his – four, different styled shirts sat in his designated section. I glanced down at the friendship bracelet on my wrist. Now that EliaseAnne was involved, I'd have to add her to the mission list.

Girls are easier to "borrow" stuff from.

My eyes landed on the empty section in the left corner of my drawer – Daniel’s designated area. He was the only one I hadn’t been able to acquire a souvenir to lust over. I sighed.

Will he ever let me in?

I felt Hope emerge in my mind; her sing song voice rang through.

“It takes time Makoto. We all have a past. He’s probably struggling with having someone to rely on as he admitted. It won’t take a day to change a habit that’s been going on for cycles. Give him time.”

I nodded, closing the drawer as I turned to leave the room. Hope made a valid point. I was just being impatient. Yet deep down, my gut told me we didn’t have much time for peace and getting to know one another.

Once we figured out what was happening with me and Midnight, we’d be headed to Heila, once everything was clear. I doubted we’d have any free time by then. My focus would be on trying to restore whatever family bond I once had. Not that I even knew what that looked like, since I still couldn’t remember them – except for my mother.

I pray to Starlight my family accepts me...this version of me.

“Makoto.”

I turned my head, noticing EliaseAnne leaned against the door frame. She wore black shorts, a red rose design on the pockets created intricately with black rhinestones. Her simple, black top clung to her curvy figure, low enough to show a glimpse her cleavage. Her straightened blonde hair was loose, different from her usual, bountiful curls.

I gave her a look, noticing the gold rimmed glasses that sat comfortably on the bridge of her nose, those ravishing emerald eyes bore into me.

I tried to ignore the weird sensation running through me – *Attraction*.

“Why are you wearing Daniel’s glasses?” I questioned.

“Cause it’s fun and I assumed you’d need something to add in his section of that drawer of yours,” she revealed with a shrug.

My eyes widened as I began to blush.

“How...?”

“You told me when you were half asleep before the exams. Well...you told Elias, who told me. I figured you’d have some problems with Daniel, so I took his glasses and walked away,” she explained, glancing away as her fingers began to fidget.

I could see her body grow tense as she tried to look anywhere but directly at me, like when she first announced her presence.

“Do you want “this” to continue...whatever it is,” I questioned.

She glanced my way, her eyes wide. I could see her confusion as well as her realization as to what I referred to.

“How did...?” She stopped, her face turning red.

“I heard everything. It’s a bit fuzzy, but Midnight explained it to me the other day in writing. I...I don’t know if I’m ready for that just yet,” I admitted; the thought of being with Eli in such a way hadn’t registered in my brain yet.

I already had to deal with loving the others. I had a hard-enough time trying to figure out how to split my time with them; Daniel my main concern now, and with the introduction of Kai, I didn’t know if I wanted to put my friendship with Eli on the table and exchange it for something more.

She frowned, her eyes blinked rapidly as they began to tear up.

I shook my head quickly. “I’m not rejecting you. Just because I can’t return your feelings now, doesn’t mean they aren’t there. Midnight...likes you, I think. She likes Elias, too. I don’t know if her being a split personality has anything to do with it. Nevertheless, she has feelings for you...and I do, too...somewhere in my heart, but I need time.” I sighed and turned away for a moment to compose myself; my eyes stung.

I don't think she understood how difficult this was to say out loud. I glanced back at her before continuing.

"There's a lot going on. I'm just getting serious with Ryder. Daniel and I are having issues due to Midnight's dislike problem. I still need more one-on-one time with Marcus that doesn't revolve around weapon modification or workout clothes, and to continue enjoying my walks with Elias. Now that Kai's in the picture, I want to get to know him as well. I also want to have some time with you. That's asking a lot from me. I'm just one individual with multiple spirits. I somehow, have to spread myself amongst you all and it's hard. I'm just trying to go in some type of order. Therefore, I need time."

I stared into her eyes, determined for her to understand that I wasn't rejecting her, but putting whatever feelings we had for one another on hold, hoping she'd allow me enough time to sort through the current situation before tackling that area.

"We can still be friends, right?" she whispered.

"Seeing as you're the only female shifter that can stand my craziness, yes. Plus, I'd be lost without my best friend. Who's going to help me be fashion worthy when we go to Earthala? Don't want to be stopped by those, uh, fashion police? I think that's what the book called it," I reassured her, wondering if I'd got the terminology right.

She pulled me into an embrace, catching me off guard. I blushed as her strong mint scent, attached to the cherry blossom shampoo we shared, flowed around me.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I know you may not understand now, but I'll explain everything once we have time, just us. Then, you'll understand why I did it. It doesn't support the fact what I did was wrong and ruined the trust we had formed, but I just want you to know, it won't happen again. I swear to the Starlight gods above, I'll be honest with you. Even if I know it may hurt you. Just...can you promise no matter what I reveal to you, you'll still be my friend?" she cried.

I hugged her back, tightly. "As long as you're not a mass murderer. Actually...if you murder stupid shifters like Brittany and her crew, I guess it's for the better good. But, if you're a

mass murderer of innocent shifters, then I can't. Or if you hate milk. Then, we seriously can't be friends anymore." I pulled back to stare up at her with a serious expression.

She laughed, tears flowed down her face. "I would NEVER hate on your dairy addiction and no, I'm not a mass murderer. If I was, Brittany and her gang would have been eliminated and buried LONG before you enrolled at Knightwood," she confirmed.

"Then, I forgive you." I grinned sheepishly as I attempted to think of a punishment, a sensation flowed through me with excitement at the thought that popped into my brain.

"As compensation, you owe me a date," I announced.

She beamed; her hands grabbed onto mine. "DEAL! I'll even treat you to strawberry milk!" she rejoiced.

I stared back at her eager expression, mortified.

"Strawberry...milk?" I glanced at her in shock, attempting to imagine such a thing.

"Yes, and guess what?" she whispered.

"What?" I leaned in closer, intrigued by what she had to share.

"It's even pink."

"STOP! No, it's not! You're lying!!!" I exclaimed. My mind was fucking blown away. First, I found out the existence of chocolate milk, and NOW, there was pink, strawberry milk.

"Yup! We don't have it here, but maybe when we go down to Earthala, I'll take you to this nice dessert place. Scarlet can come, too."

"Scarlet? The one whose boyfriend knows Marcus?" I questioned, remembering Marcus' mentioning her name when he got me the e-reader.

"Yes! Oh, trust me. You two will get along. We'll order vanilla, chocolate and strawberry milk shakes and share," she announced happily.

"Milk...shakes?" I asked, astonished.

“It’s milk with blended ice and ice cream, kinda like a smoothie, but with milk. Thus, a milkshake. They can put different syrups or even fresh fruit on top with whip cream! The place Marcus took me to had milk shakes with crazy straws and a scoop of ice cream on the side of the glass, drizzled with nuts, cookies, and chocolate.”

I stared up at her, wide mouthed. I was surprised I wasn’t drooling yet. “Do they top it off with a cherry?”

“With a nice, juicy cherry on top.”

“You owe me a date there.”

“Promise.”

“Promise?” I urged her, my pinky up and ready as I glared at her.

She laughed. “Promise. Cross my heart, hope to die—”

“Hope to die! That’s not how it goes!” I argued.

“Oh really?” She questioned, lifting an eyebrow at me.

“It goes like – Cross my heart and hope to fly! Poke a flower in the sky!” I corrected with confidence.

“Well then, guess I have to learn the proper way. I promise Makoto, I’ll be truthful to you and owe you a date on Earthala that includes a massive cherry. Cross my heart and hope to fly, poke a flower in the sky.” Her pinky finger wrapped around mine as she offered me a light smile.

“Friends?” she whispered.

“Best friends,” I replied.

“I guess this is a good time for you to see your surprise.” She beamed before giving me another hug.

“Take me ther – Hehehehe, ah, Eli! That tickles. Dammit! Tell Elias I’m going to kill him.”

CHAPTER 18



Makoto

“Can’t I remove this stupid piece of– ah! ELI, I’m probably going to fall to my death by the time I reach this so called, surprise!” I yelled, holding onto Eli’s hand for dear life as I cautiously took another step forward and prayed to the Starlight gods it wouldn’t be my last.

“Stop being so over dramatic! Where’s my bad ass bitch? Now, keep walking forward. You’re going to be walking on the grass in five seconds.” Eli huffed before she warned me, tugging lightly on my hand as she directed me somewhere.

“My bad ass bitch self wouldn’t be struggling if she could fucking see! And why the prickly grass? Will it prick me and put me to sleep for many cycles?” I questioned, trying to lighten the situation. My heart, on the other hand, was beating so fast I bet my body thought it was running in one of those 5K races humans did for “fun”. *A weird hobby, I tell you.*

The moment my feet brushed against the sharp-edged grass I stepped back, standing in place, which caused Eli to stop.

“Mako. It’s just grass!”

“Death-inducing grass, that’s what! Nope, I’m not going. I’ll stand right here and watch my surprise from afar,” I announced. *This grass wasn’t going to get me today.*

“Are you seriously afraid of the fucking grass?” Rose grumbled. Why don’t you come out here and try it? You won’t last five seconds.

There was a moment of silence.

“*No thanks,*” she responded, retreating from my mind.

I’d roll my eyes if they weren’t closed. *That’s what I thought.* I heard a deep chuckle, the calming, rich sound followed by the sweet pumpkin scent made me excited.

“Kai?” I asked; my head turned from side to side, my ears perked up to try and pin point the sound of approaching footsteps. An arm wrapped around my waist, the other under my knees as I was swooped up, the motion induced a light shriek as I grabbed onto the person’s shoulders.

“Yes, Princess. It’s nice to know you recognized my laugh,” he praised; his voice so close to my ear I felt shivers trickle across my skin as his exhales brushed against my neck.

“I can smell you,” I admitted.

“I hope that’s a good thing.” He laughed before moving forward, walking in the grass in my stead.

Thank you, Starlight, for this wondrous man.

“If you weren’t so stubborn and wore slippers, you wouldn’t have to be carried, Princess,” Eli suggested, her high-pitched voice came from my right.

“If you’re going to blindfold me, I’m not going to let you take away my sense of touch as well. That’s just suicide.” I ushered, my hands waved left and right.

“Only our Firefly would think in such a manner,” Marcus praised, the appreciation filled sound came from my left.

“Marcus! Tell Eli I’m right,” I requested.

“She’s right you know,” he told Eli who groaned.

“You’re just saying that because she ordered you to!” Eli exclaimed.

“No. She doesn’t have to order me to say it. I love pleasing her,” he admitted.

“In many ways.” I purred before giggling. I heard Eli let out a frustrated sigh while Kai chuckled, his muscled chest

vibrating against my side.

“Ugh. Nope. Not picturing it. Go get a room,” she insisted.

“There’s a waiting list and I’m first in line,” Ryder’s tingle inducing voice declared.

I smiled at his open declaration; my heart fluttered.

“Of course, he is. Always beats us to the good stuff,” Daniel mumbled nearby, making me giggle.

Kai came to a stop, lowered my legs to the ground as I stood up with his hand protectively on my waist.

“Can I take this off yet?” The suspense was killing me, the urge to rip this blindfold off and reveal whatever they’d gathered outside filled me with anticipation.

“So impatient.” Kai gripped my waist, rotating me clockwise, my body forced to stop at the imaginary three.

“Should we show it to her? I don’t think she’s ready,” Daniel teased.

“Guys! Please!!! This is my right!”

Multiple snickers replied which made my shoulders drop.

“Oh shit, she’s gonna sulk guys. Okay, you can remove the blindfold now.” Marcus panicked, giving me permission to finally remove the stupid piece of cloth.

Kai’s hands moved from my waist; his body pressed against me as he helped untie the blindfold; the slow action made it difficult for me to not get distracted.

Before my hormones could attempt to play with my feelings the blindfold fell; my eyes opened slowly as the sunlight greeted them. It only took a second before my eyes widened and my jaw dropped as I stood there speechless.

The usual spacious backyard was decorated with multi-coloured strings; round, floating circles and other decorations I had no idea what they were called.

The empty pool, that was located on the far right of the backyard, was now filled with sparkling, clear water. I was

beyond stunned; my eyes landed on the human size, unicorn float, its white appearance and rainbow coloured tail and hair glittered from the sun's rays. The shiny, gold horn tempted me to touch it; the float continued to ride the still water with the assistance of the soft, warm breeze that made an entrance.

There was a table off to the side of the pool, loaded with various dishes, a BBQ machine stationed a few feet away. Nighty was relaxed in one of the six, white, beach chairs lined along the pool's edge, in the pathway of the sun's perfect warmth.

I glanced around to the group before me; my star knights.

"Surprise Makoto." Ryder walked forward, the others positioned themselves in a row. Ryder reached for my hand, before he knelt down. His left-hand lifted and pressed against his chest, the others follow suit.

I was in shock, unable to tell them to rise as they knelt before me; the others copied Ryder as their left hands rested on their chest – their appointed coloured marks on full display.

"Makoto, our Princess. We apologize for not only putting you in harm's way with the school exam, but for not being truthful to you. We should have sat you down and told you about EliaseAnne. Instead, we assumed you wouldn't be able to handle such news and that was wrong of us. I know how strong you are, the others witnessing such strength when we needed you the most. I hope with Mother Starlight's help, you can come to forgive us, your knights. We feel horrible and are ashamed of such actions. Please, find it in your merciful heart to forgive us."

They nodded their heads, none of them daring to lift them till I gave them the command to do so.

It took me a few seconds before I found my voice; feelings of joy, excitement, love, and adoration flowed through me as I stared at my knights, who created this show of apology.

As if the power within me recognized what they had done, a wave of tranquility overflowed my senses – my body fell

into the trance like state I had experienced when establishing their knight bonds.

“Thank you. Rise my star knights. Abandon any thoughts or fears of your Princess being upset with Thy actions. You are forgiven, the Starlight gods as my witnesses.” The power flowed off my words; their markings glowed lightly before it dimmed.

They all rose to their feet, light smiles on their lips as relief blossomed on their expressions. I smiled back, my body returned to normal as the power faded away, giving me control once more.

Eli ran up first and embraced me.

“YEAH!! Everything’s back to normal! Now, for the fun to begin. Sorry boys, I’m kidnapping Mako for ten minutes,” she exclaimed, before she grabbed and lifted me up.

I shrieked as she flung me over her shoulder with ease, walking back towards the house. “ELI! Hey, I can walk myself!” I yelled.

“You were just complaining about the death inducing prickling grass and now you can walk. Too late, you just gotta enjoy the ride.” She continued forward, ignoring my light pounds against her back.

“MEW!” Nighty ran to us from the open glass door, clinging to Eli’s jeans before climbing her way up to her unoccupied shoulder. She poked her head out from Eli’s straight locks before small mews escaped her.

“Aren’t you happy?” I rolled my eyes, but giggled at my familiar’s excitement.

“Don’t take too long. The food is going to get cold!” Marcus called out.

“TEN MINUTES,” Eli yelled back as we entered the house.

Didn’t take us long to reach Elias’ and Eli’s room. Her hand pressed on the knob, which began to glow, and the click indicated approval.

She walked in, closed the door before placing me lightly on my feet. Nightmare jumped off her shoulder, headed straight to the bed – a decorative, rectangle box awaited me; the green glittered wrapping was securely tied with a gold, silk ribbon.

“What’s that?” I asked, astonished by its beauty. I’d never seen a present in real life; only witnessed such delicacies in picture books when I was younger. I never got to celebrate my birthday or Christmas at the facility, so I’d sit alone in the library, stacking multiple books and pretending to host my own party – the piles of books my presents.

Eli walked towards it, lifting it in her arms before turning to face me; her expression filled with remorse.

“It’s for you Makoto. We decided our Princess deserved something from all of us, but I’m giving this first gift. It’s a little token of appreciation and is required for the events to come,” she confessed, blushing slightly.

“Can I open it?” I whispered; my body was hesitant, but wanted to unravel and reveal the contents held within.

“Of course.” She walked up to me, placed the medium sized box in my hand, and ushered me over to the bed to open it.

I shuffled over, trying to keep my composure as I began to open the box, making sure to be gentle, so I could save the beautiful wrapping and ribbon for safe keeping.

Nighty sat quietly next to the box; her tails wagged back and forth as she stared intently at the box. If it wasn’t for me attempting to open it, she looked as if she wanted to pounce on it.

I removed the final sheet of wrapping before opening the box, revealing something neon; my hands gripped the clear packaging and pulled it out.

I blinked back the tears that threatened to escape.

“This is...the clothes people wear when they go to a beach?” I questioned, glancing at Eli who nodded in agreement.

“This one is a bikini. It’s generally called a swimsuit or swim wear. It’s what female shifters wear to the beach. You can use it at the pool,” Eli explained.

“I can wear it now?” I asked, holding the two-piece, neon pink swimsuit to my chest.

“Of course,” she urged. I placed the package on the bed, Eli helped me fold the wrapping paper neatly, putting it in her drawer till I could take it back from her later.

I made my way to the washroom; Nighty walked in front of me, dragging the packaged swim suit in her mouth as she strolled towards the bathroom.

I quickly changed out of my clothes, putting the bikini on. The bikini was neon pink, outlined with black, the matching bottoms fit perfectly. It was always nice to find a pair of underwear that fit my butt cheeks, with only enough showing to not attract the world’s attention. I guessed swim bottoms could do the same. I was tying the back string of the bra, when Eli poked her head.

“Are you—” She announced but stopped; her eyes doubled in size as she took a slow glance of my body.

I hadn’t hidden my multiple markings; the thick swirls and lines wrapped around my legs, the blossom roses looked more vibrant. With most shifters, the majority of markings were one colour, but of course, I had to be the odd ball and have different variations – the blossomed, red roses were vibrant against my pale legs.

My other markings cradled my waist, stopping just under the bra. My final marking was on my biceps, usually hidden by most clothing or due to my magic – the dark blue circles intersected with one another in a repeated manner. I’d left my hair down; the loose brown locks were still curly from Daniel’s morning hair service.

“Uh...are you supposed to feel, well, naked in these things?” I questioned as my face flushed at her obvious display of attraction.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Eli opened the door, walking in.

My eyes widened as I took in her figure, my heart skipped a beat. From her small boobs, the black swimsuit cradled them perfectly, to her markings on her chest and left leg. Her curves were perfectly portioned, and her height made her look like a swimsuit model in those magazines.

I attempted to ignore the sensations that flowed through me as I continued to blink at her, trying to find words.

"Guess Midnight's not the only one who has a little crush," Rose announced.

"I don't blame them. Elias is hot, so it's only understandable that Eli would be just as attractive. Even more so," Lexi admitted.

"We gotta make sure someone takes a recording with that weird device Marcus has for memories," Hope suggested.

"Maybe I'll ask Kai to stalk them and draw a picture when they finally kiss," Lily suggested, sounding pleased.

I can fucking hear you! Weren't you listening to my conversation before? Can't handle this. Go away.

I shooed them out of my mind, Rose remained. I hated her stubbornness to obey.

"You shifters and your morals. Hmph," she commented before leaving my mind. Of course, she wanted the last say.

"As much as I'm intrigued to know what inner conversation just occurred in your mind, it's way past ten minutes. Let's go." She reached out for my hand. I didn't hesitate, placing mine in hers, the action rewarded me with a smile before she leaned down.

"And you look smoking hot Makoto." Elias deep voice whispered against my ears; a pair of lips kissed my sensitive spot.

I froze; the goosebumps flowed down my skin at the sudden touch.

Eli pulled away from me; her eyes still glowed as she winked, the glow faded away. Eli blinked before she frowned.

“Stupid Elias. OI, this is my turn! You can’t go interrupting my Mako time. Go to sleep or something. Ugh, don’t nag at me, it’s annoying. Whatever,” she huffed, turning her back on me for a moment.

She wasn’t the only one who needed to compose herself, my face was cherry red and my body hummed for more.

The day I’d get revenge on these hormones.

“Let’s go,” Eli whispered, tugging for me to move forward.

We walked out of the house; the boys were in a circle. Their expressions all so focused, they were probably discussing when we’d be returning home. I was excited to return, but I wanted to enjoy this blissful moment before having no other choice than to face reality.

They all turned at once as we approached, their eyes grew wide – their expressions reminded me of the time I’d cooked them breakfast. Even Kai was sporting the same stunned look, the pencil he was previously spinning between his fingertips, fell into the pool.

I blushed, the attention made me nervous. I quickly hid behind Eli.

“Do I look weird?” I questioned, gulping. I could see them struggling to speak.

“If I look bad I can go chan—”

“NO!” they all yelled suddenly. Eli laughed, stepping away from me before turning to face me.

“Don’t mind them. They’ve just never seen a female shifter look as hot as you. Now, don’t you guys have something to give our Princess before we get this party started?” Eli proposed staring at them.

I looked in confusion as they conversed amongst themselves first, coming to an agreement before Kai walked to the back of the table, kneeling down and picking up a large, decorative box – the pink, glittering wrapping paper twinkled in the light with a rainbow ribbon wrapped neatly around it.

I gawked at the oversized present. My eyes had already begun to sting, trying my best to hold back my tears. Kai stood before me and presented me the gift with a beautiful smile on his face.

“This is for you Makoto. This is from all of us. I hope each gift reminds you of how special you are to us.”

I nodded, speechless as I accepted the gift. I knelt down to the grass, too caught up with opening the present to care about its prickliness.

It didn't take me long to open the gift, once again ensuring the wrapping paper was intact, so I could save it for memory sake.

There was multiple clothing, courtesy of Marcus, a pink apron with the words *My Princess Rules*, a chibi, brown haired girl with blue dot eyes wearing a gold crown and holding a frying pan as a specter from Elias, a variation of recipe books and a selection of my favourite novels from Ryder.

I noticed a small, leather black book. I inspected the simplistic cover, pulled the gold string that held it together before opening it.

I gasped, the front page presented a striking image of me, sketched in the finest details with various colours. My usual turquoise eyes were an exact replica on the cream like paper.

It was just a facial image of me smiling. I flicked through the images – Ryder holding me in his arms, his lips pressed against my forehead as I smiled, an image of Marcus and I sitting in the meadow, glancing at the sky as I pointed at the butterfly passing by, an image of Daniel laughing, his glasses on my face as his hands were tangled in my hair, finishing up a braid, an image of me and Elias, holding hands as we're surrounded by glowing fireflies – Nightmare on the top of my head as her three tails were frozen in place.

The last page was an image of me and a fork in my mouth, my face filled with delight as my rosy cheeks puffed into enjoyment.

“Kai. They’re all beautiful,” I admitted as a tear rolled down my cheek. To think we’d only just met, finalized our bond and he’d taken the time to draw all these images. Eli knelt beside me, rubbing my back gently.

“Kai’s a well-known artist. He’s been drawing since he was five and ever since has excelled. Shifters all over the galaxy request his work. He has a cycle waiting list and goes down to Earthala twice a cycle for major art exhibits that sell out.”

I nodded and closed the sacred book. I’d have to make a spot in my drawer for Kai as well. The compassion he’d already shown made me excited to get to know him and maybe, one day love him as I did the others.

I looked at the concealed packaging of the last gift, opening it up to reveal a bunch of lingerie in different colours, a few books with pictures and a pouch filled with hand crafted jewelry.

I turned my head to face EliaseAnne.

“Is this from you?” I didn’t recognize my soft voice, unable to explain the gratitude that overflowed within and love I felt.

“Yup. You can never have enough sexy undergarments. I got a set for each knight’s colour. I know; you can thank me later. The books are some of my favourites from my manga collection and the jewelry I made for you and Midnight...since you guys liked the bracelet I made. I placed a protective spell and you never know when you’ll need an antidote spell for poison etcetera so. I thought it would be good to wear something protective and fashionable...uh...and it would make me happy.” She whispered the last part, glancing away.

“Thank you EliaseAnne,” I whispered. I leaned forward and pressed a solid kiss on her cheek. I smiled up at her – those wide orbs of green blinked in shock as her cheeks burned red.

“You’re welcome...ah this is embarrassing,” she mumbled, glancing away.

Wait. I didn't get anything from Daniel? The mere thought made me frown. I could feel Hope's disappointment as well.

"Stop moping. Daniel! Don't you have something to give our Princess?" Eli turned to face the angel shifter who flinched, fixing his second pair of gold rimmed glasses since Eli had hidden the borrowed pair in my souvenir draw.

I smiled, happy that my "inner" thoughts were answered. *Guess this bad coping mechanism is handy at times.*

"Uh, yeah. Hold on," he acknowledged, rushing to grab something underneath the table, hidden by the table cloth. He returned, holding the neatly packaged box, the dark, shiny magenta wrapping topped off with a gold bow.

He swallowed before facing me directly. "Makoto. Here's my gift to you. Well, it was my idea, but I needed Marcus' credit card to get it," he sheepishly admitted.

"It's only cause what he got you, we don't have here," Marcus pitched in, smiling as his arms relaxed behind his head, his bare chest distracted me for a moment.

"Focus Mako. Play time later," Lexi reminded, unable to hide the impressed tone in her voice. *Right.*

"Thank you, Daniel." I reached out, took the box from him before neatly tearing the wrapping. A white box with a picture of something was displayed in front – the words *IPHONE 8*.

"What's an iPhone?" I pondered.

"It's a phone. It's what we use to communicate with one another," Daniel explained, taking the box from me and opening it up to reveal the communication device in a dazzling pink case. I beamed at the sparkling object.

"IT SPARKLES! Is that diamonds or something?" I asked, afraid to touch it without breaking it.

"It's Swarovski rhinestones. They're real, too. Don't worry; I got my brother to put a spell so none of them will fall off. Oh, it's water proof, too," Daniel acknowledged happily.

"YOU GOT HER THE NEWEST IPHONE! I fully asked you a rotation ago Marcus to get me one! What the fuck

happened there, huh?”

I turned to see Eli approach Marcus whose eyes were wide with fear. He quickly jolted behind Kai.

“Kai! Save me. I’m innocent! I told Daniel’s brother I needed a phone at his younger brother’s request and he got me that! I didn’t know it was the latest fucking one. Stop whipping me with the wind!” He cursed; the wind picked up and hit them both. *Daniel’s...brother?*

“Elyion!” Kai snarled, the wind dropped at his command. *Elyion. Who’s Elyion?*

“Ugh! I’ll get my revenge on you Marcus, just you wait! And Kai...ugh. Why couldn’t I be a demon. I’d just plan your death with no guilt,” she mumbled, the second half, my sensitive ears heard every word.

I giggled at their exchange before my eyes returned to the gift before me, my heart filled with happiness. I took the phone from his hand, inspecting it. *I wonder.* I lifted the phone up aiming for the pool.

“MAKOTO! DON’T YOU—” Eli yelled, but my hand move on its own accord, the phone soared through the air into the water.

“Oh Starlight’s, Mako!” Eli exclaimed before running and diving into the pool to retrieve the device.

The boys sighed, shaking their heads, their lips curved upward.

“What? You said it was water proof?”

I blinked in confusion.

What’s the point of it being water proof if you couldn’t throw it in the water?

Eli emerged to the surface, swimming to the pool’s edge and lifting herself out with ease; the water glided off her body.

Damn...she looks good soaked, too.

“I agree.”

"I wonder if this is how those commercial's in Earthala look," I replied.

"Maybe. Eli's pretty hot."

It took me a moment to register the monotone voice.

"Oh shit, Midnight?"

"Hmm. What?"

"You're doing that talking thing again," I reminded, trying to stay calm.

"Makoto? What's wrong?" Eli asked as she approached; the wind blew against her, drying her in seconds.

I gulped, feeling tingles go down my spine.

"Can you like, I don't know, lower that attraction of yours. It's distracting."

"You're distracted by Eli. Not me. And last time I remembered we're the same person," she retorted.

"Ya." I answered before her presence was gone again. I decided to share before I forgot, like the previous two times.

"Midnight again. I said I wondered if Eli walking out of the pool was like those commercials in Earthala and Midnight called Eli pretty hot, and I told her to not be so damn attracted to Eli before she pointed out were the same and uh shit." I swore, my face burning red as I realized what I'd just done.

Overshare much?

I covered my face before groaning.

Why me!

"Ignore what I just said!" I explained, turning around to escape, but an arm wrapped around me.

I opened my eyes; Daniel's eyes sparkled in the sun's light.

"That's not embarrassing Makoto," he reassured me. Kai walked up to us, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Elias and EliaseAnne, are the same person. It's normal for you to have feelings for both, even if Eli's a girl. Don't stress

about it,” he explained, his voice emphasized on Eli’s name as if it was a rare title to use.

I let my hands drop looking at the others – all of them looked calm as if my admission was a normal, everyday conversation.

“Okay,” I admitted. A nervous giggle escaped me as the glittering of my new phone caught my attention. I walked forward, taking it out of Eli’s hand. *My precious.*

“Precious my ass. You threw it in the fucking pool,” Eli pointed out, but smiled at my eagerness. She helped me set it up, explained the details before entering their contacts.

“That means all of you have these phones?” I asked; I remembered the device Marcus used to record my 1v1 exam looking similar.

“Yup. We don’t normally carry them with us, but now that you have one, we’ll have it on us.” Ryder pulled out a similar replica in black.

“That means I’m connected to all of you? If I need you, I can just call or text you?” I asked, unable to grasp such a useful device.

They nodded.

Daniel stepped forward, pulling me into a hug.

“Now, you’ll always be connected to us somehow and were only a call away. If you ever need us, just press the button. Deal?” He pulled away to look at me.

“Deal!” I agreed. He leaned forward, kissed me lightly on the lips before pulling away. I frowned, wanting more than just a simple peck, which caused him to laugh.

“I’m in line remember? Ryder gets dibs.” He chuckled.

“Fine. Um. Does this take pictures, too?” I wondered, staring down at the weird icons on the lit-up screen.

“It sure does, Firefly,” Marcus answered.

“Can we take a picture? Is there a way to fit us all in?” I started to jump in place, unable to contain my eagerness.

A picture with my knights and Eli.

“What about Elias?” I realized Elias would lose the chance to take a picture now that Eli was taking over.

“He’s asleep he won – fuck. Jeez, when did your cranky ass wake up? I swear...fine, fine, we’ll switch after we take the first pic,” she huffed.

I gave her a devilish look. Of course, Elias would never miss a chance. I could only imagine the scowl on his face as he fumed at the fact he wasn’t being included, the thought made me giggle in glee.

“Alright, let’s huddle. We should be able to fit,” Ryder encouraged.

Daniel took the spot on my left. Ryder was about to take the opening on my right before Eli slid under his arm, wrapping an arm around my waist.

The demon shifter frowned, giving her a look.

“Don’t give me that look Ryder. There’s too much testosterone. Mako needs balance,” she stressed, blinking her eyes.

I laughed.

Ryder mumbled, *I’ll get my revenge*, before walking to Daniel’s side. Eli didn’t know what she had gotten herself into.

“But, you’re a boy,” Kai commented, taking his place behind me with Marcus, being the tallest among the others.

“Elias is a boy who’s impatiently waiting for us to take a picture, so he can have his turn. Now, come move closer Captain Obvious,” she defended.

“So how are you going to put the pictures together?” I inquired.

“Don’t worry; I’ll get Marcus’ friend Junho, to photoshop him in. He’s really good at it,” Eli explained, her hand glowed to life as the wind picked up my phone and positioned it far enough so we all fit in the small frame.

“Photochop? Wait, you’re going to take Elias and chop him? And then magically infuse him into the picture? That sounds painful,” I replied, trying to imagine the process.

Marcus’ laughter was the first amongst the chuckles and giggles that followed.

I turned to face them, frowning. Eli rubbed my back as she rubbed at her eye.

“Mako, you’re one of a kind,” she praised.

“I told you that already. Obviously, there’s no one as unique as me,” I replied, confidently. We cuddled together, ready to take the picture when I remembered something. “Oh! One sec,” I turned to Daniel, pulling his glasses off his face.

He blinked, giving me a confused look. I slid the glasses on; my eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the weird frame.

“There! Nighty, come,” I commanded; the white ball of fur’s head poked up before she jumped off the chair she was sleeping on. She was in my arms and onto my shoulder within five seconds.

I took a final glance at Daniel who looked like he’d won an award with his full teeth smile. I returned back to face the camera. This was the peace I’d yearned for – to finally find somewhere I belonged.

My home.

“Alright, everyone ready. I’m going to countdown,” Eli encouraged. “3-2-1.”

CHAPTER 19



“Mako, wake up.”

I stirred, turning to my opposite side to get away from the heat. My body was exhausted after the fun-filled day I'd experienced yesterday.

The party didn't end until the wee hours of the night. We had started a campfire and roasted these white, mushy things called marshmallows. Marcus explained it was a human tradition to have marshmallows over the campfire while we told ghost stories. I found out Eli hated ghosts, her arm locked around mine as she huddled against me, trembling at Marcus' storytelling.

After ten minutes of Eli begging Marcus to stop his ghost stories, and then finding Daniel asleep on the unicorn float, we decided to retire for the night. I made sure to take a picture for memory, adding it to the other hundreds of pictures I had taken. Eli assured me she'd force Marcus to pass by Earthala and get all the photos we had taken developed into an album, where I could add them to my *not so secret* drawer. Guess I would need another drawer.

I'd fallen asleep, while I waited for the boys to finish cleaning up; my head leaned against Eli's shoulder as she absentmindedly stroked Nighty's fur who was cuddled in her lap. I only woke up for a moment as Ryder closed the door to his room, holding me in his arms. I relaxed in his strong arms, falling back asleep without an inch of worry.

It didn't seem like it was morning just yet. Why was someone telling me to wake up? Hmm, no. Still early in my

mental clock.

“Makoto. Ryder.”

It took my mind five seconds to process two important things; one was the fact that Midnight was gracing me with her appearance in my mind, and two, I could hear low whimpering from nearby before I felt something furry nudge at my cheek.

I opened my eyes; Nightmare’s turquoise grey eyes stared back at me before she pounced on the pillow, trying to catch my attention.

“Nightmare? What?” I questioned as I sat up; my eyes landed on Ryder, who was the culprit of the whimpering. I reached over him to turn the side lamp on, before placing my hand gently against his chest.

“Ryder? Ryder babe, wake up,” I urged him to wake up from whatever nightmare he was experiencing; his body trembled as sweat dripped down his face; his breathing frantic.

“No. Give her back. Anya, no,” he continued to mumble as he tossed to the side.

I nudged him harder.

“RYDER. Wake up.” I made my voice a pitch louder, power oozed from my words.

His eyes flashed open before he sat up in a rush. I removed my hand, moving back to give him enough space to gather his bearings.

He blinked a couple of times, a tear rolled down his cheek before he looked confused, looking around the room till his eyes landed on me. We stared at each other, his breathing calmed.

“Mako?” he whispered, as I sat next to him.

“Yes, Ryder. Are you okay?” I whispered back, needing to know if he’d calmed down.

It took him a few seconds before he gave me a slow nod. His eyes began to close as he fought to keep upright. I reached

out to him, pulling him into an embrace, as his head rested on my chest.

He inhaled deeply and relaxed in my arms.

“Mako. I love your smell. It’s relaxing,” he admitted; his voice was thick with sleep.

I glanced to see his eyes closed; his breathing slowed. “Ryder?” I called out.

No response was given, his breathing evened out. I sighed, getting comfortable as I continued to hold him in my arms.

Nightmare jumped around us before leaping to the side table. She flicked the switch, the light going out and jumped back down and onto the bed, taking a spot next to our feet before she settled.

I glanced down at my demon knight, my heart felt sad for him. What did he dream about to cause such a reaction?

“Anya’s death anniversary’s coming up,” Rose confessed.

How do you know? I didn’t remember Ryder mentioning it, so I was intrigued as to how Rose knew about it.

“Stryker told me. We chat sometimes when you two are both asleep,” Rose admitted.

No wonder I felt extra drowsy in the morning. I didn’t mind them having their quiet time together, needing to connect after all these cycles.

“Let’s not pressure him to tell us what’s happening. When he’s ready to reveal what’s going on, we’ll be here to comfort him and Stryker.”

I nodded; my hand brushed through Ryder’s black locks. I leaned down, kissing his forehead before I closed my eyes; my head relaxed against the headboard.

Is this how it feels to watch your loved ones in pain? It reminded me of all the times I woke up in tears, my own nightmares haunting me before one of the boys would shake me awake. No questions were asked. They simply pulled me

into their warm embrace and soothed me to sleep. I wanted to do the same, to just accept the reality we all faced.

We all had our inner demons. I just prayed Ryder knew I was here for him just as he's always been there for me in my time of need.

I fell back asleep.

* * *

“A fairy.”

“No, Mako. Just give up already.”

I let out a frustrated groan, staring intently at the mystical woman who stood in the backyard; her astonishing vibrant hair shimmered in the sunlight. The ombre colour hair – a vibrant pink morphing into a vivid lavender purple – was enough to distract me for days.

She was six-three, her heels made her a whopping six-five, which I called model worthy. The Starlight gods blessed her abundantly with large breasts and a small, round butt, her waist portioned well to match her figure.

She wore a gold dress, the material adorned with miniature diamonds at the bottom. Her two-inch heels were silver with a thick heel. I guess with the traveling she couldn't wear those stick like shoes Eli had. I had no idea how anyone could walk in those all day long, let alone fight in them.

She carried a silver wand in her hand; the small delicacy was engraved with pink, purple and gold flowers that swirled around its surface. It reminded me of my scythe, making me curious as to whether her wand was merely a weapon or her familiar in disguise.

The most eye-catching, jaw-dropping characteristic, besides her extravagant chest was her silver eyes – the large orbs filled with knowledge and wisdom, just at a glance. I couldn't wait to take a closer look at them.

“But, I mentioned everything!” I complained, turning my head back to Eli. I gave up my attempt to spy on their conversation through the gap I’d created, with the transparent sliding door in the living room.

Eli had placed a glamour on us so Matthew and this new arrival, Winterlya as the boys called her, couldn’t see us. We had planned to listen to whatever they discussed. I guess they’d thought ahead, their conversation made no sense as the words were jumbled together.

Fool proof, great.

“You mentioned five spirits out of the possible hundreds of spirits out there. That’s not everything.” Eli sighed, crossing her arms as she stared down at me. She wore green sweatpants and a yellow tank top.

I frowned at her scrutiny, standing up from my kneeling position, before brushing off any dirt from my borrowed sweatpants, courtesy of Ryder. Kai had snuck in and took all our laundry, leaving me with no spare clothes, so I kidnapped a pair of sweats and a crop top that was hidden in a bunch of his shirts. I had a hunch Elias had hid the top in his clothes on purpose.

Ryder hadn’t brought up the nightmare, but woke me up with a passionate kiss that made my toes curl and my body yearn for more than just those addicting lips. If it wasn’t for the meeting he had with the headmaster, followed by a pit stop at the castle, his mother had called for him, we would have taken it to the next level.

I wondered if I’d get to meet the King and Queen of Minato. I didn’t know if I’d even be allowed; regardless of my relationship with Ryder, it didn’t calm my curiosity. I got the feeling Ryder didn’t have a strong connection with his family, besides from Anya who was a part of the stars.

I pondered whether her kidnapping and death had impacted their family bond, or had it always been that way? And I worried if my kidnapping had done the same to my own family.

“Well, if she’s not a fairy, then what is she?” I looked over my shoulder to glare at Eli, my hands still against the door; it slid to the side, causing me to shriek as I stumbled forward – right into someone’s arms, their chest cushioned the impact. The wintergreen fragrance surrounded me as I looked up; my wide eyes met a pair of silver ones – those grey like irises looked like they were filled with multiple stars, twinkling away in whatever galaxy they reigned.

So majestic...I want silver eyes like that.

She smiled.

“You could, but it will take cycles of practice young one. Are you willing to invest time and effort into such task?” Her voice flowed with power and authority, but I could sense kindness and affection in her words.

I grinned; my mind brought up my mission list. Acquire silver eyes with vigorous training – Mission in progress.

She laughed; her hand went through her two-toned hair.

“In all my cycles, I’ve never seen someone as uniquely different and refreshing as you. Is that your coping mechanism for having multiple spirits?” she questioned.

I pulled back, stepping backward to face her. “Yup. It gets crowded in here sometimes, but they get along, I think. They have their moments. At least I found someone who actually gets my uniqueness. I keep reminding the boys that I’m one of kind, but nope. Hmph, never listen to me.” I poked at my head with a shy smile before I explained my numerous efforts, proving how different I was. She gave me a soft smile.

“My name is Winterlya Frost, future heir of Wintalyn. A pleasure to finally meet you, Princess Rosalina Mackenzie Heart,” she introduced, curtsying before me.

“Ah! No, don’t um bow and please, call me Mako.” I waved my hands frantically, before bowing my head. I could feel her vast power, the strong, yellow aura surrounded her powerful enough for me to pick up with no effort. Such effortless demonstration of strength deserved respect, regardless of status.

“No bowing? Hmph, wait till—”

“I reach Heila, where I’ll make it common law that no one will bow before me.” I finished.

She grinned. “If only all kingdoms could get a minute of you. It would be like a breath of fresh air.” She turned around, gesturing to me to follow her into the backyard. Her statement made me wonder what the other realms were like.

Eli stood close by, her arms crossed over her chest as she relaxed against the table near the grill. Matthew had returned inside, leaving us girls. He probably went back to Knightwood to finish his teaching duties.

“Matthew’s informed me that you have a split personality?” she began, turning to face me.

I nodded.

“Yes. Her name is Midnight. She was created when I was in my teens. I assumed its due to the stress of the experiments my Own – I mean, King Aspen had conducted on us. She just appeared one day, when I reached my limit during a group arena match and from then onward, she’s been the other half of me. We can’t talk to one another like my spirits, so we write each other notes and exchange places to read them. However, recently she’s been in and out of my head. We can talk for about ten seconds before she fades out and then my memory of it fades away. It’s been like this ever since the exam incident, not to mention my faint spells, which I haven’t had for two days so I guess that’s progress.” I wanted to give her enough information of what I had experienced so far, regarding the issue.

Her arms crossed as her right hand rested against her chin in thought; her supporting hand held her wand in place as she stared; her eyes assessed me from head to toe.

“Have you been feeling different?” she questioned, eyeing my reaction as my body tensed up.

I took a nervous glance at Eli; her emerald eyes opened to meet my gaze. They glowed before she nodded, urging me to explain what I’d been dealing with. I assumed Daniel and

Ryder had explained to the others what had happened, just in case I broke down again. I looked back at Winterlya before replying.

“When...I was in the coma, I was engulfed by darkness. No sound could be heard as my essence simply floated for hours. I couldn’t track the time or where I was. I didn’t even know if I was in a body. It felt as though my soul wandered in an empty, black sky, where no one knew me and at some point, I didn’t know who I was either. All I knew was I was lonely, emotion that gripped at me over and over until I accepted the fact I had no one...no friends, no family...my spirits were gone, too. I was nothing.”

I bit my lip, as I tried to control my trembling hands. I hid them behind my back as I gazed to the floor.

Although Daniel had taken the darkness from me, I could still vividly remember the way it felt. It was something I couldn’t forget, no matter how many spells were casted over me.

Footsteps approached me; Winterlya’s dress came into my line of vision. Her hand brushed against my cheek before she lifted my head; the tear lingered in my eye spilled down and crashed against her fingers.

“It’s okay. Can you finish?” Her voice was soft and filled with empathy; her expression of acceptance gave me enough courage to continue as I nodded.

“Eventually, I began to hear voices, the boys and Eli singing to me. Finally, I felt the darkness start to leave me, pieces of it breaking off and I was free. Yet, it didn’t completely leave me. It continued to haunt me whenever I closed my eyes, or if I was left alone for a long period of time. In some ways, I was afraid of it, yet, other times I knew it was a part of me. It was a battle against the darkness inside me and I simply wanted a way out. I asked Daniel to rid me of it or at least dim it down, so I could actually live my life, even if it is temporary. Am I sick? Or is this the result of me having multiple spirits and pushing over my magic limit. Can it be fixed...or am I broken?” I explained before the number of

questions poured out of me as they swarmed my mind, craving answers.

I wondered if she could see my desperation; the need to confirm if my mental status had declined or if by chance, this was a phase.

She gave me a sad look; my heart sank as I assumed the worse.

I am broken.

“You’re not broken, Princess. Far from it. I think I know what the problem is, but you need to trust me. We can’t try it here for chance of breaking anything, so we’ll head to the forest. Your knights should be here any minute, so we’ll go together. But I will warn you, I don’t know how you’re going to react to it.” she acknowledged, her eyes closed momentarily in concentration. Those silver orbs resurfaced as she opened them, nodding to herself before giving me a gentle hug.

I didn’t hesitate, my arms wrapped around her as I enjoyed her warmth.

Was this how shifters were supposed to comfort one another? Was this what I’d missed all these cycles, wishing for anyone to listen to my worries and fears? If so, I was happy that I’d been able to be surrounded by such loving individuals during this situation than back at the facility.

She pulled back before her face became serious. “Regardless of what happens, nothing is necessarily wrong with you mentally. However, I need to do this in order to prevent it from going that route. Do you understand, Princess? This may hurt, but it will potentially solve the loneliness and darkness problem. I just need your hundred percent trust on this.”

I didn’t need Hope’s power to hear the truth in her words. She wanted to help me, her expression and the way her hands gripped my shoulders told me more; as if she herself had once experienced my exact predicament.

I gave my best, determined look before nodding.

“Yes. I understand. I’m fine with pain. Been there, done that. Anything to fix this problem. I want to feel like myself again and I’m worried about Midnight, too. If I can do something to solve such concerns, then I’ll do it with no questions.”

Something about Winterlya made me feel relaxed, not afraid that she’d hurt me in any way, intentionally.

“Let’s go to the forest. EliaseAnne, I’ll need you nearby. Inform the others to gather outside the barrier I place, but you need to be within it. Understood?” She gestured to Eli who nodded, pushing off the table to walk towards the forest.

After a body scan, courtesy of Daniel who’d arrived first before the others, I stood in an open field deep within the forest.

Eli had directed us to the untouched area not far from the house, but in an area that would be difficult to come across without a sense of direction.

Winterlya was a few feet away, Eli next to her. I could see the worry in her eyes as she stared at me from afar, but I tried to ignore it. I already had to deal with the flood of questions from the boys after they caught up to us, anxious as to what Winterlya had planned.

Apparently, she’d taught them during their teen cycles back at Heila, helping them strengthen their designated elements, but she must have been a strict professor; their immediate silence when Winterlya’s eyebrow perked up as her silver eyes landed on the group, gave me such an impression.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, doing my best to calm my nerves as I stood there, waiting for Winterlya’s signal. Such events reminded me of the day I lost Lily, our failed mission to escape the walls of the facility resulted in her death. It had been awhile since I’d pondered about her. I hoped the stars treated her well. Maybe she watched me as I stood here.

“Makoto. You ready? As I explained, just relax. If you can’t bear the pain any longer, let us know,” Winterlya

announced. Her hands fell to her side, and the silver wand in her right hand glowed.

“Okay,” I replied, my eyes landed on Eli’s.

She gave me reassuring smile, informing me that she’d be right here if I needed her.

“It’s just a test. Nothing to worry about,” Hope stated softly.

“You don’t sound confident at all,” Lexi pointed out, dryly.

“Hush up, Lexi!” she argued.

“Didn’t Mako JUST say we got along well and now you guys begin to bicker?” Rose complained, sighing.

“They’re just anxious. We all are,” Lily defended.

“Such bickering isn’t helping Mako, you know,” Rose replied.

“None of your comments are helping us,” A toneless voice announced.

I blinked, Midnight resurfaced piquing my interest as the others fell silent.

“Midnight? Are you okay?” I questioned.

I didn’t know how long we’d have before she faded, let alone until we started this apparently, painful procedure.

“I’m fine. Thank you. I’m here to protect you from whatever happens. Don’t fear,” she comforted before fading.

It felt nice to hear her comforting words instead of reading them off paper. Maybe one day I’d get to hear her paragraphs of poetry.

“Let’s begin.”

Winterlya raised her wand – the silver object floated as three magic circles emerged beneath her and Eli as they began to turn clockwise, spinning faster and faster.

Her wand was engulfed in light before a figure formed, the light dimmed to reveal a large white owl. My eyes widened, the pure white feathers reminded me of Nightmare’s white fur.

Not only did its outer appearance demand attention; the power emitted from it was enough to send familiar signals to my brain; my body shivered at the realization.

Another Starlight god...no way.

I was caught up in watching the familiar flap its wings as it kept itself up in the sky; so entranced by its light blue eyes, I hadn't noticed the dimmed shouts coming from outside the barrier.

I turned my head in the direction of the sound, my eyes squinted to try and make out the blurred figures.

What's the commotion about?

I looked down to see black hands poking out of the soil below; my body grew stiff at the reminder of my nightmare – the hands that dragged me into darkness.

I didn't dare move as the hands began to rise; the scream that begged to escape me was caught in my throat as I was frozen in place.

“Winter! Is that supposed to happen?” Eli's voice panicked.

I wanted to look up to see what was happening, but I couldn't glance away, in fear I'd lose track of the frigid cold hands that crawled across my skin.

It's just a test. A simple test, to rid me of the darkness. It's probably just an illusion. Yes, an illusion.

My self-talking fell on deaf ears as I tried to sense my spirits, their presence suddenly gone. Now, I began to panic. I tried to move my body, but the hands were already around my waist; my hands clenched.

The crippling cold made me shiver as my teeth began to chatter. It felt as if my blood cooled – my breathing became rapid as I struggled for oxygen. I heard banging against the barrier and Eli's frantic voice, but everything faded; the darkness now reached higher, the thick slime like substance rubbed against the mark on my chest – the mark of my Owner.

That's when the pain began. Agonizing, crippling pain that forced a scream out of me. This wasn't like anything I'd felt – nowhere close to the electrifying shocks that had soared through me during our trial sessions or the pain that bore through me when I saw Lily's head detached from her little body. This pain could kill, and I was dying.

I knew what dying felt like, my heart stopped on a number of occasions during those intense trials prior to Midnight's awakening. Death crept around me, but someone always stopped him from taking me away; the woman with the long, strawberry pink hair came to my aid before I awakened in a jolt as the assigned scientist removed the shocking pads.

The darkness was at my neck now, my body unable to move as I continued to scream from the pain, tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Makoto, endure it. You need to embrace this side of you. Give the darkness a chance.”

The unfamiliar voice begged; I struggled to open my eyes, my surroundings no longer the open valley, but pitch black. The only sign of life was the woman before me – the woman who always saved me from death row.

“But it hurts! How is this a part of me! The darkness is evil, isn't it?” I cried to her, wishing she'd understand the immense pain I was in.

“Darkness is nothing but an element. Just as there's light, such a part of nature assumed to be good and everlasting, there is darkness. My child, only humans and shifters believe that Darkness is bad or evil. It's wrong to make such judgments. Darkness can be used for good with the right intentions. Just as light, water, fire and the other elements can be used to cause destruction and devastation to our lands.”

“But if you're here, it means I'm dying. You always show up when I'm dead,” I argued, trying to wrap my frantic thoughts around her words of wisdom. Her mismatched turquoise and pink eyes reminded me of my familiar, wishing she was here with me.

The woman smiled.

“You’ve taken care of me when you could barely walk and even after all these cycles, you’ve shown the same compassion with no knowledge or memory of my existence. The least I can do is save you from my father’s clutches. It’s not your time Rosalina, my sweet Mako. But your spirit needs to be fully awakened, or it will overpower you and my Father will have no choice but to claim your soul,” she explained, frowning as the last words left her; her sadness apparent.

“Night...mare?” I questioned. I struggled to breathe; my body grew cold as the darkness reached my face; already covering my hair and neck.

“In time, I’ll explain, but this needs to occur, or Midnight will do more harm than good. For Midnight, Makoto, accept the darkness. Such admission will reward you with power and clarity. I’ll be by your side when you wake.” She finished, her image faded away as the darkness covered my face, my breathing stopped.

Accept the darkness...for Midnight. I accept.

CHAPTER 20

“**M**AKOTO!” I screamed her name as the thick, dark sludge covered her whole.

I heard the others frantic voices through the bond we shared, but I muted it, my concentration needed to be focused on Mako.

I was ready to launch myself forward, my power erupted in me as I began to shift. A wave of power hit me, strong enough it lifted me off my feet; my body landed on the grass a few feet away.

I blinked in shock, as the powerful waves kept coming.

Winterlya stepped in front of me; her hand spread out as a silver magic circle emerged, shielding us from the ongoing, burst of power.

“Winter. What’s going on?” I screamed through the bashing wind, the power that hit us only became stronger.

“The spell I cast did not get rid of the darkness. It was to unlock Midnight.”

“Unlock Midnight! What do you mean unlock? She wasn’t trapped?” I accused, anger ran through me as Elias attempted to take control. I shoved his rage down, overpowered his attempt in retrieving his body. I stood up, approached her as she continued to block the intense waves.

I noticed the beads of sweat formed at her temples as her breathing picked up.

Shit, if Winterlya was struggling this is serious.

I needed to interfere, but she needed to tell me exactly what was happening.

“Midnight is most certainly a spirit. With what Matthew told me and the little information Makoto just explained, it was enough to tell me that she had to be her fourth spirit. Mako’s fainting spells and the feeling of darkness and loneliness wasn’t due to her surpassing her limit. It’s due to the ongoing suppression of Midnight’s powers. Midnight was awakened by force; not by the grace of the gods. Such circumstances led to her only partially being able to come forth – resulting in Mako having to be unconscious for her to take control instead of taking control on her own. Midnight was incomplete and that is why I needed to unlock the restriction on her,” she explained.

Fuck, Midnight.

Just the confirmation that Winterlya’s speculations were true, Midnight being a spirit, made me even more fearful. Whatever was happening could potentially kill them both.

I wasted no more time, shifting into my Fairy form with ease as the power gathered within my flickering wings, flapping them at a low speed to stretch them out.

A black wave shot out from the dark cocoon encasing Makoto; Winterlya cursed under her breath. I stepped forward, slashing my hand through the air, summoning a wave of wind. They clashed together, dissipating in a loud burst. Winterlya sighed, lowering her hand as the magic circle vanished.

I could see her exhaustion, adding in the travelling and amount of power she’d exerted summoning enough magic to remove the lock on Midnight.

“What spirit is she?” I demanded; my eyes glowed with power as I began to gather my magic.

I had a wild hunch, but there was only a one percent chance of such a possibility, but knowing Makoto, anything was possible.

“Midnight is a Dark Fairy.”

CHAPTER 21



I awakened to darkness – it's cold, welcoming embrace clung to my skin, as I floated around; my body nothing but a ball of light. I couldn't see, nor hear anything as I continued to float by.

Who am I? Where am I? Wasn't I here before?

I couldn't quite grasp why I was aware of my circumstances, but my mind continued to buzz away, in attempts to figure out my situation.

I was doing something important, wasn't I? It's so cold here...I'm lonely.

Time seemed to slow as seconds turned to minutes, and minutes seemed to pass into hours.

I wandered around, felt my being continue to float, until I started to remember fragments of information.

Darkness. Acceptance. Power. Midnight.

My memories returned; the thoughts of Midnight lingered in my mind.

Yes, Midnight. Is she here? The thought of Midnight being encased by the darkness during the hours I'd been in control hurt my heart. I couldn't imagine being entrapped in such a cold world, alone with no one to talk to. Is this why she'd felt so alone till we bonded? If this was where she'd resided when I was in control, I'd have no more of it. She deserved a chance to enjoy the light, the world that I'd finally been able to experience. She'd helped me survive this long; battling the hardest challenges. I never could have won without her aid.

Everyone would have died the night of the exam without her quick thinking and exertion of power to save the others before ourselves.

“For Midnight, Makoto, accept the darkness”

Nightmare’s words echoed through me. I needed to accept this cold, desolate place. If what Nightmare said was true, darkness could be used to do good, and Midnight wanted to do many good deeds. I wanted to support her new mission, to give her a chance to experience the world through my eyes like the other spirits. The cold was simply a part of the darkness; I needed to accept it with open arms.

I focused my concentration on myself; my wandering soul came to a stop. I felt warm, another mind brushed against the walls of mine – Midnight.

“Midnight, is that you?”

“Why are you here Mako? You should be up there in the light,” she questioned.

I could only picture my copy of her – those midnight blue eyes blinking as she tilted her head in confusion at my presence. If I was one with my body, my heart would bleed with unbearable sadness as reality sank in.

“Is this where you’ve always been? When I’m awake, is this where your mind stays till summoned?” I needed to hear her confirm my suspicions.

“Yes. I know it’s cold...and lonely most of the time, but you get used to it,” she admitted, her voice seemed as if she was brushing off the matter like it was nothing.

“I’m sorry Midnight. I’m so sorry. This isn’t right,” I cried. I would have been in tears if I could cry; my voice the only method to express how hurt I felt.

“Not your fault. You showed me, love. The spirits love me, too. Eli said she liked me and Elias cares as well,” she pointed out, her toneless voice gained emotion – joy flowed off her statement.

“Midnight. Don’t you want more? Don’t you crave to feel someone’s touch? To hold their hand or kiss their lips in an act of love? Wouldn’t you want to be able to see the world we’ve been hidden from all these cycles, not because you’ve been summoned by force, but by choice?” The questions spilled out of me as I tried to make her understand why I pitied her – regretting the fact I hadn’t realized it earlier.

“Sometimes. One can only dream. I assume the gods want me here. So here I am. It would be nice...to see the fireflies with Elias and talk with Eli. I...wish I could be like Rose and the others. I– I wish I could talk to you more,” she confessed, her voice cracked.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I wouldn’t allow her to stay in this darkness anymore. Nightmare was right. The darkness shouldn’t be judged for simply being the way Mother Nature created it. Midnight had kindness within her, proving such in various situations. She didn’t want to kill or hurt anyone. She was forced from day one, unable to defy the orders given to her. She deserved the freedom she was entitled to by the gods – she deserved to be a part of my spirits.

“Midnight. I accept you. Every part of you – the good and the bad. I love you for who you are and what you’ve become. You’ve protected me from all the difficult challenges and trials we’ve faced, without questioning or worrying about your own predicament. You protected my star knights when they were faced with death. You deserve to be a part of me – to be free from the darkness that holds you from obtaining your true potential. Be free and one with me. You are no longer a half of me – you are your own entity and spirit. Let this be written in the sky above. In stars, we trust.”

I FELT a growing warmth approach me, such gentleness caressed my soul as I allowed it to consume me. The darkness wasn’t evil. All it wanted was acceptance and love. It simply wanted a home.

With that, I was pure once more.

CHAPTER 22

“**T**he spell you cast on Makoto was to unlock whatever hold or barrier that held Midnight back from awakening and was the reason why that dark wind show occurred. Does that mean she’s okay? Or will she continue having those faint spells?”

I sat in the living room with Winterlya, a cup of coffee in each of our hands as we sat on the black sofas opposite from each other.

We’d just gotten back from the forest; Elias carried Mako and retired for the evening. I’m impressed he was able to stay awake for so long. Usually he’d be passed out within five minutes or less after shifting back from his fairy form.

Daniel, Marcus, and Kai were summoned by Matthew and had left for Knightwood. It amused me to see their disappointment at having to wait a few more hours till finding out exactly what happened to Mako and Midnight.

I hoped by the time they came back Elias would have gotten some rest. I didn’t want to explain myself twice, but I knew he didn’t function well with little sleep.

Now that I was alone with Winterlya, I decided to ask her all the questions myself.

“The reasoning for Mako’s faint spells was due to Midnight’s over usage of magic. From what Matthew explained to me, Makoto acquired Lily, her phoenix, by accident, correct?” she questioned, lifting her mug to take a sip of the steamy fluid.

“Yes. Makoto’s best friend was murdered after an incident, her phoenix spirit entered Mako instead of ascending to the stars. Has that happened before?”

“Yes. It has.”

She turned to stare at the transparent, glass doors, her eyes looked far away as if she’d witnessed something similar in her long life. Winterlya had ventured all the realms, witnessing many things before any of us were born, being one of the few shifters in the galaxy that had the same knowledge or greater knowledge than the Royal’s themselves. Even my father looked up to her and requested her services from time to time. If Winterlya didn’t know what was wrong with a shifter, they were in grave danger.

She closed her eyes, the exhaustion appeared in the lines of her face.

Her face became serious.

“Goddess of Destruction, Nightmare, had professed that Makoto would receive four spirits – her demon and angel given to her at birth, and the remaining two would appear by her adulthood. Matthew explained Makoto received her dragon in her teens, but Midnight had also been triggered during her teen cycles as well, through experimentation and mental triggers. I believe Midnight was forced out due to the high-stress levels Makoto’s physical and mental states experienced. Our spirits are given to us by the gods to protect our designated realms, but they can be awakened in desperate times. If a shifter is about to die with no way of preventing such events, their dominant spirit will awaken due to the sudden spike of adrenaline. This can only occur IF that host has a dormant spirit. In Makoto’s case, that must have occurred, but was stopped abruptly – either by death or the realization of impending doom,” Winterlya explained.

“Makoto explained that she’d been put in an arena with a group of shifters, fighting to avoid death which meant one shifter would be left standing. Mako said it was too much for her and she’d lost consciousness after getting hit in the head. When she’d resurfaced, Rose was the one who gave her the

information on Midnight. I'm guessing that fits your theory quite well." I could feel Stryker nudge my mind, his anger apparent.

I was just as upset and hated how much Mako had suffered.

"Yes. I believe Midnight wasn't supposed to awaken until Mako's late teens or early adulthood. Midnight is a Dark Fairy; such a spirit having been extinct for a few cycles. If an individual does carry a dark fairy spirit, they're purposely hiding it for fear of being hunted and experimented on. Nevertheless, her early summoning caused only half her power to be released; Mako's body shielded the other half in defense. I can guarantee that Mako would have died from power overload if such defenses hadn't occurred. The only reason why Mako demonstrated all these problems, including the dark, lonely feeling was due to surpassing her magic limit – triggering a break in Midnight's power. Such power wavelength must have begun to leak out and thus everything that led to what you all witnessed," Winterlya finished.

"Now, Makoto has five spirits, Midnight being a dark fairy. Karen was saying she'd need about two to three weeks to recover with little magic usage which means we can't go to Heila till then." I pondered out loud, wanting confirmation that I understood the gist of things.

"Yes. Makoto shouldn't use magic unless she has to and she's now a walking target until she stabilizes such levels. You've noticed the change in her aura. Until she can calm it, to a level where high-rank magicians and shifters can't detect it, you guys should stay here a bit longer. Once she's clear, you'll be able to leave this student gig by the end of this rotation," Winterlya confirmed, lifting her coffee up to her lips to finish it.

"Karen's probably going to have to apply those restraint bracelets on her...she's not going to like that," I confessed, lifting my mug to my lips to finish my own coffee.

"I bet. She seems feisty, but in a positive way. Midnight is also intriguing. She looks like a spirit who analyzes things

down to the smallest details. She holds great power as well. They both need to rest. Her other spirits can still take control or shift if she must use a type of magic, but they shouldn't push it," Winterlya stressed. I nodded in agreement.

"You should rest. We can talk about this tomorrow if you like." I felt bad for holding her up, not having allowed her to rest right when she arrived, after she'd traveled from Heila straight here. I'd heard she'd only been in Heila for less than a week, returning from Earthala prior to that.

She opened her eyes, glancing back at me with a weak smile.

"Yes, I'm pretty pooped out. I had to deal with some issues down in Earthala like bomb threats and other human acts of destruction. You'd think their race would take a break from trying to kill one another. Then headed back to Heila only to hear about Mako's predicament, worried me. I'm glad I got here when I did. I feel it would have gotten worse." She sighed, rubbing at her eyes before sitting up straight.

We both rose to our feet.

"On behalf of my team and all of Heila, I thank you Winterlya for coming down here on such short notice. You helped ease Mako's suffering and I'm glad the issue involving Midnight has been cleared. If you ever need our help, feel free to request it." I bowed deeply.

"Ugh, I hate when my students are so formal. Rise, rise. It's not that big of a deal. I may be the princess of Wintalyn, but that doesn't mean I don't concern myself with other realm matters. Mako's kidnapping devastated many realms and I'm simply proud that I was summoned to contribute and ensure her safety." Winterlya blushed, brushing my thanks off like she hadn't done anything spectacular. She'd rather scold us than receive thanks or praise.

"Get some rest," I encouraged as I escorted her to the door.

"I will. Tell Makoto and Midnight if they have any questions feel free to call for me. I'll be here for about three weeks before I return to Heila," She noted before she waved

goodbye. I watched her leave; her familiar landed on her outstretched arm, a magic circle formed beneath her before she walked through a silver portal.

Geez her magic is strong.

“Why didn’t she just make a portal here instead of traveling the long way?” Stryker questioned.

It would take an extraordinary amount of energy to portal through realms. She’d be basically begging Deathpre to come and whisk her away to the stars.

“Ah. I’m simply glad Makoto and Midnight are okay,” Stryker commented. Me too.

I felt the buzz of my phone before a voice entered my mind.

“Your Mom needs your help with preparations...also... your father apparently set you up with another meeting,” Kai’s voice announced through our bond.

I let out a frustrated grunt, pinching my nose as I closed the door and walked back to retrieve the empty mugs on the clear coffee table.

“How many times do I have to say I’m not interested in marriage? Who is it this time?”

My father just didn’t get it. I’d never stop loving Makoto. Why did he want me to marry some no class shifter just because they were from royal families? Makoto was a fucking princess. Wasn’t that enough?

“I don’t know. A little birdie told me it’s a blonde loudmouth who has a total crush on you and got put in her place last rotation. That broken nose is still healing apparently.” Kai’s amused tone cued me in on who the next participant was.

“Brittany? Really. How the fuck did she sneak herself in the blind date category? One look and they’d cringe with regret. I’m not going to bother.”

“Your mom probably sent you a text.”

“I don’t check my phone, she knows that.”

“Yes, but you still reply.”

“Fine, Fine. I’ll deal with it. I’ll head over there now. If anything happens with Makoto let me know.”

“For sure. You’ll explain everything when you get back, right?”

“Ya. Let Elias rest. He and Eli need it. When I get back, we’ll chat.”

“Cool. Stay calm,” Kai encouraged before leaving our bond.

Stay calm huh...when you have to relive your failures.

I let out a sigh, noticing the tremble in my right hand – such reaction only occurring when I was afraid or pissed. I knew my parents wanted the best for me, being their only child left with Anya gone.

Yet, I couldn’t stop the grief that clung to my very soul. The pressure was all on me, especially now that I was Minato’s only heir.

With all the people of Minato watching my every move, regardless of where I was, only added to the pressure of acceptance.

I needed to prove to my parents that I could be a leader, the same way I had to prove it to the rest of the kingdom. But, my past failures continued to haunt me.

I should have listened to Kai’s advice, but deep within I feared if I let go, I’d only bring shame to my family name.

If only I knew what my Father thought of me. Maybe...if he accepted me, I could let go?

I grabbed my phone, striking the ‘K’ button and pressing send before heading to my room to change.

This is going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 23

Winterlya

I opened the door to my designated flat. I was beyond relieved to be home, placing the key card on the counter.

I lifted my hand, allowing Vincent to fly into the room.

I ruffled my loose curls and dragged my feet to my bedroom. My bags were still packed, sitting neatly in the corner of the large room.

Of course, the greedy headmaster made sure I received the best suite in Knightwood, the area restricted and off limits. Anything that ensured Arthur would continue his deal to fund the academy.

I stripped out of my dress, the gold fabric dropped to the ground. I strolled over to the silver drawer before me, pulling open the top drawer that contained a silky, grey nightgown. I slipped it on, the smooth material felt refreshing against my flushed skin. I figured it was only a matter of time before I started getting a fever.

I always developed one when I pushed myself too hard. I strolled back out of the room and walked to the large kitchen.

I pulled out the wine glass from the cupboard, placing it on the counter. I stared at the other one, debating whether I needed it or not. *Would he want any wine?*

I closed my eyes; my body ached. Wine and bed. That sounds like a perfect combo if only my body wouldn't act on its own accord.

I opened my eyes to a spinning room, so I closed them once more. I bit my lip and gripped the counter as my body

felt as if it was falling. A pair of hands held me, a solid back supported me from behind.

“You should go straight to bed, Winter,” the cool, alto voice commanded.

I relaxed in his embrace, unable to ignore his warmth.

“I will. Just need some wine. Wine sounds good,” I whispered. I bet he was shaking his head in dismay.

Vincent always scolded me for pushing myself and demanding wine would solve everything. He simply didn’t understand the multiple benefits the liquid had to offer. There was even white and red, both of them did magical things to help soothe the soul.

“I thought you’re supposed to take care of me, not the other way around,” he pointed out.

“You’re a god. You can take care of yourself. I’m just an innocent, ex-human, shifter witch. Not my fault you crashed into my window on your whims,” I complained.

Not like I was human to begin with, but I didn’t know that until he and the others entered my life.

His arms wrapped around me, his lips pressed against my neck. I shivered at the touch of his lips, taking every bit of strength to not moan from his sudden gesture.

“The best thing that happened to me. I won’t hold it against you, and you’re still mad about the human thing?” He lifted me in his arms, carrying me into the living room before lowering me into the white, suede sofa.

Of course, I’m still mad you idiot.

“I heard that.” He eyed me as he smirked. I rolled my eyes, but didn’t argue.

He disappeared into the kitchen and returned a minute later with two glasses and a bottle of Moscato wine. I smiled at him as he placed the glasses on the coffee table, opening the bottle and pouring us each a glass.

He passed my glass to me before he sat in the one-seater on my left. We sat in silence and enjoyed the lavish, cool taste that lingered from the white wine.

I stared at the remaining clear liquid as I stirred the glass; the spinning movement distracted me.

“Any word from Jeffrey?”

My lazy eyes looked up at Vincent; his baby blue eyes bore into me.

I scoffed, rolling my eyes at the mention of my mother’s servant.

“You know I hate him. He might as well classify himself as a double agent for the shit he pulled.” I chugged the remaining white wine in my glass and placed it lightly on the table.

It took everything within me to not laugh at Matthew’s explanation of what happened before their arrival to Realm One. The boys stated this Professor Sepherant had looked over the cliff, not noticing their camouflage. I, of all people, didn’t believe in such luck – he’d purposely ignored their “hidden” presence.

“You know as well as I, he has no choice but to follow his orders,” Vincent pointed out.

“He has a choice. He’s bound to MY mother, NOT to that insolent, savage beast. I’m impressed that Makoto is so close to normal. In fact, I’m thankful to the gods that she turned out to be the humorous, curious princess she’s grown out to be, even after such a tragic childhood. She didn’t deserve such suffering and you know it,” I snarled.

He frowned. “You know I can’t interfere or I would have. Nightmare would have been the first to get rid of him if she’d been allowed to,” he mumbled.

“That’s cause half of you have common sense, while the other half is a bunch of hippie, lovey-dovey—” I began before being cut off.

“Winter.”

“Hmph. What are you going to do? Smite me with thunder. I bet Nightmare, Aphroditee, and Risuki would agree with me.”

“I question why I follow you around,” he commented.

“First of all, do I have to remind you how we met again? Second, we had no choice but to travel together and third, you fell in love with me,” I proclaimed with a confident smile.

“Humans...” He huffed.

“I’m a witch shifter, ex-human,” I retorted back.

“Winterlya”

“Laviathan,” I countered, not afraid of his threatening tone or using his god name.

He groaned and rose to his feet, stalking towards me. I ignored the butterflies in my stomach, feelings of nervousness and excitement fluttered within.

“I know you don’t understand everything that has happened and WILL happen. But, I need you to at least trust me. Jeffrey...has his reasons. Regardless, he’s on the good side. Just has to play dirty to get what he wants,” he explained softly, standing before me.

“Fine. He’s the least of our concern anyway.” I brushed off the matter.

Vincent offered his hand. I didn’t feel as exhausted as before, the wine helped to relax my tired limbs. I placed my hand in his before standing up with his assistance.

We made our way back to my room; my eyes landed on the picture frame on the nightstand.

I picked it up with a smile; my eyes looked over the five other men in the picture, Vincent and I right in front, frozen midway of an argument.

“You miss them?”

“Yes...but don’t tell them that. They’ll be over their heads for rotations.” I placed the picture frame back down.

“They’ll join us soon. We should do our part and start tracking your *best friend*,” he encouraged; his ending words filled with sarcasm.

“Best friend my ass. She lost such a privilege after what she did. Jeffrey may have his own reasons, but I claim first dibs in torturing her,” I declared.

“I’ll remind him when the time comes,” Vincent reassured me.

I smiled.

Yes. Just you wait, Elaine. I’ll show you what happens when you mess with a Frost.

CHAPTER 24

The waves of power came to a stop. The cocoon that encased Mako was still present, a dark aura surrounded it.

“Impossible! They’re extinct. I saw the last one die! She has to be something else?”

I remembered that day – her dark blue eyes glazed over as all remnants of life faded away as her lifeless body fell to the ground. She was only eight cycles, her body much too small for the experiment.

I was amazed that no one questioned her death. I guess it wouldn’t have mattered – our king, or should I say our father, couldn’t care less. He made the final decisions and one loss of life meant little to him.

I shook my head. I needed to focus on the present. Mako and Midnight needed me.

“What do I need to do to help her?” I questioned, looking over my shoulder. Winterlya opened her mouth to speak, a soft smile formed on her lips.

I was ready to repeat myself, but noticed the once whipping wind had ceased as the air returned to normal. I returned my gaze back to the black cocoon which began to crack.

Crack – Crick – Crack, the lines continued to form and divide, a black glow peeked out of the miniature space. It shattered.

I froze; my mouth dropped in awe at the beautiful shifter before me.

Mako's normal long brown hair was a navy blue, the tips a light purple. Her skin looked darker than her usual pale complexion, her markings on full display – the normal black tattoos, now an indigo blue, glowed softly against her tanned skin. She'd gained height, her usual five feet, five inches was now, five-eight.

Her face had obtained a new marking that started from her right temple and flowed down the side of her face, wrapping around her neck.

The most dazzling aspect of her new image was her purple, sparkling, almost transparent wings – blue, purple glitter fluttered around her as her wings fluttered at a fast pace.

Her closed eyes finally opened, revealing a pair of midnight blue eyes.

“Midnight?” I was stunned at seeing an adult dark fairy, her beauty hard to measure with my eyes.

She blinked, staring at me without saying a word. I felt my heart panic, afraid she'd forgotten me.

I took a cautious step forward; my trembling hand pressed against my chest as I took another step forward. Midnight stood her ground; her eyes lingered on my feet before returning to stare at me.

“Midnight...do you know who I am?” I asked again as I got closer to her, my wings fluttered lightly behind me.

As much as I wanted to fly forward and hug her I needed to know if she remembered who I was – who any of us were.

I knew Mako was able to shift into Lexi's full form, but I'd yet to see her completely shift with her other spirits. Now that Midnight had taken fairy form, I didn't know what to expect.

I was three steps from her before I stopped. We stared at one another, her midnight blue eyes took their time analyzing my new appearance.

Mako had seen my fairy appearance, but I doubt Midnight had been able to get a glimpse seeing as she wasn't a spirit then.

She took a step forward, then another, leaving a foot between us. We looked like complete opposites – my bright pink, green and gold appearance against her purple, blue and black appearance as we faced each other, our height now identical.

“Midnight?” I whispered, ignoring the sting in my eyes. I never thought I'd be so nervous; my hands shook.

I'd finally managed to have enough courage to tell Midnight I liked her and now, as I faced the possibility of her forgetting me, it tore my heart.

If I could have acted like the man I once was and told her straight up when I was first attracted to her like Elias, would I be feeling so afraid?

Her hand moved forward, stopping for a moment before it reached out and touched my cheek. I didn't dare move, my breath hitched as I stared at her wide-eyes. Her hand felt cool, compared to Mako's usual warmth.

Her blank expression slowly morphed into a smug smile.

“Did you think I'd forget about my EliBear? You owe me a date, remember.” Her previous monotonous tone was filled with humor as she mocked me.

I stood there unable to process what she'd just said. *She remembers me.*

“Are you going to keep gawking at her or be a man and give her a hug before she thinks you're angry at her?” Elias announced, sounding utterly bored. You're a real pain in the ass you know that?

“Fucking hug her EliaseAnne or I'll force you out and do it my damn self.” I mentally groaned, but stepped forward, closing the space between us as I hugged her. She stood still in my embrace; her body went rigid for what seemed like minutes before she relaxed; her arms wrapped around me.

“EliBear...I’m a spirit now. I can visit you now and the others, too. I don’t need to be cold anymore,” she admitted, her voice trembled.

I tightened my embrace around her as she began to sob into my shoulder. I rubbed my hand against her hair. “I know Midnight. I’m glad you’re finally free. Welcome to the world,” I soothed.

The barrier around us shattered, the white particles rained down on us. I glanced at the boys, expecting various stunned expressions, but was rewarded with smiles and relief.

Winterlya approached us, the white owl landed on her extended hand.

“Hoot Hoot.” It flapped its wings before settling down.

“MEW.”

We both jumped at the loud cry coming from our feet. Midnight smiled, before cautiously kneeling down to stare at Nightmare up close. Now that she was in spirit form, I was curious to see her reaction to Nightmare and now, Winterlya’s familiar. She glanced at Nighty before looking at the owl familiar, her head going back and forth between them.

“Starlight gods? Pretty lights.” She whispered before glancing up at me. I knelt down to be at her eye level, nodding lightly.

“Yes. Don’t tell the others though. Only I and Winterlya know. Can you keep a secret?” I whispered back.

“Ya. Mako knows too, right? She won’t tell.” She replied.

“Is Mako okay?” I was glad Midnight had awakened into her spirit form, but I was concerned about Mako.

I knew awakenings drained their host significantly and now that Midnight was her fifth spirit, I worried she’d fall into a coma again. Midnight reached out and grabbed my hand, taking a moment to inspect it as she rubbed her thumb against my palm.

“So warm...” she whispered.

I tried not to laugh.

Jeez, still distracted like Mako.

“Midnight? Mako—” I began, but she looked up at me.

“Oh, right. Mako fine. Sleeping, but okay,” she acknowledged before yawning, using her other hand to rub her eyes.

“Sleepy, too. Can I sleep now? Wait...I won’t go back to the dark place, right?” she questioned, her voice hinted her fear. *Dark place?*

Winterlya took the opportunity to kneel down on her other side. She placed her unoccupied hand on her shoulder.

“Nope. No more dark place. Makoto accepted you and now you have a section in her mind as well. You’ll simply be asleep,” she revealed with a soft smile.

She smiled back and rubbed away another set of tears that began to trail down her cheeks.

“Happy,” she whispered; her eyes went back to stare at the owl before returning to Nighty.

“Nightmare. Cuddle buddy.” She opened her arms for the foxshier, who jumped in them. She tightened her hold on her before closing her eyes.

“Ah, wait Midnight you can’t sleep...” I trailed off as her breathing slowed, falling asleep in three seconds. Winterlya chuckled.

“I guess all of you have to teach her a few things. You look exhausted yourself,” she pointed out.

I sighed, realizing how exhausted I felt. It had been awhile since I’d stayed in my fairy form for such a long period. “I better switch before I tire both of us out,” I commented, more to myself than Winterlya. I rose to my feet, hesitant to leave. Kai was the first to reach us, the others not far behind.

“We’ll keep an eye on her, relax. We’ll probably need you if Midnight wants to look around. We’ll let Winterlya explain what happened. Go switch...and good job Elyion,” he praised,

looking away. Kai was always the first to give praise, but became uncomfortable when he received any.

I smiled before I waved goodbye, turning to walk back into the forest.

As much as Kai got on my nerves, he'd always tried to praise us for whatever contribution we gave to a situation, regardless of whether it was big or small. He'd especially get embarrassed when he praised me, always struggling to admit my positive contributions. I think he's still mad at finding out I was once a guy after leaving him in the dark for a full cycle as a prank.

I found the spare set of clothes hidden in a wooden box next to a large oak tree. I hid various spare clothes, making sure there was a set for myself and Elias. I pressed my hand against my mouth as I yawned. *I need a good sleep.*

"I'll fill you in when you wake up," Elias confirmed, my conscious began to fade.

Hmm. Okay. Goodnight, and thanks, Elias.

"You're welcome, Elyion."

CHAPTER 25



“I don’t understand why he’s so busy. The only thing I’ve seen this past week is his chest, while I’m half asleep. I bet my sleep walking self has seen more of him.”

I laid on my back on Eli’s bed; my head hung off the bed as I read one of Eli’s manga books from her two large bookshelves filled with her manga collection. I would have never expected her to be so in love with such books.

Apparently, Elias couldn’t care less about them, stating comics were better. I didn’t know the difference, but I enjoyed working my brain and reading from right to left.

It took some explaining on Eli’s part for me to understand how to read the book without starting from the end.

“Just admit it, you miss him,” Eli pointed out. I peeked away from the manga book I was reading.

A week had passed since Midnight became a spirit. I’d felt absolutely amazing since waking up in the middle of the next night in Elias’ arms.

Since then, I’d been letting Midnight take over for long periods of time. Seeing as everyone else was busy and it was summer break at Knightwood, me and Midnight had been switching throughout the day while we chilled with EliaseAnne. We couldn’t push it seeing as she was still a spirit and simply contributed to my exhaustion if she took over for too long, but she could be in control for a longer period compared to the others – reaching three hours before we’d have to switch. Midnight continued to apologize for making me so exhausted, but I convinced her I didn’t mind. She’d

spent cycles in that frigid darkness because of her half-awakening. The least I could do was let her enjoy this beautiful world. I'd had almost three rotations worth of experience.

It was now her turn to enjoy the scenery. It was thanks to her help that we had gotten the chance to be here in the moment.

Elias said he wanted to catch up on sleep; he still felt exhausted from shifting. I'd forgotten that the boys weren't trained like me to shift and stay in such a form for long periods of time. They had witnessed Lexi's dragon form and now, Midnight's dark fairy form, but they'd yet to see the others.

I was still trying to process the fact that Midnight was a dark fairy. Out of all the spirits, I knew of, which was now six; I'd never thought she'd be the extinct species.

Winterlya had given me a bracelet to wear, the device spelled to withhold my magic from pouring out.

Now that I was recovering, yet again, I needed my aura to be in control and not inform all of Knightwood or even Minato of my new spirit. For now, the wristlet contraption would hide my aura, until I was strong enough to do it myself. It also hindered me from using my magic, only allowed to use my spirit's powers and even that privilege had a restriction.

It didn't bother me too much, realizing I wouldn't need my powers for anything in particular. No more exams, no more training. All I had to do was relax and wait for the approval to return home.

After remembering a bit of my family, my mother's image still engraved into my mind, I yearned to meet them. I wondered if she was still the same beautiful, kind woman in my memory.

"Yes, I miss Ryder and the others, too. But, I still don't mind us having alone time," I pointed out, not wanting Eli to feel bad. I truly enjoyed her company.

I just missed all of us having breakfast and dinner together.

All the others had been busy throughout the week. Marcus explained he had to get his rotational checkup courtesy of Karen which consisted of a week's worth of tests. He assured me he'd be back later to check on me, but that was six hours ago and still no dragon shifter.

Daniel said he was going to sleep, after he returned from Knightwood doing who knows what. He'd been busy doing something exhausting seeing as he looked like he could barely make it up the stairs before he fell asleep. I'd found him three times sleeping in the bathtub, Marcus and Elias had to carry him to bed. I wondered what he did that made him so tired.

Kai said he had a meeting with the headmaster today to give an update on how long we'd be staying. He really disliked the headmaster. I knew all of them had some type of dislike for Karen's father. What was quite surprising was that Karen was the complete opposite of him.

I'd tagged along with Elias when he needed to give a report a few days ago, peeking through the door as Elias gave a one-minute report and ditched, not even greeting or saying goodbye when he left the office. I applauded him for his attitude.

The headmaster was a rude asshole who deserved a whipping – not the pleasurable kind. He didn't even look up from whatever was on his computer screen to listen to Elias' report, stating he still wanted a collective report from Ryder by the end of the week, regardless of Elias' reasons as to why Ryder couldn't give him a report.

"I know, Makoto. Don't worry; things should go back to normal by next week. Anya's memorial celebration is Friday and then it's the weekend. By Monday we should all be free. I believe Matthew and Karen got the rest of summer rotation off so..." She trailed off.

I looked away from my book to stare at her upside-down figure.

"So?" I pressed on, curious as to what she had to say.

“I’ll let Elias tell you later.” She finished, returning to her book. I frowned.

Boo, I hate waiting.

“*Impatient much?*” Midnight voiced out.

I smiled to myself, as I closed the book I was reading.

I’m not impatient...just don’t like waiting.

“*Same thing,*” she replied calmly.

I allowed my eyes to wander the bookshelf a few inches away from Eli’s bed.

She did tell me to only take books from the two shelves across the room, but they were so far and I was too lazy. I glanced back at Eli. She was concentrated on her own book; her eyes glued to the page as she laid on her back, one of her legs relaxed on her knee as she leisurely read, paying no mind to me.

I glanced back at the bookshelf, a pink, covered book caught my attention. I moved over to the shelf, using my stealth skills to my advantage, pulling the big bundle of pictures out of the shelf without moving the others.

I dropped back onto the bed, returning to my previous position before looking at the cover – two school girls in different uniforms hugged one another. I blinked, curious as what the story could possibly be. I felt Midnight tug at my mind; her curiosity brushed against my senses. *What could this be about? Guess I’ll find out.*

Fifteen minutes had passed, and I was through eighty percent of the book.

I frowned, tilting the book as I tried to understand what device they were holding, the double-sided silicon thing did not look very useful.

“Eli?” I questioned.

“Hmm. What Mako?”

“What’s a double-sided dildo?”

“...”

“Eli?” I questioned, continuing the scene, ready to turn the page.

“Makoto. What. Are. You. Reading?”

I frowned, reluctantly moving my eyes from the sex scene that developed between the main character and her friend who’d confessed her feelings to her, to look at Eli.

I raised an eyebrow at her flushed face which only became redder.

“I’m reading Merry-Go-Lucy. But, what does the dildo do? I’ve never heard of that? Is there a book that explains what it does? How are they even going to have sex when she doesn’t have a penis? This book is so unrealistic, but the positions are interesting. Can guys do the 69 position, too? Eli?” I explained before glancing back at Eli who looked like she’d pass out at any second.

“Mako. Put the book down.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so!” she replied.

“No. You didn’t answer,” I replied back, frowning. I wanted to finish it.

Operation – find out what a dildo is: in progress.

“Makoto! Give it to me.” She moved fast; I probably wouldn’t have caught it without my fast reflexes. I was up and at the edge of the bed in two seconds, Eli on the opposite side ready to take my precious book.

“No. Midnight and I want to finish!” I demanded.

“Oh Starlight, Midnight, too! Both of you, give me the book or else,” she threatened, her eyes began to glitter.

“Or what?” I dared.

The thought of Eli’s ability to temporarily erase an individual’s memories came to my mind.

I wonder if I'll ever get a chance to confront her about how she erased my memory of Jeffrey?

Her eyes went wide as she froze in place.

"How...how do you know about that?" she whispered. Sorrow hung off her words.

Aww shit.

"Here's your chance." Midnight announced.

I sighed.

"Ryder told me. He said you did it, so I wouldn't have a panic attack each time I saw him in the halls. Ryder said he would have done the same thing if he was in your shoes," I explained.

Midnight sat at the edge of my mind, listening in.

"Aren't you, um, mad?" she questioned.

Not really. I'm upset she didn't tell me and I had to hear it from Ryder, but her intentions were good. I'm not gonna be upset over it. What's done is done.

I was ready to hear her excuse, but she stood there before bowing.

My eyes went wide at the sudden gesture, Midnight just as confused and stunned as me.

"I'm sorry for not telling you. I know I should have asked your permission before ridding such memories, but I panicked and well, ya. There's no excuse. I'm sorry you didn't hear it from me," she apologized, staying in position.

I could hear the regret in her voice as she apologized, truly giving off the impression she truly felt bad regarding her quick decision in erasing my memories regarding the Professor Sepherant who we all now knew was Jeffrey. I had been ready to lecture her when the topic was brought up, especially if she dared tried to defend her actions, but now that she'd apologized, I didn't have any anger in me to be overdramatic.

"Raise your head, EliaseAnne," I ordered.

She obeyed, her eyes became glossy.

“Eli, don’t cry. I’m not mad. I understand what you had to do. I don’t hate you,” I explained, hoping my admission would calm the potential waterworks.

Eli gave off the impression that nothing concerned her, but I knew she’d have a soft spot, that area being extra tender when it came down to my approval of her.

I was happy she was fine with waiting for me to figure out the relationship developing between her, Midnight and myself.

We needed more time with her and now with Anya’s approaching death anniversary, the person who needed me the most at the moment was Ryder.

“Are you sure?” Her hesitant voice pricked my heart.

“Eli. I’m sure. We’re fine. I’ve known for a while now. It’s fine. You’re forgiven. Just don’t do it again unless you ask permission or have a good reason like previously,” I noted.

She nodded, giving us a moment of silence till her eyes landed on the book in my hand. I smiled mischievously as I lifted the book up and opened to the page I left off.

“Now, what is a double side– EEEK!” I shrieked as I attempted to avoid Eli’s grasp, ducking under her raised arms before rotating my body to face her – my short legs were no match for her long ones as she caught me in one giant leap. We lost our balance; my body fell back, bringing Eli down for the ride as we fell onto the bed.

“Dammit, Eli—” I began to scowl at her before my words were caught in my throat, my face only inches away from Eli’s.

Her wide emerald eyes looked mesmerizing up close – those dark green orbs flickered from their usual colour to a mustard yellow; the two-tone alteration only noticeable up close.

Her scent engulfed my senses; the fresh mint mixed with the cherry blossom shampoo made her smell absolutely divine.

I blushed as my heart skipped a beat; my eyes landed on her red lips. *Bad Mako. No kissing of the gorgeous female, fairy shifter above you.*

“*Tempting indeed,*” Midnight commented, her wave of attraction not helping me in my dilemma.

“Mako...” Eli whispered, before leaning downward.

I didn’t move, ready to feel her lips against mine when the door opened.

“Mako, I’m bac– Oh.”

We both glanced at the door, Marcus stood there, holding his cellphone in his hand with a stunned expression on his face. He took a moment to stare at our position before an amused smirk formed on his lips.

“I know Kai told me not to come by, but I wanted to check on Mako. I’ll come back when you guys are done. Carry on,” he encouraged, ready to turn and leave the room when Eli’s body went rigid.

“Kai? Did you just say Kai was here?” Eli questioned.

“Ya, Kai. He was outside the door when I walked into the hallway. He said he was bringing some snacks for Mako, but decided he’d come back lat—”

“Son of a—” Eli jumped off the bed and rushed out the door.

We both stared at the door before we heard yelling followed by a crash.

“I SWEAR TO STARLIGHT, KAI! DON’T YOU DARE DRAW THAT! KAI!”

Marcus turned back to face me, shrugging off the chaos happening outside as if it was nothing.

“Should I even ask how you two got into that position?” he inquired.

“It’s Eli’s fault! I was minding my own business, reading this manga about these two girls who fall in love and she

wouldn't tell me what a double-sided dildo was!" I argued, emphasizing my need to learn what the silicone device was.

Marcus stood there, his mouth half opened as he gawked at me.

He closed his mouth before his eyes landed on my book and then gazed at the bookshelf next to the bed.

"That's...the book is a part of her hentai collection," he explained.

"Hentai? What's that?" I questioned, tilting my head.

"It's basically readable porn, Firefly. Just animated," he replied, his face blank.

"Oh."

We stood there for a moment in silence.

"Well, why didn't she say so? Jeez. That still doesn't explain what the dildo is. Marcus, explain. How are Lucy and Lia going to have sex if neither of them has a penis?" I argued, dying to solve this mystery.

Marcus was about to say something when his eyes glowed – his dragon took control.

He smiled at my shocked expression before a low chuckle escaped his lips.

"Good afternoon, Princess. Marcus is unavailable at the moment, but I can answer your questions."

"As long as you explain, and I still have time to finish this before Eli comes back," I countered.

"Whatever you like Princess. Now a double-sided dildo is..."

CHAPTER 26



I finished my glass of chocolate milk, my hair was still air drying from the cold shower I had taken after that detailed, descriptive lesson.

Talk about SEX 101 for female lovemaking.

I wasn't even going to question how Marcus' dragon spirit – *Ryuu*, knew all that information.

It was nice to finally learn his name after already meeting him once before.

Ryuu was apparently Japanese for *dragon spirit*. When I looked into his eyes, I could see the wisdom he carried in those red-orange globes, the two-toned colour always reminded me of fire.

He answered every single sex question I had – as if he was a sex education professor. I was impressed by his vast knowledge, and he didn't make the conversation feel awkward, even with him being a male. He encouraged me to take a shower seeing as Ryder would be back soon, and Marcus would probably fall asleep due to his lengthened stay.

I thanked him for his lesson, leaving Eli's room, after I finished the book and placed it back in its slot on Eli's hentai shelf. I made a mental note to find where book two was when she wasn't in her room, wanting to know what happened in their relationship.

Who knew Yuri manga could be so intriguing?

I turned around to face the empty kitchen and living room, the last of the sun's rays disappeared along the horizon; the

stars began to make their appearance in the purple-blue sky.

Daniel was still at Knightwood, mentioning that he wanted to get some training done and he'd be back in the earlier hours. Marcus decided to tag along and stated he'd "watch" from the sidelines. From the way his eyes drooped and having yawned five times before leaving, I really doubted he'd last three minutes before dozing off.

Kai and EliaseAnne were nowhere to be found; Eli broke at least seven glasses in her outburst. I think they were both hiding, not wanting to deal with Daniel's lecture. I bet Elias had already given Eli her portion of annoyance; he hated when Eli broke a glass.

Ryder still hadn't returned, leaving me alone. Midnight and the others were asleep, exhausted from today's events. It was the first time I'd experienced true loneliness. It didn't feel like the darkness I'd felt when I was in a coma, but I did notice the gripping sadness in my heart.

Funny how in such a short period of time, I'd learned to depend on having so many people around me, compared to the cycles I was left alone to defend and care for myself. I had to remind myself that there were going to be times where I'd be alone. I couldn't always have the boys or Eli by my side.

I heard a click, followed by the door opening and closing. I turned to see Ryder – a very disturbed looking Ryder. I stood there blinking at him as he walked past, headed straight to the library. The door closed shut, silence followed.

I frowned. Well shit, he didn't even notice me.

"*Something must have happened,*" Rose's sleepy voice whispered as her presence faded away from my mind, returning to sleep. As tired as I was, I couldn't sleep knowing Ryder was in that state.

I decided to wait an hour – wanting to give him some alone time before checking on him.

Ryder had been busy non-stop this past week, going from meeting to meeting with the headmaster, Matthew, and Karen or Winterlya. He still wanted to continue his meditation

sessions while he dealt with family issues. He wouldn't give me all the details, usually rushing out after sleeping in or quietly walking into his room when I was already asleep, but when he had a second or two to spare, he explained he was assisting his mom in preparation of Anya's celebration of life ceremony.

They had never discovered Anya's remains, all leads in finding the purple-eyed, demon shifter went cold after the five-cycle mark, the case had been dismissed. It was assumed she'd died in the facilities. There would be no way to find her remains even if they narrowed down which facility she had been taken to.

Once you met your fate at the facility, your body was burned, and ashes were thrown into the toilet – flushed away to wherever the stream of water led. There was no ceremony or moment of mourning. Shifter's died every day and that was how life went on.

I noticed the change in him – the nightmares hadn't stopped since my surprise party. They only worsened as the days went by.

I began to worry about him. He was only getting a maximum of five hours sleep; constantly waking up from the nightmares began to give him dark circles.

The others looked just as worried, but Kai informed me that it was his usual behavior when Anya's death anniversary approached.

He had to keep himself busy or things didn't go well. I was fine with that and tried my best to support him when I could and not ask questions. I just wanted him to take care of himself more and not go over his limit.

An hour went by rather quickly, faster than I expected before I walked to the library door, knocking lightly on the door before I entered. I peeked inside, my eyes immediately went to the corner chair in the room – Ryder sat in his usual chair, his face in his hands as he rested his elbows on his knees.

My heart sank at his troubled appearance, aching to comfort him. I closed the door quietly, before making my way to his sitting figure.

I could see the tension in his body; the light tremble was enough to tell me how bad the situation was. I knelt down before him. I didn't want to touch him just yet, in fear he'd flinch due to the tiny possibility he didn't hear my entrance.

"Ryder, baby?"

My voice was low; I hoped my soft-spoken tone was enough to get through to him. He didn't budge at first – his body grew still for a moment before his head lifted, his glossy, Tyrian eyes met my gaze.

We stared at one another; the time ticked by as we sat in silence. I wouldn't force him to talk to me, but I'd at least let him know I was right here, ready to support him.

He closed his eyes before lifting his arms out in an outstretched hug.

I leaned into him; my arms encircled his neck as I pressed my body against his in a hug, squeezing him tightly, as he pulled me into the chair; his head rested on my shoulder as his body continued to tremble.

My hand caressed his short, black hair, sticking with a consistent pattern to soothe him. I listened as he sobbed against me, his sniffs and exhalations muffled against my shirt as he cried. I continued my hug, allowed him to shed every tear he'd been holding back. He finally calmed – the shivering came to a stop as he pulled back far enough to look at me, but still had his body pressed against mine.

"I'm sorry I – I shouldn't be crying. It's not noble of me." He apologized, lowering his head in shame.

"Ryder, allowing me to hold and comfort you during a time you need support is the noblest thing I've witnessed. Anyone can gather enough courage to stride onto a battlefield, but it takes strength to allow your walls to fall and reveal that you are also an individual with a heart and admit that life is hard. You shouldn't think badly of such," I whispered. My

hand cradled his face; my thumb wiped the tear that rolled down his cheek.

“But, I can’t show that side to anyone at the castle – not even to my own family. I can’t show weakness or discomfort. I can’t reveal how upsetting it is when my father continues his useless attempts at setting me up with someone I don’t even love, for his personal gain. I can’t tell my mother that after six cycles, I still have vivid nightmares about Anya, increasing in frequency days before her death anniversary. I even feel ashamed for breaking down in front of the others when you were in a coma. What leader cries and shows weakness? What leader breaks down over such pitiful reasons? My tears won’t bring Anya back. My sorrows won’t stop my father from trying to decide my future for me. The only thing that changed thanks to such heartbreak was the beautiful woman before me. Other than that, such weaknesses are nothing more but, a hindrance,” he confessed, and his eyes reflected how aggravated he was.

I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing his words to sink in before I opened them – my face grew serious and my eyes held power as I concentrated on his.

“Ryder Carter. The Starlight gods blessed us with life. With such blessings come emotions. They can be our strength and our weakness. They can lead us to victory, giving us, the courage and motivation needed to rid our opposing enemies, or it can lead us to our downfall, blinding us from realizing how underpowered one can be. We are meant to FEEL Ryder. This life won’t be filled with just happiness. You have to experience sadness, anger, fear, and lust. Even happiness and pride can bring you down or overshadow concerns that need consideration. Your sadness, your anger, even those bloody nightmares are a reminder that you are alive. It’s a reminder that after all the challenges and struggles, you lived to tell the tale. Would I wish for you to always experience such emotions? No. But, would I wish for the gods to steal such experiences from you? I certainly would not. The pain we deal with in life is what shapes us – the sadness and regret that clings to our beings are there so that when we experience happiness, it is all the sweeter because we know that sadness

or regret. The anger that builds and bursts out in an act of rage teaches us, and the others around us, our limits and how to control it or walk away. No one should ever look down upon you for being what the gods created. Both humans and shifters alike have feelings and such emotions should never be deemed as useless. You are a wonderful leader, Ryder. You take on the burdens of your fellow knights, down to their feelings and struggles. I know you don't understand why such a gift was given to you...but with time, you will understand its purpose. Don't let your gift affect your own feelings. You have every right to break down and focus on your own troubles. Never consider it a hindrance, because it has shaped you into the leader that many look up to...including me." I leaned forward, kissing him ever so lightly. I prayed my words would empower him – give him enough strength to move forward.

I wanted him to pick himself up and strive for what he wanted in life, even if such desires were harder to achieve.

I needed my confident Ryder back, but with a newfound purpose; a mission to mold himself into the man he wished to be – a knight who'd never allow such trivial shackles to hold him as he continued to lead his fellow men and land to salvation, his princess by his side.

Those tender lips pressed back; at first with hesitancy, but progressed into something deeper. We kissed as if time had stilled, the world stopped to give us an eternity to demonstrate our passionate love. It wasn't till our lungs begged to breathe that we pulled apart, breathless as we pressed our foreheads against one another.

"Mako...I—" He hesitated, but his heavy exhales carried on. I waited patiently, focused on decreasing my own rapid breathing, while I attempted to ignore the throbbing need that spread through me. I wanted more than just kisses.

I wanted my hands to feel the warmth of his skin as I sucked and bit at his neck. I needed to feel more than those luscious lips on mine; I needed to feel them trail all along my body.

His tongue skilled enough to please me in more than one opening and I wanted it. I craved to feel him within me – to connect us together as we rode the waves of ecstasy I'd imagined we'd experience together. *But, did he want the same?*

He looked up at me, his hands moved to cradle my face. I watched the remnants of hesitation and fear fade away – replaced by a renewed confidence and determination.

“I want you, Makoto Heart. I'm done with just kissing you. I want more...no. I need more. You have no idea what you do to me. How your body excites me when you're in my arms, or how hard I became when I saw you in that two-piece bikini. If only you could know how I craved so many times to pin you against the classroom desk and fuck you, or the need I experienced to plunge into you that day in the library with your body pressing against my groin. I have dreamed of hearing my name escape those seductive lips as I bring you over the edge into the land of bliss. I just need to know if I can Mako.”

From the hunger in his eyes, to the unbreakable confidence in his posture as we sat there in silence after such a groundbreaking declaration, I knew he meant every word. I bit my lip and attempted to ignore the pooled wetness between my legs as my body shivered in desire. I was tired of being hesitant. It was time to let my body take control and work for what it wanted.

I leaned forward, my lips only a centimeter away from his before the words left me without any reluctance.

“Fuck me, Ryder.”

I watched his pupils dilate, expanding quickly before constricting back to their normal size. I felt the hardness between his legs grow, as his breath caught in his throat.

“Makoto.”

The sound of my name as it left his lips was somewhere between a prayer and a curse. I never knew I could want

something as badly as I had once wanted freedom, yet here I was, sitting in front of a man I loved.

He held me in his arms as he stood from the couch.

“Are you sure you want this? Once I start – I won’t be able to stop.”

There was no hesitation, no doubt in my soul. This was what I wanted.

“I’m sure.”

Those words were enough for a switch to flick on – his lips crashed against mine as we began to devour one another.

My hands tightened around his neck as my legs interlocked around his waist. His hands held me securely, gripping my ass while supporting me in place.

One minute, we stood in the middle of the library, kissing one another like our lives depended on it – the next, Ryder kicked the door to his room closed, the clicking notifying us that no one was getting in as he pressed me against the wall. No one was going to ruin this moment for us.

He allowed my legs to drop to the floor, his hands still possessively gripped my ass as I pressed against him – the bulge of his hard cock pressed against his black jeans. It was only a matter of time until I would taste him in my mouth as I wrapped my lips around his hardened cock. Only a few minutes until I would feel him slid in and out of me, bringing me to the edge of pleasure and then pushing me into the abyss.

I lifted my arms up as he removed my shirt; his eyes trailed my body before he pulled me into him, our tongues danced as we kissed.

I unbuttoned his pants before his hands wrapped around my wrists, stopping me.

I gazed at him, my body hummed with desire, but he gave me a seductive smirk; his tongue slowly licked his bottom lip as his gaze was locked onto me. I followed the movement of his tongue and imagined what it would feel like as it flicked across my clit.

He leaned down to kiss my neck, the kisses that followed trailed down my body.

I moaned, my overly hot, sensitive skin enjoyed every kiss followed by sucking and biting, which only added to my building desire.

His hands skimmed down the sides of my waist as he dropped to his knees, tugging the silk tie of my pants, causing the cashmere material to pool at my feet. He lifted my leg slightly, leaving kisses on the inner sides of my thighs, before doing the same on the other side as he threw the pants across the room.

He continued to tease me; his tender kisses making me tremble. My body wouldn't last if he continued to tease me this way – I wanted more. I needed more.

“Ryder.” My shallow breathing and pleading voice caught his attention; his eyes stared up to face me.

“Yes, Princess,” he whispered. His voice seemed deeper somehow, the husky sound caressed me just as much as his lips were moments before.

“I want you, now.”

He chuckled, and the sensual sound sent a line of chills down my spine. He rose up, taking hold of my wrists as he lifted my arms above my head...pinning my body against the wall. His body pressed into mine, and I bit my lip as I felt my pussy clench.

“I know baby. But I'm going to take my time ravishing your body.” He whispered into my ear before he bit it gently.

I moaned.

His hand brushed against my panties; his finger pressed against lace fabric – the lining soaked from my arousal. A demonic smile spread across his face; his eyes hooded with hunger as he pressed harder. The fabric the only barrier between his fingers and my wet pussy.

“Ryder. Stop teas– ah.” I began to revolt before he pinched the bud of my clit through the lace, sending a spiral of desire

through me. My back arched, pressing my body into his. Craving to be near him. Begging to be pleased by him.

He took advantage, his free hand left my pussy to unhook my strapless bra, flinging it across the room before he pressed himself against me. Pushing my back against the wall, before he pulled back. He let my hands go as his gaze explored my naked figure.

“Teasing you turns me on, Makoto,” he confessed, pulling his shirt off as he stepped back.

My eyes skimmed along his tanned skin, down his sculpted chest and abs before they landed on those alluring V-lines that lead to what awaited me behind the material of those jeans. I bit my lip, reminding myself that the prize within those pants was mine and I’d have it. *I’ll claim that, too.*

“Will you now?” he questioned before he pulled down his pants – his maroon boxers sliding down, too. He stepped out of them and kicked them to the side. I didn’t care, my eyes locked on his long cock. I approached slowly, reaching him in a few steps before my hand reached out to touch him – his body tensed at my touch as I caressed my hand lightly against it. His skin was soft and smooth.

I glanced up at him and watched his eyes widen with hunger and need. I’d have my fun teasing him, too.

“Mine?” I whispered. I needed to hear that he wanted what I could give him.

“Yes.” The word was breathy as it escaped his lips.

I took a glance at his cock in my hand before stroking him; his body shuddered as he moaned. I knelt before him as he had done to me and I watched his face as my tongue flicked across the tip. His hands found my hair as he pulled me closer.

I had never pleased a male before, but it didn’t matter, it was as if my body knew what to do without being told. I placed my lips around the head of his cock and smiled internally as his breath hitched. Slowly, I took him into my mouth. My eyes stayed locked on his face as I consumed him.

I felt him harden even more as I pulled back. I moved at an agonizingly slow pace, paying him back for the teasing.

His hands massaged my hair as I took him into my mouth. I let my teeth slid down and felt his grip tightened in my hair.

“Mako...ugh...don’t.” He trailed off as his panting increased. I pulled away to grin at him.

“Teasing you turns me on, Ryder.” I threw his words back at him and watched as a smile formed on those seductive lips. My own heavy voice was new to my ears, sounding completely different from my usual voice. I decided to end his misery – the predatory look in those magnificent purple eyes ignited my desire to feel him within me.

I began to suck – his length slid in and out of my mouth as I gripped his base. I felt his body grew rigid as his moans became louder and panting became more rapid.

I used my free hand to push aside the lace panties and pleasure myself. My wetness clung to my fingers as my body grew hot with desperation. I sucked harder and faster – guiding him in and out of my mouth.

In seconds, his body locked as he groaned, cumming in my mouth as he climaxed. He tasted magnificent – the salty tasting cum spurt across my tongue before I swallowed every drop.

His desire filled eyes and heavy panting pleased me more than my own fingers rubbing against my clit.

“Did you like that?” I purred, feeling a sense of confidence, I’d never expected to experience.

“Yes, baby. Very much.”

He pulled me to my feet. He acted so fast, my mind didn’t have time to register how quickly he had me lying on top of his bed. I lifted my waist as he tugged at the lace panties, pulling them down my legs and over my feet.

“Spread your legs,” he commanded.

I obeyed, the anticipation of feeling his cock slip into me only heightened the yearning that flooded my system.

His fingers began to tease me once more, sliding against my soaked folds.

“Fuck, Ryder,” I moaned, my head falling back as his finger slid in. My hands grabbed at the comforter beneath me as he began to work my clit. His mouth latched onto my nipples – taking turns sucking on each of them.

He slid another finger in; the pressure increased as he quickened the movement. I couldn’t stop the cry that escaped my lips as I felt the pressure building inside of me. He moved down my body and when my eyes met his, there was a predatory smile that slid across his face.

He kept his fingers working inside of me as his tongue flicked across my clit. He latched on drawing the hardened nub into his mouth and I moaned. The pressure inside of me released and I came hard around his fingers. He quickly withdrew them from me and his tongue took their place.

He continued the back and forth rotation – his tongue and then his fingers – building up the tension causing me to climax yet again, leaving me wet and needing more.

“Ryder, please I need you,” I begged. My voice sounded wild and uncontrolled.

“Anything for my Princess.”

He rose, positioning himself in between my spread legs – the tip of his cock at the edge of my sex. He slid a finger between my folds, the clear liquid clung to his finger.

“You’re wet enough,” He commented before licking his finger.

The sensual gesture turned me on as I stared widely.

He noticed my reaction, smirking before he leaned forward, giving me a feverish kiss. I could taste myself on his lips and in his mouth. He pulled away; the tip of his dick rubbed against my folds.

“I’ll try my best to be gentle, but I don’t know if I can go as slow as I’d like, and it may hurt,” he confessed.

I could hear the hint of hesitation in his voice, the fear of hurting me made me smile against his lips. “Please stop stalling and fuck me,” I ordered.

His cock inched into me; my body grew tense as he hit resistance.

Ryder pressed his lips against mine, distracting me as he slowly pushed forward a prickle of pain following as his cock slid the rest of the way. He paused as if waiting for me to stop him. I grabbed onto his hips and pushed him back gently before pulling him forward – pushing him back into me.

My body didn’t linger on the pain for long, the tight fit made the tension build as he began to slide in and out, the slow pace exhilarating.

We were panting and sweating as our bodies moved in time with one another. My moans grew louder as I begged him to move faster. He pulled back and I watched as his eyes bore into mine and his body pounded into me.

“I’m– Ryder, I’m gonna cum,” I moaned.

I reached my limit, the tension became too much for me to hold any longer. I clawed at the bed sheets as he slammed into me.

“Cum with me.”

His command was enough for my body to shatter as we came together, his name ran across my lips. The powerful wave of pleasure ran through me and down my core as my pussy tightened around his hard cock – feeling the hot release of cum within me.

We collapsed against the maroon sheets; my body shivered as he pulled his length out; the remnants of cum poured out.

He pulled me into him; my body weak as the exhaustion settled in; my mind already drifting. I never knew what it meant to feel completely satisfied until this moment.

“Mako.” He whispered as his hand went through my hair.

“Hmm?” I was so tired, still trying to calm my body from the mini aftershocks that pulsed through me.

“Thank you for allowing me to be your first. I love you.”

I looked up at him, my eyes already heavy as sleep begged to take over. I smiled weakly at him. “Thank you for loving me. I’m glad I claimed you and I love you.” I lifted my head to give him a final kiss; my head rested on his chest.

I heard the flick of a switch, darkness descending around the room.

With Ryder’s fingers playing with my hair and his slowing heartbeat, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 27



“Are you sure your family is okay with me being here?” I questioned, biting my lip as a distraction, my stomach doing a flip as I stared up at the castle before me.

The ancient looking architecture was made out of stone – looking similar to Knightwood’s structure, minus the gold. The most fascinating piece of work was the demon statues guarding the flight of stairs – their mouths open as they roared to the sky, their stone wings spread out. They complimented the castle entrance and would instill some fear into those who thought to cause any problems.

Ryder sighed, stopping and turning to face me; my hand in his.

“Mako, it’s going to be fine. My dad isn’t even here. Mom will love you,” he reassured me, tugging at my hand to bring me forward, kissing me lightly on the lips.

He smiled; eyes glittered with happiness before he turned around to walk forward; his hand gently tugged me along as we walked towards the castle doors – the ancient brown, polished wood opened.

Tomorrow would be the ceremony and celebration of Anya’s life.

Ryder asked the others if I could come with him this cycle; the previous times one of the boys escorted him for the day’s event. All of them approved, Kai, had the biggest grin on his face. My gut told me he was the only knight that came home

early last night; the others didn't arrive home till breakfast time.

Now I entered the castle, Ryder's hand in mine as my borrowed black heels clicked and clacked against the tiled floor.

Eli had miraculously found a dress that fit me perfectly; the simple black dress hugged my curves and the small rhinestones at the bottom were enough to catch many of the maids and guards attention. It could have also been the fact Ryder walked confidently in a suit with a female shifter by his side.

You could see the respect in the maids and guard's eyes as they looked at Ryder, bowing as he approached, before their stunned, confused eyes landed on me. I paid no mind, reawakening the *bad ass bitch* side of me and walking confidently next to him.

Even if his Father wasn't here, appearance mattered. I imagined the maids gossiping about me and the King finding out. It was a situation I was ready to face; anything to be able to walk alongside Ryder.

He showed me around the castle, starting with the medical centre. I gave my greetings and thanks, bowing at the flustered medical team who couldn't stop bowing back. Their excited expressions made me smile as they whispered among themselves – *The Princess of Heila thanked us*.

I thought it was weird for them to be so happy over my praise. It was common courtesy to thank someone who helped you survive when your own body wasn't able to.

Now, he took his time to show me his area of the castle; the private kitchen, shower, his childhood bedroom and the one he used now. When he was summoned to Heila, his parents left his room as it was, not wanting to change it.

Although he was older and insisted they could use the room for something else, his mother kept the maroon walls with multiple train and car posters the same; his kid-size bed

untouched. His new bedroom was a few doors down, the room set up similar to his room in Knightwood.

We'd brought a few extra set of clothes, setting them in his room before making our way into the main dining hall. Ryder abruptly stopped mid-stride, a frustrated sigh escaped him as his grip around my hand tightened.

I felt Rose nudge into my mind, waking up first.

"I knew we should have gotten rid of those hoes."

I frowned, confused at her comment.

What are you talking abo—

Brittany's blonde hair peeked out from the dining hall doorway before she walked towards us, an older man followed her as they talked amongst themselves.

She was decked out – blonde hair in frizzy curls, an elegant, mustard yellow floor-length dress; the material swept up half the castle and a weird shade of purple lipstick with a tad too much blush on her cheeks. Her overall appearance was a mess. Even with the little fashion knowledge I possessed, I knew she was a beautiful disaster. Purple lipstick did not match mustard yellow.

"I bet she's wearing purple heels to make up for the lipstick," Rose mumbled.

I stared down to the floor, attempting to get a glimpse of her shoes as she began walking towards us; the tips of whatever heels she wore was a dark purple which didn't match the unicorn inspired purple of her lipstick.

Her attempt to match Ryder's eyes was a complete failure...no shade of purple could come close to matching the colour of his eyes.

Ryder tugged me close to him; my body pressed against his side as he continued to hold my hand. We both stood there, waiting for them to notice us.

Brittany's eyes landed on Ryder first, the joy blossomed on her face before she double blinked as her eyes landed on me. *The beauty of disappointment.*

“I call dibs in teaching her another lesson in ‘Don’t mess with our man.’ Geez she doesn’t give up,” Rose complained, annoyed.

I was just as irked as she; annoyed that Brittany would still be trying to take Ryder from us, after he’d apparently turned her down ten times before my arrival.

“Oh, Ryder! It’s an honour to see you outside of school. Aren’t you excited for our date? It’s too bad King Carter has to miss it, but my uncle will tell him how it goes.” She bowed in front of Ryder before gesturing to the older man who nodded, looking as if he’d rather be doing anything else but standing here, representing his niece.

“Brittany. I’m curious as to whether or not you need glasses, or haven’t you noticed Makoto standing right next to me,” Ryder commented; his voice low with a pinch of anger leaked off his words.

Her eyes went wide as she gulped at his tone; her eyes landed on me as she frowned.

“Ah. Makoto. It’s been awhile. When was the last time we saw each other again?” she questioned.

“Good day, Brittany. Oh, hmmm. Let me see...ah yes, when I kicked you and your two fellow dimwit’s asses in the girl’s locker room after you challenged me and failed miserably. What good times.” I smiled innocently.

Her face turned red. “That doesn’t count. I had a challenge the day before and was still recovering. I’m much stronger now,” she defended quickly, standing confidently.

Ryder cleared his throat. “Well, if you would excuse us, Makoto and I have somewhere to be.” Ryder tugged at my arm, walking around the two.

“What? Wait! Ryder, we have a date today! At this very minute,” Brittany exclaimed, her once doll-like face scrunched in anger.

“I never agreed to it. It wasn’t my decision, it was my Father’s.” Ryder continued walking.

I could hear footsteps behind us as Brittany trailed after us.

“Your Father is the King of Minato! What he says goes. I’ve waited for three rotations for this date because you’ve been too busy shagging this whore!” she yelled, intentionally making her voice loud enough for the maids and guards to hear.

Ryder froze, letting go of my hand before he took a deep breath. I could see his right-hand tremble. I took a quick glance, noticing his Tyrian eyes bled to black. *This isn’t going to end well.*

“*Allow me,*” Rose whispered.

~**ROSE**~

I opened my eyes before clearing my throat.

I gazed up at Stryker, whose eyes were now black with a dim glow. I smiled before turning to face him as I leaned against his rigid body; kissing him lightly on the lips.

“Let me handle this baby,” I purred before turning around and walking towards the pathetic demon. Did she really think I was going to tolerate her petty attempt to disgrace Ryder and Stryker in their home?

I came to a stop in front of her, keeping a hold of the power that pooled at my fingertips.

Control Rose. No burning the frail demon shifter.

“Brittany, is it? I thought Lexi taught you a lesson the last time we met. I understand you had an appointment with my boyfriend, but I’m afraid we already had plans. Actually, Ryder is going to introduce us to the King and Queen. We’ve been so caught up getting to know one another since classes ended that he’d forgotten to remind his parents. I’m terribly sorry. I know it feels like you’re getting the short end of the stick, but there are plenty of other men out there,” I mocked,

giving her my famous innocent smile, blinking my eyes as a bonus.

“Brittany. You’re causing a scene. Don’t go picking fights you can’t win,” her uncle commented, his hushed tone made my smile widen.

Awww, Uncle Joe over here doesn’t want the world to how weak she really is. If only she’d listen to him.

“I’m not leaving here until I have my date with Ryder as planned! Do you know how much money I spent to be put on that fucking waiting list!” she snarled.

“Waiting list? Who possibly set up a waiting list to date Ryder?” I held the laugh that begged to escape me.

“The Headmaster! He set this whole thing up! The headmaster told the King that I was a perfect match for his son and the King approved of this meeting! Thus, I have spent a lot of money to get to this moment! Yet, here you are. Interfering again,” she shouted, her hands waved in the air.

I double blinked at her before a snicker escaped my lips. Three seconds passed before my laugh echoed off the walls.

I could hear Stryker sigh behind me, muttering “*Great, she broke her.*”

I totally wasn’t broken, but this was beyond hilarious.

“*You’d think she’d realize that she was scammed,*” Mako commented, peering from the depth of my mind as she yawned. I finally composed myself before facing her, wiping the fresh tears from my eyes.

“You’re trying to tell me that the Headmaster set this shit up to get some extra change and you fell for it! Please tell me you at least have a contract or a piece of paper validating that you indeed have a date with Ryder today?” I questioned, through giggles.

She stared back at me, her mouth half open as my words sunk in.

“Um...well, he’s the Headmaster! He wouldn’t lie...I – I just took his word for it!” she defended, stuttering as her face

became redder with embarrassment.

“In all my cycles, I’ve never seen someone as utterly stupid as this woman right here. I’m going to sleep. Wake me up when Ryder needs me. Feel free to shift, but don’t kill anyone,” Mako encouraged before she faded, giving me full control. Fully shift, hmmm.

I had been so used to taking over Mako’s body and switching that I’d forgot about that side of me. Dragons and phoenix shifters like Lexi and Lily could shift completely into their animal forms, which most considered shifting.

It was funny how shifters assumed demons and angels didn’t have alternate appearance when shifting, always stating we had no other form to switch, too. They merely assumed such accusations because it was a rare sight to see a demon or angel shift completely unless in a battle.

If Hope shifted into her angel form, those large immaculate wings would appear. She’d only shifted once and even though I witnessed it in the back of Mako’s mind, it was a beautiful sight. My form was no different, but I hadn’t shifted completely in cycles. *To shift or not to shift?*

“I rest my case. Why don’t you go back to the Headmaster and tell him how you’d just embarrassed yourself in front of the Prince of Minato as well as his fellow servants, guards, and GIRLFRIEND thanks to his greedy ways. Now, if you excuse us.” I gave a light curtsy before turning around.

Boo, no shifting today. How boring...I even got Mako’s permission.

“Get your ass back here!” she shrieked. The temperature dropped slightly.

I noticed Stryker raised an eyebrow before his eyes widened. I sighed. *Be careful, what you wish for.* I could hear the crackling build behind me.

I sidestepped to my left, the black orb soared past me before crashing into the nearest wall, the painting that hung there burst into flames. *Aww, that looked expensive.*

I heard the maids scrambled to put out the fire as we stood there. I turned to face her demon side – black eyes greeted me as they gave off an eerie black glow. I frowned, my patience ran thin.

“You think you’ve won just because you beat my weak host? I bet that demon doesn’t even love you! Just because you have some curves and a pretty face you think you can waltz in here and claim what we’ve been fantasizing about for cycles! He’s OURS! We had our eyes on him first! Why don’t you tell your host to get her hands off him and let us have our rightful place by his side!” she hissed.

The last thread of patience snapped, my eye twitched slightly as my hands began to tremble out of pure rage. I let the power I held back flared out, the temperature dropped dramatically. I could hear multiple gasps as snow began to fall from the ceiling and dropped around us.

I watched the demon’s black eyes widened in fear as I allowed Mako’s body to shift – the royal purple light wrapped around me before bursting outward, sprinkling light purple dust on me signaling my shift was completed.

My hair was now pitch black in large curls, its length reached past my shoulders compared to Mako’s long, brown hair. My height had increased, reaching six feet. The dress Mako wore just barely covered my ass. Mako’s leg markings were on full display – the previous glamour spell she casted, revoked.

My skin was paler compared to Mako’s complexion, bringing out my bright red lips and royal purple eyes. I couldn’t help but reach up and tap my miniature horns – the red, ivory surface felt smooth to my fingers. *I’d forgotten about these beauties.*

I leisurely walked towards the trembling demon shifter. She stumbled back as I reached her, which irritated me.

“Step back one more time and I’ll burn you to ashes and make sure your soul is trapped in this world,” I threatened.

She was solid like a rock, my words freezing her into place. The black eyes of her demon faded away and all that was left before me was a trembling little girl, alone in her battle.

“Look what we have here? Where did the confident, disrespectful demon go off, too? Aren’t you going to show me what you have now that you’re all rested up?” The frustration built within me and I couldn’t hold it back any longer.

“Or was that all a bunch of fucking bullshit?” I yelled; my rage had no bounds as my voice echoed down the hall.

I hated talking when I was in this form. I wanted to simply burn everything in my path and walk away. Nice and simple. Why waste time talking to such a self-centered prostitute who simply wanted an easy life?

“I – um...” She began before I snapped my fingers, dark flames erupted by my command.

I heard multiple shrieks as I witnessed the maids huddled as far away from me as they could. I could see the guards down the hall in shock, trembling in their armor. I wondered if they shivered from the cold or from the sight of dark flames.

I cracked my neck, before taking a step closer, into her personal space as the fire flared in my hand, the need to wreak havoc on its victims was hard to ignore.

“You walk into my lover’s home, attempt to belittle my host, cause a scene as to disgrace us AND break art so expensive you probably couldn’t afford to pay the King and Queen back for such reckless foolishness! Yet, now your little burst of rage has left you helpless to my bidding. You of all people know what these flames can do and I’m struggling not to let them burn you nice and slow,” I slurred; the power flickered from eyes as my aura grew and the dark flames grew brighter.

They were one of the strongest types of fire – besides a phoenix flame, and the hardest to summon and control.

The flames weren’t like normal fire – dark flames held their own power and if the user didn’t have enough control

over them, they would rain chaos on all those close – the host included.

She fell to her knees, trembling in place. I stepped back, just in time before a puddle of liquid began to pool beneath her, making a slow descent towards me.

I took another step, moving to the side as I watched the stream continue to Stryker, who groaned, stepping to the side. I sighed, my attention returned to Brittany's trembling figure on the floor. *Utterly pathetic.*

"I will say this ONCE. Ryder and Stryker Carter belong to me and my host, Makoto Heart. Anyone who wishes to go against my entitlement can feel free to come forward and challenge me, but be warned: I will not hold back. Whatever comes your way, you will take it in full and I will enjoy every second of it." I smiled wickedly at the crumbled demon shifter whose dress was drenched in her own urine before glancing around; my eyes noticed a pair of Tyrian eyes staring at me from a few feet away; the tall, slender woman smiled from ear to ear. *Queen of Minato...hmm, Mama Carter seems impressed.*

My vow was greeted with absolute silence.

As my eyes trailed back to my opponent, which honestly was nothing but a waste of energy. I caught a glimpse of Stryker's stunned expression. His cheeks blushed as his mouth was half open.

"No objections? Good. I didn't want to burn half the castle down, anyway." I shrugged, snapping my fingers, allowing the dark flames to dissipate, leaving a trail of smoke behind. *Ugh, how exhausting. A warm shower would be nice.*

"Seeing as I've worked up a speck of sweat, I'll go change," I announced.

I was ready to leave, but a thought crossed my mind, making me feel daring.

I turned, walking straight to Stryker. His eyes roamed my new appearance, contracting slightly as a flaming hunger reflected in them.

I took advantage of his attraction; my hand slid up against his chest before wrapping around his neck, pulling him into a deep, passionate kiss for everyone to witness.

It took all my willpower to pull away, staying close as I enjoyed his rose scent, leaving him breathless. The desire in his eyes only escalated, turning me on as my sex began to throb. *Maybe I'll change that to a cold shower.*

“Babe, I’ll be back in a few.” I hummed before walking away, avoiding the pool of urine and shocked Brittany as I headed back to Ryder’s room.

If only Mako got to see that.

I felt a nudge in the depths of my mind.

“*I’ll write out the scene in detail.*” Midnight’s relaxed tone entered my mind.

I blinked, closing the door behind me as I stood in Ryder’s room. *How the...I didn’t sense you.*

“*I know,*” she replied, acting as if it was nothing, silence followed her statement.

Dark fairies...dangerous indeed.

* * *

I sighed, the frost like droplets that poured against my skin did not do enough justice in calming the scorching heat that burned throughout my body.

I’d been in the shower for ten minutes, thinking the cold water would help cool down my sudden desire for Stryker. I could still envision the lust filled expression on his face as my lips parted his.

All that act of defiance did was ignite a fire I knew wouldn’t calm until my body got what it wanted – Stryker’s cock sliding inside me, the only way to rid me of this burning ache.

I turned the knob, allowing the water to go from cold to a steamy hot, the sudden change in temperature made my body tremble.

Everyone was asleep in my head, the silence giving me peace of mind. I didn't sense Midnight, but with her last "appearance" I wasn't too sure.

Midnight?

No response was given to my mental call, giving me confirmation that I was alone in Mako's body.

I'd shifted back, feeling quite exhausted after that demonstration of power. The summoning of my dark flames had exhausted me, making me wish I could go straight to bed after this instead of dealing with family introductions.

I smiled at the image of Ryder's mother, the Queen of Minato.

The pleased satisfaction on her face as a mischievous smile perked her lips made me jump in glee, within my mind, of course.

I'd love to have a moment just to talk to the demon shifter. It would be an honour and I was curious to see which characteristics Ryder and Stryker took from the powerful demon queen.

I groaned, Stryker's image returned to mind. Even with my multiple attempts to think about something else, I wanted him so fucking bad, but he wasn't here.

I bit my lip hard, the pain only adding to my desire for Stryker's cock – the feel of him pressed against me before sliding into me – his length filling my core.

I pressed my head against the tile wall; the shower continued to stream the hot water down my back.

My hand trailed down my stomach, the sensation tightened the coil within me. My fingers reached my pussy folds wet from my thirst for that sexy, black-eyed demon shifter. The sound of his voice in my mind made me shiver in delight.

I stroked myself, allowing two fingers to alternate before sliding them both inside as the image of Stryker's bare chest entered my mind.

I moved them faster as I envisioned his naked body pressed against mine; his long cock pounded into me. My fingers pumped faster, and the coil tightened more.

The pleasure my fingers created had my legs shaking, as I pumped them inside of me – in and out – in and out, faster and faster. I felt the pressure building, as 'Stryker' escaped between my lips the wave of pleasure washed over me. My knees buckled; my hand grasped the wall in an effort to stop myself from collapsing onto the shower floor.

I pulled them out; my juices stuck to my fingers as I lifted my head and allowed the steaming hot water to pound against my feverish flesh. I held my breath which didn't help my heart beating rapidly against my chest.

"Fuck." The need to feel him inside of me still hadn't diminished.

I closed my eyes pressing my head against the wall again. *I need a fucking miracle to get rid of this ache.* My fingers found their way back to my folds as I began to please myself once more.

I felt something wrap around my waist pulling me into an embrace, and a hand covered mine working my clit.

My eyes flashed open; my body frozen before the rich, rose scent hit my nostrils; my body roared to life with anticipation as I smiled.

Stryker.

"I guess your miracle has arrived. Do you need assistance, Roseline?" His hand moved mine back and forth.

I leaned my head back against his chest. Rotating my head slightly, before he understood my intentions and turned me in his embrace capturing my lips with his.

The exhilarating kiss ignited a wave of pleasure and need as he removed my hand from my clit and his hands slid down

my body. The water cascaded over us as we kissed. His lips released me, and I moaned as he left me panting and my pussy in dire need of attention.

He pressed my body against the wall of the shower before he knelt before me.

His face pressed against my pussy and I could feel as his tongue flicked out and over my sensitive lips. My hands found his hair as I forced him to bury his face there. He consumed me – his tongue working in and out of my folds – up and down my hardened clit.

I stared down at him and watched as he knelt before me, pleasing me and I had never felt more powerful and more turned on than I did in that moment. I released my hands from his hair as I stared down at my lover – his hooded eyes stared up at me before his tongue ran along my inner thighs, a moan escaped me as my body trembled.

“Stryker.” My voice was strained.

“I love hearing you beg, Rose. After what you did earlier, I think you deserve some release.” His tongue flicked at the bud of my clit, the rough action made me quake as I closed my eyes.

“Stryker, please...” I let out a frustrated groan as I gritted my teeth.

He didn’t say a word, his mouth diving right in, devouring me once more.

My head fell back against the wall, my moans getting caught in my throat as I came in Stryker’s mouth. That didn’t stop his conquest; his mouth sucked me till I struggled to breathe. My body convulsed above him.

My demon shifter deserved a gold medal in shower sex. His eyes found mine as his mouth released my hardened nub and there was a look of evil satisfaction shining in them. He stood before me and when his lips crushed into mine, I could taste myself across his tongue. The sweet taste exhilarating.

My body felt weak in his arms, yet I still hadn’t received what I wanted – what I needed most.

“Tell me sweet Rose, how do you want me to fuck you?” His seductive, deep voice sent shivers down my spine as I bit my lip. I leaned forward; my lips lingered near his ear.

“I want you to press me against the glass and fuck me from behind,” I purred.

I knew exactly what I needed to satisfy me – his hard cock pounding inside of me.

He smiled, giving me a quick kiss before pushing me against the glass; his roughness only sent a chill of excitement through me as he held me in place widening my stance.

A moan escaped me as he slapped my ass, the lingering sting caused the pleasure within me to grow.

His cock began sliding against my wet pussy, lubricating him well enough before he slid in – the movement was smooth and rewarded with a long groan as my back arched.

“That feels so fucking good.” The words left me in as I moaned; my breath brushed across the cool glass.

“So, does your pussy, baby.” He growled as he pulled out and pushed back into me – harder.

He wasted no time moving; his body began to pound as his hands gripped my ass. There was no slowing down, our bodies in desperate need to climax.

Faster, faster – the force pressing me against the glass – my hard nipples against the chilled surface made me moan louder.

His right hand rested against the back of mine as his other hand ventured down to my clit; teasing as he sucked on my neck. I could feel the waves of pleasure building inside of me, higher and higher.

“Stryker. Stryker.”

He slammed himself against me, his full-length entered me; my pussy folds reached his base.

I couldn’t contain the scream I released as I felt the wave of ecstasy crash down over me.

He growled as he orgasmed, my pussy milked his hard cock – clenching and releasing as I rode out the tides of pleasure. My body reeled, unable to support myself anymore as I fell against him; his arm wrapped around my waist as he held me from falling, both of us panting.

Stryker shut the water off before picking me up, my mind so far gone I hadn't realized we'd gotten in bed. His body pressed against me as I finally calmed from my high.

"Rose? Baby, you okay?" Stryker's voice seemed far away, but I still noticed the concern as he cradled me against him.

"Fine...best fucking sex...ever," I breathed.

He chuckled against my ear before placing a kiss against my neck.

"I've been waiting cycles to fuck you, Rose," he confessed against my skin. He returned to face me. My eyes were heavy, taking all my remaining strength to keep them open. Stryker smiled, kissing me lightly on the lips before pulling me against his chest.

"Sleep Rose."

"But, family thing?" I mentioned, worried about missing the family dinner.

"We were excused. It's moved to tomorrow. I just want to enjoy this moment with you," he explained.

"I love you, Stryker," I confessed, unable to hold back the words.

The longing had finally been settled; my heart happy. It was a blessing to finally be with the man I loved and cherished.

"I love you more, Rose. Thank you...for loving me after all these cycles and being confident enough to stand up for me when no other woman would have been able to," he confessed.

"I'll always be by your side to destroy anyone...who thinks...they can mess with my Stryker," I whispered. My eyes closed as my mind drifted, the darkness began to claim me.

“Yes, my beautiful flower. I’ll always defend you when you need me and love you till I ascend to Starlight.”

I wanted to respond, but I was too far gone. My hearing began to fade. I felt his moist lips against mine before he whispered his farewell.

Goodnight Roseline, my true love. Till next time.

CHAPTER 28



Makoto

After twenty attempts at waking up, I was finally successful on number twenty-one.

I swear to Starlight. Give your spirit a chance and she'll make sure to enjoy every second of freedom. Fuck, I'm exhausted.

"Well, you did give her permission," Midnight commented, yawning in my mind.

I shook my head against the pillow, wondering how I hadn't noticed her presence. It must have been due to my exhaustion.

I gave her permission to shift. I didn't give her permission to shift and have a sex marathon. Ah, my body aches in all the wrong places. It didn't hurt like this when Ryder and I fucked.

"Ryder was gentle on you. Stryker and Rose...they don't give off the whole, "let's take things slow" vibe. I saw it coming."

I could imagine her shrug her shoulders, her toneless voice held not even an ounce of sympathy. I groaned into my pillow.

I feel like Rose is rubbing off on you.

"Maybe...but I am a dark fairy. Aren't we supposed to be very blunt? That's what Winterlya said."

I seriously needed to do some research on dark fairies, especially now that one of my spirits was one. It would help me understand Midnight more.

I turned my head to the side; my eyes opened to see the sleeping shifter next to me – Ryder’s chest rose and fell as he slept peacefully.

He looked so relaxed, the best I’d seen him since my first days home after waking up from a coma.

“We should make him breakfast,” Midnight suggested.

I guess she did have a point. I wondered if the maids cooked for him or if he did his own thing. I glanced at the watch on the nightstand on Ryder’s side, 5:45 AM displayed in a purple light.

He’ll probably wake up soon. Hope no one minds me raiding the kitchen. I’m glad I brought some chocolate milk.

“Kai’s gonna be upset when he finds out you took all the chocolate milk with you,” Midnight acknowledged.

I smiled, sitting up as my hand went through my messy locks.

What the hell?

I looked over my body at all of the love bites on my chest and legs.

I knew I had to shower and do some major cover up to look presentable and not like I had a wild night of sex.

“But, you did.” Again, Midnight’s voice echoed through my mind.

Uh, first of all that wasn’t me – technically it was Rose. And second of all, it doesn’t mean that I should walk around with the marks showing all over my body. I don’t think that’ll be the best first impression when I meet Ryder’s parents. Now go away.

I was glad this side of the castle was unoccupied. Didn’t need to prove Brittany’s loud accusations were right.

I noticed movement at the end of the bed, a ball of fabric moved under the sheet near my legs. I pulled at my side of the blanket, three white to grey tails poked out.

“Nightmare?”

Her tails shot up before she scurried under the blanket, turning around; her head popped out before she glanced at me.

“MEW!” she called out.

I glanced back at Ryder who stirred, turning to his side before falling back asleep. I pressed my finger to my lips, signalling Nighty to be quiet. “Let him sleep. You know he doesn’t sleep for long,” I urged, leaning over and kissing him once on the cheek before taking my time to kiss him on his neck with every intention of leaving a visible love bite.

He moaned, stirring again but relaxing into the sheets below us, his breathing evened out as I pulled back. With that, everyone knows he’s mine. I claimed him first.

I proceeded to get cleaned up, taking a long shower before using some of the makeup I borrowed from Eli to cover the discoloured red and purple marks scattered across my chest and apparently, my neck also. I only covered the areas that would be visible from my outfit.

I slipped into some simple, black tights and a maroon t-shirt with the words *Demon Bait* plastered in thick, white lettering. I seriously needed to find out where Elias got all these shirts from.

I straightened my hair, tying it up in a neat bun before applying my makeup – aiming for a more natural look, but not hesitating to add a dash of blush to my cheeks and topping the look off with bright, red lipstick which complimented my turquoise eyes.

Thank you, Eli, for the makeup lessons.

I found the bling, stud earrings she had created. I swear fairy shifters had some crafty hands. Her ability to create such majestic looking jewellery would be any girls dream to carry such a skill.

I put the earrings in; my eyes landed on the friendship bracelet on my wrist. I was glad we’d worked things out. Whatever happened with our future relationship was up to the Starlight gods.

I made my way over to the kitchen Ryder had explained was their private one; only used by him, family and important guests.

I'd brought the carton of chocolate milk from the mini-fridge in his room, placing it in the large double door fridge before me. My eyes scanned the contents of the fridge, narrowing down the breakfast options in my head. I had more than enough to make a large breakfast.

After yesterday's events, I was famished, and I could imagine Ryder being just as hungry. I noticed the hooks holding a few aprons on the wall next to the fridge. The variety of colours made me smile at the fabric as I noticed the small embroidery on them – *Ryder, Elias, Marcus, Daniel, Kai, Mom*.

I could picture my knights in their younger cycles, crowding the spacious kitchen as they made a horrendous mess.

I bet Marcus would be laughing his head off while Ryder and Daniel argued about something, Elias quietly reading a recipe book as Ryder's mom explained to him the steps. Kai would probably be in the corner, drawing the scene out.

I giggled to myself before looking through the second row of adult aprons, easily locating Ryder's – the only purple apron in the adult set.

I strapped it on and got to work. It was still early, but I decided to start with baking cookies, muffins and brownies, and make breakfast later on. I told Nightmare to check on Ryder frequently to see if he was still in deep sleep or beginning to wake. He'd probably shower before coming out to look for me, so I wasn't too concerned. Breakfast wouldn't take long.

I began playing music on my phone, bringing the device along for the trip just in case any of the others needed us and for the sake of silencing Eli's constant nagging.

She wouldn't allow us to leave unless we brought our phones, emphasizing their purpose of being with us at all

times, even in the washroom. I thought it was ridiculous, but to save the lives of any furniture we agreed.

In two hours, I'd made multiple batches of muffins; blueberry, carrot, banana and strawberry.

I laid out the trays on the large black countertop, allowing them to cool as I placed the chocolate ones in the first oven, the second one holding the egg soufflés.

Nightmare came striding in; mewing repetitively to inform me Ryder was awake. I decided to start breakfast, making pancakes and boiling a bunch of eggs. Bacon and sausage wouldn't take long, so I wasn't worried about those.

I was so caught up staring at the muffins rise that I didn't realize I wasn't alone.

"What did my son do to score a woman who knows how to cook and put other demon shifters in their place regardless of status?"

I jumped up, turning in the direction of the gentle voice. My eyes widened at the sight of Ryder's Mom, the Queen of Minato stood in a long, jeweled robe, her long, dark purple hair tied up into a ponytail. The hairstyle made her look young, bringing out her Tyrian eyes; the exact replica of her son.

I was ready to answer when I realized she was royalty, quickly bowing before her.

"Morning, your Majesty." I greeted.

She laughed, the rich, light tone soared through the air, making me jump before I raised my head slightly to watch her hand press against her mouth to muffle her laughter.

"In all my Starlight's, it's refreshing to meet the Daughter of Arthur and Catherine, alive and safe. Rosalina, or should I say Makoto, no need to bow. We are both royals. Though, I'm very pleased with your manners and respect. It makes me wonder about your upbringing when you weren't raised within the palace walls. And good morning," she explained before returning my greetings, making her way to the counter and pulling out a black stool, sitting down.

I rose checking one last time on the muffins, setting a timer, and made my way to the counter. I pulled out the opposite stool, sitting to face her. Nightmare jumped onto the counter, running towards the Queen who smiled, her eyes twinkled with appreciation.

“Nightmare, it’s an honour as always. I see you found the Princess. I’m glad you’re reunited after all these cycles,” she whispered.

Nighty purred as she rubbed her head against her hand before sitting; her tail curled around her body.

“You know Nightmare? As in um...” I began but trailed off, not wanting to reveal her true identity for the risk of my assumptions being false.

She gave me a light smile before nodding.

“A few of us Royals know about Nightmare and a few other gods familiar forms. Some gods change after many cycles, but Nightmare and three other gods keep the same appearance. I’m not surprised to see her by your side. When you were younger we all knew if we saw Nightmare, you were not far behind, even when you could only crawl,” she confessed as she reminisced on the past, such memories lost to me. She continued.

“I don’t want to linger on what you went through during your cycles at that forsaken place, but I wanted you to know, I’m grateful to see you are well and have recovered from the incident in Realm One.”

I stared back at her, shocked at how caring this woman before me was.

“But...you don’t know me? You knew Rosalina, but I’m different. How can you be happy that I’m well?” I asked, confused.

She shook her head, holding back another laugh before her expression softened as she rested her elbows on the table; her face rested in her hands as she stared at the ceiling.

“When Ryder was nine, we decided to bring him to Heila as a birthday present. He’d been asking for rotations and we

finally decided it would be a good chance for him to see other realms. We'd come to visit your Father and Mother, having a little meeting in the living room when a sleepwalking, brown haired girl, in a poofy pink dress waddled into the room, Nightmare by your side as you carried a plastic cup of milk. The look on Ryder's face when he stared at you was priceless. You stared at him before sitting in the corner with your milk. He sat right next to you until you woke up a few minutes later. Then the shenanigans began."

I blushed, cursing my younger sleepwalking ways. I wasn't surprised with the milk drinking, but it still sounded embarrassing.

"Shenanigans?" I questioned.

"Oh yes. The moment you two started talking, you just connected. Playing from that moment until the both of you could barely keep your eyes open. We couldn't separate you two till you were both knocked out, and by the morning, you'd somehow managed to sleepwalk to the other side of the castle and into his bed. I'd never seen Arthur's face so red before. He was so embarrassed, but I thought it was hilarious. His little ninja princess, able to sneak across the castle filled with guards. Priceless." She chuckled at the memories, rubbing at her eyes before sitting up; her hands relaxed on the counter.

"I'm sure I was a troublemaker," I commented.

"Indeed, you were. Your demon and angel spirit especially. It was no wonder why Stryker liked Rose so quickly. They both gave the nannies such trouble. You're lucky you were royal children, or your mother and I would have had to spend a fortune to have a skilled enough sitter for the both of you." She took a deep breath before her expression looked sad.

"Then the day came when you were stolen on your sixth birthday. I'd never seen such sadness in my son's eyes till that day. He spent two weeks looking for the best gift to give you and there he stood, frozen in place with the little-wrapped box in his hand. When he finally got over the shock, it was Stryker's turn to anguish over the fact Rose was gone. I guess you could say I was thankful to the Starlight Gods for uniting

him with the other boys. I don't think I could have handled seeing him like that for much longer. I didn't like the fact they were called at such a young age to take on such an important mission, but it was what Ryder and the other boys needed. Now that you've returned and are well, I've seen the difference in him. Especially, after you woke up," she finished.

I blinked, unable to stop a tear from rolling down my cheek. *He loved me so deeply back then, too?*

She stood up, walked around to my side, before standing at my side. I turned to face her before her hands held my face; her thumb rubbed away the tear that escaped my watery eyes.

"My son has adored you from the moment his eyes gazed upon you that fateful day. I've seen the way he looks at you and know exactly when something is bothering him that involves you. Even after all these cycles apart, your chemistry still holds in both you and Rose. You could only imagine how amusing it was to see your little display yesterday in the hall. I've never seen my maids so afraid since Ryder burned half the castle down when he was ten," she admitted.

He burned the castle? I'd have to ask him about that.

"But...why is your husband trying to find a partner for him?" I whispered.

"I think it's his way of distracting him...between you and me, I think he believes if Ryder finds another partner to love he'd move on and focus on home. They're not as close as they used to be," she whispered, frowning.

"I don't think he'd like me," I mumbled, wondering how the King of Minato looked. From all the information I'd gathered, he seemed like a strict man who wouldn't tolerate certain behavior.

"Hah. My big, old, teddy bear is nothing to fear. He's simply rough around the edges, but he has a big heart. I know it's hard to see at first glance compared to your Father, but trust me, he cares about his son's happiness and he'd be a fool to ignore the change in Ryder since you were rescued and

awakened,” she admitted, smiling down at me before her arms pulled me into a hug.

I froze, shocked at her sudden gesture.

“Regardless of my husband’s future attempts to try and intimidate you, realize that I support your relationship with my son. Besides, Ryder’s too serious all the time. I wish he took more of my playful side. He’s going to get wrinkles if he keeps constantly having such a serious face,” she joked, but tightened her embrace.

I hugged her back, allowing my tears to fall. “Thank you for raising such a wonderful man,” I whispered.

“Thank you, Makoto for loving everything about my boy. I know he isn’t perfect and is dealing with his own demons, but his intentions are pure, and he’d do anything to make you happy.” She pulled away, a tear rolled down her cheek.

“It’s not even seven in the morning and I’ve made my boyfriend’s mother cry. The horror.” I giggled.

“You mean future mother-in-law, I hope.” She winked before laughing at my gawking expression. I suddenly remembered about the others.

“Um...weird question, but how about if I end up loving more than one man?” My voice was small, filled with hesitation as I looked at the floor.

“Oh sweetie, you mean the other boys? Don’t fret over such human-like morals. Maybe it’s because I’m more in tune with my spirit, but I don’t care about you having multiple mates. With the way Stryker and Azriel fight, I doubt those two would give you up, especially if Azriel has a liking for you. Add that with Elyion and Ryuu and I’d foresee a declaration of war,” she explained.

“What about Kai?” I inquired, curious as to whether he’d react or not.

“Kai would win by default if he participated. All he needs to do is pull out the list of favors those boys have collected and you’re his. My son would probably cheat and use his dark

flames to revoke him. He has a competitive side to him which he gets from his Father. They both hate losing.”

All these favors. I'd love to hear all the stories behind these apparent favors the boys owe him.

She shook her head as she approached the oven, taking the oven gloves to pull out my chocolate muffins.

“The timer hasn’t gone—” I began before the little white timer began to ring, shaking in place.

She pressed the button, silencing the annoying sound before placing the muffin tray next to the others to cool; the steam rose as the sweet, chocolate scent sailed across the room; my nose involuntarily took a big whiff.

Yum.

“I used to cook for five never full shifters. A headache I tell you.”

“Let me guess; Ryder and Daniel playing around, while Marcus laughed at everything, Elias the only one paying attention and Kai sitting in the corner drawing everything out.”

“You know your knights well,” she complimented.

“Your Majest—”

“Please, call me Violet. Such titles are so overused here. Nice to have a change of pace from a young shifter. Everyone else is too afraid to act out. Makes life so boring,” she complained, sighing.

“I could only imagine. You can call me Mako. Um...I have one more question.” I stood up to face her; my face grew serious.

She raised an eyebrow, noticing my change in expression.

“You can ask me anything. What would you like to know?” she encouraged.

“Why does Ryder believe emotions are a weakness?” I questioned with a stern voice.

Violet opened her mouth to answer when another voice interrupted.

“Because a leader doesn’t need such a weakness as emotions bringing him down.”

We both turned to the entrance way, a tall, bulky man entered the room.

From the power leaking off his large, built structure to his dark purple eyes, I could guarantee that the older man before me was King Carter of Minato.

He was six-seven, looking like a giant compared to my height. He had short, black hair combed fashionably to the side and his short, black beard had hints of grey. He only had a few wrinkles where his laugh lines were, appearing older than the queen, who didn’t look older than forty cycles. He wore a simple, black top and black pants, and no shoes as he approached us.

He wasn’t sporting a simple, gold crown like I’d imagined, but I guessed with his overpowering aura, you’d be a complete fool if you couldn’t guess he was the King.

“And you must be the shifter who caused that nuisance to pee all over my floor. I had to get the maids to scrub it before it dried, and the stench couldn’t be removed. I’ll admit, I’m impressed,” he commented reaching his wife’s side.

“Or you can admit that it was the most entertaining showdown you’ve seen in rotations. I saw you struggling. Hiding from that annoying man, like a child. If it wasn’t for the presence of her uncle, you would have laughed your head off.” Violet smirked before leaning on her tiptoes to kiss her husband who didn’t hesitate to return the gesture, giving her a serene smile as they wished each other good morning.

“He really loves her,” Midnight whispered, emerging in the back of my mind. He truly does love her. You can see it in his eyes and the way he smiles.

Violet burst out laughing as the King blushed.

“It seems that habit hasn’t left you,” Violet praised.

“Uh...did I have it when I was younger?” I questioned, slightly embarrassed by my outspoken thought.

“Yes. Not as frequent, but you did openly state once that one of the Royals was ugly and in desperate need of a shower to rid his yucky smell.”

I groaned pinching my nose. *Why me?*

The King cleared his throat, reminding me of my question.

“Thanks for the compliment...I think. In regard to your previous statement, I disagree.” I looked towards him, standing my ground though his power gave me the urge to quiver in the corner.

When I’d met Winterlya, I knew she was powerful, but she’d kept her aura on lockdown, only a glimpse of it leaked out when she’d cast the spell to awaken Midnight. But with the King, he didn’t just let his energy leak, he purposely boasted it in waves. I don’t know if he did it on purpose or not, but I was struggled to keep my body from shivering.

He noticed my struggle, smiling before taking a step forward as a challenge – one I was ready to face even if it was a foolish act of defiance. I had spent too many cycles backing down; I made a vow to myself that I wouldn’t do that again, for anyone.

I bit my lip standing my ground, Midnight edged closer to my mind as we both gazed up at him. His eyes widened for a brief moment before he smiled.

“You aren’t an ordinary shifter are you, young one?”

“Of course not. Ordinary is boring. I’m unique and one of a kind,” I boasted, confidently.

A hearty, baritone laugh soared through the kitchen; my eyes widened, glancing at Violet who looked just as shocked by his sudden laughter.

“I can see why my son has an interest in you. You’re still the spunky, outspoken child from all those cycles ago. You still remind me of Arthur; though, your defiant nature must be

from Catherine.” He chuckled before giving me a light smile as his aura retreated.

My tense shoulders relaxed, Midnight retreated from my mind. It was becoming stuffy with all this power.

“I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Alexander Carter, King of Minato and Ryder’s father. It’s a pleasure to meet you...” He introduced himself before trailing off.

“Makoto. Makoto Heart. Uh...my given name is Rosalina, but I like Mako better. The pleasure is all mine, your Majesty,” I said bowing.

“Rise Makoto. Bowing is so over-rated,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

“I told her that,” Violet commented.

“I’m going to ban everyone in Heila from bowing. It really is bothersome,” I agreed before we all laughed.

“What’s your opinion on emotions then, Makoto?” he proposed; his voice grew serious once more, but withheld his power.

“I think emotions make individuals stronger. I don’t see it as a weakness. Sure, there are different levels of emotion and depending upon the situation, they could be seen as a weakness. But, I don’t think that is enough for them to be considered a weakness altogether. It’s our emotions that drive us. It’s our emotions that motivate us to do good or battle evil. Or even to become evil. But, it’s those same emotions in some that give them the strength to get up and put on a crown and lead their people, who love them. It’s those same emotions that help a father teach a son how to become the best man he could possibly be. How to become a great ruler and follow in his footsteps, even if he has some really big shoes to fill. The Starlight gods gave us such feelings and those emotions to help us grow as individuals. I don’t think it should be frowned upon. To say that one man’s emotions shaped him to become evil and that is why emotions should be seen as a weakness, isn’t a valid reason. Or to say that one man’s emotions are what caused him to lose his life or the lives of others and that

is why emotions should be seen as a weakness, isn't a valid reason. Because then it would be the reason that someone could look at you and say that the love you feel for your wife, for your son, and for your people makes you a weak man. And that's not what I see when I look at you. And it's definitely not what I see when I look at your son. So, I disagree with your teachings and think your son would be a glorious king one day using the gift the Starlight gods have bestowed on him," I lectured.

Ryder had explained to me his gift – his ability to sense the emotions of others, especially the other knights. I knew it was difficult for him to sort through and control the emotions that filtered through him on a daily basis.

I could tell that he struggled between controlling his own emotions and not allowing them to be affected by the others. But I didn't care, I was here for him through the good and the bad and I would remain here for him for as long as the Starlight gods allowed.

We stood there in silence; my words lingered in the air. I was tempted to fidget in place, but fought the urge, needing to make my point clear.

I felt a pair of arms embrace me from behind, the intoxicating, rose scent greeted me as my back pressed against a firm, broad chest.

I looked up, those bright, purple eyes gazed down at me; those devilish lips giving off a prideful smile.

"I agree. Emotions can either push you to success or lead you to your downfall. It's up to the individual to decide, the gods as their witnesses. I won't think of such blessings as a hindrance anymore," he whispered before his face lowered – his lips met mine as we kissed.

He pulled away, grinning from ear to ear.

"Sure, just make-out in front of your in-laws. You're so good at first impressions," Midnight praised, her dull, bored tone filled with sarcasm as my eyes widened, and my face burned.

I looked back at the King who appeared stunned and the Queen whose shoulders shook as she suppressed another laugh.

“I – um – dammit Ryder!” I cursed, turning in his embrace to slap his chest in embarrassment.

He laughed, as I continued to hit his chest.

“This isn’t funny! Stop laughing.”

“Yes, it is, your face is beet red,” he continued.

Violet’s laughter echoed as she lost the battle she had fought, joining in with the teasing. “Someone was lost in the spur of the moment.”

“Ah! So embarrassing.” I placed my head against his chest. I attempted to hide as I prayed to the gods to suddenly disappear.

“Definitely a breath of fresh air. Well, seeing all this food is making me hungry. Shall we set breakfast up?” Alexander announced with a satisfied smile.

“OH! The egg soufflés should be ready! Ryder let go.” I pushed out of his embrace before I raced to the second oven, quickly slipping on the oven gloves as I opened it to retrieve the goodies.

“Honey, Ryder. Why don’t you guys go set the table? Mako and I will finish up here.” She gestured grabbing her apron off the hook. Ryder eyed me, his eyes landing on the apron I wore – his apron.

I huffed at the smug smile that formed on his face before he turned to face his father who’d been eyeing his wife.

They both made their way out of the room, my ears perked up as I concentrated on their conversation.

“I guess I’ve been a bit harsh on you. I’m glad you’ve met someone who loves you whole heartedly,” Alexander admitted; his voice low made it hard for me to pick up.

“It’s fine Dad...as long as you stop with this absurd game of trying to find me a wife.” He pointed out.

“I didn’t think it would gather such foolish, low ranking shifters. You’re my son and deserve better.”

I wanted to continue listening, but didn’t want to intrude any longer till a hand slipped in mine and tugged me forward, Violet’s finger pressed against her lips, signalling me to be quiet.

I nodded as we reached the doorway before peeking out to the dining room, Ryder and Alexander faced each other.

“I...aren’t you disappointed?” Ryder whispered, his pained tone hurt my heart.

“Disappointed? My only son has worked his butt off these past sixteen cycles to find the woman he loves with his fellow knights, while balancing your mission and all tasks I’ve given you thus far. You even brought that feisty woman, who is the perfect person to spice things up in the castle. I know you may assume that we have harsh feelings towards you due to Anya’s kidnapping...but that was out of your control Ryder. Your mother and I will always love you and be proud of the man you’ve become. I don’t want you looking down on your gift. I want you to realize it may sometimes be a weakness to you, but it can be your strength, just as Makoto emphasized. Understand?” He stood there with pride as he stared down at Ryder whose eyes became glossy, looking away before nodding.

Alexander stepped forward, ruffling Ryder’s hair before pulling him into a hug.

“You will always be my son and bring joy and change to our realm. We will support you no matter what, so keep your head up high, my son. The Princess can always slap some sense into you if you need it,” he joked as he patted Ryder’s back.

I hadn’t realized tears overflowed from my eyes and onto the floor as I watched the loving scene between a father and his son. Violet rubbed my back, pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to me. I glanced back at her, those purple orbs filled with tears as she smiled at me.

“Thank you, Makoto,” she whispered, pulling me into a hug.

I finally knew how it felt to be accepted by family; the warmth felt as inviting as the sunlight that guided me home.

Thank you, Starlight gods, for allowing me to experience this moment. May their wounds heal, and they look forward to a better future, their trust lying within you. In stars, we trust.

CHAPTER 29



I reluctantly pulled my eyes away from the page I sketched on, my hand urged me to finish the image of the brunette, blue-eyed shifter who was pinned down by the blonde girl, their lips just an inch apart.

“Elyion will kill you if he realizes you ended up drawing that.”

I smirked at my phoenix’s prediction. I didn’t need my gift to know the chaos that would unfold if Elyion got a glimpse of the image. *I’m saving it for when he finally has the guts to confess to her and stops letting morals hinder him from love.*

Out of all of our tragic backstories, I sympathized with Elias and Elyion the most.

I couldn’t imagine being altered into something completely opposite, having no choice but to bear such circumstances for the rest of your life. There was the slight possibility we would find a way to fix him – return him to his original gender, but the chances were so slim that even hoping for such a miracle would be considered a waste of thought.

It was hard enough to love the same sex, but I bet he struggled with our growing attraction to Mako. Our feelings spilled into the knight bond every time she walked into the room, our bodies hummed with desire and minds craved her exotic voice.

It only made it that much harder for the fairy shifter. I merely picked on him to keep his mind from the self-doubting spiral he continued to descend into when Elias took over.

“Maybe the Princess can help him?”

I nodded, my fingers twirled the thin tip pen, anything to distract the itch to continue drawing. *I hope so. Out of all of us, he needs closure and salvation from his past.*

I wasn't one to talk; my own nightmares continued to haunt me day by day. I was glad my hobby of drawing took so much time and concentration, not giving my mind enough time to dwell on the past.

To be gifted with two skills – the ability of teleportation and foresight, yet I couldn't stop those haunting events that occurred on that cold, Lunar day. It didn't matter what path I took or event I altered, death was imminent. Yet, my conscious wouldn't let go.

“Kai.”

I shook off the dread that clung to me, attempting to pull me down into the dark abyss within my darkened soul. *I'm fine.*

I was about to return to my drawing when the entrance lock clicked, opening to reveal an exhausted angel shifter. He closed the door, dropped his bag next to our row of shoes, adding his to the line, before making his way to the living room.

“You don't need to train so hard, you know.” I pointed out, returning to my sketch.

I understood his new determination to get stronger – the guilt of what happened during the exams pushed him to maximize his skills and endurance, but if he wasn't careful, he'd reach his own magic limit and that wouldn't benefit any of us.

“I'll take the next few days off, seeing as we're going to be heading to Heila by next week, right?” he inquired, walking to the counter and filling the kettle with water. He pressed the button to begin the boiling process, reaching into the cupboard to retrieve a mug.

“Yes. Everything is set down in Heila. The day before, I'll teleport Winterlya and Karen there, just in case anything

occurs. No one knows the date in which we're arriving, but it's better to be safe than sorry. The element of surprise would benefit us in this case," I explained; my hand withdrew from the picture before twirling the pen again.

The sketch was detailed enough for me to create a larger form of the image. I'd probably get a chance to start it when we returned to Heila, since most of my paints and equipment were located in my studio there.

"So, in less than a week we'll be outta here, huh. Glad to be returning home." He sighed as he pulled his glasses off, placing them on the counter.

"You should carry a case with you. If that pair goes missing you can't blame anyone," I suggested.

"Can't blame anyone? We all know the primary culprit of my ten missing pairs. Do fairies like shiny glasses or something?" he quizzed, hinting his annoyance as the kettle began to whistle.

"Maybe. You just make it so easy, leaving them there. Also, Marcus said he talked to his friend. We can head to Earthala for three or four days. I think we should take up his offer. Mako and Midnight would be thrilled."

I could already envision her excitement, her eyes glittering with happiness as she jumped in place; the image was so vivid I realized it was a vision rather than my imagination. *I'd better draw that later.*

"About Midnight..." Daniel began, but hesitated.

I looked up from my page, eyeing him intently as I waited for him to continue. He didn't, but opened the green tea packet, and placed the bag in the mug, before he poured in the boiling water.

"Are you still troubled over her disliking you? You shouldn't take it to heart," I emphasized, not liking the vibe I was getting from him.

Ryder was already dealing with Anya's death anniversary and probably faced his family as we speak. I was at least glad

Makoto was with him to ease his mourning. She'd be able to lighten the mood in that dreadful castle.

"You worry too much."

We both glanced over to a half-naked Marcus, who walked into the room wearing sapphire cotton boxers; his chest bare.

"Just cause Mako's not here doesn't mean you can walk around naked you know." I shook my head, noticing his tired eyes. *He probably hasn't even realized.*

"What?" he asked before looking down, frowning.

"Well, fuck. My bad, Ryuu didn't tell me I wasn't wearing pants. Thanks a lot, partner in crime." He groaned, his face scrunched at whatever Ryuu's response was.

"Anyways, stop trifling over such a matter. Midnight probably has her reasons as to why she doesn't like Archangels like yourself or angels in general. Who knows? It's not our place to ask until she's ready. Just bear with her," I summarized before another image slipped into my mind – Midnight's angry, tear stricken face before she walked off.

I let out a groan, my hand rubbed my eyes. *What the fuck?*

Marcus was at my side in a second, his hand rested on my shoulder.

"Kai, you okay?" He questioned, his voice filled with concern.

"Ya...I'm fine. Daniel, don't push her. I get you don't like being disliked or looked down upon, but Midnight and Mako aren't Claire," I commanded, my hand markings dimmed as my foresight calmed.

I took a few more calming breaths; my body felt a tad weak before I recovered, keeping a mental note to sketch out the image later.

"I know she's not or I guess they aren't. But...never mind. I'm going to bed." He grabbed his mug of tea and went straight to the stairs.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. *Fuck, should have kept it to myself.*

“Don’t worry about Daniel. He’ll hopefully listen. You know he hates when we bring up Claire.” Marcus patted my shoulder before taking his seat on his stool.

“The image I saw doesn’t give me much reassurance. It will probably change now that I told him, but it still bothers me. I just don’t want him going down the self-doubt train. You know how badly it affects Ryder with a slight imbalance, let alone him losing control. Ryder’s still recovering from Elias’ and Eli’s feeling overload, before all the planning he’s been doing for today.”

“I feel you. We can’t afford to have a slip up right now. I just want the remaining days to go smoothly, so we can go home.” Marcus ruffled his hair in frustration.

A beep sounded off before the door opened, Eli walked in; her eyes looked up to us before she gave a slight smile.

I frowned at her weak appearance. She looked like she’d been to war and returned from the raging battle.

“You look exhausted.” Marcus frowned.

“I’m fine. Karen had to do some tests and stuff. Nothing huge. There’s only a small detection of poison left, so I should be back to one-hundred percent when we reach Heila,” she explained, walking towards us.

I didn’t like her pale complexion, unnatural from her usual vibrant skin.

“Elyion,” I sternly called out. She smiled back at me which gave me red, flashing signals. She hated when I called her Elyion. She would rather punch me in the throat than smile at me.

“You’re going to bed,” Marcus declared. She shook her head.

“Um...I don’t want to be alone,” she whispered, avoiding our gaze and staring at the pair of glasses on the counter. She

reached out and picked them up, analyzing the spectacles which we both knew was a distraction.

I looked at Marcus before nodding.

“I’ll stay with you until Marcus comes back from his run,” I mumbled.

She looked at me with wide eyes for a moment before nodding, a relief filled smile formed on her lips. “Thanks, Kai,” she whispered.

“Just because we don’t get along all the time doesn’t mean I don’t care, EliaseAnne,” I reminded her, using his female name to demonstrate my seriousness.

“I know,” she replied before putting the glasses on. She frowned, looking around the room.

“Where’s Daniel? It’s not fun to take his glasses unless he’s here.”

We both sighed, which was enough to keep the frown on Elyion’s lips.

“What happened? Is Daniel okay?” she pressed.

“He hasn’t lost control in the feels department. Ryder and Mako should be home before sundown. But...he’s comparing Midnight to the Claire situation,” I announced.

“What? How? That...it has no relation at all. Didn’t you say he used his gift with Mako’s permission? What could possibly be bothering him now?”

“He’s afraid to hurt her, and Midnight’s apparent dislike isn’t making it easy for him to ignore such fears.”

Eli crossed her arms over her chest before glaring.

“Midnight has her own history and it’s none of Daniel’s concern nor is he in the position to ask. If she doesn’t like him there’s nothing he can do till she or Makoto tells us why. Even if she does disclose such information I don’t think it would help. Daniel needs to stop using other people as an excuse and face that haunting guilt,” Eli ranted.

Marcus and I nodded in agreement.

“We have to get Ryder to talk to him before he goes over the edge.”

“I wish he’d stop pushing us away and depend on us more.” Eli commented before sighing, wobbling on her feet.

We both rushed to her side, holding her steady.

“Sorry. As much as I’d love to continue this pressing matter I think I should lie down,” Eli apologized.

We nodded before Marcus helped her to her room, stopping midway to pick her up and carry her the rest of the way.

“The medical centre still has such a strong effect on her? Does she still get panic attacks?” My phoenix questioned.

I walked back to the counter, closing my sketchbook and putting it under my arm as I made my way to her room. *Not yet, but I’m concerned. She needs a break from that place. I think it would help her get back to normal.*

“She needs closure. King Heart’s investigating better provide some answers soon, or we’ll just have to take things into our own hands.”

I got a face cloth, soaked it in cold water and squeezed out the excess water before walking down the hall and up the stairs.

Marcus walked out of the room, his facial expression just as upset.

“She’s warming up. If it goes higher than her normal call Daniel. I’m still going with tomorrow’s plans so can you please keep an eye on her. Even if she shifts back to Elias, he may have a less intense response,” he warned.

“I know. I’ll keep an eye on both of them, and call for Daniel if anything,” I reassured him.

“I wish everything just levels out after today. Too much is going on,” he mumbled.

I patted his back.

“It will. I don’t see anything stopping us from reaching Heila. Things will work themselves out. Ryder will be back to himself when he returns later today and after your playdate tomorrow we’ll pack and head down to Earthala for the remaining days before we head to Heila. I think we all just need a break and it would be a perfect opportunity. Makoto would love it, too.” The image of her excitement returned to my mind; my fingers craved to draw it out.

“Ya. I just...I’ve been having a weird gut feeling. That’s why I’m a little concerned, but if you don’t foresee anything, I won’t worry myself. Thanks, Kai. I’ll make sure to check for those sketchbooks with the tracing paper,” he promised. He gave me a quick man hug and walked away.

I walked into Eli’s room, closing the door gently before turning to see her sleeping figure. I placed my sketchbook on the desk that was pressed against the wall in the corner, next to the two, large bookshelves filled with her manga collection.

I knelt down next to her bed, placing the cool cloth against her forehead. She moaned lightly, but relaxed, falling into deep slumber.

I got up to grab my sketchbook, ready to sit down.

“Papa...I’m sorry. I’ll try again...”

I closed my eyes, turning to face the fairy shifter, Eli’s mumbling continued.

“Sorry for failing...always...fail. Try again,” she mumbled before stirring.

I opened my eyes, grabbed my notebook and walked back to the bedside, sitting down before opening my book on a fresh page.

I allowed my hand to reach out and hold hers while my right hand began to sketch away.

Her tense body relaxed, my thumb soothingly rubbed her palm, her breathing calmed once more.

Just a few more days...everything will be back to normal and our Princess will be home.

CHAPTER 30

Daniel

“I hate you, Mommy! I wish you’d disappear!”
“DANIEL!”

SLAP

I stood there speechless, my hand slowly covering my stinging, red cheek.

“You can’t go saying things like that Daniel! How many times have I warned you of your gift! You know what, I’m done. That stupid wench should come and take her pathetic children! Why do I have to be burdened with such misgivings?”

“You’re my mommy...I’m sorry. Don’t go.” I tried to reach out for her hand, but she pulled away like I was a poisonous insect.

“Don’t you dare touch me! You should just die.”

Die...Death? Why do I have to die? I didn’t do anything. Why does mommy say such mean things to me? I want Michael. Michael loves me. I hate mommy. Mommy doesn’t love me. I wish mommy would disappear. GO AWAY.

I clenched my small fist as the tears rolled down my cheeks. I noticed mommy begin to stagger before she turned, walking towards the balcony.

“Mommy, wait. Don’t go.” I looked at her figure walking to the balcony.

“Michael!” I called out for my older brother, afraid to be left alone as I began to wail.

Dad and Michael rushed into the room, Michael by my side in seconds.

“Daniel? Wha –“

“CLAIRE!” A loud voice boomed through the room.

I shot up, panting as I squeezed the sheets beneath me.

“Daniel.”

I quickly calmed myself, Azriel’s voice loud enough to snap me out of my panic. I couldn’t wake Ryder now.

Something tugged at the sheets. I turned my head to see Makoto, who was huddled in my yellow comforter. Her eyes opened slowly before she glanced up at me.

She looked confused for a few moments before she sat up, tilting her head at me.

“Daniel? What’s wrong?”

Was it wrong for me to feel happy about her concern for me? Her voice a clear indication of such worries. Her hand brushed against my sweaty face before she leaned up and kissed me gently on the lips.

I pulled away. My mind reeled from the dream. She looked confused before frowning. I shook my head.

“Sorry, I just had a silly dream. Don’t look so worried.”

“Daniel...are you sure everything’s okay? You– “ She began before I leaned forward, kissing her.

I couldn’t stand that hurtful expression on her face – my previous reaction to her attempt of comforting me being the culprit.

I needed to get shit together...or I’d lose her, too.

Once my mind was satisfied, I pulled away, but my body still drummed with excitement; my cock grew hard as I took a second to enjoy the view; Mako in a loose, white shirt that slanted to one side, the fabric so thin I could see the detailing of her bra and dipped so low, I could see her cleavage.

I licked my lips, my body wanted to feast on those bountiful breasts and hear her moan my name, but I pushed such desires to the back of my mind.

“I’m fine Makoto. Come here,” I commanded, my voice low.

Her eyes widened as her face began to blush, but she listened to my request, crawling into my arms as I held her tightly.

I liked how my voice had an effect on her. It was better than my gift – the fear of me accidentally using it on her tugged at my mind.

I was well aware of what my voice could do. Although, it pained me so to feel as though I kept her at a distance; I couldn’t do to her what had happened before. I need to be careful with her. For so long she lived with someone commanding her every move, manipulating her emotions...I couldn’t do that, couldn’t risk hurting her that way.

No other words were exchanged as we laid there; my mind tried to calm after that vivid dream while my body tried to come down from its attraction.

Having the woman I lusted over draped across my body, didn’t help solve my internal struggle, but it calmed me.

It wasn’t long till her breathing slowed; her body relaxed in my arms. I sighed, kissing her lightly on her cheek before reaching out for the covers, tucking us both in.

I stared at the ceiling, my mind wandering – the image of Midnight’s face as she glared at me.

“Daniel. Let. It. Go. You know it won’t end well if you keep worrying about such things. Once we reach Heila we can talk with Mako and Midnight. Understood?” Azriel stressed; his voice gave off a hint of anger.

I closed my eyes, not wanting to answer him, but knew he wouldn’t leave me in peace to enjoy this quiet moment with the woman I cared dearly about but struggled to show my love.

Fine.

CHAPTER 31

Makoto

I pulled on the black leather pants, the sleek material glided up my thighs with ease as the gold zippers on the front pockets flashed in the sunlight that peeked through the window.

My hand pulled up the gold zipper, fastening the button, before I noticed the gap in the waist.

I sighed.

"You seriously have an issue with not eating. No wonder we were forced to eat three times a day or you'd be a stick," Rose commented.

My spirits had been pretty quiet lately, relaxing in their designated spots in my mind and not commenting as often as they loved. With the addition of Midnight, I assumed they didn't want to get riled up, not knowing how it would affect me.

I fastened the sapphire and black laced bra, adjusting it to hold my lady bits in place, the black rhinestones glittering.

Yes, I know. Eli and Elias aren't feeling well and are resting so I'll take some cookies before I go.

"Chocolate chip cookies aren't food." Midnight emerged from nowhere, startling Rose and me.

"Seriously Midnight, why can't we sense you? It would be nice to have a warning before you jump in here," Rose questioned.

"Don't know."

“Jeez. Maybe the library in Heila will have some history of your kind.” Rose mumbled before disappearing.

Heila library. Guess it wouldn't hurt and cookies are definitely a source of energy.

“They make you hyper. That's it,” Midnight retorted.

I pulled open my designated drawer, taking out the dark blue top. It looked more expensive, the V neck having a gold zipper while the sleeves were styled to be folded with a gold button holding it in place. It was giving me the crop top vibes, but an elegant version of the Earthala trend.

Do you want a cookie or not?

Silence

“I want three.”

I smirked before a giggle escaped me. Deal. Three hyper-inducing, chocolate chip cookies for Midnight.

“Thank you.” She disappeared before I could reply.

I was ready to put my top on when the door opened, my head turned to see Daniel walk in. My eyes scanned his body; water droplets dripped from his wet hair and fell onto his bare chest, gliding down to the black sweat pants he was wearing.

I bit my lip and attempted to ignore my sudden need for the angel shifter. I returned my gaze upward, noticing Daniel's hooded gaze; his eyes trailed my body from head to toe before returning and landing on my chest.

I silently cursed, realizing I hadn't put my top on, my breasts in the fitted bra on display. I turned away, slipping the top on quickly before fanning at my face, hoping I wouldn't be tomato red by now.

“Going somewhere?” he questioned. The sound of the door closing followed. I turned back to face him.

“Ya. Marcus said he wants to pick up a few things in town and asked me if I wanted to tag along,” I explained, overjoyed at having some quality time with my dragon shifter.

I felt like we hadn't been hanging out much. I struggled to figure out how I could possibly share myself with all of them.

I'd promised to have time with Daniel, and I'd yet to fulfill the commitment, focusing my time with Ryder and mending things with Elias and Eli. Today would be for Marcus, and maybe, I'd get to have time with Daniel and Kai before we headed back to Heila.

"Oh. Okay." He gave me a light smile, the gesture didn't reach his gold eyes which made my heart drop.

"Daniel." I used my serious tone, needing answers. I noticed his body tensed up by the change in my tone, but his face returned to a blank expression. "Are you positive nothing's going on? I mean...are we...we're okay, right? I know we haven't gotten much time together, but..." I trailed off, biting my lip.

I didn't think any excuse would help whatever was going on with him. I just wanted him to rely on me. He was hurting, I just didn't understand why.

"I'm fine" he replied.

"Lie."

I felt my shoulders sink as I frowned at his response, Hope's sing-song voice whispering in my mind – the one word was laced with anger.

Why would he lie?

He opened his mouth, but his eyes began to glow, the golden glow dimmed slightly, but stayed in place – Azriel took over.

He walked towards me, standing before me in five steps. His hand brushed against my cheek as he stared down at me.

"Good morning Princess. Don't look so sad. It hurts me to see you in such dismay." His angelic flowing voice helped calm my anxiety that had begun to build within me.

"Daniel...just lied. He never lies, not to me anyways. He's been so distant lately. I don't know what to do anymore. He won't talk to me...or the others. Is there something I'm

missing? Is it about the Midnight thing? Does he want an explanation? Does he hate us...does he not like me anymore?" I rambled, the words that pooled in my mind came out as I confessed my fears to the angel before me.

He let out a heavy sigh before pulling me into a warm embrace.

"Princess, please. Don't think like that. Daniel is dealing with something from his past. He still cares about you and knows you and the others want to help. He just needs to sort it out, okay?" he reassured me, pulling back to look at me.

I nodded, his words didn't help the sadness within me.

"They're all the same."

The words echoed in my mind.

Midnight...

I felt so frustrated with the overall situation. I knew Midnight's dislike for Daniel was taking a toll on me – affecting the way I felt for him. He didn't deserve to be judged so quickly, yet I struggled with the triangle of emotions between us, the tension palpable.

When will this end?

"Makoto. May I have a word?" Hope requested softly.

I closed my eyes, giving her the reigns. I was done with worrying about this issue for today. I wanted to enjoy the day with Marcus. I'd deal with this tomorrow.

I allowed the darkness to take me away.

~HOPE~

"Princess?" Azriel's concern filled voice greeted me as I opened my eyes.

I looked up at him; his eyes grew wide for a moment before a wide smile formed on those tempting lips of his.

“Hope.” The way my name rolled off his tongue made my heart skip a beat as I smiled back at him.

“Azriel.”

We stood there for a moment before he sighed.

“I’m sorry on Daniel’s behalf. I know lying is one of our pet peeves.”

“I get it. But, I will tell you that Daniel has to make up his mind of what he wants from Mako which includes Midnight. Just because she’s a spirit now, doesn’t mean her acceptance of him doesn’t count. Mako takes Midnight’s opinion seriously and somehow Midnight’s feelings affect Mako’s mood the strongest compared to all of us. There are just so many unanswered questions that are collecting in her mind and we don’t have time to answer them till we get back to Heila. If he can’t share what’s troubling him, he should not assume Midnight will be as forthcoming with hers.”

As Mako’s spirits, we knew her and Midnight’s likes and dislikes. Some may alter here and there, but trust was something when lost, would be difficult to earn back. They may have been lenient to Eli and Elias, but I doubt the same treatment would be given to Daniel.

“I understand.”

I was ready to leave but a question popped into my head.

“Are...you still interested in me?” I asked hesitantly, my voice low as if I sang a sad melody.

We’d barely seen each other, let alone had time for a long conversation, having only a few minutes during Mako’s and Daniel’s morning hair sessions to come out and say hello. I enjoyed his company and little quotes of wisdom. But with everything happening with our hosts, I worried he too wasn’t confident in whatever was brewing between us.

His hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me against him before his other hand lifted my chin; those tempting lips pressed against mine.

I moaned as we deepened the kiss; my hand pressed against his bare chest, wanting to feel his muscles. He pulled away, chuckling.

“What?” I questioned as I tried to stabilize my rapid breathing.

“I’d love to devour those smooth lips as I pin you to a wall, but an annoying dragon shifter is nagging me that you’re late for their date.”

“Oh snap! I better get Mako.” I was ready to call out to her before his grip tightened around me. I looked up at him in confusion.

“You get distracted like the Princess.”

“I do not.” I argued before realizing I’d lied, his eyebrow inching up.

“Ugh. Fine. A little.” I confessed.

He placed a kiss on my cheek before inching away slightly.

“I’m very interested in you, Hopefilinia. Till next time.” He pulled away, bowing before turning around and walking away.

“He’s confident in his love for you,” Midnight mentioned quietly.

I know...and dangerous to be around too long. I wouldn’t be able to ignore any request he presented with that seductive, melodic voice.

I glanced at the standing mirror to my left, seeing my flushed face. I groaned. *Fudge.*

“Dangerous indeed,” Midnight concluded.

CHAPTER 32



“Is this a bicycle? Like the song from Queen that you want to ride?”

I stared at the metallic blue and silver contraption with immense fascination as my hand reached out to touch it; the cool metal made me shiver with anticipation.

“It’s a motorcycle. You can ride it just like the bicycle from the song, but it has an engine like Matthew’s car. So, no need to pedal our way fifty kilometers to town,” he explained.

I looked over his appearance for the thirtieth time, licking my lips as I hid my hands against my back, fighting off the urge to let them rub all over him.

He wore leather pants similar to mine. His fitted navy-blue shirt was snug against his muscular, broad chest and clung to his slim waist, a large skull on the front in black and white. The bottom half of the shirt had rips and tears on purpose to give a rugged appearance. Topped off with the leather jacket that had gold zippers and matched my pant design; he looked smoking hot.

He’d trimmed his beard to small stubble, but left his long hair intact, the wild mess hanging way past his biceps and down his back. I watched as he pulled a hair tie off his wrist before tying up his hair and miraculously making it into a sexy man bun, the entire process was in slow motion to my mind as I gaped at him. He didn’t understand what effect he had on my body.

He walked forward before pulling me into a side embrace, looking down at me as I blinked out of my daze, a pleased

smile on his lips.

“Am I distracting you?” he quizzed

“You’re hot in leather,” I admitted, surprised by my flirtatious tone.

When did I become so flirty with Marcus?

“Ryuu rubbing off on you.” Lexi entered my mind, yawning. I noticed how quiet they’ve been.

You guys sure have been sleeping a lot.

“Yeah. We’re taking a break from bothering you non-stop. Don’t get comfortable though. We’ll return to full power once we reach Heila,” Lexi teased, fading away before I could argue.

Ugh, evil I say.

He gave me a kiss, his hand slid down to my ass, gripping it gently as I moaned into his mouth.

“We won’t get anywhere if you tempt me like that Firefly,” he admitted against my lips before pulling away, walking over to the front of the bike to retrieve two shell-like things with a strap and a glass front.

“What are those?” I asked, tilting my head.

They reminded me of the protection device, the picture book showed a shifter wearing when he rode a bicycle for the first time.

“These, are helmets. We have to wear them when we ride this type of vehicle for our safety. Just in case we lose control and slide or fly off the bike,” he proposed.

My eyes grew wide.

“Flying off? Are we going to fly off?” I questioned, horrified. Why would you ride a machine that flings you off?

Please don’t tell me these are those silly rollercoasters that humans think are fun.

Marcus laughed, my inner monologue clearly becoming outer as his shoulders shook.

“No, Firefly. This motorcycle is as safe as a car. It’s the driver who determines whether you’re going to fly off or not,” he explained. He leaned down and licked my sensitive spot on my neck, before whispering in my ear.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe and sound,” he promised.

The sexual tension would kill me if this continued.

He stepped back and placed the helmets on the seat before picking up a gift bag that was hidden behind the motorcycle.

“What’s that?” I questioned, eyeing the pink, sparkling bag.

“It’s for you. Seeing as the Starlight gods wanted us to dress alike for today, I think this will be the icing on the cake.” He presented me the bag; my hands grasped it before my eyes inspected it.

I reached into it; a smooth, textured material met my hands before I pulled the item out.

I squealed before opening it up to get a better look at it.

“A LEATHER JACKET! Oh my Starlight! It’s exactly like yours!!! We match! Can we take a picture?” I couldn’t hold back my excitement, lifting the jacket in the air as if it was a gift from the gods themselves.

He gave me a sleek smile before helping me put it on. The jacket fit me perfectly.

“Perfect. I’m glad you like it Firefly, and yes, we can take as many pictures as you like.” He pulled out his phone before pulling me into his side as he smiled up at the camera.

We took a few pictures; Marcus took some singles of me next to his motorcycle stating he wanted it as his wallpaper. I didn’t know how he’d get my picture on his wall, but I didn’t question such dynamics.

I was already pumped to be sitting on his motorcycle, my helmet securely on my head as I tightened my grip around his waist; my body pressed against his back.

“Is this your only ride?” I questioned, wondering if he had a car like Matthew.

“Nah baby. My other ride is a dragon.”

I laughed, shaking my head at his fair statement.

Dragons totally rule.

The motorbike roared to life, the vibrations between my legs sent chills up my body as Marcus twisted the throttle lightly, the roar exhilarating. He peered over his shoulder, a wicked smile across his face.

“Firefly, you ready? I drive fast so make sure you cling to me.” He yelled over the loud noise.

“Yes. I’m safe with my dragon,” I happily replied as I laid my head on his back, preparing myself.

He squeezed my hands that were around his waist before it returned to the silver handle and gripped it, his leg lifted off the ground as we began to move.

I practically squealed as we began slow, leaving the garage on the side of the house to the entrance path.

“I’m going to speed up now, Mako,” he warned me.

I gave him an extra squeeze around his waist, encouraging him to go faster. I took a glance back at the house, a ginger haired male relaxed against the gate, a glass of brown liquid in his hand.

I summed up the courage to remove one of my hands to wave at him before we began to speed up; his figure became smaller and smaller as he waved back.

Bye-bye Kai, see you later.

* * *

“C’mon Firefly, I think we should head back. It looks like it’s going to rain.”

“Give me three more minutes, there’s one more thing I want to pick up!” I called out while looking through the aisles of the jewellery shop.

We’d spent the entire morning and afternoon shopping around the entire town.

Marcus showed me around, helped me take pictures and taught me about the different sights, giving me the background of each shop and gadget as we walked around.

We’d grabbed a ton of stuff, picking up many items to pack up and send to Heila. He didn’t know when exactly he’d go back to Earthala or get a chance to pass by the marketplace in Heila, now that they’d be returning to duty upon arrival. Therefore, he wanted to make sure we were stocked up.

He’d treated me to a variety of food, my stomach roared to the sky above upon our arrival. I’d completely forgotten to grab some cookies before leaving so Marcus bought lunch, something he called a hamburger and fries. He said he loved this restaurant because many of their dishes were based off food from Earthala.

I didn’t blame him for his excitement; the food was amazing. Midnight decided to drop by as we passed by something called a pastry shop – various cookies and other sweets displayed at the window, catching our attention.

Marcus didn’t even ask. He strolled in and came out with a bag filled with different types of cookies and sweets.

Midnight ate a handful of cookies until she decided to retreat, apologizing for interrupting our date. I didn’t mind, and it looked like Marcus didn’t mind either, looking pleased with Midnight’s appearance.

Now we were at a jewellery shop, Marcus looked for a specific stone at his friend Junho’s request. The owner was in the back checking his inventory, so I decided to walk around.

What can I get them?

I turned to the next aisle, bumping right into someone causing both of us to stumble on our feet.

“Oops! Sorry.” I quickly apologized as my eyes locked onto the female before me – her striking Tyrian eyes made me freeze in shock.

Holy Starlight!

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking. Did I scare you?” the stranger questioned; her confusion was apparent. She had black hair, which was tied in a ponytail, and was the same height as me.

I could see a glimpse of her markings which were located on her medium sized breasts; her cleavage peeked out from the purple dress she wore. She wore black combat boots and was holding a small, stylish leather backpack. She had a bag filled with craft stuff she most likely just purchased.

“Huh?”

“You said Holy Starlight.”

“OH! Sorry, I talk out loud by accident,” I apologized.

“Ah. Well, my apologies.” She bowed her head.

“No worries...what’s that in your bag?” I questioned, my eyes became distracted by the reflective coloured beads peeked from inside the open bag.

“These? They’re crystal beads! You can make crafts and stuff with them. Each colour has different powers. You can make a bracelet with one set of beads and it can heal or summon an element depending on the ones you choose. If you use a balance of multiple ones, they can do different skills as well,” she explained.

“Is it only for female shifters?” I questioned, hesitantly.

She shook her head before smiling softly, her eyes peeking over my shoulder at Marcus who was staring at his phone.

“There’s a section for boys and girls. My boss is waiting for me, so I have to leave, but I can show you real quick which ones are the best. Who are they for?”

“My...um...lover...lovers? Hmmmm, let’s just go with love interests.” I blushed, scratching my head as I let out a nervous giggle.

“Multiple interests huh. Hehehe, totally fine by me. Why choose?” She winked at me, her bright purple eyes and mischievous smile reminded me of Ryder.

She helped me pinpoint which ones to get for each of the boy’s and Eli before I thanked her.

“Um...can I ask a weird question?” I voiced softly as I picked up the basket filled with goods, ready to ask Marcus if I could buy them.

“Sure! I like weird. Normal is totally boring.” She shrugged.

I like her.

“Do you have an older brother...or siblings?” I questioned.

She gave me a sad smile.

“Nah, I’m an orphan, but I got adopted by a family in Wintalyn. I have a pretty good job that allows me to travel around the realms. I’m here for work,” she explained, solemnly.

I frowned. I’d seen a picture of Anya at her death anniversary, the little girl’s vibrant eyes, hair colour and couture of her face looking so similar to the girl before me. *Wouldn’t that be my luck if there was such a chance of her still being alive.*

“Oh. Sorry for asking such an intrusive question. You just reminded me of one of my boyfriend’s sister who went missing cycles ago.”

“That’s depressing. Hey, you never know. Maybe, she’s out there somewhere. As long as you have faith in the stars, you never know what to expect.”

I nodded giving her a genuine smile. *Too bad...she’d be a nice friend.*

“My name is Anna, but it seems everyone can’t remember the “A” at the end, so simply call me Ann. A pleasure to meet you...um,” she introduced before trailing off.

“Makoto. Everyone calls me Mako.” I introduced myself.

“Mako. I like it! Very unique.” She shook my hand.

“I know. I’m one of a kind.” I joked as we both laughed.

“I better go! I hope we get to meet again Mako!” She gave a curtsy before taking off in a sprint, turning back once more and waving again.

Marcus came to my side, tilting his head.

“Who are you waving to?”

“A girl who helped me pick these! She was super nice.” I presented the basket of beads and other materials. He smirked.

“Is Eli’s craftsmanship side rubbing off on you?” he questioned.

“It’s fun to make things! Plus, you guys are going to be returning to duty when we get to Heila, right? So, we won’t get to see each other,” I pointed out, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“I’ll always have time for you Makoto. All of us would drop everything just to see you. We’re pretty high up in rank at Heila. Kai’s working on our scheduling, but we’re trying to make it so it’s similar to our routine at Knightwood. No matter what we’ll always have breakfast and dinner together,” he reassured me.

“Kai did that? You guys are okay with that? Doing that for me?”

“Our Firefly gets priority more than anything else. We’re your knights. Regardless of what happens in Heila, I’m hoping at least one of us will be with you at all times.”

He reached out for my hand before he pulled me forward to walk to the cashier.

“Now, let’s buy all this stuff so we can try and outrun the storm. I don’t think we’re going to make it, but I know somewhere close to our place where we can ride out the rain. It won’t be a long storm.”

“Okay.”

* * *

“Marcus. I have a question.”

I was relaxed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, my legs crossed as I sat in front of the fireplace.

We’d got caught in the wild thunderstorm, so we found safe haven in the small cabin, a few kilometers away from our home. Marcus knew we’d never make it as we left the town, the grey clouds filling the dark sky.

It rained so hard we’d got drenched in less than a minute, resorting to changing into some clothes we had bought, while ours dried on the wooden table in the dining room.

The small, wooden cabin was very plain and clean, looking as if no one had lived in it for a while.

Marcus explained it was on a part of their land; the boys used it on occasion for survival practice.

As the teachings of Knightwood state – you never know when you’re going to be in a forest filled with snakes. Blasphemy I say.

Marcus walked out of the washroom, my eyes roamed his bare chest. He’d only bought stuff for the others and not one top for himself. I was thankful he’d at least bought a pair of black, workout shorts, which he was now wearing as he strolled towards me. *Don’t get distracted by the sexy dragon shifter.*

“Ask away, Firefly. And, I’ll try not to distract you,” he commented.

I stuck my tongue out teasingly.

He licked his lips before sitting next to me, crossing his legs as he rotated to face me instead of the fireplace.

“Don’t tempt me Makoto. I can teach that tongue of yours a lesson or two,” he warned, making me gulp.

I took a deep breath as I tried to tame my overly excited hormones. “Who’s Elyion? I found out that Azriel is Daniel’s angel spirit, but last time you said Elyion and Kai’s mentioned that name too when he was talking to EliaseAnne.” I had my speculation as to who this Elyion was, but the only culprit in my mind made no sense.

Why call EliaseAnne a different name, especially when she didn’t look pleased by the term. Did it mean something else?

“I don’t know if I have the right to answer that, love.” He tugged at the hair tie still holding up his man bun, pulling it out to allow his long, brown hair to fall. He ruffled it for a bit, looking deep in thought, his eyes closing for a moment.

I sat patiently, watching different expressions morph on his face before his eyes opened; his sapphire jewels looked beautiful as the fire’s light reflected in them.

“I’m only telling you because I asked Elias and he said he’s fine with you knowing, but apart from our group, no one knows about this. It’s being investigated so we have enough evidence to place on the table before we can make an accusation about this individual. He’s too high in rank for us to use just our word against his, even with physical evidence. Do you understand Makoto? You can’t share this with anyone. Only you and your spirits,” he stressed; his deadpan tone frightened me as his eyes bore into mine.

I pushed my fear to the side and sat up straighter. I wasn’t going to back away from an opportunity to find out more about my knights.

“I swear to secrecy. The Starlight gods are my witnesses,” I swore.

He nodded before beginning. “Elyion is EliaseAnne’s original birth name. When Elias was really young a woman arrived at Miolana and offered the king a chance at a higher, political position with the promise of a higher percentage in the stock markets down on Earthala. King Kingsley would never pass up such an offer, agreeing to the terms with little questioning. The terms included his son would undergo spirit transmutation. It’s similar to what King Aspen did with his son

Malik, but from what we've gathered so far regarding the case, the King wanted to replace Elyion with another spirit – something stronger and deadlier: a dark fairy spirit.”

I was speechless; my brain tried to roll around the fact Elias' own father, another king who'd witnessed the end results of King Aspen's actions, would stoop so low and agree to such terms without caring about Elias' well-being.

Marcus turned to look at the fireplace, the flames burned away the remaining wood.

“Dark faeries are one of the rarest spirits in the entire galaxy, aside from Vermillion birds. They have a few numbers left living on Miolana. However, they began to disappear which of course, pointed our suspicions to Kingsley and this woman's experiments. Their hypothesis was that they could implant a dark fairy into Elyion, changing his spirit. After rotations of experimental trials, they succeeded with their final dark fairy – she was only eight cycles. The woman had finally succeeded in altering the spirit species, but when Elias woke up and shifted, Elyion was no longer male, but a female hybrid.”

Silence

“Hybrid.” I choked the word out, unable to say another.

“Yes. Half-light fairy, half-dark fairy. It was determined that due to the dark fairy being a female instead of a male and the powerful nature of her spirit; she overpowered Elyion's male attributes. Thus, his spirit morphed into a girl, EliaseAnne. They couldn't continue on with their experiment, concluding that they needed a male, dark fairy to attempt to change Elyion back. The problem was risking Elias and Elyion in general, having gone through so many forced experiments led them to being diagnosed with severe PTSD. They both still deal with it today.”

Post-traumatic stress disorder. I knew of such diagnoses from the multiple shifters that experienced such circumstances in the facility – myself included.

I recalled Eli being sick yesterday, running a low-grade fever throughout the night. I'd taken a quick peek when I made my way downstairs to meet Marcus, Kai relaxed on the floor, his eyes closed as Eli slept, a cloth on her face. I smiled at their joined hands, before walking away, not wanting to wake either of them up.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, deciding to confirm my thoughts.

"Is that why Eli can't stand medical centers?" I questioned, remembering how anxious she looked during my recovery time as they ran tests on her. She tried to hide it during my presence, but it was hard to hide the tremendous amount of fear reflecting in her eyes.

"Yes. She has panic attacks. It's been awhile since her last major one, but I feel like she had a mini one in her last checkup. Karen said she didn't look well when leaving, but she insisted she was fine. When she got home she looked horribly pale and almost fainted. I ended up having to carry her to bed and now, the fever she's experiencing is a common after effect," Marcus confirmed.

I turned to face the fireplace, allowing my mind to reel over everything he'd just explained.

EliaseAnne is a boy. He was turned into a SHE against his own will thanks to his oh so loving father, who was too greedy to care about the consequences of such altercations.

I could only imagine the scrutiny he experienced growing up through his teen and adult cycles – a teen male shifter with a female spirit. The thought alone was rare and probably still wasn't accepted.

"That's why they pretend to be two different people at school." Midnight proposed; her once monotonous voice filled with grief.

I felt a hand rub my back, my head turning to face Marcus, who was right next to me, his eyes glossy.

"Don't cry Firefly," he whispered.

I lifted my hands to my cheeks which were wet with tears. “How can I not? My knight was tampered with like a lab rat for such a stupid, selfish reason as STOCKS! Not only did he have to go through such experiments, so many dark fairies were murdered and are now extinct! If it wasn’t for Midnight and Eli being a hybrid, there would be none. Even if there are a few throughout the galaxy they would stay hidden thanks to one man’s greed. Now EliaseAnne is STUCK as a female for the rest of his life,” I yelled, the anger raged within me, my power began to build.

I rose to my feet and began to pace around the cabin. Marcus watched me cautiously.

“Did his Father not once imagine how life would be for him? The amount of scrutiny and humiliation he’d face! Yet for money and a position of power, he was perfectly fine with selling his son to this devilish woman for her own fucking reasons. And where is he now? Still a fucking King! Where’s the justice!” I roared, the windows shook as the cabin trembled, dust floated down from the rafters.

Marcus rose, approaching me and placing his hands firmly on my shoulders.

“Firefly. Calm down,” he ordered.

I glared at him, Midnight coming forward.

“Calm down? The woman oh wait, scratch that, the man I care about is now resting in bed thanks to his traumatic, fucked up past that will NEVER stop haunting him till he ascends to Starlight, because of his father who’s walking freely and ruling a kingdom! Where’s the fucking justice!” she shouted.

Ryuu came forward to face us, his arms wrapped around my trembling body.

The wind smashed against the cabin as the rain pounded so loudly against the wooden frame, I didn’t think the cabin would survive.

“Midnight, enough. I get your frustration, I really do. I would be one of the first to burn that castle to the ground and

torture that man till he begged for Deathpre to take his soul. Even then, I'd make sure he didn't rest till he received his portion of pain and solitude. But we need every bit of evidence and have to locate the woman and gather Elias' file. If we're able to reclaim that, it would be smooth sailing. Your father and other higher-ups he entrusted with the case are looking into it. Please, calm down. The cabin won't handle this beating much longer," he begged. The lights flickered on and off.

Midnight retreated, allowing me to take over before I closed my eyes, using Ryder's meditation techniques to calm the raging inferno that still wanted release.

I grit my teeth and struggled to calm myself. I felt Ryuu's arms leave me before his body pressed against me from behind; his arms returned to my waist before he rested his head against my shoulder, whispering in my ear.

"Mako, I can calm you down using my gift if you need it."

I pondered on his statement, remembering the time I'd woken up from my nightmare, his chest glowed a bright, sapphire blue.

"Okay," I agreed, realizing my anger wouldn't settle; not with the idea of that man walking around and our fairy shifter carrying such a heavy burden.

A calm wave went through me as my back felt warm, Ryuu's markings on his chest the culprit of such sensation.

My shoulders dropped as I relaxed; the anger that was once furious and ready to destroy dissipated. I leaned into his embrace, feeling a tad weak. I'd taken off the bracelet Karen had given to me to wear for safety, in case I needed to protect myself if Marcus and I were separated.

"Easy, Firefly," he soothed before lifting me up, lowering me into the chair near the fireplace to rest. He knelt down; his left hand rose to rest on his chest as he looked up at me. "Princess. I and my host swear that justice will be served. Let's get to Heila and once everything's settled with introductions that will be on the top list of priorities."

I nodded. “Fine. Sorry for losing control like that,” I apologized.

“It warms my heart that you care for us so dearly that you’d respond in such a way, Princess,” he praised before bowing his head and retreating.

Marcus opened his eyes, smiling softly at me.

“Don’t worry Makoto. We’ll deal...with...” He began, but trailed off, frowning as he gave me a confused expression.

“Marcus?”

“I can’t believe this. Now out of all times,” he grumbled before rising back up to his feet, his face scrunched in anger.

“What’s wrong?”

“We need to head back. There’s a situation that needs your attention, or I should say forgiveness. The rain should stop in a few minutes.” He helped me rise before we began gathering our belongings.

Forgiveness?

The rain stopped, and we packed everything up in silence. Thanks to the log-made car port and Marcus’ bringing a motorcycle cover, his bike was safe and dry from the storm.

I didn’t like the quiet atmosphere, the fear of not knowing what this situation was had my anxiety growing with each minute that passed. I decided to ask a random question.

“Marcus?”

“Yes, Firefly.”

“Why does Ryuu know so much about sex?”

His cheeks flushed as his eyes focused on putting the helmet on my head.

“Well—” He began, but was cut off, glowing eyes peered into my shocked expression.

“You sure are good at the element of surprise.” I commented, shaking off my shock.

“I like seeing your expression. It’s amusing and kinda hot.” He confessed with a smirk, making me blush.

He leaned in till his lips were inches away from my ear.

“Dragon spirits are a little wilder in that department. We like it fast, rough and daring. It doesn’t hurt to know a lot in the pleasure department. It can come in handy.” He bit my ear lightly, tugging at it. I closed my eyes, moaning at the sudden contact.

Dammit, how does he turn me on so quickly?

I opened my eyes to face his seductive smirk.

“It pains me that we have to leave due to such hindrances, but mark my words Firefly, we’ll have our playtime. Tell Lex ___”

My body wouldn’t allow him to finish, Lexi took over and pressed our lips against his.

We didn’t dare close our eyes, pleased by his wide eyes that reflected his shock before being replaced with an intense hunger.

His lips pressed against ours as we deepened the kiss, our eyes closed to enjoy his lips.

We finally pulled apart after what seemed to be minutes of passionate kissing, panting as we held our stare.

“Trust me, baby. There will be no disturbances during our play time.” Lexi purred before leaning and giving him one last kiss, biting his lower lip and tugging at it gently.

She pulled back, smirking before giving me control.

Marcus’ eyes returned to normal as he blinked, shaking his head before he let out a deep huff.

“Dragons.”

CHAPTER 33



Midnight

“**Y**ou got to be kidding me.”

Irritation seeped out of my voice as I tried to ignore the urge to break something. If glares could kill, the shifter on his knees before me would be nothing but ash.

We'd arrived back home within fifteen minutes of being summoned; Mako fell asleep as we reached the gates. I decided to take control, seeing as we had a few bags to carry and didn't want the dragon shifter to struggle.

Who'd expect our evening would involve a pathetic, brown-eyed human who was on his knees. He must have been caught in the storm seeing as his clothes were drenched and his hair still dripped droplets on the floor.

“We missed out on playtime for this?” Lexi huffed.

“You got this Midnight, I'm sleeping. Goodnight,” Lily encouraged, leaving my mind.

“Me too. Rose let me chill on your side,” Hope whined.

“Ugh, it's too crowded when you're not in your designated section,” Rose complained.

“We should kill him. I'd never seen someone so...petty,” Mako snarled.

I side glanced to the transparent doors, the stars glittered in the sky as the fireflies fluttered around.

I agree. Can I hide the body, or do you want ashes?

I watched the reddish brown-haired boy raise his head, those unattractive, brown eyes grew as wide as saucers.

“Um, Ryder...she’s gonna kill me,” he whimpered.

My eyes flashed back to meet his and I could see his fear as he cowered on the floor.

“She can do whatever the fuck she wants. Even if I wanted to stop her, which I don’t; I can’t control what Midnight wants to do, Leonardo.” Ryder leaned against the bookshelf with EliaseAnne, shrugging off his comment.

“Can’t I talk with Makoto? Why do I have to talk to her spirit? Which spirit are you anyways?”

“None of your business human, and Makoto is currently unavailable. Please leave a message and get the fuck out of our house,” I snarled. My irritation knew no bounds tonight.

I wasn’t used to talking to strangers. In the past, when I was confronted by someone, I killed them. This situation was frustrating, and I just wanted to curl up on the couch and sleep.

“I need your help.” He bowed his head to the floor, shivering.

“What do you possibly need from Mako?” Marcus demanded.

He was standing next to me, his arms crossed against his chest as he glared. I could practically see the anger seep out of him.

My eyes trailed across the room, landing on EliaseAnne, her body leaned with Ryder, her eyes closed. I had stated my concern, her complexion still pale, but she reassured me she was well when we exchanged greetings.

Kai paid no attention at all, sitting on his stool and concentrating on the sketch before him. He twirled his pencil, as usual.

The angel was the only calm looking one, but I paid him no mind. I still didn’t like him, though his angel spirit seemed to know what he wanted. Makoto knew my history with Samuel. The feelings I held for him and the way he had manipulated me. I knew it was hard on her, feeling what I felt for the angel across the room, but I didn’t want to see her hurt

by him. If he didn't love her, then she needed to know. I just needed to find the way to explain that to her.

"I...I failed the group exam. The headmaster gave me the chance to take a make-up exam, but I need a female shifter to go with me. The exam is in Minato, just on the outskirts! It won't take long, but I need a female partner," he revealed.

"Are you telling me that the female population suddenly went extinct and I'm the lone survivor? Geez, what have I've been missing?" I mocked.

"I've asked everyone! Most of the students are preparing for next semester, or they're on vacation. The remaining female shifters are too busy with their boyfriends!" he stressed, those beady, little eyes pleaded for Mako's help.

I was about to insist he fuck off, when an image of the blonde, demon shifter Rose humiliated flashed through my mind.

"What about that Brittany girl?" I suggested, coldly.

"She won't do it! I've begged her. She doesn't want to be anywhere close to the headmaster. Something about him being a scam artist! I have no one. I've been searching for two rotations, since the exam results came out. If I don't—"

"You get kicked out," I finished, bluntly.

He nodded, his head bowed once more to the floor. Makoto, please I can't deal with this. I'm a centimeter away from just ending his misery.

"Fine, Switch."

~MAKOTO~

“Yup, you are beyond pathetic. You’re telling me you had the guts to come here and beg for my forgiveness only because no female in the Knightwood population would dare take an exam with you? I hope you understand how bad you look right now.”

Not only did Leo leave us the day of the final exam, going ahead of us on his own, but then it’s revealed that he sold us out to Blair Aspen, gave him vital information of our arrival. None of us had seen Leo since we’d returned to Knightwood.

“I know, but I’m desperate. I don’t have any other friends. I get it, I was an idiot and it was because of me you got hurt... over my cowardice. I know my actions weren’t knightly, to say the least, but I’m willing to change!” he insisted, still kneeling before me.

“Elias almost died. I almost died. Do you understand any of that?” I took a step closer, trying to contain the anger that flooded my system.

“We could have died – all of us – and that blood would have been on your hands. Do you understand that?” I felt my body heating as I stood before the person who almost cost me my freedom, my life, my knights.

“Yes. I understand and cannot say enough how sorry I am. But, I’ve dreamed of being a knight my entire life and I want to give this everything I’ve got. I promise you won’t need to do much. I’ll do all the fighting to prove myself. It won’t be hard. All I have to do is find the object like the last exam. They’ll be focusing on my performance, so it won’t impact your score or rank. All mock-up exams need a male and a female, so I can’t go without you...please Makoto,” he begged. His voice cracked. “Please allow me to show you I’ve changed.”

“Everything he said was with truthful intention. He means it,” Hope sang, still awake compared to the others who

weren't present.

Do we leave him, like he left us? Or do we help him?

"No." Four sets of voices proclaimed.

Ryder, Marcus, EliaseAnne and Kai announced their disapproval. I looked at Daniel who was silent.

"And you, Daniel?" I wanted to know how he felt. He seemed to be the only one not completely against helping Leo.

"You can hear the truth in his words. Doesn't mean I don't despise and wish for his downfall, but we shouldn't put ourselves on his level. We won't be here much longer anyways." He mumbled the last sentence; his voice low enough that I doubt Leo heard his comment.

I turned to face him.

"As much as I'd love to kick your ass out of here and never see you again, Daniel is right. I'm not going to allow myself or the others to fall to your level. We aren't as selfish as you. As a knight, you put yourself last and make sure the people around you are safe and secure before worrying about your own needs. What you did at the exam was wrong and far from knightly, but seeing as your life was at risk, I'll brush your actions under the rug. I'll help you with your exam. BUT, after that we're done. We aren't friends, Leo, and I don't foresee us ever getting along after this. The boys can decide if they want to continue being friends with you, but you and I are nothing once the exam is over. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he responded, looking up to face my stern gaze. Relief poured off of him in waves and I could see the tension and stress drain from his face and eyes.

"Anyone disagree with my decision?" I asked the others. They were my knights and I wanted to make sure I had their full support with what I was deciding.

"It will be in Minato?" Ryder questioned.

"Yes. The headmaster said two of you can be in the exam area. You just can't interfere with helping me. I don't know why he's allowing you to come, but he said something about

special circumstances. I guess because of what happened last time,” Leo confessed.

“Sounds safe enough. Elias and Daniel will go with her. Tell the headmaster, I approved of her companions and will not change it,” Ryder ordered, walking away from the bookshelf to stand on my other side, facing Leo with a blank expression.

“When is it?” Kai questioned, setting his pencil down as he got off his stool, walking towards us.

“Five days from now,” Leo answered.

The boys looked among one another, clearly talking within their knightly communication.

“Fine,” all five of them announced in unison.

“Thank you!!! May Starlight bless you! I’m grateful for your help.” He thanked us over and over again.

“Alright, Leo. Now get out, you’re going to ruin our floor,” Marcus hissed.

He flinched before bowing and thanking us once more, the remnants of water from the storm still dripped onto our floor as he rose, scurrying away and closing the door gently.

I sighed, my shoulders slumped. I needed to sleep.

“Mako babe, are you sure about this?”

I looked to Marcus; his worried eyes made me smile softly at him as I reached out to stroke his cheek.

“Forgiveness is one of the Starlight gods’ mottos. We can forgive, but we don’t need to forget what he did. I’m almost back to normal, and I won’t need to do any magic, so we don’t need to worry about me exerting myself. It’s also in Minato so no Jeffrey or the Owner. Elias and Daniel will be nearby, too. We’re leaving for Heila that evening, so it works perfectly,” I reassured him, leaning up and kissing him lightly.

He smiled, before nodding. “If you’re fine with it, Princess,” he whispered.

“I guess it would be a good time to tell her,” Kai announced.

I turned to the phoenix shifter, raising my eyebrow. *Tell me what?* I noticed them all smirk, before surrounding me in a circle.

“Seeing as we’re going to be busy the moment we reach Heila we decided we’d give you one more gift.” Daniel’s pleased expression made me excited. These moments seemed to be growing fewer and fewer with him and it thrilled me when excitement shone in his eyes.

“She did earn it,” EliaseAnne pointed out. Her eyes glowed which clued me in on Elias’ interference.

“What is it?” I tried to hide my excitement.

“Well, I know you said you need to sleep, but you think you have enough energy to pack?” Kai asked.

“Pack? For what? Where we are we going.”

Marcus laughed, the others chuckled at my excitement as I could barely stand still.

“Earthala, Firefly.”

CHAPTER 34

~FIVE DAYS LATER~

“Mako are you falling asleep?” Daniel questioned.

I opened my heavy eyelids, lifting my head up slightly.

“No. I’m not...sleep...” My statement trailed off as my eyelids closed; my head leaned forward. *So fucking tired.*

We’d arrived back from Earthala early in the morning. I’d been on such a sugar rush the whole trip. I finally crashed the moment we walked onto the transport ship. I think Daniel had to carry me to our designated seats; his lavender scent was the last thing I smelled, before falling into a deep slumber.

Those five days had been the happiest I’d been, and the boys and Eli were to thank for the loving opportunity. I even got to meet Scarlet and Junho, the friend Marcus always talked about, before her other teammates, who I presumed were more than just *partners in crime*.

Now, I was sitting on my stool as Daniel did my hair, readying me for Leo’s exam which was in an hour. We’d already packed and sent our stuff to Heila, our coloured stools and only a few pieces of furniture remained in an empty housing complex.

Ryder assured me the stools would be joining us at Heila; they were still working on renovations in the castle. I didn’t know what our living arrangements were going to be, but Kai and the others wanted to get a place near the castle where we’d all be able to return to once everything settled.

It made me and my spirits happy to see how important it was to them, for all of us to be together. I enjoyed living with them and even if we had to live separately I predicted it would be short-lived. My sleepwalking self would not agree to such terms and conditions.

“Stay awake long enough for this angel to finish your hair.” Midnight nudged into my mind, warning me of her presence for once.

I’m awake. I’m just resting my eyes. But, if by chance...I fall asleep, which I won’t...don’t...cause...tro-

* * *

~MIDNIGHT~

Unbelievable.

I let out a sigh, before lifting my head, the hands in my hair paused.

“Midnight?”

I glanced over at EliaseAnne who was eyeing me, a smile formed on her face.

“MakoBear fell asleep. Hi, EliBear,” I pointed out before greeting her, compassion flowed off my voice which sounded off to me.

I still hadn’t opened myself up to feeling as I had before, but whenever EliaseAnne was around, it was if I couldn’t stop myself from feeling something for her.

I glanced down at the new bracelet filled with different coloured bears; Mako’s pink bear had Elias’ green bear on the left, Eli’s yellow bear on the right and next to hers was a dark blue bear – my bear. Eli’s bear was next to mine before the remaining guys evened out on the bracelet. EliaseAnne had created it and gave it to me during our trip. I absolutely adored it and would cherish it. Thus, the new nickname for Mako – MakoBear.

“Hey. I don’t blame her for being so exhausted. I’m surprised you’re not tired,” he pointed out. His hands were no longer in my hair, and I heard the tension coating his words as he stepped back.

I shrugged. “I didn’t stay up all night watching that thing called Netfight,” I admitted.

“Netflix, Midnight,” Eli corrected, giggling.

“Weird name. Netfight sounds more exciting. Anyways, she’s asleep. I’ll wake her up when we reach the exam. I can’t stand that whiny human. Friend me not,” I complained. I felt the air shift only moments before the angel spoke.

“Midnight, why do you hate angels?”

Everything seemed to go quiet. I froze as Eli’s giggles stopped; her eyes widened before she began to frown.

“Daniel.” Her tone wasn’t her normal high pitch sound, but low, as if she was giving a warning.

“I need to know,” Daniel argued.

I turned to face him. For so long, I could tell this was building inside of him. The way he had begun to act since my awakening. The distance he seemed to put between himself and Mako. It was only a matter of time before we ended up at this moment. I kept my expression blank.

“Why? I’m not going to answer the question just to appease your insecurities,” I bashed, grabbing Mako’s rank card from the table and slipping it into the pocket of my combat pants.

“You can’t hate me when I’ve done nothing to you!” he argued.

I glared at him. He was right...he hadn’t done anything to me personally, but he had done something to Mako.

“You lied to my host’s face saying nothing was wrong, KNOWING we hate when people lie to us. You can’t just demand me to tell you my reasoning for hating you, Archangel, when you won’t tell her what’s bothering you! You

can't even confidently stand there and say you love Makoto!" I yelled.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. I waited for his response and was thankful to Starlight that Makoto was knocked out. She didn't need to see his hesitation. She didn't need to see his inability to refute my accusation against him. She loved him, yet he couldn't say the same for her.

"Exactly. You don't know what you feel. One minute you're head over heels for her, the next, you're pulling away. You're just like Samuel. So indecisive of what you want, yet have no shame in using that godforsaken gift and alternating our emotions, huh? How am I to believe you didn't use your gift to make Mako love you?" I accused.

"I'd never use it on her," he barked back, rage sank into the lines of his face.

"That's not who I am. I would never do anything that would hurt her," he defended.

"Yet here you are...constantly shutting her out. You say you'd never do anything to hurt her, but every time you refuse to let her in, to let her know what's going on with you – you're hurting her. If you think I'll allow you to play with Makoto's feelings, think again," I warned.

"You can't decide what she wants for her!" His words cut through me and red clouded my vision.

"Oh yes I fucking can! I'M HER OTHER HALF! I've witnessed and felt everything she has in the shadows. I've felt her pain and cried her tears for six cycles. I know her better than anyone and one thing I won't tolerate is her facing heartbreak like I did. I won't let her succumb to such painful experiences over your indecisive nature. Mako needs a man who can say how much she means to him. Not a boy who's afraid to face whatever happened to him in the past."

"You know nothing," he snarled.

I saw the colour glowing in his eyes. The healing nature of an archangel, trying to overpower the wrath of an internal

demon.

I felt Hope's power swarm me in an enraged wave. I'd been so caught up in the heated argument I hadn't noticed her entrance. All I knew was she was angry. Her gift flowed into me. The chance to see all his secrets within reach.

"I know nothing? I can take one glance at you angel, and I would know EVERYTHING. How tempted I am to do that right at this moment, but do you know what stops me? The respect and love Makoto has for you. I know even your spirit has urged you to come forward and reveal your true self to Mako. Will you remain as Mako's knight or become one of her lovers? If you want to become the latter of the two, then you need to reveal yourself to her, tell her about your past, and tell her that you want her in your future. Do not hold anything back and DO NOT LIE to her again. I'll be watching," I vowed before turning and heading for the door.

"Midnight, wait!" Eli called out, grasping my arm in an effort to stop me.

I swallowed the fear that gripped at my heart as I decided to do something crazy. I opened up the box I swore to keep closed forever after Samuel. I opened up my heart for just a moment.

I turned, moving fast enough that she didn't see it coming – my lips pressed against hers. They were as soft as I had imagined, and I felt the moment she allowed herself to return the kiss.

She was frozen, and her eyes remained wide as I pulled back.

"I'm interested EliaseAnne. I don't care if you're a boy or a girl. I don't care if you may never return to being a male. This body is merely a vessel; your soul is what determines who you are. You're special to me and Makoto, and though we may get busy in the coming weeks, you just let me know when you're ready to take our friendship to the next level. I'll be ready. I won't cower away from my feelings any longer. That's all," I announced confidently.

I stared at her shocked face. My eyes turned to Daniel. The fury had drained from his face and shock had taken its place.

I turned around; my hand slipped out of Eli's loose grasp.

"I'm heading to the exam. I'll see you guys there."

I opened the door, closing it behind me as I continued my speed walk.

"You think we were too harsh on Daniel?" Hope's voice questioned, sadness leaked off her melodic voice. I knew how she felt about his angel and could feel her worry.

He needs to make a decision. I've been watching silently. I know he loves her; I can see it. But, something is holding him back. I won't risk Mako entering an uncertain relationship. She needs to know for sure that he wants her...that he'll love and commit to her as both her knight and lover. I'm not asking him for perfection, but faithfulness. I know how it feels to care for someone and not have them feel the same. I won't watch her suffer the way I did. She deserves more. She deserves better.

I knew Mako told me not to stir up any trouble, but I wanted her to be happy. I didn't want her going down my path – to fall in love with a shifter who didn't truly love her. Maybe Samuel had loved me at some point. But, that didn't matter in the end. His betrayal and lies destroyed all of my happiness and caused me to close off my emotions.

In the end, all that was left was my heart shattered and his heart ripped out. I wiped at the tears flowing down my cheeks. What was done was done.

He has it in him. He can love her wholeheartedly. I just hope my words didn't ruin everything.

CHAPTER 35



Marcus

~MARCUS~

“Karen and I will make sure everything goes smoothly with the check-in. All of you will need scans and re-evaluations to make sure you’re fit to go back on duty. As for the royalty mark, Arthur can easily rid her of it, replacing it with her rightful birthmark. I don’t think Mako will disagree with pledging to her father.”

I listened in to Winterlya’s statement. I sat on one of the desks in Matthew’s office. Kai and Matthew stood on my left, conversing with Karen and Winterlya of the plans in place for when we returned to Heila.

Ryder leaned against the wall next to Winterlya’s bodyguard, Vincent.

He appeared to be six-five and skinny, but looked like he was hiding muscles under his professional attire – baby blue dress shirt, black pants and black dress shoes. His hair was tied in a ponytail, a few strands falling to his side due to the shortness of the silver-white locks.

His shirt matched those vivid bright blue eyes which held wisdom as he concentrated on the conversation, his crossed arms rested on his chest.

We had yet to be properly introduced. Both of them listened to the discussion, not adding in any of their opinions or thoughts.

The current game plan involved Kai teleporting Winterlya and Karen to Heila in preparation for our checkup and clearance into Heila. It was standard procedure for most realms and even with our ranks, we couldn’t escape such rules.

Kai would return and teleport Makoto, Elias and Daniel, leaving Ryder and I behind to finalize things. We would be taking the slower route to Heila, which would be less than a day thanks to booking the transportation ship ahead of time.

We'd get our medical scans and regroup with the others, before going directly to the castle. Kai had used his foresight every hour to ensure the future remained clear. He had seen nothing getting in our way and Leo's exam would go smoothly. Even though we all despised Leo, including Ryder, at least he'd pass and be one step closer to becoming a knight, even if he would be a lousy one.

Leo's exam was in less than an hour. Makoto, Eli and Daniel would be heading to the exam by now. There was no way for EliaseAnne to take her place; due to the fact the headmaster knew they were the same person and EliaseAnne was a spirit – the exam policy emphasized no spirit usage was allowed.

"I guess that's it. I have another meeting with the headmaster before we get ready. I'll—" Ryder began, but froze, his body flinched before his eyes glazed over and he fell forward.

"Ryder!" All of us called out.

Vincent caught him before he hit the ground.

Karen was already next to him, helping Vincent turn him over to rest on his back as her eyes emitted a strong, gold light and her hand pressed against his chest.

My eyes locked with Kai's amber ones. Only one thing could cause Ryder to blackout.

"Daniel."

"Sensory overload. He'll be awake once his senses stabilize. What's wrong with Daniel? Ryder hasn't had a reaction like this since you guys were teens," Karen complained.

"Give us a minute to find out." I opened our knight bond, the feeling of regret hitting me so hard I flinched.

Fuck.

"Daniel! Calm the fuck down! You knocked Ryder out!" I yelled through our bond.

“Shit! Is Ryder okay? Did anyone see?” Eli’s voice was a pitch higher, worrying me.

“No one saw. He was about to leave to see the headmaster when he passed out. Karen and Winterlya are here. Elyion why is your voice so high?” Kai questioned.

“Um...Midnight and Daniel got into an argument and she stormed out...after kissing me,” she revealed.

There was a moment of silence.

“Daniel,” Kai called out again.

His voice held no emotion, but power.

I knew Daniel would be in deep shit, if he didn’t reply to the phoenix’s liking.

“Sorry. The words left me before I could stop. Give me a moment.” His low voice was filled with sorrow.

Kai and I sighed in relief; the pressure that hit us at full blast dulled.

Ryder let out a groan, struggling to move.

“Easy Ryder. Relax for a few minutes,” Winterlya urged.

His body relaxed, giving up on trying to wake up.

“What did Midnight say?” I probed, needing to know how mad she was.

“Was she crying?” Kai questioned.

I tilted my head in confusion at his question, but realized he must have seen this coming. It made his recent warning clearer.

“She called me out on being an ass to Mako. And she informed me that I needed to figure out if I loved Mako and wanted to be with her or if I was only going to serve as her knight. And some other things...but, it’s the whole Claire thing...” Daniel trailed off.

“Daniel, you need to trust yourself more. Makoto is a fierce woman who knows what she wants. If she didn’t care about you, she wouldn’t be so worried about you. I think

Midnight just doesn't want her getting hurt. She trusts all of us even though the world has been so cruel to her. Stop thinking you don't deserve her love, unless you want to lose her," EliaseAnne lectured.

We were all silent until she continued.

"We need to go. Makoto's probably at the exam site getting checked already. Kai keep using your foresight if you have enough energy. Be careful not to push yourself. Marcus make sure Ryder's okay. Let's go, Daniel," she ordered.

EliaseAnne rarely got into leader mode unless we were in one of these situations, where we're all stumped at what to do or say.

"All right," we agreed, closing out our knight bond.

"I'm assuming you solved the problem," Matthew proposed.

Kai and I nodded.

"Can you assist me, Matthew? Let's get Ryder to Karen's private office. He can rest there. Kai will teleport you guys to Heila. Vincent, how are you going to Heila? I don't think Kai can handle taking three people." I turned to face the tall, blue-eyed male.

"Don't worry about me. I can get to Heila easily," he replied, a sleek smile formed on his lips before he glanced at Winterlya.

She smiled back.

"They love each other. How sweet," Ryu commented. *For a fierce dragon you sure do love romance. C'mon lets' focus.*

"Let's put this plan in action" I voiced.

CHAPTER 36

Makoto

“**F**inal Checkpoint! This is where I have to go alone. Thank you, Makoto, seriously. I know we got off on the wrong foot, and I treated you poorly, but I’m really grateful for your assistance.” Leo’s words rang with truth, and for a moment, I found myself almost feeling something other than disdain for the boy in front of me... almost.

I nodded, looking around the mountain before us. Twenty-five minutes had passed since the start of the exam and we’d reached the final checkpoint. The exam was easy in my opinion, having minimal traps and ambushes.

Leo had kept to his word, focused on doing everything himself. I assumed Daniel and Elias would be here within a few minutes.

They had been held up at the checkpoint, having come a few minutes late. The exam adviser had urged us to begin the exam, not wanting to go past the designated time frame. So, myself and Leo had no choice but to go first.

Now we were facing this huge, ass mountain where he’d have to go alone, and I’d chill down here.

“Good luck,” I stated as I watched him depart. I prayed it wouldn’t take long till he found the black orb he was required to retrieve.

I noticed the clouds began to darken as a foggy mist, that once surrounded just the borders of the exam area, thickened and became a dark grey.

Why am I not surprised? They always got to make everything spooky and chill-inducing during exams. Geez, they could have at least kept the temperature the same. So fucking cold.

I rubbed my arms, and goosebumps appeared on my skin as I paced around trying to keep myself warm. It would have been nice if I could turn up my internal temperature just a tad, but I'd kept Karen's bracelet on to prove that Leo had done everything on his own.

I closed my eyes, standing in place as I checked in with my spirits. Everyone was asleep; my head felt empty. The silence was calming. I took a deep breath and enjoyed the blissful moments of my last day in Minato.

"MAKOTO!"

I opened my eyes at the exact moment something pierced my chest. I froze; my body's first reaction was to numb everything as time slowed.

I glanced down; my eyes landed on a purple blade, the tip stuck out of my chest; blood began to soak my white tank as it dripped to the ground.

I struggled to scream, my lungs burned from the sudden lack of oxygen. My body tensed as the blade was pulled from my body. A high, shrilled scream left my throat as I grasped at my chest; the blood poured out of me like a stream, soaking my hands.

I tried to summon my spirits, Midnight coming into my mind, but my chest began to blaze; the mark, placed on me long ago, prevented me from summoning her. *SHIT!*

I shuffled away from my opponent, turning to face them. My eyes widened as familiar, haunting purple eyes greeted me.

"Jeffrey?" I struggled to say his name as I trembled, pressing my hands tighter against my open wound. I realized now why my mark burned...I couldn't hurt the man that worked for Blair Aspen – my Owner.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Makoto. I’m impressed you’re still standing at this point. I guess our previous experiments proved to give you some immunity to such a substance.” His icy, cold voice sent shivers down my spine.

NIGHTMARE! Get Elias and Daniel! PLEASE.

There was no way I’d stand a chance against him. I knew Nightmare would come to my aid, but I needed my knights. I wouldn’t be able to fight him. I’d be lucky to live long enough for them to reach me.

Midnight continued to thrash in my mind, trying to take control, but failing. I could feel her frustration and fear, my teeth began to chatter as a shiver filtered through me; my body felt cold and weak.

“Substance?” I manage to spit out, before coughing up blood.

“You know how the Owner is. I guess some of his ways rubbed off on me. Insurance is always necessary. Just in case the first plan doesn’t work,” he explained.

Insurance.

He closed his eyes for a moment before continuing.

“It shouldn’t be much longer. The Nephilim poison should be in your bloodstream and begin to spread. I put an extra dose on the blade seeing as I know you have a strong resistance thanks to Aspen’s experiments on you.”

I gaped at him, before clenching my teeth to hold back the scream that begged to escape as a wave of pain wracked my body. It took everything in me to remain standing; my legs trembled like the rest of my body.

“Dammit, Jeffrey. He...sent you.” I struggled to finish my sentence.

“Aspen. No, he did not. He thinks you’re dead and is now looking for another shifter to best suit his plans. He didn’t approve of our demon shifter candidate, so I’m using her for other things. I have to admit, she’d be fond of you,” he

admitted, pulling out a white, silk handkerchief as he began to clean the blood off his blade.

“Then why?” I questioned, my eyes stung as another wave of pain surged through me.

He frowned at my appearance; for a moment, he looked regretful before his blank expression returned. “You and your knights are taking too much time playing students. You have better things to do. You won’t be ready for what’s to come if you keep delaying. This should speed up the process,” he confirmed as his blade disappeared with a flick of his wrist, the handkerchief stained with my blood lit up, the fresh blue flames burned it to crisp.

I struggled to answer as I gasped for air, my knees buckled as I fell to the ground. My legs felt numb, the feeling in my toes beginning to disappear.

“Anyways, your knights should be here shortly. Best of luck to you, Makoto. Survive this trial because the darkness is coming. If you don’t, we’re as good as doomed,” he finished before walking away.

I reached out, trying to summon an ounce of power, to do anything against him as he casually walked away, but nothing happened. His figure disappeared into the mist.

I eased myself onto my back, the cold grass didn’t help the immense pain that raged through me, down to my bones.

I felt something vibrate before a muffled sound came from my front pocket. I struggled to reach for it, pulling the phone out of my pocket after the third try. I lifted it in my trembling hand and rested it to my side as I turned my head to face the image of Elias and I, his name in large capital letters. I struggled to slide the answer button, blood smearing the screen as I answered.

“MAKOTO! Mako, are you okay? Where are you?”

I tried to turn my body, but I couldn’t feel my legs, biting my lip to hold back the sobs that broke through me. My hand gripped the phone, my whimpers the only sound came from me.

“Mako! We’re coming just stay on the line. Nightmare’s guiding us. Daniel hold the phone, I need to shift,” I heard Elias shout. I heard muffled noises before Daniel’s voice came through the speaker.

“Makoto! We’ll be there in less than a minute. Just be strong, we’re coming,” he urged.

I could sense his fear from here. I cried harder as I struggled to breathe, my body becoming colder and colder with each passing second.

I had to tell them it was poison. I didn’t have long. I could feel death approaching, the same feeling of impending doom that claimed me when I’d died in the past, being revived by the technicians. This time, however, I didn’t have hope I’d come back.

“Ne—...Nephilim. Nephilim po— poison.” I slurred. I heard Daniel curse.

My eyes landed on the bracelet on my wrist. How I wished I’d remembered it’s significance earlier. It was already too late to remove the piece of jewellery; the poison already clouding my train of thought and making it impossible to lift my other arm to pull it off.

“ELI! She’s poisoned with Nephilim. Tell Kai we need Winterlya and Karen.”

“WHAT! Did you just say Nephilim! Dammit summon your wings; we won’t make it if we run it.”

“Mako, thirty seconds. Just stay with me, okay?”

I tapped at the gallery button, the new picture of all of us, together popped up. Even Elias was photoshopped in the group picture, bringing a smile to my bloody lips. I knew I didn’t have much time left and may not be blessed with the opportunity to see their faces again. Having this photo was the closest I’d get seeing my star knights, one more time.

“I’m sorry. So...sor— ry. I love you, Daniel. Don’t hate— hate me. I—I just want...wanted to know more about you,” I stuttered as the sobs took control and I cried. I had to tell him,

even if he couldn't say the words back to me, I needed him to know that I loved him.

"Fuck, Mako, don't cry. I know baby, it's my fault. Everything will be okay. We'll work it out."

"The others...I love them, too. Ryder and Elias...Eli and Marcus...even Kai. I love you, my knights...so...much." I continued to sob, black spots began to form in my vision as I continued to stare at the screen.

"Makoto, we know. Don't talk like that. I'll heal you, you'll be fine. Just keep talking," he begged.

"MEW."

I heard Nightmare; her cry sounded far away. *Nightmare, my wonderful familiar and protector.* I wanted to say goodbye to her as well, to say how fortunate it was to have a god as a familiar, but I struggled to breathe.

I saw a flicker of light in the corner of my eyes, grasping my attention. I blinked, my drifting mind clearly played tricks on me. *No, it can't be.*

"*Makoto, ignore it.*" Midnight's voice echoed in my mind, but she too sounded far away. I could feel my other spirits struggling, trying to get through the foggiest of my mind, but I was so tired of fighting.

The pain in my chest was too much, my lower half paralyzed as my fingers became numb. *I'm going to die.*

I looked back at the girl standing a few feet away from me. Her skinny frame and vibrant, orange hair looked as if it were floating in place – those amber eyes held love and longing that gripped at my heart. She looked sad as she stared at me, a soft smile formed on her lips as she raised her hand towards me.

"Mako."

I cried, joy blossomed in me as I struggled to get the next breath out, my lungs unable to get enough oxygen to allow me to breathe. Her voice was the same as I remembered it. It took so much strength as I gasped for air; my mind urged me to get the word out; to call out to the girl before me.

“Lily.” I whispered with the remaining air I had, my hand dropped the phone as I reached out to her – to get a chance to hold my best friend’s hand once more.

The noise in the background began to fade, the distant shouts dimmed to silence as I reached out. In a flash, she stood before me, her hand gripped mine and the warmth took away the pain. I smiled at her serene face.

“Lily. You’re here. I missed you.” I whispered, my voice returned to me as if my air wasn’t being stolen from me as I laid in the darkness. *Lily, my shining light.*

“Mako. What have they done to you? My best friend. It’s okay, you’re safe now. Where we’re going no one will ever hurt you again. Everyone loves and lives happily with no bloodshed. We’ll finally be together,” she rejoiced, gripping my hand as she pressed her face against it.

I could feel the warmth coming from her and it was enticing, but my mind wandered back to my knights and my spirits. “But...the others? The guys and Eli? What about my spirits?”

She gave me another sad smile. “They don’t belong where we’re going. One day they’ll come, but not now. It’ll just be you and me. You’ll make new friends Mako. Let’s go,” she begged, gently tugging my hand.

“Go...but my knights...” I looked at the darkness above; my body felt as light as a feather, as if I’d been shackled down and was finally free, floating upward.

Within the darkness came a blink of light, growing bigger and bigger as I rose, Lily’s hand still in my grasp. The light felt warm and inviting; my heart craved for its warmth as we came closer.

“Mako, say goodbye. Your knights will see you again soon. We’ll be happy together in the meantime. Okay?” Lily reassured me, letting go of my hand as she flew forward, my eyes noticed her pure white wings as she soared effortlessly.

“Wings...like Hope....Hope, Rose, Lily, Lexi...Mid-Midnight. Don’t leave me alone.” I struggled with the thought

of leaving my spirits behind. I never did anything without their guidance and approval. Couldn't they come, too? I had to go get them!

I struggled, begging for my body to stop floating to the light, but I continued to ascend.

"No. Please. Daniel, Elias, Marcus, Ryder, Kai, Eli! Anyone. Stop. Don't take me! I don't want to go. I can't leave. I need them. I need all of them. Please."

I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to face the light.

I couldn't stop, refusing to face reality even as I approached it.

But, my mind already knew, and I had to accept it.

I'm dead.

CHAPTER 37



Daniel

My feet landed on the floor mid-run, almost tripping from the rough landing, but recovering as I ran towards Mako – her body still on the ground a pool of red beneath her.

No, No, No.

Azriel's power burst through me as we reached her side, dropping down to our knees; our eyes landed on the open wound in her chest. I was ready to heal it, when my eyes widened, my sense picked up the absence of a heartbeat. *NO!*

"Daniel! Is she okay?" Eli yelled, her footsteps approached.

I didn't answer, my hands pressed against her chest as I started compressions, my power began to pool in my hands as I readied myself to jolt her heart if my attempts failed.

"C'mon Mako. Breathe!" I begged as I pressed, praying to the gods to save her.

I wanted so badly to lash out, to be pissed at whoever had done this to her, but there was no time for that. I needed to remain calm. Needed to fix my princess, so I could tell her how much I loved her.

"No. Makoto...Midnight. Don't die, wake up!" Eli cried, falling in front of her as her hands held her head, while I continued. My eyes noticed the bracelet still on her wrist, letting out another curse.

No fucking wonder. She couldn't protect herself cause of that stupid piece of magic restraining protection crap.

“Eli, slow the poison! It’s too close to her heart. This will all be for nothing if you can’t stop it,” I ordered, noticing the green sludge flowing in her blood.

I already could tell her legs were the most affected, the blood flow stalled by the poison. Unless we got her to Winterlya in time, she’d be paralyzed from the waist down. But that was the least of my concern; she needed to breathe before I worried about such consequences.

“Got it!” Eli placed her hands-on Makoto’s shoulders – a bright, pink light emitted from her hands. She removed her hands, a set of freshly pink markings remained on Mako’s shoulder blades.

“It will still the poison for as long as I command it. I need to stay in my fairy form or it’ll restart. We need Winterlya. She can remove the poison without having lingering effects. But it needs to be soon. I can’t hold onto this form for much longer,” Eli confessed.

I could already see the beads of sweat on her face; her shoulders moved with her deep inhales and exhales.

“KAI. Makoto isn’t breathing. Tell Winterlya and Karen they need to prepare to treat Nephilim poisoning. I need you here ASAP. If I restart her heart she needs medical attention. Eli’s slowing down the progression of the poison.”

“Where are you?” Ryder demanded as Kai and Marcus entered our bond.

“Mountain side of the exam. Eli remove your hands, I need to shock her,” I ordered, pulling out of the knight communication so I could focus. I sent a powerful jolt of my energy within her; the spark surrounded her heart, but it didn’t beat. “Dammit, again.” I cursed as I sent another jolt.

No Mako. Breathe! I didn’t tell you yet. I didn’t tell you how much I love you. Dammit, baby, don’t leave me. I’m sorry, I beg you Starlight, bring her back. Don’t take her from me. I can’t lose another person I care about. I won’t forgive myself if she dies. Please, I need my light. I need Makoto.

I could feel my back burn, as I began to half shift, my large white wings escaped my back and spread out. The power continued to flow through me, not stopping at just my wings. My hair became longer and glowed an ashy light blonde. I felt stronger, more rejuvenated than ever as I started another round of compressions.

“Let me take over Daniel. I’ll save her I swear it,” Azriel vowed.

I took one last look at Makoto; her lips turned purple as her complexion became as pale as a ghost.

Please Starlight, don’t take her away.

~AZRIEL~

I continued the compressions, my energy pooled into my hands as I readied myself.

If I couldn’t restart her heart, I’d cast a spell. I knew it would be hard on her body, potentially sending her into another coma...but, she’d be alive. I could work with that. As long as her soul was within her body, I wouldn’t rest till I got to see those turquoise eyes and hear her voice.

Until I knew that the Princess and Hope were okay, I wouldn’t give up.

I sent another jolt – the high electric current failed a third time. I took a deep breath; my eyes looked up to see EliaseAnne’s pain stricken, pale face as she sat there trembling.

She looked at me, the tears pooled in her emerald eyes, gliding down her flushed cheeks, her trembling lips opened.

“Azriel...please, save them. I beg you.”

I nodded, closing my eyes. It was now or never. There was only a short time frame when the soul lingered in the body before beginning its ascent to Starlight. I had to try.

“Dear Starlight, Mother of all things, Creator of everything light and dark. Hear my plea. Our Princess has fallen, poisoned and left to perish on your land; your soil soaked with her blood. Do not allow a being of low stature go against your star map, and defy your plans for Rosalina Mackenzie Heart. Hear my cry for justice and renew the threads of life within. Let my strings of justice save her soul from the ascent, let the gift you’ve given to me heal and mend such wounds. Bring Makoto back to us...to me. Please Mother Starlight, answer thy call.”

I felt the power within release; the multiple white strings left my hands and began to wrap around Makoto. String after string, wound around her body, cocooning our princess...I felt the strain of my magic, gritted my teeth as I continued to let the overflowing energy release from my hands.

My eyes noticed the web within the wound in Mako’s chest – as it healed the surrounding ripped tissues. I scanned her body, watched as it began to heal. The poison still lingered, but thanks to Eli’s magic, it had stopped its progression.

I watched my strings wrap around her heart, sheltering it before sending multiple shockwaves. I waited anxiously, praying that our efforts weren’t in vain as I held my breath.

I reached out and held the hand lying on her chest, wishing to feel her warmth instead of the cold, clammy feel that greeted me. I pressed her hand against my lips as I closed my eyes.

Princess...Makoto, please. Breathe.

My eyes flashed open, widening as my ears picked up the first heartbeat; another followed a few seconds later, followed by another. It continued, beating in an irregular pattern, but it began to find a rhythm; my strings of healing retreated as my eyes watched her heart beat strong.

“KAI! Now!” I heard Eli scream through our bond.

I felt a change in the air followed by a ripping noise. I glanced over to see Kai, Ryder, and Marcus who looked like

they'd been running. Kai didn't hesitate, walking forward while Ryder and Marcus froze, their eyes landed on Makoto's body.

I couldn't focus on their reactions; the priority was to get Makoto to Heila, ruling out everything else.

"Winterlya, Karen and the rest of the medical team are ready. The Queen has been notified as well and will assist in the treatment. Are you two ready? I won't be able to make it as smooth of a trip as usual." Kai confessed.

My eyes trailed his body, exhaustion evident. I frowned, taking another glance at Makoto whose heart was already beginning to lose momentum.

"Kai, you're pushing it," I warned. We already had to deal with Makoto being on the edge of death. We'd be at a big disadvantage if Kai pushed past his limit. He gave me a frustrated look, but sighed.

"Hinotori," he summoned, his eyes closed before opening again, those amber globes glowed with immense power.

"It's been awhile Azriel, Elyion. Shall we? The Princess is already on the decline. Let us not delay," he announced. His Japanese accent cloaked his words.

We both gave each other one glance before looking at Ryder and Marcus – both of their eyes gave off the glowing effect – Stryker and Ryuu took over to bid us farewell.

"Keep us posted on the Princess' condition. We won't take long," Ryuu requested.

"I'll clean everything up down here. Just focus on stabilizing her. We believe in you three," Stryker acknowledged.

The demon and I had never been able to see eye to eye on any matter, but now as he gazed at me, I knew he believed in my ability to care for the Princess and his demon love.

I could see their fear, but I also saw their confidence. This wasn't just a coincidence. It was a test and we all knew it.

It was time to show the darkness what it meant to be knights, and it started with saving the Princess.

Hinotori placed a firm hand on my shoulder, doing the same to Eli.

I held Mako's hand tightly against my chest before closing my eyes.

“May the Stars protect us on our path to salvation.”

CHAPTER 38



Leonardo

~LEONARDO~

“Dammit, why can’t I find this stupid orb! That headmaster said it was going to be easy. But where is it!”

I frantically continued my search; my eyes searched for the black orb I was required to retrieve to pass this exam.

I have to find this Orb. I need to pass this exam. I can’t afford to fail. Mama would cry in the sky above for me failing...yet again.

I’d never been good at anything; always struggled to achieve all of my goals. I didn’t know what I had done in my past life, but I was plagued with such bad karma that I wondered if I should even have goals. I never achieved them, but this was the first time I was so close to becoming a knight.

Sure, I still had one more rotation before the final exam, but as long as I passed this I’d have the motivation to do better – to become a graduate of Knightwood. At least it didn’t matter that I was a red rank. I could still graduate, though the jobs available for my rank would be shitty jobs like a waste collector.

I would make my mom proud. She’d finally get to see her son become victorious and walk proudly with such a title to our name. It wasn’t her fault we were poor. She was the hardest working person I knew, down to her very last breath, but I would bring prosperity to our family name, removing the disgrace that clings to me wherever I went.

I looked around the clearing again before another round of curses escaped me. *Dammit, where is it! I don’t have time!*

“It seems you need some help, Leonardo.”

I jumped at the calm tone as I looked over my shoulder.

“Professor Sepherant? What are you doing here? I thought you resigned?” I was confused to see his perfect appearance; his tailored suit didn’t reflect a wrinkle; his hands behind his

back as he smiled at me. His eyes were what always scared me; those light purple eyes held a load of mystery to them and gave me the creeps.

“One can never get a break. The professor assigned to your exam bailed. He said he didn’t want to waste time supervising such a disgrace of a shifter. I guess he’s another one who hates on the Dulro’s family name.”

I gritted my teeth as a growl vibrated against the walls of my throat; the piteous expression on Professor Sepherant face only made me angrier. *How dare that professor say such things? He knew nothing but rumors and lies.*

“Thus, the headmaster summoned me for my aid. I was already in the town nearby. My servant needed to pick up some arts and crafts from that famous, jewellery store, when I got the message. I decided it wouldn’t hurt to help you out. I see how much you want this Leonardo. So, I’ll be kind enough to do this.”

His hand moved from his back, revealing a medium, black orb which shimmered in the light that peeked through the thick fog.

“You found it! Are you sure? This isn’t a trap, right?” I questioned, my suspicions overthrown with joy. *I would pass.*

“It’s not a test. I’m not held against their rules, remember? The fog is thick enough, so they won’t notice anything. Take it now,” he pushed, smiling.

I rushed over, taking the orb from his gloved hands as I took a moment to appreciate its sleek appearance before looking up to my savior. “Thank you, Sir. May Starlight bless you for such kindness.”

“No worries, Leonardo. To prevent the darkness, we must do kind to one another. I’ll give you one more tip before you go. I suggest you take the longer route back down instead of the way you came. I hear there are a few traps awaiting your return.”

Ugh, those bastards always have to make my exam harder compared to everyone else. I bet they did it on purpose, too.

“Thank you, Sir. I’ll take the longer route! I’ll be on my way. Makoto’s waiting, and I don’t want to delay.”

“Makoto, you say? I haven’t seen her in awhile. She’s at the bottom of the mountain?” he questioned, his eyes filled with concern.

Of course, he was concerned like all the professors at Knightwood with their fascination for the first female, pink rank. They heard an accident occurred during the exam, leaving Makoto in critical condition. I bet he was concerned for her well-being, especially with her helping me.

“Yes. She agreed to help me. I’ll be on my way Sir. Thank you, once again.” I bowed.

“No, Leonardo. Thank you. All the best.” He bowed, making me blush. No one ever showed such courtesy to me.

“I’ll be off. Farewell, Professor Sepherant.” I turned and began to run; the longer route would take me at least ten minutes if I ran the whole way. I didn’t mind, feeling energized at my dream being in reach.

One more rotation and I’ll live my dream.

CHAPTER 39

I opened my eyes, needing to see how bad the situation was as we materialized, feeling the solid ground beneath me.

The dizziness was hard to ignore, my world spun from the sudden shift – Kai transported us from Matthew’s office straight to the exam area. Kai’s hand rested on our shoulders before the world began to dematerialize – everything became like pixels falling around us as the environment morphed.

The process was hella rougher than his usual teleportation’s; holding the same effects as when we walked through the portal, but ten times worse, making me feel sick to my stomach. If it wasn’t for my nerves, I probably would have thrown up. Now that we’d arrived, I had to fight the bile that rose in my throat as my eyes landed on the body of the woman I loved, a pool of dark red liquid beneath her. Blood.

Azriel’s and EliaseAnne’s spike in stress leaked into our bond as they called for help.

“KAI. Makoto isn’t breathing. Tell Winterlya and Karen they need to prepare to treat Nephilim poisoning. I need you here ASAP. If I restart her heart she needs medical attention. Eli’s slowing down the progression of the poison.”

“Where are you?” Ryder demanded, being the first to recover from the wave of panic that hit us as we opened up our bond.

“Mountain side of the exam. Eli, remove your hands, I need to shock her.”

Shock her?

The words alone sent chills down my spine as my left hand began to tremble uncontrollably. I knew I had to control myself or I'd shift, but the idea of Daniel shocking our Firefly – such words emphasized the reality of the situation and that Makoto wasn't breathing. She wasn't alive.

Stryker had taken over, Ryder struggled to keep awake from the imbalance of emotions as he closed his eyes; glowing orbs of black took over as he opened them. I knew he wouldn't dare pass out when Makoto was in danger, but he wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer with us struggling to keep our emotions from tearing him apart.

“KAI! Now!”

I heard Eli scream through our bond, her high, shrilled voice scared me. I hadn't been so afraid since my time at the facility – afraid of death every time I felt *his* presence as my body jolted from the electricity going through me – I was shocked over and over again.

I glanced at Kai as Ryuu nudged into my mind, ready to take control if I needed him to. If we didn't want to shift, we'd alternate until we could find somewhere safe to shift into our dragon form.

Kai's eyes flickered back and forth as he struggled with control. Kai was the calmest among us, sometimes calmer than Daniel, but one could never underestimate a phoenix's temper – their flames erupted from the depth of the earth to consume the culprit of such rage.

He didn't look mad – he looked fearless and ready to destroy anyone who tried to stop him from his goal.

Now, Kai lunged forward as he knelt by Daniel's side; he looked completely different. His hair was now long, ashy white blonde, floating gently in the air as if the wind kept the strands captive. His angel wings were outstretched, so white and pure I bet, simply with a touch, a feather could cleanse anyone of their sins.

The power that flowed off of him was a rare sight to see and feel; the most power I had seen Daniel display in cycles.

“Winterlya, Karen and the rest of the medical team are ready. The Queen has been notified as well and will assist in the treatment. Are you two ready? I won’t be able to make it as smooth a trip as usual,” Kai explained.

He must have used the emergency spell while we were teleported to speak to Winterlya telepathically – explaining the new development.

I bet he was the most shocked out of all of us. He’d used his foresight only fifteen minutes ago and had seen nothing. Something must have changed – someone interfered suddenly. *But who?*

My eyes trailed his body, exhaustion evident. I frowned, taking another glance at Makoto whose heart was already beginning to lose momentum.

“Kai, you’re pushing it,” Azriel warned, his singsong voice low and threatening.

We all knew how stubborn Kai could be. He would never admit he needed rest or help unless you threatened him. He gave Azriel a frustrated look, but sighed.

“Hinotori,” he commanded, his eyes closing before opening again, those amber eyes glowing with immense power.

“It’s been awhile Azriel, Elyion. Shall we? The Princess is already showing signs of decline. Let us not delay,” he announced. His accent was thick, indication that he was furious.

All three of them turned their gazes to us, Ryuu taking the opportunity to take control, allowing me to watch.

“Keep us posted on the Princess’ condition. We won’t take long,” Ryuu requested.

We had no choice but to hang back. There was no way Kai would be able to teleport us to Heila after doing three trips – one with Winterlya and Karen, another to return back and now taking EliaseAnne, Daniel, and Makoto.

Any more would put his life at risk and we couldn't have that.

"I'll clean everything down here. Just focus on stabilizing her. We believe in you three," Stryker acknowledged.

We stood there confidently as we reassured our friends that we'd be okay. We needed them to focus on saving Makoto. This must have happened for a reason; the Starlight gods approved such a change.

Regardless, we wouldn't let this stop us. We'd save our Princess and fight against whatever darkness was trying to prevent us from fulfilling our destiny.

"May the Stars protect us on our path to salvation," Azriel whispered as they dematerialized, vanishing from sight.

Only the pool of Makoto's blood remained.

We stood there in silence. Stryker took a few steps to look at a large amount of blood lingered on the ground.

We followed, standing next to the demon shifter; my eyes glared at his trembling right hand – the quivering matched my left as it shook rapidly.

We placed our hand on his shoulder.

"Stryker. It's not your fault. We didn't see this coming. Even Kai didn't see this. Something must have changed. Someone did this, and we'll find out who soon enough."

He lifted his head to face us; his blank expression worried us. That never was a good sign. He opened his mouth to speak, but the sound of footsteps could be heard, our heads glanced to our right – Leonardo's figure appeared while the thick fog began to clear.

Ryuu retreated, giving me control as our anger spiked. *You've got to be fucking kidding me.*

"Huh? Ryder and Marcus. What are you guys doing here? What's with the thick, red stuff on the floor? Is that animal blood or something? I thought EliaseAnne and Daniel were supposed to be here? Did you decide to take their place or something?"

The questions just flowed out of him as he tried to catch his breath; his hands went on his knees as he huffed; his right hand holding a black orb.

He glanced back up, smiling from ear to ear before he rose.

“Can you believe I found the orb! I’m one step closer to becoming a knight. I seriously have to thank Makoto for coming with. Where is she anyways? Maybe Professor Sepherant dismissed her,” he scratched at his chin, looking confused.

Did he just say Professor Sepherant?

“What did you just say?” I questioned, praying my ears deceived me.

He rolled his eyes. “What I just said. You know, Professor Sepherant? I swear, I thought he resigned, but my designated professor bailed out on me. Professor Sepherant was in the area on business and got contacted to help out. He’s the one who helped me find the orb and told me to take the longer route instead of the shorter one, which apparently was filled with traps. I swear, I would have been here awhile ago if it wasn’t for having to take that route. I told him Makoto was down here waiting for me. I guess he was concerned about her after what happened at—”

He didn’t finish, a fist slammed into his face as his body flew into the air, crashing into the ground a few feet away. I blinked before a wave of power I hadn’t felt in rotations hit me with such force I quivered.

I glanced to see Stryker lowering his hand before dark flames flickered to life, growing around his feet. His chest was rising and falling in a rapid pattern as he huffed, his eyes so black I was afraid he’d fully shift.

Leo struggled to get on his hands and knees, coughing up blood as his eyes landed on the shattered orb next to him. He looked up; the anger stormed in his eyes, but then flickered with fear as he trailed the flames that moved around Stryker’s feet in a circular pattern.

“A knight? You? Do you know what you just committed? Do you know thanks to you the Princess of Heila is on the verge of death because you couldn’t use that fucking brain of yours and put the dots together? Fuck Leo!! I swear to the gods above if Makoto doesn’t...if she doesn’t survive this ordeal. I. Will. Murder. You. Now, you have five seconds to get out of my sight, or these flames will have their fun with you,” Stryker snarled.

The flames grew bigger as they encircled his body, a large cobra emerging from the flames.

I didn’t know which one of us was more shocked – myself or Leonardo who paled as his jaw dropped, his teeth covered in blood.

“But...I...can’t go back? You broke the orb,” he began.

“5.”

“I’ll be a disgrace!”

“4.”

“I’ll be kicked out! I have nowhere else to go.”

“3.”

“You’re my friend! You can’t do this. Ryder?”

“2.”

The cobra rose higher as it opened its mouth to hiss, the black fangs large enough to plunge into his body, finishing him.

He staggered to his feet before turning and running as fast as his legs would carry him.

Stryker stood there, watching his figure get smaller and smaller until it was no more; disappearing into the fog that faded away, inch by inch.

He called off the flames – the cobra released a final cry before dissolving into smoke. Stryker retreated, Ryder took over as his eyes dulled.

I walked towards him; my eye began to twitch as the urge to shift raided my mind. *Fuck, I need to shift.*

Ryder glanced my way as I approached; his weak, dull eyes took a slow scan of me before he frowned.

“You need to shift.”

“We don’t have time.” I replied.

“One hour.”

“Ryder.”

“One-hour, Marcus. I can’t have you shifting on the transport ship. Let go, burn the fucking place down if you want. Just get yourself in check. You won’t be able to shift again till we get to Heila. Make this moment count. I’ll deal with the headmaster. I’ll meet you at the transport docks.”

He didn’t wait for my reply, turning before walking away.

“*Make sure you get the stools,*” I said quietly into our bond.

I watched his hand rise up in a wave – signaling me that he understood. I knew at this stage, he was done talking and was now focused on doing.

I took a look at the vast land around me, hesitating for a moment wondering if it would even be enough. The barriers wouldn’t go down until an hour after the exam time was up, giving me plenty of time to burn it to shreds. Did I care if I damaged this area of Minato? Nope. I didn’t give a flying fuck.

The thought of Makoto smiling at me flashed before my eyes, her cheeks flushed as she laughed, her long, curly hair whipped around as the wind blew by. The memory of our time on the beach down on Earthala returned to me – our play date together.

All of that was a memory and I didn’t know whether we’d get another chance to enjoy such time together. That was enough to send me over the edge – my mind drifted as I allowed the urge that ran through me to take over and I shifted. I wasn’t going to linger around. My mind needed an escape.

It was time to let my animal instinct take over and reign. Ryuu would decide when we had to go. I left it up to him, my mind drifted to the darkness.

Firefly, be strong once more. We can't lose you. All of us need you. Please Starlight gods, if you hear this prayer. Save our Princess. She's our only hope for what's to come.

CHAPTER 40



Ryder

~RYDER~

I slammed my hand against the brown, wooden doors – my magic overflowed causing the lock to malfunction.

Sparks flew as smoke rose up from the magic circle where we placed our hand for access.

I grunted, pushing the broken door open as I continued my commanding stride.

If only I could laugh at the multiple stares that locked onto me; my power flooded the hall as I continued to walk towards my destination – the headmaster’s office.

I noticed the old secretary’s eyes glanced up before growing wide as she struggled out of her seat.

“Ah, Ryder? The headmaster is with a knight right—”

I glared at her, Stryker taking the moment to take over as my eyes bled black – shutting the poor, old lady up.

I turned the corner, walking straight towards the black door with the gold plate –HEADMASTER’S OFFICE, written in bold, capital letters.

I turned the knob, not caring to knock as I pushed against the weak door a pair of wide, brown eyes greeted me.

“Ryder? Uh, I wasn’t expecting you so soon. I’m with a knight right now, he told me about the exam.” The older, plump male started to fidget out of his seat. *Another knight?*

I looked to my left; Leo’s wide eyes stared at me. I noticed the tissue in his nose, a large bruise on the side of his face where Stryker punched him.

I returned my focus to the man in charge. I didn’t have time to waste.

“I guess he informed you that Professor Sepherant was on site, claiming to be a substitute for the exam professor, who I recently discovered was found unconscious in the auditorium with a large bruise on his face. I bet what Leo didn’t tell you is

that Sepherant stabbed Makoto, leaving her helpless thanks to the bracelet you insisted she wear so Leonardo over here could prove his skills, which left her to die in a pool of her own blood. My team, Winterlya the princess of Wintalyn, as well as your step-daughter, are now scurrying around Heila trying to save her from death. What a wonderful way of delivering the lost Princess of Heila to the King and Queen. I can only imagine what they'll do if their daughter, only daughter, doesn't survive this ordeal. Even if she does, I'm curious to see what punishment the King will bestow upon you?" The mockery that leaked off my voice pleased my demon nature.

What pleased us more was the way the headmaster's body quaked; his eyes grew so wide, I thought those brown irises would burst.

"What! I didn't agree to this. I had no idea Professor Sepherant was here or even on campus. I made it very clear to everyone that he should not be on the campus that he was banned. I made an announcement to all the knights!" he defended.

"I guess Leonardo over here missed the memo." I gave him a murderous glare, fighting the urge to burn him to flames. He flinched as he backed away against the wall.

"You inconsiderate f—" the headmaster began to yell, but I rose my hand, signaling him to stop.

"Leave your insults for when you're not wasting my time. I only came to give you these." I pulled out the eight sheets of paper I had rolled and tucked halfway into my back pocket. I flicked them onto the desk, the sheets of paper scattered across the black wood. I could see the horror in his eyes as he looked back up at me, realizing what I was about to declare.

"As of today, I, Ryder Carter, the son of Alexander and Violet Carter and future heir of Minato revoke our contract. As does the rest of my team of knights, Daniel Moore, Elias and EliaseAnne Kingsley and Marcus Hunt, as well as Matthew Oxwell and Karen Knightly, the first and second commanders of Heila. We will no longer be involved in Knightwood's affairs. Rosalina Mackenzie Heart or as you know her as

Makoto Heart's enrollment is invalid. All funds deposited into your account will cease as of this moment; our withdrawal forms are now on your desk. Don't worry. I made sure Elias and EliaseAnne wrote separate forms. It's a pleasure, headmaster. Pray to the Starlight gods that the princess recovers from this...or my team and I will be back and trust me; it will take all of your knights and more to stop us."

I turned around, giving one last lethal glare at Leo before walking away.

"Don't forget the stools," Stryker reminded.

I walked out of the teachers building; the cloudy sky covered the sun. I stared at the dark grey patches floating away, small flashes flickered from time to time. *A storm is brewing.*

I began to walk, making my way towards the forest.

No more games. It was time to prepare for the darkness.

~LEONARDO~

I walked aimlessly in the rain, the frigid droplets beat against my body as I continued on, dragging my feet, one step after another.

Why?

Such a simple word, but it held a thousand questions – none of which would help solve my problem as I continued to walk in the storm raging around me.

Why couldn't I be happy?

Why was I always a failure?

Why was I a dormant shifter?

Why did I lose everything I loved?

Why was I born into such a world?

Why did the gods always forsake me?

Why did they allow my mom to be stoned to death?

Why was I alone...

WERE the tears I shed every night in the comfort of my single room, my bed and a pillow hard as rocks, not enough? Were my failures and multiple attempts to please others, by slaving around the school, not a demonstration of my wish for acceptance?

For just once, I wanted to be praised. My ears craved for words of acknowledgment as my mind begged to feel what success was.

My hands wished to feel what power was like; my tongue longed for a taste of such satisfaction as I stood proudly and announced my position of high rank – people falling to their knees in awe and admiration.

Was my desire too weak to be felt by the gods above? Their bright, twinkling stars shone in the dark sky, mocking me each night as I begged for their salvation.

“Am I not worthy?”

I stopped in my tracks, the tears that threatened to spill gave in, the salt like water trailed down my flushed cheeks as I looked towards the sky.

I let out a loud cry, sobs wracked my body as I cried in place.

“Why have you forsaken me! You give everyone around me such blessings and hope, yet you belittle me and laugh. Was my rural upbringing not enough to give me a sense of joy? Is my dormant spirit to blame for such negligence? I am a child of yours, too! A being, created by your hands! Yet you leave me here to rot in suffering and agony. How long do I have to pray till you listen to me? Till my prayers are finally answered? Till I die and ascend to meet you face to face!” I roared.

I fell to my knees, pounding on the ground as if it was my enemy.

“I hate the gods...I despise you. If only I could make you pay. Yes, make you feel this agonizing pain I go through every day and night. I’d give the same amount of suffering I’ve bared my entire life. No. I’ll give you double, no, triple of my sorrow. You will regret not helping me,” I declared through clenched teeth, my eyes wide. I looked at my bloody hands; the pain gave me satisfaction.

“Would you like my assistance?”

I gazed up at the man in the white suit standing before me. His large, red umbrella leaned forward, shielding me from the cold rain that continued to beat harshly around us.

I saw his red eyes twinkle as his lips curled into a devilish smile. “You...you’re the man from before,” I stated, shivering at the memory.

“Yes. I’m sorry I had to contribute to such suffering. At the time, my resolve was as strong as yours. I needed to get rid of

my targets and you had the information I needed. No hard feelings.” He reached out to me, his open hand stopped in front of me.

I took a moment to question his motives, but I brushed off such a mentality. I wasn’t a knight anymore. The decisions I made were mine alone. Whoever got affected by them wasn’t my business or concern. I was alone in this world, with no strings attaching me to such morals.

I placed my hand in his, that strong hand helped me up onto unsteady feet.

“I can see the determination in your eyes shifter. What is your name?” he questioned.

“Leo...Leonardo,” I whispered, not having the strength to admit that wretched surname that has brought nothing but misery.

Till this day, my mom being falsely accused of trying to poison the king hung over my family name. I knew she hadn’t done it, that she’d never commit such a criminal act, yet they ignored her pleas as she begged. I had to avenge her and that started with the source: those Starlight gods.

“What conquest vexes you to the point of defying the gods?” he questioned.

“Defying the gods? They called themselves gods, yet they can’t rewrite my destiny? They’ve made my life a living hell. They watched as my only family, my beloved mother, was stoned to death. She was innocent, yet they allowed her to perish,” I exclaimed, the tears rolled down my cheeks as I continued.

“The same gods have watched me trip and fall again and again as I strive to be someone respected. This cruel world has done nothing for me. Why continue to praise such beings when they are nothing but a lie. I’m tired of worshipping them. Instead, I’ll teach them what power is. I’ll make them suffer and feel the pain that bickers and claws at my soul,” I confidently vowed as I stared up at the man.

He nodded, looking pleased with my statement. “I will help you then, shifter. I see your potential; your conviction as strong as my objective. I too hate the gods with as much passion as yours and desire to see them fall from their heavenly thrones. It won’t be easy. I can’t guarantee that you’ll survive my trials and experiments, but I promise you power and strength. Shifters, young and old will bow down and kiss your feet in adoration as you sit on your throne of power. I will take you as my own. You are now my son, Leonardo.”

He gave me the most serene smile, kindness fluttered in those vibrant, red eyes as he patted me on the shoulder. A stranger, who knew nothing about me but my new-found purpose, was willing to help me succeed and walk this path of righteousness. I’d devote myself to him and would survive whatever was given to me. I wouldn’t fail. I couldn’t afford such defeat. I’d survive this. I would get my revenge.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Please. Call me Father.”

I wiped the tears that fell from my eyes with my arm as I stood, no longer fearful. “Father. I won’t let you down.” I vowed.

“I know you won’t son. Come, let us be off. We have lots to do,” he encouraged as he pressed against my back, urging me to walk with him.

I obeyed, not doubting his words.

Revenge. Yes, I’ll show the gods who I am. I’ll let them know what a dormant shifter is capable of. I will get my payback on all of those who have forsaken me. Even on Ryder and his friends. I’ll have them kneel and beg me to spare them, counting down while I listen to their pleas. I won’t show them pity. I’ll rid them of their light – anyone that opposes my conquest will be rid of their light.

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I will get my revenge. In stars, we trust.

CHAPTER 41

Leonardo

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[Avery Song & Avery Stone Reader Group](#)

- Avery S.

About the Author: Avery Phoenix



Avery Phoenix is the new pen name of USA Today Bestselling Author, Yumoyori Wilson.

With multiple bestselling series, Avery Phoenix's mission is to bring back many of bestselling smash hits to your kindles!

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Tainted Rose (Dec, 2022)

Poisonous Dream (TBA 2023)

Forgotten Fairytale (TBA 2023)

BRIGHTEN MAGIC ACADEMY

Reflections of You

Reflections of Me (May 2023)

ASLAN ACADEMY: UNICORN BLESSED CHRONICLES

Celestia: Year One

Celestia: Year Two (June 2023)