

MAE PIERCE



TRIAD'S
CURE

POWER OF BLOOD

2

TRIAD'S
CURE

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Edited by Dark Ink Publication

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Content Warning

TRIAD'S CURE contains depictions of:

- Blood (ingestion of).
- Self harm
- Deep depression and disassociation.
- Sexual scenes that involve choking, voyeurism, knotting, tentacles, DP, anal, blood, biting, heat play, ropes.

It also contains brief references to:

- Physical disfigurement of a character.
- Death of a parent.

If you feel there is something that needs to be added into these warnings please email maepierceauthor@outlook.com.

To all the readers who think fictional men look good on their
knees. For more reasons than one.

Cami

Someone's crying was disturbing my sleep. It wasn't my brothers or my parents. In fact, it didn't seem to come from the house. The sound just echoed in the air.

"I'm here Pancake, Cami. I've got you," whispered a familiar voice.

Oh.

I was the one crying.

There was a well of grief inside me I refused to touch. Closing my mouth, I turned my head away. I was in my bedroom at home. The glow of the dinosaur nightlight I'd had since I was four spread through the room. I fixed my eyes on it, pretending it could keep me safe. A warmth spread around my waist, heating my back. I snuggled into it. My scalp tingled slightly, like someone was running their fingers through my hair.

I sunk deeper, letting the soft touch settle me. I was lost to Melbak again, just how I wanted it. Escaping that place was

my only priority right now. My fractured heart and mind couldn't handle it. The voice became my dad's instead. He was talking to ma downstairs. The low rumble helped me drift away. To a place where emotions didn't exist.

I awoke again.

Cracking my eyes open, reality dragged me back to Melbak, despite my every effort not to return. I stifled a moan. Running tingling fingers over my eyes, clearing my vision. My body ached as if I had been asleep for an age. It all came back to me in pieces. The photographs, Tallis's sharp grin, the flames as he'd burned my most precious possession. He'd won whatever game he'd been playing from the moment he'd met me. He wanted me broken. He wanted me to hurt.

Sharp agony rose to the surface. It was like I was losing my family all over again. I wrenched away from the pain and pushed it down. Wet tears still ghosted my cheeks, and it destroyed me that Tallis had seen them. I regretted that. It would be the last time. What about Wellyn and Fenar?

They'd stood by and let him treat me how he wanted, never protecting me despite what Cove had told me about boosts being precious, revered and coveted. Perhaps I could speak to Albion and see if there was another triad that would take me as a boost. I sat up, my stomach roiling as I realized that wasn't possible.

Not since Wellyn and Fenar had taken my blood.

Like it or not, they had linked me to them. I stared down at my pale, unmarked wrists. Fenar had always taken such care

to heal me gently. I had considered it a sign that I could eventually forgive him. That we could move past the unfortunate beginning we had. My stomach contracted, sweat bursting over my upper lip. I needed food. Likely, the boys needed a boost, too. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, my muscles faltering. Again, I wondered how long I'd been in bed. I remembered dreaming, sifting through such vibrant memories of my family, wishing fervently that I could go back. I was desperate to stay there with them. My gaze caught sight of the mask Tallis had made me wear on the bedside table and when it elicited no response from the inside of me, I reveled in the numbness. They wanted my blood. Needed it.

Well, I would be the boost they wanted.

Blood in a skin bag.

Not worthy of words.

Not worthy of being seen.

I dressed in the dark robes that had littered my closet from the beginning. The material was heavy. I liked the weight of it on my shoulders, if only to harden my resolve.

Tallis had scorched every part of me by burning those photos. Razed my entire being until I was nothing but a husk. In my head, I could go to my family. At night I could dream of them. I ran a quick brush through my hair and plaited it into a tight braid to pull it back from my face. Settling the mask over my face, I flinched at the feel of my breath, hot and wet in the small space. I gazed in the mirror. Now I was muzzled sufficiently. Tame and dead on the inside. I walked from my

room, steeling myself to see them. Wellyn had his head cradled in his hands. His rusty locks were mussed as if he'd been tearing at them. Tallis was sitting on the window seat, his beautiful, cruel face turned towards the sky. He looked like a statue of a Greek god, his sharp cheekbones more defined with his tight jaw and his arms crossed over his body like he was impatient. I hoped he would just leave me now. Let me blend into the shadows now that he'd broken my spirit. Fenar was pacing, and it was he who saw me, his face turning ashen. He took a stumbling step towards me, his arm outstretched and shaking.

“Cami? You're awake?” he whispered, his eyes widening. Wellyn leapt from his seat and raced towards me. I flinched as he neared. He pulled up short, his hands outstretched.

“I won't hurt you. I'd never hurt you,” he croaked, his throat thick with emotion.

You already did. I thought. I wouldn't have replied, even if I had the energy or inclination for speech. Fenar came to stand beside Wellyn, his bright eyes tracking my body, cataloging every detail. His gaze snagged on the mask and his lip curled with disgust.

“Why are you wearing that? Take it off,” he barked, shooting Tallis an unreadable look. Tallis was statue still, his eyes burning like the flames he wielded so voraciously. I could feel the heat of them from across the room and my spine snapped straight as I waited for him to gloat. Instead, he looked at me wordlessly, his lips flat and thin.

“Pancake, you don’t need to wear this,” Wellyn whispered, inching closer to me. I couldn’t bear the way his violet eyes seemed to see right through me. I shook my head wordlessly. Fenar clicked his tongue and his arms shot up. Flinching, I jammed my eyes shut when he growled. I couldn’t bear his touch. Instead, his fingers landed on the mask at the back of my head, and he fumbled with the opening until it clicked. Angrily, he wrenched it from my face. His face was thunderous, dark clouds rolling in the glare he aimed at me.

“Don’t put that on again,” he hissed fiercely, his hand ramming through his hair. He moved a short distance away, pacing back and forth like he couldn’t stand to be in my presence any longer. Wellyn stayed close. Goosebumps erupted down my arms from the chill he emanated. I held out my wrists to him, offering my blood. That’s what they wanted me for, after all. I wanted to get it over with so I could get something to eat and take it back to my room.

Wellyn’s face fell, and his lower lip jutted out.

“No, Pancake, I don’t need a boost. You need to rest and have something to eat first. You’ve been in bed for three days.”

Three days? Had it really been that long? The thought pleased me, and I hoped I could do it again. Those moments with my family hadn’t been real, but they had felt real to me and that was what I needed. Wellyn wrapped his cool fingers around my wrist and tugged on it gently.

“Come and sit down,” he coaxed. I pulled myself free of his grip, ignoring the flash of hurt on his face. I couldn’t let him touch me. It was hard enough to see him faking as if he cared for me. Fenar’s brow furrowed, and he stopped pacing when I diverted my path to him. I held out my wrists, offering my blood.

“Are you kidding me?” His voice was gravelly.

Not needing him to spurn me too, I ignored Tallis and spun on my heel to walk into the kitchen instead. They needed a boost, especially after three days. No wonder Wellyn was so pale. He must be craving it. I knew they despised me, but I wish they could just be pragmatic about this. All they had to do was take my blood and go back to pretending I didn’t exist. Snagging a knife, I walked back to the boys. They hadn’t moved from where I’d left them. All three heads swiveling in my direction when I stepped back into the room. Seeing the knife in my hand had Tallis jolting from his seat.

“What are you going to do with that?” he cautioned, and I cursed his smoky voice. It wasn’t fair that someone so cruel could sound so hypnotic. Stopping in front of Wellyn, I gathered up the nerve and sliced the knife over my wrist before he could react. A cry barreled up my throat. I bit my lip to stifle the sound. My gaze focused on the bright red blood bubbling to the surface of the shallow cut on my skin, my eyes following as it trailed downward, dripping to the floor. Wellyn’s eyes flashed with shock as he snatched my wrist, covering it with his hand. The blood would clean out of the rug, I wanted to say, but I kept my lips pressed tightly together.

“Fenar, heal her,” he demanded, and I couldn’t stop the grumble from escaping my mouth. I dipped my fingers in the blood that squeezed through his fingers, shuddering at the feel of its warmth, and lifted them to smear across his lips. His eyes rolled back, and he stumbled into me, his hand convulsing around my wrist. Pulling it free from his grasp, I lifted it to his mouth, taking advantage of his initial boost daze. Wellyn fell to his knees in front of me. I had taken to leaning against the couch. His arms snaked around my legs as he pulled me closer. His mouth was a hot, wet brand on my wrist, and I could feel the slight pull as he sucked. The lap of his tongue shot warmth to my core. I ignored it. Wellyn groaned, his fingers digging into the backs of my thighs. For a moment, I wished they were his tentacles pinning me down like he did that day by the springs. Fenar stalked over and grabbed Wellyn’s hair, yanking him back until he crumpled on the floor. He rocked back on his heels, mouth red rimmed, looking like the disheveled and wild creature he was.

“Sorry,” he apologized hoarsely, “I lost control. I won’t do that again.”

Was he talking to Fenar or me?

“We said no, Cami. You’re too weak to give us a boost right now.”

I lifted my wrist and shook it at him. The stubborn notch of my chin telling him I wouldn’t take no for an answer. They would get their boost and I would be free to return to my make-believe world. He stepped closer to me, crowding me

into the back of the couch. His fingers ran down my arm, languidly lifting my wrist to his mouth. He gazed at me heatedly as he lowered his lips. The blood was pooling slowly, stemmed slightly from Wellyn's ministrations. Fenar gave it a slow lick. A jolt of heat seared through me as his tongue ran along the cut in a way that shouldn't be erotic. I closed my eyes, not wanting to let him see the effect it had on me. It was a boost. That was it. This was just another one of his games.

"Look at me, Cami," he ordered. His breath was hot as it puffed over my wrist. He placed a kiss on my skin. It tickled, like the flutter of a bird's wings. The intention behind the affectionate gesture confused me. Why would he do this? Why make this more difficult for me? Why couldn't he just take the boost and leave me out of it?

"Watch me baby," he pushed. "You wanted me to taste this delicious blood. It's so hot on my tongue. Like the ripest fruit. The sweetest dessert. It's *sheking* perfection. The boost you give me runs through my body like a battering ram. Watch me get destroyed."

My eyes flew open as he lowered his head. He sucked on my wrist, his eyes at half mast, his tongue laving faster to gather every drop of blood. His groan against my skin set me afire and my body erupted with the sudden need to be touched. I wanted those lips on every inch of me, and he knew it. My head was spinning and by the time he stopped, I was sagging against the back of the couch. His arm scooped me up and brought me against his hard chest.

“You want to wear that mask? You want to dress in shapeless robes? You think you can put a barrier between us when your blood is coursing down my throat? Think again, baby,” he whispered in my ear as he carried me around to the couch. Laying me gently on the cushions, he kneeled in front of me. He looked like a fallen angel. The red around his mouth, however, made it obvious he was carved from sin. Fenar covered the messy cut over my wrist with his palm and the tingle of his healing washed over it. My head lolled back on the couch as a wave of nausea coasted through me. I swallowed the bile that rose noisily, choking on the sting it left. Fenar muttered angrily under his breath.

“Here, Cami.” A weight settled in on my right, the smell of something edible making my nose twitch. I cracked my eyes open to see Wellyn curled next to me, a bowl of steaming soup in his hand. He’d dunked a thin piece of bread into it and was offering to feed me. His face was so open and his lips slightly parted as he waited for my acceptance. It made the bile rise again in an equally horrifying way. I’d rather Tallis’s open cruelty than the guileless way Wellyn’s eyes shined. As if he didn’t know he was carving my heart out of my chest. Shaking my head, I held my hands out for the bowl. His expression fell instantly, a lock of hair falling over his face as he balanced the bread on the plate. I wanted to brush it back and to bring the light back to his expression, but I couldn’t do it to myself. No matter what they said to me, I could only rely on myself.

I had to accept that I was human and only blood to them. At least Tallis had always been honest about it. The hair on the

back of my neck prickled, telling me he was still watching me from the window seat, but I refused to look. Fenar was still kneeling at my feet and the mulish set of his jaw told me he wouldn't let me leave without kicking up a fuss. I pushed forward, balancing the bowl with shaking hands. He rolled his eyes with unconcealed disgust.

“Really? You won't even eat in the same room as us now?” he spat out. He rocked back on his heels, glancing at Wellyn and Tallis as if he was the only one seeing this. He slammed his hands down on his knees and shook his head. “You need to eat, especially after you insisted on boosting us. If you won't do it while we're here, then we'll leave. Alright? You stay and we'll go.”

I dropped my eyes to the bowl, breathing shallowly into my chest. Heat pricked behind my eyes, but damned if I was going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry again. Wellyn's fingers grazed my arm, a soft sound puffing from his throat when I shied away from his touch.

It sounded like a plea and an apology in one.

“You won't eat if we're here, will you, baby? You want to punish us for Tallis's actions? Hurt us if you must. Just don't hurt yourself,” Fenar pleaded, his voice tense as he pushed himself to his feet. Wellyn paused for a moment, and I could see his fingers dancing in the air as he contemplated reaching for me again. Ignoring him, I focused on the soup. I don't know how long I sat watching the floating chunks of vegetables and the slowly softening bread. Long enough for

the sound of their feet to fade into silence and the gentle wafts of steam to stop drifting off the top of the soup. I picked up the spoon, bringing a small amount to my mouth. The taste was earthy, a hint of heat spreading over my tongue. I tore off a part of the cold, soggy bread, chewing it methodically.

“I’m sorry, Cami,” a rough voice whispered. My head snapped to the window seat. Tallis was still sitting there, his gaze narrowed in on mine like a target. I shivered under the directness of it. It was like being caught in the gaze of a predator, one who had stopped at nothing to tear me to pieces. His mouth moved but I couldn’t hear any of the words. I swallowed hard, the bread turning to ash in my throat. The lump slid down, gripping to the sides of my throat as it closed in on me. Tearing my eyes from his, I placed the bowl on the low table. My pulse was humming frantically in my ears and all I could think about was when he had looked at me like that, right before he destroyed me.

My shoulders stiffened before I forced them to drop. Straightening myself up, I stood and left the room without bothering to acknowledge his words. My stomach protested. I wanted more of the soup, but I knew it would taste of nothing but remnants of flame, Tallis’s cruelty invading my tastebuds now. I didn’t need it. I needed to be away from him. To drift away into a place he couldn’t touch. A place he couldn’t light up with his sparking fingers.

“I’ll leave.” He’d left his perch, his voice too close for comfort. “You need food. Your body is weak.”

I wanted to snap back at him, but it was futile. It had never brought me any type of peace before to bite back. Why would it now? Fire was Tallis's arena. I attempted to meet it with more fire, but it had grown so big it had burned me, eviscerated me.

I would be ice instead.

Ignoring his huff of frustration, I moved faster, entering my room and locking the door. It wouldn't keep them out. They could unlock it with ease, but it sent a message. I was closed. Camellia Perrin was in a locked vault, and they could no longer have access to me whenever they wanted. Tallis's muffled curses filtered through the closed door. A staccato pulse erupted from outside as if he were pacing furiously. I didn't linger on it. I burrowed into my bed again, my eyes closing as I forced my breathing to slow. Pushing myself down until I was where I wanted to be. With my family. Tallis's footsteps as he stalked the hallway were nothing but echoes now. It was Aaron I heard instead and the cacophonous sound of him playing with a set of cardboard drums, his head bobbing to the beat.

Wellyn

I tensed at the sound of her door opening, the lock sliding reluctantly aside. My heart kicked up a notch in my chest, feverishly pumping as I waited for a glimpse of her. My shoulders sagged as she rounded the corner. It was always the same. She had become a ghost ever since Tallis destroyed her family photos two weeks ago. Cami spent all her time in her room, coming out only to give me and Fenar a boost. I wanted to refuse but was stopped by flashes of when she'd dragged the knife across her own wrist. The skin had bloomed like a blood blossom, drops of it wasted on the floor.

Fenar insisted she eat after each boost, but she wouldn't always agree. If Tallis was in the room, she would refuse. She'd turn and exit immediately, nearly running to return to her room. Tallis had taken to haunting the shadows, not allowing Cami to see him but watching her with burning eyes from around corners. I glimpsed him settling against the wall in her blind spot. His neck covered in faded, mottled bruises.

The night she had cut her wrist, Fenar and I had returned to see Tallis furiously pacing in the hallway and Cami's bowl of uneaten soup. Tentacles had burst out from me before giving him a chance to explain. They wrapped tightly around his neck until his face turned puce. My creature roiled under my skin even now, flipping my stomach with nausea. He was distraught with our boost rejecting us. He didn't understand that she was hurt. He wanted her close and punished me by moving constantly under my skin. Tallis would get no sympathy from me, so I simply ignored him. This was what he wanted, after all. He'd finally broken Cami, his games hitting their mark. Despite our innocence, she thought Fenar and I had been in on it. We'd been clueless that night. Tallis had fed us glass after glass of *Baak*, insisting on celebrating a new future. We had imbibed happily, even though my gut had warned me not to go overboard. I had been too gullible, thinking the new future Tallis had talked about was with Cami at the heart of our triad.

My memories of that night were hazy. It was almost as if someone had smeared them until they were unrecognizable. I hadn't been in my right mind, but another Legion had captured the whole thing on their reader. Watching it had filled me with horror. It branded my brain with the look of utter devastation on her face when Tallis revealed the photos. I couldn't imagine the pain she was feeling. Cami thought I had betrayed her by giving them to Tallis. She wouldn't hear the truth. No matter how many times I told her. That the display of cruelty hadn't been me. I would never have done anything to jeopardize the

trust she'd placed in me. I would never have hurt her that way. She hadn't reacted. Her face had been devoid of any emotion. Gone was the flicker of her lively spirit in her eyes. I had even tried telling her I cared for her, stopping short of the truth.

I didn't want it to be when she was a lifeless zombie who thought I had betrayed her when I first told her I loved her. There was only one thing that got a reaction from her and that was if I dared to brush a lock of hair behind her ear. I meant it tenderly, but she flinched each time. It killed me. A death by a thousand tiny cuts.

I didn't know how to break through the wall she'd erected around her. I watched silently as she crept into the room. She refused to speak, no matter how I coaxed her or how Fenar railed at her. His leg bounced up and down as he watched her. His knuckles were split again. He'd been getting into fights as much as possible. When he went to train for the Vinko, it ended in a brawl.

He could have healed them easily with the regular boost, but he refused. It was almost as if he needed the pain as a reminder. I saw the venomous look he shot Tallis. He blamed our brother as much as I did. Cami looked like a frayed thread, one step away from snapping. Had she been cleaning herself? It didn't look like it.

Her thick, lush hair lay lank around her shoulders, greasy from neglect. The sight made my creature keen inside, and I joined him. I wanted to ease her into the hot springs and wash the strands back to their original, lustrous shine. Her hollowed

cheeks enraged me. They grew deeper each day she refused more food. I saw the way her hands shook after she gave us a boost. She denied herself what she needed. Her wrists were ready when she stopped in front of Fenar.

She wanted to hold herself apart from us and keep the boosting clinical. She didn't know that it was a futile gesture. Now that she had shared her blood, Fenar and I wouldn't stop until we possessed every inch of her. I was patient. I would wait until she was ready. Even though my whole body ached to touch her like I had in the past. I would wait until she invited me to do so.

Fenar had no such compunction. I watched as he took her wrist in his hand, his long fingers pulling her into the circle of his legs. He clamped his thighs, locking her against him. She jolted slightly, always fighting a little before sinking into that nowhere place she disappeared to. Fenar wouldn't let her, though. He hooked one arm around her waist and pulled her down until her body was plastered against him. His nose pressed against the juncture where her throat met her shoulder. Deep satisfaction rumbled through him as he pressed open mouth kisses on the skin. His teeth sharp enough to puncture the skin. Neither of us wanted a repeat of the knife incident.

Cami jerked in his iron grip. The soft grunt that escaped her traveled straight to my cock. Fenar used one hand to press her close against him. The other hand pinned her arm behind her back, his fingers encircled around her wrist. I watched as he fed, sometimes stopping to kiss and whisper words in her ear. He lay his tongue flat against her throat, licking the length of it

and I had to shift to make my hard on feel less strangled in my pants.

She let out another one of those soft gasps, using her free hand to push against his bicep and escape his grip. He let her go suddenly enough that she sprawled on the ground. A smirk played on his ruby stained lips, his tongue darting out to collect any leftover drops.

“That’s right. You can glare all you want, baby, but I won’t have you ignoring me any longer.”

Cami didn’t reply, but her face fractured a bit when she turned on all fours and crawled towards me. Something was peeking through the blank mask she usually held. Her cheeks were flushed, and her pupils blown out. If I didn’t know better, I would say Fenar had turned her on. My eyes flew to Fenar who nodded knowingly. His smirk widened as he leaned back, his gaze dropping to her ass. Cami shuffled between my legs. Her eyes fluttered closed as she tilted her head to the side. She wanted me to use the same place that Fenar had. My cock twitched with how close her pink lips were to it, a flush covering me all over. Sucking in a tight breath, I lowered my mouth to her skin and hovered there for a minute. I hesitated before reaching out and tangling my hand in her hair. Pulling her head to the side, I kissed the space behind her ear.

“I miss you. I care about you. I want you,” I repeated all the things I had before, kissing her each time. Small punctuations that I hoped showed her that this wasn’t just a boost. I couldn’t take her offering without laying my soul bare for her to drink

from, too. I hoped she would read between the lines and hear my devotion effused in every word. Seeing her like this was pure agony for me. She didn't reply, but her breathing was short and shallow.

Laying my mouth on her skin, I sucked that first draw of blood into my mouth. It was metallic and sweet. A rush of volcanic heat burned through me. I laved at the mark Fenar had made, noticing that Cami panted, her hands coming to fist in the material of my pants. She pressed into the cradle of my legs; her breasts crushed against my raging hard on. I sucked her delicious boost into my mouth like a desperate man. I would have to jack off as soon as I finished. I was already taking more than enough, but I couldn't stop myself.

Boosting was the only time she allowed me close to her, and today was as close as she'd allowed herself. A low moan escaped her, and I groaned in reply. I turned her head, tearing myself from her neck to hold her head in my hands. Her eyes flew open, and I wanted to erect a temple in her honor. On her knees between my legs, her full lips parted only inches from my cock. Her eyes were wide, the pupils enlarged, and her cheeks were a tantalizing pink as she sucked in quick little breaths. I couldn't have stopped myself if I tried, not when I was high on her boost, not when I missed her so desperately.

I pressed my lips to hers.

A prayer, a lament, a promise.

I wanted to worship her more than anything. She stilled, her lips tense and unresponsive against mine. My chest contracted,

and I pulled back. Then she was kissing me, too. Her lips opening and her tongue sweeping into my mouth, like she wanted to taste her blood on me.

“Yes,” I moaned, my hand massaging in her hair and angling her head to deepen the kiss. She let me plunder her mouth like a ravenous beast, her fingernails digging into my thighs were little pinpricks. Suddenly, they were traveling up higher until they grazed against my steel cock.

“*Shek* Pancake,” I hissed, jerking as my head flung back, and eyes clenched at the slight touch. “One touch from you and I’ll come in my pants.”

Cami seemed to come back to herself. She was deliciously disheveled, her lips swollen from my attack, blood sliding down her neck from the small puncture wound. She sucked in a whimper. I wanted to kiss it away. Her eyes shuttered and I could see her pulling away.

“Don’t do that Pancake, please. Stay with me,” I begged, not caring how pathetic I sounded. I slid onto my knees, so I was on the floor with her. “Don’t disappear again. I can’t bear it.”

“It hurts too much to stay.” Her voice was husky from disuse. A curse sounded from behind me. Fenar was still here and had seen and heard everything. Horror washed over me when her face closed. Her hand clamped on her throat as she shifted away. I wanted to scoop her up in my arms, to chase away the shivers wracking her body. She had enjoyed being wrapped in my creature’s tentacles. Now she looked like she

never wanted to see me again. She fled to her room; the door slamming shut in her haste.

“*Shek*,” Fenar whispered, looking at me with wide eyes. “She spoke.” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe it. I threw myself back on the couch. There was lump of regret forming in my throat. I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have forced myself on her.

But she’d kissed me back. Her tongue had pressed against mine. She was just as hungry as I was. My eyes snagged on the plate of food. She had left before eating again. I ran my hands through my hair, tugging on the ends roughly until I could feel the bite of pain.

“Who thought you had it in you, Wellyn? I thought you were all about slow and steady?” Fenar was disbelieving.

“You try that when she’s kneeling between your legs,” I snapped, before letting out a sigh. “I just made it worse.”

“No, you didn’t. You brought her back. She has a powerful mind, an ability to stay in her head, but if we can draw her out, we can get to her. We can find a way through that ice she insists on presenting to us. She refuses to deny us a boost. It means she cares about us on some level. We must keep trying.”

“I won’t have you playing with her, Fenar,” I growled. My anger surprised him. But I stayed quiet before. I had put aside my own feelings for Tallis’s and look where it had landed me. I didn’t protect her before, not realizing how much I needed to.

Legion did things in a certain way, and I had pretended it was just games. I'd regret that forever.

Fenar narrowed his eyes at me.

“Look who suddenly has a backbone. Metaphorically speaking.” His lips kicked up in a small smile. His never-ending teasing about my creature made me glare. “I care about her too, you know. I hate seeing her this way.”

“You care deeply for her.” Tallis was sitting cross-legged on the window seat. He cocked his head at me, his forehead furrowed like he was trying to decode me. In my daze, I had missed him sneaking in.

“I told you I did. Is it so hard to believe?”

Tallis gazed out the window, a sneer forming on his face before it melted away.

“It's too quiet in here now. Too cold. I thought I would feel better. That if I could break her, it might stop this madness. I wanted everything to go back to the way it was. But it was too late. The minute she walked through the door, we were all infected.”

“Keep talking, Tallis. I haven't beaten anyone up today,” Fenar sneered, his voice a pointed threat. Tallis clenched his jaw. He turned to us, and I almost gasped at the longing in his face.

“You don't get it. She infected all of us. Even me. I've been fighting her this whole time. Fighting how much I wanted her. Every time I saw her, I was overwhelmed by feelings I

couldn't understand. I thought it was hate. You know how obsessed I am with certain things. I like them done neat. It made sense to me to have Cove as a boost, that she'd slot in easily and tidy."

His neck worked as he spat the words out. "But then Cami came in. It was messy and not how I imagined. You both took her boost, and I watched you with her. I fought with her because in my own way I've been obsessed too. I couldn't admit that I wanted her boost. I had this idea in my head, and I didn't realize it should be any other way. Couldn't let go enough to accept any change.

"Cami messed up my perfectly arranged life. She messed me up. Us! And now I've ruined it, and I don't know — I can't, brothers. I can't sleep, can't eat." His voice turned plaintive. "I messed up and I don't know how to fix it. I know you hate me right now. You should. I have been the biggest fool."

Fenar stared at Tallis like he'd grown two heads. His hands clenched into fists at his side.

"So, you were too much of a child to face your desires and lashed out to make sure you ruined it for all of us. Hate isn't strong enough for what I feel for you right now. You're a selfish bastard and you got what you wanted. Don't shy away now."

Tallis slumped against the glass and for a moment, I could see the toll this was taking on him. His face was sharp with new angles, his clothes hanging with the absence of his usual

muscles. He hadn't been eating. I hadn't noticed. I'd been too wrapped up in Cami and what the Legion Heads might plan for us. They'd been hounding us about a meeting, and Tallis had somehow put it off a third time. We were supposed to meet with them soon; we assumed to discuss the Vinko, but it made little sense. The request had specified every member of the triad, including Cami. I wasn't going to fight in the Vinko, and Cami certainly couldn't.

“You need to push back the meeting with the Legion Heads again.” I changed the subject not wanting to get into another argument with Tallis about Cami. He didn't fight back, just stared at us mulishly and allowed our furious words and fists to pummel him. His fingers came up to massage his forehead, and he shook his head.

“I've tried. They won't budge on this. Dad said they're already furious at being rescheduled three times. Whatever they want with us, they won't wait for it.”

Fenar started pacing, scrubbing a frustrated hand down his face. I didn't want the Legion Heads anywhere near our boost, and I knew Fenar felt the same way. His eyes were blazing with a determination I never thought I'd see him direct at anyone but himself. Tallis had done more than tear the threads connecting the triad when he'd staged his very public betrayal of Cami. He'd also exposed the secret we had been trying to keep, shouted it out to all the Legion there that Cami had successfully boosted us. A human.

It was unprecedented and the implications terrifying for Cami. Fenar had recounted the conversation she'd had with Albion to fill us in on how precarious the situation was for her. Tallis had gone so pale I thought he was going to pass out, and I knew the guilt of putting our boost in danger was eating at him. I hoped it was. My rage at him wasn't going to simply abate.

“What if they try to take her from us?” I whisper, my number one fear clogging my throat.

“I challenge anyone to try.” Fenar's teeth gnashed angrily. He paused his pacing and whistled a shaky breath. “I can't do this right now. My wolf is furious, and I need to wear him out, let him savage some animals instead of my insides.”

Without waiting for a reply, he strode towards the door, slamming it shut as he exited.

“Do you think they will hurt her?” Tallis questioned softly, his dark eyes boring into me. I shrugged, twisting my fingers together.

“Cami certainly seemed to think so, and it sounds like your dad agreed with her.”

“I will do whatever I can to make this right,” Tallis promised, standing, and arranging the cushions in his usual fastidious pattern.

“I don't know if you can, Tallis,” I admitted sadly to his stiff back. “And even then, I don't know if it's enough.”

Cami

As hard as I tried, I couldn't sink deep into my mind. Not with my pussy throbbing like a heartbeat between my legs. Damn them both. Why did they have to do this to me? Why couldn't they just take the boost and leave me in my daydreams? That was where the days passed and I only allowed myself to think about needs, not wants. I needed food, I needed sleep, and I needed to be a boost.

My skin stank of sweat, but I couldn't find it in me to care. I didn't want to go into the cleaning room. It was too jarring and different from showers on Earth. If I spent too much time in Melbak, too much time away from my dreams, then they were harder to get back to.

Darkness tugged at my insides, a familiar and insistent yank. It had pressed at me over this limbo time, but I'd been too deep in my mind to respond, inert in manufactured memories. I gave in to the darkness and, like a dam breaking, it flooded me, filling me with liquid fire. I hissed as I was sucked under, my vision blackening.

“Cami? Oh Cami.” A shadow was hugging me. No, it was crushing me. Pulling in a small breath, a squeak of alarm escaped me. My ribs ached against a hard chest. Two arms like steel bands tightened around me. Bright spots danced across my vision when they released me. Air flooded my lungs in such a rush that they burned, and I choked on the sweet sensation.

“I’m sorry, Precious.” A hand as big as a plate stroked my hair. “I just haven’t been able to get to you until now. I’ve been so worried that something terrible happened to you.”

“Eyke.” I offered him a small smile. It felt wrong on my face. He saw the lie immediately and scooped me up again. He cradled me gently this time, his arm under my knees and my face pressed into his chest.

“What have they done to you?” he growled. The worry had been replaced by a rage that rattled through every word he spat out.

“Please,” I begged him, “I can’t.” My voice wobbled, and I shut my mouth quickly, grinding my teeth to stop the emotions that had bubbled up. I thought I was past the tears. I didn’t want to cry anymore. I wanted to be numb.

“You don’t want to be numb, Precious,” Eyke whispered to me, laying me down on the silky bed. I hadn’t realized I’d spoken aloud and shook my head.

“I can’t do this anymore.” I hated how petulant I sounded. Eyke laid down next to me. His bulk was a warmth that I

couldn't help but snuggle into. The buzz he omitted relaxing against my skin.

“Tell me,” his voice rumbled. “Tell me how they hurt you. I am yours to command.”

“You're not mine,” I insisted, my insides cracking apart, the fissures of the triad's betrayal buckling my resolve. My eyes smarted with hot tears and Eyke's large fingers danced across my cheeks, swiping them away methodically.

“I am,” he was earnest. “I didn't choose you. I never thought to have a boost, but I am yours. You have brought me to life, and I will do whatever I need to keep you.” Vulnerability echoed in his whispered words, and I wanted to set him right.

“You can't want me. I'm worthless, human trash. I have nothing to give and the small amount I had I gave away too carelessly.”

“From the moment your finger dipped into that Gaer, I've been yours. You awoke me from a mindless torture and offered me hope. You're my chance at redemption, Cami. I'm not perfect, but I will strive to be that for you. Let me do the same for you. I would do anything for you. Absolutely anything,” he vowed. “Do I need to kill the triad that has been toying with you? I will make their deaths painful. I will make them scream and beg for release. I will fill a spring with blood for you to bathe in, if that would make you happy.”

A watery, incredulous laugh escaped me, and I pressed my body into Eyke. Murderous promises aside, he sounded

sincere, and I was so low that the balm of his words lit through me like a firework.

Tallis's actions and Wellyn and Fenar's complicities had cut me deeply. Their constant protestations to the opposite confused me. I had spent so long trying not to exist, but I couldn't do that forever. Especially now they realized how much they still affected me.

"Wh-what would happen." I swallowed past the lump in my throat to get the words out. "If I was your boost in every sense? If you had my blood?" Eyke froze against me. The hand stroking my back stilled.

"Cami." His voice was small in the relative darkness, but I could hear the fear in it, the hope.

"What would happen?" I repeated, tipping my head up to take in his stormy eyes, wide with a myriad of emotions.

"I would be free of this prison and able to return to Melbak with you. If you were my boost," his tongue swiped his lower lip with unmistakable lust. "I would dedicate myself to you. To fixing what has been broken."

He shifted on his elbow, his hand coming to cradle my jaw with a tender touch.

"I would love you, with everything I am. I love you, Cami. If you were my boost, I would be complete,"

A lone tear trailed down my cheek. Eyke lowered his lips to kiss it away. The touch made me shiver, especially with how my pussy had already been in a state since Wellyn and I

kissed. I arched my chest into him, my leg snaking up to hitch over his hip. He pulled back and searched my face, hesitating even though I knew he could see how I wanted him.

“Something happened to you, I don’t want to make it worse by—” he started, and I launched up to seal my mouth with his. The kiss was hard and hungry.

“You wouldn’t. You say you love me, and I need that.”

He rolled me onto my back, nudging my thighs apart as he loomed over me.

“I do,” he agreed fervently, “You’re everything. With you, I am undone.”

“Show me,” I begged. There was no hesitation as his hands fell to my clothes, fumbling and shaking as he quickly divested me of every scrap. The moment I felt him, hard and hot, pressed against my bare skin, I groaned. It was guttural and instant. This was what I had been craving. His huge fingers trailed down my body, tweaking and teasing until they reached my pussy.

“Precious, you’re soaked.” He bit his lip as he teased my entrance, drawing lazy strokes up and down the sensitive skin.

“Don’t taunt me.”

I cursed and swallowed a pant as he followed my instructions. His fingers slid inside easily, curling and thrusting into me slowly. It was a different torture. My hips bucked into his hand as I sought more friction. I hadn’t realized how much I needed this. My body was crawling with

the desire for release. I cried out as his thumb brushed over my clit, dancing away before I could truly get the pressure I needed.

“Eyke,” I shouted. He just chuckled, his mouth coming down on my breast. Eyke sucked on my nipple, his tongue swirling, making my pussy clench around his fingers.

“You are needy. I knew you would be.” His voice was thick with desire as my nipple popped from his mouth. He looked at me like I was a meal. Suddenly, I was flipped through the air and straddling him. Eyke’s eyes were bright and heated in the low light. His arms urged me up his body, angling me so my pussy was inches from his mouth.

“Ride my face. Take your pleasure,” he growled. I hesitated too long. Impatient fingers spanned my legs, pressing me down until I was covering his face. His tongue plunging into me had me crying out, forgetting about whether I was going to crush him. I rocked against his eager tongue, letting my hips take over. A sharp moan escaped me as I neared my orgasm. My legs shook, and I leaned forward, bracing myself on the wall, grinding my clit into his mouth. I wanted, and I took. I was greedy and brutal in my taking. He loved it, his own moans vibrating against my skin as I fell over the edge, flooding his tongue with my release.

“Take me.” I was shaky as Eyke levered me off his face and down beside him.

“I’d love to, but I don’t think you are up for that.” He grinned down at me. His chin glistened obscenely with my

juices.

“I want to be your boost.” I leaned up to kiss him softly.
“Right now, I want you to feed.”

Eyke’s eyebrows shot up and he shook his head.

“You’re confused. Hurting. I don’t want to pressure you.”

“You love me?” I asked.

“Of course I do,” he said vehemently. I nodded, straddling his waist and offering my wrist.

“Please. I need you,” I whispered, the vulnerability of the moment almost crippling me.

Eyke’s expression turned wondering and his hands fell to my hips, fingers digging into me with a bruising grip.

“I can’t go back there alone again,” I admitted, wanting the warm circle of his embrace. I needed an ally, someone who could be at my back in a nest of snakes and traitors. His fingers came up to trace the long line of my neck.

“Can I feed here?” he asked. I nodded, my heart pumping a dizzying pattern in my chest. He moved from under me and grabbed a small dagger from the shadows. He hoisted me up in his large arms and settled me in his lap. The sharp edge of the blade ran over my skin before the latch of his mouth smothered the slight sting.

Eyke groaned as the first drop touched his tongue. His fingers pulled my hair to the side, angling me open for him. The tingle of his suction sent another wave of desire through

me. I pressed into him, my hard nipples grazing against his chest. His hard length beneath me was something I couldn't resist. While Eyke fed, I lifted my ass slightly and grabbed his cock, feeding it into my pussy slowly. As I sank down, Eyke released my neck, his eyes rolling back at the ecstasy coursing through the both of us.

“I was a fool. I never realized how right this is. Better than anything I could have imagined. I'll never give up the feel of you,” he grunted as I rocked steadily, my clit rubbing against his body.

“Take your boost, Eyke.” I tilted my head and moaned as he locked on to me again. The sensation of his mouth suckling my neck combined with the friction of his hard cock made me ravenous. I slammed down on him. Ground against him with everything I had. My nails scored down his chest as I used his body, and he used mine. We were in a feedback loop of pleasure. Hurtling towards an explosion. Stars danced in front of my eyes, my breath catching in my throat as I jerked on top of him. Eyke groaned. He released my neck go, his mouth dropping open.

Hands lifted me and speared me on his cock. I leaned the top half of my body on him, boneless from the pleasure coursing through me. It was brutal. Fervid. Animalistic. An iron tang filled the air. The hot pulse of sex thickened around me like an aphrodisiac.

Eyke's scorching cock burned inside of me. He threw back his head and roared, his cum exploding out of him. The

juncture where he impaled me on his dick was sloppy now. Decadently thick with our mingled release.

Lightness pulled at me suddenly. The Gaer was repelling me back into reality. Grappling with Eyke's arms, I clutched him to me.

"Eyke!" I shouted, eyes wide and frightened.

"I will see you soon, my Precious," he promised. He let me go, a look of satisfaction on his face.

I woke in my bed. My neck stung, and in between my thighs was sticky. Still, it was as if I had never left.

Looking beside me, I'd hoped to see the gigantic form of Eyke under my covers. It was just me and my tangled sheets. I curled them in my fists and threw them aside, as if I might see the form of my giant Legion somehow underneath.

Where was Eyke?

He said if he fed, he would be free. That he would be with me. I choked on a sob. The fading pangs of pleasure were the only proof that I had been with him only seconds before. I wanted to reach for him. Tears flooded my eyes and down my cheeks. I felt more alive than I had in weeks. It made me want to vomit.

My stomach clenched painfully, threatening to do just that. I didn't bother to muffle my crying as I dissolved into bed. Instead, I let it come, punching the pillow beside me at the unfairness of this situation. Eyke had said he'd loved me, that he'd be with me and here I was—alone again.

“Baby?” A knock came on the door. Fenar. “Open the door. Talk to me.”

I didn't want him.

The traitor who had almost tricked me into boosting him. Who had always supported Tallis's cruel games against me. There was no need for the pretense now. He didn't need to sweeten me for blood. My head throbbed with a sudden headache, and it made me sob again. I pressed my face into a pillow again, soaking the material. Blocking out his insistent voice, I didn't bother to reply to Fenar.

He continued his efforts to coax me out. Eventually, he left. I flopped like a starfish on the bed, throwing my covers off and staring at the ceiling. The room was too small and reeked of sweat. I couldn't stand it.

My skin buzzed with an itch I couldn't satisfy. There was no going back now. Eyke had pulled me too far out of my pretend world to go back.

I wanted pancakes from Dilly's.

Rising from my bed on shaky legs, my hand hovered in the air to give me balance. Even with that, I still tottered to the door with the grace of a newborn deer. I'd spent far too long in bed trying to escape my woes. Looking back, I saw the rumpled sheets that were drenched with sweat and tears, and grimaced. They would be the first thing I needed to deal with.

The dried cum on my legs was rubbing together. I wanted pancakes, but I was going to get clean first. Stripping the bed,

I dragged the sheets in with me. I may as well do two things at once. The light of the cleaning room swept over me, and I sighed. During my convalescence, the grime had caked on so thickly that I felt lightened in its absence.

The sheets smelled fresh, a slight lemon scent. I sunk my nose into them, taking a deep whiff before tossing them on the bed. Reaching into my closet, I nearly pulled out those dark robes. Tightening my jaw, I decided against it, reaching instead for an outfit I'd brought from Earth.

Denim shorts and a loose, dark t-shirt. Simple, comfortable and me. I had never pretended with Eyke, and he looked at me like I was everything. I filled my lungs as my fingers curled around the door handle. It felt strange to be exiting my room. The haze had shifted. It wasn't so all-consuming. I had stuffed it down so deeply. I ignored the shocked looks the triad gave when I walked into the lounge room.

Fenar had been sitting on the side of an armchair, his reader tumbling out of his hand as he gawked at me. He snatched it up, muscling past Wellyn as he came to stand in front of me. Wellyn reached out a hand, his fingers convulsing slightly in the air as he looked at me like he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Pancake? You're back?" He winced as Fenar slapped the back of his head, glaring at him. Tallis's eyes burned into me. He was perched like a fallen angel in his window seat. A monster who reveled in my misery. Fenar stepped closer. The movement caused me to flinch. I didn't want them close to me.

His face turned stern, but he shuffled backwards slowly, his eyebrows rising as if he was saying, see? I am listening.

It was harder than I expected to be out here. My chest ached, but my stomach overtook it, grumbling.

“I want...” I started. My throat was scratchy from disuse. I had to stop and swallow a few times to keep myself from coughing.

“What do you want, baby?” Fenar seemed relaxed, but his hands were clenched so hard his knuckles were white. They both seemed frozen. Barely breathing in fear of upsetting me.

“I want pancakes,” I said finally. “And coffee.”

Wellyn’s cheeks flushed with pleasure. His grin was so wide it must have made his cheeks ache. He turned and ran to the ordering machine, specifying pancakes from Dilly’s. I squashed the spark of warmth that he knew that was what I’d meant.

My stomach growled again as I walked over to grab the plate from Wellyn. I slipped onto the stool and ate. A moan slipped out of me when I took my first bite. It was perfect. Even better than I remembered.

Someone choked, and I looked up to see the three of them staring at me with intense focus. Tallis hadn’t moved from the window seat. His scorching gaze pierced me like a dagger across the room.

“That good, huh?” Fenar drawled as he sidled closer, leaning on his elbow a short distance away. Not close enough

to smother me, but enough that his presence was noticeable. I ignored them as best I could.

The tension in the room was so thick that Tallis's tail could swish through it like a knife. As it was, his tail was one of the few sounds, a frustrated whisper. I imagined I agitated him, or perhaps it was annoyance that the other two seemed to be treating him with disdain still. Finally, when it seemed his tail was going to drop off from the constant movement, he spoke.

“You can order what you wish. Wear whatever you like. There will be no more tests, Cami.”

My shoulders stiffened at the quietness of his voice and his use of my name. What happened to ‘the human’?

The other two must have been furious with him for him to sound so abashed. I lifted the cup of coffee to my lips, savoring the taste, refusing to answer him. The cup slipped from my hand as a sudden splintering crash shook the front door. It shattered into a mess of jagged pieces on the ground.

My vision whirled as Wellyn spun my body, wrenching me away from the bench and towards the back wall. Tentacles surrounded me. I looked back to see Wellyn, but not like I'd ever seen him before. He had partially shifted. From the luminescent quality of his glowing eyes, I could tell his creature was close to the surface. He looked wild with fear.

“Cami!” a loud voice boomed “Let me in Cami!”

Another crash sounded.

The owner of the voice was throwing themselves at the door. Fenar shucked his clothes and shifted into his wolf. He prowled towards the front door, his nose sniffing in the air. Tallis had moved like a blur from his window seat to just behind Fenar, his hands a muted red as he readied his power for release. I wriggled in the tentacles, my heart a rapid beating in my chest.

“It’s alright Pancake. We’ll protect you,” Wellyn defended. I stilled for a moment, studying the cut of his jawline and the way he held it upwards, unafraid, and proud. His tentacles squeezed me gently. He was trying to comfort me, I realized, and it was too much for my jarred mind and body to comprehend.

“Cami, it’s Eyke!” the voice roared. Ripping my gaze from Wellyn, I struggled against his tight hold.

He’d come for me.

“Eyke!” I couldn’t believe it. He had come.

“Eyke, I’m here,” I shouted. His body slammed against the door with intensified vigor. “Let me go,” I protested to Wellyn. “I know him.”

Wellyn’s tentacles loosened in shock at my words. I seized the opportunity to slip from his grasp and raced towards the front door. Tallis’s tail struck out, wrapping around my arm, and yanking me back. I slammed to the ground with a cry of surprise. The air being pushed from my lungs.

The door splintered open. Eyke stood in the empty space, his giant chest heaving. His gaze found me immediately. His face was painted in a deep rage at the sight of Tallis's tail wrapped around my arm. He surged toward me.

Tallis moved in front of me, his arms held high. They flared with minute flames as Fenar lunged at Eyke, his teeth bared. Eyke swung his fist into Fenar's gut, sending him hurtling into the wall with a yelp. The wolf slid down the wall, his eyes closed in an animalistic expression of pain.

Eyke was a stone sculpture in the bright light of the day. I was used to only seeing him in the darkened space of the Gaer. Here I could see how imposing his size was. His face was covered with a thick beard, his gray eyes hard as slate as they stared down Tallis. If I wasn't aware of how gentle he was, his menacing figure would frighten me.

"Unhand my boost," Eyke gritted through his teeth at Tallis.

Fenar

*U*nhand my boost

Even with pain radiating through my whole body, there was no mistaking the intruder's words. He was ridiculously huge, with wide shoulders and tree trunk legs. Was he a human? He had no Legion features I could see. His knuckles cracked as he stepped closer to Tallis. Cami grappled with the tail Tallis had wrapped around her arm. The giant looked at her cataloging every detail.

"I won't warn you again. Remove your cursed tail from my boost before I sever it from your body."

"*Your* boost?" Tallis sneered. His stance widened as he readied to fight this colossal mass of man. I whined as I tried to move. He'd slammed me so hard into the wall I was sure I had broken a few ribs.

Wellyn was rushing behind Cami, trying to fold her into his arms. The tentacles of his creature were tucked away again.

Tallis looked from the side of his eye. When he saw Wellyn had her safe, he let his tail slide off her arm.

Cami launched herself past him with a cry. I barked in alarm. I watched, frozen in shock and pain, as she barreled past Tallis and leaped into the giant's arms. Those thick, muscular limbs encircled her, his hands coming to cup her ass as she wrapped her legs around him.

It was the most emotion I'd seen from her since Tallis had destroyed her family photos. Her face was splitting from a smile so large that my heart clenched with agony. I had never made her smile like that.

"You're free," she breathed, her voice thick with emotion. She gazed at the giant like he had hung the *sheking* moon. I mean, he was tall enough that it was possible, but who was this guy? I couldn't even shift back in my injured state to ask. Wellyn seemed to be in a state of utter shock. I could just about hear his heart cracking in two at the sight of our girl in someone else's arms.

Someone else who had pulled her out of the deep darkness she'd sunk into. Someone was succeeding where we had failed.

"You doubted me" His voice tender and teasing. It made my stomach roil. He needed to be destroyed. I wasn't the only one who thought so either. Tallis hadn't lowered his fists. The red was winking out and his tail was swishing across the room behind him like a whip.

“Who are you?” he demanded. His shoulders shook with the force of power he was holding back. Finally, someone was asking the important questions for those who were stuck as a creature. My wolf was confused. He couldn’t understand how this threat was holding our boost.

Tallis was getting close to exploding. Wellyn realized it too. He placed a hand on Tallis’s shoulder, lending the coolness of his touch to Tallis like an anchor. Cami leaned forward to press a soft kiss on the giant’s lips, her hands linked behind his neck.

“I woke up alone. I was worried it didn’t work.” She ignored Tallis, or simply hadn’t heard him in her intense focus on the stranger. Pressing another kiss to her lips, he gave her a small, private smile before he turned to face Tallis and Wellyn. His hands tightened on Cami’s body, urging her to wrap around him tighter.

“This is the triad that didn’t want you?” he frowned, looking down his nose at us.

“What? Of course, we want you, Cami,” Wellyn protested immediately. His eyes flashed with hurt. I growled in agreement. Cami glanced at me for the first time. It was gratifying to see the worry on her face. I could barely move right now, even with my body knitting back together at a fast speed.

The giant scoffed.

“You are the one who tried to break my boost’s spirit. The one who cannot see her worth because she is a human.” He

pointed at Tallis. Cami tapped his arm, getting him to loosen his hold so she could slide down. She padded over to me, filling my vision. Tallis growled and bristled at the giant's accusation. She proffered her wrist, her other hand hovering over my head like she wasn't sure if she wanted to offer any further comfort.

“Will this help the healing?” she asked, clearly bothered by my pain. I couldn't speak to her, so just tried to convince my wolf to nod, chuffing slightly as I did it. The intruder yanked her up and away from me.

“He doesn't deserve your boost, Precious.” He sat her on her butt on the bench and settled himself between her legs. As if he had the right. I growled, low and annoyed. He was the reason I was hurt. The least he could do was let me heal faster.

“You didn't have to launch him into the wall.”

“Who the *shek* are you and why are you here?” Tallis snapped. His hands flared a dim red. The giant eyed him lazily, pressing a kiss to Cami's jaw.

“I am Eyke Kindale. You are the worthless prick who I will slaughter for harming my boost.”

“What?” Tallis and Wellyn shouted. The latter sagged against the couch as his knees buckled. He was staring at Cami, desperate for her to look at him. I knew what he wanted, for her to refute this stranger, to tell us this was all a joke. That it was a way to make us jealous. Seeing her in Eyke's arms, it was working.

“Are you deaf and dense?” Eyke asked, stroking Cami’s thighs. I gnashed my teeth at him. My chest hurt and not just from being slammed into the wall. She looked at home in his embrace. The heaviness she’d carried since Tallis had destroyed the last link to her family diminished. She leaned on Eyke, her eyelids heavy with contentment. Eyke pulled back from her slightly.

“I shall kill them for you now, Precious. Perhaps it would be better if you left the room? I don’t want to get blood on you.”

He said it matter of fact, cracking his knuckles as he perused us. Not even a flicker of concern. He didn’t think three on one was a threat.

I felt useless but managed to drag myself to my feet. A growl loosed at the shooting pain that screamed through every inch of me. I bared my teeth at Eyke. I wouldn’t take death lying down. He nodded to me, a spark of approval flashing over his face.

“Eyke.” Cami put her splayed hand out and pressed it to the massive expanse of his chest. Her head tilted as she tried to get his attention. Not that he needed reminding. The second she touched him, he jolted, spinning at her bid for attention.

“Precious?” his gravelly voice held a question, and I staggered a little on my feet. He’d called her that before, a name she approved of by the soft look that infused her face. I wanted my head to stop spinning. I needed answers.

I forced myself to shuffle over to Tallis, nipping his leg to get him to do something. Both he and Wellyn were too

shocked to move. Tallis's flames had winked out and now his fists were clenching by his side. I held the flesh of his thigh through his pants, and he stared down at me, his face blank but I knew better than to trust it. He couldn't hide the desperation in the depths of his eyes, I knew what he was thinking.

He already knew he'd messed up with Cami. He'd realized too late what she meant to him. She was slipping away right in front of us. We had been fools for far too long, scorning what was truly precious. Eyke had somehow cherished her. He hadn't made our mistakes. Now he was reaping the benefits.

I yipped at Wellyn. He slid a look at me, his eyes wide and aching. He'd paled and his freckles were stark against the shocked pallor. He was on the verge of collapsing, trembling slightly. A sign that his creature wanted to surface.

"Please, Cami," Wellyn begged, his voice hoarse as his throat bobbed with difficulty, "I can't stand this any longer."

She winced and turned to head away. A rattling growl burst from Eyke. He leveled Wellyn with a fierce glare.

"You can't stand it? I should tear your throat out for your impudence," Eyke roared. Cami squeaked, her hands scrabbling over the monster's heaving chest.

"Stop! Enough!" she cried. The giant immediately turned to her once more, gathering her hair back and running his hands through it. I narrowed in on her neck. Blood. There was blood drying on the column of her neck.

I pushed my wolf aside needing confirmation. Pain crashed over me as I changed into my human form, uncaring about my naked body. My ribs slowly knitted themselves back together as I laid sprawled out on the floor. Eyke had cracked more than one with his impressive knock.

I pointed to her neck, gasping with pain.

“You boosted him.” My voice was hoarse and thick with accusation. Cami stared down her nose at me. There was that spark I had missed. It flared in the dark depths of her eyes.

“I have,” she admitted. It was too much for all of us. Wellyn hiccupped a whimper, sinking to the floor next to me. Tallis remained frozen, as if he’d turned into a statue. I couldn’t imagine what was going through his head right now. His position in the triad had been usurped.

What did this mean for us now? Were we about to be torn apart and this giant put in Tallis’s place?

“We need to talk,” she added. Bracing her hands on Eyke’s shoulders, she hopped off the bench. She avoided our gazes as she took up a spot on the couch. Eyke immediately boxing her in with his huge thighs.

Tallis leaned down to help me limp around to the other side, throwing my discarded clothes on my lap before slumping on his window seat. Wellyn walked like he was heading to his execution. His chest rose with sharp, shallow breaths. Cami sighed, and even though I felt like every part of me was breaking, I was grateful that she was speaking. Gone was her deadened state. If I have Eyke to thank for that, then I would

have to deal with my jealousy. I dressed as quickly as I could in my broken, bruised state. She opened her mouth.

“It all started when I touched the Gaer,” she told us. Tallis’s face drained of color. He covered his mouth in shock. My chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. I knew exactly when this happened. That was the night of Ambrose’s gathering. When the Gaer had been under the apartment building. My jaw clenched but I was determined to let her explain, hoping the words would calm the raging thump of my heart. The story she wove sounded so fantastical that I wanted to laugh aloud, but it hurt too much to move.

“I met Eyke. Somehow, the connection between us transported me to him in my dreams. He’s been trapped in the Gaer for two centuries. Punished because he had human features. But the Heads at the time didn’t realize that by getting rid of them, they upset the balance of power in Melbak.”

“If he was trapped, how could he be here now? And does that mean there are others still trapped there?” Wellyn asked, trying valiantly to cover his hurt.

“The key to breaking the curse is boosts. When Cami boosted me, I was freed,” Eyke interjected. He brushed his fingers down Cami’s cheeks reverently. “But the problem goes much deeper. Implementing triads is all wrong. Melbak needs quads for its power to generate properly.”

“That’s hard to believe. Why would the Heads change this?” Tallis curled his lip, leaning his elbows on his knees. Cami

looked at Eyke.

“There are still four Heads, correct? Melbak used to be four distinct sectors, with Legion carrying features prevalent in that area. Tails, fangs, horns, creatures. We can trace them back to certain areas. The Legion in the east, where I am from, boosted from humans. Our children grew to have a lack of Legion features on the outside. Of course, our powers remain strong.”

He placed a hand over Cami’s knee. “Once my brethren were cursed, there was no more representative of the east. I imagine they must have tried to create quads and without a Legion from the east, it wouldn’t have worked. Blood becomes diluted over time. Each sector of Melbak would have been intermingled enough for all sectors to be present except with the ones from the east fully removed. The triad likely became their only option.”

“So, you still need me.” A hunger flashed in Tallis’s eyes as he spoke. Cami threw him a poisonous look.

“Not if I have any say. Sadistic prick,” she snarled. Eyke patted her knee and whispered something soothing to her. Tallis puffed up under the rain of her sharp words. Like they were a balm instead of an insult. Anything was a better alternative than the silent, empty visage she’d been in this morning. Wellyn curled in on himself the more they touched. I could see his eyes glowing from where I was sitting. I wondered if his creature was as furious with him as mine was. If he could bite chunks out of me, my wolf would have.

Wellyn looked one cuddle away from a breakdown. “You’ve royally screwed me by blurting out to everyone that I’d boosted your two cronies, by the way.”

I hissed in remembrance. Like Wellyn, I had scattered memories of that night. But I’d seen the footage. Tallis had told everyone that Cami had successfully boosted, and now the danger Albion had hinted at seemed imminent.

“Have you put off the meeting?” I asked through gritted teeth, gingerly holding my ribs. Tallis’s jaw clenched.

“Dad’s been more withdrawn than usual, ignoring my request to stall, for obvious reasons.” He waved his hand in Cami’s direction, and I wanted to slap the bristling Legion for his attitude. Would it kill him to swallow his pride for a second? Cami must have been thinking the same thing.

“Sorry to be an inconvenience. Betrayal kind of cut my knees out from under me,” she bit out. Tallis slapped his thigh, his rattle shaking a death knell behind him.

“Can you stop crediting these dolts with my work?” he sneered. “They did nothing to *betray* you. You have a devoted triad now, at least. I guess I will take my leave so you can find a fourth to fall at your feet.”

Wellyn whipped out a tentacle, wrapping around the sulky Legion and pinning him to the seat.

“Don’t even think about it,” he growled. “You don’t get to run. You will fix what you broke. You owe us this.”

Wellyn's head turned to Cami, and he spoke again. "Fenar and I had nothing to do with what happened that night. I did not give the photos to Tallis. I kept your secret like I promised I would. He broke into my room and stole them. He plied us with drinks, so we were senseless. Tallis betrayed us, too. He took advantage of our hope that we would unite as one triad."

Cami's chin wobbled, and she hiked it up, trying in vain to hide how Wellyn's words had affected her. Wellyn didn't give her a reprieve. He slid over to her, on his knees, and looked up at her, those luminous eyes hypnotic.

"I could never hurt you, Cami," he whispered. "Not when my heart only beats for you, the one who revived my creature from its exile, who has always seen me when the rest of Legion cast me aside as weak. I love you. Desperately and deeply. I adore every part of you. Please, you must see that I would never harm you."

He stayed kneeling in front of Cami as she battled to process his words. I could scarcely breathe, hoping that she finally heard the truth in his confession. Hoping she would tear down the wall she'd placed between us all so we could heal. She was blinking rapidly at the ceiling to disperse tears that refused to stay contained. Unfortunately, I had to wait for her reply.

There was another unwelcome interruption at our door.

Cami

Wellyn said he loved me. My chest felt like it was about to crack open. But I believed him. There was no way he could hide the deceit in those glowing eyes. His face was cracked open so I could see every flicker of vulnerability. Now he waited patiently at my feet, staring up at me like he was my supplicant. I thought back to all the things he had been whispering to me since I'd entered my fugue. How desperate they'd seemed. I didn't want to hear it. I'd been protecting my mangled heart because it felt like he'd torn it out that night. When I'd thought his lopsided smile was at my expense, not that he was so out of it, he didn't know what was going on. But I knew Wellyn, he wasn't like these other Legion. He was sweet and guileless, completely without duplicity. Eyke's hand tightened on my knee. It filled me with warmth to know he was there, supporting me. I was about to reply when a saccharine voice rang out.

“Yoo-hoo? Is anyone home?” Eyke stiffened immediately, yanking me into his lap and wrapping his arms around me.

Wellyn scooted closer, resting his hands on my knees. The last person I wanted to see right now rounded the corner. Gloria. Her red lips were twisted as she stepped carefully out of the hallway and into the main area. She was identical to the last time I saw her. Glamorous with those blood-red nails. I hadn't wanted to see her when she'd crashed my meeting with Albion, and I certainly didn't want to see her right now. She made a habit of turning up where she wasn't wanted.

“Are you aware that your door is lying in pieces?” she asked mildly. Her keen eyes roved over everyone before coming back to rest on Eyke. She sucked in a sharp breath, something flashing in her eyes before it smothered. “I hope no fellow Legion has been hounding you, Cami.”

I tapped on Eyke's arms frantically. “Can't. Breathe,” I gasped out. He loosened his hold infinitesimally. My thoughts were untamed in my mind. I paused, waiting for them to settle. Come on brain. As my thoughts failed spectacularly, it was Tallis who jumped up, a congenial smile shaping his usually morose features. He slid two fingers down Gloria's face in the traditional greeting. He made it look unreasonably sexy.

“I fear you have me at a disadvantage,” he ingratiated. “We haven't met, but I recall my dad describing you.”

She smiled slowly, her red lips opening to show the points of her teeth.

“The family resemblance is strong in the Kerys line, Tallis,” she replied, letting him know she knew who he was, but made no move to introduce herself.

“Forgive the ramshackle appearance of the doorway. We are undertaking some renovations,” Tallis tried again, that smooth smile making him look pleasant, but I knew what his true core was. Rotten and cruel. I chanced a look at Fenar, pleased to see his poker face was better than mine. He appeared bored; his eyes half lidded. Wellyn had pressed himself against the couch where I had been sitting. Gloria narrowed her eyes, taking in the room with an arched eyebrow.

“Oh? That would be pertinent now that you are a newly boosted triad.” She turned that sharp gaze on me. “Cami, I’m disappointed I had to hear the news through gossip.”

My throat was thick. I shook my head, hoping the words would come soon. I didn’t want to admit I had boosted anyone successfully. I needed to buy myself time to make sure the Heads didn’t decide to take care of me. And I didn’t mean in a nice spa bath, pampering way.

Tallis grimaced. “I’m afraid you have me to blame for that mix-up.” He shrugged and ducked his head, as if abashed. “I wonder if Dad mentioned my temper? I fear it got the best of me and I ended up lashing out. Cami has boosted none of us.”

“No?” Gloria questioned. “Why Fenar, you seem to have built an awful lot of muscle since I saw you last. How fortuitous.”

Fenar cracked an eye and shrugged.

“What can I say?” he smiled languidly. “Trainer June is the best in the arena.”

Gloria spun towards me again, taking a step closer.

“And who is this impressive specimen?” She widened her eyes at Eyke innocently. Her guise covered a shrewd core.

“This is our consultant, Eyke. He’s assisting us with new designs,” I blurted out. Gloria let out a tinkling laugh.

“I’m surprised your triad is happy for you to perch upon the lap of a stranger. Especially after being boosted.”

“This is how we greet others in Earth,” I hurried to explain, adding, “and Tallis was incorrect in his assumptions about my boosting anyone in the Kerys triad.”

Gloria narrowed her eyes at me. Eyke stiffened, readying himself to defend me.

“My dear, you must think me a true doddering Legion if you think I’ll buy that obvious lie. Which makes me wonder why you feel you must hide the truth from me? I will defer to the Heads, of course, which brings me to why I am here. They want to see you for themselves, and they are tired of waiting.” She tapped a claw on her chin. “It would benefit you to realize there is no point in making a fuss. You’ve done admirably, the Heads need to confer with you all before they decide to allow the experiment to continue. You can’t continue to put them off, this meeting will not be postponed again.”

I wanted to argue, but kept my lips sealed shut. For the first time, I looked to Tallis for clarification. I didn’t know of any meeting, but I hadn’t been a member of the real world for quite some time. There was no point in arguing with her. She

was only a messenger. Tallis turned a full smile on her, letting out a small chuckle.

“Please extend my sincere apologies to the Heads for the mix-up. We cannot attend at this exact moment.” He tried valiantly to convince her, but Gloria only shook her head ruefully. It was strange to hear the formality in his voice. This was the first time I’d seen him act as noble as his bloodline boasted.

“Don’t make this difficult now. The Heads are waiting for you in their tower.” She reached out to pat his shoulder, missing the way his lip curled at the touch. “It will be interesting to see what they make of this,” she mused, giving me one more meaningful look. Her gaze slid to Eyke, a feverish excitement flashing and disappearing just as quick. “I’ll wait in the hall to give you a chance to ready yourselves.” She walked from the room, her shoes echoing as she left. Fenar jumped up, striding to the mess in the hall before returning, his eyes wild.

“Well, time has caught up to us.” He ran his hand through his hair hurriedly. “This place isn’t safe anymore. We need to think of a place to lie low if we get out of this meeting alive.”

He pointed to me, pacing frantically now. “Cami, pack what you need. Eyke, go with her and watch her. Wellyn, can you pack for us? Only essentials. I can’t imagine Gloria will wait before telling the Heads what she’s seen, though.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” Eyke rumbled from under me. I made to shift off his lap, but his hands clamped onto my

hips. He looked at Fenar with daggers.

“Is this meeting because of what Tallis said about me boosting you? You had to push it back because of me?”

“We don’t know exactly what it’s about. We’ve rescheduled three times. It was only a matter of time before they decided they wouldn’t wait.”

Eyke glared at Fenar, but his fingers loosened their tight grip, and I slid off his lap. Wellyn sidled up next to me, but he didn’t touch me. It was like he needed to be close. I didn’t mind, not when his skin emitted a cool wave that calmed me.

“What will we do?” My voice still felt hoarse. Fenar chewed his lip. He was trying to seem in control. Only the wildness in his eyes betrayed him, roiling with worry. He cut a quick look to Tallis, who was busy staring at the floor, his lips a thin line.

“I must make a few calls, but I have an idea. Let’s move quickly now.” He ushered us towards the bedrooms, pulling his reader from his pocket. I turned back.

“Tallis,” I called, and his head shot up in surprise. His lashes flew open at my direct gaze. “You should call Albion. He’ll be in danger if this doesn’t go well.”

He nodded once, his throat bobbing as hurriedly fished around for his reader. I made a beeline to the bedroom, my head a flurry of thoughts that melded into one. Right now, we had to get through this meeting. I hadn’t even met the Heads before, but I’d heard more than enough to know I should be

frightened. If we could get through this, hopefully we could hole up somewhere the Heads couldn't find us.

I threw my clothes on the bed, stuffing only the meagre pile of human ones I owned into the bag I retrieved. There was something square shaped in one pocket and I remembered the diary I'd taken from the Vault. I wondered if that had any information in it that could help me understand. Eyke loitered behind me. He seemed remarkably tight-lipped for someone whose people the Heads had cursed for centuries.

"Is this all?" his gruff voice asked from the door. I handed him the bag and nodded, trailing after his bulky form back into the main room. Wellyn followed soon after. He dumped their bags on the ground, looking about mournfully. He had every right to. They were forced to flee from this apartment because of me. I hadn't asked for this, but neither had he.

"I'm sorry you have to leave," I tried awkwardly. He raised his eyebrows slowly,

"Cami, this place could burn down for all I care. My home is wherever you are. I love you, remember?"

My mouth went dry as I flushed. I needed to talk to him about what he'd said. But it would have to wait.

"What are we going to do? I don't want to admit I've successfully boosted any of you," I said, unease wrapping around my chest and squeezing it tightly. We all looked to Tallis, a habit that hadn't broken despite his atrocious actions.

“Let me do the talking. Have you organized where we are going to go if we get out? The big guy will have to wait for us there. The Heads will ask too many questions about his presence.” Fenar angled his reader to show Tallis a conversation.

“Absolutely not,” Tallis spat. He glowered at Fenar, his tail swishing behind him.

“It’s big enough and the Heads won’t think to look for us there.”

“There must be somewhere else. I can’t ask him for help.”

Tallis looked to the ceiling, his nose flaring as he sucked in a deep breath. His hands were clenching at his sides. It was a pleasant sight to see him so riled. Perversely, I enjoyed seeing him sweat for once.

“I’m not leaving Cami,” Eyke declared, his hands cupping my shoulders gently. I leaned into his solid bulk, the support and warmth a delightful welcome.

“And how do you plan to explain why a consultant for remodels is privy to a meeting with the Heads for a triad he isn’t a part of?” Tallis drawled, his tail swishing with annoyance. I turned in Eyke’s embrace. Wrapping my arms around him, I hugged him.

“As much as I want you there, we need to keep you away from them.” I couldn’t believe I was agreeing with Tallis.

“Where is Eyke going?” I asked, curious who could elicit such a strong disgust in Tallis. Fenar walked over, hoisting one

bag off the floor.

“Ambrose’s,” he replied.

The dashing, horned Legion whose party we had attended. Tallis’s frenemy? No wonder he seemed so disturbed. While I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Nakasha again, that was something I could get behind.

Wellyn

Gloria was striding ahead, her shoulders loose as she led the way. It did not surprise her when Fenar took Eyke in a different direction, vowing to meet us at the tower. She didn't seem suspicious of the giant Legion. Maybe awed. Perhaps impressed by his size, which I think we all were. He'd left without too much fuss, recognizing that he couldn't haul Cami into his arms and run like he wanted to. I was still processing everything she had told us about him. It seemed too unreal to believe. I wanted to press him more, but I wasn't in a position to do so. Right now, I was focusing on breathing deep enough to settle my creature. It was currently freaking out at our closeness to Cami and the knowledge that we were about to be in the same room as the man who rejected us so spectacularly. I snuck a look at my boost, sending her a tentative smile when she caught my gaze.

“We didn't talk about what we are going to do,” she whispered under her breath, nibbling on her plump lower lip. Her delectable curves had been diminished, and I despaired at

the loss. Dark bags hugged her beautiful eyes. After we got out of this interrogation, I was going to dedicate myself to making sure I fed her, kept her safe and loved.

“They won’t care about anything we have to say, except for Tallis. We don’t register as anyone important because we have the surname Leave.” I wondered if I should tell her about my history with the noble family lines of Melbak, but I didn’t want Gloria to overhear. “Let him do the talking. He knows how serious this is. He will fix this.”

Cami didn’t seem convinced, giving me a hesitant nod and hunching her shoulders. We stepped up to the portal. I offered her my hand, melting as she interlaced our fingers and stepped into me. She hated the sensation of portals, but it was the quickest way to travel. I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and endured the grappling suffocation of my skin on my bones and the popping in my ears as we moved to the Heads’ tower.

We bustled out into the busy main hall where Legion passed by us, eyeing with open curiosity. Gloria pursed her lips and waved us on. Cami’s jaw popped open as she caught sight of the view out the expanse of glass. The Legion Heads’ tower was enormous, housing the residential apartments and the offices of those who worked with the Heads. It looked out over the only area of Melbak that was yet untouched by the Gaer. The thick forest made way for a looming volcano, with the dark clouds behind it. Gas belched from the top in a steady stream, obscuring the moody skyline.

“Is that an active volcano?” Cami whispered as we rushed to keep up with the frenzied pace Gloria was setting.

“It is, but there is no threat in the tower. It’s protected by a shield and the stilts allow the lava to run underneath. It is a sight to see when it erupts,” Tallis answered, looking back at Cami without his usual animosity. Cami’s eyes shuttered, and she glanced away. I watched Tallis’s throat work as he swallowed, turning away from us both. The flash of hurt in his dark eyes made me want to strangle him again. Stupid Legion. Did he think he could offer her one comment without animosity and she’d welcome it? If I’d realized the ends he would go to justify his skewed thoughts, I could have prevented this. Would we have been a functioning triad? I couldn’t imagine, especially with the rawness of what happened still gaping in my heart, how deep the hurt must be for Cami. Only this morning she still believed me complicit with what had happened, and I still needed to make sure she knew how I felt. Gloria tapped her long claws on a dark lacquered door with gold trim. As the heavy weight of them swung open, she ushered us through with an impatient noise in the back of her throat. She waved over a gray-robed Legion with elfin ears, similar to mine.

“Advise the Legion Heads that the human and her triad have arrived.”

The Legion nodded and scurried away, her robe kicking up in her haste to leave. We stood in silence while we waited, the tension thick. The door cracked open, and I turned to see Fenar slip through, his gaze bouncing until it landed on Cami. He

sidled up behind her, still maintaining a safe distance, but enough that she would know he was standing guard behind her. I raised an eyebrow at him, a silent question that everything went well with Eyke and Ambrose. He nodded, looking so serious for once that it threw me. He had been dreading this meeting since we first received the summons.

After the discussion he'd been present for with Cami and Albion, he'd conjured worst-case scenarios of the Heads demanding to have Cami killed. I couldn't linger on those thoughts for long because the messenger Legion was back, ushering us through another set of lacquered doors and into an equally ostentatious room.

Columns spanned the length of the airy room, bordering a lowered area that was decorated with only a low seating area. Four ornate chairs were on the lip of the lowered dais so that anyone who sat in them would look down on the other seating area. They'd covered the walls in gigantic murals depicting past Vinkos, including one that looked to be showing the original battle that the nine founding families (or twelve, as Eyke insisted) used to unite Melbak and bring peace. It was obvious where we were expected to sit, so I carefully helped Cami down the small drop and slid in next to her. It was cold, hard, and uninviting. Bare of any cushions or comfort.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, conscious that Gloria was still observing us. Tallis sat on my other side while Fenar took up the open space next to Cami. She hiked her legs up until she was sitting cross-legged and peered intently at the murals on each wall. My insides flipped as I saw her allow Fenar to

rest his hand on her knee. I hope we looked like a more united front than we were. The doors swung open, and the Legion Heads ambled in. My pulse ramped up to a dizzying level.

“Ah, Kerys triad, it’s nice of you to finally join us,” the clipped voice of Head Avanti echoed out in the large room as he reached one of the four ornate chairs and threw himself down in it. His shoulders slouched immediately; his watery eyes narrowed as they cataloged my boost. She stiffened under his proprietary gaze, meeting his eyes with a stubborn tilt of her chin. He waved a hand at Gloria.

“You may leave,” he dismissed her, missing the way her claws dug into her sheath. Interesting. She didn’t argue, though. Just bowed and walked to the door. Head Custray sashayed in, her toned body encased in a loose pair of trousers and a wrap top. She pursed her lips, her reader plastered to her ear.

“Of course, we want peace with Demons. Why else would we be signing the treaty?” She rolled her eyes, waiting for a response.

“Is it a slow day in Hell? We can discuss delegates another time. I’m walking into a meeting,” she barked, slumping into her chair with a huff.

Head Aydro slipped in from behind, her horns a brilliant, pearlescent white. She gave a reassuring smile to Tallis, tucking her hands in her lap as she settled in the seat. That just left Head Lamott.

I hadn't been in the same room as him for over five years. Would he even recognize me? I didn't realize I was vibrating until Cami squeezed my hand, rubbing my arm with her shoulder. Shooting her a thankful look, I focused on settling myself. My gaze found him. I expected him to be laser focused on me. It wasn't. Instead, he locked onto Cami. The hunger that sparked in his eyes made my stomach flip. He looked the same. The rusty hair he'd shared with me was slicked back, not a strand out of place. His short, white claws were filed smaller, blunter, but still lethal. His power didn't come from strength, and he didn't need his claws to be large to land a killing blow. I would know. He'd threatened me with them many times.

My father was not in the habit of losing.

That was why he had discarded me, after all. Cut me from the family line like discarded trash. I was an abomination. An embarrassment. My creature too weak and strange to live up to the Lamott name. He didn't have one of my four brothers with him today. Usually, they followed him wherever he went, like clones with their wide, stocky shoulders and thick muscles. They were everything I wasn't, except for the hair. I still had that shock of Lamott red. My father didn't even flicker as he took us in, stoic in every way, tapping the side of his chair methodically.

Had every trace of me been erased from his mind as soon as he tossed me into the shadows? I felt a brief press on my back. From my peripheral, I could see Tallis's tail hovering behind me. His face remained unaffected, but I understood the

gesture. He guessed how I was feeling and was letting me know I wasn't alone. I hardened my resolve. I'd spent years feeling lesser because I couldn't live up to my father's expectations. But I had a new family now. One that accepted me for who I was. In a twist of fate, I was the one who had a boost. Something no brother of mine could claim.

"Tallis, the human has successfully boosted you. Is that correct?" Head Custray asked, her eyes going filmy white. This was serious. She was using her powers to ensure that we were being truthful. Luckily, the way she had worded it made Tallis's response easy.

"No, Head Custray, that isn't correct," Tallis replied with a respectful incline of his head. Cami's knuckles were white as she clenched her fists in her hands and I wished I could pull her into my lap and soothe the fear. Head Custray sniffed, nodding to the other heads, confirming he wasn't lying.

"But you claimed as much recently? Is that not right?" she tried again and Tallis flashed a brilliant smile, slipping into his noble roots.

"If we are discussing the same night, I had imbibed too much and was speaking incorrectly. Cami has not yet boosted me."

Head Avanti clicked his tongue and shook his head with impatience.

"Do it now, then. It has been long enough, and we want to know if it is successful, or whether this is another of your father's wild theories."

Everyone in the room looked at Cami, who notched her chin higher under the intense scrutiny. She didn't waver or shake as she met their eyes. Tallis gulped audibly next to me, thrown by the suggestion that Cami give him a boost immediately.

"No," Cami declined, the word a full sentence that dared them to argue.

Head Avanti spluttered, his eyes bugging at the gall of Cami to deny their demand.

"You know you are required to do what the Legion Heads command, little one?" my father drawled. His claws went deadly still on the side of his chair. He tilted his head to the side and leaned forward slightly, his nostrils flaring as if searching for her scent. It made me want to snarl with possessiveness, to spirit her from the room and away from his entitled gaze. Cami didn't have the same reservations as me. She met his amused expression with a fierceness that made me want to snatch the golden circlets from his head and place it on hers.

"I am not Legion. I am not subject to your commands. I recall that from my contract, settled with a binding agreement," she argued, her voice strong.

"Who do you answer to, if not the authority of this world?" My father raised a lazy eyebrow. His lips quirked like Cami had told a joke. "What reason is there for delaying? It seems simple enough to me."

I fought to keep my fingers from clenching at my side. I despised the teasing tone of his words. He had always done

that when I was a child. Pretending everything was amusing until it wasn't. Then he would turn to strike like a viper when you least expected it. Tallis stiffened next to me, his chest arrested in a held breath as he waited for Cami's rebuttal.

"Albion Kerys said I would have time to situate myself and get to know the triad before boosting. I'm sure you can understand that this has been a tumultuous time and my triad has been testing me to ensure I am worthy."

The Heads didn't react to the comments she made, which made me wonder how close they'd been watching us. If they knew of Tallis's tests, they could easily refute that Cami hadn't boosted one of us.

"I approve of the idea. We know humans are weak. It makes sense to test them like a young Legion." Head Avanti nodded deeply. Cami tensed, likely hearing the echo of Tallis's words in the comments. Head Lamott cleared his throat and stretched in his chair.

"Yes, I must commend you Tallis, in your commitment to Melbak. It will serve you all well in the future. Especially for what we have planned at the Vinko."

His lips lengthened in a smile, but it was gloating. Insincere.

"I will boost them when I feel best," Cami added, stubborn to the end. She was refusing to let him have the last word, just like she did with Tallis.

"Head Aydro, how does it feel to have such a motley group serving under your house in the Vinko?" Head Custray asked

slyly, tittering at the sharp look Head Aydro cut her way.

“I wouldn’t linger on receiving a boost, Tallis. The rules are much changed this year,” Head Aydro warned, eyes darting. “We’ve decided each member of the triad will be required to fight, including boosts.”

My stomach dropped through the floor. I sat frozen by the admission she’d just made. Every member of the triad? Including boosts? That meant I would have to fight. Me, who had lifted nothing larger than a heavy tome. And Cami. My soft boost would be required to battle in the most brutal arena of power that Melbak had. The place where the elite all struggled for power and dominance.

A growl rattled through the air from Fenar, but it cut off as soon as it started. I glanced at Tallis, knowing I was doing a poor job of hiding my terror. Not for me. For Cami. There was no way she could fight and come out alive. She’d be a target for every single Legion. Not just because she was a human, but because her boost gave us an unfair advantage. Cami’s hand landed on my knee, and I covered it immediately, leaning into her as a wordless show of support.

“Unusual strategy. What is the purpose of the change?” Tallis queried, sounding bored. He crossed a leg over his knee and arched an elegant eyebrow.

“It’s not for you to question the Legion Heads,” Head Avanti blustered. My father placated him with a waving hand.

“Now. Now. He’s naturally curious. You should understand, Tallis, you inspired us, after all. Legion need to remain strong.

The threat of other creatures is always a possibility. We are a proud, strong and intelligent race. One that hasn't been polluted over time like Demons for example. One that puts heavy sanctions on ourselves as youngsters. But as we become adults, some Legion have become indolent. Remaining weak for their entire lives." His eyes lingered on me as he spat out the word weak and I burned all over, my skin prickling. "How can we call ourselves powerful if we cannot win? If this trial succeeds, then humans will have to prove they are on par with Legion. We can't allow our race to be diluted with pathetic, poisoned boosts. If they can survive a Vinko, then they are truly worthy of Legion."

Cami paled. Her knuckles were tight under my hand. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking.

"I have a binding agreement that protects me from harm in this world," she whispered softly, like she was repeating it for her own peace of mind. My father heard her though and tipped his head, jutting his lip out in a parody of pity.

"Don't you worry about that, little one. I would focus on boosting your triad. They'll need it to keep you alive," he chuckled. Then his gaze met mine, finally looking at me. It held a blistering, raw and unfettered hatred. His lip curled like I was a sight that he'd like to slash into pieces. His claws gripped the side of his chair, scoring them with lines as he pulled himself to his feet.

"We are finished here," he stated, switching back to the cool, emotionless mask that he usually portrayed. The other

Heads watched as he strode from the room, unaffected as if he didn't just throw a bomb at us. The face he'd briefly shown under his mask was one he only shown in private. When he was about to beat me or rail at me again. Sweat broke out on the back of my neck. He knew who I was. He knew who I was, and he wanted my boost dead.

Tallis

S*hek* me. Honestly, *shek* me.

Ambrose's mustache was twitching as he swung his ridiculously opulent doors open and invited us inside. I was waiting for his insults that were usually couched under flowery language. The words that you only realize later were a barb. He'd been aiming them my way since we were children. We'd been friendly but always competitive. Until they formed his triad from noble lines and mine was not. I grew used to reading between the lines. I avoided his gaze as we tromped through the house. Eyke appeared and glued himself to Cami's side. Wellyn dogged her footsteps as Fenar took a break from begging for her attention to clap Ambrose on the back. I sulked in the back, feeling as forlorn as the discarded bags I was loitering around. The ambush we'd just left had exhausted me. I didn't have anyone to blame except myself.

Ten times over.

I was a fool.

Jealousy and self-hatred roiled inside me. Normally, my powers would have flared at the intense emotions. Now they barely sparked. My fires were influenced by my emotions and until the night I'd burnt the photographs, I'd always had a tenuous control over them. It was a struggle to access the fires that were once volatile explosions.

I had to work twice as hard to bring about mere flame hands.

It had taken everything within me to summon even a mild heat when that giant, Eyke, had slammed through the door. A stray thought should have created that with ease.

I had betrayed Cami, and my body was betraying me. Punishing me for my stupidity.

"Tallis, come my friend, join us in the small parlor." Ambrose beckoned to me. I bristled, waiting again for the snide remark that didn't come. He had to know what the Legion Heads had planned for Vinko. His mother was one of them. It would affect him as well. Nakasha wasn't a fighter, but she was a Legion. She had powers.

My boost was vulnerable in every way his wasn't.

"We appreciate you letting us come," Fenar spoke graciously when I didn't offer any platitudes. I was here. What else did he want from me? It was too much to ask me to fawn over my nemesis. My reader chimed with a message from my dad.

Take care. Wait to hear from me. Do not come for me.

My spine crawled with nerves. When he hadn't answered my call, I had messaged him. I was still trying to wrap my head around everything Eyke had told us. The revelations he'd spun hadn't quite digested fully.

Gaer containing souls of Legion? It sounded like a macabre fairytale. It sounded like something Demons would make up to harvest fear. I trailed behind the group, following them into the 'small' parlor that was the size of the main room in our apartment. The walls were jammed with ornate furniture that no doubt belonged to Ambrose's ancestors, judging by the wood on some of them.

Wood had been a rare commodity since the Gaer had infected most of the groves. The giant Eyke went to stand by the window, his eyes focused on the surroundings. I wonder how much had changed. From the stiff set of his shoulders, I would say Melbak was unrecognizable from what it used to be. It seemed he had kept it together in our absence. Cami wandered over to a shelf that was stacked high with strange mechanical objects. I watched as she picked up a rectangle with two slots in the top, a cord dangling down to the floor.

"What's with all of this?" she asked Ambrose, her gorgeous forehead furrowing in confusion. Falling back into the red velvet wingback, he huffed a sigh, waving a dismissive hand at the shelf.

"That is Kevin's doing, I'm afraid." He pulled out his reader and tapped away on it. "I'm just having tea delivered." His fingers twisted his mustache absentmindedly.

Ambrose's pompous act would normally have caused a flare of fire that would have been a struggle to contain. The man incensed me.

"I'll thank you not to handle those if you please. They are very delicate," came an imperious voice from the doorway. Cami spun around to face Kevin as he strode into the room. He stumbled upon realizing who it was, a flash of alarm skirting over his features as he hurried to her side.

"Oh! I apologize. I had no notion the human boost was attending us." Kevin shot Ambrose an annoyed look. "You have noted my collection. This is only a portion of what I own but they are the most intriguing pieces. Perhaps you can lend your expertise and advise me of their uses. Some of them I haven't made heads or tails of."

Cami stammered, looking at the item in her hand with alarm.

"This?" She held the rectangle up and Kevin nodded vigorously. "It's a toaster." She slid it back on the shelf carefully. Kevin's eyes widened comically, his antlers quivering with excitement.

"How very excellent," he breathed. "And what is a toaster?"

"Kevin, bonding over your human obsession can wait. The Kerys triad and their—friend—" he darted a look at the muscled Eyke hulking at his window. "Were about to inform us why they require refuge from the Heads. One of whom is my mother."

Eyke seemed to gear up to insert himself again, his giant maw opening in readiness. Thankfully, Pyke interrupted, slinking in with his shoulders slumped. He'd covered his iridescent scales with a long-sleeved, dark robe, and it gave him a broody visage. His ivory locks shook as he threw a brief shake of his head towards Ambrose, answering some unasked question. Ambrose clenched his jaw in response, eyes darting to the exit, not bothering to hide the longing and worry in them. Pyke waved his hand ambivalently and threw himself down next to Fenar, grunting a welcome.

Ambrose cleared his throat, wrapping himself in his natural authority again. His eyebrow raised towards me, inviting me to take charge of my triad and act as the leader I should be. My throat dried at the implication. I wasn't even a part of this triad anymore. A hysterical bubble of laughter floated from my chest. I quashed it quickly. How did I get into this position? I would have blamed Cami previously. She was the reason for all of this. But I wouldn't do that any longer. I had reconciled myself to the foolishness of the person I had been before. Instead, I turned the burning resentment into my skin, knowing that my impotence was of my making. I don't know what I had hoped to achieve, but everything had blown up spectacularly in my face.

"The Legion Heads do not want Cami to boost us. They always intended the experiment to be seen as a failure. Now, to ensure this, they've changed the Vinko rules. In a blatant attempt to kill her," Fenar eventually spoke, realizing I was incapable of acting as the leader right now. Pyke cast a

suspicious look at Eyke, who was taking in the room with his arms folded over his chest.

“It seems highly irregular to discuss such accusations with a stranger in the room,” he drawled. Eyke only sniffed.

“Where she goes. I go,” he rumbled, staring at Cami with such intensity that I saw a faint pink spring in her cheeks.

“Where is Nakasha?” Cami asked, breaking eye contact with the beast. *Finally*. My blood boiled in my veins that she allowed such a stark perusal. Had I attempted that, she would have railed at me or rolled her eyes. How had he won her over? His story about the Gaer, it was improbable and insulting. She claimed she’d touched the Gaer but if that was true, she’d be dead. Just the simple thought of her death had a cold sweat breaking out over my skin. Pyke answered her through gritted teeth.

“She is asleep.” He looked askance at Ambrose. “I cannot see why it is any business of yours. Featureless freak.”

Cami stiffened at the insult. Fenar growled and shoved him roughly.

“Don’t speak to my boost that way,” he nearly roared. Pyke scoffed.

“She’s a human,” he reminded us, as if that gave credence to his words. Wellyn hurried over to her, gently interlacing his fingers with hers, his body blocking her partly from view. He leaned to whisper in her ear. Whatever he said eased the tension in her face. I stalked to the couch, the boiling in my

veins bubbling over. My tail swung out and wrapped around Pyke's neck, pulling him back so his mutinous face was glaring at me, turning red.

“Insult my boost in my presence again and I'll tear your head off, Pyke,” I warned, my voice shaking with rage. “Do you understand? She is worth ten of you.” I squeezed my tail until he darkened in color. His hands scrabbled at the tight ring of my tail. I didn't release him until I saw the slight nod of his head. My tail swung behind me, a sure sign that he'd annoyed me, but I didn't hide it. Pyke gasped for air, leaning over and coughing.

“*Sheking* prick” he cursed hoarsely, rubbing his neck.

“What happened to the Tallis that wanted to break his human? Or did it break you, too? Seeing her little tears?” He sneered, getting to his feet, and stomping from the room before I could throttle him a second time. Kevin hummed in disapproval, the noise bleeding out the awkward silence of the room. He rubbed his hands together nervously.

“Don't take his words to heart, I beg you. Pyke is stressed.”

“I'm not offended. If I took to heart every comment made to me about being human, I would never recover.” Cami turned back to the shelf filled with human oddities and seemed to focus intently on them. Her shoulders were tight, head tipped up like she was trying to contain tears. She would never admit that the words hurt, but I could tell they had pierced her.

Only this morning she'd broken the silence I had pushed her into. My guts churned with acidic nausea. I wished it would be

a fire in my veins I felt rather than sickness. But that was my curse to bear. I hadn't realized what I was destroying when I went after Cami. I thought it would squash the draw I felt towards her. It had only deepened it. Now the sight of her filled me with a longing so keen that it felt like a blade puncturing holes in my lungs, stealing my oxygen. I'd wanted things neat and sedate. The same as they always had been. Comfort of the predictable. I'd been scared to love deeply. I saw what had happened when my mother passed away. Everything was in pieces around me, the sharpened edges of my ruin, a cage I doomed myself to exist in. There was only myself to blame. Now the Legion Heads were making blatant plans to take her from me before I even righted my wrongs.

Cami

“**T**hey will want Nakasha to fight in the Vinko if they get their way. But I don’t believe this is anything except a blatant attempt to kill Cami,” Fenar insisted for the tenth time.

Ambrose and Kevin had been pestering us with questions. I zoned out for a good portion of it, exhausted beyond words. I hadn’t moved about this much in weeks. It was taking a toll on me. The meeting with the Legion Heads had sparked a rush of adrenaline that was crashing now. Trays of tiny cakes had appeared at some point. They had appeared sweet but were filled with a bitter liquid that coated my tongue that no amount of water would remove. I’d retreated to an armchair, curling up into it and letting the terse discussion roll over me.

“My mother would never agree to such a thing.” Ambrose pursed his lips.

“All due respect, we all know that they outnumber her amongst the Heads. But if you could speak with her, find out if this is a concrete plan, we would appreciate it,” Wellyn said.

Ambrose glanced at Eyke. His manners forbade him from pressing us about who he was and why he was so attached to me. Thankfully, the others hadn't mentioned anything. It would raise too many questions at this stage.

"I will speak with her," Ambrose relented with a sigh. "Until that time we'll keep your presence here a secret. I'll speak with Pyke to make sure he understands as well."

For a moment, I considered trying to retreat deep into my mind again. Imagining myself sinking into manufactured memories and letting all this fall away. But I couldn't hide anymore. Wellyn's stare burned into me. His eyes were bright with the joint gaze of his creature. He wanted to discuss the words he had spoken earlier, and I wanted the same. Eyke loomed behind my chair, his large hands gripping the back like a sentry. He'd said little since our return, tension ratcheting higher as the conversation between the Heads was revealed.

"I've had the guest quarters readied. If you follow that hall—" Ambrose waved his hand, worrying the end of his mustache with his fingers, his eyes sunken. Nakasha wouldn't have missed this meeting. I knew from our interactions that she was the heart of this triad, and nothing would happen without her opinion. Yet she wasn't here. I bit my tongue, knowing I wouldn't like the answer. Instead, I allowed myself to be led away. The quarters were sumptuous and seemed to sprawl on in an impossible way.

"How is this place so big?" I wondered aloud, and Fenar jumped to answer.

“Ambrose can afford an expansion. It gives him unlimited space.”

“An expansion?” I looked at him and he sucked in a breath, rushing to answer me.

“Space is infinite if you have the means to access it. The elite have the resources to buy a pocket of space and use that to build into.”

“So, are we still in Melbak?” I asked, my head furrowing in concentration.

“Perhaps we can discuss time and space later. Ambrose has the means to buy anything he dreams of, and this apartment could sprawl the space of Melbak if he wanted it to. But I don’t want to speak about him, Cami. We must talk.” Wellyn pushed in between the two of us, his hand sliding to the small of my back. Opening the door, he ushered me in before I could respond. He tried to close the door, but a large hand barred him.

Eyke.

Ignoring Wellyn, he sought me for confirmation. I tilted my head toward the enormous bed. Eyke wordlessly strolled over to it, swinging his legs up and tucking his hands behind his head. Wellyn clenched his jaw but didn’t comment.

“What can I do?” he asked in a harsh whisper. The question had me frowning, and he repeated it, his fingers reaching to clutch at my waist.

“What can I do to prove what I said earlier?” His eyes were wide with desperation. I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

“You said you—” The words were caught in my throat, my heart clenching at the enormity of it.

“I love you,” he finished it for me. His chin thrust up, expecting me to argue with him. I could see it in every line of him, the tension and fear. He thought I was about to reject him. Instead, I stepped into him, sliding my arms around his waist. My head tucked under his chin. He released a strangled exclaim as he tentatively wrapped me in his arms. I spoke into his chest, letting the coolness of him wrap me up. I missed the feeling of it.

“Since the first moment we met, you were honest about wanting this. You made me feel like I was special and not just a boost. Tallis destroyed my photos, and seeing you sit by and watch destroyed my heart.”

Wellyn’s arms convulsed around me. He exhaled roughly.

“I didn’t—I wouldn’t ever,” he hurried to say. I glanced up, pressing my fingers against his lips. I searched his face, taking in the long, rusted lashes and the light that shone from his unnatural violet eyes. He was always open. Everything was there on his face. How had I not realized it before? He loved me.

“I should have known. I should have trusted you. I love you, too. I have since the Spring, I think. When you listened to me admit the darkest parts of myself and you didn’t turn away. You held on tighter.”

Wellyn choked, his eyes shiny as he dropped his forehead to rest against mine.

“My heart hasn’t been mine since the first time I saw you. Every moment I’ve been passing you slivers of it, knowing I was a goner.”

His lips pressed against mine sweetly. Like he was afraid I would pull away. He pulled back and his hand came up to cradle the back of my head.

“I know I still need to earn your forgiveness for letting Tallis play his games. I should have said no. I should have protected you more. That is the greatest regret of my life.”

“It’s weird. The hurt is still there. Though now, when I think about it, I should have realized it wasn’t how it seemed. I might need some time to sift through the conflicting emotions in me, but I need all the help I can get right now,” I whispered. “Promise me to always work with me and not against me anymore.”

“This is as it should be,” Eyke rumbled from behind and I startled. I’d forgotten he was in the room with us. His mouth quirked as I walked towards the bed. “This bed is big enough for us all.” He let his offer to Wellyn hang in the air. Wellyn didn’t move, his eyes sliding to me first. Hopping onto the bed, I inclined my head at him.

“I’ve missed you,” I admitted. “I’m ready to be a boost sandwich.” I rested my cheek on Eyke’s expansive chest. Wellyn scooted up behind me, his fingers skating over my stomach to fit himself behind me.

“This is strange,” I chuckled, closing my eyes. In such a short time, I had broken Eyke’s curse, boosted him, and left my depressed state, only to have Gloria swan in and throw everything into disarray. The meeting with the Legion Heads had frightened me more than anything I’d come against in this world. The lengths they would go to rid me of were astonishing.

“Everything will be alright, Precious,” Eyke promised, his hand grazing my hair. Wellyn pressed a kiss to my shoulder and hummed in agreement.

“That we can agree on. I don’t know you yet, Eyke, but if you are sincere in wanting the best for Cami, then we will be friends.”

Eyke’s chest jostled against my cheek as he reacted to Wellyn’s words.

“Cami changed everything for me. I will always choose her. That you can be sure of,” he replied, pressing a kiss to the top of my head to punctuate his words. It felt right, being protected between the two of them. The tingle I had always felt near Eyke hadn’t disappeared. Mix in Wellyn’s cool skin and I felt like I had slipped into a relaxing cocoon. I needed it.



Something smashed, the sound jostling me awake. It had come from outside the room. I leaped to my feet, racing to the door

to see Eyke holding Fenar by his neck against the wall. A cup laid in broken pieces on the floor.

“I’ll tear out your throat,” Eyke growled as Fenar struggled against his grip. The wolf’s eyes flashing with irritation more than fear.

“Little help, baby?” he drawled hoarsely. “Your big lug took offense to me bringing you a cap of cino.” I groaned, taking in the scene before me.

“Let him go, Eyke. He was doing essential work.” I turned to walk down the hall. I couldn’t remember where I was going, but I was sure I’d work it out. Fenar jogged behind me, panting as he filled his lungs again.

“Wellyn is positively blooming today.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “I take it that means you’ve forgiven him.”

I shrugged, not willing to have any discussion before a replacement coffee was in my hand. Fenar turned and walked backwards, his dark eyebrows wagging at me.

Wait. His dark eyebrows?

I shook my head, clearly still half asleep to have not realized his fluorescent hair was gone, a deep caramel blonde in its place. His natural color? He smiled under my intense perusal, preening.

“You like it?” His body stiffened as he waited for my response.

“Don’t fish for compliments,” I muttered grumpily.

His lips twitched as he held the impulse to say more, pleased by my response.

“Why the change?” I asked, sighing as we came into a large room that was full of more human gadgets. Kevin wasn’t kidding about his collection. Fenar searched around the room, distracted for a moment. His fingers brushed against an air-frier, and his forehead wrinkled with a grimace. Eyke entered the room behind me, his footfalls light despite his size.

“I am trying this new thing,” Fenar confessed, his breath hitching as he steeled himself, “where I stop pretending to be someone I’m not. Where I try being myself for once.”

“Good for you.” He dropped a little at my perceived disinterest. “I look forward to getting to know the real you.” He gave me a tight smile. He masked it by walking to the ordering machine and getting me another coffee. I sighed gratefully as he pressed the warm mug into my hands.

After last night, it was clear Fenar had nothing to do with what Tallis planned. I couldn’t hold that against him, but we weren’t friends. I couldn’t trust him like I could Wellyn. He’d proved he had the capacity for deceit, and I was never sure of his true intentions. I bet I had seen more facets to Fenar than any of his friends. He’d shown me his home, where he’d grown up, and how he helped them. I’d seen the joker, the charmer and the player. The one who tossed a saucy wink and waited for women to fall over themselves for him. How much of that was his true character versus what he cultivated to seem more accepted by society? Melbak wasn’t accepting of those

who didn't have a blood lineage to boast about, and he didn't. But he was handsome, strong, and powerful. His creature was fierce, and he was brave. All things Legion seemed to value.

"I realize you didn't have anything to do with Tallis. The night he..." I cut off with a wave of my hand. Fenar looked at me.

"I know it's too much to ask for the same forgiveness you gave Wellyn, but just know that I regret ever making you think I would hurt you in such a way. I have been foolish, but I am done pretending. Especially about how I feel about you."

Fenar stepped closer to me, his fingers lightly gripping my elbows. He looked so different like this, and it wasn't just the hair. The somber note in his tone reminded me of the Ward Estate. It had been the first time I'd seen him serious. No mocking, teasing or joking first. I swallowed at the searing heat in his eyes.

"You seem sincere, but you'll have to forgive me if I don't quite believe you," I admitted finally stepping back out of his grasp. He nodded, as if expecting that response. He hesitated for a moment, eyes flicking to Eyke before he responded.

"Nobody ever bothered to look past the mask I put on, except for you, Wellyn and Tallis. I only have myself to blame for how you feel about me."

An urge swept over me. To test how serious he was about showing his true self.

“Tell me something about yourself that nobody else knows.” I sipped my coffee. He chewed his lip, looking at Eyke again, but he must have decided the embarrassment was worth it as he confessed.

“I used to hoard blankets at the Ward Estate. I’d create a cave and pretend I was in another place. Where I was wanted, where people cared about me. It got so bad that I had weekly inspections in my room to clear out what I’d stolen. Something about the muffled softness made me feel safe. The urge only stopped when Wellyn arrived. Something in me recognized him as safe, as my family.”

He trailed off, and I put the coffee down, my heart cracking at the thought of Fenar huddled under a pile of blankets. Imagining the warmth of them was the love he craved so badly. I remembered the piles of blankets around the apartment.

“You still have a serious collection of blankets, don’t you?” I asked.

The door slammed open before he could respond. Kevin burst through, his eyes wild. Eyke leaped in front of me, his arms outstretched. Fenar slid in behind, his hands hovering at my sides. He didn’t touch me. Both men pulled away when they realized there was no immediate threat.

“What has happened, Kev?” Fenar frowned at the out of breath Legion. Ignoring Fenar, his gaze shifted to me.

“It’s Nakasha.” He swallowed. “She told me she confided in you about her illness. That you claimed to know a solution.

She was furious at the impertinence until... well...now she needs help. The others don't want to ask you, but I won't have her dying because they are too foolish to take help from a human."

Pushing out of the protective huddle, I hurried over to the distraught man. His chest was heaving, and he threw me a harried look as he waved me forward.

"What is all the noise about?" called Tallis as he rounded the corner, hurriedly buttoning a shirt. Wellyn almost slammed into his back as he tripped over his boots. Kevin didn't reply, his breath coming in gulps as he tried to get oxygen into his lungs.

"Nakasha is unwell." He darted a look at Eyke, who tensed. "She's been drained of energy for a week, sleeping mostly. But we haven't been able to wake her for a full day now. She's going to die, I know it. Unless your solution can save her."

He turned resolute, sucking in a heavy breath.

"Help her, help her or I'll have to—" he stumbled over the threat he'd been about to speak. I placed my hand on his arm to stop the bluster. He stilled under my touch, his cheeks flushing red.

"Of course we'll help her. But it's unconventional. You'll have to trust us," I warned, knowing Nakasha's triad would fight the solution. They all feared the Gaer more than anything. Believed it to be dangerous. A shiver coursed through me. Perhaps I was wrong too. What if we were wrong, and this was not a solution for the boosts? My fear must have

been radiating out of me, because Eyke reached out to run a few fingers down my face. The comforting buzz of his touch eased my muscles.

“This will save your boost, trust me,” Eyke assured. “Gaer cannot harm boosts or me. I wish we had more time, but I don’t have enough strength to fix it yet.”

“Fix what?” I wondered, but Kevin grabbed at Eyke and forced him to move.

“I don’t care what it is. Just do it. If it makes her well again, we’ll do anything.”

The group of us followed Kevin, pressed into the hallway. Eyke grunted.

“You will have to do nothing. That will be the hardest part,” he warned, but didn’t elaborate. We passed through a familiar door and into the large room where Nakasha slept. The room was low lit. Pyke was kneeling by her bed. He shot up when we entered.

“Kevin, what is the meaning of this? Get them out of here,” he hissed, standing protectively, barring Nakasha from view. Ambrose was sprawled in a chair on the other side, his normally immaculate condition ruffled, his hair sticking out on all ends. He eyed us with a resignation that concerned me. Kevin pushed Pyke aside firmly, uncovering the slight form of Nakasha on the bed.

Their boost was leached of color, except for the raised, red welts that covered parts of her face. Her eyes were closed, and

she looked weak, her chest moving only slightly as she struggled to breathe.

“They know how to fix this. She told Nakasha that she had found a way, that she’d avoided the illness. We can sit in this room and wait for the last breath to rattle out of our boost, or we can do something about it. Shelve your prejudice for a moment. She’s a human, but she’s a boost as well. A healthy boost. Don’t you want Nakasha well?” Kevin ranted, his timid manner disappearing as he faced down his furious triad.

“She’s led you up a merry path,” Pyke scoffed, his fist pounding into the bunched sheets. “What would a human know of the ways of Legion? How could she possibly help?”

Ambrose cleared his throat.

“Tell me what solution?” he pressed. His haunted eyes held a spark of hope. Big hands clamped on my shoulders.

“It’s Eyke’s solution,” I admitted, emboldened by his solid presence. “He’s bought me time until I complete everything fully.” I choked a little on the words, not wanting to even consider boosting Tallis and completing the quad fully. “But this goes against what you believe. Though it isn’t dangerous, it is necessary to save her. It will forever change your dynamic as a triad, though.”

I hesitated to say more. Pyke glared like he wanted to throttle me. The tendons in Kevin’s neck pulled tight, and Ambrose seemed to deflate even further. Nakasha was unresponsive on the bed, her eyes tightly shut, covered with a film of grime. She was suffering. That much was obvious.

“The Legion Heads have told us continually that she is fine. That this is nothing to do with her being a boost. They insist she will wake up soon and be well. After what you said yesterday, I am concerned that there are machinations happening behind the scenes.”

Eyke had walked over and was peering at Nakasha with a clear look of unease.

“If you want my help, we must take her now,” he bent over to look closer. “She is suffering from the incomplete bond.”

We all froze. Pyke swore under his breath, but the comment seemed to take the fury out of his actions. His shoulders drooped, and he fell forward to lean his hands against the bed. I expected Ambrose to order his triad into action, but he only rubbed a hand across his face, as if we weren't even here. I wondered when he'd last had a boost and whether that was affecting him. The silence was deafening, the lack of noise seeming to ring in my ears as we waited and waited for the Aydro triad to decide. Then the dam broke. I pushed through and stood at the foot of the bed. Placing my hands on my hips, I pointed at Ambrose.

“Up. You are saving your boost today. Do you need help to carry her?” I ordered him, surprising myself with the authority that leaked through my tone. Pyke made a noise of protest. I sliced a hand through the air to silence him. The tension in the air was so thick I choked on it, breathing shallowly.

“Shut it scaly,” I warned him. He pursed his lips in a tight line until they were nearly white. But he didn't say a word as

Ambrose bundled Nakasha up in his arms. I turned to Kevin and Eyke, who were already looking to me for direction. Somehow, I ended up running the show. That was fine with me because someone had to fix this.

“Kevin, can you help Ambrose with Nakasha? Eyke, where would be best to take her?”

Eyke hummed. “Anywhere with the Gaer will work,” his voice strange as he watched the wasted form of Nakasha held tightly in Ambrose’s arms.

“Gaer? What are you suggesting we do? I’m not going anywhere near that poison.” Pyke eyes flashed bright with indignation.

“You must trust Eyke. The Gaer isn’t what it seems, and it isn’t poison to boosts. I should know. I touched it,” I blurted out. There were sharp inhales of shock, all except Ambrose, who was striding forward, looking more himself than he had moments ago.

“It matters not, she’ll die anyway, Pyke. Can’t you see that?” he argued. Pyke clamped his mouth shut and hurried after him. Eyke gripped my elbow as I made to follow them.

“That would have been you,” he whispered in my ear. His voice wavered mournfully at the statement. He was so moved that it surprised me. Still, I let him hold me. Could that still be me if I didn’t boost Tallis? I felt queasy at the thought of ending up like Nakasha and boosting Tallis. Both were abhorrent to me.

“It would be better for you to stay here,” he acknowledged, his gray eyes apologetic. I wanted to argue, but knew he was right. Out there, I wasn’t protected. I needed to stay put until we could get more information about the Legion Heads plans. Instead of arguing, I nodded and watched him trail after Kevin.

I ran my hands through my hair, knowing it was likely a mess. I was barefoot, only wearing one of Wellyn’s shirts and underwear. My stomach growled. Fenar chuckled, breaking the tension in the room.

“How about round three for your morning drink?” he asked. Wellyn guided me back to our quarters, his arms wrapped around me. When we arrived, there was already a steaming cup of coffee waiting. I grabbed it and the diary I’d swiped from the Vault library. Wellyn insisted on sitting behind me, happy to play with my hair and sit in silence. Fenar was scrolling through his reader. The natural caramel hue of his hair kept throwing me whenever I caught glimpses of it from my peripheral. He didn’t say anything when he caught me peeking again. The slow smirk sliding across his face as he lowered his gaze told me enough. Tallis had stayed in the room as well, surprisingly. He’d disappeared, no doubt to brood somewhere private, but had returned with a platter of food. Wordlessly, he’d placed it on the low table where I could easily reach, then hastened to the other side of the room. He had his back turned to me now, perusing the spines of the small collection of books in the room. I wished he would leave. He must feel how unwelcome he was here. I wanted

nothing to do with him. His presence made me tenser than I realized.

Especially when Wellyn rubbed my shoulders, tsking at the tightness they held. I tried to focus on the diary, using a translator that Fenar had rustled up from somewhere. It differed from the one I'd used at the Vault, like a sheet of glass that slid over the words on a page and deciphered them into words I could understand. The writer wrote with a florid flare, painstakingly recording details about her everyday life. I couldn't quite believe that this had survived the purge of all other mentions of quads.

She seemed blissful, content, and spent her days with her Legion. I named her Goldie, after the cover of the diary. The only undercurrent of discord came with someone she had named The Bold Lord who was determined to destroy the relative peace of Melbak. He fought for the rights of the Kindale line and its sub-houses, Lea and Canoste. The Heads had banned them from taking boosts. That didn't sit well. Goldie seemed to think it served them right. She claimed they had perverted the name of boosts in the first place. I set the diary aside with a sigh, lodging the translator in as a mark for later. I couldn't read anymore. Even with Wellyn rubbing my shoulders, my body was tense. I picked up the half-finished comic I'd drawn of Tallis, the further adventures of Bossman, I'd called it. I'd stuffed it in my bag on a whim when I'd rushed to pack everything. The nub of my pencil snapped when I shaded a little too hard.

Great.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Wellyn whispered to me, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. I shook my head. What was there to talk about? My whole life was the plot of a ridiculous movie. It was unbelievable that there might be people legitimately plotting my death.

“We should discuss the Vinko,” Fenar huffed, tossing his reader to the side. “It’s a setup. I think we can all agree on that.”

I grimaced, about to protest, when Tallis interjected, his tail swiping the wall as he turned.

“We can’t do much until we have more information. It could have been a bluff to try to scare Cami into speaking.”

My mouth dropped open. I hadn’t even considered that. Wellyn scoffed from behind me, tense and hard at the mention of the Vinko.

“It’s no bluff. In fact, it’s the perfect foil. The legitimate way to eliminate a threat and a loose end in one sweep. They can maintain the façade of championing the strength of Legion with no one suspecting a thing.”

Fenar tossed his head back and glared at the ceiling.

“We’ll get him Wellyn. One day we will destroy him and every cursed thing he stands for.”

I turned to look at Wellyn. Who were they talking about? Wellyn shook his head, his jaw tight.

“Who? Is there more to this than you are telling me,” I narrowed my eyes.

“Cami, this doesn’t have anything to do with you. Trust me when I say that.” He shifted from under me, refusing to look me in the eye as he stood.

“But you won’t tell me what it is?” I was stony, that familiar sear of pain flaring in my chest. After our talk last night, I’d thought we’d put this to rest. I thought we’d agreed to work together. That meant no lies, no secrets, so how far did that go?

“Not at this stage, no.” He sucked in a breath, expecting me to argue with him. I didn’t. His words left me strangely empty. It stung, and the implication radiated through me. I had no claim on Wellyn, despite the implied ones that came with saying “I love you.” He didn’t trust me enough to handle it. Or was this another example of him believing that I couldn’t comprehend it because I was a human?

Ducking my head, I snagged my things off the couch, curling up in the opposite corner with them on my lap. Wellyn shuffled on his feet, waiting for me to respond. What was there to say? He could keep his secrets and I would keep my hurt feelings. There was no need to rail at him and force him to tell me something he wasn’t interested in sharing.

“Cami, I don’t want to tell you something that might put you in even more danger. It’s not because I don’t want to tell you,” he whispered. I flicked him a hard look.

“That’s your choice. I respect that. But I wonder what the words we spoke last night meant, especially since it sounds

like you're doing it to manage threats against me. Working together means honesty."

Wellyn made a soft noise in the back of his throat. I didn't need to see his face to know he was wounded.

"Don't sharpen your claws on Wellyn. This secret is serious. If it got out, we would be in danger, you especially," Tallis interjected from his post in the shadows. Folding the drawing shut, I put it aside and glared at him.

"Thank you for that helpful piece of information Tallis, although next time you could see if I gave a shit about anything you have to say."

Something flashed in Tallis's eyes. A mocking smile spread across his face. He stepped off the wall and spread his arms wide, his tail drifting behind him lazily.

"Is that right, Pet? You can punish me if you dare," he taunted, focused on me like a laser. My skin flushed under the bold perusal. Leaping from my seat before I could process what I was doing, I strode over and jammed my finger into his hard chest. He didn't move, just arched a dark eyebrow.

"Call me that again and I will show you what damage these nails can really do," I warned him, jabbing him again for equal measure. He stepped back, until his back hit the wall and I followed him, my finger fused to the hard planes of his chest. I wanted to wipe the smirk off his face so badly. Wanted to make him feel the deep hurt I had been carrying since he burned my photographs. A tremor of deep emotions ran through me, causing my lip to wobble. I snatched it between

my teeth to hide the weakness. Tallis didn't miss the action. His dark pitted eyes narrowed on my mouth.

“You are too feisty for such a defenseless human. The only use those blunt nails might have would be shredding down my back while I make you scream my name in pleasure.”

I reared back, a look of disgust freeing my trapped lip. It curled in disdain. Tallis leered at me while my brain short-circuited on his comment.

More games.

He had found a new way to humiliate me. My cheeks were hot as I raised my hand and launched it at his cheek. Like a claw, the nails gripped his cheek, leaving four stark red lines across his face. My chest heaved as I spun away, but Tallis's tail shot out and wrapped around my wrists, binding my hands together. He huffed under his breath, raising a hand to gingerly brush the scratch on his face.

“Ahh, Pet, you've proven me wrong again. My cheek is an excellent canvas for your rage. Have you anything else you want to mark me with? A bite mark on my other cheek, perhaps?”

The smirk was still there, not perturbed by my lashing out. He liked it. I leaned in, wriggling my arms in his iron grip.

“If you don't let me go, I will bruise your nuts so hard you'll beg me to geld you,” I promised.

“Please, no fighting” Wellyn sighed from behind us. I shot him a look. Was it not obvious that I didn't want to be around

this infuriating Legion? There was something about Tallis that pressed my buttons. I couldn't stand him. My heart was thundering in my chest just being close to him, my head spinning. Tallis squeezed my wrists tight once more, eliciting a squeak from me. Then he let me go. I stumbled back into the arms of Fenar, who tsked in my ear.

“It seems you have some energy to burn. Shall we use it in a more useful way?” He put a hand to the small of my back and propelled me toward the door. “I want to train you. Give you some tools to protect yourself. If we end up in this Vinko, you're going to need it.”

“Wait, Fenar.” Wellyn called out, but Fenar just waved a hand and kept pushing me forwards. If it took me out of the same room as Tallis I was okay with that. I also welcomed some space from Wellyn. His secrets made the ground underneath me seem unsteady. It made me think of him lolling and drunk, moments before I had my comforting belief that he was on my side obliterated.

Cami

Fenar guided me into a room where the floor was covered in soft material mats. The walls were lined with a variety of different weapons. Fenar eyed a staff that had a dark stone attached at the end. Reaching up, he brushed the metal length of the pole.

“Ah, I don’t think I’m quite ready for that,” I told him hesitantly. He shot me an amused smile, shaking his head.

“This staff used to belong to Tallis. Ambrose won it from him many years ago. He uses it with his tail. I’ll have to see if I can slip it out for him.”

“Or burn it in front of him,” I suggested, liking the idea of destroying something he cared about. Fenar rolled his shoulders, motioning for me to come across from him.

“Or that, if that’s what you want.”

I didn’t reply. It was difficult to articulate what I wanted, especially when I’d like to see the sinfully handsome Legion trussed up and punished. But I had bigger things to worry

about. Like making sure I wasn't weak if someone decided they couldn't wait to kill me. Fenar must have seen the switch in my state because his own expression was serious.

“Why does he hate Ambrose so much?” I asked.

“They grew up together, their families were close. All of Ambrose's triad come from noble lines and Tallis expected the same. It didn't work out that way, obviously.” He ran a hand down his form. “Things were not automatically great between us. All his old friends abandoned him, including Ambrose. They treated him differently, and he never got over it. We've proven how strong we are, and I don't hold any grudges. But Tallis has never forgiven them for distancing themselves from him.”

I stared at the staff, knowing it would have killed Tallis that Ambrose had it in his collection. How he must have hated being seen as lesser. His pride must have stung. But he had reconciled himself to it. He'd accepted his triad brothers.

“If I were to attack you, what would you do?” Fenar asked, feinting towards me so quickly it made me flinch. At any moment he could reach out and grab me. Wanting to preempt him, I watched his arms. Now I wish I had paid more attention to those self defense classes I had taken a year ago. What I would've given for some pepper spray. I rolled my eyes to cover my frustration at the blanks in my knowledge.

What would I do? I could kick and scream, but against Fenar's sculpted body and quick reflexes I'd be caught and subdued in moments.

“I’d scream, run, and struggle? It wouldn’t do much, I imagine,” I guessed sourly. Fenar nodded, pleased with my response.

“Exactly, you are not an expert warrior, and the best tool you have is the way people underestimate you. They think you’re soft and submissive, but you might surprise them enough to escape if you give them every bit of the temper I know you have.”

He gave me a sly smile before leaping forward and wrapping his arms around my waist. The quick movement shocked me. I didn’t protest. Instead, I let out a small squeak as he cushioned my fall on the mats, pressing his significant bulk against the length of my body. My hands wrapped around his biceps as my mouth gaped. My lungs ached from the air being pushed out of them. I should have fought. Instead, I slackened.

Fenar’s scent was overwhelming. A musky undertone that reminded me of his wolf swirled with a citrusy sharpness. Coupled with the warmth of his body lying on mine, it seemed to flip a switch in my brain. There was a sudden, intense longing for him to lean on me fully, to part my legs and let him settle between them. My gaze dropped to his mouth, where his top fangs partly grazed the bottom of his full lip. The heave of my chest was from more than stress. When my hazy brain caught up to the way my body was leaning, I jerked into movement. My nails sunk deep into the open skin of his arms, raking downward as I thrashed my body. Fenar grunted before a low laugh escaped him as I bucked upward to dislodge him. I

opened my mouth to scream. He covered it with his large palm. My nostrils flooded with the scent of his sweat. The heady sense that he could take me right now and I could not stop him filled me.

“You have other weapons. Don’t hold back for fear of hurting me,” Fenar reminded me, unbothered. His head tilted, feeling my bared teeth. He removed his palm from my mouth, and I struck. Lunging to the side, I bit his straining forearm. Fenar hissed, snatching his arm away. That gave me just enough space to roll to the side and wriggle out from underneath him.

He snatched my clambering feet, dragging me back and looming over me. Pulling my feet out and propelled them back, attempting to leverage him off me. He held on tighter. Attempting to draw him in closer, I drew my legs towards me and lashed out with my hands, managing to swipe across his face the same way I had Tallis.

Fenar guffawed at the direct hit, covering his cheek with a palm. One of my legs was free, and I coiled it into my body, sending it straight into Fenar’s knee. He groaned and crumbled onto the floor next to me. With my other foot free, I managed to scramble away. My heart pounded as adrenaline raged through my body. Fenar rolled onto his back, throwing an arm over his eyes.

“That was very good, Cami. You would have enough strength to fumble out of a Legion’s attack.”

His summary of my amateur moves rankled a bit, but I settled myself. He was the expert. Even though his smug face deserved to be swiped at, I needed his skills right now.

“You’ll teach me, right?” I slid over to him on the mat. Vulnerability welled up inside of me and I didn’t like it or how small I was in the face of legitimate death threats. Fenar opened one eye to look at me, all traces of amusement gone. He looked so different with his natural hair color. It was almost like looking at a stranger. The bright colors had been a shield, one he was shedding. Lying next to him, I was glad to be seeing the real Fenar. He teased and charmed, but the dial wasn’t turned up to one hundred. He was relaxed rather than scheming how to wield his flirtations.

“You can count on me, Cami,” he promised.

We climbed to our feet, and Fenar took me through a set of more basic movements. He walked me through what to do if someone came up to me from behind and grabbed my hair along with showing me the sensitive places on a Legion. His cheeks pinked, an absurd notion, when he mentioned the sensitivity of the area between a man’s legs. He huffed when I laughed at him.

“You said you’d chop Tallis’s balls off. I’d say you were aware how sensitive those parts are. You can be scary when you want, you know,” he hastened on.

“Legion with tails are very sensitive at the base. If you have the option to dig your nails into the skin, it will certainly shock a Legion enough to let you go.”

I wiped a sleeve over my face, mopping up some of the sweat. That was interesting.

“So, if I grabbed Tallis’s tail, it might get him to leave me alone? Is it a debilitating sort of pain?”

Fenar’s smile deepened and he let out a husky chuckle.

“I wouldn’t call it painful, more that it would shock him. If you understand my meaning.” He smirked, and we shared a look of mischief. I liked the idea of causing Tallis some measure of pain. I looked towards the doorway, expecting someone to come interrupt us. Maybe Eyke if he’d returned. But it remained empty.

“Don’t hold what Wellyn said against him. He loves you desperately, and it’s safer for you to not know,” Fenar added, bumping me with his shoulder. It was like he knew what I was thinking. I pulled a face.

“How much worse could it get, Fenar? I need to know he has my back. We talked about working together so what happened with Tallis wouldn’t happen again. I thought both of you had been in on some elaborate ruse to fool me. It hurt horribly thinking that Wellyn had given Tallis something I’d trusted him to keep safe. Now he’s being shifty again so soon after I let him back in again. I’m alone here. Doesn’t he get that? How can I trust him when he keeps things from me?”

Fenar crowded me with a focused glance.

“You think you’re alone here?” he asked, dismissing everything else I said. I threw my hands up in exasperation.

“That wasn’t a dig at you, Fenar. I didn’t trust you before Tallis destroyed my photos. You can’t expect me to put myself in your hands. Not when you’ve proved to be duplicitous before.”

He stared at me.

“How long?” he asked, breath suddenly ragged. His eyes glowed with a luminescent quality that told me his creature was at the surface. My forehead creased.

“How long what?” I frowned, not understanding the abrupt change in his stance. He turned toward me, looming so close that the heat of his body scorched me.

“How long will you hold that mistake against me?” he growled agonizingly. “My words hold no weight. My actions dismissed. Despite trying to be better, I am still held apart. I’m right beside you. I have been since I realized I couldn’t go through with stealing your boost. Yet you *still* consider yourself to be alone. Nothing I do seems to move you.”

He was panting over me now, his hands clenched at his sides. His words were furious, but there was also hurt. Squeezed underneath the indignation and bluster was the young Fenar who wanted something he couldn’t have. The Legion, who thought he had to fake his very self to get anywhere in life, was faltering. He’d changed his hair, confessed his intention to be honest about himself, and I could see the toll it was taking on him. Right now, a single wrong word would send him spiraling into dangerous territory. I’d held him apart because I didn’t trust him. He’d been trying too

hard to scale a wall I'd built between us. Something he'd likely never done before. Even the smallest step towards baring his true self was terrifying to him. My own fears were pushing him away, but he didn't know that.

All Fenar saw was the rejection. After his walls crumbled, he let me see inside him and he thought I didn't think he was enough. He wasn't perfect, but he was here, trying to reach me and help me with the skills he had. I stepped into his stiff body and wrapped my arms around his waist. Lacing my fingers behind his back, squeezing hard until his hands settled lightly on my waist.

"Come on. You can hold me tighter than that," I scolded into his shirt. His fingers danced up my spine, one slipping under my hair to cradle the back of my head. Humming, I pressed myself closer, shutting my eyes and letting myself sink into the hug fully.

"Cami, baby, I'm sorry." Fenar leaned his head down to nuzzle my hair. I melted into him a little more. Something hard nudged against my stomach.

"It's okay. We are all going through a lot. I know you've been working on yourself, and I've loved seeing the changes." The hug felt nice. I rubbed his back, hoping he felt the same way.

"No," Fenar cleared his voice nervously, trying to put some distance between us. "Not because of that."

A noise of protest left me as I grabbed the back of his shirt to keep him from letting go. When I looked up at him, his

cheeks were flushed. Beyond sheepish. The hardness pressed against me again.

“Oh.” Instead of stepping back and pretending I hadn’t felt his erection joining us for a hug, I leaned in and pressed my body against it.

“Does it turn you on to lash me with your tongue?” He placed his hands on my hips, swallowing hard, then shook his head and huffed a laugh.

“I’ve been fighting this since we got in the room. I didn’t want you to think I’m a creep who couldn’t keep it in his robes.” He swallowed again, shoving at me gently. “Just ignore it. It will go away eventually.”

The incident at the temple rose to my mind. Wellyn had driven me wild with his tongue and I used Fenar’s leg for the delicious friction. He’d been an amazing kisser. I couldn’t deny the urge to taste him again right now. Especially when he was trying so hard to be a gentleman, looking resolutely up at the ceiling, willing his body to relax. He hadn’t got off that day, even though I had. I wondered how he would react if I offered some mutual distraction. An orgasm couldn’t hurt the tight tension I had built up in my body. Pressing my breasts to his body, I urged him to walk backwards until he hit the wall

“Baby? Wha...ohhh,” Fenar groaned the moment my hand hit his cock, wrapping around its hot length through his clothes. With my one hand busy jerking him, I used the other to maneuver his own hand to my ass. He squeezed the flesh

there, almost involuntarily, sending a thrum of hunger through my clit.

“We have unfinished business, don’t you think? Last time you took such good care of me, but I was selfish, wasn’t I?” My voice sounded beyond husky as I reached up and slipped my fingers in between his robes and down the waistband of his pants. Fenar groaned as my hand wrapped around him. Skin to skin felt deliciously better. He wasn’t too long but very thick, with a slight curve. I wrapped my fingers around the base, enjoying the throaty noises escaping him.

“You don’t have to,” he muttered under his breath, his eyes glazed as he stared down at me in disbelief. My nails drifted lazily over his length as I slowed my strokes, fingers dipping into the beading come. I brought it to my lips and sucked it off, the salty taste making my mouth water.

“You want me to stop?” I couldn’t help but taunt, enjoying the fumbling way he gripped my ass, grinding me on his length. If he felt me now, he’d slip right in.

“Never, I just don’t want you to feel you have to do anything you don’t want,” he said fiercely. His lips fell to my neck, fangs running over the length. A shiver wracked through my body. My knees buckled as I groaned.

“Oh, do that again,” I urged him. He obeyed, his fangs like pinpricks of pleasure on my skin. Slipping my hand back into his pants, I began pumping his length again. Fenar was laying sloppy kisses up and down my neck, occasionally scraping his fangs along the skin until I was a panting mess. I wanted his

lips on mine and I told him so. We crashed against each other, thankful that the wall was there to hold our desperate, messy movements. Fenar's fingers stole into my trousers, bypassing my panties, swiping up and down my drenched lips. I moaned into his mouth, the clash of our teeth, tongue and breath making both our hands frenzied as we worked each other to a building explosion. Fenar wrapped his hand around my hair angling my head back so he could thrust his tongue deeper against mine. Each slide matched the touch of his fingers down my slit. He circled my clit, the noises of my sopping pussy almost as loud as the groans we poured into each other's mouths.

"You're so wet baby," he keened against my throat, nipping me with his fangs. My fingers squeezed around his cock. Everything he did to me made me return it to him tenfold.

"Next time I want to taste you. Want to drink you all night," he whispered against my lips, his fingers pressing against me expertly. Whimpering, I leaned against him fully, moving my hips to get more of his touch. I wanted that too. I also wanted him to spin me around and fuck me against this wall. But I knew that would cross a line somehow. This was enough, for now. My pussy spasmed, thighs trembling as he pushed me towards an orgasm. He felt solid under my hand, the pre-cum helping my hand to slide down his cock perfectly. There was the distinct smell of sex in the space, making me feel a heady desire for release.

"Are you going to come soon for me, baby?" Fenar asked, sucking on my neck. His own hips jerked up into my hand. He

was close as well.

“Y-yes, oh yes,” I panted, capturing his lips, and tangling our tongues as we both exploded together. My hand flooded with scalding lengths of cum. Fenar cupped my pulsing pussy and for a moment we just panted together, leaning against one another for support. Fenar withdrew his fingers, and I watched, fascinated, as he sucked on them, licking them with a moan. His eyes flashed with wonder.

“I could live off your taste,” he moaned. I pulled my hand out of his pants and watched his pupils dilate as I cleaned his release off with my tongue. I reached up and pulled his face down for another kiss. It was lazy, sated, and sensual. I could taste myself on his tongue. It was erotic as hell. The kissing tapered off, and I threw my arms around his waist again, where this had all began.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve that, but I guess I need to have a tantrum more often,” Fenar chuckled into my hair, mystified. I huffed a laugh and looked up at him.

“I want to believe you, Fenar, when you say you’re there for me. I need people to be with me and since that moment you have tried, your actions have been good. Letting go is something I need to work on. I admit I hold a grudge and that isn’t fair. I have put you and Tallis in the same box and that isn’t right.”

Fenar hummed under his breath, digesting my words.

“Words and actions. Hold me to a high standard, baby. I promise I won’t let you down.”

I snuggled into his chest, taking the reprieve he offered. Allies were imperative right now. It was time to move on. Except for Tallis. As far as I was concerned, that Legion could jump off a bridge.

Eyke

My guts churned as I followed the Aydro triad through the forested area. I wanted us to be well away from the prying eyes of other Legion and was relying on them to take me somewhere safe and secluded. Ambrose was cradling his boost, his knuckles white around her sheet covered body. I couldn't stop my gaze from snagging on the surrounding. Things had changed so much during my imprisonment. My power had overwhelmed the land. Even with me incapacitated, it had stayed corporeal. Somehow, I had disrupted the natural way of Melbak. What they called the Gaer had weakened the land, which had tampered the presentation of boosts. It was a loop designed to destroy and my power was at the heart of it.

I never intended this when I designed it.

This was a nightmare.

Leaves crunched under my heavy boots. All around me there was a thrum of power, and it cowed me. This wasn't what I had wanted. It was hard to marry the ideals of Eyke the Bold with who I was now. Melbak was my home, but it was

unrecognizable. My mutated powers had changed the landscape irrevocably, and I keened to see the destruction it caused. Technology had developed. Building structures looked alien to me. I sucked in a shuddering breath, pushing down the myriad of emotions that were crushed against my chest. I wanted to fall to my knees and scream my foolishness at the sky.

What had I done? What was I thinking?

There was a part of me that thought the Heads of my time were right to put me away. They saw me as a threat. Rightly so. Yet destruction came even from my cursed state. My mind wandered to my precious boost, Cami, and how she would have ended up just like the compact form in Ambrose's arms. She would have been weakened by my callous decisions. She would have died because the load of supporting Melbak was too much of a burden for her to carry.

No.

I shook my head to disperse the alarming thought. Never. I was going to fix everything, and Cami would never know the darkness I had set in motion. I would never touch my power again. It crawled over the land, almost sentient, and that shocked me. So many souls crushed within it. It was too much to process.

Right now, I had a boost to save. I had to focus on that. The human obsessed one, Kevin, darted me a concerned look. He would not speak about his worries, but they were etched all over his face. He didn't trust me, but he had no alternative. His

choices were limited. Either follow a strange, human featured Legion, one he didn't know, or watch his boost fade away until she died.

“Here should be fine.” My voice came out gruffer than I intended. Inside, I was being held by a few loose threads and one wrong step or word would send me unraveling. I focused on breathing, expanding my lungs and pushing the air out. That I could control. Eventually, I would fix all of this, and Melbak would be free to flourish again. The triad turned and the angry one glared at me. Pyke. I motioned to the Gaer. It was thick here, undulating in between the trees, covering the ground, and snaking up the trunks of the trees. Infected with shadow. My chest clenched, but I shoved it away. Save the boost first. I could cope with the enormity of the problems later. Ambrose shuffled forward. Nakasha was a shell of a Legion in his arms. I cast my flinty gaze over them, knowing I looked formidable despite my lack of Legion features.

“One of you will have to press her hand into the substance,” I explained. Pyke blanched. *Predictable*. His mulish mouth opened to argue with me. My jaw clenched, holding back a barrage of information about why he should trust me.

“Absolutely not. He's an utter lunatic, not to mention he's featureless. Why would you suggest such idiocy? Touching the Gaer causes death,” Pyke snarled at me. Kevin placed a hand on his bicep, but he wrenched it free, giving him an incredulous look. “This is a ploy. Someone wants our boost to be killed.”

I remained silent. Any words from me would inflame his fears. I was stuck on his comment about Gaer causing death. That wasn't possible. My eyes turned skyward, blinking back a hot press of tears. It was never supposed to hurt anybody, just teach them a lesson. The triad hissed under their breath as they tried to come to a consensus. It was futile. They had followed me out here, into the dense, infected forest, hoping I had some cure to save their precious boost. They would capitulate eventually. The substance roiled, as if sensing a boost. A mindless drive had motivated me too, had urged me towards Cami, I had somehow known she was the key to my escape. Who of my brethren would it free? Which of my house would join me in this strange Melbak that didn't know who I was. A jolt of dizziness slammed into me. I would have to swear them to secrecy to protect the knowledge of me getting out.

Of my own twisted creation.

“How can we trust you?” Ambrose was sick with worry. I could see the strain on his face and wished I had a way to promise him it would be alright. Instead, I shrugged.

“You have no other choice at this point. You must have her touch the substance. It will connect her mentally to the Legion who will complete the quad she needs. We will explain to Nakasha when she wakes up that she will need to boost this new Legion and, instead of a triad, you will have a quad. I wish I didn't have to rush it this way, but I don't know how long it will take to unravel the curse. It's more prolific than I could have ever expected.”

“You are insane,” Pyke goggled at me, shock on his features. “What madness are you talking about? Quads?”

I folded my arms over my chest, wishing I could explain more. Wishing I could be honest about all that I knew but knowing would only cause more trouble. They set to whispering again, the poor boost looking paler than ever. I couldn't stand it anymore. She was going to expire in front of their very eyes if I didn't act. I strode towards Ambrose and motioned for him to pass her into my arms. He didn't question it, the fool, but gave me a stern look before he returned to arguing with his triad. They would thank me for this one day. I hoped. I strode toward the churning black. A tendril lengthened as I neared, reaching towards the boost. A calm settled over me even as the clamor of protests kicked up behind me. I unraveled the sheet from the boost and offered her to the tendril. It hovered before shooting down to contact the welted skin of her ankle. Hands grabbed at me, almost sending the boost sprawling on the ground as I found my balance again.

“How dare you,” Ambrose's voice was tremulous, his mustache shaking with barely constrained rage. The substance melted into her skin, fading away as if it were nothing. I exhaled, offering the boost back to her keepers. Pyke snatched her from my grasp, running his fingers down the length of her skin as if she would disintegrate right in front of him. I didn't blame him. This was a shock and my actions had caused Legion to fear being close to this substance. They didn't understand what it truly was. It would be a few uncomfortable

days as the boost connected to her chosen fourth. A strangled noise escaped Pyke as the welts faded before his very eyes. The boost's skin was unmarred in moments, the edge of illness seeming to lighten.

“She will heal now. Although it may be some time before she wakes,” I said, holding back from mentioning the fourth person again. Ambrose stroked the sheet that encased his boost, an expression of wonder effusing his features for a moment before he turned and slammed a hard fist into my face. Not expecting the sudden blow, I fell to my knees on the ground.

“*Shek,*” I spat, tasting metal in my mouth.

“That’s for playing with my boost’s life. If she doesn’t survive, I will finish the job,” he promised. I gave him a curt nod. That was honorable, and I respected the loyalty he showed to his boost. I would feel the same way if someone had done it to Cami. We made our way back out of the forest, dodging the thicker Gaer.

“Fenar asked if we would grab a few things from your old apartment,” Kevin explained as we split off from Ambrose and Pyke, taking a shorter way than I expected. I recognized my handiwork on the smashed door, but sucked in a horrified breath at the carnage that had taken over the rest of the apartment. Everything was ruined. Debris covered the ground like a blanket of destruction.

“What in the...” Kevin trailed off as he spotted the words strewn across the walls.

The Knights of Melbak mark you. Death to all boosts.

I fumbled for the nearest surface, my fingers clenching around the bench. They had slashed every piece of furniture. Shards of material littered the floor as if a whirlwind of demolition.

How could this be?

Kevin aimed his small device at the wall, documenting the threat. How could this be happening? How could the Knights have found me so quickly, and why did they still exist?

Cami

I felt bad for Wellyn and Fenar. Their home had been destroyed because of me. All three of them were worried about the threat. Since Kevin had sent them the photos of the damage the Knights of Melbak had left. For the past two days they had become unbearable. Tallis was shadowing my steps, thinking I wouldn't notice his skulking presence. Wellyn and Fenar had taken to hovering over me as if some invisible force was going to snatch me up and spirit me away if they didn't follow my every step. I appreciated it to a point. Then they'd tried to follow me into the cleaning room. I put my foot down. Eyke hadn't been the same since he'd returned either. He'd become detached, as if seeing Melbak for the first time in hundreds of years had changed him. He was withdrawn, answering questions with one-word responses or grunts. It was disconcerting. I knew this world must be as overwhelming as it was for me. Nothing I said seemed to pull him from his fugue.

Hence why I had escaped, insisting I sit beside Nakasha's bedside with Kevin and wait for her to wake. I had taken the diary with me, determined to focus on something other than my mounting worries and frustration. Kevin raised an eyebrow at me from the other side of the room when I flipped a page of the diary with a little more force than necessary. I rolled my eyes.

"I think if I met this boost, I wouldn't like her very much."

Goldie was a real bitch.

The more I read, the clearer it was. Entitlement oozed out of the pages of her diary. She really disliked humans. They were the perversion she'd mentioned. She described that people had taken humans as boosts. It was disgusting and wrong to her. She wrote in dark raging slashes about the Bold Lord and how he deserved to be destroyed. It gave me goosebumps to read the very situation Eyke had told me about. I'd asked Eyke about it, showing him the diary when he'd returned from helping Nakasha, but he'd turned on his heel and excused himself. I wondered if it brought up terrible memories for him.

Goldie was determined her quad smash the Bold Lord, her nemesis, in the upcoming Vinko to ensure that the Kindale house didn't win. I didn't really understand much of what she was saying, but when she wrote about her quad, it made me jolt. It was proof that there had been a change. They had introduced triads after something serious had happened. There wasn't any mention of the plague that Legion continuously used as an excuse to hate me for.

“Most boosts are a little spoiled because of their rarity and the desire for the power they give their triad. Sorry quad.” Kevin flushed. “It’s hard to get used to the idea that there will be another Legion joining us soon.” His hand snaked out, wrapping around Nakasha’s like she was an anchor he needed securing to. He stared down with adoration and my stomach flipped at the open affection he had for her.

“You love her very much,” I pointed out, putting the diary aside with a decisive snap. Kevin shot me a rueful smile, his thumb rubbing over Nakasha’s hand.

“Something in the relationship between a boost and their Legion is inevitable. You have boosted some of your Legion. You know how the body reacts. It becomes more than lust, though. It’s as close as a Legion can get to another. A sacred linking. With each boost, it seems like threads of you wrap around each other. I couldn’t imagine living without her.”

A prickle courses its way over my body as I imagined my ‘quad’ wanting me the way Nakasha’s did. I couldn’t deny the way it felt when I was around them. With Wellyn in particular, since he’d been my friend since I arrived. Did I want that? Their hearts and devotion? The hopeful feeling soured as I thought about Tallis. He was the fly in my ointment. The blot on this whole situation. He despised me. Hated me. He’d never accept me. Although since I’d come out of my breakdown, he seemed different. Like a sad little boy who didn’t want to say sorry but desperately wanted affection. I didn’t want to boost him, to feel any sort of physical reaction towards someone who had treated me so horribly. But if I didn’t, he’d have to

leave his two brothers of choice. They were a package deal. Nakasha groaned from the bed, her eyes flickering open.

“Nakasha? You’re awake!” Kevin exploded with joy, leaning over his boost and covering her face with small kisses. Her hands came up to cradle his face. She gave a husky laugh.

“I had the strangest dream,” she sighed. Her eyes narrowed as she spotted me beside her. “Why are you here?” She sat up, slow and stiff. “Kevin?” She looked at her Legion with a mixture of confusion and indignation. I collected the diary and tucked it under my arm.

“You can thank me next time, I guess.” I held my hands up in a gesture of peace. Kevin slid half onto the bed and gave a nod toward the door.

“I’ll explain it all to her, but it would be best if you left for now,” he agreed, his fingers tangling around Nakasha’s from where they were digging into the bedding.

“Explain what to me? What is the meaning of this, Kevin?” Nakasha’s imperious voice pitched as I hurried down the hall. Pyke must have heard it. He hurried out of another room, racing past me.

“She’s awake?” he asked. I nodded. Was her strange dream Nakasha meeting the fourth in her quad? I strolled back into our quarters and ordered a chocolate milkshake, wanting something sweet to tide me over. There was a large box on the counter, white with a burgundy ribbon and a card underneath.

“It’s for you,” came a smoky voice. I started, almost losing grip on the milkshake.

“God!” My hand flew to my chest as I sought the owner of the voice. “You scared me half to death,” I scolded Tallis as he stepped out from behind the nook in the corner. His normally coiffed hair was unkempt, and his cheeks sharp, like he hadn’t been eating. His fingers seemed to have a slight shake to them as he rested them on the counter. He stared at me with rattling intensity.

“What is that human drink? I like the warm one you drink in the morning. Cup of cino.” He stared at the milkshake with curiosity. I pursed my lips. Were we doing this now? Stilted conversation and awkward small talk. Still, he was too thin for his own good, so before I could overthink it, I slid my drink over and offered it to him.

“You have this one. I’ll order another. It’s a chocolate milkshake.”

With a new milkshake in my hand, I took a sip, enjoying how Tallis all but hoovered the drink down.

“Where do the ingredients come from for this food? Like, if this has milk, does it come from Earth ingredients or the closest Melbak version of this food?” I asked, thinking about milking rats and how I could never consume dairy again if that was the case. Tallis paused his drinking, placing the almost empty milkshake on the counter. He tilted his head as he considered my answer, but I waved my hands, cringing at the thought.

“No, don’t tell me,” I hastened. “I don’t want to know.” I would not let it ruin coffee or milkshakes, and this was one of the best ones I’d ever had. Tallis leaned forward and wrapped his shapely lips around the straw in the milkshake, sucking up the last drops. I looked at the sizeable present on the table. Tallis had said it was for me. I reached out and snagged the card. It was a small white cardstock with a gold trim. I read what was scrawled on the paper in English, my eyebrows inching upwards.

Dear Cami,

I am sorry for the pain I caused you. I have no excuses but that I am a fool and realized too late the precious gift you could have been. This gift is a token of what I wish for you, a peace between us and an end to the enmity that plagues us both. I want more than anything to start anew with you, to earn your forgiveness.

Yours, Tallis.

I lay the card on the table and gazed at Tallis. Words fled me. The card filled my head with a buzzing that wouldn’t translate into anything productive. Tallis was rocking back on his heels, his hands tucked behind his back. He was tense, his tail unmoving as he held his breath.

The shadows on his face were dark, and regret made him brittle. He held himself tightly, expecting me to attack him. How different he seemed in this moment, stripped of his arrogance and anger. I pulled the present over and gently unwrapped the ribbon. Placing it to one side, I slid the lid off

the present, curious beyond anything to what Tallis would consider a token of peace between us. I leaned over the box and shrieked, stumbling back and hiding behind the counter.

“You asshole!” I screeched, realizing my error immediately as his ‘gift’ used its disgusting wings to flutter out of the box and zoom through the air toward me. He’d given me a ratid. I darted up and grabbed hold of Tallis, using him as a shield as the ratid continued to follow me. Its long pink tail drooped in the air as its leathery wings beat determinedly in my direction. Tallis turned to look at me, his face comically confused as I maneuvered him in front of the dreaded flying rat.

“You dislike it?” he said, having the nerve to sound hurt. I reluctantly let go of the death grip I had on his sleeve to pound a fist on his back. The ratid came close again. I screamed, ducking and dragging Tallis in front of me. I pressed up against his back, choking on a sob.

“I fucking hate those things, you utter prick. Which, of course, you must have known. You almost got me there.” A hysterical bubble of laughter burst out of me. “I thought the present was a sincere gesture for peace. But no, Tallis you never cease to surprise me with how cruel you can be.” I hissed at his back, watching the air obsessively for more swoops. Tallis’s tail wrapped around my wrist, and he turned to glare at me.

“It *was* a sincere gift. I wanted to apologize,” he growled at me, which might have seemed scary except that an intense object of my irrational fear was trying to get past him, and he

was my only protection. I leaned into him, squeezing my eyes shut and crying out.

“You are such a liar,” I shouted, hoping the tight grip I had on him was hurting. Wellyn, Fenar and Eyke burst into the room, obviously hearing my cries of distress. The three of them took in the room’s chaos with confusion, all except Fenar whose gaze drifted from the gift box on the counter and the hovering ratid and burst into peals of laughter.

“I’m going to *sheking* kill you,” Tallis promised Fenar, who couldn’t speak for how hard he was laughing.

“What is going on?” Wellyn asked, seeing the ratid swoop through the air. I still had an iron grip on Tallis and jerked him around like my living Legion shield. The least he could do for exposing me to this hideous creature. Eyke had a big smile on his face and rumbling laughter was leaking out of him.

“Just Tallis taunting me again. Who told him how much I hated ratids? Please, can someone contain that disgusting creature before I—,” I cut off as the ratid swooped past me, its wings brushing my head. I couldn’t help but squeal again, hating how stupid I looked and burning up with fury that Tallis would pick now of all times to provoke me again. I watched as Eyke strode forward, his height helping him as he snagged the ratid’s tail and cupped the creature in his hands. He ambled over to the box and popped it inside, putting the lid on again before it could escape. I sagged in relief, leaning against Tallis’s stiff back without thinking. My wrist was still wrapped in his tail and a thought leaped into my head about what Fenar

had taught me. I reached down to the base of his tail, wrapped my fingers around it, and dug my nails in as hard as I could. Tallis yelped, head spinning around with his eyes blown wide and mouth hanging open. I gave his tail another fierce tug and sneered at him, stepping into his personal space.

“Oh, did that hurt?” I asked. “If you keep pushing me, I will spend every waking moment finding ways like that to torment you. Fenar told me how painfully shocking touching a tail can be.”

Tallis didn't respond, his throat working as his tail slithered off my wrist, the pressure making my blood tingle as it rushed back. He shot Fenar another fierce glare, avoiding my gaze altogether before storming out of the room. He was shaking so much it surprised me he didn't explode, his fires always volatile. Wellyn peeked into the box, lifting the lid just enough to get a good look at the foul creature before sighing.

“Fenar,” he sighed the Legion's name like it was a punishment. “I assume you had a hand in this.”

I crossed my arms and glared at Fenar as well. He only shrugged, strolling over to throw an arm around my shoulders. He flashed me a sharp grin.

“I only mentioned how you seemed fixated with the creatures. He assumed I meant it positively.”

He coughed as I elbowed him in the side and Eyke cleared his throat, spreading his large hands on the counter.

“And the tail? Was that a harmless humiliation as well?”

Wellyn hoisted himself up on a stool near the counter and gave Fenar the best approximation of a disappointed dad look. He shifted beside me, quick to reply.

“Hey, now that is not on me. I thought we understood each other about what it did. Anyone getting their tail grabbed by Cami is going to have their brain scrambled enough to let her get away.”

“She won’t be touching anyone else’s tail,” Eyke growled, and I looked at Fenar in confusion. His cheeks were pink, and he seemed embarrassed.

“Fenar,” I reached up and pinched his chin. “Grabbing his tail hurt him, didn’t it? You said it would shock him.”

Fenar chuckled before he saw my expression and heard the rumble of disapproval from the other two in the room.

“Look, it doesn’t cause him pain per se, but it really gave him a jolt of sensation.”

“What kind of sensation?” I pressed, slow and deadly. I already had a fair idea of what he was saying. “What kind of sensation, Fenar?”

He wouldn’t answer, so I elbowed him in the side again and walked towards Wellyn.

“What did I just do to Tallis? Just tell me,” I begged. Wellyn’s eyes flashed bright as his creature reacted to my emotion. Wellyn sighed, sharing a loaded look with Eyke

“Well, the tail is very sensitive. Touching the base of it would be much like touching ah...” He paused, his cheeks

flaming pink now.

“His cock. Touching the base of his tail would be like wrapping your beautiful hand around his cock,” Eyke filled in for him. I fell into a seat and covered my face with my hands.

“No, no, no,” I moaned. “I did not just give Tallis a hand job, did I?” I sank my head on my arms, melting in mortification. I wanted the ground to swallow me up. A hand danced along my back, cupping my shoulder, and Fenar’s amused voice tickled my ear.

“He didn’t cum, so I wouldn’t say you did. Just gave him a memory to keep him pushing forward.”

I pushed up on my hands and shook my head at Fenar. He was leaning on his elbow, and the mirth was clear in his smile.

“So, he actually wanted to give me a gift. He wanted to have peace between us?” I said, hoping to hurry the conversation away from the questionable way I’d just handled Tallis. My cheeks were hot, and I pressed my palms on them, hoping to contain the scalding heat.

“I won’t defend Tallis. He meant to hurt you by burning your photographs. But he is a good Legion, and he deeply regrets his actions. He’s afraid he will lose everyone who is important in his life. He’s scared to be alone without friends. Or you. He’s a stupid fool, and this was a sincere gesture. Unfortunate that we gave him unreliable intel.” Wellyn raised his eyebrows at Fenar, who protested again.

“I didn’t realize he would try to gift her one. Anyone who has talked to Cami for over five minutes would know she can’t stand the things.”

Poor Tallis.

That was the thing. We’d never even had a conversation for over five minutes. Not without sniping or arguing. He’d written the words on the card with such out of character vulnerability, hoping to give me an olive branch.

Was I really feeling sorry for Tallis? Clearly, I was losing it. I hadn’t been outside in days. Maybe that was what I needed. Some fresh air and to stretch my legs. My gaze snagged on the white box, and I grimaced.

“Can you do something with the creature?” I asked, pointing to the box. Wellyn flattened his lips before answering.

“About that. The ratid must have imprinted on you, seeing how it was following you about the room. It considers you its mother and won’t be able to join a flock. It will just continue to find its way back to you. I’m afraid you have a new pet.”

My head dropped into my folded arms. Things couldn’t go smoothly. I’d given Tallis a partial hand job and now I was mother to a ratid, the creepiest animal I’d ever seen.

Great.

Tallis

The humiliation wouldn't fade. Like my cursed erection. My body had finally got what it had been craving since I spanked Cami over the side of the couch. That felt like eons ago. I had tucked myself into some small room filled with Kevin's human junk. It seemed like he had many of these little rooms squirreled away in the sprawling apartment.

Stacks of strange human objects seemed to languish in teetering towers. I couldn't care less except that it gave me a nice hole to hide in after the way my apology had blown up in my face. My hand snuck down to my cock and without thinking, I palmed it, swallowing a needy groan. It had sprung to attention the second Cami had slid her hand around the base of my tail. Then she'd dug her nails in, as if knowing the sharp sensation would fill me with arousal. Not to mention the glorious torture of having her soft body pressed up against my back, shaking and wriggling. It might have been in terror, but it was so easy for my body to attribute it to something far preferable. That her movements and the way she latched on to

me were out of desire. I would not tug myself to completion in the cramped space, but the ache wouldn't subside. The sensation of her hand on my tail was like nothing I had felt before.

I wanted her. Desperately.

I'd settle with hopefully getting her to forgive me. We had bigger things to worry about. I would solve the problem of the photos shortly, but I wanted something to show her I was truly filled with regret. To prove to her I was remorseful, and I'd changed. Actions over words. That was what she needed. I cursed myself in the dark for trusting anything Fenar had to say, but it was my fault. They'd all known she hated ratids. I hadn't a clue. I'd never even taken the time to learn a thing about her. She'd been the focus of my unfair hatred. Desire that I'd repackaged to be something more palatable to my deluded mind.

I recognized that now. I'd watched her and listened for a chance to find her weaknesses, not realizing that the obsessive watching was just another sign I wanted her. I didn't think we'd ever had a one-on-one conversation where we hadn't bitten each other's heads off. That was what I was hoping the gift would achieve. To pause the aggression towards each other and connect to her without fighting. I'd taunted her the other day because I loved the way she fired up at me.

After I'd burned the photographs, she'd been downcast and lost. I craved that spark of fire in her eye and the flare of her nostrils. Her body coiled like a cobra, ready to strike me down

with my impertinence. And it was the only way she looked at me.

I understood all this when I went to Earth and met her family in person.

I had seen why she had poured her soul into those mementos. Her family was wonderful, and they adored Cami, their memories of her unchanged. Only their concern about her had been muted by Gloria. I'd seen every photo of her as a child, soaked up every story of her and added it to my never-ending collection. My reader vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out to see an incoming call from my triad fathers. Of all the people. I stifled a sigh, answering the call.

"Hello," I answered, keeping my voice low.

"Tallis," Serich and Rourke greeted me, they weren't my biological dads, but they were my parents just the same. I sighed internally, cricking my neck to the side.

"We heard from Albion that you're in a spot of trouble. That you thought we wouldn't care."

Serich growled and took over. I could imagine him gnashing his fangs.

"You thought we wouldn't care what was going on with you? You need us, we're there. We've been *sheking* terrible triad dads, but we love you. You know that, don't you?"

I let out a large sigh, hearing it crackle over the line.

"How did you get mother to forgive you when she was pregnant with me?"

I'd heard the story a thousand times about how they'd messed up so badly my mother had threatened to leave them. It seemed messing up with boosts was in my blood.

"Boy, tell me you didn't," Rourke sighed.

"I absolutely annihilated her. I was terrified of feeling actual love and subconsciously sabotaged myself. I don't think she'll ever forgive me." My chin wobbled. I shook my head at how low I'd fallen.

"Tallis, the only thing you can do is keep trying. Talk to her and show her you are sorry with actions and words," Rourke exhaled with sympathy.

I sank deeper into misery. They were right. It was time to stop moping in a closet and make my intentions known. I had to fight or give up. I refused to give up.

"I have to go," I told them and hung up. My reader vibrated again. This time from Cove. What could she want? She'd made it very clear she didn't want anything to do with me after seeing how I'd treated Cami and how I'd made her a part of the ruse.

Where are you all? Someone trashed your apartment. Are you all ok? I tried Fenar and Wellyn before you, so don't get a colossal head about this.

I pulled myself to my feet. Any lingering heat I felt after being close to Cami fading away as I thought about Cove.

How had I thought myself in love with her?

She had never inspired such feelings in me. I understood her anger, welcomed it even, as it meant Cami had one more ally. Cove would be a good friend to her, and Cami needed all the friends she could get. I sent a response to Cove, hoping my trust in her wasn't misplaced.

We're at Ambrose's—Cami is in danger, but no one is hurt.

Only my ego. It was battered and bruised, just as I deserved. I pulled my shoulders back, readying to make my way back into the company of the others.

I'm coming to see you all.

Cove sent a reply straight away. I knew she would. Slowly, I made my way back to the quarters. They still lingered there, seated around the counter, the ill-fated gift box taunting me on the table. A glaring reminder of my incompetence and foolishness. I cleared my throat in the doorway, tucking away the self-loathing for a moment to appear calm. This used to be so much easier. Now it was like trying to contain a hurricane. The feeling choked me and tangled me in knots. Fenar shot me a mischievous grin, sliding over a piece of paper.

“What's this?” I asked as I picked it up. I snarled, the response unconscious as I saw I was wrought in cartoon form again. The title read “Further Adventures of Bossman”. In it, I was stomping my feet, my hands outstretched. I had a brutal look on my face. At least this time, I wasn't depicted as a baby.

“Seeing how you didn't know Cami hated ratids, I figured you'd also like to know she is a talented artist,” Fenar said.

The rage dissipated, and I looked at Cami with pride. This wasn't news to me. I'd seen the comics she'd drawn for her dad, but she didn't know that. Cami had ducked her head, but not before thumping Fenar on the shoulder.

"You did this? You drew the other one?" I clarified, even though I already knew.

"I did." Her shoulders rolled back, and her eyes flashed. It was perfection, that fire she held. She waited for me to lose it. That was what she expected.

"You are very talented, and you captured me very well," I complimented instead, folding the piece of paper reverently and tucking into my robes as a keepsake. Anything of hers I coveted now. "Cove went to our apartment. She is coming to visit. I hope that is alright?" I offered the last part of my sentence to Cami, drinking in the way her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders. She cut me a quick look, her cheeks bright and red. She shrugged, looking at the others for confirmation. It irked me. I wanted her to talk to me, to respond to me even though I hadn't earned it and certainly didn't deserve it. But I wanted so much to be standing around the counter like part of a team, rather than the outsider I had become.

"Who is this, Cove?" The brutish Eyke raised an eyebrow, not bothering to mask any of the distrust in his expression towards me. I watched, mouth watering, as Cami snuck out a hand and stroked his wrist. What would it feel like to have her touch me in such a sweet gesture? I might never know. It made

me hold my tongue in response to Eyke. I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize Cami's forgiveness.

"She's a friend. A trustworthy one, right, guys? It's fine if Cove is here?" Cami's fingers turned circles on his skin. I ground my teeth together to quash the rising wave of jealousy.

"We can trust Cove. She's been our friend for a long time," Wellyn confirmed, but I noticed he lodged himself a little closer to Cami, as if his creature didn't quite agree. She had a strange look on her face. It was like her emotions were flickering underneath it, trying to decide which one to land on.

"I need to know. Was she in on it?" she finally asked. Her jaw clenched; teeth gritted as if she didn't really want to know but had to ask. Everyone in the room turned to glare at me. I stifled a sigh. Her eyes dropped to the counter as she waited for confirmation. I wanted to kick my ass for causing that look.

Did she think Cove had known my plan to hurt her, and that she was as poisoned on the inside as I was? The wound I had carved into her was still healing. One that likely wouldn't heal with me. When it came to that one destructive moment, she would always think of me. I had known it was wrong the minute I sent the photos up in flames.

We were stuck in a loop. Her hating me for what I did and me regretting my foolish actions. I folded my arms, my face a mask of indifference despite the roiling inside my gut.

"No," I replied succinctly. "She's not an idiot like me."

She deserved to know that Cove would be a friend if she needed one. There wasn't room for me to apologize again.

As if summoned by my morose thoughts, the girl I had once thought would be my boost sailed through the door. Cove's blue eyes widened, eyelashes fluttering as she floated over to Cami on the stool. She barely spared me a glance. She leaned in to give Fenar and Wellyn an air kiss before throwing her arms around Cami and laying her small head on her shoulder. Closing her eyes, she squeezed Cami who sat in shock.

"You're awake," Cove breathed. She tucked a strand of crimped hair behind her ears and took a step back. "I've popped in a few times since," she shot me a venomous look. "You know, and they said you were resting. I didn't know what Tallis had planned. I hope you know I would never make such an underhanded move. Lull you into a false sense of friendship and betray you."

"Why not? It was very effective. Really took the wind out of my sails. I thought Legion lived for that kind of game. It certainly seemed like everyone else there was eating it up."

My face burned and my stomach churned from not only the lack of food but also from the pit of disgust that I had for myself. I had no appetite. The regret that oozed through me hijacked my powers. I said nothing. I simply bore the look of disappointment and rage that came from her giant shadow. Cove creased her eyebrows together and shook her head.

"It's true that Legion enjoy that sort of thing but not towards people they care about. I consider you a friend. Even if that

wasn't the case, you're a boost and should be treated with the respect that the role deserves. You serve your triad by helping them and Melbak. What Tallis did was inexcusable."

Nobody was looking at me now. The air was thick with tension. I should leave. Take the uncomfortable emotions in the room with me. I was the broken link in this chain. But I couldn't make myself. I promised I was going to fight until my last breath to make it right.

My skin was tight over my body. I wanted to rage and fight, but this was my punishment, and I would not run from it anymore. Until the day I made Cami see how sorry I was, I would endure it. There was no way to achieve that if I slunk off into the shadows and let them pretend I wasn't part of this quad.

At some point, Cami would need to boost me. We would need to fulfill the alternate roles Eyke had mentioned. I knew that no matter how much Wellyn and Fenar despised me for what I did, they wouldn't turn me away. We were chosen brothers and they would twist the knife in, protect her and disdain me, but they wouldn't abandon me. Cami shivered and tossed her dark hair over her shoulders as she raised her arms above her head to stretch.

"I want to go for a walk outside," Cami demanded. She avoided replying directly to Cove's comments about being a boost. It was clear she didn't consider herself special. I certainly hadn't helped with that. As far as going outside, it was a foolish idea. Most of the others agreed with me.

“Absolutely not. It’s too dangerous.” Fenar frowned, crossing his arms over his chest.

Eyke scratched at the back of his neck and mumbled, “If it’s what Cami wants, I say yes. Surely a short walk won’t hurt too badly.”

I scowled at the suck up. He’d been withdrawn since he came back from healing Nakasha. Even now it sounded like an excuse to escape outside again and not because she’d asked. Cami raised her eyebrows to Wellyn, daring him to argue with her. I almost tipped over when he shook his head, his hand darting out to rub down her arm.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. We don’t know who might have eyes out for us.”

Cami’s bottom lip curled

“Well, I don’t know, but that could be easily rectified, couldn’t it?” The dare in her voice was still there, infused with bitterness. She was still upset about Wellyn not wanting to tell her who his father was. Before the poor Legion could expire, I cleared my throat. My vote still counted after all.

“I agree to a walk. It’s three to two,” I said.

Cami’s head snapped up, her eyes narrowing, expecting some nefarious reason behind my sudden agreement. There was no ulterior motive except that I was a suck up as well and it was clear everyone else understood that. Cami didn’t wait to hear my reasoning. She slid off her stool and made towards the door. Fenar was quick on her heels, protesting.

“It’s not a vote situation. We need to stay here until...”
Cami interrupted, her hand in his face.

“Until what? We can’t stay here forever, and I can’t see Nakasha being alright with us being here for much longer while she recovers. I’m not her favorite person you know.”

“Until we hear from Albion and Head Aydro it is best to stay hidden.”

“Don’t wolf out on me. I just want a ten-minute stroll. I’ve been cooped up for weeks. I’ll admit that’s my fault for letting Tallis get to me, but I feel like I’m about to crawl out of my skin. The fresh air is what I want. Is that so bad?”

Fenar set his jaw mulishly and I could see he was going to argue that it was indeed a foolish action. Grabbing his arm, I raised a brow.

“We can do ten minutes. We’ll go into the deeper part of the woods, and everyone can keep a lookout.”

He growled under his breath before he bit out a sharp agreement. And stalked ahead of us. Cove came and wound her arm through Cami’s.

“So do you want to tell me why your apartment is trashed and you’re holed up at Tallis’s nemesis?” She raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow and flicked a glance at me. Wellyn jogged up behind Eyke. He squeezed past, his hands cupped together. His lips pursed as he nodded to his enclosed hands.

“I know you’d rather not, but we should take the ratid with us as well. It would only follow you anyway and it can do its business that way.”

Cami groaned while Cove squealed in delight. She peered over to peek in Wellyn’s tightly enclosed hands.

“You got a ratid? How special!” she gushed. Cami cursed, glaring at me. She hated my gift, but the heated look she sent my direction energized me.

“Do you want it?” Cami asked hopefully.

“It’s imprinted on you Cami. It’ll follow you around until it feels like it’s secure. You should talk to Nakasha, she has a few I think.” Wellyn grimaced.

“There are more of these creatures flying around the apartment?” Cami shuddered and Cove sighed.

“Wow, a ratid. It’s hard to find one that is young enough to imprint. Dangerous too. That was a very thoughtful gift, Wellyn. Very courageous of you to climb up and raid a nest for one.”

“Oh, it wasn’t a gift from me,” Wellyn stuttered. Eyke let out one of those laughs. It was like the roll of thunder before a downpour. Not that I noticed much since Cami was looking at me again and my brain became scrambled from the clear, warm fix of her dark eyes.

Cami

I'd got what I wanted. I trudged through the sickly trees, sucking down the humidity in the air. But it made no difference. It was like I had strung my shoulders up with wire, unable to move from the tension that rode through them. I thought it was the walls driving me crazy, but that was too simple an answer. I jammed my hands under my armpits, moving deeper through the trees at a furious pace. Maybe endorphins from the exercise would perk me up. Everyone else was at my back. They could no doubt sense the mood I was in. It wasn't hard to guess. I was scowling like crazy, so much that the person closest to me was Tallis. I wished he would haunt someone else's footsteps. My ratid was flapping above me. The flutter of its wings and occasional chatter surrounded me. It had swung too low once, its hairless tail brushing my hair had made me squeal and dart ahead. Fenar's hard grip had kept me from stepping into a glut. He'd given me a cheeky smile and waggled his eyebrows.

“Just like old times, baby? Lucky I’m not as violent as you,” he teased. I’d elbowed him in the gut and stormed away. I could hear him now, talking to Cove, laughing about something she’d said. Eyke had taken up the back, looming and quiet. Wellyn had fallen into step next to him.

“We should head back soon,” Tallis murmured. I slowed to a stop. Teetering on my toes, I wondered if I should act on the desire to bolt. It wouldn’t solve anything, but the desire for flight was hounding my insides. I wished that the threat of danger made me want to clamp my feet on the ground and raise my fists. I’d enjoyed the idea of being a badass with Fenar the other day. But I was weak and hiding sounded so much better. I’d literally hid in my mind for weeks because of the idiot next to me. He shuffled closer. I shot him a warning glare, but he was reaching out his hands to nab the ratid that had been about to land on my shoulder.

“Here, I’ll hold on to it.” He coaxed the creature up onto his shoulder instead. It settled and looked at me, its big round ears twitching a little. This was the closest I’d been to it without having a meltdown. It didn’t look so much like a rat up close. It had a round, furry face mottled with gray. Black eyes stared solemnly back at me. It had wings like a bat, leatherlike and veiny which it tucked into its back. It was sweet, twitching its nose.

“Did you really steal it from a nest?” I asked, perturbed by the sight of Tallis, dark and soulless, with a fluff ball perched on his shoulder. The fat pink tail draped down his front. That still made me shudder. Tallis fixed me with an intense look.

One I couldn't comprehend him giving me. I was used to the burning sear of hatred from him. Now it seemed like he hungered for me instead.

“Yes,” he answered, turning his proud nose to the side as everyone else gathered a few steps away from us. “I apologize for frightening you. I didn't know your aversion to the creatures. In Melbak, it's considered a declaration of highest esteem, because gaining one is so difficult. That was my intention with the gift because you have all my esteem. I wish I could go back in time and realize how perfect you are instead of trying to delude myself.”

I frowned at him, dumbfounded.

“We should get back,” he repeated and before I could respond, there was a whistle through the air. A sudden explosion sent soil raining down on me.

“Get Cami,” Fenar barked gutturally as he transformed into his wolf. I looked around wildly, seeing only flashes of dark blue in the trees. The wolf bounded after them. Tallis wrapped an arm around my waist and hauled me against him. We moved quickly after that, ducking behind a large rock while shudders of explosions rumbled through the ground. My ears rang from the sound.

“Cami!” I could hear Eyke calling for me. I shifted to peer over the rock, but Tallis held my head down.

“It could be a masker,” he warned, pushing me further into the dirt. “They can imitate any voice.”

The ratid had crawled over to me and was burrowing under my hair, but I found myself unable to react. There was a bubble of air around us which seemed to hold off any of the incoming projectiles. Tallis hadn't removed his arm from around my waist. He was hovering half over me protectively, his body shaking. I wondered why he didn't respond. Why didn't he lob a fireball back?

"That's Cove," he whispered, referring to the bubble of air. I watched as a spray of blackened leaves cascaded down, making a pile to the side. I jerked at each sound, my hands coming to latch onto Tallis's arms despite myself. He was scorching. The heat of him helped me to focus on my jumbled thoughts.

"Who is it? The Heads?" I asked. He'd refused to move, so my hot breath was ghosting over his neck. He shook his head.

"This is chaos. They wouldn't dare do something so uncouth."

"Uncouth," I repeated, choking on a hysterical laugh. Of course, an obvious, all-out assault would be uncouth to Legion. Not sophisticated enough. I smothered a cry at the pained scream that sliced through the woods. The bubble on top of us wavered before disappearing.

They'd hurt Cove.

Her protection was gone, leaving us vulnerable. Two figures darted through the trees and advanced. They crept forward, expecting Tallis to launch his fire. I waited for him to burn them to a crisp. Only he didn't. He hauled me up instead,

tucking me behind his firm body, keeping a firm grip on my arm. Dark robes swathed the approaching figures, their heads hooded, and identities obscured by a dark mesh.

“We only want the boost. Give her up and we will let you go free,” one of them coaxed Tallis. It was hard to determine whether they were male or female with the high, reedy voice that seeped through the mesh. The ratid crawled out of the space under my hair and launched itself off my shoulder. I hissed as its little claws dug into my skin. Tallis turned, distracted, thinking they had hurt me. I didn’t understand the wild look in his eyes. Why he was being so reticent about his powers?

“You’ll have to kill me first,” Tallis spat at the two hooded figures. The one who had spoken held their hands out toward Tallis, a large, bright ball of electricity surging between them.

“Last chance,” they taunted. They didn’t give Tallis a chance to respond before launching the ball towards him. Tallis puffed out his chest, arms thrown wide. His intentions were obvious. He was going to take the hit. Without thinking, I jerked him to the side, the ball crashing past us, sizzling the rock behind us.

“What are you waiting for, idiot? Burn these creeps!” I shouted, my heart thumping loudly in my ears. One figure ducked as my ratid swooped them. It screeched as it angled its wings to strike its sharp claws at their hidden face. Another electric ball slammed past us, the crackle of it hissing in my ear. Tallis was holding me behind him, his head swiveled as he

searched for a place to run. It was impossible. We were trapped in by a log which was too big to climb. By the time we climbed over it, we'd be slammed by another electric ball.

“I can't. My powers don't work,” he growled through clenched teeth, shaking his hands out in front of him. They flared red, winking with a slight heat before fading out. He cursed under his breath and clutched at me.

“When they hit me, I want you to run as fast as you can. The others will follow your scent. Make sure you see them before you reveal yourself in case they have a masker.” his voice hitched even as he readied to sacrifice himself for me. His chest puffed again, and his tail was trembling defiantly in the air. I thumped my hand on his back, enraged by him even as our lives were in danger.

“You're not going to sacrifice yourself for me,” I shouted, my stomach dropping. I knew what I had to do. Snatching a piece of sharp rock that the electric ball had dislodged from the stone, I sliced my wrist before lobbing it at the electricity Legion. They ducked, narrowly missing getting hit by the sharp shard. The power they had been cultivating dropped to their feet, the resulting explosion sending them lurching high into the air. They slammed backward into the trunk of a blackened tree. The other masked Legion was busy slapping away my ratid, their arms flailing as they fended off the determined creature. I spun Tallis and pressed my wrist to his lips. His eyes flared with surprise.

“Drink it, you fool. Maybe this will sort your power out.” My head was spinning from the adrenaline coursing through me. I gripped Tallis’s arm with my free hand and was thankful when his tail wrapped around my waist, hauling me into his chest. He didn’t argue, just closed his eyes, and sucked on the small stream of blood my cut provided. My breath was heavy in my ears, ragged and quick. The hot exhale of Tallis’s breath sent shivers across my body as he swiped his tongue over my wrist. He took as much as he could. Leaves crackled underfoot as the hooded Legion crawled to their feet.

“The Knights of Legion are too many for you to best. Even with your cursed boost,” they sneered. If only they could hide the waver that shook their words. Tallis tore his mouth from my wrist, pressing a quick kiss to the back of my hand before he shoved me behind him again. I would have argued, but my stomach felt woozy, hot, and full. I swallowed a mouthful of rising bile, the acid searing my throat. *Please let this work*, I chanted internally, hoping for Fenar’s giant wolf or Wellyn and Eyke to crash through to help us. The dim roar of other clashes, echoed grunts, and thwacks of bodies fighting surrounded me. Tallis raised his hands and my knees buckled to see them flare red hot, flames dancing in them.

“Not much longer Pet. Just let me take care of these zealots first.” Tallis hurled a ball of fire towards the hooded figures. An electric ball careened toward us in retaliation. Tallis’s fire hit its mark, slamming the figure in the chest and launching them to the ground. Soil sprayed around him as the force of his fall dug him into the ground. I watched as my ratid swooped

down on him, clawing at his eyes. I called to it, not knowing if it would understand me.

“Get the other one,” I bellowed. Its round ear twitched, hovering in the air a moment before following my direction. It circled the electrical Legion, aiming for their eyes, claws outstretched. With the added distraction, Tallis quickly wound his hand back and let loose a messy ball of fire towards the remaining figure. It raced towards them, clipping them on the shoulder. The force of the blow sent them spinning backwards, slumping over onto the dirt. They were down for the count. A small part of me wanted to rip the hoods off and see the faces of those who had attacked us.

Knights of Legion.

Ziggie’s crazy accusations seemed so much more real now. They couldn’t be working for the Heads. It seemed like their fight was with boosts, and I had unwittingly stumbled into their crosshairs by having compatible blood and debt problems. Tallis shook his head, his tail plastering me to his back, pushing the breath from my lungs with a grunt.

“Let me protect you a little longer. I want to make sure they’re truly down.”

He inched over to the first fallen figure, pulling off their hood. I didn’t recognize the Legion underneath. He had dusky skin and pointed ears. His eyes flickered under his closed lids. He wasn’t dead. Just knocked out. My ratid was hovering in the air, its wings flapping steadily as it scanned the surroundings. It let out a screech and hurtled towards a group

that stepped through the trees. I gasped, my body reacting before my brain. My fingers grappled onto Tallis. He looked up in surprise as he pulled at the hood of the final figure when a wolf bound between us and the approaching group.

“It’s just us,” Wellyn cried. His arm was braced around Cove, carrying her. She didn’t rouse at the shout. There was a tinge of red on her forehead. She appeared much smaller in this state. Tallis’s tail unraveled around me. He turned to inspect me.

“Are you well?” he asked, his voice strange as he looked me up and down. Was I well? I felt discombobulated. My insides were churning, and I couldn’t quite process everything with how my heart was careening against my rib cage. Tallis stroked my arms, unable to wait longer for a verbal response. I shrugged him off and stepped backward, closer to the fallen body of the Knights of Legion.

“I’m fine. Just freaking out,” I finally croaked. A sharp nick against my throat prevented me from saying more. All the other comments dried up as I was dragged down to my knees. The attacker hadn’t been knocked out at all. They had been biding their time. I couldn’t move. Their arm was wound around my shoulder, securing me with the weapon to my throat. The cold promise of it pressed against my delicate skin.

“Let her go,” Tallis warned, deadly quiet, as he spun on his heel to face my captor. “I will destroy you, Ziggye.” I threw my head back to glimpse the girl who held me. The blade kissed me with a shallow line. I hissed. She wasn’t looking at

me, though. Her gigantic eyes were focused past Tallis's shoulder, her mouth agape. I followed her line of sight. It was Eyke who had captured her attention. He was magnificent. The lowering light of day cast him in a grim spotlight. Blood had splattered his clothes, and he was baring his teeth at Ziggie like he wanted to tear out her throat.

"Don't move Cami," Wellyn called to me. Even with Cove in his arms I could see the stiffness in his limbs. A bow strung tight, waiting to see if Ziggie would make good on her threats.

"Release my boost," Eyke ordered, walking slowly towards Ziggie with his hands up. I hadn't seen him use his powers, but the way he was inching closer, I assumed he had to be in a certain range for it to work. Ziggie made the same leap, tightening her hold on me. She angled the blade tighter against my throat.

"The Bold Lord?" she whispered, her voice trembling through the deafening silence of the trees. Eyke heard her. His expression crumbled and his nose flared. Ziggie wriggled behind me, uncaring that the blade snaked another thin line across my neck.

"How can it be? You are him, are you not? After all this time, you've returned to us! Knights of Legion follow your edict. We've kept to your manifesto. To avenge your curse and rid Melbak of boosts. Just like you wanted!" Her voice rose in pitch, infused with a fever of long held obsession. I could hear the excitement. Feel the jitteriness of her shaking against me.

Ziggie was fangirling hard. Over Eyke. Who was looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

“What is she talking about?” Tallis asked what I couldn’t. What Fenar wanted to by the way he prowled in front of the big man, teeth flashing. Tallis’s hands flared red as he waited. The boost had helped his fire powers. My heart dropped the longer Eyke stayed silent, shifting on his feet. My stomach lurched, the realization of what was happening stealing my breath. Eyke had been cursed. He’d been trapped in the Gaer, a substance he seemed to understand and know implicitly. He’d been different since he helped Nakasha. Seeing the scope and damage the Gaer had wrought over Melbak had affected him greatly. I thought of Goldie’s diary, written so long ago, and her fear of The Bold Lord, the Legion from the Kindale line, which Eyke had said had been one of the original twelve families.

“Eyke Kindale.” My voice rough. He stiffened.

“You have some explaining to do.”

Eyke

The Legion blinked her owlish eyes at me. The knife in her hand still angled close to my boost's throat. How many of my misdeeds were clicking together like puzzle pieces in her brilliant mind? I should have burnt that diary the second she showed it to me. I should have never let her leave the apartment. Maybe then the lingering dregs of my long reaching mistakes would never have their tainted hands all over my boost.

Right now, I had to focus on that. I had to free my boost. I needed to get a little closer to pull the Legion's essence from her body, but as I took a step forward, I hesitated. Cami would not forgive me if I slaughtered this Legion in front of her. My forehead dotted with sweat as Wellyn hissed at me, hoisting the unconscious weight of his small friend up.

"Do something," he urged. The wolf snapped at my calves. They didn't trust me. For good reason. I held my hands out and appealed to the Legion.

“Release my boost and we will talk, Knight.” I used the term from my manifesto. One I had written in a rage all those eons ago. A wide smile broadened her face, but she didn’t let go of Cami, who was glaring at me hard enough to make my throat tighten.

“But I could dispatch her easily, Lord. I could—” she wheedled. I slashed a hand through the air, unable to contain myself any longer. I knew Cami was confused, likely furious with me, but I needed her safe and I could explain everything to her.

“Now Knight,” I ordered and sucked in a relieved breath when she pulled the blade away. She gave Cami a push towards Tallis. He looked like he was about to explode. His hands were flaring red, and his chest was rising in quick intervals. I saw the blood dripping down Cami’s hand and neck and had to stop myself from scooping her up and inspecting her. She allowed Tallis’s tail to snag her waist, pulling her to his side as he maneuvered her out of the way. Smart Legion. The wolf at my feet transformed into an aggravated, naked Legion. He stormed over to Cami, flashing his ass as he ran his fingers over her neck. She craned her head to raise her eyebrows at me. My boost wanted answers.

“I can explain,” I confessed to her roughly, eyeing the stranger with caution. I didn’t want her to change her mind and decide she didn’t like the direction her supposed leader was taking. My words seemed to have the opposite effect on Cami. A look of pure disgust filtered over her. She sneered at me.

“You know more about this than you let on, don’t you?” She motioned toward a wave of Gaer that was rumbling along the ground toward us. I designed it for boosts, which was the problem. The Heads had trapped me in my creation, but I had always meant it to contain boosts. The culmination of years of experimentation. My powers perverted the essence of Legion into something that had become a force of destruction. My jaw tightened. I didn’t want to admit it to her. She had come to me so sweetly. She had offered me freedom with such trust. I hadn’t wanted to jeopardize that. I had been working on a plan to fix the Gaer before I admitted to my role in creating it.

“Yes,” I admitted with a sigh. It was too late. I should have been honest from the start. But how could I explain to her my thinking, stagnated for hundreds of years? How could I convey the rage I’d felt at the injustices the Heads had rained down on my noble family lines? How I thought boosts were the problem, and if Melbak could be free of them, Legion would have an equal starting point. It was too hard to compress years of history into mere words. How could I explain to her the rage of being punished, the role of human boosts, and how it had led to the downfall of my house and sub-houses? The girl, one of my Knights, was bouncing on her toes. She sent me a bright smile. She was the only one who didn’t seem to pick up the undercurrent of strain.

“You lied to me,” Cami glared, leaning into Fenar despite his nakedness. He was glaring daggers at me, he and Tallis both. It was nice to see them protecting Cami. Just as it should

be. I couldn't do anything. We had to get out of here and somewhere safe.

"It's irrelevant right now. We need to get somewhere safe. The Heads are the real danger to you, and we shouldn't tempt them by being out in the open. Not to mention," I waved a hand at the advancing Gaer. Nobody made to move except for the girl who was checking the pulse of a fallen Legion. Another Knight. I felt a weariness that threatened to crash over me, but I didn't have a choice. The brief interlude from the consequences of my actions made this moment bittersweet. I had been choking on the enormity of it all after seeing the extent of Gaer and how it had crippled Melbak.

I had done that.

I had set it in motion.

My vitriol fueled words had become a ghost hand guiding these Legion who called themselves Knights. In the past, I would have relished this. The legacy that had grown in my absence. Now I knew different. I wasn't that person and instead it lay heavy on my shoulders. A beep interrupted my morose thoughts and Wellyn shuffled to slip his device from his pocket, glancing at the brightly lit screen. I didn't quite understand how it worked. Technology had come a long way since they had trapped me. He looked up, his face wan and pinched.

"We can't go back to Ambrose's. They had a visit from Gloria. She had permission to search the premises. She

wouldn't tell them what they were looking for, but it's obvious it's us. Where can we go?"

"The Ward Estate?" Fenar offered, but Tallis immediately denounced that with a frown.

"They would have eyes on it, and we don't want to put Hilles and the children in danger." His hands flashed red, on, off, on, off, until Cami reached out and placed a hand on his arm. She didn't seem to realize her unconscious offer of comfort as she chewed her lip in thought. I felt a primal need to haul her over my shoulder, take her somewhere I could explain, with my words, and preferably my body. To keep her protected.

"Where can we go that the Heads won't find us?" Fenar growled, shooting me a dark look. A throat cleared, and we all looked at Ziggie, who had her hands clasped to her chest and was looking at me like I was the sun. I grimaced.

"You must come to our headquarters. We have successfully evaded the Heads, and it's a secure location," she gushed, looking hopeful. The devotion that poured out of her made me shudder. I didn't have time to deal with that either.

"You tried to kill me not five minutes ago," Cami protested, throwing her hands up. Fenar had healed her more obvious injuries while we had stood there. If only he could heal bruised hearts and betrayal. Ziggie tossed her head, looking irritated at being spoken to by anyone but me. She didn't shift her gaze from me. It made my skin crawl, but it was the best option. We needed to get out of here and I may as well dismantle this

outdated organization while I could. She clearly considered me the Knight I was two hundred years ago.

“If I’d known the Bold Lord was resurrected and offered you his protection, we would never have attacked you. Even if you are a boost.” She clasped her hands together. “I suppose we should apologize for trashing the apartment as well.”

“My boost and quad will come to no harm?” I asked, uncomfortable that I had to put trust in someone I didn’t know. Someone who had devoured my manifesto and made it their own mission as well.

“If you will it, it shall be so,” the girl intoned. Cami protested again, but Fenar and Tallis must have realized this was the only solution. They surrounded her, patting her and distracting her. Fenar swept her up into his arms, covering himself with Talli’s robes. Tallis pointed a finger at the girl.

“Touch her and you die, Ziggie,” he cautioned, pushing past her with a snarl. Wellyn slanted me a wary look as he hefted Cove’s unconscious form into his arms.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he cautioned and went to join the others. The girl, Ziggie, flashed me a saccharine smile and motioned to the crumpled body of her companion.

“Lord, would you be able to assist me? You are so well built and stronger than I am.” She fluttered her lashes. I swallowed another sigh. She didn’t seem to be bothered by the bodies of her other brethren who I’d left strewn on the ground behind me, and I wasn’t about to remind her I’d incapacitated several

Knights, leaving them close to death. I had enough on my shoulders, and I knew this wasn't going to be a calm night. I followed a few steps behind, the dead weight of the fellow in my arms less heavy than the knowledge I had hurt my boost. She'd turned into Fenar's neck now, letting him carry her as we hurried along the same path that led toward the apartment building that Ambrose lived in. Ziggie hurried forward and slammed her hand on a pad that made steps materialize down from the raised platform. They had to be built like this to combat the spread of Gaer. Ambrose's triad had told me that when I had first questioned the strange build. So many long reaching consequences of my actions.

"We can't stay here," Tallis disputed, looking at Ziggie like she was dense. She ignored him and went to a door down a small hallway. Opening it, she ushered us in. It held walls of shelves and boxes filled with no apparent pattern. There was barely space to breathe. Crushed up against Fenar, Cami must have realized I was close because she looked up and narrowed her eyes before glancing away. Tallis muttered under his breath about cultish creeps as Ziggie fiddled behind a shelf. A crisp click echoed through the room and a smaller hutch swung inwards, dim and dank. She lowered herself into it without a word.

"I guess we are going down," Fenar drawled, sounding like he'd rather do anything but.

"We can't trust these people," Tallis argued, folding his arms and frowning. "They could lure us down to kill Cami." I couldn't stop the roar that rattled out of me.

“They’d be dead the second they tried,” I promised, but my chest tightened at the thought. What if that were true? But we had nowhere else to go. I pushed through to the front, passing the body of the unconscious Legion to Tallis as I went. He took him with a grumble but not before Cami spoke, driving a sharp lance through my heart.

“We can’t trust Eyke, either.” The air turned uncomfortably thick. I turned, poised to enter the hatch, and waited. I silently plead for her to meet my eyes and see the well of regret that was lodged there.

She didn’t know that she was my compass.

That the second she showed up in my silk sheets and unlocked me from a mindless existence, she showed me the true direction I needed centuries ago. If there was ever a person in the world who could trust me, it was Cami. Underneath my skin, there was a length of wire connecting my heart to hers. Her heart might be closed to mine while her mind went crazy pinning theories on me, but mine would always beat for her. Finally, she looked up, so defiant, her brown eyes flashing a challenge at me. I hovered at the entrance of the hatch while everyone held their breath, seeming to understand the wordless conversation we were having.

She tore her eyes away, turning into Fenar’s neck again, and waved a limp hand, giving me permission to go on. I guess I had bought some time for now. Cami was willing to put her safety in my hands for the moment. Sliding down the hatch, I

felt a cold tingle of power slide over my body. I shook it off, looking for Ziggie in the dim light. She was hovering a few steps ahead. She was transformed. Her overly large owl eyes had turned small. Her nose was still sharp, and she continued to vibrate with a constant energy. She looked like me. Like Cami. Legion with human features. She ducked her head as if embarrassed by the perusal. Of course, they must somehow be descendants of the three trapped family lines.

“We don’t use our glamors down here. We are free to be our true selves amongst Knights.”

The reverence in her voice made me shift uncomfortably. I didn’t want this. The awe or the loyalty. I had been missing for two hundred years and yet the kernels of my blazing hate had grown into a forest. There was the sound of footsteps and ten more Legion rounded the corner, their faces transforming when they saw me. Ziggie turned to them with her arms outstretched.

“The Bold Lord has returned to lead us to glory. He will bring about a new era in Melbak,” she proclaimed.

Cami’s strangled gasp from behind me told me she had heard her words.

Perfect, this couldn’t get any worse.

Cami

The headquarters of the Knights of Legion reminded me of a bunker a millionaire end of the world prepper might have. Sleek, tidy, underground, and full of whack jobs. Ziggie looked almost human. In fact, they all did. It was strange to see her flitting about the place with normal size eyes. They were proud of their heritage. She'd explained more than once to Eyke that they wanted to flaunt their human features. Although not above ground. The Heads took a great dislike to any child born with human-like features. They tended to go missing.

I had used a cleaning room, finished a bowl of mediocre porridge and a cup of spicy broth, and was sitting between Fenar and Wellyn. Across from me was an enormous portrait of Eyke. It had a gold, ornate frame and nearly reached the ceiling. Like it belonged in a palace. He looked much the same, although there was an arrogant tilt to his chin and a coldness in his demeanor that I had never noticed from him.

Dressed in dark blue robes trimmed with red, he had his hand on the hilt of a sword. A gallant air, which I suppose was the intention when it was painted. Ziggie had ushered him over to it, exclaiming how incredible the likeness was and how they were so thankful to have him there to take up the mantle of Knight again. His adoring Knights surrounded him, regaling him with their efforts to spread his manifesto. I'd been soaking up all the snippets I'd caught, a desperate need in me to understand his secrets. He'd written it before 'the curse' which hadn't really been a curse at all. Ziggie had offered to get me a copy before Eyke forbade it, his jaw ticking. I could imagine what he wrote in it. I'd had time to sift through the memories of Goldie's diary and what he'd said to me when I'd first met him. Three families were cursed and erased from general knowledge and forgotten. The supposed 'human plague'. Instead of quads, the Heads enacted triads, but there was still a decline in boosts as Melbak got weaker and Gaer took over more of the land. Gaer, which Eyke seemed to know so much about. He wasn't afraid of it like every other Legion. Why did he know so much? That I couldn't quite figure out. Wellyn placed a cool hand on my bouncing knee. I thought I would want to sleep after the attack. Three of their knights had been knocked out, but no one seemed to care now that their long-lost leader was back again. Energy jittered through me. In all the chaos, I had put aside the fact that I'd boosted Tallis. Darting a look at him, I saw he was still close by. He was sitting against a wall with one leg kicked up. Cove was lying next to him, uninjured but solidly out. My ratid was curled on Tallis's lap. It looked incongruent for a dangerous, dark

Legion to have such a soft, snuggly creature using him for comfort. I had a new respect for the creature. It had protected me and thrown itself in the path of danger even after I spurned it. Tallis cracked open an eye, as if feeling me look at him. My heart notched up a gear, and I looked away. Eyke was waving off his adoring fans, ignoring the insistent grip that Ziggie had on his arm. Even though I was furious at him, that small touch made me queasy. He was mine.

“We need to speak, my boost,” he began, his voice deep and slow. I crossed my arms. This should be good. I waited for him to spill.

“So, you were a big deal two hundred years ago,” Fenar joked instead, jerking his head toward the ostentatious portrait. Eyke gritted his teeth but answered with a small nod.

“You have questions,” he stated, and my temper flared. He was standing with his arms behind his back, looking like a mountain of a man and completely unbothered by the trove of secrets he’d kept about himself.

“Start from the beginning, big guy. Did you target me specifically? Now that we’re in your cult bunker, what are you going to do with me?”

The fears came blurting out. I didn’t know this Legion at all. I’d trusted him with a naivety that made me want to vomit. When he said he’d needed my help, when he’d talked about being trapped, he’d been hiding a darker truth this whole time. His nostrils flared, and he moved towards me, his face haunted.

“Back it up, buddy,” Fenar lost all humor, flashing his fangs. I felt better knowing he and Wellyn were next to me. Eyke’s shoulders seemed to droop before he fixed me with his flinty eyes.

“I was head of my family, the Kindale line, two hundred years ago. Human boosts were many and Kindale took the majority, as did our sub houses Lea and Canoste. So much so that often children were born with human features. There was nothing to identify them as Legion. I was one such child.” He waved his hand to his face. “I was one of the last born to a human boost before they were banished back to Earth or wiped off the face of Melbak. What the Heads didn’t want others to know was that a boost from a human was stronger than one from a Legion. That with our boosts coming from humans, we were more powerful. The other houses conspired against us, spread the idea that humans caused disease and enacted laws to have human boosts banished. But that wasn’t enough because we had supposedly brought this danger to Melbak. The Heads banned our houses from taking boosts at all. It meant we couldn’t win a Vinko, and because of this, we were being decimated and stripped of power. I was young, tempestuous, and frustrated. My anger was my driving force. The desire to bring my houses back to glory. I thought I had the only solution to these injustices.”

He took a breath and waited, giving us the opportunity to comment on what he’d just admitted. I wasn’t about to interrupt. I wanted to know how he’d ended up cursed and

what all this had to do with me. He rubbed his beard and continued.

“I imagined a life on Melbak that was equal, where power wasn’t parceled out by existing strength, allowing powerful to become more powerful. I tied it all back to one thing, the thing they barred me from having.”

“Boosts,” I added warily. He nodded, his throat working as he swallowed loudly.

“If the other houses didn’t have access to boosts, then they would be on the same level as us. Equal. As it was, collectively we were weaker, and I didn’t see it changing. I wanted to give us a chance. Years went by with me experimenting with my power until I had created a way to localize it and use it as a weapon. I designed it to trap all the boosts in Melbak. To capture them in one swoop. I had wanted to show the other Heads what it was like to be lacking. I wanted them to have to rely on their own strength and see that without the boosts, they were just like us. I had intended to use it for a short amount of time, a few weeks. Only to prove my point. I knew they wouldn’t ever understand until they had to go without. I wanted to punish them like they had punished me, and for what? The crime of having human boosts?”

He turned on his heel and started pacing. His words sunk in. Eyke had planned to do something wildly dangerous, cruel. I looked at my triad and wondered how they would fare if they didn’t have my boost. Could they survive? Eyke had wanted to cause suffering. He had acted out of desperation, but it was

still so extreme. My heart chilled. It was too much to comprehend.

“The Heads knew of my plans, though. One of my associates betrayed me. Instead of capturing the boosts, they tampered with my power, and it captured me, along with I’m assuming most of the missing family lines. I did not design it to exist for this long, and with me stuck within it, the power never abated. I was unconsciously powering it this whole time. They’d laid a cruel trap. The curse would end if I took a boost. They thought I would never do such a thing, considering how vehemently I argued against them. The moment I met you, I knew I had been wrong.”

He seemed to implore me with his eyes.

“It was like a game of Ratid and Wolves, but I was too arrogant. I played, thinking I would win. You, a novice, smashed through my strategies and destroyed the foundation of my prejudice. I never meant for you to find out. I wanted to fix this monstrosity. My power had created something I never wanted. I was working on a solution.” He looked haggard.

“That’s comforting,” I deadpanned, rubbing a hand down my face.

“Cami,” Eyke started, and I shook my head, pinning him with a sharp look. He pressed on. “You were never a part of this. I fell for you the moment I met you.”

“You barely know me,” I argued, and he had the gall to smile softly.

“Oh, but I do.” He cleared his throat. “My power? It steals people’s essence, their soul. The essence can be very dark, most Legion are. You can imagine how tainted they could get.”

He motioned to Ziggie who bounded over to him with delight. His eyes blazed as he held out his hand hovering around Ziggie’s neck like a collar. Black particles sped from her body to his hand, like a dark collar. Ziggie choked, her eyes bursting open. “It’s second nature for me to use my power. See how it comes to me? I can sense the inner nature of this Legion right now. I know her at her core.” He pulled his hand back with a grimace and Ziggie fell to the ground coughing. Eyke paced away from her, looking disgusted with himself, and furious. An oiliness spread through me at his words, I didn’t want him to know another intimately. His next words soothed the rising hurt.

“So showing me how you could kill someone is supposed to make me feel better?” I spat out, a flutter in my gut at how powerful he seemed right now. It was exhilarating and terrifying.

“Yes, because I am yours to wield. The essence inside of people calls to me and yours? It sings, bright and incredible. I’ve seen your soul, and I know I’m not worthy of its brilliance. You say I don’t know you, but I’ve seen your essence, and it is the most precious thing in the universe. I never meant to cause you harm. I would never hurt you. I never meant for any of the hurt my power has created.”

I looked at him for a moment, stunned in silence. My head was spinning suddenly, my tongue felt sluggish in my mouth. Ziggy got to her feet and bowed, smiling maniacally again, which Eyke ignored.

“I can’t do this right now. I am filled to the brim, and I don’t particularly want to see your face at the moment.”

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, trying to will the spinning to stop when Tallis spoke.

“Looks like I’m not the only fool.”

“We are nothing alike,” Eyke snarled.

“No? It seems like we are similar in breaking the heart of our boost. It’s an exclusive club. You can be vice president,” Tallis taunted. And wasn’t that the crux of it? Everywhere I turned, I found more ways to have my trust flung back in my face. My fingers clenched around Wellyn’s. Even he had truths he held back from me.

“I just need some space,” I announced, hating that my words sounded slurred. I guess everything was really getting to me. “Can you all leave me for a bit?”

I didn’t open my eyes but heard the shuffled sounds of people moving. I don’t know how long I sat there, but the floating sensation only intensified. My body felt like it wasn’t my own.

My eyes snapped open.

“No,” I whispered, trying to get up, but my arms wouldn’t hold me. I looked around, whimpering. I was seeing double.

The feeling was terrifyingly familiar.

The last time I had felt like this had been the night of dad's accident. I had sworn to myself I would never take another mind-altering substance. I never wanted to put myself in a position where I couldn't make rational decisions and be fully in control of myself. That broth must have been something else. I willed my fingers to bend, to give me leverage to lift, but it was as if I'd been downing tequila all night. My forehead sprung with sweat, and I whimpered again. My heart was racing so hard in my chest, thumping in my ears as I slumped downwards. I was scratching at the confines of my mind, blind panic overwhelming me. I couldn't move.

"Cami?" Tallis kneeled next to me, his forehead scrunched from what I could tell. Everything around me was becoming blurry, and I was holding white knuckled onto consciousness, terrified I was going to black out.

"Help me," I cried. "I-I-I can't, please." It horrified me how slurred I sounded. Tallis picked me up, cradling me in his arms with a tenderness I appreciated. My gut sloshed precariously as he walked carefully. Whatever that drink had been, it hit me like a ton of bricks, and I was absolutely, one thousand percent, smashed.

"You are sick?" Tallis probed, but I was spiraling. Something about the lightness, the sense that I wasn't in my body, was even more disturbing knowing what damage it had caused before. I wasn't in my right mind. I was stuck halfway

in a nightmare, remembering the last time I'd been blacked out drunk.

“The drink,” I slurred, my head lolling on Tallis's hard chest. I let out a little sob and felt Tallis's arms tighten around me.

“What's going on?” That was Wellyn. I couldn't see him, but I felt the cool touch of his fingers on my forehead.

“Find out what the *shek* was in the drink Cami had. She's unwell. She's upset. Get something to counteract it,” Tallis barked, continuing to walk. I tried to talk to Wellyn, to explain why I was reacting this way, but the words came out garbled. Oh god. My stomach lurched. I needed this to end. I felt a screeching desperation clawing at my body, but it didn't respond.

“Give her to me,” Fenar insisted as Tallis sat, settling me in his lap. It was warm and a very nice lap. His tail wrapped around my leg, anchoring me to his solid chest. That strength was the only real thing I had right now. I needed it.

“No,” Tallis disagreed stubbornly, stroking me softly when I sobbed again. I'm sure his shirt was a mess by now. “I think I can help. There's something my mother used to do.”

I felt his calloused hands slowly push at the material of my sleeves until my arms were bare. He wrapped his hands around the too tight skin, and then the sensation of heat pressed against me. It built and built until I hissed. His hands lifted.

“Are you out of your mind?” Fenar shouted, but remarkably, some of the panic abated. I could blink through the fog for a moment before crashing into the confusing dizziness again.

“Again,” I mumbled. His fingers were trembling when he touched me and started that slow burn once more. My skin tingled, prickled and thrummed under the localized heat. Each time, he would move his hands to a separate spot, taking me to the point of pain and stopping.

“My mother was in pain for a long time,” Tallis murmured, his hands coasting down my skin, hypnotizing the panic inside me. “She was a boost.”

I turned my nose into his neck, focusing on the rising sting.

“She had a lot of different ways of dealing with pain. She had the same powers as me and whenever I hurt myself and was inconsolable, she’d do this. It always helped cut through the fear and the pain and help me focus.”

His hands shifted again.

“She would have liked you,” his voice cracked as I melted into him, the room swirling with constant dizziness still. But the constant building of heat and the slight sting of pain made my scattered mind concentrate.

“When she died, my dad fell apart. My other two triad fathers did too. It was like without her, they couldn’t keep going. They loved her so much it destroyed them. My dad has thrown himself into work to resurrect Melbak in her memory. I watched him for years, a husk of himself. I never wanted that.

To be consumed by such deep feeling that everything else paled.”

“What about Cove?” I muttered into the skin of his throat. He snorted, and I jostled momentarily until he hauled me tightly against him.

“Our mothers were best friends. We grew up together and lived a very similar life. She had always been there, and I thought it made such a nice, clean fit.” He gulped. “I like neat things, logical, where it all makes sense.”

“Your cushions.” I winced as he hit the point of pain.

“Yes, my cushions.” There was a smile in his voice. “You always messed them up. Just like you were messing me up. I was trying so hard not to be my father. I was trying to keep everything neat and safe. Until you burst into our lives and showed me what it feels like to burn.”

My breath hitched, and I pulled myself back to look at him. My vision was still blurry, and I squinted to get definition.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked, clamping my hands on his shoulders to stop myself from swaying. He seemed torn, like he was chewing on a confession, but Wellyn burst through the door.

“Here, this should help,” he rushed over and brought the glass to my lips. I felt my tongue coated in a cool mint liquid, rushing up my nostrils and making me cough.

“That should do the trick. It’ll burn off the effects of the drink. Ziggy apologized. She thought it would numb the

shock of everything that's happened, but she didn't realize how strong it would be for a human nor how you would react."

Blinking, I shook my head to remove the sharp sensation in my nostrils.

"Oh good, the room has finally stopped spinning," I moaned, slumping forward, until I realized I was still sitting on Tallis's lap. He was searching my face intently, his face serious. I pushed off his shoulder, hiking my leg to the side and landing on the mattress he was sitting on. We were in a small bedroom, filled with two sad single beds covered in peach sheets.

"I'll leave you to rest," he said stiffly, standing slowly. I watched as he walked to the door, his tail dragging.

"Thank you." I gave him a small smile as he turned to look at me. "You don't know this, but I have a fear of drinking. Well, anything that might put me out of my right mind. My dad was in a car accident the last time I drank. He was coming to pick me up. It was my fault that he was hurt, so I promised myself I would never put myself in that position again. I never want to cause pain. So, thank you for helping me."

He nodded.

"That explains the chair with wheels." His whispered words were more for himself than for me. But before I could question him, he quickly left the room.

Fenar

There was no leaving my boost. That skirmish had been tame in the grand scheme of things, and my wolf had felt a surge of pride at being able to protect my boost so well. But even my head was spinning with the knowledge Eyke had dropped. A burning frustration seeped through me that there was so much heaped upon Cami's shoulders. That the history of Legion was hounding after her like ghosts, determined to turn her into dust. Sitting on the opposite side of Cami, on the other small bed, I ignored the questioning look Cami was giving me. I rubbed my chest and sighed when she scooted further up the bed, lips pursed towards me. Wellyn perched next to her, wringing his hands in his lap, and taking her in with wide violet eyes. They shined with inner light. His creature was close to the surface.

“Are you sure you're alright?” he asked.

Cami nodded. Her eyes were slightly wired.

“Whatever that second drink was, it's worked as fast as the first. And Tallis really helped with his heat.”

We sat in silence for a moment. Wellyn picked at his nails.

“My father is Head Lamott,” he blurted out, eyes wide as he waited for Cami’s reaction. I sucked in a breath through my teeth. I knew it had been hard for him to admit that. Cami’s forehead creased and her hands darted out to frame Wellyn’s face.

“Head Lamott? From the meeting? The one with the white claws?” she clarified. Wellyn nodded his head in her hands. His mouth opened and closed, as if he wanted to speak, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“This was your secret?” Cami whispered. Her head tilted so that her hair fell to the side.

Again, Wellyn nodded, his skin pale with the confession. I didn’t know what he expected, but Cami leaning forward and pressing her lips to his in a sweet, earnest kiss obviously wasn’t it. He sucked in a jittery breath as Cami moved closer and weaved her hands down his neck to rest on his chest.

“Thank you for telling me. I understand why you wouldn’t want me to know. He gave me the creeps,” she admitted.

“Tallis and I are the only other people who know the truth, and if it got out, it would be detrimental to Head Lamott and dangerous for our lives,” I butted in, seeing how Wellyn had gone mute.

“He’s an evil Legion, Cami,” Wellyn’s voice shook as he finally spoke. “He cares only for power and is ruthless in his way to get it. I didn’t want you to know. It was just one more

thing to put you in danger. But I don't want to make the same mistake as Eyke did. There is no secret worth losing your trust.”

Cami melted into him. His arms snaked around her to form a tight embrace. He glanced up at me, his fingers running the length of her spine. His muscles quivered as he clutched her into him, shell-shocked, like he hadn't expected her reaction to be so accepting. It was smart. He'd seen the ramifications of keeping things from Cami in the spectacular blow up just before. Wellyn was also still under the impression that his father reflected on him negatively. It was his greatest shame to be found wanting by his father and tossed aside. He should have known Cami wouldn't care, and I was smug that she was proving my thoughts right.

“I believe it, and I will wring his neck if I ever get the chance. He missed out on you. He's already a loser in my mind. But I am glad I know my instincts were correct about him.” Cami turned her head and sighed, rubbing a fist against her eyes.

“In the spirit of sharing, I boosted Tallis.”

“What?” I spluttered. I sank further into the bed opposite them. She shook her head, her eyes squeezed shut.

“I know! It was when we were being attacked. His powers weren't working, and I just panicked. And now, with everything with Eyke, that drink, I feel like I'm going to explode.”

Her hands rubbed down her thighs, her chest catching on a nervous inhale. I met Wellyn's eyes over her shoulder. I didn't care that she'd boosted Tallis. It was only surprising. However, Cami was getting in her head right now. I could see her shoulders creeping up and almost hear the stampede of thoughts running through her mind. A slow smile spread over my face, and I leaned forward, smothering the desire to let my wolf howl like he wanted to. I knew what she needed right now.

"It's been a long, hard day, hasn't it, baby?" I sympathized, pouting at her as she cocked her head.

"You need someone to take care of you, don't you?" I added, amused by how Wellyn perked up, understanding what I was suggesting. His hands wrapped around her shoulders, and he massaged the skin there, digging his thumbs in hard enough to make her head drop back and groan.

"That's nice," she sighed, her eyes fluttering. "I just want a break. I need a holiday." She mused to herself more than anything and I caught Wellyn's eye, looking pointedly at Cami's breasts. We were going to give her a holiday alright. I wanted her floating to the ceiling. He grazed his hands down, tentatively squeezing her sweet skin. I watched, mouth watering, as her nipples hardened immediately. She stiffened, glaring at Wellyn and trying to wriggle away.

"Ahh, what are you doing?"

"Pinch her nipples, Wellyn, our girl needs a break and I know the best way to blow off steam." Her pupils dilated.

Cami's body wanted this, even if her mind needed a little coaxing. Wellyn hesitated before twisting her nipples gently, encouraged by the soft whimper she made. But she was looking at me and I stared at her, nodding my praise.

"That feels good, doesn't it?" She nodded. "You want Wellyn to take all this away?"

Wellyn was already unbuttoning her top, and my throat tightened as he revealed her gorgeous tits. Her nipples were begging to be sucked on and she arched her back, the uncertainty leaking out of her as the possibilities turned her on. I swallowed hard, adjusting myself, trying to focus. I had to look after my girl right now. This wasn't about me.

"You want him to lick you, baby? Taste you all over that pretty cunt? I bet you're so wet already," I teased her. Wellyn took the hint, maneuvering her onto her back and kissing his way down her body. I couldn't help but feel jealous as his mouth swallowed one of her nipples. His hand came up to play with the other stiff peak. But the way she threw her head back, her plump lips parting with a sigh of absolute pleasure, I wanted more of that, even if I wasn't the one to do it.

"Tongue those pretty titties, Wellyn. Suck them hard enough to leave your mark. She belongs to you, remember? Our beautiful boost." I palmed the straining cock in my pants, trying to relieve some of the pressure, but that only made it worse. Cami was growing impatient, her hands fumbling at her pants and pushing them down her legs. Wellyn ignored her movements, coming up to claim her mouth instead.

“I love you.” He looked down at her, his body trembling. Cami melted under his gaze, the intimate moment searing me with longing.

“I love you too. I want you. All of you. Do you think that we could?” She looked over at me with a heated smile. Wellyn glanced at me, as if remembering I was still in the room.

“Fenar can talk me through it maybe,” he joked, and I realized they hadn’t had sex yet.

“I can leave,” I tensed, everything in me screaming in refusal.

Cami parted her legs and moved her hips against Wellyn in a teasing movement. She was wanton right now, cheeks flushed, and lips tortured from being caught in her own teeth.

“No, stay. I want you, Fenar. If that’s okay, Wellyn?” she asked and Wellyn laughed a little under his breath.

“Don’t judge me on my first time, Fenar,” he blushed, I guffawed.

“I’m about to bust in my pants right now, and I’m not even touching our girl,” I admitted, squeezing my cock as evidence.

“I think you’re neglecting Cami though. Taste that cunt for me. Tell me how sweet she is,” I ordered, filled with brightness from Cami’s words. She wanted me here.

She wanted me too.

It was enough to stay and witness her beauty. Wellyn wasted no time burying his head between Cami’s parted legs, his curls

shaking as he tasted her with abandon. He licked a stripe up the length of her, groaning and looking over at me.

“She tastes like perfection. Already so wet,” he praised. I watched as he grabbed Cami’s hand, bringing it down to her cunt and pressing her fingers inside herself.

“Get your fingers nice and dripping. I think Fenar earned himself a taste.”

Shek.

I choked a breath, watching as Cami plunged her fingers before trailing them back up her body, stopping to drag them around her nipples. She coated them in her juices until they were shining in the light. Wellyn ducked between her legs again as Cami gave me a taunting look.

“Better clean me up.” Her voice was pure sin. I fell to my knees beside the bed. Her hooded eyes closed as I reached for her breasts like a ravenous beast. Her taste exploded in my mouth. I searched it out with my tongue, sucking her fiercely, unable to keep my hands from landing on her skin and massaging them as well. Wellyn had left hickeys, and I wanted my mark there too. I scraped her with my fangs knowing she enjoyed a bit of pain with her pleasure. The moans she was making let me know she loved it. Her hand landed on my head, and she twisted her fingers in my hair.

“Oh god, this is what I wanted last time,” she panted. “At the temple, I wanted both of you together so badly.”

I looked up, watching Wellyn's head buried between her shaking thighs.

"She's close, Wellyn, our girl's about to flood your face."

I looked back to Cami, soaking in every inch of her flushed skin marked with mine and Wellyn's attentions. Her head turned side to side, as if she was fighting her orgasm until she tightened, a scream exploding out of her as she arched her tits to the ceiling, her thighs clamping Wellyn's head as he licked her clean.

"So beautiful. The most stunning thing I've ever seen," I whispered, kissing the corner of her mouth. I brushed a lock of her dark hair from her face and moved back, settling myself on the other bed. I was glad to hear the small noise of protest she made, but this was not for me right now.

"You better get that cock out, Wellyn. Our girl isn't done yet." I winked at her, unbuttoning my own pants to free my strangled dick. Wellyn shimmied out of his clothes and leaned over Cami to give her a passionate kiss. His hands skimmed over her body reverently, like he couldn't believe he was with her. He gave me a look, biting his bottom lip. He was nervous.

"Lie down, Wellyn, our girl is going to show you how it's done." I shared a loaded look with Cami. She didn't waste any time, swinging her leg over Wellyn and hovering above him.

"You don't want my mouth for a bit?" she teased, rocking her hips against Wellyn's cock, and covering him with her arousal. He moaned, closing his eyes. The tendon in his neck popped out as he shook his head.

“No, I don’t want to embarrass myself again,” he admitted, his cheeks pink.

“Cami doesn’t care if you can’t wait, do you, baby?” I interjected, wanting to break the awkwardness that was creeping in. She leaned over Wellyn, her tits brushing against his chest lusciously.

“I just need to feel you inside me, be close to you, share my body with you. I want this to be special for you. To make you feel as good as you make me feel.”

They shared a look that had me letting go of my cock and feeling like a creep. It was so heated, soft and lingering. An intimate moment I shouldn’t be a part of. My chest ached fiercely. The longing was so strong that it felt like a physical weight choking the breath out of my lungs. Wellyn leaned up and brushed a sweet kiss on Cami’s lips and she sat up, gripping his cock and angling it towards her opening. I wondered if I should sneak out, let them have this, but Cami looked at me as she sunk down on Wellyn’s cock, slow and deliberate. Wellyn swore, his hands landing on her soft hips.

“What should I do now, baby?” she whispered to me, and I jolted at her use of the name I usually called her. She rocked back and forth, tilting her head with her eyes wide and innocent. I sucked in my lower lip to control the wobble it gave, emotions threatening to overwhelm me. She was still thinking of me, even impaled on her Legion, she was including me. I leaned forward, licking my lips. Wellyn had

closed his eyes, his face scrunched together like he was trying to keep it together.

“Squeeze your pretty tits, baby,” I ordered, grunting as her fingers flew to her chest and obeyed. “Pull back slowly on Wellyn, until just the tip is in that perfect cunt and *shek* him nice and slow. Can you do that?” I sounded breathless. Cami nodded. Her fingers were white as she kneaded her plump tits. Her hips were hypnotic as she rose on her knees, teasing Wellyn with slow, gentle thrusts. She sucked him down with a whimper, grinding her hips quickly before obeying my command.

“You ride his cock so well baby. Watch her Wellyn. Watch her while she takes you.”

Wellyn’s eyes flew open. They burned violet, his creature floating close to the surface. Cami was his choice, and he wanted to be near for this first time. Wellyn sobbed a little, scrunching his eyes closed again as Cami undulated slowly above him.

“Open your eyes,” I growled, knowing that seeing her like that was pushing him closer to the edge but wanting him to imprint it to memory. She was a gift, a sensual goddess. He should remember this moment forever. He did as I commanded, a wildness entering his gaze.

“Grind yourself against him baby. Give that clit what it wants,” I ordered Cami. She moaned, her hands still working her tits as she pushed her pelvis down, rubbing herself against Wellyn. He was panting, his forehead dotted with sweat.

“I can’t. It feels too good,” he cried over to me, and I shook my head.

“Hold on. Hold on,” I urged, watching Cami as she angled herself to short, shallow rocks as she hit the spot that would get her to explode again. “Our girl needs this. She needs a break, remember? We have to take her to paradise.”

I fisted my cock, mesmerized by the vision in front of me. Cami was otherworldly in her beauty, her head tipped back and her hair streaming down her back in waves.

“His cock is nice and hard in you, isn’t it baby? Are you getting close? Are you going to choke his cum out of him? Tell me baby, let me hear you,” I urged, gratified as she moved faster, spurred on by my words. Her throat worked and chest heaved.

“It feels so goddamn good,” she moaned, “I’m going to come soon.”

“Then *shek* his brains out baby. Take him there with you.” My hand strangled my cock, flying up and down its length. This was the hottest thing I had ever seen and seeing Cami’s ass bounce furiously on Wellyn’s cock had me roiling with jealousy but drooling all the same. Wellyn’s fingers dug into her thighs, like he was trying to stop her but coax her at the same time. They were both straining, shaking, and panting like a moving artwork. It was hypnotic and magical, and I could almost sense the explosion of energy as they came almost at the same time. Cami cried out, her hands falling to his chest as her ass flew back and cunt ground down on him. Wellyn

pulled her to him, his hips lifting them both as he flooded her cunt with cum. Cami whimpered on his chest, her hips still moving slightly on top of Wellyn. He was looking at her with wonder, his fingers dragging through her beautiful hair.

“Thank you for choosing me,” he whispered to her, kissing her, and flipping her onto her back. He slipped out of her slowly and she sighed, as if missing his cock inside her. He looked at me and blushed. Ridiculous considering what I’d just witnessed. He raised one of her hands and kissed her knuckles, like he was a gentleman courting instead of stark naked and covered in cum.

“I’ll get something to clean up,” he said, slipping on his clothes and padding towards the door. He crept out without waiting for us to respond. Cami rolled over to her side and let out a tremendous sigh. I was still sitting with my hard dick in my hand, and I coughed, trying to pull the covers over it.

“Sorry,” I said, awkwardly. “There is no way I could watch you like that and not be rock hard.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’d be hurt if you weren’t.”

“It’ll go away in a moment,” I assured her. She sat up and stretched. Whatever I had thought to say dried up as I watched her body move. She kneeled and spread her legs, her upper thighs slick with cum. I couldn’t look away from her cunt and the thatch of dark hair above it.

“My mind is still racing away. I wish there was something you could do to take me out of it.”

Her fingers danced down to circle her clit, spreading her lips to show me how red and engorged it was. I was breathless. Frozen.

“What do you want, baby?” My voice was gravelly with desire. Cami’s eyes latched on to the pre-cum dripping from my cock.

“I want you to fuck me till the only thing in my mind is you.”

I moved without thinking, my pants falling to my feet and ripping my shirt over my head.

“You want me to make you scream my name, baby?” I asked, standing over her naked.

Cami

Was I really about to do this?

I had literally fucked his triad brother moments ago. But as Fenar towered over me, his cock straining towards his stomach, slick at the tip, I knew I wanted it. It didn't help that my body was riled from the two amazing orgasms Wellyn had wrung from me. My whole body was zinging, like electricity was racing through me. I wanted more, so much more, and I knew Fenar was willing. He ran his tongue over his lip as he looked down at me, waiting for me to say it explicitly.

“I need you.” I hoped he knew it was more than just a body. He had helped make Wellyn's first time so scorching hot, his filthy tongue the perfect soundtrack. Fenar slid in next to me, not wasting another second. I moaned into his insistent mouth. His hot cock pressed up against my hip. He took me like a man possessed. His tongue plunged into my mouth with a hunger that I welcomed. I met him with the same ferocity. I needed this. Any control possessed snapped. He turned feral,

scraping his teeth down my neck before latching onto my nipples with a growl.

“Oh God, Fenar,” I squealed as he nipped the round flesh of my breast. His hands ran the length of my body, squeezing my hips before tangling in my hair as his mouth sought to claim every inch of my skin. I clung to his body like a buoy, drowning in the ecstasy of this abandon. His fingers traced the hair above my pussy, diving into my dripping lips. He mouthed my neck with a groan.

“This cunt is about to be mine,” he promised, his voice rough again. My channel clenched around his fingers at his crude claiming. The words should have offended me, but instead they set my heart thumping even louder in my ears. I wanted him to mark every inch of my body, a primal need rising in me I had never felt before. He circled my clit with a deliberate slowness, a breach from the ravenous pace he’d set so far. He hovered above me, looking at me with such intensity that I couldn’t look away.

“Does my baby like this?” he taunted with a sly smile. His fingers were feather light. I angled my hips, chasing his touch, pouting when he evaded it.

“Don’t tease me Fenar,” I scolded. He abandoned my clit altogether, causing the delightful hum that had been building to move to my thighs, making them tremble with anticipation. “Fenar!” He plunged two fingers inside me, drawing a moan as he found the spot that brought sparks to my eyes. I choked, and he chuckled, nodding slowly.

“I’ll take care of you, don’t fear. I’ll live in this cunt. Fill you with my cum until you can’t go a day without it. I’ll chain you to my bed and *shek* every single one of these holes until every Legion understands what you already know.”

His eyes flashed luminescent, his creature rising. Wellyn had been the same. His fingers worked inside me, obscene noises filling the room in a chorus with my panting.

“You know what you are, don’t you, baby?” he prompted, leaning down to scrape his fangs down the column of my neck. I was getting close, my thighs shaking and clamping on his hand as he wrenched another orgasm from me.

“Yours,” I screamed, my voice turning into a moan as he coaxed a few slow, languid waves of my orgasm forth. He placed his drenched fingers on my lips with a cocky grin. I didn’t protest, cleaning them as he stared at me.

“*Mine*,” he rumbled, pulling his fingers from my mouth. He flipped me over on all fours. I collapsed onto my elbows as he settled behind me, squeezing my ass until I whimpered. It reminded me of Tallis’s hand when he spanked me. My pussy was drenched from the memory. Fenar rubbed his cock between my lips, letting my juices cover his hard length.

“I know what you’re thinking about, my naughty baby,” he whispered as he lined himself up, the head of his cock nestled right at my entrance. I didn’t reply, my hands clenching in the sheets of the bed. “You’re thinking about Tallis’s hand on this perfect ass.” He thrust into me shallowly, panting.

“Fenar!” I protested as he pulled back, denying me the feel of him inside me.

“I forgive you because I can’t deny you anything. I’m all yours Cami, everything I am, is yours.”

He plunged into me, pushing a hand on my back to bury himself to the hilt.

“Yes,” I hissed, reveling in the burn that rippled through me. Fenar’s control broke, his sweet words forgotten as he gripped my hips and pounded into me at a furious pace. The sound of our skin slapping together was wet and erotic. I moaned into the bed, adoring the feeling of being completely and utterly taken. His hand tangled around my hair, tugging it, and wrapping it around his fist like a handle. He wrenched my head to look back at him. My breath exploded out of my chest at how magnificent he was. His muscular body rippled as he thrust into me. It was almost angry, but the look he raked over me was possessive like a brand.

“Can you take more, baby?” He gritted his teeth. “I want to—my wolf.” He gasped as I clenched around him. I tipped my chin in challenge.

“I can take whatever you give me. Don’t you belong to me?” I reminded him of his words. He tipped his head back, his throat working as he nodded vigorously.

“After this, there will never be another for me but you. If you take me,” he gulped, slowing to a rolling thrust. His cock was inside me, but suddenly, something different crept up. It was blazing hot, hard and—huge. My eyes widened. Fenar

tightened his hand on my hair, twisting it until my eyes watered.

“What is it?” My mouth dropped open as he ground against me. Something huge had swollen at the base of his cock and was demanding entry to my pussy. Fenar let go of my hair and urged me to lie down. He hiked my hips back, lifting one knee up to angle himself against me. It burned. It tingled every time it touched me. His cock was steel inside me. There was no way I could take anything more.

“It’s my knot,” he spat out through gritted teeth as he looked at where we were joined, as if enthralled. “My wolf wants to claim you as much as me. If you take me, I can never find release with anyone but you.”

I jolted at the confession, hissing as the movement sent him further into me. Fenar was grinding against me with slow, coaxing thrusts, trying to force something that wasn’t going to fit into me. It was too big and the implications? I would be tied to him, always. I looked at him, my face pressed into the bed, and felt a wave of something wash through me. Fenar groaned as my body yielded, and he slipped in further than before. His gaze flew to me. He had never been more beautiful than in this moment. Everything was stripped away.

This was Fenar without the walls.

I could refuse him, and he would stop in a moment, but is that what I wanted? He’d proven himself repeatedly. I knew there was no one who knew him better than I did. Not even his brothers. This was a precious gift, and he wanted to give it to

me. He groaned as his knot slipped further into me, my pussy opening as if it was just waiting for my acceptance.

“You want to be only mine?” I swallowed a moan. The pressure of his knot was right inside me, rubbing against the most delicious spot. Fenar nodded, the tendons of his throat taut.

“I already am. It’s you who has to decide if you want me.”

I wanted to hear him say what effused every inch of his face right now. I wanted him to unravel that last bit, to prove himself, but I realized it was my gift to him. To show him I accepted him just as he was.

“I love you,” I admitted, surprised by how my throat closed after, my eyes misting with tears. I cried out as his knot slipped fully inside of me, locking us together in a tornado of bliss.

“Cami,” Fenar breathed. His hands stilled on me, and his eyes exploded open in shock. My heart was a rollicking thump in my chest. He hadn’t thought I would say the words. I could see the child Fenar, a lone tear quaking down his cheek. “I never thought...I...” He stroked my skin like he wanted to infuse his love into it. His knot was still pulsing inside me, and I had to tamp down the desire for him to move.

“Claim me Fenar. I love you and I need you,” I begged, wriggling back on him to prove my point.

My declaration broke the dam inside of him because his filthy tongue lost its heat and as he moved, he could only

babble out endearments. I sunk into the bed, letting him grip my hips as he thrust me into a melting puddle. The knot locked us together, keeping his thrusts short and shallow, but each slight movement sent sparks racing down my spine. It was decadent. The fullness and the pressure keeping me right on the edge of pain.

“You’re so beautiful. So perfect. I love you endlessly. My heart beats in time with yours. It will follow you until the end of the world. I would step in a million gluts for you. I would cut my heart out of my chest for you to keep,” Fenar panted, his gaze pinned to where his knot had melded us together. I pushed myself back on him, throwing an impish smile over my shoulder. These sweet words were everything, but I loved when he was dirty even more.

“Is my cunt wet enough for you?” I teased, slamming back into him until he groaned, and his fingers tightened on my hips. A garbled cry rose from him. He picked up the pace, his animalistic side resurfacing.

“*Shek* yes,” he hissed. “You’re strangling my knot with your pretty hole. It’s so hot. I can feel my cum boiling inside my cock. I can’t wait to fill you up, baby. Knotted together while my cum floods you. Next time I want you to ride me. I just about lost it watching you with Wellyn grabbing those perfect titties—*SHEK*.” He slammed into me, grinding his hips against my ass forcefully. I cried, open-mouthed into the sheets and stiffened, an orgasm knocking me sideways with its force.

“Fenar,” I wept, closing my eyes as I rode the incessant waves. I felt his weight collapse on me as he shouted. His warmth flooding inside me like he’d promised. He pressed a thousand little kisses to my shoulder blades, nudging me to my side. His arm snaked underneath me, and he pulled me flush against him. His knot was still throbbing inside me. The pressure almost comforting.

“Thank you,” he whispered against my salty skin. I snorted softly, already half asleep.

“I should thank you,” I mumbled. “I’m only thinking about you and that amazing knot.”

The sound of his husky laugh rustled through my hair as I drifted off to sleep.

Wellyn

Sitting next to Cove and Tallis, I offered them a slice of the cured meat I'd pilfered from the open kitchen area. I'd meant to take it back to Cami, but I'd heard the sounds coming out of the room when I returned. Fenar and Cami should have some space. I searched for the jealousy I expected, but I couldn't muster up anything to tarnish the glowing joy that burnt inside me like a furnace. I would have liked to lie in Cami's arms and hold her close, but there would be plenty of time for that. Cove picked up a slice with a sigh and chewed on it.

"They don't have an ordering machine down here. This is the best I could find," I apologized, and she shrugged. She had a red lump on her forehead from where a projectile had hit her during the tussle. Tallis shook his head, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"Is she alright?" he whispered. I whipped my head to frown at him, but he froze, a slight wrinkle between his eyes. I

cleared my throat, not wanting to get into how Cami was at this exact moment.

“She’s confused and frustrated right now. No aftereffects from the drink if you were worried.” I gazed across the room and saw Eyke staring at me. His shoulders were slumped, and he sighed as Ziggie tugged on his sleeve to show him something. She’d been enraptured since he’d walked through the door. All the Knights had been. It was a homecoming that Eyke never intended. I held no sympathy for him. He’d created something that had ruled our lives for years. Something that had caused pain and suffering for every Legion.

“Poor little human.” Cove picked another slice up and popped it into her mouth. “She’s not equipped for this.” She said while chewing. My creature bristled under my skin. A rush of denial came through me.

“She is fierce, and she has us,” Tallis countered gruffly. He pinned Cove with a look, sitting up and shaking his head at my raised brow.

“Does she now? Last I heard, you were repudiating her, Tallis. Has something changed in that respect?” Cove looked down at her nose at her childhood friend. It held weight despite her tiny stature.

“Tallis is going to make it right? Aren’t you?” I prompted him and his hand fluttered to his chest, where I knew he was holding his grand gesture. His jaw clenched as Cove hummed.

“Is that right? I rejoice to hear it. Although I hope it’s not too late.”

“It’s not too late. She boosted you, after all. Please tell me it wasn’t a trick you used to manipulate her. You see how she punished Fenar for even contemplating it,” I warned. He slapped his fist on his thigh and glared at me.

“I would never risk it, and she offered. I would never dare to ask.”

“What happened?” I pressed, seeing the hurt flicker on his face. He hissed and knocked his head against the wall.

“After...after...” He sucked in a breath, his cheeks hollow. “After I hurt Cami, my powers wouldn’t work. I couldn’t access them. It was like there was a wall inside me. We were about to be attacked and I couldn’t defend her. So, she boosted me, correctly thinking that it might help cure the block.”

I felt stricken at the thought of Cami defenseless and Tallis trying to protect her with nothing in his arsenal.

“You didn’t say anything.” Surprise rose in me as he threw his hands up.

“And say what? That I had *shaked* up so bad that my own powers had abandoned me? It’s not like we’ve been on speaking terms until recently, anyway.” He folded his arm mulishly, as if daring me to disagree. Cove stiffened, looking at me with wide eyes. I reached over her and gripped his knee.

“We weren’t. I agree with you about that. But I can see you’re trying, and she will, too. Just keep going. When will

you show her?” I motioned to his chest. He pressed his palm to the space, as if guarding precious treasure.

“Show her what?” Cove’s curiosity sparked as she leaned over. Tallis turned away

“Nothing, it’s, look, it’s something to make up for what I did. I’ve been waiting for the right moment,” he stammered. I covered the urge to smile.

“It won’t make it right, but it will go a long way to proving you are sorry. Just give it to Cami. There won’t be a time that will be perfect,” I counseled, settling back against the wall. I felt my reader buzz in my pocket and slipped it out.

Meet me at the training arena. I have information on the Heads.

It was from Kevin. My gut dropped at his message. I read it out to Tallis and Cove, the former frowning deeply.

“Tell him we’ll be there as soon as we can,” he rumbled, and I typed out a reply.

Just you. Tallis is too recognizable up here.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Cove said slowly, looking between us. I shrugged and stood, brushing my knees off.

“I agree, what could he tell you that would require you going there?” Tallis pointed out. I noticed the ratid poking its head out from his sleeve.

“Look, you’ve got the ratid to look after, and it would be good for one of us to monitor him.” I tilted my head toward

Eyke, who was like a beleaguered mother with her young hanging off her. After finding out his role in creating the Gaer, I was concerned about leaving him around Cami. We had little choice right now. Everyone was seemingly after her and I didn't trust his intentions when it was clear he'd been lying about his past. He seemed to care sincerely for Cami, but I didn't know him.

“Keep me updated. If I don't hear from you in thirty, I'm going to come after you.”

I brushed him off, squeezing Cove's shoulder.

“Don't let him leap off a cliff while he's wallowing will you,” I teased, walking off to the sound of Tallis's stiff protests.

The trip to the training ground was uneventful. My head felt as if it was about to swivel off with the way I was looking around to make sure no one was following me. The hair on the back of my neck prickled as I walked into the training arena. Kevin hadn't mentioned where to meet him. I imagined it wouldn't be down in the actual arena but the spectator boxes. I made my way to the Aydro box, thinking he would have access. A throat clearing made me spin, and I blanched. My father stood in the doorway, my four brothers looming behind him. Tone, Ronen, Kaden and Hallet. Ronen leaned over my father's shoulder with a cruel grin.

“I told you it would be that easy, father. He's weak and stupid if he fell for a simple hacking trick like that,” he taunted, strolling closer with his hands tucked behind his back.

My knees trembled as they moved to surround me. Like so many memories in my past, I heard their laughter and taunts ring out, the menacing press of their bulk and the promise of pain to come.

“My son.” Head Lamott curled his lip, hovering back from the circle of brothers to examine me. “I let you live once, and this is how you repay me?”

I didn’t say anything, grunting when Hallet punched me in the kidney from behind.

“Boosted by a human. You couldn’t be more of a disappointment.” He sniffed with distaste. Another of my brothers took that as his cue to boot me on the lower back, sending me sprawling to my knees. I sucked in a ragged breath and glared at the man who had terrified me once. I dared him to continue with my eyes, letting him see the raw and thick hatred I held for him.

“Show me your creature. That pitiful abomination that gave me no choice but to discard you.”

I spat at him, uncaring that it landed on Tone’s boots instead. He retaliated with a sharp kick to my jaw. It sent me flying onto my back. My brothers hauled me up, pulling my arms behind my back painfully. I didn’t struggle, there was no point. They grossly outnumbered me and enjoyed it more if I struggled.

“I want to see what change your boost has had on the disgusting creature that lives beneath your skin,” Father spoke again. I turned my head away. My creature roiled inside me.

Disgust etched itself on my father's face and I had no doubt my eyes were shining. I never wanted to subject my creature to them again. The abuse he'd suffered had contributed to me losing him once. Never again.

My father stalked forward and cuffed my jaw, his dulled claws digging into the tender skin underneath. He was still wearing the golden circlet of a Head. How could someone so truly evil be in such a position of power. He dug the claws in until they pinched.

“Do you remember what these do?” he asked silkily. The unrelenting grip he had made me gulp. My brothers shoved me closer to his face. I remembered, and it terrified me. I tried my best to keep controlled, but each second in his prison unveiled a thousand buried memories of this exact scenario. But I had been a child then. Now, I was an adult.

Strong.

Loved.

“I gave you a choice once before. Do you remember? You were a sniveling waif. A weed to be plucked from the mighty Lamott line. I said I could grant you the mercy of these...” he pinched my skin further and my eyes fly open with alarm. “Or you could fade into obscurity and forget me and your worthy brothers and disappear. Sink into the shadows like you deserve. But you didn't heed my words. Somehow you have a boost. Another boon you don't deserve. Even if it is a filthy human. So, I want to see if the change is worth you defying your father. Your creature, now!” he barked and let go of my

throat. My head hung low, and I gasped for air. There was a burning in my chest as I sucked in precious oxygen. I looked up at him.

“You’re no father of mine,” I snarled. “I owe you nothing.”

He backhanded me as soon as the words left my mouth. The force of his blow caused me to clench down on my tongue. Iron flooded my mouth.

“Ungrateful brat,” he muttered through his teeth, seething. “You have been the bane of my life since you were born, weak, and tarnished. Now with your boost, causing trouble within the Heads. I wish I had killed you those years ago and saved myself the trouble.”

My creature lurched against my skin in silent protest, and I bared my teeth at him. I pushed it down, not wanting to give my father what he wanted. I would not subject my creature to that.

“Your little boost is sweet, isn’t she?” He changed tact, a slow smile spreading his thin lips. “I’d always wondered what the draw could be about a human, but I must admit she smells strong. I look forward to tasting her blood myself. Before I test out her other wares, of course.”

I lunged forward, still held by two of my brothers, and shouted at him. My vision was red imagining him with Cami.

“Don’t talk about her!”

Tone and Kaden looked at my father, slightly askance at his statement that he would dabble with a human.

“Father, what about mother?” Kaden asked. He looked down when father pointed a claw at him.

“Your mother is my boost, and she does as she’s told. She’s the reason for this weak son I am ashamed of. What other reason could there be for his weakness?”

Blinking at the sudden heat behind my eyes, I stared at the floor. I hadn’t thought about the woman, who was technically my mother, in years. I had only met her twice. Both times the small, wan lady who shuffled behind my father had horrified me. Even the other members of his triad had seemed beaten down, controlled by the overbearing presence of my father. He allowed allotted times to boost, but they didn’t interact with my mother and certainly didn’t have any type of relationship with her. There was no room for anyone else with my domineering father around. I had been too busy trying to make myself small enough to escape his notice to wonder about the woman who had brought me into the world.

“I had planned to intern her with your mother, let your brothers have at her, but then I saw the little one. She’s entirely too bold for my liking, but I’ll enjoy the challenge of breaking her in.” He tapped a claw on his chin. Kaden didn’t bother to hide his shock at his father’s words.

“But, but she’s a human?” He wrinkled his nose.

My father rolled his eyes.

“I’ll treat her like the filthy animal she is. Once Albion Kerys is beaten and I have dealt with this charade of bringing

in human boosts, then I can punish the traitorous Heads who are supposed to be allied with Lamott.”

I perked up a little, careful not to let on I was listening, but hopeful my father would continue to run his mouth.

“The Vinko plan could still work,” Tone said, and my father scoffed.

“By the time they decide, we’ll have to wait another four years to do this the right way. If they just sided with me, we could get this finished. But no. Some obscure law had to be dug out and presented that showed boosts forbidden from Vinko.”

I looked up, regretting it immediately. My father saw my pleased expression.

“Don’t worry, son. I found a workaround. Why do you think you’re here? Your boost is going to agree to be tested, like a proper Legion juvenile. She’ll have to take the three tests and prove her worthiness. She’ll either die trying or, if she gets free, she won’t last long after I congratulate her.” He wagged his claws. My stomach dropped to the ground. The three tests for Legion were grueling, mind bending and dangerous. Could a human pass them? Even if she did, with one prick of his nails, my father would make sure she didn’t survive.

“Bloody him up. I want a picture that pulls at the heartstrings,” my father ordered, his eyes steel. My brothers didn’t hesitate, raining down fists and feet to do his bidding. There was no point in fighting back. All I could do was try to protect myself as best I could. I was outnumbered and I knew

that even if I did fight, one prick from my father's claws would end me. I had to take the beating and hope I could buy myself some time.

He needed me alive.

For now.

Cami

Had I complained about being in Ambrose's kitted out penthouse? I should have kept my mouth shut. At least that place had windows and an ordering machine, which I'd steadily realized was one of the best things about Melbak. Fenar squeezed my thigh, like he could hear my thoughts. I swirled the *Seffe* in my bowl and tried to muster up the energy to eat it. It wasn't even fresh like when Tallis had ordered it for me. They dehydrated it, and that seemed to make it ten times fouler.

"You get used to the taste," Ziggy assured Eyke, noticing his reticence to try it. He grimaced, pushing the half-filled bowl away from him. I'd only been out in the main area for twenty minutes, and the air already felt unbearably stifled.

"We could always get back under the covers," Fenar whispered in my ear, and my cheeks heated as my core flooded with want. I had a feeling I'd unleashed a beast.

"I don't think I can," I replied, honestly, and his teasing expression fell, immediately contrite. "I'm just sore," I

explained, not really wanting to elaborate while I was sitting around a table filled with other Legion. I could hardly believe what had happened. The term ‘dicked down’ didn’t seem to encompass it. Not one, but two Legion had been inside me. One who had the most magical peen adaptation. If I could recreate it on Earth, I could be swimming in cash. A knot was everything I never knew I needed. But now I was aching. The size would take some getting used to. Not to mention the implications of what we’d done. I leaned into Fenar, closing my eyes to soak in his warmth. There wasn’t a hint of regret. I only wished we could have time to celebrate and spend time together without dark clouds looming over us.

“I love you.” Fenar kissed the shell of my ear. Something deep unlocked in Fenar, and he couldn’t stop himself from saying the words. He nuzzled his face into my neck, uncaring who saw him lavishing affection on me. I looked up, eyes clashing with Tallis, who was scowling at the other Legion. My ratid still clung to him.

“Thanks for taking care of him. Or her?” I spoke. He flicked a quick look at me.

“No problem,” his hand grazing his chest. I looked round the table at the faces of the Knights and saw several staring hard at me. There was one special person missing, however. One who I needed to reach out and talk to.

“Don’t look at my boost,” Eyke growled, slamming his spoon down and making the bowls clatter. I started, surprised

by the forceful growl that came as one stubborn Knight sneered at me.

“It’s ok. I need to speak with Wellyn anyway,” I rose from my seat.

“Where is he?” I asked Cove. She tucked a lock of straight silver hair behind her ear and met Tallis’s eye. The tension in Cove’s shoulder and the flicker of uncertainty in Tallis’s sent a shiver through me.

“Kevin contacted him on his reader. He left to get information and should be back soon. He checked in recently with what he learned.” Tallis cleared his throat and I stiffened, leaning my fingers on the table.

“Do you want to share with the class buddy? What information could Kevin have?”

Tallis fished out his reader and passed it over to me, open to the conversation he and Wellyn had. It was much like a phone, and I scrolled through the text, Fenar translating it for me in a low voice.

Tallis: Check in, all good?

Wellyn: Yes. Heads planning to expedite Vinko unless Camellia takes the Legion trials.

Tallis: No way—it could kill her.

Wellyn: I think it’s a good idea, where are you now?

Tallis: Are you crazy? We’ll talk when you get back.

That had been fifteen minutes ago, and as I stared at the screen, a chill raked over my spine.

“Something isn’t right. Wellyn doesn’t call me Camellia.” My stomach flipped with a heavy unease. “Why would you let him go up there alone?” I glared at Tallis, shocked to see the hurt buried in his dark gaze. Fenar snatched the phone and grumbled under his breath.

“Wellyn didn’t want to leave you alone, that’s why,” Cove interjected, nudging him, and tilting her head towards Eyke. “For *reasons*.” I looked at Eyke, who was grimacing at the table, aware of the unsaid implication Cove had made against him. I sighed inwardly at my tender Legion asking Tallis to watch me in case Eyke had any more bombshells he had to drop.

“I understand, but those messages...they’re off.” I cleared my throat and moved away from the table, wanting to leave immediately. “We need to go to him. I don’t want him up there alone.”

“I agree. Can you get my things from the room? I’ll head up there and make sure he’s alright.” Fenar scowled at the reader.

“Cami?” Tallis called out. “Can I talk to you first? I’m sorry I didn’t pay more attention to the messages. I admit my mind was distracted thinking about everything that happened between us.” I turned with my arms crossed over my chest. I didn’t know what to expect of Tallis anymore. Since he burned my photographs, he’d seemed reticent, even regretful of his actions. It was obvious as he stood near me, the evidence of

his failed gift clawed onto his shoulder. His ever-present arrogance had vanished. Melted away and left a Legion who could barely meet my gaze. I pitied him. The rage I'd felt had been dulled by everything that had happened. I still couldn't believe that I'd boosted him. I waved to the bedroom, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible. Tallis's shoulders stiffened as he walked into the room. I followed, realizing my error. The room still reeked of sex and the sheets a complete mess on the bed. My chin rose, waiting for the snarky comment that didn't come. Instead, Tallis seemed to blow out a frustrated breath, his gaze still pinned to the floor. His fingers were fidgeting with the edge of his jacket.

“What is it Tallis?” I prodded, my dislike of him shadowed by the curiosity brewing at his strange behavior.

“I've been trying to find a way to do this. I thought my previous gift might show that I was genuinely sorry for what I did to you. To apologize for everything I put you through.” His hand patted the chittering ratid. “That didn't work out how I wanted it to. But I have something else for you.”

Tallis slipped his hand in his jacket and pulled out a white envelope. I swallowed a gasp as he handed it to me. It couldn't be. I was going crazy for even thinking about it. The lump in my throat was enormous. An inferno engulfed my lungs.

“Open it,” Tallis breathed, and I slid open the top, falling to my knees at the gift inside. Photos. I spread out the multitude of photos on the bed. The ratid landed on the bed, sniffing its little nose at them. I snatched up one of my parents. It had

been taken in front of a house I didn't recognize. My dad was in a wheelchair, looking thin but happy. Ma was perched next to him, just glowing. There were pictures of my brothers with toys in their hands. The last photo was one of the entire family. They were holding up a sign that read *We love and miss you, Camellia!*

"W-w-what is this?" I wept through spasming sobs. My chest hurt from how hard I was crying. I had to keep swiping my eyes to clear them of the never-ending stream of tears. Tallis had fallen to his knees beside me and was collecting the photos up, trying to stuff them back into the envelope. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He looked at me, the whites of his eyes taking up his eyes. "I thought this would make you happy. Fresh memories to replace the ones I destroyed."

"Stop," I gripped his wrists. "Stop. I love them. I just don't understand. How could you have these? They look recent, and the one with the banner?" I cried again, my words getting swallowed into the muddle of tears and even snot pouring down my face. Tallis's face was close to mine, and I stilled as he raised a hand, solemnly wiping the tears from my eyes.

"With the help of my dad. I went to Earth and to your family's home and took these." He shook off my death grip and extracted a photo that showed a lovely white, two-story house with a wildflower garden.

"This is their new home. They just moved in with the money you earned for them. Your family is all together again. The boys from your aunts and your dad from the hospital. I

said I was there on your behalf to deliver the boy's birthday presents because you couldn't be there. They remember you still. Gloria didn't remove you from their memories. Just helped them not to be worried about you."

Tallis pulled out the photo with the boys holding the toys. I realized they were a wolf and an octopus. "I had to get these. They are like Fenar and Wellyn." He shot me a thin-lipped smile, like he was waiting for me to melt down again.

"Oh, my god," I croaked, my fingers shaking as I drank in Aaron and Percy's joy. "W-why? H-h-how?" Thoughts slammed around my skull, swallowed by intense emotions. I leaned against Tallis as I flicked through each beautiful picture of my family. There were even some older ones with me still in them from before dad's accident. One was of us camping together. I drank in my younger self with braces and almost dissolved again. Tallis was rubbing my back in soft, steady circles as I sifted through those precious mementos.

"You did this for me?" The warmth of his chest against my arm anchored me and calmed the shock. I was shaking all over, utterly confounded by what was in front of me.

"I knew as soon as I lit the other photos up that I had made the biggest mistake of my life. I couldn't stop thinking about you since you arrived, obsessing about you. What I thought was hate was really something bigger, scarier and something I couldn't comprehend. I fought so hard against it, thinking of my dads and how much easier it would be to have Cove. You were an aberration. Something that I could expunge if only I

tried hard enough. But Cami—” Tallis gripped my forearms and gazed at me. “You can’t know how deep my regret is that I hurt you. That I was blind for so long. I meant what I said on the last note. I’m yours. I know what is in my heart now. It’s you and I will prove it to you.”

My mouth dropped open. Even if I wanted to reply, words had fled my mind. Tallis was holding onto me still, his fingers curling around the exposed skin and where he touched it burned. Was he telling me he loved me? Where had that even come from? He had been horrible to me ever since I arrived. He had decimated me. Cut me to my very soul with his actions. And all because he couldn’t accept that what he felt for me wasn’t hate, but love? But I inhaled the photos, spread out on the sheets, and felt the joy radiating off them. He had gone to Earth to get them for me. To replace the ones he’d destroyed.

Tallis had met my family. I couldn’t get my head around it.

“I-I have letters as well,” Tallis announced, uncomfortable with the silence that was dragging out. He let go of my heated skin and handed me another bundle. I looked at it mutely, words still escaping me.

“They love you so much, Cami. You aren’t forgotten by them. They have pictures of you up all over the new house and your dad even showed me some of your comics. It made me realize who the mastermind behind Bossman was.” Tallis shook his head ruefully. He blew out a breath and got off his knees, tired of trying to communicate with a wide-eyed blank

slate. The rattle on his tail seemed to shiver with discontent as he stood. I launched myself into him, toppling him over onto the rumpled bed. My arms clenched around him, smothering him in an aggressive hug.

“Thank you Tallis. Thank you,” I mumbled into his chest, realizing belatedly that this might be a bit much. I pushed up, but his arms banded around me, plastering me against him so I could barely move.

“Let me have this, please,” he whispered. I hesitated before I lay my head down on him again. His breath shuddered out of him in a quiet sob. We lay together, our arms wrapped around each other for a few minutes. When I tried to pull away again, he reluctantly let me go. I inched myself up and, before I could second guess myself, I kissed him. I had intended it to be a sweet, gentle, thank you. Tallis had other ideas. He kissed me fervently, his fingers clenching into my hips, sweeping away the tentative press of my lips. His tongue swept into my mouth and plundered it. Desperate and hungry.

His reader chimed in his pocket, and I wrenched myself away, stumbling to the other side of the room. Tallis had surprised me with his sincere apology, but that couldn't erase the hurt he'd caused. Words were lovely, but they could mask any level of deceit. I needed Tallis to show me he was true to his statements. Tallis fumbled his reader out, his chest heaving. He shot up like an electric bolt had run through him, his hands scorching red. His reader tumbled through his hold on to the bed.

“No, no, no,” he cried, looking wild and disturbed by what he’d seen. I lunged forward, plucking the reader up to see what had alarmed him. My heart stopped in my chest and my lungs roared with the need for a thousand steadying breaths. It was a photo of two hulking Legion, whose red hair matched Wellyn’s. They were holding him up between them. His face was pulverized, none of his features were recognizable. Blood had soaked his shirt and splattered the floor. The reader chimed again. This time with a message. I moaned as I read it, my gut dropping to the floor.

Send the human to take the trials or say goodbye to him.

Eyke

I tried to breathe through the chaos that had erupted around me. My boost was hysterical, arguing with Fenar with a vehement rage, which I would have enjoyed if she wasn't fighting to go to her death. The implication of a human taking the trials had whipped the Knights into a frenzy. In their eyes, it would help legitimize them. It was further proof that they were worthy even with their human heritage. The loudest one, Ziggie had stopped hanging off my arm and was whispering into one of the reader devices. Her eyes lit with a sick excitement that made my stomach flip. The trials hadn't changed in hundreds of years. They were still as dangerous as they had always been. Except now, if a Legion failed, they would remain alive. In my time, we slaughtered them out of shame. No house wanted a Legion that failed in the test of mind, body and soul trials. Tallis was pacing, his tail sending a whip of air right next to my face.

“Watch it,” I growled, shooting him a sharp look.

“It’s a trap. There is no way they will let this stand. It’s another trick,” he snapped at me, his pacing becoming more frenetic. “You’re old as *shek*. You must know some way to protect Cami. What happened in your previous time with human boosts?”

“Tallis, you need to stop,” Cove comforted, placing a placating hand on his arm.

“No! No. I just got one step closer and now they are trying to take her away from me for good? I won’t let it happen. I can’t!” his voice broke, and he looked at Cami with a longing that I knew intimately. We were fools in love, but fools saved no one.

“I’m not going to leave him with that monster,” Cami shouted, her dark hair flying like a curtain around her. “I will take whatever damn trials I need to in order to get him back safe with his actual family.”

“You don’t understand,” Fenar groaned, movements jerky with panic. “These trials are formidable, and you are going in without even knowing what they entail.”

“So, tell me.” That proud chin tilted, and she crossed her arms. Even in my dread, I could admire how magnificent she was.

“It all comes back to Melbak. Legion aren’t just spouting words when they talk about our connection to the land. It’s a symbiotic relationship between the two of us. When you boost us? That power recharges the land. Like at the temple and the spring. In turn, Melbak controls the boosts that are born, their

power a blessing from the land. That has been souring because of the Gaer. Melbak has weakened, and that has affected the presenting of new boosts. We need it and it needs us. Legion ingest three, separate, tiny doses of an elixir that build a bridge between us and Melbak when taking the trials. The land itself controls what tests you face. It isn't something the Heads can manage. Which might sound perfect, but it's also terrifying." He leaned forward and cupped Cami's face. "I *still* have nightmares about my trials. I had to fight with every cell in my body. Creatures of unimaginable terror converged on me. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done."

Cami's jaw clenched and her eyes shimmered.

"What choice do I have? I can't leave him."

"Let us think for a moment, baby. What if there is a way out of this that saves Wellyn and stops you from having to take these trials?"

"There isn't," rang a voice from the entrance. I was by Cami's side in a flash. I shuffled my boost behind me, ignoring her rabid protestations. The woman that sauntered in was familiar. She was sporting human features like all the Knights.

"Gloria?" hissed Cami. I grabbed the back of her shirt as she lunged towards the woman with her finger outstretched. Gloria looked on, bemused. Ziggy raced towards her, wringing her hands.

"Thank you for coming," she gushed, sliding into step with Gloria until she was face to face with Cami. My boost bared

her teeth in a very convincing show of aggression. My heart thumped painfully with adoration.

“Let. Me. Go. Eyke!” She tossed me a mutinous look. Gloria smirked, her red lips sliding up in the imitation of a smile. She ignored my boost and looked at me instead. Hungry and awestruck. I grimaced, sick of the fawning. The small time I had been here I realized I wasn’t built to be a leader of sycophants.

“Our Bold Lord returns. It is an honor to meet you properly this time.” She reached out and ran her fingers down my face. “I had my suspicions when we met before.”

“You’re a Knight? I thought you were Avanti’s lackey,” Fenar frowned, folding Cami into his hold. Tallis was looming behind them. A show of solidarity against the newcomer. Gloria sneered, and I realized where I had seen her before. She had come into the apartment after I had just escaped the Gaer. She didn’t have blood red claws or fangs any longer, though. She was hiding in plain sight, like so many others.

“I can’t do much for my cause without inserting myself in the houses that despise me and my kind. You’re welcome, by the way.” She examined her nails.

“For what?” Cami said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, for finding an old, forgotten ruling that forbids boosts to perform in Vinko. That was Lamott’s triumph. He was positively tickled by the idea. He wanted you slaughtered legitimately and publicly. It was wonderful to wipe the glee off his face. Unfortunately, I hear he’s made a contingency plan

and working outside of the Heads. I can't do much when he acts illegally.”

“So, he can beat a Legion half to death, and no one can say a word about it?” Cami spat, still ready to maim.

“Who is going to speak out against him, little human? Head Aydro is the only one who really is averse to his methods. No, you are going to have to complete the trials. But not the way he is hoping. He wants you to run into it without thinking. Without strategizing or preparing,” Gloria explained.

“I don't have time for this!” Cami seethed, turning in Fenar's arms to appeal to him directly. “It's Wellyn. I can't wait. I won't let him suffer. He's hurting. Please, let me go.”

“Lamott will kill you if you survive and he'll kill Wellyn, too. He clearly hates humans enough to go to the extremes. Please, baby, let us consider all the angles.”

My chest squeezed as she slumped in his arms, fingers itching to comfort her as well. I couldn't do that, but I could act in other ways. I turned to Gloria and clicked my fingers at her.

“Get me a conversation with your master. We need power on our side and to crush Head Lamott. It's time to bring House Kindale back.”

Her cold exterior faltered and her fingers shook as she pulled her device from her hand. She hesitated before putting it in my hand.

“My house cares deeply about blood purity. You have nothing to offer Head Avanti that Head Lamott can’t give him in spades.”

I stared her down, impassive. She sighed and handed it over, pointing out the button to swipe over.

“Avanti isn’t your house. You understand that don’t you? If you have those features, it’s likely Kindale or one of our sub-houses that is your heritage. You have my manifesto. What else has been saved of mine from before the time of my imprisonment?”

I cast a look at Cami again, knowing that time was of the essence.

“The Knights stole nearly everything from your study before it was destroyed,” Ziggie interrupted, rushing to insert herself into the conversation.

“It won’t change anything. You’ve been away from this world too long, Lord, and the way things work has changed,” Gloria argued, but her eyes held a spark of hope.

“Avanti wants power, strength and prestige, right? Ambrose filled me in on the standing of his mother and the fact that the other three Heads are in a loose alliance without her. Head Avanti hasn’t the wealth nor skill to elevate himself and has relegated himself to being a second hand to Head Lamott, who can do everything he wants. It’s a cheap imitation that poisons him daily. I guarantee that when I speak with him, he will flip on his former owner.”

A contemplative look flittered across her face, and I knew I was right. Some things never change, and the greed of the Heads was one of them.

“If we want this to truly end, I need to rob Head Lamott of his power and ensure he can’t threaten my boost again. I know how to play these games. They stay the same no matter the years that have passed.” I lifted the device to my ear, moving away, meaning to take the conversation somewhere private. A little hand wound its way around my arm, and I started when I saw it was Cami.

“Gloria? Speak,” echoed a tinny voice. I frowned, not quite understanding the process. “Gloria?”

“Head Avanti, you don’t know me, but I am Eyke Kindale. It would be to your benefit to meet with me. I have information that will change the structure of Melbak as you know it.”

“I don’t know how you thought this would go, but approaching me through my assistant is not acceptable,” he scoffed.

“I have the means to clear Gaer off Melbak. If you meet with me and agree with my terms, I will allow you to take the acclaim for that. They will know you as the house that saved Melbak from certain demise. The one that inadvertently solved the decline of boosts. The start of a grand new era. Avanti at the forefront.”

Cami was leaning in, listening keenly to catch Avanti’s choked response. He spluttered on the other end, clearly

dubious over the grand promises I was making. I wasn't sure how easy it would be to back up my promises, but I would do anything to ensure Cami was safe from this Head Lamott.

“You lie. It isn't possible,” he sounded wary.

“That's your choice to make if you prefer to be under Lamott's boot. There are other Heads who would be more open to me,” I hedged. His expletive was immediate.

“Have Gloria bring you to my tower, and if you are lying about this, I will make you die a painful death,” he promised. I mashed the buttons, hoping I turned it off properly.

“What is your plan?” Cami asked, “And can you really back up that promise?”

I wanted to shrug, my nature to keep things to myself clawing at me. But I could see the shades of distrust in her dark eyes. It made me want to tear open my chest and lay everything at her feet so she knew I was irrevocably hers, that everything else paled in comparison. The power, strength, and prestige that Avanti so desired had been all I ever drove for as well.

It had been my downfall.

I had torn Melbak apart in my desire to be the strongest house.

“I know men like Avanti. I used to be like him. No amount of money can buy the knowledge I have. He wants to be the most powerful house, and I can give him that. The Knights would have my records. Proof of the original houses. I'm

relying on that. The house Kindale is going to be restored. I can protect you better if I am a Head as well.”

Her lips twisted in a bitter grimace.

“You expect me to believe I can trust you? You hid your true self from me and the pain and suffering you caused. How can you come back from that?”

My chin hit my chest as I dropped my head in solemn acceptance. I’d obliterated the trust she’d guilelessly given me. I was a monster in her eyes, and if Legion knew the truth, they’d tear me limb from limb.

“I never intended for the Gaer to cause the legacy of pain and death that it has. That was the fault of my enemies, who are long dead. They trapped me without realizing what would happen. I may have created the Gaer, but I would never have done it if I’d known the destruction it had caused.”

Cami shook her head.

“All the boosts who sickened before their time. All the people who died when they encountered the Gaer. There are children who’re infected by your corrupted powers, dying agonizingly slow deaths.”

I pulled myself up to my full height. My stomach tilting at her words. At the idea of children being hurt by my powers. I fervently hoped that my theory about the ‘dead’ being taken into the Gaer was correct.

“I am heartbroken that my powers have caused so much agony. I will have to live with that for the rest of my life. It

wasn't my intention that it became what it is now. I was young, stubborn and ego driven, but I am not a monster. I would never willingly hurt a child. I hope you know that. I could apologize for an eternity, and it wouldn't make a difference I can see that, but I am sorry regardless. I am sorry that you look at me like I'm a poison to be purged. Sorrier than you'll ever know. I will do everything to fix us, and Melbak. I can only do that through action. My words are empty if I don't follow through."

Cami looked away, her fingers fiddling with her sleeve.

"What can I do? How can I fix this?" I added softly. I was walking a tightrope, expecting to flail into the abyss.

"I don't think you're a monster. I think you're an enormous dick, but we have bigger concerns right now," Cami sighed. "But when it comes time to get rid of the Gaer you will go to the Ward Estate and make sure we cure those children first."

I agreed immediately, wanting to say more, but she turned to leave. I watched her walk away from me and it took everything in me to not haul her back and guard over her like a dragon with a hoard. She faltered, turning her head and I perked up, hopeful.

"One more thing. No more lies." She set her shoulders back in a stance that reeked of power. I would have gladly worshipped her if she'd let me.

"No lies," I nodded instead, aware that I wasn't in a position to offer Cami anything.

She searched my face, emotions flitting over her own like they were looking for a mirror. Uncertainty was the victor, and it was only years of training that stopped the dismay from surfacing in mine. She didn't trust me, and I had no one to blame for that but myself.

Cami

I'd followed Eyke because I didn't trust him.

He was too good at keeping his secrets and I wasn't about to let him make some deal that screwed all of us over. Eyke said he cared for me, but I didn't really know the Legion, and he'd proven he had a dark history. He had wanted to get rid of all boosts. I *was* a boost. That kind of left me in an awkward spot. My head was racing, branded with the image of Wellyn. His evil father had him right now and was doing god knows what to him while he waited for me to arrive. I made my way back to the main room where Legion were milling about, buzzing with an uncertain air. I made a beeline for Gloria, the only one who seemed to have inside information, and the only one who seemed unaffected by what was going on. She looked so different without her Legion features. The fake teeth and nails that had shocked me so badly a lifetime ago when I was unsure what I had been roped into. Fenar and Tallis fell in at my back like little shadows.

“Can they rig the trials?” I asked. It was pertinent to know if I was walking to my death, even if I’d already decided. Gloria looked at her nails, blunt but still brilliantly red. I still couldn’t believe that she’d masked her true self so well.

“No. Like Fenar said, Melbak controls the trials, and its power is something we can’t even comprehend. Although the likelihood of you surviving is low. I can’t imagine a human would have the strength to complete the trials.”

“Did you complete them?” I asked, a sharp edge creeping into my tone.

“I might look human,” Gloria sniffed. “But I am Legion. We are not the same. I still have powers and I was raised under the pressure of our society. We don’t compare.”

“Why didn’t you let Lamott have his way and make me join the Vinko then?” I wondered, confused by her. She clicked her tongue at me like I was a child.

“If you competed in the Vinko, there was zero chance of you surviving. At least this way, there is an infinitesimal chance you might prove me wrong. You have done it so far.”

“Your belief in me is inspiring,” I sniped bitterly. Wringing my hands together, I turned to Fenar. There was fear deep in the depths of his eyes.

“I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do. I need Wellyn to be safe, but I—I don’t think I will survive this.”

“You will,” came Tallis’s harsh voice, a guttural promise. My eyes flew to him in surprise. He nodded his head like he

was trying to convince us both. For a moment, I put aside any other feelings I had for the Legion and took the comfort he offered. I threw a hand out, grabbing onto his arm and pulling it towards me. He made a noise of surprise before reacting. Fenar and Tallis wrapped around me, their arms anchors.

“I’m scared. I’m just a human. This is too much,” I admitted in the crush of their embrace.

“I know, baby, but you’re strong. Everyone keeps talking about how hard these trials are, but I’ve never met a stronger human.”

“You’re such a flatterer.” My laugh was wet with a sudden rush of tears. His arms shook around me.

“No, he’s right. You are powerful. Resilient. Melbak designs trials for every type of Legion. Small, large, smart, or dense. It caters to challenge you specifically. I believe you’re here for a reason. You saved all four of your Legion but maybe it’s even bigger than that. Maybe it’s Melbak that needs saving. You need to draw on your indefatigable spirit,” Tallis rallied, and his tail snuck around my calf. I stayed there for a moment, focusing on pulling my breathing back to normality. I couldn’t fall apart right now.

“I am going to go with Gloria now,” Eyke interrupted. I poked my head up over the embrace of my other two Legion. They parted reluctantly. I nodded to Eyke.

“I don’t know if I’ll see you before...” I trailed off. My chest ached at the vulnerability on his face. His chest heaved, and he held out a hand to me.

“Precious,” he sighed as I placed my hand in his. “I will see you again. I know your strength. I’ve felt it in your essence. As soon as possible, I will be by your side. After I ensure I’ve completed this deal, I will come to you. I know you are frightened, but you’re taking my heart with you into this next challenge. You’re my light in the darkness, always.”

I was so afraid that I forgot my anger towards his omissions. I flew into his front, throwing my arms around him and hoping it would stem some of the dizzying terror that was crashing over me. He kissed the top of my head, his fingers trailing the length of my spine. But I couldn’t let him leave on that note. I pulled him to me, an impulsive decision, and fused my lips to his. He poured solace into me, his mouth the conduit for the steel foundation he built in me. I gave him my worry, my fingers clutching desperately to him, selfishly unloading. He took it all, until I pulled back, looking to Gloria, who had her lips quirked in amusement.

“Take care of him,” I said to her, reluctantly backing out of his consuming embrace.

“The Bold Lord doesn’t need care from the likes of me,” Gloria told me, a hint of admiration in her expression towards Eyke before her usual resting bitch face returned. I turned to Fenar, ignoring the nosy Knights around us who were wide-eyed with the drama they only half understood.

“I’m not delaying this any longer. Take me to that bastard so we can get Wellyn safe. We don’t have the time to debate this anymore and there is nothing that can prevent it happening.”

“My brave boost,” Eyke said, pride in his chiseled features.

“Our brave boost,” Fenar amended, his fingers catching on my shirt and pulling me into him again.

“Can you care for my ratid until I return?” I asked Tallis, feeling the need to make this dire moment lighter. His throat moved as he swallowed hard, and he nodded.

“It needs a name. You need to give it a name before you go,” he pleaded, like he wanted to delay the inevitable.

“Let’s call it Hope. I need a shitload of it right now.”

I didn’t like the way his face crumpled and slid clear of emotion like a mask.

It didn’t bode well for my survival.

Cami

My knees shook as we reached the heavy doors to the training arena. I wasn't so much walking as being carried. Fenar was kind enough not to point this out to me.

“You don't have to do this,” he whispered in my ear. He was on one side and Tallis was on the other. Eyke had left with Gloria to see if he could convince the other corrupt Heads to help us with Head Lamott. I shot him a dark look.

“Would Lamott let Wellyn go?” I hesitated by the door.

“No, he'll kill him and then he'll come for you,” Tallis grimaced. He was never one to cushion his words. I sent him a small, grim smile.

“I don't have a choice, then. I'm not leaving Wellyn with his sadistic father any longer,” I declared, slamming my fists on the doors, and walking through, hoping I looked more confident than I felt. That went out the window when I saw Wellyn crumpled on the ground. Blood had congealed on his face. He was curled into a small, sad ball. I ignored the red-

headed Legion lazing about the room, even blanking Head Lamott as I tore my arms from Fenar and Tallis and ran towards my sweet Legion. I fell to the floor next to him, brushing his blood matted hair out of his face and moaning at the state of him.

“Oh my god, Wellyn. It’s ok. I’ve got you.” I swallowed a sob. It wouldn’t do any good to get hysterical right now.

“This is darling. Who would have thought my weakling spawn could inspire such devotion?” I would know the cruel voice anywhere. My head whipped up, and I glared furiously at Head Lamott. He smiled down at me, only feet away from his gravely injured child.

“Monster,” I hissed, my throat tight with outrage. Head Lamott shrugged, looking to the peanut gallery of beefy Legion who were clearly Wellyn’s brothers.

“Glad you could finally join us,” he inspected his white nails. “I wondered if your lover might bleed out before you came.”

I ignored the horrid man, reaching my hand back to Fenar, who had kneeled behind me and was gripping onto Wellyn’s leg, healing him.

“Can you puncture my wrist? I need to boost him,” I asked. It was strange how matter of fact it had all become. The idea of it had made me feel disgusted before. Fenar hesitated.

“You need all your strength for the trials.”

I narrowed my eyes, shaking my hand and ignoring the surprised bark of laughter Lamott made.

“Wellyn needs to heal, right? I can help speed it up while you do the rest.”

He didn't argue. It was futile. I pressed my neatly bleeding wrist into Wellyn's mouth, trying to coax him to take some blood. It was slow, but combined with Fenar's healing, I could see the cuts stitching together and the swelling reducing.

“It's fine. We'll just wait on you, shall we?” Lamott quipped, and I held back a growl.

“Just fixing the mess you made,” I gritted. “I'm sure you can try to wait a little longer to kill me.”

“I don't need to try. Your weak heritage will do all the work for me,” he replied with a sniff. He clicked his fingers and one of his lackey sons strode forward with an ornate metallic cup. I couldn't see the mixture inside, but the bitter smell made me wrinkle my nose, even from a distance. He gave me a grin of perverse pleasure. Wellyn stirred, his mouth moving away from my wrist with a moan. His face was now unmarred, save for some yellowing bruises.

“Cami? N-nooo,” he groaned, his hands feebly trying to push me away.

“It's ok,” I pressed my cheek against his. “You're ok.”

I looked back and gave Fenar and Tallis a heavy look before standing. My knees cracked on the way up. Not a grand sign

for undertaking trials that a human had never completed, and that some Legion didn't even complete.

"I'm ready." I sucked in a deep breath and Head Lamott had the nerve to slow clap, his eyes bright with glee.

"Now this will be good," he commented. His meathead sons laughed on cue.

"Cute." I glared at them. The laughter petered off. I held out my hand, clicking my fingers. "I've been told there's a drink I need to take. Considering I'm here under duress and all, I don't suppose you'll give me the bullet points?"

Head Lamott tilted his head, licking his lips predatorily. Behind me, I could hear Wellyn muttering under his breath, struggling in the hold of his brothers. Lamott tipped the cup, gazing at it.

"The trials are a noble tradition amongst Legion. We built our entire society on the ideals they uphold. Strength, resilience, and power. We are the greatest race in all the planes of the universe. We do not need human blood sullyng the glory of Melbak or siring a legacy of weakness."

"Is this your villain speech?" I sneered.

Lamott snarled. Moving quicker than I expected he gripped my jaw in one hand, pressing his blunt, white claws until the skin pinched and a noise of distress escaped me.

"Little one," he purred, leaning his face close to mine. "You are entirely too confident for such a spineless creature. These trials test Legion strength, mind and heart. Three separate

trials. Each one as grueling as the last. We fashioned the trial elixir from the very essence of Melbak. From where we all came from and where our powers derive. Where the power of your blood sings from. Your body will remain here. I'll even let your triad stay and protect you. I can be magnanimous."

He let go of me and scoffed over my shoulder. "But your mind will be in real peril. Open to injury or death. So you can run your smart mouth, but the ancient power of Melbak will still prove you're an unworthy opponent."

I remembered how Nakasha could still hurt me for a few seconds before the pain transferred to Albion. How could it protect me from literal death? I lifted my chin and reached forward to snatch the elixir. Lamott's eyes flared with surprise as I downed the lot, tossing the gaudy cup to the side.

"I guess we'll see, won't we," I mocked, the liquid carving a bitter path down my throat.

"Cami! No!" my triad called out and I turned to look at them, wobbling a little on my feet. Lamott laughed, leaning over to slap his thighs.

"Oh, this is too good. She's taken care of it all on her own," he spoke between chuckles.

"I-I-I..." My tongue was heavy in my mouth, moving sluggishly. My vision blurred, and I staggered. The hands of my triad wrapped around me and held me as my knees sagged. This was very wrong. My heart galloped in my chest, sweat springing to my upper lip.

“You were only meant to take a sip,” Tallis moaned in my ear, sounding terrified. “One sip per trial. One sip per trial,” he repeated like he couldn’t believe I’d taken the lot.

Well. Shit.

It would have been nice if someone had told me that before my impulsive decision, but I didn’t have time to ponder it as I slid out of consciousness and my body lolled in their embrace.

Cami

My body was tight and wound as if someone had shoved it through a tiny keyhole and left it to languish on the other side. Even blinking made me groan in protest. I cracked my eyes, hoping that I wasn't going to be face to face with some conjured nightmare. The intense pain slowly trickled out of me, the sensation similar to a cleaning room. An invisible line crept up my body, erasing any lingering aches.

I pushed to my feet, my neck prickling at the feeling of being watched. I was in a swamp, on a high soil rise where the mud hadn't quite reached yet. All around me was thick, sludgy muck and thin trees with mangrove like roots. It was hard to tell if it was dawn or dusk. The sun was dropping low below the tree line at a steady pace. How long did these trials go for? And how would I know when I was successful?

If I was successful.

A shudder ran through me as I stood on the tiny hill, frozen with indecision. I was woefully unequipped to deal with this and regretting my hasty decision to antagonize Head Lamott.

The state he'd left Wellyn in had stirred a rage in me I couldn't control. I wanted to burn everything down on his behalf. Now I only had the heat of the quickly fading embers of my anger to keep me warm. As the sun dipped, so did the air. The constant humidity of Melbak had spoiled me and I shivered in this new simulation, the sensation jerking me into action. I couldn't stand out in the open, not when I had no idea what was hiding in the shadows. Looking down at the dank marsh, I spotted one tree that had a thick trunk and long branches. Getting off the ground was my best chance for protection. I trudged down the slippery hill and lingered on the edge, looking at the trees with reluctance. The mud was sludgy and deep. I really didn't want to step into it, but I forced myself in, wrinkling my nose as it went up to my mid-calf. Using my hands to grab onto the towering mangrove roots, I yanked my legs out of the greedy mud. My nose wrinkled and I gagged on the stench that wafted up with every step I took. It was a slow process. I struggled through, quickly realizing I was a sitting duck if I didn't get out of this muck soon. I could barely move my legs. Each step was hard fought, and my arms were screaming from overuse. Down among the tree roots, it was thick. I focused on the large tree not too far away. The difficulty of slogging through the mud was almost too much for me to comprehend.

“Get it done, Cami,” I huffed under my breath, wrenching my foot upwards. My boot slithered off my foot with a suctioning noise and I tamped down the urge to cry. There was no way I could get those back. I lost my other shoe on the way

to the tree. Thankfully, the tree's trunk was rough with buckled bark. I hooked my fingers around the deep notches in the tree and used it as a step to lift. The mud sucked at my feet hungrily as I pulled out of it. The markings continued as I went higher, like useful little handles, and I chanced a glance out behind me.

Immediate regret.

My stomach dropped, and I clung to the tree, allowing myself a tiny whimper. Was it just now that I was realizing a fear of heights? My body was shaking, and I was close to shutting down. Why was I here again? I peeked upwards and saw a thick branch, big enough to hold me with what looked like a nest resting on it. I was going there. The climb was brutal and my muscles spasmed as I crept along.

“Fenar better get me into shape when I get back.” My eyes stung when I thought about my fanged charmer. “I can't die out here.” I tried to motivate myself. “I only got to experience that knot once.”

The sun was all but gone now. Shadows reigned, and I looked forward at the amalgamation of sticks and mud in front of me. There were strange shapes that glinted. I shuffled along the branch. It was wide enough for me, but my gut was not cooperating at being so high up. The nest was full of scattered objects. A metal bucket, what looked like a fishing rod, and a few rusted keys. I was about to head back, in case whatever lived here was not a happy bird. Then I saw a blade. With its black handle and rusted edge, I should have missed it, but it

must have been my lucky day. A foul undercurrent of rotting came from the compacted mud, surrounded me as I reached over the lip of the nest and snatched the blade.

I moved halfway down the branch where there was a wide knot that I could rest against. Restfulness didn't come easy, and I drifted in and out, unable to fully fall asleep.

The noises were too foreign. Sharp and shrill calls echoed in pitch black, and I had to muffle my mouth to stop my sounds of distress from being heard. My muscles were stiff from being held tense all night. At least I had the knife, which I clutched like a lifeline. Not that I knew how to use it. Another chilling, sharp call. It was closer than before.

The morning was seeping red, the sky a canvas of blood. It should have felt better to see the details again, but it somehow made it worse. At night, I could pretend I was still in Melbak and not some twisted alternate reality. Who would have thought I'd miss that post-apocalyptic wasteland? The tree trunk shuddered. I lurched sideways with a squeak.

What was that?

I didn't have to wait long to find out. A flash of white hustled up the tree trunk like it belonged. Oh no. I looked at the nest with a heave of my stomach. I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't made for this. I scooted around the knot in the branch, ducking down as best I could.

If it came past, it would hopefully miss me. I had the perfect view as it loped up onto the wood. I clamped my teeth on my tongue in surprise. My eyes so wide I couldn't look away. It

was a bird. Of sorts. I'd give anything for my ratid Hope right now. At least that thing was cute.

This was a monster.

It had two legs which were muscled, smooth alabaster. It had two sets of arms. A set of humanoid looking ones and another scarier set that held a set of deadly claws.

It had the body of some furred creature clutched in its grip as it navigated the branch with ease. The marks on the trunk made sense now. They were from this creature's claws. Feathers covered its back, thickening as it reached its head. Like a giant crow, with filmy gray eyes and a ridiculous sharp beak.

As Fenar would say—*shek*.

The creature sidled past me, letting out an ear-splitting screech as it made its way to the nest. I took shallow breaths, trying desperately to temper the rising panic in me. Thank every god under the sun that I had this knife. Useless as it was, it was better than nothing. The creature didn't seem to notice me, content with tearing the guts out of its current prey. I just hoped I could stay out of its clutches. I crouched behind the insufficient barrier, unable to look away as the creature decimated its food, tearing off little strips and chattering its beak in contentment.

Dizziness washed over me as my heart violently raced. I tried to breathe, but my lungs hitched on hysterical sobs. I covered my mouth and tried to hyperventilate silently.

Not ideal.

I was a terrible heroine. I was dying here. Was this part of the trial? Was this the creature I had to defeat to prove my strength? In some strange way, it seemed like a sweet monster, almost cooing at its food and making warbles like it was loving the gruesome painting it was making in the nest. The thing could gut me in a second, but wasn't that a bit on the nose? Big, scary monster, kill and destroy. But if I snuck down this tree, I would be caught within seconds, gutted, and turned a pretty red. Not a speck of me to remain. Doubt paralyzed me and I was struck with fear, sickened at the situation I was in. It didn't hurt to wait, right? Maybe it would fall asleep, and I could slink down the tree trunk and escape. I watched the creature snap its beak and loll its head to rest on the side of the nest, then shake itself awake, like it was trying desperately to stay alert. I felt like I had the opposite problem. The adrenaline and fear pumping through my veins made me restless. Time trickled. The creature slumped, slowly and surely, and its freaky eyes fluttered closed. I still didn't move.

My legs were on fire, screaming at me to stretch them. Tough. I tried to motivate myself. *If you want to stay alive, you'll have to put up with it a little longer.* I was contemplating moving when I noticed a white, fluffy ball dance through the air. It was the size of a tennis ball. It floated in the air before dropping suddenly, landing on the crow creature. I turned my leg, pointing my toes and swallowing the curse that bubbled up as the worst pins and needles overtook my feet. I switched up positions, gritting my teeth at the sensation. The creature

stiffened as the ball latched onto it. My shoulders hiked up around my ears as the ball spread little white tendrils, inching achingly slow. They crept under the feathers, disappearing out of sight. More of the white balls seemed to follow, dropping onto the creature and latching on.

Oh. Damn.

I had a memory of a horrific animal documentary I watched where fungus took over the mind of insects, controlling and using them to further their propagation. Was this some Legion sized version of that? I didn't have to wait long to find out. The creature's eyes flew open, but even filmy gray, I could see that no one was home. With jerky movements it sat up and picked its way over the branch. If the balls could take over this creature, surely, they'd find me easy prey.

Nope.

Wasn't going to entertain those thoughts. I thought I'd get a warrior's death, not become a mindless fungi zombie. Inexplicably, my heart ached as I watched the choppy steps the creature took. Noting the closeness of the creature, I eyed my knife. Could I free it from the fungi, possibly? Did I want to take that chance? I peeked over the wooden knot. The creature didn't react at all. I sidled closer to it, the stench of dried blood a real reminder of how deadly this creature was. My fingers ached as I clenched the handle of the blade, unsure how to kill fungi. The creature was sluggish, like it had forgotten how to walk. That made it easy to slice through the tendrils. I darted around to the other side of the creature and cut the white lines

off, feeling bold enough to reach out and pry the balls off. They floated away, dropping into the air current to no doubt to find new prey.

The creature remained frozen.

Best not to wait around. I maneuvered myself around it, about to shimmy the hell out of there, when it squawked. I looked up. The creature's eyes suddenly flooded with a set of emotions I could recognize. Confusion, fatigue, and fear.

Me too, buddy, me too.

Maybe I had misjudged the creature. Maybe it was just a softie after all.

It lunged towards me with a snap of its beak. One of its larger hands swiped at me. Nope, scratch that. The claws caught my right leg, digging into the skin, gouging it deep. But it wasn't even the injury that was the problem. It had slammed into me so hard that it had knocked me out of the tree, and I was toppling towards the ground, my leg searing in agony. Next time I'd let the sucker turn into a fungi zombie. I closed my eyes as I fell, not even trying to stifle the blood-curdling scream I made.

Fenar

My wolf was about to tear someone's throat out.

“Stand back,” I warned, my voice gravelly and laced with a deadly challenge. I eyed Wellyn's poisonous family and wished I could obliterate every one of them. They were lurking about still, outnumbering us. Not content to leave until they saw what happened to Cami. She'd been gone for an hour. The longest hour of my life. I looked behind me where Wellyn cradled her head in his lap. Tallis was crouched next to her. He looked like he was down to kill some people too. I vowed that by the time we finished this I would wipe the floor with Head Lamott, a bastard of epic proportions.

“Now, now, rabid wolf,” Lamott smirked. “I didn't make the human swallow the lot. That was her own stupidity. Just hand her over. She'll likely expire any moment.”

As I struggled to hold it together, my wolf threw himself at my insides. I turned away from Lamott. There was no point in engaging with him. He would just try to antagonize one of us. I slid in next to Cami's free side.

“Any change?” I whispered, loathe to let those idiots hear me talk about my girl. Wellyn shook his head. He still had a yellowing bruise on the length of his jaw, but considering what he looked like before, it was a vast improvement. Tallis slumped to his knees, looking like a fallen angel, Cami’s ankle encased in his tail, like he had to be touching her. He clenched his jaw, looking so tortured I would have laughed, except I felt the same way.

“Why did you let her come?” Wellyn muttered, brushing Cami’s dark hair with gentle ministrations.

“Are you serious?” I said, mouth agape, chest burning.

“Try telling Cami no next time. She would have razed us all to get to you. She loves you.” Even with the dire situation there was still a bitterness in Tallis’s tone.

When she’d taken the entire trial elixir, I had just about exploded, running to her to cradle her fall to the ground. A keening wail had rung through my ears, echoing in the arena. It took a moment to register that it was mine.

“Cami, please,” I begged my girl. She was like a doll, no sense that she was in danger at all. It looked like a peaceful sleep. Her precious, horn free forehead unwrinkled. “Come back to us, baby. We haven’t had long enough with you. You only just forgave me. I need to love you ten thousand more times. I need my tongue deep inside—.” Tallis cut off my rambling, hissing and hunching over her leg. My chest was collapsing as I smelled it.

Blood.

Please. No.

I scrambled closer, the three of us covering her from the prying eyes of Lamott. Not that they wouldn't realize what was happening. Her leg was nearly torn apart. Her upper thigh had four large claw marks. Brutal slashes that made the skin look like mincemeat. Blood soaked the surrounding material. Tallis lifted his head and looked over my shoulder.

“Back up, or I'll burn every one of you to ash,” he threatened. I rested my hands on Cami, my fingers trembling. My fangs pricked my lips in my shock.

“*Shek*, Fenar. Do something,” Wellyn entreated. “This can't be happening.”

In the trials, if you suffered injury, you had to keep going until the end. Healing services were available, but most Legion would rather amputate their limb than accept the help. It showed weakness. It showed that you couldn't complete the trials without help. Legion valued strength above all else. I didn't care. Cami wasn't Legion, and I wasn't a fool. If I left this wound, she would bleed out. I let my healing powers stream into her, using one hand to rip the material away so I could make sure the wound was healing well enough. But my powers weren't needed. The wound seemed to disappear on its own. Helping it along with my own healing, I looked up to meet the luminous eyes of Wellyn. His creature was lurking perilously close to the surface.

“The binding agreement is working. Watch, I'm barely healing her.” I sucked in a relieved breath. “You need to focus,

Wellyn. She needs you to protect her.”

His arms morphed into tentacles, wrapping around her with a firm grip. He shook his head.

“We both must be here. He won’t accept that he can’t come through,” he whimpered through gritted teeth. I nodded, understanding him completely. My wolf was desperate right now, but he knew I needed to be here to heal.

“You’re only proving my point,” Head Lamott drawled. He was too close for my liking and Tallis agreed. Leaping around Cami’s prone body, he muscled him back.

“What did you expect, father? Humans are weak,” Ronen joined in with a taunting voice. I felt the heat of Tallis’s fire as he decided a show of power was necessary. Wellyn turned and bared his teeth at his worthless family. I looked down at the wound. It was all but fixed, looking more like a scratch than anything. My head drooped, my chin hitting my chest, and I sucked in a shuddering breath. I was lucky I was kneeling, or else I might keel over. The healing I’d had to do on Wellyn had fatigued me, but Cami needed me, and I couldn’t imagine what horrors she was facing right now.

The monsters I’d had to battle against in the strength trial had been beasts of nightmares. My worst thoughts made real. I worried about my delicate human. The sharpest thing about her was her tongue, and the strongest thing was her spirit. She could survive. I believed in her.

“What is the meaning of this?” I knew that voice. Head Aydro, Ambrose’s mother and the only Head we could trust. I

perked up, turning to watch as the remaining Heads streamed through the door. I switched sides to better protect Cami. I'd make sure no one would catch me unaware.

Head Avanti looked curious more than anything, craning his head to look at my boost. I lifted my lip and growled, unable to bear his eyes on her. Eyke brought up the rear, sliding past Head Custray with a stealth a man of his size shouldn't have. He strode over to Cami, kneeling next to Wellyn and lifted a huge hand to cup her cheek. His jaw clenched, and he looked over at Head Avanti, narrowing his eyes like a reminder.

"The human boost volunteered to take the Legion trials. Since she couldn't partake in the Vinko, it was a tidy compromise, I thought," Head Lamott sniffed. "I'm not sure why this required all the Heads to attend. Surely you have more important things to do?" Tallis's hands flared dangerously.

"Forced her to partake, you mean, after beating your so— your sorry fists into Wellyn. He used him as bait to ensure she came. She signed her life away to protect him. I will not stop until every Legion knows of his corruption," he promised. Lamott shook his head, bemused, his sons shifting uncomfortably in his shadow.

"Is this true?" Head Aydro frowned while Lamott continued to smile, not an iota of regret in his relaxed posture.

"What of it? We all agreed that she should take the trials, did we not? I just expedited the process before we talked each other's ears off."

“You circumvented the correct procedure, Lamott. Harmed another Legion in the process. That’s a separate matter entirely,” Head Aydro pressed, and the smarmy smile fell, going cold.

“I could have cut the throat of that Legion you’re so eager to protect and it would make no difference, because he is worth nothing. It’s a travesty that this sham of an experiment has gone ahead. For them to claim a human has boosted them.”

Wellyn didn’t flinch from his father’s cruel words. They weren’t anything new. I rubbed my hand against his tentacle. He didn’t need that sadistic asshole when he had us. Head Custray looked at Tallis, her eyes filmy white.

“Is this true? You’ve been boosted?”

“Yes. Four of us successfully,” he replied.

“What do you mean, four?” Lamott scoffed, eyes shifting uneasily. He looked over at Wellyn, doing a double take when he caught sight of his tentacles. Something flickered on his face. Doubt? Maybe even fear.

It was gone the next second.

“That discussion can wait,” Head Avanti cleared his throat, nodding towards Eyke. “We are here to discuss you acting out of ordinance.”

I gave a sidelong look to Eyke. He’d done something with the slimy Head Avanti, but his concrete mask wasn’t giving anything away. Lamott grinned in barely concealed triumph.

He obviously felt safe, his alliance with Avanti and, by extension, Custray making all this like a joke.

“Let us take a vote then,” he smiled. “Did I act out of turn in giving the boost the trial elixir? And should I be punished for it?” He added the last bit with a quirk to his lips that quickly melted off when Head Aydro’s hand shot into the air, followed by Head Avanti. The last hand to creep up was Head Custray’s, who had exchanged a look with Avanti prior to answering.

Lamott looked apoplectic, his face and neck flushing red.

“Are you sure about that?” he warned Head Avanti, who met his gaze with a sniff.

“Things are changing, Head Lamott, and you cannot just do as you like without consequences,” he replied. The watery eyed, sniveling Head looked good with a bit of backbone for once.

“Damn, Eyke, what did you say to him?” I whispered, mystified. A ghost of a smile went over his lips, but he just shrugged.

“What happened with Cami?” he asked instead.

Cami

One moment I was falling through the air, convinced I was about to make a large splat, and the next I was opening my eyes to a room. Melbak was using my penchant for crime shows in this change of scenery. I was in an interrogation room, a silver metal table, and chairs on either side in front of me.

It even had the one-way mirror.

I stood in front of it, taking in my now glossy hair and unblemished skin. I looked down at my leg with trepidation, expecting it to still be bleeding. There was nothing. It was back to a clean slate again. Down to my unmarred shoes. I guess the binding agreement extended to this simulation. I hoped Albion wasn't too hurt. Also, if I ever saw one of those bird creatures again, they could go full zombie, no help from me.

“*Salut*, stranger,” came a curious voice. There was someone in the room with me. I whirled around to face the intruder. After my last trial, I wasn't taking any chances. Palming the

rusted blade, I held it in front of me, hoping I looked more badass than I felt.

The visitor gave me a hesitant smile, holding up his hands in deference. He was tall. Thin like a willow with a shock of dark hair falling over his inky eyes. The veins on his hands were blue, stark against the paleness of his skin. He was focused on something dangling under the table and moved with exaggerated slowness.

“Easy with the *couteau, petite guerrière,*” he breathed, his accent heavenly. Easing himself into the chair, he reached his hands underneath the table. There was a clank of metal on metal and watched as he drew up a set of handcuffs. Melbak was going all out with the details.

“Are you speaking French? I don’t understand what you’re saying,” I huffed, as if that was the most important thing. I wasn’t thinking clearly, apparently. His shapely lips slid into a half smile as he locked himself in the cuffs.

“Apologies. I am a little flustered. This vision caught me by surprise.” He fussed with the second cuff, struggling to close it. After a moment, he managed to slide it closed. I narrowed my eyes at him, my heart racing as fast as my thoughts. What was the meaning of this trial and how could I beat it? It was a trial of the mind and I felt like I was losing mine.

“A vision?” I relaxed a little as the stranger pulled the chains and showed he was securely attached, unable to reach me. I didn’t lower my rusted weapon though. I wasn’t that trusting. He tilted his head, the action remarkably birdlike.

“Yes, I am blessed with the second vision. But I confess, I can’t quite interpret this one. It feels different. This room feels charged with energy.”

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked, my hand shaking a little. What I wouldn’t give to have my four guys at my back right now. I could really use their strength to lean on. The stranger widened his eyes and made a show of lifting his hands again.

“I am slightly detained right now, but I have no plans to hurt you. Are you a shifter?”

My brow furrowed.

“No, I’m human. I’m taking the trials.” At his blank look I elaborated, “The Legion trials, on Melbak.”

His back straightened, and he searched my face, agitation mounting when I didn’t give him what he was looking for.

“Melbak?” he whispered before frowning. “You lie. Humans were banished a long time ago, along with my ancestors.” He splayed his fingers on the table, the chains rattling as his hands shook.

“Melbak is dying. The boosts they need are not presenting. I have the power of a boost and they are trialing me.” I gave him the vaguest of notes and his dark eyes seemed to spark with an incredible energy. He looked down, his dark hair a curtain over his head as he seemed to process what I’d said.

“This explains much. I’ve felt the rumblings of power growing amongst the shifters on Earth. This will change things

for us,” he mused, more to himself. I leaned forward, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Who are you?” I prodded. He gave me a bleak look.

“Centuries ago, when humans were banished from Melbak, there were Legion who still held human features. Those in control banned them from accessing their creatures. A cruelty to our kind. A collection of Legion fled to Earth, calling themselves shifters, and erasing our past. From what I’ve read, we used to have powers that have disappeared over time. We’ve only maintained the ability to shift and select few of us have visions of the future.”

I was stunned into silence for a moment. Eyke had mentioned the Legion who had escaped. I had never imagined they could still be on Earth where they were flourishing and adapting away from Melbak. A small part of my mind reminded me that this was a trial. Was this meant to be a mind fuck? But something deep inside me rejected the thought.

“Well, I wouldn’t get your hopes too high about that changing. This ‘vision’ is part of a trial I’m being forced to take. The Heads are hoping I fail and die here. My quad is looking after my body while I’m stuck here. Well, I hope they are.” I gave an empty laugh, brandishing my knife. “I’ve passed one by the skin of my teeth and I’m not sure how this is a trial of the mind.”

The stranger winced, shaking his head slowly.

“A human as part of a quad? It seems like Melbak must be in true danger if they allow that again.” He mused.

“Do you have quads?” I asked, curious about him.

“No, we don’t, but I have had visions about a special girl. They all show her with more than just me.” His shoulder lifted in a shrug.

“I expected these trials to be scary, not confusing. Perhaps Melbak is trying to lull me into a false sense of security.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I promise I am real. I am not a figment of a trial sent to torment you.” His lip quirked.

“Just what a mirage would say to throw me off,” I smirked.

He laughed, a lyrical sound. I couldn’t help it. I liked him.

“You have me there. My name is Julien, by the way. I have a feeling what we are experiencing right now is more for me than you.”

I kicked my leg up on the wall and folded my arms. Not offering my name in return. I had to be smart, not naively trusting, as was my default. Look where that had got me with Eyke.

“How so?” I said, and he looked around the room, bemusement etched on his features.

“Legion derive their power from Melbak, yes? What I sense in this room is Melbak. It has a certain tang, and my visions lately are filled with it. They promise significant change. I can feel something coming. You must be linked to this, perhaps the catalyst?”

There was a disbelieving grunt in the back of my throat. I threw up my hands and paced the length of the room.

“I highly doubt it. If I get out of this alive, it will be a miracle.”

“If you survive, it could mean the start of a new beginning for the Legion on Earth. If Melbak is weak, it could become stronger through your boost powers, right? That feeds back into all Legion. The possibilities are exciting—gahhuugh.” I turned, about to argue, but stopped short. The handcuffs Julien wore had turned into black vines. They were wrapping themselves around Julien’s neck. The table clanged as he attempted to move his trapped hands to relieve his airway. But he couldn’t. I leaped across the table and jammed my fingers into the space where his neck was, just underneath his jaw. He was making horrific garbled noises, turning a dark red. I angled the blade I had and attempted to saw the vine.

“Hold on. Hold on,” I cried. “I’m working on it. Shit, these vines are strong.” The blackened ropes tightened even as I cut through their thick body. The knife bowed in my hand as it struggled to make headway. Suddenly the vines disappeared, and my hand flew forward, before I could stop it. The edge collided with Julien’s lip, slicing his top lip and part of his cheek.

“Oh no. I am so sorry,” I cried, pressing my hand against the wound. Blood was trickling down his neck. And he let out a slight laugh.

“It’s fine. I think we just got a clear warning from the powers that be. Don’t you?”

“If that’s the way you want to spin it buddy,” I joined his laughter, mine higher and more hysterical, “My name is Cami, by the way.” Hopefully, he wasn’t a mirage and was who he said.

“You can’t let him out of these handcuffs?” I looked at the ceiling in a huff. “He’s all about your mystical power.” I shot Julien a wry look.

“I tried.” I shrugged, startled as he waved his hands in front of my face.

“You succeeded,” he cupped his hand against his face to stem the bleeding.

“I imagine this won’t be the last time we see each other,” he promised. Then I heard a knocking. I froze, watching the door and expecting it to fly open. When it didn’t, I looked back at Julien and jumped.

He was gone.

Great.

I was losing it. Someone knocked on the door again. A familiar voice floated through. One that had my knees buckling.

Wellyn

The tension was so thick I swore my father was going to choke on it. He was fuming, clenching his fists as he tried to think of a response to what had just happened. It wasn't often that Head Lamott was caught in a misstep. In the past, his expression would have sent me scurrying for cover, desperate to avoid his special brand of torture that he used only on me. I never saw him raise a hand to my brothers. But me? I was an easy target, small and useless, worth his ire.

“You cannot truly believe it is conscionable to introduce humans back into our society.” He shook his head in mock disbelief. “The immense losses that occurred because of human filth still shake us as a society.”

I couldn't help the snort that escaped me. He shot me a filthy look.

“You will refrain from insulting my boost,” Eyke rumbled, joining Tallis in forming a barrier between Cami and everyone else. I ran my fingers down the side of her face, watching as Fenar checked her obsessively for injuries. My creature was

close to the surface. He had been since he realized she was in the room, coming to protect us from his worst enemy.

“And who are you? Except an unwanted upstart?” Head Lamott drawled, his eyes narrowing as he looked Eyke over with painstaking detail.

“You’ll be seeing a lot of me in the future. It’s a disgrace that they considered you strong enough to lead. Don’t worry, I’ll teach you what it means to be Legion.”

My father only laughed. He was in control again, never one to allow his base emotions to get away with him. But I could see the calculation deep in his eyes. He was watching at how the other Heads were reacting, especially his alliance member Head Avanti and how he responded to Eyke’s pointed comments.

“You’ll forgive me if I dismiss advice from a no name Legion. One who seems to be as featureless as your human boost.”

Eyke swept out his hands slowly, an ominous smile on his face.

“Two hundred years and we’re still on this? If you could have let go of your prejudice, Melbak wouldn’t be in the state it is. One step from imploding. You willfully let your boosts wither and die horrible deaths knowing there was a potential cure.”

I sensed some of the anger Eyke was expressing had more to do with his own feeling of impotence and guilt in his role

for the sickness and death that was his unknowing legacy. But Lamott didn't know that, affronted by the fierce insult directed at him. He looked at the other Heads, but it seemed his alliance wasn't going to stand this test. As soon as Eyke had offered them an out, they leaped at it, and now it seemed Lamott was on his own. Head Aydro looked at Eyke with reproach.

“It is not for you to speak on such things. The Heads hold a heavy burden.”

Eyke laughed, a hollow sound.

“My boost has never sickened. She's weak, yes, but as all other boosts died around her, she continued to live,” Lamott noted smugly, and I let out a noise of dismay. My mother, a woman I had barely spared a thought to, she was as much a victim as I was, both of us under the heel of this psychopath. I watched my brothers give each other meaningful looks behind my father's back, but they didn't speak up. No one ever spoke out against Lamott. That was why he was so powerful. Bloated by his untouchable ego and vicious power. Except for Eyke, who lifted one eyebrow.

“What did you say?” he asked, stepping forward once, his powerful shoulders rolling back.

“You said we willfully led them to their deaths, but my boost is alive and well. She has lasted longer than all the others, a testament to her blood. She has produced fi-four powerful sons so clearly. I am doing something right.” He smirked. Cami twitched underneath my fingers, like she was

flinching. I pressed a kiss to her forehead, desperately hoping she was alright.

“*You know*,” Eyke whispered, “You bastard. You know exactly why your boost has lasted longer than the rest.”

Everyone’s gaze turned to Eyke with surprise and disbelief that anyone would question a Head with such impertinence. My father flipped his hand at Eyke.

“Who let this nobody in? Boys, remove him. I’m done wasting words on him.”

My brothers moved toward Eyke, and he growled under his breath. A warning that seemed to frighten them enough to falter.

“I’m a Kindale. I was a Head before they imprisoned me for the crime of having human features. Does that satisfy your curiosity about who I am?”

Eyke shot my brothers a venomous look, and they melted into the background again. Had they always been so spineless? I’d been so terrified of them as a child, but here they were, quaking in their boots. My father paled; his eyes widened to round circles on his face.

“Now, just wait a moment. Explain what you mean,” Head Aydro interrupted.

“He knows what I’m talking about,” Eyke sneered, pointing a finger at my father, who was doing a poor cover up for how he was truly feeling. He looked truly shaken. His eyes flitted

to me. I glared at him. If he was looking for me to support him, he was truly delusional.

“Your Head knows more than he lets on. His boost could only be well if he had a quad, not a triad. But why would he keep it a secret? Unless his connection to the Kindale line was something he was ashamed of?”

Something exploded in me, stunning me to every miniscule cell. The constant look of disgust in my father’s eyes when he looked at me. I had thought it had been my creature, but he’d always despised me, even before it showed. I lifted a hand to my slightly pointed ears, just shy of touching the skin. He watched the movement with a stillness, his eyes wide with dread.

No.

It couldn’t be.

A memory surged forward. One I had suppressed of me as a child. The heat of warm blood coating my neck as a blade sliced through the skin of my rounded ears.

Round ears.

The way I had lain on the floor while my father berated me, deriding my tainted blood. I could never understand how a parent could despise their child so deeply.

Unless they ended up being the very picture of what you were desperate to hide. I looked at each of my brothers with claws and tiny horns. They were acceptable. But me? I had the unfortunate luck of being born featureless.

Until he'd made sure I wasn't. He'd cut my ears into the shape they were in now.

"You," I tried to speak past the strangle in my throat. "You mutilated me. Cut my ears so they didn't look *human*."

"Shut your mouth," my father bellowed, staring forward before realizing he was in mixed company. The other Heads were looking on with a sense of complete confusion, not following the undercurrents of what was happening. Tallis, Fenar and Eyke were all looking at me, understanding dawning on each of them like a flip switched.

"You hurt your own child?" Tallis growled his voice shaking in anger. "Because he was featureless?"

"He was a weakling, always! He was waste. A shame to the Lamott name."

"But you aren't Lamott at all, are you? If he was born featureless, that must mean your ancestors were from the Kindale line, or one of its sub-houses, am I right?" Eyke scoffed, folding his arms over his expansive chest.

My Father was blustering, his neck flushing red with indignation.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he gazed around trying to gauge the support he had.

"I don't answer to you," he added with a mulish jut of his chin.

"You answer to us though, and you have already messed up once today, Lamott. I, for one, would like to know more. Are

you inferring he knew a way to keep our boosts well?” Head Aydro interjected, shooting Eyke a look as he sighed. My father hissed, his eyes manic.

“It’s more convoluted than that, but essentially yes. Somehow, your fellow Head has knowledge of the accurate history of Legion and used it to his advantage.”

“It’s not an advantage to be the product of filthy human blood. There was a reason my ancestors hid the knowledge away. They didn’t want to be lumped in with all you featureless freaks. They were ashamed of how they had been led astray,” my father spat, instantly realizing his mistake when the room made a collective inhale of surprise. My head was spinning with these revelations. My ancestors were Legion who had human boosts. Whose children were featureless. I just had the misfortune of being born before my father took a blade to rectify the ‘foulness’ of my heritage. Eyke started laughing, low and breathy, before it turned into a roar of absolute agony.

“I always wondered how the Heads found out my plans. Now I know.”

He raised his hands towards Head Lamott, and I watched in fixed silence as black seeped from my father’s chest, like tiny particles of gas. He made a noise of surprise, his head slumping forward.

“Your ancestors betrayed me,” Eyke hissed. “They sold me out for their own safety. Your legacy isn’t strength. It’s cowardice!”

I flinched. Was that to be my future as well?

“Stop!” I shouted, and Eyke turned to me with cold eyes. “He needs to pay for what he’s done. But you’re not the one to decide that. Then you’ll be no better than him.” I could feel my creature shining out of my eyes. He was in solidarity with me. Eyke looked abashed, tensing for a moment before letting his powers drop. The black substance shot back into my father. He slumped to the ground, stunned.

Cami

“Camellia?” my dad called, sounding unbothered.
My dad.

I scrambled around the table and opened the door, screeching as the floor dropped out from under me, and I was surrounded by the sudden sensation of falling through the air. My hand collided with a larger hand, one with callouses. It engulfed mine, and I struggled to swallow a gigantic lump in my throat. The ground met us with a whistle and an impact that had my teeth rattling. While I recovered from the sheer drop, my father picked himself up and dusted off his pants, still reacting like nothing had happened. We were in a quiet alleyway. There was something familiar about this place. I couldn't put my finger on it.

“You're late honey,” Dad chastised. He headed towards the exit, motioning for me to follow him. He was walking. No, he was striding, his legs powerful and strong. I hurried after him, watching as he reached a door and held it open for me.

Dilly's café.

The lump in my throat came back with a vengeance and I meekly walked past him into the café, wide eyed, drinking in the place I had relegated to nostalgia in my mind. Every table was occupied, people crushed in against one another with the signature mismatched chairs. The sound of the coffee machine grinding beans and the hum of contented chatter brought tears to my eyes.

“Over here Camellia,” called ma. I looked to the opposite corner. Tucked into the best table in the house sat my wonderful ma and the boys. Aaron came flying into me, his little arms tightening around my waist.

“Where have you been? You need to light the candles. We've been waiting for ages,” he whined, dragging out the last word drastically. Grabbing my hand, he tugged me back to the table. Ma slid out of her chair and enfolded me in a soft hug that had my knees wobbling. Percy moved with excitement, his eyes wide and joyous. Untangling myself from my ma, I gave him a cuddle next. Dad came up behind me and squeezed my shoulder.

“Come on, before they get too cold,” he coaxed. I couldn't stop looking at him. Perfect and untouched by my mistakes. He gave me a funny look and pulled the empty chair out for me. I sat, the movement without thought. It was as if I wasn't in control of my own body. The sounds, sights and smells were so jarringly familiar and yet I'd mourned them. I'd said goodbye, never thinking to experience them again. Aaron

climbed onto my lap, wriggling around to get comfortable, without realizing that my brain was melting and falling apart. There was a plate of pancakes in front of me and Ma was diligently sliding candles in. She held out the lighter to me.

“Make it bright,” she smiled. My hand shook as I lit the candles, every cell contracting in bittersweet agony. What kind of test was this? I had expected more monsters, more danger, but this was perfect.

We sang ‘Happy Birthday’, and I tucked into my plate of pancakes. Over my head, conversation bounced in pleasant harmony. Dad teased Ma and tickled Percy. He turned his piercing brown eyes to stare at me.

“That comic you drew, the one with the bear and wolf in the bar, make a series of those. I got tears in my eyes laughing,” he said, his words like an arrow through my heart. The pancake I had been chewing, just as amazing and delicious as always, turned dull in my mouth. I lay my fork down and reached over the table to my dad, laying my hand over his. He watched with bemusement as I pressed down, feeling the warmth, the strength, the solidity. This wasn’t real, but it felt so good. It felt so right. This was what I imagined they would be like when I left. Able to enjoy living without stress.

“I drew a funny comic recently actually, teasing this guy who wasn’t very nice to me. It was very satisfying seeing his face when he read it.”

My dad shook his head, giving me a disapproving look.

“Well, now, you should use your skill for good. Two wrongs don’t make a right and all that,” he prattled.

“Dad,” I mock rolled my eyes, but the comment stuck. Tallis had destroyed my photos, and it had ruined me because I thought I would never get to do this again. But ever since, he’d been truly remorseful. Perhaps when I got back, I would give him another chance. One more chance to prove he was sorry and had changed. For now, I would let myself soak this up a little, then I’d work out how this was a test. After breakfast, we went back to my childhood house, and I stared hard at the framed photos on the wall. I lingered in the kitchen until Ma pinched my butt and urged me to play with the boys. Time seemed to drift away while I played Uno and chatted away to my brothers. It wasn’t until I noticed the dimming light that I remembered I’d been there all day that I stood up, shocked.

“I need to go. I think...” my voice tapered off, and Dad looked up from where he was reading the paper, his glasses balanced on the end of his nose.

“Honey, dinner is almost ready. You can’t disappoint your Ma like that. It’s Auntie Dianne’s casserole.” He winked at my disgusted expression. “Just kidding, it’s gnocchi.”

So, I found myself at the dinner table, eating the most wonderful meal and soaking in the conversation. Everything felt brighter here. It felt right. Something inside me twinged. A cry for attention, but I ignored it. I had to clean dishes and then Dad sent me to have a shower and I almost raced up the stairs to experience a proper water shower again. I towel dried my

hair, changing into my pajamas out of habit more than anything.

“I don’t really know what I’m meant to do now,” I admitted to myself more than anything. But Ma was bringing me over a hot chocolate. I sipped on that while I tried to think. She lay her hand on my forehead and clicked her tongue.

“You should head up to bed. You look exhausted.”

I was. I hadn’t slept properly since this trial had started and even before that, sleep had been fraught with nightmares. It didn’t take much more encouragement. I wandered up the stairs and fell into my childhood bed with a sigh.

Sleep came easy. Too easy.

The next day, I woke with a brimming sense of energy. I was going to work out what the purpose of me being here was, but when I walked down the stairs, Dad distracted me, pulling out his tackle box.

“Feel like a day trip?” he asked, so hopeful that I couldn’t say no. His truck smelled like salt, musk, and woodchips. I breathed it in blissfully, my body jumbling around my seat as we took the rough path down to the lake. I had taken my pencils and was busy drawing comics, ones of all my guys, sending them on various escapades.

My head perked up, a piercing thought cutting through the fuzziness. They must be so worried about me. And here I am, out here fishing with my dad. Glued to his side which he’d laughed about, wondering what had gotten into me. My eyes

drifted out to his bobbing line, and he jostled me with his shoulder.

“You’re thinking so loud you’re scaring the fish away. Just relax, honey.”

I shot him a small smile. I wanted to relax, but there was something niggling at me, something that I was meant to be focusing on. The line went taut, and Dad shouted, reeling it in with fervor. We stayed at the lake all day, catching two decent lake trout, and heading home tired but buzzing with contentment. I fell into bed with a smile, falling asleep almost instantly.

Days passed. Each time, I felt myself grasping at a nagging sensation before something else popped up that needed attention. Aaron skinned his knee. Ma needed a lift to the hospital for work. We were planning a movie night, and I served up the dumplings we’d gotten as takeout. I took a bite of one, and it wasn’t as good as the one’s Fenar had given me. Those had been the perfect balance of flavors, smoky, sweet, and salty.

“Oh god,” I whispered, my bowl tumbling to the ground, spilling out onto the wooden floorboards. I looked at my family with a growing sense of horror.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” I challenged them, watching as the confusion flit across their faces. Dad set his bowl aside and frowned.

“Camellia, can you help clean up your mess before you have an existential crisis?”

I shook my head, backing until I hit the wall. I couldn't believe how much time I'd spent here in this what? Simulation? What kind of trap was Melbak playing with in this trial? Even now, digging my fingers into the knowledge that *this* wasn't real, it was still slipping away. Being replaced by a fog that promised to ease the tension in my body and mind. That if I just let go, I could enjoy this.

No! I rebelled against the thought, knowing I must have looked insane as I writhed against the wall, trying to get my brain under control. Dad's face seemed to change, something calculating bleeding into his expression.

"Relax honey, we're trying to enjoy a movie night, remember? Maybe we can go get an ice-cream afterwards?" he soothed as Aaron and Percy erupted in excitement. I planted my hands over my ears.

"No, no, no." I looked about wildly, thinking I could go through the door, but then what? I was so confused. Dad had crept closer. Ma looked on in utter dejection.

"Don't you want to stay here with us?" he whispered, his arms creeping up around me and his comforting scent engulfing me as I pressed into his chest. I clung to him, the fuzziness creeping in.

"I do. I want to be with you, but this isn't real Dad," my voice cracked, and I flung my head back to look at him "You're standing in my childhood home. We had to sell it, remember? After your accident? All of this is just a hopeful dream. It's not reality."

I don't even know why I was arguing with him. More like I was arguing with myself, trying to get my sluggish brain to recognize I couldn't stay here any longer.

"Don't you love us, honey?" Ma asked so sorrowfully that a sob barreled out of my throat. Tears burst from my eyes, covering my cheeks.

"Of c-course," I cried. "But my heart is bigger now. You aren't the only ones I love, and they're worried about me, too. They need me too."

I thought of my Legion. Wellyn, with his big heart. Fenar with his flashy exterior and vulnerable soul. Eyke with his steadfast support, despite everything I'd learned about him and even Tallis, who had been blunt and honest and kissed me with such passion. We had been through so much, and I owed it to them to be strong.

"I need to go," I whispered. Dad's arms tightened around me.

"Are you sure?" Dad hesitated, but his voice had changed. It sounded ancient and rippled with power. I looked into his eyes and saw unfathomable depths in them, deep and glimmering with untold energy.

My skin shivered with goosebumps. This was Melbak talking to me. Dad cocked his head like he was examining a bug. It was disconcerting to feel the power rippling off him.

"You could stay here forever. I've been kind to you in these trials. You tipped the scales in my favor. This was meant to be

your reward.”

My heart twinged, knowing it was offering me this as a kindness. I could stay there forever, but one couldn't subsist on dreams and hopes.

My family was everything, but I couldn't pretend that this was them. I had to accept it and let the idea of perfection go. My Legion needed me, and together I believed we could build a new dream.

“Yes,” I decided. “Let me go.” A laugh rang out that rang in my ears, making me shrink in fear. My skin tightened and my ears popped as my vision went black.

Cami

I woke gasping, jack knifing upwards, startling the surrounding crowd. I caught sight of Fenar first and grabbed at him with greedy arms. His head fell to my neck, and he nuzzled me with relief.

“Cami, baby, I-I-I thou—,” he bit off his words with a curse, settling for wrenching my upper body until he wrapped me in his arms. I wasn’t cognizant of anything except the warmth that came from all sides. Wellyn at my back, Eyke and Tallis at my sides. In my delirium, I lifted my head and gripped their faces, kissing them each once. I melted back into Fenar’s embrace, letting him lift me up and wrap my legs around him.

“We were so worried about you, Pancake,” Wellyn cried, covering the back of my neck with desperate pecks. I gave a wet laugh, my fingers traveling over each of them like I couldn’t believe they were real. Now that I was free, the trial Melbak had trapped me in seemed cheap. It couldn’t emulate this, the effusive love, the frantic touch and need that poured off each of them. I hiccupped, turning my head to look at

Eyke. He had his large hand on my shoulder and was massaging it gently.

“My boost, the first human to complete the Legion trials,” he smiled, smug. I bent my head to lean on his hand.

“Never again,” I choked. “That was scary, weird and powerful. I didn’t think I would ever get out.”

I turned my head to look at Tallis, crouched down beside us but not touching me. His dark eyes were intense, cataloging every inch of me. He looked like he’d run a marathon. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he was all sharp angles. I held out a hand in silent invitation and he latched onto it, cradling it to his chest with a sigh of relief.

“How long was I out of it?” I asked, my muscles trembling and aching as movement forced blood into them after disuse. I grimaced, shifting on Fenar’s lap, but he only growled, holding me tighter.

“Almost twelve hours,” Tallis answered. Hope poked her little nose out from the back of his neck.

“Has she been on you this whole time?” I laughed, low and quiet. My throat felt burned, perhaps from the elixir. That was some potent stuff.

“I promised I would look after her,” he said solemnly, my hand still cemented to his chest. His heart pounding against it. Hope crawled down our entwined limbs, tucking itself under my hair. Not my favorite thing ever, but I was feeling benevolent from surviving a terrifying ordeal.

“This is sweet and all, but it’s tradition that all Legion receive congratulations from the Heads before the trial is complete.” I hated that voice.

I turned my head and glared at Head Lamott. He was looking ruffled and pale, but still arrogant as ever. Beside him were the other three Heads who were watching on in interest.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I complained under my breath. “After this, they have to leave me alone, right? No more attempts to kill me.” It was a joke but from the looks on my Legion’s faces, it did not go over well. Fenar helped me to my feet and bared his fangs at the Heads.

“No harm will come to my boost. She’s proven her worth,” he warned. I staggered over to Head Custray, supported by Wellyn and Eyke. My legs were still jelly. Her eyes turned white as she reached her hand out to slide her fingers down my face.

“You swear you completed the trials fully, no falsehoods or trickery?”

“Yes,” I muttered, as she turned to the others and nodded. My calves contracted as I stopped in front of Head Avanti.

“You swear to serve your Heads as a proud Legion—ah” He cut off with a noise of embarrassment, remembering I wasn’t Legion at all.

“Serve as a proud boost,” he amended, waiting for my nod before sliding his fingers down my face. Eyke wrapped a thick

arm around my waist and hauled me over to Head Aydro. She gave an amused smile at the action.

“You swear to use teeth, claw and tail to defend Melbak?” she asked, and I puffed out an agreement. Her fingers went down my cheek as well and I looked toward where Head Lamott was standing, his hands twitching by his side.

“I request Head Lamott gives no congratulations, given his proclivity for attacking humans and his actions that require further punishment,” Eyke argued, looking at the other three while Head Lamott made a noise of disgust, inching forward. The other Heads hummed, pursing their lips as they considered the request. Head Lamott used their distraction to lunge forward. Quick and lethal, his hand was outstretched, his claws aimed towards my throat. I made to move, but my legs faltered, sending me falling forward, closer to his deadly reach. It was like it was all happening in slow motion. I couldn’t look away from his claws. The one he meant to use to tear my throat out. Movement shifted beneath my hair. Hope launched itself from my shoulder and soared through the air, slamming into Head Lamott’s hand, and sinking sharp little rat teeth into his soft skin. He cursed, shaking his hand as Eyke shifted me back, covering me with the bulk of his body. Lamott tossed Hope to the side with a growl.

“You’ll die for that,” Wellyn warned, his voice rough. He partially shifted his arms into two tentacles, one wrapped around his father’s throat, choking him until he collapsed to his knees. The other wrapped around his wrist and immobilizing his killer claws.

“What is the punishment for killing a Legion Head?” I asked, stepping out of Eyke’s protection. He made a noise and snatched for me, but I waved him off. The warmth of Fenar and Tallis from behind bolstered me and I was confident there was no way he could get me. I was vibrating, just like Wellyn.

“Tell me!” I demanded to the remaining Heads who didn’t seem surprised by Head Lamott’s situation, only intrigued.

“We have a law that protects boosts. Head Lamott attempted to kill a boost in front of witnesses. I would be comfortable in sentencing him to death. What say you?” Head Aydro said, as if discussing the weather. Head Custray shrugged.

“He was going to lose his position after the stunt he pulled with the trials. Technically, that’s twice he’s attempted to murder the boost.”

“Agreed. It would tidy this mess up.” Head Avanti flicked his fingers with distaste. “Preferably sometime soon. I’ve had to postpone much work for this disaster.”

Head Lamott’s eyes were bulging at this flippant discussion about his life. I stepped forward, putting my hands on Wellyn’s shoulders.

“You don’t have to do this,” I whispered, seeing the fury etched on his features. His eyes were luminous as he looked at me.

“Would you think less of me if I said I wanted to? He’s a tyrant and a poison. If I let him live, he’ll only come back, over, and over, until he finally destroys us.” His face twisted in

fury. I thought of his creature, abused, and broken by the man who was now on his knees, gasping for air that wouldn't come. A noise of dissent came from the shadows, and I watched as Wellyn's horrible brothers moved forward.

"You can't kill him. He's a Head. Head Lamott. That means something," one of them protested.

"Not after what he revealed. It seems the Lamott line is not as pure as your father wished," Head Avanti sniffed. "Besides, you'll likely inherit his role."

The brother's back stiffened, and he hesitated before sliding into the background, exchanging furious whispers with the other skulking redheads. Wellyn laughed, ringing out like a bell.

"You see what your legacy has wrought you? Abandoned by every person you thought you controlled," Wellyn sneered. He looked nothing like my sweet Legion. This was the cutthroat that had to defend himself from the moment he was born. Pride mingled in me, and I couldn't look away as Wellyn flexed his tentacles. "You wanted to see my creature? To mock him? Well, dear father, you'll have your wish. Know that this abomination is about to squeeze the life out of you."

Head Lamott cowered as Wellyn's creature burst forth, tentacles flying to wrap around every inch of skin. One wrapped around his mouth, muffling the terrified noises he tried to make from his squashed throat. His creature was magnificent, giant, and fierce.

“Don’t watch, baby” Fenar folded me into his arms, shielding me from the brutal violence. Hope landed on my shoulder, and I tipped my head in a little cuddle.

“I take back everything I said about ratids. You are welcome to rub your long tail against me anytime.” I shuddered as she squeaked and did just that.

I heard a thud and flinched.

“It’s done,” Tallis sounded pleased and exhausted at the same time.

I avoided looking at the slumped body, focusing only on my gorgeous Legion striding forward. Naked. He wrapped his arms around me, breathing deep into my hair.

“Is it over?” I asked, my skin crawling with the need to get away from this place.

“You’re safe with us, Cami,” Eyke said gruffly. I pulled away, watching as everyone else shuffled out of the room. Business concluded enough for them to leave. My eyes bounced over the lump on the ground, ignored by those around it. Knowing that could have been me, I felt an urgency surge in me. I turned back to my four Legion.

“I need to say something.” They all went arrow straight and tense. “I learned something in the trials. I got to experience being with my family. It was as if this had never happened. It was a wish come true. It was everything.” The dread was mounting on their faces. I hurried to finish. “But it wasn’t real. It was a simulation, and I had to make a choice. Stay in the

memories with those I love or try to build a life with more than scraps of lost time. I can't live in the past any longer. I can't keep holding onto substitutes of what I once had. I must move forward. Take a leap."

I took a deep breath.

"We have a chance here to be something to each other. There is a lot of love here, and I want to make it grow. I want a new beginning and a promise."

Tallis seemed to stop breathing as I looked at him. I stared deep into his eyes and saw the terror there.

"I'll promise anything," his breath ragged as he sucked one in finally. "Just give me one more chance. You want a new beginning, then let's start over," he begged, and I swallowed the urge to laugh. Maybe it was the trial, but I realized I couldn't keep the anger in me. I had to let it go. If I held onto it, I would never move forward. I would always search for an escape into a make-believe world. I stepped up to him, putting my hands on his chest.

"Promise to care for me and to love me in time?" His tail locked around a leg and slid up my thigh as he grasped my face.

"I do. My heart has been yours since you called me a spoiled brat. I just didn't want to admit it."

"This is your last chance, Tallis," I warned, and he drew me close and kissed my forehead softly. I had lifted a weight off his shoulders, and he gave me a boyish grin.

“You won’t regret it.”

I turned to the other three, one eyebrow raised.

“So? Do you promise?” I asked, and Fenar winked at me.

“Baby, you know I need more of your loving,” he drawled. I shivered in anticipation. Despite my body being about to tap out, I would still jump back into bed with him if he tempted me with that knot.

That reminded me.

I turned back to Tallis with a smirk.

“Promise to spank me again sometime?” I looked towards Wellyn before he could answer, enjoying the strangled noise he made.

“I’ve always been yours,” Wellyn professed, his eyes shining bright like a lamp.

“You’re my light, Precious. I promise to make up for the hurt I’ve caused. I want a new beginning too,” Eyke promised.

“Now my turn,” I sighed, leaning on their solid warmth as they pressed in around me. “I promise to love you and discover love for some of you.” I leaned against Tallis. “I promise to move forward and let go of the past.”

They didn’t answer but continued to press in on me, hands falling on my body until I felt like I could stop standing and they would hold me up. Right now, in this moment, we were laying the foundation for a new start. A bright future.

I couldn’t wait.

Cami

TWO WEEKS LATER

“**T**hank you for being here,” Eyke said softly as we stood on the steps to the Ward Estate. “I’m sorry it’s taken me this long. My power was more convoluted than I realized. It will take a good amount of time to clear it, but the initial tests have proven to be successful.”

Eyke’s throat bobbed as he looked at the faded door, studiously ignoring my gaze. Fenar walked a few steps away, as if knowing I needed a moment. I tilted my head and reached for his hand, shocking him as I curled my fingers around his.

“Of course. You know I’m here for more than just boosting you, though, right?”

He swallowed again, not replying until I tugged on his hand.

“Eyke?” I probed.

I hadn’t seen my giant Legion much in the past two weeks since the trials. Since I’d promised a new beginning and he’d promised to love me. We hadn’t had a chance to talk to each other, though he’d left me several gifts and I would often

receive deliveries of thoughtful snacks and drinks with notes that he'd scrawled, saying he was thinking of me. When he released the last of his power, the physical forms of the trapped Legion had lain littered on the ground where the Gaer had once roamed. It was a sobering to see the mass of Legion who had to be integrated in Melbak. Fenar was working to set up a rehabilitation center next to the Ward Estate, a place where these Legion could be integrated and counseled.

“My stomach churns,” he admitted softly, flicking me a look drenched in shame.

“Everywhere I look, I see where my powers have created destruction and,” his voice cracked. “I fear so much. These children hurt because of my actions. I am responsible, even though it wasn't ever my intention to cause this level of harm.”

A shiver raced down my spine, his words eerily similar to mine when I admitted my secret to Wellyn. I remembered the dark, oily stain the shame and disgust left on my insides. I had thought myself irredeemable, broken, and tarnished. It had taken the sweet embrace of Wellyn to help me realize that dad's accident wasn't my fault and that I didn't deserve to beat myself up over it for the rest of my life. Eyke was lost in that sensation right now, on the precipice of sinking into oblivion, destined to drown on the yoke of guilt. How long had he been choking on this fear? Was it the first time he went outside the apartment and saw the enormity of the Gaer? No wonder he didn't confide in me.

Shame is a secretive emotion.

It latches onto your heart and hijacks it, forces you inwards and sabotages your relationships. Terrible thoughts consume your mind making it hard to see logically. All you know is that there is a stain on you, one that others can't see, but you're sure they can sense. And if they stayed near you long enough, they would realize, their noses would wrinkle at the reek of it. I'd been devoured by it, and it had only been one person hurt by my actions.

Eyke had hundreds, thousands who were affected by his creation. He stood stoically, his shoulders proud and seemingly unaffected. He'd worked non-stop for weeks to fix this mess. And the first moment he could, he was here, because I had asked him to help these poor children.

"If you could go back and choose differently, knowing how your powers have been perverted, would you still do it?" I asked, knowing the answer but needing him to say it.

"Of course not," his reply was immediate and released through gritted teeth.

"You are not that Legion anymore Eyke, you said it yourself. You were egotistical and angry, but you weren't cruel. You didn't hurt these children. You wouldn't. There is a tough exterior. You could freeze a Legion with your glare, but underneath? You're a big softie. You're a natural leader, but you don't have to put on that 'powerful guy' act with me. I understand what you're feeling right now and it's ok, I'm here, I've seen all your darkness and I still love you."

I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my hand around his neck, guiding his head to lean on my shoulder. He shuddered silently, his arms clutching around my waist.

“We’re going to fix this, and I know you will create a better legacy for Melbak. One that you actually chose,” I soothed, running my fingernails through his hair. His beard tickled my skin as he puffed quick breaths on my skin.

“I’m scared and overwhelmed,” he admitted softly. This steely man was crumbling in my embrace.

“I’ve got you,” I assured him. “Let me hold some of the burden.”

His stormy eyes lifted, and they looked glassy.

“You would do that?” he choked, stilted. I frowned at him.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I kept secrets from you. I thought you couldn’t forgive me?”

My heart ached, and I cupped his face.

“Yeah, big guy, it hurt me. It was a pretty big secret you were holding onto. But I hadn’t recovered from my nightmare time with three other stupid Legion, and I was sensitive. My life was being threatened. More than once. I hadn’t had a moment to process before I found out who you really were.”

His chin drooped to his chest, and I tucked a finger under it, lifting it up.

“But you’ve never shown me anything but care. You say you love me, but more than that, you show me. I’m sorry if you thought I wouldn’t forgive that. But I thought I implied it by saying I wanted a clean slate.”

Eyke pressed his mouth to mine in a hard kiss, his fingers rucking my shirt up and coasting over my skin. It sent goosebumps flying.

“I’ve missed you. So much,” he said fiercely.

I stroked the side of his beard and smiled.

“Me too. Now let’s free some children.”

Fenar had slipped inside the Ward Estate, giving us some much-needed privacy. We found him in the blue room with Hilles. She swallowed me in a tight embrace when I walked through the door.

“Cami, I’m so glad to see you again. This must be Eyke,” she welcomed, sliding her fingers down his face. He returned the gesture with a nod. Fenar was sitting by Randell, his knee bouncing with a nervous energy. He’d been trying to heal these kids for years. This was a big moment for him as well.

“I’ll give you the room. Good luck,” Hilles said, giving Eyke one last look. The door closed softly behind her as we walked to Fenar.

“What did you tell her?” I asked. The official story was that we were here at Head Avanti’s behest, part of Eyke’s deal with him. Avanti would get the glory, but Eyke didn’t care, he just wanted the Gaer destroyed. I put my hand on his back, aware

that it was confronting for him to see his powers holding these children frozen in time. I looked at Randell, gratified that the Gaer hadn't moved since we had been here last. Eyke sat on the bed, careful not to jostle the boy. He looked peaceful, like he was frozen in sleep. His jaw worked as he stared at the little boy.

“Their essence hasn't fully formed. That's why they are like this. My power could only partly latch onto them. I can't let this go on a moment longer.”

He outstretched his hand, and I watched as the Gaer seemed to peel off Randell's hand, disintegrating in the air. When finished, Eyke moved to the next bed, filled with a desperation to fix these trapped children.

“They are weak. Heal them as best you can,” he instructed Fenar. We worked like a well-oiled machine, moving from bed to bed. Eyke would remove his power, and Fenar would heal them. It wasn't until we finished the last child, we heard a plaintive cry. I turned to see Randell had shifted, his hands hovering slightly in the bed as he moved his head sluggishly. Fenar raced over to him, whispering softly, and comforting him. Hilles burst through the door, like she'd been there listening. She fell over Randell with a cry, pressing kisses to the boy's forehead.

“How? It's a miracle,” she gushed, and I looked at Eyke. He'd ducked away and was blinking rapidly. I wrapped my arms around his waist and stared at him.

“You told me you saw my essence, and it made you fall for me,” I whispered, trying to distract him. “I don’t need to see yours to know how much I admire you. You didn’t hesitate to leap in to fix this, you could have thrown your hands up and pretended it wasn’t anything to do with you. You’re a good Legion.”

He cupped his hand around my head, pulling me into him.

“Thank you, Precious, I’m a better Legion with you beside me. I’ll show you every day. I promise. I won’t stop until I destroy every inch of Gaer.”

Cami

ONE MONTH LATER

I adjusted the sleeve of my robe, pulling at an invisible thread. Cool hands run down my arms, chilling me even through the material.

“I promise you have nothing to worry about,” Wellyn whispered, his breath tickling the back of my neck. Tell that to my heart that was crashing away in my chest. I looked into his shining violet eyes and tried to relax my shoulders. Tallis had organized an event. A surprise event that had kept my Legion shifty over the past month. Had it really been six weeks since the trials? After subsisting so long in a state of terror, it had taken some time for my body to stop thinking there was danger around every corner. That wasn’t to say I was better. If I saw certain things from the corner of my eyes, I still flinched and I felt a crawling sense of unease whenever we were out in public.

When Tallis had approached me to ask if he could throw a party in my honor, I initially balked. The last time he’d organized a party had been one of the most horrific nights of

my life. But after thinking about it, I realized I had to face my fears. Even though it was the most difficult thing I could imagine, I had to trust. If I went down the path of giving into the panic, I would never get back to my true self. This was a journey that would take time, care, and support. I was lucky I had four Legion devoted to helping me heal.

“I can’t turn my thoughts off,” I admitted and Wellyn made a noise in the back of his throat, wrapping his arms around me.

“I understand,” he soothed, not trying to convince me otherwise. My sweet Legion didn’t try to placate me with empty assurances. He knew where my thoughts went. He knew how real the anxiety in me was.

“Baby? Are you ready?” Fenar called, coming around the corner and halting to a stop.

“Promise me,” I begged, needing the balm of their declaration.

“We love you,” they spoke immediately.

“You’re safe with us,” Wellyn added, pressing a kiss like a seal.

I pulled my shoulders back and turned with a fortifying breath.

“Let’s do this,” I drew my shoulders back.

My gut roiled as we made our way to the same rooftop area as that fateful night that Tallis had destroyed a part of me along with the photos. Fenar and Wellyn flanked me like guard dogs. All their sweetness gone and replaced with brutal

strength. I noticed that the Legion milling around had tall glasses of brown milky substance and I thought of the drink Fenar and Wellyn had taken that night, when they'd been too drunk to step in to stop Tallis. Fenar caught the line of my concerned gaze, and the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“Don't worry baby, this is an alcohol-free gathering, Tallis insisted only chocolate milkshakes and coffee be served.”

“Really?” I laughed at the absurd combination, swallowing a lump that formed in my throat. That mollified me more than anything, that they remembered how I felt about being drunk and served something else — human drinks, no less.

“You should see the food Tallis has organized,” Wellyn smirked, and I looked around to see several floating platters of what looked like mini pancakes with strawberries and maple syrup drizzle. My stomach rumbled on cue.

“I will get you fed in just a moment. Let us say some things first.” Wellyn laughed and Fenar smacked a kiss on my cheek, directing me through the crowd to a raised stage where Tallis and Eyke waited.

They were all wearing identical black robes, sleek and silky. Eyke had the circlet that proclaimed him Head Kindale resting on the nest of his hair and looked regal in every way. His stony face melted when he spotted me, a smile twisting those serious lips into something lighter and joyous. Tallis seemed to pale the closer we got. His tail was tucked between his legs to stop its wild swinging. He held out his hands as Fenar helped me on the stage and kissed my knuckles softly, reverently.

“There she is,” he breathed, as if he’d been afraid I wouldn’t come. I had kept my word to him about a clean slate and the past month had shown me a changed Legion. He was intense, in an entirely different way. I’d catch him watching me with a look of hunger that took my breath away. He’d thrown himself into learning everything there was to know about humans, putting aside his animosity for Ambrose to start an initiative with Kevin, of all people. It was about educating Legion about humans, to dispel the lingering myths and prejudices against us. He had given up his role of triad leader to Eyke, admitting that he had no regrets, not after seeing how good Eyke was at it. Eyke had been busy breaking down the Gaer and working with getting all the freed people rehabilitated.

“I like the milkshakes,” I said, and he blew out a breath like he needed the affirmation from me.

“You know there are other flavors,” I teased, and his eyes widened.

“You must introduce them all to me, but I need to say something first.”

My gut lurched, and I scrambled at his fingers as he disentangled himself from me.

“Trust me,” he urged, “I am making it right.”

I had no choice but to stand on the stage, looking out at the rapidly quietening group of Legion as they realized something was coming.

“Fellow Legion, I’ve asked you here today to witness my humbling.” Tallis faced the crowd, his hands outstretched. He looked at me.

“Some of you will recall a similar gathering in which I hurt my boost immeasurably. I come to confess my mistakes, to receive your judgment and ire.”

He paused for a moment before slowly dropping to his knees, his hands resting loosely on his thighs. His tail was unmoving for once, limp on the ground. He looked up at me and swallowed audibly.

“Witness me, a dishonorable Legion, one who deserves to wallow in misery. I must vow to you, Cami.”

I made a noise under my breath, my hand coming to cover my mouth. My heart was beating so fast I could barely concentrate. Tallis continued, his dark eyes looking vulnerable.

“I promise to be your servant. Your supplicant. We promised a clean slate to each other, and I have never been so happy to be in your presence this past month. Regardless of how you feel for me, know I will follow your steps for the rest of my days, content to love you from afar. I will protect and fight for you, always.”

He bowed his head, and a smattering of awkward applause rippled through the crowd. My cheeks were flaming from the public declaration, and I was about to bolt when he stood and turned from me. He addressed the crowd.

“I invoke Penitence. Fenar will attend me, and I implore you to punish me as you see fit for the crime of mistreating my boost.”

Fenar jogged up to stand next to him, and Eyke and Wellyn appeared next to me.

“What is Penitence?” I looked to Wellyn, who wrapped his cool hand around my elbow and was leading me over to a cushioned seat.

“The crowd can exact their own payment on Tallis. He’s given all of them—” Wellyn waved at the converging Legion, “—free rein to hurt him in whatever way they see fit. Short of actually killing him of course.” He huffed a light laugh. As if this was a normal occurrence. I watched as a line formed in front of Tallis, blood thirsty expressions on the excited crowd. Eyke waved a milkshake in front of me.

“As the aggrieved party, you can put an end to it. When you feel he has suffered enough, let me know.” Eyke nodded to Fenar, who was in full charm mode.

“Well folks, step up, step up, a good time to work out any pent-up aggression. Just a reminder, this is Penitence, so we encourage pain but not to the point of death.”

I sipped on the milkshake. A nervous gesture more than anything, not sure what I was about to see. The first in line was a surprise. Nakasha. She sauntered forward with a tight-lipped smile.

“Let it be known that mistreatment of boosts is a travesty.”

She leaned forward and sunk her claws into Tallis's shoulders. He made a grunt of pain, his head rocking back as she twisted them. She pulled them out viciously, her claws now dripping red with blood. She stepped off to the side and Fenar stepped up and lay his hands on Tallis's shoulders, healing his wounds. Nakasha met with a tall, dark-haired man and made their way to us. Another Legion stood in front of Tallis and seemed to direct an electric current into Tallis's body, making him jerk.

"Let me introduce you, Precious," Eyke said with some excitement. "This is my friend Dougil, the fourth of Nakasha's quad."

I flicked my eyes to where Tallis was bent over in agony, coughing. Nakasha stood in front of me with an eyebrow raised.

"Dougil, this is Cami." She gave the man a fond look before looking at me again. "You should know that I didn't punish Tallis for you specifically, but on behalf of boosts. You don't measure that high on my radar of importance. I thought you should know in case you considered us friends now."

"Hi Dougil, nice to meet you and Nakasha, it's always a pleasure," I sighed, wincing as Tallis let out a toe-curling bellow. I peeked around Nakasha to see Tallis waving a hand covered in blisters. Dougil reached over and ran two fingers down my face, his eyes twinkling. He was one of many freed Legion who'd I'd met over the weeks. After Eyke had broken down his powers, the trapped people had emerged.

“I’ve seen you several times now. And a new friend of mine mentioned he spoke to you. He was concerned you may not have been well. I promised him I would confirm.”

“What friend?” Eyke growled, stiffening beside me.

“I’ve been sharing visions with him. It seems we have similar prophetic powers. He is from Earth. His name is—”

“Julien?” I breathed in disbelief.

“Oh, do you also have future visions?” Dougil asked, a bright smile on his face.

“Who is this Julien?” Eyke pressed darkly, his hand creeping to the back of my neck.

“Rosie, who knew you had it in you?” crowed Fenar, and I looked over to see Tallis slumped on the ground, his arm around his gut. Ambrose was rubbing his horns and scowling at Fenar.

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped.

Eyke squeezed the back of my neck.

“Precious?” he pressed, his voice low. Wellyn perched on the arm of the chair and pressed in close to me.

“In my trials, Melbak trapped me in a room with him. He said he was from Earth. Apparently, he descended from the Legion who fled centuries ago. He said he’d been having visions, and that Melbak threw us together because it wanted us to meet. Please tell him I hope he is well and his lip healed alright.”

“Of course. He will be relieved,” Dougil said as Nakasha sighed and tapped her still bloody claws on Dougil’s forearm.

“I’m bored now, darling. Let’s see if we can get another bite of the small, flat cakes floating around.”

Nakasha didn’t say goodbye, only turned on her heel and sauntering away, Dougil’s hand at her back.

“They seem to get on well,” I mused. I had wondered how Nakasha would react to having a fourth Legion thrown into her established group, but by all reports, it had been smooth. The existing boosts in Melbak, who had all been suffering various stages of boost sickness, had been joined with their fourth members as well. The transition to adding a new Legion had gone smoothly, their society well versed with the idea of sharing. Boost sickness was a thing of the past. I was glad I would never have to experience it. My eyes drifted back to Tallis, and I closed one eye, cringing as I watched another Legion ram Tallis’s side with his horns. Fenar whistled and hooted, such an irreverent reaction I couldn’t get my head around it.

“I don’t like this,” I admitted to Wellyn, shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

“You can stop it, Pancake,” he soothed and Eyke reached over, his large fingers tapping the bottom of my glass. I took a sip at his silent command. Of course, Legion would organize the most brutal of punishments. This had everything they loved: public humiliation, needless torture, and blood. Tallis seemed to move slower, even though Fenar healed him each

time he bent over, like the wounds were still on his body. It was only then that I saw Albion, Tallis's own dad, at the front of the line. Along with two other, older Legion. One was burly, with a thick beard and the other had a mouth full of fangs and long blonde hair.

“His own dad?” I breathed, looking at Wellyn and Eyke in disbelief.

“Of course, and his triad fathers. They were all very disappointed in Tallis,” Wellyn explained, as if this justified it. I watched as Tallis pulled his shoulders back and nodded at his dads. Albion moved so his tail swiped across Tallis's face twice before wrapping around his throat and throttling him. The other two stood with their arms crossed and frowned. And Tallis did nothing. His hands stayed by his side, clenched into fists, but still. I was sure that a Legion might revel in this, but it was making my stomach roil. Another strange feeling was rising in me watching Tallis be beaten mercilessly, one that surprised me in its ferocity.

I didn't want him hurt.

For so long I had imagined causing him pain like he had done to me, but now? With a veritable feast of maiming in front of me, it made my chest itchy, uncomfortable. I had promised a clean slate, but I had never told him I'd forgiven him. Something about seeing his own dads hurt him on my account broke something in me. The dam surged forth and my throat tightened.

I cared for him.

I more than cared for him. What I had with my guys was beyond logical words. It felt like part of me was connected to each of them and that when they hurt, I hurt. Since the trial I realized how I needed to grow to move past sinking into memories. I had to make new connections, fresh memories, and my new photos from Tallis were more than I ever thought I'd have from my family. Wellyn and I were searching the Vault to see if there was a way a binding agreement could be broken. I hoped one day I could go back to Earth and see my family again.

I pressed the milkshake into Wellyn's hands, shooting up from my seat, filled with resolve.

"Stop!" I shouted, rushing down the stage to reach Tallis whose face was turning a dark color. Albion released his son and Tallis fell to his knees for the second time that night. His hand rubbed at his throat, chest rising and falling with labored breaths. He stared at me with a mixture of fear and wariness.

"Cami." Albion smiled. "There are many more Legion who want to punish Tallis on your behalf." He swept his hand behind me where the line of Legion shuffled impatiently. I wasn't so sure they were doing it for me. Not when I didn't recognize any of their faces.

"Penitence is over. It's done." I put my hands on my hips. "He's proven his remorse to my satisfaction."

The crowd rustled angrily, mutters of dissent gathering in sound, until Eyke turned and hissed.

“My boost said it’s done.” He pointed a finger. “I will destroy anyone who dares to denigrate her.”

That shut them up.

Eyke’s booming voice did little to dispel the rumors around him being connected to the Gaer. Even though Head Avanti had taken credit for finding the ‘cure’, Legion didn’t quite believe him. Especially not after they saw Eyke coming from the Ward Estate. The Gaer touched children finally freed. Alive and well.

“Are you sure you want to stop?” Tallis whispered croakily in my ear. I turned to look at him, the marks still clear on his skin.

“This might be a Legion’s wet dream, but I’m not as naturally bloodthirsty as you,” I said, drifting a little closer.

“I did like seeing you on your knees, though,” I murmured.

Heat flashed in his eyes. It felt like there was a scorching air between us. I couldn’t deny my attraction. My desire. Maybe there was something wrong with me if seeing him get beat up had me salivating.

“Anytime you need a repeat, I will oblige.” God, his smoky voice was obscene. Was he promising what I thought he was? “I’ll sing my praises at your temple. Speak in tongues and prove my devotion.”

My clit throbbed at the thought. Yeah. These bloodthirsty Legion were definitely rubbing off on me.

Someone cleared their throat, and I looked up to see Albion still standing there with a wry smile.

“I think we’ve waited long enough to introduce your boost to your dads, haven’t you?”

Kill me.

I flushed. Thinly veiled dirty talk in front of not one, but three dads? Tallis, however, was unperturbed. He grabbed my hand and nodded.

“Cami, this is Serich.” The fanged one smiled. “And this is Rourke.” The brawny one bowed, and I saw two little horns deep in the tangled curls of his hair.

“Hello,” I squawked

“We are honored to meet you.” They both inclined their heads. And with a hopeful look, Serich added, “When do you think you might make us grandfathers?”

I squawked again, louder.

Tallis

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Just hold me still for *shek's* sake!” I hissed, wobbling to one side. “I almost had it then.”

Wellyn cursed when my tail slapped him on the back of his head. His tentacle slapped my head in return.

“Why did I have to be the one to help? You couldn't use the giant to do this? Just his arm's reach would pluck it out of the nest.”

I focused on steadying myself on the trunk, inching my fingers forward until I brushed the edges of the ratid nest.

“I'm not giving him any ideas. Last time I mentioned Cami's love of chocolate and a thought I had about surprising her with some and he whisked her away on a date and showered her with guess what? Chocolate.”

I scowled as I pressed forward, feeling around the nest for the soft warmth I was searching for. This was the eighth nest we had searched in, and I was sure Wellyn was going to give up. His creature got agitated if he stayed away from Cami for

too long. My hands were scratched from being attacked by territorial ratids.

“Besides, he’s out at the rehabilitation center with Fenar, helping reintegrate all the freed Legion from the Gaer.”

“I still can’t believe how incredible Melbak is without the Gaer,” Wellyn sounded wistful, drifting me to the right. It was incredible how the land had changed over the last six months. The trees had grown back thicker. The lakes and springs were clear and always full of Legion. The fissures were closing. Even the gluts seemed to disappear. Cami still lamented the red skies of Melbak, but the greenery she was pleased about. I wriggled my fingers a little further, gritting my teeth. I made a sharp cry of triumph when I finally felt the soft, warm fur of a ratid youngling. My fingers wrapped around it, and I pulled it out as gently as I could with Wellyn holding me up.

“I’m good,” I said, cupping the youngling in my hands. Wellyn bent over and I jumped from his shoulders awkwardly. I crowed as I peeked in on the ratid. It was a rare one, with black and white spots, and a white tail. Cami would love it. I pulled the creature to my mouth, careful not to make direct eye contact, and gave it a choice.

“To serve?” I asked, starting the ancient ritual which Legion had founded with the ratid hundreds of years ago. The creature’s intelligent eyes blinked at me, its nose wrinkling. I felt a pinch in my chest as I waited, afraid that all my hard work was going to amount to nothing. The ratid squeaked its assent, climbing down my arm and behind my neck. It would

have to learn to share. That was one of Hope's favorite places when she wasn't following Cami around like a sentry.

"Success," I sighed, looking at Wellyn with a giddy smile.

"She's at the springs, apparently," he pocketed his reader.

"Perfect," I breathed. There was nothing I liked more than seeing Cami in her human swimsuits. They were entirely too revealing for anyone else to witness, but Wellyn had a way of clearing out the water with his creature.



As expected, the springs were heaving, and the back of my neck prickled when I found my boost. She was lazing by the edge, her delectable body encased in a red string bikini. Her curves were magnets for half the Legion in there. Some of which I would bet were only there because she was. Cove was sitting next to her, and another man I only vaguely remembered.

"Is that Seb Decker?" Wellyn growled, pushing past me while pulling his shirt off. Regular boosts had wrought an incredible change in all our bodies, and I whipped my shirt off as well. The little troublemaker paled as we approached, his gold skin turning bronze.

"I just remembered I have somewhere I need to be," he gulped, leaping from my girl's side, and racing away.

"Excellent decision," I snapped at him as he passed. Cami rolled her eyes at Cove as I slid in beside her. Wellyn stripped

down completely, his creature emerging before he got into the water. Immediately its tentacles wrapped around Cami's thighs and tugged, impatient for her to get in the water.

"You can wait!" I threatened him. Cami needed to see my present first. I made a show of glaring at all the other Legion lounging in the springs, enough that they crept to the exit.

"Are you quite done? Everyone was enjoying themselves before you started scaring them away." She looked at Cove for support, but the Legion only shook her head.

"Don't look at me. You knew how he'd react if you wore that here, which is why you wore it, wasn't it?" She poked Cami in the side, who ducked her head with a smile. My head felt dizzy at the sight. I would never get sick of having her brilliant smile aimed towards me.

"Is that right, Pet?" I whispered in her ear, kissing the shell and lingering to soak up her incredibly salty scent. I felt her shiver and hoped that the rest of the day would go as planned.

"Maybe," she breathed. I resisted the urge to paw at her. A near impossible task.

"I got you a present." I held my breath, leaning back and pulling the new ratid from behind my neck. Cami's eyes widened, and she squealed, collecting the creature into her hands with infinite care. She cooed at it and Cove sighed.

"That is beyond sweet, and it has such unique coloring!"

"Hope is on top of the column over there." She pointed up to the lip of the stone column. The ratid took her hint, leaping

off her hand and flapping up to meet its new brethren. Cami pushed the breath out of me as she threw herself half on me, wrapping me up in a grateful hug. My skin burned. It always did when she touched me. My cock surged under my clothes, desperate to get closer to the object of my desire.

I wanted her so badly I could weep. Her skin was soft, warm, and slightly wet from the springs. The past few months had been a lesson in patience, my fuse burning ever shorter with each lingering touch or kiss she gave me. Cami had been true to her promise. She had given me a clean slate, and I had kept mine. Now with the freedom to, I admitted my feelings readily. I worshiped the ground she walked on. We had been taking it slow. She let me take her on dates and we kissed. We'd even 'dry humped' once, something Cami had laughed about after. I wasn't laughing, though. I'd had pants full of cum from her undulating hips pressed against mine. The only bad thing about sharing Cami was that I had to listen to her *shek* my brothers. Technically, we had slept together. Twice. Only sleeping, though. Being pressed up against her curves all night had been agony.

"I'll have to thank you later," she purred up to me, those lips promising sensual acts that had a knot taking up my throat. I swallowed a groan.

"Gross." Cove wrinkled her nose. "Could you keep it in your apartment at least? Preferably the bedroom."

Cami squealed as Wellyn's creature got impatient, yanking her until she slithered down in the springs with a laugh. I

watched as she glided in, kicked her shapely legs in the clear water, chasing the creature and running her hands down its tentacles.

“Nothing yet?” I asked Cove and felt like an ass when her face fell.

“No, not for me.” She gave me a sad smile and shrugged her tiny shoulders. “It’s ok. I am hoping there is still a quad who might have me. Or who knows, maybe a guy might present as a boost, and I could become part of their quad.”

I squeezed her shoulder and nodded. Eyke had reversed his powers and dismantled the Gaer, causing a late presentation of several boosts. Cove had hoped that she might be one of them, but it seemed unlikely. It devastated her, having always wanted to be a boost.

“Anyone would be lucky to have you,” I comforted her.

“I’m grateful you bullied me into working with Kevin’s new initiative. He has me working on Inter-plane Relations. I’m going to be working on repairing relations with Demons.”

I wrinkled my nose at the mention of Demons, a miserable bunch of creatures. I couldn’t think of anything worse, but I didn’t say so. The past few months, the Heads had already made vast changes. After the ‘unfortunate’ death of Head Lamott, his role had been taken over by Wellyn’s brother, Ronen, who’d been surprisingly submissive. They’d postponed the Vinko as well. It was too difficult with an influx of a hundred Legion who needed help to understand a new

Melbak and learn the basics of technology. Something that Eyke still hadn't quite got the hang of.

“You don't miss being in charge of the quad?” Cove asked.

“Now that they have formally recognized the Kindale line, it just made sense for him to lead us. Although Kindale quad still feels wrong to say,” I admitted, smiling at her surprise. It had shocked everyone how easily I'd given up the leadership to Eyke. But he was more suited to the role. Ruthless, authoritarian, and strong. Speak of the Legion. A message popped up on my reader.

Where are you?

I sighed and replied.

Coming.

He sent back immediately. I shook my head knowing it was pointless to argue with him over the reader. He didn't understand it, anyway.

“I better get going. I just stopped by for a quick dip and got distracted by your lovely boost.” Cove gave me a brittle grin, one that didn't mask how she was feeling at all.

“If you need to talk, I'm here,” I offered, knowing I was terrible at communicating but for Cami's sake I was learning to be better at ‘feeling my feelings’ as she urged. Cove tucked her silver hair behind her shoulders and shrugged.

“Thank you, but I am alright. I just need time.” She called out to Cami and Wellyn, waving at them before picking up her belongings and slipping out the entrance.

Leaning back on my hands in contentment, I let my tail dip in the sultry water. I watched as Cami stroked around like she was part fish. Wellyn was making a game of chasing her, tugging on her legs with his tentacles and pawing all over her.

“Incoming!” Shouted Fenar. I turned my head just in time for him to leap past me and cannonball into the water. Eyke strolled in after him, a bemused look on his face. He stripped down to his underwear and slipped into the water, elegant despite his size. Legion inundated Cami. Her squeals made my lip quirk. She protested loudly as Fenar hoisted her against him, nipping her shoulder. Eyke lunged for her, and they began a game of tug, Cami being manhandled between them. I remembered the promise I had made myself a long time ago. That I wouldn't come here until I had my family again. When I'd paid for my mistakes. My tail stroked the water, my heart bursting with gratefulness. I hoped my mother was watching this somehow. At peace that her foolish son had finally found true happiness.

“Stop it!” Cami admonished, sliding from Eyke's meaty grip, and flailing towards me. I gripped her outstretched hands and pulled her up next to me. “No more.” She wagged her finger. Fenar pouted, but Eyke just inclined his head, ever the gentleman. Wellyn wrapped his tentacles around their ankles and dragged them under the water as payment.

“Do you want to come back to the apartment with me?” Cami asked me with her eyebrows raised. Not waiting for a reply, she stood and towed herself off, throwing a loose robe over her head. I scrambled to my feet, my instinct to obey the

owner of my heart. But I couldn't ease the tension on my shoulders.

"Is everything well?" I probed, struck with a sudden fear that all the headway I'd made had not been enough. She had found me wanting somehow. I hadn't atoned enough for her to ever truly forgive me.

"Of course," she gave me a distracted smile before waving to the boys. "Heading out now. Don't hurry back."

My stomach was an ocean of nausea as I trailed after her. The ratids left their post, bound to their beautiful master, just like I was. I sifted hurriedly through my memories of the last few months. Had I messed up somehow that I hadn't realized? By the time we got to our apartment I was sweating so badly that the scanner wouldn't recognize my hand. Cami bumped me aside with her hip and gave me a quizzical look. I faltered when she grabbed my hand, exclaiming at the perspiration there.

"Are you feeling sick?" she asked as she led me through the large family room and down to her bedroom. We'd been in our new apartment for a month now. With the addition of Eyke, we'd needed more space. We were one level higher than Ambrose, in the building next to him, and that had filled me with a perverse sense of achievement. I trailed after Cami, my heart booming in my chest as she led us to her bedroom. There was an enormous bed, enough for several of us to pile in if we wanted to. She pushed me down to sit on the edge and wandered over to her closet.

“I have a dilemma. I need to pick an outfit for Nakasha’s gathering. But I think these won’t be stylish enough. Can you give me some advice?” Her voice turned muffled as she disappeared into the space. I relaxed infinitesimally.

There was no terrifying reason she’d asked me back here. As the most fashionable member of the quad, she wanted my advice. Cami stepped out after a moment, and I couldn’t stop the curse from flying out of my mouth. She rose on her toes and spun, and I got a 360 view of my demise. The robes, if you could call them that, had taken some serious inspiration from her Earth clothes. Someone had tailored the bottom into tight blue shorts, her thighs bulging in the material. There were two longer strips that hung down the side, but they hid none of how it encased the cheeks of her ass like a second skin. The front dipped low and the soft folds of her cleavage made my mouth water.

“What do you think?” She put her hands on her hips.

“I-I-it’s nice” My words turned to a whine as she bent over, fussing with a speck of lint on the floor. Her dark eyes flashed as she looked at me again.

“I’ll try the other one. That’s the one I’m leaning towards.”

She wandered back into the closet, and I looked at the ceiling. I needed divine intervention. There was no way I was letting her walk around in public in those robes. Her delicious body was on full display, and I wanted to hide it away. I didn’t have any right to that. It was her body, but alarms went off in

my brain when another Legion looked at her. I had to fight the urge not to set them on fire.

“Thoughts on this one? I think it’s very me.”

“Cami,” I moaned as she turned agonizingly slow.

She was wearing black this time. I couldn’t call them robes because they were literal scraps of material. The top was nothing more than a bikini. A thick gold chain hugged her waist, a sheer curtain attached to it, flowing to cover her hips and ass. A tiny black triangle was all that covered her pussy. So much skin. I felt myself growing hard under my robes. She tilted her head, spinning for a second time. This was sweet torture. There was no way I could let anyone else see her like this. Her ass was eating up the material, like a damn meal, and I couldn’t say a thing. I had to be cool, supportive. Not be a possessive prick.

“You look so beautiful,” My throat was strangled with panic. She ran her hands over her hips, walking towards me.

“The chain is lovely, isn’t it? Seb helped me choose the color. It was his idea,” she admitted, leaning so I could get a closer look. Her delicious body was so close, her curves making me want to explode.

Wait. Seb?

I pulled her onto my lap, glowering down at her.

“You let Seb see you in this?” I asked softly, desperately trying to hold on to my powers. The bed smoked where my

hands bunched the material, and I lifted them and focused on breathing. Cami looked at me with wide eyes.

“Well, we worked on it together. It took a long time, and I had to be right next to him, almost sitting on his lap like we are right now.” She huffed a little laugh.

“Cami,” I warned her. I was past the point of being reasonable. This was too far. She had let another man see what wasn’t his, and she wanted the whole of Legion to see it too?

“I didn’t think you’d mind. You’ve been so accommodating to me since we started again. I am hoping he could help me design some more bathing suits, similar to this, but less on the top.” She adjusted the top, showing me the size, she’d like. I saw red. It would barely cover her nipples. I swore I could smell ash in the room.

“No,” I spat through gritted teeth, pushing down the pressing need to expel my powers.

“I forbid it,” I added, and waited for her argument. For her to lash me with her tongue, but she only smiled. It was slow and sneaky.

“Oh?” she pouted, her lower lip sticking out. “Did I do something bad?” She wriggled on my lap, batting her lashes. I sucked in a deep breath, trying to get it together so that I could stop myself from ruining all the mercy I’d earned. Under her steady wriggles, my cock hardened, making my head spin with want.

“It’s too revealing,” I managed.

“I see. You like it, but you don’t want anyone else to see me in it. Except our quad.”

“No Seb,” I growled. I was like an animal, driven to monosyllables and base urges.

“I guess I really messed up,” Cami sighed, hopping off my lap and laying herself over my legs with her ass up. “You better make sure I don’t do that again.”

“Cami?” I couldn’t look away from her pert cheeks.

“Go on, punish me,” Cami whispered, and I groaned. My hand carved a path over her curves reverently. I remembered the last time I had spanked her, back when I was deluded about how much I wanted her. I hooked a finger under the seam of her panties, pulling it away from her skin. Then I used my powers to seer the material in two. Cami squeaked as I tore the miniscule strip of material out from under her and tossed it to the ground. I flexed my hand on her skin, allowing a trickle of power to fill it.

“Is that too hot, Pet?” I asked silkily, mesmerized by the heat of her skin on my hand.

“Your power?” she asked with a hint of fear.

I brought my hand down across one cheek, relishing in the sound it made.

“You’ve been a disobedient girl, haven’t you?” I asked, rubbing the sting away before adding to it with another harsh pass of my flat hand.

“So bad,” Cami moaned, her thighs moving together in such a delectable fashion. I could see a peek of her fat pussy lips, wet with her lust.

“Did you really let Seb see you in that ridiculous scrap?” I asked, choking off her response by slapping her again, this time on the opposite side.

“No—I—gah!” she cried out as I ran my fingers softly over her, dipping into her drenched slit. “I just wanted to make you angry. I wanted you to spank me.”

I brought my fingers to my mouth, eyes fluttering closed as I savored my first taste of her.

“Can you take a little more? I don’t think you understand how badly you’ve behaved,” I taunted her, bringing my tail up to coast over her lips. I sunk my fingers into her again, hissing as her walls clenched around them.

“I think so,” she whimpered.

I pumped them into her for a moment, the scent of her driving me mad.

“This will sting,” I warned, but she didn’t tense, and I swung my tail down on her delectable ass. She shrieked and bucked on top of me. My tail rattle was harder than my hand, the ridges quickly making a lovely pattern on her reddened skin. Something primal rose in me.

I had to mark her all over.

I gripped around her waist and tossed her on the bed, ignoring her noise of surprise. I tore at my robes, flinging them

to the side with a scowl.

“You knew what you were doing, didn’t you, Pet?” I prowled towards her, my tail curling around her upper thigh and wrenching it open. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glossy, a cheeky smile stretching across her face.

“You’ve been too nice,” she chided, slipping the skimpy outfit off and laying back, bare and beautiful. I slid up her body, watching her face to see if she would object.

“Too nice?” I whispered, eyeing her lips with a ravenous hunger. Her eyes flashed.

“Yes, you’ve been sweet, considerate and loving.” She pushed up, her breasts pressing against my chest. She reached around and wrapped her fingers around the base of my tail. “Which is all fine and well, but it isn’t you.”

“*Shek, shek*” I groaned, “Don’t do that. Didn’t you learn your lesson from last time?” My cock got impossibly hard, and my toes tingled at the waves of pleasure her touch was eliciting.

“I did, but you haven’t.”

My mouth dropped open, and I sagged against her. If she didn’t take her fingers off me, this was going to finish embarrassingly quick.

“W-what are you talking about?” I gasped and she let go, narrowing dark eyes at me.

“You keep walking on tiptoes around me.” She pushed her hand on my chest, urging me to flip over. She straddled me,

her hands spanning my chest. “You keep waiting for me to say I don’t want you.”

I stiffened, my hand wrapping around her wrist. Please, no. Don’t let her do this while I’m seconds away from covering her with cum.

“And do you?” I murmured. The tendons in my neck were aching with tension. Cami’s eyes flashed with hurt, and I reached up and cupped her face.

“Pet? What did I do? I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Shut your stupid, pretty mouth, Bossman and listen.” She curled her lip in distaste, shaking out of my hold. “I said clean slate, and I meant it. These past few months have been wonderful. I can tell you are doing everything you can to prove you care for me.”

“I love you,” I said quickly, wincing when she pursed her lips in disapproval.

“So, stop handling me like I’m a bomb about to explode. It’s like you feel you can’t have an opinion that differs from mine in case that’s the thing that will make me default back to hating you.”

I wilted, lying prone. The passion I had been cultivating was fizzling out fast. I’d messed up again. I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out that was wrong again. Cami shimmied down my body, kneeling between my legs.

“I made a mistake once and someone wise reminded me I wasn’t that person anymore, that I’d given everything up to

atone for it. It helped me to heal. So let me say to you Tallis, you're not that Legion who made mistakes, and you have given up so much to make it right. I know if I asked it, you'd give me up too."

"Is that what you want?" I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw.

"No, I want to suck your cock and see if your cum tastes like fire. That's what I'd like to do," she drawled and before I could answer, her hot mouth had wrapped around my cock. My top half levitated off the bed in surprise, my eyes flying open like I'd been electrocuted. Nothing could prepare me for that view. Her dark hair was a curtain around my thighs and her plump, pretty lips fit around me perfectly. Her slick tongue danced around my length, drawing a desperate cry from me. She pulled off with a pop, looking like a siren, a string of spit connecting her to my aching cock. Her pink tongue swiped the bead of cum from the top of my cock.

"Tastes good." She winked, climbing back up my body.

"You want me to unleash? Because there is something I've been dreaming about doing to you since I saw your beautiful ass the first time," I admitted, surprising myself with how determined I sounded. Her eyes flared with eagerness, and she nodded.

"Wait here a moment," I told her, leaping off the bed to run to my room. I grabbed what I needed, quickly making my way back to Cami, who was lying on her back, touching herself on the bed.

“That’s perfect,” I breathed, holding up my prize. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She eyed the ropes with interest. There was more than a little fear behind her eyes, but my feisty boost didn’t flinch.

“I need you to stay still for me,” I whispered, as I ran my hands up and down her legs. I wound the rope around her ankle, securing it slightly with a knot. Her breathing stuttered as I pressed her heel to her ass, wrapping the rope around the juicy top of her thigh and calf, joining them together. I looped the rope three times around her thigh and shin, immobilizing her.

My chest panted as I switched over to the other leg, tying it separately until both legs were trussed perfectly. Unable to help myself, I slid my tail between her legs, gently teasing her clit until she whimpered. The rope slid through my hand like an old friend. I felt like I was creating art with my greatest muse. Her pussy was so wet that my tail was noisy as it tortured her. Her tits were rising rapidly, her pupils dilated as she watched my fingers deftly tie off the last knot. I leaned back on my heels and surveyed my work. Her heels were plastered to her ass, framing her pussy perfectly. I pressed my hands on her bound thighs and spread them wide.

“I need to be inside you,” I admitted, my voice rough, breathing uneven. My fingers danced over the ropes.

“Finally!” Cami smirked. “I’m more than ready for you.”

I shuddered, lining my tip up with her sweet hole. She wriggled, gasping as I entered her at an agonizingly slow pace. She was scorching fire, so much that my eyes rolled back, and I dropped my head, hypnotized by the sight of us joined. It was more than I could stand. The most incredible feeling I'd ever experienced. I pulled back and thrust into her with force. I wanted to see those tits bounce. I grabbed onto the ropes, using them like handles, and unleashed. Cami wanted my fire? She was about to get it.

“F—fuck Tallis,” she moaned, her mouth dropping open in a sultry moan. “You feel so good inside me.”

“So *sheking* good, my perfect little Pet. I want to tie you up again till you can't do anything but take the cocks of your Legion in every hole.” My tail rubbed against her clit as I panted. I leaned over, pressing my weight into her, and took her mouth. I kissed her with abandon.

Our tongues fought each other. My teeth knocked against hers as I stole her oxygen and gave her mine. I wanted to consume her. I wanted to imprint myself on every inch of her. A madness drove me, set alight by the perfect heat of her body on mine. It was furious, aggressive and unhinged. My hand snaked into her hair, my knuckles turning white as I held onto it like an anchor. I dropped my head to her neck, biting down its length and laving my tongue on her salty skin.

“You set me on fire,” I moaned against the swell of her breast, needing her pert nipples in my mouth. Everything dissolved except her. I let the wild flames rage at me. All the

careful walls I'd placed eviscerated, and I let her feel the force of my desire and need. My obsession. I could never go back to careful again. Not now that I'd tasted her.

“Own me. Take me. I'm yours,” she cried out, her fingers coming up to dig into my arms as she stiffened, my tail working an orgasm out of her. She jerked as I wrung every last aftershock, my cock still pounding into her roughly. I wanted to stop, to pull back, but it was impossible. She felt too good, and it swept me away by how perfect we were together. Nothing had ever felt this good in my life. My balls tightened, and I shouted, my fingers digging into the ropes on her legs as I shot a flood of cum deep inside her. My cock jerked inside her, pumping like it wanted to claim every part of her with me.

Lightheaded, I looked down on my girl.

“I told you I could take anything you give me.” Cami smirked, rocking her hips against me. “What else you got?”

I took a moment to look at her flushed cheeks, her skin glistening with perspiration. Her big, dark eyes were coy, her nails leaving tiny pinpricks on my skin. I had almost missed out on this. Somehow, this perfect goddess had given me a second chance. My cock hardened, not wanting to waste this opportunity. My tail pressed against the tight hole I hadn't claimed yet. I savored the sharp inhale she made, the tilt of her chin in challenge.

“I'm giving you everything.”

And I did.

Cami

ONE YEAR LATER

Fenar tucked his favorite fuzzy blanket around me, fussing with the edges. He leaned back and surveyed his work, his chin dipping in approval.

“There, you’re perfect.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. I tried to smile, but my lips wobbled, and I slumped further into the blanket.

“Don’t cry, please. I can’t stand it,” Wellyn exhaled from beside me.

“I know I shouldn’t have got my hopes up. It just doesn’t get any easier and I miss them so much,” I sighed.

“We were all hoping for a different outcome, but perhaps there is another way. In the meantime, there are photos, videos and letters. Gloria did great in restoring your parent’s memories. We’re taking good care of them even though you can’t go back,” Wellyn promised.

I hummed noncommittally. My chest was aching too hard for me to even think about it. I wanted to wallow for a while.

It turns out Legion Binding Agreements really are binding, and there was no way to break it. So, despite researching every dusty book in the Vault for months, we had finally given up on me ever being able to go to Earth and see my family. I'd missed two of the twins' birthdays now. The second was at least bearable because I could send presents and letters with Tallis.

He often traveled to Earth. At first because of his role in helping Legion to understand humans better and now as a go between with the Legion of Melbak and the Legion of Earth. Although they didn't call themselves that and they hadn't maintained many of their powers, mostly just the ability to shift into different creatures. Fenar snuggled into me, huffing a breath against my neck.

"There are good things just around the corner. You might not go to Earth but..." he trailed off before leaping from the couch and heading to the door. I watched him with confusion as he swung the door open.

To reveal my family.

Wellyn gripped my thighs as I gasped, my hands flying to cover my mouth. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Tallis was pushing Percy's chair through the door. Eyke followed with Dad's wheelchair and Ma walked in while Aaron darted around everyone, racing towards me like a rocket.

"Cami!" he squealed. I caught him as he launched himself on top of me.

“How? How! How?” I repeated, my brain on a one-word loop. My arms squeezed Aaron so tight that he complained. I let him down. He hugged Fenar and Wellyn. I waited for my family to react, to notice Tallis’s tail and Fenar’s fangs, but they didn’t. Because they weren’t there.

All my Legion looked like humans.

My mouth dropped open. They’d planned this for a long time, especially if they had time to approach Ziggy for a glamor. Ma came over and threw her arms around my neck, her eyes wet with emotion.

“Ma,” my voice cracked as her perfume covered my nostrils, so familiar. I felt like a child again.

“My baby girl, you look so beautiful! We’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ll let you enjoy your visit, but the por—transportation will close by tonight. So, I’ll be back before then,” Gloria called out from the doorway, disappearing before I could even thank her.

“Daddy,” I cried, leaning over to hug my Dad, and sobbing at the feeling of strength in his returned hug. Photos didn’t do him justice. He looked so healthy. I hugged Percy, being careful not to squash him like I had Aaron.

“Camellia, it’s good to see you honey,” he shouted with excitement “I can’t believe how quick it took us to get to Madagascar. This is such a nice little place you have here.”

I hiccupped, looking up to see Fenar hastily pulling the curtains over the windows to block out the red sky.

“Can I get anyone a coffee or a tea? Milkshake?” Tallis asked. I tried to catch his eye.

“You are an angel Tallis. I’d love a coffee,” Ma sighed happily, squeezing my arm as I settled back on the couch.

“Nothing for me, son,” Dad waved his hand dismissively.

“Angels are all self-righteous narcissists. I am nothing like them.” Tallis muttered to Wellyn as they went to the ordering machine. I hurriedly tried to distract them, wondering how I could explain the advanced technology when I supposedly couldn’t even give them a phone call.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I whispered. To think I’d just been wallowing on this couch moments before and now my family was here. In Melbak.

“Just breathe,” Eyke whispered as he slid in beside me, tousling Aaron’s hair. I looked at him with tears in my eyes before turning back to my parents. Dad’s hair looked grayer since I’d seen him last. They both had more lines on their faces, and I drank each one in, memorizing them.

“We had to get special permission from the government for your parents to visit,” Tallis chatter conversationally as he placed the coffee in front of Ma. She looked up at him with adoration. If she had to pick a favorite of my guys, it would be Tallis. She’d spent a lot of time with him and always raved about his elegance and impeccable manners. My other guys

had visited and met my family, delivering my letters. They knew them well by now. My inability to visit was explained away with the help of Gloria. She hadn't lost the awe she had for Eyke and could always be convinced to do anything that might mean he looked upon her favorably.

I shook my head, wiping my eyes with shaking hands. Aaron had climbed off my lap and was halfway up Eyke's shoulders when he froze.

"Woah, Cami." He pointed to the ceiling where Hope and Spots were peering down curiously. "What's that?"

"Oh, my god," squeaked Ma, her coffee sloshing a few drops onto her cuff. "Is that a rat *with wings*?"

"Very common creature in Madagascar." Tallis nodded serenely, holding out a plate. "Muffin?"

"When are you going to put a ring on my girl's finger?" Ma prodded, before flushing pink. Dad cleared his throat, and I choked on a laugh. I'd explained that I was dating all four of the guys and that we had an agreement. My parents hadn't seemed to understand, but they valiantly attempted to support me either way. Wellyn looked at me with adoration.

"Mrs. Perrin, Cami has us forever, regardless of a ring," he promised.

"Yes, well." My Dad pulled at his collar. "As long as you're treating her like you should. She's special."

"We know," all four of them chorused. I had to wipe away tears for another reason.

“I love you all. Thank you for making this happen.” I looked at each of them, letting them see the truth in my eyes. Wellyn flushed, Fenar winked, Tallis smoldered and Eyke put his arm around my shoulders, jostling Aaron from his seat.

“We’ll do anything for you, Precious, you know that.”

Ma crowed at the sweet comment, giving me a look.

“Ohhh, that is the sweetest! I might have a new favorite.”

Tallis stiffened, shooting a venomous look towards Eyke, who couldn’t help himself by adding, “I am the better boyfriend.”

“In your dreams. Who organized this entire trip?” Tallis shot back. I couldn’t see his tail, but I bet anything that wherever it was, it was swinging furiously.

“You didn’t organize it all on your own. We were involved too,” Wellyn protested and Fenar didn’t even try to argue, too busy making Percy smile.

“Chill out, or I’ll lock my bedroom door,” I joked, and they stopped immediately, an audible click as their jaws closed.

Dad looked like he was about to expire. But Ma just leaned over and whispered in my ear. “I want more details later.”

I laughed nervously. Nope. There was no way I was going to give details about my sex life with four guys who weren’t even human. She’d have a heart attack if I was ever honest about Fenar’s knot. I changed the subject, reaching over to squish Aaron’s cheek.

“Tell me everything that’s been happening. I want to know it all.”

Dad started talking about the architecture course he was doing. I settled back and fought the urge to pinch myself. I’d decided long ago to sacrifice the world I knew for the greater good of my family. Now I was a world away, and the love I felt had quadrupled. A sudden rush of tears made me blink. I tried to recall how scared I had been when I’d first come to Melbak, and these Legion had burst through the door. I never could have imagined the level of happiness that I had now, never thought I was worthy of it. But here in this room? Surrounded by the most precious people to me. How did I ever get so lucky?

Epilogue

CAMI

“Get him!” I hollered, leaning out of the viewing area, and jumping up and down. Fenar’s wolf leaped on the Legion and dug his sharp teeth into his arm. I pumped the air. Hope and Spots were like weapons, coasting with their wings outstretched before dive bombing any Legion who dared try to move. My ratids were fierce protectors, and they loved to fight.

“I have your drink, my vicious boost,” Eyke’s rumbling voice had me tearing my eyes away from the violent scene in the training grounds below. I accepted the glass of water with a grateful smile, brushing a light kiss against his cheek. I took a sip. My throat was raw from screaming down at my Legion.

Eyke stepped up behind me, his wide chest the anchor I could always rely on. His fingers drifted down my side, a small but reverent touch. In these little ways, he made me feel cherished. I didn’t get to spend nearly enough time with my giant Legion. His duties as Head Kindale kept him busy often. He was here on official business today. All the Heads were

present for the long-awaited Vinko, and perks of being boost to a Head meant I got the best view in the arena.

“I need you to drink up,” he murmured against the skin of my ear. “If you lose your voice, you won’t be able to scream my name tonight.”

I shivered, looking up at him with a smile.

“Well, we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

A roar from the crowd drew my attention, and I watched as Tallis swung the staff in his tail down on the last remaining Legion, slamming him into the ground.

“Yield,” he commanded, his hands flaming red with a warning. Fenar padded up next to him and growled, his muzzle soaked with red. He sneered, hesitating for a moment until a tentacle snaked around his neck and tightened. Wellyn stared down at him, the silent threat obvious. The Legion floundered, his hands flying up in the universal symbol of surrender. There was an almighty roar. Legion in the crowd screamed their approval. I was one of them. I hung over the railing, Eyke gripping my hips as Tallis and Fenar jumped up onto the hastily assembled stage. Attendants rushed in to help assist the Legion who were still on the ground in various states of injury. Vinko was about proving brute strength and to win without simply killing was a genuine test of Legion power. Power that Tallis, Fenar and Wellyn had shown in force. I watched as they were given their trophies, still caked in blood and muck from the gory battle.

It had been hours of fighting, and I was beyond proud of my three Legion for achieving a win on their first Vinko, especially Wellyn. He'd been so nervous about his creature being ridiculed. But it had dominated, its skin was thick like armor, no longer small or soft. The other Legion hadn't known what to do with him, especially when he partially shifted. I watched as they were handed a wreath of deep red flowers and saw how they pointed to the viewing box.

"Blood blossoms," Eyke whispered in my ear. "The winners gift the wreath to the person who they fought for. Who they spilled all this blood for."

My heart constricted as I watched the attendants run the wreath across the field and up to the viewing area. Before being placed in my hands. Eyke arranged it on my head, my cheeks hurting from the proud smile I couldn't wipe away. The crowd was roaring again, loving that they honored their boost, but I only had eyes for Tallis, Fenar and Wellyn. Eyke's hands affixed to my hips and my chest expanded with so much love. My Legion's eyes locked on me, dark satisfaction at seeing me draped in the blood blossoms. I felt my blood heat under my skin, knowing they would need a boost after this and that often led to... I swallowed a whimper. We were going to need to escape soon.

I needed to be with my guys.

A roof rattling growl distracted me, and I spun around, Eyke covering me with most of his bulk. Cove froze in the doorway to the viewing area, gaze pinned on Kevin and the Demon

delegate who had traveled from Hell to view the Vinko. The Demon growled again, his claws shredding the seat he was sitting in.

“Ah Krexeldess, this is Cove,” Kevin stuttered, waving his hand rapidly for Cove to approach. “She works with Legion interplanetary communications. Cove, this is our new Demon delegate, Krexeldess.”

“Krex,” he whispered, like crunching rocks. “Call me Krex.”

Kevin’s eyes bugged out of his head, and he whipped his head to look at Krexeldess in utter surprise.

“B-but Demons only allow their mates to shorten their names,” he said, darting a look at Cove who had stopped in front of the Demon, her eyes wide like saucers. I sucked in a breath as he stood and bowed to her.

“Correct,” he acknowledged, looking at Cove like he wanted to throw her over his shoulder and run away with her.

“What is this feeling?” Cove whispered, rubbing her chest furiously. Kevin stuttered, protestations coming out in a squeak. Krexeldess reached out and clasped Cove’s hands, gripping them tightly.

“It’s the mating bond solidifying.” His small smile looked more like a grimace. “I am pleased to meet you. I believed I was mateless.”

Cove’s terrified gaze flicked to me, and I watched as her eyes rolled back in the back of her head and she crumbled.

Krexeldess caught her deftly, cradling her slight form against his chest. Kevin fanned his cheeks, clearing his throat.

“Well, that was unexpected,” he gulped weakly.

“I must take her to Hell, the bond needs to be consummated,” Krexeldess deadpanned. Demons weren’t known for their effusive emotiveness, but I would think that finding a mate would be an exciting prospect. Worthy of a smile, at least. The Demon obviously considered the matter decided. As he strode for the door, Cove still nestled in his tight hold. Kevin paused for a moment before hurrying after them with his finger in the air.

“Wait—wait just a moment,” he called as he disappeared.

“What does that mean?” I asked Eyke, shocked dumb by what had just happened. He blew out a breath, looking perplexed.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing, but Demons are not like Legion, they do not have quads or even triads. They have only one mate.”

“We need to do something for her,” I made to follow, but Eyke shook his head.

“Never get in between a Demon and their mate.”

I felt a strange pang in my chest for Cove, whose most fervent desire was to be a boost, to serve her quad. How would she react to only having one partner? I didn’t have long to think about it as my Legion burst through the door and

converged on me. I threw my arms around each of them, kissing them in a way that left me breathless.

“We won,” Wellyn whooped, gleefully lifting me in his arms.

“I was watching.” I laughed. “I’m so proud of you. All of you. And you, my little cuties.” I stroked my ratids who were perched on Tallis’s shoulder.

“How do you want to celebrate?” I asked, leaning into Fenar as he rubbed his fingers through my hair. “Do you have something you want to do? Go out to celebrate?”

Tallis smirked, exchanging looks with the others. The back of my neck prickled, and I narrowed my eyes. Nothing good ever came when they looked like that.

“We had a little idea,” Fenar drawled, nipping my ear.

“Oh?” I breathed; whisper soft as they pressed in on me. I hoped they were thinking what I was thinking.

“We just want to go home and have pancakes,” Wellyn said sweetly, entwining our fingers. I deflated a little, valiantly trying to hide my disappointment. They just fought for hours. They’re tired, I scolded myself. There will be plenty of time for dirty sex later. Eyke rumbled a laugh at my back.

“We’ve worked up quite an appetite,” Tallis growled, leading us to the door. They nodded to the people who congratulated them but didn’t stop.

“That’s to be expected,” I agreed. “You wiped the floor with everyone. I’m guessing you need a boost?”

Over the years, it had become second nature. So many things I had once thought strange were now completely normal. Wellyn hummed and squeezed my hand.

“No, just the pancakes, I think,” Fenar said with a slight smile. “But we had one request, as Vinko champions.”

“Anything,” I smiled, noticing how they were rushing me, an urgency coming over their movements. What was the hurry?

“We want to eat them off you, baby,” Fenar grinned.

“And lick you clean,” Wellyn added, his hand turning into a tentacle and running up my arm. The suckers pulled at my skin, making goosebumps spring.

“And make you dirty all over again,” Tallis promised. My knees buckled, heady with lust.

“Am I invited to this feast?” Eyke kissed the side of my neck. I shivered and ran.

“What are you waiting for? I need you. All of you.”

Their chorus of laughter followed me, and my heart galloped as I flew down the corridor, desperate to be back in our apartment. I looked back, my hair whipping into my face, and I found the Legion who were gaining on me.

Wellyn caught me first, swinging me around and hiking me up, urging me to wrap my legs around him. I laughed with abandon, my heart bursting with joy.

“We’ve got a surprise for you,” he whispered in my ear, and I pulled my head back and looked at him.

“What is it?” I glanced at the others as they caught up.

“Don’t tell her.” Wellyn warned to Eyke who was opening his mouth to reply. He frowned, his eyebrows pulling together.

“But she wants to know,” He countered, and I pouted.

“Yeah, I wanna know,” I whined and Tallis cursed under his breath.

“You know I can’t handle it when she does that,” he muttered to Wellyn, sounding strained. I turned my eyes on him, wide and pleading.

“Please, Bossman. I’ll be so good. So obedient.”

He scoffed, his tail coming to swat my behind.

“Obedient? You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

I just laughed, waiting patiently until we got to our apartment. I was as filthy as Wellyn, my outfit stained with blood and grime. I sighed.

“Don’t worry Pancake, we’ll get you nice and clean.” He gave me a wide smile and dragged me to the cleaning room. I stopped short in the door, Fenar’s arms wrapped around my waist.

“What is this?” I whispered, bouncing on my toes as Wellyn smiled and nodded.

“We had this specially made for you, Precious. A shower like the one from Earth.”

Squealing, I rushed into the huge shower, standing underneath the gigantic waterfall showerhead, and clapping my hands. I launched myself into each one of my guy's arms, smiling so huge it hurt.

“I can't believe it! I am so excited. You have no idea!”

Tallis raised a dark eyebrow and shook his head.

“I don't see how this could be better than a cleaning room, but why don't you test it out? I'm going to get clean as well and meet you in the bedroom.” His fiery eyes lit me up, and I hurried to untie the knot at my neck.

Eyke and Fenar left as well, leaving Wellyn, who started to strip. I turned the shower on and sighed as a cascade of warm water drenched me. I gave him a stupid smile as he stepped into me and wrapped me in his arms.

“Thank you. I love it,” I whispered, leaning up on my tiptoes to press a soft kiss on his lips. I loved the contrast between his cool skin and the warm water.

“And I love you,” he replied. His hands coasted over my slick skin with reverence. Violet eyes flashed, the only warning I had before his arms turned into tentacles. They ran over my me, the suckers across my skin like a million tiny kisses. I shivered, sagging into Wellyn's hard chest. We cleaned each other of grime until we were both sparkling.

“I love you so much.” I declared to Wellyn. He took my lips again, his tongue running along my bottom and dipping languidly against mine. I felt one of his tentacles slip between

my legs. Opening my thighs, I let it in. My knees turned watery as one sucker positioned itself over my clit and pulsed.

“Not fair,” I gasped, my fingers digging into Wellyn’s arms. The end of the tentacle breached my entrance, plunging inside my heat. Wellyn’s hard cock was pressed to my stomach. I reached down and wrapped my hand around it, jerking him easily with the water running over us. It was his turn to sag against me. I chuckled against his chest.

“If you keep doing that, you’re going to get *shaked* right here, right now. My blood is boiling after the fight and I’m high on adrenaline,” Wellyn warned through gritted teeth. I narrowed my eyes at him, stroking him harder and faster. His tentacle pulled out, and I cried at the loss of sensation. Wellyn picked me up, one arm and the other a tentacle. He pressed me against the wall, all shades of my sweet man replaced with a lust driven Legion.

“Just remember you asked for this,” he teased, lining his cock up and sinking it deep into me. I wrapped my legs around his hips and moaned. How was this a bad thing? He held me easily, his hips pistoning into me, deep and hard. My tits bounced from the force. The sound of our bodies meeting was like a choir of debauchery. The sound just made me wetter. Wellyn dropped his head to my shoulder. His tentacle was suddenly teasing my entrance. Wellyn slowed his movements, his body trembling as he tried to maneuver his tentacle alongside his cock inside of me. He was holding me up with one arm, pinning me to the wall with his chest and powerful legs.

“It won’t fit, Wellyn,” I panted, squirming. He didn’t relent until his tentacle was partly inside me. He thrust into me gently, both his cock and tentacle moving.

“It will. Just wait,” he whispered. “I’ve seen you take Fenar’s knot. You can take us both. We need you.”

He meant his creature and I tried to relax, taking them both. The pressure was incredible, the fullness had my head dropping back against the wall. His suckers were inside of me, pulsing against the walls of my pussy, and it was enough to hurtle me toward the edge.

I just needed a little bit more.

“Give me everything. I need it,” I gasped. He didn’t reply, but his hips slammed me against the wall, his tentacle still rubbing determinedly against my g-spot.

“God yes,” I cried, scrunching my eyes shut and screaming as an orgasm ripped through me. Wellyn choked, his hips stuttering, and I felt the flood of his cum filling me. We slithered to the floor, a pile of slippery, unstable limbs.

“Now I can see the benefit of a water shower,” Fenar joked from the doorway. I looked over with a goofy smile on my face. He was only wrapped in a towel, and I could see the hard outline of his length against the material.

“Can you take some more, baby? We won a victor’s feast, and I intend to gorge myself on that sweet cunt.”

“Come and get your prize, then.” I smirked. He whooped, disentangling me from Wellyn’s arms and tossing me over his

shoulder. Wellyn just laughed and followed behind us.

“What? I’m not going to miss this show.” He smiled at me, and I let my head hang down again.

“Naughty baby couldn’t wait and started this party early,” Fenar scolded, slapping my ass and tossing me on the bed. Tallis leaned over me with a slight scowl.

“I guess someone is asking to be disciplined.”

I couldn’t help the way my eyes lit up and my clit tingled at the thought. I tried to turn over, to present my ass, but Tallis only shook his head, his tail wrenching one leg open so I was exposed to Fenar. Tallis gave me a dark look.

“Now it’s your turn to wait, Pet,” he taunted and nodded to Fenar. “You know what to do.” Fenar grinned, diving in between my legs to use his talented tongue on my pussy. I melted, my eyes fluttering closed. Eyke and Tallis held my hands, the former reaching over to palm one of my breasts. He rolled one of my nipples between his thick fingers and whistled in appreciation.

“I want you wet like this all the time, Precious,” he said. I would have replied but Fenar had me right on the edge and I was close to coming again. My heels dug into the mattress and a soft kean escaped my lips. I was right there.

Almost.

“Not yet.” Tallis clicked his tongue, and I cried out as Fenar pulled away. “Wellyn, come hold her other leg.” Wellyn

hastened to do as he was asked. I glared at him, and he shrugged.

“Why isn’t he getting punished?” I gasped as Fenar leaped in again, scraping the inside of my thigh with his fangs. His tongue danced around my clit, and I moaned. My body jerked, still in the unrelenting hold of my other guys.

“Because he doesn’t make delicious noises like that,” Tallis grinned down at me and I gnashed my teeth at him, my legs starting to shake as Fenar brought me close to the edge. Once again, he pulled back just as I got close, and I turned my head into the mattress and screamed.

“How about something to take your mind off this torture?” Eyke stroked my face, tilting my head so I was looked directly at his hard cock. The head of his cock glistened with cum, and I opened instinctively, wanting to taste him. I needed a distraction. He slid in as Fenar worked his fingers inside my sopping pussy, his thumb lightly circling my clit. I was brittle, the knife’s edge felt almost painful now that I knew I wasn’t going to get release. I focused on swallowing more of Eyke’s cock, my tongue collecting the leaking cum. His hips thrust forward involuntarily, and a low rumble escaped him.

“Right there, *shek*, you take me so well.”

I whined around his length as Fenar pulled away from me and nipped the soft flesh of my inner thigh.

“Enough,” Eyke gasped, pulling out of my mouth with a pop. “I need to be inside her.”

I watched him in a daze as he muscled his way down and nudged Fenar to the side. Tallis started to protest but Eyke shot him a look and he just pulled away. Wellyn chuckled under his breath, moving out of the way of my giant Legion.

“*Shek* her until she can’t talk, Eyke. She’s desperate for that fat cock of yours.”

“Don’t talk about my cock,” Eyke groused as he slid into me and I arched my back, sighing. I begged him with my eyes, and he shook his head, thrusting slowly.

“Please. Please,” I begged, as he hiked my hips back to slam into me, almost angrily.

“Precious,” he growled, leaning over so his weight was on me.

“I want it, please?” I leaned up, trying to chase his lips but he shook his head.

“What’s she asking for?” Wellyn whispered to Fenar.

I stretched my neck and Eyke groaned, his thrusts becoming brutal.

“Are you sure?” he hesitated, leaning over to circle my throat with his hand.

“Yes,” I hissed.

My pulse fluttering against the firm grip of his hand. My vision blurred, becoming darker. Eyke’s hand was wrapped in black particles. We had done this several times, but never in front of the other guys.

Eyke had needed to realize that his powers were not evil. That was how it started. He needed to know he could control them and use them without fear of recreating the Gaer. It was an exercise in trust and it felt incredible. Eyke was literally pulling part of my essence out of my body.

Buzzing filled my ears and my eyes cleared enough that I saw Tallis coiled tight, his tail lashing and ready to strike. I waved my hand and offered him a blissful smile. He frowned slightly, but settled.

Eyke was hunched over and thrusting into me, brutally hard. If I could speak, it would have been incoherent moans. I loved when he choked me with my essence. My heart thundered as I hovered on the edge. I was so, so alive.

“It’s too good. I can’t—” Eyke apologized as he stiffened and filled me with cum. His hand loosened around my neck, and I jolted as my essence flooded back into my body. My eyes rolled back, and I struggled to find my voice. I needed to reassure my guys.

“All consensual boys,” I gasped, running my fingers up Eyke’s muscular arms. “I trust Eyke with my essence. You know he’d never hurt me willingly.”

My giant leaned over and kissed me softly. A silent thank you before he pulled out. I pouted, my gaze flitting to Tallis, who was raking his furious gaze over me. My whole body was a live wire, worked over by all three of them except him. I batted my lashes, but he was in a tough mood today. He shook his head at my antics.

“You know what I want.” He narrowed his eyes, twirling a finger.

“And you know what I want,” I sniped back. The guys laughed at me, so I turned over onto my knees and stuck my ass out, wiggling it, not feeling even mildly embarrassed by the cum that leaked out and dripped down my leg.

“Patience, naughty Pet.” Tallis’s voice was rough with desire as he settled in behind me. He ran his hands over my ass and pulled my cheeks apart. I shivered as I felt the cool sensation of liquid drip down my crack, and the firm press of Tallis’s thumb on my hole. I squirmed a little. A hard slap fell on my cheek.

“Rude,” I grumbled, wriggling again in a barely concealed effort to get another. Instead, Tallis’s tail slid around my throat. He pulled me back, contorting me like a pretzel.

“Are you ready?” he purred, rubbing the head of his cock against my hole. It was scorching. Or were those his hands? I tried to look around to see, but I couldn’t move.

“Use your words,” he barked, and I made a noise of disbelief. It was the best I could do with his tail choking my throat.

“She can’t talk with your tail wrapped around her pretty neck,” Fenar voiced my thoughts. Tallis’s cock pressed insistently against my ass.

“She doesn’t need to talk. I can tell she’s ready. But she’d be better muzzled with a cock down her throat,” he reflected. His

tail slithered off my throat, and I collapsed to my elbows. Tallis inched his cock into me, and I moaned at the sting as his hands pressed my cheeks apart, forcing them to allow him entry. It wasn't the first time he'd fucked my ass, but somehow it always felt heightened, like it was the first time.

He'd jacked off to my ass long before we'd ever been officially together and something about that thrilled me. He was so obsessed with a part of me, and I loved that. He couldn't resist it, but he only allowed himself to take it on special occasions. When he'd really *earned* it.

After that Vinko, I'd let him fuck whatever hole he wanted. I had little time to ponder that, as Fenar tipped my chin up with a devious look.

"I can't wait to knot that greedy cunt of yours later," he promised, thrusting his cock into my gaping mouth with a groan. They filled me to the brim, and I hummed around Fenar's cock. The feeling never lost its sheen. I reached up and squeezed his swelling knot, making him whine and dash my hand off.

"Naughty, eager little slut. Choking on me and Tallis and still wanting more," Fenar growled, making me choke. There was a sharp sting on my ass, and I cried out, the noise muffled. Tallis swatted me with his tail, his hips meeting my ass in a languid pace. He was taking his time tonight, but Fenar was right. I wanted more. Wellyn and Eyke groaned in the background.

Tallis's tail slithered between my legs, sliding between the lips of my pussy. I melted as it rubbed against my clit, my eyes fluttering closed.

"Oh, baby likes that," Fenar gloated as if it was his tail sending waves of pleasure through me. Tallis's fingers kneaded my plump cheeks, and he chuckled, low and breathy. Fenar pulled out of my mouth, and I made a noise of dismay, chasing the glistening head as he moved back.

"No, I wanna save my cum for your sweet cunt." He leaned down and kissed me instead, one of his fangs nipping my lip. Hard. Iron trickled into my mouth and his tongue snaked across the tiny slit, gathering up the drops. He sucked on my lip, his thumbs running over my cheeks. I groaned into his mouth, my body tingling with my long-withheld orgasm. Tallis slid his tail down until the hard rattle head rested against my clit.

"Please," I gasped, tearing away from Fenar to toss a desperate look over my shoulder.

Tallis gazed at me with hooded eyes, thick with desire. He ate me up with his intense brand of fire. His lips quirked to the side, a dark lock of hair falling over his face as his hips snapped forward. He finally gave in. I tore my eyes away, dropping my head to chest. His rattle shook against my sensitive skin, providing just the right sensation. It was like a vibrator, coaxing a shaking orgasm out of me. I moaned into the bed, mindless for a moment, while Tallis pounded against me.

“Isn’t. She. Perfect?” Tallis praised through gritted teeth before I felt his cum explode inside me. Each of my guys murmured their agreement. He plastered himself against my back, pressing a series of kisses to my glistening skin.

“You ready for me, baby?” Fenar teased as Tallis pulled out, sliding up the bed to give me a sharp, biting kiss. I turned onto my back.

“I don’t know, I’m pretty beat.” I put my fist to my mouth and pretended to stifle a yawn. Fenar’s expression dropped, and I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Brat.” His shoulders dropped, and he shot me a smile. His fingers crept up my thighs, gripping the flesh hard in reproach. I wrapped my legs around him as he slid deep inside, his knot bumping at my entrance. Fenar pushed his cock forward slowly, his face twisted with pleasure.

“I want to draw this out until you’re a puddle underneath me,” he gasped, his hips slapping against me. The sound of our joining was decadent. I shot him a look of dismay. I didn’t want to be edged again.

“Don’t—Oh!” My protests turned to groans as Fenar ground his knot against my entrance, the hardness of it slipping inside me immediately. They already primed me perfectly for him. I writhed on the bed, sparks flooding behind my eyes at the sensation of him locked inside me.

“I need to feel the grip of your hot cunt more than I want to play.”

His eyes flashed gold as he moved his hips. He pressed his weight on me, taking my mouth like a man possessed. His tongue and mine tangled. Our kisses became sips as we shared oxygen and every inch of our skin. Fenar's hips pumped agonizingly slow, locked within me. He pulled back slightly, his hand snaking between us and finding my clit. I moaned, his fingers slick and hot as they circled my already sensitive nub. Fenar kept his eyes pinned on me, nodding his head as I bit my lip.

"That's it, baby. You can give us another one. I want to sleep well knowing you were screaming my name the loudest." He smirked, ducking, as Eyke swiped a large hand at his head. I wasn't paying attention. An orgasm fluttered under each pass of Fenar's fingers. Wellyn slid in beside me, watching in awe. His fingers stole over to roll my nipple between his fingers.

"Give it to us, Precious," Eyke rumbled.

"Watching you cum is an addiction," Tallis admitted, lying down on my other side. He reached out and pinched my other nipple, sharp. I felt the sting as he shot some of his heat into it.

"Maybe I'm being too sweet to your pretty clit," Fenar mused, his thumb and pointer framing before he clamped them together. I cried out, the harsh sensation sending an orgasm rippling through my body like an electric shot.

"Yes," Fenar hissed, his fingers pulling away. He plunged into me deeply, filling me with cum. I felt boneless, even more so as Fenar hoisted me around, so I was facing Wellyn with

him at my back. I listened to Tallis grumble about not being next to me. Eyke slipped in behind Wellyn, his long arm reaching over to brush down my arm.

Eyke, Fenar, Tallis and Wellyn.

My Legion.

They each owned a piece of me, and I owned every single one of them. I never thought I would feel such lightness. But sometimes blood has gifts, and mine gave me the greatest ones of all.

Them.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading.

If you enjoyed the Power of Blood duet please consider leaving a review or recommending to others. Aside from reading, it is the most powerful way you can support an indie author. Every time you recommend my books, Cami gets another ride on a knot!

Want to keep up with what I am doing in the future?

Join my readers group on facebook here

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Next up I am working on The Reluctant Demon, a novella about Cove and Krex. Read on for a snippet of the first chapter.

The Reluctant Demon

Please note that this is an unedited version and is subject to change before publication.

Chapter One

I woke up with my fingers sliding in between my legs. That wasn't necessarily strange except that I didn't recall being around anyone long enough to inspire the raging need coursing through me. I rolled around in the soft sheets; the bed hugging my body like a cloud. Bed? I launched upwards with a gasp, trying to clear my vision. It took me a moment to remember what had happened to me.

A Demon.

Who called me mate.

My chest filled with lightness, possibilities and hope filling me for the first time in years. Giddiness wound it's way through my body, filling me to bursting.

"Good, you're awake." Came a gruff voice and I looked to the side to see the hulking demon. His long black hair was

tangled over his bare chest, two ridged horns protruded from the side of his forehead, following the line of his skull and pointing backwards. His chest was covered in a white tapestry of scars. I crawled out of the sheets, moving to the end of the bed, but his lip wrinkling up made me stop. I frowned. Now that I was awake, I was aware of the thread between us. It felt taut, almost painful and through it pulsed an undeniable attraction. I rubbed my chest, a movement his eyes flickered to.

“Where are we?” I asked, and he sighed. Like it was an imposition to answer me.

“Hell.” He replied, deadpan. I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t. He just shifted in his seat, fingers rubbing his forehead.

“Krex, it’s Krex right?” I faltered as he winced. He flicked a look at me with pursed lips.

“My name is Krexeldess, but you are my mate,” he seemed to choke on the word. “I give you the right to my shortened name.”

“Okay, my name is Cove, if you weren’t sure.” I fiddled with the sheet. The excitement I had felt was slowly slipping away the more I took in his stance. He was tense, frowning and his nostrils flared,

“I remember your name.”

“Ok, great. I’m a little surprised by this whole—” I waved a hand between us, “mate bond? I didn’t even know it was

possible to mate with a demon.”

“It’s unheard of, to be honest. There are few Demons who have mated with humans, but your kind,” I didn’t miss the way his nose wrinkled. “I’ve never known of any case of Demon and Legion mating.”

My ego balked at his obvious derision.

“You would prefer a human?” I asked, incredulous. A sharp pain in my chest had me sucking in a breath.

“I would prefer a Demon, but it doesn’t matter,” he sighed, waving his hand dismissively. “It is done.”

I bit my tongue, about to retort that I’d prefer a Legion rather than a Demon but I held back, knowing it was shock making him speak so bluntly. Perhaps he didn’t know how hurtful he was being. But then he spoke again.

“I have taken the liberty of masking your Legion features. It would be better if you pretend to be a human for now. For your sake and mine.” He worked his jaw like I was a sour taste he was trying to chew away. My hand snapped to my forehead, feeling for the tiny nub of my horns, but all I felt was a smooth expanse. I gasped, looking at him in horror.

“Excuse me? You’ve taken my horns?” I said, rubbing the skin there hoping this insult would wipe away and I would be whole again.

“I didn’t remove them, only masked them so nobody would know what you are,” he said, slowly, as if I were stupid. My heart galloped in my chest, my throat tightening as I digested

his words. Like this wasn't disorientating enough, this *Demon* was insulting me right to my face. Wasn't he supposed to be my mate? I didn't know exactly what that entailed, but I was sure it didn't involve denigrating their appearance.

"Why?" I asked, and he stared blank-faced at me. "Are you ashamed to have a Legion as your mate?"

He sighed deeply, getting to his feet. I was getting sick of the sound. Despite my rising hurt, I soaked in the way his muscles loomed, need surging. I rubbed my chest furiously.

"I would think it obvious, Demon and Legion have only recently declared peace with one another. It would be safer for you to exist here as a human."

My head was spinning, and I choked on his arrogance. What made him think I was staying here? He moved to the bed, his hands falling to the ties on his pants.

"What are you doing?" I squeaked, scurrying up the bed. Again, he looked at me like I was dense, his muscles tensing with frustration.

"We must complete the mating bond. Can you not feel it within you? We need to satisfy it and cement the bond." He put a knee on the bed and then, noticing my horrified look, he added. "I need to be inside you. That is how it's done."

"I gathered that, asshole." I snapped, losing my temper. He fell to the ground after I thrust a few handfuls of air at him. My skin crawled at the distance between us, desperate for his

touch. But there was no way I was letting him insult me and then use my body.

He might have preferred a Demon for a mate, but I was a Legion and I wasn't defenseless. He might have hidden my horns, but he couldn't mask the powers I had. Krex looked up at me in shock, flat on his ass still. I would have laughed, except it felt like my heart was about to fall out of my chest.

"You can control air?" he questioned, picking himself to his feet gingerly.

"Don't come any closer to me, or I'll send you on your ass again." I warned. He didn't listen, rolling his eyes, and I smiled, sending him flying backwards a second time.

"Stop that," he said through gritted teeth. He picked himself up gingerly but wisely stayed back this time.

"No." I tilted my chin up and folded my arms over my chest. "There is no way I am letting you touch me. You might be ashamed to have a Legion as a mate, but let me tell you buddy, I'm not pleased about it either. You know Legion mate in groups right? I could have been bouncing on four dicks for the rest of my life, but I get stuck with your surly ass? No thanks," I spat.

Legion didn't even have mates, but our relationships were four Legion men and one woman. Krex rolled his shoulders back, looking at me on the bed like he was contemplating rushing me.

“This bond won’t rest until I’ve filled you with my seed.” He said, his hands clenching at his side. “But I can see you are distraught, so I’ll give you some time to come to terms with it. I will have you reconcile yourself to accepting me. No number of men will be able to satisfy you when I’m done with you.”

“Keep dreaming Krexeldess.” I sneered and a flash of hurt washed over his face, inexplicably.

“Krex.” He frowned, “you call me Krex.”

“Your mate calls you Krex, and you made it very clear you didn’t want the one you got. So, I’ll call you what I like.” I said, glaring at him to cover the hurt I was feeling. He shuffled his feet before tossing his hair over his shoulder and storming from the room without another word.

I slumped on the bed, tears rushing to fill my eyes. My chest *hurt*. It ached like Krex had slammed his shoulder into it with his body instead of his hurtful words. I rubbed my forehead, wanting to feel my horns, but they weren’t there.

How did this happen to me? I had waited so long and this was the person who fate had decided would be mine.

And why was he so disgusted by my being Legion? If anything, it should be me who was disappointed. Everyone knew Demons were dreadful, dreary creatures who fed off misery and sadness. I patted down my body and felt around the bed. I searched the room, but couldn’t see my reader anywhere. I didn’t know if it would work here, but I needed to speak to my family and friends. The last thing I remembered

was feeling the bond snap into place like a rubber band and then fainting when Krex voiced what the sensation was.

A mate bond.

All I had ever wanted to be was a boost. Something that had dwindled to an impossibility as time passed. Every year I got older, and I didn't present as one. Nakasha and Cami became the heart of their groups, their legion loving them.

I ached for that kind of love, to be surrounded by a quad that adored me. My heart was gaping, huge and empty in my chest. I had this giant capacity for love, but no-one to give it to. Krex was right that Legion and Demons had only just reconciled, after centuries of enmity and intense rivalry. Legion despised being compared to Demons, even though we were very similar. I didn't care though; I was ready to give myself over to experience. Until Krex had taken my horns.

He was ashamed of me.

I had waited years to find love, and fate gifted me with a Demon who couldn't stand who I was. I rubbed my thighs together, heat building there with no effort on my part. My body was betraying me, but my mind was stronger.

He might be my mate. But I wouldn't accept anything less than devotion.

I knew the weight of my worth and if he wanted me?

He'd have to work.

About Author

Mae Pierce fell in love with reading when she was a little girl and found she could escape in these wonderful, made up worlds. She loves fantasy, romance and redeeming her irredeemable male characters (after they've groveled sufficiently). She is a creative creature and loves curling up on the couch with whatever new hobby she's taken on that month like embroidery or paint by numbers.

Mae lives in Melbourne, Australia with her two wild boys and her ever patient husband, who enables her book buying obsession.