



TOUGHEST
DEAL

ALESSA THORN

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MERCENARIES AND MAGIC

BOOK 3

ALESSA THORN



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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Please note that 'Toughest Deal' contains graphic violence, swearing and sex scenes. It also contains mentions of past abuse and rape (off page), M/M scenes and blood magic.

The night smelled of garbage and gunpowder. The first was the result of the overflowing bins, strategically placed beside a filthy entrance; the latter was from the magical sigil scorched into the door's steel surface.

The dirty man leaning against the warded entrance registered the spicy scent of cloves before a thin cigarette was flicked into his face. There was a flash of silver, and hot blood poured down his front from the cut in his throat. His eyes rolled up into his head in time for him to see Altun Baruk step elegantly over his body and open the door.

Altun walked carefully down a set of concrete stairs, her heeled boots clicking and the tip of her scimitar dripping. A circle of ten chairs had been placed around a small stage that held a teenage girl strapped upright to a steel operating table. Beside her was a rack of instruments, ranging from a scalpel to a board hammered with nails. Upbeat dance music played through a small Bluetooth speaker, the rhythm in stark contrast to the bleak surroundings.

A mage with a scarred face was holding a small silver knife, ready to start his ritual, and didn't notice Altun coming down through the shadows. Neither did the occupants of the chairs.

By the time they registered a newcomer in their midst, the curve of Altun's blade was there to meet them. She let all her years of swordsmanship out, dancing between the spraying blood and flying body parts, the screams washing over her

while she ducked the few who tried to fight back. She saved the mage for last.

He did his best, throwing his knife and the rest of his torture tools at her. Altun chuckled, her blood-flecked face like a beautiful canvas of death, and held up a hand to stop them in the air in front of her. The mage gaped and backed away.

“I have money...”

“So do I,” Altun replied, swiping her hand to the side and sending all the horrible objects crashing to the ground. “I thought it was well-known that this city belongs to me, and I have rules about magic users and snuff clubs operating inside of it.”

“What do you care? This girl is worth nothing! No one—” the mage stopped talking as the point of Altun’s blade pressed into his bare chest.

“I was once a girl that people thought was worth nothing,” she said, her dark eyes flashing with malice.

“Please don’t do this. I didn’t know your rules,” the mage begged.

Altun’s power flared out of her like an invisible sword, and the mage’s eyes went wide before a red stain connected his shoulder to his hip, and the top half of his torso slid away from his body.

“Fucking amateurs,” she growled.

Altun unbuckled the straps from the girl’s wrists and ankles. She was high on something, her pupils blown out wide.

“So much red,” the girl murmured.

Altun took off her black fur coat and wrapped it around the naked girl’s thin shoulders.

“This way,” she ordered and led the girl back up the stairs. Her driver and her car were already waiting as planned. What wasn’t planned was the tall blade of a man leaning against her BMW. He didn’t move as the driver stepped forward to take the girl from Altun.

“Deliver her to the usual place and see she’s taken care of,” Altun instructed. “I’ll find my own way home.”

Her driver didn’t question her; he just helped the now crying girl into the car’s back seat.

Altun turned to the other man. He was all hard lines, shadows, and violence. When he smiled, though, it was like seeing a streak of lightning, capable of utter destruction, there one instant and gone the next.

“Aren’t you old enough to know better than to walk into a snuff club without backup?” Konstantius Zalam asked.

“You are here, aren’t you?” Altun patted the hilt of the scimitar hanging from her hip. “And I wasn’t alone. Where’s your other half?”

“Athena is training with Silas.” Kon lit a cigarette and offered it to her. “You know, if you told her about some of your extracurricular activities like this one, she wouldn’t think you’re a heartless bitch all the time.”

“But I *am* a heartless bitch,” Altun replied, taking the cigarette and having a deep drag. “Is there a reason you are here, Basti?”

“We haven’t seen you in a week. I was concerned,” Kon replied.

“I’m touched, but don’t worry, I’ve been busy researching.” They walked through the dark streets towards where Kon had parked.

“Find anything of interest?”

“Not yet. I know Dee’s weaknesses for certain artifacts, but I haven’t found something to tempt her out of hiding. Yet.”

Kon hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe she knows we are coming for her.”

“Perhaps, but she’s too arrogant to be concerned about it,” Altun replied. Her sister had always underestimated her and her magic. Altun could only hope that time hadn’t changed that.

Kon drove them back through the city, past Galata Tower and straight to Altun's front door.

"You know you're not doing this on your own. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met, Altun, but you need us. Don't hide out anymore. We are a team," Kon said as they pulled up.

"Konstantius is a part of a team. I've never thought I'd see the day when you played along with others," she said with a soft laugh. He had always worked alone until Athena and her misfit family of mercenaries had adopted him.

"We all need people when we are taking out a secret society." Kon's lightning smile flashed. "And next time you decide to clear a rat's nest, ask Athena to help."

Altun smirked. "I'll think of it as a bonding exercise, shall I?"

"It's the only kind she'd be interested in." Kon leaned over and opened the door for her. "Come to the warehouse for dinner this week." He wasn't asking, Altun noticed.

"Fine. I'll drop by when I have something useful to share," Altun replied and patted his cheek. "*İyi geceler, Bastı.*"

Altun watched his dark car disappear into the night and exhaled. She had cared for very few people in her long life, but that dangerous boy was definitely one of them.

Altun could feel the past biting at her heels, and she knew deep in her gut that her time for keeping secrets was about to end. She could only hope that when they resurfaced, they didn't kill them all.



ALTUN'S HOME was equal parts safe house and jewel box. It was covered with protection wards and filled with rare, beautiful, and mostly magical objects.

The tension between Altun's shoulders finally eased once she was behind a locked door and sipping on a fine brandy.

After cleaning her scimitar thoroughly, she sat down at her carved wooden desk and opened a locked drawer.

Inside was a single photo. It showed a young, smiling couple standing beside an older woman holding a small boy. The boy had big, dark eyes and scruffy, wild hair, his arms thrown around the woman's neck.

The photo had been taken two days before Azra and Eren had been slaughtered by Liddell, leaving Kon an orphan on the streets of Istanbul. Two days before, Altun had confronted her sister and had been stabbed three times and tossed into the deep Bosphorus. She had died in those dark, ancient waters, and when she had been washed up on the shore, she had been reborn as Altun Baruk.

“Fucking ghosts,” Altun whispered under her breath before locking the photo away once more.

Altun opened her laptop and lit one of her thin clove cigars. She skimmed the contents of her inbox with boredom. A notification flashed up, alerting her that a contact who owed her a favor had found something of interest.

Altun opened the attachment and frowned. It was a bill of sale, nothing fancy or formal, just a note written out by a shaky hand for a golden necklace. The pendant was a plain chunk of unpolished crystal.

The quality of the trinket wasn't what made her pause; it was that the note claimed that the necklace had once belonged to the famed magus of Queen Elizabeth, John Dee.

Altun swore viciously when she noticed the name of the person who had bought the piece for an absolutely eye-watering sum—Julian Richard Burbank of Belgravia Antiquities, London.

Altun blew out a cloud of spicy smoke and smiled. “You sneaky son of a bitch.”

Julian Burbank had been twenty-five years old when he realized he liked beautiful, ancient objects more than he enjoyed being a gangster.

He'd had the revelation quite suddenly while beating the life out of a mercenary a few years younger than him. The cocky little shit had offered to help him kill the gang he was indebted to for a split of whatever was in their safe.

Julian had gotten rid of the shitty gang members he despised, gained equity, and started his new life in one bold move. Silas Edgeworth had been his dearest friend ever since.

It was because of the Edgeworths that he'd recently been in Istanbul and embroiled in violence and magic and intrigue. Julian had returned to England after Gadal's head exploded so spectacularly, and for the first time, he was finding life incredibly dull.

One couldn't learn that magic existed and see it being used without it changing something fundamental inside of them. Now, everything and everyone that he thought he enjoyed wasn't enough.

The real problem was, for the first time in his life, Julian wanted something he couldn't buy, barter, or beat into submission.

He had money, beautiful possessions, a list of equally beautiful casual lovers who would cater to his every whim.

None of it was satisfying because none of it was Altun Baruk. She was a venomous forbidden fruit he longed to taste at his own peril, but he had been denied the privilege. She had become a killer combo of fascination and obsession for him.

The one time they had eaten alone together, Julian had been so entranced by Altun, he had offered her anything he owned in exchange for a single night with her. She had smiled indulgently at him and told Julian he had nothing she wanted.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Julian had set about trying to find something to get her attention. Julian's exceptional talent was when he fixated on having something, nothing would stop him from getting it. If he needed to discover an impossible object to get Altun into his sphere once more, he would do it.

In fact, he might have already. The object burned in his pocket like a dirty secret, waiting for him to whisper in Altun's ear.

Julian pulled his attention away from the sorceress of Istanbul and back to the small, soft-spoken Italian man in front of him. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a finely tailored suit. His employer had a Veronese painting that he wanted Julian to appraise.

"You would have to come to Florence yourself," the man was saying. "My employer doesn't like his art leaving his house. We would pay for all of your expenses and for the trouble."

Julian rubbed at his chin, considering the proposal. Maybe a trip to Italy would help alleviate the malaise he had been suffering from. Julian was tired of his world being in black and white, and Italy always had a way of...

Voices rose from outside of his office doors. It was quite the feat because Julian not only had a decorative wooden door, but an inner security door made of steel. Cressida, his receptionist, was squeaking in a raised and panic voice with enough volume to cut through both of them.

“I do apologize, *signore*,” Julian began when the inner door blew open. His world flooded with color as his obsession walked in.

Altun was as radiant and luminescent as an exotic spider. She was wearing an emerald velvet wrap dress that clung to her dangerous curves and a black cape jacket. On anyone else, it would have made them look like a Bond villain. Altun looked like a Byzantine queen. She glanced down at the owlish man, who visibly shrank inwards.

“Get out of my chair,” Altun demanded. The man scrambled out of the office as Cressida came in.

“Mr. Burbank, I’m so sorry, she just—” she began, her pretty face pink with frustration.

Julian held up a hand. “Enough. Please shut the doors. I’ll deal with her.”

Altun’s burgundy painted mouth quirked in a way that said she very much doubted it. Cressida let out a small huff of anger before slamming the doors behind her.

“Very mature. Are you sure she’s old enough to be legal? Might want to check that before she tries to fuck you,” Altun said sweetly.

“She can try all she likes, but I don’t fuck employees, love. Drink?” Julian got out of his chair and poured them both a scotch. He needed to do something other than stare at Altun’s golden brown skin and vicious eyes.

Altun was the kind of woman who only got more alluring as they got older. She didn’t have a flashy beauty like Cressida’s unlined, youthful radiance. Altun carried herself with the confidence of someone who was truly comfortable in their own skin and knew how to wield her physicality like a weapon. It was like comparing bubblegum vodka to a rich, smokey scotch.

Julian loved scotch. The rarer and more aged, the better.

“I have to admit, Burbank, I thought your office would be a lot more extravagant than this,” Altun said, crossing her legs.

Her dark eyes took in the bookshelves, the safe, and the few expensive paintings he had on the dark gray walls.

Julian passed her a crystal glass of scotch. “I’m not stupid enough to keep the good stuff in such an obvious place.”

He could smell her perfume—pepper and blue lotus and the cloves from her spicy little cigars. It was sharp and sensual and utterly unique.

Julian sat back behind his desk, needing the barrier between them. She sipped the amber liquid.

“What can I do for you, Baruk?” Julian asked.

Altun’s gaze sharpened. “Do you still have it?”

“You’ll have to be a little more specific, love.”

“Dee’s necklace,” Altun replied. She leaned forward and placed her glass down on the edge of his desk, giving him a tantalizing view straight down the front of her dress. “Do you have any idea what it truly is?”

Julian knew, but he still shrugged. “Enlighten me.”

“It could be John Dee’s fourth seeing stone. He claimed the stone was left for him by the angels and was one of his most prized possessions. Show it to me, and I’ll tell you if it’s authentic,” she replied.

“Hmm, I bought it because I thought it was pretty.”

Altun’s smile widened. “No, you didn’t. Stop playing coy and show me.”

Julian reached into his pocket, pulled out the red box, and placed it on the desk in front of her. Altun opened it and stared at the necklace. After a long moment, she tentatively placed a finger on the stone. Her face shifted, her eyes glassing over. She shuddered and snapped the box closed.

“It’s genuine,” she said and drained her drink. She got up and poured herself another one. “Fuck. Do I want to know where you found it?”

“Probably not. The guy was like a hundred years old and didn’t want to part with it, but his manor needed a new roof

more than a magus's trinket."

Altun walked back over to the desk and leaned her hip against it. She sipped her drink. "Was this bait for me or for Dee?"

Julian leaned back in his chair. "Couldn't it be both?"

"It would be better in my hands than hers," Altun said. She tilted her head, studying him. "You're not a charity, so what do you want for it?"

"My asking price is still the same, Altun." Julian looked her over from her black high heels to her glossy dark curls. He smiled his shark smile. "Twenty-four hours with you. Anything goes."

Altun looked at the fine gold watch on her wrist. "I'll give you one hour."

"Deal," Julian said quickly. Her mouth popped open in surprise.

"What?"

"An hour, starting now." Julian got to his feet and strode over to his office doors. He opened them and said to the people in his waiting room, "Sorry, something has come up. Cressida? Hold my calls. I'm not to be disturbed for the next hour." He shut the doors again and locked both of them in.

Altun was staring at him like he was crazy. If only she knew.

Julian pulled out his phone, set a timer, and placed it on the desk. He took off his suit jacket and hung it neatly over the back of a chair.

His smile was vicious and triumphant. "I know exactly what I'm going to do with you."

For the first time in a long time, a flash of anticipation and nervous energy shot through Altun's body. Julian carefully removed his cuff links and rolled up his sleeves. Colorful tattoos covered his arms, revealing the thug under the exquisite tailoring.

Underneath all the polish and veneer he put on to make people comfortable, Julian was an animal. A gorgeous predator with his silver-streaked hair and beard, cold eyes, and hard body.

Altun had felt the danger the moment they had met, and the hair on the back of her neck had risen in warning. She had always chosen betas for her bed, someone who wouldn't make a fuss when she inevitably sent them on their way. It was because she was a predator too.

When Altun had first encountered Julian in Istanbul, the problem wasn't that someone else was pissing in her territory; it was that for the first time she had met someone she wanted to push until they showed fang.

They called him the Butcher of Belgravia for a reason, and she had seen him almost beat a man to death with his bare hands. He was savage when he let himself be, and once she had seen it, the polished Julian could never fool her again.

Altun wanted to see what Julian looked like when all the violence and carnality came to the surface, raw and feral. She wanted to see his real face and see if he flinched when she showed him hers.

That wanting was too dangerous and distracting, which was why she had laughed off his offer to spend the night with him and sent him on his way. She'd thought he was toying with her, but the look he was wearing now was deadly serious. He was a hunter who got a bait she couldn't resist, and now she was caught. The Butcher had come out to play.

Julian took off her cape jacket, placing it beside his own, and Altun let him maneuver her up against the door behind his desk. With quick movements, he took off his black suspenders and bound her hands.

"Confident of you to think that you can get me off in less than an hour," she couldn't resist provoking him.

Julian lifted her tied hands above her head and placed them over the sturdy coat hook on the door.

"Stop assuming this is going to be for your benefit." Julian tugged off his expensive silk tie and tied it over her mouth. "I wouldn't want you to make too much noise and worry anyone in the waiting room."

Altun rolled her eyes, and he just chuckled, a husky sound she liked way too much.

Julian tugged on the tie of her dress and unwrapped it to reveal her green and black satin lingerie. She liked to coordinate her outfits down to her skin, and the way Julian's blue eyes roamed over her told her he appreciated it.

She didn't squirm against the scrutiny. A deal was a deal, and for the next hour, she would let him do whatever he wanted to her. It was worth it for the seeing stone, and it was hardly the first time she had sold her body.

Altun let Julian stare at the three scars on her soft stomach where Dee had stabbed her over and over, and the bruises from the fight at the snuff party two days beforehand.

Julian's finger slid over one scar. She rarely let anyone touch them, and the sensation was jarring.

"Did Dee do this to you?" his voice was deadly cold.

Altun nodded. She was suddenly grateful for the tie in her mouth preventing her from saying anything else.

Julian went to his knees in front of her and licked the scar. Altun tried not to shy away as he treated the others with the same attention. His hands were rougher than she expected from a white-collar dealer, another indication that he wasn't only the well-mannered man he put on for the world.

Julian tugged the front of her bra down so her breasts popped out over the top. He made a sound in the back of his throat that had her pussy clenching reflexively. His warm mouth closed over one of her burgundy nipples and sucked it roughly.

Altun moaned, unable to pretend to be unaffected by him. His hard hands gripped her hips to steady her, and Altun lost all sense of time as he began to slowly and aggressively work her over.

By the time he moved down further, her breasts were covered in sensitive suck marks and were flushing red from the scrape of his beard. A trickle of sweat slid down her back as he worked his way across her stomach. Altun hoped he didn't notice the embarrassing tremble in her legs.

Julian's mouth pressed to her satin covered mound, and she let out a surprised squeak as the heat seared her. He slid a finger under the edge of her panties and glided it down to her center. Altun's face burned when he found out how wet she was.

Julian didn't gloat about it, merely tugged the fabric so her panties slid down her thighs. He lifted one of her legs over his strong shoulder and stared up at her. His blue eyes were as vicious as she had ever seen them. Cold realization slapped her in the face.

This wasn't sex; this was war.

Without looking away from her, Julian licked her pussy. Altun groaned, her spit soaking through the silk of the tie. Julian's hands slid around to grip her ass to hold her tight to

him. Altun was pinned and helpless to do anything but hang there and take everything he gave her.

Julian knew exactly how hard to nip and soothe her. It was fucking torture. His tongue slid inside of her, and she rose on tiptoes, unable to take the sensation of him fucking it in and out of her.

She didn't know how much time had passed, but she felt like a raw nerve, every touch blurred with pleasure and pain. One rough finger pressed inside of her, and she ground against it, needing release so badly, she could cry.

Julian seemed to sense whenever she was getting close because he would back off, robbing her of coming every time. She wanted him to fuck her already.

Julian had no interest in giving her what she wanted. He had told her outright that it would not be about her, and now she believed it.

Julian put her other leg over his shoulder, so he was taking her full weight as he feasted on her relentlessly. He added another finger and thrust into her. Altun couldn't look away as he fucked her hard with them, driving her towards the edge again.

She was dripping wet, and when his other hand traced over her back hole, all she could do was rock her hips helplessly against him, her cries smothered by her gag.

Altun's orgasm hit her so hard, she screamed, her legs tightening around Julian's head as she rode his hands and face. She felt a tear leak from her eyes, and she blinked it away, horrified that he had wrung it out of her.

Julian finally pulled his fingers from her before lowering his mouth back down and licking the come out of her. Altun whimpered as he undid her again.

Altun's legs were shaking when he finally kissed her inner thighs and placed her feet back on the ground. He gently pulled her underwear back on and kissed his way back up to her breasts before righting her bra once more.

His hair and shirt were askew from her thighs, but he didn't look remotely flustered. His predator eyes were glowing with leashed control and emotion as he stared down at her.

With care, he retied her dress and wiped the tear from her cheek. He stared at it on his thumb for a long moment before sucking it into his mouth. Somehow that was more intimate than what they had just done. It made her feel like he had taken something from her she hadn't been willing to give.

Altun was shaking, unsure of what the fuck had just happened. Julian hadn't said a word the whole time.

He turned and took a knife from the drawer in his desk. Altun didn't move as he slid the flat of the blade under the tie and cut the fabric free from her mouth. She took a shaky breath, speechless, as he ran his thumb over her lips.

She wanted him to kiss her to break the tension, but he didn't. He lifted the knife and cut the suspenders, freeing her wrists. He tossed the knife onto his desk and rubbed her hands and wrists, checking for damage.

Altun leaned forward, her mouth a hair's breadth from his, daring him to close the distance. The alarm on Julian's phone went off, breaking the strange spell and making them both jump.

"That's our hour," Julian said, stepping back from her and turning the alarm off. He picked up the red box and placed it into her hand.

Altun pulled herself together and straightened her shoulders. "Pleasure doing business with you, Burbank."

"We'll have to do it again sometime," he replied.

Altun pulled on her cape. "You would have to come to Istanbul for that."

"Yes, I would," he replied, putting his hands in his pockets. He looked like a ruffled sex dream with a murderer's eyes. "I could do with a holiday, and Istanbul is so nice this time of year."

Altun needed to get the fuck out while she still had some dignity. She strode toward the door, giving him a small wave over her shoulder. “Thanks for the orgasm. I’ll see you soon, Burbank.”

“Count on it,” Julian said, but Altun didn’t turn. She knew a threat when she heard it.

It took hours for Julian's heart rate to go back to normal. After Altun had left, he had gone through the door behind his desk and into the small bathroom. He washed his face and re-combed his hair before changing into his backup suit.

Julian could smell her everywhere, like her perfume and taste had seared into his skin permanently.

He needed to get some control back. He stared at his reflection in the mirror for a long moment. Outwardly, he was calm, but his eyes betrayed him. His silence had been a roar of thoughts and emotions the whole time he was with her.

"That was probably a bad idea," he told himself. Not that he regretted it. He thought that having her would scratch the itch, cure the obsession. It usually did when he became fixated on someone.

Julian had planned on getting them both off and sending her on her way. Instead, he had let his dark side get the best of him, and it had turned into something more than sex.

Julian couldn't pretend he was a decent person with her. Altun could see through him to the beast within. He had wanted to edge her, break her, and have her beg him to fuck her. He would've denied her, just to see what she would do.

Julian should have known Altun wouldn't break or beg. He hadn't wanted to let her leave but hadn't had the power to make her stay. He had spent most of his life ensuring he never felt powerless again. Yet here he was.

“Enough,” he growled at himself and went back to work.

The following hours were torture. An endless parade of people to smile at, shake hands and sign deals with. He tried to remind himself that this was his empire. That it shouldn't feel like a burden.

By six p.m., his world was in black and white again.

Julian stood by his windows, looking out at the city, waking up for the evening. He opened his messages and texted Silas.

Found a John Dee artefact. Altun came and collected it from me today to use as bait.

Silas's message bubble danced. *She came personally? I didn't know she left Istanbul.*

Maybe Altun thinks I'm special.

I doubt it, and it would be a dangerous thing if she did. You might be punching above your weight there, old chap.

Lucky I'm so ambitious.

I'll say nice things at your funeral.

Julian laughed, and some of the tension in him eased. It lasted long enough for his office doors to open, and a woman walked in.

For a moment, he thought it was Altun. They had the same build and dark hair, but something in her gait was off. Instead of a spider's beauty and elegance, this woman reminded him of a viper, from her tight black dress down to her black snakeskin pumps.

“May I help you?” he asked, feeling the danger in the air. He switched on a lamp. “You'll have to be quick. I'm actually closed.”

“You are Mr. Julian Burbank?” the woman asked. He struggled to place her accent.

“I am, and you are?”

The woman smiled, and it was so similar to Altun's, his blood went cold.

“My name is Marina, and you have something I want, Mr. Burbank,” she said sweetly. At least her tone was pleasant. He had seen psychopaths with more life in their eyes than the woman in front of him. An involuntary chill swept down his spine.

Julian sat down at his desk, and keeping his hand low, he shot off another message to Silas. **Dee has just walked into my office.**

“I have lots of things for sale. I can provide you with a catalogue if you wish,” Julian replied, smiling at her. “Or is it something specific?”

“A necklace has recently come into your possession. Crystal pendant, set in gold, seventeenth century, previous owner Mr. John Dee,” she said, crossing her legs. “I would like to buy it.”

Julian sucked on his teeth. “Sorry, that item has already been sold.”

“For your sake, I hope not,” she replied. Two brawny-looking men came into the office. Both looked like bruisers. That was fine. Julian was one too.

“Threatening me won't help produce something that I don't have. The necklace isn't here,” Julian replied. He had the knife in his drawer beside him and a pair of brass knuckles that he was too sentimental to get rid of. He slid the drawer open.

“Tell me who you sold it to,” Dee demanded, her eyes flaring with anger.

Julian weighed up the request and its consequences. Every outcome was going to be the same. He might be an asshole, but he wasn't a rat.

After seeing the scars on Altun's beautiful body, he wasn't inclined to play nice with this bitch. He would never give Altun up. For starters, he was more afraid of her than the woman before him.

Julian smiled his shark smile. “No.”

“Have it your way,” she said and waved at her men. They closed in on him.

“Like that, is it?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Julian laughed, then he stabbed the first man under the chin in a quick, fatal strike before ducking the second man’s punch. Julian grabbed his laptop off the desk and smashed it hard into the surprised man’s face.

Julian threw what was left of the laptop at Dee. It bounced harmlessly off an invisible force field around her. *Fucking magic.*

“I can see why Theodora likes you so much. You’re just her type,” Dee said. She gave him a pleasant smile and threw a fireball at him.

Julian dropped behind the desk to avoid it, but Dee wasn’t done. She was setting his entire office alight as she sashayed to the door.

Julian risked looking up. Dee was gone, and everything was burning hot between him and the exit. Julian kicked open the burning door to his bathroom and dragged a decorative rug out of the way. He had dealt with enough shady fuckers over the last few decades that having a secret back door had been a prudent investment. He grabbed the metal ring and heaved the door up before dropping into the darkness and shutting the door behind him.

“Well, that was just fucking rude,” he muttered. His phone screen was cracked in one corner, but it still worked enough for him to use it as a flashlight. He made his way through the old sewer tunnel and popped out two blocks away from his offices.

Out on the streets, sirens were blaring, and he could see the orange glow of the inferno. He tried not to feel bad about it. His collection was held elsewhere, and insurance would pay for the rest. It was the inconvenience of having to set up a new place that got to him.

Julian flagged down a black cab and got inside. His lungs felt like they were scorched, and he was filthy with blood, ash, and sewer grime. He gave the driver the location of one of his safe houses and called Silas.

“Julian! What the fuck?” he answered almost immediately.

“I’m okay. Thanks for asking. My place not so much.” Julian told him everything that had happened, and Silas let out a barrage of choice curse words.

“Do you have somewhere safe to go? The warehouse in Battersea is free at the moment,” Silas said.

Julian stared at his dirty reflection in the tinted window. His eyes were still full of murder. He usually tried to be a neutral party in scuffles, but Dee had just declared war on him personally.

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t need it,” Julian replied. He leaned back in his seat, decision made. “Roll out the welcome wagon, Edgeworth. I’m coming to Istanbul.”

It was past midnight when a small private plane landed in Heraklion, and Leo Colleoni stepped out into the darkness. He checked his watch. He had three hours before he had to be back on the plane and heading back to Istanbul.

The night had started with him eating at Kon's place with the entire Edgeworth crew and comparing notes with Izabella on their latest searches. They had split their workload with Iz focussing on Dee specifically while Leo had tried to find any trace of illegal research done in Russia to back up Gadal's claim that Athena was a child created with alchemy and magic.

They didn't toss around the word *homunculus* without risking Kon's wrath, even though that was the alchemical term for what she was.

They didn't know where to start on trying to dissect Kon's lineage. He had been made the old-fashioned way, by two practitioners who had been feeding magic into him through rituals before he was born.

Athena's creation would have needed doctors, equipment, a facility to work at. There would be a trail.

Leo had been checking his data mining algorithms when he had received a notification telling him that Morozov had finally left his compound in Germany and had come to his secret holiday house in Heraklion.

Recently, Leo had made Morozov his special project. He didn't tell anyone about it because he didn't want anyone to

stop him. Leo wasn't in the mood to explain his motivations either. As long as he was back by dawn, it would never be an issue.

Morozov had a large house with his own private beach. He always came for a two-week stay every couple of months, like clockwork. Leo wouldn't have been able to get close to him in Germany, where he had a small army living at the compound, so Leo patiently waited for the opportune moment.

On the plane, Leo had hacked into the house's CCTV and checked how many guards would try to get in his way. Now, standing in the shadows, he pressed go on the pre-recordings that would turn him into a ghost. He had a reputation to keep, after all. He pulled out two sleek handguns, checked their silencers, and let the Colleoni assassin out of his cage.

Leo walked confidently towards the beach entrance of the house. His gun fired twice, taking out both guards with clean head shots. He took one of the key cards and swiped his way inside.

Leo fell into a dark, calm place in his mind as he worked his way through the bottom level of the house, taking out guards as they made snacks in the kitchen and watched TV. They never had time to pull for their guns.

Leo opened the door to Morozov's office and found the older man sitting at his desk. He had steel gray hair and the dead eyes of a weapons dealer.

"Hands on the desk, or I'll blow your head off," Leo said calmly.

Morozov was smart enough to obey. His eyes glanced at his security monitors and at the open door behind Leo.

"Don't bother looking for your men," Leo said, walking into the room. He dropped some black zip ties onto the desk. "Tie your arm down."

"Do you have any idea who I am? There's not a place on this earth you could hide from me," Morozov growled.

Leo smiled, and it showed just how dead he was inside. "Don't make me ask you again."

“Whatever you have been paid to attack me, I can double it.” Morozov tied his wrist to the armrest of his computer chair. Leo stepped over and tightened it before tying down the other.

“Double of nothing is still nothing. This isn’t a job. This is going to be a special present for someone who deserves it,” Leo said, spinning the chair around to face him.

Morozov frowned, studying him. “Do I know you? What is this about?”

Leo leaned casually on the edge of the desk. He holstered his gun before taking out a thin-bladed knife and a folded-up piece of paper.

“This is about a deal you tried to make in Baghdad five years ago,” Leo replied, the rage inside threatening to burst out of him.

“You’ll have to be more specific. I made many deals in Baghdad during that time,” Morozov said dismissively.

“The job went bad because of someone not shipping what they should have, and the crew you had sent were taken by rebels.” Leo placed the blade at the collar of Morozov’s shirt and cut it open to expose his over tanned torso. “You sent in another crew to retrieve the weapons but didn’t care about the lives of the mercenaries you had left to be tortured for information they didn’t have.”

Recognition flashed in Morozov’s eyes, and he tried to pull himself free of the chair. “They were hired guns. They knew they were collateral damage.”

“Collateral damage is one thing, but incompetence is another. That job wouldn’t have been an issue if you had insured that the right shipment was sent. The fallout could’ve been avoided, and those mercenaries would never have had to suffer for your mistakes.”

Leo carefully unfolded the piece of paper. It was a printout of a hospital file, detailing all the wounds on the body of a patient. He held it up to Morozov’s sweating face. Leo yanked him by the chin so he couldn’t look away.

“This is what they did to him over days.”

“What’s your point?” Morozov snarled through his squished cheeks.

Leo placed the list on the desk in front of him. “My point is I don’t have days, but I’m still going to enjoy inflicting every one of these on you.” He grabbed the man’s pocket handkerchief and stuffed it into his screaming mouth. Leo carefully rolled his sleeves and got to work.



LEO MADE it back to Istanbul before dawn, like he had planned. He had disposed of his bloody clothes and was stepping into the shower when he heard his front door rattling.

Right on time, he thought and got under the spray. He soaped himself down quickly and hoped that it had removed any remaining blood. The lack of sleep wasn’t unusual. He would just have to deal with it.

Leo pulled on some sweats and a shirt before stepping out of the bathroom. A tall, broad mercenary was standing in his kitchen, making two espressos. Sandy blond hair, hazel eyes, wicked smile. It was a sight that never got old.

“I think this is the first time I haven’t had to wake you up for a run, sleeping beauty,” Dante said cheerfully and passed Leo his coffee.

“Maybe I’m getting used to you barging in whenever you feel like it,” Leo replied. He drained the espresso, and Dante passed him the second one. Leo needed at least two to get moving in the morning, and Dante knew it.

Dante’s eyes scanned him. “You sleep okay? You’re looking a little more wired than usual.”

“Sleep eluded me, so I worked,” Leo replied. He didn’t need to tell him what on. He stretched his arms over his head and caught Dante looking at the patch of skin on his stomach where his shirt rode up.

They might have shared some hasty kisses a few weeks ago, but neither one of them had mentioned it. It was probably for the best. Dante was a big enough distraction as it was.

“You ready? I need to run. Julian is due in today, and I feel all antsy that Dee got so close to one of us,” Dante said, rinsing the cups. The man was such a neat freak, it spilled over wherever he was. Leo may have checked out his ass as he put the cups in the dishwasher. It had been a long night, and he needed the dopamine.

“Julian is fine. You’ll see him tonight. Now, let’s get this run over with so I can crawl back into bed,” Leo griped for appearance’s sake.

“Just for that attitude, I’m going to make you do a workout too,” Dante said as they headed for the door. “At least fifty squats while I watch to make sure you do them right.”

“You’re a tyrant.”

Dante shrugged. “Try to make me care. I could use the wrestle.”

Behind his back, Leo grinned, and they headed out into the streets.

Julian had always been quietly impressed with Kon's warehouse in Eminönü. It was a busy, popular district with a bright night life and armies of tourists, and yet, the place itself was completely forgettable. No one seemed to notice it, slightly separate from the overcrowded sprawl of restaurants, apartment blocks, hotels, and historical sites. Its boring exterior made it an excellent place to hide all the treasure inside of it.

They still hadn't finished going through everything that they had taken from Liddell, and Kon wasn't trying to sell any of it. He was hoarding it like a dragon, and Julian didn't blame him. Julian pulled up in front of the warehouse and waved at the security camera at the side entrance. The door opened, and a blonde head popped out.

"Still alive, old man?" Athena asked. She wasn't a naturally affectionate person, but she still caught Julian up in a hug. It showed just how worried she had been.

"I'm okay, Cub. You know, it would take more than a woman throwing fireballs to stop me," Julian replied, giving her braid a gentle tug.

"Well, they say cockroaches would survive a nuclear fallout," she teased, and he smacked her on the ass.

"Very funny."

Still laughing, Athena let Julian inside. Kon and Silas were in the kitchen, cooking something that smelled amazing, and Izabella was turning her cards on the coffee table.

“Jules!” Iz fixed him with one of her electric smiles and got up to hug him as well.

“If I knew I would have so many beautiful women hugging me after an attempt on my life, I would’ve told you about all the others,” Julian said, kissing Iz’s cheek.

“Well, don’t expect a hug from me,” Silas called. “I had a bet going with Kon that you would be dead, and I’m down fifty bucks.”

Kon laughed, a strange expression for the Basti of Istanbul. Julian flipped them both off and sat on the couch.

“That’s okay. I’ll stay with the ladies. They are way more attractive than you two,” he said. He had just sat down when Dante barreled through the door.

“Daddy! You’re here!” he exclaimed and climbed over the back of the couch and into Julian’s lap. “I thought you were dead and done for.”

“Nice to know you all think I’m incapable of taking care of myself,” Julian grumbled. He didn’t shove Dante off. It was strangely nice to know that he had people that gave a shit.

“Let the man breathe,” Leo said, looking at Dante with his arms around Julian’s neck. The Colleoni assassin smiled, but it didn’t reach his dark eyes. Julian knew the look of possession when he saw it. Dante was completely clueless, as usual. They were all still happy to overlook the fact that one of the most prolific assassins in recent years liked to masquerade as a harmless hacker.

“It’s okay, Dante, you can stay there. It’s been a while since I’ve had a handsome man throw himself into my lap,” Julian replied because one attempt on his life wasn’t enough excitement for the week. Leo rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen.

“Tell me you hurt the people who attacked you,” Dante insisted.

“I killed her thugs, but Dee had an invisible force field around her that deflected anything thrown at her.”

“Force field! Wonder how she did that,” Athena said, passing Julian a beer before sitting down beside him.

Julian had a sip. “It was some impressive magic, that’s for sure. I’m hoping Kon will know. He’s our resident wizard, after all.”

“Do you think the magical shield would be good enough to stop a bullet?” Dante asked, his hazel eyes going cold. “Something to test next time she pops up.”

Kon came over to join them, sitting down next to Athena. “What did you have that she wanted so bad?”

Iz and Leo were at the kitchen counter, hunched over a laptop and talking in Italian.

“Dee’s fourth seeing stone. The one that he claimed the angels gave him. He had it set in a necklace and was one of his most prized possessions.”

“And you sold it to Altun?” Kon asked.

“It was a fair trade.” Julian smirked at the happy memory. “She picked it up a few hours before Dee showed up. There’s no doubt that they are sisters, though Altun is more beautiful.”

Athena elbowed him. “Are you sweet on the spider, old man?”

Julian shrugged. “Isn’t everyone? She’s impressive.”

“She’s the most dangerous person in this city,” Kon reminded him.

“It’s one thing I like about her. Dee tried to kill her, and you can tell she’s still threatened by Altun. I think there’s more to our spider than she’s showing the world,” Julian replied.

Kon snorted. “Undoubtedly. I worked for her for years, and I don’t think I know half of her secrets. She’s a fortress.”

A fortress that Julian wanted to lay siege to. He tried to shake the visual from his head, not wanting to get an erection with Dante still in his lap. The kid was cute, but Julian had never been tempted to go there despite the flirting. Like Athena, Dante was one of the Edgeworths’ adopted children,

and he didn't want to risk Silas slitting his throat in his sleep. He slept bad enough as it was.

"Fortress or not, she's going to need help to take down Dee. There is something seriously off about her. She's not just violent. She's crazy," Julian tried to explain. "She called herself Marina."

"Marina? I suppose we can ask Altun if that's her real name. Might be a lead we can use," Athena said thoughtfully.

"Now's your chance," Kon replied. Julian glanced up as Altun came through the door of the warehouse. She was the most casual Julian had ever seen her—in leather pants, a white button-down shirt, and a richly embroidered red and purple robe.

"Still breathing, I see?" Altun said by way of greeting. She gestured at Dante. "Get off him."

"I was here first," Dante complained.

Julian gave Dante a pat. "Come on, you're in her seat." Dante protested but still moved. Julian grinned up at Altun. "All warmed up for you, sweetheart."

"Funny. Give me your hands," Altun said. Julian frowned but obliged her. She stroked both palms, feeling up his forearms.

"Not that I'm complaining about the massage, but what are you looking for?"

Altun placed her hands on either side of his face, and Julian tried to remember to keep breathing. "Dee let you get away, which means she's unconcerned about finding you again."

"She didn't have the chance to put a bug or anything on me," Julian replied.

"Maybe not a conventional one." Altun combed her fingers through his hair, and he fought the urge to start purring. "Ah. There it is." Altun traced a pattern on the back of his neck, and Julian's ears popped.

"Ouch, what the hell!" he complained.

“Don’t be such a baby. It was only a little hex,” Altun said. She lifted his head and looked into his eyes. For a split second, he saw a flicker of concern before her walls came up again. “Are you okay?”

“She only threw a fireball. I’m fine,” he assured her, placing his hands over hers. Altun nodded and let him go. Everyone in the warehouse was staring at them and trying to pretend that they weren’t.

Altun looked over at Kon. “I could use a drink, Konstantius.”

“Of course,” he said, getting to his feet and heading for the kitchen.

Altun sat in the chair opposite Julian and crossed her legs. “You need to tell me everything that happened with Dee. How did you know it wasn’t me? She’s always enjoyed glamors to fool people.”

Julian fixed Altun with a knowing grin. “Oh, I knew.”

“Julian said you are prettier,” Athena piped up.

“He would be the first to think so,” Altun replied and lit one of her thin clove cigars. “I’ll need as much information as possible. Leave nothing out. The smallest detail can have significance.”

“I’ll wait until you have that drink first, Theodora. You might need it,” Julian said sweetly.

Altun breathed in sharply, like she had been hit. Not looking away from Julian, she called, “Kon? You’d better make that drink a double.”

The Istanbul night was a glittering blanket of lights spread out around them. Kon insisted on having food before serious conversations, and it gave Altun time to collect herself. A part of her wanted to run away and not tell them anything. She didn't want Kon to stare at her like she was a stranger, or Julian to think she was some kind of monster.

You are, though, a voice reminded her. It sounded too much like her sister. Knowing that Dee had gotten so close to Julian felt like Altun's skin was dipped in acid. She knew her sister, and the threat wasn't a message for Julian, but for her. It was Dee's way of saying, 'I know this one is important to you, and I want you to know I can get to him at any time.'

Julian had jumped in front of Altun to protect her from Gadai exploding, and that one action had been enough for Dee to target him.

"You look like you're about to burn the city down," Athena said from beside her. They were standing at the edge of the roof, where the view of the city was best.

"I don't know how to mask how angry I am. She burned Julian's place down to mess with me," Altun admitted. If anyone knew uncontrollable rage, it was the girl beside her.

"And are you going to let it mess with you? Because none of us know what we are up against, but you do. We need you sharp. If whatever you have going on with Julian will compromise you, maybe rethink it," Athena said, ever the pragmatist.

“I have nothing going on with Julian. I bought a necklace from him.”

Athena raised an ashen brow. “Really? Because you hovering over him earlier was the most emotion I’ve ever seen you express.”

“I know you think I’m a heartless spider, but I don’t want people getting hurt.”

“Then maybe you should come clean and tell us what you know so we can help you. Kon cares about you, and we all want Dee off our backs,” Athena replied.

“Kon might put a bullet in me after I tell you everything.”

Athena grinned. “Well, it would save me from having to do it.”

“Least you’re honest,” Altun said with a laugh.

“Come on, stop brooding over here and come and eat something,” Athena said. They walked together across the roof to where dinner had been set out on low tables surrounded by flat embroidered cushions.

A spot had been left for her beside Julian, and Altun tried not to overthink it. She hadn’t been truly concerned in years until she learned of Dee going to visit him. She didn’t know why it bothered her so much. He was hardly the first man to go down on her. Julian fucked with her head, and she couldn’t figure him out. She hated puzzles.

“You smell good. Blue lotus, right?” he whispered, eyes glittering.

“You are a terrible flirt,” she replied, staring at the tattoos on his forearms. He had rolled up his shirt sleeves, and she fought the urge to trace the patterns of ink. Maybe she should sleep with him and get it out of her system.

“I am an amazing flirt. I also had a near death experience, and that makes a man want to celebrate being alive. What are you doing later?”

Altun shook her head at him. “You aren’t going to want me for company later, Burbank. Trust me.”

“And if I do?”

Altun smirked. “Then you had better have something I want.”

“I’m sure we can work something out.”

Altun’s heart gave a jittery jump when Kon placed a plate of couscous, roasted chicken breasts and spicy vegetables in front of her. It had all been cooked in one large cast iron dish and had been seasoned exactly the same way his mother used to make for her. It was as if all the ghosts in her past decided that tonight was the night to break free and damn the consequences.

“Are you okay? You look like someone has just danced over your grave,” Izabella said from beside her.

“I just... I haven’t eaten this meal in a long time,” Altun said, her voice cracking.

“Kon is a really wonderful cook. You’ll love it,” Izabella assured her. Altun didn’t doubt it.

Altun had a mouthful, and her eyes burned with tears. She swallowed them down, the salt mixing in with the flavor of the tomatoes.

Azra, I’m sorry I didn’t take care of your baby better, she prayed to the ghost standing behind her.

“Okay, Jules, tell us what happened in detail,” Silas said from down the table. Julian obliged, and Altun felt her temper rising with each word.

“Is Marina her real name?” Leo asked from his place across from her.

Altun dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “It is. I’m surprised she used it.”

“Does that make your real name Theodora?” Julian said.

“Yes. My mother named us both after Byzantine empresses.”

Leo tapped his fork against his lip. “What’s your surname? I can do a search to see if it’s an alias she still uses.”

“Avci. I don’t like your chances of anything coming up.”

Leo frowned. “Why is that?”

“Because the alias would be too old,” Altun said. She took a mouthful of the whiskey that Kon had poured for her and then blew her world to pieces. “Marina Avci was born in 1907.”

The table went silent as the information sank in.

Athena was the first one to break the silence. “But that’s bullshit. It means you would have to be how old?”

“One hundred and twelve years old.”

“You’ve been holding out on me,” Kon said, his dark eyes burning.

Altun laughed, a choked sound holding years’ worth of secrets that were about to go up in flames. “In so many ways, your head will spin, Konstantius.”

“You’ll have to tell me your ageing secret,” Julian said.

Altun gave him a charming smile. “I bathe in the blood of my enemies.”

“Hot,” Julian and Dante said at the same time.

Kon hadn’t looked away from her. “Magic or a curse?”

“A bit of both.” Altun continued eating, needing a break in her story to give herself the courage to continue with it. No one was calling her a liar like she had thought. They were all getting too used to magic, and Athena was a homunculus after all.

“Were you once a part of Aurora?” Kon asked.

“Yes.”

“What made you leave?”

Altun stared into his eyes, and it was like his father was staring back. “Your parents.” She could see all the pieces in his head fitting together. Athena was glancing between them, her hand gripping her knife too tightly.

“You were the one who helped them escape and got them to Istanbul.”

Altun nodded. “We all wanted out. The order wasn’t what we had thought it would be. I was done being abused by my sister. We helped each other get out.”

“Prove it,” Athena said, pointing her knife at Altun. “Prove that you’re not still working for them, or I’ll gut you.”

Altun reached into her pocket and passed her treasured photo to Kon. He stared at it, the Bastard of Istanbul shrinking away and revealing the little orphan boy within.

“Why didn’t you tell us this sooner? We came to you about Liddell!” Athena demanded.

“Believe it or not, I was still trying to protect Kon. Like I’ve always done.”

Athena’s eyes flamed. “Protect him? You turned him into your killer.”

“He was already a killer when I found him again, little wolf. I hired him to keep him under my protection, to hide him from the Aurora, and he *still* went after Liddell. I couldn’t stop him without revealing who I was, and I’ve spent the last two decades hiding from them,” Altun replied. She didn’t want to fight, but she would not let herself be yelled at. “I told you both to drop it, and neither of you listened. That’s on you. I had hoped Dee was dead.”

“That was why you needed the obsidian mirror. It shows the dead,” Kon said, his voice small.

Altun nodded. “Yes. I used the mirror and learned that Dee was alive. That’s when I involved myself. And before you accuse me of being a heartless, opportunistic bitch, Athena, please consider that my involvement makes the target on you all bigger. I barely saw Julian for an hour, and Dee was there, ready to kill him. Everything I have done was to keep Aurora away from Kon.”

“Why?” he asked, looking up from the photo.

“Because I was your god-aunt, and I promised your parents I would.”

“The fire...”

Altun’s hands balled into fists. “When Liddell was confronting them, I was floating in the Bosphorus, full of holes. Dee found me and said that they would leave your family alone if I returned to them. I met her on a boat under the pretense of me rejoining the order. She told me she had commanded Liddell to burn your house down, so I put a bullet in her, and she stabbed me three times. I was in the sea, dying, when you were trapped, Kon. By the time I recovered enough to get to the house, you were gone. It wasn’t until years later when I saw you with the gangs that I knew who you were. You look so much like your parents. You didn’t recognize me, and I decided to protect you by not telling you who I really was. Theodora Avci was dead, and it was better that she stayed that way.”

Altun let them process it and finished her chicken. If they were going to kill her, she might as well have her last meal.

“Why did they want you to return to the order?” Silas asked.

“It probably had to do with the fact that I was Marina’s scryer.” Altun received a lot of blank looks. “What do you know of Dee’s angel conversations?”

“A little, but assume these reprobates know nothing,” Julian replied.

“John Dee was a practitioner who was obsessed with communicating with angels specifically. To do so, he needed an assistant called a scryer and a show stone. Like this one.” Altun pulled the necklace from around her neck and showed it to them. “In a very basic theory, a scryer looks into the stone, has visions, and then Dee would interpret the meanings. I was my sister’s scryer. She had magic —my whole family did— but she was fascinated with angels and other ephemeral spirits and beings. The angel conversations are the main reason she is obsessed with John Dee and took his name as her own. She has never had a scrying talent like mine, and our magic

melded seamlessly together. The order used my scrying abilities to spy. When I left, they lost an asset.”

Kon drained his beer. “Liddell was also obsessed with communicating with the Divine. Do you think there is anything in his collection that might tempt Dee to come out of hiding again? Or would Liddell have shared it with her?”

Altun snorted. “Liddell didn’t share. You have to understand the Aurora only works together to achieve their own ends. He wouldn’t have told her about any of his acquisitions if they had made her more powerful than him. I would need to know what exactly is in Liddell’s collection to ascertain if there would be anything she wants. Have you catalogued it yet?”

“Not all of it. We’ve been busy,” Kon replied. His eyes flashed with the Basty once more. “We work together from now on, Altun. No more secrets.”

It was a better outcome than Altun had hoped for. “No more secrets. You can keep that photo if you like.”

“Thank you,” he replied softly.

Athena pointed her knife at Altun again. “You hurt him, and you won’t have to worry about Dee. I’ll fucking stab you and toss your carcass in the Bosphorus.”

Kon kissed Athena’s cheek. “Are you playing my fierce protector again, *güzelim*?”

“I’m not playing,” Athena grumbled but simmered down under his affection. Altun shook her head at the pair of them. The Aurora would have a fit if they knew that their two magical children were now in a relationship. Together, they would tear their makers apart. Altun could only hope she was still alive to see it.



AFTER DINNER, Altun gave Kon a list of objects that Dee was obsessed with. They made a plan to go through Liddell’s

collection while Altun and Julian would search out anything on the open market.

Izabella and Leo would get to work on trying to find anything listed under Marina Avci. They were all long shots, but they were people who needed to be productive or they went mad.

Altun could feel her sister drawing closer to them. Athena liked to call Altun the spider, but they had no idea that Altun was actually the more reasonable of the two. Her sister had always presented herself to the world as a good, kind force with her holy desire to communicate with the angels and learn from them. Behind that pretty, pious mask was a monster. The scars on her belly weren't the only ones that Altun carried from her sister. The ones that couldn't be seen were even worse.

"Let me take you home," Julian said once they were both downstairs.

"I can call my driver."

He smiled. "I'm sure you can, but it's unnecessary. We both live in the Galata district. You've had a rough night, so let me take you home."

Altun wanted to argue, but one look in his cool blue eyes, and she knew she would lose it. "Okay."

They said their goodbyes, with Julian promising to return the next day to help Kon with the cataloguing. Altun's ears were ringing from all the conversation by the time she sat down in the quiet hush of Julian's car.

"They are a loud lot, aren't they?" he said, reading her expression instantly.

"They are terribly...alive," she replied, not knowing a better way to describe the intensity of the Edgeworth clan.

"Let's do our best to keep them that way," Julian said and started the car. "There's something that's bothering me."

Altun laughed. "After the conversation we all had, I should think so."

“Actually, it wasn’t mentioned. How did Dee know I had found the stone?” Julian replied.

“If I could find out, I don’t see why she couldn’t.”

“And how did you find out? Scrying?”

Altun smiled and shook her head. “Money. I had a contact send me a digital copy of the receipt.”

Julian swore. “Cressida made a scan of the receipt for filing and I had the original.”

“Which means your pretty assistant isn’t as stupid as she acts and sold the information off, or your system was hacked.”

“It can’t be Cressida. She’s not smart enough to be dirty. It’s the reason I hired her. I’ll message Iz and get her to look at my systems.”

“It might be worth all of us double checking our systems for weak points. Those are the ones Dee loves to put pressure on.”

Julian smiled. “Are you saying I’m your weak point?”

“Absolutely not. You’re the Edgeworths’ weak point,” Altun replied sternly.

“She said I was your type.”

“I thought you told us everything. You never mentioned this.”

Julian shrugged. “What happens between us is no one’s business but ours. When I threw a broken laptop at Dee’s head, she said, ‘I can see why Theodora likes you so much. You’re just her type.’ I took it as a compliment.”

Altun wanted to melt into the seat. “I don’t like you.”

“You like me, otherwise you wouldn’t have let me fuck you with my tongue for an entire hour.”

“A deal is a deal,” Altun replied simply, trying to ignore the ache between her thighs that the memory invoked.

Julian didn’t need directions to her house. He navigated the chaotic traffic and tight, winding streets like he had lived

in the city for years. He pulled up out the front of the townhouse before getting out and opening the door for her.

Altun took his offered hand and stepped out beside him. “I might not know how to show it, but I am glad Dee didn’t kill you, Burbank. Life is more interesting with you in it,” she said before she lost the courage to do so.

“I know the feeling, love.” Julian kissed her hand before letting it go. “I live about two blocks from here if you ever need a cup of sugar. Or the best sex of your life. Either one.”

“I don’t bake, and the best sex is a mighty boast.” Altun looked him over because she loved staring at him whenever she could. “I’m a hundred years old, and I’ve had a lot of sex.”

“None of it with me,” Julian replied, completely unintimidated.

Altun laughed, her first true one of the night. “Good night, Burbank.”

“Dream of me,” Julian replied.

Altun opened her security gate and stepped under her wards. “No,” she said and closed it on him. On the other side of the wrought iron, Julian only smiled.

Julian was back at the warehouse by nine a.m. He had already spoken with a shaken Cressida, had organized her a generous severance package, and told her he would provide her with a reference to any job she applied for. No, he didn't know when he would return to London or be re-opening the business. He needed a holiday, and Dee's fire-bombing had settled the matter.

"You're here early," a sleepy Athena opened the warehouse door to let him in. "Kon will be down in a bit to show you where he got up to with the catalogue. Put the coffee on, will you?"

"I'll make it strong," Julian said, and she grunted before heading back upstairs. He had wanted unlimited access to the collection the last time he was in the city, but Kon had only allowed him to catalogue what he was willing to part with. Julian knew that Kon had hidden all the really good stuff. He checked his phone again before sending Altun a message.

Are you sure you don't want to help me go through all of Liddell's pretties?

Julian got to work, putting on coffee and finding mugs when his phone chimed.

Missing me already?

You are nice to look at.

Focus on looking at things that will help us.

Julian smiled. She was at least replying to his messages. That was a start.

“Who has you grinning like that?” Silas asked. Julian jumped. He hadn’t heard the doors open.

“Where the fuck did you come from?” Julian demanded.

Silas smiled. “It’s not my fault your hearing is going in your old age.”

“I’m two years older than you.”

“You look more, though.”

“Going gray has made me look distinguished.”

Silas laughed. “Sure. You better make me a mug of that coffee too.”

“Where is your prettier half?” Julian asked, looking for Iz.

“She stayed up late on her computer, so I’m leaving her to sleep in,” Silas replied. He was smiling happily. “What?”

Julian placed the steaming mug down in front of him. “I don’t know which is more frightening, your murder face or your getting laid regularly face.”

“Fear both,” Silas replied. He had a mouthful of coffee and watched Julian check his phone again. “You going to tell me what’s going on between you and Altun?”

“Nothing, unfortunately,” Julian admitted.

“Dangerous game, even for you.”

“The only games worth playing are dangerous.”

Silas frowned. “And the fact she’s a century old sorceress doesn’t bother you? Because it should.”

“It makes her the most interesting person I’ve ever met. You don’t get it. I’ve seen Dee in the flesh. Believe it or not, Altun is not the one who is a psychopath.”

Silas choked on his laughter. “Kon told me she slaughtered her way through an underground snuff club less than a week ago. She’s got no problem killing.”

“Then she fits right in with this crowd. There’s a deadness in Dee. At least Altun is alive inside. She vibrates with life,” Julian tried to explain.

Silas shook his head. “Of all the people for you to become infatuated with... Maybe you should fuck her. That usually makes you lose interest.”

“Didn’t work,” Julian said under his breath, making coffee come out of Silas’s nose.

“Oh my god, what the fuck?” Silas complained. He pushed Julian out of the way so he could wash his face in the sink. “Tell me you didn’t.”

Julian shrugged and told him about the deal for Dee’s necklace. Silas looked shocked, which was a hard thing to do.

“You really have a death wish,” Silas said.

“It meant nothing. It was just business,” Julian lied. He drained his coffee and refilled it.

“Dangerous ground,” Silas replied. His expression said that he didn’t believe Julian for a second.

Julian leaned against the counter. “I know, but I can’t help myself. She’s under my skin.”

“Like scabies.” Silas shook his head at him. “Maybe keep it to yourself. Altun is like family to Kon, and you don’t want to cause shit when we are in the middle of a fight.”

“Don’t worry, she’s keeping her distance. It won’t interfere with stopping Dee.”

“See that it doesn’t.” Silas washed his cup and stacked it into the dishwasher. “You need some help to open up the crates?”

That was one thing Julian loved about Silas. He just got on with it. Julian felt a little better for telling him about Altun. He had never had this reaction to a man or a woman before. He had always been happy to be a bachelor and found other people required too much maintenance in the long term. She really was under his skin, and the worst part was that he didn’t want to claw her out.

Kon joined them not long after in the back loading area. He didn't look any worse for wear after his night of revelations. He and Julian weren't close, but he still felt compelled to check in.

"How are you doing?" Julian asked him as they pried open a wooden crate.

"You mean knowing that I've had a murderous god-auntie watching over me? About the same. Altun has always had my back. I could never figure out what she saw in me to want to take me on. Now I do," Kon replied. They lifted a top layer of Styrofoam to reveal the treasures within. "I suppose it will be good to have another magic user about in case I need a mentor."

Julian chuckled. "You're very pragmatic."

"No way else to be. I can't change the past, but I can kill anyone who impedes me and Athena having a future," Kon replied, his expression going full Basti.

"Don't look at Julian like that or he'll hit on you," Silas teased. He began opening the next crate. "He's got a weak spot for dangerous things."

Kon grinned. "We have that in common."

"See Silas? It's perfectly natural," Julian argued and then glanced at Kon. "I don't suppose you know what the best way to seduce Altun would be? She doesn't strike me as a flower kind of girl."

"Head of her enemy might be the best option," Kon replied. He didn't look concerned about what Julian had asked. "I've honestly seen no one try to court her. People are usually too scared to try. I don't think she's had a full-time relationship the whole time I've known her."

"Julian isn't the relationship type either," Silas replied.

"I could be. I've never really tried."

"And you're going to start with Altun?" Kon said something in Turkish under his breath. "God be with you."

Julian laughed. "What can I say? I love a challenge."



IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON, and Julian had only managed to get through one crate. Liddell was a hoarder, that was for sure, and everything he hoarded was fascinating.

Julian had a hard time moving on from each object after making a few notes about it. He hadn't come across anything to do with Dee yet, but there was plenty of magic. It was no wonder Kon had kept these particular crates hidden the first time he had shown Altun and Julian what he had taken from his former boss.

Julian was opening a new crate when his phone rang. He looked at the London number and answered.

“What?” he demanded.

“Guv, long time no chat. Your pretty receptionist gave me this number because your old one is a bust. Where you at?” a man asked casually.

“Is that you, Gregory?” Julian put down his crowbar. Greasy Greg was one of the dodgier people Julian worked with from time to time. His items were always stolen and even harder to resell because of it.

“Got it in one. I heard your place got bombed. Nasty business, that. You still buying or you are out?”

“All depends. What you have”

“A little bird told me you're hunting stuff by Queen Elizabeth's wizard, John Dee. Is that true?”

Julian paused. “Okay Greg, you have my attention. What have you got and who did you nick it off?”

“A book. Apparently written by the big man himself. As for where I got it from, all I can say is I might know a certain security guard at a certain museum who doesn't know half the stuff they got in their basement,” Greg replied.

“Fair enough. What's the book called and how big is it?”

“Just a short little thing. It says on the inside ‘Mystery of Mysteries and Holy of Holies.’ Sounds very important. The inside writing is barely legible, so don’t ask me what any of it says.”

“If it’s Dee’s, I have an expert that can verify it. I’ll pay you five hundred pounds to not offer it to anyone else, and I’m going to need a few photos. If it’s legit, I’ll fly you where I am to make an exchange. Sound good?” Julian asked, opening his banking app.

“See? This is why I enjoy doing business with you, Butcher. You’re a professional. I’ll send you some photos when you send me the money.”

Julian tapped it in. “It’s done. And Greg? I mean it. No talking shit down the pub, not a whisper into your girl’s ear. Okay?”

“I got it, I got it. Let’s talk soon,” Greg said and hung up.

A few minutes later, Julian received a handful of photos that he immediately sent to Altun with some kissing emojis. She was going to know if it really was Dee’s handwriting quicker than Julian could look it up. Not three minutes later, his phone was ringing.

“Tell me you have it,” Altun said.

“Is that any way to start a conversation?”

“Julian, don’t test me. I know where you live.”

Julian laughed. “I have the buyer lined up. I only want to know if you think it’s legitimate.”

“It looks like it. I’ll know it when I can touch it. If it is what I think it is, it will be enough to lure my sister out of hiding.”

“That good, is it?”

Altun let out a patient sigh. “Do you know anything about the books Dee wrote under the instruction of the angels?”

“Didn’t get that far in my research, love. Why don’t you meet me for a late lunch and tell me all about it? You can

convince me to buy this book for you.”

“You’ll buy it anyway because you want to make me happy,” Altun said, her voice dropping to a sultry purr that made Julian’s dick twitch. “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Hmm, how about I tell you in thirty minutes at that lovely little bistro we went to last time? What was it called, *Theodora’s*? What a lovely coincidence. See you there,” Julian said and hung up. He turned and saw Silas watching him from the doorway. He shook his head in dismay.

“You’re going to regret this,” he said.

Julian made sure that there was no dirt or wood chips on his dark blue T-shirt. “Do you regret Iz?”

“Never,” Silas replied without hesitation. “Altun is not Iz. Just don’t dive in without testing the waters first because I’m pretty sure there are sharks in them.”

Julian laughed. “Then I’ll fit right in.”

Kon's warehouse was within easy walking distance to the Grand Bazaar and the small bistro Julian had discovered on his last trip. It was also the place he'd first taken Altun to for lunch and propositioned her. The food had been good, though he couldn't remember what he had eaten. He had been too focused on the woman in front of him.

Theodora's was tucked away from the major thoroughfares, away from the hordes of tourists moving from the Bazaar to the historical centers. It had a pretty rustic ambience, an island of relaxing quietness after the press of people, trams, and traffic.

Julian picked a table outside that was partly shielded by a pot of purple bougainvillea. He scratched a tortoiseshell cat that was lingering under the table before sitting down. On the wall beside him was a replica mosaic of the Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian and actress of the Hippodrome.

Altun's namesake. Theodora suited her. She held herself like an empress and had a delightful streak of dirty underneath the polish that Julian couldn't resist.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting long," Altun said, appearing from behind the bougainvillea. She was in black silk palazzo pants and a black and red brocade coat to ward against the late fall chill, her mouth a dark slash of burgundy lipstick. Gorgeous as always.

"I just got here. I'm glad you came," he replied, pulling the chair out for her.

“You didn’t give me much choice, and I want to ensure that the book doesn’t slip through our fingers.”

Julian passed her a menu. “Even the Sorceress of Istanbul needs to eat.”

“Is that what you call me?” Altun smiled at him, her dark eyes shining with amusement. “I don’t mind it. It makes me sound very mysterious.”

“You *are* very mysterious. As I’ve told you before, most people think that Altun Baruk is a man.”

“And I bet those people are all men. I chose the name to help to obscure things a little more.”

Julian leaned back in his chair. “Theodora had to die, I suppose. It’s a shame. I could have called you Theo.”

“Anything is better than Dora. Tell me about the book and where you found it,” Altun asked.

Julian explained about his call from Greasy Greg, the vague origin of how the book was acquired, and the descriptions he was given of the contents.

While he talked, Altun waved over a waitress and ordered for them both. It didn’t bother him; she knew what was worth eating there, and he hadn’t come because he was hungry.

“If the book is what I think it is, it will be priceless. Don’t let him know what he’s got,” Altun said after he was done.

“Never would. He’s after some quick money, and I’ll give it to him. With a free trip to Istanbul, Greg won’t say no,” Julian assured her. “I’ll need you to verify it for me like you did the stone and choose a safe place to do it. Somewhere public. Greg trusts me, but not that much.”

Altun smiled. “I have just the place.”

“Thought you might. Now, why don’t you tell me why you think it’s so important?”

“Really? You want a history lesson?”

“I love history, especially when it’s being told to me by a beautiful woman,” Julian said with a coaxing smile. “Come

on, you know you want to.”

“Over his life, Dee wrote many angelically inspired books. There are a handful that survived, but there would have been more if not for a particular incident that happened in 1586,” Altun began. The waitress returned with a pot of mint tea and Julian poured her out a cup. “The angels commanded Dee to place all the books in a furnace. The story goes that Dee later rediscovered the same books out in the garden, but some were missing. Among them was the book he referred to as the ‘Mystery of Mysteries and Holy of Holies.’ It was transcribed in angelic script, or Enochian as it’s called these days, and Dee had yet to translate it into English. Dee believed it contained the most profound mysteries of God and valued it more than any other.”

Julian sipped his tea. “How on earth did it end up in Greg’s dirty hands? Do you think some enterprising servant took them out of the furnace?”

“It would appear that way. It was Dee’s most prized book, and it’s definitely going to get my sister’s attention. It’s never been translated, and if it contains something powerful, like Dee suspected, we can’t let her get it,” Altun replied.

“Do you think you could translate it?” Julian asked. Altun seemed to consider it. The waitress came back and put a lovely blue and white ceramic tagine pot down in front of him.

“If it uses Dee’s original Enochian alphabet, then yes. It’s not a question of can I, but should I?” Altun said finally. She lifted the lid of her own pot and picked up her fork. “This lamb tagine is delicious. They only serve it on certain days. They use an old family recipe.”

“One of your family’s?” Julian dared to ask.

Altun chewed and smiled. “Why would you ask?”

Julian gestured at the mosaic of the Empress. “*Theodora’s*’ and the fact that it’s one of the few places you openly come to. You are relaxed here, and the staff all know you. Last time I was here, I thought they might have been paying you protection money. Now, I think it’s yours.”

“Not just a pretty face, are you?” Altun teased. She gestured at his pot. “It’s not poisoned. This time.”

“I’m not worried. You like me too much to poison me just yet,” Julian replied, and had a mouthful. It was damn good, spicy and tangy at the same time, but he expected nothing less.

“And what makes you so sure that I like you at all, Burbank?”

Julian smiled. “You’re here, aren’t you? You wouldn’t come out of your palace to meet someone for lunch if you didn’t like them.”

Altun picked up a lemon wedge and squeezed it over her couscous. “Good point. You are persistent, and I can’t help but wonder why,” she said.

“Isn’t it obvious? I want to court you.”

Altun froze and seemed to force herself to swallow her food. “Excuse me?”

“I want to court you,” he replied and let out an awkward laugh. “You know, I don’t believe those words have ever come out of my mouth.”

“Because they are insane. We are at war. Now is not the time.” Altun’s cheeks were flushing, and Julian’s grin widened.

“Now might be the only time if we are in a war,” Julian pointed out. “We can keep making deals for sexual favors if you like, but I think it’s polite to state my intentions with you upfront.”

Altun shifted in her chair. “I don’t understand why. Sex is one thing. Courtship is something else entirely. What do you want from me?”

“What I always want...*everything*.” He probably had lost his mind, but his damn mouth wouldn’t stop. “I have done whatever I have wanted my entire life, but I have never courted a century-old sorceress before. I’ve lived a wild and interesting life, but you are the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen.”

Altun stared at him for a long time. It was the same way he would stare at a rare object, trying to assess its worth and whether or not he could justify what it would cost him. He let her think while he ate the rest of his tagine.

“If we survive my sister, I will consider it,” Altun said finally.

“That’s good enough for me, but don’t expect me to stop trying until then,” Julian replied. “You can look at it as a trial period.”

Altun let out a husky laugh. “You can try. I can’t guarantee you’ll have any success.”

“I’ll take those odds,” Julian replied, lifting his tea to toast her.

The following evening, Altun pulled up in front of Kon's warehouse to wait for Athena. She had considered what Kon had said about spending more time with the little wolf, and Altun had decided that the exchange for Dee's book presented a perfect opportunity.

The boys were already in their places and waiting for them to arrive. It was so strange to be working with people again, but Altun had found a perfect murderous pack to take down her enemies once and for all.

The warehouse door opened, and Athena stepped out in a sparkly silver dress that showed off her hips and her impressive cleavage. Red lips quirked into a smile that meant murder.

"I see you took my instructions to heart," Altun said as Athena sat down in the back seat beside her.

"You demanded I dress *slutty* and didn't tell me what for. Where are we going?" Athena asked.

"It's a surprise. You only need to know that you are my arm candy for the evening. Play the part, keep your eyes open, and don't let anyone fuck with you," Altun replied. She looked over the spangly little dress. "Are you armed under there?"

Athena grinned. "What do you think?"

"Good girl," Altun replied. If everything went sideways, she wanted backup beside her.

“Kon tells me you have a scimitar collection,” Athena said after a while.

“I do. You’re welcome to come and look at it if you like.”

“Hmm, I’ll think about it. What’s going on with you and Julian?”

Altun laughed. It had taken a whole five minutes before Athena’s protective instincts kicked in. “There is nothing going on with me and Julian except mutual self-interest.” *Or destruction.*

“Don’t give me that shit. You two are circling each other. You should be careful. Julian loves to fuck about and play games.”

Altun raised a brow. “You’re concerned about *me*? I thought you would give me a lecture about breaking Julian’s heart.”

“I’m not sure he has one to break. I’m not concerned about you. I only want to warn you because you’re Kon’s auntie. I’ve known Julian a long time. No one keeps his interest for long, and I don’t want you to be the next conquest,” Athena replied.

Altun patted her hand. “Don’t worry about me, little wolf. I don’t have a heart either.”



FROM THE OUTSIDE, the club in Tarlabaşı looked much like the run-down townhouses and apartment buildings that filled the district. It was a garish apricot color that was chipped, faded, and flaking off to reveal the aged, gray concrete underneath it.

“Charming spot. Am I going to be propositioned by street walkers or mugged while I’m here?” Athena asked, suspiciously eyeing the people that were lingering on the streets.

Altun chuckled. “Probably both if you’re not careful.”

Athena sucked on a tooth. “I wouldn’t leave this nice car out in the open if I were you.”

“That’s why I have a driver,” Altun said as they pulled up. There were two bouncers with too many muscles standing by the doors. They both wore identical black shirts, pants, and gun holsters. They stared at Athena until they saw Altun take her arm, and they quickly averted their gazes.

“Mistress,” one said in a thick Eastern European accent and opened the doors for them.

“Good night so far?” Altun asked.

“Full house. No one dead yet.”

Altun laughed. “The night is still young.”

“Oh my god, are those guns real?” Athena asked, her eyes wide and innocent. The change in her personality would have crept Altun out if she didn’t admire the deceptive skill so much.

“They are. Better behave, eh?” the bouncer said with a wink.

“I meant these guns,” Athena giggled and poked his bulging biceps. The man blushed and flexed as she did it again.

“Come along. We aren’t here for these two,” Altun chided gently and pulled Athena away.

Inside, the building had been gutted and fitted out with a bar and meeting area on the first floor. A staircase led up to the higher levels where all the fun was.

“What is this place?” Athena asked.

“It’s a surprise. Stay close,” Altun replied as they moved through the crowd. The next floor was packed with people, all crowded around a large fighting cage in the center of the room.

The air smelled of sweat, alcohol, blood, and cigarettes. Athena’s face broke into a wide smile, unable to hide the fighter inside of her. Altun led her up to another flight of stairs and to her VIP box that overlooked the cage.

“Best seats in the house!” Athena said excitedly.

“I should think so, considering I own the house,” Altun replied and then laughed at Athena’s expression. “You shouldn’t be surprised. I have to maintain good relationships with the gang leaders in the city, and this is a cash only enterprise. It’s also neutral ground. Lots of deals, lots of information.”

“And you get to hear and see all of it,” Athena replied.

“Exactly. Knowledge is power, and power is the best way to stay safe when you’re trying to remain hidden from people like the Aurora.”

They were interrupted by a waitress who took their drink orders.

The fights started, and Altun spotted Julian standing with Silas beneath them. He was casually dressed in a dark button-down shirt and leather jacket.

It was jarring seeing Julian in anything but a suit. They were all tailored to make him appear less big and threatening. The shirt and leather jacket he was wearing stretched over his broad shoulders and showed exactly how built and intimidating he was. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone tonight, so he could be the Butcher in a crowd full of men and women just like him.

Julian looked up, his gaze catching Altun’s and holding it. Her skin pebbled with the intensity of his expression. It was almost violent in its possessiveness. In the past, if anyone had dared look at her in such a way, she would have struck them blind for their boldness.

“Yeah, sure, nothing going on between you two. Sure,” Athena said beside her.

“I like pretty things, and I enjoy looking at him,” Altun replied unapologetically. The waitress returned with a bottle of vodka and two glasses of ice.

“Why did you want me in this box with you and not out with the boys?” Athena asked. She pointed out Dante and Leo in the crowd on the opposite side of the stage from Silas. They

looked like they were drinking and arguing and blending in with the crowd.

“It was Kon’s idea. He said we needed to bond, and I thought this was about as close to a girls’ night that either of us would tolerate.”

Athena poured the vodka and held up her glass. “To girls’ night.”

Altun laughed and clinked her glass against hers. “The fun is only just starting.”

A contestant had blood and teeth dripping out of his mouth as the fight ended. The announcer called up the next fighters, and Athena froze as Kon walked into the ring. His skin shone with oil, making all of his colorful tattoos gleam under the lights. Suddenly, a knife pressed against Altun’s throat. She hadn’t even seen Athena move.

“What the fuck is going on?” Athena hissed.

“It was his idea. He said to tell you, ‘This is payback for the bear in Germany.’ He said you would know what it meant,” Altun replied.

“That *bastard*.” Athena dropped the knife, and Altun touched her throat. No blood. “I get into one fight, and he holds it against me forever. I am used to cage fighting—”

“And so is he. It was how I found him,” Altun told her. “He used to fight to make money for the gangs. I recognized him in this very place and hired him as my assistant.”

Athena looked angry and worried at the same time. Kon was stretching his arms as the other fighter eyed him up.

“He’s my whole fucking world, do you get that? If he dies because of this shit fight you have with your sister, I’ll fucking kill you,” she said, her voice cold.

“Believe me, the last thing I want is Kon getting hurt,” Altun replied. She watched as Kon pushed his dark hair from his face. “I was there when he was brought into the world. He was so tiny, with a full shock of black hair. I want nothing to hurt him, but he won’t sit out of it even if I asked.”

“I know,” Athena said. “It’s not who he is. Who any of us are. It’s not just about you, Altun. I want to kill every fucking person who tortured me, who *made* me into this...thing.”

“You can null magic and resist it, Athena. That’s a very useful skill to have when you are hunting practitioners. Have you trained with Kon to see how you can make the ability grow?” Altun asked.

Athena shook her head. “No. He doesn’t want to cast anything at me in case it hurts me. I keep telling him to just do it, but he won’t.”

“I’ll do it if he won’t,” Altun offered. “You both need training and guidance to control your abilities.”

Athena nodded with a vicious smile. “Done. We will use whatever powers we have to get Dee, and then Serapis, and anyone else, until it’s done.”

Altun’s stomach clenched at the mention of Serapis. She had met him three times, and each time had left lasting impressions. None of them were good. She knew she had a chance to defeat her sister, but Serapis? He had no weaknesses that Altun knew of, and his magic was unique. No way to get to him or reveal his real identity...

The bell rang loudly, crashing into Altun’s thoughts and drawing her back to the present just in time to see Kon throw his first punch.

“I am going to murder him for doing this to me,” Athena grumbled. She was on the edge of her seat, staring down at Kon dancing around the ring.

“He’ll be fine. You seem to forget who is in your bed.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I just don’t want anyone else touching what’s mine.” Athena’s eyes shone with lust as Kon executed a beautiful kick to his opponent’s head.

Altun drew her attention back to Julian and Silas. A short, grizzled man had approached them and was speaking into Julian’s ear. He stopped the man from pulling something out of his pocket.

Altun beckoned Julian with a finger. She didn't want his clueless contact flashing a centuries-old book in such a reckless crowd.

"We are about to get company," Altun told Athena. The mercenary didn't reply. Her predatory focus was on Kon. She wasn't blinking; she was barely breathing.

Oh, Gadal, what were you thinking when you created this one?

Silas entered the VIP box first and looked over at Athena. Altun raised a brow, but Silas just shook his head. Athena was fine.

"This is some nice digs," the stranger said, looking about the box. His gaze landed on Altun. "Well, well, I can see why Julian has been keeping you a secret."

"Careful, Gregory. I don't like you that much," Julian replied, the threat in his tone cold enough to make the other man check himself.

"Apologies, guv. She's beautiful," Greg replied with a wink in Altun's direction.

"She is, and she will kill you if you are rude," Julian said and held out his hand. "She's also our expert, so the book, please."

Greg pulled out the book from his pocket and passed it to Altun. It had been placed into a large envelope, which was better than nothing, but the flimsy covering still made her cringe.

Altun slid the book out onto her lap. It was a plain tan leather journal. She touched the first few pages, and magic burned her skin. Altun tried to keep the shock from her face as her psychometry talent swamped her.

She saw a flash of a cluttered desk, an ageing hand holding a quill and rapidly scribbling in the book. Julian's warm hand rested on her neck, bringing her crashing out of the vision and back into the fight club.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

“Fine. Pay the man, Burbank. It’s good,” Altun replied. She didn’t know how to take his concern for her wellbeing. She could have been lost in the images of John Dee for hours if Julian hadn’t touched her. She didn’t want to know how he drew her away from such a powerful vision so easily.

Julian pulled out his phone and transferred the money. Greg was thanking them, but Altun was too rattled to engage with any of it.

A part of her had always thought that John Dee was more mystic than a magician, but there was power coming off the little book unlike anything she had felt from any of his other artefacts.

Altun drained her vodka. She needed to get the book home so she could study it properly. The fight below had finished. Kon was smeared in blood, and the man on the ground was unconscious.

“Athena, fetch Kon. Our business is over for the evening,” Altun said and rose to her feet. Julian held an arm out for her, and against her better judgement, Altun took it.

Athena's blood was pounding a battle song in her ears. Kon was stepping out of the cage and disappearing through a back door.

"I'll wait to drive you and Kon home, Cub," Silas said, and Athena gave him a nod before she strode down the stairs from the VIP box.

The crowd was readying for another match, and people took one look at her expression and got out of her way. A man leered at her and then backed away as soon as he saw the murder in her eyes.

So much for playing the clueless bimbo, she thought. That was before Kon put himself in danger for no goddamn reason. If he wanted a fight so badly, she would have been more than happy to give him one.

Payback for Germany? What an asshole. Germany had been necessary to get an audience with the boss of those fights. Dee was closing in on them, and Kon had painted a target on his back by shouting, 'Here I am!' to every lowlife in Istanbul.

Athena was glad she wore heeled boots instead of open toes that night because the floor was getting stickier the deeper she went into the gutted house. It shouldn't have surprised her that Altun would own such a place. The woman had layers and layers of dodgy about her.

It's probably why she fits in so well with the rest of us.

Kon had spoken little about Altun's connections with his parents and the Aurora. Athena didn't want to push him and accidentally tear open old wounds. She also didn't want to think about how connected they all were. Words like 'fate' and 'destiny' started to pop up, and Athena hated the idea of not being in control of either.

A security guard stepped in between Athena and the door that she had seen Kon disappear through.

"Only fighters are allowed in back rooms. Girls have to go into the party rooms," he said gruffly. Athena's blade pricked the front of the man's jeans. He looked down at the knife in his dick, and his eyes went wide.

"Get out of my way or they won't find enough of you left to bury," she ground out between her teeth. The guard reached behind him and opened the door. "Good boy."

Athena kept her blade low, hiding it behind her thigh, and walked down the hallway. The floor was covered in dirt and drops of blood, water and fuck knew what else. It opened up into two rows of cubicles with showers and benches. Other fighters were getting patched up or having their hands wrapped, preparing for their turn in the cage. One opened his mouth to say something snide at her, but her glare had him shutting his mouth again.

Athena kicked open a cubicle door, the fighter showering inside yelped as he covered his junk. Awareness prickled along Athena's scalp as a door at the far end opened, and Kon stared at her.

"Looking for something, Edgeworth?" He hadn't showered yet, his tattooed body still covered in oil and grime, the cut on his brow and lips still bleeding. He was the Bastard in all of his violent glory. A wiser person would have backed away.

"Seriously? A fucking cage match?" Athena said, pointing her knife and striding towards him. The few fighters saw the blade, grabbed their shit, and backed out of the rooms.

Kon's dark eyes burned from the fight, his posture readying for another one. "I can do what I want."

“Sure, when we don’t have a group of psychopaths after us!”

Kon’s lip curled. “It didn’t stop you in Germany.”

“That was different, and you know it,” Athena stopped just out of his reach. “If you wanted a fight, Basti, I would be more than happy to give you one. You didn’t have to go to these lengths to get my attention.”

“You think I did this for you?” He looked at the knife. “You better put that away.”

Athena tossed the blade and caught it again. “Or what? What are you going to do, Basti?”

Kon struck, swift and vicious, disarming her and slicing the strap of her spangly dress.

“You bastard, I *like* this dress,” Athena growled. She lashed out, swiping her leg around. Kon shifted backward into the cubicle to dodge her.

“Enough,” he growled and drove the knife into the wooden wall. Athena went for it, but he grabbed her by the front of her dress and dragged her into the cubicle with him. The door slammed shut behind them.

Athena brought her arm down to break his grip on her. Kon used her momentum to twist her and pin her to the wall. One hand gripped her wrists tight above her head.

“I said enough. Just say you were worried about me already,” Kon growled into her ear.

“I am mad at you, not worried! If I was in that cage with you, I would have kicked your ass.”

Kon chuckled huskily, making goosebumps spread down her back and her nipples go hard. “But you weren’t. Instead, you’re the pretty little arm candy.”

“You’re insufferable. This whole thing was an unnecessary risk,” Athena snapped.

“No, it wasn’t. I went in the cage so I could get information from the other fighters here from the gangs. I want

to know what's happening in the city's underbelly and if Dee is already here," Kon replied, nuzzling her neck. "I would have gotten more if you hadn't charged in here on a rampage."

"Baby, you haven't seen me on a rampage," Athena snarled and tried to wriggle out of his grip.

Kon laughed and pressed himself up against her. She could feel his hard dick through his thin fighting shorts. Kon's teeth dragged down the back of her neck. "You aren't going anywhere."

Athena whimpered, blood rushing to her head, and she ground her ass against him. Kon hissed, his free hand sliding under her short skirt.

He traced her knife sheath, moving closer to where her pussy was already throbbing. He slid his fingers under the side of her panties, his teeth fastening on the back of her neck when he found her wet. Athena gasped as he stroked her.

"Just as I thought. Hot and dripping. You can be angry all you like, *güzelim*, but you love seeing me kick the shit out of people." Kon thrust his fingers inside of her, and Athena leaned back against him, her breath coming in pants. "Admit it, and I'll fuck you the way you need."

"I hate you sometimes," she said, her brain hazing with desire. He knew exactly how to touch her to get a rise out of her. It was so good, and it wasn't enough. She needed him inside her. "Fuck, fine. I do like watching you fight. You're fucking perfect."

Kon's laugh was infuriatingly smug. "That's all I needed to hear." He removed his fingers from her and let her wrists go.

Athena turned to face him. Kon grabbed the blade from her thigh, making her freeze. He slid it down her cleavage before pulling it towards him, the sharp edge cutting the front of her dress in two. He looked over her black lace and thigh holsters, then he slid the blade back into its sheath.

"That's better," he said, gaze hot enough to burn.

Athena exploded, leaping up into his arms and claiming his mouth. He tasted of blood and salty sweat and something

that screamed Kon. Athena wrapped her legs tight about his waist, hanging onto him. Grabbing his silky dark hair, she pulled hard.

“Never scare me again. You got a plan? Fill me in on it,” she gasped against his mouth.

“And miss this reaction? No way in hell,” Kon said, slamming her up against the wall again. He freed his dick from his shorts, hard and perfect. Athena reached for it, but he blocked her, making her hiss in frustration. Kon only grinned and tore the crotch of her underwear.

“I liked these panties too,” Athena growled.

“They are my panties now,” Kon replied and thrust hard into her. Athena’s cries were smothered against his lips, Kon’s tongue fucking into her mouth.

This feral Kon would always be her favorite. It was what had her hopelessly addicted to their encounters in the past. Being together hadn’t changed it, and she doubted anything ever would.

“Fuck, Athena. You look so good taking my cock,” Kon said, staring down where they were joined.

“Stop looking at it and fuck it already,” Athena complained.

“That’s it, I’m done being polite.” Kon pulled out of her, dropping her long enough to turn her around and push her down so her hands were gripping the small bench. He thrust back into her, making her rise on the balls of her feet. He grabbed her hair, pulling her head back so he could kiss her. His other hand was holding her hip hard enough to leave bruises.

Athena’s nails scored the wood under her hands, and she laughed breathlessly. Kon snarled and fucked her until she was screaming and not giving a fuck if the whole fight club heard. He bit down on her back, and Athena came with a full body spasm.

“That’s it, moan for me,” Kon hissed. His hands palmed the curves of her ass, squeezing tight enough to make her cry

out. He didn't stop fucking her, only changed angles to move deeper and harder.

Athena was crashing through a second orgasm too fast, unable to catch her breath. Kon swore with a choked gasp before pulling out and coming all over her back.

Athena was shaking, her knees weak. Kon turned the shower on and filled the space with steam. He undid her bra, stripped off her holsters, and pulled her under the water with him. Athena wrapped her arms around his neck. "You fought well tonight."

Kon soaped her down with gentle care. "So glad you noticed. Did Altun get her book?"

"She did. She went all dazed when she touched it. I could feel magic," Athena replied. "She wants to train us to use our abilities better."

"If anyone understands what we are capable of, it's her. We need to have an edge against Dee, and she's the only practitioner I know who can teach me how to use my magic." Kon pulled her tighter to him. "Will it bother you to try experimenting?"

Athena hadn't stopped having nightmares of Gadai using magic on her. The thought of letting someone else do it to test her limits made the irrational hurt child within her lash out. The adult side of her tried to push all those feelings aside.

"If it's you and Altun throwing power at me, I'll try to deal with it. Being immune to magic that Dee might try to use on us will be worth being the lab rat again."

Kon lifted her chin. "No one is ever going to turn you into their lab rat again, *güzelim*. I promise you. This will be proper training, not torture."

"I know."

Kon brushed his lips against hers, making her melt against his warm skin. She would do anything to keep him safe and be able to curl into his strength at the end of the day. If that meant facing every one of the horrors of her past, so be it.

She wouldn't be afraid to let Altun tear out the monster inside of her because Kon would always be there to pull her back to herself and to love her anyway.

“Fine, I'll do it. I'm just going to be grumpy about it,” Athena relented.

Kon smiled his open and gorgeous smile that filled his dark eyes. “That's my girl.”

Altun left her car for Athena and the others to use, accepting another ride from Julian. He didn't know why she went with him, and he wasn't about to question it.

She probably doesn't want the book out of her sight, he told himself. He had placed it in a briefcase on the back seat. Greg was happy for them to take it off his hands.

"You want to tell me what happened back there?" Julian asked as he navigated the streets.

"You will have to be more specific," Altun replied.

"The book, Altun. You went completely blank, like you were in a trance," Julian pressed.

"I have a psychometry talent. I can read objects as you've seen. That book has a lot of power in it. I wasn't ready for it, and it pulled me under." Altun glanced over at him, as if sensing his mood. He didn't feel like his usual casual self. He had let the mask slip and wondered if letting her see this other side of him was a good idea.

Julian's hands gripped the leather steering wheel tighter. "You were completely gone. I was...worried."

Altun looked back at the traffic. "You wasted that worry for nothing. I was completely fine, Julian. I always am."

"I have no doubt. It still doesn't mean I want to see you hurt." Julian cleared his throat, feeling awkward. "Do you think the book will be enough to tease Dee with?"

“Without a doubt. The problem is, I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to use such an object as bait. If we fuck it up, and she gets her hands on it... It’s not worth thinking about.”

“You really think it’s that important? You said you could read it, right?”

Altun hummed. “Maybe. I need to study it and compare it to the Enochian I know. I don’t know what’s in it, and that worries me. It could be some prayers, or it could be the key to understanding the entire universe.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“That’s magic,” Altun said with a shrug. “The sooner I know what’s in it, the better.”

Julian parked in front of Altun’s townhouse. “Invite me in, and I’ll let you touch it.”

Altun raised a brow, and excitement tickled at the base of his spine. Faint color bloomed in her cheeks at the innuendo.

“I mean the book, sorceress,” he said with a chuckle. “Though I wouldn’t say no to you touching anything else.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t. I need to study the book, and until someone wards your house for you, I don’t want it unprotected,” she said finally and got out of the car. “Well? Are you coming or not?”

Julian didn’t need her to offer twice. He grabbed the briefcase and tried to clamp down his enthusiasm. He followed her through the black iron gates and took in the pretty little garden and vines that traced up the wrought iron trellises. Above the door shone golden sigils.

“Do they do anything or are they just to warn people they are stepping into a sorceress’s den?” Julian asked.

“They do both. Why? Are you scared?” Altun purred.

“A wiser man probably would be.” Julian followed her inside, and his collector’s eyes went into overdrive.

Jewel colors on the walls accented with dark wooden furniture and brass lights made him feel like he was walking

through a gilded peacock's wing.

Everything from the art on the walls to the bookshelves to the plush carpets was rich and gorgeous. If Altun was a house, this would be her ideal rendition.

“Help yourself to a drink. I'm going to change. I don't enjoy smelling like a club,” she said, disappearing up a wooden staircase.

Julian walked into a sitting room with emerald green velvet couches. A carved marble chess set was placed on a small side table next to a chaise lounge. He studied the game for a moment before moving one of the white pieces.

He poured them both a drink of brandy from a crystal decanter, and sipping, he stared at a painting on the wall. It was of a goddess or a saint, he wasn't sure which one, and was painted in a brilliant example of *chiaroscuro*, seamlessly blending light and dark.

The woman in the painting looked like a Byzantine queen, with dark skin and black, braided hair. A jumble of objects was falling from her outstretched hand—an eight-pointed star, an ankh, a feather, a sacred heart, a pomegranate...

“She is Sophia, the Divine Spark, painted as universal feminine wisdom and magic from multiple myths and religions,” Altun said from behind him.

“It's gorgeous,” Julian replied, tearing his eyes away from the hypnotic painting.

Altun was wearing a man's robe of red brocade with a black fur collar. She wasn't showing any skin except for her bare feet, but Julian found the outfit curiously erotic.

Altun took her drink, stared at the chess set, and moved one of the black pieces. She curled up on the chaise and gestured at him to sit down opposite her. She was a queen holding court.

“You have a gorgeous home, Altun,” Julian said.

“Thank you. It is good to have a sanctuary, don't you think?”

Julian nodded. "I've always had places that felt temporary because I've traveled so much for work. Perhaps I should take you shopping and get you to decorate my place here. This feels like a home. My apartment feels like a hotel room in comparison."

"That is a lovely compliment. I'm surprised you don't have a proper base. You must have an exquisite collection."

"I do, but it's all in storage," Julian replied, and for the first time, it bothered him. "I've never found a place that felt like home enough to build something just for myself."

He had never confessed that to anyone. Feeling uneasy, he sat down and took out the book. It looked so small and plain. Like it couldn't possibly contain magic. He offered it to her.

Altun smiled in genuine pleasure as she accepted it and placed it on her lap. She turned one page, her eyes scanning the script.

"What can I do to convince you to let me keep this and translate it?" she asked him.

Julian shifted another white chess piece. "Beat me, and you can have whatever you like."

Altun looked up from the book. "And if you win?"

"You do whatever I want," Julian replied with his shark smile. She didn't look the least bit intimidated, as so many often were. "You never know, I still might leave it here in an act of generosity."

Altun laughed, a deep husky sound that went straight to his dick. She tilted her head in a certain way, and as she did that, she showed off her long neck. Julian wanted to lick that perfect line, just to taste her skin again.

"I can't quite figure out if you think I'm a whore who needs to be bought, or if you're trying to turn me into yours," she said, not the slightest bit offended.

"That's not it at all. I just know that we are too much alike, and I'm not your usual type, no matter what your sister claimed. I have to make it worth your while in other ways

because sex isn't enough of an experience for you," Julian explained.

Altun looked at the chess board and moved a black knight. "And what is my usual type, if we are so much alike?"

"Betas," Julian replied without hesitation. "People you can fuck for a bit and then discard without them causing a fuss. It's not always a power play. You just don't want to deal with the drama or the emotions. You don't want the commitment or the fight when you're done with them. People aren't the most interesting thing in your world, and they certainly aren't a priority for you."

Altun didn't deny it. "If you know this, why are you so determined to pursue whatever this game is with me? We are both alphas, predators even, and have never had an exclusive relationship with anyone."

"I don't know. Perhaps it's because I think it would be worth the gamble. It's partly because it would be a challenge every single day." Julian propped his head on his hand, studying the game board. "I've been incredibly bored for a lot longer than I'm willing to admit. Life doesn't feel so dull when you are around." He looked up and smiled at her. "And when we do fuck properly, it's going to be an experience neither one of us will forget."

"You mean *if* we fuck," Altun said, taking out one of his pieces.

"*When*," Julian repeated and took one of hers in retaliation. "I might even make you say, 'Thank you' when we are done."

"That would be a first," Altun replied. She pulled a silver case from her pocket and lit one of her thin clove cigars. She took a drag and then offered it to him while she studied the board.

Julian didn't comment on the intimacy of the action, only accepted it and inhaled the spicy tobacco. It had the faint taste of her lipstick and brandy, which did nothing to calm his raging hard-on.

“So there have been no husbands, wives, or children in your sordid past?” she asked.

“No. I thought about it once or twice, but it never held its appeal for long. I like my freedom too much, and I had a gloriously fucked-up childhood that ensured I never wanted to reproduce,” Julian replied. He had another hit of her cigar and tried not to think about crying women and hard hands that went roaming when they weren’t hitting. “What about you? You don’t have any tragically beautiful love story where he died of old age?”

Altun laughed softly and shook her head. “No. My story was already tragic enough. My sister taught me it was unwise to love anyone.”

“What is the deal there? Was it just Kon’s parents that made you and Dee fight? You seem to have loved them enough to risk the Aurora’s wrath.”

Julian held out the cigar for her, and she put it back to her lips.

“My parents were occultists and active practitioners. The house was always filled with important people from all over the world. Helena Blavatsky came to learn from them when she was fresh off the boat from Russia. People like that were always around,” Altun began before getting up and retrieving the decanter of brandy and refilling their glasses. “Marina was a few years older than me and grew up with gifts. She was the darling protégé and was obsessed with angels from all cultures. She thought I was limiting myself by worshipping Sophia.”

Julian’s eyes drifted to the painting. “That Sophia?”

Altun nodded. “My sister didn’t want to do the work to achieve higher knowledge in the old paths of wisdom. She thought the angels would guide her to her answers, so she became obsessed with John Dee and his process. Into this mixed environment of mysticism and magic, I was born. The unexpected child, who was naturally curious about everything. I wasn’t a protégé. I had to work hard for it, and I surpassed Marina. She was talented, but she had also been spoiled and

was lazy. I was...hungry. I still am really. I love magic and won't ever get enough of it."

"And your sister resented you?" Julian guessed. Altun had stopped playing. She was staring at him as if judging how much she could tell him.

"Resentment is one word for it," she said finally. "She was abusive, and not just physically. She decided the best way to deal with me was to strip pieces off me, bit by bit. Every achievement I made was criticized. Every physical change I had in my body was judged."

"The worst part was that she did it with a gentle smile and in a way that made me think she was being kind. She was trying to *help* me better myself in every way because she loved me. What she really did was make me into a creature full of anxiety and self-hatred, who did anything she wanted to impress her. I was her seer, desperate to use my learning and power to help her achieve her goals, and I didn't dare have an ambition of my own. And this is what I thought love was."

Julian wanted to take her hand, to comfort her in some way. He knew better than to attempt it. "So she was a piece of shit. What made you realize it?"

"Azra. Kon's mother," Altun replied. "We were all living in a compound in Russia. She and Eren were trying to get pregnant, and the Aurora was gathered for a summer of magic and ritual. Azra and I became friends. She didn't like how Dee treated me. She knew I hid my own talents out of fear of her. The other Aurora members all adored Dee. To displease her was to risk the wrath of all of them. Azra made me feel like a person, and once she had pointed out all the ways my sister liked to destroy me, I couldn't unsee them."

"No wonder you fought so hard to get them out." Julian sipped his brandy and stared at the magnificent creature before him. "All of your glorious wrath for their death makes sense now."

"I loved them, and Dee got Liddell to kill them. I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't even kill her properly in retaliation. Knowing that she was dead was the only thing that gave me

peace over the years. Now I know I failed to kill her, and it's eating away at me," Altun said and then flinched from saying too much.

"We will get her, Altun. You'll get your chance to get that peace back," Julian promised her. "And if you can't do it, I will happily blow your sister's head off for what she did to you."

"Ah, there he is," she said, staring at him. "You only let that true face out so rarely."

"It scares people. It's better to keep it hidden," Julian replied. "No one wants to know that they are having tea and doing deals with a killer."

Altun snorted. "People are idiots. Your shadow side makes you interesting. You don't have to hide it from me. Masking it must be exhausting."

Julian suddenly felt raw and disarmed. "It is, but my nicer side is better for business."

"Well, you're not doing business now, are you? Be free of it," Altun said with a flick of her hand.

Julian laughed. "Very well. You asked for it," he said and shifted his piece. "Checkmate."

Altun blinked and stared at the board. "You sneaky son of a bitch."

"You were the one who told me to show you my true self. He's a total bastard, and he always wins," Julian replied. He leaned forward, plucked her cigar from her mouth, and whispered against her lips, "And he's insatiable."

Julian leaned back in his chair, his eyes roaming over Altun. Her bare feet were propped up on the couch and her lovely body draped over the curved end. He took a drag of her cigar, contemplating. Her dark eyes heated as they studied him in return.

“You won, so what will it be this time, Burbank?” she asked, propping her head up with one hand. “Would you like me to suck you off in return?”

His dick was on board with that idea.

“Hmm, we might get to that,” he replied, contemplating the long list of things he wanted when it came to her. “I want you to start by undoing that robe.”

Altun leaned back on the chaise and undid the ties. She was completely naked underneath, the sight of her soft brown curves making Julian’s brain fall offline.

“You are beautifully made, sorceress,” he said, his pulse leaping. His feral side was out and in charge, so he followed the compliment up with, “I want you to spread your legs and touch yourself.”

Altun didn’t question or hesitate. She glided her fingers down her throat, over her chest, and circled her dark nipples. He might have been in charge, but she was going to put on a show.

Julian’s smile widened at her willingness to play, to torture him back.

Altun didn't break eye contact as she reached her pussy and stroked herself. She used her other hand to knead her breast, her full mouth opening to let out a soft rush of breath. Julian's mouth went dry.

"Are you going to give me some inspiration?" Altun asked, her voice husky.

Julian hadn't planned on it. His dick was aching and pressing too hard against the zipper of his jeans. "Do you need some? Have your other lovers not left an impression?"

"You really want me to be thinking of anyone else but you right now?" Altun widened her legs so he could watch her fingers press inside of herself. "You want me to be imagining another dick stretching and filling me?"

Fuck no. Julian opened his jeans and freed his dick with a hiss. It was hurting and so sensitive, he worried he was going to blow untouched.

"Very nice," she said, staring at him and making him burn. "Bring it closer." Altun had goaded him, taking over the situation entirely, and he didn't care.

Julian got up and walked to the chaise. It was backless, so he put a leg on either side of it and grabbed the cushioned curve behind her head.

"Close enough?" he asked, his dick at her eye level.

"You tell me," she said and opened her full lips in invitation.

Julian let out a low growl. "Don't stop fingering yourself."

"I had no intention of doing it," Altun replied, her warm breath tickling his cock. His hands gripped the couch tight, and she lowered her lips onto his tip. She ran her tongue over him, hot and slick. Her dark eyes looked up at him, and she sucked his tip. She was teasing him, and he loved it.

Julian glanced down, watching her fingers disappear inside herself in glistening strokes. He groaned, unable to hold it in, and thrust into her mouth. She didn't complain, only took him deeper, her little gasps and gags driving him insane.

“Fuck, Altun,” Julian ground out between clenched teeth. “By the time I’m through with you, I’m going to have dominated every part of you, claimed every sweet hole so completely, you’re never going to want anyone else.”

It was a promise. A vow. She would drive him into madness, and instead of backing out and protecting himself, he was charging forward. Zero brakes. Zero fucks.

His orgasm was burning through him, surging forward. Altun pulled off him, making him snarl.

“Come on me,” she panted, her hand wrapping around his dick and jerking him hard. Julian cried out, unable to hold back, and came over her flushed tits and stomach. Altun’s head tipped back, her own release riding her so hard, her eyes glazed over.

Julian gripped her shoulders, lifting her up and claiming her swollen mouth. Her hand curled in his hair, tugging it hard as she kissed him back, hungry and rough. Julian’s tongue stroked and tangled with hers, drinking in her taste of brandy and sex and spice.

Julian pulled back, breathless, his emotions jangled, the beast inside of him only momentarily satisfied. He stared down at her, wanting her and with no idea how he could possess her. He stroked her arm and lifted her glistening pleasure-drenched fingers to his mouth to lick them clean.

Altun shivered, and his whole body tightened, his dick trying to rally so he could blow all over again.

Julian cupped her flushed cheek. “You are in so much trouble and you don’t even know it.”

“I’ve survived for over a hundred years. I’m sure I will survive you too,” Altun replied, her dark eyes flashing with challenge.

“I’ll let you keep believing that.” Julian chuckled, low and deep, and pinched her chin. “Keep the book, sorceress. You deserve it.”

“It amuses me you thought this was about the book,” Altun replied.

Julian's breath caught. "It wasn't?"

Altun shifted her chin and caught his thumb in her mouth. She gave it a sucking nip, making him hiss in pain. "I'll let you figure it out for yourself."

Julian smirked, zipped up his pants, and moved off her. She looked like a debauched goddess, his come still glistening on her skin. It was one of the sexiest things he had ever seen.

"Happy reading, sorceress," he said and headed for the door. If he didn't go, he would beg to stay, to take her to bed, to worship her until neither of them could take it anymore.

Altun would never want him if he showed that kind of weakness, so he forced his legs to walk out of her glistening web and into the night.

Julian had never suffered from prolonged feelings for anyone before and was finding it...uncomfortable.

Usually, when he was obsessing over someone, he would get off with them, and the fascination would be over. His post-nut clarity would put everything into perspective for him, and he'd walk away.

Julian had left Altun's house the previous evening and had waited for the inevitable feeling. It hadn't come. If nothing else, it had gotten worse. He didn't know how to cope with the fire lacing his veins.

The only solution Julian could think of was to find Silas and let the mercenary beat some sense into him.

As they did on most days, the Edgeworth crew was working at Kon's warehouse. Julian had ants running under his skin, his mind fixated on Altun. If Julian didn't burn off some frustration soon, he was going to explode.

Altun hadn't messaged him, and each minute that passed was a fight with himself not to message her. Maybe she had gotten the clarity he hadn't and was now moving on. It made him want to break things, but mostly, he felt like a fucking idiot.

Julian had dragged Silas up to the rooftop of the warehouse where Kon had built his outdoor gym. The afternoon was cool and cloudy, a gray haze sitting over the city. It was still hot enough that they had built up a sweat in minutes.

“You want to tell me what bug has been up your ass all day?” Silas asked as he pulled off his shirt and tossed it off the fighting mats.

“There’s no bug. I just feel like we are taking two steps forward and one step backward all the time. We are going through all of Liddell’s stuff with no idea what we are looking for,” Julian replied. He tightened his fingerless MMA sparring gloves and turned back towards Silas.

“There’s definitely a bug. Did Altun bop you on the nose for trying to hump her leg or something? You guys seemed fine last night when you left,” Silas said, dodging a sharp blow Julian aimed at his head. “Definitely about the Spider. What did she do?”

Silas grappled with him, dragging him to the mat. Julian rolled, trying to throw him off. Silas got a good blow on his ribs before Julian got out of his reach again.

“She did nothing. It’s me. I want her, and it’s driving me crazy,” Julian admitted, ducking Silas’s punch.

“You only want her because you know you shouldn’t go anywhere near her. She’s not the kind of girl you can fuck over when you tire of her, Jules. She won’t put up with your games.”

Julian smirked, thinking about their chess game the night before. “You might be surprised.”

“Jesus Christ, you want to die? Is that it?” Silas demanded, sweeping Julian’s feet out from under him. Julian groaned as his back hit the mat. “You realize she’s got magic and could use it to fuck with your head?”

“She wouldn’t use her magic for something that she could do for herself,” Julian replied. He pushed the damp silver-streaked hair from his face.

“And you’re sure about that in the whole three times you’ve hung out? Come on,” Silas scoffed. “I can admit she’s beautiful in a dangerous, exotic way, but she’s hardly the first beautiful person you’ve been with.”

Julian got back to his feet. “I know. I wish I knew what it was about her, but I can’t help it. She’s unlike anyone I’ve met. Even her armor has armor. I want the challenge of getting it off and seeing who is behind it.”

“And what’s going to happen when you do? You think scary, powerful Altun Baruk, who everyone fears, is going to play housewife with you? Get your slippers and make you dinner every night?” Silas taunted.

“No, and I don’t want a housewife. I don’t need one. I have no idea what would happen if we were together,” Julian paused and considered the prospect. “That might be the appeal. The unknown.”

“You’re getting melancholy in your old age.” Silas smiled. “And slow.” He caught Julian’s arm, threw him over his shoulder and back to the mat.

“Prick,” Julian groaned.

“If you stopped thinking with your dick for five seconds, some of that blood might hit your brain,” Silas replied. Julian launched himself at Silas, grabbing him around the waist and dragging him to the mat beside him.

“What the fuck cheat move was that?” Silas laughed as Julian tried to pin him down.

The door banged open, and Izabella appeared. One look at her face, and both Julian and Silas froze.

“Izabella? What’s wrong?” Silas asked, going from laughing friend to killer in the blink of an eye.

“It’s Dante. He’s just turned up, and he’s really upset. You had better come downstairs, Silas. He doesn’t listen to anyone but you when he gets like this,” Izabella said.

“We are coming,” Silas said, and he and Julian quickly followed her downstairs.

“I don’t know why you’re so upset, Hill. That piece of shit was bound to annoy the wrong person,” Athena was saying. She was sitting on the back of the couch, watching as Dante

paced. Leo was at the desk in front of the cluttered bulletin boards, where he usually worked with Iz.

“What’s happened now?” Silas demanded.

Dante was one of the most laid-back people Julian had ever met. He had never seen the merc so agitated.

“I got a call from Davis. You remember Davis?”

Silas frowned. “Who set up the Sarajevo job for us? What about him?”

“He checks in every now and again. I got a call from him an hour ago. He told me that Morozov was found dead in a place in Crete. His whole security crew slaughtered,” Dante said, pushing his hands through his hair.

“Shit,” Julian breathed. Morozov was one of the few people in the world who was untouchable. That someone finally got him was going to send a shock wave through the arms dealers. If he wasn’t safe, no one was.

“Good fucking riddance,” Athena said.

Silas put a fatherly hand on Dante’s shoulder. “Justice is finally served. Don’t worry about it, D.”

Dante shook his head. “You don’t get it. This hit wasn’t normal. Morozov wasn’t just killed. They tortured him before he died, *exactly* the way I had been in Baghdad. Whoever whacked him took the risk to stick around and fuck him up.”

Julian let out a low whistle, his mind racing. “They would have to be quite the pro to get to him. Highly skilled and merciless. A complete surgeon of a hitman...” Julian’s eyes landed on Leo again. *The Colleoni assassin*. Leo looked back at him, his deceptively innocent act dropping for a brief second and showing the cold satisfaction beneath.

No. Fucking. Way. Julian valued his bits in all of their places, so he said nothing. He had tried to tell them who Leo really was, and they had kept pretending he was their sweet hacker. Kon was looking at Leo with narrowed eyes. He knew too. Of course he did.

“There was no one left from the Baghdad job to want to get revenge. It doesn’t make sense,” Dante said. He turned to Iz and Leo. “Can you look into it for me? None of this seems right.”

“Who cares, Dante. Seriously? Fuck that guy. He deserved it. It’s better to let this shit go,” Silas snapped. Dante opened his mouth to argue, but Silas put up his hand. “No, Dante. I won’t let you get upset over that fucking prick. He left you to die. The person who did him deserves a fucking medal. Morozov is worm food in a grave somewhere. It’s over.”

“I... Yeah, you’re right.” Dante rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m going to go and get a drink. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” Dante disappeared, the warehouse door slamming behind him.

“He’s spiraling. I’ll follow him and make sure he doesn’t hurt himself,” Athena said, jumping off the couch.

“No, I’ve got it,” Leo argued, already moving.

Athena grabbed him by the arm, making him stop. “Don’t lose sight of him. We are too exposed as it is, and the last thing we need is Dee sending someone home with Dante because his guard is down and wants to fuck his grief away.”

“I said, I’ve got it,” Leo said, pulling out of Athena’s grip and leaving the warehouse.

Athena looked like she was still ready to follow, but Silas shook his head. “Don’t worry, Cubbie. They will be fine,” he said.

“They better be,” Athena grumbled.

Kon pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. “Leo will protect him.”

“But who’s going to protect him from Leo?” Julian muttered.

Out of Athena’s eye line, Silas smiled darkly. He knew exactly who had killed Morozov. Hell, Silas had probably pointed Leo in the right direction and put the knife in his hand.

Julian raised a brow, and Silas shrugged, completely unapologetic.

No one fucked with Silas's family and kept breathing. He'd had it in for Morozov for years and only had to wait for the perfect moment to strike, and Leo had been the weapon he needed.

“What's that face for, Jules?” Izabella asked.

Silas's green eyes went flat in warning. Yeah, Julian wasn't that dumb.

“Nothing, love. Silas just hit me one too many times, that's all,” Julian said and smiled down at her. “Two questions: what are you cooking for dinner tonight and am I invited?”

Dante's blood was up, his bones trying to climb their way out of his overheated skin. The scars on his chest and back hurt; his pulse raced, and he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. He was out in the streets, walking back towards his apartment. If he didn't burn off some of his anxiety, he was going to drown.

He's dead. He's dead. He's dead, Dante chanted over and over in his mind.

Dante had always hoped he was going to be the one to do it. He had dreamed of putting a bullet in Morozov's head from the moment the job in Baghdad went to shit.

Dante didn't know how he was going to do it. Morozov had always been guarded more diligently than the Pope, but he had always wanted to be the one. Dante didn't know who had robbed him of his revenge, but he would find out.

And do what? Buy the fucker a drink? He couldn't deny that a large part of him was relieved that someone else had done the deed. He had wanted the fucker to suffer, and if the rumor was true about Morozov being tortured the same way Dante had been, then he had definitely gone out screaming.

Dante's scars ached again. The street hazed in front of him, and he was back in a chair, the dirt floor underneath soaked in his blood. He could feel death watching him... Dante shook his head, pushing the waking nightmare away. He needed a drink or seventeen.

Dante had found the bar when he had been on a run. It was less than a block away from his apartment and would be the perfect place to drown his sorrows. Maybe pick up a stranger if the churning rage let him be charming long enough.

The sun had set, and the nighttime crowds were already filling the tight restaurant-lined streets, but the bar still had tables. Dante found a booth in the back and ordered a whiskey and pint of beer on tap. He downed the whiskey in a single mouthful and ordered another. There were men speaking in inaudible murmurs, sharing hookah and drinking tea. No one paid him any attention

There was a football match on the screen behind the bar, and he focused on it, unseeing as his memory tried dragging him back to the sweltering room in Baghdad.

“And why is a guy like you drinking all alone tonight?” a man said, pausing by the booth. He had a clipped British accent that told Dante he’d had a posh education at some point. He was lean and fit with big brown eyes and a come-fuck-me smile.

Dante opened his mouth to reply when an icy voice said behind him, “He’s waiting for his husband.”

Leo slid into the booth opposite Dante and stared at the stranger. The man backed up and gave them a smile. “You two enjoy your night.”

Dante glared at Leo. “How did you find me?”

“How do you think? I traced your phone,” he replied with a small shrug. The waitress came back with Dante’s fresh whiskey. Leo swiped it before Dante could. He had a sip and grimaced.

“What is this utter swill you are drinking? My mouth is offended,” Leo complained.

“Not aged enough for you, rich boy?” Dante mocked and held out his hand. “If you don’t like it, give it back.”

Leo moved the glass out of his way. “No, I’m keeping it. You still have a beer.”

“Did you come here to just steal my drinks and piss me off?” Dante demanded. “Let’s not forget cock blocking me.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Please. That boring white man isn’t what you need tonight.”

“Like you would know what I need, let alone what I want.” Dante tried to hold on to his rage, but it was a struggle because Leo was his favorite person to stare at and tease. The humidity had made his dark hair curl, and Dante wanted to run his hands through it, just to see it spring back up. He was leanly muscled, olive-skinned, tattooed, and dangerous. It was a killer combo that never failed to hit Dante in the guts and dick at the same time.

“I’m not going to let you sit here and have a pity party on your own,” Leo said, toying with the drink coaster.

“Why not?”

“Because you refused to leave me alone when I was trying to wallow in my misery. This is payback. Be grateful I’m not making you do pushups.” Leo’s dark eyes flickered around the room. He was counting exits, looking for cameras, assessing and memorizing people in the bar.

Sometimes Dante wanted to kick himself in the head for not seeing what Leo was sooner. He was like the Edgeworth crew—a professional killer with lightning reflexes and gray morals. Worse, he was a Colleoni. The closest mercenaries had to a royal family. They had been kicking ass and getting paid since the fourteenth century.

All that family legacy, money, and power had created Leo. The man who tricked them all into thinking he was just a pretty hacker boy who never cleaned his apartment. It would grind Dante’s gears if he didn’t like the killer combo that was Leo so much.

Dante drank some of his beer to cover the awkward silence. At least he wasn’t thinking about the room in Baghdad anymore. No, he was thinking about a storeroom in St. Petersburg when he had kissed Leo and had discovered just how fucked he was over him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Leo asked. It took Dante a few seconds to realize he was talking about Morozov.

“Not particularly. I wanted to kill him. Someone else got to him first. It sucks, but I’ll deal with it,” Dante said, trying to brush the question off.

Leo wasn’t buying his bullshit. He rolled his eyes. “Sure, you’re dealing with it fine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re here, exposed and making yourself the perfect bait to our enemies because you are pouting that someone killed the man who fucked you and your crew. That piece of shit does not deserve your anger. He’s dead, and it is over,” Leo replied. He leaned forward to whisper, “Did you even consider the vulnerable position you are in? Do you care that Dee and her minions could walk right in and kill you because you stormed off?”

“Dee isn’t stupid enough to fuck with Altun’s territory, and despite what you might think, I’m not a complete fucking idiot.” Dante’s temper flared, the rage rolling back in. “I’m here because I need a fight or a fuck, and if you’re not going to give them to me, you can fuck right off.”

Leo’s dark eyes flared at the challenge. “If it means that you’re not sitting here exposing yourself and the rest of us, I’ll take you home.”

Dante choked on his beer. “Excuse me?”

“I know exactly what you need, Dante. You won’t find it with anyone here, but I’ll give it to you,” Leo said, his voice dropping to a purr.

Dante’s pulse tripled. Fuck. This couldn’t be happening. He forced his devil-may-care smile. “And what is it you think I need, *bello*?”

Leo turned the glass in his hand. “You need someone to take your bad day out on.”

“Other way around actually,” Dante replied and then wanted to punch himself in the face. It was the truth, though.

He needed someone to kick the crap out of him for the pain endorphins, or he needed someone to...

"I'll do it," Leo said, his dark eyes heating.

Dante couldn't breathe. He was suddenly back on the plane all those weeks ago with Leo's hands in his hair, a dominating growl in his voice. His dick hardened, and his mouth went dry.

Leo cocked a brow. "What's the matter, Dante? You scared?"

Yes.

"No. I'm wondering why you would offer." They hadn't talked about either of those kisses. Not a peep.

Leo let out an exasperated laugh. "You have been trying to get into my pants since the day we met, and now you knock me back?"

"I haven't knocked you back. I'm just curious—"

"And I'm done sitting in this bar." Leo got to his feet and drained the whiskey before slamming the glass down on the table. "What will it be? Yes or no. Yes, I take me home and I'm in charge. No, you stay here and I call Athena to come and drink with you."

Dante's palms were sweating like a teenager's at prom. "Yes?"

Leo smiled at him like a lion did at a baby gazelle. "Then let's go."

Leo knew it was a bad idea to follow Dante to the bar and to toy with him when he was raw and vulnerable.

Surely, it was better if Leo took advantage of Dante's fragile state than someone else. At least, that was what he told himself.

He didn't like the thought of anyone touching Dante, especially some plant of Dee's that would take him to a nice quiet place and then slit his pretty throat.

Leo hadn't planned on what had happened next. He had seen Dante drinking and looking so beautiful and sad, and the words had flowed out of his mouth. Dante's pupils had blown out, and the grip Leo had kept on himself for weeks vanished.

The bar was only a short walk to their building, and neither one of them spoke as they wove around people and ignored men in front of shops and cafés gawking at their menus and flaunting their knockoff designer jackets.

Leo could feel Dante's warm presence at his back as they rode up the elevator to their apartments. They had done it a hundred times in the past weeks, Leo doing his best to ignore the close proximity every time.

Dante was near enough to him that Leo could feel his soft breath at the back of his neck. He fought not to tilt his head. It was too submissive, and he had said he was going to be in charge. It didn't matter that both of them flipped between dominant and submissive, depending on the mood they were

in. Leo had to be dominant because Dante needed it, and he was in no position to deny him.

Outside the elevator, Dante paused at their apartment doors and hesitated.

“We are going into your apartment,” Leo said a little too quickly. “Or else I’m going to have to watch you clean up first.”

“Then maybe you should stop being so dirty,” Dante replied before opening his door. “Take your shoes off.”

Leo grinned and toed off his boots before Dante shut the door behind them. He had broken into Dante’s apartment before with the mad urge to touch things and mess everything up to annoy him. Curiosity had gotten the better of him, and he had gone snooping instead.

Everything in the apartment had its place. The man even folded his underwear. It would have been cold and sterile as a hotel room if it wasn’t for Dante’s warm presence and sexy male scent over everything.

“You got me here safe and sound, so you don’t have to worry about me going home with the enemy now,” Dante said with an uneasy shuffle of his feet. “You don’t have to stick around if you don’t want to. I’ll stay put.”

Leo chuckled, low and deadly. “You’re trying to give me an out? That’s fucking cute, but it’s too late. You let me in, and I’m not leaving until I get what I want.”

“And what’s that?” Dante demanded.

So many things.

“First, I want you to not speak unless I tell you to. Starting now.”

Dante’s eyes were bigger than Leo had ever seen them. He was shocked. Good.

“Second...come with me and find out,” Leo said and headed towards Dante’s bedroom.

Dante followed him, already so obedient. In the room, Dante didn't reach for him or try to kiss him. He just waited.

Leo couldn't resist him at the best of times, but having the bigger man go submissive on him made his blood burn.

He wanted to kiss Dante so badly, his lips hurt. He didn't because all pretense of control would go out the window if he did. Dante kissed Leo in a way that made his entire brain go blank.

Leo looked Dante over slowly, admiring the leashed violence in a too tight shirt and jeans, and his mouth watered.

"Take your clothes off and get on your knees," Leo said, surprised that his voice remained steady. Dante's features went peaceful with the command.

So fucking perfect.

The thought of anyone but Leo controlling Dante like this made Leo's temper flare and his possessive streak roar. The trust in Dante's expression almost undid him.

Dante pulled off his shirt, revealing golden brown skin, muscles, and scars.

Athena had once commented that Dante's willingness to show Leo his scars was a big deal, and Leo still couldn't figure out why. They weren't ugly. They only spoke of Dante's strength and resistance.

Leo had inflicted the same wounds on Morozov, and the man had died before he was half done. Dante was fucking unbelievable, to have lasted long enough for Silas to find him.

Dante unbuckled his pants, and Leo's breath stuttered. Dante didn't show any nerves or embarrassment over being completely nude. He was big and gorgeous, with a cock to match. Dante dropped to his knees in front of him, and Leo bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood.

Leo wet his lips, suddenly nervous. If his family knew about Dante, they would hunt him down and use his safety to get Leo to do whatever they wanted. He knew it, and he still couldn't stop or say no.

Leo ran his fingers through Dante's hair, making Dante's eyes flutter closed and lean into the touch.

"We can only do this once, so let's do it right, hmm?" Leo said, the words lodging in his throat and making his accent thicken. Dante frowned, but he didn't open his mouth to argue. Leo smoothed the line between Dante's brows before sliding his fingers back into his hair. He tightened his grip and rubbed the front of his pants against Dante's face.

"Come on then, Hill. It's not going to suck itself."

Dante's expression heated, and with quick movements he had Leo's pants undone and his hard dick free in seconds. Dante didn't speak, but he gave Leo the dirtiest smile he had ever seen and kissed his tip. Dante's mouth closed hot and wet over him, and an involuntary, shuddering breath escaped Leo's lips.

Dante gave head the same way he kissed, completely focused on the task, like his only goal was to suck Leo's soul out of his body. There was something so incredibly sexy about having Dante completely naked, open, and vulnerable, compared to Leo still fully clothed.

Dante worked Leo's pants down to his knees so he could stroke his hands over Leo's lean thighs, massaging him as they moved to his cup his ass. Dante didn't need any direction. It was like he was in Leo's head, knowing just when to suck harder or ease back to tease his sensitive head.

It took all of Leo's self-control not to paint Dante's gorgeous face with his come. Dante flicked his tongue under the base of Leo's aching shaft, tickling him enough to make him jump.

"Stop playing with it," Leo growled. Dante grazed his teeth over one of Leo's balls in response, reminding him he might be in charge, but only because Dante was letting him be.

Unbelievable that he still needs to be annoy—Leo rose on his toes as Dante unexpectedly deep throated him, and he hit the back of his throat.

“Fuck, enough,” Leo all but whimpered. “Get on the bed and hold on to the bars of the headboard. Let them go once, and I walk.”

Dante gave him a sassy look that said he didn’t believe him. Leo wanted to prove him wrong but couldn’t. He had wanted Dante for too long. He needed this release before he choked on his own desire.

Dante climbed on the bed, giving Leo a mind-blowing view of his muscled back, his thick powerful thighs, and perfectly toned ass. Dante never missed a leg day, and Leo had been dreaming of straddling those thighs for weeks.

Dante rolled onto his back and gripped the headboard, all his chest muscles flexing and his enormous dick jutting from his body invitingly.

Leo swore in Italian under his breath, soft and vicious. He didn’t deserve this. Dante could go into any bar in the city and find ten people that would be more worthy of him than Leo.

Leo knew it, but he still unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the floor. Dante focused on him with all of his sniper training. He went hot all over.

Leo had never given a shit about any of his lovers to care what they thought of him. He cared about what Dante thought. It was why he fought so hard to resist their connection.

Leo didn’t know if he would be strong enough to give Dante up when the Colleonis came for him. He needed this just once before his life was over.

Leo kicked off his jeans, and Dante stared. He made a helpless, hungry sound, and Leo’s neck burned.

“Something to say?” Leo asked, wanting to give Dante a chance to back out. Or maybe himself. Dante shook his head, his hands gripping the wooden bars of the headboard tight enough to make his biceps bulge.

“Good boy,” Leo teased. Dante only rolled his eyes, making Leo smile. His unsanctioned visit to Dante’s apartment had also ensured that Leo knew exactly which drawer had his

lube and condoms. Leo ignored Dante's surprised look as he found them and tossed them onto his covers.

Leo trailed his fingers down Dante's chest, possessive of what was his, even if it was only for a night. Dante's eyes fluttered with pleasure at the touch until Leo reached his scars, and Dante flinched like he had been burned.

"No. The bastards who did this aren't allowed here," Leo snarled at him. "Understand?"

Dante's hands flexed, making Leo think he was about to let go of the bed. His heart stopped and his breath caught. The moment passed, and Dante gave a nod.

"You are beautiful, Dante. Scars and all. It's one of the most annoying things about you." Leo leaned down, running his lips over a raised lump of scar tissue. Dante trembled under him. "Relax, *carissimo*. I'm going to make you feel so good, it will make you forget all about what happened." Leo's hands didn't stop their exploration as he moved between Dante's legs.

"I'm so pleased this is as big as those little shorts of yours made it look," he said, wrapping his long fingers around Dante's dick. "You've been driving me crazy with those infernal things."

Dante smiled, innocent as an angel. *A fallen one, perhaps.*

Leo's grip tightened. "And because of that, when I suck this lovely dick of yours and work myself open while thinking of your fingers inside of me, you aren't allowed to watch."

Dante groaned and banged the back of his head against the bed in protest.

"Perhaps it will teach you not to be such a dick tease," Leo replied to Dante's glaring. "Or we can stop?"

Dante huffed, his pissed scowl promising retribution, and finally shut his eyes. Leo stared at the naked skin before him, not knowing where to start. He had lived off brief, tantalizing glances and accidental touches. Now that an entire feast lay before him, he was paralyzed by the weight of choosing. He

started at the top, licking the powerful lines of Dante's golden throat and collarbone, relishing the taste of him on his tongue.

Leo teased, sucked, and savored his way down to Dante's nipples. He alternated between teeth and tongue, hard and soft, pain and pleasure, until Dante's back was bowing with every rousing caress.

When Dante's nipples were flushed, the surrounding skin covered in bite and suction marks, Leo moved down to the ridges and dips of Dante's abs. He licked a hot stripe over his carved hip dips and down the sexy as fuck valleys that led to the most perfect dick Leo had ever seen.

Leo opened the cap of the lube, and Dante shifted, recognizing the sound. Leo brushed his slick fingers over his hole while blowing softly on Dante's dick.

"Should I tell you what is happening?" Leo whispered, and Dante nodded. "I'm staring intently at your pretty flushed cock, imagining all the things I want to do to it. I'm wondering how it's going to feel when I have you at last." Leo licked Dante's dick in a barely there touch. "I'm going to finger myself and suck you until neither one can take it anymore."

They both groaned when Leo wrapped his mouth over him and sucked. He stroked and teased his ass, working himself open while making Dante gasp, his big body lifting to chase the sensation of Leo's mouth.

Leo tasted salty pre-cum, lapping it up, the need to taste and take burning through every part of him. They were sweating, Leo edging them both until they were shaking. Leo stopped only long enough to open the condom, sucking on the end before using his mouth to roll it over Dante's dick. Leo straddled him and rested his hands on Dante's chest.

"Dante? Open your eyes, *carissimo*," Leo whispered. Dante's eyes were mad with want as they rested on his. He was ready to crack.

"Watch," Leo commanded, grinding the broad tip of Dante's dick over his wet hole. "Don't look away." Leo sank himself a little lower on him, savoring the thick stretch as he

worked himself onto Dante inch by inch. Dante made a sound, raw and animalistic.

Leo paused. “Are you okay?”

Dante let out a breathless laugh and nodded. Leo sank slowly the rest of the way down. “Fuck, *carissimo*, I’m going to be feeling you for days.”

Dante’s cheeks blushed, his grin so bashful that Leo couldn’t stop his own smile. He brushed a sandy lock from Dante’s face.

“I’m going to ruin you,” Leo said with his most threatening smile. His grip on Dante’s chest tightened, and he rolled his hips. Dante bit his lip, his muscles flexing with restraint. Leo fucked himself down onto his cock, over and over, his whole body turning electric. Dante was inside him, and it was everything he had wanted and hadn’t known how to ask for. He ground his hips down hard until Dante’s dick found the sweet spot inside of him.

“I wish I could hate you for making me feel this good. I should kill you for making me this crazy for you,” Leo hissed, falling back into Italian so Dante didn’t understand him. His nails scratched down Dante’s chest. “Maybe if I fuck you hard enough, this constant hunger will leave me. I can go back to being numb again, instead of wanting all the impossible things you represent.”

The wooden bars Dante was holding snapped with a pop. Before Leo could react, Dante surged up and kissed him. Leo was helpless to stop him, Dante’s powerful hands holding him down tight as his lips took and took. One hand dropped to wrap around Leo’s dick, jerking him hard as Leo rode him.

Just when Leo thought he couldn’t take it anymore, Dante shoved Leo onto his back and pulled his legs over his shoulders. Leo barely had time to breathe before Dante was driving his dick against his prostate.

Leo’s vision whited out, all semblance of control gone, his speech reduced to a roar of profanity and worship. Leo bit down on Dante’s lip. Blood flooded his mouth, and he came in

an agonized gasp of pure pleasure. He covered Dante's torn up chest and stomach in hot come, Dante stroking him through it.

Dante dropped Leo's legs so he could gather him up in his arms, smothering his shouts into Leo's sweating skin. Dante squeezed Leo hard enough to crack his ribs as his dick swelled inside of him. He kissed Leo deeply as he came, robbing them both of breath.

Leo couldn't move, couldn't think. He was come drunk and enclosed completely in Dante. It was heaven and hell in turn, and he surrendered to the sweet agony of it.

When Leo finally came back to his senses, he kissed Dante and untangled himself, hissing softly when Dante slipped free of him.

"Stay here. I'll get something to clean you up," Leo whispered. Dante nodded, lying back on the bed to watch Leo walk on uneasy feet to the ensuite.

Leo cleaned himself up, his hands shaking and not feeling like he was in his body properly. He wet a cloth before going back to Dante. He had gotten rid of the condom, but he was still wearing a dazed, contented look on his face.

I put that smile there, Leo thought smugly. He gently wiped the come and sweat from Dante's body. He disposed of the cloth and suddenly didn't know what to do.

"You want me to go?" he asked.

Dante shook his head, his hand touching the scars on his stomach. Distress flashed in his eyes before Dante tried to hide it. Leo couldn't handle it, so he sat on the bed beside him. He put his hand against the mound of scars.

"They don't belong to him anymore. You hear me?" Leo said firmly. Dante still looked uncertain and upset, so Leo added, "I came on them, so I'm sure that makes them mine now."

Dante let out a surprised laugh before he broke, and it turned into a sob. He rolled onto his side away from Leo. Leo wasn't having that, so he curled around Dante's back and wrapped his arm around him.

“It’s okay, *carissimo*. Don’t cry. No one is ever going to hurt you again,” Leo promised. “I’ll fucking kill them before they do.”

It was impossible for Leo to give Dante what he deserved, but murdering his enemies? That he could do, and neither the Aurora nor the Colleonis would be able to stop him.

Altun stretched out on heated marble like a contented cat and let the hot steam in the air warm her skin. She had dragged herself away from John Dee's notebook for the first time in four days to get her thoughts together.

The bathhouse was Altun's favorite thinking place. It was within walking distance of her house, where she could rent her own private rooms. It was also not so traditional that she couldn't hire a male masseuse when she needed someone with muscular hands to get the knots out of her back and shoulders. She tried not to flinch as the current one working her over found a particularly tender place in her lower back.

Altun had been hunched over the notebook, studying its tiny pages and trying to decipher the cryptic meanings behind the Enochian script.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw two things—mystical glyphs glowing brightly in her mind and Julian. Usually, it was of him standing above her, looking like sex and danger as he kissed her.

Don't think about Burbank, Altun chastised herself. She needed all her focus, and now, it was split. She didn't know what game Julian was playing. She was sure he'd wanted to fuck her the other night, and she would have let him, but he had walked away like nothing had happened. She might have been embarrassed if she hadn't been so infuriated.

She didn't know why she cared enough to be bothered. It wasn't like she couldn't get someone else to fuck her. Hell,

most of the bathhouse staff were also sex workers and would get her off for an additional fee.

It was tempting, but it wasn't what she wanted. The wanting was the dangerous part. It was the reason she had turned her phone off for the last four days. Altun didn't trust herself not to text Julian and demand that he visit her. She liked Julian's company, not just what he did to her body, and that was as surprising as it was horrifying.

Altun was finally relaxing when the door to the marble room opened, letting a cool rush of air.

"Excuse me, sir, this is a private session—" the masseuse began.

"We have a meeting, and you're in my way, boy," Julian said, easy and condescending.

"Madam Baruk, I—"

Altun raised her head and looked over her shoulder. Julian was wearing a woven linen towel, a frown, and nothing else.

"It's fine. You may leave, and I'll still pay you for your time," Altun assured him. The masseuse looked between them and all but bolted from the room.

"Thanks for letting out my steam and scaring away the help," she said haughtily. She lay back down on the hot marble. "You better have a good reason for interrupting."

"You haven't answered anyone's calls and texts for days," Julian replied.

"So what? I have been busy."

"You aren't working alone anymore, Altun. You have people that worry about you."

Altun huffed a laugh. "I can take care of myself, and I don't report to anyone. Now, if that's all, you can send my masseuse back in."

Strong fingers curled over her ankle. "I'm disinclined to go anywhere. If you wanted a rub down, you only needed to ask."

Altun's mouth went dry as he trailed the back of his knuckles down her bare calf. "Why do you have to be so difficult?"

Julian laughed softly. "Me? You're the one who goes silent for days at a time."

"I was busy translating Dee's book like I said I would. How did you find me, anyway?" Altun asked. She made sure her phone and car were never tracked.

"Kon said you like to come here to think. I asked at the desk," Julian replied. He lifted a small bronze vial and trickled oil over the back of her thigh. "If I can find you so easily, Dee can too."

"I won't live behind my wards in fear of my sister, and I needed the massage you interrupted," Altun said. She bit back a moan when his hands stroked down her legs.

"I'm taking care of it, aren't I? I told you I'm only a few blocks away if you needed anything. That includes massage services." Julian dug a thumb into the arch of her foot. "Any complaints?"

"I don't care who does the job as long as it gets done," Altun replied with a sigh.

"Is that so?" Julian's grip on her ankle tightened. "Was that pretty boy going to give you a happy ending as well?"

"If I asked him to." Altun didn't know what to make of the annoyance in his tone. "I don't know what business is it of yours."

"It's not my business, but you strike me as a quality person over quantity." Julian's breath was warm on her ear. "Do you want a boy getting you off or a man?"

"I want you to work on my shoulders," Altun replied, her insides melting at the husky purr of his voice. He was in her head, and she didn't like it.

Julian dripped more of the warm oil on her shoulders, letting it trickle slowly down the groove of her spine before smoothing it over her skin.

“Did you find anything interesting in the book?” he asked.

“Yes and no. I’m translating it, but the magic is still a jumble. I can see the outlines of its form. It feels like a protection spell of some kind. I’m not sure yet. It’s complicated,” Altun tried her best to explain.

“Could Kon help you with it?”

“No. It’s better that I keep it to myself until I understand what it does. It can still blow up in my face, and I don’t want it near Kon until I know what it does,” Altun replied. Julian kneaded at a particularly troublesome knot in her shoulder, and her toes curled. “It feels too important to use to bait Dee unless we have no other choice. How’s the cataloguing going?”

“Good. Liddell was a real hoarder, and Kon had a lot more than he let on the first time he showed the collection to me,” Julian replied.

Altun smiled. “He’s learned the value of secrets, that’s why. Has anything interesting come up?”

“Plenty, but I don’t know if any will be useful for drawing out Dee. We are making a complete list, and I’ve put aside anything relating to angels and Gnosticism just to be sure. I’ve suggested we give it to you to look over and select something.”

Altun hummed in pleasure as Julian’s hands buried into her loose hair and massaged her scalp.

“God, that feels amazing,” she whispered.

“You can call on my massage services whenever you wish.” Julian’s grip tightened in her hair. “If you check in once a day.”

“You are really hung up on that, aren’t you? I was busy. Time has no meaning when I’m focused on magic,” Altun said, the pressure on her scalp sending tingles all over her body. “You miss me?”

“Yes,” Julian replied, shocking her. “Everything went black and white again, and I didn’t like it.”

“Oh,” she said, unable to think of anything else. She hadn’t considered that anyone would miss her. It made her feel tender in a place she hadn’t paid attention to in a long time.

Julian’s hands roamed from her head, sliding down her back in firm stokes. She bit her lip when he kneaded her ass before gliding down the soft skin of her legs. Wet heat was pooling dangerously between her thighs.

“Would you like me to do the front too?” Julian asked once he reached her feet again.

“Yes.” Altun rolled slowly over on the slick marble and stared up at his savage face. He was hard under the towel but hadn’t moved to do anything about it. Steam was clinging to the sharp grooves of his tattoo muscles, his silver forelock hanging over his face. Altun lifted one leg and prodded him in the chest with her toe.

“Don’t get distracted from the job at hand, Burbank,” she said. There was something raw in his brutal features, and it made her want to provoke him.

Julian grabbed her foot, lifting it higher so he could nip the inside of her ankle. “Be careful.”

Altun smiled. “No.”

“Keep teasing me and see where it gets you.”

“Hopefully, it will get me fucked.” Altun’s eyes dropped to the bulge in his towel. “Don’t you want to put that to use?”

“You aren’t going to get it until I’m ready to give it to you.” Julian’s blue eyes turned vicious. “And after being ignored for days, I’m not in a giving mood.”

Altun lifted her hand behind her head. “Then leave and send that other boy back in to do the job you don’t want.”

“You really want me to go?” Julian leaned forward so her leg would widen. He looked down at her wet pussy. “Doesn’t look like it to me.” He lifted a small silver jug of water and trickled some down onto her clit, making her hiss in surprise. Julian’s smile widened.

“That wasn’t a no,” he said.

“I don’t want you to go,” Altun gasped, hating herself for admitting it and not caring at the same time.

“What do you want, Altun?” Julian’s hand traced down her slick thigh down to where she throbbed with need. “Do you want to be filled up?”

“Yes.” She was above begging, but he made her want to.

Julian stroked her pussy and slid two fingers inside of her. Altun’s back arched.

“Not what I had in mind,” she panted.

“Hmm, but it’s all you’re going to get until you learn not to shut me out,” Julian replied, stroking and curling his fingers in a maddening rhythm. Altun was edging closer to her orgasm when more warm water was poured over her. She was so sensitive that she cried out, helpless against the sensation.

“Fuck, you make it hard for a man to stand by his decisions,” Julian growled. He dragged her ass to the edge of the marble and dropped to his knees. Altun’s feet were placed on his shoulders, making her legs widen whenever he moved forward.

“The memory of your taste has been slowly driving me crazy,” he said, his tongue lapping at her once. He groaned against her clit, sending sweet vibrations through her. Altun wanted to grind herself into his face. Julian sensed it, his hand moving to her hip to pin her down to the marble.

“Maddening. That’s what you are,” he whispered before thrusting his fingers harder into her. Altun couldn’t find the words to reply. He started sucking and licking her, and all other thoughts left her mind except for Julian making her body sing. Altun’s orgasm knocked the air out of her in a keening wail.

“You make the sweetest sounds when you come,” Julian said, his fingers continuing to grind into her. “But when I fuck you, I promise you’ll scream.”

“*Fuck,*” Altun hissed, magic lashing out of her. Invisible hands lifted Julian off her, dragging him backward on the marble bench behind him. Altun stood before him, naked and

shining with oil and power. His eyes were wide in surprise and a touch of anger, but he wasn't afraid.

"Tricks, sorceress?" he growled, struggling against the invisible bonds.

"You want to play power games? Perhaps you shouldn't forget who you are dealing with," Altun mocked. Her hands slid up his thighs, widening them so she could drop between them. She pulled the knot of his towel, loosening it to reveal his thick cock. She wanted nothing more than to sink down on it, having it stretch and fill her.

No, he wanted games, so she would give them to him. Altun widened his legs, her power still gripping him tight and took him with her mouth. Julian swore, but he didn't tell her to stop. His muscles flexed like he was reaching for her, so she freed one hand. He curled his fingers into her oil damp hair.

"Take me deep, sorceress," he said, voice dropping in a snarling command. Altun's body tingled at the command, and she sucked him down as far as she could go.

Julian's head went back, hitting the marble hard. He didn't loosen his grip on her, pulling her down with each thrust. He went thicker inside of her, and he tightened his grip roughly, holding her down as he came hot in her mouth. Altun groaned at the salty taste of him, her nails scoring bloody lines on his thighs. He finally loosened his grip, and she moved off him. They were both panting, overheated and covered in oil and sweat.

Altun's magic released Julian, and he grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her up into his lap. Altun was kissing him before he had the chance to say anything, her tongue thrusting into his mouth to steal the taste of him. His clever lips dominated hers, meeting her with the same intensity and giving it back to her.

"I think I missed you too," Altun admitted, breathless.

Julian gave her the most beautiful, open smile she had ever seen. "Good."

Julian didn't want to let Altun go, so he carried her from the steam room to the adjoining cool off area. They went down the marble steps into a sunken pool of warm water, both of them sighing. Altun's hands were around his neck, fingers threading idly into his hair.

"I can see why you like this place. I haven't been so relaxed in days," he said, doing his best not to smile. Altun reached for a glass of chilled lemon water that had been left on a silver platter next to the pool.

"I might have to come to you for a massage more often," she replied and sipped. She was flushed and glowing all over, and Julian couldn't stop staring at her.

He *had* missed her the past days. He enjoyed talking to her and seeing how her brain worked behind her pretty, dark eyes. He wanted to get under all of her layers and see what he found to horrify and thrill him. His skin was still tingling with the aftereffects of her magic gripping him like a vice, and for the first time, he liked the feeling of being powerless.

"You are welcome to call whenever you like. I can only handle so many days with bickering mercenaries," Julian replied.

"I wasn't much better company. This book is eating my brain away," Altun said, slipping from his arms to refill her glass. "It's mocking me."

"Maybe give it a rest for a few days and see if the answer comes to you. You said that you aren't going to use it as bait,

so you can study it whenever you like,” Julian suggested. He accepted the cup she gave him and drank down the sweet, tangy drink. He could get used to this kind of relaxation therapy.

Altun curled underneath his arm and rested her head against his shoulder.

“Perhaps you are right. We have bigger mysteries to solve, and I’m too distracted at the moment to give the book the attention it needs,” she said with a sigh.

“A psychopathic sister will do that,” Julian replied.

“She’s not what’s distracting me,” Altun said, her voice so low, he wasn’t sure he heard her right.

“Me? Surely not.”

Altun’s lips twitched. “Don’t ask me why. It’s a mystery I’m yet to solve.”

“Does that mean that against your better judgement you are letting me court you after all?” Julian asked, needing the answer. “What about your boy toy?”

“I was using him for massage services only, Julian. You were the one who jumped to the wrong conclusions, and I let you because I liked the idea that you were jealous.”

Julian had been tempted to wring the man’s neck, and it was only Altun’s glistening naked body that stopped him. “That was naughty of you.”

Altun laughed softly. “Perhaps, but it yielded the outcome I wanted.” Her smile faded a little. “One of the reasons I’ve never committed to anything more permanent is because I’ve never been good at sharing. I know your reputation and proclivities, Julian.”

“You mean the same ones as your own? I’m not going to fuck around on you, Altun, and I’m not interested in sharing you with anyone else while we are courting,” he said firmly.

Altun moved so she could straddle him. “Good, because if you cheat on me, I’ll kill you and trap your soul into a little

dancing monkey toy that can only say, ‘I’m a pretty boy who didn’t know how to keep his dick in his trousers.’”

“Sounds like a cursed object to me. There’s a market for those,” Julian replied, his grin widening.

Altun raised a brow. “Oh, I know there is. I’d sell you for millions and buy a man half your age to pleasure me whenever I like. I’d call him Deimos.”

Julian tilted his head back and roared with laughter, the sound echoing off the marble. “You have yourself a deal, sorceress.”

“Against my better judgement,” she said, laughing with him.

Julian brushed her wet hair behind her ear. “Are you hungry? Come home and let me get you something to eat.”

Altun nodded in agreement, and his heart swelled. She was the most powerful, terrifying woman he’d ever met, and he couldn’t stop smiling.



OUTSIDE, the air had gone chill, and a thick fog had rolled in over the Bosphorus. Julian waited under a carved stone archway for Altun to come out of the women’s changing rooms and bathhouse entrance. He was more relaxed than he had been in days, and it wasn’t only because of the blowjob.

It had been an uncomfortable couple of days, waiting to hear from Altun and being denied. Silas had teased him about being a pining teenager before Kon had taken mercy on him and told him where Altun would likely make an appearance.

All the emotions swirling inside of him were all so new, and despite feeling completely out of control, Julian was having more fun than he’d had in years.

The doors opened, and the scent of spice and blue lotus hit Julian’s senses before Altun emerged, dressed in a robe embroidered with peacocks that looked stolen off a Byzantine

princess. Maybe it had been; you never knew for sure with Altun.

Julian held out his arm to her, and she wrapped hers around it. He didn't know why the small gesture made him feel so warm inside. If he examined the feeling, it might go away, so he let it be.

“Did you walk or drive?” Altun asked.

“Walked. Istanbul parking is non-existent, and I like the challenge of not falling down some unexpected stairs leading into basements along the tiny footpaths,” Julian replied. He'd had more than one heart-stopping moment from finding the random openings in the footpaths.

“The danger keeps you focused on where you are going,” Altun said with a wicked grin. She took out an engraved case from her pocket and placed one of her clove cigars to her lips.

Julian opened his mouth to ask if she wanted a light when a black van roared around the corner into the narrow street. He saw the window open and the flash of a gun barrel before bullets rained down on them. He dragged Altun down behind a stone pillar, hot fire burning through his shoulder.

“What the hell are you doing?” Altun demanded. Blood was pouring down his shirt and over his chest. She swore, pressed her hand over the wound and muttered a harsh word. Julian groaned as magic seared him.

“That will stop the bleeding for the moment. Stay down, Julian. I'll deal with this,” she hissed, shoving him to the ground. Julian was too dazed to argue with her.

The black van had turned and was coming back towards them, ready to open fire again. Altun strode out into the street and streaks of light burned under her skin. She was the terrifying sorceress of Istanbul, and she was pissed.

Words full of anger and intent roared out of her, and she slammed a fist down into her palm three times. An invisible shock wave rolled out of her and hit the van, smashing it three times, buckling the front, the middle, and the back like it was

as flimsy as a soda can. The van stopped a few meters from her, but Altun wasn't done.

With another snarl, she made a twisting gesture with her hands as if she was kneading invisible dough. The magic hit what remained of the van, rolling it into a crumpled ball of metal.

Julian blinked, unable to fathom what he was seeing. It had taken seconds for Altun to destroy their enemies and crush them to paste.

“What the fuck are you?” he whispered, awe robbing him of his voice.

“I'm not to be shot at like a common thug,” Altun said, pulling him to his feet. She pulled back the ruined fabric of his shirt. “Can you walk? We need to get you to my house.”

“The bullet didn't come out, love. I need a hospital,” Julian replied, still shaken.

“Dee will expect it and will have all the hospitals, vets, and backyard doctors being watched.” Altun held out her hand to him. “Do you trust me or not?”

Julian's bloody hand took hers without hesitation. “I just watched you destroy a car with a few words. If you think you can fix it, I believe you.”

Altun pressed a quick kiss to his lips and pulled out her phone. “Kon? Pull everyone to the warehouse. We were just attacked at the bathhouse. Julian is shot, but I'm going to handle it. I'm going to need you to send someone to collect the mess and clean the site. And Kon? None of our crew is to leave the warehouse until I say so.” Altun hung up before cocking her head at him. “What's that look for?”

“Competence turns me on, and you are very competent,” Julian admitted, and swallowed hard. “I like it.”

Altun's hand tightened on his. “That's good because I'm going to need your dick for what happens next.”

Altun managed to get Julian back to the safety of her townhouse without being attacked again. The magic that she had burned through to destroy the van in her fit of anger had left her completely drained.

Stupid and wasteful woman, she berated herself. She didn't need to use that much magic and energy to stop the shooters.

All that had gone through her mind was that they had shot Julian and they needed to die. His blood on her hands made her beyond irrational. What was worse was that she knew the guns were for him all along. Dee didn't want to kill her, not without making her suffer first. She always knew exactly where to hit.

"Not that I'm doubting your abilities, but just how do you plan on getting this bullet out?" Julian asked. Altun locked and bolted the front door behind them and used the last of her energy to charge the wards.

"With magic. This way," Altun said. She pulled off her coat and swayed. Julian's good arm went around her waist to steady her.

"Easy, sorceress. Are you hurt?" he asked, his eyes filled with concern.

Altun straightened and shook him off. "No. I'm suffering from a magic drain. Everything comprises of energy, and magic is the manipulation of that energy. I used my resources wrecking the van."

Julian frowned. “If you’re this spent, how do you expect to heal me with magic you don’t have?”

“Easy. We’ll have sex and make more,” Altun replied, and headed up the staircase. “Don’t dawdle.”

Julian hurried to follow, his frown deepening. “Are you sure you don’t want to try digging it out first? It’s numb from whatever magic you slapped it with.” He took in her bedroom, expression lightening up in appreciation. Like the rest of the house, it was furnished with glossy dark furniture and expensive artwork.

Altun took off her boots and unbuttoned her blouse. Red covered half of Julian’s shirt and jacket, and seeing it in the light made panic claw at her throat.

“You have been trying to get into my bed since we met, and now you don’t want to?” she asked, trying to sound amused, but the panic had made her too high-pitched.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to—”

“Then what is it?” she demanded.

Julian caught her hand that was struggling with her buttons. “It’s because you are crying, love,” he said, gentler than she had ever heard him speak. Altun’s hand flew to her cheeks and found them damp.

“Oh my god,” she stammered, wiping at them in horror. She couldn’t remember the last time she cried.

“You’re okay. You aren’t shot, so it must be shock,” Julian tried to soothe her.

“I might be okay, but *you* aren’t,” she replied, more tears building in her eyes. She couldn’t hold them in and couldn’t stop. “Don’t you understand? She wants you dead, not me. I’ve never been allowed to care about anyone but her, or she kills them. Just like she did Azra. I *have* to heal you, Julian, because I can’t handle seeing you hurt. I can’t let her take anyone else from me!”

Gone was the cold and calm Altun Baruk, leaving only the emotional and panicked Theodora behind. She tried to push

her down and bring Altun back to the surface. She was still struggling when Julian put his arms around her.

“It’s okay. I care about you too,” he admitted and kissed her. Any resistance she had left shattered into a million pieces. She pushed her hands under his jacket, pulling it off so she could get closer to the warm body beneath. She needed to feel him against her, to feel he was alive like he’d been at the bathhouse. His shirt was already ruined, so she yanked it open, sending buttons scattering about the room.

“Now, this is my idea of romance.” Julian let out a laugh and treated her blouse to the same attention. She guided him backward until the back of his legs hit the edge of the bed, making him sit.

“I don’t want to get blood on your nice sheets,” he said, his hands stopping before touching the covers.

“Fuck the sheets,” Altun growled, kissing him again. She undid her pants, sliding them off with her underwear and climbed into his lap. Julian ran his hands up her thighs and back, making a husky sound of appreciation.

Altun touched his wound, and with a bloody finger marked her third eye, then his.

“I always knew you’d be kinky,” Julian commented.

“You have no idea.” Altun used more of his blood to sketch a glyph on her chest. “This is to channel the magic so I can heal your wound properly. Trust me.”

“I do, sorceress. I’m not scared of you,” he replied, making sweet pain lace through her chest. He really wasn’t afraid of her, and he accepted her. The magic. The violence. The darkness.

“Stop making me feel things and kiss me,” Altun demanded, her voice breaking. Julian’s answering smile was a wicked, delicious thing.

“Anything you want, sorceress.” Julian kissed her deeply before moving along her jaw. He tipped her head back and covered her neck in soft bites. With a subtle move, he undid

her bra and cupped her breasts. “Fuck, you are so beautiful it hurts.”

Altun moaned as his grip tightened, his long fingers pinching and teasing her nipples before he rolled her onto the bed, and his mouth took over. She had been aching for him since the bathhouse, her pussy still wet from the last orgasm he’d given her. She pulled at his belt and unbuttoned him.

“Impatient little thing, aren’t you?” he teased and kicked off his pants.

“I need you...” Altun pulled him closer, unable to articulate the burning in her veins to possess him.

Julian brushed the hair from her face. “I know. Take whatever you want.”

Altun rolled her until she was on top. He was all hard muscles, ink, and blood. Red was staining Rorschach patterns all over her sheets, but she didn’t care. Altun took the broad head of Julian’s dick and ran it over her pussy, using her own wetness to slick him down.

Julian gripped her thighs hard enough that she would have bruises in the morning. The thought filled her with dark pleasure. Like Julian himself. She didn’t think he would be the one to break her, but here she was.

Altun’s tongue curled around the first syllables of the spell, and she lowered herself down onto him. She gasped, feeling like he was invading every part of her, not just her body. He was under her skin, in her soul and magic.

“Fuck, sorceress, you are so fucking hot and wet,” Julian hissed and sat up so he could kiss her. He tugged her down the rest of the way, and they both moaned. Altun’s magic burned, urging her to let it out and to take what they were about to build. It all felt like too much.

Altun kissed Julian and began to ride him, her hands sliding over his bloody chest in her need to touch every part of him. He was so hard and perfect all over. She admired not only his body but his vicious mind, the leashed violence he carried

with him, the ruthlessness and humor and flirting. She wanted it all.

Julian clutched her ass, smearing bloody handprints on her, and pulled her down onto him roughly enough to edge on pain. It was desperate and taking and exactly what she needed. His reckless lust mirrored hers. Altun pushed him back onto the pillows, the energy from the spell between them charging. Magic glowed under her skin, streaking out from where they were joined like she was filled with lightning.

“Holy fucking shit,” Julian gasped, driving himself up into her. The magic had pulled him in too. Pleasure and power were filling them up, making them both drown in the sensation of it.

Altun wanted to surrender herself entirely to it, but she pulled herself back from the edge. Her body was burning, her orgasm breaking through her. She cried out words of healing and placed her hand over his wounded shoulder.

Julian shouted in surprise, eyes blurring in a haze of pain, and the bullet was suddenly in Altun’s hand. Magic rushed back through her, sealing the wound and leaving a starburst of golden scar tissue.

“See? No hospitals needed,” Altun said, showing him the bullet. Julian looked at the slug and down at his shoulder.

“Fuck, you’re no sorceress. You’re a goddess,” he replied. His expression darkened with lust. “And I’m going to fuck you blind.”

Altun let out a startled laugh as he pulled free from her and flipped her onto her hands and knees. Julian lifted her hips up and thrust his cock back into her, driving the air from her lungs. Altun gripped one of the carved posts of her bed to hold herself steady, her whole body feeling him rock into her. Julian gripped a handful of her hair, making her cry out.

“What was that, goddess?” he growled, teeth dragging over the back of her neck.

“Harder, Julian. Break me. Own me. Make me feel it,” she begged.

“Fucking hell.” He let out a breathless laugh. “I’m never going to get over you.” Julian leaned over her, wrapping an arm under her and closing a big hand over her throat. His chest was pressed into her back, heavy and exactly what she needed.

Julian slammed into her, making her rock forward. Her nails broke as he thrust into her harder and harder. Altun surrendered to the punishing pace, letting him take and fill and bruise. Her cries were strangled gasps of ecstasy as his fingers tightened around her throat. Altun’s vision went black, and she orgasmed with a scream that shook the bed. Julian was coming, filling her up with his essence, his energy surging through the still connected spell before she sent it back to him, mingled with her own.

“Fuck...me...” he stammered, pulling free from her and collapsing on the bed beside her. Their faces were streaked with tears and sweat and blood. Altun was on him in a heartbeat, their breath mixing in damp gasps as she kissed him until their lips were swollen.

Julian’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her down onto his chest and holding her close. Altun wasn’t used to intimacy after sex, but she couldn’t imagine pulling away.

“Never get shot again,” she whispered against his skin.

Julian let out a deeply satisfied male laugh. “If you fuck me like that every time I do, sorceress, I’m going to get shot once a week.”

The following morning, Julian woke in a Dionysian mess of torn clothes and sheets, blood and come. A shower was running in the adjoining ensuite, and a cup of coffee was steaming on the small table beside the bed. He had a mouthful and wandered into the bathroom. Altun was soaping herself down, the water bright orange at her feet.

“Now that’s a sight to wake up to,” Julian commented, leaning against the door frame and sipping his coffee.

Altun smiled through the steam. “You look like you’ve committed a war crime.” She rinsed off before opening the glass doors. Julian opened a towel for her, and she stepped into it.

“Swap.” She took the coffee with a peck to his lips. “Come downstairs when you’re done. I’ve got an idea of how we can get about the city without Dee finding us.”

Julian wanted to drag her back into the shower with him, but she had a determination in her eyes that hadn’t been there the night before. He knew he would lose the battle, so he let her go and stepped under the spray.

Julian washed the blood off his shoulder and inspected his golden scar. It was like a small sun that was tender to the touch. It was magic. *She* was magic. He’d never felt or experienced anything like it.

Seeing Altun reduced to a raw, emotional being full of shining golden power was life changing. Having all that magic

roll through him while being inside of her was nothing short of transcendental.

If their relationship ever ended, Julian already knew he would be ruined for the rest of his life. He had never been in love before, and he wasn't certain the complicated ball of possession and yearning he felt was it. It was close enough. It felt more like a worshipful obsession than love.

If he'd been a smarter man, Julian would have retreated as gracefully as possible. He was out of his depth. He had plunged headfirst into a world of powers he didn't understand and could barely hope to survive.

"Worth it," he whispered. There were worse ways to go than fighting side by side with a woman capable of reducing a moving vehicle to rubble with a word.

Julian scrubbed himself down with Altun's delicious smelling shower gel, a part of him relishing the idea of smelling like her throughout the day. He didn't know what she had planned, but he couldn't wait to find out.

When Julian got out of the shower, he found a new button-down shirt and trousers waiting for him. They were tailored perfectly to him, which would've seemed odd if he hadn't seen Altun heal his bullet wound the night before. Nothing seemed impossible after that.

Julian found Altun downstairs in a pretty courtyard out the back of the townhouse. A silver tray sat on a table beside her with a silver pot of coffee, fruit, and pastries. She was eating baklava, reading a newspaper, looking relaxed and glowing with vitality.

Irresistible, Julian thought. He doubted many people had seen her in such an unguarded manner. He was awestruck and unworthy.

"Sweets for breakfast?" he asked, joining her.

"It's the only way to start the day. How is your shoulder?" Altun asked, looking up.

"The scar is tender and hot to the touch, but it doesn't hurt," Julian replied. He lifted her hand and kissed it. "Thank

you.”

“It was the least I could do after getting you shot,” she replied, her neck turning a lovely flush of pink. “Sit down and eat something.”

Julian joined her, pouring another coffee and staring at the pretty greenery around him.

“I spoke with Kon and none of them are hurt. Apparently, Dante and Leo saw someone tailing them on their run and made straight for the warehouse.” Altun folded her paper. “Dee is getting bold. I thought it would take her longer, but you not giving her the seeing stone probably provoked her more than we thought.”

“So what’s the plan?” he asked.

“Kon had what remained of the van taken to the warehouse, and they are looking for clues. We can’t make any moves against Dee if we can’t leave our houses, so I’m going to make something to help us be mobile.” Altun’s gaze moved over him with an appreciative sweep, and she smirked. She focused again. “I’m going to need some supplies, and I could use the company if you feel like living dangerously.”

“I’m in.” Julian smiled his shark smile. “I know you’ll protect me.”

Altun clicked her tongue. “How confident you are.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone that I’m your favorite,” he teased her. He snagged a croissant from the tray. “Where are we headed first?”

“To the only place to get magical items in Istanbul.” Altun’s smile was full of secrets. “The Old Bazaar.”



WHEN ALTUN’S driver pulled up in front of the main entrances of the Grand Bazaar, Julian had to hide his surprise.

“Really? I didn’t know you needed some knockoff Louis Vuitton to create magical talismans,” he said as they got out.

“Have some faith, Burbank,” Altun replied. They got out of the way of a man pushing an overflowing cart of stock, and Julian tried to mentally prepare himself.

Most of the Grand Bazaar was packed with tiny shops selling jewelry, handbags, and other cheap crap to tourists. It was brightly lit and loud, and Julian did his best to avoid it at all costs.

Altun walked through the Bazaar, ignoring the hawkers trying to sell her discount gold trinkets and mosaic lamps. Julian kept pace beside her and tried not to let the place overstimulate him too much.

Altun knew exactly where she was going, moving around the crowds and down the increasingly tighter lanes. She stopped between a place selling pomegranate tea and a rug stall.

On the wall between them was a lead plaque the size of Julian’s palm. A crude looking Medusa head had been carved into it. Altun pressed her palm to the motif, and the stone slab at their feet slid back. A staircase of stone led down into the darkness.

“This way. Mind your step,” Altun replied and started her descent. No one seemed to pay any attention to them at all. Julian followed her, trusting that she knew what she was doing.

Inside, the tunnel smelled of spices and dust. The stone closed above his head, and the faint light of oil lamps bled through the darkness. His eyes adjusted and he took hold of the railing just to be sure he didn’t fall and crash into Altun.

The sorceress was waiting for him by an archway. She was smiling, like she was surprised he had followed her. Little did she know that Julian didn’t want to let her out of his sight again. The thought made him feel foolish, but it was still the truth.

“Don’t let anyone touch you or give you anything,” Altun said, taking his hand. “Don’t talk to anyone or anything. Stay close.”

“Why am I suddenly worried?” Julian only half joked.

“Because you are smart. Don’t worry, if anyone is going to steal your soul for a spell, it’s going to be me,” she replied and led him through the archway. “Welcome to the Old Bazaar. The underground market that has existed in Istanbul since before it had its first name, Lygos. Like the city, it has always been at the crossroads of the world, and anything or anyone magical has used it to barter whatever they need. It’s truly neutral. Light and dark magic are traded here, and none hold sway.”

Julian’s senses flooded with smells of cooking food, sulfur, strange flowers, and spices. It was like he had stepped back in time five hundred years. Lanterns hung from the painted dome ceilings with burning silver incense holders. Stalls of all shapes and sizes crowded on either side of them. Objects of strange make hung like strings of charms. Cursed antiques were hawked at him; souls of dancing girls who moved in a soundless dance were trapped in glass... Altun tugged him along, and Julian had to tear his eyes away from a merchant selling carved martyr bones.

Altun moved aside a red carpet and stepped into a cluttered store full of tiny objects—beads, amulets, bones, bells, coins, feathers—spread out over velvet shelves and in wooden cabinets. Julian put his hands in his pockets to keep himself from touching anything.

“Madame Baruk, I haven’t seen you in months,” a man’s voice said from behind a cabinet. He stepped into the light, and Julian did his best to keep his face neutral. The man looked middle-aged with long black hair shot with silver. It was the set of ram horns curling from the top of his head and the orange eyes that had Julian pausing in surprise.

“Yusuf, it’s been too long,” Altun replied and kissed both of his cheeks.

Yusuf looked at her over the top of a pair of wire-framed glasses. “You in trouble again? Or have you been getting lost in more pleasant pursuits?” The orange eyes stared at Julian curiously.

“Can’t it be both? I’m after some protection charms for some friends of mine. There’s someone who means them harm, and we need to stay out of sight until I have what I need to fight back,” Altun explained.

Yusuf took her hand, flipped open her palms and clucked his tongue irritably. “Come out of hiding finally, has she?”

“Unfortunately. Do you know anything?” Altun asked.

Yusuf shrugged. “Rumors only. She’s been trying to summon djinn and ifrit. They are closer to earth than the angels. Maybe she thought they would give some insight into their celestial brethren.”

“She can’t have succeeded in contacting any of your distant kindred or she would have used them against me by now,” Altun replied. She followed Yusuf to a counter, and he rummaged in the cupboards behind him.

“If I give you what you need, you must take the fight out of the city. This place’s magic is unstable enough without two warring sorceresses tearing it apart.”

Julian kept silent, trying to take everything in. Altun was showing him a part of the world he’d never imagined, and he didn’t want to fuck it up.

“How many are you going to need?” Yusuf asked her, placing a black velvet tray down in front of her.

“Eight,” Altun replied.

“Well, look at you, finally making more friends. I thought I was going to be the only one forever.” Yusuf set out eight tiny silver bars with loops on the end of the tray. “And how are you going to pay me for this?”

“What do you want?” Altun replied with a sweet smile.

Yusuf looked over at Julian. “I could take the love he has for you.”

Julian flexed, readying to stop him from trying, but Altun only laughed brightly.

“If you take that, all I have to fight for is my revenge. Doesn’t seem worth it,” she replied. Julian’s stomach was somersaulting that the strange creature had outed his feelings. Altun didn’t seem to mind.

“Why bring him if he’s not going to be a part of the bargain?” Yusuf asked.

“He needs to know what he’s getting into.”

Yusuf laughed, a strange high-pitched bray. “With you? I don’t think a trip to the bazaar is going to be enough. What else can you offer if not him?”

They switched to Turkish, and Julian couldn’t keep up with the back-and-forth banter. He tried not to be concerned. Altun had already made it clear she wasn’t about to sell any part of him off.

Julian got distracted by the small metal pendants Yusuf was taking out of the wooden chest. They were all shapes and sizes and carved with tiny figures and symbols.

Yusuf began threading them onto the silver bars with stone beads and finally a small glass evil eye. When he was done with each one, he clamped the end with a small pair of pliers and threaded it onto a thin leather cord.

Julian’s hair stood on end as Yusuf stretched out his hands and chanted softly over the charms. Heat and static charged the air, and Julian had to stop himself from bolting out of the store. The magic that Altun used the night before felt completely different. Whatever Yusuf was, he was ancient and not to be fucked with under any circumstances.

“There we are, my darling. These should suit your purpose. Charge them to the wearer. While they are on, any eyes that mean to harm them will slide away from them like oil over water. They aren’t to come off, or the magic will be less effective the next time they wear them,” Yusuf instructed, placing the charms into a leather pouch, and held his hand out to Altun. “My payment.”

Altun placed her palm in his, and flames licked over them. Julian stepped forward, but Altun held out her other hand low

to stop him. Yusuf chuckled, and the flames disappeared. He passed the bag to Altun.

“Good luck with your sister. And remember, keep the fighting out of Lygos. We have enough problems,” he said. He bent to kiss her forehead. “Come for tea once it’s done, child, and tell me all about it. Bring him back too.”

“Nice to meet you,” Julian said with the politest smile he’d ever given in his life. Altun took his hand and led him out of the store. Her fingers were shaking in his grip, but her face was stone.

Julian followed her up the winding staircase and back into the Grand Bazaar. The bright lights and the noise felt strangely muted, and it wasn’t until they were out in the sunshine again that he could breathe properly.

“Altun, what did he take from you?” Julian asked once they were down an alleyway and out of sight of the market.

Altun stopped walking, and a shudder ran through her. “He took the feeling of my mother’s love. I had to give love of the dead to pay to protect the ones I love now.”

“Jesus, Altun.” Julian brought her close, and she curled under his arm. “Why say yes to such a thing?”

“I was never my mother’s favorite. I barely got a smile from her, never an ounce of approval. I didn’t think that it would matter so much if he took it,” Altun replied, her voice muffled against his shirt.

“And did you find out that she really loved you more than what you imagined? Is that why you’re upset?” he asked softly.

Altun stepped back from him and shook her head. “No. I found out just how little she loved me.”

She let him go and walked away, leaving Julian’s heart aching for her. She was the girl that no one wanted, the one to control or to use, always the outsider and unlovable one. It was no wonder she trusted no one and had isolated herself so completely in her jewel box house of magic and mysteries.

Julian hurried after her, determined to make up for all the people who should have loved her the way she deserved.

Kon's warehouse looked deceptively peaceful. No vans were waiting or people hanging about, keeping an eye on it. Julian looked up at the roof, where he spotted a newly constructed sniper's hut. Silas gave him a wave from inside and a red dot appeared on Julian's chest. Julian flipped him off with a grin and followed Altun inside.

The remains of the van were laid out on the workshop side of the warehouse. Dante and Athena were taking it apart with electric grinders and big grins on their faces.

"Find anything yet?" Altun asked Kon over the noise.

"A phone that the driver had. Leo and Iz are working on it. It's probably all we need, but those two were having so much fun with the van, I haven't had the heart to stop them." Kon looked Julian over. "I thought you were shot."

"I was." Julian flashed him the golden scar. "The sorceress here fixed it."

"How?" Kon demanded.

"Power of the di—"

"Healing magic," Altun interrupted. She held out the leather bag to Kon. "I need your help to key one of these to each of us."

Kon tipped the contents into his palm and let out a soft hiss. "Where did you get these?"

"The Old Bazaar," Julian replied.

Kon's eyebrows shot up, and he looked accusingly at Altun. "It's *real*? And you never took me?"

"Don't pout because she likes me better than you," Julian crooned.

"Not helping," Altun told him with a disapproving frown. "Kon, do you want to learn how to key these to people or not?"

"Of course I do," Kon grumbled.

Julian left them to it and went up the metal staircase to where Silas had come in on the mezzanine overlooking the warehouse floor.

"You're looking awfully chipper for a man who got shot yesterday," Silas commented. "The sorceress use her powers on you or something?"

"Sexual healing isn't just a bad song, old boy," Julian replied, leaning on the railing beside him.

Silas snorted. "Fuck off, you serious?"

"Yep, and it wasn't even the weirdest part of the last twenty-four hours." Julian did his best to explain the attack, the healing magic Altun had done, the secret bazaar, and the wizard goat-creature that was Yusuf.

"You know you sound crazier than that time you did acid in Goa during Diwali," Silas said with a shake of his head.

"It's the truth. We don't know shit about this world we've ended up stumbling into. It's quite humbling to realize I haven't quite seen and done it all." Julian looked down at Altun. "She's nothing like we thought."

"Dear lord, has it finally happened? Are you emoting over a woman?" Silas only half teased.

Julian nodded. "I am. She's been treated like hell her entire life. If killing her sister gives her the peace she deserves, I'll fire the gun myself."

"Of all the women to fall in love with, you have to pick the most dangerous one."

“You say that like I would have been happy with someone sweet and nice.” Julian pulled a face. “Fuck white picket fences. I want a sorceress who fucks like she’s trying to steal my soul.”

“She just might if she can get a good enough buyer for the decrepit thing,” Silas said with a laugh.

Julian grinned. “I like that about her.”

“You would, you freak.” Silas knocked him with his shoulder. “If it makes you happy, who am I to say otherwise? If you break her heart, don’t come to me to save you. I’m more afraid of her than you.”

“As you should be. She’s terrifying.”

Beneath them, Dante let out a bark of laughter and threw a severed finger at Athena. She dodged it with a shout and chased him with the saw.

“Dante doesn’t seem to be letting Morozov’s death worry him,” Julian commented, watching their shenanigans. He caught Leo staring at Dante with an expression of disapproval and longing.

“Dante found someone to hook up with and got it out of his system. He still has the hickeys all over him to prove it,” Silas replied.

“Is that so? I wonder how the assassin felt about that,” Julian replied.

“None of Leo’s business what Dante gets up to,” Silas said. They both watched as Dante shot Leo a smile.

“Oh, I think it is. After all, Leo made it his business to go after one of the most powerful weapons dealers in the world on Dante’s behalf.” Julian glanced sideways at Silas. “I’m not a fucking idiot. I know Leo’s wet work even if Dante is clueless.”

Silas rotated his shoulders, a tick of his that Julian knew he did when he was feeling awkward and trying to figure out what to say. “I wasn’t sure what Leo was planning to do when he asked me who Dante’s boss was. I thought he was going to

do some hacking. Maybe fuck Morozov up financially. I don't feel bad that he killed him."

"Just don't be in the crossfire when Dante learns the truth," Julian replied. "Or when the Colleonis decide they want their assassin back."

"That's Leo's choice. We are his family now, not them. If he wants to stay, he stays."

Julian let out a sigh. "I can't wait to see you try to tell his mother that."

"As far as I'm concerned, she stopped being his mother when she shot him with her golden bullets," Silas said, baring his teeth.

"You can't rescue every fucked-up wounded killer you find, Silas. They aren't stray puppies," Julian replied. It was an argument they had more than once. It changed nothing. Silas was who he was, and Julian would support him regardless if he thought it was a dumb fucking idea.

Altun gestured for them to come downstairs, and Julian's heart skipped a beat.

"The look on your face right now," Silas chuckled. "She's going to chew you up and spit out your bones."

Julian rubbed at the back of his neck. "Maybe, maybe not. It's going to be fun finding out."

"Hopeless," Silas muttered, and they went down to see what was happening.

Altun and Kon had set out the necklaces and were talking softly in Turkish. Julian wondered if she told him the price she had to pay for such trinkets.

"Athena, I'm going to need one of your knives," Altun said, holding out her hand. Athena reached to her boot and pulled out a dagger, offering it to her.

Altun took it and gestured at Julian. "Hand."

Julian didn't hesitate. She knew what she was doing. Altun pricked his finger and pressed one pendant into the welling

blood. Julian's skin burned, his lungs tightened like a hand was squeezing them. The pressure disappeared, and Altun slipped the necklace over his head.

"Don't take it off," she said, resting her hand on his chest.

"I remember," Julian replied, tucking it under his shirt. "If it works as well as Yusuf the goat said it would, I'll wear it forever."

Altun's lips twitched in amusement. "Never call him that to his face. His ifrit ancestor got fresh with a fawn, and he has no sense of humor when it comes to goat jokes."

"When am I going to meet Yusuf?" Kon asked. He still looked pouty over being left out, so Julian grinned at him. He felt special that Altun trusted him to show him something so secret.

"I'll take you to the bazaar when I feel like it's safe to do so. Now, do as I showed you and key Athena's charm," Altun replied impatiently.

"Fuck yes! Got you, *pendeja!*" Izabella cried out from the other side of the warehouse. She lowered her headphones and smiled at them. "I've just traced the last messages the phone received with instructions to go to the bathhouse."

"Where are we heading, Bella?" Silas asked.

"Kassiopi, in Corfu."

Silas's face lit up. "Red bikini time."

"Of course Dee would have a villa in Corfu. She's so ridiculously extra." Altun's sneer radiated menace. She looked up at Silas. "How much plastic explosive do you have on hand?"

"Not much, but Athena has a flamethrower."

Athena bounced up and down. "Oh, fuck yeah. I've been waiting to use it for a special occasion."

Kon put an arm around Athena's shoulders, his eyes going cold. "Bring it, *güzelim*. Dee told Liddell to burn my house down, and I'm in a mood to return the favor."

The villa located a little way out of the town of Kassiopi was an elegant sprawl of white columns and terracotta tiles. Lush tropical flowers bloomed brightly around it in glazed blue pots, the same aquamarine as the ocean in front of them.

It seemed almost a pity to burn it down. At least it would have been if Dee hadn't thrown a fireball at Julian and then shot him. Altun was all out of pity.

Altun waited at the electric gates for Silas, Athena, Kon, and Dante to clear the perimeter of the patrolling guards. Julian sat in the driver's seat beside her, one hand resting casually on her knee.

"I expected there to be more security than this," he commented.

"It's probably one of her holiday houses. These guards are likely just for show, but if she has anything of value inside, I'll consider taking it," Altun replied. She did her best to hide her nerves as the gate swung open, and Leo waved them through.

Altun insisted they cover their faces just in case their identities hadn't been made, and Athena had taken that instruction as an excuse to buy plastic kids masks of smiling kittens. Leo's was yellow and orange, and Altun couldn't stop her laughter when she saw them.

"You must have some fun, otherwise life isn't worth living," Julian said and drove the black Jeep up to the house. Altun stepped out and looked around. She could feel Dee's

magic in the weak wards around the property. It took a simple cantrip and a flick of her fingers to tear them down.

Still doing the bare minimum, Altun thought. Dee always looked to her powerful friends to protect her, and now with the two of them dead, Altun hoped she was afraid of what was coming for her.

Inside, the villa was a typical holiday house with white walls and bright art. It wasn't cheap, but it wasn't enough to tempt Altun to take. Altun followed the thrum of magic to a room at the back of the house. It was a neat study with nothing magical about it.

"Always with the tricks," Altun muttered and turned to Julian and Silas. "Check the bookshelves in the house. There's a hidden room somewhere."

A small camera was mounted in the corner of the room, a green light flashing. Altun looked up at it and gave it a little finger wave before she brought her fist down on the table and magic blasted out of her. The desk collapsed in on itself, computers and windows shattered, and the walls cracked around her.

"Altun! We found something!" Kon called out from deeper into the villa. Altun stepped out of the rubble and went to find him.

A door had been built into the back of the butler's pantry. It was wooden and carved with an elaborate Key of Solomon.

"Feel better?" Julian asked, picking some plaster from her hair.

"No, but I will," Altun replied. She pressed the symbols in an old familiar pattern and the door slid back. "So lazy."

Julian's hand closed around her arm. "Make sure she hasn't purposely done it to get you in a trap, love."

"I wish she thought like that. It might actually make this more interesting," Altun replied, stepping through the door. Inside was a secret inner room that had been built at the center of the villa. The roof was made of glass that would show all the stars at night.

Painted on all the walls were Enochian sigils, shining angels, and prayers in Hebrew. In the very center of the room was a wooden table that had been crafted to John Dee's specifications with a large square in the middle containing the letters of the angels' names in Enochian and a pentagram with seven smaller pictograms that he called the 'Ensigns of Creation.' Altun swallowed down bile, fighting back a surge of memories and strange longing. She had discovered her abilities surrounded by these familiar symbols and decorations.

"Where are all of her other things? I thought she would be like Liddell and have a hoard of books at the very least," Kon said. There were no books or other trinkets. Not even a show stone on the table.

"This room is meant to be sparse. It isn't a regular work room. It's a place solely meant for contemplation and communication attempts. An 'inner room' like Jesus mentioned in Matthew 6. John Dee believed it a necessary place to keep the material world and ephemeral separate. This is a sacred space." Altun stepped out of the room and back into the pantry. "Light it up, Athena. The entire house. Burn it to the fucking ground."

With a wild laugh, Athena rushed in with her flame thrower and heat rolled out of the door behind her.

"What now?" Julian asked, following Altun out of the kitchen.

"We make contact and lure her out," she replied. She walked back through the house until she saw another blinking camera. Altun took her phone from her pocket, typed her number in large digits, and held it up.

Julian lit a cigarette. "You think she's watching?"

"She's watching." Altun could feel her sister's slippery magic pressing between her shoulder blades. Altun counted slowly back from five. She didn't make it to three before her phone rang from a blocked number.

“Little sister, I don’t see you for over twenty years, and when you finally resurface, it is to burn my house down. Why?” Dee’s voice purred over the line. Goose bumps rose on Altun’s skin, and a cold rush of fear dumped over her. Julian’s hand touched the small of her back, steadying her.

“The same reason you turned up in London to burn Julian’s office. Because I wanted to,” she replied, drawing out every inch of the cold bitch persona she had fought so hard to cultivate. “Just like you wanted to put a bullet in him two nights ago.”

Dee hummed in amusement. “Ah. The man. You always were such a tender, romantic little thing. He’s a little rough and common for my tastes, but I can see why you like him. He’s a survivor, like all cockroaches.”

Altun gripped her phone tighter. “We are a tenacious sort. It’s true.”

“Stop being childish, Theodora, and come home. You’ve been granted your freedom for decades now, and your rebellion against the Aurora has gone on long enough.”

“Freedom? You stabbed me and tossed me into the ocean!” Altun snarled.

“Only after you shot me.”

Altun knew Dee was trying to provoke her, so she took out one of her cigars and lit it.

“We can do this back and forth all day, Marina, or you can tell me what you really want. There has to be something I can give you to make you and the Aurora leave me alone permanently,” Altun said. She inhaled the fragrant smoke, willing it to calm her raging heart.

Dee let out a delightful laugh, and it took all of Altun’s willpower to stay on the line. Dee always laughed the brightest when she was about to cause the most pain.

“Give me the Magus’s fourth seeing stone and the head of your lover, and you can keep your freedom and control of your shit hole city,” Dee said.

Altun pretended to be considering it for a moment. “It’s still only John Dee’s trinkets you want? I’m happy to be rid of their basic power. You aren’t getting Julian. I’m not quite done with him yet.”

“Stop acting like you have something more valuable to offer me than your pain,” Dee replied, her voice like honeyed poison.

Altun smiled at the camera. “I have ‘The Mystery of Mysteries and the Holy of Holies.’ I like to think it’s a better trade than your sick fetish of making me sad.”

“Even sadness has power, littler sister, and your tears always tasted the sweetest.”

Altun ashed her cigar. “Do you want the book or not? I’ve started translating it, and I must say, it’s more than I thought John Dee capable of producing.”

“That’s because it was written by the celestials, not by an old man!” Dee snarled, finally breaking.

“So you want it? Tell you what, I’ll even stop translating it so you have the secrets first. It’s good, but it’s not to my tastes anymore.”

Dee snorted. “And that man beside you is? How terribly base you’ve become, Theodora, just like your namesake. I am tired of this conversation. Bring the book to Prague in two days’ time. I’ll send you the address,” Dee said, her voice smooth as silk once more. “Enjoy that man of yours, but never forget. We all had you first.”

Altun hung up the phone, took a gun from her pocket, and shot out the camera. Once it was nothing but broken glass and plastic, she leaned over and vomited into the garden.

By the time Altun straightened again and had the horror of her memories under control, Julian had taken a bottle of water from the Jeep and offered it to her with a clean handkerchief. He didn’t ask what was wrong. He didn’t pry or push her for answers. He was just *there*, and that was enough.

Altun stared at the flames and smoke that were eating the villa away.

“Is everyone out of there?” she asked, voice cracked and raw. Her fear and terror were building, building, building. Creating their own kind of vortex of power inside of her.

Julian touched his earpiece. “Are you and the kids fully clear?” He waited until he got a response and gave her a nod.

Altun took a deep breath, harnessed all the pain and pent-up horror inside, and screamed it out with a spell of destruction.

The flames glowed blue as they ripped through the villa, pillars and tiles shattering under the impact of her magic. Wind whipped around her, and with a mighty gust, it dragged what was left of the charred villa into the sea.

Altun’s eyes were burning, but she had no more tears of grief for the broken girl she had been. She would never be that person again.

Julian was staring at her, slacked-jawed and wide-eyed. Was he afraid of the display of power that felt so damn good to finally release?

“If you have something to say, you had better spit it out now,” Altun snapped, trying to wrap anger around herself like armor in case he struck.

“You are the fiercest woman I’ve ever met, and I’m thrilled to have the honor of being in love with you,” Julian said sincerely.

Altun swayed, the confession knocking her back just as the magic drain hit her.

“You always know exactly what to say,” she murmured and started to fall. Julian caught her, picking her up in his arms and cradling her close.

“Go to sleep, love. I have you. You’re safe now,” he whispered.

Altun sobbed. For the first time in her life, she actually believed it.

They hadn't arrived back in Istanbul until two a.m. the following morning. When Altun still hadn't woken, Julian had taken her back to his apartment because God only knew what her wards would do to them if they tried to break into her house.

Kon had assured Julian again and again that the deep sleep was natural, and she could remain in that state for a good twelve hours.

"I've never seen someone spend that level of power before. Her body needs the rest. So leave her be," Kon had told him when he dropped them off. Julian had gently washed the soot from her face and hands and had placed her in one of his clean pajama shirts. She had slept the whole way through it, so he tucked her into bed and tried not to hover.

It had been another long, weird fourteen hours.

"I thought Izabella turning into a fireball was unreal, but that shit was wild. Be careful when she wakes up," Silas had advised.

Altun's power, magical and otherwise, had never worried Julian the way it did others. Her power was one of the things he was hopelessly drawn to. It was like standing next to the sun.

Julian was more worried about the effect Dee had on her. The repulsion on Altun's face had been so real, the trauma so raw that he hadn't known how to help her. Or if she would let him.

“She’s fine,” Julian had murmured to himself before checking she was still breathing. All he could do was wait, and he hated it. He had fallen asleep beside her, wishing she’d wake up and tell him off for something.

The next time Julian woke, he was alone in bed, and someone was moving about the lounge room. His phone already had a message from Athena, telling him to come to the warehouse when Altun woke up. He didn’t want to go anywhere except back to bed with his sorceress.

Altun was standing on tiptoes, the back of his shirt riding high on her thighs, and was using a black marker to draw sigils around his front door. In the past, if Julian had caught someone vandalizing his walls, he probably would have tossed them out of the nearest window.

“What are you up to, love?” he asked curiously.

“Wards. This place needs protection,” Altun replied without slowing her sketching.

“I didn’t want to risk getting into your place without you conscious.”

“I always thought you were too smart for your own good,” she said. She wasn’t looking at him, all her concentration on the magic.

“That’s why I’m going to make coffee and leave you to it,” he replied. He was touched that she would want to make wards for him at all.

Julian brewed coffee and tried to wake up. He was groggy from the day before and didn’t know how Altun was so productive.

A wave of warm heat rolled over the apartment, and he smiled. He was getting used to the feeling of her magic. He made her a coffee the way she liked, black and sweet as sin, and took it out for her.

“Should you be doing magic so soon after yesterday?” he asked.

Altun accepted the coffee from him. Her face was radiant, like she was lit from within. “Magic makes me feel better. The wards don’t take much effort for me at all. Besides, I can’t leave you unprotected when I go to Prague.”

Julian’s brows rose. “You think you are going to face Dee alone? That’s adorable, sorceress.”

“And what makes you think you are coming?” Altun asked, sitting down on his couch like she owned it. She looked genuinely surprised at the mere thought she wouldn’t be doing it alone.

“Not just me, love. You don’t get it. You’re adopted by the Edgeworths now. One of the family. The dreaded F word. You aren’t ever fighting a battle by yourself again,” Julian replied, sitting down on the ottoman in front of her. “And if your sister comes near you again, I’m going to fucking blow a hole in her head.”

Altun sipped her coffee. “You’ll have to beat me to it. What makes any of you think I’m going to allow you to leave Istanbul?”

“We already know where the meeting place is, love. Did you forget Leo had a tap on your phone? Dee texted an address while you were out. The kids know everything.”

Altun went pale. “They listened to our conversation.” Julian nodded, and she swallowed hard. “Did you?”

“No. I’ve been here with you.” Julian leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “I know she said something to upset you enough to throw up afterward. It’s up to you if you want to tell me about it, and the kids are too scared of you to ask any follow-up questions.”

Altun toyed with the cuff of the shirt she was wearing. She let out a tired sigh. “I have been abused a lot in my lifetime, and not just sexually. By acquaintances of my parents, before the members of the Aurora. My sister knew and did nothing about it when I was a girl, and then she made me feel like I was nothing but a whore for my magic, abilities, or body to be offered to the Aurora for whatever rituals they needed. She...

rubbed that in my face. I have spent many years getting over my past and the things that happened in it. I should have expected her to bring it up, to make me feel small and dirty. It hasn't worked. I know my power these days. I own my magic and my sexuality.”

Julian swallowed hard. This glorious, fucking strong woman was everything. “She knows about you now, all that you’ve achieved and accomplished as Altun. So why bother to rub it in your face?”

“Dee did it because I refused to give you up, and she thought it would drive a wedge between us. She thought you wouldn’t want me if you knew.”

“Then she fucked up.” Julian was so furious, he wanted to break something. His hands ached to commit violent things to everyone who had ever touched her without her consent. He tried to match her calm demeanor, but it was a struggle. “If Dee thought it would cause issues, make me think less of you or desire you less, it’s never going to happen. I’d be the biggest fucking hypocrite ever.”

Altun’s eyes darkened in fury, and his heart leaped that she cared enough to be so angry. The air electrified around her. “Who hurt you, Julian? Do they still draw breath?”

“I had a fucked-up father, who raped both me and my mother. It was how I ended up in the gangs. And no, he stopped breathing a long time ago.”

Julian had told no one about it, not even Silas. He needed her to know that he understood those feelings of shame, and that he knew that some days it hit harder than others.

“What did you do to him?” Altun asked.

“I broke both of his hands and put a bullet in his head. He had a gambling debt to the gang, so when they turned up and saw what happened, they got rid of the body and made me work off what my father had racked up.” Julian rubbed at the back of his neck. “With Silas’s help, I killed them and walked away. No one came after me about it because it wasn’t to take over. I just wanted to be free of the whole fucking mess. It

took friends like Silas to be done with it forever, so let us help, love. Don't shut us out."

Altun put her coffee down and placed her hands over his. Her face was cold and lovely in its ruthlessness. "I *will* kill Dee for everything she has done to me, and this time I will make sure that there is no way she can survive it. If you want to help, I won't say no, but I need to take Kon somewhere before we leave for Prague."

Relief washed through Julian. He really didn't want to fight her about it.

"Okay, but I get to double tap the bitch when you are done," Julian said.

Altun leaned forward and kissed him, feather soft. "It's a deal. Thank you for looking after me when I am vulnerable."

"I'll look after you anytime you need it, love," he replied, wrapping an arm around her.

"Why?" Altun seemed confused that he would bother.

"Because I'm invested in your wellbeing." Julian kissed the top of her head. "And I protect my investments. Also, I've never wanted anyone so fucking much every minute of the day."

Altun's eyes lit up with pure mischief. "Aren't you worried I'm using my sorcerous pussy magic on you?"

"Baby, I don't care if you are. I'll drop down and worship it whenever you want," Julian replied, and they both laughed between kisses.

Neither mentioned his confession of love in Corfu, and Julian didn't feel the need to bring it up. She knew how he felt, and he was happy to wait until she caught up.

Maybe he was under a spell, but he couldn't have cared less. Julian had never wanted something so bad in his life, and he was willing to play as dirty as he had to in order to keep her.

Altun texted details to Kon where to meet her. Her body was oddly light and limbs still tired from using so much magic the day before. She hadn't let loose like that in too long, and she was relieved she still had the ability to call down destruction when she really needed it.

Since Altun had learned her sister lived, she had been determined to kill Dee or kill them both trying. Now, Julian had come along to complicate the plan, her life, and her emotions. Julian had insisted on taking her home to make sure she wasn't in danger of passing out unexpectedly when she showered and changed her clothes.

It didn't matter that she was fine. Julian had made sure she was before leaving her to visit with Kon. It was a strange experience to have someone care about her wellbeing. Azra had cared in her way, but she had known that Altun could look after herself. Julian knew it too; he just ignored it for the most part. He seemed to like playing the part of protector...and Altun did to.

She had always been fiercely independent, learning not to rely on anyone for anything. She thought that having someone in her life permanently would suffocate her. Julian didn't feel like suffocation; he felt like comfort. Maybe that was a different kind of dangerous.

Altun knew they should stop before things got too serious, but she was selfish and wanted to keep him. She wanted to know what it was like to be loved in case she didn't survive

her encounter with Dee. She wanted to live through it to see if their budding relationship went anywhere.

As Altun watched Julian drive away, she sent a five-word prayer to Divine Sophia. *Please let me have him.*



KON WAS WAITING in the dark shade of the entrance into the Şişli Greek Orthodox Cemetery. Dressed in black, he blended in with the other mourners who were wandering around the cemetery like sad ravens.

“This seems like an odd place for a chat, Altun,” he said and checked her over. “How are you feeling after yesterday?”

“God, not you too. I’m perfectly well, just like I have always been without you men in my life making a fuss,” Altun huffed.

“Sorry for caring.” Kon held up his hands in surrender, but he was grinning too much to make the apology sincere. “What are we doing here?”

“Walk with me,” Altun said. He offered her his arm, and she took it. Despite everything, he turned out well. They walked under the trees, the cool breeze whistling through the tombstones and mausoleums.

“We have been looking into the location Dee sent through. It’s a townhouse in the Old Town,” Kon said.

“Let me guess, Bethlehem Square.”

“How did you know?”

“It’s where John Dee lived for a time. God, she’s nothing if not consistent,” Altun replied. “Have a look at old plans for the area.”

Kon nodded. “Iz and Leo are already on it. We’ll scout the whole square and anything underneath it before you go to meet with her.”

“I’m still uncomfortable with you all coming along. If Dee catches on—”

“She won’t know half of us are there. Athena and I will come with you. She will expect you to have bodyguards. And before you start to argue, Athena won’t be dissuaded.” Kon’s voice had dropped to a growl. “We listened to your call, and Athena recognized her voice. She’s been getting flashes of her memory back from the time before Silas found her. Apparently, Dee used to argue with Gadal about her. She thought she was an abomination and had no soul. I think there was more to it, but Athena’s not ready to talk about it. All I know is that she won’t let Dee get away.”

Altun felt nauseous. She knew exactly what the Aurora could do to a young girl whom they didn’t consider their equal.

“I understand,” she said because she knew there was no fighting them. “If Dee kills me, it comforts me to know you and Athena will finish her. If it all goes to hell, don’t let the Aurora take you two alive. They will unleash such horrors on you both.”

“We know. She’s never going to be put in a cage again, Altun. You can believe that.”

They stopped in front of a large mausoleum. It was decorated with a mosaic of Sophia on one side and Constantine and Helena on the other. Altun unlocked the red and gold painted door. Kon followed her into the cool darkness. Altun lit some incense and candles, and the chamber revealed a large sarcophagus.

The walls were painted with Gnostic saints, as well as Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, and Pythagoras. Above them, looking down from a celestial ceiling covered in stars, was Sophia, the Queen of Heaven.

“Altun? What is this place?” Kon asked in a whisper.

“The names on the front of the tomb are not theirs. I couldn’t risk that, but the bones inside belong to your parents,” Altun said, her voice shaking a little. She had wanted to bring

him there for so long. “After I was stabbed and half drowned, I had to stay as a nameless woman in the hospital. Once I finally got out, I tracked down what had happened to your parents’ bodies. No one could find any surviving relatives, so they had been placed in pauper’s graves. I had them moved here.”

“Why are you showing me now?” Kon asked, his face suddenly holding traces of the little boy she had loved so dearly.

“If Dee kills me, I want you to know where to find them. I’m sorry I didn’t show you earlier. I’m sorry for a lot of things,” Altun said and swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “I should have protected you better. I should have told you who I was from the beginning so you weren’t so alone. Instead, I thought I was protecting you by hiding who I was. I tried to make you strong in the only way I knew how.”

Kon let out a deep sigh. “I know why you didn’t tell me, but if you had, I never would’ve worked for Liddell and met Athena. I felt alone in the world, but you were too. Maybe it is time that we both changed that.” He took Altun’s hand, and they stood in silence for a long time.

“What can I do to make it up to you?” she asked finally.

“Teach me. Be my auntie again and my mentor. There’s no one but you that I can trust to do it right, and I honestly don’t know how I can help Athena with her abilities or Izabella with hers either,” Kon admitted, raking his hands through his dark hair. “I have these books and no idea where to start.”

Altun smiled. “I can show you all, but don’t expect me to be an easy teacher.”

Kon bit back a laugh. “Don’t expect Athena or I to be easy students. Iz will be the nicest of us.”

“I have no doubt. All we need to do is survive Dee first, and then I can show you whatever you like,” Altun replied.

Kon sobered. “Serapis has to die too.”

“That will be a harder task than you can ever imagine. He might let the Aurora die out with the other three gone and leave us alone.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Altun’s stomach clenched. “I want to. He’s not like the others. He’s not like anyone.”

“Neither are Athena and I. She won’t be able to stop until they are dead, or she dies trying. I owe it to my parents to help, and most of all, I owe it to her. She’s a part of me, and I need her to feel like it’s over,” Kon replied.

“Then I’ll help in any way that I can,” Altun said, knowing that she wouldn’t abandon them to fight on their own.

Kon put his arm around her shoulders. “Come back to the warehouse with me, *Hala*. You need to eat, and we all need to make a plan.”

Altun had a horrible lump in her throat. “You used to call me Auntie like that when you were a boy.”

“I know. I remembered.” Kon’s smile was achingly sweet. “And if I don’t bring you home, Julian will pitch a fit and hunt you down.”

“The man is persistent, I’ll give him that,” Altun said with a smirk.

Kon cocked his head. “Do you love him?”

“I think I do,” she admitted, the lump back in her throat. “It is hard for people like us to find someone that understands us truly. Julian and I are a lot alike. He...he doesn’t look away when I’m the monster. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“It really does. Aren’t we lucky we had the Edgeworths crash into our lives?” Kon replied, and they stepped out of the mausoleum.

“We *are* lucky, Kon. Now we have to make sure we keep them alive,” Altun said. She locked the door, and whispered a prayer to Azra and Eren, *Don’t worry, I have him now*.

Kon let out a bark of laughter. “That’s one thing you need to learn about the Edgeworths, Altun. They keep *us* alive, not the other way around.”

Altun had taken one step into the warehouse when Athena popped out of nowhere and was suddenly in her face.

“Hey, so I’m going to kill your sister. I hope you don’t mind,” she said, all but bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“You will have to get in line, little wolf,” Altun replied. She had never seen Athena so openly agitated before. “Kon told me some of your memories returned.”

“They did, and your sister is a bitch.”

Altun blew out a breath. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“She once tried to use magic to kill me, and it didn’t work,” Athena replied, then the words didn’t stop coming out of her. “Gadal was furious, and he came in with another man to stop her. Gadal was having a meltdown, but when the other man saw none of her power was having any effect on me, he laughed and laughed until she ran away crying.”

“Do you know who the other man was?” Altun asked, half dreading the answer.

Athena gnawed on her lip. “I think it was Serapis. He was also one of the people in the room in St. Petersburg when Gadal tried to use me like a fucked-up puppet.”

“What else do you remember about him?” Altun pressed. She knew Athena could be volatile and that the memories triggered her whenever they occurred. She needed to talk them

out to someone who understood the significance of what she was saying. Altun should have tried to rescue her too. It didn't matter that she knew it had been impossible at the time. Guilt still wracked her.

“Black hair and beard with white in it. Brown skin. He felt...ancient. I don't really know how to explain it better than that,” Athena said. “He was like the Wizard of Oz. The others all seemed to be full of bluster, and he was just calmly watching everything in the background. He looked kind of bored, to be honest, like a parent watching kids he can't decide whether or not to kill.”

Exactly like the god he so desperately wants to be. Altun didn't voice the thought. It would serve no purpose to distract them. They needed to get Dee first.

“That is definitely Serapis. He's the most cunning and dangerous of them all,” she replied instead. She needed to stop talking about Serapis, as if speaking his name could make him focus on them. “Where are we on the plans for the house in Prague?”

“This way, Iz and Leo have been printing stuff,” Athena said, waving her over to where the walls were covered in everything they knew about the Aurora. Iz and Leo were fighting with a printer to make it spit out A3 sheets of paper. Kon had joined Silas and Dante in the kitchen. Her eyes couldn't find...

“Julian's in the back with all of Liddell's crap,” Athena said before she could ask. “Go see him. I'll help these two fix the printer.” She walked over and banged on the top of it. Iz and Leo both squawked at her to stop. Altun shook her head and went to find the one person who actually made any sense to her.

Julian was leaning down inside a wooden crate, his ass clad in tight jeans. Altun's mouth watered. She wanted to grab that ass and squeeze.

Julian looked great in a suit, but there was something about him in a tight T-shirt and jeans that made her go feral. Maybe because it was a casual side he didn't show the world.

“Stop looking at my ass,” Julian said, straightening up. He was holding a small onyx statue of Kali.

“I can’t help it when it’s sticking up in the air like that,” she replied with a grin. “Find anything good down there?”

Julian passed her the statue. “A few things. I swear the man was a crow of a collector. There’s nothing really cohesive about it, except that it centers on gods.”

“Liddell wasn’t bound to any one religion. He didn’t care *what* he was collecting as long as it was divine and it gave him what he wanted,” Altun replied. It was a lovely piece, and with a quick read of it, she knew exactly what temple they had stolen it from. *The bastard.*

Julian frowned. “And what was that?”

“What all of the Aurora wants. Power and immortality at any price.”

“Thought you had that one sorted, Miss one hundred and change,” Julian teased.

“It’s not permanent. It slowed down the aging process, nothing more.”

“Can it be removed?”

Altun thought about it. “Not without great difficulty, and I’m not so sure of the results. All the aging might hit me at once.”

“I suppose you will have to stay lovely and beautiful forever while I get old and decrepit,” Julian replied.

Altun fluttered her lashes at him. “Lucky I like older men.”

Julian came to stand in front of her and ran his thumb over her lip. “Oh yeah? You want to call me Daddy, baby?”

Altun chuckled. “You have to push your luck, don’t you?”

“Always.” Julian leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. “I want you to know something very important.”

“And what’s that?” Altun asked, her heart skipping erratically at the violent look in his eyes.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard tonight that you’re not going to be able to walk straight tomorrow.”

“Hmm, is that so?” Altun said. Heat was already licking at her veins at the promising growl in his voice. “Tell me more.”

Julian kissed her and flicked his tongue into her mouth. “I’m going to own every part of you, fill you with my come and make you scream until every wall you have built between us is gone. I’m not going to stop fucking you until you finally believe you belong to me.”

Altun dragged him down and deepened their dirty kiss, her hands burying into his hair. Her leg was wrapping around him when a loud crunching sound snapped her out of her lust fueled haze. She looked up and saw Dante leaning against the door, eating from a bag of chips.

“Just act like I’m not here,” he said cheekily and ate another chip.

Julian looked like he was about to explode. He wrangled all of that dark desire away and whispered, “To be continued.”

“Aw, come on, it was just getting good,” Dante complained.

“There’re some things a pup like you is too young to see,” Altun said condescendingly.

Julian grinned. “Did you want something, Dante?”

“The nerds finally got the printer working, and they have blueprints of the house for you to have a look at,” he replied.

Everyone had assembled on the couches in front of the corkboards laden with information. The blueprints of the townhouse were pinned up with colorful lines all over it.

Julian slipped into an armchair and patted his knee. “Got your seat right here, love.”

Never one to have her bluff called, Altun sat down in his lap. Everyone else tried their best to pretend that it wasn’t happening, which amused the hell out of Altun.

“What have you found, busy bees?” Altun asked.

Izabella looked at Silas, who shrugged. “What? No arguments? You’re going to accept that we are coming?”

“I was outvoted,” Altun replied. She pulled out a thin cigar, and Julian lit it for her. “You’re all smart enough to know what you’re walking into and the risks involved. Dee is my kill. That’s my only rule. If she takes me down, Athena has her next. Julian gets her collection, but anything magical goes to Kon.”

Julian flexed underneath her, his arm curling around her waist. “Please stop talking like you’re going to die.”

“We are here to make a plan, aren’t we? Then we have to add in all outcomes. That includes if Dee kills me.”

“She’s right,” Silas said, and Julian glared at him. “Don’t pout, Burbank. You know how this goes.”

Altun could see the argument brewing, so she turned to Leo. “Tell me about the house plans.”

“The house’s foundations are the oldest part of it. The rest of it has been renovated in the last fifty years,” Leo replied, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Title deeds on the house on either side are owned by two shell corporations, both on my list, as Aurora owned.”

“Is anyone living in them?” Silas asked.

“Not that is listed and not that we can determine from here. Maybe once we are in the city, we can check for ourselves.”

Altun stared at the blueprints. “Dee will have cameras all around the square, including the church. Can you hack into them?”

“From here, it would take too long. When we are on the ground, it should take less than twenty minutes,” Izabella said.

“Depends on the system,” Leo countered, and they fell into an argument full of computer jargon.

Julian was frowning at the maps, his mind ticking over.

“What is it?” Altun asked.

“I want to know what’s underneath the house and the square,” Julian said, and the argument stopped. “It’s one of the oldest parts of Prague. Not only that, but a famous alchemist lived in it, and perhaps others after him. You said that the ground floors are all original, right?”

Leo nodded. “Yes, but what does that—”

“Speculum Alchemiae,” Altun said. She took Julian’s face in his hands and kissed him. “God, you’re clever.”

“Of course there is a possibility of it…” Kon said, moving to the maps to stare at them.

“Someone please explain for the normal people?” Dante asked.

“Speculum Alchemiae,” Julian repeated. “In 2002, Prague had a massive flood. In the cleanup afterward, a house was found in the Jewish Quarter that had a secret alchemy lab underneath it, dating back to the 1500’s. At that time, the city was a hot spot of occult activity, alchemy, and *the dark arts*. This lab became known as the Speculum Alchemiae, and it’s now a museum.”

“And this is relevant, why exactly?” Athena asked.

“Because, Cubbie, there was also an underground network of tunnels leading to places like the palace and barracks, but most importantly, it was underneath the Old Town Hall. It’s in the same district as Bethlehem Square,” Julian replied. He glanced over at Silas. “I mean, if those tunnels exist, there are bound to be more, right?”

Silas rubbed at his stubble. “Doesn’t hurt to look. Dee had that secret inner room in Corfu. Maybe she didn’t touch the lower floors of the house because she has something similar underneath.”

“Job for you, boy wonder,” Dante teased Leo. “Better dig deeper. Literally.”

“You’re hilarious,” Leo replied drolly.

“And ridiculously handsome. In case you need the reminder,” Dante said and fluttered his lashes. Leo told him to

go fuck himself in Italian and went back to his laptop.

“I don’t know about this square,” Silas said, looking at the printout of the city map. “The way it’s shaped, the nearness of the other buildings... Dee would have picked it for a reason. It feels like a trap.”

“Then we put a trap around the trap,” Kon replied. He took a red marker and started putting red dots on it. “If I was Dee, or someone in charge of her security, I would put lookouts in these places. They make the most sense for a trap.”

“We need to take out any of her guys and replace them,” Athena said, her eyes distant as she tossed a small knife in the air and caught it. “That way, if she checks, she’s still going to see people.”

Silas shook his head. “We don’t have a big enough team, and I don’t want to bring anyone else in. You, Kon, and Altun are going into the house. That means Julian, Iz, Dante, Leo, and I are on the outside.”

“If we get into their security camera feed, we can film it and patch it in. I’ve done it before,” Leo said vaguely. “It worked well, and Dee won’t be hovering over monitors when Altun is there. We identify where she has people tomorrow in the day. As soon as Altun enters the house, we take over their security and take out her guards. It’ll give you three a safe exit to retreat, if nothing else.”

Altun chuckled. “Well, well, there’s a little Colleoni assassin left in you after all, Leonardo.”

“It’s a good idea if it works. You need to get into those systems before we leave for Prague,” Silas said.

Izabella nodded. “Divide and conquer. Leo can do the cameras. I’ll dig for historical records mentioning tunnels under the square. Maybe we will get lucky.”

Altun had a soft feeling spreading through her as she listened to them argue and plan.

“You okay, love?” Julian asked.

“Yes, it’s only...thank you, everyone. For helping. I’ve never worked with a team before,” she managed to get out with a genuine smile.

“Well, we can’t have you going in alone and dying,” Athena said with a wink. “You are Kon’s auntie. That means you’re family. We protect our family.”

“And we kill anyone who threatens us,” Kon added, the Basti back in his eyes.

Julian planted a kiss on the back of her neck. “Don’t worry, sorceress. You’ll get used to it.”

That wasn’t Altun’s concern at all. The danger *was* getting used to it. She’d had a family with Azra and Eren, and they had been taken from her.

Never again, she told herself and forced steel into her spine. The Aurora had taken enough from her, and now she was going to return the favor.

At sunset, Altun bowed out of the chaos of the warehouse. She could only handle so much noise and people, and she'd had her fill of both.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner?” Kon asked.

Altun kissed him on the cheek. “I'll be fine. I need to go and get my head on straight for tomorrow night. There's magic I need to build up and spells I need to look over.”

Kon nodded and then gave Julian a hard look. “Make sure she eats.”

“I will,” Julian replied.

Outside, Altun waited while Julian opened her car door for her. “You two are as bad as each other. I'm quite capable of looking after myself. God knows I've had to do it my entire life.”

“Yes, but now you don't have to do it alone, and that's the point,” Julian replied with infuriating calm.

They drove through the chaotic traffic, crossing the Bosphorus and into the winding streets around the Galata Tower. Julian parked the car in front of her townhouse.

“Do you want company, or would you prefer to be alone to study tonight?” he asked.

“I'll study, but I don't want to be alone. I'll feel better if you're...if you're with me under my wards. I don't think Dee

will attack me tonight, but I won't sleep if you're not safe," Altun replied, allowing herself to be vulnerable. She wouldn't do it for anyone else. She couldn't risk the damage to her hard-won reputation.

Julian squeezed her hand, like he knew every thought going through her head. "I'm happy to stay. Let me go home and grab some things so we can leave straight to Prague tomorrow."

Altun nodded and went to get out of the car. Julian grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

"You better not be leaving without kissing me goodbye," he growled.

"Who would have thought you were such a romantic fool under all of your badass reputation?" she laughed.

"Not me, and yet here we are." Julian kissed her until she was breathless and let her go just as quickly. "Now you can leave."

"Now that I have your permission. You have thirty minutes to be back here, or I won't let you inside," Altun huffed, but they both knew it was for show.

Like always, Altun felt safer and calmer as soon as she was inside her house, a robe on and her feet bare. She mixed up an herbal tea that tasted terrible but would restore her magic quicker than sleep or food.

She needed to be at her best because she didn't know what Marina had actually learned in the past twenty years. Altun could only hope that she had stayed focused on contacting celestial beings and hadn't learned any combat magic, but it seemed unlikely. Dee had always wielded her words like weapons, her tongue sharper than any blade.

"Don't let her in," Altun murmured to herself. She gripped the marble counter in the kitchen and took deep breaths. She hadn't been ready for Dee's verbal attack in Corfu, no matter how much she had expected it. All the years apart had made her forget the way her sister liked to tear pieces off her.

Julian doesn't care about what happened in the past and neither should you.

Altun put in a delivery order with *Theodora's* and gathered the books she wanted to check through that evening.

John Dee's book was still waiting for her, and she could feel it in the back of her mind. Its magic and its secrets would have to wait. She needed to make a suitable copy of it; she just needed to find the right mirroring spell.

Altun was sitting on the rug in her lounge room, the books fanned out around her when Julian arrived. She smiled the second she felt her wards warn her of his return. She couldn't wait to strip that deliciously tight shirt off him and lick his... She shut the thought down. *Study first, then sex.*

"How's it going in here?" he asked. He stroked her hair. "It looks like you've been busy."

"I've lost a spell, but I know it's here somewhere." Altun saw the leather overnight bag by the door and a jolt of excitement pulsed through her. She liked the idea of having him stay whenever she felt like it.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I have food coming." Altun picked up another book. "I couldn't bother cooking."

"You can cook?" he asked, raising a brow.

"Don't look so surprised."

"I'm not surprised, just jealous because you seem to be able to do everything," he replied. He took out his laptop and sat down on the couch opposite her.

"I'm over a hundred years old. I've had time to get good at things. Except knowing which damn book has the spell I need," she muttered and went back to it. She eventually found it and moved onto refreshing her memory on battle magic. She would be ready for everything, including dropping the entire house on Dee's head like the wicked witch she was.

At some point, Julian poured them both drinks and went to get their food from the front gate. They ended up eating where

they were, both engrossed in what they were working on.

“What do you think of this? It’s an altar piece that looks almost Byzantine. Apparently, they found it in Lake Svetloyar,” Julian said, showing her his screen.

“Let me guess, they are claiming it was from Kitezh,” Altun said, taking his laptop for a closer look.

“Yes, how did you know?” Julian was smiling, like he usually did when she impressed him unexpectedly.

“Anything found in that region, people try to tie back to the city, which was mysteriously lost underneath the water to protect it from Batu Khan and the Golden Horde.”

It looked like a large square piece of bronze that was definitely showing the signs of having been at the bottom of the lake for centuries. There were figures carved into it that looked like ikons. Some were saints and others had wings.

“Hmm, it was part of a tryptic at some point. You see those marks on the side? That’s where they were joined. I’d ask where the other two pieces are first. My guess is they are selling it off in parts to make more money out of it,” Altun said and gave it another look. “I could verify it for you if I could touch it. If it *is* from Kitezh, I’ll know.”

Julian kissed her. “Thank you, sorceress. I’ll take you up on that.”

Altun beamed, unable to stop it. She liked they could work in the same space without annoying each other. It all felt too easy.

You could have this whenever you like. The thought hit her in a tender spot in her heart. She was suddenly torn between wanting it desperately and feeling like she didn’t deserve it.

She took a sip of her whiskey and tried to calm her racing thoughts. Julian frowned over the top of his screen. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, and that’s what bothers me,” Altun admitted.

Julian closed his laptop. “Explain it to me, love.”

“This feels too good. I don’t like people in my space, and you seem to just...” Altun struggled to find the right words.

“Fit?” Julian guessed, and she nodded. “I know what you mean. I’ve always been the same. The fact I don’t feel cramped by being around tells me what we have is the real deal.”

“You think so?” Altun asked. She had no experience with the feeling.

“I know it. Not only can we sit like this and not want to strangle each other, but I’m dying to rip that robe off and ravish you. It’s a killer combination,” Julian replied with a grin that promised her every dark and filthy thing she always imagined.

“Great minds think alike. I’m just worried about the future.”

Julian rested his ankle against his knee, so calm and casual that she almost resented it. “What about our future?”

“I haven’t thought past killing Dee. I don’t know what I’ll do without my revenge.”

“Yes, you do. You’ve been doing it for years,” Julian argued. “You’re a goddamn phoenix of a woman, Altun. Kill the past for good, burn it to ashes, and let yourself live for something else. You’ve got three kids to train up, a man who adores you, and a city to keep an eye on. There’s plenty to live for.”

Altun pushed his leg down, and she gently moved between them. “That habit you have of always saying the right thing when I’m upset is very annoying, Julian Richard Burbank.”

“Ohhh full name. I’m in trouble,” he mocked.

“In more ways than you can possible fathom,” Altun said and palmed his cock through his jeans. Julian leaned forward and nipped at her lips.

“Get up here,” he growled and dragged her up into his lap. Altun straddled him, the roughness of his jeans rubbing against the soft lace of her panties. “I hope you’re done

studying for the evening because if I don't fuck you soon, I think I might cry."

"Sounds sexy," Altun purred, grinding herself against him. "I bet your tears taste so sweet."

"Yup, that does it." Julian stood up and placed her on her feet. "Come willingly or you're going over my shoulder."

Altun gave him a haughty look and opened her mouth to sass him. She didn't get the chance before she was over his shoulder, and they were heading up the stairs.

"If you think this neanderthal act is going to work on me, you're mistaken," she complained. Julian's hand went inside of her gown and under the back of her panties. His fingers explored her roughly, making Altun gasp.

"It's working better than you think, sorceress. This pussy is already wet and begging to be fucked," he said and tossed her down on the bed. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it to the other side of the room. "I hope you remember what I told you today."

Altun feigned ignorance. "Hmm, you talk a lot. Can you be more specific?"

"I'm going to get specific alright." Julian tugged the tie on her robe and pulled the sides back. The gleam in his eye turned positively feral. "In case you need the warning, I'm going to ruin you tonight. Over and over again, until I'm stamped deep into your skin and soul."

Altun shivered in anticipation. Only he could say something so possessive to her and have her not want to rip him apart. She wanted to belong to him more than she wanted to belong to anyone.

"You better get to it because you have your work cut out for you," Altun said. She couldn't help but goad him when he was already worked up. "I'm still not going to call you Daddy."

"By the time I'm done with you, you are going to call me whatever I ask you to," Julian replied. He bent down and grabbed the top of her panties with his teeth and pulled them

down her thighs. He threw them over his shoulder and spread her legs wide.

“Fucking glistening and gorgeous,” he said, almost moaning as he stared at her.

“Compare it to some kind of fruit, and we are done,” Altun warned him.

“Love, anyone that compares pussy to fruit clearly doesn’t get enough pussy.” Julian ran his hands over her bare thighs. “Do you have any objection to me plundering every sweet hole in your body?”

Altun let out an involuntary groan. His dirty mouth got her every time. “None whatsoever. My only objection is you not getting on with it.”

Julian responded by getting to his knees and putting his mouth on her. Altun’s hands gripped his hair, trying to hang onto something as his lips and tongue drove her insane. He sucked on her clit until her back arched before fucking her with his tongue.

Altun was panting, pleasure drenching her. Would it always be this way between them? Julian circled her clit with his thumb, and his mouth moved down to rim her.

“Fucking hell,” she groaned, releasing his hair so she could cling to the sheets. Pressure was building until she couldn’t take it anymore. The next time his tongue thrust inside of her, she came in a strangled cry.

“That’s what I need to hear,” Julian chuckled and rubbed his cock through the wetness coming out of her. Altun gripped his hips, pulling him inside of her, her hips rising to meet his in an effort to get him in quicker.

Julian kissed her roughly. “I love how good you taste. I love how perfect and tight your body is around me. Do you like me inside of you? Do I feel good?”

“Fuck, yes. So good,” she stammered, her brain so lust dazed that she was losing the ability to speak properly. Julian didn’t need more encouragement. He ground his hips in a slow circle before pulling out of her.

“What? Don’t stop...” Altun complained.

Julian only laughed softly, pushing her down and moving further up her body. He ran his wet tip over her lips. “I want to watch you suck your come off my cock, sorceress. Don’t panic, I’m still going to fuck you, but I’ll be doing it when I’m good and ready.”

Altun groaned, wanting to be mad but too turned on. Instead, she obeyed, opening her mouth and sucking him down.

“Fuck. That’s it, suck me clean,” Julian said, his voice cracking. She loved seeing him so undone, loved the taste and weight of him on her tongue. Julian grabbed the bed above her head and fucked her mouth in a steady rhythm. Altun gripped his ass, her nails digging into the perfectly muscled flesh.

“I just want to come down this perfect throat of yours,” he said through gritted teeth. He swore, pulled himself free, and lay down on the bed beside her. “Get on my dick and be quick about it.”

Altun obeyed and climbed on top of him. She sank herself down onto his wet dick. Julian cupped her breasts, squeezing them and driving her mad as she rode him. He pulled her down to kiss her, his tongue tangling with hers and sucking down every desperate sound she made. His hands slid down her back to grab her ass and pull her down on him harder.

Altun bit into his shoulder, smothering her sounds as she came again. He said he was going to fuck her senseless, and she believed it. She couldn’t stop, couldn’t get enough of the bliss of being joined with him and having their bodies moving together.

Altun was still fucking herself down on him when his fingers ran over where they were joined, gathering some of the slickness. He moved them to tease her ass, and she almost came again.

Julian gave her a dirty kiss, smothering the whimpers of bliss that were rolling out of her. She was drunk on him, his

taste and heat, the feel of him filling her with his cock while he gently worked her open.

“Fuck, Altun, you make it so hard not to fill you with come,” Julian growled, his teeth nipping at her lips. “Are you going to come for me one more time like a good little sorceress before I fuck this sweet ass of yours?”

Altun let out a strangled sound, his words triggering her, making her fuck back eagerly on his cock and the fingers that he was thrusting inside of her. Sweat soaked their skin, their scents mingling. Altun wanted him to know she was claiming him as much as he was claiming her.

“You are all mine,” she gasped. Her vision went dark around the edges, and blood roared in her ears. Her pussy gripped him tight, pulsing as she came hard, a scream tearing from her throat.

Julian was swearing a litany of curses that she could barely make out through her lust fueled haze.

“We aren’t done yet,” he growled. He lifted her off him and flipped her onto her stomach before pulling her hips up. “I need all of you. I need you to know who you belong to.” Altun gasped as the head of his cock pressed against her ass, gently thrusting past the tight ring of muscle.

“Jesus fucking fuck,” he gasped incoherently. Altun was gripping the sheets, completely undone by pleasure as he worked his way inside of her.

“You still with me, baby?” Julian asked, brushing the damp hair from her face.

“Yes, don’t stop, please,” she moaned.

Julian kissed her tenderly. “I knew I could get you to beg for me.”

“Fuck you,” she laughed and then groaned when he moved. Julian gripped her hips, his hands shaking as he fucked into her.

Altun couldn’t move, and nothing could have made her. She was coming again with a guttural cry. Julian was panting

above her. His powerful body shone with sweat as he dominated her completely. Altun surrendered to it, finally letting go of the last of her defenses. With him, there would never be any.

Julian's pants turned into a cry, his hands and body crushing her as he came inside of her. He licked the sweat off the back of her neck before kissing her shoulders and spine.

"Tell me you belong to me," he whispered in her ear, his voice like darkness and dreams.

Tears welled in Altun's eyes as she admitted, "Yes, I belong to you."

Julian's body trembled, and he let out a shaky breath, like he needed her to say it. He kissed her cheek. "I love you so fucking much, and I'm going to take such good care of you in every way you need me to. I promise I'm going to make up for every hurt that has ever been dealt to you."

"I love you too," Altun admitted in barely a whisper. "I might not know how to show it sometimes, and I'll probably unknowingly hurt you just by being me, but I do love you."

"That's enough for me." Julian tilted her head to the side. "*You* are always going to be enough for me." He kissed her slow and steady, not breaking the connection as he slid free from her and rolled onto his side. He brushed his fingers through her hair, staring at her. "God, you are so beautiful."

Altun's cheeks heated. "I'm covered in come and a total mess."

"Yes, and I did the messing," he said cheekily.

"You can do the cleaning too because you are so proud of yourself."

Julian laughed softly. "It would be my pleasure to take care of you, sorceress. I thought I already made that clear."

This time when he picked her up and carried her to the bathroom, Altun didn't voice a single complaint.

It had been five years since Julian had visited Prague. He would've liked nothing more than to have a leisurely week with Altun in some historic five-star luxury hotel with lots of sightseeing in the day and mind-blowing sex whenever they felt like it.

Altun had finally dropped her guard with him, and it was a glorious thing to see. He didn't know if he deserved it, but he was going to work like hell to make sure he could keep her happy for as long as she would let him.

Instead of worshipping his beautiful sorceress, Julian was walking the streets around Old Town with Silas, mapping the area for escape routes and hunting any signs of anyone in Dee's employment.

Kon, Athena, and Altun were holed up in the hotel, making plans and probably doing magic. Dante and Leo were checking rooftops for spotters and cameras. They were setting up a few of their own and sending the information back to Izabella, who was calibrating everything.

"You're so worked up about tonight, you're giving me anxiety," Silas complained. "Altun is better equipped to deal with the Aurora than we are."

"I can't help it. I care about her, Silas. I don't want her cunt of a sister to take one more damn thing from her," Julian snapped. He stopped walking and ran his hands through his hair. He wouldn't let Dee kill Altun or take her back to the

Aurora. She deserved to be free of the damn bastards once and for all.

Julian hadn't realized that he'd spoken out loud until Silas put an arm around his shoulders and brought him in for a hug.

"Jules, she's going to be okay. Did you not see what she did to that house in Corfu? What do you think she could do to a body? The woman is elemental when she's mad," Silas said, giving his back a rub and making Julian's inner child want to sob. "She's got too much to live for and won't go down without a fight. For fuck's sake, Dee stabbed her and threw her into the Bosphorus, and she managed to not only survive, but become the unspoken boss of Istanbul."

"I know. I'm still uneasy about the whole thing. You were right. This whole thing feels like a trap, and we are going to walk right into it," Julian replied. He gave Silas one last squeeze and let him go. "Thanks. I haven't given a shit about anyone like this before, and I don't know how to take it."

"I know. Don't worry, bestie, we've been in worse scrapes than this," Silas said with a smile. "Let's check if we can find the entrance to these tunnels."

"Nothing like climbing around in dark tunnels, probably filled with ancient shit to make you re-prioritize."

Silas smacked him on the back. "That's the spirit."

Their speculation about extra tunnels had yielded some interesting research. Leo had run a program to pull up any ancient blueprints of sewer systems and tunnels.

Julian had let them explain the maps and the possible entrances or exits to Silas. He would let the professionals deal with that; he was only a tag along. Sure, he could handle himself in a fight, but for the first time, he felt strangely useless. He had no magic and no skills like the others.

You don't need to do anything except watch Altun's back, he reminded himself. Well, in the capacity that he could. She would go into the house with Kon and Athena, leaving the rest to watch, wait, and be ready.

They were all hoping that Dee didn't know who Athena and Kon were. Julian had his doubts about that hope, especially if Gadai had known who they were. It didn't matter either way because if Dee tried to capture them, it wouldn't be to kill them, but to present them to Serapis. Their lost alchemical children returned safely to the fold.

God help them if they do try to lock Kon and Athena up.
The pair of them would make the Aurora regret it in a hurry.

Julian adjusted the cap he was wearing to better shield his face and followed Silas through the square and down one of the streets.

The part of the Old Town they were in was ridiculously picturesque, with cream-colored buildings and terracotta tile roofs. It was like walking around a pretty cake.

Five minutes later, they came to the National Awakening Park. Julian took a photo of the neo-gothic monument and sent it to Altun. It looked like it had been ripped off a church or a castle.

How much do you think I could get for it? Julian waited as three dots began to dance.

Why? Are you finally going to decorate your boring apartment?

Julian's grin widened. **Thought you might want something pretty for your backyard.**

Perhaps I need to knock down the building I own next door and make room.

It didn't surprise Julian at all that Altun owned the townhouse next to hers. She wouldn't want any nosey neighbors looking into her gardens for a start.

"Hey, you want to stop flirting and pay attention to the task at hand?" Silas asked.

"I was playing tourist like we are meant to be," Julian replied.

They crossed over from the park to the tree-lined path that ran along the Vltava River. Real tourists were taking selfies

and pictures of the scenic views of the city across the river. Silas was looking for a way down.

“Over there,” Julian said, pointing to a blue and white sign advertising Prague Boats and timetables. They went down the set of stairs to the jetty that stretched into the water.

There was a small patch of land with a few trees along the Smetana Embankment. They walked to the very edge where they could look towards Legion Bridge.

“There it is,” Silas pointed. A few meters along the stone fence was an archway sitting a little above the waterline. “Izabella said that is the only way in from this part of the Old Town.”

“Unless they have a boat waiting for them, I don’t see how it would be a very good escape route. Especially in winter,” Julian pointed out. The only way to get up there was to get wet and climb, and the only way down was to jump into the freezing Vltava.

“They have magic, Jules. For all we know, Dee could fly in and out on a fucking broom,” Silas replied. He chewed on his lip and stared at the archway thoughtfully. “We found it, and that’s the important thing. We might not be able to cover it the whole time, but we can keep an eye on it.”

Silas pulled out a small camera from his pocket and hid it in some grass with a rock on top of it. He pulled his phone from his pocket and called Izabella. The change in his expression was instant, his green eyes going soft.

“Hey. Yeah, we are in position. Is this spot okay?” he asked. He wriggled the camera. “Better or worse? Good. It’s going to be freezing down here tonight, so let’s hope we don’t need it. Okay, I’ll be back soon. Love you.” He hung up and caught Julian trying not to laugh. “Shut up, Burbank.”

“It’s very cute, really,” Julian replied and dodged the rock Silas threw at him.

“You act like you’re above it, but I saw you yesterday when Altun sat in your lap. It was like all your Christmases had come at once,” Silas said.

Julian grinned. “I don’t know about Christmas, but I sure was coming last night. And this morning.”

“I don’t want to know. Like at all. *Ever*. I’m scared enough of Altun to want to know what fucked-up kinky shit you two are into,” Silas complained. They headed back to the stairs and up onto the street. “Let’s hope Dante and Leo have found what they are looking for. The more eyes we can get on that house, the better.”

Disguised as the building maintenance team, Dante and Leo traversed the tops of the buildings around Bethlehem Square. Leo had barely said a word to him in days, and Dante's politeness was starting to run out.

Don't think about him naked, don't think about him naked. It was a chant that Dante was also getting sick of because it didn't fucking work. Leo was too distractingly hot, no matter what he was doing.

Right now, wearing dark blue overalls with the top half tied around his waist and showing off his lean body in a black T-shirt, Leo made Dante want to throw himself off the side of the building.

"Stop staring at me," Leo said as he adjusted another small camera to point toward Dee's townhouse.

"Easier said than done. You are very fetching in overalls."

Leo straightened and gave him a wary look. "Complimenting me won't get me in your bed again."

"I wasn't trying to get you in my bed. You were pretty fucking clear that it would only be a one-off thing," Dante said, frustration leaking into his voice. "Although you never said why."

"Is it really the time to talk about this?" Leo asked. He picked up his workbag that had roofing tools sticking out of it to make it look like they were checking tiles.

“You mean because you’ve been so chatty since it happened? If anyone has anything to be ashamed about that night, it’s me. I don’t know why you did it, if you were going to stop talking to me altogether afterward,” Dante said.

He knew he probably shouldn’t push it, but what did it matter? Leo was already not speaking to him, so he didn’t know how it would make it worse.

“We’ve had a little more to worry about than what’s going on with us,” Leo retorted.

They had reached another vantage point where a sniper could sit. Dante had been a sniper, so he had marked the places. Leo had added a few more, which told Dante a lot about Leo’s hidden skill set.

“There’s nothing going on with us. You’ve been clear about it.”

Leo raised a brow. “Do you regret it?”

“No! I regret you ignoring me for days after it. We are friends who slept together, but that shouldn’t affect us still *being* friends,” Dante tried to argue, getting more flustered by the second.

“Friends. Yes. Okay,” Leo said vacantly, setting up another camera. It made Dante want to pull his hair out.

He knew Leo was hiding things from his past. That was a given. What Dante didn’t understand was Leo’s breathless confession. *Maybe if I fuck you hard enough, this constant hunger will leave me. I can go back to being numb again instead of wanting all the impossible things you represent.*

It might have been the heat of the moment. Leo had lapsed back into Italian, and Dante could only assume it was because Leo didn’t think he would understand him.

“Don’t give me that, Leo. I might like to be a sub occasionally, but that doesn’t mean I will take your shitty attitude when your clothes are on,” Dante growled. He was so done.

“They were your words, Dante.” Leo tossed him one of the small cameras. “Here. Be useful and set this one on that point over there. It’s the last one.”

Dante bit down on his frustration and went and did as he was told. Because of course he did. Fuck.

With the last camera in place, Dante and Leo headed back to the rooftop access and started down the interior fire escape stairs. Dante could smell Leo’s expensive aftershave mingling with his sweat, and his dick throbbed. He needed to clear the air between them, or he would explode.

“Yeah, I’ve had enough,” he muttered.

“What did—” Leo started as Dante grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed him up against the concrete wall. Anger flared in Leo’s eyes and something else...*panic*.

“Leo, come on. Talk to me. Are you embarrassed? What is it? Tell me already,” Dante demanded.

“Nothing is wrong. I’ve just got too much on my mind, and sometimes that means I don’t talk very much,” Leo said. Dante was still holding him down, and Leo was allowing it. “Really, Dante. That’s all that it is. I don’t regret fucking you. It just can’t happen again.”

“So you said, but you never said why.”

Leo looked away. “I have my reasons, and they’re good ones. They also have nothing to do with you.”

“*Such* good reasons that you can’t even talk about them,” Dante said. He was horny and in a mood, so he stroked his thumb over Leo’s neck and felt the rapid pulse underneath. Leo’s long lashes fluttered. Oh yeah, Dante wasn’t the only one who was suffering. Good.

Dante leaned in and whispered in Leo’s ear. “Don’t you want to know what it would feel like to have your hands around my throat when you are fucking me from behind?”

Leo sucked in a sharp breath. “Dante, I...”

The stairwell door on the floor beneath them banged open, making them both jump backward. Leo kept hurrying down

the stairs like there really was a fire. Dante followed him like a lion chasing down a gazelle. He had seen the desire in Leo's eyes, and that was all he needed to know. Something was holding Leo back, and when Dante found it, he was going to smash it to hell.

Leo didn't wait for him outside. He kept up his stride and his head down as he walked back to their hotel opposite the Church of Saint Bartholomew. Dante caught up to him, keeping pace. He didn't say anything else. Leo couldn't run from him when they were sharing the same hotel room.

"I don't want to see you hurt because of me," Leo said abruptly. "If I let you any closer, bad things could..." Leo trailed off, and Dante turned to see what he was staring at.

A gorgeous bear of a man with curly shoulder length hair was leaning against a black Porsche. He had piercings up one ear and tattoos peeking out of the top of his shirt. He was staring at Dante with a lazy smile on his face that said quite clearly, 'Yes, fucking me would be the highlight of your life.' Leo was glaring pure hatred at the stranger.

"Someone you know?" Dante asked with a frown.

"Yes. Don't say a word and stay behind me," Leo replied, his eyes going into ice cold assassin mode.

"Nice overalls, sexy," the stranger called with a cheeky smile.

Leo walked over to him, his hand casually sitting in his bag. Dante knew he had at least one gun in there. *What the fuck is going on?*

"What are you doing here, Dario?" Leo asked calmly.

"I can't check on my little brother? You don't call, you don't write," Dario replied. He looked around Leo at Dante. "You must be the pretty himbo that Rodrigo mentioned. Dante, right?"

"Talk to him again, and I will shoot out your kneecaps," Leo snarled softly.

Dario laughed, a deeply masculine sound that had members of both sexes turning his way. Jesus. What was up with these Colleoni men?

“Touchy, touchy. You like this one, hmm? It’s cute.”

Leo took a step forward. “Out with it, Dario. I have better shit to do today than talk to you. Why are you here?”

Dario’s expression sobered. “Morozov, Leo. You seriously think we wouldn’t recognize your handiwork?”

The ground shifted beneath Dante’s feet. He tried to keep the surprise from his face, but he didn’t know if he was succeeding. The air compressed in his lungs.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Leo said slowly.

“Bullshit. Why go after him? He’s a client of ours, and *mamma* is pissed,” Dario replied, crossing his impressive arms. “Spit it out, little brother, so I can understand your motivations. Is this like a revenge thing against us after we left you alone for so long?”

The muscles in Leo’s jaw feathered. “I had personal issues with Morozov. It has nothing to do with the family. I didn’t even know he was your client.”

Leo had killed Morozov. Dante’s vision swam, and he swallowed down the bile creeping up his throat.

“I’m going to let you two catch up,” he said, giving the brothers a wide smile.

“Nice to meet you, Dante. I hope this psycho treats you as well as you deserve,” Dario called after him.

Dante didn’t reply. He was too focused on not throwing up as he disappeared into the hotel. He needed to get far away from the too intense gazes of the Colleoni brothers.

“I need a fucking drink,” he grumbled and went to find one.

Leo was going to kill something, and it was most likely going to be his favorite brother. The charm around his neck was dormant against his skin, so he knew Dario didn't mean him any harm. That didn't mean that he was safe.

Leo needed to go after Dante and make sure that he was okay. He could murder his brother for outing him like that.

"He seems a bit too sweet for your tastes, *Leone*," Dario commented.

"Appearances are deceiving, especially in Dante's case." Leo knew just how well their crazy matched. "I killed Morozov for my own reasons. It wasn't anything personal against the family. If there's no other reason you're here but to scold me, get it out of the way. I'm busy."

Dario let out a tired sigh. "Really? You want to do this right here?"

"Yes. I'm on a job."

Dario nodded. He knew what it was like. "There're personal problems brewing in the family. You need to come home and help us sort them out."

"I don't have to do shit," Leo said with a bitter laugh. "I'm not a Colleoni anymore. Your petty vendettas are not my problem."

"It's not a vendetta. Someone is trying to dismantle the family, Leo."

Leo shrugged. "Maybe it should be dismantled."

"Don't be childish," Dario hissed, the easy-going act vanishing. "We have endured for centuries. Now we have a ghost, a hidden figure, who is trying to take us down piece by piece. We have no way of telling where they are going to strike next. We need your help, and you will need our protection if they decide to stop hitting our finances and start hitting our people."

"I don't need your protection," Leo replied, his mind racing. Whoever was after them must have pretty enormous balls.

"You might not, but can you say the same for your boyfriend?" Dario said. He clicked his tongue in irritation. "Don't shoot me, little brother. I'm just pointing it out. You have people that our enemies could go after. They don't care that you think you're not a Colleoni. They will kill him and you, anyway. Don't do it for us if you hate us so much. Do it to protect your boy."

Leo hated that Dario was right. "Fine. I'll look into the attacks on the companies, but I am not coming home. I have two golden slugs that are reminders I'm not welcome there."

"Mamma still loves you, Leo," Dario said with a sad smile. "Otherwise, she would have put them in your head."

Leo hated the sick longing that welled up within him. "I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Thank you, *Leone*." Dario pulled him into an unexpected hug. "Watch your back."

Leo waited until the Porsche disappeared down the street before he dared walk back into the hotel. His nerves were all over the place. He was still trying to think of what to say when he opened the door to his room. Dante was sitting at the table on the balcony, a small pile of liquor mini bottles in front of him.

Just great.

Leo needed to buy himself some time, so he stripped off his overalls and changed into some jeans. Leo still had murder

in his eyes as he washed his face repeatedly. They didn't have long before they were meant to meet up with Silas and the others, and he needed to get his head on straight.

Fucking brothers and their big fucking mouths.

They were smart enough to send Dario and not Rodrigo. His mother knew Leo would probably put a bullet in him before asking what he wanted. Leo had always loved Dario, and she knew how to leverage that love. Just like she knew how to leverage every weakness of her enemies to get what she wanted.

Leo's biggest leverage was currently sitting on a balcony like a big target for one of Rodrigo's rifle bullets.

"Do you think drinking is the best idea when we have work tonight?" Leo asked. Dante didn't look at him, just drained the little bottle in his hand.

"Why did you do it, Leo?" he asked, his voice flat. "No lies. No bullshit. Tell me the truth."

"Come inside so you're not a sitting target, and I will," Leo replied.

Dante cocked his head. "Am I in danger?"

"Just get in here." Leo was about to drag him in, kicking and screaming. Dante relented and went inside to the mini bar. He took out a small bottle of vodka and sat down at the end of his bed.

"Why did you kill Morozov, Leo?" Dante asked. "You snuck out to Crete and went on a murder spree without telling anyone. What did he even do to you?"

"It wasn't about me. It was about what he did to *you*," Leo snapped. He sat down on his own bed and clasped his hands, not knowing what to do with them. He stopped fighting himself and finally let his murderous, possessive side speak. "He left you to be tortured for days. He deserved to fucking die in all the ways that he made you suffer. I needed him to die screaming. *Needed* it, because I couldn't sleep at night knowing he was still drawing breath."

Dante's brow furrowed in genuine confusion. "I don't get it. You barely tolerate me at the best of times. You look one step away from murdering me yourself."

"So? That doesn't mean I'm not going to kill anyone who hurts you," Leo argued.

Dante let out a strange, shuddering exhale. "I can't figure you out, so just tell me what you want from me, Leo?"

"Nothing," Leo's voice cracked. "Everything. I don't know."

"That's not a proper answer," Dante groaned.

"It's the only one I have."

Dante drained the vodka, anger flashing in his eyes. "You have no fucking right to be a possessive bastard when you don't want me. We fucked once, something that now looks like a pity fuck on your behalf. You've barely looked at me since!"

"I am *always* looking at you, and it wasn't a pity fuck," Leo snapped back.

"It must have been if you never want it to happen again."

"You idiot, of course I want it to happen again, but it can't." Leo raked his hands through his hair. "Don't you get it? My brothers *know* you are my weak spot already. I've never had one that they could use against me. Now, my mother will use you as leverage to put my collar back on if she thinks I care enough. I can't let them involve you in whatever war they are about to be in."

Dante dropped the little bottle he was holding. "I'm your weak spot?"

"Of course you fucking are."

"Is it because I'm your Beatrice?" Dante asked.

Leo started. "What did you just say?"

"The night Liddell drugged you, you were quoting Dante Alighieri at me," he said and then quoted in perfect Italian, "*He woke her then and trembling and obedient, / She ate that burning heart out of his hand.*"

Leo paled and inwardly cursed his past self. He couldn't think of a single coherent reply.

Dante wasn't done. "You wouldn't stop calling me Beatrice until you fell asleep."

"Fuck. Since when do you know Italian?"

"Since I was in the army and needed to know multiple languages," Dante replied. "I brushed up again recently, seeing how you love to mutter things at me."

Leo got to his feet and paced before his body exploded. He was such a damn fool. He halted in front of Dante, close enough to touch.

"Do you know why I call you Beatrice? Because she was the source of all of Dante Alighieri's longing and desires. The perfect thing he always wanted and knew he could never, ever have." Leo took Dante's face in his hands and gave him a hard and final kiss that broke him in two. "So yes, you are my Beatrice. I can never have you, because they will kill you, and your death isn't a price I'm willing to pay."

Dante reached for him, but Leo moved out of his grasp. He opened the door to run away. Where, he didn't know. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think straight.

Silas's bulk filled the door and blocked his escape. His green eyes looked between them, like he knew they had been arguing.

"Whatever is happening, put a pin in it, boys. We are on, so get your stuff," he said gruffly.

Leo pushed down every jagged broken piece of himself. He had a job to do, and he couldn't walk away from this family who had taken him in.

Once the job was done, he would leave Istanbul and hope that the Colleonis would follow him. It would probably kill off the last shred of hope and humanity he had left, but that was better than being forced to watch them die. He knew exactly what his family was capable of, and the Edgeworths deserved better. And so did Dante.

Altun buckled her scimitar around her waist and did one final check of the spells she had placed on it. She had also coated the blade in poison as a last resort. Not that she thought that Dee's swordsmanship would have improved much, but like so many other things, she couldn't be certain. She was taking calm, centering breaths when Athena, Kon, and Julian came into the suite. They all had hard looks in their eyes, ready for anything.

Athena's badass expression vanished as soon as she saw Altun's scimitar. She rushed over to look at it.

"Ohhh, what a pretty girl you are," she cooed at it. "Can I hold it?"

"Later. It's currently covered in poison," Altun replied.

Julian was looking Altun over like he wanted to eat her alive. God, the man could turn her on with a glance when he wanted to. It was damn irritating.

"You're looking particularly intimidating tonight, dear," he said appreciatively. "Like a sexy pirate."

Altun was dressed in flat soled, knee-high boots, black leather pants, and a waistcoat. Underneath, she wore a crimson shirt and tie. To complete her outfit was a tailored overcoat that brushed her mid-calf.

"If I die tonight, I wanted to look good. This waistcoat also has Kevlar in its lining in case Dee decides to shoot me for old times' sake," Altun replied.

“When you live through it, I would like you to take me as your prisoner and use various sexual tortures on me so I will tell you all my secrets,” Julian said, with a dead serious expression.

“Gross,” Athena complained.

Kon wrapped an arm around her waist. “I don’t know, the idea has merits if you were doing it to me.” Athena blushed, which surprised Altun.

They had spent most of the day together, Altun showing them how to break wards and possible magical traps that Dee could have placed around the house.

They were extremely sensitive and intuitive when it came to magic and with their blood thirsty streaks, the pair of them worked so well together it was almost frightening.

With time and training, they would be unstoppable. It made her glad that they had gotten away from the Aurora when they did, otherwise Gadal and the others would have gotten their perfect magical weapons.

There was a sharp knock at the door, and Athena let Silas in. He looked calm and ready. “It’s full dark out there. Dante and Leo have been set loose and hunting anyone that might be watching the building. We are ready when you are, Altun.”

“Let’s get this over with,” she said with a nod.

“One last thing.” Julian stepped in front of her and kissed her deeply in the consuming way that left her knees weak. He dipped her low, and Athena and Kon cheered.

“You are ridiculous,” Altun said fondly.

“It’s called romance, baby. Get used to it,” Julian replied, straightening her up.

Altun pulled down her waistcoat and cleared her throat. “Let’s go.”



THE STREETS WERE dark and eerie from the misting of fine rain that had settled over the city. Silas and Julian had left the hotel by another exit, and Kon and Athena flanked Altun, looking like the bodyguards they were.

They stopped in front of the cream and pale-yellow townhouse and waited. Altun could feel Dee's wards that were considerably stronger than the ones in Corfu. Someone else must have set them for her and keyed them to her blood.

Altun could have broken them easily, and she was mad enough to rip them away. She resisted, needing Dee to think she had the upper hand.

The polished oak door opened and Altun got the first look at her sister in decades. She looked younger, her vanity getting the better of her. She smiled, her cloyingly sweet smile. Revulsion slicked Altun's skin.

"Hello, sister," Dee purred. "Show me the stone."

Altun pulled out the necklace and the amulet. "It's the Magus's. I can feel his power on it."

"Toss it over," Dee replied, and Altun did.

It was the real thing. Altun had thought about making a replica, like she had of the book. In the end, she had decided against it. If the necklace was real, it would make Dee more inclined to believe the book would be too. Ultimately, the necklace was just a stone.

Dee was running her hands possessively over the necklace, a mad gleam in her eye that she usually got whenever she found something relating to her favorite magus.

"Come in," Dee said, and with a small flick of her fingers, the wards dropped for them. As soon as they were inside, they slid back into place, silently trapping them in.

You can break them if you need to. Pretend you felt nothing.

Altun would fall on her own sword before she would let the Aurora take her alive.

Inside, the house was decorated like a fairy godmother lived in it. It was a hideous monstrosity of pastels and marbles and gold. Her sister's taste hadn't changed at all. Everything was disturbingly light and sparkling.

"Your thugs can wait here. You and I need to talk in private," Dee said and waved them into a sitting room with white couches and carpet. Athena smiled, and Altun had a feeling that everything wasn't going to be so pristine by the time the night was out.

"I don't feel comfortable with you out of sight, ma'am," Kon said sternly.

"It's quite all right. My sister and I haven't caught up in too long," Altun replied. She smiled at Dee. "There is still the book to make a deal over, and these types of negotiations take time."

"Their dedication to you is admirable," Dee said as they left Kon and Athena behind. "Are they well trained?"

Not in any way, shape, or form.

"They are blunt instruments, but effective nonetheless," Altun replied.

Dee laughed. "We can't have them being too smart, or they get ideas of their own. Let's go somewhere a little more fitting for such a momentous occasion."

They walked through a study with books bound in identical cream leather, and Dee opened a golden door.

"After you," she said. Altun hesitated, and Dee laughed. "It's not a trap, little sister. I want you alive to help me."

Altun swallowed hard and walked into a chapel room. Like the inner room in Corfu, it was covered in beautiful murals of angelic beings of all religions. In the center was another scrying table, but bigger and more elaborate, with two chairs around it. In the middle of the table was a crystal ball.

"Finally learn to scry, did you?" Altun asked.

"I always could. I just had better clarity when we worked together. Don't you miss doing magic with each other? Our

powers compliment each other,” Dee said.

“That’s not how I remember it. I can only recall you tying me into a spell and scrying until my magic had burned itself out. There was never sharing involved with you,” Altun replied, ice threading through her words. She wasn’t about to reminisce and pretend that she hadn’t been abused her whole life.

Dee tucked a lock of shining hair behind her ear. “You needed a purpose, and I gave you one.”

“If you say so, sister.” Altun brought the book out of her pocket and laid it on the table. “Shall we?”

Dee’s eyes focused on it, like there was nothing else in the room. “Where did you find it?”

“It was in a museum in a bunch of archive boxes. No one knew what it was, but I’m telling you now, it is his. Look at the handwriting,” Altun said. She opened the book and held it up for her to see.

“There’s no mistaking it.” Dee shook herself and her eyes cleared. “What do you want for it?”

Altun closed the book. “Where is Serapis?”

“I don’t know. He’s been even more reclusive than usual of late. We have only been meeting once or twice a year.”

Altun laughed. “Don’t lie to me. Both Liddell and Gadal have died in the past few months. Your illustrious leader is really going to let that slide?”

“You don’t understand. Serapis has never really cared about any of us. I believe he was the head of the Aurora so he could keep a check on us and to ensure we never became more powerful than him,” Dee replied.

“So you’ve finally come to see that for yourself. Well done. It’s only taken a hundred years.” Altun stroked the book’s cover. “I can’t pass it up for something of no value. What’s inside... I can’t begin to imagine what it is. The complexity of it.” It wasn’t a lie. She still had no idea even from what she had interpreted.

“We don’t need to barter over it. Work with me again. Be my seer. We can figure it out together. Fuck the Aurora. Let’s get this power and be done with them,” Dee said, edging towards her. Altun moved, mirroring her to keep her out of arm’s length.

“I’ll never work with you again. Not after everything you’ve done to me,” she said, keeping her voice steady.

“You are so wrong about that,” Dee said with an almost sad expression. “If you think I’m going to let you and those magical children walk out of here tonight as my enemies, think again.”

Altun feigned shock. “You know who they are?”

“Of course I fucking do. That girl looks the same and is as soulless as ever. The boy looks like his useless parents that you loved so much, you betrayed your own blood,” Dee spat, still furious. “Don’t worry, I have my own people in the house who are going to deal with them. They will make a fine present for Serapis.”

Altun wanted to laugh in her ridiculous face. “I wish them luck.”

Dee’s answering smile was cold. “Let’s hope your collector puts up a fight as well.” She placed her hand on the crystal ball in the center of the room, and a vision of Julian standing a few streets away came into view. Cold dread washed over Altun, but she held back her emotions.

“Let him go, or you will get nothing from me,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Theodora, but I need you to know how serious I am about having you back by my side,” Dee replied. She whispered something under her breath, and Julian shook. Blood poured from his eyes and mouth. Altun drew her sword and brought it down on Dee. It stopped an inch from her face.

Dee giggled. “Uh oh, someone has gotten better at wards than you.”

Altun backed away and took her cigarette lighter from her pocket. She lit it and held it towards the book. “Release him, or I burn it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You would never burn something so valuable over a mere man,” Dee said.

Altun held the flame to the pages, and Dee screeched and broke contact with the crystal ball. Instantly it clouded over, Julian gone.

“Are you insane?” Dee snarled, reaching for the book.

Altun pulled it back out of her reach. “Yes. I told you to leave him alone.”

“Fine. I’ll kill you and take the book for myself. God, you’re a disappointment,” Dee snarled. She lifted her hands like a conductor readying an orchestra, and a wave of power shot out of her...and vanished. Dee stumbled back and lifted her arms again. “What is this?”

“Oh hi! Here you two are!” Athena chirped happily and came into the chapel with Kon behind her. She was splattered with blood, the long knife in her hands dripping gore. “Sorry about your lounge. It looks like a Jackson Pollock painting in there.”

“You vicious little brat,” Dee snarled.

“Yes, it is I. The soulless abomination here to take your power away,” Athena said dramatically. “Neat trick, huh?”

Dee smiled cruelly. “I have a few of my own,” she said, pulling a small object from her pocket and throwing it towards them.

“Bomb!” Kon shouted, and the world turned white.

Altun lunged through the smoke, reaching for Dee and finding nothing but a coat where it had been dropped.

“Fuck!” Altun snarled. The air was clearing, and there was no sign of Dee. “There has to be another opening. Athena! Pull your aura in like I showed you.”

Athena nodded and shut her eyes. Kon placed his hands on her shoulders, and whispered encouragements to her.

Altun felt the second the magic came back into the room. She released her power, and the room lit up with auras.

“There,” she hissed, following the line of power Dee had left. She went to a mosaic and pressed the face of a smiling angel. The tiles sank inwards, and the bottom of the wall opened into a narrow passageway.

“Stay here,” Altun demanded.

“No way in fuck, *Hala*. We do this together,” Kon replied. They didn’t have time to argue, so Altun pulled her sword free and charged forward into the darkness. Behind her, Kon whispered a spell, and a ball of light shot out of his hand, lighting their path.

“Your first spell,” Altun said with a fond smile. “I remember.”

“It comes in handy,” Kon replied.

They followed the tunnels, the ground underneath them covered in dust. It was enough to make out Dee’s footprints,

and Altun picked up her pace.

“Fuck, I have no reception to tell Silas where we are,” Athena cursed.

“It doesn’t matter. He’ll figure it out,” Altun replied. The old stone walls ended at a metal flood gate. She rattled the lever to open it. Locked.

“I’ve got something for this. Step back,” Kon said, a feral gleam in his eyes. Athena and Altun got behind him. Kon’s hands glowed, and Altun threw up a protection ward around herself and Athena.

A fireball glowed blue in Kon’s hand before going white. He threw it at the barrier, and the metal melted like plastic until it was nothing but molten globs on the ground. Kon looked over his shoulder and shot them a wink.

“I am so turned on right now,” Athena said breathlessly.

“Save it for later.” Altun dropped the shield, and they charged through what remained of the door and into a new sewer system. Two inches of foul-smelling water soaked their feet, but Altun ignored it. She could also smell the cold air and hear the horns of distant boats.

“We must be getting close to the exit Silas found,” Athena whispered.

Altun started to jog, hoping that there was no escape boat waiting for Dee. They had the cameras to see her exit if she escaped, but the thought of losing her when Altun was so close was unbearable. She should have known that Dee would run. She had always been such a fucking coward.

Altun slowed as the tunnel entrance came into view. Kon’s light filled the space, and the first thing she could make out was Julian. He was soaked, the front of his shirt and face covered with blood. Dee pressed a silver blade to his throat.

“Not another step, Theodora, or I will kill him,” Dee snarled.

“Sorry, love. I knew something went wrong when I started bleeding. When it stopped, I ran here to stop her from

escaping,” Julian said softly. “She’s done something to my legs so I can’t run.”

“It’s going to be okay, Julian,” Altun assured him.

Dee laughed. “Don’t fucking lie to him. I am done playing these games with you, Theodora.”

“Let him go.” Altun couldn’t think, the panic overwhelming her. “Please, Marina.”

“If I do, you will come with me back to Serapis. No more fighting me,” Dee demanded. “Your rebellion is over. It is time for you to be with Aurora, where you belong.”

Altun could barely breathe, but she nodded. “Yes. I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Julian whispered.

“Finally! I get through to you at last, Dora.” Dee pulled Julian’s head back, and a trickle of blood ran down his throat. “Any last words to my whore of a sister?”

Julian’s blue eyes softened with love as he looked at Altun. “Get a good price for my stuff, baby.”

Before anyone could stop him, he pulled a gun and shot himself in the chest. Dee screamed as the bullet hit her too, and she dropped Julian in surprise.

Altun’s magic lashed out and caught Dee before she could jump into the river below. Her counter spells slashed at Altun, but she ignored them, letting her power crush Dee until her bones shattered.

Athena rolled Julian over. “Altun!”

Kon’s power looped over Altun’s and held onto Dee. “I have her. Go to him.”

Altun dropped beside Julian and tore open his shirt. Blood was covering everything. “Silly, silly man.”

Julian coughed, blood staining his lips. “Couldn’t let you go back.”

“Don’t talk. I’ll deal with you later.” Altun turned to Kon. “Let Dee go, make sure your magic is not connected to us. Athena hug him. Don’t let any magic get through.” Kon didn’t argue, just pulled his power back and locked it down. Athena wrapped her arms around him. “What are you going to do, *Hala?*”

“What I need to.” Altun stroked Julian’s hair from his face. Taking one last look.

“Don’t...” he wheezed.

Altun began the chant, the words coming out of her like dancing flames. The spell locked onto Dee, making her scream and writhe as she died.

Altun pulled all of Dee’s magic and life force into the healing spell, pushing it into Julian. Golden light rolled through her veins, illuminating them, and she still pushed for more. Altun fell into the power, letting the spell take as much as it needed.

Save him, take it all, she begged, surrendering to it. The spell clasped onto her and started to feed. It ate away at the magic that had kept her alive for so long. She could hear Kon shouting, but she was too lost in the power to stop.

Warm lips pressed into hers. “Enough, Altun. I’m here.” Arms went around her, pulling her down. “Let it go, baby.”

Altun shuddered all over as the spell closed off. She was shaking and weaker than she had been in years. Julian was holding her tight, and Dee was a husk of skin and bones beside them.

“What the fuck was that?” Athena asked.

“She used Dee’s life force and something else from herself to save Julian,” Kon replied. He crouched by Altun and put a hand on her back. “What did you give it, *Hala?*”

“The spell that’s keeping me alive,” she said, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“I thought you said it would kill you if you took it off,” Julian said, squeezing her tighter.

“I said I didn’t know.”

“You could’ve died!”

“But you would live. That’s all that mattered,” Altun replied. He was so warm and full of healing magic.

“Can you walk? We need to get out of here,” Kon said. He helped Altun to her feet. She stared down at the husk of her vicious sister. With a fresh surge of hate, Altun pulled her scimitar free and hacked the leathery skin and bones to pieces. She stumbled and Julian caught her.

“It’s enough, love. She’s dead,” he said, pulling her away. Tears were falling down her face, and she couldn’t make them stop.

“Burn what’s left of her, Kon, don’t leave a piece behind for Serapis to find,” Altun sobbed.

“Go back to the house and call Silas,” Kon said, turning to the pieces of Dee. “Athena and I will be right behind you.”

Julian pulled Altun to him, and supporting her, they moved slowly back up the tunnels to Dee’s house.

“Never scare me like that again,” Altun said with as much venom as she could muster. “I don’t need the gray hair.”

Julian laughed. “I hate to break it to you, baby, but you already have some.” He pulled down a lock from the side of her head. It was silver white.

“Fuck,” Altun growled.

“It makes you look even more like a super villain. I like it,” Julian teased and kissed her softly. He tasted of blood and magic and something that was pure Julian. She groaned, pulling him tighter to her. Somehow, they were alive, and that was worth any gray hair.

Julian's eyes hurt just by looking at the inside of Dee's house. They had walked through a room that resembled a chapel and into a Barbie dream house.

"This is hideous," he said, looking about. His phone started ringing almost instantly. His screen was cracked, but he still managed to answer it.

"Where the fuck are you?" Silas demanded. "I'm at Dee's house, and I can't get a meter closer."

"I'm inside. Hang on, Altun is going to lift the wards," Julian replied. Altun was covered in grime, and her skin was pale. She took out her sword and opened the front door. Silas, Iz, Dante, and Leo were all waiting outside, soaking wet and wild-eyed.

"Wait," Altun said and hacked at the wooden door frame. "There, I damaged the sigils enough that it should let you through." She swayed but got out of the way before Silas charged his way in.

"Where are Athena and Kon?" Izabella asked. She looked at the lounge room and turned gray. It was splattered with blood and body parts.

"Don't panic, Mom. I'm right here," Athena said, coming out through the study. "Oh. Maybe don't look in there, Iz. I was ambushed." She shut the doors, hiding the gruesome scene.

“Is it over?” Dante asked. He stared at the blood all over Julian. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“I shot myself. It’s okay; Altun fixed it,” Julian said.

Altun straightened her shoulders. “We need to find anything to do with Serapis. I’m going to check the upstairs study. Everyone spread out.” She marched off, determined as ever. How she had the energy, Julian didn’t know.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Dante said, steering Julian towards a bathroom.

“I’m not an invalid. If you want to be useful, raid the kitchen and see if there’s anything to eat. Magic has drained Altun, and I’m wrecked,” Julian replied.

“On it,” Dante said with a nod and hurried away.

Julian turned on the golden taps and took demented pleasure in covering the pristine basin in blood. He had another golden starburst above his left pec to match the one on his shoulder.

“You’re getting too old to be shot this many times in a week,” he grumbled to himself. His shirt was ruined, so he tossed it into the bin. His leather jacket was serviceable once he had wiped it over, so he slid it back on.

In the kitchen, Dante had found fancy juices in the fridge and passed him two of them.

“You can give one to Altun. She looks too scary right now for me to want to talk to,” Dante said with a grin. “I like this jacket, no shirt look on you, Daddy.”

“Don’t let your flirting make Leo shoot me, brat. I’ve had my fill of bullets for the week,” Julian replied.

Dante’s cheeks flushed with color. “No reason for him to care what I do.”

“Whatever you say, Hill.” Julian left him in the kitchen and roamed up the winding staircase, following Altun’s dirty boot prints on the carpets until he found her going through a desk. Leo was sitting on a couch with his laptop connected to a pale pink one that Julian could only assume was Dee’s.

“How did you know there would be another study up here?” Julian asked. He handed her the bottle of apple and pomegranate juice. She opened it and drank it in deep gulps.

“The one downstairs is for show. I don’t even know if all those white books have anything in them,” Altun said.

“Where’s the safe?” Julian asked.

“There is none.”

Julian frowned. “I doubt that.” He began dragging things off the bookcase, searching for a lever. Nothing. He pulled the small coffee table away and drew back the gray and cream patterned rug. One small corner of the carpet was lifted. He pulled on it, and the tile lifted away.

“Bingo,” he said when he found the tiny safe underneath it.

“How did you know?” Altun asked him.

“I used to be a thief, love. In a house like this, there is always a safe,” Julian said. The lock had a keypad and a small screen. “Any idea what her PIN would be?”

Altun thought about it and entered some numbers. “It’s not her birthday. Or mine.”

“Try John Dee’s,” Leo said, not looking up from his screen. “13071527.”

Altun put the number in, and it denied her. “Shit.”

Julian hummed. “Try it backward?”

Altun did. The screen went green, and the lid popped open. “Unbelievable.”

“Not really. Us humans are predictable sorts,” Julian replied and searched around inside. He pulled out a white leather journal and passed it to Altun.

“That’s all there is,” he said.

Altun sat down on the couch and started going through it. “It’s a planner, part grimoire, part diary.”

“Anything good coming up in the next week?” Julian asked.

Altun flipped some pages and let out a soft hiss. On the page she was studying, there was a black forked drawing—half a circle with a line coming down the bottom.

“What is that?” Julian asked.

“It’s a bident, and it’s Serapis’s mark.” Altun held the book out to them. Next to the image were the words, “*Meeting with S and Gabriella Colleoni.*”

“Fuck,” hissed Leo. “This must be what my brother meant by the family is in trouble.”

“Your brother?”

“Dario. He was waiting for me outside the hotel,” Leo replied, eyes full of murder.

Altun snapped the book shut. “We need to get the fuck out of Prague, especially if the Colleoni clan is working for the Aurora.”

Ten minutes later, they all left by the back door. Altun and Kon raised wards around it so no one but them could enter it.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to burn it to the ground as well? I mean, you can’t want any of her ugly as shit decor,” Athena argued.

“There might be other things of worth in there, but whatever they are, they can stay there until after we deal with Serapis,” Altun said and curled her arm around Julian’s waist. “Let’s go home.”

For the next three days, Julian and Altun holed themselves up in her townhouse and refused to take any messages that weren't life threatening. The Edgeworths, wisely, didn't bother them.

Not that Julian could answer a phone at the moment.

His hands were cuffed to Altun's headboard as she rode his cock like a she-demon. Her hair was a wild mass of dark curls, plus the alluring silver streak that he couldn't stop touching when he had his hands free. Her soft breasts were bouncing every time her hips dropped, and her sweet pussy gripped him tight.

"Fuck, sorceress, you're a goddamn vision of debauchery," he groaned. They were both shining with sweat despite the winter that had blown into Istanbul. Neither one of them cared what the fuck was happening on the other side of Altun's door.

Julian pulled against his restraints as she let out a strangled cry. He had to give it to Altun; she did not fuck around when she tied someone up.

Altun leaned down over him, giving him a punishing kiss while she came hot on his dick.

"Don't you go yet," she said, her dark eyes hazy from her orgasm, yet still clear enough to boss him around.

"But—" Julian began, and then she slid off him. He pulled violently at his cuffs. "You can't be serious." His dick was so

hard, it was physically hurting, flushed red and covered in her shining come. “Don’t be cruel, sorceress.”

Altun laughed, a glorious, deep laugh that said he should’ve known better. “Is my sweet boy in pain?” she teased.

“When I get out of these cuffs...”

“You mean *if* I let you out of those cuffs?” she said, dark eyes sparkling as she stroked his dick.

“Please, don’t,” Julian gasped. Altun smirked and then sucked him down her throat. “Oh, love, is that what you were about? Do you enjoy tasting your come on my cock?” Altun groaned, the vibrations echoing through him, turning him feral.

Julian thrust up into her mouth, making her take all of him. He was so worked up, it took less than a minute before his whole body lit up like it was on fire, and he was coming hard down her sweet throat.

Altun sucked him until he stopped, then she crawled up his body and kissed him. Julian almost got hard again as he tasted both of their come in her mouth. The cuffs popped open, and Julian wrapped his arms tight around his sorceress.

“I don’t want to alarm you, but if you keep fucking me like that, I’m never going to leave,” Julian said, his pulse beating so hard, he thought he was having a heart attack.

“You better not cry when I finally do want my house back to myself,” Altun replied.

Julian laughed and traced his fingers down her back. “No promises. Why? You thinking of kicking me out, love?”

Altun propped her chin on his chest so she could look at him. “Not exactly.”

“Talk to me. You have a scheming look in your eye.”

“Buy the place next door off me, and we can put a gate in,” Altun replied and his heartbeat double timed.

“You want my money and my dick?” he teased.

Altun smiled like a sphinx. “I can’t let you have it for free. It would make the relationship too unbalanced. Fair is fair, and we are all about that.”

“Relationship,” Julian said, running his fingers through her hair. “What are we, love? We are too old for girlfriend and boyfriend.”

“No, thank you.” Altun screwed her face up at the titles. “Partners?”

Julian smiled and rolled over to pin her down. “Sounds like a deal to me.”

Altun laughed, and it was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. “The toughest deal you’ll ever make.”



JULIAN DIDN’T WANT to venture out that evening in the unexpected snowfall, but they had been receiving text messages all day that Kon and Athena needed to see Altun.

“We still need to eat, and we also can’t hide forever,” Altun had said and kissed him to soften the blow. He selfishly wanted to keep her for a few more days.

Since Prague, Altun had been so gloriously free. Killing Dee had finally chased the shadows from her eyes. She was mesmerizing, flush with magic and glowing from all the sex they were having. Right now, her big dark eyes were watching him drive and all but undressing him.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to pull this car over and bend you over it, snow or no snow,” Julian warned her.

Altun bit into her smile. “Fine. I’ll be good.”

“You wouldn’t know how. It’s one of the things I like about you,” he replied.

Like Altun had predicted, Izabella and Kon were in the kitchen, and the rest of the warehouse was full of the Edgeworth clan. Leo was lounging on the couch, his laptop

balancing on his knees. Dante sat beside him with his arm casually thrown over the back of the couch as he studied something on Leo's screen.

"Still alive, old boy? I had my doubts," Silas teased, passing Julian a beer and Altun a whiskey.

"What's the celebration for?" she asked.

Silas shrugged. "Being alive when another Aurora member is dead? The fact that it's snowing? Pick one."

It was too cold to eat outside, so they all sat down around demountable tables that had been produced from Kon's back storerooms.

Izabella was serving dinner when all the security alarms triggered at once. Guns and knives appeared from nowhere as they all jumped to their feet and got ready to be breached.

Kon pulled up the security cameras. "Well, fuck," he grunted and showed them his screen.

Icy fingers of dread tickled down Julian's spine when he saw the lone figure waiting by a black car.

"Ideas?" Kon asked.

"She's here to talk, or she wouldn't be waiting," Silas replied. "Leo, any thoughts?"

"Silas is right." Leo was pale as he grabbed his iPad and clicked on Kon's feed. He brought up two cameras, ones that showed the roof of the buildings opposite them and the figures stationed on them. One man was built like a tank, with long hair. He was waving at the camera. "That's Dario."

Leo pointed at the other man who was holding a rifle trained on the figure below. "And that is Rodrigo. If they wanted to fight, they wouldn't be giving us this warning."

Altun lit a cigar. "Well, I suppose we should let her in and see what she has to say for herself."

Kon tapped something on his phone, and the front door opened. An elegant woman in her fifties stepped inside. Her curly caramel hair was in a perfect chin length cut, and her

make-up was understated and impeccable. She was wearing a silver wolf fur coat and heeled leather boots.

“*Buonasera, signora,*” Kon greeted politely. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Gabriella Colleoni gave them a warm smile. “You can start by handing my son over to me.”

Dante moved Leo behind him, and Gabriella’s smile slipped into a sneer.

“You must be his new pet I keep hearing about.” Her expression faltered when Silas stepped in front of them.

“You shot Leo and threw him away. He’s my son now,” Silas said, his eyes going a flat olive color that meant murder wasn’t far away. Altun’s hand slid behind Julian, and he felt her tuck a gun into the back of his jeans.

“Is that what you think?” Gabriella said, amber eyes cold. “You might want to hear me out before you start telling me I have no right to my own blood.”

“Then start speaking because you’re in my city without an invitation,” Altun replied. She took a drag of her cigar. “That’s not very polite of you, Colleoni.”

“Altun. You were next on my list to visit,” Gabriella said.

Altun ashed her cigar, so it fell onto Gabriella’s boots. “Of course I was. You want to tell me why you’re here, interrupting *my* family dinner?”

Julian hid his smirk. Altun had just claimed Leo too, and that was bound to make Gabriella Colleoni think twice about trying to take him by force.

Gabriella sat down at the head of the table and crossed her legs. “We need to talk about Serapis.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

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SET



PROLOGUE

Long ago, the world was void and chaos. Out of the churning mass of the dark and wild waters of Nun, the god Atum rose. He began to do what he did best, and started creating.

In time, and with no small effort on behalf of Atum's children Shu and Tefnut, the turbulent waters receded. Geb, the primordial earth, and Nut, the sky, separated. Re, the sun, finally found a place to rest, and everything started to get warm.

And thus, the world was born along with four new gods: Set, Osiris, Nephthys, and Isis.

Then life started to get really complicated...

1.

Once, he had been a god of the deserts, with the storms and fiery, red sands in his veins. He was a wild dog, a beast of cunning, strength and protection, annihilation and destruction.

Every night, he fought Apep, the demonic serpent of the Duat, to save the worlds and the petty gods that ruled them.

Set had been war on the wind and burning lust between the sheets. He had been worshiped, revered, feared.

Now, his typical day was reduced to guarding a group of drug dealers as they ran cocaine out of Cairo.

How the mighty have fucking fallen, he mused, stubbing out a cigarette in the hot, sandy street.

The world changed; stories became myths, and even those were more twisted than the waterways of the Nile. Set had seen Egypt change so many times throughout the centuries, he had lost count.

Currently, just about every city and *nome*, or district, in Egypt was run by a different government party, and the majority were puppets to gangsters or warlords. He never bothered to keep up with current power changes unless they affected him directly.

The only thing that time never changed was people. The strong preyed on the weak, the rich on the poor, and only power ever seemed to matter.

Set knew all about power because he was the strongest of them all. The men he worked with didn't need to know that.

He tended to keep a low profile these days.

Only his boss, Kader Ayad, knew of his divine status, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it.

“Hey, he wants to see you now,” a prison guard said from his booth at the front of Cairo prison.

Set ducked under the boom gate and made his way through security. They let him keep his phone because he was well-known, and they knew better than to try and take it from him. He relinquished his two handguns and an ancient khopesh sword that hung on his back.

Set was kind of pleased to see swords being used more often. Bullets were expensive, but blades could be used over and over. He liked his sword, and his back felt naked without its weight.

A guard escorted Set even though he knew his way around the labyrinth of cells. It was all for show; they were all ready to play pretend as if Kader Ayad didn't run the whole place.

Kader himself was a well-built man in his early fifties. His cell was bigger than everyone else's, decorated with rugs and a proper bed. He had a desk with neat notebooks stacked in one corner.

“Ah, Set, it does my old heart good to see you,” Kader greeted as the guard opened the cell door to let Set in. They shook hands, Kader acting like a benevolent father figure who was always worried that Set wasn't taking care of himself.

“Why don't you get yourself a decent house already?” Set asked him, leaning against the cool iron bars. He checked that the guards were gone, and they had some measure of privacy.

Kader chuckled. “You know as well as I that this is the safest place for me.”

Set did know. He was the only one of Kader's men that actually supported him going to prison. It was a lot harder for his rival bosses to get to the richest man in Egypt if he was behind bars. It kept the killings in Cairo down, and that was good for business.

Kader owned the prison like he owned the judge who had sentenced him. Kader was kept comfortable, and he kept his business running as efficiently as he had ever had.

“So tell me what’s on your mind, boss?” Set asked.

Kader scratched his graying stubble. “I have a problem, and I don’t trust anyone to handle it but you.”

“Sounds serious.” He’d had Kader give him death squad orders with more cheer.

“It is. I received word this morning that Moussa Omar has...found my daughter.”

Set cocked his head. “What daughter?”

It was rare that Set was surprised. He’d thought that Kader couldn’t say anything that would shock him anymore.

“My daughter, Ayla, that I’ve kept hidden for the past thirty years. I don’t know how that slimy shit found out about her.”

“Does she know who you are?”

“Of course not! I’m a bastard, Set, but I would never do anything to compromise her safety or her mother, Amara. I loved them, so I walked away from them and kept them hidden.” Kader raked his hand through his hair. Set had never seen him so shaken.

“I’ve kept tabs on her over the years, making sure she had enough money for school, that sort of thing. I never made contact with her, even after her mother died. Never wanted to risk it.”

“How do you know the Adder is after her?” Set asked.

Moussa Omar had been the leader of their rival syndicate for the past five years. They had an uneasy truce with the Adder and his snakes, but that didn’t stop both men from circling each other and wearing down each other’s businesses.

They were a few insults away from a skirmish, and if Moussa killed a family member, it would be an all-out war.

“Abasi got intel from one of our spies that are working their way through the Adder’s ranks. Moussa was boasting that he would topple our family as soon as he had Ayla. They are going after her tonight.” Kader sat heavily on his chair. “This is the exact reason why I kept her a secret, so she would never be used as a bargaining chip.”

“Looks like they have men in our ranks, too, if they have found out. Better get Abasi to plug that leak,” Set said.

Abasi was probably the only other person Kader trusted implicitly. His second in command had been like a true son to him and was good at getting information out of people. Kader liked to say that Set was his hammer and Abasi was his scalpel.

“Where am I heading, and what information can you give me?” Set asked.

Kader opened one of his books and pulled out an envelope. He passed Set a photo of a woman wearing a white doctor’s coat and an easy smile. Her long, curly brown hair was held up in a messy bun, her arms around a group of laughing children. Set took a picture of it with his phone and handed the photo back.

“Pretty. She must take after her mother,” he teased. The old man managed a smile.

“She does. She’s a doctor with *Panacea*. They are a Doctors Without Borders sort of setup, run on philanthropic funding. She’s been working all over Egypt and Africa but is currently based on the malaria outbreak just north of Aswan,” Kader said, pride in his voice. His expression clouded. “They said they are going to snatch her tonight. I need you to take the helicopter and get there first.”

“How messy do you think it’s going to be?” Set asked, mentally going through his inventory of weapons.

“I would like you to get her and get out of Aswan before they can reach her and cause a fuss. *Panacea* is important to her, and I want to keep civilian casualties at zero if you can.” Kader’s fatherly face slipped away, leaving only the cold mob

boss behind. “If you encounter Moussa’s men, you can be as messy as you like. He needs to know that there are some lines he can’t cross without consequences.”

“Understood. What should I tell the girl?”

“The truth, if you have to. Get her out of there. I don’t care what it takes,” Kader replied. “When things cool down, I’ll set her up somewhere. Until then, she’s your responsibility.”

“You said this was an extraction, not a fucking babysitting job.”

“Just do as you are told, Set,” Kader snapped. He flinched at his tone and added apologetically, “Please do this as a favor to me.” A favor carried a lot of weight in their world, so Set nodded.

“Fine. I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

Set headed out of the prison and breathed a little easier as he slung his sword on his back.

He checked the picture on his phone, the doctor smiling up at him. He didn’t know her, but he was sure she didn’t deserve the shit that was about to rain down on her.

Set climbed onto his motorbike and headed towards the airfield where Kader kept his helicopter and an excellent collection of weapons.

He grinned at the afternoon sky. He knew when a good fight was coming, and he could just about taste blood in the air.

Moussa didn’t hire complete idiots. At least he wouldn’t use the idiots for a job this important. Set would get in and get out before they knew he was there.

As for the doctor, how much trouble could she be?

2.

Doctor Ayla Neilos was trying to tackle her never-ending amount of paperwork and wished for the hundredth time that they could hire another medical administrator.

Only on days when it got out of control did Ayla miss the private practice she had worked at in Alexandria.

At least with *Panacea*, she felt like she was making a difference, and that was worth it. It didn't matter if she was working out of demountable buildings, and tents with no air-conditioning. Even the moments of utter boredom felt more endurable.

Helping people who really needed it and seeing the good their work did was worth the painful paperwork and justification for every pound they spent.

Ayla put down her pen and rubbed at her tired eyes. She would need more tea if she was going to finish the stack of work before midnight.

Ayla had been working north of Aswan for the past month where a strange case of malaria had broken out at Nagaa Al Hajar. With any luck, she and her boss, Pierre Abras, would wrap up the inoculation project soon, and she would be able to go home to Alexandria for a few months.

Ayla hadn't had a break in years, and she was exhausted emotionally and physically. She had been avoiding going home since her mother had died of breast cancer.

The apartment felt too empty without her, and only when she was there, did Ayla feel truly lonely.

Can't run from it forever. Maybe not, but she had been doing a damn good job so far.

Outside, the sun was setting, staining the Nile River with red and gold streaks of light. Ayla stopped to admire it for a few moments, so she didn't see the man making his way to her through the small demountable buildings.

"Are you Ayla Neilos?" a voice asked behind her.

"Yes?" she said, turning around. She didn't have time to scream as she was struck in the face, and a black bag was put over her head. Rough hands pushed her to the dirt, pulling her hands together. Ayla wriggled until something cold was pressed to the back of her neck.

"Relax, little mouse. I really don't want to shoot you," a man said. Plastic ties were looped around her hands and zipped together. "Your father should have hidden you better."

Her father? "You have the wrong person. My father is dead!"

The man only laughed as someone grabbed her feet and arms. She was tossed into a van, more voices shouting outside as they drove away.

Ayla tried to keep her breathing steady under the hot hood, her cheek throbbing in agony.

She had some self-defense and weapons training; it had been a prerequisite for working in the war-torn places *Panacea* went to. She was someone whose presence would be missed, and if her attackers wanted a ransom, *Panacea* would pay it.

All Ayla had to do was stay calm and wait for an opportunity to get away. At least, that was what she told herself over and over.

The drive wasn't long. The sounds of traffic were loud, and the smell of the city coming through the open windows told her that she was probably in Aswan.

“If you make a sound, I’ll put a bullet in you. Understand?” someone asked, nudging her in the ribs with a gun.

“Yes,” she replied. He hauled her upright and out of the van. Night had fallen, and through the fabric of the hood, Ayla could make out the glare of streetlights. A door opened, and she was marched up a flight of stairs.

“So this is the lost princess?” a new voice sneered, and the bag was ripped off her head. A man stood in front of her, a scar curving along one black cheek and disappearing under a cap. A serpent had been tattooed on his neck in white ink. “Ah, it’s going to be a shame to wreck such a pretty face.”

“What do you want with me? I have money. My company will pay you. Just let me go,” Ayla said, licking her dry lips.

“It’s not about money. It’s about the respect your father owes us.”

“I’m telling you, my father is dead. Look, the locket around my neck.” Ayla turned her head so they could see the silver chain. “There’s a picture of my father in it. He died in a car accident when I was a baby.”

The man tugged the necklace out, Ayla flinching when his fingers stroked against her breast to pull the locket free. He opened it and started to laugh.

“This is not your father, and you know it. Tell us how he is getting his cocaine into Cairo,” he demanded.

“I’m not lying—” The man struck her hard and fast in the ribs and stomach, and Ayla dropped to the dirty floor wheezing.

“Lock her in the room.” He stared down at her with pitiless eyes. “You have an hour, and then if you don’t start talking, I’m going to get creative.”

Ayla was dragged into a windowless room. The man who had snatched her hauled her up into a wooden chair and fastened her arms to it.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Doctor,” he said, the door slamming behind him.

Ayla’s eyes filled with tears as she wriggled and pulled against her bonds. She swallowed down her fear and tried to think.

Ayla knew little about her father, only that he had been a doctor and died when she was a baby. That’s what her mother always used to tell her. She never remarried, and as Ayla got older, she stopped asking questions that only made her mother sad. If he *was* alive, which was impossible, why would her mother lie about it?

Ayla didn’t know anything about the person that these men thought he was. She had to think about what else she could offer them to spare her because she didn’t know about cocaine in Cairo.

You are so fucked, a small voice whispered, and Ayla began to panic.



An hour later, the door opened, and Ayla was dragged, chair and all, into the other room.

Five men were staring at her, heavily armed and marked with the same snake tattoo on their necks.

“You ready to talk yet, Doctor?” one asked. He pulled a knife from his belt, and Ayla jerked in her chair. Heavy hands pushed her shoulders down and pulled her head back.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know anything about cocaine or the man you think is my father. I can’t give you something that I don’t have,” she said. The cool flat of the blade was pressed to her cheek.

“Such a shame. This face is so pretty,” the man hissed.

A heavy knock sounded at the door, and all five men tensed. Ayla let out a breath as the blade was taken away from her face.

“No one knows we are here, boss,” one man said, looking nervously at the door.

“Check who it is.”

The nervous man pulled out a gun and opened the door a crack. The weapon dropped from his hands as a knife was pressed under his chin. He backed up, and another man stepped through the door, kicking it closed behind him.

“Gentlemen, you have really fucked up tonight.” The stranger was tall and powerfully built, with a neatly clipped beard and long hair tied back. Dressed in black and heavily armed, his golden gaze rested on Ayla, and the world went silent.

Power radiated from him, and Ayla suddenly knew that he was the true predator. The others were only playing.

The air seemed to suck out of the room as their gazes locked in a long, tense moment. The hair on the back of Ayla’s neck rose as he took in the bruises on her face and frowned. He dragged his golden eyes from her to the man beside her.

“Do you idiots know who I am?” he asked in a deep growl.

“You’re Set Akhom,” a braver man answered. “I thought you were a myth.” This seemed to amuse Set, who flashed a sharp smile.

“Good, so you know what I’m going to do to you if you don’t give the doctor to me.”

The leader of the group shifted behind Ayla and pressed his knife to her throat.

“Not going to happen, dog. I don’t care who you think you are. Moussa will have his prize and take Cairo with it.”

“Moussa is stupid to think he can win a war against Kader, and you know it.”

Ayla went cold as the edge of the blade dug into her skin, and wetness dripped down her neck. Set’s eyes glowed like those of a feral animal. A gun went off, and the knife fell away from her neck.

“Down!” Set shouted, and Ayla threw her body forcefully to the left, tipping the chair and hitting the floor hard. Hot blood that wasn’t her own splashed down over her, and she screwed her eyes up tight.

Men were screaming, guns exploding. Then all went shockingly silent.

“It’s over,” Set said from beside her. He cut her hands free and lifted her to her feet.

Carnage was the only word that crossed Ayla’s mind as she took in what remained of her kidnappers. Bile rose in her throat, and strong fingers gripped her chin, pulling her gaze up to the blood-splattered man in front of her.

“Don’t look. Can you walk?” Set asked. Ayla nodded numbly. “Good, we need to get you out of here before the others arrive.”

“Who the fuck are you?” she demanded.

Again, that too sharp smile flashed on his dark face as he took her hand. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m your knight in shining armor.”



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